



Top tips: Understanding neighbourhood and towns centre trends

Improving your neighbourhood or town centre without first investigating the issues, is like baking a cake without knowing the ingredients.

To understand the issues facing your neighbourhood shopping centre so that you can realistically shape its future, it's important to get out there and gather key bits of information about current trends. We call these nuggets of information Key Performance Indicators or KPIs for short. It's good also to compare (or benchmark) your community with other similar ones and thereby learn if there are any obvious peculiarities. Similar approaches are taken in many other walks of life.

So what are these important nuggets of information or KPIs that will tell you about the trends facing your local shopping centre or high street? Here are some of the KPIs collected regularly across the country by the People and Places Partnership. This approach has been designed so that it can be used by local volunteers setting out to improve their community. It is also easy to repeat year after year to chart progress. It's not the only way of understanding a place though – what's important is that you find a way that works for you and allows comparisons with other similar places.

Vacancy rates

An important piece of information that alerts people to the challenges and often grabs the headlines. Counting empty shops only tells part of the story though and it's important to realise that it's quite normal for one in 10 shops to be empty at any time.





Footfall

Another good measure and easy to collect using a willing volunteer with a couple of free mornings and a counter app you can download for free. It's also instructive to take counts on different streets to help understand the flow of people and why maybe few people venture on to what might seem an attractive side street. As a guide, a count of 100 people walking past over a 10 minute period on a mid-week morning is fairly typical for the centre of a bustling small town.

Business types

Now things start to get a little technical around standard terms used to categorise types of businesses. The most important distinction to understand though is the balance between everyday or convenience shopping for things like food, and comparison shopping for clothes or electrical equipment which is much less a spur of the moment purchase. As anyone who has tried to find a butcher in a city centre will know, convenience shopping is more typical of small towns where every fifth shop is likely to sell everyday items.

Car parking

Suffice to say, when town centre businesses are asked about local hot topics, parking will always top the list. Indeed, if less than half of your businesses are negative about parking, you are probably getting something right. Customer perceptions tend to be a little less negative. It's also important to pitch these perceptions against parking facts and again there are standard templates that volunteers can use to help understand this. As a rule of thumb, if on a busy day 15% of car park spaces are available, things are working well. Cost, duration, location and signage are other variables to take in to account though.

The people that make the place (and those that don't!)

As one of the delegates at the Department for Communities and Local Government's recent series of pilot workshops said, when it comes to the images of our neighbourhood and town centres, 'perception is reality'! It's therefore important to compare town centre facts with the perceptions from the people that work, shop and visit there. It's also good to gather facts about them – where, for example, do most of the shoppers come from and how long and how much do they spend in town? There are three main groups who between them can tell you all you need to know about how a shopping centre or high street is perceived:

- **Businesses** will provide insights in to why they are based in a town centre, priority issues and the impacts on their profitability. More than three quarters of businesses in small towns will typically say that the potential for local customers is the reason why they carry on trading there
- **Town centre users or customers** will be surprisingly willing to tell you about themselves, their shopping habits and why they are in town. Four out of 10 users of small towns will be there for convenience shopping and six out 10 will visit at least once a week. Over 70% of users are likely to say they are attracted to small towns because of the access to local services, the convenience and ease of walking around rather than the shopping alone.
- **The non-users** (for want of a better phrase) of a town centre have a lot of important information to share about why they go elsewhere. Surveys issued through local social media get surprising hit rates and often show that customers would come back if only...

What next

Share survey information with local businesses and groups. Almost certainly there will be surprises from amongst your findings and it will help build a consensus around what is the future role of your neighbourhood or town centre and how to achieve this. And keep surveying your local centre annually to understand how it is hopefully improving thank to your efforts.

This guide has been prepared by the People and Places Partnership as part of the Great British High Street programme.
chris.wade@people-places.co.uk



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