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**Sent:** 11 January 2019 20:37  
**To:** Johnston, Charles <[REDACTED]@scotborders.gov.uk>  
**Cc:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Galashiels Town Centre

Hi [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] said he had been in contact with you, following on the recent MIR meeting we both attended.

Attached are one layman's observations and I would like to emphasise that they are entirely personal. I suspect many colleague in Energise Galashiels Trust may agree with some of these thoughts, but this has NOT been discussed by the group, so entirely my own ramblings.

### **Thoughts on the future of Galashiels Town Centre**

[REDACTED] - January 2019

The definition of 'town centre' used in this paper is Channel St, Douglas Bridge, Market St, Bank St and High St, part of the zone identified in the current Local Development Plan as the 'Town Centre'. Planning Policy uses were valid years ago, when this area was also the main retail centre of the town – however, it is no longer relevant to assume (arguably this has been the case for some years) that just because a zone is the 'town centre' that it represents, or indeed can represent, a 'core retail' activity zone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Galashiels is the major retailing centre in the Scottish Borders, but the consumer £pend, and associated footfall (which is mostly from adjacent carpark to store), must be predominantly in near-to-town shopping complexes, the major retailing zone being the Tesco / Asda / Galawater Retail Park area. With secondary retail park zones existing at Lower Buckholmside and the King St/ Comely Bank areas. It would be an informative exercise to determine the £value of retail spend in these areas, compared to that within the 'town centre.

Following a Retail Gap Analysis study, SBC Economic Development undertook a survey of UK national enterprises who could potentially have a retail presence in Galashiels (and/or Hawick) – this identified approx. 60 nationals but, at that time (2017), there was no tangible interest from any of these potential investors in investing in Galashiels town centre.

The trends in consumer retailing purchasing habits are clear for all to see – no one can predict whether this will change but it seems unlikely that in the next 10+ years that there will be any reversion to old habits. There is likely to be more pressure on bricks and mortar retailers which will come from several fronts.

The continued impact of online consumer purchasing in an increasing digital world is unlikely to slow any time soon – if anything, new entrants, intent on disrupting existing online platforms and traditional retailers, will emerge. The digital world impacts the traditional world in various ways:

- We are now all used to being able to purchase 'atomic' products (an atomic product being one that is a physical entity, such as a camera, or a coat, or bottle of wine) online – not so very long ago we did so in traditional retail stores . There is more choice online, it is price competitive and products can be delivered within a day or so if required. Consumers will buy more and more online.
- The digital world will continue to disrupt 'atomic' products by killing some off altogether (as has happened with music vinyls/cds and video rental stores) and replace them with 'digital bits' products delivered directly to a home or device such as a TV or phone or smart home assistant such as Alexa, with no need for any town centre / retail intermediary.
- The digital world has already, and will continue to impact service businesses, which use 'atomic products' as part of their business. Banks no longer require as many coins / notes, travel agents no longer have as many holiday brochures.
- The digital world has disrupted and will continue to disrupt these types of service businesses plus Post Offices, Tourist Information Centres, all of whom have digital options to retain existing and attract new clients
- The digital world will also disrupt how some 'atomic products' are made with the development of 3D printing techniques. This will allow for personalised atomic products to be ordered remotely, produced by specialised 3D printers and delivered directly.

All of this will continue to impact town centres. In planning for the future, and thinking about Galashiels Town Centre, it seems reasonable to me to expect to see:

- Fewer banks / building societies, certainly smaller banks, possibly a 'Banking Hall' which hosts multiple brands.
- No newsagents – as printed paper costs increase per unit with falling physical circulation
- Perhaps no shoes shops – we may have shoes personalised /designed online, or sporting trophies personalised with the winner's own face - all created by a 3D printer and delivered next day.
- Libraries – are likely to become too costly to maintain in their current format
- Churches are likely to continue to have to merge with falling congregations.
- Large supermarkets coming under more online pressure for 'atomic products' and finding themselves with excess floor space – they may sublet this space with the 'guarantee' of footfall, which may cause further vacancies in town centre units.
- An increase in the number of 'online collection points' – but more likely to be existing premises trying to add £value, rather than new business opportunities.
- There may new developments with some bricks and mortar premises becoming 'galleries' where consumers can come and before purchasing from whatever online source is most competitive. This will require a new business model, where product manufacturers pay galleries to display their products, rather than the present model of retailers purchasing products.

In Galashiels Town Centre, the potential of footfall when the Great Tapestry of Scotland Visitor Centre opens (forecast 50,000+ visitors p.a.) should hopefully attract some investment interest from new retailers, but probably smaller niche businesses. However, it seems unlikely that they will do much to seriously dent the volume of vacant properties in the Douglas Bridge / Channel St area, most of which are large footprint units of several 000's sq

ft and have been vacant for extended period of time, some several years. And that is before we see any further impact of the digital world!

It may be that small niche businesses do benefit from having a presence in a visitor destination zone, but it is likely to be that this is only a 'shop window' generating some £revenue, and that the premises they rent are primarily for manufacturing their products, with the majority of sales generated online.

It is difficult to see, by April 2020, that the key visitor approaches to the GToS Centre will create a positive impression of Galashiels and of the Scottish Borders. The Galashiels Master Plan aspires to the town becoming a recognised 'visitor destination' – to be that Galashiels town centre needs to look attractive and welcoming.

**There is already some relaxation of Class 1 Retail – the Core Retail policy for Galashiels Town Centre should be suspended altogether for a period until 2021, to try and attract any usage of as many vacant units as possible on the basis that the town will look better than it does today!**

**The town centre will have to transform to become the niche retail (not core retail) / leisure / social / food & drink / entertainment / housing and, if unable to be transformed, is likely require the demolition of some of the over-supply of what were retail units.**

Other observations that may / may not be relevant to the LDP.

- Conservation zone – quite how some of the current area qualifies is unknown and, in any event, does not appear to be enforced – indeed may not be enforceable. Should this be reviewed with Bank St genuinely conserved?
- Electric cars (and then self-driving cars) – as they become increasing prevalent, more charging points will be essential – is this a LDP issue?