Forum welcomes Portas Review, but says more work needs to be done in key areas

The Forum of Private Business has welcomed the Government's decision to accept virtually all of the recommendations in the Portas Review, but said it has not nearly gone far enough in key areas.

Last year ministers asked retail guru Mary Portas to compile a report on how to revive the UK's flagging high street economy, which is suffering from reduced footfall and high vacancy rates.

The Government has now said it will implement most of the 28 key proposals put forward by Ms Portas, including better management of town centres with new town teams, affordable town centre car parking, a town centre 'first' approach in planning and disincentives for landlords who leave shops empty.

The Forum's Head of Campaigns, Jane Bennett, said: "While it is refreshing to see the Government has embraced the spirit of the Portas Review and clearly understands the importance of the British high street, we feel that it hasn't nearly gone far enough.

"The issues of parking and business rates, we believe, are absolutely crucial to the future success of the high street and the small, independent retailers who ply their trade there. And while there has been movement here, it is

not nearly bold or brave enough.

"The Government says it will ask councils to 'look closely' at town centre car parking charges. This is simply not enough. Councils earn money from this and are hardly likely to give it up. Essentially, the Government needs to fund this initiative if it is serious about nursing the high street back to health. Unless car parking charges are abolished, the high street will never be able to compete on a like-for-like basis with out-of-town centres, where parking is universally free.

"For hard pressed consumers, if it is a choice between paying even a nominal charge to park when they visit the high street, or paying nothing at all to visit an 'out of town', it will be a no brainer for the majority. Unless this issue is tackled head on – and increasing footfall is all important here – everything else is irrelevant," she said.

Miss Bennett also urged the Government to revisit spiralling business rates. “If the Government wants to make our high streets ‘the beating hearts’ of our communities, as Communities Minister Grant Shapps has said, it needs to look at how it can encourage more entrepreneurs to start up businesses there. We welcome the news that rate relief will be doubled, but only the smallest retailers will benefit from this and only for the next two years. It’s a case of giving with one hand and taking with the other as well, bearing in the mind the imminent rates increase of 5.6%.

“In the recent budget, George Osborne ignored our calls for a reduction in business rates and now traders will face this huge cost increase – estimated to be an average of £800 a year more – from April. On one hand we have Grant Shapps saying the Government is embracing the Portas Review, while on the other George Osborne is squeezing traders till the pips squeak.

"We do however welcome the Government looking at ways to encourage landlords not to leave premises empty. Boarded up shops are an eyesore and do not send out a positive message that a town is thriving. They can also attract vandalism, which increases insecurity and fear, can cause harm to the surrounding businesses and creates a downward spiral effect in the local economy.

The proportion of shops in Britain lying empty hit a new record of 14.6% in February, according to figures compiled by the Local Data Company. Their research last year, however, also showed places such as Stockport near Greater Manchester had vacancy rates as high as 30%.

"What we need now is the rapid implementation by government of the measures outlined in the Portas Review," added Miss Bennett. "Beleaguered high streets need swift action to turn the tide in their favour, not

dithering and delays.”