

# Horsham Society

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## Have your pounds been spent online?

**H**orsham District Council made headlines when it purchased The Forum as a long-term public investment to secure the economic future of the town.

HDC certainly isn't acting alone. 2018 can now be seen as the year of the Council Big Spenders who invested over a £1 billion in commercial property purchases throughout the UK.

Local authorities have made a strong presence in the commercial property market urged on by the alarming decline of footfall in the traditional high street.

Councils, our own included, rely heavily upon income from business rates so the shift in the commercial viability of the high street spells a disastrous drop in normal income just at a time when central government support is shrinking.

The high street has been hit in the past by the giant out-of-town shopping malls such as Bluewater with its 300 shops in Dartford, which propelled this corner of industrial Kent into the same league as Edmonton in Canada, long regarded as the world's largest shopping mall.



West Street in Horsham.

Those malls, and myriad smaller ones, had spelt the near-death of the traditional high street. That fate is now exacerbated by changes in shopping methods as much as format.

Online shopping is replacing the footfall of the usual shopping expedition and its challenge will influence many more outlets than just the high street. Perhaps those same shopping behemoths may prove even more vulnerable to change than the smaller, more flexible high street.

The latest Office of National Statistics figures reveal that just short of a fifth of all retail sales were completed online in 2018, a rise of 15 per cent in the year. In five years the proportion of sales via electronics has doubled.

Will it double again in the next five?

The convenience and choice of online shopping and the precision of delivery has enhanced its appeal across all generations. Today, more than half the population of over-65s shop online.

Central government is sufficiently concerned to have appointed a minister for the high street and there is growing pressure for planning policies to allow a suitable mix of uses including housing on the high street so that they grow in response to these rapid changes in the retail industry.

Councils have encouraged civic societies to enhance shop fronts and refurbish

dilapidated premises, discovering that community projects have been effective in towns as far apart as Lancaster and Barnes, Nantwich and Wimbledon.

Horsham, too, might benefit from a considered plan to enhance East Street and West Street.

Recent restaurant closures and the loss of one stylish retailer have marred East Street's appearance, while the continued stalling of the development around Lynde Cross has thrown all the expectations for renewal on the impending opening of Piries Place.

There's much to be done to revive the town, a revival which must be judiciously thought through as we apparently face not simply a phase in the business cycle but a radical sea change in how we shop and live in this strange new world.

*The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website [www.horshamsociety.org](http://www.horshamsociety.org) or phone 01403 259038.*