

UNLOCK THE HIGH STREET

Letter 1

Over 4,188 bank branches have closed in the UK, at a rate of around 50 a month, since 2015 according to Which? magazine. Natwest has shut 1086, Lloyds 680, and Barclays will have closed 650 branches by the end of year. I am sure we all know of branches in our neck of the woods which have closed, or which are earmarked to close. It's an inconvenience. There are just some things that you need to do in person even if you do use internet or phone banking.

But for shops and businesses on the high streets, branch closures are a double whammy. Not only is it more difficult for the many independent shops and businesses which rely on cash trading to bank, branch closures further reduce footfall and therefore spending as people have less reason to go onto the high street.

Whilst I welcome the UK Government's High Street Task Force, by far the most effective way to support local and particularly independent shops is to reform the complicated business rate system. We need an urgent post-Covid business rate review.

Letter 2

As we thankfully seem to be coming out of the worst of this terrible pandemic, and people are returning to the high street to shop and socialise. It's good to see and I hope that many people will move back to "shopping local" and supporting smaller, independent retailers in particular. We can all do our bit to help the high street bounce back.

But Government needs to play its part too. We urgently need Government to review business rates to help businesses. The system is a mess, held together by a patchwork of discretionary and mandatory rebates, and which favour online shops at the expense of traditional "bricks and mortar" businesses which need a physical presence.



Letter 3

10 years on from the Conservative/LibDem Coalition commissioned report onto the future of the high street, the Portas Review, our town centre remains in crisis. Long-term trends like internet shopping and the bank branch closures have neither been reversed nor stemmed. Structural failures like business rates have not been adequately reformed, and the tax system continues to be gamed by multinationals. Covid too has brought fresh challenges for shops and businesses with lockdowns and social distancing having a serious impact on many business' bottom line.

That is why I, along with the Co-operative Party, are calling for a new focus from Government and councils on high streets. Government needs to act, and act quickly. What's needed from Downing Street is a renewed focus on town centres and high streets, and an urgent review of business rates to ease the burden on hard-pressed shops.

Letter 4

Our high street was once the pride of our community, but long-term trends like internet shopping combined with the Covid crisis has hit the many shops and businesses hard. I sense that we've reached a tipping point in our community where if we lose any more independent businesses, the high street will fall to rack and ruin.

The UK Government has set up a High Street Taskforce but perhaps understandably Downing Street's focus has been on the NHS and the vaccine roll out and its yet to deliver change on the ground.

Government needs to act now, and that's why I along with the Co-operative Party is calling for an urgent post-Covid review of business rates to relief the burden on hard-pressed shops and businesses in our community.

Letter 5

Along with colleagues in the Co-operative Party, we have tested the health of our high street with a short survey. The picture is stark. What once was a bustling centre is very quiet even on a Saturday, X number of shops were vacant, and where once were a diverse range of retail outlets we now have X number of betting shops/payday lenders, closed pubs.

We need greater transparency of ownership and new routes for community and co-operative ownership, because we know what who owns our economy is in whose interests it operates. We want to tap into the power of community politics that saw many neighbourhoods through this pandemic through mutual aid networks. We need to reform the way businesses on our high streets are taxed, so that they aren't penalised by onerous business rates while global online retailers get away without paying their fair share. And we need to put our money where our mouth is – not just providing the funding for town centre renewal but allowing the people affected rather than politicians and bureaucrats to decide how it is spent.

