

This note was produced by Eileen Conn for Peckham Vision's workshop on Peckham Town Centre 8 July 2013.

Below are extracts from a report of November 2011. This report "The 21st century agora: a new and better vision for town centres" is available at <http://goo.gl/OITPc>

It was: ... *A collaborative response by leading doers and thinkers to the Mary Portas review, designed to highlight and stimulate new and creative ideas.* For more information contact Julian Dobson on 07545 874556 or email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk

EXTRACTS FROM THE REPORT:

... Town centres that offer a poor customer experience will continue to fail – expensive transport and parking, dirty buses, and a poor quality public realm will keep turning people off.

... The challenge for previously disconnected stakeholders in town centres is to use social tools to respond together to local needs and aspirations.

... recognition of the uniqueness of place and that these unique places are created and shaped by the people who use them: the 'build it and they will come' model of retail development is no longer appropriate or sustainable.

... The public should no longer be seen simply as customers but as co-creators of place; public bodies should be curators and carers of place, not just regulators and enforcers; and all landlords should be long-term investors in communities, never just extractors of value.

... Each place has its own issues and complex networks of stakeholders. What works in one place – the Business Improvement District model, for example – will not work in another. But the principles of engagement with people and animation of place through a broad range of uses and events apply generally, and can be adapted to suit local circumstances.

... It is more important to enable those who emerge as leaders to act as leaders, whether they are residents, chambers of commerce, traders' associations, independent artists, social entrepreneurs or festival organisers.

... The role of local animators is to create places that allow experimentation and new ideas to develop, while providing alternative activities to shopping, drinking and eating.

... this animation doesn't just happen. It requires brokers, enablers, troubleshooters and network builders. It is a highly personal and social process that cannot be achieved simply by producing guidance or a helpful website: it requires people on the ground with the energy, freedom and resources to make things happen.

... 4 Multifunctional centres – the 21st century agora

The heart of this business of animation is a vision of a town centre as a 21st century agora – not just a marketplace for goods but also for ideas and engagement. Just as the ancient Greek agora was the place where democracy was exercised, so the 21st century agora should be a place that meets the civic needs of today's and tomorrow's public: engagement in society, in culture and the arts, in learning, in relaxation and enjoyment of green space, in sport and play, in socialising and debating local futures – and in shopping and trading.

... A town centre is a civic space, not a private one, and all have roles to play – including landlords. There should be an expectation of collaborative working within town centres.

FURTHER EXTRACTS:

About us

This response to the independent review led by Mary Portas brings together organisations at the cutting edge of reimagining town centres and high streets, and highlights how they can once again become enjoyable, exciting places to use. Our views are based on what is already being achieved through imaginative thinking.

We have co-produced this submission to the review to demonstrate the way we all need to work in future. We represent different skills and interests, but we are working together to show how much more can be achieved by collaboration and forging alliances than through narrowly focused lobbying on behalf of particular stakeholders.

In a nutshell

High streets and town centres that are fit for the 21st century need to be multifunctional social centres, not simply competitors for stretched consumers. They must offer irresistible opportunities and experiences that do not exist elsewhere, are rooted in the interests and needs of local people, and will meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Many shopping areas are facing long term decline as consumers' preferences change, spending is squeezed and competition intensifies. These include some city centres, market towns, local high streets and neighbourhood parades: all face difficulties, especially outside the major destinations and tourist areas. They also share some common challenges.

If we are to put the heart back into our local centres, we cannot do it simply by making shops more competitive or adjusting the planning system in favour of town centres and independent retailers, important as these measures are. We can't just pick away at particular problems or complain about the success of supermarkets. We need to start with the people who use (or could use) these places and the unique assets each place has to offer. Then we have to seize the opportunity to innovate that the current crisis presents.

We need to make sure, too, that we encourage innovation that will last. Below we set out some of the key elements of the context to which town centres will need to adapt: if these are not taken into account now, the review will at best offer sticking plasters rather than solutions.

Summary: key themes and principles

1 A different world

For a host of reasons, the high streets and town centres of the 21st century will not (and cannot) be the same as they have been in the past. These reasons go well beyond retail and will affect us all. They include consumers' preferences, the state of the economy, geographic inequalities, rising costs of energy and commodities, and the need to work, live and enjoy life more sustainably. Such issues are often considered as problems – but they are also opportunities to imagine and create a vibrant, 21st century future for high streets and town centres.

2 Unique places, not clone towns

Our response to the issues summarised above must be grounded in the uniqueness of place and the different people and organisations that make each place what it is, not in formulaic approaches. High streets can be reimagined as start-up zones, health hubs or learning centres – particular approaches should always be in response to local priorities and needs. A core message is that we need a 'place first' approach that is deeply connected to the aspirations, strengths, creativity, energy, needs and drive of local people. From this, principles emerge about the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders that can be adopted generally and adapted locally as a flexible, responsive framework.

3 Collective animation

Each place needs to be collectively animated (not just planned or managed) in a way that is flexible, responsive to change, open to new ideas that enliven space, and able to seize opportunities. Our centres can become lively, creative, exciting and useful places that reflect the diversity of our communities – but not through retail alone. We must seize the opportunity to experiment and try new activities and be ready to take risks to bring the magic back to town centres.

4 Multifunctional centres – the 21st century agora

At the heart of this place creation and place management is a multifunctional approach to urban space and its use. Local centres are about much more than shopping, although shopping is an important part of the mix. They are about enjoyment, creativity, learning, socialising, culture, health and wellbeing and democratic engagement – a 21st century agora where people engage in the life of their locality.

This multifunctionality can create a strong purpose and sustain new and existing markets, supporting retail trades that complement and enhance the experience of using a town centre or high street. In considering the future of retail, the review will need to think as broadly and imaginatively as possible about everything else that makes up a thriving centre. This includes the relationships between the centre and the surrounding area. Factors such as housing stock, sociodemographics, transport and local culture all play a significant role.

5 Information, mapping and responsiveness

To respond in this way we need to be aware of likely future trends and issues. We need to know and map who the different players are who can make each place distinctive, and broker more effective relationships between them. And we need to be tuned in to the public's needs and wants through intelligent use of information and technology. Local centres need to be able to match and surpass the smart information systems of Tesco or Amazon.

6 Our civic roles and responsibilities

A town centre is a civic space, not a private one, and all have roles to play. At whatever scale we work, all stakeholders need an awareness of their responsibilities and opportunities as civic players. This includes the supermarkets and multiples that are often seen as part of the 'clone town' problem, and the landlords and local authorities who decide how property is used. This is particularly important in areas where large property portfolios are held by banks or other institutions with limited local knowledge and understanding.

7 Making it real

Between us, we have many examples and ideas of how this could be and is being done. By bringing these ideas together we can create the ingredients that will allow local people to rethink their shopping areas as multifunctional, people-friendly places. We have included several case studies with this document (see Part 2), as well examples of the extensive resources and further information available.
