

Case Study

Economic Growth Advisors Programme

LB Havering

Enhancing and capturing disposable income in Romford.

Key themes covered by the case study

- ✓ An economic growth strategy
- ✓ Business engagement and retention
- ✓ Inward investment
- ✓ Regeneration and housing

Summary

What are/ where the main objectives for the economic growth advisors project?

The main objective of the project was to produce an evidenced based research report to inform strategy for future plans in Romford Town Centre, and ways to establish aspirational living.

Our intended approach

The project had a multi- faceted approach:

- A review of current planning policy and other strategies.
- A SWOT analysis of Romford and its appeal to consultation.
- A 'mystery shopper' exercise with local agents.
- Discussion with key developers.
- Review of town centre promotional material.

What were we looking to achieve?

- Understanding Romford and its current residential population.
- How to promote Romford to a more affluent population.
- A critical review of work around the office quarter.

What were the intended outputs and outcomes?

- A fresh perspective on the future of Romford Town Centre at a strategic level.
- A recommendation for further work stands.

Rational for project

LBH is very keen to ensure that Romford remains a vibrant town centre and that it attracts people to live and work in the town centre. The project was looking to fulfil several objectives: further build the evidence base to help shape council policy.

- To look at ways in which LBH can capture disposable income in the town and stop slippage to other competing centres.
- To also give LBH a starting point to discuss the issue of flatted developments with newly elected Members.

The intended outcomes were:

- To provide guidance about attracting investment to Romford and further sell Romford as place to live.
- To provide a critical review of who the Council can animate the office quarter.

Key actions

Secondary research

Initially, the consultants sought to understand Romford, its current position, and its context with Havering and London. Undertaking desk top research, Renaisi reviewed several of our key council documents which would provide a key insight into the position of Romford town centre as is, and which would later inform the findings of the commissioned research paper.

Documents reviewed included the Business Growth Strategy, understanding the necessity to promote and enhance Romford's position as east London's premier town centre, and to make the town centre a vibrant place, the Area Action Plan, which provides the planning framework for future development, and the Romford Urban Strategy which offers a strategic vision for Romford. Understanding how we hope to enhance Romford's attractiveness as a place to live, but also as an appealing and distinct leisure, retail, and cultural destination, should help shape the consultant's idea of likely and additional spend and the sectors where this could be enhanced and captured.

Drawing on experience, trends, and London-wide statistics, Renaisi were also able to drill down into the factors that determine where those with disposable income live, and ways that these may be applicable to our study area. For example, the prevailing narrative surrounding Romford's affordability compared with other London centres could be pulled upon as a 'selling' point of the area. However, they were also able to identify negatives to the area, identifying that Romford may have commuter residents who spend their capital outside of the borough, and also our lack of the 'cool' factor. This information was summarised in a SWOT analysis, showing the strengths and weakness, but also the area opportunities and external threats to the area which has given us a concise and digestible written analysis of Romford town centre.

Renaisi then cross referenced this information with place making strategies and growth agendas in other town centres, to illustrate best practice and tried and tested methods to attract disposable income that we could draw on. For example, identifying our market as a great asset and should be a focus for future investment, Renaisi have offered a case study of Brixton Road Station Market of a successful rejuvenated market, whilst also noting our locational differences. Similarly a case study of Willesden Green was used as an example of ways to animate and activate the town centre using 'meanwhile' spaces as interim uses for young entrepreneurs in vacant units, and Forest Gate (which is most similar to Romford in size and demographic) as examples of how we need to engage the local residents in a bid for collaborative regeneration.

Primary research

To supplement the desk top work, the consultants also undertook a 'mystery shopper' exercise with two residential property agents to understand how agents promote Romford to prospective residents currently. This exercise starkly showed that agents did not sell Romford as a place to live on its merits, but rather its cheap price and proximity to central London. This highlighted to us that the regeneration of Romford is as much to do with our marketing as with the physical location. Renaisi also spoke with developers who saw real potential for the area and suggested ways for a better development plan such as amalgamating larger sites to develop as whole rather than fragmented smaller sites. The poor reputation of the area was also picked up on which again enforced our need to re-brand the area. This qualitative side of the research has been central in making our view and plans for future plans and development more holistic and place focused.

Marrying the primary and secondary research methods together has produced a strong starting point from where we can form future strategies and design interventions for the area. Using site specific information such as our policies and mystery shoppers has meant that the recommendations are ideally matched to Romford town centre and lie within the scope, opportunities, and constraints of the area. However, the use of examples of high streets elsewhere has also meant that we continue to think creatively, innovatively, and robustly, and are able to see how leftfield ideas in fruition have worked successfully.

Further development

The findings of the research will inform our strategy for future plans in Romford Town Centre, and ways to establish aspirational living. It will compliment some other commissions we are currently carrying out such as on our Office Quarter and leisure and retail offer, which will all feed into a master plan for the town centre. The recommendations have provided us with some evidenced based research to use as a solid stepping stone to our future work streams and interventions.

Key findings and outputs

The main output of the project is a report project with key recommendations that will be taken forward by the Council.

These recommendations are as follows:

- Set a strong vision for the area, establish priorities, and set realistic goals.
- We need to be braver with attracting developers to Romford and look to intervene or facilitate better configuration of land ownership.
- Roll out the red carpet treatment for our developers to highlighted Romford in its best light and show our commitment to its development.
- Sell Romford as place to live and this will involve working closely with residential agents. We already hold a forum for commercial agents and should look to establish a similar platform for the residential sector.
- Build on the emerging creative sector.
- Seek to activate the office quarter.
- Support our assisting businesses and create space for start-ups.
- Rebrand Romford and use our agents to assist with the reputation change.
- Use the market as a focus for regeneration plans.
- Continually understand the current market, any changes, and review our SWOT analysis.
- Ensuring a coordinated, coherent and cooperative approach in shaping Romford.

The report met the objectives and requirements that were set out at the start of the project and will be taken forward as part of future strategy development.

Economic benefits

At the moment it is not possible to calculate the benefits of taking forward the recommendations in the report.