

Reinventing the High Street in a changing world

MARY Portas recently published her report on the future of our High Streets which deserves to be studied by all councillors, traders, and others concerned to recreate our High Streets as centres of economic and community life.

On one level it makes for depressing, if unexpected, reading. Our High Streets are in decline with supermarkets now accounting for 97 per cent of grocery sales. More worrying, though, is their move into non food items such as stationery, books and flowers, and more recently services such as pharmacy, opticians and GP surgeries.

As Mary says, these are all items which were once the preserve of High Street specialists. And then, of course, there is the internet which is taking an ever larger market share.

Her solution is to reinvent our High Streets. No longer should they be seen to be just about buying goods but instead as destinations for socialising, culture, health, wellbeing, creativity and learning. A place where shopping is just one small



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part of a rich mix of activities. In this way, she believes, we can sustain and grow new markets and businesses.

She has also identified enablers for such an approach including for example the creation of a strategic vision and co-ordinated action which treats the High Street as a business to be managed in the same way as a shopping mall would be.

We can see this all too graphically in Horsham today. Swan Walk is excellently managed. When there is a vacant shop it is immediately camouflaged or put to an attractive temporary use. The traders all contribute through their rental to consistent

and very impressive Christmas decorations.

What a difference to the rest of the town centre where empty shops are left as ugly scars and the majority of traders make little or no effort with Christmas decorations, thinking wrongly that it is the council's responsibility alone.

Horsham is in many ways well placed to meet the challenge. We already have a small but attractive offering for visitors with our museum, Capitol and historic centre; and there is certainly no shortage of restaurants and coffee shops.

Mary suggests the creation of a Town Team, which brings together the council, traders, landlords and residents with responsibility for creating a vision and trying out new ideas. We already have a town centre manager, albeit shared with other towns in the district, the Horsham Unlimited business partnership, and progress has been made with the market committee.

Together, they need encouragement to be more proactive and the council, which is currently creating a new Town Plan, needs

to get behind them. It is more about vision, imagination and will than money.

What is missing in Horsham? One of the biggest challenges is gaining the interest and support of absentee landlords and High Street chains which often allow their local managers little or no flexibility to engage with local initiatives.

Mary also has some advice for local shopkeepers. Surviving in today's competitive world means doing things differently, not trying to compete on price or speed of delivery but instead offering experience, service and specialism. Now, isn't that just the description of the niche shopping experience that we want to develop in Horsham?

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone, who shares these concerns. For more information, visit our website www.horshamsociety.org or telephone 01403 261640.