

DONALDSONS

# **HALIFAX CENTRE STRATEGY REPORT**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

March 1995

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## **1.0 Introduction**

1.1 The Council has already established three main aims for the town centre:

- i) To seek improved facilities - particularly in the range and quality of shopping.
- ii) To reduce unnecessary traffic and pollution whilst maintaining accessibility.
- iii) To create an attractive and safe environment - which will be maintained and improved.

1.2 Our Brief addresses these three aims and we have reported under the headings of Health Check, An Appraisal of the Development Potential of Key Sites, Development Partnerships, Transport Strategy and Town Centre Management.

1.3 Our report culminates in a succinct strategy and action plans to address the three established objectives.

## **2.0 Health Check**

2.1 In order to analyse the centre's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), we have carried out our own attitudinal surveys in respect of Halifax, Huddersfield and Bradford and have held two workshops attended by "key players" in the role of Halifax as a town centre.

2.2 Our SWOT analysis confirms that Halifax town centre is already threatened by Huddersfield and Bradford and that the situation is likely to be exacerbated once the White Rose Centre, South Leeds is completed. In comparison with these centres Halifax lacks, firstly, major multiples requiring in excess of 20,000 sq ft (1,858 m<sup>2</sup>) and, secondly, appropriately sized unit shops required by today's high street retailers. In their Halifax Shopping Study of October 1994, DTZ Debenham Thorpe concluded

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that there was capacity for increased town centre comparison goods retail provision amounting to 82,000 sq ft (7,618 m<sup>2</sup>) (net) by the year 2001. In order to ensure that sufficient demand exists from retailers to occupy this amount of additional accommodation, we have carried out a retailer survey. In terms of large space users, requirements totalling 74,000 sq ft (6,875 m<sup>2</sup>) were identified whilst, in addition, there is evidence of demand for high street unit shops totalling 114,000 sq ft (10,590 m<sup>2</sup>). Whilst these requirements merely represent expressions of interest at this stage, the survey adds weight to our view that a new retail scheme providing appropriate retail accommodation would let well.

2.3 Our SWOT analysis and retailer survey identify four main areas which need to be addressed in a strategy for Halifax town centre:

- i) There is an urgent need for town centre retail development opportunities to be identified.
- ii) Action is required in order to resolve existing transportation/highways concerns including such matters as highways improvements, car parking issues and transport policies.
- iii) Pedestrian areas should be upgraded through a planned programme of new surfacing and street furniture.
- iv) Attention needs to be given to day to day matters affecting the performance of the town centre such as promotion, maintenance, corporate identity, safety, signage, cleansing, etc. These aspects come within the ambit of Town Centre Management.

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### **3.0 An Appraisal of the Development Potential of Key Sites**

3.1 We have identified and considered the suitability as major development opportunities of four sites - Broad Street, The Woolshops, Westgate and the Head Post Office site. We have also made recommendations on potential opportunities at Upper George Yard, the Borough Market, the Piece Hall, North Bridge/Charlestown Road and The Shay. In considering these various opportunities it is important to bear in mind the key criteria of potential developers and, particularly in the case of Halifax, the need for any new scheme to respect the Conservation Area setting and to complement the quality and style of many of the fine buildings which the centre boasts.

#### **3.2 Broad Street**

3.2.1 We have considered the attractiveness of the Broad Street site for a major town centre retail development scheme but have concluded that it is too divorced, in physical terms, from the prime retailing core. Instead, we believe that the site lends itself to a mixed use development which could include any combination of offices, leisure, bulky goods retail and residential. Accordingly, we recommend that a Development Brief should be produced on the basis of a mixed use development, identifying the various appropriate uses but deliberately not being prescriptive, so that developers are clearly given the initiative to come forward with their own proposals.

3.2.2 So far as timing is concerned, we recommend that work on the preparation of an appropriate Development Brief should be commenced immediately and the site should be marketed at the earliest possible opportunity.

#### **3.3 The Woolshops**

3.3.1 Due to its location immediately adjoining the relatively recent Woolshops development, the site has clear potential for a major town centre retail scheme. Whether or not the development opportunity becomes available, however, depends largely on the attitude of Sainsburys to whom we have

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spoken. They confirm that they would consider relocating to an alternative site but, if this were not possible, they would also consider extending their existing store on to the site of the existing sorting office.

3.3.2 We have given consideration to the merit of the Woolshops site in comparison with other development opportunities, most notably Westgate. From the point of view of the town centre as a whole, we believe that a major development on the Woolshops site would have the effect of concentrating too much retail in one area to the detriment of the Southgate/Borough Markets/Westgate areas. On the contrary, a new scheme at, for instance, Westgate would provide a more satisfactory balance to the town centre as a whole.

3.3.3 In any case, the Council would be unable to take the lead in promoting a development on the Woolshops and, clearly, Sainsburys hold the key to whether or not any such scheme could take place. Accordingly, we recommend that discussions should continue with Sainsburys with a view to them progressing plans to extend their existing store.

### **3.4 Westgate**

3.4.1 This area has been considered for redevelopment previously and specific proposals were drawn up in 1989. These proposals envisaged a two level scheme providing three large stores and 26 units shops. Generally speaking, schemes with two levels of retailing have become less popular over the last few years but the sloping nature of this site means that it would be possible to enter each level at grade and this could, we believe, lead to an attractive and viable scheme. Proposals of this type still, therefore, warrant serious consideration.

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- 3.4.2 An alternative approach is for consideration to be given to a scheme with a single level of retailing (with the exception of large stores which could trade at two or three levels) and incorporating glazed pedestrian ways similar to arcades as close as possible to the existing lines of Westgate and Carrier Street. In this case, storage would be provided at the upper level and, in order to achieve the appropriate mass of building form which would be appropriate for Halifax town centre, it would also provide an opportunity to incorporate residential accommodation.
- 3.4.3 We believe that there would be considerable developer interest in the Westgate site but we have a concern that a predominantly single level retailing scheme will not have the necessary critical mass to appeal to retailers and to provide the substantial improvement in Halifax's retail offer which is necessary to improve its vitality and viability. It is for this reason that we recommend the inclusion of the Westgate/Thomas Street block within the overall scheme.
- 3.4.4 We have produced a sketch scheme which shows a potential redevelopment of the joint sites. This scheme retains the façade of the Listed former Theatre Royal and other unlisted buildings with some architectural or historic interest and could, potentially, provide three large stores and over 40 unit shops.
- 3.4.5 We recommend that the Council should regard the combined Westgate sites as the prime retail development opportunity in the town centre and that it should commit itself to taking the lead role in bringing it forward for development at the earliest possible date. This would include a commitment to use Compulsory Purchase powers, if necessary. As in the case of Broad Street, a Development Brief will be required.
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### **3.5 The Post Office Site**

3.5.1 The existence of the Listed Olde Cock Public House and other buildings of some historic or architectural interest clearly poses constraints on a large scale redevelopment scheme and this coupled with the fact that Marks & Spencer tell us that they do not wish to relocate, leads us to conclude that this site is unlikely, in the foreseeable future, to provide a major retail development opportunity to satisfy Halifax's requirements.

3.5.2 Nevertheless, we believe that the Council, through its Officers, should continue to encourage British Telecom to rationalise its operation and to consider promoting a scheme with a commercial content in the underused accommodation occupied by the telephone exchange to the rear of the main Post Office building. Similarly, discussions should be held with the Co-op who are, we understand, dissatisfied with their current accommodation. In particular, consideration should be given to the Co-op relocating to the proposed Westgate redevelopment, which would create the opportunity for their existing store to be refurbished and, possibly, remodelled to provide unit shopping fronting King Edward Street.

### **3.6 Upper George Yard**

3.6.1 Due to the poor pedestrian access available, the lack of prominence of this backland site and the lack of specialist retailers in the current economic climate, we do not believe that the current proposals to provide speciality shopping will be implementable.

3.6.2 We believe that the most appropriate commercial solution would be to demolish the derelict warehouse building in the centre of the site and the two unattractive shop units fronting Cheapside and to build two or three larger, deeper shop units in their place. These would be attractive alongside Marks & Spencer, who should be encouraged to introduce a side

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entrance, if levels permit. If demolition were not possible or the agreement of land owners was not forthcoming then we believe that the most appropriate use for the existing vacant warehouse would be residential. We appreciate that refurbishment costs would be high and it may be difficult to achieve a viable scheme, in which case it would be necessary to explore the possibility of grant aid.

### **3.7 The Borough Market**

- 3.7.1 The Borough Market is a fine example of a traditional market hall which contributes towards the vitality and viability of the town centre as a whole. Although it is true that market traders are threatened by the increasing number of discount retailers and changes in shopping patterns, nevertheless, we believe that the Borough Market continues to provide an interest and atmosphere which is not replicated elsewhere.
- 3.7.2 We recognise that the Borough Market generates substantial rental income for the Council and, in any case, we do not believe that it would ideally lend itself to unit shopping. Consequently we have no doubt that the Borough Market should remain as the Borough Market.
- 3.7.3 Consideration should, however, be given to making the market more attractive and profitable. We believe that the Westgate proposals will be of benefit to the Borough Market but, in the context of the Westgate scheme, the physical appearance along Albion Street could be enhanced by considering moving the fishmongers inside the market with the creation of unit shopping in their place along the Albion Street frontage. If the interior can be re-configured to satisfactorily accommodate their requirements, then this proposal ought to increase the market's overall rental value. We also suggest that the existing utilitarian doors to the Borough Market should be replaced and that further consideration should be given to putting the



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current under-utilised upper floors to better use. Whilst we understand that there are problems concerning means of escape, nevertheless, we feel that the feasibility of residential units should be explored further, probably through co-operation with a Housing Association and, possibly, with support from the Living Over the Shop Scheme.

### **3.8 The Piece Hall**

3.8.1 The Piece Hall is the only Grade I Listed building in Halifax town centre and, despite its somewhat run down appearance, it remains a unique attraction offering speciality shopping, an open market three days per week and the potential for events when the market is not operating. Whilst we have considered major proposals to, for instance, provide a lightweight roofing over the central courtyard this would, clearly, be prohibitive on cost grounds and would also, probably, be difficult to achieve, bearing in mind the Grade I Listed status of the building. Accordingly, we conclude that major works are inappropriate.

3.8.2 Consideration should, however, be given to further enhancing the existing attraction. The majority of the retailing takes place from the upper levels and much of the ground floor looks uninteresting and uninviting and we suggest that consideration should be given to introducing uses which will act as a destination, such as a quality wine bar or restaurant. The central courtyard has potential for staging events but we believe that its full potential is not being realised and we would recommend the staging of more concerts aimed at younger people and more events using a marquee if protection from the elements is more important. Although we have considered the possibility of using the centre courtyard for temporary car parking when the market is not operating, we do not recommend this course of action.

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**3.9 The North Bridge/Charlestown Road Area**

3.9.1 This substantial area of land stretching from the North Bridge Leisure Centre to Bailey Hall Road contains many buildings which have become surplus to their original requirements and vacant areas of land currently used for surface car parking, scrap yards, etc.

3.9.2 The area is clearly in need of long term redevelopment and we would recommend uses such as non-food retailing, leisure uses, employment generators and, particularly, relocations from other town centre sites with development potential. We are aware that existing owners such as NEGas and Nestlé have their own plans and, clearly, Council Officers should liaise with these substantial landowners in order to bring about the overall objective but we believe that the Council's priority should be to concentrate on the two town centre opportunities which we have identified.

**3.10 The Shay**

3.10.1 This site was examined by DTZ Debenham Thorpe, who recommended its potential for food retail use without adversely affecting Halifax town centre. However, since that time members have resolved not to sell The Shay.

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## **4.0 Development Partnerships**

- 4.1 *Having considered the various forms of development partnership and, in particular, direct development in partnership with a fund and joint venture partnerships, we recommend that, in the context of Halifax generally and the Broad Street and Westgate opportunities in particular, the Council should proceed with traditional development agreements. We believe that direct development in partnership with a fund exposes the Council to an unacceptably high level of risk and that joint venture partnerships, where the Council is committed to a specific developer partner, do not provide the best mechanism for selecting the most appropriate developer for a specific redevelopment opportunity.*
- 4.2 *The traditional development agreement approach is commonly used and well understood by developers so that it would not deter them from becoming involved. It allows the Council to take the lead role in controlling the development process and, in particular, its timescale without any of the risks involved. With the use of competition, it can be readily evidenced that the Council has obtained the best consideration and the legal arrangements are sufficiently flexible to allow the Council to receive its consideration as rental, capital or both. Overage provisions also allow the Council to share in the success of the scheme but not, importantly, to be responsible for any risk.*
- 4.3 *In terms of developer selection, in respect of Broad Street we recommend the preparation of a Development Brief followed by advertising nationally and locally with developers invited to express their interest by a stipulated date. Sufficient information would be requested from developers at this stage to enable a shortlist of, preferably, four to be drawn up and those shortlisted would then be given a fixed period of time, say three months, to provide detailed plans of their proposals together with financial offers.*
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- 4.4 Normally, we would recommend a similar approach in respect of Westgate but the situation here is complicated by the extensive ownership within the site of O & C Estates. There could be advantages in reaching an agreement with O & C Estates to reflect their ownership in the redevelopment area. We recommend, therefore, that further discussions should take place in order to ascertain whether or not some sort of agreement can be recommended. Conscious of the need to progress the development of this area rapidly, however, we would recommend that a time limit of two months should be placed on these discussions with a firm decision taken on the appropriate way forward at that time.

## **5.0 Transport Strategy**

- 5.1 The "zone and loop" system addresses the problems of congestion and pollution by imposing a road system which, by its very nature, prevents through traffic and reduces circulating traffic by creating self-contained zones. We consider this to be a totally appropriate solution, particularly as flexibility within individual areas appears achievable. In order for the circulation system to work effectively and to efficiently take through traffic out of the town centre, it is clearly necessary for certain improvements to take place. The proposed Church Street widening appears essential in this respect if further congestion is to be avoided. We are aware of proposals for an eastern by-pass but consider this to be a long term proposal which, depending on the ability of the improved Church Street to carry the volume of traffic generated, may not, in fact, prove to be necessary. The proposed Orange Street/Winding Road link clearly has major repercussions on the Broad Street development opportunity. We have seen options which envisage the new link road cutting across the Broad Street site with the replacement car parking provided to the north and the remainder of the site, to the south, available for development. Provided acceptable pedestrian linkages from the car park through the new development and into the centre were practical and "user friendly", then we believe that this option provides the basis for detailed consideration by developers within the context of the overall Development Brief. We remain doubtful however, that the Broad Street site is sufficiently valuable to fully fund the Orange Street/Winding Road link.

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- 5.2 In terms of car parking, we agree with the overall strategy of, in the long term, providing for four large car parks located to the north, south, east and west of the centre at its periphery. We therefore support, in principle, the proposal to provide a new major car parking provision to serve the Broad Street and Westgate redevelopments, but we suspect that the development potential of these sites will only support a relatively small car park and that sufficient finance may not be available to provide all the additional spaces envisaged within the transport strategy. No judgement can be taken at this time and it should clearly remain the Council's stated intention within the Development Briefs that substantial additional car parking should be provided within these general areas. On street car parking presents different problems. Most retailers would like to see as much on street car parking as close to their premises as possible. This, however, creates congestion and pollution when spaces are occupied and drivers often drive around until they find an available space. Until the planned off street car parks are available, we believe that interim parking controls are essential and we note that the Council has recently introduced restrictions to short stay, on street car parking. Whilst unpopular with shoppers and retailers, we regard this control as essential if congestion and pollution are to be reduced and the attractiveness and safety of the overall town centre environment improved.
- 5.3 With regard to public transport, the bus station provides an excellent access point to the town centre, being centrally located and providing modern facilities. The same cannot be said of the railway station which is more remote and where pedestrian access to the town centre is somewhat confused and a steep rather unattractive climb acts as something of a disincentive. We note that consideration has been given to an innovative transport system and we can see the benefits of such a system provided that it operates regularly and at short - less than 10 minute - intervals throughout the day. We believe that the regularity of the system is more important than its appearance although it must be "user friendly" and, for the benefit of those using the
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town centre, we would like to see a minibus type of system with an easily recognised livery which is, above all, regular, available at intervals of less than 10 minutes and cheap. As well as transporting shoppers around the town centre, this system should pick up visitors to Eureka! and those employed at Dean Clough.

- 5.4 Pedestrianisation proposals are usually, initially, resisted by retailers but, in the course of time, most come to accept that pedestrianisation is, in fact, beneficial. Certainly, increased pedestrianisation fits in with the Council's aim of creating an attractive and safe environment and we would recommend extensions to the existing pedestrianisation schemes wherever possible. In some cases, such as Market Street, there exists a conflict between pedestrians and buses/service vehicles and, whilst full pedestrianisation would clearly be the ultimate objective, in the short term, traffic calming measures should be introduced to reduce the speed of buses and service vehicles. In terms of the existing pedestrian areas, early attention needs to be given to their overall appearance and they should be enhanced by the implementation of a programme of environmental improvements including upgrading the surfacing and street furniture in a manner sensitive to the Conservation Area.

## **6.0 Town Centre Management**

- 6.1 The SWOT analysis identifies that attention needs to be given to day to day matters affecting the performance of the town centre such as promotion, maintenance, corporate identity, safety, signage, cleansing, etc. These aspects come within the ambit of Town Centre Management. This initiative has been taken in many towns and cities up and down the country and there are now over 100 Town Centre Managers in post. We recommend a structure which involves the formation of a Town Centre Management Forum and the appointment of a Town Centre Manager. The Town Centre Manager would be directly responsible to the Forum but would also liaise with the Officers Working Group and, through that Working Group and the Town Centre Working Party, relate to the Council's Service Committees and the Policy and Resources Committee. We recommend that the Halifax Town Centre

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Forum should be a constituted association and membership of this association would be available to all users of the centre who have the common goal of improving the centre. An annual subscription of, say, £100 would be payable. Within the association, we recommend that an Executive Board of 17 members should be formed who would run the Forum on a day to day basis. We have recommended the make-up of the Board and we have also suggested a constitution for the Town Centre Forum.

- 6.2 In terms of funding, heads of expenditure would include the Manager's salary, support staff, accommodation, promotions, conferences/travel and recruitment costs. Excluding the once and only recruitment costs, we estimate the necessary annual budget to total around £62,500, ignoring any contributions in kind. We have already identified at least £15,000 per annum from the Private Sector but, once the initiative has been adopted by the Council and it becomes clear that it will actually come to fruition, further funds should be forthcoming and we recommend that it should be assumed that the Private Sector will be able to contribute around 50% of the total annual budget figure. The Council's commitment in taking the initiative and contributing to the funding is, clearly, essential. We recommend, therefore, that the Council should show its commitment to this initiative by allocating the sum of £30,000 per annum within its budget for a three year period.
- 6.3 In respect of objectives, we have prepared a suggested job description for the Halifax Town Centre Manager which identifies, amongst other things, the job purpose and specific duties. In terms of objectives and actions, we have listed these within two categories. Firstly, the achievement of immediate short term objectives aimed at demonstrating the implementation of an effective town centre management programme and, secondly, longer term objectives where the aim should be to achieve them within the three year period. Clearly, the objectives will eventually be formed by the Town Centre Forum and will be heavily influenced by input from the Halifax Centre Working Party, via the inter-departmental Officer Working Group.

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6.4 Finally, it is important that both the Project and the Town Centre Manager are regularly monitored. The overall success of the initiative will show itself in a number of ways - for instance by retailers through increased turnovers, by shoppers who appreciate a pleasant environment and a wide choice of facilities and by the attraction of non-shopping visitors to the centre and investors who wish to carry out refurbishments and developments. Ultimately, success can only be gauged by consultation with those parties who have identified current weaknesses. A regular appraisal system is needed in order to assess the performance of the Town Centre Manager and to assist him/her in fulfilling the required role. The Forum would expect to receive regular written and verbal reports supplemented with sound budget planning and control but the Forum Chairperson could, if considered appropriate, become the immediate supervisor of the Manager and a regular assessment could be made of actions, decisions, innovations and organisation skills.

## **7.0 Strategy and Action Plans**

7.1 We believe that the three established aims of the Council should be specifically addressed by the following strategy:

- i) To substantially improve the retail offer, attractions and opportunities by seeking developer partners for the Westgate and Broad Street sites at the earliest possible date and by demonstrating commitment to the use of Compulsory Purchase powers, where necessary. Elsewhere in the town centre to take the initiative in improving the attractions of the Borough Market and the Piece Hall and in encouraging private owners to bring forward appropriate smaller scale development schemes.
- ii) To minimise congestion and pollution within the centre by implementing the zone and loop system (including the Church Street widening and the Orange Street/Winding Road link), increasing the provision of off street car parking in strategic locations and improving public transport facilities around the centre.



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- iii) To enhance pedestrian areas by implementing a programme of environmental improvements in a manner sensitive to the Conservation Area and by ensuring that new development is of a high quality.
  - iv) To promote and support the concept of Town Centre Management with the creation of a Town Centre Forum and the employment of a Town Centre Manager.

7.2 We have produced specific action plans for Broad Street and Westgate which include the key processes necessary to bring about the development of those sites. If the identified programme is adhered to, then we would anticipate that the Broad Street development would be completed by September 1998 but the Westgate scheme would take longer, due to the anticipated need for Compulsory Purchase action and the delays which this involves, with an anticipated scheme completion date of late 1999. Unfortunately, town centre schemes, generally speaking, take longer to bring to fruition than any other type of development and this is reflected in these timetables. It is important to stress, however, that neither scheme will come to fruition unless the Council gives its whole-hearted support.

7.3 We have also produced summary action plans in respect of the other development opportunity identified, transportation issues and the implementation of a Town Centre Management initiative.