



# PRESS RELEASE

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## **THE MARY PORTAS REVIEW – INSPIRATIONAL OR WORKMANLIKE?**

Between 2000 and 2009, town centres lost 27m square feet of retail space, whilst out of town put on 50m square feet. In 2000 49% of retail spend was in High Street stores, in 2011 it is 42%. Household names such as T.J.Hughes, Virgin and Woolworths have folded, leaving a void hard for others to fill. Nearly one in six town centre stores stand empty.

There is nothing written in tablets of stone that says our High Streets must stay in their current form. Look above the facades of the shops in many towns and you see upper floors betraying the buildings' previous use, before High Street became synonymous with shopping. The issues facing them today are quite easy to express. For potential customers, they can present difficult and expensive parking, a poor quality environment and lacklustre shops. The competitive offers from one-stop supermarkets and out-of-town shopping malls can be more attractive, locations where access for car-owners can be far easier, parking is usually free, the environment is better controlled and more pleasant. For certain types of purchases, the on-line marketplace offers a hassle-free alternative to bricks and mortar, as budding businessmen find it easier to start trading on-line with low start-up costs rather than commit to shop premises. And finally, for those who do operate a shop, the High street can hamper growth through high rents and rates, properties that are too small for modern trading conditions and expensive fit-out costs. Empty units or a surfeit of charity shops can kill a High Street, adding to the risks of long term leases. Add in such mundane problems such as the hassle of receiving deliveries in town centres, then it is easy to see why budding entrepreneurs today find it hard to take on the challenge of town centre trading. Historically, landlords have been loath to bring down rents because this would reduce the capital value of their premises and hence impact on their company's worth, whilst local authorities can seem to treat town centres as cash cows rather than vulnerable assets in need of support.

So how well has Mary Portas done in her review to find solutions to this catalogue of problems?

Ken Parsons, RSA Chief Executive, commented, "Mary Portas correctly identifies some of the issues that are pushing customers away from High Streets, although it is hard to see how some would be implemented in a time of drastic budget cuts in local government. For potential store operators, she makes several recommendations to make life easier in their relationship with landlords and she rightly identifies the need to make change of use easier to ensure that as properties cease to be needed for retail they quickly find alternative use rather than stay empty. Crucially, she rightly identifies the need to make more explicit the presumption in favour of town centre development in the new National Planning Policy framework. Overall Her 28 recommendations make sense.

However, would their implementation make the next entrepreneur with a great business idea plan a chain of high street stores rather than a website? Would they persuade a retail chain to seek a High Street presence rather than go out-of-town? Or would they persuade a family heading out on a shopping trip to steer the car towards the town centre rather than head for the out-of-town retail park? Only time will tell, but this report seems more workmanlike than inspirational – not the revolutionary breakthrough that we perhaps unfairly expected from Mary. “

**Notes for editors:**

**The Rural Shops Alliance (RSA) is the national voice for about 7,500 rural retailers. We campaign on their behalf and also help these shops to become more competitive with practical advice and support, to the benefit of thousands of rural communities. Many ‘blue chip’ suppliers and county councils sponsor and partner the work of the RSA. Our direct contact with rural shops and with these organisations means that we keep in close touch with emerging issues and concerns in our fast changing business sector.**

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