

**National Federation
of Women's Institutes**
Campaign action pack

theWI
INSPIRING WOMEN



**SOS FOR
HIGH STREETS
AND TOWN
CENTRES**

Decline of our high streets and town centres

The NFWI notes with concern the continuing decline of our high streets and the damaging effect this has on local communities. We call on every member of the WI to support their local shops and make the high street their destination of choice for goods and services. We call on decision-makers to work collectively, at all levels, to help bring an end to the decline of our high streets and to ensure that high streets flourish and provide a focal point for local communities. NFWI Board, June 2013

High streets are in trouble. Over the last ten years changes in shopping habits have hit the high street hard. When combined with a slowdown in consumer spending, banks reluctant to lend, and increasingly high rental and business rates, many high street businesses are struggling. And it's not just the shops: the services that we all rely on too are finding it harder to stay afloat.

Why does this matter?

The challenges facing our high streets and town centres reach to the heart of our communities. Healthy high streets are important for a number of reasons.

- **Diversity:** When the shops close, footfall decreases. And that's when the services on the high streets – the hairdressers, the GPs, the banks and the libraries – start to lose their custom too. Before you know it, you have a vicious cycle of falling numbers of shoppers and store closures that goes on and on.
- **Places for people:** High streets have been

the centre of our communities for centuries. They are a shared space – not only to run your errands, but to meet friends, socialise and learn new skills. If the high street loses its attractiveness, our shared spaces disappear, and it's hard to get them back.

- **Healthy local economies:** Money spent on your high street or town centre is far more likely to stay in the area with benefits for the community and local supply chains. Our high streets and town centres are underpinned by local retail that provides goods and services that can help your area thrive with local jobs, better facilities and investment.
- **Local food:** The erosion of the high street places real pressure on local food systems; in many areas the dominance of supermarkets, which often sell little in the way of locally produced food, means we're gradually losing sight of our connection with food, with where it was grown, reared and farmed. This can have negative implications for the viability of local networks of producers and suppliers.

The NFWI campaign

*The high street of the future –
a space for all of us*

The face of the high street is in flux. High streets dominated by butchers, bookshops and bakers are no longer the norm, but the WI's campaign is not about nostalgia. We want to see high streets and town centres that are fit for purpose in the 21st Century and meeting the needs of communities as well as consumers.

Our campaign is about the value of high streets and town centres as hubs of social and community life; creating a viable future for high streets depends on ensuring they are places that people want to visit. Consumer choice is an important factor but creating vibrant and sustainable high streets and town centres is as much about addressing a community's health, education, housing and entertainment needs as it is about shopping.

Mary Portas' review of the high street, the government's Town Centre First policy and the Business Select Committee review of the retail sector have provided some ideas to reinvigorate the high street. But it's going to take coordinated action by many different people; the challenges facing the high street are complex and intertwined. Solving problems with parking and business rates must be part of the solution but are not the whole picture.



The challenges facing high streets

Town centres and high streets must meet the needs of the shoppers and those working and living in an area, with good parking and accessible transport options, a range of sources and inviting public spaces.



Councils need appropriate powers to support high street business and allow locals to decide what development is right for their community. Planning rules have been criticised for being too lax; driving customers out of town and leaving local authorities with few powers to oppose change of use applications, such as for betting shops and payday loan companies.



Shopkeepers need rates and rents that are a fair reflection of the market and encourage (rather than inhibit), trade and investment. Rates are critical to the health of the high street yet revaluations have been delayed and rate relief is confined to the smallest businesses or discretionary cases. When coupled with high rents and increasing costs, businesses are struggling.



Online retailers have an advantage with rates and tax. But you can't get your hair cut on the internet! The high street needs to champion what it does better than online retailers ever can and tailor traditional retail models with digital savvy and online technology.



Get involved - ways to support your high street

There is no single solution to the challenges facing our high streets and town centres. Here are a range of suggestions on ways you can offer your support.

Raise awareness

Spread the message about what's going on in your high street

Who is keeping your high street and town centre alive and thriving? Help us find the most innovative retailers and the local schemes that are giving your area a boost, and tell us about fantastic service that you have received in your shops or the great local produce that's available. Contact the Public Affairs team with your pictures and stories, we will share the best ones on the WI's High Street wall of fame that we'll be creating on our Facebook page and on twitter, using the hashtag #SOSHIGHSTREETS.

Register for our Future High Streets Summit

The NFWI will be running a free summit for members next spring in central London. The event will provide an opportunity for WI members to come together to debate what we want from our high streets and town centres and hear from key industry bodies and those leading the battle for the high streets and town centres of the future. Every federation will be invited to send a delegate and a number of places will be available for individual members. Contact the Public Affairs team to register.

Press for change

Talk to your local authority about parking and transport

It's widely recognised that good car parking provision and accessible transport is a key factor impacting on the vibrancy and prosperity of high streets. Yet in many areas

there is concern parking charges are being used to boost town hall coffers and public transport is being cut. How are parking policies in your area encouraging people to use the high street and town centre? Talk to your council about their support for local public transport, their approach to parking and options for developing more innovative policies, for example free controlled schemes such as 'free after 3'. Contact the Public Affairs team for template letters.

Planning

Good planning is important for shaping the places in which we live. New planning policies recognise the important role that communities play in shaping their local areas through involvement in neighbourhood planning. Contact the Public Affairs team for information on ways to get involved with neighbourhood planning.

SOS for High Streets and Town Centres

Campaign action pack

Take action

Spend locally

Money spent on your high street or town centre is far more likely to stay in the area with benefits for the community and local supply chains. Think about the impact that where you choose to shop has on your local economy and take a look at collaborative schemes such as Totally Locally that reinvigorate high streets by encouraging local businesses and communities to work together.

Sign our high street pledge

What support does your high street and town centre need? Sign our high street pledge and let us know what WI members up and down the country are doing to get behind your high streets and town centres; whether you plan to start using your local library again, visit your butcher or greengrocer more often, learn more

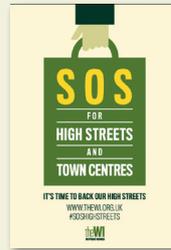
about your area's heritage, or ask your local town team how you can support them. We will share your pledges to inspire other members.

Tell us your views

What do you want from your high streets? We have put together a short survey asking what you want from your high streets and town centres. The results will inform national campaigns. The survey is available online at www.theWI.org.uk/campaigns or from the Public Affairs team.

Build public support

Help keep high streets and town centres on the agenda by displaying the WI's SOS poster.



We have provided further detail about some of the knotty issues that the high street is facing. Briefing papers for members on Parking, Planning and Business Rates are available on the NFWI website or from the Public Affairs department.

Contact us

Public Affairs Department
National Federation of Women's Institutes
104 New Kings Road, London, SW6 4LY
020 7371 9300
publicaffairs@nfwl.org.uk

www.theWI.org.uk
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My High Street Pledge:

Signed

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