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## **PR8-24 | BUILT ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO HIGH STREETS IN TOWNS AND SMALL CITIES**

### **Introduction**

We are writing in response to the Built Environment Committee inquiry into high streets in town and small cities.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) is the national membership body that works with the 43 county associations of local councils to represent and support England's 10,000 local (parish and town) councils.

Local councils and their 100,000 councillors are the first tier of local government, closest to the people, and play an essential part in delivering hyper local services, building strong communities, and strengthening social fabric.

Local councils cover more than 90% of the geography of England and over a third of the population and invest over £3 billion per year to improve and strengthen communities.

### **Summary and key messages**

Local councils play an important role in supporting high streets, town centres and local economic development through an extensive range of activities and projects, including organising community events, improving the public realm, employing town centre managers and town rangers, managing public toilets, holding markets, investing in communications and funding CCTV cameras.

The high street is the core of the community for towns and small cities and the main hub for commercial activity. Its purposes include enabling the buying and selling of goods, enabling residents to participate in cultural activities and access services and acting as a social gathering place.

Alongside a diverse retail and service offering, all high streets should have leisure and cultural activities, good transport connectivity and be safe and inviting to visitors.

Property ownership, a lack of incentives, planning laws including permitted development rights, changes in retail habits and working practices, neglect of

buildings and shortages of principal authority funds are all obstacles to bringing underused properties on high streets back into use.

As the tier of government closest to the communities they serve, local councils should be given a greater role in the redevelopment, aesthetics and conservation of the high street and the government should extend the general power of competence to all councils to support this.

The competitive element of government funding programmes such as the Town Deals and the Future High Streets Fund tends to divert resources away from towns that don't win (which are often the ones in greatest need of funding) and encourages the delivery of projects that are not in the best interest of the town or city. However, should the government choose to continue with a competitive funding model, it is imperative that local councils are able to apply for funding directly.

Locally produced neighbourhood plans and masterplans are more likely to have involved the local business and residential community in their creation and meet local needs and aspirations.

### **Common examples and case studies**

Common examples of activity by local councils, particularly in towns and small cities, include:

- Organising a calendar of events of small to large scale events, including food festivals, street fairs, eco-fairs and Christmas light switch-ons
- Public realm maintenance improvements, including painting lampposts and railings, renewing road signs, fixing other people's benches and painting other people's bollards
- Promoting environmental sustainability
- Increased investment in communications, particularly raising awareness of activities and opportunities e.g. through newsletters and social media posts
- Holding markets
- Improving the street scene and signage
- Street sweeping
- Litter collection
- Managing public toilets

- Employing a town centre manager to encourage and promote the economic and commercial vitality of the town
- Employing a town ranger e.g. to keep the town weed free, clean street signs and wayfinding signage, paint lines, and keep green areas tidy
- Providing town centre floral arrangements
- Funding groups such as volunteers managing the Christmas Light switch on
- Funding warmer hubs for winter
- Running a business forum
- Collaborating with the landlord of the local shopping centre
- Carrying out benchmarking surveys
- Becoming members of tourism organisations
- Providing charging points for electric vehicles in car parks
- Funding CCTV cameras
- Protecting heritage assets and visitor attractions

Local council case studies are set out below:

#### Trowbridge Town Council, Wiltshire

Trowbridge Town Council works with Wiltshire Council to deliver the Future High Streets Fund projects, including re-use of empty shops grant scheme. The town council has also taken over street-sweeping and litter collection to improve service levels.

#### Sevenoaks Town Council, Kent

Sevenoaks Town Council financially underwrites a vibrant town team with membership of all sectors of the local community. The town team organises business shows, business awards, events and works to improve the public realm at a cost of approximately £25,000 per year.

The council is also looking to be the lead on the development of a Sevenoaks Business Improvement District with an initial investment of £10,000. Work has just begun on the creation of a town centre and St John's Hill Masterplan at a cost of approximately £70,000. The council has just completed a 20 mph speed limit consultation process and will be funding the proposal if it goes ahead and including an additional zebra crossing at a cost of £150,000.

The council is the lease holder of the Stag Theatre and cinema and supports it financially at a cost of approximately £40,000 per year. It is operated independently with town councillors as trustees and brings thousands of visitors into the town.

The council is looking to invest approximately £300,000 subject to grant funding for an electric bus. Parking Spaces have been provided for a new car club.

£50,000 has been spent on improving public realm, painting lampposts and railings and renewing road signs.

Sevenoaks in Bloom is an annual investment of approximately £20,000, successfully obtaining Gold Awards and benefiting the local aesthetics.

Corsham Town Council has a town centre policy which prioritises the vitality of the town centre in decision-making, making it more sustainable, attractive, active and accessible. The council does this by encouraging and enabling flexibility to respond to specific local issues and circumstances. They encourage better collaboration, community engagement and combined resources and investment. They communicate effectively with all their stakeholders to achieve a shared vision.

Projects they have run include: producing an interactive retail map, organising town centre events (food festival, street fair, eco-fair, Christmas lights etc), running a business forum, regular retailer newsletter, social media posts, rent free accommodation for the tourist information centre, collaborating with the landlord of the shopping centre and others, they employ a full-time tourism and events officer who also provides business support. They carry out benchmarking surveys and invest in public art and public realm, town centre trails and competitions. They do advertising and are members of tourism organisations.

Probably the most significant individual investment is paying the local authority to maintain two-hours free parking which costs the town council around £80,000 annually.

#### Weymouth Town Council, Dorset

Weymouth Town Council (as a coastal council) works in partnership with the BID and unitary to increase footfall during shoulder months via event funding. This increases the perceived value of the "hub" feel.

### Cirencester Town Council, Gloucestershire

Cirencester Town Council has invested more than £1.5 million in the 'high street' through a major regeneration scheme which has brought back to life the Market Place and created a community space which is now the markets and events hub of the town. The council also works in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce, local businesses and retailers, and the Cotswold District Council in regular health checks and grants that support the local economy.

### Westbury Town Council, Wiltshire

Westbury Town Council has invested in improvements to the High Street environment by simple measures such as renovating and repainting street furniture, installing planters, improved signage to make the High St feel more cared for. The council is also undertaking a major project to rebuild areas of the High street to create an improved public space with better seating that can be used for small events, an investment of over £200,000. They are working with local groups to take over vacant premises. They also have a major project jointly with Wiltshire County Council for plans that could attract major funding such as Levelling Up investment to totally regenerate the town centre and surrounding areas.

NALC's answers to the inquiry questions are as follows:

#### **1. How do you define a high street in a town or small city?**

The high street is the core of the community for towns and small cities and the main hub for commercial activity

It will include retail, shops, cafes, eateries, pubs and bars. Many thriving high streets in towns and small cities will hold a market or host other street traders on certain days. Successful highstreets in towns and small cities have a recognisable and clearly defined sense of place. Larger towns and cities might have more than one high street, which might be described as primary and secondary trading areas.

The high street will be the main hub for bus routes and key roads and have centrally defined parking.

They are usually characterised by being better maintained (particularly with regards to street cleaning and litter collection) and with attractive seating, planting and where the high street is pedestrianised – a thriving street café culture.

They can also be the focus of community event activity, including food festivals, street fairs, carnivals and Christmas light switch-ons.

High streets have a number of purposes:

#### Commercial

High streets enable residents to buy goods from a range of shops. They also provide a central location for businesses to attract customers and generate economic activity.

#### Support

High streets allow residents to access support from libraries, banks and council offices and other public services such as dentists and GP surgeries.

#### Cultural identity

Where a high street contains cultural amenities such as theatres, art galleries, museums and historical landmarks, this contributes to the cultural identity of a place and enable residents and visitors to participate in cultural activities.

#### Social gathering place

High streets offer a function as social hubs by providing a collective space for people to gather, shop, dine, socialise and participate in community events. They contribute to the social fabric of a community by fostering interactions and connections among residents.

#### Historic

Many high streets boast historic buildings and architectural landmarks that reflect the heritage and character of a community. Preserving and celebrating these elements adds to the charm and attractiveness of the area, attracting visitors and enhancing quality of life for residents.

## **2. What should be included on high streets to meet the needs of the whole community?**

### Public realm

An attractive, well designed, sustainable and interactive public realm, including well maintained green space, should be at the heart of every high street. This can include trees and planters to provide shade, increase biodiversity and enhance the aesthetic appeal of the street.

### A diverse offering

High streets should have a mixed retail and hospitality offer, including clothes shops, greengrocers, butchers, pharmacies, hardware shops, bookshops, stationary shops, travel agents, estate agents, hairdresser, banks and building societies, supermarket, café's, pubs, markets and restaurants.

They should also contain a wide range of services, including libraries, gyms and doctors' and dentists' surgeries and potentially, a community hub.

### Leisure and culture

There should be at least one cultural or entertainment offering such as a cinema, theatre, concert venue, museum or gallery, alongside activities such as bowling, laser tag, gaming cafes, climbing walls or ice rinks to help draw in visitors and encourage greater footfall from residents.

The high street should also play host to a regular programme of events, such as festivals and street fairs.

### Transport infrastructure

Bus stops, bicycle racks and parking facilities (including electric charging points) should all be features to enable visitors from different locations to access high streets.

### Street furniture

High streets should be furnished with amenities such as benches, streetlights, litter bins, drinking fountains, clean public toilets and maps to make them clean, safe and inviting to visitors.

### Safe access



All highstreets should have safe access for pedestrians and cyclists, with well designed pavements and crossings especially for pedestrians and cyclists.

### **3. What are the obstacles to bringing underused property on the high streets back into use?**

Several obstacles exist to bringing back underused property on the high street:

#### Property ownership

Property owners are not always interested in renting out their property, especially where the property value is more important to its overall financial performance. They may be absentee landlords, or they might not understand or have an interest in meeting the needs of the community. There are also occasions where landlords expect tenants to pay for repairs even though the buildings were in a poor state when they were let out.

A fragmented ownership structure, with multiple landlords (including pension funds) owning different properties can complicate the process of identifying property owners and coordinating redevelopment efforts.

#### Lack of incentives

A lack of incentives from local authorities can contribute to underused property not being brought back into use. For example, at present, property owners pay minimal capital gains tax and no business rates on listed buildings that are kept empty, while business rates for buildings that are occupied are often too high for business premises operating on tight margins with low footfall.

#### Planning

Changes to permitted development rights mean that disused retail units are now being converted into dwellings. While this can bring people back into town centres, in many cases the dwellings are of poor quality, reduce the footprint of the high street and drive retail developments online or out of town.

Efforts to bring underused property back into use can also be impeded by planning departments that 'use' classes to limit development and planning constraints around conservation areas and listed buildings.

#### Change of retail habits



A substantial change in retail habit has seen a significant growth in online shopping and a reduction in people visiting their highstreets. This has already led to the disappearance of several well known high street retailers.

#### Change of working practices

A change of working practices in favour of working from home and hybrid working has led to half empty offices and meant that some highstreets are losing custom because of absent office workers.

#### Neglect/dilapidation

The longer properties stay empty, the more work is needed to bring them back into use.

#### Principal authority shortage of funds

In some cases, principal authorities no longer have the money or resources to proceed with compulsory purchase orders. They are also increasingly cutting back on services and amenities that make high streets clean, safe and inviting to visitors.

#### **4. Who is involved in ensuring a thriving local high street and does the current structure of Government support facilitate those groups in working together?**

Multiple stakeholders are involved in ensuring that local high streets thrive.

Depending on the area, this can include the following.

- The local community and out of town visitors to the high street
- Volunteer/community groups
- National government
- Local businesses, chambers of commerce, Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) and Start Up Business Support Groups.
- Local (parish and town) councils
- Principal authorities
- Town teams
- Landlords
- Blue light services
- Health and educational sectors
- Tourism associations
- Statutory agencies e.g. water, highways, telecoms

- Transport companies

However, the current structure of government support does not always facilitate those groups in working together.

- While occasional grant funding from central government can be useful, it can be difficult for local councils to access it. Furthermore, the constraints under which funding bids are invited mean that often the projects that are delivered are not in the best interest of the town or city. For example, funding is most urgently needed for the maintenance of existing infrastructure and yet it is only offered for the building of new things.
- A regular funding stream that is directly accessible for local councils to apply to would be more beneficial for long term planning.
- Levelling up can sometimes feel as if it has been imposed on local councils, with allocations not being based on town centre need. The result is an approach that has no impact on high streets with the lowest footfall and highest vacancy rates.
- Levelling-Up funds have been shredded into dozens of activity streams, all with meaninglessly small amounts of funding.
- In Sevenoaks the local council was successful in securing High Streets Heritage Action Zone funding, but over time the principal authority's commitment waned, impacting on delivery.

**5. What role does the planning process have in determining the success or failure of the high street locally and is it fully able to address the challenges highstreets face?**

- The planning process can play a huge part in the success or failure of a local high street. Planning decisions regarding land use, zoning, regeneration and development regulations and infrastructure can directly impact the vitality, attractiveness and functionality of high streets.
- The speed of decision-making and the onerous requirements which can be placed on applicants can lead to premises lying vacant for prolonged periods of time. This in turn, leaves a high street looking unappealing and even encourages vandalism and anti-social behaviour.
- Permitted Development Rights are used to remove viable businesses and turn premises into undersized, often low quality, windowless bedsits.

- Locally produced neighbourhood plans and masterplans are more likely to have involved the local business and residential community in their creation and be able to meet local needs and aspirations.
- Successful high streets are under-pinned by long strategies guided and supported by the community and other stakeholders. Planning policies, especially neighbourhood plans, can play a key role here.
- The relaxation of planning laws in recent years has made High Streets more flexible and hence provided more opportunity for some of the Use Classes to be accommodated. As an example, before change of use from retail to restaurant became permitted, a restaurant would typically pay about 10% higher rent for a high street unit with an existing catering consent due to the scarcity of such planning consents. The current planning system is not able to fully address the challenges high streets face.
- At present the planning system does not provide security for the provision of quality shared and public spaces.
- While the planning system cannot fully address such challenges, it can do more by speeding up decision-making. One of the barriers to this is the shortage of resources (especially people) and skills within the sector.
- Lack of money, lack of local control and absentee and corporate landlords are also an issue.

## **6. What has been the impact of national level planning policies regarding high streets in the last five years and are any changes required?**

The impact of national level planning policies on high streets in the last five years has been varied.

- Planning policy has encouraged a focus on high streets as the primary locations for retail, commercial and leisure activities and led to greater flexibility in land use.
- However permitted development rights have also been used to create unsuitable development.
- For example, Dunstable in Bedfordshire now has housing in the town centre that did not require planning permission. However it doesn't have any refuse storage, which is a blight on the town centre scene.
- Similarly, Newton Abbot in Devon has seen a former bank converted into an inactive residential block which contributes nothing in business rates and presents a totally inactive frontage, which is entirely out of place. Additionally, a former Marks and Spencer unit has been converted into a Job Centre without

any planning permission being sought. The presence of the inactive frontage has severely impacted upon the vibrancy of the main high street.

Changes that are required include:

- A rethink of permitted development rights. Support for planned change, through town teams and funds for coastal towns have been impactful in a positive way. However, permitted development rights cut across any attempt for joined-up thinking, rewarding greed and delivering an imbalanced housing mix, poor quality accommodation and all the social problems associated with it.
- Penalties should be put in place for landlords who sit on empty properties.

## **7. What should be done to ensure that high streets being redeveloped now are structurally and financially resilient for future societal changes?**

The following should be done to ensure that high streets are structurally and financially resilient for future societal changes:

- Local councils, as the tier of government closest to the communities they serve, should be given a greater role in the redevelopment, aesthetics and conservation of the high street, via neighbourhood planning policies as a minimum.  
Accordingly, grant funding should be accessible directly to local councils rather than being accessed via the principal authority.
- The government should also give communities a 'general power of confidence' by extending the general power of competence to all local councils.
- Funding pots such as the Future High Streets Fund and the Towns Fund should be directly invested in the local high street and town centre and should be available to access by those at the nearest level e.g. the Town Team. They should be flexible enough that investments made are both wise and appropriate.
- Business rates should be reduced and the business rates system changed so that town centre locations are not considered more valuable than own of town retail. In addition, the introduction of business rates for online businesses needs to be considered to level the playing field.
- Local councils should be entitled to mandatory rate relief on buildings they run or manage on which national non domestic rates are levied, such as libraries, museums and art galleries.

- High streets should be designed with flexibility, for example the potential to create pedestrianised zones and install infrastructure such as electric vehicle charging points and Wi-Fi.
- Rents on commercial properties should be lowered.
- High streets should be encouraged to play host to a range of events to draw people to them – something that many local councils are already doing.
- Greater support needs to be given to independent businesses.
- Principal authorities need access to proper funding to maintain or replace high street infrastructure.
- The public needs to be engaged in discussions around the future of their local highstreet.
- The areas around highstreets need to be supported by public transport, walking and cycling routes.
- Conservation of historic buildings needs to be maintained sympathetically and new buildings need to be built with quality materials that blend into the street scene.
- More sustainable design principles need to be included in redevelopment projects to reduce environmental impact and enhance resilience to climate change. This can include green building standards, energy efficient infrastructure and sustainable transportation options.

## **8. How can spatial planning, street design and layout help to drive greater footfall to high streets?**

Spatial planning, street design and layout is a key part of establishing a sense of place and can help drive greater footfall in the following ways:

- Provision of wider pavements and greater pedestrianisation in the high street. Clear, well-lit pedestrian access from the bus stop or train station and roads that are easy to cross, can enhance the appeal of the highstreet for pedestrians and lead to increased footfall.
- Mixed use development can create a lively and diverse environment, attracting people during both the daytime and in the evening.
- Designating areas for markets and events can generate excitement amongst locals and visitors.
- Integrating entertainment options, cultural venues and recreational facilities into the high street adds to its appeal as a destination for leisure and entertainment.

## **9. Has the High Streets Taskforce been effective in providing support and expertise in high street recovery and what should this look like in the future**

A limited number of NALC's largest local councils have received effective support and expertise from the High Streets Taskforce. For example, Cirencester Town Council has found the footfall framework invaluable. However, many other local councils have no experience of the taskforce's work.

In future the taskforce needs to facilitate collaboration and networking amongst stakeholders at a local and national level, especially principal authorities and local councils. This will help build capacity through knowledge exchange, sharing of ideas and peer learning, empowering communities to take action and address issues such as vacancy rates, declining footfall and changing consumer behaviour.

## **10. How can transport connectivity be improved to facilitate better access to high streets and town centres and how should this be funded?**

- Increased investment in public transport is required to increase the frequency and reliability of bus, train and tram services (so that they run at least once an hour), expand coverage, enhance accessibility for people with disabilities and integrate different modes of transport. Funding for this could come from public private partnerships, government subsidies, fare revenues and dedicated public transport levies.
- This could be complemented by the introduction of smart transport technology, including real time passenger information systems, mobile apps and contactless payment systems. Funding for this technology could come from government grants for innovation and research, private sector investments in technology development and deployment, public sector infrastructure and information boards, and user fees or subscriptions.
- For areas where regular public transport services are not viable, community transport schemes, car clubs, bike sharing and e-scooter schemes need to be implemented more widely, with funding coming from public-private partnerships, user fees or subscriptions, advertising revenues and sponsorship.
- Good quality cycling and walking routes such as cycle lanes, footpaths and bike parking to help encourage active travel. Funding for this can come from government grants, local authority budgets, developer contributions (e.g., through planning obligations), and active travel funds.

- Secure car parking near to shops is also vital, especially for disabled drivers.

**11. To what extent are the Government's funding programmes to support high streets, such as the Town Deals and the Future High Streets Fund, successful?**

So far, the success of programmes such as the Town Deals and Future High Streets Fund appears to be limited. Local councils cannot apply directly to them for funding, and they encourage principal councils to invent initiatives while ignoring projects that are important to town centres. Additionally, the competitive element tends to divert resources away from towns that don't win (which are often the ones in greatest need of funding).

Where the government does continue with a competitive funding model, it is imperative that local councils can apply directly.