

Written evidence submitted by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH)

Response to the inquiry of the Housing, Communities and Local Government (HCLG) Committee, into the future of England's high streets and town centres in 2030

1. The Royal Society for Public Health has been campaigning since 2015 on ways to help businesses and local authorities improve the health of their communities. Focusing on high streets as a location of particular interest, our work to date is largely on how environment relates to and impacts on wellbeing. This written submission therefore largely addresses the first term of reference for the inquiry, namely “the role of high streets and town centres in contributing to the local economy and the health, wellbeing, cohesion and cultural life of the local community.” Please see our report, *Health on the High Street*,¹ for a more detailed account of RSPH’s research and policy positions.
2. A consensus has existed for some time that the high street must reinvent itself to survive, and a key ingredient for competing has to be a focus on consumer experience – something only the physical environment of a high street can provide. RSPH believes that making high streets a diverse place in which to have fun and enhance wellbeing will in turn make them an attractive destination for the public, which in turn may help rejuvenate many. The twin goals of creating a health promoting high street whilst stimulating investment in local economies should not be mutually exclusive.
3. The growth of online retail in recent years has been undeniable, and is forecast to continue. Currently e-commerce represents 17.1% of all retail sales,² and by 2030 some estimates are that this will have risen to around 40%.³ An attractive high street is an important part of vibrant communities, and an engine for economic growth in local areas – not to mention the impact it can have on activity levels through encouraging more walking. Therefore, this growth of the online retail market is a significant factor in limiting the high street’s ability to positively impact on the public’s health.
4. RSPH believes that the continuing ability of those smaller local businesses, with a stake in their community, to survive and compete in an increasingly online world will be key to maintaining a vibrant and attractive town centre where members of the community want to spend time. This will mean that local businesses will have to become increasingly digitally literate and engaged, in order to compete with the online market. There are already initiatives and resources set up to help local businesses achieve this, such as *Save The High Street*,⁴ but local authorities will also have a role to play in enabling small local businesses to flourish in the future.
5. With regards to promoting the health and wellbeing of the public in the future, there are a number of current trends on British High Streets which are of concern. RSPH’s identification of the most and least health promoting businesses is based on extensive public opinion polling and review by an expert steering group, evaluating a business on four areas of health promotion. For details, see [Health on the High Street](#).
 - a. **Vacant shops.** While long term persistent vacancy rates are now dropping in some areas such as London, in other areas such as Scotland and the North East, shopping centre vacancy rates continue to rise (by 1.4% and 1.2% respectively last year).⁵ Empty shops do not have a neutral impact on the high street. While one or two may be overlooked by consumers, clustering of empty shops negatively affects the feel of the high street. The Mary Portas Review⁶ highlights that, “When key high street buildings are in a state of disrepair or lifelessness, they can destroy the spirit and potential of the town” (p.36). She also highlights the link between empty properties and antisocial behaviour, noting that empty shops attract vandalism, decrease sense of security and increase fear. They are also a missed opportunity for good. In health terms, a premises has the potential to be used to improve health depending on how it is used – perhaps by boosting the mental wellbeing of visitors, encouraging social interaction, supporting positive lifestyle behaviours and/or providing access to healthcare. However, when empty, a potential community asset is not being created.

- b. **Pubs.** The number of pubs in the UK fell from 50,800 in 2015 to 47,000 in September 2017 (as reported by [Guardian](#)) – with 21 closing every week. Pub numbers have been on a steady decline for nearly half a century, but this jump down is significantly more than was seen in recent previous years. Pubs are not simply purveyors of alcohol, but act as hubs for community life and on balance can be important for the mental wellbeing of individuals. For these reasons and more,⁷ pubs should be seen as positive factors when thinking about the wellbeing of the community, and their persistent decline in numbers should be cause for concern.
 - c. **Bookmakers.** One very positive development is the reduction of stakes on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals, which will come into effect in the coming years. The number of bookmakers on high streets continues to decline (a 3.2% decrease from March 2017 to March 2018⁸). Our report gave evidence of the destructive effect that problem gambling has on mental health, and therefore the detrimental impact of the clustering of bookmakers on the local communities (which are typically in more socially deprived areas).
6. **Business rates.** The move towards public health funding through business rates retention will see a very different funding landscape for local authorities in the following years. In this context, RSPH has called for legislation that would allow councils to set their own differential business rates. This would mean that outlets promoting unhealthy behaviours – such as payday loan shops, fast food outlets, and betting shops – can be discouraged, and businesses that are locally based and promote community cohesion and individual wellbeing can be supported financially.
7. **Health inequalities.** A city environment can be designed and planned with health promotion in mind, but it can also further the health inequalities that already exist in the UK. One way in which councils can counter this is through better investment in the elements of a built environment which require no money to use. Included in this should be consideration for outdoor gyms, and making sure that cycling infrastructure is developed in poorer areas of cities.

¹ Report available for download at <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/health-on-the-high-street-.html> (last accessed 15.06.18)

² The retail industry: statistics and policy; House of Commons Briefing Paper, Number 06186, 21 March 2018

³ 2030: The Death of the High Street, Parcelforce <https://www.parcelhero.com/content/downloads/pdfs/high-street/deathofthehighstreetreport.pdf> (last accessed 15.06.18)

⁴ <https://savethehighstreet.org/> (last accessed 15.06.18)

⁵ Retail and Leisure Trends Report 2017/18: The evolution of our retail landscape; The Local Data Company. Available at <http://info.localdatacompany.com/download-ldcs-latest-retail-leisure-trends-report-2017/18> (last accessed 15.06.18)

⁶ Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6292/2081646.pdf (last accessed 15.06.18)

⁷ See [Health on the High Street](#)

⁸ Gambling commission statistics. See <http://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/news-action-and-statistics/Statistics-and-research/Statistics/Industry-statistics.aspx> (last accessed 15.06.18)