

The Portas premium

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It's not just the 12 successful English high streets that will benefit from the funding bids following the Mary Portas Review. Both the winners and losers will gain from the momentum created by the process.

Despite submitting a strong application, a traditional market town I recently worked with was not one of the 12 towns to be awarded [Portas Pilot](#) status. At odds of around 30/1, deep-down I'm not sure any of the Town Teams really expected to win, but the positivity and collective effort that the bid process created, could itself leave a positive legacy.

Channel 4 News and BBC Radio Five Live's Wake Up to Money cover the financial results of only a handful of major retailers, not independents. The only coverage the independent sector and traditional town centres generate is generally negative, bleak and sadly all too often about rising vacancy rates and continued decline in trading conditions.

Like the [Clone Towns](#) work prepared by the New Economics Foundation, my experience suggests that the noise and excitement the Portas Pilot competition generated – perhaps in contrast to the Portas Review – was significant. It made the local, regional and national news, fostered dozens of social networking pages and has created a library of YouTube videos that alone provide a record of conditions in over 350 towns and high streets across the country.

The funds available for the winners at around £100,000 per town will not themselves make any significant impact and are incapable of directly doing anything desperately meaningful. While 12 towns will benefit from this finance to perhaps start one or two projects, over 350 towns will not and come away empty-handed. And so for winners and losers, meagre capital rewards aside, the process itself could have a number of benefits:

- It acted as a short, sharp and powerful mechanism to bring stakeholders together in the form of Town Teams to discuss issues, work intensively and positively. While this is nothing new, many towns and high streets remain the sole domain of Town and Parish Councils and encouragement for this expansive collaboration involving traders, businesses, landowners and residents will serve as a useful reminder to many
- The application process itself forced people who perhaps might not normally read government papers to pick up a copy of the Portas Review and go through its ideas. Again, the report covers a lot of ground that isn't necessarily new but it will have increased collective knowledge of how people can address town centre problems. I am sure that many Town Teams will now fade away but others will not, and in some cases they will pick up and run with the proposals they put in their application – after all, £100,000 wouldn't have made much difference if they did win, so what have they got to lose?
- The application process will have generated significant leverage and contributions in kind from local stakeholders, businesses and community members ranging from pledging match funds, producing videos and social media sites, to meeting and discussing concerns, and ideas and planning for improvements. It will also have improved levels of data and intelligence by forcing bidders to collate information on land ownership, vacancy rates and business performance
- The competition generated enormous media exposure at all levels. Bids I was aware of were repeatedly asked onto local radio and television and progress was continually reported in the local press creating a healthy sense of competition and increasing the distinct identities of towns in that area
- Perhaps most telling, even before the deadline for applications for the original round of Portas Pilots, in response to the enormous popularity of the competition, Minister for Housing and Local Government Grant Shapps made a quick announcement about a further round of Pilots and more funds being made available. The level of interest the competition created sent a powerful message back to DCLG about the strength of feeling from local communities about their high streets. This is inevitably due in part to the meagre rations of funding currently finding their way into town centre regeneration, but is also a clear signal from communities that they still care for their town centres and want them to work.

In one bid on YouTube that I have seen, whilst setting up his stall at dawn, a thoughtful market trader

poetically describes himself as a speck of dust blowing through a market town centre with over 500 years of history. The reward for becoming a Portas Pilot isn't much larger than that speck of dust but let's hope the process itself has been good value for money.

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