

# Summary: 21 February 2013: Sold Out: Lifting the lid on the future of the High Street

## 1. Introduction by Bill Grimsey

There had been major long term change in the retail market; most recently 7 major national chains hit the buffers. Key things that had influenced change included: barcodes (which enabled supermarkets to grow and capture market share); internet (already 20 per cent of non food bought online and projected to raise to 50 per cent.); mobile technology (making consumer choices much more flexible). Change will continue with an impact on all the development forms: high streets, already the focus of policy concern; large scale retail parks, likely to be rapidly reshaped soon; and malls which may grow as leisure destinations.

Changes have been partly driven by consumers changing their shopping habits and major high street chains were not adapting quickly enough to technology changes and consumers' preferences. But there had also been an impact from private equity investment with the leveraged buy out model and short term returns.

There were different costs and returns on physical retail space and virtual stores and the current planned growth does not take this into account. The Portas review concentrated only on high streets and appeared to be driven by the demands of tv. Entrepreneurs will emerge and high streets need different services making them community centres. Towns will need a unique reason to be there. There are very few visionary local authorities who are prepared to accept the profound economic changes and reinvent places. Local government needs help to apply some business sense and avoid romantic nostalgia. Solutions will depend on social interaction, despite home working, creating jobs not just displacing them, the experience rather than buying and taking account of trends such as click and collect.

Planning tools are out of date eg retail impact study when the future might be more about flexible space that can change over time and more residential space. Town teams need a small number of the right people with a vested interest in success.

There is lots more in the book!

## 2. Key points made in discussion

- Waterstones was attempting to become a destination with both retail and service. It might work in some niche locations.
- Local politicians don't have the vision although some CEOs did. There were no votes in town centres and thus little skill, vision or civic will. Councillors have only a 4 year term: not a long time to get things done. In 20 years only the poor will shop on the High Street.
- There is a widespread responsibility for not facing the problems. The task force report on Tottenham recommended too many consultants being brought in to create masterplans and tinkering through shop front grants.
- The High Street will reinvent itself as Barking did with tech skills centre, a multi media library and market. Such destination high streets should include FE Colleges, leisure, health, as well retail and be based on an understanding of how people use their time. The USP of a local area had to be rooted in the local community not simply a replication of national chains.
- The current model was dead because there too much supply often in the wrong place. Public service hubs were part of the future model – drawing people in – as was a more flexible release of land for residential into retail area.
- Some places such as Roman Road in Tower Hamlets were trying to recreate social interaction; a café had been opened and there was an art centre and cinema with demand for more locations. But there was a backdrop of private landlords sitting on property, waiting for residential permissions.
- It was unclear yet whether the impact of mobile technology would be to support more face to face interaction or substitute for it.
- The effects of new big retail schemes could be very wide spread. Because of the obsession with employment numbers in the narrow locality the accounting was not done properly to reveal where jobs were being lost.
- Some stores such as Apple were nominally about sales but also created incredible service, an enjoyable experience, a destination and design – all helping to link the internet to the high street.
- Planners needed to take up these issues: to plan for uncertainty; to drop conventional impact studies; to recognise the social impacts on different groups and not simply follow outdated trends; and recognise the difficulty of changing large mall developments; to engage investors; and to think about the changes over a long life time. Otherwise there was a risk of zombie centres: wrong brief, wrong questions, no memory, no framework, and an answer nobody needs.
- There was a clear need for this conversation to be much wider with the professional and other interests.