

Insight focus

JULY 2020

Supporting the recovery of High Streets and Town Centres

Town centres and high streets continue to respond to structural changes in what society demands of their function and offer. This process has been exacerbated by the rapidly materialising impacts of COVID-19 necessitating that town centres and high streets adapt.

Town centres have always been the places where people come together to meet to exchange goods, services, money, ideas, leisure and other experiences. They have continually evolved, as society's needs and demands of them change. Inevitably, the current pandemic has and continues to rapidly accelerate their evolution.

Pre-pandemic, town centres, and the wider retail and leisure market, were in the process of undergoing major structural change – change characterised by an oversupply of retail space in many locations, tumbling rents and values, and most visibly an increase in vacancies. Recent news headlines report high-profile retail closures as operators consolidate operations – rapidly accelerating the process of structural change which was already underway.

The commerciality of centres and opportunities for development is likely to remain, but what works will differ as centres develop more distinctive mixes in response to local demand. Moving forwards, there is an urgent need to understand the evolving and

multifaceted implications of COVID-19 and how different places can draw upon their unique character and strengths to most effectively respond.

Supported by Government initiatives through funding, policy and regulatory changes

(especially the proposed changes to the Use Classes Order that will

come into force from 1st September 2020), local authorities and businesses have key roles to play. Those authorities that take a positive and pro-active planning strategy to support independent businesses and ensure centres can both evolve and attract new investment will create the platform for recovery. Through active participation and leadership, national and independent businesses need to step up and play more active roles as stakeholders in centres.

With innovative and deliverable proposals, and the evidence in place to support them, there is now a real opportunity to bring forward measures that can help turn around and reposition many of our town centres to ensure a more positive and vibrant future.



Re-imagining the high street

The transformational trends and latest pressures on our high streets affect demand for space and its use, the design of buildings and public realm, and transport access.

The initial trends show:

1. An increasing functional demand to **work and shop remotely and more locally**, to enjoy community, cultural and leisure activities locally too, all within a continuing decrease in retail space demand overall;
2. Increasing numbers of **new homes** being delivered above a wider range of ground floor uses and on the edges of consolidated town centres; including through new Built to Rent and co-living accommodation provided alongside co-working space;
3. Greater representation of **schools, health centres and other local community and learning uses** on the high street;
4. Greater **fusion of uses or sharing spaces across longer days**: organic foods and household goods, alongside therapy rooms and yoga studios; daytime coffee shops transforming in the evening into wine bars or craft beer taprooms; and cycle shops becoming vibrant community cycle hubs.
5. New innovations in **high street entertainment**, continuing the growth in competitive socialising; and
6. Investment in **public realm and local markets** to reinvigorate high streets and make them more cycle friendly, pedestrian focused and exciting places to meet and socialise.

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How Lichfields can help

Lichfields is working with local authorities, developers, owners, asset managers and operators across the UK to share and apply our insight and expertise to assist in navigating a route to recovery.



Asset adaptation and management

Sweeping changes to the Use Classes Order aim to support the recovery and re-imagining of high streets and town centers by allowing far greater flexibility to change between retail, commercial, business and service uses without the need to obtain planning permission. The changes will facilitate adaptation of town centres, high streets and shopping centres and, in effect, represent the most fundamental change in town centre planning policy for over 30 years. The temporary Pavement Licences process will also simplify, speed up and reduce the costs of the consent route for outdoor seating, making it easier for people to safely drink and dine outside.

Lichfields understands the urgency in supporting the recovery, is evaluating the project and asset-specific implications of changes to the Use Classes Order and is ready to liaise with officers to achieve swift, positive outcomes.



Partnering and delivery

Many local planning authorities are grasping the nettle to lead the charge in identifying, masterplanning, curating and delivering required change, working with local communities, private sector partners and other stakeholders operating in their town centres and high streets. In addition to new Class E of the Use Classes Order adding greater flexibility, the rarely used Local Development Orders can provide a tool for local planning authorities seeking to create further flexibility, by enabling a wider range of main town centre uses which fall within new Use Classes F.1 or F.2 or are sui generis – including pubs, takeaways and exhibition halls – to occur within specified parts of a town centre without the need to seek planning permission.

Basingstoke, Bishop Auckland, Redcar, Staines and Woolwich are a few examples of town centres where Lichfields is currently working to help shape and deliver different interventions to contribute to enhancing centre vitality and viability.



Residential-led mixed use developments

Town centres and retail stores are suitable locations for residential and mixed use development due to being well-served by public transport and supported by the co-location of employment uses and social-infrastructure. The accelerated repurposing and downsizing of retail space creates opportunities to bring forward a wider range of uses including residential, community uses and more agile flexible spaces serving multiple functions.

Lichfields is experienced in helping clients manage their property portfolios more effectively, to turn challenging assets into placemaking and property opportunities and continues to do so. Lichfields is able to assist at all stages of the planning process from influencing and appraising the concept and strategy for repurposing property for housing-led and other mixed use redevelopment, promoting such schemes through the plan-making, masterplanning, pre-application and application / appeal processes, providing specialist townscape, heritage, daylight and sunlight, environmental and economic assessments, through to permission and development delivery.



Plan making for a post-COVID-19 era

How and where people shop, work and spend their free time will change in the post-Covid era. It will become increasingly important for local authorities to have an up-to-date evidence base in place underpinning town centre policies and strategies. This evidence base should evaluate the specific needs of local communities so that the findings can be translated into deliverable visions, strategies and action plans which meet local needs and aspirations and establish the foundations for recovery.

Pairing our market leading planning and socio-economics expertise, Lichfields analyses complex socio-economic intelligence and town centre trends to help our clients develop robust, evidence-driven strategies.



Securing funding

Nationally, substantial Government funds are adding significant resource to deliver positive change in our town centres. Lichfields is assisting many local authorities by putting together clearly articulated, substantiated and evidenced detailed business cases to secure new funding.

About Us

From pioneering the first shopping centres and superstores, to the recent wave of residential and leisure-led mixed use town centre schemes and to securing new funding and adapting high streets, we are always at the forefront of town centre developments.

Our diverse client base of operators, developers, centre owners, financial institutions local authorities and central Government gives us perspective from all angles, and ensures our advice is commercially realistic as well as drawing on the latest planning innovations.

Please get in touch via the contact details overleaf to find out how we can help.

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