

## Evolving High Streets

Over the weekend my attention was drawn to a new report called “Evolving High Streets” by Southampton University. I have included some of the relevant conclusions in this paper. The whole study is available on:

[http://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Opinion\\_Pieces\\_Southampton\\_Nov\\_2014.pdf](http://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Opinion_Pieces_Southampton_Nov_2014.pdf)

Revitalising Britain's town centres is no small task because:

- They arouse strong feelings. Maintaining their economic health and vitality is viewed as a priority by a large number of consumers – even by those whose shifting shopping habits are at variance with these objectives.
- Secondly town centres and high streets are commercial and community spaces of considerable and deceptive complexity. As a result identifying and understanding the likely evolutionary paths of those spaces is difficult. Indeed moving beyond the short term into re-imagining the high streets of the future often produces scenario forecasts which are interesting and creative but which become embarrassingly detached from on the ground reconfigurations in a very short period of time.
- Thirdly because geography matters Britain's regional and local economies are in markedly different states of economic health.

Future Challenges for the Management of Town Centres

- As town centre management practice continues to evolve in the future it will be imperative for new models to foster entrepreneurship as well as social innovation. The continuing blurring of the boundaries between the physical and the virtual (digital) worlds will help on this front, particularly in the sharing economy.
- Similarly events and festivals in town centres, which currently 85% of town managers are responsible for, will grow in importance as test beds for urban innovation and sustainability, social marketing, and entrepreneurship interventions. Town centre management will continue to play a pivotal role here, though it may well be through job descriptions such as “community engagement manager”, still unfamiliar to many UK based town centre partnerships, even when they are commonplace in other European countries.
- Similarly the development of hybrid forms of town centre management including integrated destination management with a stronger focus on the visitor economy or online community management with a focus on people's virtual interactions with their town centres via social media will continue to develop.
- In 2013 The Grimsey Report called on local authorities to act confidently and pro-actively to make High Streets their centre piece of their local economic vision.

## The Night-Time Economy.

- It seems reasonable to forecast that more people with disposable income will want to go out at night. It is also probable that a wider demographic, including an older generation for whom nightlife is an established feature of social life, would want to participate. An expansion in the sector offers opportunities for a growth in jobs and the possibility for new enterprises. New possibilities are emerging to fill vacant properties in ailing local high streets with hybrid bars/cafes and micro pubs for example.

## High Street Reconfiguration

- It is clear that any reconfiguration will inevitably be a continuation of the long term shift away from retailing to service but especially cafes and bars, health and beauty and medical services.
- With many modern retail high streets perfectly positioned for top up shopping, achieving the right mix of multiple and independent retailers and leisure offers such as cafes and bars can position a centre alongside online shopping, not against it.
- Convenience shopping has emerged strongly from the years of crisis and austerity and now occupies a strategic position in ensuring the future vitality and viability of vital commercial and community spaces. This has come from a powerful shift in consumer behaviour and valuations against out of town shopping and to convenience shopping.

## E- Retailing

- After two decades of Internet use we are likely to move towards a phase in which the distinction between the online and offline world diminishes. The increasing demand for retail properties from e retailers and other types of firms such as artists and designers also fosters the growth of new retail concepts in town centres such as pop up shops and innovative shop- in -in shop concepts.
- As such Internet based firms and technologies are currently able to and also will contribute to the viability of the high street. However this does not imply a bright future for all high street retailers. If the current development of online shopping continues experts expect that some 25% of total retail space will be generated from the internet in 10 years' time. This means that the substitution effect of the internet on some bricks and mortar retail trade will be much greater in the coming decade.
- A clear retail vision and cooperation between actors at the local level is essential for town centres to adjust to online shopping in the near future and to benefit from the new business opportunities provided by the Internet.

**Cllr Mel Usher**  
**Chair**  
**Town Centre Panel**