

HIGH STREETS

Bill Grimsey has published a renewed call to revitalise ailing UK town centres. But is there anyone equal to the challenge of making Britain's towns great again? **Mark Faithfull** reports



The vision for Burgess Hill in West Sussex, where NewRiver has planning approval for a redevelopment including residential units, a library, leisure and retail

Calling for a new LEASE OF LIFE

Mary Portas. Bill Grimsey. Their names are synonymous with attempts to revive the UK's troubled high streets and yet, far from a bold new future, a torrid 2018 suggests some UK towns could be in meltdown.

An extensive list of CVAs this year includes The Original Factory Shop, House of Fraser, Mothercare and Carpetright, while Poundworld has fallen into administration and retailers including Toys R Us and Maplin have disappeared altogether.

As a result, there is a new impetus behind the plight of the high street. The *Daily Mail* launched a campaign to save the British high street, and the *Mirror* launched its High Street Fightback campaign.

Undeterred by mixed reactions to his first review, Grimsey, the retired veteran retailer

best known for his time at the helm of frozen food retailer Iceland, is at it again, this time with *The Grimsey Review 2*. He concedes that the recommendations in his first review in 2013 were largely ignored. So, five years on, why try again?

"This review really was targeted at central and local government, and the fact

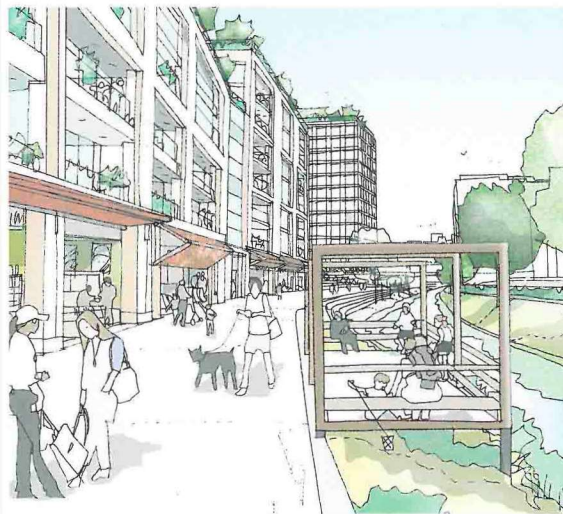
"I was part of a generation of retailers that turned UK towns into clones. That's not fit for purpose any longer"

Bill Grimsey

is that there is no recognised vehicle for local authorities to create not a retail plan, or a spatial plan, but a proper commercial proposition that provides a basis for the next 10 to 20 years," says Grimsey. "Town centres cannot rely on retail for traffic, so they need to figure out why people come. Unless you identify a USP and a way to attract investment, then you are going nowhere."

Key to moving past merely talking shop is to identify clear priorities and provide actionable and practical guidance, ideally under a dedicated and independent body, he says. The next, and crucial, step is getting government buy-in.

Grimsey reflects: "I was part of a generation of retailers that turned UK towns into clones and that's not fit for purpose any longer. If we can get town centres to play to



ROMFORD: A NEW MIX OF RETAIL AND COMMUNITY

Regeneration developer First Base has worked on a number of town centre projects, the latest being Romford, Essex, adjacent to a new Elizabeth line station.

“We looked at reintroducing the sorts of uses that were there before high streets became retail-dominated. A high street or town centre plan needs reinvention and a re-blurring of the lines between retail, leisure and community,” says First Base director Barry Jessup. “Too many local authorities saw the introduction of big-box retail, with its demands for large logistics

areas and car parks, as the saviour. In reality they did much to rob these locations of character and we actually see their demise as a real opportunity to bring in a mix on a more human scale.”

A joint venture between First Base and the London Borough of Havering for Romford will bring around 1,070 new homes, work, retail and leisure spaces, plus a new school and health centre. A new bridge will link the site to the Elizabeth line at Romford station, and retail and F&B will occupy the scheme’s lower floors.

their strengths, the UK will be a very different and much better place going forwards.”

In Grimsey’s view, part of that process involves re-evaluating the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and the way zones are reinvigorated. “BIDs are working in some urban areas, but some national retailers are being handed huge national bills every year for the levies across multiple BIDs. And they don’t see the ROI,” he says.

“Scotland’s Town Partnership (STP) has been quite successful and has changed the conversation by talking about community improvement districts, which brings in

“Too many local authorities saw the introduction of big-box retail as the saviour”

Barry Jessup, First Base

all stakeholders, including businesses. I also want to see government backing for portals for data and best practice to help local authorities. That’s what we need, it’s a

no-brainer. We need to share what does and doesn’t work and identify the leadership to take this forward, not have another review.”

Edward Cooke, chief executive of shopping centre body Revo, has been leading calls for financial support for towns and retailers. “We have been pushing the Government to change the way they charge business rates. We believe the tax rate should be set annually, be significantly lower and not be linked to the RPI [Retail Price Index] or CPI [Consumer Price Index],” says Cooke. “Obviously, it could have an impact on HMRC revenues, but our view is that this would be largely offset by the help it would give businesses.”

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO A BELGIAN TOWN

Just four years ago, the Sint-Amanduskerk, a Catholic church in the West Flanders town of Roeselare, Belgium, a city of 63,000 people, was lying empty, maintained by the council at public expense. Today it plays host to a local farmers’ market, pensioners’ meetings and parents enjoying a drink while their children use the crèche.

It and the green space created around it is symbolic of the radical transformation of the town, inspired by Bill Grimsey’s first review, which led the council to rethink its entire approach to the town centre, build a new public square with a library, renovate the Sint-Amanduskerk and restore the area around the train station.

“Five or six years ago, we saw the challenge presented by the internet and how it could change our city,” recalls Mayor Kris Declercq. “We knew that if we didn’t put political effort into changing the situation, our town centre would be dead. With Bill’s report, we saw a way to transform the town and to make sure that we could make Roeselare a place people wanted to live, to raise their children.”

The city’s main shopping street was redesigned and free ‘speedy parking’ was introduced for people spending just half an hour in town. Parking in squares like the grand Grote Markt was relocated to underground car parks, so that those areas could instead host tables from local bars and restaurants.

The council trialled fining landlords if premises were left vacant for more than a year and offering cheap rents to new businesses. It also introduced free pram hire; a courier system to take shopping from shoppers to their homes, town-wide free Wi-Fi, an app offering reductions and a local gift card.

“We made the town a meeting place – people come for leisure, for culture and for dinner as well.

“But they also come to shop,” says Declercq. “I was very inspired five years ago. I needed some big reforms for our shop owners. It is good that a city like us has found inspiration in the UK to see how the same problems can generate creative solutions.”

Infrastructure funding

Revo proposes the introduction of a specific infrastructure fund for public realm and mixed uses in towns and cities.

Ian Fletcher, director of real estate policy at the British Property Federation (BPF), concurs and points to the Barclay Review of business rates in Scotland, where the recommendations were implemented “despite the focus on Brexit”. He says the BPF would like to see something similar introduced in the rest of the UK, where many companies are still struggling with business rates and where the Government has done little to address the lack of confidence in the issue. He stresses: “We’re not asking for a rush job, but we need to start somewhere.”

Matthew Hopkinson, co-founder of insight company Didobi, which provided data for both editions of *The Grimsey Review*, adds: “One of the biggest differences between the latest review and the first one is that there is much greater recognition that it’s a much bigger problem than too many shops, or online. Occupiers are seeing retailers going under that they perhaps wouldn’t have expected.”

Hopkinson advocates an independent body like the STP to advise towns. “It really rolled

NewRiver has planning approval for 226 residential units at Cowley



THINKING BEYOND RETAIL

“The UK is over-supplied with retail floorspace, in part as a result of the way planning has been allowed,” says Allan Lockhart, chief executive of developer NewRiver. “We would like to see out-of-town retail impact assessments funded by developers giving the money to local authorities to commission genuinely independent studies, to ensure they are justifiable beyond doubt.”

He advocates a proper test of social impact and town centres given special status. “Elderly and lower-income residents are often the only shoppers left in a town centre and that’s not good for social cohesion,” he says. “We need developers and local authorities to work to bring in medical facilities, local authority services and libraries, and residential alongside retail to create community hubs.”

NewRiver has such plans across a number of schemes, including Wallsend where, with North Tyneside Council, it incorporated a library and customer service centre for the council using surplus retail space. Footfall increased and vacancy rates went down, and the partners then developed an Aldi on adjacent council land. “The town centre desperately needed a food retailer,” adds Lockhart.

“We also have planning approval for 226 residential units at Cowley and a redevelopment at Burgess Hill, with 140 residential units, a library, leisure and new retail.”

its sleeves up and brought the BIDs back under its umbrella,” he says. “It’s about going back to why people wanted to live in towns. They need to be diverse, multi-generation hubs that work for everyone and, actually, the social and mental well-being of people living in nice places has huge benefits.”

Fletcher agrees and says the BPF would favour a central organisation to which it could input its own expertise and experience. “What the latest review did well was identify the structural obstacles to change,” he says.

“We’d like to see more flexibility of uses in planning and more sharing of information and quick action. Most of this is not rocket science.”

Clearly, there is much work to be done. Where the last round of reviews stopped short of effecting real change, retailers will be hoping that landlords and local authorities alike take notice and move to rethink high streets if they are to remain relevant.

THE GRIMSEY REVIEW: FIVE YEARS ON

While both editions of *The Grimsey Review* carried a series of recommendations, some of the key points and developed ideas from 2013 to 2018 include:

LEADERSHIP

- Reiterated previous call to establish a commission for each town centre to build a 20-year vision supported by a broad business plan in five-year chunks, and create a full-time high streets minister.
- Has now also asked for equivalent of Scotland’s Town Partnership.

THE VISION

- To prepare for a connected town that puts libraries and public spaces at its heart.
- To enable the change-of-use process to convert entire sub-high streets to residential or other uses and consolidate retail.

BUSINESS RATES

- Calls for independent review and alternative tax.

EMPTY SHOPS

- Calls for penalties for landlords with shops that are left empty for more than 12 months.

PARKING AND OUT-OF-TOWN RETAIL

- Nominal first-hour parking charge.
- Inclusion of free 30-minute parking zones.

NEW SET UP NATIONAL DATA PORTAL

- Knowledge portal to support the implementation of data platforms for high streets and town centres.