

# Newport First Impressions Exercise



**Commissioned by the Newport Town Team and undertaken by Waitrose  
Newport.**

**Partners present - Andrew Yip, Phil Whittall, Liz Kosack and Nick Birch.**

**Conducted – Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2013 between 11am-4pm**

***“A pleasant, hidden gem - badly in need of  
some PR”***

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## **Background and Introduction**

Communities and their residents often have difficulty in developing an objective assessment of their strengths, limitations and opportunities, due to over familiarisation, fears of offending someone and the diversity of local perspectives. The Association of Town Centre Management has designed a process called 'The First Impressions Exercise' which is a tool to provide valuable feedback and insights from a neutral source with no local vested interests. It is a simple and inexpensive mechanism to provide feedback to the local community from a "first time" visitor perspective.

In December 2013, the Newport Town Team approached Waitrose in Newport regarding conducting this experiment. Waitrose has a long history of being committed to the communities in which we serve and through our new "Partner Volunteering" scheme we arranged for 4 of our Partners to conduct the exercise in January 2013. Our Partner Volunteering scheme involves Waitrose as a business paying for our staff to volunteer in local communities during their normal working hours hence allowing local communities to benefit and giving our Partners opportunity to give themselves to a local cause, without losing time or income.

To gain a balanced perspective, the team allocated to conduct the survey was made up of two local Newport residents and two 'out-of-towners'. Philip Whittall and Nicholas Birch have lived in Newport their whole lives and are entirely familiar with the area and what it has to offer. Andrew Yip and Elizabeth Kosack have moved to the area through their work and had never been to, or even heard of, Newport before that point.

The exercise took place on Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2013 – commencing at 11am and finishing around 4pm. The weather was cold and snowy, although a lot of the snow which had fallen the previous week was nearly all thawed. We began by driving into Newport from all 4 directions - Stafford, Wolverhampton, Market Drayton and Telford. The next stage revolved around parking up at various locations around the town and exploring local shops, attractions, points of interest etc. We were dressed in normal clothing and did not carry a clipboard to be as inconspicuous as possible. Any ideas were quickly and discreetly noted on our mobile phones. Finally we decided to stop for lunch at the restaurant which had most appealed to us on our tour of Newport and test out the local cuisine. The following report documents our thoughts and opinions at each stage of our day in Newport and includes ideas surrounding the town's strengths and areas for improvement.



**Central Square was one area we thought the town could improve upon**

## **Initial Impressions**

*“My initial drive into Newport took me down a country lane with lots of open, green fields either side. I expected the town to be a rural community, maybe quite picturesque etc.”*

*“I had never heard of Newport before I was told I was moving there with work. I had no idea what Newport would be like or what there was to do there. Most people I told assumed I was moving to Wales!”*

*“Most people outside of Shropshire, and even some in the likes of Telford, will not know where Newport is.”*

*“Isn’t Newport in Wales?”*

*“Quite a country town, it’s about who you know not what you know.”*

*“I have no idea where Newport is.”*

The comments above are just a sample of the initial expectations we had about Newport. Quite shockingly the last comment came from a resident of Stafford – barely 15 miles away. I think it is fair to say that Elizabeth and Andrew, the two participants from outside Newport, arrived in the town having no prior knowledge of it, with no idea about what to expect and certainly with no idea about what there was to see and do there. The general ‘gut feeling’ was that it was going to be a small town in the Shropshire countryside. Even Nick and Philip, life long residents of the town, thought it unlikely that people outside of the local community would have a reason to visit Newport.



## **Driving into Newport**

We drove into Newport from all 4 directions and observed the following:

### **From Stafford along the A518**

Driving along the A518 the journey into Newport is pleasant and the road conditions good, even for nervous drivers. Even without a Satellite Navigation System there were plenty of road signs from Stafford and the road was fairly straight. However if you were to come from the east via the M6, at both the Eccleshall junction and Stafford (north and south) junctions there are no road or local attraction signs to direct people to Newport. For instance at the M6 Crewe junction there is a sign for Stapley Bridge Water Gardens, which even if drivers do not follow the first time they see it, they can go home and 'google' to potentially research and visit the attraction at a later date.

Upon the initial approach to Newport both Elizabeth and Andrew noticed the beauty of the Aqualate Estate. However they were told by Philip and Nick that the estate was not open to the public. As outsiders this appeared to be a real shame as visits to, or walks in the grounds of, old country houses/estates are key tourist attractions. Interested tourists will travel for many miles to see estates and in the past few years, since the popular Downton Abbey appeared on TV screens, interest in this type of attraction has peaked all over the country.

After the initial disappointment that we would not be able to see the enticing Aqualate Estate, the next attraction we noticed was the 'Welcome to Newport' roundabout which, especially in the summer months, is very attractively decorated with colourful flowers and really sells Newport as a 'blooming and vibrant' countryside town. What is interesting to note is that from this direction we completely missed the Mere Park complex. Only from past experience would a visitor from this direction know that it was there, advertising was small and discreet and somebody new to the area would have no idea what to expect from it.

### **From Wolverhampton along the A41**

Again the drive from Wolverhampton is easy; the road conditions are good and Newport benefits from beautiful rolling countryside at either side of the A41. Again road signage for Newport and its attractions was limited. At one point a local attraction road sign was pointed out by Nick – the sign was behind a lamp post – and had not caught the attention of anybody else in the car. It was also obvious that in the summer when there are leaves on the trees that this sign would be even more obscured. Interestingly the two attractions on the road sign were the “historic church” and “canal walk”. Later in the day we found the church to be closed with no historical information or event information available and the canal side walk not very well publicised when we were actually in the town. There was a sign for Mere Park however this was on the actual turning for the complex meaning a driver going 60mph and preparing to slow down for a roundabout would not have time to process the information and make a decision to stop there. Overall the general impression was that if drivers were using the A41 there would be no reason to stop and indeed no indication that there was a thriving town barely 2 minutes drive off the main road.

### **From Telford on the A518**

Sign posts for Newport are better along this route but still do not jump out at drivers. Also there was nothing to indicate what Newport has to offer as a ‘pit stop’ if a driver was using the A518 to get from Telford to Stafford. On the way into Newport through Church Aston, The Aston restaurant caught our eye and Philip, Nick and Elizabeth all commented that they had heard good things about the food there – this influenced our decision to return to the restaurant and have some lunch. This route into Newport takes drivers to the end of the High Street however parking areas were not very noticeable/sign posted except on the main road.

## **From Market Drayton along the A41**

Travelling southbound on the A41 is similar to northbound in terms of road conditions, pleasant views and lack of signage for Newport and its attractions. An interesting observation was that for the second time Andrew and Elizabeth noticed an interesting estate on the drive into the town only to find out that it was closed to the public – Chetwynd Park. By confirming with Nick and Phil we understood that this estate is only open for the annual Newport Show which again seemed a shame as the estate looked by intriguing and appears to have the makings of a potential tourist attraction – such as Shugborough in Staffordshire.

Another point of interest was ‘Madame Piggott’s’ house on the way into Newport from the A41. Nick and Philip were able to identify the old house however Andrew and Elizabeth were oblivious. A quick wikipedia search informed us of the local tale of Madame Piggott however there was an opportunity for a noticeboard telling the story outside of the house. Haunted attractions and ghost walks are an increasingly popular tourist attraction – for instance the ‘Shiverpool’ haunted tours in Liverpool. Clearly Newport has a supernatural history of its own which could be an opportunity to appeal to tourists.





## Driving Around the Town

Driving around Newport is reasonably easy and parking along the High Street is available however spaces were often full. It was also not advertised that parking in Newport is free. At around 1pm on a Thursday afternoon the New Street and Stafford Street car parks were full and we felt that Water Lane was too far out of the town to park as shoppers. Parking was so hard to find that we had to use our work car parking space to avoid delays. There were disused spaces of land such as the Old cement Works which we felt would make convenient car parking. Despite driving around the town for about half an hour we did not notice any signs for local attractions or events.

Driving along the High Street does allow drivers to see the quaintness of Newport with its small shops and rural appeal. The group agreed that Newport always looks better on a sunny day when there are summer events on – such as when the town was covered in bunting for the Diamond Jubilee and Olympics. Even the Christmas lights and decorations bring out the picturesque side of the town. The Newport in Bloom campaign was also referenced as a positive event in the town's calendar and even the banner advertising the Newport Show was good to see last year.



## **The Walk About Section**

We started our walk in Stafford Street car park and tested the Public Conveniences. These were surprisingly clean and modern inside and were not at all what we were expecting to find from the outside. A short walk through the Waitrose alleyway took us to the main high street and to the main shopping area. The first thing the group noticed was the vast number of shops in Newport. Walking along the street we found a kitchen shop, a jewellers, a dry cleaners, a chemist, a book store, a florist, a video rental store, and a few quaint knick knack shops. There were also smaller versions of chainstores – Subway, Costa Coffee, Boots, Clark's and Gregg's. The one thing which struck us all about the proportion of shops was the high number of hairdressers, opticians, estate agents and pubs. While a variety of these establishments is surely of benefit to the local community – with the exception of maybe pubs, these are not the type of businesses which attract tourists or shoppers outside of the town who have the choice of shopping in Newport or perhaps going to Stafford or Telford. The new and second hand book stores, the gift shops, the kitchen shop and even the video rental store all stood out as unique local businesses and ones that we would want to visit. These were the type of shops were you could find a birthday present for example, or buy an item for your home without going to a retail park or city centre. The people in the businesses we visited were very friendly but did not provide anything more than good customer service - and as visitors to the town we felt that there was not very much information about Newport in the stores.

Walking along the main road it would have been hard to locate various businesses without walking the entire length of the high street. We felt that a noticeboard with 'you are here' and an itemised map of the high street with each store listed on – the kind found in large shopping centres – would have benefited a visitor. This could also be printed in leaflet format and placed at the till point in shops.

There were also no noticeable local events or directions towards the various local walks available. Businesses we felt that were missing from the Newport High Street which the town would benefit from were:

- An upmarket wine/cocktail bar

There were numerous pubs and a night club in Newport however the night club did not look appealing for over 25s.

- A good clothing store – with a selection for a younger cliental.

Clothing was a major area in which we felt Newport could improve. We did not notice a single clothing store that appealed to our age range (23-39) and with a growing student population in the town this is a potential opportunity to capitalise on. We tried looking for an outfit for a night out and couldn't find anything suitable. A clothing store with concessions of well known names such as Barbour would be drawing.

- A cinema

With the nearest cinema in Telford there is opportunity for a cinema in the town which would appeal to Newport residents, surrounding communities, students as well as providing young people with something to do.

Another area we felt was under-utilised was Central Square. Aside from a few benches the focal point of the town centre lacked any other attractions or information. As previously stated there is opportunity for a town noticeboard or perhaps a statue, water fountain or other point of interest in the square. In addition while the majority of the high street gives the impression of being reasonably old fashioned and picturesque – the large blue building in Central Square stands out for all the wrong reasons.

Locals Nick and Philip were able to identify it as the old Market Hall however there was nothing for a visitor to engage with and one suggestion was that the building could be used as the upmarket bar we thought the town needed. While litter was not a obvious issue in Newport, we noticed litter in the windows of the Central Square nightclub which had a negative affect on our impression of the town's main square.

Continuing to walk away from the town centre towards the south we came across a map with a guided walk on. Even locals Philip and Nick were unaware that there was a walk that takes you from Newport all the way to Wellington. There was no signage to the beginning of the walk from the high street and we stumbled across the entrance by accident. Another interesting point from this part of town is the 'sheep island' which is a roundabout known locally and not so locally by this nickname. It was this type of uniqueness which excited us and gave Newport a landmark that people can recognise.

Walking north of the high street toward the Shell garage we stopped at the Parish Church only to find it closed and limited information on its notice boards. It would be useful to see some historical information and perhaps details of up and coming services, open days, opportunities to climb the tower etc. We also observed that the water fountain by the church was not in use – perhaps because of the winter weather – however a water fountain would help beautify the town. Continuing on past Water Lane we found the canal walk however the information board was limited and didn't explain any of the restrictions on the canal path, sights or areas to walk to or any timings or distances. An information board with details of where to walk to, what there is to see there and approximately how long it will take would be beneficial for a visitor to plan out their time in the town.

Lastly we returned to the restaurant we liked the look of the most – The Aston on Wellington Road. The manager was very hospitable and even though it was close to the time they closed for lunch he let us order food. Lunch for 4 cost £50 which was expensive but the quality of the food was excellent and the venue very pleasant. We used our time over lunch to compile our ideas.

## **Overall Feelings**

The Association of Town Centre Management recommends using the questions below to summarise the exercise:

### **1) Overall 'Gut Feeling' about the Community**

The consensus was that Newport is a hidden gem of a community which is badly in need of some PR/marketing. Newport simply does not shout loud enough about what it has to offer. For instance there are no TV/radio/Newspaper advertisements for Newport – even at local and regional level. Driving into Newport from any direction is straight forward however signage is minimal and it would be very easy to miss it when driving along the A41 and A518. The high street has a reasonable number of businesses for a small community and the town has plenty of attractions to offer and a rich history to draw upon - however famous local stories such as Madame Piggott are unknown to visitors. Newport is naturally surrounded by beautiful countryside and the town has a rural appeal yet the country walks which could attract tourism are hard to find and even harder to plan out for people not familiar with the area. Andrew and Elizabeth both commented that they had had their eyes opened to a lot of the things Newport had to offer by Nick and Philip but without these local guides those things would have gone unnoticed.

### **2) List the six most positive features you observed in the community:**

- The location – good connections to Stafford, Wolverhampton, Telford and the North West.
- Good schools.
- A large number of shops for such a small town – very few empty store fronts compared to similar towns.
- A pleasant, rural atmosphere – lots of greenery, flowers and plants.

- Friendly people – shops and restaurants were very welcoming – willing to answer questions.
- Cleanliness of the town.

**3) What do you consider the key areas that the community needs to give attention to?**

- Signage – road signs, tourism markers, notice and information boards etc.
- PR and Marketing – shouting about Newport events and businesses at regional level and even beyond – employing local radio, newspapers, the internet and even the television.
- Focusing on Central Square – providing a key ‘central’ point to the high street so it becomes an attraction in the town.
- Improving upon the number of businesses on Newport’s high street by widening the diversity – a nice clothing shop, a cocktail bar etc.
- Promoting local history and stories – the Parish Church and Madame Piggott.
- Promoting free parking and looking at ways to increase parking spaces.
- Utilising the university and its students as a source of income for the town.
- Limited public transport links.



**Central Square was an area which we thought could be improved.**