

MP's bid to bring 'Queen of Shops' to struggling towns



THE government's retail troubleshooter 'Queen of Shops' Mary Portas is being urged to visit South Devon towns where businesses are facing a major business rate crisis.

Totnes MP Dr Sarah Wollaston has already asked the TV presenter (pictured) to bring her no-nonsense approach to turning around ailing businesses on a fact-finding mission to the towns of Totnes, Dartmouth and Salcombe.

Now she is asking for local people to add their voice to hers to persuade Ms Portas to help highlight the plight of the towns' independent operators faced with soaring business rate bills.

Salcombe's worried businesses are the latest to add their voices to the protest over massive hikes in business rate which have hit towns across South Devon.

They will be meeting Mrs Wollaston next month to hand her a petition containing signatures from 600 traders and local people

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demanding a business rates review.

Mrs Wollaston said: "I am really hoping we can get Mary Portas to look at this problem in Salcombe and Totnes where the towns' unique character is at risk.

"I'd love to get her to come down and look at this. I would suggest that as many people as possible write to her or contact her online to ask her to come and look at this issue.

"Salcombe has written to her and I have done so as well but it would be lovely to have that back-up from as many people in the community as possible."

South Hams businesses have been protesting for the last year over the huge hikes in business rate they are facing.

In many parts of the country business rates actually fell following the last Government review but in areas like South Devon, where

many national chains have moved in helping to push up high street business values, the rates have soared.

James Spencer, vice-chairman of the Kingsbridge and Salcombe Chamber of Commerce, said that while the national companies could cope with the increases there were putting at risk the independent businesses that give the town its character.

On top of that, changes in rate relief could mean businesses miss out on help with their bills.

Under new guidelines, many businesses which once qualified for a 50 per cent discount have seen that slashed or told they don't qualify at all.

Ms Portas has been appointed by the government to head a review aimed at halting the decline of traditional shopping centres.

Mrs Wollaston pointed out that the last business rate review was done before the recession and warned that the whole process was 'inflexible'.