

Grays Town Centre

Consultation with businesses and organisations based in Grays Report of Findings

March 2013



SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

1. Why do businesses and organisations locate in Grays?

The clear main reason for locating in Grays town centre is access to customers, with 71% of respondents identifying this as their reason for locating in Grays. Other reasons were identified with around 10% identifying town centre facilities, property prices/rental values, support services, and transport links. Respondents were also asked to identify positive reasons for locating in Grays. Access to customers was again the main positive reason. Other reasons featured more strongly with 41% of responses identifying proximity to amenities/services/other organisations and 21% of responses identify transport links.

2. What would Improve Grays?

A wide range of suggestions were made including;

- More police/better security/night time policing/CCTV
- Better parking/free parking/free parking for businesses/better sign posting of parking
- Better road system/improve one way system/traffic flow/deal with congestion/remove bus lanes.
- Wider range of shops and restaurants/cafes /more places to eat/more places for entertainment/big name retailers.
- Wider range of businesses/business centre/affordable business premises/attract blue chip companies
- Improve the appearance and make the town more welcoming/improve facilities such as toilets

3. What should the future role of Grays be?

Respondents generally see a mixed role for Grays in the future. The emphasis is on Grays being a place for entertainment, culture and socialising (60.9% of responses) and a place for markets and events (53.6% of responses). There was also strong support for convenience retail (40.6%). Developing Grays as a place for communities to meet and as a centre for business based around professional office based services and business centre floor space received lower levels of support. But the level of support for these was none the less significant with 34.8% and 23.1% of respondents support respectively in favour of these.

4. How good is the Grays town 'offer'?

Public transport and ease of access within the town centre are considered to be good or very good by most respondents. Opinions about car parking, and access in to the town were mixed. A large proportion of responses considered these to be poor/very poor but slightly more considered them to be good/very good (36.8% and 42% of respondents respectively).

Opinions about safety in the town were mixed but the balance of opinion (44.9% of responses) considered the town to be poor/very poor in this respect

Opinions about litter and graffiti were more mixed with similar numbers of responses rating the town as good/very good, average, and poor/very poor. However the balance of opinion (37.7% of responses) was that the town was poor/very poor.

In other respects the majority of respondents identified Grays as being average, poor or very poor. This was particularly the case for a range of issues that respondents see as the basis for the future of Grays; for example selection of shops, leisure and entertainment, cultural facilities, range of events all scored poorly in the survey.

5. How likely are improvements to encourage people to visit Grays town centre?

Respondents identified a wide range of potential improvements with the most popular being lower parking charges, wider range of shops, cafes and restaurants, better facilities for visitors and improvements to lighting and signage.

Grays market receives very strong support with over 80% of respondents supporting additional market days and a range of different types of market.



Thurrock Council

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Public Consultation**

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Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of the consultation was to gather a representative sample of views of residents and people who used Grays railway station to support the development of a vision and strategy for the future of Grays.

The consultation has explored a range of views, some of which were and positive some of which were negative, all of which Thurrock Council and its partners can build upon to develop the town centre.

It is interesting to see that of the respondents, those who completed the survey online were, in the majority of cases, more negative than their counterparts who completed the questionnaire either over the telephone or face to face at the Railway station. This is not unexpected as these respondents actively participated in the survey rather than being sought out by an interviewer and, therefore, may have had views they wished to share in the consultation.

During the consultation, there were a number of key strands that were highlighted for further development.

Retail offer

One of the most compelling issues that respondents were not happy about was the range of shops available in the town centre. Since Lakeside Shopping Centre opened less than three miles away, Grays town centre has had a number of major national shops close and relocate to the shopping centre. This has had a detrimental effect to the town and the range of shops on offer, including the sheer number of people shopping in the town. Of the respondents interviewed, only one third shopped in Grays town centre for their food and only 14% shopped for other goods. Interestingly, nearly one third of those interviewed were visiting Grays town centre to visit the bank. Further research should be undertaken to explore how to capture these people so they use other services and facilities in the town centre at the same time.

Of those interviewed, well over half thought the range and selection of shops was *poor* or *very poor*, with nearly one third saying they were average. Respondents clearly want to see the selection of shops improved as nearly all (95%) said that increasing the range of shops would *likely* or *very likely* encourage use and increase the number of people visiting Grays.

However, respondents were relatively positive about the markets. The market is open just twice a week on Fridays and Saturdays and is well used by shoppers. Six in ten respondents said they would be *likely* or *very likely* to visit the market if there were additional market days introduced or different types of market. Furthermore, respondents suggested introducing specialist markets to encourage people into Grays with three quarters highlighting farmers markets with a third suggesting specialist markets.

Thurrock Council and its partners should, therefore, explore the opportunity of expanding and developing the markets further and try to encourage new retail ventures to encourage more use of the town centre.

Travel and accessibility to the town centre

Access to Grays Town Centre, its geographical location and the ease of getting around the centre were seen positively by respondents with two thirds saying they were good or very good. Moreover, car parking was seen as good or very good by 43%, however, it was also apparent that even though the car parking facilities were good,

the cost could be lowered to encourage people to use the town centre. It was even suggested to offer free car parking at weekends and bank holidays to encourage greater use.

Respondents also rated public transport positively. Although one quarter could not comment as they were not public transport users, half of respondents thought public transport was *good* or *very good*. Again, it was thought that if public transport was improved at the weekend and bank holidays, more people may be encouraged to use the town centre more.

The partnership should explore opportunities of providing offers for car parking and even free car parking at weekends and bank holidays to encourage greater use.

Personal safety

Attitudes towards personal safety were mixed but were highlighted as an important element if Grays town centre is to be improved, with 45% of respondents saying personal safety was *poor* or *very poor* with only one in five saying *good* or *very good*. To encourage more people to use the centre during the evening, respondents believed that more police patrols and more CCTV should be introduced. Although crime levels may have actually fallen in and around Grays, it is important to remember that perceived crime levels can be higher than actual crime levels.

The partnership should consider a campaign that will educate about crime levels and promote Grays town centre as a safe place to be. Moreover, CCTV and additional police presence would help reassure town centre users, particularly during the evening. The Grays police station should also be promoted more as it was identified by some respondents as a positive aspect to the town centre.

Shoppers' facilities

Respondents clearly had mixed views on facilities such as toilets. Whilst one quarter were happy with toilet facilities, it was clear that one third were not. However, toilets were not mentioned by respondents when asked to suggest one thing to encourage people to the town centre. This shows that although an important issue to respondents, it was not a deciding factor that would encourage people to visit Grays.

Bars, cafes and restaurants

The second most popular choice, increasing the range of bars, cafes and restaurants was seen as integral to encouraging more people into the town centre. This was overwhelmingly so when considering increasing numbers visiting the town centre during the evening.

When asked, over one quarter of people said that increasing the range of bars, cafes and restaurant would increase the number of users to the town centre during the evening and to a lesser degree, but still very important, during the weekend. It was clear from the consultation that respondents, particularly those who use the Railway station and those aged 30-44, want to see an increase in the range of bars, cafes and restaurant on offer.

Thurrock Council and its partners should explore opportunities with the private sector to develop the food and drink offer.

Leisure and entertainment

Grays town centre is home to Thameside Theatre, which puts on a number of shows and artists throughout the year. Respondents spoke favourably about theatre with many visiting on a regular basis. Some, however, did think that the theatre could show a wider range of acts and performances, and allow community and school use. In addition, some respondents suggested that to encourage more people to use the

theatre, special deals could be offered such as a meal and theatre deal, and special lower priced tickets. Also, some suggested that the seating could be improved as the current ones are not comfortable. Specialist or older films could be shown to attract more customers.

Thurrock Council, its partners and Thameside Theatre should explore introducing different initiatives to encourage use of the theatre and local businesses such as restaurants.

The State Cinema, which closed in 1988, is a Grade II* listed building but has been unused for many years. A multi-complex cinema is located at Lakeside Shopping Centre. However, 6% of respondents thought a new cinema would bring people into the town centre during the evening. With a multi-complex cinema so close, it is unlikely that a company would locate a cinema in Grays town centre, so careful consideration is needed to ascertain what could be offered and how a cinema could be created using existing venues.

Family/community events and activities

One fifth of respondents believed that improving the range of family/community events and activities during the weekend and bank holidays would increase the number of people visiting Grays town centre. This, coupled with increasing the range of children's facilities and activities, indicates that more family orientated events at the weekend and bank holidays would encourage more visitors.

Moreover, to support more family activities, public transport could be improved during weekends and bank holidays with the offer of reduced travel. Car parking should also be either reduced or free to entice families into the town centre.

Thurrock Council and its partners need to review the current range of family/community events and activities and identify new events that will encourage families. It may be beneficial to explore what types of events and activities have worked well in other similar sized towns so successful ideas and events could be replicated in Grays.

Summary

The consultation has explored some interesting issues and has highlighted some key concerns and opportunities for Thurrock Council and its partners to take on board and explore. Not all improvements can be made by Thurrock Council alone, but when explored as a partnership with key stakeholders and local businesses, there is a clear opportunity for Grays town centre to develop into a successful, sustainable town for the people of Thurrock.