

# Alternative high street

## rethinking the town centre challenge





Inf



Cardiff Castle  
Castell Caerdydd



National Museum  
Amgueddfa G.Cymru



Civic Centre  
Canolfan Dinesig



St David's Hall  
Neuadd Dewi Sant



Shopping Centre  
Canolfan - Siopa



Toilets  
Toiledau

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# Towards the alternative high street – introduction



**Councillor Peter Box CBE,**  
Chair of LGA  
Economy and  
Transport Board

For better or for worse, our town centres are changing; responding to powerful socio-economic trends driving shifts in retail behaviour.

Locally, there is consensus among town centre partners that new approaches are needed to ensure high streets adapt successfully, the merits of which are drawn out by the contributions to this report.

Nationally, Mary Portas, like most other national commentators, has pointed to plummeting retail spend in town centres as the beginning of the end for high streets.

But it is crucial that we begin to think more positively about the challenge facing our town centres. Retail is not the future, and town centres are adapting. We have to go back to the start, moving beyond retail, and refocusing places as centres of social, community and cultural economies.

This is our vision for the alternative high street.

And public opinion is with us. Almost 8 in 10 of people see local producers as important to the future success of their high street. 74 per cent want to see local amenities, and almost 70 per cent restaurants and cafes. Retail is still important, but as part of a wider community offer.<sup>1</sup>

For decades, however, there has been a national focus on assessing town centre performance in terms of sales which has led to national policy solutions focusing on retail, without sufficient acknowledgement of all the services that matter to communities.

Rather than empower communities to take ownership of their town centre, successive administrations have implemented small scale national schemes that address short term issues. For instance in the last few years government has announced a fund for high streets during the recession, a fund for high streets during the riots, and a fund for high streets following the Portas review.

This is not enough. Looking ahead we must consider how all partners and services can join-up to deliver a local vision for a town centre, nationally, government must focus on removing the structural barriers that prevent this happening, giving local partners genuine power to tackle local issues.

So we must adapt our high streets, building on each place's opportunities for growth and

<sup>1</sup> LGA/ComRes Public Opinion Poll, Clustering and the Future of the High Street, February 2012

reconnecting with individuals as communities and not just consumers. This will be crucial for developing a new town centre offer, and one that out-of-town centres and the Internet struggle to match.

As central and well connected public spaces, the innovative use of town centres can attract and engage people, supporting businesses to thrive, and create valuable retail demand in the process.

Councils are beginning to seize on these opportunities, thinking creatively about how everything fits together into a single offer to town centres – this can include anything, from shops, housing, restaurants, pubs, cinemas, and bowling alleys, to homes, hotels, museums, churches, green space, transport, safety.

Local partnership is crucial. Every high street involves a complex and vast range of interest parties, including retailers, residents, businesses, landlords, public services, the community and the voluntary sector. All partners must sign-up to the single local vision if it is to be achieved.

Councils need to play their part, showing local leadership and bringing together partners to understand and meet the demands of the community. It is not easy, as local government faces the toughest financial settlement in recent history, but councils are up for it.

In this pamphlet, we build on our submission to the Portas review with a collection of articles from contributors that are beginning to look at some what can be achieved to support high streets.

We want open a wider discussion with government, businesses and councils around a new vision for the high street, one that gives communities genuine power to remodel their place so that it responds and reflects their aspirations and needs.

As a start, we want to consider:

- Extending our understanding of the performance of high streets beyond retail figures to take into account community satisfaction
- Embedding measures to support high streets within the wider locally accountable economic ambition; and encouraging all government departments and their agencies to proactively participate in local strategies with the flexibility to pool resources around a strategy.
- Giving partners and the communities they serve the planning power to decide what their local high street should look like and what it should offer, for instance in tackling clustering
- Enabling communities to have greater control over the local transport offer, for instance giving local councils a commissioning role over bus services.
- Making high streets transparent and offer tools to better involve the full range of partners in local strategies, including absent landlords.

# Rethinking the challenge

**Councillor Clarence Barrett**, Chair of LGA Urban Commission, considers the retail bias in how national commentators tend to measure high street performance, and argues for a complete rethink which focuses on the wishes and satisfaction of local communities.

All indications suggest 2012 is going to be a tough year for the traditional town centre. Mary Portas, like many other commentators, has predicted further gloom for high street retailers. A wide range of national figures reinforce this.

But national understandings of the real level of threat to the high street are limited because town centres are places of great complexity and variety; no two are the same, and because there is a heavy bias in favour of understanding value on retail performance alone.

Nevertheless, most high streets will have to adapt to declining retail spend

National assessments on the performance of high streets struggle to get beyond the bland analysis of retail performance indicators. And most of these indicators point to a decline in spending on town centres, for instance:

- As a share of total retail spend, high street sales are anticipated to decline further from 43 per cent in 2009 to 40 per cent in 2014
- The number of town centre stores fell by

almost 15,000 between 2000 and 2009, with further estimates of a further 10,000 losses up to 2011, a further decline in store numbers of 6.4 per cent expected between 2009 and 2011

- Estimates suggest retail floor space in town centres has fallen from 27 million square feet (or 9 per cent ) between 2000-2009, out of town retail space has risen by 50 million square feet over the same period. A further loss of 8 per cent is expected from 2009 – 2014
- High street footfall, that is the number of people on the high street, has fallen by over 10 per cent during the past three years
- Whilst difficult to measure, assessments indicate increases in the number of empty shops. One assessment suggests a rise in vacancy rates as a proportion of floor space has been from 6.4 per cent in 2006, to 11 per cent in 2010, anticipated to rise to over 12 per cent by 2013
- This has all led to a surplus of in-town secondary retail floor space, much of which is no longer fit for purpose <sup>2</sup>

## **But drivers for change play out differently across places**

There are a wide range of factors that drive change on the high streets, some of them macro-economic, some of them national, and some of them local. But all play out in places in different ways. These factors include:

<sup>2</sup> Figures from 'Understanding High Street Performance', GENECON LLP (December 2011)

- Economic trends – people have less disposable income during the recession, consumer spending is expected to contract by 1.2 per cent in 2011 remaining flat in 2012
- Social and technological trends – people are choosing to spend more of their money online, the UK is Europe's leading e-retail economy, with sales expected to have reached £68.2 billion in 2011, an annual increase of 16 per cent <sup>3</sup>
- Spatial factors – the format of a linear high street offering a variety of shops is becoming less popular, with people preferring a services to be clustered around central spaces; whether it be in-town, edge-of-town, or out-of-town

### **We have to value high streets differently**

We have to move beyond sales figures to understand the alternative uses preferred by local communities. In reality, town centres are there to serve and reflect the interests of local communities, which are rarely limited to shopping.

High streets can often have a highly emotional resonance with people that cannot always be captured. This has been demonstrated by the riot clean up and by concerns over the homogenisation of high streets; communities care about their high streets.

Data and understanding on other aspects of high street vitality – such as assessments of the level of cultural, community, social and leisure activity, and the value of offices, public space and residential use – are impossible to assess nationally.

As locally accountable agencies, councils understand the value of the service mix in town centres, and where the opportunities for growth are. Local authorities continue to

try and ensure the service mix creates retail demand in key areas, but more important is to ensure the overall offer responds to community need.

There might be a few universal indicators that could help gauge this; such as analysis of footfall. But ultimately the complexity of services and partners requires a local understanding of the needs and challenges, a local understanding of the solutions, and so a local plan to deliver them.

**Plymouth City Council** with its Business Improvement District partners rebranded its Summer Festival through a website, a leafleting campaign, and bus, radio and print advertising. Research suggested an additional 300,000 day visits were made to the town centre.

**Whitstable in Kent** has become famous for its Oyster Festival and a growing food culture, this identity is being driven by the community, which is keen to ensure that any further development contributes to that local culture.

**Camden Town Unlimited** has stimulated a 35 per cent increase in visitor numbers preparing and delivering the reshaping of Camden's streetscape.

<sup>3</sup> Interactive Media in Retail Group, statistics available at <http://www.imrg.org>

# Planning our way to growth



**Councillor David Parsons,**  
Chair of LGA  
Environment  
and Housing  
Board, explores  
the extent to which  
councils are able

to plan and shape the offer on the high street, and how to give councils greater say over services in their town centre.

How far does the planning system provide elected representatives with the flexibility to respond to community concerns, to encourage investment into the area and stimulate local growth? The answer it would seem is – it depends.

High streets have been taken over by takeaways, off-licences, betting shops and late night bars. Oversaturation of whatever type is often a concern to local residents. We hear of example after example of councils that have been unable to respond to community concerns about clustering or change of use of buildings on their high streets.

Where change of use is permitted by national rules it does not require explicit planning permission by the local authority; furthermore the only tools available to councils to restrict this are blunt and expensive to use. This not only removes the opportunity for proper consideration to be given to the application which can often mean important design and

access statements to demonstrate how crime prevention measures have been considered in the design of a proposal but it means that elected councillors are powerless to respond to community concerns.

We do not want to see a situation where every change of use requires planning permission. We do however think it is reasonable that where there are community concerns that the local authority should have a route to consider the issue through the proper planning process.

We're therefore offering Government a suite of options, which include a simple opportunity to streamline and reform existing planning powers. Options include a more localist approach to the use classes order and improved planning tools. For example, current tools including article 4 directions are costly, time-consuming and difficult to implement. The aim is to allow councils to shape their high streets as their communities wish, and deliver vibrant high streets with a diverse range of different businesses that contribute to the local community as well as robust economic growth.

Local authorities can genuinely transform the lives of local people and are able to make changes happen instantly. Councils are seeking to take the lead and deliver diverse high streets that local people want, and now is the time to give them the means to do so.



**West Lancashire County Council** is leading an ambitious regeneration plan looking to deliver a new central core for the town. Following detailed consultation with residents and businesses, the plan will focus on combining retail, leisure, residential, recreation, civic uses, education, community and office development into a comprehensive town centre offer.

**South Shropshire District Council** would not grant planning permission to for a large out of town supermarket outside of Ludlow; instead only allowing the development within the town, and only if the building fit the town's character as a thriving market.

**Cheshire West and Chester Council** transformed an unused city centre site into a quality green space, St Martin's park, offers a multi-purpose open air public area for visitors to relax, a multi-purpose space for events, and bus connections in and out of the area.



# The stage is set



**Councillor Flick Rea**, Chair of LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, describes the merits of revitalising some

town centres as spaces of cultural and community interaction and development.

The town centre can transform into almost anything; a gallery, a theatre, a gastronomic hotspot, a music venue, a market, a walking trail, a sports centre, a playground, a winter wonderland, even a fairground.

As central and well connected public spaces, the innovative use of town centres can attract and engage people, creating valuable retail demand in the process.

As far back as medieval times street and food markets, fairs and street entertainment, outdoor plays and music performances were an intrinsic part of a vibrant high street and community spirit. We need to go back to our roots.

Of course at the same time we need to embrace and adapt technological and social trends so we don't fossilise our high streets. Entrepreneurial local authorities such as York Council are leading the way by offering free wi-fi across the city.

The UK's rich history and culture is the main reason why tourism is the UK's fifth largest industry. Local government possess the

innovation and passion to create cultural hubs which reflect local historical and community need, to serve both as preserves of our national cultural heritage as well as catalysts to drive up tourism in our local areas.

We need to paint a new picture, where a diverse offer creates a new experience for visitors. How about putting a café in the old Woolworths shop. Across the road a museum revealing the local heritage and history. Next door is an open air theatre showcasing the local talent and a short stroll down the high street leads you to a local playground opposite to the local library hub with its study areas, community training courses and pop up cinema.

Already many local authorities are planning festivities, street parties and outdoor screenings to help local communities and visitors celebrate our culture and heritage this summer.

This is at the heart of what local authorities want to achieve for their town centres. With all local areas facing unprecedented funding pressures, local authorities are thinking of new and innovative ways to fund cultural and heritage services.

We can make our high streets enchanting places full to the brim with exciting things to see and do. With the world's eyes on us for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and Queen's Diamond Jubilee it is a once in a lifetime opportunity to do this, and increase tourist numbers and revenue for years to come.

**Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council's three seasons cultural programme** sits at the heart of its ambitions for revitalising the High Street, the town centre became a stage for school performances, cultural sites became free exhibition centres, and street entertainment and specialist markets were ran and marketed on key trading days.

**Chorley Borough Council's Midsummer Arts Festival** attracts audiences of 4,000 people from the surrounding area to its high quality arts and cultural events in the town centre throughout July and August.

**Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council's new Cultural Quarter** brings together a library, lifelong learning centre, and centre for cultural events into an attractive new building close to the city's main shopping streets.

**Stroud District Council** launched a regeneration initiative turning vacant premises into temporary art galleries, promoting local artists, improving the street scene, and helping landlords market their properties.



# Using heritage

Steven Bee and Brian Human, Historic Towns Forum, suggest how local areas can use their heritage to reinvigorate high streets, and how that heritage itself illustrates the scale of adaption our town centres have already undergone.

A majority of our high streets lie within the historic districts of towns and cities and include a wealth of buildings and spaces that are an important part of our heritage.

Our heritage is one of the main reason visitors come to Britain; and the Taking Part Survey shows that here more than two thirds of adults and children visit heritage sites each year.

These interests can be capitalised on through the conservation of high street heritage as part of a diverse commercial and cultural centre. High streets have always been and must continue to be, more than just places for shopping and adapt to the needs of multiple uses and users.

The alignment, connections, uses and built form of each high street often reflects hundreds of years of sequential remodelling, as services adapt to serve the needs of the community.

Public and private buildings have shaped and been shaped by shifting high street activities – some early places remain, but few have escaped modification. This evidence allows us to interpret, through the changes: periods of prosperity and poverty; the dominant trades at different times; and fashions of architecture and consumption.

This evidence of the changing offer on our high streets can help us plan and design future changes. We cannot think of the current high street challenge as the end, but as part of a historical adaption.

And we must encourage and ensure the long-term success of the high street, while allowing users the opportunity to follow the story of its evolution.

**Norwich City Council** has helped the city become one of the top ten retail centres in the UK by developing a shopping experience mixing chains and independent stores in a variety of cultural and modern settings. The city's approach is encapsulated by the Castle Mall, which hosts a wide range of shops near the historic Norman Castle, the home to a popular museum.

**Chorley Borough Council** has launched a town Heritage Trail, offering visitors a step-by-step guide highlighting significant historic monuments around the town centre.

**Sheffield City Council's tram network** provides fast, reliable services connecting shops with the welcoming rail station, park and ride sites, and attractions such as the Cathedral, sports and entertainment venues.

# Safer high streets and a vibrant night-time economy



**Councillor Mehboob Kahn,** Chair of LGA Safer and Stronger Communities Board, describes the importance of strong partnership

working in developing a safe and vibrant night-time offer, and some of the tools used to achieve this.

A thriving night-life can bring benefits and dangers. At its best it draws in people, fosters a sense of community, and stimulates the local economy. At its worst it can create a no-go area where the only open venues are betting shops, pubs and takeaways; with alcohol-fuelled violence and bottles, or worse, littering the streets.



I think many communities would recognise their high street falls somewhere in between. Many local authorities, including those awarded the coveted Purple Flag status, are taking positive steps to reap the benefits of a thriving night time economy; a fact recently recognised by Government when it delegated further powers to councils through the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act.

So what would the ideal high street look like, and how would it ensure safety for residents and visitors through a managed night-time economy?

Imagine a pedestrianised boulevard, strategically lit to emphasise the assorted cafes, restaurants and late-night shops. Community wardens patrol the area, greeting people as they go. There is no litter, graffiti or vandalised street furniture. A street entertainer performs in the street, attracting passers by. Although the place is bustling, there is no disorder and a tangible sense of community.

How has this idyll been created? It is clearly utopian in presentation, but all the key levers to creating it are available now to local authorities and the partnerships they support. It has all begun at the planning stage. Councils, businesses and the community collectively articulate their vision for the night-time economy and implement a strategy to achieve it.

**Cambridge City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council** has worked with private and education partners to develop a set of specific guides that detail what the city has to offer for: City Centre, Day and Night, Markets, Shopping, and Transport.

**London Borough of Lewisham** set up the Love Clean Streets project offering a virtual means communities to report incidents of town centre enviro-crime, the number of reported incidents dropped significantly as a result, with complaints about graffiti dropping by 30 per cent.

The council has identified trouble spots and designed their planning and licensing policies around them, such as regulating the numbers of premises selling alcohol. Effective use of licensing conditions to manage queues and safety through the provision of door supervisors means that opportunities for conflict have been minimised. Opening hours have also been managed to stagger the closing times, allowing for crowds to disperse before they grow too large.

The locally-elected Police and Crime Commissioner has been elected on a mandate that included commitments to a safe night-time economy and has used the police element of the late night levy to fund taxi-marshals to provide safe journeys home; street pastors to build a sense of community; and police support officers to convey a feeling of security.

Retailers were rapidly convinced of the benefits of working with the council, police authority and community groups to benefit from a renewed focus on the night time economy. A few independent shops have been encouraged to open late, to create an evening experience that goes beyond provision of food and alcohol. Fast-food shops have been approached by their community safety partnership and encouraged to provide extra staff to cope with increased demand around 11pm.

A sense of shared values has been established through the partnership work, resulting in behaviour that respects the area and a sense of community pride. Alongside the street scene picture, this makes for better longer term sustainability than could be achieved by pure capital investment.

Local government, together with its partners have many of the ingredients to manage a thriving and safe night time economy. It takes leadership and commitment, but above all local partners need the freedom to get on and get things done.

**London Borough of Wandsworth** is improving town centre street scene by limiting the times when trade waste may be left on public footways.

**Brighton and Hove City Council** has installed a range of large communal containers in the city centre to prevent black sacks being put out, which had led to rubbish being strewn across the streets.

# In the market

**Krys Zasada**, National Association of British Market Authorities, explores how markets can revitalise high streets as centres of flexible local retailing, while providing space for retail entrepreneurs of the future to innovate and develop.

Markets have existed for millennia and, historically, ensured the residents of towns and cities had access to affordable fresh food and other commodities. They have also acted as a key source of local retail innovation. Most commentators agree:

“...the public market hall paved the way for the modern chain store (or multiple shop as it was called in Britain), the department store, the ‘supermarket’, and, eventually, the shopping mall.”

Markets were the retail nursery that created many of today’s multi-national retailers e.g. TESCO (Hackney, East London), Marks & Spencer (Leeds), and Morrison’s (Bradford). This innovation is still being displayed today through, for example, Farmers’, Christmas and Night markets.

There are hundreds of markets occupying prominent High Street locations. Many of them make significant contributions to High Street viability. Leicester Market, winner of Britain’s Favourite Market award in 2009 and 2010, comprises over two hundred covered stalls boasting an eclectic range of goods. The Market has existed at the heart of the city centre since 1300 and is still a major shopping destination.

There is growing interest among Britain’s new entrepreneurs for trading opportunities on retail markets, and many markets are creating imaginative support packages to help the fledgling businesses develop. In addition to their commercial value, markets can play a critical role in moving towards a more flexible, locally responsive community, cultural and shopping experience. We need to move flexible, local retailing innovation to the centre of our renewed focus for the alternative high street.

**Bolton Market** introduced the first Electronic Market loyalty Card in November 2011, responding to the calls from the community. Locals like them as it rewards customer loyalty and is a form of saving for many. Retailers like the intelligence that can be gained from loyalty cards. A 6 month trail has been funded by the Council at nil cost to the traders. To date: 600 cards have been issued, with an 85 per cent registration rate; 25 per cent repeated weekly usage rate.

**Manchester Markets** have allocated funds for a promotional campaign to attract potential new traders. Targeting and supporting young people with innovative ideas for new market businesses. A wide range of support is offered, including promotional, advice and mentoring, and even an apprenticeship scheme.

# Back to the start, the 21st century agora



Photo: Sophie Ballinger

**Julian Dobson**, Chief Executive, Urban Pollinators, considers the challenge faced by our high streets in the context of their

change over time, arguing that we have to learn from the past in creating town centres as spaces for social exchange

Towns and cities have always been centres of trade and exchange. But it's no coincidence that the great towns and cities of the world have always been about much more than that.

When Plato wrote his Republic, one of the earliest and most influential attempts to describe a just society, the Athenian town centre was far more than a marketplace. The agora, as it was known, was a centre of religious worship, civic and judicial activity, sport and leisure.

More than that, it was a place to meet, to debate and discuss the issues of the day, and to exercise democracy (limited as it was by our standards). It was a social space.

Last year I coordinated a submission to the Portas Review calling for a '21st century agora' approach to our town centres. As the Danish architect Jan Gehl puts it, we should go into town because we want to go

into town – not just because that is where the shops are. We need to rediscover the sociability, diversity and democracy of urban space.

That need is becoming acute because the model of the high street as shopping centre that has been dominant for the last century and a half is approaching its end in many of our town centres. Out-of-town shopping, the accessibility and convenience of supermarkets, and the inexorable rise of internet shopping have created a massive oversupply of town centre retail space. In Rochdale, even McDonald's is leaving the high street.

This trend will not be reversed by better customer service, cheaper parking, or retail makeovers. The story of the recession was a story of the failures of companies: Woolworths, Borders, Zavvi and more: 173 medium to large retailers with more than 18,500 stores were affected from 2007 to 2011, according to the Centre for Retail Research.

The story of the next few years will be the shrinking town centre presence of healthy and profitable companies, not just the failure of unprofitable ones. Property agents Jones Lang LaSalle predict that 25 per cent of all retail leases will expire by 2013 and 50 per cent by 2015. As chains 'rightsize' into prime locations, the gaps in our high streets will increase.



So the question for the town teams proposed by Mary Portas will not just be how to stop the rot. It will be how to rethink the purpose of place in an internet age, and an age in which demographic and economic trends are combining to reduce disposable income.

This is where going back to the idea of the agora offers us a way forward. A 21st century agora is not a case of turning the clock back, but of learning from the past to inform the future.

What would create that mix of activities now that would make town centres sociable, lively places to visit? How could they become places where business and civic life grow, where people engage in society and not just in consumption?

As our submission to the Portas Review showed, there is no shortage of ideas and experience. The challenge is to apply this thinking to town centres as a whole, and to do so in ways that involve the whole community.

**Bristol City Council** has launched a virtual High sTweet, which uses social media to promote the city's vast range of local independent shops, and advertise council grants and other business development opportunities.

**Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's Business Vitality Grants** for new town centre business aim to drive a better mix of independent shops and an improved offer for shoppers.



# What next for the high street?

This is a critical time for town centres; local partners need to be brave in setting out a vision, but need the tools to pursue this path.

Too much attention has been paid to the high street challenge, and not enough on the opportunities for growth.

Yes, nationally, retail spending in town centres is declining. But this plays out differently in each place, and within this decline are opportunities to develop a more coherent offer that serves not only consumers, but communities.

We need to completely rethink how all services engage in the high street as the centres of social and economic activity.

Individual initiatives will not address the challenge, instead local and central government must collectively consider and remove the structural barriers that prevent town centres from adapting to economic and social change.

Mary Portas began to explore how the alternative high street might be created.

But we want to go further, handing communities genuine power to reshape and revitalise services in their town centre.







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