

Portas, pop-ups and popular town centres

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Isn't it inequitable that so much effort and publicity was generated by the £2m Mary Portas Pilots, while the larger High Street Innovation Fund was quietly and uncompetitively awarded without any fanfare?

Since the Portas Review was published in December 2011 attention has finally been given to our town centres. It has led to the creation of a number of modest programmes such as the Portas Pilots and High Street Innovation Fund, with effort being put back into addressing issues including vacant units, low start-up rates and low footfall.

Today the government announced the start of a consultation on allowing the temporary use of vacant buildings for a period of two years for activities that would otherwise have required a change of use planning permission. Red tape will be scaled back to enable temporary businesses, known as pop-ups, to make use of vacant high-street premises.

The lack of flexibility the current system allows is considered by ministers to be a major disincentive to start-up businesses moving into vacant town centre property. Any attempt to bring more activity back into town centres is to be welcomed, but is it not worth thinking about how all of these programmes and initiatives might have been applied together? And isn't the main physical deficiency of town centres being overlooked?

Following the Portas Review, the government's first initiative was to set up around 10 Portas Pilots. This was rapidly expanded and a second round of pilots was announced, which in total will see around 20 Town Teams share a pot of £2m to deliver projects. The media coverage, excitement and energy created by this programme were significant, even if the odds of success were stacked against bidders.

We worked with groups on round one and two applications and as I have written here before, it is clear that the process of forming a Town Team, undertaking research and being encouraged to design innovative approaches to old problems will have a positive legacy and generate significant added value regardless of whether or not a town is awarded pilot status.

Alongside the hype of the Portas Pilots, another public fund of £10m was launched and directly awarded to 100 local authorities based on levels of vacant non-domestic property and the severity of impact of the 2011 riots; the High Street Innovation Fund (HSIF). At the end of March 2012 the chief executives of 100 qualifying local authorities received a letter from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) somewhat out of the blue confirming the award and giving broad guidance on how they might use their grant of £100,000.

Questions were quickly raised in Parliament about the way that the funding was allocated and in particular, about how local authority wide vacancy rate data for all non-residential property could be used as a proxy for the performance of high streets, which the fund appears to be targeting. More sensitive retail specific databases that weren't considered, when analysed have highlighted that this approach has led to authorities which contain town centres with very low vacancy rates being awarded funds.

These arguments aside, DCLG is keen for local authorities to use the HSIF to focus on reducing vacancy rates by building more productive relationships with landlords and using tools made available by the Localism Act (April 2012) such as business rate reductions, which is to be applauded. Other undefined measures are not ruled out and this fund provides an opportunity to test innovative ideas over and above a simple rate reduction.

On reflection however, an initial question might be: isn't it a little inequitable that so much effort and publicity (over 370 bids in the first round) was generated by the Portas Pilots which only has a value of £2m whilst the much larger High Street Innovation Fund was quietly and uncompetitively awarded in the background without any such fanfare?

In a period where the majority of built environment funding is being channelled into large infrastructure projects and in light of the added value the Portas Pilot process undoubtedly generated before even a penny

has been spent, it seems a shame that more of an opportunity wasn't made of the £10m HISF pot.

A second question might be: if HSIF is seeking to reduce vacancy rates by encouraging local authorities to grant business rate discounts for empty properties, wouldn't it have more of an impact if it was delivered once government has decided whether or not to allow temporary users to occupy such properties without planning permission? Surely a coherent package of measures would have a greater impact?

Finally, whilst any funding, no matter how modest, and changing the rules to encourage town centres has to be welcomed, fundamental investment in town centre environments is still lacking. Until mechanisms or sources are provided, all of the work being done in town centres is in danger of being undermined.

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