WHY OUR HIGH STREETS STILL MATTER

A think piece by Mary Portas
30.5.2014
Three years ago I was asked by Government to complete an independent review into the future of our High Streets. My findings were documented in “The Portas Review”¹ and presented to the Prime Minister, David Cameron, in December 2011.

Since then, many stakeholders have changed, but I have found myself remaining, alongside countless dedicated volunteers, a constant player. It was with this in mind, and as the Portas Pilots reach the grand old age of two, I sat down to write some reflections.

We all know that reversing the many years of decline on our High Streets won’t be solved quickly, but continuing to learn from what’s happened so far and discussing how we can continue to revive our local High Streets, is the only way we will speed the journey along.²

Back in 2011, my main message was that High Streets are vital to our communities. Today, this message has not changed. People still want a place to commune, to share, to meet, to transact and whilst a lot of towns were, and still are, under huge pressure and with signs of sustained neglect showing, those basic human needs have not and never will go away.

At the heart of my report was the idea that High Streets are not dead. Regardless of what the doom-mongers say about the inevitability of “Big Box” retailing or the convenience and simplicity of the internet, High Streets will thrive if we re-imagine them.
And countless communities have been re-imagining. It’s been 2 years since the Government began to act on my initial recommendations. 333 High Streets have benefitted from an investment of £3.6m via their Town Teams. A High Street Innovation Fund has made an additional £10m available for investment and the High Street renewal awards have funded seven areas from a £1m budget. Whilst progress from central Government has been far slower than I’d have hoped, there are communities up and down the country turning their High Streets around and getting on with it, with or without Government funding.

And of course there are the 27 Portas Pilot Towns, awarded funding by Government to trial the recommendations. In my opinion this was a hastily created policy from Government. Vague supporting processes meant that for most of the Portas Pilots, bumpy starts were the status quo. Rapidly created Town Teams were given insufficient guidance by Government on how to either establish their objectives or achieve them. These issues still trouble a minority of the Town Teams, but I’m pleased that the Future High Street Forum is now working to address and guide future progress.

Overall, most of the towns are starting to see successes and I’m delighted that their hard work is beginning to pay off. I’m pointing to some of this progress later on in this piece because I don’t think it gets sufficient exposure.

Business Rates have emerged as the leading challenge for many businesses on the High Street. Last December Government announced a £1,000 discount on the Business Rates of all occupied property with a rateable value of £50,000 or less to give a leg up to smaller firms. To give you an idea, that would mean 869 businesses in Rotherham (you’re going to hear a lot about Rotherham in this paper) qualify for a Business Rates reduction. This is a good start, but I look forward to seeing more consideration, by someone more qualified than me, and resulting changes to our business rates system which is universally agreed as not fit for purpose.

Some local authorities are starting to reconsider their role – from tax collector to community incubator. Later on in this paper I talk about the work Rotherham Borough Council are doing to take a very active role in the regeneration of a once desolate town centre. Their attitude is a beacon many should follow. Local Authorities can give rate reductions, enabling new businesses or supporting existing ones, and so it’s important they have vision and become enablers of progress.

Planning has been at the heart of a lot of the problems our High Streets are facing, and Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) are still a major area of concern for me.
LPAs must work with local communities to know and understand what they need and not behave as masters of the tick box exercise. I’ve added a short review of the latest change to regulations enabling conversion from retail to residential usage (see Annex 2). The Government say they have deliberately added safeguards but I think everyone needs to be aware and wary.

On another planning matter, “Town Centre First” as a policy is convincingly bandied around but the approval of Out of Town development still happens at a depressing rate so I question whether local and central government really mean it? According to independent research for the Association of Convenience Stores in November 2013, 76% of the new retail floor space given planning approval since the new national planning laws came into force is located outside of town centres. Of the 43 developments permitted, 5 were in town centres (12%), 7 were edge of centre (16%) and 31 were out of town (72%).

It is my belief that we are seeing the perceived long-term threats to the High Street as more benign in their impact, and in some instances a surprising positive force, than we’d ever imagined. People are creatively evolving their business models and internet is changing the way we use our High Street forever.

But of course, the real driver for these shifts are consumers who seem to be adapting to their new choices of Out of Town, Multiple Retailer, the 24 hour economy, the Pop Up everything, the High Street and the Internet and blending them together. This is what I call the Super High Street – the evolved version of our current High Streets. A constantly adapting community space responding to changing behaviours and consumer needs and embracing technology to better serve local people – I so hope it’s the shape of things to come.

Our towns will adapt and survive – they already are. People yearn to connect and feel part of something bigger than themselves. Yes, they want convenience and for their lives to be simpler, and a growing number are connected wherever they are. There’s an evolutionary resilience in smaller format retail that suits our appetite for localism and convenience. If these trends are captured and enhanced huge progress is possible.

We’ve recently seen a recession driven retreat from the High Street by many of the big names, yet - what many people wouldn’t have predicted even a few years ago – they are being replaced by independent retailers. This is great to see; it gives the variety and difference that the people who regularly shop there desire whilst enhancing the sense of community.
Finally, the role of bigger businesses in the development of our communities, of which High Streets and Town Centres are such vital parts, must be increased. Recommendations 16 and 17 suggested that larger businesses play a more active part in regeneration. It seems clear to me that the prosperity of independents and multiples are inextricably linked, more than perhaps either side realise.

Shortly after publication of The Portas Review, I asked Government to establish a regular meeting hosted by the Minister with responsibility for High Streets and attended by the key players in this small national drama. My reasoning was that for an issue of such importance it would require the active support and enthusiasm of a very large group of influential people and organisations. This became the Future High Street Forum which meets quarterly and includes all kinds of members including John Lewis, M&S, Argos, Costa, The Post Office, Tesco and Wetherspoon’s. Also represented are the local authorities, the associations of the people who run shopping centres, independent retailers, town centre managers, landlords and so many more. As a member of the Forum, I continue to push for policy and practical progress.

New initiatives flowing from the forum, the big businesses with their more substantial resources, plus Brandon Lewis, a new Government Minister who is more active than many, seems to be making a difference.

The purpose of what follows is to share some of what I’ve seen over the past 3 years, to talk about some of the inspirational towns that are out there, and to get each and every one of us to continue to think about the future of our High Streets. If you live in Deal in Kent, Leek in Staffordshire or Ramsbottom in Lancashire you perhaps have already seen the benefits of the hard work people are doing, not only fighting against the demise of High Streets, but producing award winning places to shop and commune whilst they are at it.8

I hope you read on with an open mind, and an open heart. After all, it is only us continuing to place a value on our High Streets which will save them.”

Ma•ly Portas
For anyone with an interest in High Streets, or ambitions for a business on one, I recommend these as a non-exhaustive informative or inspiring starting point: StartUp Britain (particularly PopUp Britain), National Association of British Market Authorities, Action for Market Towns, Association for Town and City Managers, Meanwhile Space, Urban Pollinators and Revolutionary Arts.

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4 https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/future-high-streets-forum
5 https://www.gov.uk/apply-for-business-rate-relief
6 http://www.acs.org.uk/en/research/planning.cfm
7 https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/future-high-streets-forum
MY OBSERVATIONS
People are the point of all of this.

Whether they live in thriving or blighted communities the reason for placing so much attention on High Streets is that there are alternatives to accepting decline.

As I said above, it’s about re-imagining them and making them places people want to be. To quote Julian Dobson of Urban Pollinators, commenting on The Regent’s Canal, a ‘High Street’ without any shops or services, “it attracts people in the way that a good High Street attracts people, whether it’s full of bars, shops or public buildings. It works because it’s a stage, a promenade and a garden. If we want our traditional High Streets to have a future, that’s what they need to be too.”

When I wrote The Portas Review the words of Jane Jacobs, a fantastic and radical urban analyst, who in 1961 predicted the decline of American neighbourhoods, kept coming back to me. Just earlier this month I picked up a copy of The Week. Flicking through I read the Editor’s Letter and saw Jeremy O’Grady articulating the same point, as relevant today as it was over 50 years ago.
“Is there a tide of history, and if so at what point should we give up trying to swim against it? Secretly, shame-facedly, most of us – I suspect – believe there’s no point swimming at all. Consider the High Street, a public good that contributes to our sense of wellbeing every bit as much as a new car or the latest iPad. A vibrant, diverse and characterful parade of shops is what marks out the boroughs, towns and villages we love, from the drear, dormitory uniformity of those without such. It’s the place we like to live near, the place we look for on holiday. It’s what we mean when we say somewhere has a “buzz”. And we’re letting it get washed away. We buy ever more goods online; councils charge rents only chains can afford; free car parks are the preserve of supermarkets. And though we sigh, though our politicians throw a few token life savers in the direction of Mary Portas, most of us tacitly accept what the hard-nosed, deputy editor of The Economist, Emma Duncan, argued last week in The Observer. Nothing to be done. Better just let the incoming tide (aka “economic reality”) submerge it.

That council of despair (how big business must love it) is the mood music of our age. But must we heed it? If Madrid can devise a brilliant parking metre policy that favours small engines (see Europe at a glance), can we not do something similar to favour small business?... You can’t meddle with the market, says Duncan and her ilk. Yet isn’t that exactly what politics is for?”

Back to the story and the good news is that we’re starting to realise this with Deloitte⁸, Kantar Retail, Southampton University, among many others, seeing positive signs in the data. We visit our High Streets frequently because we live in close proximity to them – 80%+ of us live within 5 miles of our High Streets and 38% of us visit them almost daily according to the Deloitte report which I’ve referenced heavily in this paper as I think it’s one of the most important and well researched pieces on the subject in the public domain last few years.

Whilst retail parks have advantages, especially in parking convenience, the High Streets that have thrived have done so because they maintain a healthy balance of leisure activities, services, High Street chains and attractive independent stores. 15 years ago, not many commentators were forecasting the end of “Clone Street” because they thought people liked it. But slowly people started to complain about the homogenization of the High Street and it’s no surprise that today, according to the data, people like a place that feels local and relevant. In fact, Deloitte say 73% of us believe that we (i.e. local people) should decide which shops and services we have in our towns (which is why I recommended Town Teams of local people as the very best way of addressing the issues).

Deloitte also observe that 59% of us use the High Street to top up on our groceries, 55% to buy health and beauty products and pharmacy, and half of us still buy our clothes and shoes there. It’s by no means the end of “big box” retailing – we still value the convenience of the ‘weekly shop’ but it doesn’t take a soothsayer to predict the big supermarkets rushing back to town centres over the next few years.

Of course there are natural wins for the High Street, such as dry cleaning, shoe repair, opticians, hairdressing, banking (still, according to Deloitte 58% of us like local branches), general healthcare and so on. And whilst we seem to hear a constant stream of complaints about closures and cutbacks, according to Deloitte, 44% of us are still visiting High Streets to go to the Library, which is why I welcome initiatives such as the one in Dorking where the library was re-located to the High Street. I’m not the only one applauding, the local paper quoted a local saying “It’s absolutely superb. It’s great that it’s in the centre of town”¹³. I’ve constantly said that High Streets are not just about shops and we have to consider what local people want, in services, hospitality and retail, both day and night-time, to really re-imagine our community hubs.

We often hear that people find Out-of-Town formats the most convenient way to shop but here again Deloitte put the other side of the debate by revealing that 61% of us express satisfaction that our High Streets are convenient, 59% like the choice of bars. We feel they are, on the whole, safe places to be and half of us like the public spaces such as the parks and squares.
Our main dissatisfaction? I sigh as I write this because, as ever, Deloitte explain - it’s parking charges! 34% of us are dissatisfied with the cost of parking so we can access the High Streets we otherwise regard as convenient. The more progressive local authorities are providing free parking at key times or freezing increases of parking charges, but more authorities need to take action.

Put it another way (as Deloitte do), here are the top five we want to see more of:

- Free Parking (60%)
- Choice of stores (59%)
- Independent stores (57%)
- Specialists eg Butchers (50%)
- Parking spaces (48%)

And the bottom two – things we want to see less of?

- Charity shops (31%)
- Betting shops (52%)

So, I take from this that we seem to have an overwhelmingly positive view of our High Streets. We believe we should be involved in their futures and we see them as a solution to many of our needs.
Along with you, I’ve seen just about every prediction it’s possible to make about the internet – from “people will never buy clothes online” to “people will never buy clothes anywhere other than online”. As ever, the truth is somewhere between and varies depending on which people we mean.

The most important thing for any business to survive is adaptability. Let’s not forget the web is only 25 years old and we’ve only begun to understand what it can do and how it might influence us. The rapidly developing capability of technology is fascinating – but even more interesting than that is the way people are adapting their behaviour because of the technology. For example socialising their shopping by asking for comments on items they are trying on, or simply just instagramming new purchases. We’ve always gone shopping with our friends but now we go with every friend we’ve ever had connected through a smart phone.

It’s too big a subject to get in to here but my thought is that, as I travel around meeting people I often hear worries and fears that the internet will disrupt local business. If anything the internet should help smaller more local businesses be more connected and competitive, and reach a wider, global audience.

We know that incorporating digital seamlessly into retail experiences is the way forward and I am pleased that John Walden from Home Retail Group is leading the charge with the Digital High Streets Advisory Board which reports into the Future High Street Forum. Already some towns are cleverly starting to get in on the act, Hereford’s Open High Street, Ashford’s Digital High Street and businesses like Hubbub (offering home delivery from local retailers) are fantastic examples of retailers making the most of digital technology.

There’s also a new type of convenience culture happening, and High Streets are well placed to cater to it.

The idea of “en route” shopping mentioned in a BBC report14 sees the combination of digital, mobile and bricks & mortar playing a more intertwined relationship – and the High Street as a convenient connection point. This is the Super High Street at play again. Businesses need to innovate to be part of this and

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For every £1 spent in the UK, 50p goes on food. It is really important that we bring this back to our High Streets. Trend forecasters, Planet Retail identify that “People are increasingly doing one big shop - in store or online - every week or fortnight, and then topping up at convenience stores” and this is good news for the High Street. Market research firm Mintel forecasts Britain’s convenience sector sales will grow 5 percent to 43.3 billion pounds in 2013 and jump to 54.1 billion pounds by 2018. Since the economic downturn, careful consumers now prefer to buy little and often and do so in the shop around the corner rather than out of town superstores, to save on the rising cost of petrol.

A BBC news report (January 2014) also revealed that fact is though that despite convenience stores, like Sainsbury’s Local or Little Waitrose being up to 3% more expensive, time-poor people prefer to shop there because it’s convenient and fits into their life. I find this particularly fascinating because I do believe it represents a march away from the Big Box retail strategy of the 90’s and 00’s. It looks like the multiple retailers have discovered that an endless pursuit of what they call “value leadership” is actually a race to the bottom and no basis for a sustainable relationship with customers.

Tesco have more data than anybody on our shopping habits and even they have been surprised by the speed of change. Last year, in a bid to make their Big Boxes more appealing, they backed indie feel coffee shop Harris & Hoole before buying the restaurant chain Giraffe and Euphorium bakery. I knew it was only a matter of time before they headed back to the High Street because they were having to go to greater and greater lengths to make the Boxes more appealing.

So it was no surprise when Tesco Chief Executive Philip Clarke called an end to the “space race” when he said in Feb 2014 that Tesco are only opening 700,000 sq ft of new space in the upcoming year, half of the 1.4m sq ft laid last year. This is due to customers now spending less time and money in big stores and more online and in convenience stores. Tesco will continue to expand its convenience chain Tesco Express at a rate of 150 stores a year.

Waitrose MD Mark Price said in March 2014 that Waitrose is set to accelerate the expansion of its network of Little Waitrose convenience stores. Waitrose currently has 42 Little Waitrose outlets and plans to increase rate of openings in the year ahead and signaled it’ll open 23 more.

It’s clear that bigger retailers will open many more small-format stores on our High Streets and that’s a good thing. But of course that presents a new challenge. I think we should be very clear with the big grocers that our expectations as consumers, and potential customers, are that they behave responsibly. I’d encourage them to list the products of other local stores and producers and if there’s a good butcher, the multiple needs to keep their meat selection simple and promote the expertise of the butcher. This may sound idealistic, but it’s already happening; the Co-Operative in Liskeard stocks local produce and Budgens ran a whole experiment of stocking the work of local independent stores. And here’s a note to the supermarkets, if you’re moving back, be prepared for a fight. The lo-
ocal independents aren’t taking it lying down anymore. One example I read recently was of Jacob’s Ladder, a butchers at Crystal Palace market who took on the local Sainsbury’s, price matching their minced beef.17

What I think is also interesting is the way local food shopping has become better and better in some parts of the country. Not only are food markets making a real come back, the quality and convenience and prices are now able to really compete, especially with smaller format multiple grocers. The people who own the stalls seem to be more commercially minded than ever and know how to take on the big boys and have the balls to do it. A recent article in the Guardian18 was a great insight into what’s happening out there and I recommend you read it.

There is a role for local authorities here too. They must make sure that if the big grocers are applying for planning permission, any approval firmly places responsibility onto the grocers to add value to the High Street and not disrupt existing business.

Why should the multiples behave in the way I suggest? Well I think they have all had a wake up call recently, largely because of the way the discounters have taken share from them. Reactions have been varied of course. Morrison’s have launched a price battle I’d be surprised they can win, Tesco, Sainsbury and Asda are desperately keen to avoid a “race to the bottom” but know their business model is under serious threat. And that’s why I think they should pay attention to what I’m saying here and be good neighbours and responsible citizens. The only store group seemingly not affected by Aldi and Lidl is Waitrose and it’s not because they’re posh. It’s because Waitrose shoppers like Waitrose and they are loyal to it. They have an affinity for the way they do business and are engaged with the brand.

15 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25762466
16 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25762466
17 http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/may/12/can-britain-food-markets-make-comeback
18 http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/may/12/can-britain-food-markets-make-comeback
Pilots seem to get all of the attention when it comes to media coverage and analysis and fair enough – they are pointing to the future for all High Streets. But Recommendation 4 from the Portas Review has been brilliantly implemented by NABMA with the very successful Love Your Local Market Campaign.

Besides a lot of acronyms – this is a story of people everywhere getting together and creating fabulous markets for us all to enjoy. Love Your Local Market has become so successful they’ve even signed deals to spread the ideas in France, Spain, Italy and Holland!
I’m thrilled to see that this year’s National Markets fortnight which kicked off on the 14th of May, had an amazing 926 markets signed up. As a great article in the Guardian said, this year’s celebration comes against a brighter background with fewer markets reporting sales drops and more saying business is up!

I think the truth of this is simple. Some people are realizing what we’ve lost in shrink wrapping our food, consigning it to little polystyrene coffins and chiller cabinets with no soul. The hyper-consumption our economies have both created and grown on the back of didn’t make us any happier and, for some of us at least, we want to go back to the start. It maybe as simple as meeting the person who made the cheese or finding more enjoyment in slow shopping and slow food. There are now nearly 800 farmers markets in the UK, and other developments (like the way social enterprises are opening locally produced food stores, such as Greens of Lincolnshire in Market Rasen) are clear indicators of this. Again, thanks to Jo O’Connell at the Guardian I saw Edinburgh’s Waverley Station19 – roll up roll up Edinburgh and enjoy your “ethically sourced gifts, local products and tasty treats”!

Markets are where we shop together – where we instinctively know the good stall-holders, where we see what everyone else is buying. I love that markets are a place for entrepreneurs to try things out with less risk.

If you have a local market, love it and use it and I promise, it will get bigger and better.

Markets are the oldest form of retailing and the best ones retain the excitement they always have had.

Markets are about discoveries and trying new things, they’re about bargains and treats. They are local, with local produce and producers, flavours and culture.

Most of all, they too, are about people.

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There are fabulous examples of Pop Up shops changing the way we shop, instantly adding huge variety to our High Streets and allowing people to cost effectively test ideas. A recent piece in the Financial Times showed how many were now, according to a Shoreditch local “not just mainstream but normal”. He was referring to BoxPark – a Pop Up Shopping Mall created from containers (the ones from lorries and ships). The article makes the very useful point that 80% of shopping is still done in physical shops – something the more excitable Webinista’s tend to overlook. Pop Ups are one way the High Street can demonstrate fast evolution.

Many of the Town Teams have used Pop Ups (in fact just about all of them) to very powerful effect, helping demonstrate rapid change to locals. Wolverhampton introduced a smart competition format where budding entrepreneurs competed to win “Idea2Reality”. Winners received retail space rent-free for six months and a contribution towards business rates to help them get off the ground. They also get support in mentoring and business advice. It looks like a great scheme and I believe it has been a real hit. Surely every town should be doing something like this?

Tiverton had an issue with major multiples closing down and leaving quite a few boarded up eyesores on a main street. Their response was to take one of the spaces and open it to smaller businesses to improve the look of the street and give new shopkeepers and makers a chance.

It’s not just sell sell sell of course, a Pop Up Charity shop opened in Preston in March. Healthy Planet, a London based charity took over the lease of a department store and have filled it
with their own projects and those of 20+ other local third sector organisations. It’s now home to charities who work to reduce youth unemployment, promote healthier lifestyle awareness, help homeless people and also help for victims of sexual abuse. It’s a remarkable space demonstrating the possibilities for un-needed space.

Pop Up Margate can be found in the heart of the High Street. I’m told it’s been a real hive of activity and created an improvement in footfall. Their task is all about making the High Street vibrant to attract visitors before or after their trip to The Turner Gallery. Using Pop Ups and, as they did in Margate, a Christmas night market are two good tactics to gain extra attention and create reasons to visit.

Thinking more generally, Pop Ups represent an opportunity for brands to really embrace “Showrooming”, the practice of looking at goods in a store and buying online at the lowest price. Of course it’s an issue and everyone is learning to deal with it but I think embracing it is the best course. Take the example of Nespresso who now have six boutiques for their machines around the UK. In a world of showrooming they could have avoided all the bother and just sold online or let John Lewis host the showroom.

But they have also gone out there and created beautiful little shrines to coffee and invited people in. Sure, people can have a look around and check Amazon on their mobile as they go around but Nespresso know that the immediate gratification of taking it home now works with enough people to make their Boutiques a big success.

Big brands using Pop Ups to bring to life the physical home of their brand is a growing trend. In London the House of Peroni is back for a second year and 1948, Nike’s Pop Up in Shoreditch was so successful it has now gone permanent. Take John Lewis as another example, they recently opened a Pop Up on Upper Street in London to launch their “House” collection, creating a buzz with events and the sheer difference to their usual retail format. I hope that this practice will spread across the country and some of the bigger retailers will trial Pop Ups in new locations to test the market, and retail concepts.

Pop Ups provide a perfect opportunity to bring something new onto the High Street, test new retail formats, and drive footfall by offering experiences and products at limited availability, adding colour and difference to evolving High Streets. After all with a Pop Up, they also pop down!

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20 The article is behind the pay wall but it was on the 16th of May and by Duncan Robinson
21 http://www.boxpark.co.uk/
22 http://www.wolverhamptonportaspliot.co.uk/idea2realitywinners.html
23 https://healthyplanet.org/about/news/blog/item/834-preston-bh
24 https://healthyplanet.org
25 http://margatetownteam.org.uk/pop-up-margate-town/margate
27 http://thehouseofperoni.com/
28 http://www.timeout.com/london/shopping/1948-1
29 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enmF2AGPyO
I also wanted to review the data which has been published since The Portas Review to see what’s actually happening on the High Street in terms of hard measures like vacancy rates.

I’ve called for Government and the Association of Town & City Managers to develop a fact-base of data on what’s going on in our fast evolving High Streets. Seeing the real picture and what’s going on – and adapt accordingly, will lead to greater efficiency. This is quite a bit of work and so I’m only suggesting that this is the start. It’s also something that my colleagues on the Future High Street Forum are working on and we will be announcing more soon.

The latest data from April 2014 by the Local Data Company was particularly encouraging.

Britain’s shop vacancy rate has remained stable at 13.6% for the second consecutive month, according to the Local Data Company and this figure also shows a slight decrease in vacancy rates year-on-year, with the figure for March 2013 at 14.1%.

Matthew Hopkinson, the LDC Director was widely quoted as saying: "We are still seeing the drawdown of the major chain retailers in some towns but these are being replaced by independents or fast expanding ‘new chains’ especially in the leisure sector."

Behind the data was the promising fact that, on average, 44 independent shops opened EVERY DAY across Britain’s 500 High Streets last year. 44 entrepreneurs every day, who want to set up business on our High Streets. This further demonstrates that momentum is building as the economy recovers. So there’s a demand for good local shops and lots of entrepreneurs prepared to give it a go.

But as I posted on Facebook on March 25th 2014, now for the rug pull. You have to see this against the much less welcome fact that the same research also reveals - that 41 independent shops go out of business every day in the same 500 High Streets. 41 stories of dashed dreams and despair. Business is still tough, and no more so than for businesses on the High Street battling away and hopefully winning.

So, the good news is that we have 1,000 more independent shops in our towns than we had this time last year but at a dreadful churn rate, which is where Government and Local Authorities have to help more!

How many of the 15,000 who closed did so because the burden of the unfair tax of Business Rates proved too much for them on top of high rents? How many because the local authority chose to make parking fees and fines a major source of income or because local feelings about an Out-Of-Town development were ignored?

Commenting on the 25th March 2014 LDC data, Michael Weedon, deputy chief executive of The British Independent Retailers Association added: “The churn is huge, with more than 15,000 independents closing in 2013 but nearly 16,000 opening their doors for the first time’. The real organic fertility of the High Street is illuminated by the LDC data. The margin of growth is tantalisingly fine, with net growth in independents of only 762 overall last year. But this was

Overall, what does the data on High Streets tell us?
the third year of this kind of growth and this kind of change. It is not a fluke. It is consistent. It is real and it has reduced the LDC shop vacancy rate to below 14% for the first time since 2010. Give an entrepreneur a sniff of an opportunity and a chance of a profit and they will create businesses and fill empty units. Government’s role in this is to remove obstacles, dismantle barriers to the profitability of small shops and clear the way for them to lead our towns into a future that incorporates the best of the past.

Again Deloitte join the debate on the 4th of April with another insightful review of Local Data Company information revealing that in competition with Out of Town, the High Street is an “unexpected winner”.

“Using Local Data Company (LDC) data on nearly 5,900 shops, Deloitte’s analysis shows that the High Street is far outperforming retail parks and shopping centres, which have respective vacancy rates of 37% and 29% for space formerly occupied by these retailers.”

I’m not overlooking that vacancy rates remain high – 14% on average although sadly higher in Scotland at an appalling at 37% compared to a lower but still unacceptable 18% in Greater London. But the good news is that after all of those dreadful insolvencies post 2009, only 20% of the space that was vacated by Woolworths, HMV, Blockbuster and others remains unoccupied. And the even better news (for me at least) is that a disproportionate amount of the space has been utilized by Independents.

Hugo Clark, director at Deloitte, concluded: “The results of this research are surprising and seem to challenge a number of myths around the state of the High Street. They would suggest that far from being dead, the High Street appears to be showing great resilience and a capacity for reinvention. It seems that a structural shift is taking place with the High Street emerging as an unexpected winner.”

More good news emerged in late April from The British Independent Retail Association claiming that seven out of ten independent retailers are confident in the trading year ahead of them, the highest level since the recession.

This is the second quarter of overall recovery and against, as they put it, a backdrop of “widespread flooding and otherwise grotty weather”.

So that’s what the data is saying, and what it tells me is two things. Firstly, that the High Street is regenerating in a new way through the simple power of plucky entrepreneurs who, despite all the bleak warnings from so many commentators, give it a go. And secondly that a real strength of High Streets is the mix of shops and services and the richer that mix, the more attractive the street is. The Camden Collective is a fantastic example of bringing together an interesting mix.

It’s interesting how smaller formats of gyms seem to be spreading, local yoga centres, nursery groups and crèches. All of these services add value and footfall to really compliment the area and, when it’s done well its very powerful competition to the Out-of-Town malls who, in my view are failing to respond to the service provision needs of customers and paying the consequences.

For example have a look at Bubba Hub in Pilot town Bedminster, it’s a very cool place to hang out for anyone with kids. I understand that the charity Hop Skip and Jump is soon to launch its Care in the High Street initiative too.
CASE STUDIES
What did the
Portas Pilots teach us?

To repeat a remark from earlier, this document isn't an exhaustive assessment. The last thing our High Streets need is another review. There has been a wealth of information created by the Pilots and it is for DCLG and ATCM to usefully document this.

Whilst I didn't have a say in who the Pilots were or how the programme was implemented, I do have a keen interest in how they get on because they matter and we can learn from them.

What follows are the sorts of stories and facts that get very little airtime or coverage but which I think more people should hear about; partly because this work deserves more recognition but also because other people can learn from this and perhaps implement some of it in their local communities as well.
The turnaround achieved in Rotherham is one of the best case studies I know.

Collaboration at its finest; an inspired and talented Town Team, an enlightened and committed Local Authority, a busy and ambitious local college and a very supportive British Land. The results they’ve started to see are impressive to say the least.

If you have an interest in High Streets – and you’ve read this far – go and visit Rotherham and get the story first hand.

Rotherham High Street was at the heart of a town strategy which aims to redefine their role as a shopping destination versus some extremely well resourced competitors – for example Sheffield Meadowhall.

The main elements of their strategy are:
- Physical Regeneration
- Retail Investment & Development
- Transport & Accessibility
- Safe & Welcoming Environment
- Marketing, Promotion & Events

And the results?

According to the Town Team, footfall has risen three years in a row, 86 new businesses have opened their doors in the last 3 years. Before being nominated as a Pilot they had a vacancy rate in the order of 20%. The exciting news is that it’s now down to 14%.

What do people think? The Rotherham Town Team did a shopper survey in 2012, repeating a survey from 2009 and it shows a significant positive shift.

When I visited them in April, the Town Team told me that 75% of respondents now state that the main reason for visiting the town centre is ‘Shopping – national/ independent/ markets’ – compared to 35% in 2009.

And what about this for a whopping difference - 35% of shoppers said that the main reason for visiting is that Rotherham had a good range of shops they liked compared to only 2% who said this in 2009. Another 92% of shoppers are satisfied or very satisfied with the independent shopping offer (compared to 42% in 2009).
And they were drawing younger people back in - 56% of shoppers were aged 25-44 (compared to 31% in 2009).

The Town Team used a mystery shopping technique to understand where they could best intervene and used the findings to create a series of training packages to help businesses improve their standards. Following their study, 26 business representatives completed World Host Customer Service training and 15 businesses have completed Social Media Training. Six businesses completed grant funded projects to improve the physical appearance of their premises and three businesses benefitted from one to one expert advice on store layout and pricing structure. Ten businesses completed Visual Merchandising training.

They then turned to Marketing and launched a high profile Shop Local campaign showcasing the independent alternative on offer, specifically targeting the 16,000 Shop Local Cardholders and those with higher levels of disposable income.

They've used Pop Up shops but they've also turned the model on its head and created a Pop Up High Street. Retailers set up stalls in the Council offices, out of town retail parks, at Rotherham Hospital, Borough Fayres and events. All of which directly traded and more importantly, showed shoppers what they were missing by not shopping in town.

It's not all about shops either - the Council has made a commitment to repopulate the town centre and has successfully created 233 new homes to date. They've protected a wonderful old building and provided a mix of affordable and market rate housing, bringing more people within the catchment area of the town centre. They have big plans to continue this process.

And finally, the omnipresent issue of parking, flagged in my 2011 Review and subsequently raised during every single conversation I have had on the issues facing our High Streets. For 2014/15, Rotherham BC plans, for the fifth consecutive financial year, for no increases in the cost of parking. Guess what? In the shopper survey, 55% of shoppers came by car (as a driver or passenger) compared to 24% in 2009. I'm sure that's had no coincidental effect on the increased footfall.

Impressed by the data, I visited Rotherham recently and here are some of the really encouraging projects I saw.

**Whistle Stop Sweet Shop & Temperance Bar**

3rd generation confectioners Kara & Tony Chapman opened their traditional sweetshop in the town centre in 2010 providing sweets from a by-gone era to shoppers of all ages. The business quickly became popular with customers requesting specialist confectionary that only a larger business could secure. Support via the Portas Pilot initiative led to the business expanding into larger premises in a more prominent location offering a significantly increased range including sweet cakes and gifts. Housing Yorkshire's only temperance bar (the only one to open in the UK in the 21st century) and offering sweet making workshops
and children’s parties, Whistle Stop secured itself as a destination for locals and tourists alike.

**Battling for Rotherham**

Chris Hamby has been in retail for over 40 years running his own shoe shop & antiques centre on Rotherham’s historic High Street. Photographs of the long-term empty shops on this street have unhelpfully appeared in numerous national newspapers and become the poster-child for ailing High Streets in irreversible decline. Mr Hamby took exception to this and instead had a vision to renovate 5 of the most prominent buildings and bring them back into retail use.

How? He worked with Rotherham Borough Council, convincing them to loan him the money, they used their prudential borrowing powers so that he could buy the vacant properties on the street. Then he secured a significant Townscape Heritage Initiative Grant. Subsequently, these properties have seen a transformation with new businesses here contributing to the 7% reduction in the town’s vacancy rate. The bit that everyone should pay attention to is this: Hurdles can always be overcome with imaginative thinking.
Mr Hamby had the vision, the local authority backed him when the banks wouldn't and gave him an affordable loan.

**The Makers Emporium**

Further evidence that a supportive local authority makes all the difference came at the next stop of my visit. Rotherham BC has taken over a 3,000 sq ft block of the High Street as part of an exciting retail incubation project.

Once an old pub and music club, this building is now home to 26 different local artisans, artists and craftspeople offering them fairly priced, affordable space, and offering handmade and unique products to Rotherham shoppers. Foremost, this is a commercial space but the inclusion of a learning space, thanks to The Source National Skills Academy and Rotherham Youth Enterprise, adds to the overall success of the project and helps to drive footfall as well as bringing in young people to the area. Another example of a very clever way to differentiate the High Street offer and become a destination.

It's interesting to note that many pilot towns – Market Rasen, Hatfield, Ashford, Margate and Tiverton for example have all found success in similar business and community hubs.
There are strong themes that everyone can learn from in the case of Ashford – I’ve mentioned many of them already in this paper.

First of all: funding. Ashford managed to match fund their Pilot allocation of £100,000 with a further £100,000 from the local authority. I think that it’s important to point out that the LA money was drawn together from Section 106 contributions that had been generated by local planning applications. Rather than snaffling the money away they used it for the purpose it was originally intended.

Secondly Ashford had a clear strategy – so from the outset they had an agreed plan which they are implementing well.

Quoting directly from them – here’s their strategy:

- To use technology to promote the town centre, by developing a digital High Street. An innovative website and app will guide visitors through the town, with special offers and ‘click and collect’ features for all the businesses, to promote larger stores and increase footfall to independents.
• To create a new and compelling vision for the town centre, by reimagining it as one town centre, with different 'sections' having their own character.

• The rebirth of the town centre market, and the launch of a farmers’ market to drive footfall to the town centre on Sundays, our lowest footfall day. (set to open in June 2014)

• To use the website, app and market to galvanise businesses and provide income to support the Town Team and management of the town centre.

I think the language in there is fascinating. "Digital High Streets", "compelling visions for the town centre" and notice the vital importance placed on the town centre market. I can't help but point out that this is the stuff that never seems to get reported but it's happening and I believe the media have a duty to find the truth about the smart, hard work people are doing.

Here it is again, the Super High Street. A High Street fully integrated into how we live our lives in the digital – it's the world of click and collect, convenience, community, consumers and commerce.

Ashford have the right vision and instead of running scared of the web, they know its power to help. And so they’ve created Love Ashford online*. It’s built in beta because local retailers are loading their content for free. They have their own page to promote what they do, they can integrate all of their social media, participate in newsletters and offer click and collect on their goods. Participating in a site like this will massively increase their chances of being found on the web – far more than if they just have their own site.

I think every town in the UK should consider a similar scheme – another great example to look at is Crouch End where a committed group without any funding have created a really valuable community digital resource.* I see these kind of projects more and more and keep encouraging people to think how the web will help and not hinder.

But there's more to the Ashford story – the Town Team's members are very broad ranging, for example. There are people from the public sector, the Chamber of Commerce, and local shopping centres. Naturally there are independent retailers on there but also big national retailers M&S and Debenhams who I understand have made significant contributions. The team is chaired by local MP Damian Green – another smart move that really cements the authority of the group.

Another clear sign of how committed the local authority are to the project is that they took on experienced retailer (ex Head of Retail at Austin Reed and Fenn Wright Manson) to deliver the Portas projects. This appointment was funded by the local authority and the investment has paid off; the vision and ideas are beginning to take shape with more expediency than some of the other Pilot towns.

Another theme I hear time and again is made manifest in the case study of Ashford – the importance of Learning and Development.

The Town Team is working with the National Skills Academy to make Buying & Visual Merchandising Workshops available to local retailers. Retailers were given advice on driving sales, cutting costs, and maximizing marketing and product performance. The aim was all about building stronger, more resilient businesses. In the pipeline is social media training so that businesses can maximize the opportunity of the digital High Street plan.
Ashford is another town that has used Pop Ups very effectively. Pop Up Ashford (a project in association with Pop Up Britain) gives local independents the chance to trial on the High Street with less risk. As in other towns, the Pop Ups are also used for other activities such as evening networking meetings. Following the success of the first six months, the Local Authority has committed funds to extend it for another six months (from May 2014).

Next, Ashford went after Arts Council funding to create a Pop Up Art Gallery. Aside from the cultural benefits you’d expect, this is also having a positive commercial effect with a start up Gallery opening recently.45

And finally, Ashford have created a Town Centre Action Team who look after the appearance of the area and make sure it’s a pleasant place to visit and shop, even getting the paint pots out themselves when necessary - an action not to be underestimated. I understand this tactic has also been hugely beneficial on London Road, Brighton – in their case helping to reduce anti-social behavior that had been preventing footfall.
Loughborough is another interesting example where again we see common themes emerging.

One big benefit Loughborough had was that it was already a Business Improvement District (BID). Applying for Portas money was almost the first thing they did after they were incorporated in February 2012.

In the original report, I spoke about the importance of BIDs and recommended developing the model. The problem with them still remains that they are an additional cost to local businesses and people don’t normally vote for a new tax, but for High Streets where there is a BID, we often see more progress. I believe that DCLG are currently conducting a review of BID’s and in between other High Street activities we should all make our feelings known.

Back to Loughborough, the integration of BID and Town Team (the chair is the same for both organisations) has very literally enabled their visions to be joined up.
In the middle of all this is what they call the “Love Loughborough Partnership” which draws together an even broader group of local organisations. Interestingly the local MP is a vocal and active supporter and regularly adds significant weight and authority to the BID’s dealings with the local authorities, major retailers and even the local bus companies.

I’ll quote their vision in full as I did for Ashford and Rotherham because it’s important to see how these visions and plans drive success.

The Partnership has agreed a Vision - “A Town That People Love” - and a set of Strategic Aims under four broad headings:

1. Strategic Development – To secure the long term structural changes necessary to deliver the Vision
2. Adding Value – To build and develop existing businesses and encourage new and innovative enterprises
3. Enjoy Loughborough – To create a safe, attractive and accessible town centre
4. Shout about Loughborough – To increase footfall in Loughborough town centre

Loughborough BID are interesting because the first thing they did was to establish the facts. Using the local University and expert market research companies they gained a detailed understanding of their catchment area. They worked out exactly who could come to Loughborough and who did.

This is exactly the kind of information big national retailers have, but which is as rare as hens teeth when it comes to towns or independents.

Once able to see the big picture, they have been using the data for all kinds of things including attracting desirable ‘anchor’ businesses to the area and lobbying to divert buses away from crowded shopping streets. One thing I think this has been crucial for is in planning applications. The Pilot team have a very active involvement in local planning. Armed with real data they’ve been far more successful than before in influencing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ planning decisions. They have been working to influence the councils Core Strategy for the town centre and this is something all Town Teams need to be thinking about.

Loughborough are nothing if they’re not ambitious and they also used their local experience and data to lobby central government on the subject of business rates before the 2013 Autumn Statement. As well as lobbying me when they had problems getting a national retailer onside! If you don’t ask, you don’t get.

Love Loughborough Partnership at work

It’s not all data though. They used Portas funds to deliver retail consultancy advice to independent retailers. For some reason this kind of thing sometimes attracts media criticism but it seems a pretty obvious step to me. Improving the quality of local shops and services to make them more attractive to shoppers, enabling them to compete with well-resourced national players sounds smart to me. 60 businesses have been trained and I’m told the results are tangible.

Another move I’ve seen or heard about having strong results is social media mentoring and training – this time using the clever idea of getting retailers engaged with students at Loughborough University. Not only can retailers learn skills from this younger generation of digital natives, but it also helps get the students on board, educated about the shops and services available in their local town, and involved in the cause to revive them. 26 businesses are signed up which feels like a healthy number.
Getting younger people involved in our High Streets is hugely important. We're talking here about re-imagining these vital community spaces for the next generation and so their ideas must count highly. From early days on this project I remember with great affection the sheer raw enthusiasm and energy of Tom and Joe Barrett - the brothers behind the Stockport Teenage Market. It's such a vibrant fun space with so many fresh ideas and experiments going on. The idea is now spreading to Kettering, Middleton and Salisbury and when we all met up in Rotherham I saw the Loughborough people eagerly talking to Joe about taking the idea to them.

**Hubs and Spokes**

So many of the Town Teams use creative business hubs as a way of breathing life into their High Streets and “The Generator” is the Loughborough version.

They’ve identified a University-owned town centre building with a whopping 20,000 sq.ft. of flexible space for locally generated creative businesses. This project is at feasibility stage but it sounds great so fingers crossed. They also have plans for a community shop that can showcase work by the BID and the University and College and also incubate smaller businesses.

A huge concern for small businesses trying to do good things in towns is being thwarted by banks who simply won’t lend to them. So Loughborough is creating a Business Support Fund that will be used to identify and support local entrepreneurs looking to occupy town centre premises, without the onerous guarantees required by most of the banks.

Other initiatives include engagement with landlords, a radio promotion link, a vacant shops clean up and a facelift for one particularly bad example of 60’s architecture. Having seen the success of positive parking measures in Braintree, they also had a go with “Free after Three” parking and bus promotions with discount vouchers in town centre businesses redeemable with a bus ticket. I think the view is that it was a success with over 15,000 page views to the promotional website. Because Loughborough is a BID they have a loyalty card which already has 8,600 sign ups.

The last thing I’ll mention is similar to the ideas used so successfully in Leamington – in their case a night market. Loughborough’s interpretation is a programme called “Fabulous Fridays” which was run from May to September 2013 with extended shopping hours, evening markets, entertainment and events. The event will be running again this year although I don’t have any more details at the moment.

It’s early days for Loughborough (as it is for all of the Town Teams) but I like the direction they are going in. They have a solid understanding of the facts, they’ve made great alliances with partners, they’ve raised almost £300,000 in match funding and they are moving forward. They are trying lots of things, learning from them and then modifying or re-applying, and that is exactly what a pilot is supposed to do.
Crisp Street market was a result of the vision of the pioneer of the Festival of Britain, Frederick Gibberd. In 1951 Crisp Street Market was re-designed from its Victorian roots and emerged as the first pedestrianised shopping centre of its kind.

More recent history hadn't been kind to Crisp Street but it was successful in gaining a Portas grant of £100,000 - this time from the fund established by the Mayor of London. The money was match funded by Tower Hamlets and the scheme to revitalise the area got going.

What I love about it is the recognition and involvement of the local community. The idea was to make it a vibrant place to go and spend time. They call it "Animating Places" which is a great idea for everyone. They had a clever radio project – turning a disused building into a recording studio and capturing the local sounds – have a listen to the local boxing club one – it's fascinating. The radio idea is part local consultation, part chronicle. It's been a great tool for engaging local people in the revitalisation.
They’ve also been designing an outdoor dining area that connects the fresh produce sold in the market to the kitchens of the local cafés. They are also using communal dining events to create new links for the whole business community. I like that they persuaded the market traders to extend their hours (a bit like the Leamington night-market idea) to get new visitors and promote the area to potential trialists.

The Mayors of London and his regeneration team having been doing lots to bring vitality and growth to High Streets. They have been huge Portas supporters from the outset and made their own budget available. They are coming up to their third wave of funding now and have been clever at re-applying learnings from their various projects. Chrisp Street for example is a test bed for Roman Road and the Watney Market.

As for Chrisp Street, I believe the whole area is being re-developed as Poplar Village and I’m told that Chrisp Street and its rich heritage will be at the heart of the development – I strongly hope that the local community will be as well.
ne of the town teams I feel closest to is Market Rasen. I’ve seen them from the start approach the revitalisation of their town with a brilliant combination of smart thinking and planning coupled with getting the sleeves rolled up and getting on with it. Big Surprise! The team is led by women (sorry, couldn’t help it) and they have worked so incredibly hard and with such passion to help the town they love. Their story is well worth reading and they’ve published a really thoughtful piece about their learnings, this is my summary and perspective.

There’s a great bit on their website about just how bad things had got before they became a pilot. As it happened Google Streetview came to town and the rather
bleak drive-through is there for anyone looking for reasons to be cheerful.48

First of all they did lots of very positive and practical things (did I mention they are led by women...). They had funding as a Pilot and also from High Street X and used it to tidy up the town centre. The area, like so many other towns had been a bustling market that would draw people from miles around as they had for centuries (the town was first granted a charter for a market in 1219). By 2012 it needed a spring clean. Flags, hanging baskets, cleaning and help from the Flouro-Orange Community Payback people started to make the place look and feel a bit smarter.

The market was and will continue to be the real focus of what the town team believe will restore their community. The clever part was to focus and have regular markets and make sure they had a big market once a month – What they call MR BIG (Market Rasen Business Improvement Group). They regularly get 25-30 stalls but the peak for MR BIG is 70+ and that really polls the crowds.

The market draws people and enriches the whole area. This is what I mean about High Streets being an experience. It’s not just about transactions. It’s about chatting with friends you haven’t seen for ages, popping into the library, sitting on a bench and watching the world go by or meeting a farmer who can talk for hours about his eggs.

Next they tackled some of the vacant property issues by trying different uses. They created businesses like Greens of Lincolnshire, an award winning micro farm shop. They also had a go at a collective shop – 30 artists and makers in “The Big Corner Shop” as well as arts based projects and other ways of adding a richer experience and reward for anyone making the trip.

As their document also makes clear, they had a strong marketing programme focused on improving people’s experience when they were there. Better signage as well as lots of work enticed them in with social media and an ad campaign “Reasons to love Rasen”. They also created a local town brand using the local University and did all the right things to get some sense of identity for their lovely old town.

The market is the key to how they will perform in the future and that’s where they are now focussed.

What’s great about their document is the detail of the lessons they have learned and I have to agree with every word.

They’ve learned it’s about so much more retail. Their population is only 3,500 and they don’t have much of a summer tourist influx. That isn’t enough people to sustain a large shopping offer in face of the competition and a very mobile populace – many of whom travel every day to Lincoln and other bigger centres and access retail there.

They say themselves in the report – and I think they are bang on –

“More strategic intervention is required - more housing, more provision for start-up businesses and more innovative initiatives to truly re-invent a market town for the 21st Century gives a flavor of what we believe is required, longer term. Our challenge is to arrive at a strategy and delivery format that can accommodate a broader strategic remit”49

Rates have crippled many of the businesses they were trying to breathe life into (how many times will we have to say it?). They’ve had the same problems with absentee landlords (a national register like the Off Road Register for cars wouldn’t be a bad idea), finding new funding is proving extremely time consuming – these people do have other things to do as well.

They remain ambitious and are full of schemes if someone has the cash to support them.

They also had a problem that not everyone has had to endure to quite the extent MR have – a two tier local authority structure with a helpful district council and a town council who seem less helpful. The result is that a lot of initiatives get muddled up and neatly wrapped in red tape.

As a town team they also – quite simply – need help. I met up with them at the Rotherham visit and they are as determined as ever but are coming to the end of their funds. They need more resources some kind of sustainable funding so they can keep the people they
hired to execute their ideas. They have a volunteer who they describe themselves as “exhausted” because, as they are happy to admit, they underestimated the problems they would encounter in getting things done. They also haven’t had much luck in getting some help from the bigger shops. The local managers don’t appear to have had the authority or budget to get engaged at a meaningful level. Perhaps the BITC Healthy High Street scheme can help here.

What I find most interesting above everything else about Market Rasen is the vision that the team has. I’ve rarely read documents as thoughtful or met people with such a clear sense of how their community should develop and prioritise its resources.

Maybe it’s because of the issues they have had with the Town Council but I wouldn’t mind living in an area that they ran.

Bearing in mind these people are local volunteers with busy lives and lots to think about. They have set an objective of making Rasen a better place to “Live, Work and Visit”. That’s what I’d expect enlightened politicians to say (actually I’d be rather surprised and excited if they did).

And of course, being Rasen they then go on to outline their plan so they are not just empty words. They talk about creating employment opportunities or better quality office provision. They are putting free wi-fi all the way down the High Street and hooking up with more child friendly facilities and so on and so on.

If they run in the General Election next year I think I might vote for them.

They have a strong future strategy – again, all brilliantly thought through although God knows where they find the time.

From 2014 to 2017 they will focus on developing Tourism, Trade and Technology. They want new visitors and a much more balanced economy, which will be achieved by attracting a range of small businesses, employing people and keeping them in the area.

And to make Market Rasen a great place to visit and a great place to grow a business – they know technology will be the great enabler.

So they have done great things, have suffered setbacks along the way, have learned and re-applied. They still have enormous barriers to overcome and need help. However they believe in the project with a passion and have the vision that I know will keep them going. Did I mention it’s run by women...?!
THE LESSONS I DRAW FROM ALL OF THIS
When I published my review, nearly two and a half years ago, I said that the worst thing that could happen was that my report was left languishing in a filing cabinet, in some dusty corner, in a Civil Service building. Well, that didn’t happen. But boy it’s been a rollercoaster ride. It initiated huge public debate and traction, and here are just some of the good things I’m aware of that happened because of it:

- 27 Portas Pilot towns trialling how to re-ignite their High Streets
- 333 Town Teams who recognise their High Street matters and are doing something to keep it
- The launch of Love your Local Market fortnight, now in its third year and seeing over 875 markets signed up
- Government has the right people round the table as part of the Future High Street Forum
- £10m set aside as part of the High Street Innovation Fund
- 7 areas receiving funding from the High Street Renewal Awards
- Bigger Businesses taking a responsibility from the High Streets responsible for their success through Business In The Community's Healthy High Street campaign

Two years is too early to judge, but I strongly believe we’re on the right path. We need more commitment and action from Government, specifically on:

- Access and Parking
- Reforming business rates
- Landlord registers
- Long term support for Town Teams and simplification of the process of forming BID’s (with new funding ideas)

Finally I would like to say this. The real story behind our current fight for the High Streets is about people. The hundreds of towns teams and thousands of volunteers and retailers small and big, council officials, market organisers and stall owners, community workers, landlords and developers who have put their shoulders to the wheel and proved that doing something can make a difference.
1. Put in place a "Town Team": a visionary, strategic and strong operational management team for High Streets

2. Empower successful business improvement districts to take on more responsibilities and powers and become "Super-BIDs"

3. Legislate to allow landlords to become High Street investors by contributing to their Business Improvement District

4. Establish a new "National Market Day" where budding shopkeepers can try their hand at operating a low-cost retail business

5. Make it easier for people to become market traders by removing unnecessary regulations so that anyone can trade on the High Street unless there is a valid reason why not

6. Government should consider whether business rates can better support small businesses and independent retailers

7. Local authorities should use their new discretionary powers to give business rate concessions to new local businesses

8. Make business rates work for business by reviewing the use of the RPI with a view to changing the calculation to CPI

9. Local areas should implement free controlled parking schemes that work for their town centres and we should have a new parking league table

10. Town Teams should focus on making High Streets accessible, attractive and safe

11. Government should include High Street deregulation as part of their ongoing work on freeing up red tape

12. Address the restrictive aspects of the "Use Class" system to make it easier to change the uses of key properties on the High Street

13. Put betting shops into a separate ‘Use Class’ of their own

14. Make explicit a presumption in favour of town centre development in the wording of the National Planning Policy Framework

15. Introduce Secretary of State "exceptional sign off" for all new out-of-town developments and require all large new developments to have an "affordable shops" quota

16. Large retailers should support and mentor local businesses and independent retailers

17. Retailers should report on their support of local High Streets in their annual report

18. Encourage a contract of care between landlords and their commercial tenants by promoting the leasing code and supporting the use of lease structures other than upward only rent reviews, especially for small businesses

19. Explore further disincentives to prevent landlords from leaving units vacant

20. Banks who own empty property on the High Street should either administer these assets well or be required to sell them

21. Local authorities should make more proactive use of Compulsory Purchase Order powers to encourage the redevelopment of key High Street retail space

22. Empower local authorities to step in when landlords are negligent with new "Empty Shop Management Orders"

23. Introduce a public register of High Street landlords

24. Run a high profile campaign to get people involved in Neighbourhood Plans

25. Promote the inclusion of the High Street in Neighbourhood Plans

26. Developers should make a financial contribution to ensure that the local community has a strong voice in the planning system

27. Support imaginative community use of empty properties through Community Right to Buy, Meanwhile Use and a new "Community Right to Try"

28. Run a number of High Street Pilots to test proof of concept
NEW PLANNING RULES AND PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

I think the recent change to planning regulations is vital to understand and affects anyone interested in High Streets and healthy Town Centres, even though it very clearly falls into the “boring but important” section of my favourite weekly magazine.

Caveat: I’m not going to set myself up as a planning expert so please only read this as a layperson’s guide to the new regulations that came into force on the 6th April 2014.

The government has a clear policy of creating more housing to meet rising demand and to help ease pricing pressure. In certain places we have an over-supply of retail property.

The new regulations have been introduced to make it easier to convert retail and business property to residential which when I first heard about it gave me the fear that landlords will sell off property from under the feet of successful business just as much as they sell off vacant property. I could suddenly see a new and unwelcome pressure on the High Street with landlords cashing in faster than you can say Foxton’s.

Here’s what Town Teams need to know to make sure that these new rules don’t add a new threat.

1) There are specific safeguards to protect key shopping areas and these were put into the legislation specifically to support High Streets.

- Prior approval is still required from the local authority
- Local authorities have a duty to consider whether the change is undesirable for the attractiveness of the High Street – for example where it affects the adequate provision of services – e.g. this change means we no longer have a coffee shop
- Or where the change of use would impact the sustainability of the shopping area (for example where it is a local footfall driver and attracts shoppers to the area as a whole.
- There are other exclusions as well – for example the size limit is 150msq, the normal planning rules apply in Conservation areas, listed buildings and so on. The local authority also have to approve change of use in view of land contamination, transport impacts and flooding risks.

The appeal process is the same as the main planning process so if you are immediately faced with a local change of use request you still have 56 days to kick up a fuss and make your case.

2) If you don’t face an immediate change of use application but fear you might, here are some other things to do.

- Get on to the local planning authority and get them to tell you exactly which parts of the area are currently designated – make sure you and other interested parties are happy - if an area you regard as vital to the High Street isn’t listed, get it on there.
- Consider lobbying for a change to Article 4 directions – your local authority have the power to remove Permitted Development status if they agree that, for example the value between retail and residential property is so huge you anticipate an avalanche of applications. The council can do this without the Secretary of State getting involved.
- You can also lobby for a change to local development orders – the idea is that the local authority can make it easier to convert retail and business property to residential to encourage people back to the more fringe areas around our town centres - creating new customers for the Super High Street. So for example, if just off your High Street is an area with only one or two shops left and is in a bit of a sorry state, the local authority can act to make the transition more quickly to make the whole area a bit stronger.

My top tips would be:

- Localism can work – kick up an amazing fuss and planning authorities will listen
- Councils have to understand that the High Street protection measures are there to protect our precious High Streets
- Using those grounds you can protest against an existing application
- You can anticipate issues by ensuring key shopping areas are recognised by the planners and reviewing Article 4 directions and Local Development Orders to the benefit of your community
- Most of all seek qualified advice – this is just a guide based on the way I see it and the conversations I’ve had with central government on the issue
ANNEX 3

TWO AND A HALF YEARS ON FROM THE REPORT AND THIS IS WHAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE TOLD ME WOULD, OR HAS, HELPED THEIR LOCAL HIGH STREET:

**Town Teams**
- Learn the lessons of the Pilot towns (resources and help to do this being announced soon) and steal ideas with pride!
- Have a clear agreed vision and plan and execute it
- Imagine your High Street in 20 years from now and build to that goal
- Get your local authority on side by using any means necessary including making one hell of a fuss
- Embrace the web, copy the www.LoveAshford.com scheme and help your retailers to make money online
- Learn how to use the new planning regulations to the advantage of your High Street
- Make links with other Town Teams including the pilots and help each other
- Try Community Hubs – they seem to really work
- Study the huge diversity of ideas to see which ones might be relevant for your locality
- Don’t worry about Out-Of-Town competition – take them on
- Celebrate your successes and shout about them

**Local Authorities**
- Help the Town Teams – work with them and make things better, be co-operative, help them with funding, help them link to Colleges and other local resources including your Enterprise Teams
- Make a regenerated High Street a key priority in your five-year strategic plan and clearly identify the key shopping areas
- Make the new planning regulations work in favour of the High Street as the exemptions are intended to – don’t allow a rush to residential to effect core shopping areas
- Observe the clear guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework (especially section 2 – “Ensuring the Vitality of Town Centres”)
- Help new businesses by using your discretionary powers
- Listen to local people when they oppose developments
- Look at case study examples of how Local Authorities have been heroes in Rotherham and Ashford
- Specifically – look at the way Rotherham used their Prudential Loan capacity to help local entrepreneurs when the banks wouldn’t
- Support community use of space with positive help with Community Right to Buy, Meanwhile Use and imaginative third sector ideas
- Be proactive and have an officer responsible for making sure empty space on High Streets is quickly returned to commercial or community use and never allowed to idle
- Have neighbourhood plans, improve participation in their creation and make sure people know what’s in them (oh, and implement them)!
- Help by using your communications muscle to amplify what they are saying to locals

**Government**
- Implement web based resources including guidance for the Town Teams and case study material as fast as possible
- Reform Business Rates as soon as you can (and before that reduce Rates Avoidance to raise extra revenue to plough back in)
- Divert some of the Business Rates Retention scheme money into BID’s to enable more to be set up with a lower drain on local business
- Create a national landlord register of empty property and who owns it for the benefit of communities, Local Authorities and Town Teams
- When you say “Town Centre First”, please make it clear what you mean to planning authorities and back the words with actions
- Make a complete package of advice and help available for Local Authorities so they know what your expectations are and what they can do to reduce the gaps between the best like Ashford and Rotherham and the ‘long way to go’s’ like Market Rasen and Loughborough
- Create disincentives for landlords leaving property empty
- Continue to improve the way you communicate the positive stories to journalists
- Continue to de-regulate markets and encourage more to join the 875 celebrating National Markets Fortnight

**Big Retailers**
- If you are opening smaller format stores PLEASE be mindful of the existing shops and help them. Compete with other multiples of course but don’t drive the independents out
- Join in with Boots, John Lewis, Tesco, Argos, Costa, M&S, The Post Office, Co-op, Lloyds and a host of other businesses and offer help to the Future High Street Forum
- Work with BITC in their Healthy High Streets initiative and invest in it
- Make taking an interest in the health of the local High Street and helping smaller retailers a bonusable objective for your branch managers
- Pay bills to smaller companies more quickly – take pride in being a prompt payer and make it a CSR target
- Network with local firms and allocate contracts to smaller businesses
- Simplify procurement to make it easier for small businesses and have the attitude that you’re helping them by giving them a leg up