

# Planning the post COVID-19 High Street

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As UK non-essential shops re-open this week, the outlook for the retail and hospitality sectors looks challenging, to say the least. At a recent [Planning Futures](#) webinar, moderated by Hannah David, I joined fellow panellists Steven Porter of law firm [JPC](#) and Morris Greenberg of leisure property specialist [CDG](#) to discuss the shape of the high street, now and in future months. Here's a brief summary, below.

## A sickly state?

Recent temporary changes to planning have enabled outdoor eating and takeaways, and in many places measures have been taken to improve pedestrian and cycle access to and within town centres. However, these are just palliative steps, and we face serious challenges when the economic consequences of the Covid lockdown start to become apparent. Moreover, these consequences will be layered upon long-term structural changes: the fundamental shift online of retailing and services, combined with more home-based leisure.

We have to face the fact that High Streets will in general need to contract.

## What's next?

What planning measures would make a difference? Encouraging diversification and the introduction of new uses, and making High Streets more attractive and accessible places, are key. However, this needs to be done in an intelligent way, with a vision for the future of the High Street concerned, and a sensitivity to the factors that make each High Street unique.

Introducing new Permitted Development Rights is a very blunt tool. In fact, these can easily have adverse consequences, in breaking up consistent frontages and fragmenting centres that really need to be consolidated. Saving the High Street requires "bottom up" initiative, rather than "top down".

Planning authorities need to be creative in the way in which they 'zone' town centres, positively planning for new concentrations of activity. I wonder whether we need something like the vision of the comprehensive redevelopment schemes of the 60's and 70's - albeit with a different lens? We don't now need new "Arndale Centres"; but we do need proactive strategies and - within sensible bounds - a willingness to innovate.

## Coming to the surface

JPC's Steven Porter drew attention to the issues bubbling under the surface for hospitality businesses, such as high rents in city centres, landlord debt and the dependence of restaurants on tourism. In the short- to medium-term, some of these establishments won't reopen and so the high street could be littered with empty units. Will landlords take a leap of faith, allow pop-ups and realise that some space has no real prospect of being relet for traditional retail use?

Shopping centres are not immune to this change, Porter added, quoting the recent example of [Ballymore acquiring a centre in Edgware](#) with the intention of developing housing on its site.

Morris Greenberg described the ‘hero to zero’ shockwave of lockdown, with operators looking to offload leases or ceasing to trade. However, he also shared how the rise of new models of delivery, pick-up and prepare-at-home branded products, along with the rise of dark kitchens, show that innovation is vital to endure the crisis.

### **Confusion reigns**

The perennial issues of Use Class Order and licences were mentioned by all the panel. The UCO has changed little since it was introduced in 1987, and does not properly reflect the realities of the 2020s. Are dark kitchens A5 or B1(c)/light industrial, for example? When does an outlet migrate from being an A1 shop to an A3 food & drink establishment, or vice versa?

Furthermore, there is widespread inconsistency between planning and licensing control, with different opening/closing hours under the different regimes, and confusion as to what each regime is trying to achieve.

### **Getting through the transition**

Adapting and adopting new ideas, alongside relevant planning reform, were the key themes of the discussion, with a call for a clearer local and national planning system. Experimentation and risk-taking within a sensible planning environment, plus a reinvigoration of the presumption in favour of sustainable development, all form part of regaining the momentum. Every high street is different and hopefully local authorities understand this DNA, will demonstrate leadership and the ability to flex the system in order to survive, if not succeed.

The full discussion can be viewed [here](#).

Panel:

Roger Hephner, Director, hgh

Steven Porter, Partner, JPC, a commercial and private client law practice

Morris Greenberg Managing Director of CDG Leisure, a Leisure property consultancy

Moderated by Hannah David, Planning Futures.