

## High Street Review

### What do you think are the problems with the high street?

Action for Market Towns welcomes the fact that the review won't just look at how to make over failing shops, but is considering the future of our town centres at a deeper level. The issues surrounding the future of the high street take in far more than simply the retail element. There is a need to consider the reasons why fewer people appear to be visiting their local high streets and spending less, which in turn has a knock on effect on retail. Action for Market Towns contributed to a joint submission to the review convened by Urban Pollinators and working with the Empty Shops Network, Incredible Edible Todmorden, Meanwhile Space CIC, MyCard, Research 00:/, Res Publica and Wigan Plus. The report, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Agora, can be found here:

<http://towns.org.uk/2011/07/26/towards-the-21st-century-agora-response-for-mary-portas-review/>

### There is a range of issues that are contributing to a downturn in the high street, including:

- Competition – from out of town shopping and the internet. The former usually have free parking and shops located around other anchor attractions such as cinemas, bowling alleys and spas, creating a destination for more than just shopping. Larger national chain stores generally have longer opening hours and certainly supermarkets offer a massive range of products beyond groceries, which can negate the need to visit more than one shop. The internet offers a very good choice of products, often at cheaper prices that can be delivered straight to the door, albeit with some time delay. With people trying to fit more into their lives, this straight-to-door delivery can be very valuable. The big stores are not immune to downturn in spend of course, with some of the biggest names no longer appearing on the high street.
- Business rates – need to be kept down as far as possible to encourage entrepreneurs and independent retailers.
- Lack of local investment - including the design of open spaces, safe, well-lit, accessible spaces
- Recession – this has led to a lack of confidence in consumer spending. People are worried about their jobs and their income and are simply tightening their belts.
- Lack of funding for community led solutions – as a result of local authority cuts for example
- Enterprise zones on city edges are great for cities, but what are the consequences for towns outside them, not benefitting from the opportunities and subsidies available.
- Local populations against change – in terms of not wanting or encouraging development that might help their ailing high streets.
- Poor accessibility – for example expensive local parking, inadequate bus services, inaccessible shops (eg for those with pushchairs/ wheelchairs) especially in historic centres, lack of wide opening hours among independents (with many closing at 5/5.30pm, taking half days and not opening on Sundays or during town festivals).

## What do you think should be done to solve them?

Action for Market Towns works with towns across England and (and increasingly Scotland and Wales) to explore how they develop solutions to issues they may be facing. Many of these revolve around the high street, be it getting more footfall, improving access and signage, providing business skills, and strategic benchmarking.

We encourage towns to establish '(market) town partnerships' which bring together the local community, local businesses and the local authority to come together to think about the future of their town. This can often result in the development of what we call a Community Led Plan which is essentially a vision and accompanying action plan for that location, evidenced by facts and figures.

To find out more about Community Led Planning, visit our website here:

<http://towns.org.uk/2010/06/17/amt-town-action-planning/>

It is amazing the sorts of things that can be, and are, achieved through Community Led Planning, often by communities and businesses themselves – we have a database of such activities, which is member-only, although we'd be happy to share some examples with you. In the meantime, you can take a look at the finalists for this year's Action for Market Towns Awards

<http://towns.org.uk/market-town-awards/market-town-awards-2011/>

## Other potential areas to explore include:

- Increasing footfall – through tourism development, festivals, events, using the high street as a venue and social hub to get more people in, extending opening hours.
- Business rates – AMT welcomes the government's recent announcement regarding a proportion of business rates being retained in the area they were raised. The key however will be to ensure that this money is actually spent in that area and on areas that will be of value to those local businesses – such as design, infrastructure, subsidising parking etc. Is there a way to ring-fence the money for this, otherwise it may well filter elsewhere?
- Competition – Clearly of town centres, supermarkets and the internet are here to stay, at least in the foreseeable future. AMT believes that high streets should look to identify solutions that work with these 'competitors' rather than against them. We've published a report called 'Town Centre Comeback' which explores this idea in more detail and gives actual examples of how towns are working with multiples for mutual benefit - <http://towns.org.uk/2011/06/16/get-amts-town-centre-comeback-report-free-until-1-july/>
- Rewarding Loyalty - We also believe that town centre retailers can learn a lot from the larger multiples in terms of rewarding loyal customers. When used as part of a wider promotional mix, and ideally with a strong business forum/group to drive them, especially in the beginning, local loyalty schemes have been proven to be very effective for driving footfall and spend. Read our report on this here, with actual case studies: <http://towns.org.uk/amt-i/loyalty-cards-shop-local/>. AMT is backing one particular loyalty solution which offers cash rebates to consumers in return for spend, and has the ability to add investment into town partnerships: read more here: <http://towns.org.uk/2011/08/02/my-high-street-my-town-my-card/>
- Lack of local investment – AMT hopes that the introduction of Neighbourhood Planning (ideally within a more holistic community led plan) will lead communities to consider development in their areas as a positive. Especially in light of the potential incentives of the New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy, the key being how to ensure that money raised through

these means remains within the community and is spent on infrastructure that will benefit that community.

- Innovative use of vacant shops – AMT supports the work of the Empty Shops Network in terms of finding innovative ways to utilise vacant shops.
- Encouraging independent, specialist shops and markets – with a particular focus on local, eg local food, crafts etc.
- Encouraging entrepreneurship, particularly within schools.

### **How might these solutions work in practice?**

Solutions should focus on the whole centre rather than simply retail. As described earlier, town partnership model using community led planning, and neighbourhood planning, can achieve a great deal, as outlined in our case study database: <http://towns.org.uk/good-practice/>

### **Who could/should be involved in taking your solutions forward? (e.g. government, businesses, local partnerships such as Business Improvement Districts, third sector (charities and community groups), local people)**

There needs to be a partnership approach with all sectors working together. As an example, AMT, with ACRE, published a piece of research into how local authorities could take a more active role in supporting community led planning – often a hurdle has been getting community plans supported by local authorities – see our website here: <http://towns.org.uk/2011/07/21/localism-in-practice-making-the-most-of-community-led-planning/>

### **Do you see yourself/your organisation as having a role in helping develop thriving high streets? And if so, how do/would you achieve that?**

AMT is a national charity supporting those living and working in and around small towns. We offer:

- Access to an extensive case study database
- Support to market town partnerships
- Training
- Loyalty scheme advice
- Localism solutions including neighbourhood planning
- Support in developing tourism, working with multiples, benchmarking town centres