

Via email to
kelly.tolhurst.mp@parliament.uk

ask for: Diane Savory
email: diane.savory@gfirstlep.com
our ref: DS
your ref:
date: 13/01/21

Dear Rt Hon Kelly Tolhurst,

To support Cheltenham in its Covid-19 economic recovery a Recovery Task Force has been established. Hosted by Cheltenham Borough Council, the Task Force is a vehicle with which conversations and actions focussed on economic recovery can be driven forward. A core group has been established around the skill sets of property, retail, commercial, culture, political, charity and place making. The background of the Task Force and our Business Plan can be found here <https://movingtocheltenham.com/certif>.

There have been many losers on the High Street arising from the pandemic and leadership at this time is fundamental both in understanding and responding to the challenges ahead which is why I am writing to you today.

In Cheltenham, we want to be as proactive as we can to create opportunities for entrepreneurship at this time of crisis. As noted in a recent piece in the Financial Times <https://www.ft.com/content/d8a4da1c-c0e7-4442-8b77-9113540a3a13> *“chain retail can clearly no longer be the backbone of the high street. Instead, we need to rebuild on the back of local and independent businesses that are committed to their areas, deliver a diversity of services and enable communities to come together and connect.”*

In this regard, the Cheltenham Economic Recovery Task Force is developing a unique project – Counter Culture, which, if successful could be applied across other towns and cities to help bring vacant shop units back into use, driving revenue back into business rates.

We know that as a response to recovery, at the right time we need a celebration of the High Street and maximising activation of our vacant units will be key to driving footfall and capitalising on a staycation visitor economy as our communities regain confidence in a post COVID-19 environment.

A key barrier to realising activity within vacant units is;

- 1) Accessing private equity landlords, particularly based overseas, and
- 2) Business rates

Our project is to access vacant units on a temporary basis, creating a pop up environment that reads to a day time and night time economy, acting as a driver for footfall to the High Street. These vacant unit takeovers would deliver creative market places that match creative and cultural uses with commercial content. Recognising the value of retailing, food and beverage, start-ups, research and development and culture in a ‘pop up’ environment we are confident will add vibrancy to our High Street; as part of our response to creating the right environment for creativity and innovation within economic recovery and sending a positive message to entrepreneurs within our community.

Part of the package of support for the 'pop up' environment is a clear marketing plan that during the period of occupation showcases the vacant unit and helps boost the promotion by the landlord and its agents.

One of the barriers in developing this innovative project is not all the uses we are proposing to include within the market place attracts the business rates discounts currently permitted. Our ask therefore is that greater flexibility is tested in respect of vacant units. We consider that time limited wider exemptions focussed on activating vacant units in response to the COVID-19 pandemic would act as a stimulus to not only enabling improved access to vacant units more easily, but acting as a stimulus to recovery. This should not be a blanket exemption as we recognise the value of business rates to delivering services at the locality level.

In the first instance we are developing a pilot which we would like to launch as quickly as possible as we emerge from the current lockdown, which if successful could be developed longer term via a Community Interest Company, providing a clear vehicle for delivery and management.

We recognise we need support in lifting the barriers and would welcome engagement on how government can support this. Please feel free to contact either myself or colleague tracey.crews@cheltenham.gov.uk

Yours sincerely



Diane Savory OBE DL
Chair
Cheltenham Economic Recovery Task Force

cc. Rt. Hon Luke Hall – Minister for Regional Growth & Local Government
Mark Robinson – Chair of High Street Task Force
Simon Quin – Executive Director High Streets Task Force
Victoria Atherstone – Cheltenham Borough Council Cabinet portfolio for Development & Economy
Rowena Hay – Leader Cheltenham Borough Council