

Western Morning News

THE VOICE OF THE WESTCOUNTRY

Falmouth traders may have answer to high street woes

Everyone knows the traditional high street is under pressure. The recession and the squeeze on consumer spending has hastened its decline, but even when retailers were booming, the high street, particularly in our market and seaside towns, was struggling to see off the competition from burgeoning online sales and the growth of the out-of-town superstores and shopping malls.

Yet everyone agrees that a vibrant high street, full of unique independent shops, is a great asset to any community and those towns that have been able to hold on to their traders are testament to the fact that when it is done well, the high street is still a great place to do business.

The problem is that so many factors are working against that vibrancy, from expensive and inconvenient parking to a business rates regime which snatches back any profit from successful business before they have even had a chance to use it to enhance their operations.

The Prime Minister's appointment of Mary Portas – TV's "queen of shops" – to run the rule over Britain's waning high streets and suggest what might be done to save them could easily be seen as little more than a bit of window dressing. The use, by previous governments, of celebrities to undertake what seem like popular causes have seldom ended with any changes for the better. This project could go the same way.

But there is hope. The Falmouth Business Improvement District today throws down the gauntlet to Mr Cameron to come to the famous and historic

Cornish port with Ms Portas to talk to traders and see what needs to be done to enhance their high street.

But instead of leaving it all up to the queen of shops to solve their problems, Falmouth traders have their own, well-advanced plans. And they could be used as a blueprint for other towns, across the Westcountry and, indeed, across the nation.

The best ideas are the simplest and Falmouth Business Improvement District has come up with a five-point plan that addresses all the concerns, virtually at a stroke.

In essence, the traders want their customers to have easy, free or low-cost parking; co-ordinated public transport; professional and well-funded town centre management; business rates that are paid locally and retained locally, without excessive increases that penalise businesses for doing well and – crucially – a cut in VAT.

Not all of these things are purely in the gift of Mr Cameron. But those that are not could become a reality with a bit of Prime Ministerial pressure. And we're pretty sure Ms Portas can be persuasive too, if she is given the chance.

Retailers are among the major drivers of the economy; earning wealth for the communities in which they are based, providing employment and contributing, through taxes and rates, to the local, regional and national finances.

Shopping streets are part of what gives heart and character to our market towns and, in a tourist area, help to bring in the visitors too. They are well worth saving. This plan could be the answer.

Restore Hoe to past glory

Plymouth Hoe is a world-renowned location and an area of natural beauty.

Its place in world history is recorded by such events as Drake's famous game of bowls before defeating the Spanish Armada and the city's citizens and servicemen and women dancing on the Hoe in defiance of Hitler's bombs.

It overlooks one of the best natural harbours in Europe and is the focal point of miles of wonderful coastline. It is a natural amphitheatre. As such it should be one of the driving forces of the economies of Plymouth and the West.

It should be a world des-

tinuation, but it is far from it. With the exception of the restored magnificent Tinside Lido, the Hoe is tired and lacks amenities.

The Hoe and the waterfront that links it to the Barbican need more than a lick of paint – they require a leap of imagination.

So it is encouraging that Plymouth businesses are meeting this week to discuss how the Plymouth waterfront can be shaped for the future.

Tourism is lifeblood to the South West. The region has to attract visitors and often it is as simple as the making good of what we have.



If commercial fishing continues at its current pace it is estimated that the world will run out of fish by 2050 – ten years before the effects of reform kick in

True scale of the threat to our seas must be addressed now

The Government's White Paper on preserving natural resources for future generations has all-but-ignored very real threat to the marine environment, argues **Dr David Gibson**

The coastal waters of the UK have never been under such pressure. Whether it's from commercial shipping, the growth of vast offshore wind farms, aggregate and mineral extraction, leisure activities or over-fishing, the precious marine resources around our islands are under stress, putting the entire ecosystem in dire risk of collapse.

In the last 75 years it is estimated that around 90 per cent of the commercial fish stocks in our waters have disappeared. In particular large predators such as sharks have almost been wiped out, with unknown consequences on marine food chains and entire ecosystems.

This does not take into account the billions of pounds that the marine environment contributes to UK PLC each year. Thousands of jobs depend on it and the societal benefits such as good health and wellbeing that can be attributed to engaging with the marine environment cannot be ignored. There is a very good reason that people pay handsomely to live by the coast and that one of our nation's favourite holidays is to spend time by the sea. It is because, consciously or unconsciously, we know that the coast and all it offers is simply good for our health.

However, because all of this is happening below the seemingly calm surface of our coastal waters, society seems to simply ignore it.

If the same degree of mass extinction had happened in our fields, gardens and forests there would be a national outcry.

Earlier this month saw the publication of Defra's White Paper entitled "The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature". In this document, Environment Minister Caroline Spelman attempts to create a roadmap for how the UK will safeguard its natural resources for future generations.

'Because all of this is happening below the surface of our waters, society ignores it'

It's a weighty document, running to some 77 pages, and it contains some visionary new ideas. It recognises the full societal benefits of a healthy and functioning natural environment. It also extends the coalition Government's localism agenda by proposing the establishment of Local Nature Partnerships running in parallel to the newly formed Local Economic Partnerships.

However, the timescale of these reforms is daunting. If the predictions run true, then by 2020 we should start to see the benefits of the reforms, but the full impact won't be obvious until 2060. That alone would be bad enough, but the

degree of consideration given to the marine environment in the White Paper is very worrying. There are a scant two pages of content dealing with the marine environment, and this is simply a rehash of what is already happening.

The passing into law of the Marine and Coastal Access Act in 2009 – in theory – marked the most radical overhaul of the management of our marine environment ever seen in the UK. The formation of one single government body, The Marine Management Organisation (MMO), should have resulted in all of the diverse and often-conflicting uses of the marine environment being centralised within one body. An informed and knowledgeable group of individuals would be able to make decisions about all aspects of the management of our coastline and all of the cross-boundary issues would be resolved. In contrast, the reality is that a huge number of problems have plagued this organisation from the start, which has resulted in a lethargic and ineffective role out of change. There is a woefully inadequate amount of funding available and no-one really knows how it is all meant to work going forward.

Even before the MMO was formed, a national consultation process began to define a national network of Marine Protected Areas around the UK. Four separate geographic regions were

formed to propose sites of national and regional importance for biodiversity. These sites were to be agreed by all of the different stakeholders involved, and were envisioned as creating a unified approach to marine conservation. The jury is out on whether this will be a success or not. The proposals are now being evaluated for scientific rigour and many are worried that they won't pass muster!

The token acknowledgment in Defra's White Paper therefore does nothing to allay fears that our marine ecosystems will continue to decline at an alarming rate. The harsh reality is that few of our children, let alone grandchildren, will be able to eat fish or enjoy the simple pleasure of rooting around in a rock pool on a family holiday to the coast a few years from now. It is estimated that if commercial fishing continues at its current pace then the world will run out of fish by 2050, ten years before we see the full effects of the land-based reforms for wildlife! If this happens it is envisaged that the entire marine ecosystem will drastically change, and not for the better.

The conclusion has to be that our seas can't wait this long and that the politicians really need to get to grips with these issues now.

Dr David Gibson is the managing director of the National Marine Aquarium in Plymouth.