

E-Newsletter

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Building Futures

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Opinion Piece: Peter Studdert on Town Centres

Will 2015 be a turning point for town centres? Over the last thirty years local authorities have struggled, often in vain, to protect their town centres against an onslaught from out-of-town shopping centres. Poor access, congested roads and inflexible shopping formats have all conspired to put historic town centres at a competitive disadvantage to big box



out-of-town stores with free car parking and easy road access. Government policies have given some help through the imposition of the 'sequential test' to new retail proposals, but loopholes such as those highlighted by a recent House of Commons Committee report¹ have still been found by determined developers.

But perhaps things are changing, and town centres are starting to fight back. People are changing their shopping habits, and it's the out-of-town big boxes that are suffering. On-line shopping is becoming increasingly popular, so the location of the shop itself is becoming less important as people become more adept at surfing the net for the best deal and rely on home delivery for their weekly food shopping. This means that people are once again looking to their local high street for their day-to-day shopping needs, and the larger supermarkets are changing their formats to respond. So town centres have a big opportunity to regain their role as places that provide the local and more specialised shops and services that people are now looking for.

But town centres should not just be seen as places to shop. They should be great places to live, to work and to meet friends and enjoy leisure time. With changing work patterns town centres need to offer flexible workspace and meeting space to enable the self-employed to meet and exchange ideas. And with an ageing population, town centres are becoming more attractive to older people who want to be close to local services and be less reliant on a car.

All this requires good management as well as good planning. Town Centre Management initiatives or Business Improvement Districts will continue to be essential if town centres are to take full advantage of these new trends. All town centre interests need to be brought together to ensure good communications and to provide the flexibility to respond to the new opportunities.

However, no two town centres are the same. All have unique characteristics derived from their history and their local geography, and so a tailored response to these new opportunities will be required. In particular, Conservation Area Management Plans are essential to ensure that the character of historic town centres is preserved and enhanced, and it is the quality of the physical environment that will attract new investment and new activity. Local planning authorities need to continue to insist on a high quality of design and place-making in new developments, and use the strength of design policies in the National Planning Policy Framework to back up their aspirations.

With a general election in the offing, 2015 will certainly be a memorable year. Let's ensure that it is also remembered as the year that town centres started to regain their historic role at the heart of our communities.

Peter Studdert is an independent adviser in town planning and design. He is a former Director of Planning at Cambridge City Council and is joint Chair of the Hertfordshire Design Panel.



¹ Communities and Local Government Committee - Fourth Report: Operation of the National Planning Policy Framework. December 2014

Changes to the Building Futures Website.



A new Building Futures Intranet website went live at the end of January. Available to the Hertfordshire local authorities who subscribe to the Building Futures partnership, the new intranet website contains the Sustainable Design Toolkit as well as the supporting PDF versions of the toolkit. These can be used to create a sustainable design statement to submit alongside a planning application or pre-application submission. Continued updates to the toolkit and modules provide an invaluable

source of information and support.

Don't worry if you don't have a subscription, you can still visit the original Building Futures website for news updates and Information on the Hertfordshire Design Review Panel and the Building Futures Awards. You

can also find links to our [twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#) pages for news and discussion items.

If you are interested in becoming a member of the Building Futures Partnership please email building.futures@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Building Futures Awards 2015.

This year's Building Futures Awards are coming up fast. The biennial awards recognise and reward projects that demonstrate innovation, creativity and high quality in response to environmental challenges.



If you know of an innovative, sustainable and high quality design project in Hertfordshire that has been constructed since 16th September 2013 please contact building.futures@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) announcement



Sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) will be a planning requirement for developments of ten dwellings or more and equivalent non-residential or mixed development schemes from 6th April 2015.

The announcement that local planning authorities will take the lead on delivering SuDS, rather than the new SuDS Approval Bodies (SABs) as originally proposed, was confirmed by Communities Secretary Eric Pickles before Christmas.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) currently requires SuDS to be prioritised for new developments only in areas at risk of flooding; SABs were supposed to both approve and maintain SuDS. Following a joint consultation by DCLG and Defra last summer, SABs have been dropped and replaced by making sustainable drainage a planning requirement instead.

Eric Pickles has confirmed that local planning policies and decisions on planning applications will be expected to ensure that SuDS for the management of run-off are in place from 6th April 2015. Revised planning guidance will be published. Furthermore, the DCLG is consulting on making local flood authorities a statutory consultee on planning applications for surface water management.