

Supporting High Streets and Town Centres

Background Note, 6 December 2013

Our vision for Town Centres

The way the nation shops is undergoing a radical transformation. Consumers already take advantage of the increased choice offered by the internet and out of town retail. By the 2020s, online shopping is predicted to have doubled and make up around twenty per cent of all retail activity. High streets have to adapt in order to survive and succeed.

Town centres need to be diverse, accessible, modern and attractive. Above all, the key to success is local leadership and diversity. Every area needs to come up with their own plan for the future of their town centres, with local authorities working hand in hand with local businesses to transform their town centres.

Government is supporting this by announcing a new range of powerful measures to provide the tools for public and private sector to transform their town centres for their local communities. This package builds on the wide range of measures resulting from Mary Portas' review of high streets, published two years ago.

Government is therefore acting to:

1. support business and private sector to have a greater stake in their high streets.
2. make it easier to diversify town centres.
3. ensure town centres remain accessible to visitors.
4. promote the use of technology to modernise town centres.

2. Making it easier to diversify town centres

Encouraging Change of Use

Local councils set out how their towns and high streets will be used, through their local plans and local planning processes. **There is considerable scope for local authorities to use their powers and judgement to actively promote new and vibrant uses for their town centres.**

Land reviews

The National Planning Policy Framework already requires local planning authorities to regularly review how land is allocated. To ensure that councils are keeping their high streets up to date, we will **publish new guidance that councils should review their retail land to take account of the changing local market.**

Permitted development rights

The proposed permitted development rights on **'shops to homes'** offer a **greater set of freedoms** for town centres to respond to wider structural changes. The Government **will publish a formal response to its consultation in the New Year.**

As announced at autumn statement, as part of the Red Tape Challenge work to consolidating and review the General Permitted Development Regulations we will **consult on relaxations for change use from retail use (A1) to restaurant use (A3) and from retail use (A1) assembly and leisure uses (D2)** such as cinemas, gyms, skating rinks and swimming baths.

We will also **consult on creating a national planning permission to allow the installation of mezzanine floors in retail premises where it would support the town centre.**

These measures are targeted to support the diversification and vitality of town centres. They recognised the Portas Review recommendation to make it easier to change surplus retail space to leisure uses in the D2 use class.

Planning simplification

We want to see local authorities making use of planning simplification. Local authorities can do this in a number of ways:

Streamlining engagement with key parties

'One Stop Shops' can be of real benefit by providing a single point of contact for developers, where they can deal with planning, buildings regulations, environmental health etc as part of a comprehensive service to support the town centre. These can also be expanded to include economic development services and business support and could include surgeries to support small businesses in developing their schemes, or to appoint an 'account manager' to guide businesses through the various planning and non-planning consent regimes.

It has been estimated the evening economy is worth £66bn to the UK, and accounts for nearly a third of the town and city centre turnover. As such a significant contributor to our economy, government and local areas cannot afford to overlook the potential opportunities for growth in this area. Diversification is one way local areas can help maximise the potential of their high streets and city centres. We want to ensure our town and city centres are vibrant destinations, accessible to groups of all ages, achieving economic growth and creating a space where communities can come together and enjoy a much wider range of activities on offer.

This may include promoting retail through shops opening later, making our town centres places to eat out and relax with later opening cafes and more restaurants. We would like to see greater availability of alternative cultural events such as evening opening of museums and libraries, increased numbers of restaurants, cinemas, bowling alleys, theatres, street entertainments and more. Providing a range of visiting opportunities, with more flexible opening hours to fit around peoples busy lifestyles will help to ensure that our high streets are attractive destinations.

Overall, Creative Industries are estimated to contribute £36.3bn in Gross Value Added to the UK economy (2.9% of UK Gross Value Added)) and employ 1.5 million people in either the Creative Industries or in a creative role in another industry (5.14% of UK employment). The Heritage Lottery Fund estimate that heritage tourism contributes to just under £14bn to the economy. In 2009 our national museums and galleries had a combined turnover of £900 million. Inbound visitors in 2009 spent £1 billion in museums and art galleries, whilst domestic tourists spent £1.75 billion over the same period.

We support the excellent Purple Flag scheme. This scheme, developed by the Association of Town and City Management, recognises effective management of our town and city centres in the evening and at night. Town and cities that meet or surpass the required standard can be accredited with a Purple Flag, celebrating their more desirable night time environments and recognising them as great places to visit - for residents, visitors and tourists alike.

Red Tape Challenge on High Streets

But we think there is more which can be done. Government wants to see vibrant town centres which move beyond the traditional retail offer. We are keen to look at ways to encourage greater diversity in high streets and public realm, greater diversity in premises and buildings, and greater diversity in opening times.

Local areas are best placed to comment on regulatory issues which act as a brake on town centre viability and vitality. That's why we will launch a Red Tape Challenge, if there is sufficient evidence to do so. We are **calling for that evidence today, and businesses, councils, residents and other interested bodies can comment** by emailing highstreets@communities.gsi.gov.uk by 17 January 2014.