



As planning consultants who have supported many clients over the years who operate in the retail and leisure sectors and on the 'High Street', Planning Potential have keenly paid attention the ebb and flow of occupier trends and economic and planning policy designed to 'stimulate' footfall and ensure the 'vitality' of centres.

With the onset of a Labour government and the consultation on a new NPPF we were interested to see what plans were afoot for the UK's high streets and town centres to support the growth agenda and to continue to support their revitalisation post-Covid. What we did not expect when reading through the 15 Chapter consultation document was that high streets, town centres, retail or the night time economy were not mentioned, not once. Whilst 'economic growth' and the need to provide supportive infrastructure to the planned increase in housing is encouraged, no text changes to 'Chapter 7: Ensuring the vitality of town centres' have been proposed.

As big believers that a city, town or neighbourhood centre plays a vital role as the heartbeat communities, whatever their size, the lack of regard or even mention of them within the draft NPPF seems surprising. Whilst the focus of the Government's planning reform agenda is on housing growth, we are sure many would have also anticipated some mention of reform to stimulate investment and revitalise the UK's most struggling high streets and town centre.

Whilst Covid is now casually attributed to the sharp decline in town centre footfall, many will recognise this as a trend that has been around for much longer. At various stages, the planning system has attempted to reverse this with policy stimulus and Government backed funding opportunities, however our experience is policy, and

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investment has not been coordinated and sustained. The previous Conservative Government did in late 2023 put forward a High Streets Bill that would have required LPAs to prepare a High Street Improvement Plan for at least one of their 'High Streets' with the intention this would be a material consideration for planning, however Labour have as yet been silent on whether this Bill will be followed through.

Despite this void in policy and funding, Planning Potential have continued to work with an ever-increasing range of clients who continue to commit and invest in town centre and high street locations, boosting footfall and benefiting employment amongst other gains for local economies.

In particular, as a result of the 2021 introduction of Use Class E, we ourselves have observed the increase in food and beverage (F&B) occupiers moving into vacant former retail premises without the need for change of use. Within the larger centres this has noticeably boosted evening economies, with the High Streets Task Force reporting that the trend is now for activity and footfall to be as busy at 7pm in the evening as it is at 9am, with them observing that 2023 may have signalled *"the end of retail as high street's dominant function"*.

Again, such an observation is not sudden, but it demonstrates private investment by landlords and occupiers has perhaps been the biggest driver behind those centres that have adapted and been stimulated despite the many challenges posed.

We continue to work with many successful clients in several sectors who are active on the high street, including amongst others: Gail's, Metro Bank, Merkur, Urban Fun, and Pret a Manger. Our planning role extends to portfolio management for many of these clients, including the submission of applications seeking:

- Change of use
- Listed Building Consent
- Relaxation of operator restrictions
- Shopfront works and external alterations
- Advertisements
- New or replacement plant
- New or renewal of Pavement Licences for tables, chairs and street furniture

We also work for many new operators who are looking to expand in the UK, with our expertise including the support of colleagues at Heritage Potential and Communications Potential to provide a full planning service for those who are looking to adapt premises to meet their requirements.

Please do contact our offices should you require assistance in securing permissions in central and high street locations.