



Thurrock Council

**Grays Town Centre
Public Consultation**

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Enventure Research

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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.

