

From Ken Forest

Submission for Theme 2

Matters 10 & 11      The Economy and Town Centre, Retail and Office Growth

The economy is important for the future growth of Tamworth. As a market town Tamworth has lost most of its traditional manufacturing and industry. Firms such as Reliant, Cincinnati, Doultons, the Paper Mills, Cotton Mill and many other large employers have left and their lands replaced by housing. With little incoming employment large proportions of new occupants commute out of town to Birmingham, Lichfield and other places where jobs are easier to obtain.

Back in the 1990s, at a time when I was chair of the local Civic Society we contacted retailers such as C & A and British Home Stores and others to come into the town to stimulate the local economy and to support the Council's approach. Also to offset the emerging threat to the town centre of Ventura Park . This was following my attendance at a House Of Commons "Out Of Town Shopping" investigation of the Dudley "Merry Hill Shopping Centre" effect. We received no response whatsoever. This indicated and confirmed what Tamworth Council had already told us, that these retailers had no interest in putting a store in Tamworth.

More recently, with growth of internet shopping and delivery services, the traditional shopping approach is changing and under threat. Office growth is also changing and not showing the growth levels traditionally occurring with smaller office space areas, with staff working from home and occasional journeys to the main office on some days only. Indeed the Council itself leads the field in Tamworth with their agile working methods which now results in less office working space being necessary. The system is popular with staff and saves time and experience to both employer and to employees and gives flexibility.

This has allowed parts of Marmion House to become occupied by Social Services, Staffordshire County Council and other organisations. I believe some floors are no longer used and remain commercially vacant. The Council are better placed to provide the details.

If the Council are struggling to reuse existing office area in the town centre than this does not bode well for the future of Tamworth's office growth or for retail. The Council seeks to promote Tamworth as a tourist attraction and cultural centre which was something the Civic Society always supported.

A few years ago as a member of the local Heritage group I investigated and campaigned for a local museum. I talked with Council officers, visiting where undisplayed objects were stored and reported back to the Heritage group. Unfortunately this museum project was abandoned on viability grounds. Tamworth has much to offer but the small traditional retailers are not changing or responding to more modern ways despite the best efforts of a respected and dedicated council officer.

Encouraging employment into the town is problematic. That has been ongoing for a number of years and showing decline until recently. Most of the small traders are holding on. From information received on some individual cases this may not be too much longer. Compared with 2014, based on my surveys, talks with retailers and observations, to date, 2015 appears to show a slight improvement over 2014 in the town centre. But when I visit Polesworth, Lichfield, Atherstone or Nuneaton I perceive that they have much less vacant commercial property than Tamworth. This indicates that their growth rate and recovery level is higher than for Tamworth. I support and encourage all efforts to regenerate the town centre, whilst accepting that there are challenges to delivering this, principally due to the finance but also the lack of interest from the private sector.

Similarly, high vacancy levels are noted in the adjacent light industrial areas. The ONS population figures for Tamworth show the lowest growth for the region, and the region is also lower than the UK generally.

The key to stimulating growth in my opinion rests in the town centre with its mix of uses. Retail, office use, smaller residential units for single persons, the elderly and retired and for childless couples. All of whom are unlikely to require a car. Keeping it flexible and catering for a rapidly changing culture is the key to the future of Tamworth.

Tamworth's low pay image and employment shortfalls are driving young people out of the town for a better future. Those leaving would likely be the more qualified and aspiring. The need to retain these young people is important. There should be an emphasis on the growth of apprenticeships and emphasis on qualifications. A recent announcement that Tamworth college is considering relocating into the town could be beneficial to be incorporated into the Local Plan. Encouraging working from home would also be beneficial in order to reduce the need to travel at peak periods.