

Motion: Urgent unlocking the potential of local high streets

This Council believes that healthy high streets are essential for employment, shopping and leisure but many shops and businesses were struggling even before the Covid pandemic: high street retail employment fell in more than three-quarters of local authorities between 2015 and 2018 according to the Office of National Statistics¹ and more than half of all UK consumers were shopping online before the pandemic².

This Council notes retail is among the sectors most affected by the coronavirus pandemic; the almost complete shutdown of non-essential shops between March and June 2020 and subsequent local and national lockdowns and ongoing restrictions has hit businesses hard, and the need for social distancing has changed the way many businesses operate reducing footfall. The pandemic has accelerated what in many cases has been a longer trend of lower footfall and changing shopping habits: as the Portas Review a decade ago acknowledged, the form and function of many high streets needs to adapt if they are to survive.

This Council welcomes the willingness of Government to acknowledge the problems and come forward with initiatives in response to these challenges such as the furlough scheme, the Covid support business loans, and the High Street Taskforce. However, as the Treasury Select Committee stated in 2019, the current system of Business Rates places an unfair burden on “bricks and mortar” businesses compared to online retailers, and the Business Rate system needs radical overhaul³. The announcements in the Budget, though welcome, fall short of what is required: small changes to revaluation cycles and temporary discounts simply tinker around the edges, and will not deliver the support that local high streets need and deserve.

This Council resolves to

- Write to the Government to urge it to scrap business rates and replace them with a system which is fit for purpose and which levels the playing field between bricks and mortar businesses and online retail giants.
- Campaign to devolve funds like the Towns Fund, Levelling Up Fund, UK Shared Prosperity Fund and other national funding pots, to give local communities, councils and regions the ultimate say in how it is spent in their area. (NB – Not Wales)
- Explore what local action can be taken to revive our high streets.

UNLOCK THE HIGH STREET

Suggested actions (any combination of these can be added to council motion if helpful)

- Explore the creation of Community Improvement Districts to reconnect communities with the levers that drive economic development in town centres and create an equal partnership of business and community organisations to galvanise action at a local level.
- Make any data held by the council on ownership of high street properties public and in an accessible format, so that community groups seeking to buy empty shops through a community share offer have the information they need to do so.
- Provide advice and support to community and co-operative businesses to take on ownership or management of vacant high street properties so that communities have a say and a stake in their local town centres.
- Make full use of s215 planning enforcement powers where empty units are attracting antisocial behaviour or creating an eyesore on the high street – and name and shame those premises which don't do their bit and are regularly subject to enforcement.
- Proactively contact landlords of vacant premises (and work with Chambers of Commerce, Landlord Associations and BID managers) to explore meanwhile use options and/or encourage alternative rental models (e.g. turnover rather than market rent) to enable new co-operatives, SMEs, social enterprises and community businesses to open their doors on the high street.

1 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/population-estimates/articles/highstreetsingreatbritain/march2020#:~:text=High%20street%20retail%20employment%20fell,29%25%20in%20Great%20Britain%20overall>

2 <https://www.retail-insight-network.com/features/uk-online-shopping-growth/>

3 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmtreasy/222/22203.htm#_idTextAnchor000