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**High Streets update**

**Purpose of report**

For information and comment.

**Summary**

This report provides an update on the work on high streets and town centres and upcoming activities for the LGA.

**Recommendation**

Members are asked to note the report and comment as necessary.

**Action**

Officers to take actions as directed.

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## **High Streets update**

### **Context**

1. National attention on the country's high streets is growing. Town centres have hardly been out of the headlines recently, particularly as large retailers such as HMV, Jessops, Blockbuster and JJB Sports go into administration or close altogether. Meanwhile, work continues on the Portas Pilots which began last year and continue to attract media attention. During this time, Channel 4 has been filming a documentary following Mary Portas and her team in Margate, Tower Hamlets and Liskeard. An exact broadcast date has yet to be confirmed but it is expected to air sometime in early spring.
2. Many national commentators are pointing to plummeting retail spending in town centres as the beginning of the end for high streets. But councils are thinking more positively about the challenges our town centres face, moving beyond a focus on shops and considering social, community and cultural economies.
3. Understanding what lies behind the unprecedented changes occurring in our town centres is also vitally important for local authorities. For example, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently highlighted that 6 out of 10 British adults now use the internet to buy products such as food, clothing, music or holidays. This is twice the OECD average, making Britain the biggest online shopping nation in the developed world. According to KPMG and the British Retail Consortium, shopping malls have also seen an increase in visitors by over 30%.
4. Councils need to provide thought leadership on how town centres can respond to these wider, structural shifts in their local economies. In supporting councils to respond creatively to these and wider challenges, the LGA is working with government, business and other national and local partners to promote practical solutions to revitalising high streets.

### **What is government doing?**

5. In response to the Mary Portas review of the future of the high street, the government continues to support 27 'Portas Pilots', as well as over 330 Town Team Partners with particular emphasis on responding to the changing ways in which consumers shop. In parallel to this is the government's High Street Innovation Fund, which is supporting 100 localities across the country to implement long term changes in town centres.
6. Local Growth Minister, Mark Prisk has invited the LGA to be represented on a new national Future High Streets Forum, bringing together leaders across retail, property and business to better understand the competition town centres across the country face. The forum will advise the government on the challenges facing high streets and help develop practical policies on issues of critical importance. The LGA will be represented on the forum by Cllr Mike Haines.

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**What is the LGA doing?**

7. The LGA's response to the Portas initiative has been to encourage wider debate on the future of high streets, with a focus on long-term solutions that take into account the significant economic, social and technological trends that are changing the face of town centres.
8. The LGA is working with the Association of Town & City Management (ATCM) and a variety of other knowledge networks to access the latest intelligence on changes in consumer spending, development financing, investment cycles and online retail trends which are challenging the traditional high street.
9. Cllr Mike Haines will represent the LGA at the new national Future High Streets Forum, which meets for the first time on 25 March.
10. From the 15-29 May the National Association of British Market Authorities (NABMA) will be running "Love Your Local Market Fortnight" with a particular emphasis on connecting communities with local markets. During last year's campaign over 400 markets participated resulting in 2000 new traders and, in participating town centres a 10% increase in footfall.
11. The LGA is promoting the Love Your Local Market campaign this year and over the coming weeks will be actively encouraging councils to support the campaign locally. Through the LGA's representation on the government's working group on retail markets, it will also be supporting where possible, local and national efforts to boost market trading in town centres, particularly around creating skills opportunities for young people.

**What are local authorities doing?**

12. There are many examples of good practice at a local level, with councils supporting high street development. For example, Birmingham City is currently focussing its attention on areas with high levels of empty high street properties in order to free them up to enable use for cultural and creative means and reenergising high streets where retail has ebbed away. The council is developing a bid for the Single Pot which would enable a join-up between skills development funding, business support and access to finance to be facilitated by the council via the temporary suspension of business rates. The scale of this would be much larger than is possible through current funding streams.
13. In Altrincham, Trafford Council has provided a £350,000 interest free loan fund to assist businesses to set up in vacant town centre units and this has been boosted by £100,000 from the High Street Innovation Fund. This scheme was put together with the input of the town centre representative business organisations and is part of a bigger £750,000 Town Centres Investment Fund, including environmental improvements in Trafford's town centres and Altrincham Market.
14. Wychavon Council took part in a joint venture with Waitrose to acquire land and build a supermarket in a previously run-down high street with an out-of-date 1970s precinct. Waitrose had been having problems with land acquisition and the joint venture resulted in

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the approval of a new site, refurbishing a car park providing 340 spaces in the heart of the town centre, attracting more vibrant shops and increasing visitor numbers to the town.

15. Councils are continuing to think outside of the box in reenergising their high streets, which is reflected in the five point plan for reviving high streets, which the LGA called for in response to the government's high street review:
  - 15.1. Working with partners to create a unique sense of place around a cultural and economic hub that local communities can enjoy.
  - 15.2. Seeking better ways of funding regeneration and business support activity, and calling for greater flexibility to reinvest business rates back into town centres to boost local economic growth.
  - 15.3. Making high streets more accessible, lobbying for greater local control of transport services and maintaining high quality and fair car parking.
  - 15.4. Calling for radical reform of the planning system and the freedom for councils to shape their area in accordance with local wishes, such as preventing clustering of particular types of shops.
  - 15.5. Keeping town centres safe and clean but also calling for greater freedom to set licensing fees locally to support community ventures and lifting restrictions so that income from late-night licenses can be spent on a wider range of local services.

**What do the public want?**

16. According to an LGA poll conducted last year, more than three quarters of local residents want councils to have more control over high street improvement. When it comes to shops, nearly 8 out of 10 local people want to see a diverse range of local shops, believing that local producers such as butchers or bakers are critical to the future success of their high streets. Post offices, libraries and dry cleaners scored highly, alongside newsagents, restaurant and cafes.
17. Councils have been pushing for more entertainment and leisure facilities on high streets to provide them with greater long-term security. Polling shows that young people in particular recognise the importance of entertainment, with over half of 18 to 24-year-olds seeking facilities such as cinemas and bowling alleys. Thirty-eight per cent of the same group believe that sports centres can contribute towards the future success of high streets.