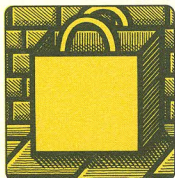


trading places

Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks consider whether the post of High Streets Minister has been as much about spin as about action

yes, minister



It's probably going to be a question on *Pointless* sometime soon: name any of the three Ministers with responsibility for high streets that there have been in England since Autumn 2013. Can you name them all? And if you got the names, then how would you do on the contribution of these three Ministers to re-energising the high street?

The remit of the Minister for High Streets, Town Centres and Markets was to add legitimacy to the Portas Review findings, enabling the Government to be seen to be acting on the proposals from Mary Portas' report.¹ Mark Prisk was in post from autumn 2012 until he was sacked in October 2013; his position being taken by Brandon Lewis. At the time Brandon Lewis was appointed there was a fear that, as he was a junior Minister, this represented a downgrading of the importance of the high streets agenda.² A key role for Brandon Lewis was Chair of the Future High Streets Forum, a think-tank, established under Mark Prisk, bringing together English-based academics, business leaders, experts and local leaders with the aims of:

- helping to accelerate the programme of local mentoring established in response to the Portas Review;
- advising the Government on how better use could be made of existing buildings, to bring people back to live in town centres, thus increasing footfall and supporting shops;
- supporting the expansion of initiatives such as 'Love Your Local Markets' and pop-up shops across the country;
- researching a practical toolkit to help town teams future-proof their high streets; and
- exploring solutions to barriers such as local parking policy.³

It did not begin well for Brandon Lewis. His background as a key proponent of delaying the rates revaluation had not endeared him to retailers, who considered that they would be continuing to pay

rates at a level that was not warranted by the value of their property in a period of economic downturn, in relative terms to other sectors of the economy or the rates (not) paid by their online retail challengers. Shortly after taking up his post he found himself in a spat with Bill Grimsey, who had recently published his own report on the high street, which Brandon Lewis had rather too quickly (and rudely) dismissed.⁴

In late 2013 Brandon Lewis tried to push forward the high streets agenda. Policies included making it easier for vacant properties to be used and a rates incentive for those taking up use of vacant properties.⁵ Given the problems of the high street and the rising clamour over the rates burden, this did not seem to be the 'high street renaissance' that Grant Shapps spoke of,⁶ although 'every little helps', one supposes.

In June 2014 a competition was announced for awards for the best high streets around the country.⁷ Seven types of high street were categorised, 135 entries were received, and a shortlist of 21 high streets was drawn up from across the UK. Winners were announced in late autumn 2014; the reward is monetary – £250,000. However, it is the rhetoric that is worth repeating:

*'The Great British High Street Competition is something to be proud of... It is about giving recognition to the tireless work to revitalise our high streets by local authorities, businesses and town teams on the ground. This effort to adapt to how consumer habits have changed is to be praised. ... many of our high streets have turned the corner thanks to great British fortitude and resilience. Independent retailer confidence is high.'*⁷

The Great British High Street website seeks to demonstrate what is good about high streets: 'Our high streets offer so many exciting and diverse experiences, so if you want to show off what is going on in your area, then please get in touch!'⁸ The competition sought to find and praise those that are working to make their high streets great places in which to live, work and shop. Favourite high streets and popular high streets are being showcased. Of course, showcasing a few examples may give the impression that all is well on the high street. It also perpetuates the TV makeover

