

Economic Affairs Scrutiny Panel

Retail Policy Review

Witness: Town Centre Manager

Friday, 9th November 2018

Panel:

Deputy K.F. Morel of St. Lawrence (Chairman)

Deputy D. Johnson of St. Mary (Vice-Chairman)

Witnesses:

Town Centre Manager

The Connétable of St. Helier

[10:01]

Deputy K.F. Morel of St. Lawrence (Chairman):

Thank you so much for coming in. Before we get started if we just state our names for the record, if that is okay. So I am Deputy Kirsten Morel, chair of the Economic Affairs Scrutiny Panel.

Deputy D. Johnson of St. Mary (Vice-Chairman):

David Johnson, Deputy of St. Mary, vice-chairman.

Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:

Simon Crowcroft, Constable of St. Helier.

Town Centre Manager:

Daphne East, Town Centre Manager.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Thank you so much. Thank you for coming in. As you know, we are undertaking a review of the retail sector in Jersey. In fact, we have seen headlines today in the U.K. (United Kingdom) about the struggling retail sector. We are not the U.K., we are here to discover what is happening in Jersey and obviously as St. Helier is the major retail centre in the Island it is really important that we explore your views on it and where you see it all going. It is very much exploratory. It is just to try to understand the picture, as it is. With that in mind, I was just wondering if you could describe your views for the retail sector, the main thrust of any strategy you have in the retail sector in St. Helier.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Do you want me to go first and then hand over to Daphne?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Either you or Daphne, I do not mind.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Just an overview from the political position of the Constable of St. Helier is that St. Helier is extremely resilient and is doing very well compared to most other towns, certainly in the U.K. and possibly further afield. I think that is evidenced in the fact that we are continuing to see private sector investment in major sites in the town centre. We are seeing a very healthy turnover of empty shops, particularly in the central shopping area. We went through the recession with more or less no vacant units in the main precinct. Although there has been a bit of catch-up now, so we are seeing some shops that are not being re-let as soon as they are vacated. The situation is perhaps slightly worse than it was during the recession, but still we are being approached from major investors who are looking to invest in St. Helier in the shops, and we are seeing empty units like Mothercare, for example, which has now been taken over. Where units have not been taken over it is often because the rent has already been paid to the end of the lease and there is not much incentive for the property owner to do anything about it. Particularly, if they are an off-Island owner who perhaps is not so concerned about the look of our town centre as an on-Island property owner. But generally, what with the investment ... also some investment by the States, not as much as I would like to have seen, but there has been some investment from the States in the public realm and of course the Parish invest a great deal of money in maintaining the capital, keeping it incredibly clean. The Parish puts in exercises to make the town centre vibrant so people do not just come to town to shop but to socialise and enjoy the ambience of the town. Generally, my overview, is that things are going well.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

The Government has had retail strategies in the past and they are working on one at the moment. How does St. Helier and the Government kind of dovetail or work together to bring these forward? Are you finding that process useful?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes. I think on this issue of retail strategy development, we have been involved. We are invited to be around the table and the Minister has been constantly finding out what we think so that ... that does not apply to every States department but as far as Economic Development, I think we work very closely with them. They support us. Again, we would like more financial support. At Christmas, for example, the financial burden has perhaps fallen unfairly on St. Helier ratepayers because all Islanders enjoy Christmas in St. Helier. But we are getting some ... Daphne will have the figures about how much funding we get, but we get some funding from the States and of course assistance from the private sector as well; from the shops and hospitality businesses that support the town centre.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

The chair has asked my question. I was not surprised but really heartened that you are involved at an early stage. I was not quite sure to the extent to which E.D. (Economic Development) consulted you but you are in on the ground floor on any development, are you?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, absolutely. There is a steering group and a working group, so I sit on that group as well, with the Jersey Retail Association involvement as well. So it is very much a 2-way conversation. The Minister is very supportive to try and get all the views of all retailers, including obviously St. Helier and what we do to try and make the town vibrant, so, yes, we are there at the table.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

One thing that we are seeing happening in town at the moment is a shift towards the south of St. Helier. How is that affecting, from your perspective, the entire retail offering in St. Helier? Can you sum up what is happening in that sense? Geographically, how is it moving? We know it is towards the south; what is happening in the north?

Town Centre Manager:

The norths, the Colomberie, West Centre areas, are obviously struggling for footfall. They find that the shift has really affected them. They obviously are quite boutiquey and independent shops in those areas, which I think brings us a point of difference, which is fantastic. We have feedback from visitors that they like the independent shops and not just having U.K. chains. So I think it is important that we support those areas as much as we can. We have little groups in those areas as well with the traders to try and find out their issues and what they would like resolved. Usually it is around signage, it is around parking access. It is trying to enliven their areas as well. We do not own ... the Parish does not manage and own a lot of those areas, which is shame because I think some

investment would be nice in the public realm around those areas as well and to support the traders to do more.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Can I come in on that question because we have recognised for a long time that there is a danger in the drift to the south? In the past I have described Colomberie as a Cinderella district of St. Helier, and that is why Daphne supports groups of traders up there, to try and find out how things can be improved. There are certain blocks involved in doing that. As I was saying on the radio this morning, we do not have the ability, as a Parish, to, for example, remove a literal block which in the case of Colomberie is a set of bicycle stands, which are right in the way of the person getting to the top of the precinct who wants to go up into Snow Hill and Colomberie. The Minister will not remove those cycle racks. There is a physical block to getting into Colomberie. There is also a huge amount of traffic coming through, a lot of commuter traffic, traffic that is not coming into Colomberie to benefit the district. Again, we have not got very far with trying to get the States to improve Colomberie, in terms of regeneration, so that people will see that as a destination in itself. It could be like the Brighton Lanes. It could be a place full of quirky little shops run by local people. But to make that work you cannot have it as the main commuter thoroughfare. You have to reduce the traffic so that people can start to enjoy the shopping experience up there. The other point on the plus side, I would say, about what the States are doing is that they are, I think, supporting the idea of keeping people in the north of town. So we have seen the police station relocating to the north-east sector, which has got to be good for Colomberie. I think there are going to be moves when we look at the future of the civil service, possibly to find a centre for them, again in the north of the town. These things will all help footfall. As far as footfall goes, we only have one footfall camera, which we pay for.

Town Centre Manager:

We do.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

The Parish pays for. Again, we have asked for ... if we had more footfall cameras we could get better data about the drift to the south and hopefully we would see, as we do work in the north of town, as the North of Town Masterplan eventually gets moving, I think we would be able to measure the footfall better. So I would certainly want to see the States supporting the Parish with more footfall cameras, data-gathering exercises.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

The basic point of course is we talk about the retail sector but it overlaps with everything else St. Helier wants, does it not? You talk about Colomberie. What about what I call the North of Town, the area around the Odeon, et cetera. There is a special project for that, is there not?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes, there is. The North of Town Masterplan, approved by the States, probably a decade ago, no funding has been put into it. The first section, which is the Midvale Road scheme, was taken out by the former Minister of the programme of Future St. Helier works. So the public sector investment, after the Town Park, has more or less stalled. Notwithstanding that, there are certainly indications that there is going to be significant private sector investment in the area around the Town Park. If it takes a proposition to the States to get the North of Town Masterplan back on track then I would certainly be willing to do that. If the panel supported that, it would be helpful.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I have a question here about what more support would you like for the retail sector, but you have answered that. Financial support for that particular masterplan, maybe?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think so, yes.

Town Centre Manager:

And data. We have the one footfall camera. I think we are really lacking data. Also, to put other retail strategy together, there is not that much data available. So if we had more cameras to be able to understand the shift and the flow of the town centre then you would be able to plan better. Pedestrianisation of areas may come up in the planning process. There are lots of areas that we could focus on if we had data and we just do not have that.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

You would obviously argue that is not just for the benefit of St. Helier, it is for the benefit of the Island.

Town Centre Manager:

Absolutely.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Workforce and everything.

Town Centre Manager:

Yes. Visit Jersey, from their perspective as well. Inward investment, we could give a booklet to inward investors to say: "This is our retail sector. This is how healthy it is. These are our top 10 areas" that would be very, very beneficial but we do not have any of that data at the moment.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I notice that we used to publish statistics on the retail sector but I think they finished in 2015.

Town Centre Manager:

They did.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Was that entirely a Government-led initiative, which the Government then stopped doing as well?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Would you find it welcome to have them back again?

Town Centre Manager:

I would absolutely welcome that. We use Springboard for our footfall camera and they are international, but they also collect sales data in the U.K., where that is obviously anonymised, so it would be a place where retailers could feel comfortable to do that. I think it is important that we have sales data again, to understand the shift of retail. But also the inward investment in retail and how we are batting above our weight in terms of town centres but there is still more we can do. We kind of need all of that.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Do you have any insight as to why those statistics have stopped being published?

Town Centre Manager:

No, I never really had an update on why. They just ended, I believe. It just stopped. I do not even think there was an announcement. It just finished, which is such a shame. Can I give you one key point on footfall as well? We are up on footfall, so here today we are 8 per cent up. We are looked at against the south-west of the U.K. and the U.K.; the south-west is minus 3.4 per cent and the U.K. is minus 2.4 per cent. So we track these on a daily ... we can get that daily data and hourly data if we need, but it is positive data to have.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

But that footfall is obviously based on whatever the identity of the person ...

Town Centre Manager:

Absolutely. It does not transfer into sales unfortunately.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

The workforce will come into that as well.

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, absolutely. Our town centre is quite unique in some way that it is the workforce or the people, so we have people living and working in St. Helier. Monday to Friday is the busiest time. So Saturday is obviously our leisure shoppers and all the workers leave St. Helier and go out to the countryside and the seaside but Mondays to Fridays is a very, very busy time for us. It is a benefit as well to retailers for impulse purchases.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

But you would have no way of knowing from the footfall cameras how much, for instance, tourism related to that?

Town Centre Manager:

No. You can see a spike. So if we do an event you can track a spike and understand it. We are very lucky that our footfall has been consistent, so we have not had a huge drop-off in footfall, but again that is based on the fact that the workers are in the town centre as well.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Can I just also add, because you asked about support? One of the things we have tried to do, certainly for 5 years, since Daphne has been town centre manager, is to tackle this perception that it is difficult to park when you come to town.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

We have a section on parking.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

We can go into parking.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

We felt rather blocked because we have come up with lots of innovative ideas like free after 3. For example, public car parks could be free to encourage people to come in for the last couple of hours and do their shopping, reduced cost of parking because we know from the answers to questions that we get that there is not a problem in terms of capacity. There is almost always space in the public car parks, but the public do not know that and they do not know where the space is. So if we

could get people up to Fort Regent, for example, and if there could be a reduced rate provided there for shoppers, possibly in tandem with some kind of Hoppa bus operating around the town, then more people would come to town and go easily into Pier Road Car Park and become shoppers. But when we have asked that in the past the Minister's response has been: "If the Parish pays us, we will make the discounted parking." Well, it should not be St. Helier ratepayers who are paying for incentivising the parking opportunities.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I well take the point in the sense that I use Sand Street and Pier Road, never a problem.

[10:15]

Sand Street, in fact there is rarely a problem there. That is obviously the ideal one for shoppers. It is a question whether lack of parking is deterring shoppers; do you think it is, do you?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think there is a perception.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Perception rather than a real one?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

They often tell me almost a matter of pride: "I have not been to town since last year" or: "I have not been since last Christmas" and I sort of feel: "More fool you." But they say it is because it is so hard to park. That perception needs to be challenged and it needs to be challenged in concrete ways so that we bring in incentives so that people say: "Well, I might try using that car park because it is going to be free after 3 o'clock", for example, what better reason do you need?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

The whole issue of parking I find quite fascinating. You are right, probably about 90 per cent of our submissions are from private individuals have mentioned parking and the lack of parking or the lack of convenience around parking. There is definitely a perception. What I find interesting is how this tallies up with ... I mean in correspondence to me, I think, and I apologise for breaking any confidence in there, you mentioned cycling and walking, better to promote those. So how do you marry this demand, this kind of customer demand for parking, with what is possibly an alternative policy direction that you would like to go?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think it is complementary. The fact is whether you come to town to shop on a bike or on your feet or by taxi or bus, or by private car, the message we want to get out is that there are opportunities, it is easy to park whatever your mode of transport. The problem at the moment is it is considered difficult to park in your car. It is quite difficult to park a bicycle because the bicycle racks are mainly full with commuter cyclists, which is great, but we certainly need better cycling parking, but we do not even have any cycle routes in St. Helier. So you can come down the east-west routes and you are more or less dumped on the other side of a busy road with no idea where you can cycle in St. Helier, how you can get to the central market, where you can leave your bicycle when you get there. I consider myself a bit of an expert in cycling legally around town, and it is really difficult. I have to think really hard before I go to a certain place on my bike because I obviously have to do it legally because I will be spotted if I do not. But St. Helier it is a very difficult town to cycle. That is why I have been persistently asking the Minister where the cycle strategy is, which we have asked for, for over a dozen years, because without a cycle strategy you cannot encourage people to cycle conveniently and legally in town.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I accept that. Going back to the do cycling and retail therapy go well? I mean in a sense that ... it is not the shopping itself which is a problem, it is getting your goods home and the problem at Fort Regent may be ... you touched on an Hoppa service, you can have them slightly out of town, you are going to need the service to get from that parking area to the main thoroughfares.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

My view is that if you order something really big it will probably be delivered anyway. I do not think Pier Road is as difficult a car park to use as a shopper as people think it is. It is just a short hill and probably do people a lot of good to walk up and down it.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

It is my daily exercise.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

As far as parking on the street goes, I think there is this idea that people feel they have to park on the street whereas certainly in terms of sustainability, it is much better to get cars into off-street car parks because then you free up the street space for much more useful things, whether ... obviously disabled parking has to be a priority for street spaces, but I think able-bodied people should park off-street and then you have got more opportunities for al fresco, for cycle tracks and so on. Things that are a better use of the street space in the town centre.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

You mentioned earlier about the areas of responsibility which are not St. Helier's, they are the Government's. How much does this ... it is not a division. I do not mean it in a totally negative sense, but how difficult is it for St. Helier and the Government to get their plans matching and working together, because there does seem a lot of opportunity for things to fall through holes in what you are describing?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think it is a division. That is a good word. I have been in my position for nearly 17 years and despite St. Helier being part of the last Strategic Plan, an important scheme like Midvale Road was simply removed from the Minister's priority list. Other schemes, I talked about the difficulty in getting bollards removed and getting physical blocks to people moving round town changed. We are largely kept in the dark about what the departmental priorities are for the town. That is why I have come to the view that delegated responsibility to certainly this Parish for how the town works is in order, because we have a Roads Committee that is in charge of the Parish roads, which tend to be the minor ones. We meet in public. We are very accountable as a body. I think it would be absolutely right for the States to hand over responsibility for how St. Helier works in terms of transportation to the Parish, together with a budget, because obviously ratepayers are not going to take on more financial burden for the States. But if we had probably at least the same budget as the States currently spend on town, I suspect we would use it at least as efficiently as the States does, and possibly more efficiently.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

You have asked the question I was going to raise about is responsibility at the moment in the right place, i.e. for St. Helier you say not and the Government should relax it in your favour?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think we should have delegated powers, yes.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Just looking at facilities in a slightly wider way than just parking. I think parking is related in that it is about ease of access for different people. You mentioned people with disabilities and it is the same with mothers with children, and how easy it is to move around town and to cater for children's needs as they are in town. Do you have any plans to increase breastfeeding facilities in town and childcare facilities or is that on the Government side as opposed to the St. Helier side?

Town Centre Manager:

So we have a family room now at the Parish in the Town Hall, which has been used massively. I think 5 or 6 mothers, fathers, grandmothers a day come in and out. So it is a great facility and they

really enjoy the space and it is very convenient for them. Mothercare was the only other space that was quite close to the area and, clearly, that is there no longer. I think Boots may have a little space. From our side of things we have managed to do what we can within our own facilities. I think now it is trying to encourage other areas and other States departments to deliver the same. It is very important that you get mums, particularly who are off on maternity leave into town, to enjoy and get out and about in the fresh air, and it is good for the kids. But also we are hoping that they will shop and they will impulse purchase. So it is quite important for footfall.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Can I ask 2 related questions? First, I recall that in the States there has been raised, I think by the Connétable, the question of public conveniences. Again, this is something you would see coming within any transfer responsibility from the department to the Parish.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

We have already got that. We already run the public conveniences.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

The public convenience.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Well, we run some of them in St. Helier. Of course we run those to the benefit largely of non-parishioners, people who are coming into town to shop, people who are using the evening economy. We have invested a lot certainly in the Conway Street, the new public toilets there. Yes, I think it is really important, and I think more could be done to let people know where the toilets are because it is an important thing, when you come to town. We have also established a "Changing Places" toilet behind the Town Hall, which is the only one in town, I think, although there may be one on the Town Park; I am not sure if it is operational. So we have advanced facilities for people who need that kind of extra care that you get in changing places, disabled toilets. It is a sort of thing on a strategic level that a local authority would be expected to provide. I think going along with that is this vexed issue about parking control officers. They currently work for the States although they used to work ... in times past they used to work for the Parish. It does seem to me a curious thing where you have central government running parking control officers. Central government should be doing higher, more strategic things, than giving people parking tickets. That is another delegated power that would clearly make sense for us to look after those people who are not just out there to give parking tickets but to make sure that businesses can service their properties and that people can get parking spaces, and they are not being used by people who have got no right to be using them.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

That can almost be the nature of tourist guides in a way. They can have more than one function and it would be helpful rather than just ...

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Related to that, it is just quickly: how has the ... you have got the community volunteers who work ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Community wardens, yes.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

How does that work?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

We introduced them because we felt that parking control officers were seen as being just there to give parking tickets but we brought them in essentially to manage the residents parking areas around the town, and they do not come into the town centre except when the States officers are not working. So there is a kind of division of labour there, which is not very practical. I would rather see a single group of Parish wardens - which is the word I have tended to use for them - who are there not just to obviously police the parking and restrictions but they are there to give directions to tourists who help businesses get deliveries made, and so on.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Before we leave parking cars, one final question. Temporary parking discs, et cetera. This is a real position. I had a parishioner who had a broken angle. You no longer or no one any longer issues temporary disabled parking discs. That seems to be an antisocial situation. I think that out of the goodness of St. Helier they used to be responsible for it. Do you think the way forward again is just to come through central government?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

No, I think it is a function the Parish should be ... the Parish currently processes all disabled permits for the whole Island.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

These are permanent ones?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

They are permanent ones. The law that we do it under delegated responsibility does not allow us to issue temporary ones. So I think the law needs to be looked at. I believe it is going to be looked at because there are other groups of people who feel that they should have disabled parking rights. For example, people with autism, with children with autism, have argued that ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Pregnant mothers, yes.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes. So I think that matter should certainly be reviewed. It needs to be done in a way that is objective because the current system is very much driven by, you go to your doctor and you get ... the doctor signs a form. So not everyone who has a disabled driving permit, it has been argued, should have one because you see them sprinting away from their cars, in some cases. I accept that that is an exception but certainly there is anecdotal evidence that the disabled parking system needs to be reviewed. It needs to be ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I am sure it was abused before.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think it needs to be more user friendly but also there is a limited amount of disabled parking and it is important that those spaces go to the people who really need them rather than people who have not handed in their late parents' disabled permit. So there is some abuse of disabled parking that needs to be dealt with quite severely.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

There is a case presumably for why should disabled parking discs be free? If you are producing a facility for them should they be paying?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think the key thing with disabled parking is to be generous with the time allowed rather than to be generous with any kind of financial discount.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I accept that.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

We are moving on to kind of the properties in St. Helier, and that sort of thing. We will look at the very live issue of vacant shops, but before we do, the thing about the siting of retail outlets, and we have stores which are already here and recently there was a letter in the paper which referred to a new store in St. Helier being ... I think it is in the card market, greetings cards, and it being sited ... coming in and being sited just a few doors down from an existing retailer. In that sense, is that not just cannibalising one business to feed the new business? If there was a greater thought towards siting of new businesses then perhaps if the new shop had been at the other end of the High Street that would be a better place to put it. I was just wondering what your views are on that potential for businesses being cannibalised by new ones, and also how you go about thinking. Do you have any say in where shops go?

Town Centre Manager:

No, unfortunately we do not. We have no powers to tell people where they can set up shop at all. I think it would be nice to have some ... we talk about the Brighton Lane, et cetera, it would be lovely to have a cultural quarter or a quirky quarter where you had just restaurants. It would be lovely to be able to have those little areas. But unfortunately the law does not allow us to tell people where they can go. It really is driven by the market itself and driven by the rents. The shop you are talking about clearly was in a prime location that card shop could afford to take on. So really we just do not have the control. But again it would be lovely to have some sort where you could invent Brighton Lane, et cetera.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Of course it is driven by the market and driven by rents that means as rents, as we have already discussed with the Minister for Treasury and Resources the other day, rents often have clause which mean that rents will only go in one direction. So that is always going to be to the disadvantage of local entrepreneurs who perhaps want to start their shop. It will always favour larger, not necessarily from our side, but certainly larger businesses.

Town Centre Manager:

Absolutely. We would love to see more. We try and support the idea of pop-up shops with these empty spaces but unfortunately there is not an opportunity within our gift to be able to force that. There is no way that we can do that, so it is down to communication with estate agents and landlords to say: "Is there a possibility for a short-term lease?" and unfortunately they always say no because they do not want any issues of repair, et cetera, so we do not get the opportunity.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

As you raise pop-up shops, is there a danger there that that might go against the atmosphere you are trying to create of a thriving town if there were too many of them?

Town Centre Manager:

Thank God, we have a good, strong market. I do not think we will have many of them. I think the areas ... it would be lovely to see the next shop as a pop-up Christmas shop potentially for the next few weeks. That would be fantastic.

[10:30]

So opportunities like that maybe to have artists' areas and places where people could do crafts, et cetera, and at least get a foothold within the town centre to get footfall and see if their business would work, and then move on to a permanent location elsewhere, would be a wonderful opportunity but we just do not have input.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

At the moment, as I understand it.

Town Centre Manager:

At the moment.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

As you mentioned, the Next shop, am I allowed to ask if any approach has been made to them, as to whether they would allow it to be a Christmas shop for a limited period?

Town Centre Manager:

It is still being rented to Next, so they are still paying the lease for the next 4 years. So their intention is to leave it as it is.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Has any approach been made to Next to say ...?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay.

Town Centre Manager:

We even looked to see the windows created slightly differently, gave it some vinyls, et cetera. We always approach empty shops about that, about trying to make it at least look more attractive rather than just blank.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Continuing with that, I know the Constable was in the media recently talking about the possibility of there being an empty property tax. I was wondering if you could talk further on that just to see how you perhaps ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes, I mean it is coincidental that we have been thinking about it, and whether I should bring an amendment to the Budget. But clearly if the Scrutiny Panel is going to do that, that is probably better.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I do not know, we are just exploring at the moment.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

We are carrying out a review.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Do not hold on your own amendment waiting for us.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

No, it is frustrating, as Daphne has mentioned, there were empty shops that are stubbornly refusing to move and I can see that if the rent has already been paid there is not much incentive on the owner to do anything about it, and we felt that we should look at whether other jurisdictions have financial levers they can pull. Daphne has done a bit of work on the Irish example where they do have these incentives, fiscal incentives, and it seems to me that we should be doing that because it would ... it is not unfair, all we are really saying is that unless your property is available for other uses and you are just keeping the door shut then there should be some kind of fiscal measure.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I think you are probably preaching to the converted in the sense that when matters related to property are raised in the States, or even with the Minister for Treasury and Resources, there seems to be a fear that that is the Parish's business. We will not go near property. I am interested to hear, Constable, you saying that this is an Island-wide matter. I would agree that it is the Island as a

whole. Treasury are losing out because the income is not coming in on which the Treasury can take its tax. So you would see it in the form of a tax rather than any rating issue then?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes. Do you want to talk about the Irish example?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, the Irish brought in the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act in 2005 and that really was around when the Celtic Tiger failed slightly for the Irish economy and they had a lot of empty housing estates. So what they have done is they have encouraged it, from an accommodation point of view and residential, to be filled and now what they are doing is bringing it into the urban economy and bringing it into town centres where clearly they are not as okay as we are and they are seeing a lot of empty shops. So they have attached a levy to these empty shops for a certain period of time. I think theirs is quite a long period of 12 months. I think we would need to see the market moving a little bit quicker than that. There is a small percentage at the moment but they are putting it up year on year.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

That is very interesting, I am involved in another review involving the Irish so I will be pleased to look into that as well.

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, that would be great. Any more information.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Is this something St. Helier could lead on? Do you have to wait for the Government or could you use the rate system in some way?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

The rates system is pretty clunky, it would probably need a law change. It would also need the agreement of the other 11 Constables. So it may well be that pursuing it as a Budget amendment ... we are certainly looking at it at the moment whether it is possible to bring it in with this year's Budget, because that would be a quicker way of doing it and it would be much more targeted on the capital and the shopping area of St. Helier.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Yes.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Perhaps I can just mention the other point where we are helped by the States, which is that we have had planning policies for some years now, which make it very unlikely that we will have a kind of ... you know, every other shop a charity shop experience. It would not be a problem to me because I like charity shops but, you know, over the half term I have been in a couple of places in the U.K. where the town centre is more or less charity shops, bookies and cafés and that is it. There is a huge shopping centre next door with ample parking and all the serious retail and hospitality is in that shopping centre. That is clearly not something we have done. The Parish has lobbied, certainly for a couple of decades, against out of town shopping. We did not want a supermarket on the waterfront for that reason, because we want people to keep coming to town. We want to keep the central market and the big department stores a really important part of the retail mix. So I think Jersey has got it right. Even across the water in Guernsey, you have seen what happens when you created Admiral Park and there is certainly less ... in St. Peter Port there is a feeling that most people have gone somewhere else to do their shopping rather than the town centre. So I think, again, from that point of view, we are fortunate and we have good planning policies that support retail.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

That is important to know. I was just going to ask about revaluing and sticking with rates. It is just about there has not been a revaluation of business rates ... or from a rates perspective for 15 years or thereabouts. Is this something the Parish is against? Would it be happy to see a revaluation of rates?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Absolutely. We have been arguing for it. We have not always been supported by the other Parishes who are concerned about a possible knock-on effect on the corner shop in St. Martin or whatever, but the revaluation that we are looking for would not affect the corner shop in St. Martin. In fact the corner shops all over the Island will probably be better in terms of rates. But the bigger financial houses would pay more because we currently have a situation where the rates are completely skewed and people are paying far less in rates than they would in a comparable place in the U.K. or in Europe, and these are big financial institutions which... and big retail outlets as well and they come to Jersey and they cannot believe how low the rates are because business rates in the U.K. are so much higher. So we are missing out on quite a lot of income that could help defray the cost of running the capital, which is something I go on about quite a lot. St. Helier ratepayers pick up all the bills for running ... for being the capital, for the cleaning, you know, for the lighting and so on, which could be ... we could have more money from the rates if the rates were revalued and businesses paid more, particularly the larger premises.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Apart from a general increase in income from rates, are you effectively saying that the retail sector is, to some extent, subsidising the business sector? It should be better apportioned?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think probably the issue is more around the financial services sector. I think financial services ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I meant that, yes.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes, which is a really important part of our economy and we ... obviously we are very grateful and pleased that they are here but they simply do not pay what they should be paying in rates and that means that the burden is falling a disproportionate way on domestic ratepayers and on smaller retailers.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

That would necessitate a fairly drastic overhaul of the present system or ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I am not sure if it is drastic ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

... or revaluation process.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

We have rates assessors who are willing to carry out that revaluation and it is a job that could be done within a year or so. It can certainly be done within this term of Government.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

For that to happen basically the other Parishes would need to agree?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay, thank you. To support retail I think you do do events which you may regard as retail events. Should we be doing more? Are they run independently of retail? Can they lead to almost competition with the retail sector? Are you with me?

Town Centre Manager:

I am with you. We do many events. Things like Street Food Thursdays has worked really well from a P.R. (public relations) point of view and from footfall in the town centre. That started about 2 years ago where street food vans are in on a Thursday. That has brought footfall to the town centre but it has also brought people into the shops as well, so that was to support a late-night shopping on a Thursday evening, extend those hours. Things like mini events, Funky Fridays is something we started this year. That has really enlivened the Charing Cross area and retailers and cafes in that area absolutely love it and they have great footfall on that Friday afternoon. So I think things like Fete de St. Helier, which is obviously our annual street party that we do around St. Helier, there may be a bit of competition because we will have craft stalls and retail stalls in that area, so that may be a slight competition on that weekend. That is one weekend when we obviously celebrate everything in St. Helier and I think it is important from the parishioner's point of view, the resident's point of view, to have that as well and to have it in closed streets and pedestrians being able to walk through normally car-using areas. I do not think it is much of a competition, I think the Christmas lights switch-on, which is coming up in 2 weeks' time, is there to support retail fully and the retailers do their gala evenings on that evening because it is the best time for them and their footfall is fantastic. Year on year they have seen an increase in sales because the switch-on is so well attended. So I think we work very much in unison with all the retailers.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Do you work in unison with the Government to publicise this or, again, does the burden fall on the Parish to publicise it?

Town Centre Manager:

It is with the Parish, so, yes, it is part of the remit to make sure that we are putting it out on social media.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

So, again, is that an area where you would like more support from Government?

Town Centre Manager:

I think we quite like control of that because I think we can manage that as much as we need to in terms of publicity and I think that it also shows from a Parish point of view the town centre is vibrant because we are actioning things for the Parish rather than it being States led. It is Parish led. I think it is important for us to have that independently.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

How do you find retailers from their buy in? Do you find ... there is a suggestion that retailers need to think outside the box a bit more and perhaps have events within their own shops to tie in with events that the Parish is supporting. Do you find this happening? Are you asking retailers to join in in that way?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, absolutely. Sometimes it can be very difficult to get retailers' mindset to think outside the box. We talk about retail experience and it needs to be a retail experience. Coming into town is no longer just to come in to shop, you have to have an experience, you have to have some kind of draw apart from just going in to buy a dress or whatever you are focused on. People spend more time in town if they have got an experience, an event, live music, whatever that may be and what we try and do from ... my time is spent getting the retailers to understand that that retail experience is hugely important. So if we are doing Street Food Thursdays, Christmas lights, if they can do something that is a joint approach then it works much better for them. They have started to do that, we just would require more.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Is this what is called the Retail Consumer ...

Town Centre Manager:

The Jersey Retail Association.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes, so presumably that is moving ahead now. It is fairly new, is it not?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes. Yes, absolutely and I am part of that group as well, so we ... all of that information gets fed through the retailers.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think there are missed opportunities. I was in Bournemouth for their air display and you could not forget it was the air display, the whole weekend almost every shop had aeroplanes in the window, they buy into their events in a way that we do not here. Battle of Flowers, again here you could walk around parts of town and not know the Battle of Flowers was on, whereas that is something the whole retail community should be embracing and have flowers in the windows and retail could do their own little floats in the windows. So I think there are missed opportunities where they could be part of those events.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Although, again, the air display almost takes people out of town ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes, people out of town.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

... and you can walk down King Street and there is no one but they could adapt their hours ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

That is right, yes. On either side of it, in the build up to it, they could almost make a long weekend of it. It is not just an afternoon, it is right across the long weekend and so everybody benefits from the air display, not just the people.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Is there any co-operation with you on that from Ports of Jersey, who run the Battle of Britain air display? Do they liaise with you as to what ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Not particularly.

Town Centre Manager:

No, not particularly.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Not at the moment. Again, the boat show is something that happens but we are not really invited to discuss how could the boat show be used to get more retail vitality in the town and so on.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

So these are areas where you would like to be involved?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes.

Town Centre Manager:

We had approached ... when I first started in this role I approached the boat show, particularly to say even if you just could put some little mini boats in our event spaces for that week beforehand it would be wonderful. But I think logically sometimes it can be ... I feel like I am asking too much almost. People just do not quite get it. I think moving forward anything ... with the help of Visit Jersey, I would hope, adding that extra extension to the event or before the event would work for everybody.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think while Daphne is mentioning Visit Jersey it is ... I love the work they are doing to market Jersey online, particularly the videos are great, but they are still tending, as tourism always has done in Jersey, to focus on east-west is best. Let us get out of town and look at the coastline, let us look at the north coast, let us look at the opportunities to go coasteering and so on, and surfing. Of course we are lucky to live in a fabulous environment but I have yet to see a Visit Jersey advert which is wholly devoted to the shopping experience, which is pretty remarkable. In terms of shopping centres in the south of the British Isles, St. Helier must be way up there in terms of the range and breadth of offer. Yet, I do not think Visit Jersey really markets Jersey as a shopping destination. Dubai do it, people go to Dubai, which is in the middle of the desert, to go shopping, which is quite bizarre. It is a long way away. Why are we not doing more to get people to come to Jersey to shop?

The Deputy of St. Mary:

If that did happen there would be momentum for new retailers to come in, yes.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Just before we finish off on events, as far as if you are putting on an event as a Parish or something, how do you find the process for ... the bureaucratic process for enabling the events? Is it an easy process to deal with? Can it be frustrating? What is your experience?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is bureaucratic, is it not?

[10:45]

Town Centre Manager:

It is bureaucratic. To begin with I found it very, very bureaucratic, very difficult. I think we have probably more of a relationship now and I think with the Bailiff's entertainment panel as well, we

know we have 2 set events that the Parish runs each year, which is the Fete de St. Helier and the Christmas lights switch on, so now we have momentum where we know exactly what we are doing and it is a little bit easier. But I think anything new can be very difficult to approach, certainly the red tape area. Live music in town and many events like that. We now tend to have a bit more control in the Parish because they are on our events basis so that works very well, whereas previously that had not really happened. So it can be difficult. New entrants ... clearly events have reduced since tourism are no longer and it is Visit Jersey, so events happening are in decline. Things like the Big Gig, for instance, did not go this year. Things like that we kind of need new entrants to come into the market and bring more vibrancy into the parks and the areas around town.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Are applications to the panel ever declined?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, absolutely, yes.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

They are?

Town Centre Manager:

Ours are ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

So it is a real test then?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, absolutely.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is something that, again, should be with local government. Local government should decide whether anyone is allowed to give a free massage in the Royal Square. There was an application a few years ago which was turned down because it was not considered seemly for someone to be giving people ... you get this in railway stations in the U.K., and it would seem a great thing in the Royal Square but it was turned down. I think the Parish is a can-do organisation, we tend to say yes as long as there are no health and safety issues, and it is another responsibility that could and should be delegated to local government so that we can just get on with it.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Moving on to Sunday trading, it has been in the news recently. There are different views. What is your own view? Would that help the prosperity of St. Helier if it was opened up?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think Thursday afternoon trading would be good. That is a bigger problem that one of our prime retail centres, the central market, is closed on a Thursday afternoon. I know there are good reasons for that but I would like to see that market open on a Thursday afternoon. In terms of Sunday trading, I tend to agree with a recent commentator who said that most of the people who want to open can, it is only really in the town centre ... it is the department stores that cannot open. Whether they would open if Sunday trading was liberalised is open to question. Town is quite busy in the summer on a Sunday because of all the smaller shops that do open.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Also French tourists ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Also you have the tourists. But to make town on a Sunday for the local market, I think, certainly in the winter, is probably not going to work. The other issue for the Parish is that if Sunday trading becomes more popular, we are going to have to increase the amount of resources we put into the town in terms of keeping it clean on a Sunday. It is going to have an effect on policing as well, so States of Jersey Police will have to put in more resources. It will come at a cost to the community and there is, of course, this sort of overarching question which is people ... a lot of people would like Sunday to be different, and that includes people who live in St. Helier. A lot of people reside in the centre of St. Helier and they want one day a week when it is different. At the moment they still have that.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Just to emphasise your point, most people take that particular point but focusing purely on those that are involved in retailing and what you are saying it has a knock-on effect to all sorts of other people, from traffic wardens to public safety and everything so it is not just a retail situation, okay. Sorry, we are jumping around a bit. You mentioned the central market. Why is it not open on a Thursday now?

Town Centre Manager:

We do not have the powers over the central market so we are not involved ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is run by the States again.

Town Centre Manager:

So we do not have any influence unfortunately. We have suggested, when late night shopping, and particularly Thursday evenings, were extended several years ago, that it would be fantastic to have a food village going on in central market on that evening and we were flatly declined that it would not happen.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I think you are echoing some of the thoughts the panel has had on that; it is a gem, in a way, and it should be the centre of attraction.

Town Centre Manager:

Absolutely. It is an attraction. I met visitors walking up trying to find the central market, you send them in the right direction and they absolutely adore it. It is a jewel in our crown but we would definitely like to have a bit more influence and support.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Are there moves in that direction?

Town Centre Manager:

No. There are no moves unfortunately.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Have you done any research to get people's views, particularly tourists, but in general about the central market and how important it is to them?

Town Centre Manager:

We have not done any research but there was a report ... I think I put it in my submission to the panel, Guy Gothard did a report - I think it was in 2010 potentially - which was very much about the improvement that could be made within the market to improve it as a visitor attraction but also from a parishioner's point of view. That was very telling in terms of the slight changes and the big changes, and I do not believe any of that ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is not even published, is it?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I do not think it is available.

Town Centre Manager:

I do not know if it is available. I had it through one of the market traders.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

The reason why it is closed is it is a throwback to early closing day, which all towns in the U.K. had at one stage.

Town Centre Manager:

Yes.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

We do not know why it went elsewhere and not there.

Town Centre Manager:

Yes.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

It has recently been refurbished as well ...

Town Centre Manager:

The fountain has, yes.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It was in a list of the best 100 markets in the United Kingdom or British Isles. There is no question that it is high quality. It is a major asset to the Island. I just think we should exploit it more. I have certainly, in the past, offered to the States that the Parish would run the market. Again it is a local government function rather than a central government function but it was more or less ... I think the last Minister, the one before the current one, said they clearly wanted it to be ... wanted to keep hold of it for reasons best known to them. Again, I think that the Parish is an accountable ... we have democratically elected members of our Roads Committee who are quite willing to take on more of these kinds of roles if given the chance.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Going back to your earlier comment about Visit Jersey, which you admire in other respects, your comment about not focusing on St. Helier applies to the market as well. As far as you know, that is not publicised at all?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is amazing that you still ... when you are in the U.K. you still meet a lot of people who do not really know much about Jersey. I am astonished how many people I meet who have been to Jersey and certainly they do not really know ... they know we are an offshore finance centre but they do not know that we have this amazing history, this amazing heritage or this amazing shopping experience, but they have all heard of Dubai. I think the question has to be asked of Visit Jersey: "What more can you do to market Jersey and St. Helier in particular as a place for short-break destinations around shopping, dining and this kind of thing?"

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I would question perhaps whether our retail offering is therefore sufficiently different? One submission we have had is very much focused on the idea encouraging high-end retail. So more designer shops, that sort of thing, and trying to have a system where there is more investment in that area. That, of course, does not help people who are doing their daily shopping in town. Do you have views on whether St. Helier, to become different, to attract more tourists, should go down the high-end route or is it a more balanced ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I think it is a mix, is it not? If we could get some high-end retailers ... I do not know the names, Daphne may know them, but there are big shops, there are high-end ...

Deputy K.F. Morel:

There is high-end everything.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

There are French companies as well that I think could come in, which brings one neatly to the retail tax. The worst message we have sent out in the last year is slapping a 20 per cent tax on retail because we want to encourage this kind of inward investment in our retail centre, and it really does not help to have such a swingeing tax on larger retailers, which is why I am looking at an amendment this year in the Budget.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

You are going to be busy.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes.

Town Centre Manager:

Supporting retail.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Of course the retail tax, and this is always again the balance that ... the problem is the retail tax is designed to ensure that off Island retailers do pay some tax because there a complaint from the population that they do not. I assume any changes will be balanced with that.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Ten per cent I would consider is a meaningful contribution without being off putting and I think ... again, it is a long time ago now but I brought the petition against G.S.T. (Goods and Services Tax) to the States because I thought that not having G.S.T. was helpful in terms of marketing the retailers abroad. Guernsey currently have that. Of course it does not compensate. There are more important issues than G.S.T. but if it were possible to have a G.S.T. free shopping experience it must surely help.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

G.S.T. brings me to our final area of questions, which is online shopping. I say the G.S.T. obviously touches that because of *de minimis* levels and we have heard recently in the Budget and from the Minister for Treasury and Resources 2 days ago that she had no intention now of changing *de minimis* levels, which many retailers - we know from submissions - believe is unfair and disadvantaged. So rather than going into the fairness or otherwise of G.S.T. and *de minimis* levels, how are you seeing retailers react to the threat of online shopping? Are you seeing a meaningful reaction, are you seeing a lack of reaction because they do not know what to do - it might be more for Daphne, I do not know - but what do you see happening there when faced with this challenge?

Town Centre Manager:

I think we have to remember that online shopping was called catalogues previously so people shopped from catalogues, and online shopping ... there has always been some other form or way to shop. Online shopping has increased definitely dramatically and I think one of the retailers I deal with said that Amazon is the biggest retailer in Jersey without even having a shopfront. The retailers definitely are being more meaningful about what they need to do and this is this added value and retail experience, really coming into shop needs to be an experience and retailers now know that customer service, having the product available, having selections, et cetera, is vital to their shop. But also it is the people, is it not? It is that experience of knowing that if I do not have it in your size I will get it somewhere else for you or I will do my utmost to support you. So I definitely see the retailers ... business is difficult anyway but they are definitely changing their attitude towards fighting back.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Do you find any moving into online retail themselves as an extra bit to their business?

Town Centre Manager:

Yes, I think the digitally enabled retailers. There is a click and collect service with some retailers. But equally I think the statement from one of the retailers is that 60 per cent of the customers live within 10 minutes of their store so they do not need online. Not to go on about G.S.T. but if you are a local store and you sell online at the same time, you still have to add G.S.T. on to the online purchase. So they are at a disadvantage when it comes to that and it is an unfair playing field. I do think retailers know it is there, the threat of online will always be there, but equally returns online I think it is up to 30, 35 per cent. So that is never promoted. I think we need to not be fearful of the stats online but we never hear the negative side, which is the returns. Because it is promoted by online retailers.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

It has been very encouraging, I think.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Is there anything you wanted to add?

Town Centre Manager:

Can I just say something about Sunday trading as well, because I get feedback from retailers?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Absolutely.

Town Centre Manager:

There is very much a split camp and I think from my position as town centre manager it is not about town opening, because as the Constable said there are a lot of stores that can open, but it is about giving them the choice. It is about just taking the choice away from Government. Why should Government tell you when you can and cannot open? Then it is up to the retailers to do it themselves.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Thank you so much for coming. It has been really helpful.

Town Centre Manager:

Thank you.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

It has been very good, thank you.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Thank you very much.

[10:57]