



APPG on Economic Development
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FUTURE OF OUR TOWN CENTRES

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REPORT

Context

High streets up and down the country are under attack. From the rise of online shopping driving the decline of footfall, to the mounting pressures of business rates, tax, and the Living Wage, Britain's retailers are struggling to turn a profit.

Bank, Marks & Spencer and Prezzo branches, Poundworld, BHS, Carluccio's, Homebase, Mothercare, Debenhams, Maplin, ToysRUs, and Carphone Warehouse are among the well known closures. Charities, betting shops, fast food outlets and boarded up units pervade many of the UK's high streets. For a growing number of shoppers, the ease and convenience of online shopping, with its infinite choice and next-day delivery, will always trump shopping on the high street. The future of the High Street is uncertain.

The first three sessions of the APPG for Economic Development looks at what can be done to improve their future sustainability and success.

The APPG share the practical learning and good practice examples from all meetings in a report to inform and improve both policy making and action.

A journey from tables and tumbleweed to 1290 and Top Town

Matthew Colledge shared the story of Altrincham's successful regeneration from a starting point where it topped the 2010 league table of 'Ghost Town Vacancy Rates' in the national news with more than 30% vacancies. With a plethora of neglected, vacant and boarded up buildings, stalled developments, empty prime sites, a lack of investor confidence and the Trafford Centre nearby, Altrincham was beset by apathy and a lack of vision, leadership or appeal. Crime and anti-social behaviour were on the increase, independents were going under, socially, culturally and economically the town was hitting rock bottom - it was a 'complete cauldron of despair'.

The defining tumbleweed moment came when Matthew, then leader of the council, walked past the Market House at 5pm on a Friday and saw only a solitary elderly woman walking down the street and a paper bag being blown around. Something had to change.

Deconstruction and re-imagining

The first key action was to gather a small group from the town's most important asset, its people - residents groups, civic community, landlords, businesses to start to re-imagine what the town centre should be. Altrincham had been given Market Town status in 1290, and the group looked all aspects of the town, geographically, social, demographic, architecture, economy, history, USPs, competitors and problems. The past informed the future, and focused them on developing a vision of a Modern Market Town which has buzz: *"A town centre which is easy to use and is a vibrant place where small independent businesses can thrive alongside major chains providing a destination experience"*.

A catalyst for change

These discussions led to a broader partnership under Altrincham Forward, a partnership of public, private and community, based on the high street, and became a pivotal tipping point for a renewed confidence and belief. A strategy and operational plan covering Economy, People and Place was developed, driven and led by the people from the community and facilitated by the council.

New relationships, new conversations and working groups, a new landlords forum, and new momentum led to a £.05m private investment and £120k of public money as things started to change; an Enterprise Hub launched, environmental projects underway, together with a rich programme of community events. By 2013, Investors regained interest, units were being improved and let again, public confidence was rising, and the decline in town centre footfall reversed, small businesses started re-emerging, and the Market was redeveloped for and by independent food businesses, the pioneering brainchild of Nick Johnson and Jenny Thompson. The cultural view of Altrincham was changing rapidly, and this helped a successful BID be secured in 2015.

From being top of the wrong table in 2010, 7 years later vacancy rates had reduced by 73%, the Market gave £1m in VAT for the Exchequer and was a significant contribute to the change in perception, local spend increased massively, and the town has seen a major and sustained increase in footfall. External developments got underway like the transport interchange, the hospital and mixed, high quality residential/business investment, providing important landmarks of purpose.

All this work by the people of the town was recognised when Altrincham won the Great British High Streets Award in 2018.

Key learning from the journey:

- Engage people from all parts of the local demographic - residents, young people, retailers, developers, independents, the college, community groups, landlords.
- invest as much time as needed in thinking about and developing the vision and the art of the possible
- Constant open communications to residents and businesses
- The council mustn't own the process, but enable and support
- The community needs to lead, they will drive and engage others
- Success didn't come from outmoded traditional regeneration or strategic masterplan models
- A one size model doesn't fit all
- Simple, quick wins are important to show change - e.g. car parking for 10p/hour
- A landlords forum was a key innovation to get them talking and working together

- Community events are vital animators - Town in Bloom, volunteer clean up groups, Easter Egg hunt, Goose Green festival, art events, food and drink trails.
- Focus on the independents and space for them to thrive
- Procurement must change: swapping the focus on risk and ROI instead to creativity and innovation
- Reignite the core and the benefits will spread and attract large chains again
- Patience, faith, preparedness to take risk and challenge traditional approaches and models.
- Keep on the journey to curate the town to its full potential.

Evidence and learning from the research base

Cathy Parker's presentation reinforced many of the points made by Matthew, particularly about having the right strategies for the right size of town and its function, and being ambitious but realistic - not just aiming for Las Ramblas! In putting the local story into national context, Cathy started with a few facts about the systemic change over the last decade:

Footfall has been declining every year - 19.7% in 10 years

The growth of online spending has grown from 1.6% in 2002 and on track for 30% by 2028

The UK shop online more than any other country - food at 26.5%, non food 6.3%

Out of town retail park footfall is up 8.1% over the last ten years

Cathy's research investigated all the empirical evidence on what affects town centre vitality and viability, and found 201 different factors, which were rated by importance, and by how much control a location has over the factor. Exploring the top 25 most impactful, appearance, a clear 'offer', the experience, activity hours and the town centre vision and strategy are some obvious priorities to be addressed by those who want to rejuvenate their town centre environments.

You can access Cathy's research on the factors that influence the vitality and viability of town centres and high streets [here](#)

Using Springboard data they have also monitored footfall hourly, 365 days a year, in 156 UK town and city centres, which revealed that around 80% of towns are performing worse than the UK average, and only 20% on the upside, with Edinburgh, Walthamstow, Derby and Oxford as the best footfall performers last year.

Further research undertaken with Cardiff University, using hourly footfall data, explored how people used town centres, and categorised them into four key clusters - Comparison, shopping (stable footfall throughout the year with a big peak before Christmas), Holiday, (busy in summer) Speciality, (busy in summer/pre Christmas) and Multifunctional (ie a flat seasonal profile). For policy makers seeking best practice and knowledge in transforming their own town centres, it's important to seek inspiration from a town that is similar in profile. For example, Ballymena in Northern Ireland is much closer in usage patterns (and therefore function) to Hull than it is to Banbridge, which has the same footfall volume as Ballymena and is also in Northern Ireland. However, Banbridge has much more of a visitor economy than Ballymena. Ballymena, like Hull, is a retail and service centre that serves a rural hinterland.

You can access the Institute of Place Management's Policy Briefing on Town Types [here](#)

In the work for the report [High Street 2030 - Achieving Change](#), the Institute of Place Management in Manchester Metropolitan University asked how local people and organisations in Aldershot, Altrincham, Bristol, Holmfirth and Shrewsbury have achieved change, the sorts of challenges faced,

what would make their town centre better, what did they imagine it to be like in 2030 and how to go about achieving those visions.

Key learning of essentials for place transformation

- Leadership - this is fluid, changes as the journey progresses, and must be collective in nature.
- Energy, enthusiasm and trust in this collective team are the bedrocks on which things develop.
- Sharing knowledge constantly, experts can be helpful to get discussions started, blending this with local knowledge
- communication has to flow widely, openly and quickly, it can't get held up by cumbersome sign offs and approvals processes
- Ensure young people don't feel excluded from and disenfranchised by the decision making process, it is their future, they bring ideas and new thinking
- The coordination role is vital - place professionals are needed to integrate planning, placemaking, marketing, branding, communications and place maintenance - collectively known as *place management*.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The next meeting of the APPG for Economic Development will continue to explore these issues, and will take place on **11th September**, with speakers Graham Wilson OBE, CEO of the National Association of British Markets, and Ben Houchen, Mayor of the Tees Valley Combined Authority.

On **6th November**, our last session will be putting the spotlight on seaside towns.

On **21st January 2020**, we'll be exploring the challenges around the UK's productivity.

All are welcome. Please visit www.ied.co.uk/appg for more information