

Chief Planning Officer's Advice Note:

Town Renewal and Priorities Assessment

This is one of a series of notes issued by the Chief Planning Officer to guide greater consistency when making planning decisions. These notes may be updated from time-to-time in response to changing circumstances.

It provides guidance to help reach a decision only and should not be used as a reason for refusal. The note cannot be used as a substitute for the policies of the adopted Local Plan

Cornwall's towns and high streets, once dominated by retail shops, are changing fast in response to changing shopping habits, new lifestyles and working patterns. We are not alone; this is a national, indeed international, trend. Our settlement pattern is made up of one small city and an unusually large number of dispersed market towns and most are facing huge change on their high streets, with traditional retail in decline as a new 'digital industrial revolution' changes the way people shop and spend their time.

The changes being faced by Cornwall's high streets are not unusual in the UK, but they are exacerbated by additional economic challenges faced in Cornwall, including lower than average pay, geographical remoteness and the seasonality of tourism. This change is leading to an increase in the number of empty shops and an increase in the number of charity shops which in turn is leading to reduced footfall in most of our towns, especially in those that are not in tourism "hot spots".

Traditionally town centres have been focused on shopping, this follows through into regulation such as planning policy which is focused on protecting A1 retail in primary cores. As changes to our lifestyle and working patterns start to take effect, we have started see in some places the hollowing out of those cores where premises perhaps are now too big, or property is held by institutional investors unwilling to be proactive.

Before the COVID 19 pandemic, major chain stores reported that a clothing brand could function with only 150 bricks and mortar stores. In the context of the UK, even before the pandemic, Cornwall is unlikely to be the prime location for many of those high street names when assessed against larger conurbations and urban areas such London, Birmingham and Bristol.

What is clear is that as peoples shopping and leisure habits change a protect A1 retail at all costs approach is not sustainable. Towns and high streets need to evolve to become community hubs. Shopping remains important, but we need a move of focus more to smaller shops, community facilities, services, employment, more residential and sustainable forms of transport and connectivity.

The key to vibrancy is to maintain bustling places and we have to get used to the potential for higher

turnover of uses and changing nature of buildings. Specifically, the Council considers that it is important to encourage in place shaping discussions consideration of how town centres can:

- Proactively utilise vacant and underused premises for alternative activity and entrepreneurship including the introduction of pop up shops and mixed use, meanwhile uses, office and residential space, leisure, creative and cultural activity. This will be supporting change from Use Class A1 and allowing this to happen quickly and not requiring lengthy period of marketing that may have previously been required.
- Create managed workspace hubs to enable different ways of working and providing town centre working accommodation for employees unable to work from home but wanting to reduce their need to commute, this could be through meanwhile and pop up reuse of empty buildings.
- Encourage community facilities including D1 and D2 and other sui generis uses to promoting mixed uses and create additional footfall into the town centres.
- Encourage the use of upper floors including disused storage space and ancillary floorspace. It is accepted that more people, generate activity. Residential uses in towns are important to achieving this, through reuse of upper floors.
- Redevelopment of town centre sites to increase mix of uses, as illustrated by the Jennings Street and Coinagehall Street site allocations for Penzance.
- Recognise that some existing town centre buildings can go back to residential (i.e. Lemon Street in Truro) to support a mix of uses seen in smaller main street Towns like Lostwithiel. This town centre mix of uses can support housing requirements for residents with a reduce likelihood or reliance on cars such as older and younger people and provide an essential mix of accommodation a balance community need to support long term sustainability.
- Provide for the multi-use of public realm to support pop up uses and events including provision of tables and chairs, temporary eateries and theatre and art events to attract people into towns.
- Make places accessible including access for walking and cycling and high quality WIFI.

Town Centre Priorities Assessment

Specifically, the place shaping work associated with town centres priorities will need to look at:

- Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;
- Areas of persistent vacancy or underuse of premises;
- Changing market patterns, demand and need (e.g. floorspace requirements, shop layout etc);
- Community demand for non-retail facilities and urban greenspace/public realm;
- Housing demand and unmet need; and
- Connectivity throughout the town and where potential improvements can be made.

Using this information, priorities to support a new mixed-use environment and encourage a diverse offer within a town can be considered. This could include improving parks, green spaces and public realm and changes in use that makes best use of the built, cultural and heritage assets. Solutions could also consider 're-greening' town centres and public spaces to provide clean and safe environments for all, through less dependency on the car, improved green infrastructure and connectivity across towns and traffic free or 'busy day' i.e. Saturday restrictions.

Renewing our town centres to rekindle community spirit, local pride and additional footfall has to be at the heart of our place shaping ambitions and will start to address some of the challenges required to create sustainable communities throughout Cornwall. Contact

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