

NORTHUMBERLAND TOWN CENTRE PERFORMANCE SYSTEM



Introduction

The vitality of a town centre is reflected by the number of people present at different times and in different parts, whilst viability refers to the centres ability to attract continuing investment and to adapt to changing needs.

The InfoNet is currently developing the Northumberland Town Centre Performance System, which is designed to assess the vitality and viability of rural market towns and larger centres within the former coalfield areas. The system, which is due to be launched in June 2007, will use information held on the InfoNet Employer and Northumberland Property Data Service (NPDS) databases as a platform. The service will initially cover the towns of Alnwick, Amble, Ashington, Bedlington, Berwick upon Tweed, Blyth, Cramlington, Haltwhistle, Hexham, Morpeth, Newbiggin, Ponteland, Prudhoe, Rothbury, Seahouses and Wooler using town centre boundary definitions included in Local Development Frameworks. There will, however, be flexibility to include additional settlements as the system develops.

The service is primarily aimed at colleagues within the six district planning departments, economic development officers, market town officers, town centre managers and any other partners or individuals with an interest in town centre performance and vitality.

The system will use a number of indicators (listed below) to assess the economic prosperity, social and cultural functions and the condition of the physical environment for each of the towns. This approach reflects the guidance in Planning Policy Guidance 6 on Town Centres and Retail Developments which recommends that local authorities regularly review the vitality and viability of town centres. It is also designed to meet the information needs of the Northumberland Local Area Agreement and economic indicators required by CEDOS and the Audit Commission.

Following a baseline health check during 2007, which can also incorporate the results of work already commissioned or undertaken by colleagues within the district authorities, regular assessments will be under taken and published in order to monitor the health of the town centres. The collection and analysis of data will enable the identification of individual town centres' strengths and weakness, informing the local authorities and other partners involved in town centre issues.

- Diversity of Uses
- Retail Trends
- Vacancy
- Retail Rents & Yields
- Pedestrian Flows
- Accessibility
- Environmental Quality
- Perception of safety
- Customer Views
- Economic Contribution

Diversity of Uses

The diversity of uses within a town centre contributes to the attractiveness of the centre to the local community. The NTCPS will analyse the amount of space in use for different functions: Retail, Offices, Civic & Public Administration, Restaurants & Licensed Premises and Arts, Culture & Entertainment. Attention will also be given to those establishments that contribute to the evening economy, in particular the mix of bars and eating-places.

Retail Trends

The range and diversity of the retail offer directly influences the appeal of a town centre to visitors and shoppers. The NTCPS will provide an analysis of multiple chain and independent retail occupiers, broken down by category (Convenience, Comparison and Service Retail). As a means of measuring town centre vitality and the retail offer, the system will also highlight the number of charity outlets in each location. Overtime, it will be possible to track changes and review how the retail offer has developed in response to customer views.

Vacancy Rates

All town centres experience a baseline level of vacancy rates and should not always be interpreted as a sign of weakness. A large number of vacant units within centres, however, may indicate decline related to poor performance of the town or that shop premises are inadequate to meet the demands of modern retailers. Furthermore, units may be located in parts of the centre unsuited to retailers' requirements. From September 2006, the Northumberland Property Data Service (NPDS) is monitoring the retail property sector and is able to monitor flows of properties to and from the market and void periods.

Retail Rents and Yields

Retail rent and yield are important indicators of viability. Using data from the Valuation Office Agency, the NTCPS will measure changes in Zone A rents within primary shopping areas and yields for a selection of the towns covered by the service. Average rental levels for the remaining towns will be estimated from the NPDS database.

Pedestrian Flows

Pedestrian counts are a useful measure of vitality, in relation to the number and movement of people in different parts of the town centre and at different times of the day. The counts provide a clear picture of footfall patterns across the centre and of the number of people in the town. Over time trends can be identified and the success or decline of locations monitored. Through the NTCPS, the InfoNet will set out a rolling programme for the 16 towns covered by the system so that a footfall count is undertaken in at least one town in each of the six districts every 12 months. Delivery of the footfall counts will be managed and analysed by the InfoNet, but delivered by independent market researchers.

Accessibility

The availability of different access modes to a town centre is important if shoppers are to be attracted to a centre for frequent visits. NTCPS will provide information on the quantity and type of car parking in each of the centres; and the frequency of public transport services and the range of origins served.

Customer Views

Shopper surveys will help authorities in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of town centre improvements and in setting further priorities. As with footfall, the shopper surveys will be undertaken as part of a rolling programme and will be used to establish the views of consumers and to set priorities for future investment. Interviews will be undertaken by MRS accredited interviewers and the results will be analysed by the InfoNet. As well as asking questions relating to regularity of visits, distance travelled and satisfaction with the range of shops and services (including the night time economy), shoppers will also be asked their opinion on the **Environmental Quality of Town Centre**, covering cleanliness, quality of pedestrianisation, traffic segregation, safety and security, ambience and atmosphere.

Perception of Safety & Occurrence of Crime

High levels of crime in a centre will impact on the way people use it and may deter traders from locating there. Using information collected as part of the community safety analysis function undertaken by the InfoNet for the Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnerships, the Health Check for each town will include an analysis of reported crimes. This will be supplemented with information on perception or fear of crime from the Shopper Surveys. Consideration will also be given to any initiatives designed to address town centre-related crime and measure their impact on the number of incidents.

Economic Contribution

As well as providing the main service centres for local residents, town centres are also a major focal point for economic for economic activity and employment. Using the InfoNet organisation database and by applying grid references to each business address it is possible to build up a picture of the town centre in terms of sector (using SIC), number of businesses and employment levels. It is also possible to add in additional datasets, such as the number of businesses in the town centre providing work-based learning, the number of training places and the qualifications achieved.

Taking things forward

Establishing the IT system to under take the analysis of diversity of use, retail offer vacancy levels, average rentals and the economic contribution of the town centres is underway. This involves bringing together the NPDS and InfoNet organisations databases into one, which on completion will hold occupier and property information for around 15,000 organisations. This is a huge task, which we would like local partners to contribute to. For the town centres, we would like local partners (local authorities, town centre managers, market town officers and development trusts) to help ensure that the database is as accurate as possible from the outset by updating and amending lists of occupiers that fall within their respective town centre boundaries. This may be a little time consuming at the outset, but once it is complete it will be much easier for the InfoNet to maintain, as updates to the NPDS data will highlight where occupiers have moved and where new tenants have moved in. Partners may be asked to help fill gaps in occupied details in order to keep the database up to date, although it is not anticipated that this will become an onerous task.

By June 2007, we would hope to be able to provide a baseline assessment for each Town Centre, covering all indicators with the exception of the footfall and Shopper Satisfaction surveys. Following the baseline assessments, the rolling programme for footfall and customer satisfaction surveys will be agreed with partners and the work on towns to be covered in 2007/08 commissioned.

Outputs

Members of the service will receive an Annual Health Check for each of the towns in their remit area. Each health will include data and analysis covering all of the indicators and themes highlighted above, although information from the footfall and satisfaction surveys may not be updated every year. Members will also be able to request additional ad hoc analyses through the InfoNet Enquiry service. This will be free to members as long as the time taken to complete the work does not exceed 2 days.

What will it cost?

The cost for the InfoNet to maintain the IT system and to provide the crime and public transport data for each of the 16 towns is £12,000. The cost to individual members will depend upon the number of organisations that subscribe. However, if we assume that the 6 districts and Northumberland County Council all become members of the service, the cost to each authority will be c£1,700.

This, however, does not include the cost of the footfall surveys and customer satisfaction surveys. In order to keep annual costs to a minimum and to ensure that the process remains manageable, it is proposed that footfall and satisfaction surveys be undertaken for one town in each district per annum. The cost per annum to each district is not likely to exceed £2,500 (per town). This assumes that the maximum number of interviewers required for any town per day will be 5 and that interviews and footfall counts will take place over 4 days in total. The interviews and counts will be undertaken by a network of independent interviewers and the analysis of the results will be carried out by the InfoNet.

Further Information

For more information on the service or on how to become a member, please contact:

Bryan Latty
InfoNet
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 2EF

T: 01670 533947
F: 01670 533967

blatty@northumberland.gov.uk

Myra Jamieson
InfoNet
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 2EF

01670 533790
01670 533967

mjamieson@northumberland.gov.uk

Northumberland InfoNet

Regeneration Division, Chief Executive's Directorate
Northumberland County Council, County Hall, Morpeth
NE61 2EF
Fax: (01670) 533967



www.northumberlandinfonet.org.uk