Ashford Workshop

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16.10.18

Foreword

This report has been prepared from the results of a workshop held during the Ashford Town Centre Stakeholder meeting on 2nd October 2018. Around 80 participants were put into 10 groups, and were tasked with identifying and scoring potential barriers to the future success of Ashford town centre. The barriers have been grouped and matched against 25 Priority Interventions for town centres, which were identified and tested through the ESRC funded research *High Street UK2020*, and the Innovate funded *Bringing Big Data to Small Users* projects.

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About the Institute of Place Management

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HSUK2020 project: Factors impacting vitality and viability

The main research underpinning our analysis of town and district centres is High Street UK 2020 (HSUK2020).
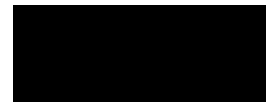
In 1994, the government commissioned the publication of *Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge* (HMSO, 1994). This led to changes in national planning policy, which then placed a clear focus on town centres first for future development. The report defined vitality and viability in respect of town centres. They are both concerned with life: the first (vitality) being about whether a centre feels lively and the second (viability) whether a centre has the capacity to attract the investment needed, not only to maintain the fabric of the place, but also to allow for adaptation to changing circumstances. The terms vitality and viability were used in national planning policy, used by local authorities and local partnerships, and are much discussed by researchers. A wide range of initiatives were also undertaken in town centres across the country with the aim of promoting vitality and viability.

In 2014, as part of the ESRC-supported HSUK2020 project, the IPM undertook a comprehensive literature review to identify factors contributing to centre vitality and viability (see Parker *et al.*, 2017). This produced some 160 factors and these were discussed with a number of stakeholders from ten UK town centres who were partners in the project. This meeting identified additional factors, some of which were found in the wider literature, and some of which had not yet been researched. In total, the study identified 201 factors that impact on town centre vitality and viability. However, as they stood they had no sense of priority or importance. Therefore, 22 leading town centre experts drawn from practitioners and researchers were asked to rank them using two scales: how much a factor impacted on town centre vitality and viability, and how much local control could be exercised over a factor. This then led to the 'Top 25 Factors' impacting vitality and viability, detailed below:

1. ACTIVITY HOURS	Ensuring the centre is open when the catchment needs it. What are the shopping hours? Is there an evening economy? Do the activity hours of the centre match the needs of the catchment?
2. APPEARANCE	Improving the quality of the visual appearance. How clean is the centre?
3. RETAILERS	Offering the right type and quantity of retailers. What retailers are represented?
4. VISION & STRATEGY	Having a common vision and some leadership. Do stakeholders collaborate? Is the vision incorporated in local plans?
5. EXPERIENCE	Considering the quality of the experience? Measuring levels of service quality and visitor satisfaction. What is the image of the centre?
6. MANAGEMENT	Building capacity to get things done. Is there effective management – of the shopping centre(s) and town centre?
7. MERCHANDISE	Meeting the needs of the catchment. What is the range and quality of goods on offer?
8. NECESSITIES	Ensuring basic facilities are present and maintained. Is there appropriate car-parking; amenities; general facilities, like places to sit down and toilets etc.?

9. ANCHORS	The presence of an anchor which drives footfall. This could be retail (like a department store) or could be a busy transport interchange or large employer.
10. NETWORKS & PARTNERSHIPS	Presence of strong networks and effective formal or informal partnerships. Do stakeholders communicate and trust each other? Can the council facilitate action (not just lead it?)
11. DIVERSITY	A multi-functional centre. What attractions are there, apart from retail? What is the tenant mix and tenant variety?
12. WALKABILITY	The 'walkability' of the centre. Are linked trips between areas possible – or are the distances too great? Are there other obstacles that stop people walking?
13. ENTERTAINMENT & LEISURE	An entertainment and leisure offer. What is it? Is it attractive to various segments of the catchment?
14. ATTRACTIVENESS	The 'pulling power' of a centre. Can it attract people from a distance?
15. PLACE ASSURANCE	Getting the basics right. Does the centre offer a basic level of customer service, is this consistent? Or do some operators, or parts of the offer, let this down?
16. ACCESSIBLE	Each of reach. How convenient is the centre to access? Is it accessible by a number of different means, e.g. car, public transport, cycling etc.?
17. PLACE MARKETING	Communicating the offer. How does the centre market and promote itself? Do all stakeholders communicate a consistent image? How well does the centre orientate visitors and encourage flow – with signage and guides etc.
18. COMPARISON/CONVENIENCE	The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience. Is this sustainable?
19. RECREATIONAL SPACE	The amount and quality of recreational areas and public space/open space. Are there places that are uncommodified? Where people can enjoy spending time without spending money?
20. BARRIERS TO ENTRY	Refers to obstacles that make it difficult for interested retailers to enter the centre's market. What is the location doing to make it easier for new businesses to enter?
21. CHAIN VS INDEPENDENT	Number of multiples stores and independent stores in the retail mix of a centre/High Street. Is this suitably balanced?
22. SAFETY/CRIME	A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting. Perceptions of crime are usually higher than actual crime rates. Does the centre monitor these and how does it communicate results to stakeholders?

23. LIVEABILITY	The resident population or potential for residential in the centre. Does the centre offer the services/environment that residents need? Doctors, schools etc.
24. ADAPTABILITY	The flexibility of the space/property in a centre. Are there inflexible and outdated units that are unlikely to be re-let or re-purposed?
25. STORE DEVELOPMENT	The willingness for retailers/property owners to develop their stores. Are they willing to coordinate/cooperate in updating activities? Or do they act independently?

Table 1

You can read more about the IPM's HSUK2020 project on the IPM blog here, or alternatively in the Journal of Place Management and Development's open access special issue here.

Ashford Workshop Preliminary Findings

To produce Figure 1, we have looked at each barrier discussed across all the workshop tables, and then grouped them according to the Top 25 Priority Interventions, identified through our HSUK2020[1] Project.

Figure 1

[1] http://www.placemanagement.org/special-interest-groups/managing-places/town-and-city-centresdowntowns/town-centre-policy-and-research/hsuk2020/
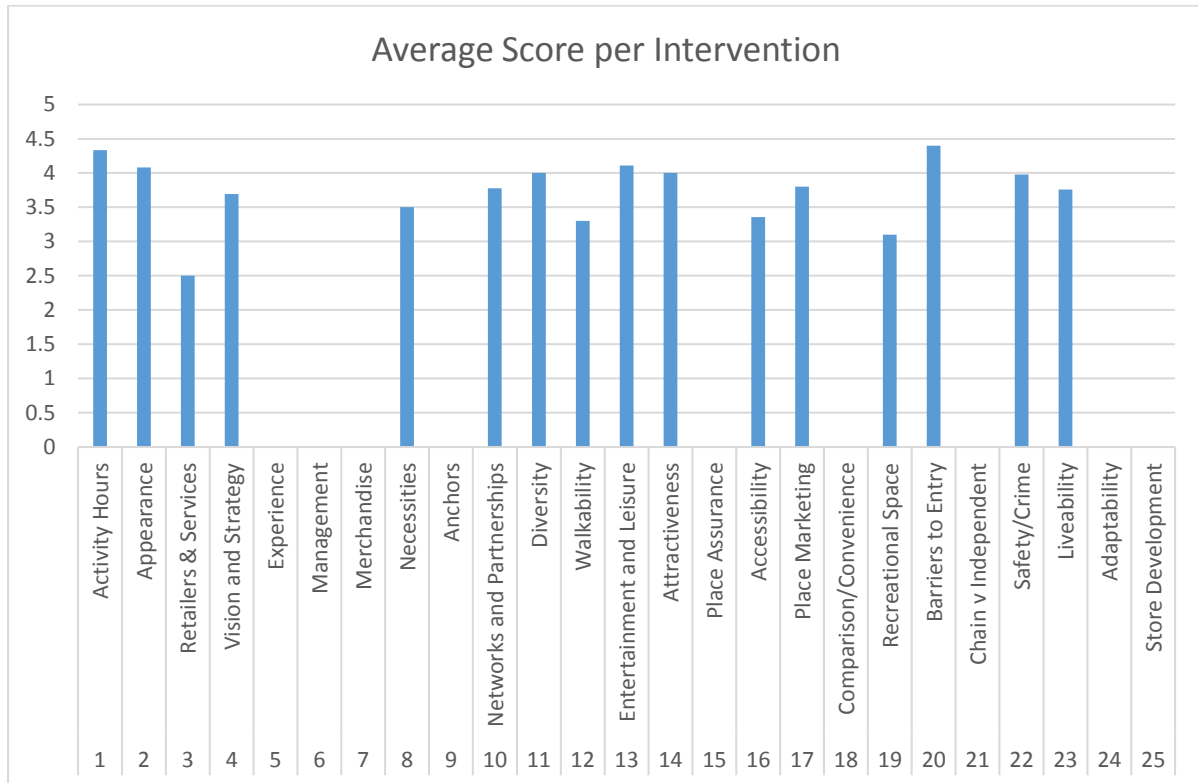
Table 1 identifies the six barriers which were scored 4 or higher:

IPM Priority Interventions	Specific barriers identified by Ashford Stakeholders
1. **Barriers to Entry**	Attracting new businesses
2. **Activity Hours**	Lack of activity after 7
3. **Entertainment and Leisure**	Cost of events Lack of space to showcase talent Lack of events
4. **Appearance**	Commercial waste Not aesthetically pleasing
5. **Diversity**	Commuter town Lack of creative draw Limited diversity
6. **Attractiveness**	Limited tourist visitor pull

Table 2

However, we also took into account both frequency and average score to create a weighted score:

Figure 2

The top barriers by weighted score:
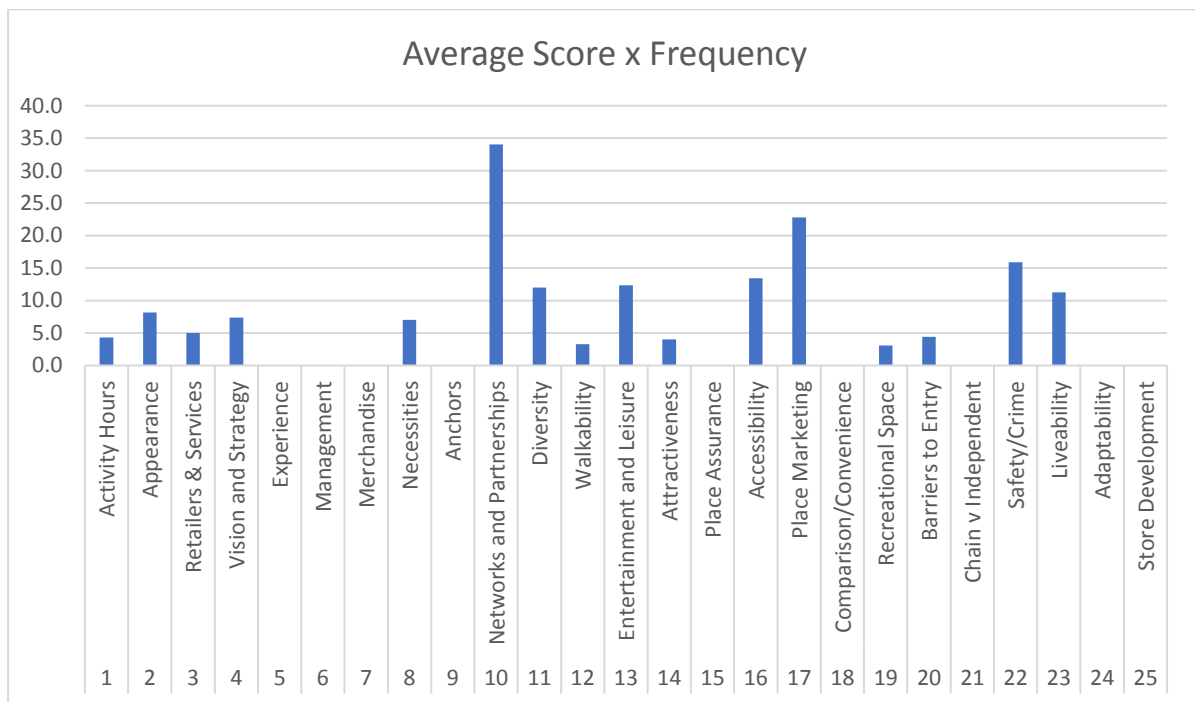
| IPM Priority Interventions	Specific barriers identified by Ashford Stakeholders
1. **Networks and Partnerships**	Political leadership change Two-tier local government Meaningful resident engagement Apathy and distrust Difficulty getting involved Levels of policy Partner engagement Community participation Lack of engagement
2. **Place Marketing**	Negative perceptions Poor reputation Communication Negative perceptions Local paper Lack of pride
3. **Safety/Crime**	Negative perceptions of young people Anti-social behaviour Unsafe Lack of CCTV
4. **Accessibility**	Connectivity (town as roundabout) Connectivity within centre Accessibility issues Lack of infrastructure
5. **Entertainment and Leisure**	Cost of events Lack of space to showcase talent Lack of events
6. **Diversity**	Commuter town Lack of creative draw Limited diversity
7. **Liveability**	Cost of housing and living Lack of local employment Lack of residential

Table 3

Finally, here is the data used to calculate the weighted score:

Rank	Intervention	Score	Frequency
1	Activity Hours	4.3	1
2	Appearance	4.1	2
3	Retailers & Services	2.5	2
4	Vision and Strategy	3.7	2
5	Experience	0.0	0
6	Management	0.0	0
7	Merchandise	0.0	0
8	Necessities	3.5	2
9	Anchors	0.0	0
10	Networks and Partnerships	3.8	9
11	Diversity	4.0	3
12	Walkability	3.3	1
13	Entertainment and Leisure	4.1	3
14	Attractiveness	4.0	1
15	Place Assurance	0.0	0
16	Accessibility	3.4	4
17	Place Marketing	3.8	6
18	Comparison/Convenience	0.0	0
19	Recreational Space	3.1	1
20	Barriers to Entry	4.4	1
21	Chain v Independent	0.0	0
22	Safety/Crime	4.0	4
23	Liveability	3.8	3
24	Adaptability	0.0	0
25	Store Development	0.0	0

Table 4
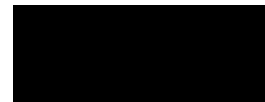
7. Recommendations: What can Ashford do next?

With such a large group attending the consultation and workshop in Ashford, clearly the town has made great strides in terms of building networks and partnerships to enact to change in the centre. Clearly, there is a good local understanding of Ashford's position as a town centre and the broader structural changes affecting the UK's high street.

The snapshot we captured from the workshop suggested Ashford might take into account the top 25 factors that impact on a centre's vitality and viability (as discussed in this report) and start by tackling the key perceived barriers identified above. Each of the factors we have identified can be influenced to a considerable extent locally. It may be, however, that the mechanisms and partnerships needed to bring about changes need strengthening.

The timescale needed to make these changes should also be considered. If many of the weaker areas will take years to achieve, then much momentum for change could be lost and the centre may decline before it improves. We think, therefore, that it is also important to identify some 'quick wins' that will address areas of concern, but which can engender wider engagement and enthusiasm. Quick wins could come from a more active place marketing presence (especially via social media), the use of pop-up/temporary retail provision, to improve the diversity of the offer community events to add more entertainment and leisure opportunities, improved signage, and fostering more stakeholder collaboration.

Recommendations regarding what stakeholders in Ashford could do to enhance its vitality and viability are presented in relation to the IPM's '4Rs' framework, which includes *repositioning*, *reinventing*, *rebranding*, and *restructuring* as the four main areas in which a place can improve its performance.

Priority #1 Restructuring

The workshop findings clearly suggests *Networks and Partnerships* is seen as the main barrier to success in Ashford. This appears to be on two levels: relations with the county authorities; and limited public engagement. In addition, accessibility (both to and within the town centre) and livability appear to be other significant constraints. To address this issue, we would advise **restructuring**.

Restructuring strategies relate to both governance structures and forms of management, and also the physical structuring of a place (Peel and Parker, 2017). The first requires the cooperation of all place stakeholders and creation of strategic networks and public-private relationships that will nurture conditions for the sustainable development of a place, rather than taking top-down approaches. The second requires the proper use of current infrastructure, in addition to the development of new retail spaces to enhance place attractiveness and place development, and the provisions services for potential new residents within the town centre

Priority #2 Rebranding

The second most significant barrier appears to concern about place reputation, image and communication, which we could group under *Place Marketing*. To address this issue, we would advise **rebranding.**

Strategies of rebranding focus upon the application of branding, marketing communications, and public relations techniques in order to deliver a consistent place identity, which relates to the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions in the minds of potential consumers of a place (Ntounis, and Kavaratzis, 2017). Successful place brand management can lead to positive word-of-mouth, and assist in the transformation of previously negative, or just as problematic, non-existent images. To achieve this, Ashford's stakeholders should come together to co-create a positive and consistent place brand. Indeed, participatory place branding processes can flourish when place stakeholders are engaged in the right context and are encouraged to work together collaboratively.

Priority #3 Reinventing

The third most significant barrier appears to be perceptions of *Crime/Safety* in the town centre. There are perhaps a bundle of issues tied to this concern, such as lack of activity after dark, diversity of leisure/recreational activities and the range of events, which might attract more people into the centre during the evening, which would go some way towards addressing negative perceptions of the town centre at this time of the day.

Reinventing strategies relate to the activities undertaken to revitalise a place's identity and offer (Theodoridis, Ntounis, and Pal, 2017. Any place, however, should understand and seek to meet the needs of its catchment, and be sensitive to these insights when making any changes within a centre. We would encourage stakeholders in the area to make use of the footfall data being recorded to track progress of any interventions. This data can be an invaluable resource, particularly for local businesses when considering aspects such as opening hours.
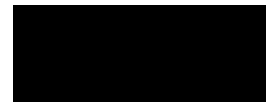
Priority #4 Repositioning

The final set of constrainst appear to focus on the *entertainment and leisure* offer, and *diversity* of both retailing and services in the town centre. Ashford's footfall signature suggests the town is already functioning as a multifunctional centre, however, going forward, taking in consideration the likely impact of retail sector change, Ashford might consider **repositioning** itself as more than retail destination, a "modern market town" perhaps, as a place to both live and work.

Repositioning is a strategy that relates to clearly identifying and communicating a place's market position (Millington and Ntounis, 2017; please click here to read more about repositioning). It can be used to counteract decline, and enables centres to identify potential competitive advantages. The starting point is understanding forces of change, and the value of unique responses that reposition centres. Such responses should build on a place's distinct capabilities, whilst also being accommodative of future trends in order for a centre to be resilient. Knowledge exchange between stakeholders is also crucial in such strategies to generate a shared understanding of a centre's identity and function.

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