

A sustainable future for local high streets

DOBSON, Julian <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6164-2707>>, UDALL, Julia <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0742-1142>>, ARCHER, Benjamin and CERULLI, Cristina <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4669-5624>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/33612/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

DOBSON, Julian, UDALL, Julia, ARCHER, Benjamin and CERULLI, Cristina (2024). A sustainable future for local high streets. UK Parliament.

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

High Streets Research Network – Written evidence (HSC0014)

A sustainable future for local high streets

Response by the High Streets Research Network at Sheffield Hallam University to the House of Lords built environment committee inquiry into high streets in towns and small cities

Authors: Julian Dobson¹, Ben Archer², Cristina Cerulli³, Julia Udall⁴

1. Introduction: about this submission

For more information contact Julian Dobson (julian.dobson@shu.ac.uk) or Benjamin Archer (b.archer@shu.ac.uk)

1.1 Why we are submitting this evidence

This evidence is being submitted by the **High Streets Research Network** hosted by Sheffield Hallam University, which brings together academic researchers interested in the future of high streets and town centres. Rather than responding to the committee's questions comprehensively, we want to highlight some key themes which we consider pertinent to the committee's inquiry.

1.2 About the High Streets Research Network

The High Streets Research Network is a multi-disciplinary network coordinated by Sheffield Hallam University and bringing together a wider group of around 120 researchers and practitioners via LinkedIn. This response is coordinated by three departments within Sheffield Hallam University: the Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research (Julian Dobson); Department of Natural and Built Environment (Cristina Cerulli and Julia Udall); and the Department of Law and Criminology (Ben Archer).

1.3 Summary of key points

The key messages of our submission can be summarised as:

- A new vision of high streets is required in the context of current and emerging challenges
- Winning and retaining the trust of local communities is key to the future of high streets in towns and small cities

¹ Senior research fellow at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

² Lecturer in law, Sheffield Hallam University

³ Professor of ethical practice in architecture, Sheffield Hallam University

⁴ Senior Lecturer in architecture, Sheffield Hallam University

- High streets need to be genuinely inclusive, rather than seeking to attract some members of the community by deterring or excluding others
- Sustainable regeneration needs to embed and retain value within localities and nurture and support local leadership

2 Defining the high street: social, spatial and economic intersections

The idea of the 'high street' is usually taken for granted as a street at the heart of a town or city with a predominantly retail focus. The Office for National Statistics defines high streets as places that are a 'named street predominately consisting of retailing, defined by a cluster of 15 or more retail addresses within 150 metres'⁵. Brett and Alakeson⁶ define high streets as 'streets or small collections of streets which act as the physical centre of a local community, whether that community is itself a small town or part of a larger town or city'.

Not every place with the name 'High Street' functions as a high street. We consider that high streets have a threefold centrality that is:

- Physical: they contain a physical cluster of buildings and public spaces which are usually central within their location.
- Economic: they contain an economic cluster of activities that generate work and income or provide services for a wider community.
- Social: they are a focus for people who gather for work, to access services, for relaxation and/or because they live there.

Retail, traditionally, has been an integral part of that mix. But from the late 19th century to the early 21st century, retail and leisure uses tended to crowd out other functions, leaving many high streets as monocultural retail landscapes, with little life other than shopping. This has been exacerbated by the growth since the 1980s of mall-like developments, first as out-of-town shopping centres and retail parks, and, later, as urban purpose-built shopping centres, built on specially cleared swathes of town and city centre land.

The high street, as we define it, is first and foremost a hub of socio-economic activity, where people gather in buildings and spaces designed or adapted for the purposes they want to achieve. But it is also a hub of memory: it is often significant because of a continuity of activity, sometimes over many centuries, and/or collective and personal emotional attachment. Memory and emotional attachment matter because they generate what is often described as 'pride of place' or 'sense of place', whose restoration often underpins initiatives to revitalise high streets. However, it is important that memory and attachment are valued in ways that enable multiple narratives, including minor voices, avoiding

⁵ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020) *High Streets in Great Britain*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/highstreetsingreatbritain/march2020>

⁶ Brett, W. and Alakeson, V. (2019) *Take Back the High Street: Putting communities in charge of their own town centres*. Available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PCT_3619_High_Street_Pamphlet_FINAL_LR.pdf

sanitised and uncritical recollections of 'olden days' and creating space for new narratives to be developed. This submission considers both the activities and the attachments needed to create thriving places.

High Streets are often centres of communities, not just as a place of attachment but also as a key infrastructure for livelihoods and mutual support in times of precarity, where large numbers of people are employed, and money can be retained within a local economy⁷. In this sense they can be understood as 'economic ecosystems'⁸. They hold unique cultural and wellbeing functions, often responding to the culturally specific needs and lifestyles of those in the wider neighbourhood around food, clothing, leisure and self-care⁹.

3 Why we need a new vision of thriving high streets

3.1 The current juncture: high streets in crisis

The 'crisis' on the high street is a classic example of a 'wicked problem'¹⁰: a challenge characterised by being framed as a problem; by overlapping complex policy domains; by a continual search for 'solutions'; and by the unintended consequences of the actions taken to achieve a solution. Among the factors contributing to the 'wickedness' of the problem are:

- Changing retail trends: in the UK, the last 50 years have seen a process of generalisation (bigger supermarkets muscling out smaller specialist retailers), concentration (purpose-built shopping centres, both in-town and out of town, often mainly accessible by car), globalisation (multi-national brands edging out localised and independent retailers) and digitisation (the surge of online retail). Some sectors are rapidly becoming obsolete. Department stores, which until recently were considered 'anchor tenants' within high streets, are on a downward spiral: between 2016 and 2021, a total of 388 department stores closed, accounting for 83 per cent of UK department store space¹¹. The past five years saw Britain lose 6,000 retail outlets. The upsurge of internet retail has weakened the link between local identity of high streets and shopping.
- Dysfunctional property ownership: as property ownership is increasingly financialised, it has also become increasingly distant from the location of

⁷ See Hall, S. M. (2021). *The Migrant's Paradox: Street Livelihoods and Marginal Citizenship in Britain* (Vol. 31). U of Minnesota Press.

⁸ Wrigley, N., & Dolega, L. (2011). Resilience, fragility, and adaptation: new evidence on the performance of UK high streets during global economic crisis and its policy implications. *Environment and Planning A*, 43(10), 2337-2363.

⁹ Ogborn, G., Bowden-Howe, C., Burd, P., Kleijn, M., & Michelson, D. (2022). Barbershops as a setting for supporting men's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative study from the UK. *BJPsych Open*, 8(4), e118.

¹⁰ Rittel, H. W. and Webber, M. M. (1973) Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy sciences*, 4 (2), pp. 155-169.

¹¹ Jahshan, E. (2021) 83% of UK department stores lost in 5 years. Retail Gazette, 27 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2021/08/83-of-uk-department-stores-lost-in-5-years/>

buildings, with commercial property viewed as an investment for pension funds or private equity groups often hoping to 'flip' assets quickly to cash in on rising values¹². The desire to extract profits has frequently led to inflexible and costly rents that exclude small and start-up businesses, and to practices of irresponsible ownership where vacant properties are landbanked for their book value rather than brought back into use. While a model of holding high street properties as assets for future capital gain is threatened by the stalling of demand for retail spaces, as well as by recent increases in interest rates, the emerging trend of investing in 'bedded' assets like co-living as a safer and more predictable inflation-proof investment could be a significant factor in shaping future high streets¹³. This trend is also bolstered by planning deregulation: in the 'post retail high street' the rise in permitted developments is leading to the conversion of empty and unsuitable retail units into poor quality housing in response to an escalating housing crisis¹⁴.

- The erosion of local government: since the onset of austerity policies in 2010, local authorities in England have been forced to function with constantly reducing resources against a backdrop of increased responsibilities and demands for statutory services such as social care, resulting in a real-terms cut in spending power by 23% between 2010/11 and 2024/25¹⁵. At the same time the business rates system, which local authorities increasingly rely on to fund their spending, still penalises town centre uses compared with out-of-town premises.
- Changing patterns of socialising and consumption: traditional gathering places such as libraries, pubs and places of worship are slowly disappearing from town centres, although prior to Covid-19 the restaurant sector was growing and it continues to thrive in more affluent locations. While some studies do show a medium-term increase in diversity of retail and leisure, this has still been accompanied by a sharp increase in the rate of vacant properties¹⁶.
- Digital transformation: internet shopping now accounts for 26.3 per cent of all retail spending and is on a long-term upward trend¹⁷, but the impact is wider than this - the shift to on-demand entertainment is challenging

¹² Grimsey, W. (2012) *Sold out: Who killed the high street?* Croydon: Filament Publishing.

¹³ White, Tim. 2024. 'Beds for Rent'. *Economy and Society* 53 (1): 67–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2023.2245633>.

¹⁴ Clifford, B., & Madeddu, M. (2022). Turning shops into housing? Planning deregulation, design quality and the future of the high street in England. *Built Environment*, 48(1), 123-140.

¹⁵ Local Government Association (2024). Spring Budget 2024: LGA on-the-day briefing. Available at: [Spring Budget 2024: On-the-day briefing | Local Government Association](#)

¹⁶ Orr, A. M., Stewart, J. L., Jackson, C., & White, J. T. (2023). Not quite the 'death of the high street' in UK city centres: Rising vacancy rates and the shift in property use richness and diversity. *Cities*, 133, 104124.

¹⁷ Office for National Statistics (2024). Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales. Available at: [Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales \(ratio\) \(%\) - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

the traditional opening hours of town centre businesses, while also offering new opportunities to animate public spaces.

- Effects of energy costs on viability of small businesses¹⁸. This is a significant contributing factor to business closures, and limits property owners' ability to invest in their businesses and look after their properties.
- Climate risk: risks from climate change continue to increase, and flooding, water shortages, and extreme heat could all affect the viability of town centre environments, while global supply chains are vulnerable to climate-related disruption.¹⁹

3.2 The need to win and retain communities' trust

Our research has highlighted the need for new approaches that give local communities a real say in the future of the places that matter to them. Policies that have positioned high streets primarily as places of consumption and have focused on providing new attractions to drive footfall have had limited and short-lived success. In an entrenched cost-of-living crisis and a context of structural change, competition for consumer spending is producing ever-shrinking concentrations of 'successful' retail centres while others struggle to keep up. This approach is unsustainable.

Distant commercial ownership and the 'flipping' of assets such as shopping centres from one owner to another have detached high streets from the communities they serve. Our work on the Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) pilot scheme²⁰ suggests that community leadership and development should be placed centre stage.

While the CID programme did not identify an ideal model, governance structure and funding source, it showed an enthusiasm and need for engaging local communities in high street regeneration. This points towards a latent capacity within communities to engage with challenges in their high streets and town centres and shows that there is a public care and concern over these spaces, which could be mobilised with the right level of support and encouragement. Existing approaches (for example, those led by local authorities or Business Improvement Districts) seldom view local publics as equal partners in high street regeneration.

It is also important to acknowledge the role of aesthetics and design (for example, of shop fronts or public spaces) as an important expression of cultural identity and lifestyle in high street regeneration schemes^{21 22}.

¹⁸ See <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/apr/16/more-than-1m-uk-small-businesses-trapped-in-high-cost-energy-tariffs>

¹⁹ UK Climate Risk (2021) *Business briefing*. Available at: <https://www.ukclimaterisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CCRA3-Briefing-Business.pdf>

²⁰ Dobson, J. et al. (2023). Community Improvement Districts: learning and policy recommendations. Available at: [Community Improvement Districts: learning and policy recommendations | Sheffield Hallam University \(shu.ac.uk\)](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research/communities-and-places/community-improvement-districts-learning-and-policy-recommendations)

²¹ Hall, S., & Datta, A. (2010). The translocal street: Shop signs and local multi-culture

Taking the CID pilots as a cohort, it was evident that several factors contributed to their success or frustrations in building local partnerships. An individual who already had credibility as a local leader was key, but that credibility was dependent on the track record and networks of their organisations. This suggests that there needs to be a careful balance between taking initiative and inclusivity; the convenor's agency and authority rests in their ability to listen to, mobilise and activate diverse groups in a location around issues of common concern, addressing all types of power (power over, with, within and to) in order to strengthen 'civil society, culture, and people's sense of citizenship and worth'²³

3.3 Opportunities for community-based organisations

In previous work with Power to Change²⁴, we identified five opportunities for communities to play a significant role in regenerating the high streets that matter to them. These are:

- **Symbolic spaces:** Community businesses will often be attracted to spaces that have particular meanings or connections for local people, such as former town halls (as in Hebden Bridge, where a former town hall no longer wanted by the local authority is now a thriving community-owned hub) or department stores, which are often viewed as 'anchor' buildings within high streets. Often there is an explicit intention to save a building because of its emotional pull on a community. In Manchester, the Withington Public Hall Institute is reinventing a public hall built for the local community in 1861 as a café, restaurant and community arts venue with space for gigs, talks and exhibitions. Repurposing such buildings sends a visible signal to local people that something is being done to counter decline.
- **Available spaces:** Community businesses will often gravitate towards spaces where there is no obvious alternative tenant or owner. In such instances, community-based organisations can become an entrepreneur of last resort, moving in to find new uses for distressed assets that have outlasted their original purpose. Department stores, which have emptied rapidly over the last decade, are often considered ideal for community uses. However, renovation costs are high and landlords are seldom willing to write down the value of their property. In a context where retrofitting rather than demolition is crucial to meeting net zero targets, design guidance that embeds best environmental practice is essential²⁵.

along the Walworth Road, south London. *City, Culture and Society*, 1(2), 69-77.

²² Ganji, F., & Rishbeth, C. (2020). Conviviality by design: the socio-spatial qualities of spaces of intercultural urban encounters. *Urban Design International*, 25(3), 215-234.

²³ VeneKlasen, L., and Miller, V. (2007). *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*. Practical Action.

²⁴ Dobson, J. (2022). Community businesses and high streets: 'taking back' and leading forward. Available at: [Community businesses and high streets: 'taking back' and leading forward | Sheffield Hallam University \(shu.ac.uk\)](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/2022/05/24/community-businesses-and-high-streets-taking-back-and-leading-forward)

²⁵ See <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/introducing-retrofirst-a-new-aj-campaign-championing-reuse-in-the-built-environment>

- **Adaptable spaces:** Buildings that are flexible and easily adapted to new uses are likely to be most attractive to community businesses. Markets in places like Radcliffe, Manchester, provide opportunities to animate space with a continually changing mix of small-scale activities. Buildings that can be used as community hubs, accommodating uses ranging from meeting places and cafes to repair and making spaces, provide opportunities to start small, experiment, and grow in response to need and demand with a mix of social and commercial activities.
- **New customers** on the high street: Hybrid and homeworking has taken off since the Covid-19 pandemic, with a significant minority of workers mixing office, home and co-working locations. Four years on from the pandemic, flexible working is here to stay for many employees. This provides new opportunities to repurpose high street buildings, offering opportunities to bring buildings to life with a different mix of users and at different times of day.
- **New constellations** of interests: There are opportunities to link resident-led groups, public services and private businesses in creating new alignments of interests to rethink spaces and activities. These could include rethinking traditional services such as libraries as they adapt to the loss of local government funding; new governance arrangements to give community voices a more central role; creating live-work spaces alongside housing providers; and connecting with business-led initiatives to engage with local communities such as the Love Wavertree campaign in Liverpool, where businesses and community groups have come together to inject new life into a local high street. Upper Norwood Library Trust in south London is an example of a resident-led initiative that brings together a local authority library service, performing arts space and community venue.

3.4 Embracing diversity – including people who are vulnerable

3.4.1 Economies of care

Our research and practice show the need to understand high streets as economies of care as well as being commercial economic spaces. By 'care' we mean the practices of providing, maintaining and nurturing that take place outside the commercial sphere and are not driven by market considerations, but are integral to the economy and society of the place. These are often driven by concerns for sustainability (such as zero waste shops); justice (including cultural centres and charity premises); and heritage (including local civic societies). They are frequently provided through organisations and networks working at the boundaries of social, commercial, formal and informal activities. Underpinned by a desire to counter dynamics of urban development that are 'uncaring by design'²⁶ and focusing on examples of self-organisation, our work²⁷ instances of *caring*

²⁶ The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso Books, 2020).

²⁷ Orlek, J., et al. (2023). 'For a Relational Understanding of Care in Critical Urban Action'. *Lo Squaderno*, no. 65 (July): 43–47.

with within community-led projects²⁸, focusing on the 'spaces and relations' produced by care within such initiatives²⁹. We observed how *caring with* practices, even when institutional, rely on relationships between people, which is both a strength and a vulnerability.

Caring is characterised by more-than-market motivations: organisations may be established to meet local needs or develop more sustainable forms of practice; or their work may be driven by a concern to save and repurpose local heritage. The Community Improvement District pilots illustrate how a focus on care as well as commerce can bring new ideas into local high streets. Kilburn CID in northwest London employed 'community activators' to reach out to groups and individuals who were previously under-represented within formal structures. Their starting point was to work with existing organisations that had been identified as potential 'changemakers' such as Kilburn State of Mind, a local learning and skills charity, as well as cultural organisations such as Kiln Theatre. Several CIDs focused on listening the voices of young people, and some (such as Wolverton in Milton Keynes) highlighted the need to engage with specific communities, such as those of South Asian heritage.

3.4.2 Ending zones of exclusion

There has been a notable increase in consumer preference for quasi-public spaces (most prominently out-of-town shopping centres) over the traditional high street in recent years. Such spaces are desirable because they offer security for visitors, largely through 'codes of conduct' that exclude unwanted citizens and undesirable behaviour³⁰. Often this removes vulnerable groups, such as people experiencing street homelessness and young people who are meeting without engaging in shopping or other forms of consumption.

In response, there is a growing trend towards the securitisation of high streets to mimic the assurances of safety that shopping centres offer. One way that this occurs is via Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs), an anti-social behaviour (ASB) tool introduced in 2014. PSPOs can be introduced in any public space within a local authority's jurisdiction (including town and small city high streets), regulating *any* ASB that causes a 'detrimental effect on the quality of life' to other public space users. Punishments include a £100 fixed-penalty notice (FPN) or a £1,000 fine.

Archer³¹ has researched *how* and *why* local authorities introduce PSPOs, sampling nine local authorities in England. He found that PSPOs were common in

²⁸ Tronto, J. (2015). *Who Cares?: How to Reshape a Democratic Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell Selects).

²⁹ Trogal, K. (2017). 'Caring: Making Commons, Making Connections'. In *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture*. Routledge.

³⁰ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/international-and-comparative-criminal-justice-and-urban-governance/from-the-shopping-mall-to-the-street-corner-dynamics-of-exclusion-in-the-governance-of-public-space/9DB575A09FAA4CDA8FD729BDF12E4E3C>

³¹ Archer, B. (forthcoming). *Investigating the implementation of Public Spaces Protection*

town and city centres, regardless of the level of socioeconomic disadvantage that these public spaces experienced. Three had regulations on begging, and the majority had restrictions on alcohol/intoxicating substance consumption (largely attributed to people experiencing street homelessness)³². The rationale for introducing a PSPO was in part to re-encourage once-deterred citizens back into the area; participants sometimes referenced the 'Broken Windows Theory'³³ in justifying why a PSPO was necessary to reverse negative perceptions of a space.

While the use of earlier ASB tools and powers sought to simply displace unwanted citizens (embodying an 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality), Archer found PSPOs were used to force, sometimes coercively, people experiencing street homelessness towards service provider support. Practitioners also recognised that some groups, such as young people, had few options for socialisation other than 'hanging around' in such sites, and therefore were treated with more tolerance. Work by other colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University has explored the impact of PSPO enforcement against people experiencing street homelessness³⁴. They found that such citizens experience routine displacement from public spaces, but such action did not produce meaningful behaviour change.

PSPOs are a troubling creation in attempting to develop 'zones of exclusion' within our high streets; a tool which Archer has argued could be increasingly used against street homeless people following the repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824.³⁵ Proposals in the current Criminal Justice Bill, specifically the powers against 'nuisance rough sleeping' and 'nuisance begging' could worsen the experience of people experiencing street homelessness (irrespective of the punishments of £2,500 fines or one-month imprisonment). This Bill specifically defines 'nuisance begging' as being present while causing 'harassment, alarm or distress':

- On public transport,
- In a station for any form of public transport, or at an entrance to or exit from any such station,
- At a bus stop, tram stop or other place where members of the public get on to, or alight from, any form of public transport,
- At a taxi rank,
- On a carriageway or cycle track,
- In any area outside business premises (whether or not the area forms part of a highway) where people are consuming food or drinks supplied by the business,
- Within 10 metres of an automated teller machine or night safe,

Orders. Sheffield Hallam University.

³²

https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237532/an_examination_of_the_scale_and_impact_of_enforcement_2017.pdf

³³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/>

³⁴ https://www.shu.ac.uk/-/media/home/research/helena-kennedy-centre/projects/pdfs/livingwithinapspo_fullreport_sept2022.pdf

³⁵ <https://mmuperu.co.uk/bjcg/articles/co-productive-approaches-to-homelessness-in-england-and-wales-beyond-the-vagrancy-act-1824-and-public-spaces-protection-orders/>

- Within 10 metres of a ticket machine, a vending machine or any other device through which members of the public obtain goods or services by making payments,
- In, or within 5 metres of, the entrance to, or exit from, retail premises, or
- In the common parts of any building containing two or more dwellings.³⁶

This list overtly states that people experiencing street homelessness are unwelcome within public spaces such as high streets. The HSRN's position is that the use of punitive tools to address the presence of vulnerable citizens (often people experiencing street homelessness) in high streets is troubling – it classifies such citizens as 'undeserving' of their role in society, often because they lack the financial means to participate in the overriding economic purpose of this environment. PSPOs should not be introduced purely to exclude vulnerable citizens; moreover, the Criminal Justice Bill 2023 (specifically its provisions around street homelessness) should not be enacted as statute. Town and small city centre high streets should embrace the diversity of citizenry within society, rather than exclude those who are most vulnerable; alternative, supportive approaches that would work collaboratively with service providers should be adopted to addressing their underlying difficulties, rather than punitive sanctions and cycles of criminality.

4 Locking value into localities

4.1 The need for economic, social and environmental resilience

We recognise that the social economy is not a substitute for the commercial economy. We argue, though, that it is foundational to the success of the wider economy, not just in generating footfall but in strengthening the local bonds and networks on which the wider economy rests. Social economy organisations can thus occupy a niche in the high street with a wider regenerative potential. There are three ways in which this happens:

i) **A niche in time.** Social businesses and community organisations can occupy vacant premises on a temporary or 'meanwhile' basis, while the private market recovers. Meanwhile Space CIC has developed an extensive portfolio of such projects. International examples such as Renew Newcastle in Australia have been widely celebrated. Such temporary interventions may become permanent if they find long-term support or a commercially viable business model, or they may animate space sufficiently to allow the private market to recover. However, there is a risk that such activities may simply support gentrification processes, excluding in the long term the entrepreneurs and activists who have made the initial investments³⁷.

³⁶ Criminal Justice Bill 2023, section 49.

³⁷ Munzner, K. & Shaw, K. (2014). Renew Who? Benefits and Beneficiaries of Renew Newcastle. *Urban Policy and Research*, 33, 17–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2014.967391>

ii) **A niche in space.** Community-led organisations can cluster within groups of vacant buildings, creating a sense of variety and activity greater than can be achieved through the repurposing of a single shop or office building. In doing so they build a local reputation and identity. Midsteeples Quarter in Dumfries, where community-based arts organisations are seeking to acquire buildings in line with a locally-led masterplan for the area, is a well-known example. Hastings Commons, working more organically, has a similar place-based focus.

iii) **A niche in the market.** Community-led organisations pursue activities that might not always be commercially viable, from community arts to repair cafes. These activities usually have a social focus, aiming to be inclusive and affordable and catering specifically to marginalised or vulnerable groups. In doing so they open the high street to new people, adding diversity to what can often be a monochromatic mix of traditional high street activities.

4.2 Economic value beyond consumption

Our work with community-led organisations highlights that it is important to resource activities that build non-market value. We would however caution that 'community high streets' are not an easy solution or quick fix. Building community capacity requires long-term support and commitment, although unlike many regeneration projects this is not capital-intensive.

Building on the idea of community businesses as a niche in which new thinking and practices are developed, it is possible, though, to foresee the development of community-oriented high streets in which community businesses and organisations are key players. In some respects this would be a reworking of the traditional high street of the past, where public services, faith and voluntary groups played a significant part in the mix of uses alongside retail, offices and living space. A central role of community businesses in such locations would be one of reintegration: binding back together the different groups and interests that make up the 'community' in any space, rather than privileging commercial uses. Our research³⁸ showed five ways in which community businesses could contribute to such a process of reintegration.

- i) **Diversity:** Community-led activities and organisations bring in people who might not otherwise feel welcome or included in retail-dominated high streets. Those who are vulnerable or minoritised do not always feel commercial spaces are geared to their needs or tastes. Community businesses can provide traditional high street activities such as cafes or arts spaces in ways that are often more welcoming and accepting than those offered by their commercial counterparts.
- ii) **Dwell time:** Community organisations often offer activities, from arts to co-working, that keep people in a location for longer than a typical shopping trip would do. The longer a person spends in a place, the more likely they are to use more than one facility there - someone spending a day in a co-working space, for example, may also visit a

³⁸ Dobson (2022).

- local cafe for lunch or for meetings, and may then go to a pub or cultural attraction after work.
- iii) **Resilience:** Because of their combination of business and social missions, community businesses often have a commitment to place that is limited among purely commercial investors. They are likely to be rooted in a locality and to look creatively at ways to adapt if their business model is not successful. They work from an ethic of care rather than profit, which reduces the risk of being caught up in cycles of boom and bust.
 - iv) **Reinvestment:** Community businesses reinvest in the communities they serve. They often have organisational structures that stress public rather than private benefits – Community Benefit Societies, for example, established under the 2014 Cooperative and Community Benefit Societies Act, are run by shareholding members and are required by law to act ‘for the benefit of the community’; while Community Interest Companies (CICs) can make a profit but cannot be sold for private gain. Where they take over empty buildings, whether as tenants or owners, they invest in the building’s fabric and reverse the visual and reputational damage caused by dereliction. They often reinvest on multiple fronts, providing a variety of social benefits by repurposing vacant buildings: there might be community activities on one floor, co-working or offices on another, and affordable housing above them. Because community businesses are generally owned or managed by their members (the average community business has around 200 members involved in governance), local accountability and reinvestment is built in.³⁹
 - v) **Leadership and governance:** Community businesses offer opportunities for ‘local champions’ - individuals who are passionate about the places where they live and get stuck into activities to improve those places. But alongside visionary leadership goes partnership and accountability, and community businesses can assist with this too, widening participation in town centre governance and working with local people to listen to and amplify their concerns and ideas.

4.3 The need to lock in community value

High street regeneration needs to lead to sustainable change, not short-term fixes that are jeopardised when investors want to cash in or move on. This means investing in communities that have (or could have) a long-term stake in a place. Migrant communities, for example, often catalyse economic activity and new community connections, providing shops and cultural facilities for newcomers who are overlooked by commercial investors.

³⁹ See Archer, T et al. (2019) *Our assets, our future: the economies, outcomes and sustainability of assets in community ownership*. Power to Change Research Institute Report No. 21. Available at: <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Assets-Report-DIGITAL-1.pdf>

We have identified four stages of community-led high street regeneration that can lead to sustainable change. These should be enabled through a national programme of support. These stages are: (i) engagement and vision setting; (ii) place activation; (iii) short term interventions; (iv) property ownership, development and revenue generation. These stages need to be resourced by:

- community leaders or activators who can facilitate conversations, welcome less-heard and marginalised groups and create inclusive visions
- organisations with local credibility and sufficient infrastructure (capabilities and networks) to deliver events and activities
- organisations with legal status (or the backing of an incorporated partner) to cover insurance and overheads and enter into contracts
- organisations with sound, transparent governance and a mature approach to risk management as well as access to specialist skills (surveying, property management, business planning etc)

At each stage resources should be made available commensurate with the local organisations' maturity, ambition, infrastructure and capabilities. In our view, a national programme is required in which communities wishing to pursue a community leadership in their high streets should receive sufficient resources to cover:

- A project manager or coordinator for a minimum of three years
- The cost of community-based peer researchers or community activators/organisers for initial groundwork
- Facilitation and expert advice tailored to the needs of the community
- Access to expert advice and funding for publicity, branding and community engagement
- Access to a capital fund to acquire, repair and repurpose property, along the lines suggested in Power to Change's call for a High Street Buyout Fund.⁴⁰

4.4 Design for the public good

There is no shortage of innovative and engaging design initiatives focusing on 'more than market' agendas on the high street. We Made That's 'High streets for all' study sets out some important recommendations that chime with our concerns to promote diversity, social value and community leadership⁴¹, drawing on its finding that nearly half (45%) of high street visits in London neighbourhoods were not primarily concerned with shopping.

We would especially commend design approaches that seek to stimulate social interaction within and without economic transactions (such as the Ridley's

⁴⁰ See [Why now is the time for a High Street Buyout Fund - Power to Change](#)

⁴¹ <https://www.wemadethat.co.uk/projects/high-streets-for-all-study>

temporary restaurant in Hackney, a project by The Decorators in collaboration with Atelier Chan Chan, which worked within the market's existing infrastructure to stimulate bartering transactions). While some design initiatives focus on improving appearances to minimise the effects of perceived decline, others try to tackle systemic issues. Our own design work with Studio Polpo⁴² ranges from an interactive 'High Street of Exchanges' exhibition in the British Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale⁴³ framing the high street as community infrastructure to initiating Sheffield Community Land Trust, a community interest company pursuing a 'potentially groundbreaking project'⁴⁴ to purchase and retrofit a high street building to create permanently affordable housing, business and community spaces⁴⁵.

4.5 Enabling community asset ownership

While initiatives such as the Community Ownership Fund are welcome and should be developed as a permanent part of the funding landscape, the UK system of property ownership, landlord and tenant relationships, and business taxation tends to militate against efforts to bring empty property back into use for community benefit. Property owners are often perceived as inflexible and more interested in the book value of their assets than in the uses they could serve. Community organisations often struggle to find suitable properties at the right price, or to get access to them when they have discovered the owners. Negligent ownership, where landlords sit on a vacant building in the hope of cashing in on upturns in the property market, is a recurring problem.

Meanwhile Space has worked for a decade to broker deals to bring empty spaces back into temporary use for community groups and businesses, and while it has grown significantly it cannot meet the demand for its services. It has shown the need for community organisations to receive property advice from experts who know the local market to put them on a par with commercial investors.

Community organisations value assistance in getting 'the right property at the right price in the right place'. The help needed ranges from the temporary - sorting out 'meanwhile' licences to enable community businesses to use property on a short-term basis - to long-term issues such as asset transfer and community ownership. They need access to information, as it is often hard to know who owns a high street property, and brokerage so they can negotiate with owners and their agents. If they are not buying property, community businesses need sufficient security of tenure to enable them to plan with confidence and invest both in the fabric of buildings and the activities that go on within them.

⁴² Cristina Cerulli and Julia Udall are also directors of the architecture practice Studio Polpo: www.studiopolpo.com

⁴³ <https://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/the-garden-of-privatised-delights/high-street>

⁴⁴ <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/is-sheffields-high-street-ready-for-a-post-retail-future-2>

⁴⁵ <http://www.studiopolpo.com/#sheffield-clt>

4.6 Greener, more biodiverse town centres

There is extensive evidence that greener, more biodiverse places where people can connect with nature are more welcoming and better for physical and mental health. The health and wellbeing benefits of green spaces have been widely researched⁴⁶ and there is no reason why high streets should continue to be sterile, hard-surfaced environments designed for vehicles rather than people. There are already some welcome signs that local authorities are beginning to make their high streets and town centres greener. Sheffield's celebrated Grey to Green scheme, for example, combines urban greening, promotion of biodiversity and improved flood resilience; Stockton's replacement of a redundant shopping centre with a new urban park has been widely reported. Such activities can happen on a smaller scale too: the regeneration of Villette Road, a neighbourhood high street in Hendon, Sunderland, includes hanging baskets designed to attract pollinating insects, as well as improvement of a park at one end of the street, creating a more pleasant environment for local people.

4.7 Beyond parking: reducing congestion while improving access

Alongside the growing challenge of climate change and the need to reduce carbon emissions, towns and small cities struggle with issues of congestion and poor air quality; public transport is often poor and pedestrian and cycle routes are patchy. Ideas of the 15-minute or 20-minute neighbourhood are now being taken seriously by many local authorities. The idea that everyone should be able to access all their everyday needs within a 15- or 20-minute walk or cycle journey is particularly relevant to the development of high streets, which even in current circumstances can provide a template for well-connected communities.

While some parking may always be required near high streets to support those with limited mobility, this does not have to be on the street and it is not necessary for private vehicles to compete with pedestrians in town centres. Sheffield Hallam University has experts on active travel who can provide evidence on these issues⁴⁷, and numerous international studies of best practice are available⁴⁸.

We recognise that active travel, while preferable, is not possible for everyone and convenience is often a driving factor, especially for those with reduced mobility or for families. However, convenience for individual visitors should not make the overall town centre environment worse for everyone through congestion and pollution. Accessible, reliable and affordable public transport is therefore key to the future of high streets, especially in locations that may serve a wide rural or semi-rural catchment area. Demand-responsive transport

⁴⁶ See, for example, the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Space to Thrive report, available at: [Space to Thrive report | The National Lottery Heritage Fund](#)

⁴⁷ See [Active Travel Portfolio Research and Evaluation Programme | Sheffield Hallam University \(shu.ac.uk\)](#)

⁴⁸ See, for example, the Transit-Friendly Streets report at [Transit-Friendly Streets: Design and Traffic Management Strategies to Support Livable Communities | Publications – Project for Public Spaces \(pps.org\)](#)

systems⁴⁹, free town centre shuttle buses, and affordable park and ride schemes can all make a contribution.

5 Why we need to focus on community-led governance

Our work with Power to Change on Community Improvement Districts⁵⁰ highlighted the importance of building trust as a foundation for decision-making. While the moves towards wider partnerships in the government's Long-Term Plan for Towns⁵¹ are welcome, we consider a formal role for community-led organisations is needed in high street regeneration as local voices are routinely sidelined in development and planning decisions. Locally accountable organisations should be regarded as equal players in decisions on the future of their high streets, recognising that their long-term investment of time and skills matters as much as commercial investors' input of capital.

Community-led organisations also need financial support. This is not just a question of making grants and loans available. What they often value most is a 'leg up' - actions that may be small in themselves but can level the playing field between a community organisation and a private enterprise. Catalytic funds are particularly important: money that helps community organisations develop their plans, capacity and business cases before taking on a property.

There are times when larger sums of capital are required, and community-led organisations need to be able to borrow at preferential rates. The proposed High Street Buyout Fund could be a national response to this challenge.

Key to the success of any of these actions is the establishment of trusted and trusting relationships. Power to Change's guidance on setting up Community Improvement Districts highlights the importance of trust-building activities.⁵² The guidance sets out five key principles, quoted below:

- Be imaginative. Community-led approaches can be more agile and more creative than many others: think big! This is about leadership, and about developing leadership in local people
- Doing something – an activity, an event or a conversation, can generate trust and galvanise further action
- Who isn't at the table is sometimes as important as who is – both in terms of less heard voices and powerful ones
- Change moves at the pace of trust, and building trust can take time
- Governance should come after engagement and visioning – form follows function

⁴⁹ See, for example, Coutinho, F. et al. (2020). 'Impacts of Replacing a Fixed Public Transport Line by a Demand Responsive Transport System: Case Study of a Rural Area in Amsterdam'. *Research in Transportation Economics*, Thredbo 16 conference, 83 (November): 100910. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.retrec.2020.100910>.

⁵⁰ Dobson et al., 2023

⁵¹ See [Our Long-Term Plan for Towns - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

⁵² Swade, K. and Dobson, J. (2023). Getting started with community improvement districts. Available at: [PTC_CID_Guidance.pdf \(powertochange.org.uk\)](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/PTC_CID_Guidance.pdf)



A COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT APPROACH

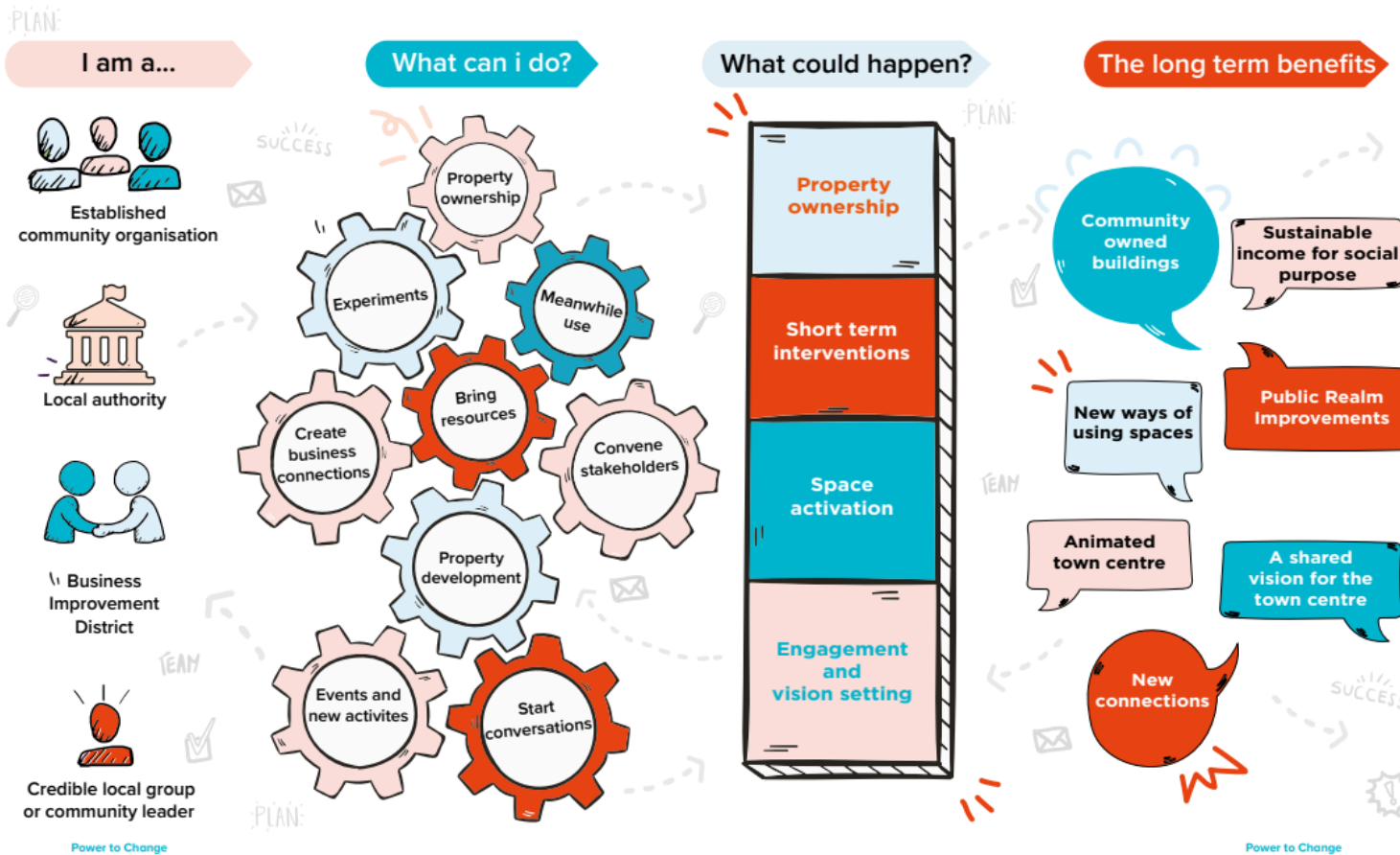


Figure 1: A Community Improvement District Approach

The visual above, taken from the guidance document, illustrates how different voices within a community can contribute to this process of high street regeneration. This is a fluid and dynamic process that will look different in each location, but the underpinning principles are common, and we would recommend them as a conversation-starter.

21 March 2024