

Grimsey Recommendations

Create a more supportive Environment

1 Establish an empowered organisation or Town Centre Commission under strong, established leadership through the local authority for each town centre, with a defined remit to build a 20-year vision/strategy for their unique place. Ensure that this vision is underpinned by a comprehensive business/place plan.

2 Create a national independent organisation, similar to Scotland's Towns Partnership, to capture and share best practice from towns online for Town Centre Commissions to access. This could be hosted by the Local Government Association (LGA) but would need central government endorsement. Work such as this review, the recent LGA *Revitalising Town Centres* handbook, academic research, investment models and case studies could all be accessed, as well as information and advice on how to build an evidence base and how to write a town plan supported by a network of experts that the organisation co-ordinates.

3 Accept that there is already too much retail space in the UK and that bricks and mortar retailing can no longer be the anchor for thriving high streets and town centres. They need to be repopulated and re-fashioned as community hubs, including housing, health and leisure, entertainment, education, arts, business/office space and some shops.

4 Embed libraries and public spaces at the heart of each community as digital and health hubs that embrace smart technology.

5 Establish common key performance indicators to measure the economic and public health of each town. Link the reporting through a data dashboard to provide independent, objective and current data on performance. Data gathered by the town needs to be delivered in Open Format (Open Data) so it can be shared.

6 Set up a National Urban Data knowledge portal to support the implementation of data platforms for high streets and town centres. A shared dashboard (cloud-based) with a town Data Portal-as-a-Service should be piloted.

7 Local authorities should establish events teams to manage a comprehensive programme of activities that complement the Town Centre Commission Plan by driving footfall to local high streets.

Government and planning

8 Accept that there is no confidence, in business rates, it is accelerating shop closures in many towns and is an outdated and unfair tax that needs a major overhaul. An immediate independent review should look to replace it with either a land/area/ property value or sales tax.

9 Give local authorities powers to introduce penalties and incentives for landlords of commercial properties that are left empty for more than 6-12 months. Review the existing property use class system to increase flexibility and look to establish a change of use to make the asset productive.

10 Introduce clear high street assets ownership accountability by establishing a landlord register for each town to be able to trace the owner of every single property and engage them in the health and wellbeing of the place.

11 Enable the change of use process through new legislation to be used to convert entire sub-high streets to residential or other uses within the agreed town plan and relocate successful independent businesses to the main commercial centre.

12 Connect planning applications, and in particular new developments, to the business plan for each town and ensure that developments fit within the criteria set by the Town Centre Commission Plan.

13 Give local authorities ultimate power in granting planning permission in line with the Town Centre Commission Plan. Remove the appeal and authority of the Planning Inspectorate to override decisions.

14 Give local authorities powers to introduce incentives and penalties to prevent the process of “land banking” for future speculative developments.

15 Local authorities should appoint high quality design teams to create and enhance spaces for civic and social use. Design should celebrate the historic character and local identity with high quality streets and public realm.

16 Create a flexible planning framework to unlock the potential of areas by encouraging SMEs and making it easy to pilot new business concepts at low risk. The Fountain Arcade in Stockton-on-Tees offers a great example where the local authority is providing conditions to incubate new businesses at low risk.

17 Review Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) provision and make it more straight forward for Local Authorities to enforce a CPO in order to benefit the Town Centre Commission Plan.

18 Review and amend the planning use class system legislation to enable greater flexibility of building use and also to distinguish between the specific use of logistics warehousing used for direct retail sales.

19 Create a nominal maximum charge (£1) for the first two hours of parking in town centres, while introducing 30 minutes free parking in high streets with no paid extension option.

20 Review and evaluate future use and relevance of out of town shopping parks, prepare a plan to bring unwanted space back into use to benefit the community in line with the Town Centre Commission Plan, while applying a Town Centre First policy and calling for no further out of town development.

21 Local section 106 income or any planning gains should be used to support the delivery of the Town Centre Commission Plan.

22 Establish a review of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) process, which have relevance in big urban conurbations but needs more scrutiny in smaller towns. Consider replacing them with Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) embracing all the stakeholders, occupiers, owners and service providers in an area including the local authority.

Smarter use of technology

23 BT and Virgin Media, the major beneficiaries of SuperConnected Cities £150m funding between 2014 and 2016, need to offer a Town Digital Package to ensure ongoing digital transformation to the top 13 cities and all 1,048 UK high streets in smaller towns.

24 Install LED lights in street lamps to improve the quality of light on the street, while minimising costs. The lamps will also provide improved security as they can include CCTV cameras and integration with police systems for fast response.

25 Provide free public wifi and well-connected workplaces that support flexible working patterns and attract freelancers to high streets and town centres.