



Morecambe & District Chamber of Trade and Commerce

Hotels, Restaurants and Licensed Premises, Shops, Commercial & Business Premises, Leisure Property

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Uses of Government funding for retail promotion

At the Cabinet Liaison Group meeting on Monday 11th January Cllr Mace said that he wanted to hear from the commercial sector what we thought the most useful application of the government funding might be.

I think it might be useful to set out our thoughts in writing and thus provide greater clarity than I was able to do at the meeting itself.

It is, of course, quite right to say that a large scale event such as the Georgian Festival can bring large numbers of people into a town and thus increase spend over a weekend and I fully accept that in the right circumstances an increase in the order of 40% might be achievable. The trouble is that we will not achieve more than one such festival with the sum of money on offer and if some of that money is to be applied to Morecambe we also have to take into account that our retail centres are widely spread making the task of achieving comprehensive participation in the event by retailers and public pretty near impossible. Smaller scale events such as street performances really do have the effect of diverting shoppers from the all-important task of spending their money. So we must look carefully at how we answer the question posed last night.

I suggest that the first question we should ask is precisely what kind of achievement we might be looking to make. Without careful research I can only draw on my own experience. Speaking personally I know that a half percent permanent improvement in my annual turnover would be far more valuable than a forty percent improvement over one or even two weekends. Perhaps it is worthwhile looking at such an option. Personally as a taxpayer I would far rather my money were used to attempt permanent improvement than short term, temporary gain.

It is perhaps worth looking at ways in which we can affect the shopping experience and to do that we must first be clear what that shopping experience is.

I suggest there are three main considerations most of which may be self-evident but which should be stated for the sake of clarity

1. Shoppers are drawn to shop in areas by the gravitational pull of the centre in question. The fundamental principle is that the more nationally eminent shops there are the more people will be drawn to them. Hence The Trafford Centre will exert a greater gravitational pull over larger distances than Preston and Preston will probably exert a greater pull over longer distances than Lancaster and so on. There are exceptions to this rule in the form of what is called destination shopping. That is to say people travelling to a specific shop for a particular good or goods which may only be available in few places.
2. Shoppers must have relatively easy access. So good transport links and easy parking are substantial considerations. Hence out-of-town stores with free parking can be more attractive than town centres where parking bears a cost. Similarly one might think that advance charging places more restrictions on customers than pay-as-you-leave parking. That is certainly so as far as I am concerned and is one of the reasons why I do my out of town shopping in Kendal rather than Lancaster.
3. The experience of the place and its amenities. This covers a multitude of features ranging from such easily identified factors as empty and drab shops to public conveniences and more cosmetic considerations such as floral display and the condition of street furniture.

If one takes these three main considerations in turn it is easy to see that the £50,000 on offer could not have much effect on item 1. Item 2 could be affected in the short term by offering some form of cheaper or even free parking or by delaying the proposed increases in car parking charges. Over a sufficient period of time this might modify people's shopping and travel habits but I suggest that the available finance is not large enough to enable easement over a sufficiently long period of time. Item 3, relating to the shopping experience, seems to me to offer the best prospect of achieving lasting benefit. £50,000 could be used to effect longer-lasting changes which may improve the shopping experience. Most of the changes would be cosmetic and the effect may not be dramatic but then neither is the sum on offer and if a modest amount of aid is all that is on offer we could consider ourselves satisfied if a modest but long-term improvement could be achieved.

Once an approach is determined the precise ways of putting the ideas in to effect can be explored and assistance applied as thought fit.

John Bates
(President)

