

**PUTTING COMMUNITIES AT THE HEART OF HIGH STREETS**  
**APPG for Civic Societies Jubilee Room Palace of Westminster 25 February 2019**

**Chair**            **Craig Mackinlay MP**

**Speakers**        **Ian Harvey (CEO – Civic Voice)**  
**Jake Berry MP (Minister MHCLG for High Streets, Coastals, N Powerhouse)**  
**Louise Brennan (Historic England – Midlands)**  
**Emma Robinson (Barnes Community Assn.)**

**NOTES**

**1**        **Chair**

HMG is well aware of the problem of High Streets – so far has afforded £12 billions of rate relief and more to come. Banks are still 'consolidating' and PHs are closing at the rate of one every 12 hours. Modern retailing has changed and is changing fortissimo as it faces an online onslaught and a downward spiral evaporation of bricksand mortar business. So it's time to take stock and review possibilities. His own High Street (Ramsgate) is a case in point – it stretches about a mile (?) on any axis and needs to take into account the changing (ageing) demographics if it is to remain (or recapture?) 'the heart of the community'.

**2**        **Ian Harvey**

Ran through CV's ambitions to promote 'town pride' especially through Civic Day and its 256 community groups with their own wide variety of community initiatives, CV particularly pleased to be in dialogue with the Minister for the 'common cause'.

**3**        **Jake Berry**

Wanted CV to reflect on how it can contribute and had approached Sir John Timpson (as an example of a successful non-monolithic retailer) for a new strategy rethinking the High Street now that Portas was some eight years old (and could not have anticipated the online impact.) He hopes that HMG has lived up to the Timpson recommendations which he was wholeheartedly pleased to adopt. Shopping habits have changed so drastically that policy makers need to keep pace and be 'as light of foot' as entrepreneurs.

The three major Timpson recommendations have been addressed :

- 1 Local Authorities, MPs and civic societies and the like can't be retail experts themselves but can help High Streets compete (with the monoliths) with Big Data – targetting identified market segments. A 'resource' is promised by end of year (so 'watch this space.)
- 2 Upside-down planning : local areas need to develop their own bespoke plans – not just a challenge for **local authorities** alone but they will be **required to work with communities** to determine what their High Street is for ;. **BUSINESS PLANS** with

evidence of co-operation all round.

3 Many areas already have 'visions' but what they lack is cash – hence the FHSF. JB rather liked the Timpson concept of the Perfect Day – one day a year when communities got together to spruce up their High Streets. It seemed Civic Day would be the perfect vehicle and, curiously, he made at least two references to art galleries in his address (the country will be flooded) but none to 'edukashun' (I think we've given up on that – rumours of GCSEs being abolished !) But the likes of Lincoln and Canterbury have been saved by having 'academia' at their hearts as a magnet for economic activity year round ....

Some questions taken from the floor (some of which rambled and were statements rather than interrogatory but there was a general sentiment that JB was 'on the right lines' and his despatch commendable.)

There was a question about lack of impact assessment over permitted development which appears to be a London problem. The response was that this policy has provided tens of thousands of much needed housing and on a small scale is helping to provide 'vibrancy' in the community to counteract 'the monoliths.' There was a promise of further action re land use and JB was keen on the possibilities of relocating 'public sector hubs' into High Streets – a Directive/Guidance under active consideration.

(Not directly discussed but one of the criteria for the FHSF is 'densification' – a policy espoused by Griff Rhys Jones : for all one knows 10% of the alleged 3 million homes required could be found in High Streets with adequate 'direction' – thus saving an appreciable amount of greenfield and optimising use of existing infrastructure : a strategy recommended to CPRE and presumably one attractive to CV ?)

A question was asked about local authority 'transparency' in decisionmaking (with a supplementary about it being a bit 'unfair' to restrict FHSF submissions to one per LA.) Was there an avenue of appeal against 'transparency, lack of ?

JB said 'will keep eyes open' to lack of transparency and expected to read that there had been active community engagement from the start. He wanted to see real transformative investment which meant caution about 'thinness of spread' (forget any cosmetics like 'cobbles' which he cited as a no-no.)

**NB** JB fully expects to see **matchfunding** in submissions so given the highly competitive state of affairs submissions without something tangible in this respect will be hard pushed. The emphasis is on 'transformation' for the next few generations with sustainable diversification.

**There was an intimation that the FHSF would not be a 'one-off' but capable of extension what is not too clear at present is the 'crossover' between MHCLG and DCMS but life is dynamic and 'malleable'.**

#### 4 **Louise Brennan**

Historic England appreciates the role it can play in the High Street – practically every one has a heritage (some unkind soul mentioned Crawley as an exception.) They are keen to partner civic societies and are looking for another 16+ Heritage Action Zones : slide rules have indicated that for every £1 invested £1.60 of economic activity is generated.

Grimsby is presently under consideration as a multi-deprived area and Derby is regarded as an outstanding example of 'public sector seedcorn' success which is now attracting private investment as per the 'cunning plan'.

5 **Emma Robinson**

The message received was that communities should be their own salvation – it's up to them to shape their own High Streets. In Barnes they had taken time out to set up 'charettes' to develop a common vision. They saw themselves as particularly challenged as their area had the highest 'online retail penetration' in the country. Some 350 citizens had participated in producing the Vision and they had been commended by the Minister re the 'Digital High Street' : two basic questions had been asked 1)'What's in it for families ?' and 'What historic assets should we be shouting about ?'

So Barnes set about restoring a hidden Thames Bridge but it was also emphasised that 'quick wins' are also important to maintain community enthusiasm.

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