



NORTHERN IRELAND INDEPENDENT RETAIL TRADE ASSOCIATION

NIIRTA Submission to the Social Development Committee on the Mary Portas Review

Introduction

NIIRTA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Social Development Committee on the Mary Portas Review on the future of our town and city centres.

Our 1300 membership includes wholesalers, independent retailers of all kinds, suppliers to the sector and Chambers of Commerce & Traders Associations.

We have members in every, village, town and city and our collective membership has a turnover of £3 Billion to the local economy.

We have a mutual membership agreement with the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) and work very closely with their members in Northern Ireland

In recent years we produced a number of policy documents on the future of our town and city centres and can be accessed from www.niirta.com/policy.cfm

These include

Nightmare on Every Street (2008)

Programme for Prosperity (2010)

The Jobs Plan (2011- along with seven other business groups)

The Belfast Manifesto (2011- supporting Belfast Chamber of Trade)

Comments on the Portas Review

Over 1000 small shops closed their doors, a loss of £450m in retail sales, reduced footfall and the highest shop vacancy rates in the UK.

Given these challenges facing retail a key priority for NIIRTA this year is to see our Executive acting upon the recommendations of Mary Portas in her review of the High Street and Town Centres.

While the Portas report relates to England, many of its 28 recommendations are highly relevant to regenerating our own town and city centres in Northern Ireland and should be required reading for our Social Development, Regional Development

and Environment Ministers.

It doesn't help that responsibility for town centre regeneration is spread across three different government departments –DOE, DSD & DRD -which makes it difficult to get a joined up approach when trying to get things done. NIIRTA has suggested in our manifesto, Programme for Prosperity that these departments should be merged with one department having the sole responsibility for Planning, Regeneration and Transport.

The Portas proposals for a Town Centre first approach to retail planning, establishing 'Town Teams' to provide strategic management and National Market Day are all key policy recommendations, which our own Executive could implement

Key to any successful town centre is the right mix of niche, independent and multiple retailers supported by a strong night time economy and a vibrant Arts and culture scene. We need to attract more independent retailers to locate in Town Centre because they add something different than the offer of the chain stores and offer the consumer real choice.

As Mary Portas says in the introduction of her report

“Fundamentally I believe that our high streets are uniquely placed to deliver something new. I believe that our high streets can be lively, dynamic, exciting and social places that give a sense of belonging and trust to a community. I also fundamentally believe that once we invest in and create social capital in the heart of our communities, the economic capital will follow”

Retailers themselves need to raise their game and constantly re-invent themselves and adapt to a rapidly changing environment where the increase in online buying poses a particular challenge. This is made very clear in the Portas Report - How we shop as a nation has quite simply changed beyond recognition. Forever.

That means embracing the Social Media revolution, ensuring that retailers do not miss out on a vast consumer market which uses Twitter and Facebook many times a day. Unattractive shop fronts, and badly laid out shops should be a thing of the past if we are to drive real change.

Retail is Northern Ireland's biggest private sector employer and with real change it can continue to be and contribute to sustainable recovery in our local economy.

NIIRTA DSD Policy Priorities

NIIRTA has strongly welcomed Minister McCausland's statement of 7th February 2011 when he stated:

“I support any initiative which can benefit our town and city centres which are clearly facing a difficult time in the present economic climate. Having seen the Portas Review, I have taken a number of steps as my Department continues to consider how we can best deliver support and regeneration in urban areas. Our focus should be on putting the heart back into the centre of our high streets, re-imagined as exciting social hubs for shopping, learning and socialising.”

As an initial response the Department is taking the following steps:

1. Setting up a taskforce of senior officials to respond to the difficult trading challenges facing Northern Ireland's High Streets. The taskforce will review the support which the Department already provides to regenerate town centres to see whether this might be further strengthened in light of the recommended actions identified by Portas, and also reflect Northern Ireland trading circumstances.
2. 2. The Minister will meet with representatives of business, local government and his DFP, DRD and DOE Ministerial colleagues to develop a NI Executive action plan to boost the performance of Northern Ireland's high streets.
3. 3. The Minister will invite Mary Portas to Northern Ireland to advise on the content of the Northern Ireland action plan.
4. 4. A Report and Action Plan will be presented to the NI Executive by April 2012 for endorsement.

NIIRTA would also support:

- At present, DSD is not a statutory consultee for Retail Planning, even though its input into out-of-town retail developments is vital. We wish to see this immediately amended and it made a requirement for DOE planners to fully consult the Department on all future retail developments, to allow for a proper impact assessment of how they would impact on city, town and village centres.
- NIIRTA recommends that there is a clear need for a relationship between the town centre strategy and development plans, and that it should be set down in legislation. DSD must have a five-year action plan to prioritise needs and to integrate them with development plans and to assemble sites.
- NIIRTA supports our colleagues in the Association of Town Centre Management who recommend that the DSD should establish a panel of advisors to discuss on a regular basis, urban regeneration and the prospects for our towns and cities. This panel might include economists, property market specialists, retailers and town centre managers.

- DSD must champion the need for greater priority to be given to the establishment of Town Centre Partnerships; such as we have in Ballymena and Belfast.
- DSD should consider the establishment of a Town Centre Regeneration Agency to champion our town centres, ensuring policy co-ordination by the NI Executive and to ensure investment and funding are made a higher priority.
- NIIRTA fully supports the Assembly's Social Development Committee Report on Town Centre Regeneration in the last mandate and urge the DSD Minister to implement its 17 policy recommendations.
- NIIRTA is also planning a Town Centre Regeneration Summit with the DSD Minister in May to examine policy priorities.

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