

JANUARY INSIGHTS by CHRIS TURNER

Welcome to the January Insight for 2025 and a Happy New Year to BIDs and their supporters across the British Isles. As you would expect, over Christmas and New Year, the BID ballot activity has been very slight, but ballots are now coming up and we're expecting some seventeen in the next few months, with the first, Tweed Valley ballot, closing on January 16th.

There is a great piece in the Economist here on **Corner shops**, which for many has become the [high street of last resort](#). Post offices and banks have retreated, leaving the smaller tasks of paying in cash and collecting parcels or benefits unsupported. It is these services that have helped Britain's 35,000-strong independent corner shops stay alive. Parcels are only one part. Customers of online-only banks, such as Monzo, can deposit cash wherever there is a PayPoint. Benefits can be paid out in cash via corner shops in the same way. About 4m households—roughly one in seven—are on pre-payment gas and electricity meters, meaning they have to head to a shop whenever it runs out. 'Bossman' as Corner-shop owners are often called, are happy to offer almost any service, provided enough customers buy a can of Diet Coke on their way out. And, of course, corner shops are very much at the heart of many BIDs.

[Tourist Taxes](#) are clearly raising great interest in England after their arrival in Edinburgh. A question was raised in parliament about whether there was an interest in tourist taxes in England and the [answer](#) thus far is that "whilst both hotels and short-term lets are vital to many local economies, some Mayors have called for the introduction of a tourist levy and some local authorities have called for further powers to manage the impacts of short-term lets where they are affecting the affordability and availability of housing to buy and rent" but the current government view seems to be that areas can introduce a form of voluntary levy on businesses providing overnight accommodation (such as hotels) through setting up an Accommodation Business Improvement District. It will clearly be interesting to all of us in Business Improvement Districts across the country as to whether the current enthusiasm

for Accommodation BIDs in England fades whilst the government mulls over whether or not tourist taxes might be the answer. Of course, the current debates around the new devolution agenda will take many local authorities' eyes off this particular ball until the new structures are firmly in place.

And, of course, the [devolution agenda](#) is indeed hotting up, as local authorities across the country respond to the offer of greater levels of devolution, the role of executive Mayors and rather enforced levels of merger. The government has announced a programme of local government reorganisation to replace **all** 'two-tier' county and district councils with single tier 'unitary' authorities. It will also reorganise existing unitary councils "where there is evidence of failure", or their size or boundaries are limiting public service performance. The government has already written to council leaders to invite proposals and aims to deliver a first wave of reorganisation in this parliament. These new unitary councils will be required to have populations of at least 500,000, although there may be exceptions. The government has made plain that individual local authorities will not be eligible for mayoral devolution so the new unitary authorities will need to join with neighbouring areas to form mayoral strategic authorities across one or several historic county areas. A valuable YouTube piece from the **Centre for Cities** is [here](#). The impact of these proposals on BIDs will be major and we will need to keep an eye on developments as they emerge. We are planning a webinar later in this year once the impact of the consultation becomes clearer in the run up to the Act in the summer.

Yet another view of **the death of the high street**, from the perspective of tech [startups](#). The [report](#), published just before Christmas, tells a different story – it's not dying, it's changing. And as part of the debate on how to address the all-important and highly visible role that town centres play in communities, it's worth understanding how they are changing to make them the best they can be. The internet has opened up a world of choice for consumers, and e-commerce has exploded as a result. E-commerce sales were 16 times higher in 2024 than they were in 2006. But to view online shopping and bricks and mortar retail as adversarial is far too simplistic. For many high street shops, the online market is a vital source of diversification, enabled by the UK's booming e-commerce startup sector. The

high street is not dying, it has changed. Consumers know this, but this change has not been reflected in policy. The same More in Common research found that nine in 10 people wanted closed department stores to be “reimagined” including for purposes other than retail. Indeed, back in 2023, the government’s own High Streets Task Force found that retail was no longer the main driver of visits to urban centres. Instead, people went for leisure, for entertainment, to socialise and have fun. It’s time that policymakers changed their ambition for the high street – it should not become a relic of the past but should develop into the bustling modern multidimensional hubs they have the potential to be.

On the other hand, almost 13,500 retail stores in the UK closed for good last year, equivalent to about 37 shops a day. A ‘brutal’ year for the retail sector saw 28% more closures than the 10,500 in 2023, according to [the Centre for Retail Research](#). Independent retailers, typically smaller businesses with between one and five stores, were particularly hard-hit, with 11,000 shops shutting down – 84% of all closures. Commercial real estate firm [Altus Group](#) warned that the Government’s planned cut to the business rates discount in April would make survival for retailers even tougher. The cut to the discount from 75% to 40% will see the average shop’s business rates bill ‘spiral’ from £3,589 to £8,613 over the next financial year, the group warned. The Centre for Retail Research forecast that 17,000 more shops would shut permanently in 2025.

For those interested in broad brush stroke data, there is some interesting material from Sky News here - [The economy in 2024: Some of the year's big moments in charts](#). From the war in Ukraine to down-to-the-wire election results, 2024 has seen its fair share of milestones which have affected the UK economy; and we now have the highest level of taxation ever.

Sometimes it's just spirit lifting to see things in the world that impact on placemaking and one sad event which took place just before Christmas was the death of one of the great architects who spoke eloquently about the role of place and buildings. [Joseph Rykwert](#), was a historian and critic of architecture of exceptional intellect, cultural breadth and distinctive outlook. His first book, [The Idea of a Town](#) (1963), by exploring the rituals that underlay the

founding of ancient cities, sought to restore the importance of such things as memory, feeling, intuition and instinct in the making of the places where human beings live. It was an important part of a wider reaction to technocratic approaches that were causing widespread destruction in cities across the world. It is now commonplace for developers and planners to talk about “placemaking”, by which they mean the ways in which architecture and landscape work together to make social urban spaces, a concept that owes much to Rykwert’s belief that buildings should not be considered in isolation but as part of the fabric of a city. [The First Moderns](#) (1980) revealed the roots of 20th-century ideas of modernity in thinkers and architects 200 years earlier.

As ever British BIDs continue to provide a range of training, certificate and diploma programmes and the dates and content of the whole **British BIDs Academy** is now available on our website. The first class of the [Certificate in BID Management](#) will be starting in a few weeks and the single courses are filling up already. Do please join us and I look forward to seeing you at many of the events.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Professor Christopher Turner, Head of Research, British BIDs