



## Location Model Oswestry Town Centre Executive Summary

**Prepared for:** Advantage West Midlands and Shropshire Council

**Prepared by:** Skillsmart Retail Research Department

**Date:** December 2009

---

## 1.1 Introduction

This summary highlights key findings from the Location Model retail research programme (including mystery shopping visits, street interviews with shoppers and a town centre assessment) carried out in Oswestry. It is one of 15 market towns across the region to benefit from an economic support package (via Advantage West Midlands) aimed at countering the effects of the recession. The Model is particularly aimed at towns which have a high proportion of independent retailers and where positive intervention could secure benefits.

---

## 1.2 Background to Oswestry's customers

The total population living within a 20-minute drivetime of Oswestry is approximately 61,000. An analysis of the consumer categories within the local population indicates that in comparison with the UK average, the area has a higher than usual group of consumers categorised as:

- **Affluent Greys (29% of local population)** – Wealthy 'empty nesters' and older couples living in detached properties in rural areas; they have high disposable incomes and expensive hobbies and interests
- **Secure Families (17% of population)** - Home owning families living comfortably in stable areas in suburban and semi-rural locations
- **Struggling Families (12% of local population)** – Low income families living in rented accommodation in areas of high unemployment

---

## 1.3 Mystery Shopping results for Oswestry

A mystery shopping visit involves an anonymous individual visiting a store, posing as a customer and judging it against a range of criteria. The strength of the mystery shop approach is that it offers an objective assessment of shops against a number of agreed criteria. ESA<sup>1</sup> researchers, commissioned by Skillsmart Retail, carried out two rounds of mystery shopping in November 2009 in 30 independent outlets.

Main findings from the mystery shopping exercise:

- **Oswestry's independent retailers' overall mystery shopping score (84.9%) ranked 15<sup>th</sup> against benchmarked mystery shopping studies**
- **Of the 30 outlets that were mystery shopped, only 6 scored beneath the "benchmark score" of 80%**
- **17 out of 30 shops had their customer service rated either "good" or "very good" in both mystery shopping assessments**
- **Of the 60 mystery shop experiences, nine out of ten (92%) mystery shoppers said that they would return to the shop and a similar proportion (88%) said they would recommend this store to a friend. This score compares favourably with previous Location Models**

Other points of note:

- The majority of stores had clear branding (97%), an eye-catching exterior (90%) and an inviting window display (88%)
- Staff members offered an initial greeting to the mystery shopper in two-thirds (65%) of the mystery shopping assessments
- Staff members made an initial offer of assistance in three in five (62%) mystery shopping assessments

---

<sup>1</sup> ESA is a full service agency with over 25 years experience providing specialist retail research and is accredited to industry quality standards see [www.esa.co.uk](http://www.esa.co.uk).

- Stores were easily accessible for wheelchair users in seven out of ten (70%) cases
  - Staff made an attempt to upsell in a quarter (25%) of the mystery shopping experiences
  - Staff were seen to be wearing name badges in just two of the assessments
  - Chip and Pin devices were present in three-quarters (76%) of mystery shopping experiences
  - Store opening times were clearly visible in more than seven in ten (73%) assessments
  - A shopfloor manager could be easily identified in more than half (53%) of mystery shopping cases
  - A receipt was offered in three in five (63%) mystery shopping experiences
- 

## 1.4 Street interview results for Oswestry

A series of street surveys were conducted by ESA in November 2009. A total of 100 shoppers in the town centre were interviewed (82 of these were residents or lived within ten miles of the area, and 18 were visitors). The street survey revealed a number of points of interest to the retail and wider business community in Oswestry.

Main findings from the street interviews were:

- **Environment (clean and tidy)**
  - Nine in ten interviewees (88%) felt the town centre was clean and tidy
- **Signage**
  - Over three-quarters (78%) said that it was easy to find public facilities such as toilets
- **Variety of shops**
  - Four in five respondents (80%) felt that there was a good variety of independent shops in the town centre
  - Less than half of respondents (48%) felt that there was a good variety of national retail chains in the town centre
- **Safety in town**
  - The vast majority of interviewees (98%) said that they 'generally felt safe' when in the town centre
- **Town improvements**
  - Under half of the respondents (49%) felt that the town centre had shown definite improvements over the past two years
  - Two out of five (42%) thought that the local council had contributed a lot to the improvement of the town centre
- **Shopping experience**
  - More than nine in ten respondents (93%) thought that shopping hours were convenient and met their needs
  - A similar proportion (92%) thought the shops were close enough to make a convenient shopping experience
  - Less than half of respondents (47%) had made a purchase in the town, whilst average spend was less than £30
- **Online usage**
  - One in six interviewees (16%) stated that they used the internet to buy items otherwise found in the town centre
  - Three-quarters of respondents (75%) said that they make online purchases at least once a month, whilst a quarter (25%) buy online at least once a week
- **Other questions**
  - Four in five interviewees (82%) thought they would be spending "about the same" over the next year
  - Less than half of respondents (47%) like to be approached by a staff member when they are browsing in a shop

- Over half of respondents (57%) like an initial greeting when they enter the store
- **Oswestry-specific questions**
  - Over three-quarters of respondents (78%) did not think Oswestry needed a new supermarket
  - When street interviewees shop in a rival town, over six in ten (63%) are looking to buy clothes

Verbatim comments from the street interviews included:

#### **Generally positive comments**

- 'The shop assistants were very helpful and friendly.'*
- 'It was a very nice town, with plenty of shops and cafes.'*
- 'It was clean and pleasant to shop in.'*
- 'The town had enough shops.'*

#### **Other recommendations / ideas for improvement**

- 'There was not enough disabled access or disabled parking.'*
- 'It was a satisfactory town, but it did not have many shops.'*
- 'The town needed more, decent shops such as shoe shops.'*
- 'There were too many charity shops.'*

## **1.5 Town Centre Assessment for Oswestry**

The town centre assessment focuses more on the environment that shoppers and retailers have to operate within. The assessment results in a measure of how well the town centre is physically equipped and how well it provides an attractive retail environment.

Verbatim summary from the town centre assessor:

*"Oswestry was a very friendly town, which was peaceful and quiet. The litter in question was on the side of the road, walking away from the town centre towards the museum."*

Main findings from the town centre assessment:

- **Car parking**
  - Parking facilities were easy to find and free from congestion
- **Eating establishments**
  - There were not many independent food establishments
  - The cafe visited by the assessor was clean and had efficient staff
- **Public toilets**
  - Public toilets were very clean, dry and smelt fresh
  - A disabled toilet and baby-changing facilities were present
  - There was an inspection timetable on display
- **Public transport**
  - There were few bus stops in the town centre
  - Plenty of taxi ranks which had many taxis available for hire
- **Public directions and signage**
  - Directional signage was available for most public facilities apart from the railway station
  - Few signs for public transport and taxis
- **Cleanliness**
  - Some instances of dog fouling
  - There were no instances of anti-social behaviour
  - Disabled facilities rated "good"
  - The assessor did not see any street cleaners

- **Improvements**
  - There were visible signs of minor improvements being carried out
  - No signs providing details of when the work would be finished
- **Tourist attractions**
  - Tourist attractions did not look busy
  - There was no marketing information for the tourist attractions
  - There were no souvenir shops selling merchandise to support the tourist attractions
- **Retail shops**
  - The majority of shops were open
  - There was no advertising in the town to support either small independent retailers or larger multiple chains
  - The assessor commented that although Oswestry seemed to get busier in the afternoon, it seemed very quiet in the shops

## 1.6 Initial recommendations

Results from the **mystery shopping** suggest some simple things could be done quickly and economically by the stores to improve service:

- Only two-thirds of mystery shoppers were greeted by staff when they entered the store (although the majority of staff offered a farewell as the mystery shopper left). Greeting the customer and offering assistance before the point of transaction makes the customer feel welcome
- Identifying a shopfloor manager could be made easier by a distinguishing badge. This could contain the name of the staff member or simply "Here to help" or "Manager"
- Ensure that customers are offered a receipt and a choice of having it placed into the bag or handed to them personally. Receipts are the basis for all returns policy

It also pointed out a number of areas for attention in the medium to long term:

- Upselling is crucial, and occurred in under half of the mystery shopping experiences in Oswestry. This may also involve a review of the product range to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of complementary goods

Although shoppers and residents were generally very positive about Oswestry, the results of the **street interviews** highlighted an area for focus:

- Only half of street interviewees felt the town had shown a definite improvement in the past two years. The town centre assessor noted minor improvements were being carried out in the town, but did not see any signs providing details of the work. It suggests that more signs are needed to provide details about any physical improvements being carried out to the town
- Only a third of interviewees agreed Oswestry had enough specialist shops to meet their needs. It seems that despite having a retail offer that caters for everyday grocery needs (four in five street interviewees did not want a new supermarket), more specialist shops are needed in the town. When street interviewees visited nearby rival towns, clothing (43%) was the main item they shopped for

The **town centre assessment** was generally very positive about Oswestry, and provided further suggestions:

- The assessor noted a lack of street cleaners. Although litter was rare, there were several cases of dog fouling. More street cleaners could help tackle this area
- The town centre assessor did notice some posters but none advertised local independent shops. Overall, there was very little advertising for independent retailers in the town and improving this area could be a way of raising the profile of Oswestry's independent retailers.

---

For more information or if there are any queries on the executive summary, in the first instance, please contact Phil Mosley, Research Manager, Skillsmart Retail on 020 7462 5070 or [phil.mosley@skillsmartretail.com](mailto:phil.mosley@skillsmartretail.com)