



Ensuring that Letchworth has a Resilient and Thriving Town Centre



**A Report by Transition Town Letchworth (TTL)
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Letchworth Town Centre was laid out originally when shoppers bought from a variety of separate shops, like the green grocers, butchers and fishmongers. Supermarkets have now taken over provision of most food essentials and currently Letchworth Town Centre, in common with other towns, largely caters for 'retail recreation'. Major shopping tends to be on-line, from large retail parks or the industrial estate with attractive free parking.

1.2 Shops frequently close in Letchworth, with notable losses being Tower Electricals, the toy shop, the school uniform shop and Mock Turtle. This is not only an issue for businesses but also for residents of the town who are slowly losing the benefit that a successful balanced local shopping centre provides. Letchworth is in no way unique in its struggle to build a vibrant town centre. Discussions over how to address failing high streets is a common topic for media debate.

1.3 Keeping the town centre healthy and vibrant is part of making Letchworth a special place to live and planning and delivering a strategy for a

successful town centre is really important for the utility of the people of the town. Transition Town Letchworth (TTL) are a charity whose objective is to undertake local projects to help build resilient communities and in so doing tackle climate change. TTL are interested in seeing local businesses thrive, providing local employment, local products and services and local recreational activities. TTL want to eliminate unnecessary transport costs by ensuring local goods and services are on offer in Letchworth. TTL are therefore keen to contribute ideas on how to reinvigorate our town centre.

1.4 This report is intended to contribute to the ongoing conversation with the people and organisations that are active in Letchworth about developing a strategy which could make our town centre much more sustainable.

1.5 Whilst developing the ideas in this paper a number of ideas for encouraging people to use Letchworth Town Centre were generated and these are captured in Appendix A.

2. ATTRACTING PEOPLE INTO THE TOWN CENTRE

2.1 In Letchworth Town Centre shops like Morrison's, Iceland and Home Bargains appear busy. However, conversations with some shopkeepers in more specialist stores indicates that they are experiencing a declining footfall. TTL would like to see data on the footfall of Letchworth compared with Hitchin and Biggleswade.

The Town Centre Retail Mix

2.2 To frequent a shopping centre people must have a level of confidence that they will be able to purchase the products and services that they seek. If a person wants a number of items and only some are available in Letchworth and all in another local town then all the purchases are likely to be made in another town. A gap analysis needs to be undertaken to see which products and services Letchworth residents have

to visit other towns to purchase, along with the estimated level of demand for these products by Letchworth residents. This study would assist new businesses and existing businesses in identifying opportunities.

2.3 Gaps that are identified could be filled in two ways, firstly a new shop could be encouraged to come to the town centre which has products that can fill the gap. For example, Trespass, with their children's and adults outdoor garments, is a good example of a shop which has filled a market gap and has become an established part of the town. The second option for filling a gap is for existing local shops to extend their range of products. For example, a few years back Annie's sweet shop began providing cake decorations after a

customer asked them to fill this gap in the town offer.



2.4 There has been a policy of letting market forces determine the retail mix in the town centre. However, there have been quite a few failures over the years. One phenomenon is that people with similar ideas have started up their business at the same time and when they offered a similar quality product revenue divided between them. When demand in the town could not sustain the volume of shops offering a particular range of products they all failed. The three 'luggage and bag shops' that opened in quick succession a few years back is a prime example of this kind of failure. If only one luggage shop had opened would it still be a viable business today? In the more recent past, a small Deli fitted up its shop in the Wynd at the precise time that No.12 opened its more central and more up-market cafe and deli at the top of Leys Avenue. The Deli in the Wynd, where footfall is less, failed. This is a different scenario where one shop has succeeded whilst another failed. Coffee shops and restaurants are the latest phenomena and it will be interesting to see how they all do, we are already seeing failures. Given we want new businesses to succeed, are entrepreneurs given sufficient information and support to develop and test the viability of their business plan before they invest their money? For example, are independents given information on potential other new businesses that will be competition for them?

2.5 Pop-up shops can be a good way of testing out the demand for a particular product.

However, are some pop-up shops, which often appear at Christmas selling off surplus stock at below market prices, leading to the loss of vital Christmas sales for established businesses?

2.6 Any gap analysis should consider if opportunities exist to fill a product or services gap in surrounding towns. Filling a gap in all the local towns' retail offers will attract customers from neighbouring towns into Letchworth Town Centre. It may be that Letchworth already has an offering that fills a retail gap in local town's which could be better exploited. For example, could our haberdashery offering be an attractor?

Location of Key Services

2.7 Although a lot of activities have been moved on-line there are services which we still need to visit on occasions. Some of these services are already located in the heart of our town centre, for example, the banks (though banks are rapidly reducing staffed branches), but others are in more peripheral locations, for example, the Post Office, Health Centre, Citizens Advice Bureau and children's centres. Would a long term strategy to relocate key services closer to the core of the town centre help increase footfall?



Recreational Offering

2.8 On recreational sites, like Stevenage Leisure Park, there are often activities (playzones, cinema, bowling) alongside places to eat. Letchworth has seen an increase in places to eat in the town centre but the supporting entertainment offer is more limited, generally adult focused and has opening times that do not have a good overlap with the retailers. The

council's local plan suggests that North Herts residents will go to Cambridge or Stevenage for their leisure activities but should this policy, with its transport implications, be reconsidered?

2.9 In Letchworth it's important that recreational activities meet the needs of the differing demographics so there is something for everyone. There should also be sufficient advertising for existing town-wide facilities e.g. skateboard park, swimming pools, carting, gallery, cinema / theatre and Standalone Farm. Ideas for increasing the recreational offer are:

- Install play equipment alongside the water feature on Leys square, where the cafe on Ley's square has seating for parents in the vicinity.



- A ten-pin bowling alley, perhaps called the 'Skittles Inn' to link to Letchworth's historic past.
- A unique leisure offering for the local area, e.g. a tree top trek and / or natural activity trail, which could attract people from neighbouring towns. This would fit with the town meets country theme of the town.
- Re-purposing our town museum building for visiting exhibitions, for example, there are some interesting science exhibitions for children that tour.
- A Hack Space where people can come together and share learning, for example, it could have a pay-as-you-use 3D printer.

Unique to Letchworth

2.10 National chains have led to one high street looking much like another. For a time Letchworth held out against this development refusing to let national chains have a shop in the town, but then it changed strategy and the large chains have been encouraged into the town. Low priced shops have done better and stayed and higher priced shops tended to have failed. A few of our more unique shops have lasted, David's being a well known example and perhaps a less prominent one being Martin's, although Martin's appears to be downsizing. Some local chains tend to have converged back to Hitchin, e.g. Tim's and Brookers. Development of more independent shops may also have a better synergy with the customers who are attracted by Letchworth's more recent recreational developments (theatre and Broadway Gallery). TTL would love to see Letchworth rediscover its reputation as a town with independent shops. A review on the current proportion of independent shops in Letchworth could be undertaken along with some research on how effective setting a target for independents has been in other towns and cities (e.g. Norwich).

2.11 There are some products where we like to see before we purchase, for example, clothes, shoes, furniture and furnishing. For electronic gadgets, with the exception of phones and computers where we care about the user interface, we often buy without seeing the product. If the supplier of goods to our shops also supplies or even owns an on-line retail outlet which is undercutting what shops sell for, then shops end up being free showrooms for other businesses. Shops which have at least some unique products may stand a better chance of success. This may be why the micro-brewery may succeed, especially if they can get some of their products bottled at times like Christmas when people are looking for small consumable gifts. Mock Turtle was a nice example of a shop that has something a bit different and a bit special but unfortunately it closed. Annie's provide luxury chocolates and sweets that we cannot find in the supermarkets.

2.12 To encourage shops to consider stocking local products, could regular exhibitions be held where local people can show their products with the aim of finding a local shopkeeper to be their distributor or showcase? The recent Artisan Ladder community exhibition demonstrated for a week some of the products that are made by local people and businesses.

More Than Just a Shop / Restaurant

2.13 For a while some shops have survived by also having an online presence, this was the case for some of the shops in the arcade and the Green House has a strong online presence. However, online competition is fierce and to succeed IT skills are clearly essential. Additionally, if this proves profitable then why have the expense of a shop? Ebay purchases are often dispatched outside working hours suggesting that many competitors have this as a second business probably run from home so with few overheads.



2.14 There are quite a few examples of shops that have survived where they provide something extra. David's is a hub for lots of community initiatives which brings customers into the shop, and runs its events with authors. One of the longest surviving shops on the Wynd is Garden City Crafts that also runs workshops. Alice's Wonderland in the arcade have run workshops and groups to help people learn to knit.

2.15 Are the supermarkets places we go to shop quickly and is the town centre a place where we can buy products but also some kind of service or entertainment? Sitting in a cafe appeals to some but not all, but we might frequent them more if they provided some other entertainment or information. For example, have cafes with:

- spaces that can be sectioned off for small groups to meet during the evening and daytime.
- games (e.g. chess) boards so that people can go for a coffee and a game if an opponent turns up. Pixmore cafe on the industrial estate utilises this idea.
- a play corner or craft activity for small children, (e.g. a ball pit, lego, games and books).
- Displays to support local businesses who do not have premises in the high street, for example, knitting/sewing pattern catalogues so you can browse in comfort and then pop to the relevant shop to buy the product afterwards, example pieces of furniture with a catalogue from a local furniture maker or curtain samples from our local curtain maker, Talinca (www.talincainteriors.co.uk).

3. THE TOWN CENTRE ESTATE

Size of the Town Centre and Location of Shops

3.1 The NHDC Local Plan identifies Eastcheap and the top of Leys Avenue as zoned for retail, however, it is also acknowledges that this policy is often ignored (see Appendix B). The number of retail shops closing on Eastcheap and the increase in restaurants which are not open for the full day illustrates the point. With empty

shops and shops that are not always open, the incentive to explore the whole of our town centre is reduced.

3.2 The new retail area just outside Biggleswade is drawing in customers; it has the nearest big Marks and Spencer store and it has a few other

'big draw' stores. We see a pattern of retailers setting up a 'Big Store' that has little competition in an area so it can draw customers from a distance, alongside small stores (often food stores) which provide a 'free delivery', on-line shopping collection point. The medium sized stores that used to be in most town centres appear to have gone.

3.3 What was right for the turn of the last century is not necessarily right for today's world. Is the retail centre of Letchworth just too large for the local population? As retailers have contracted or vanished, might the town centre now be concentrated into Eastcheap, the upper part of Leys Avenue and their spurs? The vacated retail premises might then be further developed for housing for those seeking proximity to the town, the trains and buses. With housing in such short supply, sustainable travel being promoted, and the green belt being eroded it would be wrong not to explore if some of the town centre can be repurposed.

Appropriate Rents

3.4 The further you go from Leys Square and Eastcheap the lower the rents that can be negotiated but footfall may also be lower. It's a dilemma for new shops to decide what a better position is worth. There is also the question of whether rents are a good reflection of likely footfall, for example, why have so many businesses failed in the Arcade? It could be that as town centre shopping is less popular the number of shops considered to be in a prime position has reduced and it may be an appropriate time to review the rental value of shops.

3.5 In a free market, rent would be set where demand and supply balance but does the number

of empty retail units suggest rents may be too high? A period of lower rents would help to show if this can boost demand, but if the demand is not very elastic the empty shops problem will remain and this result would re-enforce the argument that the town centre is too big. Have lower rents been experimented with in Letchworth and what was the effect?

Quality of Retail Spaces

3.6 Properties on the Wynd lack insulation which leads to high heating bills. For the start up businesses which take on these units this can make a big difference between success and failure. A survey of the town centre real estate carbon emissions would be helpful, with action taken to improve buildings that are considered as integral to a future town-centre strategy.

Parking

3.7 People struggle to find a parking space in the town centre, and have to pay for a space in the main car parks, but they can park free at a local supermarket. In the town car parks people have to decide on arrival how long they will stay and this may lead to people rushing their visit. If paid parking is to continue, a pay-on-exit approach may be beneficial. A review of spare parking capacity should be made and if there is insufficient capacity a plan made to address this issue.

3.8 The town centre is within cycling distance of most of the residential areas and improved cycle parking provision (including some covered parking) could also improve accessibility. TTL's bike survey identified a number of deficiencies in the town centre cycle provision.

4. NURTURING BUSINESSES

4.1 Letchworth does help independent shops start off with its low rents in the Wynd. Could this idea be developed further with an incubation support package for new independent start ups? As well as offering low rents for the start up businesses wherever they locate, a

mentoring scheme could be put in place to help ensure the business starts with a viable business plan, has advice around good financial practice and help with creating an online presence to promote their shop. This might be a unique

service that the Heritage Foundation could offer to help new retail businesses.

4.2 Single traders can find it hard to keep their premises open but cannot afford to pay to have regular staff to work in a shop. Small businesses won't thrive when customers find a shop hasn't opened; this can and does happen in the Wynd. Could a service be provided by the organisations renting the shops, or the BID, where temporary staff time can be 'purchased' on an ad-hoc basis to keep a shop open all day?

Co-operatives

4.3 Usually small businesses rely on the investment of time and money by an entrepreneur which can be high risk for the entrepreneur in today's retail world. The co-operative business models may provide an alternative way for getting new retail businesses started in Letchworth. A co-operative is a member-owned business. The members may be

employees, customers, suppliers or local residents, but this shared ownership is central to a co-operative's existence.

4.4 A few years back a group of retired local residents wanted to fund a micro-brewery (something Letchworth now has) and were looking for people to manage the project. A co-operative could have been a good business model for this enterprise.

4.5 Co-operatives fit well with the ethos of Letchworth and seem worth exploring as a way to bring unique shops to Letchworth which will leave the town more resilient. If the Heritage Foundation could invest in a support officer with expertise in co-operatives and whose role would include exploring if some of the gaps in our retail offer can be met through either a co-operative owned by local residents or a workers' co-operative, this could help reverse the decline in our town centre.

5. SUMMARY

5.1 Letchworth Town Centre is being affected by a change in both what we buy and how we buy it. The widening offer of goods in supermarkets, the ease of online shopping, the growth of out-of-town shopping centres and the change in what interests us as consumers has all affected our retail habits.

5.2 TTL believe that there is an opportunity to achieve a more resilient town centre for the people of Letchworth. The actions that we believe can support this are:

- Undertake a footfall survey to compare Letchworth to Hitchin and Biggleswade. Follow this with a rent review which takes into account footfall in the different sections of the retail area.
- Undertake a gap analysis to determine which products are not currently being met by Letchworth retail outlets and estimate for these products the extent of local demand.
- Undertake a feasibility study for introducing more recreational activities to Letchworth.

- Produce a strategic vision on how key services, which will bring people to the town centre, could be relocated to the town centre over time.
- Commission a study to determine what size of town centre will meet the needs of the town and produce a strategy on how to achieve a more concentrated town centre.
- Research the effect of setting a target for independents in towns and cities (e.g. Norwich) and consider setting a target for independent retailers in Letchworth.
- Develop a business nurturing service for small independents.
- Facilitate business networking with the aim of promoting a more circular economy.
- Undertake a review of parking provision, both volume, price and payment mechanisms.

5.3 Some of these actions may already have been carried out by the BID, NHDC or Heritage Foundation. If this is the case TTL would like to discuss the learning.

Appendix A: Ideas for the Business Improvement District (BID) Team

Letchworth BID organises events and publicity to help promote local businesses. The Letchworth BID Manager has also shown an interest in a local currency which is an initiative promoted by a number of Transition Town groups.

Events

Special events are arranged to encourage people to visit the town centre with the hope that this will affect their longer term shopping behaviours. Special events can be large (e.g. Food and Beer Festival) or smaller (e.g. TTL's annual apple pressings), they can be one off (e.g. 'The Beach comes to Letchworth') or regular fixtures (e.g. the Farmers Market). Ideally events that are held should bring additional demand to local businesses and at worst should not detract from their businesses.



There are many active groups in Letchworth who could be encouraged to put forward ideas for town centre events throughout the year. Below are some ideas for events that have come from TTL discussions.

- Hold a Big Lunch with pleasant street music / entertainment at least once a year. Local music and performing arts groups could entertain. Shut the street and let the food vendors bring tables out so their customers can be part of a wider social event. Have space for families to picnic (which they may do by popping into the sandwich bars and bakeries).
- There are some workshops for children which take place around Leys square. Consider having a dedicated workshop space in one of the vacant premises and link in to some of the arts and crafts that take place in the town to offer events in the centre of the town for both adults and children. The Settlement team and Digswell Arts Trust may have some ideas on this.
- Broadway Gardens is close to the town centre and could be a good place to host a circus or winter ice rink. Ideally a hire option could be found where the BID could generate some funds from these activities. Local restaurants could offer a circus / skate and meal ticket.
- Given that Letchworth struggles to support outlets for higher end fashion, provision could be made for daytime and evening fashion shows (the Broadway Gallery would make a suitable location) where boutiques from local towns visit or local distributors of fashion ranges come and display their products (e.g. there is a me&i clothing distributor in the town). More home businesses, like me&i, may be encouraged if there are regular events that could help boost sales.

Voucher scheme

A few Transition Towns have introduced a local currency to try to encourage a local economy, supporting smaller shops and traders who are under threat from larger chains and online businesses. New Economics Foundation research has shown money spent with independent businesses circulates within the local economy up to three times longer than when it's spent with national chains. Local currencies encourage people to think about where their money is going and commit to spending a proportion of it locally. On the environmental front, a local currency can support local businesses in sourcing more goods and services locally, reducing their carbon footprint.

Paper currencies are technically a voucher rather than a currency. With ecurrencies there appears to be a 1.5% fee that the business will incur and this may be higher than the 0.8% credit card fee. There needs to be an incentive to get consumers to convert their money into local currency, for example the first £10,000 of Totnes pounds were issued with a discount of 5%. There is a significant administrative overhead to a local currency that it would be good to avoid. So can Letchworth achieve the benefits of a local currency, people buying from local businesses and local businesses sourcing locally, in a different way?

Ideas which could be explored are:

- Currently, members of Letchworth Arts and Leisure Group (membership costs £12) get a discount in local shops of up to 10%. Promoting the discount card more widely, through Love Letchworth, may widen take-up and help shops.
- Introduce a Letchworth voucher which people can use as gifts. Allow the vouchers to be used in local stores (including eateries). A redemption mechanism would be required so shops can get the voucher money back. This could be a way of bringing new people into the town centre as those residents who want to see the town centre thrive can buy gift vouchers for their friends, encouraging them to use the town centre.
- Investigate an electronic Letchworth loyalty card where people build up points in all the local shops and get to redeem them when they have a certain number. Shops contribute to the reward depending on how many points they have given out. A number of Letchworth cafes have cards with stamps but this scheme is less likely to encourage people to buy from local stores where goods are purchased infrequently (e.g. shoes). If residents can build up points across shops with a single card there is less clutter to carry round (just one card) and an incentive to use other shops which are in the reward scheme.

Advertising

TTL has had a few initiatives encouraging people to shop locally and last year TTL were involved in a “shop locally” Christmas poster campaign. This campaign recognised that residents need to give their custom to local shops for them to thrive.

‘Love Letchworth’, which is managed by the BID, have been showcasing local shops in recent advertising. However, advertising of shops does not necessarily give people an understanding of what products can be purchased in the town. Would some signposting of where particular products can be found in the town be beneficial? For example, could the Love Letchworth site provide people with a product search mechanism which returns advice on shops selling a requested product in the town?



Appendix B: North Herts District Council Local Plan 2011 – 2031 Proposed Submission, October 2016: Extracts relating to the retail centre in Letchworth

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| Para. | Extract from Local Plan 2011-2031 Proposed Submission, October 2016 |
| 5.13 | <p>In assessing proposals for main town centre uses, we will adopt the ‘sequential approach’ as set out in Government guidance. Therefore retail uses will be considered in the following order of preference:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. within the primary or secondary shopping frontages of town centres, on allocated sites within town centres, or in local centres; 2. other parts of the town centres; 3. the edge of centres; and 4. out of centre, only where there are no available, suitable and viable sites which are sequentially preferable. |
| 5.16 | The first preference for leisure facilities includes both the primary shopping area and wider town centre area. |
| 5.18 | With regard to retail use, the edge of centre is generally taken to mean up to 300m from the primary shopping frontage. |
| | <p>Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages Town centre boundaries for Letchworth Garden City are shown on the Proposals Map. Within the designated Primary Shopping Frontages, planning permission will be granted at ground-floor level:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) For retail A1 uses; or b) Exceptionally for an A3 or similar use if they do not, individually or cumulatively, undermine the retail function of the centre and where the proposal will attract people to the centre, enhancing the centre’s vitality and viability. |
| | <p>Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages In the Secondary Shopping Frontages of Letchworth Garden City, as shown on the Proposals Map, planning permission will be granted at ground-floor level:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) For retail, professional services and restaurants (A1, A2 or A3); or b) Exceptionally for other main town centre uses¹ if they do not, individually or cumulatively, undermine the retail function of the centre and where the proposal will attract people to the centre, enhancing the centre’s vitality and viability. |
| 5.21 | Too many non-A1 uses can create ‘dead frontages’ (units not normally open during normal shopping hours or which attract relatively few customers), reduce the interest and attraction of the primary shopping area, and harm the retail function. This is particularly a problem where there are a number of units in a row which are not shops. This is something the Council is keen to prevent. |
| 5.22 | We monitor all retail units within the four main town centres on an annual basis, as well as those in the local centres. There is evidence in some centres that shop (A1 use class) units are being lost to non-shop uses in the core shopping areas. |
| 5.25 | Evidence in the form of predicted footfall, opening times and linked trips will be required for any application seeking to meet the exception criteria. Where a shop unit has been vacant for an extended period of time (normally at least six months), documentary evidence should demonstrate that all reasonable attempts to sell or let the premises for the preferred use(s) have failed. |

1. Other uses include pubs (A4) and hot food takeaways (A5).

Proposal Map (Source: NHDC Local Plan 2011-2031 Proposed Submission, October 2016)

Letchworth Garden City

