

skilled people from overseas. That's why we've rolled out the red carpet to entrepreneurs and introduced special visas for them. But we also need an immigration system that is controlled, that is fair, that doesn't lead to abuse of the benefits system. That's the balance we've pursued in government – and that's what we will deliver in the next parliament.

It's been four years since you appointed Mary Portas to rejuvenate the high street, yet the number of shops going out of business tripled in 2014. Do you concede your government's intervention has failed, and why are you not tackling business rates until 2016 at the earliest? There is no denying how much our shopping habits have changed. Things we could once only get locally we can now order online. Shopping we used to do at the greengrocer, bakery, chemist and hardware shop we can now do under one roof at out-of-town supermarkets. High streets have suffered as a result. But in government we've been clear: we back our high streets. They're important for our communities and our economy. I know that from my own local town centre. I love popping into town with the children and browsing the shops in Witney or Chipping Norton on a Saturday. And I would argue we've done more than any other government to boost the high street – from the doubling of business rate relief to launching a billion pound package of support, to lifting planning restrictions so empty properties can be used. This is having an impact. We've got 760,000 more businesses in Britain, many of which have taken root in town centres. Obviously there's a lot more to do but there's also a lot we can do as consumers – making the most of what our high streets have to offer.

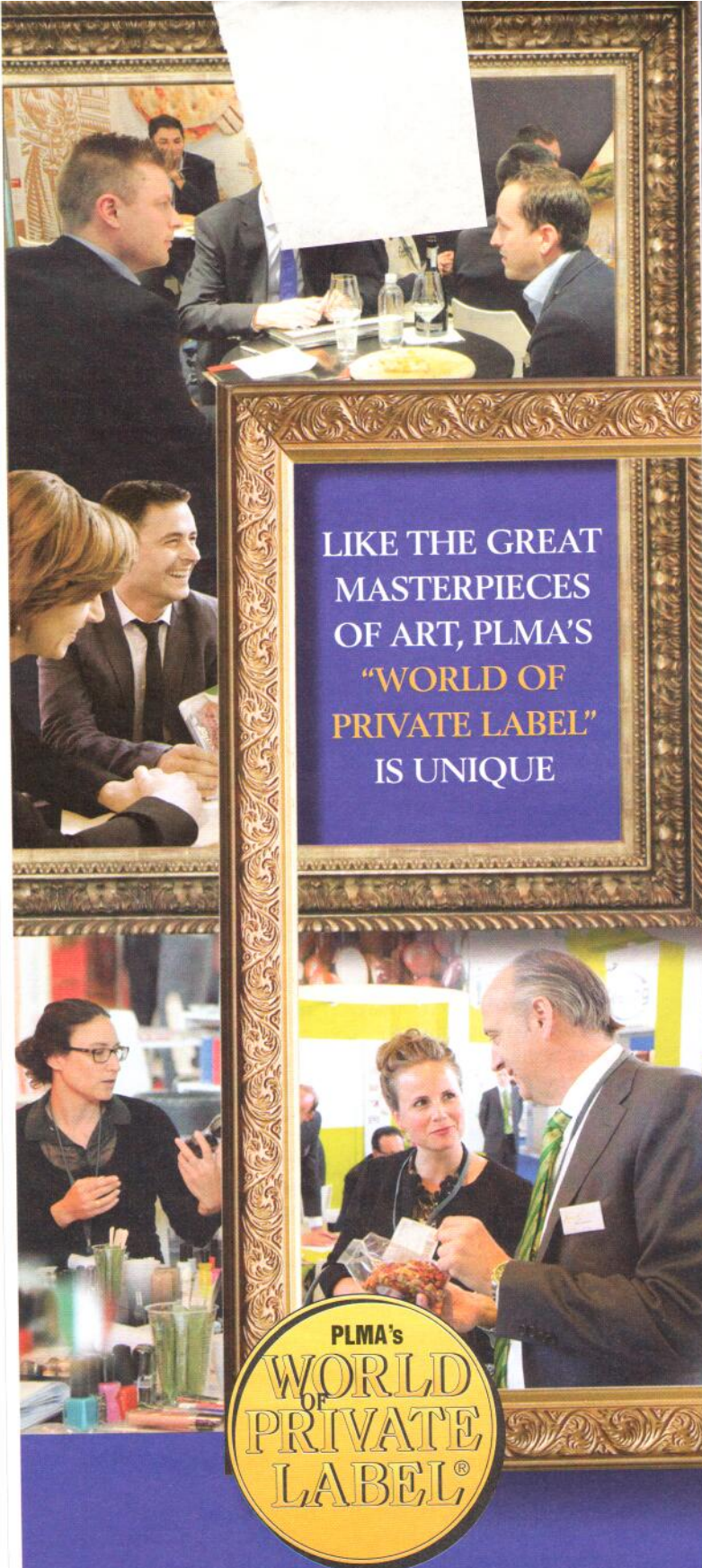
What will you do to make good on your pledge to extend the Groceries Code Adjudicator's powers to cover suppliers and producers? The Adjudicator is now up and running and

Christine Tacon is doing good work. We've said we will undertake a statutory review of the Adjudicator next year to see how we can best build on its early work – and we will make sure all those people who grow our crops and supply our shops get the protection they need. For too long the balance of power in the food supply chain hasn't always been right.

You said recently companies should give their employees pay rises – do you believe supermarkets should up wages to the 'Living Wage'? The economy is growing; inflation is at a record low. Businesses are feeling the effects – and it's right their employees do too. That's why I have urged Britain's bosses to give their staff a pay rise. For the lowest paid we have raised the minimum wage, and clamped down hard on those who don't pay it. I support the living wage; I think it's good for businesses, good for staff morale, good of course for the hardworking people who work in supermarkets. Businesses that can afford to pay the living wage should consider doing so. But beyond the minimum wage I don't think it's for government to dictate to companies exactly what they pay their staff.

What commitments would a Conservative government make toward ensuring no food goes to waste, when so many don't have enough to eat? It's an absolute scandal how much businesses and households throw away – literally billions of pounds worth each year. We're doing everything we can to tackle it: ensuring pubs, restaurants, hotels and caterers do their bit; getting the grocery sector to reduce a further one million tonnes of waste; putting measures in place to stop waste at source and distribution. Ultimately this is something we must all commit to – from government departments to businesses' boardrooms to families' kitchens. 

For a full, uncut version of this interview, go to thegrocer.co.uk



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