

Protecting and reviving historic cores – Response from the Historic Towns Forum (HTF) with English Heritage

Dear Ms Portas

Response to your High Street Review on behalf of the Historic Towns Forum with English Heritage

In response to your call for comments upon key stakeholders and organisations as to how we can ‘bring back the bustle’ to the High Streets, I am pleased to make the following observations from the Historic Towns Forum (HTF), which has been informed by a joint working project with English Heritage

The HTF offers a strong platform from which to lobby policy makers on behalf of historic towns and cities and encourages contact between local authorities having responsibility for the management of historic towns and cities, and between these authorities and other public, private and voluntary sector agencies.

Details of who and what the HTF is can be seen on our web site at

<http://www.historictownsforum.org/>

HTF Response

Our response is based upon a series of two roundtables with leaders in the retail sector set within the context of our members’ interests in the overall protection and revivification of historic cores, and the wider retail issues at stake.

The roundtable discussions were held in association with a wide range of property professionals ranging from our sponsors Bircham Dyson Bell, CgMs, Land Securities, John Lewis Partnership, to a wide range of partnership organisations including English Heritage, RIBA, CLG, LGA, ATCM, Design Council, British Retail Consortium, Heritage Lottery Fund, RICS, IHBC, Heritage Alliance, National Retail Planning Forum, RTPI, British Council for Shopping Centres, British Property Federation, and VisitEngland.

In light of these discussions we have prepared this submission to help inform your High Street Review to Government on 14 October.

The first of the two round table events was designed to look at issues and challenges facing high streets, town and city centres, but with a focus specifically on the historic environment.

Purpose and objectives of these roundtable discussions were to:

- examine the issues facing historic high streets, town and city centres (or ‘historic cores’)
- discuss whether any general principles for managing them can be identified

- decide what the sector should do in the short and medium term to address existing challenges and what actions we believe other organisations and bodies should be taking.

We therefore attach to this letter the principal issues that we discussed together with a series of recommendations which we would like you to take into account in your submission to the Government.

If in the interim you would like further information or to have a separate meeting with the HTF then please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Dr Noël James

Director

Historic Towns Forum

HTF/EH Report to the Issues affecting the High Street

1. Introduction and background

A number of issues and trends have combined to create a set of very challenging circumstances for historic high streets, town and city centres (or 'historic cores'), including

- the recession
- changing shopping tastes and patterns
- the increasing prevalence of internet shopping, growth of edge of centre and out of town retail areas
- commercial property market trends.

Taken together, these have manifested in the form of struggling retailers, rising vacancy rates and high streets with a lack of footfall, social interaction and consequent loss of vitality. These trends were confirmed by the latest British Retail Consortium figures on August 22nd. These issues all contribute to a sense that our high streets and town centres are in crisis, are without a clear purpose and that there is as yet no clear strategy to address the factors behind the malaise.

2. Context

At the same time as historic cores are coming under increasing pressure, local authorities and the management of their central areas are also being forced to cope with a different planning environment and set of financial circumstances.

- Local authorities face an average 28% cut to their budgets over the next four years (LGA figures) with consequent implications for staffing of planning, conservation and town centre management departments
- National planning policy is currently undergoing a radical overhaul, with changes likely to take until mid-2012 to be complete
- The Localism bill has the potential to change the way that local authorities engage with their communities in developing plans for future development.

Against this background, the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) announced a 'high street review' on 17 May, to be led by Mary Portas. The BIS website indicates that the review will

- Examine the case for developing town centres that contribute to promoting economic growth, creating jobs and improving quality of life in local areas
- Explore new business models for high streets relevant to the modern consumer
- Recommend what action government, business and other organisations should take to create diverse, sustainable high streets where businesses of all sizes and independent retailers are able to thrive.

We understand that the BIS review is due to produce a final report in the autumn.

3. Key areas discussed on 07 September roundtable discussion

- Beyond where we are in the economic cycle, to what extent are the critical trends temporary or do they pose long term issues?
- Are historic cores affected by these issues to the same extent as elsewhere? If to a different extent, are there general principles that we can derive from their management?
- Are there implications from the reform of the planning system in this context?
- What should the range of stakeholders be doing in the short and medium terms? (Heritage sector/local government/central government/retail associations)

This first roundtable session included a wide ranging discussion on the current issues facing historic town centres and high streets, including their origins and implications. A number of common themes emerged during the course of the debate:

- The recession – and the way it is driving many of the problems behind a lack of vitality and footfall while also affecting lending for investment
- Challenges and complexities presented in managing town centres in the context of multiple ownership
- The challenges of operating in a town centre environment – opening hours, unit size, Use Class restrictions, car parking, DDA access, rent and rates, on-line retailing, impact of supermarkets and out/edge of town centres, changing (reducing?) resident populations
- The environmental quality, including cleanliness, security etc, of town centres and high streets as places to shop
- Overall coordination of town centre strategies across stakeholders
- Importance of developing partnerships – both locally and across sectors
- Implications of localism and big society agendas for historic cores (NPPF, neighbourhood planning, community participation, asset transfer)
- Difficulties in ‘embedding’ new independent and small-scale retailers in the local economy, which struggle to be viable – particularly in the current economic circumstances
- The opportunities offered by diversification, e.g. niche products, links to tourism and leisure, live/works units, the creative industries
- Maintaining distinctiveness in town centres
- Encouraging other uses in town centre locations and the difficulties in and opportunities for doing so
- Integrating the historic centre to other parts of the town centre or edge of the town centre to promote linked shopping trips
- How historic centres need to compete with and adapt to the threats posed by existing out of town shopping centres and retail parks
- There is a wide range of differing types of historic centres all of which have different heritage qualities – from University towns as Cambridge/Oxford to market towns such as Ludlow and seaside towns such as Margate. Therefore can one heritage solution fit all?

Areas and ideas for discussion at the 14 October event

While the recession is the biggest single factor behind the current problems, it is clear that there are a number of other structural and long term issues that are likely to persist as and when we move into an economic upturn, and may indeed grow in significance. The following are some areas for discussion and suggestions for future activity.

1. Greater coordination and partnership

The discussion on the 7 September event touched several times on difficulties around the number of different stakeholders in terms of the management of historic cores.

Town centre management strategies – what we should be working towards:

- Identifying opportunities for greater coordination between various stakeholders in developing TCM strategies
- In terms of historic town centres, what would the retail and development sectors like to see from local authorities and other stakeholders?
- Which models of TCM (and funding) work best, and is there a correlation with historic towns?
- Evidence base for establishing TCM posts
- Partnerships – locally and nationally. What should change?
- BIDs and town centre partnerships – encouraging participation on the part of local authorities and businesses

Proposed recommendation to Government

- Investigate whether Local Planning Authorities have now cut their town centre managers as result of cut backs in Government expenditure
- Research with ATCM to map strategies against heritage – compiling case studies
- Analysis of BIDs and historic environment element

2. Emerging agenda

Localism and the Big Society

- Does the potential decentralisation/'pushing out' of decision making offer any opportunities to create local ownership of change/development
- Changes to business rates and LG finance in the Localism Bill and the impact on town centre businesses
- NPPF and any effects on the town centre first/sequential approach
- Developing appropriate Local Plan land use strategies and policies to reinforce the town centre first approach – crucial given the likely enhanced role of the NPPF
- Planning for town centres and high streets through neighbourhood planning

Proposed recommendation to Government

- DCLG/BIS to consider in any forthcoming review of good practice guidance following the adoption of the draft NPPF on the role of town centre managers and 'business improvement districts' for the protection and enhancement of historic centres as a places to shop, visit work and live.
- DCLG/BIS to strengthen within the NPPF the 'town centre first policy approach' and the need for effective town centre management so as to enhance the vitality and viability of town centres, including historic centres. The HTF will also be submitting representations to this effect by 17 October
- DCLG or English Heritage to undertake a survey of a range of historic centres that shows the range of strategies they have undertaken to promote the economic health of their centres and lessons that can be learned from existing practice.
- Local Planning Authorities to ensure that within forthcoming development management plans policies are included seeking the retention of retail floor space and strategies for reuse and diversification of former high street units within historic centres where it is not longer viable for retail use.

3. Creating and protecting balance in the retail offer

Realistically, it is likely that in all but a few historic cores there will be significant representation from the larger chain-store firms. Nevertheless, at the first event there was a consensus that ensuring smaller and independent retailers are supported to ensure a balanced retail offer and encourage diversity is crucial. This links to the issues raised in section 2 above.

- Support, guidance and advice for new independent and small scale retailers and businesses in establishing themselves in the historic centre , which has implications for rents, rates and access to investment
- Revisiting guidance for local authorities – retail development. What issues should this cover, e.g. planning, design, finance etc, and what tone should this take?
- Encouraging other uses in town centres to reinforce vitality and footfall – does asset transfer offer an opportunity?

Proposed Recommendation to Government

- Revised retail development guidance reflecting this issue (see 2 above)
- English Heritage revise the good practice guide on how retail development can help to enhance and protect heritage assets.

The actions proposed under sections 1-3 above may be developed and consolidated into an action plan. If there is agreement to this it will be essential to agree:

- who does what;
- what resources are required and where they are coming from; and
- the timescales.

Addendum

Retail Development in Historic Areas - published 2005 by English Heritage and the Historic Towns Forum

A revised and updated version is now under consideration. As a follow up action to this round table exercise, the focus of the revised version could be widened to incorporate some of the issues discussed at the two events – particularly around the advantages offered by coordinated town centre management strategies in historic towns. This would offer the opportunity to incorporate in the revised publication some of the actions identified under each of the above themes (e.g. surveying historic centres in partnership with ATCM).

Involving BIS and CLG in the development of the revised document would be crucial in ensuring it is complementary to the current High Street review and any conclusions/recommendations it contains.