SAVING THE HIGH STREET – FROM A PLANNERS PERSPECTIVE

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Small independent shops versus the big chains; bricks and mortar versus online; the debate about the future of the high street is certainly divisive. **Planning Insight's Troy Healy** gives his take on how the high street is changing:

Q: How can we make the high street more relevant, engaging and profitable for the communities it serves?

The high street needs to have a genuine mix of cultural and business activities which bring people to the area for a variety of reasons.

There needs to be a recognition by authorities that online retail is not a temporary problem to be weathered. Successive generations are going to be less interested in going to a brick and mortar shops.

High Streets need to be reinvented as destinations with culturally enriching elements, as a place to experience rather than a location to purchase things.

Where this has been achieved, such as Camden Market and Covent Garden, retail spaces have survived.

Shops which focus on giving customers an "experience" of the product will continue to do better that those that just provide ranks of shelves.

The internet and social media provide cheap and effective ways for stores and events to advertise themselves to local people.

Even apps which help people to plan their public transport trips are helping to make the shopping experience better for consumers by reducing car parking anxiety.

Q: What are the biggest challenges for our high street over the next 6 months?

The loss of Debenhams store will be a significant feature in the next 6 months to a year. Of 165 stores nationally we can expect a significant number to go as a result of the administration.

Some of these will have been anchor stores in highstreets and the result will be drops in foot fall.

Uncertainty over the market and supply chain in a post Brexit environment will mean that there are not going to be a host of other retailers circling to invest in the vacant storefronts.

Q: How can local people help shape the future of our high street?

Aim to spend locally, particularly with retailers based in the UK as well as supporting community events in your highstreet.

Keep track of planning applications which impact your high street, incremental loss of spaces to residential conversions are not always appropriate. If you see applications coming forward which you feel strongly about you are entitled to tell the authority and may influence the decision.

Q: How is technology helping planners shape our high street in a nutshell?

Better technology and access to accurate information in relation to performance is helping planners to justify pivoting the high street to a new direction and focus.

Evidence based planning is the most effective way that we can change the perspectives of local authorities. Demonstrating that their policy does not reflect reality allows us to move forward in a positive way.