

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 25 January 2007

REPORTING OFFICER: Chief Executive and the Strategic Director of Environment.

SUBJECT: Victoria Square: Developing the Night Time Economy.

WARD Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report outlines the approach to be taken in developing a management plan for "Victoria Square".

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That Executive Board

(1) Approves, subject to resolving any legal, health and safety and risk management issues, the development of management plan including Al fresco drinking and dining on Victoria Square.

3.0 INTRODUCTION

3.1 Much progress has been made in regenerating Widnes town centre over recent years with extensive street and public art works, the opening of Asda and JJB stores, the Simms Cross development, the private sector investment taking place in the Windmill Centre and the full occupancy of the Ashley Way Retail Park.

3.2 Of particular note is the progress made in and around Victoria Square:

- Opening of the Vue Bar
- Creation of the training centre bringing more people into the area during the day
- Refurbishment of the Square and improved street scene along Widnes Road
- Refurbishment to the Kingsway centre
- Improvements to the church environment
- Extensive refurbishment of the Grosvenor is underway.
- Refurbishment of the Cornerhouse.
- Development of a new restaurant in Alforde Street

3.3 This investment in and around the square brings many benefits including an improved environment, job creation and improved facilities for local people. It all helps to improve the 'feel' of Victoria Square and is intended to create the

sense of a 'happening' place (which attracts both visitors and residents). Of real importance is the mix of activities that will take place including: eating/drinking, learning, leisure/exercise and entertainment. To ensure the benefits are maximised and the current momentum is maintained it is considered appropriate to develop a **Victoria Square Management Plan**. Much discussion has already taken place with the police regarding such a plan who take the view that that a properly developed and resourced management plan is the correct way forward.

- 3.4 The police see that the development of such a plan as a good way forward for the partners and authorities meet their duties to reduce crime and disorder within the areas they serve (section 17 Crime and Disorder Act 1998). As such, partnership and cooperation are seen as integral to the way forward. Key elements that the police have identified are designing out crime, use of CCTV, safe/controlled access/egress to the square including taxi and late night public transport, street cleansing and links with the PCT.

4.0 THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

- 4.1 Much time has already been put into researching best practice and there is a wealth of information available on managing town centres at night time. Particularly of use is information that comes through the Association of Town Centre Managers and the 52 page Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 'Good Practice Guide'. (See summary Appendix 1).

- 4.2 The plan will address a range of issues including:
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|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Marketing | Events |
| Residential amenity | Improved lighting/safe paths |
| Public Art | Arrival and dispersal including walking, cycling, car parking, buses and taxis. |
| Toilet facilities | |
| CCTV | Policing style and costs |
| Community safety | Health Issues |
| Alcohol controls and bye-laws | Maintenance regimes including early morning cleansing |

Appendix 2 explores these issues in more detail.

- 4.3 A preliminary workshop session has taken place with representatives from all appropriate council departments and partners to look at the issues and opportunities that will need to be considered in the management plan.
- 4.4 An integral part of the management plan relates to the issues of 'Al fresco' drinking and dining and these constitute a particular matter for consideration with its own distinct set of issues to be considered and assessed. Al fresco is at the heart of the government's vision of creating a European culture and is clearly being encouraged. It refers to drinking/dining outside licensed premises but not within beer gardens (these should be covered by the premises license). It will be regulated primarily through the licensing system and planning system. However, where the area concerned is part of the

highway as is the case of Victoria Square, a highways licence will be required and a number of technical issues will have to be resolved around use of pavements, not obstructing passers by and perhaps pedestrianisation. It is anticipated that requests will be forthcoming from licensees for the Council to allow such drinking in various locations.

4.5 After discussions with the police, it is proposed to permit al fresco drinking/dining on designated parts of Victoria Square (adjacent to certain buildings). For the police, the key issues with this include -

- Clear physical demarcation of where such activity takes place
- All furniture to be stored away at the end of the day
- A clear specification for how premises should manage such areas

5.0 FINANCIAL ISSUES

5.1 There will clearly be a variety of costs associated with managing the night time economy. Wherever possible, this should be met from within existing budgets such as cleansing and town centre management. However, it is thought unlikely all costs will be contained and as such there is a question as to where the additional resources will come from.

5.2 Previous announcements from government have made it clear there will be no general approach by use of a fee or levy system, though some establishments may be required to pay for extra policing should they not be able to keep their house in order. Some areas do operate a voluntary levy schemes though success varies whilst others use sponsorship, for example to fund late night buses. This emphasises the need to work closely with the local businesses in order to create a relationship that encourages such contributions. The planning system may be able to provide some income through 'section 106' planning agreements associated with any new planning applications. However, these do not really provide continuity of income in the medium term.

5.3 The development of formal Business Improvement District (BID) would give certainty of income and involve local traders more closely in the management of the town centres. (A BID enables an additional charge to be collected on top of the business rates but the traders have to vote for it). However, a recent survey of Widnes and Runcorn town centres has shown no real support for a BID at this time.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Development of a management plan for Victoria Square at this time will be a very complex task. The practical impacts of the new licensing regime and the arrival of new venues and activities will be monitored closely to determine if the plan needs revising over time.

6.2 Finalising the plan and its subsequent implementation will depend on the continuing involvement of key partners and particularly the commitment of their resources.

- 6.3 The development of the management plan will be fed into the multi agency alcohol task group that is chaired by the Strategic Director for Health and Community
- 6.4 The involvement of local businesses in developing the night time economy and the management plans cannot be underplayed. Businesses will be offering a significant range of leisure activities and collaborative work is needed to make such the night time 'experience' is a positive one that encourages people to return on other nights. Working with the businesses is a central part of the Government Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy.
- 6.5 There will clearly be a need to engage the public in this issue. A proactive media campaign about the benefits of the plan is considered a key activity in its own right. Local residents will, undoubtedly, need much reassurance.
- 6.6 During discussions with officers from a range of departments, the police and investors, a clear message came from everyone that the emphasis must be on a vibrant mix of activities with the development of 'quality' establishments in a quality environment. There is a real sense that Halton can attract people from south Liverpool, Warrington and parts of St Helens if the offer and environment is correct.

7.0 POLICY ISSUES

- 7.1 There are a number of policy documents that provide a context for Halton's town centres, including the Community Strategy, the Unitary Development Plan, the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy and Statement of Licensing Policy. There is clear support in such strategies for the development of the night time economy. The existing Town Centre Strategies (1997) have the aim to 'make town centres a focus of community life and avoid dead shopping streets' which covers such issues as promotion of sites for leisure and entertainment. Finally, the Economic Development and Tourism Strategy seeks to develop the town centres to their full potential to ensure they reflect well on the Borough and its overall quality of life. The relevant policy is

Halton will invest in the public realm and encourage the gradual regeneration of the two older town centres and their retail, office and leisure offer, and support efforts to develop the retail offer at Halton Lea.

8.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 None

9.0 Risk Analysis

- 9.1 The development of a full risk analysis will be the starting point for the development of the plan. The final plan will seek to maximise the opportunities to Halton whilst appropriately addressing the risks associated with that. The

high risk is associated with not developing a specific management plan for the square.

10.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

10.1 The management plan will explicitly consider issues of equality and diversity as the benefits of the square must be made readily available to all those that live, work and visit Halton. As such, a full equality assessment in lines with the Council adopted procedures will be produced.

11.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
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Contact Officers –

Gary Collins (Regeneration)

Sally Mcdonald (Major Projects)

Phil Watts (Planning)

John Tully (Legal and Member Services)

Spencer Webster (Risk Management)

Howard Cockcroft (Leisure Services)

Appendix 1

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Good Practice Guide Most cited problems re town centres and night time (pages 16-18)

- Lack of transport to aid dispersal 52.8%
- Litter/rubbish on streets 33.7%
- Street fouling 30.3%
- Areas feel threatening or unsafe 29.2%
- Noise disturbing local residents 28.1%
- Rowdiness, fighting in the streets 23.6%
- Vandalism 15.7%
- Drug dealing 13.6%

Key Good Practice and Management Controls

Night time transport

- Increased use of subsidised buses and development of new routes, some of which become commercially viable. Entrance fees including small public transport levy
- Organisation of taxis including pay in advance booking system and managed taxi ranks. Dispersal of taxi ranks to avoid queue fights
- Special parking charges in the evening, driver rescue scheme for people that have drunk too much, designated driver schemes
- Cited more as a possible than good practice is a club in Holland that stays open until public transport starts again in the morning and provides free breakfasts!

Litter/Fouling

- Partnerships with licensees where they help with cleaning costs and have their own staff clean up allocated areas throughout the night. Door staff taking bottles and glasses off people as they try to leave.
- Potential use of EPA powers to enforce businesses to clean up outside and adjacent to their premises
- Local authorities to provide extra sized bins and key locations
- Additional public toilets though the cost is acknowledge. Use of portable toilets on Friday and Saturday nights.

Safety

- Make towns more attractive with street scene improvements, good sign posting, use of public art, good lighting, live events and increased residential accommodation as appropriate. Theme areas.
- Banning drinking in public areas

Noise Prevention

- From venues- Use of planning, building regulations, Environmental Protection Act and the Noise & Statutory Nuisance Act. Noise impact assessments.

- From the street- much more limited such as ASBOs, but Planners urged in planning policy guidance to take noise generating activity into account in development plans to reduce possible conflicts.
- Licensing Act 2003 – can impose staggered closing times, limiting time which tables/chairs outside premises can be used.
- Education campaigns
- Improved residential design and ensuring compatibility of mixed uses in development schemes i.e. would it be sensible to have flats above a nightclub?

Crime and Disorder

- Manage hotspots such as taxi and fast food queues
- Policing needs to be longer term, not 'binge' policing as it is sometimes referred to. Greater use of fixed penalty notices and conditional cautions
- Nite net linking pubs/clubs and police
- Wardens/Community Safety Officers can encourage/guide people along and assist in managing numbers. Effectiveness very much bolstered if police has presence
- Proof of age schemes.
- Pub watch, though acknowledge concerns that some schemes simply displace trouble from inside to outside premises.
- CCTV, varies from area to area with some being effective in improving detection after violent crime whilst others deter crimes against property. Must be actively managed to make a difference on the night. Most seek link to police control, room.
- Safe refuge for people who are not able to get home safely by themselves

General

- Designation of defined areas and encouraging businesses to locate there can make management easier
- Mixed use approach, not just an alcohol economy
- Business Improvement Districts offers scope for raising additional finance (as does section 106) and engaging businesses
- Retaining ownership of premises for greater control

Appendix 2

Developing the Night Time Economy and Managing Night Time Activity

Developing a wide range of events/day and evening including specially themed festivals.	Presently town centre events are limited and aimed at the daytime to support the shopping offer. This will need to be reviewed to support the evening activity.
Marketing and PR.	Present marketing is aimed at agents/investors to encourage the development of facilities. As these increase it will be more viable to advertise areas as destinations in their own right. When people arrive in the town, they may benefit from on the spot guidance from identifiable staff e.g. guides
Improved lighting/safe paths between venues/parking/bus stops/taxi ranks.	Making the area 'feel' safe and relaxed. Works best in mixed-use areas where there are significant numbers out and about.
Enhanced transport arrangements.	Whilst there is much talk about quick dispersal to help people get home, it is
Public Art	The Square has been identified as a location for a piece of public art.
Toilet facilities	Lack of readily accessible facilities are real problem in some other towns. The Square must have an answer to this.
Arrival and dispersal.	Quick dispersal of people once they leave a venue is essential. However, it is just as important to have a system that makes it easy for people to get to venues in the first place. Possible solutions include multi story car parks and patrolled taxi ranks.
Residential amenity.	How can night time activity be encouraged without spoiling the quality of life for town centre residents, many of which may not appreciate what is going to happen to the town centre over the next few years. Issues will include noise, litter and vandalism.
Policing style and costs.	Policing style will influence the 'feel' of an area. The government suggests that costs will be kept similar, just spread out over the evening. This is yet to be proven.
Maintenance regimes.	In a practical sense, the more people are in the town center the more litter is likely to be dropped. This will need clearing up so the town centre is ready for business the next morning.

Community safety.	The fear of crime and actual crime are two sides of the same coin. This needs to be managed so that areas do not get a bad reputation. In general police say that existing premises are not too bad. They have more issues with youths drinking on streets and in parks –an issue to be considered as part of the alcohol reduction strategy.
Health Issues.	Too much drinking is proven to have ill health effects. It is important to educate drinkers as to the health problems this will cause them including sexual health matters
Alcohol controls and byelaws.	The desire to encourage al fresco drinking/dinning at Victoria Square will encourage similar proposals elsewhere but the bye-law needs to be enforced elsewhere