

Reason for survey

At their January meeting Maldon Society members were shocked by the news of the intended April increases for car parking charges the town centre.

The Society is aware of the present difficulties in **town** political representation at **district** level and the **evident lack of effective consultation** on various specific topics (most recently its iconic maritime heritage, not covered here) before figures appeared in the draft MDC budget for April onwards. The Society is also conscious of the crucial role the High Street plays in both the local economy and, importantly, in community life.

In order to better understand the current position, the Society has undertaken a simple survey of over 200 businesses in and immediately adjacent to the High Street. Whilst intended to test out the specific reaction of businesses to car park charge increases, it also sought a grassroots picture of the general health of the High Street.

The definition of businesses included **all** non residential properties on the High Street and its immediate offshoots. *(a copy of the hand delivered form is attached.)* Results and possible conclusions are given below.

At present just below **10% of the premises are empty**. The national average last year was just above 10%. It is thought Maldon may currently benefit from the large number of smaller premises and the considerable efforts of key entrepreneurs and business owners.

1. Impact of the Blackwater Retail Park on the High Street?

When the retail park was given planning approval, it was explicitly recognised that this could impact on the High Street, but no consideration was then given as to how that impact might be monitored. Anyone reading the current MDC budget figures could infer that the heavy daytime use of the central car parks implies no effect has occurred, whereas it merely corroborates an overall lack of parking spaces. A surprising **75 businesses (47%) considered the Retail Park had affected their own business** - if not like for like, then in reducing their own footfall as the town has become less busy with shoppers. *(This suggests further analysis of car park occupation is necessary as this finding conflicts with an MDC assumption).* Only 2 (specialist) businesses considered the retail park had brought in more trade for them.

2. Impact of raising car parking charges?

MDC currently propose to increase evening and Sunday parking by 50% to £1.50, and daytime charges by 10%, whereas the UK's consumer price inflation rate year on year at December 2019 was 1.3%.

The survey showed **overwhelming opposition (87%) to raising the town centre charges** because of the detrimental effect on their **own** business. Those who didn't think the raised charges would directly affect them included those whose reps or customers now park in the retail park rather than queue for a town centre space, or they relied on online trade to supplement their business, or were located at the far end of the High Street. Even

this group did however comment that they considered the **increased charges would affect the town centre as a whole.**(Section 5 below gives more detailed comments.)

3. Assessment of trading position over last 12 months?

In the current economic climate it was perhaps surprising that 12 businesses said their position had improved. On closer examination these proved to be new start ups, on line or highly specialised businesses.

However these were outweighed by the **79 businesses (50%) who said their trading position had actually declined in only the last 12 months** - in one case by 30 %.

4. Staying on the High Street in 3 years' time?

In all **18 businesses (11%) currently intend to have vacated the High Street within 3 years.** Although not always specifically stated, from the rest of the return it was apparent this mainly meant ceasing trading rather than moving.

A further **63 businesses (39%) were not sure** what their position would be, which reflects the tremendous uncertainty for businesses at this time.

This means that **less than half the total were confident they would be on the High Street in 3 years'** underlining the fact that the High Street needs support from customers and councils alike.

5. How else can Maldon District Council help?

This was an open ended question inviting comments which have been grouped together

5.1 PARKING

Parking was identified as a **major problem** for the businesses, especially pricing policy, and a variety of solutions suggested.

Some were keen to have **free parking (somewhere) for the owners themselves (8) or concessions for retailers and office workers.**

The biggest single request, to increase footfall, was for **cheaper customer parking (15),** or to hold the price (5)

Others identified the need for completely free customer parking (15), or free for a specified period (for one hour or half an hour), or at a specified time of day, or on a specified day, particularly Saturdays or Sundays, all weekend, and midweek were also mentioned.

Equality with the retail parks and others was requested (see below)

(Analysis of current parking data would help indicate how pricing policy could best be adapted to satisfy some of these aspects).

Quite apart from the pricing policy however, **the other main complaint concerned the lack of spaces.** One suggested removal of taxi ranks for short term parking. It is apparent from comments made that very many of the High Street businesses run on an **appointment system.** Not just all the hair and beauty salons but also the professional businesses such as solicitors, dentists, funeral directors. Ease of parking was crucial for all age groups of customer. (***Urgent action is needed to review how extra spaces can be provided , and possibly greater separation of short and long term parking in the town centre***)

There were many reports on the frustration and anger from customers with the new machines. Businesses were irritated with the lack of involvement on the new machine rollout, in particular the need for machines to take cash, screen to be higher and better lit, and better signposting and labelling. Customers were reported to be actually staying away rather than try and use a card. ***(A serious rethink on machine policy is needed in the light of these comments)***

5.2. RATES

Rates were also hugely important for the businesses particularly at this difficult time for High Streets generally.

Businesses who commented highlighted the need for lower rates (28), continued small business relief (8), no rates (6), capped rates (2). Others suggested rates should be better matched to size of business and for there to be no rates initially for new businesses.

One respondent quoted a rates bill of £51k per annum. Another that raising business rates doesn't help business and without the businesses MDC finances are dented too.

(The businesses clearly need feedback on what is possible, and whether MDC can help provide more relief)

5.3 COMMUNITY

Written and verbal comments confirmed how people come into town for social contact, often just for company as well as deliberate social activities. One bank teller even noticed people rejoin queues to make conversation. One church response added "The High Street is a great meeting point for people and its demise will only diminish the sense of community in Maldon", underlining that **more is at stake here than council finances.**

5.4 PUBLICITY

There were calls for better advertising of the town, and the High Street itself, and also the lower part of the High Street. There were calls for more special events in the Town Hall or on the High Street itself, similar to the festive evening but at other times of the year.

5.5 UNFAIR COMPETITION

There were several different calls for **more equal treatment.** Rates and parking charges in town should match those at the retail parks, and at Heybridge. Charity shops had an unfair advantage when selling new stock. People park in the town then go to the prom where rates are different.

Similarly, there were requests for **controls on opening** of new shops in the same trade such as barbers and hairdressers, and one wanted encouragement of more branded shops.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this survey has provided an accurate reflection of views from those who make the High Street what it is. There was a very high rate of return, reflecting the evident enthusiasm for being asked as many feel ignored and powerless politically.

It is starkly clear from the survey that the continuance of the Maldon High Street as we know it is genuinely at risk. Individual livelihoods are on the line. Those who want to use the High Street need stress free access. The wider community health of Maldon is interlinked with an active High Street.

There is much that the council can do if it chooses. It has a responsibility to do so.