

P-05-967 Welsh Government to amend its NDR relief policy to help keep Debenhams stores open in Wales, Correspondence – Interested Party to Chair, 17.05.20

Dear Janet

I am writing to you and Chair of the Petitions Committee to ask that the below petition is urgently considered for a full debate in the Senedd, now that it has reached more than 5,000 signatures. I have already written separately to all the Members of Senedd who represent my constituency of Newport East and South Wales East.

Welsh Government to amend its NDR relief policy to help keep Debenhams stores open in Wales

<https://petitions.senedd.wales/petitions/200008>

The Welsh Government's decision to cap business rate relief threatens a major and perilous blow for town and city centres like Newport, where I live.

Newport has experienced some positive regeneration in recent years, primarily linked to the Friars Walk development. As you may know, the anchor store in Friars Walk is Debenhams and I have been very worried to hear the news that Debenhams may not reopen its flagship Welsh stores as a result of the rate relief cap. If we were to lose that store it would leave a gaping hole in Newport city centre that no other retailer is likely to be able to fill, especially in the current financial climate. Being a small, compact city centre, Newport would feel the impact of the loss of a store like Debenhams in a catastrophic way. Unlike Cardiff, there is not a plethora of other large department stores and major retail shops for people to go to.

I urge you not to underestimate the significance of a store like Debenhams in a place Newport. We suffer a large number of vacant retail units along our main historic shopping street (Commercial Street) and even in Friars Walk itself, which has only been open a few years. Part of the reason for this is the crushing burden of an outdated business rates system, which does not reflect the reality of modern retail businesses.

I never thought I would ever write to my elected representatives or petition the Government for greater support for a large retail business. But in fact I am writing to you out of concern for the future prosperity of Newport more broadly, the 3rd biggest city in Wales, and the gateway to our nation. Newport deserves to live up to its potential and have a thriving city centre. All Welsh towns and cities deserve this, which is why it is so critical that this decision is debated, scrutinised and hopefully reviewed.

If you are in any doubt about the seriousness of this matter, I would encourage you to walk the length of Commercial Street and through Friars Walk and count the number of empty shops, which I personally find quite soul destroying. Newport has a lot of potential and the very hard work in recent years with developments like Chartist Tower would be potentially wasted if we do not get the right kind of support for key businesses in our city, now.

A debate in the Senedd is needed, urgently, on this matter -- to protect Welsh towns and cities from economic damage.

Thank you for your time considering this matter.

P-05-967 Welsh Government to amend its NDR relief policy to help keep Debenhams stores open in Wales, Correspondence – Interested Party to Chair: further comments, 23.05.20

The recent news from Trago Mills in Merthyr also highlights why disadvantaging big employers is dangerous for job security. It is also worth noting that retail employs a disproportionate number of women so it is women who always bear the economic brunt when retailers close stores or go bust. For places like Newport and Merthyr, stores like Trago Mills and Debenhams play a huge role in our wider economies and the aspirations of our towns and cities.

I would also like it noted in my comments that business rates need urgent and major reform more generally. They are contributing, in a serious way, to the decline of our high streets. The boarded up shops we see in places like Newport are on the whole due to the disappearance of major retailers. Big retail needs help as much as small independents. The rate relief for 2020 could have been the start of a broader discussion on that and I am worried that the Welsh Government are still not grasping this.

Thank you again.

Best wishes,