



**Town Centre Commission**  
**Consultation with the Market Traders**  
**January - March 2006**

**DRAFT REPORT**



## **Consultation by the Town Centre Commission**

**January - March 2006**

### **Summary**

As part of the consultation programme of the Northampton Town Centre Commission (TCC), NBC consulted with the Northampton Market Traders to discover their views on the future development of the Northampton town centre. This report summarises the findings of the consultation session, and forms an important part of the information gathering exercise that will help to produce a Central Area Action Plan for the town centre.

### **The Town Centre Commission**

The TCC has been established in Northampton so that those people and groups with a stake in the future development and success of Northampton are able to give their views and input into future developments. Engaging with people means giving all members of the community a chance to have their views, and NBC realises that market traders have specific needs in relation to getting the most out of their town centre for both themselves and their customers.

### **The Central Area Action Plan**

NBC is required to produce a Central Area Action Plan, which covers the town centre. This document will be set in the context of the statutory planning framework, and will be used to help assess future development plans that are made within the town centre.

### **The Northampton Market Traders**

The Northampton Branch of the National Market Traders Federation represents the interests of Northampton's market traders. The Branch is managed by a Branch Committee and has a long history of working with partners, including Northampton Borough Council, in plans to develop the market square and the wider town centre. NBC sees them as key partners in the development of a Central Area Action Plan, and the organisation specifically requested to be involved in the partnership. Market traders also have a history of involvement in the Town Centre Partnership (TCP), which is represented on the TCC Steering Group. The TCP also includes local businesses operating within the town centre.

### **Consultation Events**

NBC met with the Branch Committee on 11 January and 1 March 2006, and attended the Market Traders AGM on 22 March 2006. This report summarises the views expressed at these meetings. An Appendix to this report further documents previous work undertaken by the market traders.

## Summary of Issues Important to Northampton Market Traders

- There are currently approximately 268 stalls including catering units on the market square, and there are over 80 regular traders who employ over 200 people. There are a further 30-40 casual traders who use the market square and it is a very good entry level business opportunity for local people. It has always been a part of Northampton's identity, with well known generational Market families promoting a 'wholesome' image, and adds significantly to the Town Centre's overall footfall. It also provides several hundred thousand pounds per year by way of income to NBC.
- The market traders feel the market has been in a state of decline for a number of years as evidenced by the number of stalls that are occupied. The traders have tried a number of initiatives to try and reverse this decline including farmers' markets and antique stalls. They cite the temporary closure of the Mayorhold Car Park as a driver for changing shopping habits. They say, "without the market there would be no town centre" and they collected 30 000 signatures in a two-month period from the public in support of the market staying on the Market Square. They believe reinvestment and greater marketing is needed in respect of the market square.
- The present design of stall is exceptionally robust and severe weather proven resulting in virtually no cancelled Market Days ever. This basic stalwart design has been with Northampton for well over one hundred years and is a historically proven link with the past appearance of the Square as well as being a modern day practical advantage.
- The market traders were involved to a limited degree in the 'Market Square Enhancement Project' initiative by NBC in partnership with the East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) that promoted a competition for designs for the future development of the market trading area. Entry models were displayed by a Northampton Steering Group, and they understood funds would be made available to proceed with the successful entry. This project has been placed on hold and should be reconsidered in the context of the development of a Central Area Action Plan. (Letts-Wheeler)
- The development of other shopping centres at Weston Favell, Riverside and Sixfields which has had a detrimental effect on the retail within the market square, which goes beyond fair competition because these sites all enjoy free parking and are well signed by the county council. The market traders do not see enough people visiting the town centre, which they see of 'general poor quality' and in need of increased footfall.
- The issues important to their customers are good affordable parking provision, the ability to carry purchased goods a short distance to car or bus, the availability of local produce (and flowers and plants),

affordable prices and high quality goods. The market traders also highlight what they believe is a by product of high use of the market by the many new ethnic and multi cultural groups now living in the town. These newer communities appear to find the market recognisable and familiar, and as such it serves to assimilate residents into one larger community. Helping to promote a peaceful forward-looking multi-cultural town at ease with itself.

- Customers further have concern about the range of shops in the town centre, which may encourage major shopping trips to other town/city centres. Possibly the market offers low cost options/solutions for aspiring niche traders to help fill this gap. Equally, the lack of speciality shops such as butchers and fishmongers is seen as a concern. Customers make reference to the threat of receiving a parking ticket and they believing 'paying on foot' is a positive step. The general cleanliness of the town centre needs to be improved according to customers.
- The market traders state the market square is disabled/wheelchair user friendly because of its wide gangways and aisles that make it easily accessible to and by everyone.
- It is believed that the signage into and around the town centre could be improved. As well as additional signage even further out listing what Northampton Town Centre has to offer. (i.e. Including the market)
- In terms of public transport and accessibility, it is felt that it would be useful to have bus drop-off points at Mercers Row, The Drapery and Woodhill. It would be useful to have several Park and Ride schemes – utilising the bus lane from Sixfields, for example.
- The range of street traders – most notably on Abington Street – needs carefully managing to reflect an agreed identity for the town, and not to detract from a vibrant market centre. In other words they should be encouraged to pay for casual stalls on the market as available.
- A green, practical, and economical solution should be found to waste management.
- Beyond retail the market fulfils important social and community roles.
- Empty and dormant office space within the town centre could be incentivised for greater use thus increasing the number of office workers/ customers.
- The drunken people's shelter, which is a visitor's first impression of the town on exit from the Mayorhold car park, could be re-sited.
- Encouragement of groups from other towns to make coach party shopping trips to Northampton.

## **Consultation at the AGM**

The AGM undertook the following tasks:

- Considered the role of the Town Centre Commission
- Learned about the Central Area Action Plan
- Considered the views of market traders for the future vision of Northampton town centre/Central Area
- Listened to other views

## **The Town Centre Commission**

- Engages with anyone who has a stake in the future of the Central Area
- Records the views of stakeholders
- Ensures views feed into an Issues Paper/Central Area Action Plan
- Is managed by a Steering Group

## **Central Area Action Plan**

- Part of Northampton Development Framework
- A series of planning documents against which development proposals are assessed
- Will identify, examine and integrate proposals and initiatives (already being discussed) to establish a single agreed development framework for the future of the town.
- The Development Framework comprises a Core Strategy for Northampton and is supported by a series of Local Development Documents, of which the Central Area Action Plan is one.

## **Uniqueness of the Town**

Two generic urban design principles were outlined in respect of the uniqueness of the town:

- To utilise key sites of the town for single or multiple purposes varying through the 24-hour day and within the week and seasons
- To promote high quality development sensitive to a local unique architecture and responsive to local history.

The AGM was asked to consider how these principles would work in the town centre.

## **Delivery**

- NBC – Regeneration and Growth area, created as part of the NBC restructure; new performance management framework; new resources.
- West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC)

## What Happens Next?

- A report of market traders' views will be made
- Report (draft) will be circulated to local group for comments, and details circulated at AGM on how to comment further
- Views will be considered as part of the development of the Central Area Action Plan

## Ongoing consultation

The TCC is continuing to gather views on the Northampton town centre. You can comment further in the following ways.

Visit the TCC website at the following link [www.northampton.gov.uk/tcc](http://www.northampton.gov.uk/tcc)  
This link includes a questionnaire that you can complete.

Telephone Martyn Swann (01604) 837861

E-mail Martyn Swann [mswann@northampton.gov.uk](mailto:mswann@northampton.gov.uk)

Write Martyn Swann  
Consultant for Corporate Manager  
Regeneration and Growth Division  
Northampton Borough Council  
Cliftonville House  
Bedford Road  
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## **APPENDIX to the CONSULTATION WITH MARKET TRADERS REPORT**

*This work in this appendix has been produced by Northampton Market Traders and is not the work of Northampton Borough Council.*

### **Northampton & Markets - Part One - Brief Historical Background**

#### **Section One - 1189 to 20th Century**

The first record of Northampton's charters appears in 1189, when King Richard 1st, looking for money for his crusades, granted a charter giving the Town particular administrative rights. Amongst these was the right to elect a mayor.

Northampton's Market Square, one of the largest in England, dates from 1235 when the selling of goods - including livestock - in the All Saints churchyard was stopped by King Henry III, and transferred to the Square. Livestock continued to be sold in the market until 1873, when a purpose-built cattle market opened.

In 1265 Northampton University was dissolved by Henry 111, having only been in existence for a few years, from circa 1261. This was supposedly because Northampton University posed a threat to Oxford and Cambridge. It may also have been because the students had sided with Simon de Montfort and his barons against the King.

1675 brought the Great Fire of Northampton, which devastated the town centre, including All Saints church, destroying about 600 buildings in 6 hours. Three quarters of the town was destroyed, about 700 families were made homeless, and 11 people were killed.

Some £25,000 was raised by local business people - a huge sum at that time - for rebuilding the town centre around the Market Square, which was the centre of trade and commerce in those days, there being few private shops in the town. New streets were built wider than before, against the possibility of another fire. The King (Charles 11) is said to have donated 1000 tons of timber towards the rebuilding of Northampton.

In 1724 Daniel Defoe described Northampton as the "handsomest and best built town in all this part of England.....finely rebuilt with brick and stone, and the streets made spacious and wide".

1815 saw the opening of the Blisworth to Northampton branch of the Grand Union Canal, giving much easier access to the coal-fields of the Midlands, and facilitating trade of raw materials into a growing Northampton, and the output of finished goods, mostly boots and shoes, for there were more than 1000 shoemakers in the town at that time.

There was electoral reform in 1835, and for the first time councillors were elected to represent wards. Amongst their duties were the administration of civil law and order, and markets. At this time the general markets were held about once a week, with almost anything movable being sold, including livestock of all kinds, which were sold in the surrounding streets. This is how Marefair, Sheep Street, and Horsemarket got their names. Larger and special markets and seasonal fairs would be held at less frequent intervals.

Only ten years later in 1845 the first railway station opened, thereby increasing the opportunities for trade and communication. This station was situated at the lower end of Bridge Street, in what was known as Cotton End.

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From about this time onwards there was a rapid expansion of factory-building in the town, as manufacturers saw the opportunity to use the skills of hundreds of workers who had previously only worked at home, or in small workshops and out-houses. With new mass-production methods, these workers were able to turn out shoes at a much faster and cheaper rate than in days gone by. Factory-owners built many rows of terraced housing for their workforce, much of it very close to the centre of the town. Most of these workers used the market as their main shopping centre, although corner shops in terraced areas, and better-class shops in the town centre, were becoming more prevalent.

In 1851 the Corn Exchange opened at the top of the Market Square. Although mainly used for the marketing of corn - under cover now instead of out on the Market Square - it was also used for concerts, balls, and public meetings, etc.

1863 saw a Fountain erected on the Market Square to commemorate the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark. The following year (1864) the poet John Clare died in Northampton Asylum off the Billing Road (now St. Andrew's Hospital). Also in this year the old Town Hall at the corner of Abington Street and Wood Hill was demolished, and the present Guildhall was built in the pseudo-Gothic style highly favoured at that time.

In 1873 at last a purpose-built Cattle Market on Victoria Promenade opened, removing from the Town Centre the livestock portion of the market, leaving behind a much-reduced general market, which would continue to grow over the years ahead.

The Market Square, under the terms of one charter, becomes a forum for political discussion and free speech after 6.30 pm. It was used for this on many occasions in the past, particularly on the run-up to local and national elections. In 1874 there was a riot on the Market Square, provoked by a parliamentary election campaign involving Charles Bradlaugh, a radical atheist. Eventually the mayor read the Riot Act, but the rioters took little notice, and did not disperse until troops arrived and fired into the air.

In 1880 Bradlaugh was elected as an MP. Between 1880 and 1886 Bradlaugh fought for the right of unbelievers to sit in the House of Commons, and he was the first atheist to become an MP. His Act of 1888 established the legal right to affirm the Parliamentary oath rather than swearing the oath on a bible. Bradlaugh was MP for Northampton from 1880-1891. One of the most controversial public figures of the late nineteenth century, Charles Bradlaugh championed unpopular causes like birth control, republicanism, atheism, reform, peace and anti-imperialism. His views placed him in conflict with powerful interests, institutions and people, but most of his arguments have since been vindicated.

1879 saw most of the remains of Northampton Castle disappear when the Castle Railway Station was enlarged, no doubt to the detriment of the Tourist Trade in present times.

By 1901 the Emporium Arcade was built at the top of the Market Square to house dozens of small businesses, forming a kind of indoor market of its own, complementing the Open Market outside.

The Emporium Arcade was an undoubted draw to visitors as well as the many local people who lived within a few streets of the Market Square, and continued right into the 1970's before being demolished. Had it been kept and carefully restored, it would no doubt have continued to provide an attraction to modern-day tourists.

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## **Northampton & Markets - Part One - Brief Historical Background**

### **Section Two - Early 20th Century to Present-day.**

There were few notable changes to the Open Market and the Market Square from the beginning of the 20th century up to the 2nd World War. On days when there was no market the Square was used as a general parking space for vehicles of all kinds, although in those days the Town was glad to see visitors, and there were no parking charges. On Sundays in the summertime in the period between the World Wars, local bus companies would run tours and trips from the Market Square, and this tradition continued well into the 1950's.

Early in the 20th century electric trams were introduced, a modern replacement for the horse-drawn trams which had run since 1881. At about this time horse racing at the Racecourse was abandoned after a series of accidents, and it was eventually given to the town as a public park. Even today it is referred to as 'The Racecourse' locally, rather than The Racecourse Park. By the end of 1905 the Co-operative Society had opened a building in Abington Street, and Northamptonshire County Cricket Club had entered first-class cricket.

The Corn Exchange on the Market Square was converted into a cinema (The Exchange) in 1920, some of its previous functions having gradually transferred to the Cattle Market buildings.

In 1930 the Market Square fountain was renovated, and four hanging lamps became part of its attraction. Markets continued to be held on the Square before, through, and after the 2nd World War. Arrangements for stallholders were open to some abuse in those days, and Frank Brierley, who was to become a local entrepreneur, recalled sleeping on his stall some Friday nights, so as to have first claim on it for the big Saturday market!

In 1960 another of Northampton's Town Centre historical attractions was demolished; the ancient coaching inn called the Peacock Hotel, built circa 1456. In the same year the New Theatre in Abington Street was demolished, to be replaced by a supermarket. This year also saw extensive one-way streets assigned, and prohibited parking introduced to the Town Centre. In 1962 the Market Square fountain was demolished, although the base pedestal remained until the early 1970's.

1964 saw Central Government publish a "South East Study", selecting Northampton as one of 4 major expansion areas. This was to be the beginning of the end of Northampton as a market town.

In 1968 Northampton was officially designated as a "New Town". A Development Corporation was set up to substantially re-develop the town in partnership with local council. Expansion was to be mainly to the east and the south to accommodate new residents, mainly from the London area.

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From 1970 onwards Town expansion started with road widening; new road building; the clearance of some areas designated as slums; and the influx of new and varied commerce and light industry.

The old Bridge Street railway station was demolished.

Barclaycard House, a massive office block in Marefair, was completed. This actually helped the town centre and markets trade, because in reasonable weather scores if not hundreds of its office-workers would stroll into the town centre during their lunch break to do some shopping.

By 1972 the planning proposals for the new eastern developments were approved, and the population rose to over 133,000. Big changes in the Town Centre saw the old Emporium Arcade at the top (North Side) of the Market Square demolished, despite many strong local protests. Northampton had lost yet another Town Centre attraction. Most of Newland, a terraced area north of the Market Square, was also demolished, including the old Temperance Hall, a cinema known locally as 'The Fleapit'. With the

destruction of these many terraced houses went thousands of the market's local customers, who had lived near enough to walk and shop easily.

By 1974 planning proposals for the southern developments were approved. The Odeon cinema at the top of the Market Square, formerly the Exchange, was closed and changed to a bingo hall.

On the burgeoning Eastern District, the Weston Favell Shopping Centre opened. Building in the old Newland area was progressing at a feverish pace, and in 1975 the Grosvenor Shopping Centre was opened, changing dramatically the northeast aspect of the Market Square. A year later the Dergate bus station was closed and the new Greyfriars bus station opened. Cunningly, the latter was designed to disgorge its passengers into the Grosvenor Shopping Centre, not into the shopping streets of the town, as the Dergate had done.

In 1979 another of the more notable buildings in the Town Centre was demolished; this time it was the Notre Dame High School in Abington Street, which might have made an excellent public building. It was replaced by nondescript shops and offices. St Edmund's Church, on the Wellingborough Road coming into the centre of the town, a Victorian church built in local sandstone, was also demolished.

By the end of 1985 the Northampton Development Corporation was wound up by the national government, having added 20,000 dwellings, 40,000 inhabitants and over 200 companies. By this time the population was around 168,000, and climbing.

The markets in Northampton continued to be busy, and the Market Square had its market area expanded to cover the whole square inside the perimeter roadway. The number of market days had been expanded too, from Wednesday, Friday and Saturday to Tuesday and Thursday as well. This was partly in response to a need for Northampton Borough Council (NBC), in common with many local councils, to seek additional income, under restraints imposed by the then national government which are still in force today (2006). In the late 1980's and early 1990's NBC was taking almost £1,000,000 per annum in rents from market stallholders, and very little of this was ever invested in promoting the future of the marketplace. From this point on the rent take would gradually go down.

In 1988 the Peacock Place shopping arcade opened on the east side of the Market Square, but the upper level of shops was never fully occupied, and trade for the rest never brisk. Shops came and went quite often, and frequently empty shops were available even on the lower level.

In the year 2000 the 'TOPPS' traffic warden scheme was introduced, one of the most hated of NBC's anti-motorist measures, which has seen more complaints from visitors to the town than any other. At the same time Town Centre parking fees were again increased, driving more shoppers out of town. The markets and the shops again

suffered a further gradual drop in trade. The number of empty shops and short-lease shops again increased, and more stalls became vacant on the market.

2002 saw the All Saints Piazza opened in front of the Town Centre All Saints Church. This area has rarely been used since for any civic functions, events, or outdoor exhibitions of any kind. By this time the market itself had begun to seriously decline, and the Market Hall, built in the 1930's, was already being considered for eventual closure. The years since the late 1980's had seen several shopping centres and retail parks built around the perimeter of the town, all with free parking, while the Town Centre continued to increase its parking fees and restrictions. All shops in the Town Centre continued to feel the effect of this policy, not just the markets. By 2006 many big-name stores in the Town Centre had packed and gone.

## **Northampton & Markets - Part Two - The Current Market**

### **(1) Factors necessary for a vibrant town centre market**

The factors presented here are necessary for the success of almost any town centre market, not just Northampton. By presenting these factors first, we shall have the opportunity to compare them against what Northampton has at present available. We should then be in a position to ascertain what changes are necessary, which of these are possible, and which are likely. From this we should be able to project what the future may hold for Northampton Market. The factors below are in no particular order of merit, and although the absence of any one of them may not preclude a successful market, the absence of two or more will begin a downturn in trade that may be difficult to reverse.

**a) High-density housing infrastructure close to the market.**

This could be flats, housing estates, or traditional terraced housing. It must be close enough to the market for people to want to come out twice or more a week for perishable goods like fruit and vegetables, and at least once a week for general market shopping. Often people living close to a market will visit on market-day "Just to have a look", and will then buy something on impulse. The walking distance is important, particularly for the disabled, the elderly, and mothers with young children, so the closer the housing is located to the market, the better.

**b) Easy access to the marketplace.**

Markets need easy foot access, so that the market may be approached from different directions without detour. Traditional town centre markets generally have good access, because such markets are located where roads and pathways cross. However, when the site of a market is changed to one with relatively poor access, perhaps tucked away behind buildings, or in a little-known square, that market will fail.

**c) Close to bus routes.**

Bus setting-down and picking-up points must be close to the market. This is particularly important for the disabled, the elderly, and for mothers with young children, three social groups which form an important percentage of the market traders' customers. Nobody wants to walk far with loaded bags of fruit and vegetables, or other bulky items, so it is vital that all major bus routes drop off and pick up as close to the market as possible.

**d) Close to car parking.**

Most people using a car to visit a town centre want to park as close as possible to where they are shopping. Car parking alongside the market is ideal, so that heavy bags can be put in the car without a long walk. The farther someone has to walk with full bags from a market to the nearest car park, the less likely they are to shop at that market. At the present time people are used to carrying their shopping the short distance across a supermarket car park to their car, no further. Therefore car parks should be located as close as possible to the town centre market.

**e) Free or cheap car parking.**

The great majority of car users take it for granted that they will enjoy free parking in any supermarket or retail centre they visit, probably for the duration of at least two hours. Therefore it should be obvious that free or very cheap car parking is essential to the retail life of a town centre and its market. Once car parking becomes expensive in comparison with venues which are free, the customers will go elsewhere. The town centre should be an inviting and welcoming environment for the visitor, and part of this welcome should be free parking.

**f) Clean safe shopping environment.**

The look and feel of a town centre will often determine whether the visitor or tourist will ever come again. A pleasant welcoming town centre will feel safe to go about one's business in, or to wander around and explore. It will have well-kept buildings and shop-fronts, clean roads and pavements, and only essential street furniture. It will have clean and decent public toilets as well as those provided by stores and public houses, and be well signposted so that a visitor never feels lost. The market itself will be a continuance of this experience; a bright colourful shopping area vibrant with scores if not hundreds of small businesses, selling a huge variety of goods at bargain prices. A safe clean shopping environment is essential, or visitors will not come again, and even local people will come less and less frequently.

**g) No 'sell-everything' supermarkets or chain stores in the vicinity.**

The presence of supermarkets close to an open market is at best a mixed blessing. If the supermarket sells an immense variety of goods very similar to those sold on the open market, and at the same prices or less, to which are shoppers going to go when the weather is less than ideal? While the free car parking the supermarket brings is useful, as it may mean more prospective customers, the time limits imposed generally ensure that not a great of time is left to look around the open market. It can be stated as a general rule that when a supermarket of the 'sell-everything' variety is opened near to an open market, that market will deteriorate.

**h) High Footfall.**

A high footfall of prospective customers will ensure the success of almost any market. High footfall is largely the result of a combination of all the factors above. Other factors which contribute to high footfall through a town centre, in no particular order of merit, are: local authority offices located in the town centre rather than outside the town itself; local offices and stores which allow their staff to go out and shop during the lunch break; business office buildings located within easy walking distance of the market; a good mix of retail shopping, including specialist shops, to suit a wide diversity of interests and depths of pocket; places of interest to visit in the town centre, historical buildings, particular styles of architecture, museums and art galleries and libraries; churches and chapels of historical interest, etc.

**i) A local authority familiar with best principles for town centres.**

A local authority with knowledge of all aspects beneficial to its town centre is essential for the well-being of the retail sector. Relatively few local authorities have any unified structure plan for their town centre. Most have allowed development both inside and outside their town centres without any investigation of the future consequences of this or that particular course of action or planning decision. As a result, many town centres are declining, their retail sectors pulling out.

## **Northampton & Markets - Part Two - The Current Market**

### **(2) Comparisons with Northampton town centre market**

**a) High-density housing infrastructure close to the market.**

Northampton had high-density terraced housing close to its market until the 1970's, when much of this (Newland) was levelled and the residents moved to estates further away from the town centre. Some high-density housing at Spring Boroughs remains. However, the residents of this estate sometimes complain about the four-lane highway which cuts them off from the town centre. Many do not like using the pedestrian subway, even in daytime. Some older residents do not like using the road crossings. It may be that for some people the four-lane highway forms a psychological barrier to the town centre.

Terraced housing just outside the town centre still exists. It is possible for many people to walk from areas like Billing Road, Wellingborough Road, and the streets between, into the town centre, but not many would wish to walk back loaded with heavy shopping. There is also considerable terraced housing in the Semilong area, and the area behind the Police and Fire Stations, bounded by the Racecourse and sweeping across to Kettering Road, and also the area between this and Wellingborough Road. Only the relatively young and fit would wish to carry heavy shopping bags on the return journey from the town centre to these areas.

By and large, Northampton market has lost the best of its closest high-density housing infrastructure. Although recent years have seen resurgence in the building of small blocks of private flats near the town centre, these are usually occupied by people who would perhaps be less likely to use the market.

**b) Easy access to the marketplace.**

Access to Northampton market is quite good, with the main entrances at the north and south ends of the marketplace. A couple of small alleys through the southern wall of buildings also give access, as does another alley on the lower southwest side. Work could be undertaken to clean up these alleys, often the haunt of beggars, to make them more user-friendly, with better signposting to the market. In

years past, when the buses came and went from Mercers Row and The Drapery, these alleys were in constant use with a stream of people going to and from the market. Another area of pedestrian access is from the Grosvenor Centre in the northeast corner. This can be quite busy at times. By and large pedestrian access to the market in Northampton is fairly good. But the signposting of the market could be improved. Considering that the market is one of the biggest attractions in the town centre, it is presently very poorly signposted. Tourists are more likely to stumble across it by accident than by following directional signs.

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### c) **Close to bus routes.**

Several bus routes drop off passengers in The Drapery, quite adjacent to the market, but not enough do this. Very few buses pick up from The Drapery, however. Instead, market customers have to walk from the market, up through the Grosvenor Centre, and eventually into the bus station. It is a long way to carry bags of goods like fresh fruit and vegetables, or an armful of flowers.

When the Grosvenor Centre was built the then new bus station was built alongside, cunningly designed to disgorge its passengers into the Grosvenor Centre rather than into the streets of the town centre itself, as the previous bus station had done. In inclement weather particularly, people who walk from the bus station into the Grosvenor Centre tend to stay there, and do all their shopping there.

A careful review of the bus routes into and out of the town centre is required, with the bus stops being re-sited so that buses can drop off and pick up their passengers in Bridge Street, Gold Street, The Drapery, Mercers Row, and Wood Hill. Additionally, a minimum payment park and ride bus system from satellite car parks would ease the traffic situation in the town centre.

### d) **Close to car parking.**

There is parking at the Grosvenor Short Stay car park, but this disgorges its passengers into the Centre itself, as might be expected. There is some parking on the Mounts car parks, a short walk from the market, and there is ample parking in the Long Stay car park on the Mayorhold, now called the Shoppers' Car Park. A slightly longer walk to the South, there is St John's car park below Derngate. At all of these, parking is relatively expensive when compared with the free parking available at supermarkets and retail centres. Often, during weekdays, many of these car parks are more than half-empty. Even on Saturdays they are rarely full. So although Northampton town centre has a reasonable amount of car parking fairly close to the

marketplace, it is not fully utilised, for reasons which become obvious under the next item below.

**e) Free or cheap car parking.**

There is not very much free car parking in or near Northampton town centre. All the car parks charge heavily compared with the free parking available at the satellite retail centres and supermarkets around the outskirts of the town. The stark truth is that these are the town centre's direct local competitors in the shopping stakes. Street parking in the town centre is restricted and expensive, and closely monitored by over-zealous civic traffic wardens run by the town council. Parking in the streets around the town centre is also restricted and monitored by these wardens, with large sections of many roads being 'Resident Permits Only'. The residents have to pay the town council a hefty fee each year to be able to park in their own streets. The visitor can use up a great deal of fuel driving through these streets waiting for one of the few free parking spaces to become available, and the number of free parking spaces - and visitors - diminishes year by year.

It is realised that the local council is required to raise vast revenues each year in order to make up the shortfalls from national government, a process that started in the 1980's and has been with us increasingly ever since. However, to do so, it has sacrificed its own town centre's retail trade, in common with other town councils throughout the land. Like those other councils, it has seen a decline in the numbers of people visiting its town centre, and it has seen many of its best shops depart, and its market gradually become a ghost of its former self. There can be little doubt that unless special measures are applied, or this onerous burden of revenue raising by local councils is lifted by reasonable funding from national government, the demise of town centres will continue.

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**f) Clean safe shopping environment.**

The shopping environment in Northampton town centre at the present time (Winter 2006) is probably cleaner and safer than it has been in the past. There is still room for improvement, but market traders remember that only a few year ago drunken persons were allowed by the then council to occupy all the seats at the top (North end) of the marketplace, drinking, sprawling, arguing, fighting, etc, as they pleased. This went on for several years. The Police avoided moving them on, and the then Town Centre Manager called in so-called 'Outreach' organisations to talk to them and discover their problems, and what could be done to help them. This made no difference at all. During this period visitors to the marketplace could be counted on never to come again, and many county visitors to the town were disgusted by what they found here, and avoided the place. The market traders even took photographs of these disgraceful scenes and showed them to councillors at Market Liaison meetings. Some councillors were shocked, but amazingly some found the photographs hilarious.

So for years the managers in the shops at the north end of the market complained, and the market traders complained, and nothing at all was done. All were gradually but relentlessly losing custom.

Eventually a 'Drunks' Shelter' was built in Sheep Street, and the marketplace was made a no-drinking zone, but the damage had been done, and the reputation acquired over several years still hangs over the marketplace today. The drunken people now congregate in and around their red shelter, carrying out their activities in much the same manner as before, but now confined to this particular small area in Sheep Street. They are probably the first sight the new visitor sees as he or she walks out of the Shoppers Car Park opposite, and serve as it were as an introduction to the town centre, and perhaps give an indication of the sort of quality that visitors can expect in Northampton.

The daytime environment in the town centre at present is relatively safe, especially when compared to the same area at night, and particularly Friday and Saturday nights. Sometimes there are complaints of dirty streets, unkempt buildings made worse by graffiti, drunken persons haranguing passers-by, beggars in alleyways, and a plethora of pedlars and so-called 'survey' people in Abington Street. Another frequent complaint is about the over-zealous civic traffic warden, ready with his camera to photograph the car tyre one inch over the white line, or putting a £60 ticket on the car parked one minute over the allotted time. All or any combination of these will make the casual visitor vow never to return. So while the town centre is a reasonably safe and clean shopping environment, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

**g) No 'sell-everything' supermarkets or chain stores in the vicinity.**

At present there is no direct threat from this direction. While Morrisons supermarket to the south may take a portion of the formerly market fruit, vegetable, and meat and fish trade, and Wilkinson's chain-store in Gold Street take a portion of the formerly market hardware trade, and any number of fashion-wear shops compete with some fashion traders on the market, these are all separate stores each under its own roof, not some immense megalithic trading monster. Whether a huge Wal-Mart-like store will be allowed to develop within the future plans for the town centre is unlikely. There would certainly be protests from many individual shops and chain-store branches if this looked at all likely. Such a mega-store would threaten not only the market, but most of the retail businesses within the town centre.

**11**

**h) High footfall.**

At present there is no high footfall in Northampton town centre, even in Christmas week. The reasons for this have been given above. To obtain high footfall for the town centre generally would be a task of great magnitude, requiring co-operation between private businesses and local authority, between bus services and train services, and the funds to roll out such a collective effort could only come from a

branch of national government. It would require a complete re-think on what town centres are for, and a concerted plan that would affect every aspect of local government. In place of sumptuous local authority offices outside town, there would be adequate offices within town. In place of the present philosophy of holding the public at arms length, there would have to be a philosophy of inclusiveness, warts and all. In the private sector, business would have to be seen to be done in and around the town centre once again, not on some remote retail park more suited to industrial endeavours.

**i) A local authority familiar with best principles for town centres.**

Great changes would be necessary for Northampton's local authority to become familiar with best principles for its town centre. Like many local authorities, it has been slowly but perhaps not deliberately strangling its town centre since the 1980's, aided and abetted by national government policy. Now that it is too late for many town centres, the government of the day has made noises about 'saving' town centres, and has even allocated funds in some cases, for works to be undertaken in this direction. Whether this has come too late to save Northampton town centre remains to be seen. Certainly a third-rate local authority, cited as being one of the very worst in all England, cannot on its own be expected to turn around its town centre so late in the day. It will need clear instruction and funds from elsewhere to even begin thinking about the task. We stand in the eleventh hour.