



GLOBAL OUTLOOK

These are challenging times for Britain's high streets, but Cornwall is up for the fight, says Richard Willcox, chairman of South West BIDs

Cornwall's towns and city have always been a melting pot of ideas and influence; places of enterprise and innovation, as well as resilience. And we've always had a global outlook. My 'home patch' of Falmouth for example, has been a key maritime port since the 1600s, when the Falmouth Packet Ships carried mail and messages to and from the far-flung reaches of the expanding British Empire.

Today, across Cornwall, our independent businesses come from a range of established and emerging sectors alongside nationally recognised outlets. These businesses operate, collaborate and draw inspiration from the creative landscape and form close-knit business and social communities that they are integral to.

With an increasing number of newspaper column inches dedicated to the 'high streets are changing' rhetoric, it's worth exploring what it is that makes Cornwall's 'urban' places so intriguing. How are they adapting to change, challenge and opportunity? And what can we all do to support their ongoing evolution, and in many cases, re-invention, to ensure they continue to be vibrant, relevant and successful in the future?

Cornwall's towns and communities stand apart but why? Geography and location are key to answering that question – the 'granite-rock' distinctiveness, geologically and metaphorically, and our ever-present connection to the sea, clearly helping to forge the Cornish identity. A land apart.

Within every high street and smugglers' opeway, a fiercely independent and entrepreneurial spirit resides, allied to a rich

seam of creative thinking. All of which gives rise to an unparalleled pride of place, with communities that champion local business, authenticity and provenance. This is a place clearly aligned with the small, micro business; like the Westerly 'blow' as the breeze is called here, it's the prevailing force within our business landscape.

But as is the case up and down the country, the small business, so often at the heart of our high streets, exists within a fragile environment. Whether due to the shifting sands of consumer attitudes, trends and behaviours, the wave of digital influence, or how high streets are perceived and experienced, the pressures and external forces currently at play, are extreme. And the pandemic has rapidly accelerated the challenges.

But Cornwall and its businesses are up for the fight.

We are witnessing a steely determination and resourcefulness to refocus and reinvent at all levels – whether that be business, town or cross region. Numerous examples of high street partnerships and Town Teams now exist, from Launceston in the north to Penzance in

the west, Camborne in the mining heritage heartlands, to Falmouth on the south coast. Innovative repurposing of public arenas into greener, healthier and more connected spaces are being mapped out. Designs for new social hubs embracing the interplay between residents, businesses and visitors realised. Multi-million-pound investments in place and people, united behind a purpose.

This is about tapping into new ways of

thinking, working, living and doing things – pioneering circular local Cornish economies that *all* can engage in, benefit from and ultimately enjoy.

Because, whether located at the coast or in the countryside, each Cornish town has its own story to tell. Skills are transferrable, places aren't. Like a fingerprint, each is unique. Thus, it is about physically bringing to fruition, the tapestry of human experiences and imaginings when it comes to mapping out how a town should look, feel and project itself onto the world. We must go beyond that which is laid down in a building control manifesto to harness Cornwall's 'community capital' and our collective creativity, to help shape the future of each local high street. And, by doing so, create a potential blueprint for the rest of the UK.

Our role must be to enable businesses across the sectoral landscape to not just exist but to flourish, and empowered communities to thrive. We should commit to inspiring spaces where the digital sits alongside the creative and where social entrepreneurs naturally collaborate with climate innovators. Well-curated, cultural and events programmes then should aim to further elevate the offer, striving to make our places and spaces even more desirable to experience, invest, work and live in.

South West BIDs is an influential, professional partnership that champions place across the south west of England. The 5000+ businesses they support, employ thousands of people across numerous sectors. Collectively, the group instigate many schemes in areas such as public realm, festivals and destination marketing that help attract millions of visitors, encourage investment and stimulate economic growth. www.southwestbids.co.uk

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