



High Street review

A submission by Civic Voice to BIS's
review led by Mary Portas

August 2011

1. Civic Voice is the national charity for the civic movement, working to make the places where everyone lives more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive and promoting civic pride. We champion and support a network of volunteer-led, community based civic societies and other community groups across England who are the champions of the place where you find them. Among other things civic volunteers are the most numerous participants in the planning system. 290 groups with over 75,000 members have joined Civic Voice. Civic societies play an important role in supporting and strengthening high streets and town centres through practical initiatives, policy debate and influencing planning decisions. The review has excited significant interest and we have received a large number of submissions from local groups¹. We have also undertaken an online survey of views and convened an online discussion forum in preparing this submission.

2. We welcome the spotlight being placed on the high street through this review and the opportunity to shape the Government's approach. The importance of a diverse range of local shops, services and other activities in our town centres was identified as one of the most important contributors to what makes places enjoyable and people proud to live there in the results of Civic Voice's Love Local survey (www.civicvoice.org.uk/campaigns/love-local) in 2010. This also identified the loss of independent shops as one of the main things people feel is at risk.

3. Civic societies report a wide range of challenges in our high streets, including:

- ☛ Loss of shops and services that play a community role – post offices, pubs,
- ☛ Lack of planning control over damaging changes of use, such as banks to betting shops
- ☛ Closure of public facilities – toilets, baby changing facilities, fountains, clocks
- ☛ Declining environmental quality – street clutter, illegal advertising, litter, A-boards, broken paving, unmanaged flower beds & green space
- ☛ Loss of historic character and significance
- ☛ Unsympathetic shop fronts
- ☛ Poorly designed new development
- ☛ Impact of both edge of town centre and out-of-town retail development

¹ In response to our call for views on the Portas review of high streets we received feedback from Timperley (Cheshire), Saltburn by the Sea (Cleveland), Newark (Notts), Bristol, Hythe (Kent), Sutton Coldfield (Birmingham), Swindon (Wilts), Brunswick (Newcastle), Assington (Suffolk), Isleworth (London), Whitstable (Kent), Mitcham (London), Hadleigh (Suffolk), Beverley (N Yorkshire), Huntingdon & Godmanchester (Cambs), Thornbury (S Gloucs), Altrincham (Cheshire), Marple (Manchester), Odiham (Hants), Lewes (Suffolk), Doncaster and Leeds

- ☛ Planning by appeal tactics used by larger developers to overcome local community views and council refusals
- ☛ Weak use of planning conditions on major retail development to support other retailers and improve community facilities and the public realm
- ☛ Loss of diversity and independent shops
- ☛ Cumulative impact of the number of betting shops, hairdressers and charity shops
- ☛ Impact of temporary and charity shops paying low rents on existing businesses
- ☛ Loss of festivals and other events which provide a focus and generate positive feelings
- ☛ Closure of local markets
- ☛ Lack of planning and other powers to ensure the diversity of retail and other town centre uses
- ☛ Lack of incentives for individuals using local shops and facilities
- ☛ Limited use of incentives which promote good management of town and city centres at night, such as Purple Flag
- ☛ Closure of civic facilities – libraries, museums, arts and cultural centres, meeting spaces
- ☛ Block ownership by major institutional landlords obstructing action and creating blight
- ☛ Empty shops and vacant sites
- ☛ Loss of town centre managers
- ☛ Domination of traffic and road space
- ☛ Weak licensing controls resulting in problems from “passive drinking” which are then ignored in licensing decisions
- ☛ A lack of alternatives to drinking in the evening
- ☛ Loss of council staff supporting local communities and businesses
- ☛ Apathy among local councillors and community groups being ignored
- ☛ Local councils setting a poor example through weak management of their own shops
- ☛ Unsympathetic rents and business rates set by local councils without assessing the wider impact on the high street
- ☛ Unimaginative scales of parking charges and use of “pay and display” instead of “pay as you leave” methods
- ☛ Loss of residential use in the town centre
- ☛ Weak powers for local councils to intervene where they are not property owners
- ☛ Local council priorities being distorted where they are major landowners or developers.

4. More strategically, we are deeply concerned by the growth of “clone towns” with the new economics foundation identifying 41% of UK towns as clone towns and a further 23% on the verge². We also have particular concerns about the loss of non-retail services, facilities and activities in our high street that provide the all important “civic glue” that binds communities together.

5. We commend the shared report *The 21st century agora: a new and better vision for town centres* co-produced by Urban Pollinators³ with other organisations for this review and support its approach. We are working with this group in preparing for the outcome of the review. The future of the high street has been a focus of public

² new economics foundation. 2010. *Re-imagining the High Street: Escape from Clone Town Britain*.

³ <http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/wp-content/plugins/downloads-manager/upload/C21%20agora.pdf>

discussion and policy debate for decades and the review will need to be bold in its approach and reframe and revitalise the fundamental purpose of our high streets if it is to be effective.

6. In outline we believe:

- ☛ our collective sense of community and well being is intimately connected to the health of our high streets which play an important social role in bringing people together
- ☛ each high street has its own important and unique DNA which makes it distinctive, and this is the fundamental asset on which to base its future and build its resilience
- ☛ local communities have untapped potential to play a much more central role in supporting and shaping the future of our high streets
- ☛ policy interventions to strengthen land use planning and support local and independent shops have an important role to play but are not sufficient
- ☛ successful local centres will be those which provide strong “civic glue” through which people engage in their local area as well as shopping facilities – they will focus on “experiences” as well as “products”
- ☛ the quality of public spaces and their management is critical to the high street
- ☛ there is a need for major commercial interests and institutional landlords to recognise and develop their civic responsibilities
- ☛ effective high streets should be playing an important role in boosting economic recovery.

7. Civic volunteers identified the following measures to better protect our high streets (in priority order):

- ☛ transfer business rates from out-of-town development to reduce rates in town centres
- ☛ block retail development which closes too many local shops
- ☛ bring empty shops back into use
- ☛ provide free parking
- ☛ allow planning authorities to control the mix of shops
- ☛ free up councils to offer rate relief
- ☛ introduce community right to protect valued local shops and services
- ☛ tackle landlords who leave property vacant.

Planning

8. We believe the planning system has an important role to play in supporting the high street, including by:

- ☛ changing the Use Classes Order to introduce a new Use Class for community uses, such as essential shops – such as bakers, greengrocers and butchers – and services – such as banks, pubs and post offices. An alternative would be to make them *sui generis* by placing them outside the use classes altogether. We also support separating pubs from A2 and A1 uses which are purely commercial and making post offices *sui generis*
- ☛ enhanced support for local communities preparing neighbourhood plans and for Local Plans to influence the diversity of retailing and other high street uses
- ☛ revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework to remove the bias in favour of economic growth over other objectives and strengthen the town centre first approach by reverting to requiring retail and leisure uses to be in town centres “*wherever possible*” not only “*where practical*”.

Taking action

9. The following provides a flavour of just some of the practical action being taken by civic societies and other local groups to support the high street:

- ☛ Huddersfield Civic Society has taken over an empty shop to show what can be achieved by local volunteers
- ☛ High Street Malvern was set up in 2007 with the support of the Malvern Civic Society to develop the commercial health and well being of Malvern as a thriving business community by bringing together residents, traders and supporters of the town
- ☛ Since its inception in 2004 the health check run by Fleet and Church Crookham Civic Society provides the most wide ranging survey of the needs of the community available and is used to influence future planning policy
- ☛ Hale Civic Society and Heath & Hampstead Society run “shop local” schemes which offer incentives for using local shops
- ☛ In the immediate aftermath of the recent floods, which washed away 225 of the town’s traders (80%), Allerdale Borough Council worked with Cockermouth Civic Trust and others to implement the Cockermouth Shopfront Heritage Grant Scheme - this pioneering initiative has helped rebuild the battered shopping streets with a distinctive look which supports tourism and its economic recovery
- ☛ Sutton Coldfield Civic Society is just one of dozens of civic societies to have produced a Town Centre Trail which celebrates its heritage
- ☛ Bromley Civic Society is working with retailers to provide interpretation of the history of their buildings and their previous uses
- ☛ Wakefield Civic Society runs a local restaurant of the year awards scheme
- ☛ St Albans Civic Society runs a retail awards scheme and has run a successful campaign to protect, fund and promote an historic Odeon cinema
- ☛ Tonbridge Civic Society campaigned successfully to restart the high street clock
- ☛ Over 100 civic societies are participating in Civic Voice’s Street Pride campaign to tackle street clutter and improve the public realm www.streetpride.co.uk
- ☛ Nantwich Civic Society has run a clean up campaign⁴ with local businesses to tackle everything from poor signage and weeds to shabby shop fronts
- ☛ Ripon Civic Society has undertaken a survey of shop fronts which provides an important photographic record and is the basis of bouquets or brickbats awards publicised in the local newspaper

⁴ http://www.civicvoice.org.uk/uploads/files/Nantwich_Town_Audit.pdf

☛ Transition Hythe has produced an online retail directory of what is available in the high street www.transition-hythe.com

10. We would welcome further discussion with BIS and the review team about how to further promote community action in support of the high street.