

Letter from Westminster

ONE of my favourite books is *Look Up Winchester* which is a self-titled 'tour of Winchester's historic High Street above the eye-line, with stories behind its facades'. It's a compelling read and a reminder of how many seasons our High Street has witnessed and how it is constantly evolving.

Jack Wills was once a picture house, our newest recruit (The Ivy) was first a Draper's, then Debenhams and then LK Bennett while Cath Kidston was once The White Hart Inn where the Duke of Wellington - whilst campaigning for election as an MP - gave a speech from the first floor

balcony. Now there's an idea.

My point is that a city, which might just have been Arthur's Camelot, is always changing and that's OK. So it is in this context that we should see the current crossroads, and it does appear to be that, facing our High Street.

Earlier this month I attended the Winchester Business Awards and it was refreshing as always to be among entrepreneurs with a positive mindset, a modern approach to retail and, no coincidence here, thriving businesses. As reported in this paper last week, some are even doing so well they're branching out across the district with new stores.

Back in March, I discussed Winchester High Street with Cllr Guy Ashton and we reckon of some 300 shops in the core city centre, a dozen were empty with no sign of a new tenant. That's about 3.7 per cent. The vacancy rate quoted by the BID last month was 3.2 per cent so decreasing. The national average for empty retail space is nearly four times higher at 12 per cent.

There are nine charity shops, 15 coffee shops and independents such as The Hambledon sit alongside familiar national brands. We have TK Maxx, Poundland plus Primark and good job too. Winchester is full of young families, including mine, and we use.

I sometimes hear blame for a changing retail environment laid at the door of the city council around rent and rates but this doesn't stack up. Government sets the rate and private landlords, including charities we may support, private individuals we may even be and pension funds we may rely on, set rent. And behind every retail closure there's an individual story that explains what happened.

For policy makers in Government, it's the trend we must spot and - where possible - act upon. The recent rates revaluation has hit many but, of course, reflects the prosperity of Winchester and that's a double-edged sword. It was also long overdue and that must change which is why I supported plans to move to regular revaluations because we cannot have cliff edge spikes like 2017 ever again.

Yes there has been a discretionary relief scheme, which I pushed Treasury to create, but I remain of the view the fundamentals of business rates need to change. The new Retail Sector Council is bringing the sector together with Government and local councils, making recommendations on the areas that come up time and again. Those include business rates, where the Government have made a clear commitment to make sure that the system is up to date for a world in which people increasingly shop online. A levelling of the playing field would be a good start.

I often make time to 'walk the course' in town and spend time popping into shops to see how it's going. What I see is a vibrant High Street; not one that is presiding over its own death but changing for sure. T was ever so.

Steve Brine,
MP for Winchester and Chandler's Ford