

Councillor Malachy Pakenham
Chair, Night Time Economy Task and Finish Group
St Albans City & District Council

12 July 2016

Dear Cllr Pakenham

Unlike at least one other local residents association, we have not been invited to make a submission to this Task & Finish Group, but as our members mostly live close to St Albans city centre, we would like to make our views known. In particular we are concerned that the health and well-being of residents in the city seem to be treated as ancillary to enlarging the economy rather than as an over-riding priority.

The stated purpose of the group is to recommend ways of improving the Night Time Economy in St Albans and Harpenden, and how they can be both busy and safe – a reported fall-off in night time footfall is regarded as undesirable.

There may well be room for increased activity during the ‘evening’ period of 5-10 pm, but apparently previous attempts to encourage shops to stay open later have failed. The early part – the ‘shoulder period’ – is when the many commuters who live here return home and relax, and they cannot be expected to drive great changes in commercial activity at this time. Those who work in the city itself might be more likely to remain in the centre after work, but a more promising approach might be to encourage tourists to stay on into the evening. This would depend on a range of attractions. The Alban Arena and Abbey Theatre are already active, but the latter is not especially central and the former could do with a make-over – both could do with better advertising of events and booking arrangements, e.g., a central billboard. St Albans is now well served by the Odyssey cinema. Perhaps the best hope for a central attraction will be the new Museum complex, which should be developed with late opening and evening events as a focus. Of course the quality and location of cafes, bars and restaurants constitute an essential ingredient in taking advantage of evening activities – St Albans seems to be well provided in this area. As far as late evening shopping is concerned, the lack of a top-class department store is a disadvantage – perhaps one could be encouraged to bid for the BHS building.

The biggest contribution that could be made to the tourist-based economy in general is a major smartening up of the town centre and Conservation Area, in the development and maintenance of clean streets and pavements, de-cluttering street furniture and rapid removal of litter. A photograph of the imaginative and attractive centre of Winchester is attached as an example of this.

It is when it comes to the Late Night period (10 am to 2 pm) that we feel that the approach implied by the survey is flawed. Activity in this period is almost entirely driven by alcohol, and it should be seriously asked whether it is ethical for the Council to seek to expand it. Obvious models for a successful Late Night Economy could be found in places such as Soho, Monte Carlo and Las Vegas, but are not suitable for an English cathedral city. We feel that St Albans has already moved too far and indiscriminately in this direction. Walking from the railway station up Victoria Street or along St Peters Street and surrounding roads during this period on

Friday or Saturday night (or indeed almost any night during warm weather), one cannot avoid hoards of people crowding in and around the bar venues and taxi ranks, and across the pavements outside. Most of these venues have extremely loud music which is heard everywhere. Groups of people indulge in noisy behaviour and obstruct the footways. For younger or older residents on their way home late at night this can be a very unpleasant, if not intimidating, experience. Residents, including those on the fringe of the centre, also suffer unreasonable noise disturbance late into the night. It is hard to see how the Council benefits from this economically, but if it is allowed to expand yet further into residential roads, where it already has a significant impact, the consequence – eventual depopulation around the centre – will most certainly have an effect.

The chief recommendation of the Task and Finish Group should make it clear that the Night Time Economy has both potential benefits (in the early evening) and severe disadvantages (when it comes to the period after 10 pm) for which the Council has responsibility.

Robert Pankhurst
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Secretary, for APRA Committee