

Successful town centres

Yesterday I wrote about one way to get more customers into shopping centres. Today I will range more widely with suggestions for improving and modernising town centres.

Government does need to cut business rates on retail premises. It has done so for small retail businesses but not for the larger chains which represent a large part of the High Street. Rents are falling and are likely to fall further as retail adjusts to the lower cost base and competitive prices of on line business.

The ratio of bars, restaurants, coffee shops and other food outlets to traditional shops has to rise, as people want an experience beyond just buying goods. The High street can also be a good location for hairdressing, nail bars, health and fitness services and the rest where services are delivered by a person which could not be delivered by the internet.

The modern High Street does need traffic free areas with space for seats, displays, street markets, and events. A successful Town Centre is sustained by continuous promotion with festivals, seasonal events and pop up retail alongside the established retail. Anything which creates more footfall is good for the centre.

In some cases High streets are too extensive. There needs to be conversion of retail premises to residential or compatible other commercial uses. It should be made easy to change a retail planning permission into residential. Councils need to give guidance and support, helping the town define its shopping contour.