



‘How can we save the British High Street?’ APPG on Customer Service Annual General Meeting, 9th July 2019

Portcullis House, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0AA

In attendance:

- Chris Evans MP
- Bill Esterson MP
- Martin Whitfield MP
- Carolyn Harris MP
- Jim Shannon MP
- Alex Sobel MP
- Tracy Brabin MP
- John Grogan MP
- Baroness Neville-Rolfe
- Baroness Burt
- Jo Causon, Institute for Customer Service
- David Dagger, Institute for Customer Service
- Nadine Story, Institute for Customer Service
- Helen Dickinson, British Retail Consortium
- Jo Moran, M&S
- Bethan Davies, Kindred
- Gareth Morgan, Cavendish
- Sabrina Huck, Cavendish (Secretary of the AGM)
- Abigail Noble, Cavendish

Annual General Meeting

Chris Evans MP opened the Annual General Meeting to conduct the officer election. Nominations were as follows:

- Chris Evans MP (Chair)
- Philip Davies MP (Chair)
- Carolyn Harris MP (Secretary)
- Martin Whitfield MP (Officer)

All officers were elected unopposed.

Chris Evans MP then moved to open the discussion on the theme of the session

Contribution from invited speakers

Jo Causon, Chief Executive, The Institute of Customer Service

- Jo welcomed guests, and thanked Chris Evans MP for chairing the meeting.
- Explained that the UKCSI shows that customer satisfaction in the retail sector is falling.
- Acknowledged that the retail sector was a key driver of the economy.
- Highlighted the importance of the right training to boost workforce skills.

Helen Dickinson, British Retail Consortium

- Said that the sector faces a perfect storm: online retailing has changed how people shop and changed consumer demand has led to some store closures and job losses on the high street.
- But retail also invests significantly in technology meaning that consumers have more access to information than ever before.



- Highlighted the importance of people development and skills training in the sector, for example through apprenticeships.
- MPs should not forget that retail often brings a social and community connection to an area.

Jo Moran, M&S

- Said that M&S was undergoing a transformation plan at the moment to ensure stores are fit for purpose.
- Easy access and community connections were particularly important for elderly customers and could play a role in combatting loneliness.
- Highlighted the link between online and offline shopping – customers might order something online but then pick it up in store.

Chris Evans MP

- Pointed out that he often felt that M&S stores were busiest in the food department but less so in the clothing department.

Jo Moran

- Said that an average shopping basket in M&S was worth about £20 as most shoppers come in to do top ups.
- Their weekly shops might be done online with food delivery to their door.
- People are also more conscious of food waste and buy only what they need. Most customers do not meal plan for the whole week ahead and buy all the food in one go.

Helen Dickinson

- Pointed out that click and collect does not work as smoothly with food as it would with for example clothing or other household items.

Jo Moran

- Explained that technology was helpful to make a transaction easier and quicker but to provide a good shopping experience, human interaction was also key.

Jim Shannon MP

- Highlighted the importance of making shopping a good experience for the elderly too.

Chris Evans MP

- Said that some smaller towns had successful high streets because they would have a number of interesting boutique shops whilst a larger town close by would cater to the population's needs with more chain shops.

Helen Dickinson

- Said that the localised approach was often successful. Big retailers often spend so much time trying to ensure that customers have the same experience in every one of their outlets across the country whilst in some places an shopping offer more tailored to the area works well.

Tracy Brabin MP

- Self-service increasingly does not feel personal. In particular in towns shops and the personal connection still make a big difference to everyday life.

Jo Causon

- There was no point in trying to replicate online experience in store.
- We need both technology and human contact.
- Said that 26% of people were still prepared to pay more for good customer service.



- People used to make a whole day out of shopping, including going for a coffee or a restaurant with their friends.

Helen Dickinson

- Automation will replace some jobs but the jobs that remain will be more customer-focused and higher skilled and more fulfilling.
- But there was a danger that some businesses would not be able to invest in this transition.
- Policymakers need to help facilitate this.

Carolyn Harris MP

- Spoke of specialist services that some shops offer and highlighted the example of bra measurement in M&S as a special and treasured customer service offer that women can't get anywhere else.

Jo Moran

- Said that M&S was investing at the moment in training to ensure staff were confident to give this advice and advertise the service more to customers too.

Carolyn Harris MP

- Expressed concern over the development of clusters of betting and pawn shops on some high streets.

Jo Causon

- Said that often successful high streets offer a mix of shops for vibrant communities whilst also offering some community spaces.

Tracy Brabin MP

- Highlighted Clarks as an example of a shop that offered excellent customer service when it came to supporting customers to choose their shoes, especially those customers with more complex needs.

Baroness Burt

- Highlighted the need for online retailers to make a fair contribution to society through tax.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe

- Spoke about the impact of business rates and the need to change the system to not disproportionately affect high street stores that struggle for their survival whilst online stores are not faced with similar financial obligations.
- Highlighted the importance of small shops for rural communities, particularly those that offer community spaces such as coffee shops.

Helen Dickinson

- Acknowledged that whilst online stores create value, the tax system we have today does not match up with the way the modern economy functions.

Carolyn Harris MP

- Said that there was a gap of accountability between online retailers and physical stores where consumers might face a higher risk of getting substandard products.



- Argued that there was a need to ensure consistency of enforcement of regulation across both.

Helen Dickinson

- Agreed that online and physical stores shouldn't be seen as completely separate and that regulation and enforcement should be consistent.

Baroness Burt

- Asked about the impact of the apprenticeship levy.

Jo Causon

- Argued that the levy was not flexible enough. Companies should also be able to use the funds for upskilling their workforce, not just apprenticeships.

Alex Sobel MP

- Pointed out that the shopping experience in Leeds was excellent, offering a range of shops and artisan retailers which means that many people from the surrounding areas come here to shop.
- Highlighted the potentially negative impact of these big retail hubs on businesses in smaller towns.
- Said that planning law was not rigorous enough to avoid the clustering of some outlets like betting shops.

John Grogan MP

- Said it was easier to revive the high street in places where the population was affluent.

Helen Dickinson

- Said that the Great British High Street campaign was a place that people could look for inspiration.

Tracy Brabin MP

- Told the meeting about a NatWest trial where they would do business banking where there's other banks.
- The lack of banks in some small towns is an issue where all ATMs charge and local businesses cannot pay in money at the bank.

Baroness Burt

- Said that some post offices tried to fill this gap, but it was not an ideal solution for business given the visibility and long queuing.

Jo Moran

- Questioned how stores can use their spaces better to be more flexible and collaborate with other retailers to offer more services.
- M&S had started doing this with WH Smith. Their shops now sell M&S products.

Bill Esterson MP

- Highlighted the particular challenges poorer areas face regarding their high street.



- Said that even for physical stores, having a good online presence can be helpful as it encourages customers to go there to shop.
- The customer experience they will then have in the shop is very important to ensure people use physical stores.
- It is important to think about how it can be turned around where customer experiences are not as good.
- Asked what stakeholders would like to see from policymakers to help combat challenges.

Helen Dickinson

- Said her main policy ask would be to abolish transitional relief. Transnational relief is a method of limiting or 'capping' any significant variation in non-domestic rate bills as a result of property revaluation.

Jo Causon

- Said a more flexible apprenticeship levy system would be important to ensure good customer service training.

Jo Moran

- Also highlighted the need for business rates reform in addition to the other points.

Chris Evans MP, Chair of the APPG, brought the meeting to a close and thanked speakers and guests.

Ends.