Report of the Head of Economic Growth

City Centre footfall cameras and 'Place Data'

Summary

1.   This paper seeks support from the Executive Member for a long term solution to the various issues surrounding current provision of footfall measuring in the City Centre. This will require an interim 'fix' to allow scope, costs and partnership arrangements for this solution to be developed.

2.   Footfall counts are provided under contract through a network of cameras at five points across the City Centre in a long-standing contractual arrangement with the data intelligence service provider, Springboard. The company uses its bespoke software to analyse camera data and count people passing those locations. The majority of these cameras are not functioning for a number of reasons, meaning loss of consistency in data provision.

3.   The data produced supports the Council, and partners such as the York Bid, York Retail Forum, Make it York and individual retailers, in understanding the health of the High Street, allowing us to produce a key Council Plan performance indicator that consistently maps out footfall in York City Centre. This information is held on the Open Data platform and is available to the public to access.

Recommendations

4.   That the Executive Member:

•   Notes the difficulties caused by the unplanned switching off of some of the City Centre cameras, and the subsequent interruption in data provision, and the steps being taken to ensure that these difficulties are avoided in future

- Agrees that a long term partnership solution potentially offers greater opportunities for use of data intelligence, and that this should be further explored
- Agrees further examination of how place data can support evidence-led policy making that can be of benefit to the City.

Reason:

- To provide continuity of data and ongoing information about the health of our City Centre streets
- To allow for the exploration of more advanced technologies to assist in future-proofing the strength of our high streets via evidence-led policy making

Background

Springboard and footfall data provision

5. In a climate where many high streets are struggling across the country, footfall data is an important tool in measuring the health of our City Centre environment and the robustness of the local economy. In York, we have been collecting such data for approximately 10 years.

6. City of York Council has had a contract with Springboard, a data capture and demographics company, to provide counts using their specialist equipment and software. Their footfall counters and subsequent data and reports help us to understand how many people are present in the city centre, but do not currently provide any intelligence on who those users are, how they are using the space, or how much they are spending.

7. The package originally included five cameras, belonging to Springboard, installed at the following locations, the first three of which are at key points for assessing the volume of people using the City Centre:

    - Stonegate
    - Coney Street
    - Parliament Street
    - Micklegate
    - Church Street

8. Springboard's software counts footfall by analysing the camera coverage and recognising human shapes passing across the area monitored by the camera. Although the software can identify a human shape, no unique identifiers are used, and so the same person could be registered multiple times. Conversely, the many people who visit the city

centre but do not pass one of the cameras are not included in the "footfall" count.

9.   The arrangement between the Council and Springboard is a rolling contract, funded from the budget of the Economic Growth Team. This contract is due for renewal, and we are seeking to proceed on a short term contract extension for a further 12 months. This will allow for a more comprehensive, advanced place data scoping exercise to be undertaken to put in place a long term holistic solution.

Functionality issues

10. There have been a number of ongoing issues with the footfall cameras, largely due to their location on premises which have become vacant, leading to power and connectivity being lost. The locations of the cameras were established by Springboard, who have agreements in place with landlords or tenants of buildings, independently of the Council.

11. When a retail unit becomes empty, the power is often switched off, rendering the cameras inoperative. Where these are outside of the Council's ownership, continuity of data is dependent on the goodwill of landlords, and the speed with which vacancies are filled and shops reopen. This has been an issue for two of Springboard's camera locations – Coney Street and Stonegate – since Summer 2019.

12. A third camera at the Parliament Street site is positioned in such a way that optimum data is not always being captured due to the increased usage of that street for events and specialist markets. A fourth camera, located on Church Street, has not functioned since June 2017 when it was removed from the contract to reduce costs.

13. As a result of these issues, the only footfall data captured for Christmas 2019 was on Micklegate, a street peripheral to the City Centre, and not an accurate indicator of footfall traffic in the busy main shopping streets during this vital period. Springboard have been providing estimates of footfall at the other locations, drawing on the understanding of trends in the data over the last 10 years, backed up with intelligence on footfall in many other UK cities.

14. Steps are currently being taken to make the Springboard camera locations more resilient by providing power and connectivity which is either independent of individual landlords and tenants, or is through buildings which are owned by the Council, where we will be able to ensure continuity.

15. Data capture problems affect a number of partners, as well as the Council, including Visit York and The York BID. Anecdotally, we are aware that some City Centre businesses use these figures as a guide to buying stock and hiring additional staff, so there is an additional knock on effect at a commercial level.

The York BID and other potential partners

16. Although Springboard's counters and software are a useful tool, they provide only basic information. Technology is evolving constantly, bringing alternative ways of providing demographic data, predicting patterns of behaviour and identifying hot-spot areas, through GPS or wi-fi enabled methods, and by supplementing counts with other data on spend and customer origin.

17. The York BID has a long-held desire to look for additional ways of understanding the City Centre and the movement of those who use it. In addition, other partners have expressed an interest in entering a revised arrangement with the Council that would bring the potential for enhanced funding.

18. Reviewing the Council's existing contract with Springboard to provide a short term arrangement, running in parallel with work done to understand how people use the City Centre, provides an excellent opportunity for the Council to revolutionise our understanding of the City Centre, and to explore ways in which we can become better informed about how is it used.

19. Running two methods of data collection in tandem would also reduce the risk of any interruption in data provision, but would still provide consistent and regular information, even, for example, with a reduced number of counters.

Place data and its application

20. Although footfall cameras have their use in supplying rudimentary information, using 'place data' is an excellent way of making evidence based policy decisions. Bath is a good case study of where this has happened. The Bath BID has recently developed a new way of drawing together data from a range of sources, including Springboard cameras, city wi-fi data from Pinnacl, mobile phone data from O2, and data from Visa on money spent through their systems.

21. Previously the Bath BID had six footfall cameras backed up by point of sale data, but they now use place data – in this instance from Movement Insights - to capture information on several critical factors, such as:

- Visitor spend in the area
- How many people visit
- Where visitors come from
- How people move around the area and;
- What people think of Bath as a place

22. This Bath Smart City Data project was launched in May 2019, and was developed in collaboration with several important organisations in the City, including the BID, the Council, Visit Bath, the Counter Terrorism Unit and Avon and Somerset Constabulary.

23. There are a number of case studies from the Bath BID demonstrating where data intelligence has been used to positive effect.

24. The Bath BID awards recognise the efforts of local businesses across several themes, including 'Welcome', 'Prosperous', and 'Safe'. The 2019 winner of the 'Smart' award was L'Occitane, and the part of their success in lies in their use of business intelligence information, as well as footfall data. This excerpt comes from the rationale behind awarding them 'best in category', including their use of evidence based decision making:

> *"L'Occitane …..…used Bath BID footfall information to demonstrate their performance compared to other UK stores (and) used business intelligence from a number of sources to develop their business including BID footfall and internal footfall information. As a result of their efforts they were ranked 2nd out of 122 national stores and they were particularly commended by their management for the quality of data in their presentations."*

25. In another example of data intelligence application, the Bath BID were able to gain an understanding of coach party start points and attract high-spending visitors via targeted promotional campaigns.

26. All place data collated by the Bath Smart City Data project, including footfall, sales indices and visitor profiling is available to BID levy payers through the Bath BID website, and a bespoke reporting service is also offered. An example of a Visitor Profile report, and the type of knowledge that can be acquired is attached Bath BID: Visitor profile information, November 2019

27. It is possible to apply this type of approach to York whilst ensuring personal data and privacy compliance. Multiple organisations have expressed an interest in exploring a place data option, but more work is required to flesh out how a consortia approach might work, not least the financial aspects of such an arrangement.

Analysis and conclusion

28. The Council has worked with Springboard to provide footfall data for a number of years. Footfall data is seen as both a useful indicator of the health of the City Centre - particularly core retail areas such as Parliament Street and Coney Street - as well as an important performance indicator measure, as recognised in the Council Plan. Consistent, uninterrupted data provision remains a priority.

29. It is clear that footfall data is important not only to the Council, but to other stakeholders across the City. This opens up opportunities for a new partnership approach to providing and funding statistics, as well as additional capacity for interpreting and analysing metrics.

30. In addition, there is an emerging requirement for partners to understand more about the City Centre, how it is used, and by whom. This indicates a need to explore emerging place data technology, and the subsequent benefits that may bring, in much greater detail, including the ability to make evidence based policy.

31. Our contract with Springboard is an important component of intelligence on city centre usage. As highlighted above, the models used elsewhere often take Springboard camera counts as one of their inputs. It is also important to note that the company is uniquely placed in providing comparison data between cities and other locations, as their system is the most widely adopted model across the UK. Disaggregating local changes from widespread trends in footfall and retail depends on having other comparators, and being part of the Springboard network provides access to such information as one of its broader benefits.

32. The recommended approach is thus to:

- Extend the Springboard contract for a year, developing the resilience of individual counters by reconfiguring them to have power and connectivity which can be ensured through CYC infrastructure and premises;
- With the York BID and other partners, explore options for a long term place data solution, with the Council retaining a role as key partner and recipient of metrics and place data evidence.

Council Plan

33. The applicable Council Plan 2019 - 2023 priorities are:

- Well paid jobs and an inclusive economy
- An open and effective Council

34. There is a key performance indicator under 'Safe communities and culture for all' to which the data from the footfall cameras is a major contributor:

   - Parliament Street footfall and Secondary Centre footfall

35. Understanding the health of the City Centre and how place data is used provides context for several aspects of the Council Plan, including the challenges faced by independent retailers and how customer use patterns might contribute to the number of vacant units on the high street.

Implications

Financial

36. The interim contract proposals will be funded from existing budgets.

37. The outcome of the review and opportunities for new data capture will be subject to a further report to Executive Member and may need consideration by Council in the 2021 /2022 budget process.

Human Resources (HR)

38. Not applicable.

Equalities

39. Not applicable.

Legal

40. As the project proceeds further, we will ensure that our Legal Team is satisfied that the nature of the data received is GDPR compliant and that privacy regulations are adhered to.

Crime and Disorder

41. Not applicable.

Information Technology (IT)

42. Not applicable at present.

Property

43. Not applicable.

Risk Management

44. The recommendations address the various risks outlined above, including mitigating against having no data at all for the Christmas period, the busiest time of year York City Centre, and not being able to report a key indicator for the Council Plan.

Contact Details

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Specialist Implications Officer(s) None

Wards Affected: Guildhall

For further information please contact the author of the report