

Townfoot Consultation Report: Independent Overview

Purpose of the Overview:

Acting in my capacity as an independent consultant with experience of both public consultations and public realm development in Cumbria, I have been asked to comment on the validity of the report with specific reference to the accuracy of the analysis of the responses received.

Methodology:

I conducted an independent analysis of the raw data before reading the report. I then checked my analysis against that provided in the report.

Basic Conclusion:

The report provides an accurate numeric analysis of the responses received. It addresses some of the negative scores and comments by explaining the reasons why certain options are not possible and clearly sets out the next steps in the process.

Additional Observations and Recommendations:

Scores: I recommend that key figures are presented both as absolute numbers and as percentages as this is a powerful way of showing data for comparative purposes:

Of the 202 responses received:

- 53 either scored all the themes as '0', or gave no scores at all = 26%
- 130 gave a score of 3 (the maximum score) to at least one choice = 64% of the total responses.

Looking at the scores given to the various themes, the most popular are 'Why is Alston here' and 'Alston's unique location make it well-connected'. I believe this indicates a degree of overlap between the themes. Indeed some respondents comment that they regard the themes as inter-related and not mutually exclusive. This suggests that designs can be developed which address both these themes.

Comments: I carried out an analysis of the written comments in order to ascertain the degree to which they supported the numeric scores. Certain caveats always apply when attempting interpret and 'count' comments in a consistent way:

- It is usual for proposed public realm developments to attract strong feelings both positive and negative, especially in prominent sites. This is clearly the case with respect to Townfoot.
- It can be difficult for respondents to provide considered responses to 'themes' rather than ideas that can be visualised.
- It is difficult for respondents to focus on one location without reference to the wider context of the town.
- Some people will have very clear ideas of what kind of development they would like to see – or not – whilst others will wait to be persuaded as more concrete ideas emerge.

- Some people comment on other issues without referencing the key purpose of the consultation – and it should not be assumed that this indicates either support or opposition.

There are examples of all these perspectives within the comments which some respondents made in addition to numeric scoring of the options.

- 106 respondents provided additional comments – 53% of the total.
- 32% expressed support for some kind of development of the Townfoot site.
- 24% expressed their opposition to the development of the site.
- 16% expressed their desire to improvements elsewhere in the town, including dilapidated buildings on the approach to Townfoot.
- 9% stated that they would welcome limited improvements to the site, including flower displays and picnicking facilities.
- 7% stated they wanted the site to be developed for car parking.
- Other comments were to do with the process of the consultation.

All these comments and the issues they raise are important and any development of a single site will have to navigate a range of aspirations. However, within the context of this particular consultation, those comments proposing things that are not real options (such as giving over the site for car parking) should be discounted.

Comparing the scores with the comments, it appears that those respondents who scored all themes '0' or who gave no scores at all were more likely to provide a written comment than those who gave a score of 3 to at least one choice. However, the comments still show 32% in support of some kind of development against 24% who strongly oppose it.

Overall Conclusion:

The report fairly and accurately reflects the responses received to this consultation exercise. The presentation may be strengthened by the inclusion of percentages. Consideration may be given to the inclusion of an analysis of comments.

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