

# The Future of the High Streets

Non-Verbatim Minutes



The Devolution  
All-Party Parliamentary Group

<b>Date</b>	Wednesday 17 May 2023
<b>Time</b>	13:30 – 14:30
<b>Venue</b>	Room M, Portcullis House Hybrid meeting supported by Zoom for virtual delegates.
<b>Chair</b>	<b>Andrew Lewer MBE MP</b> Member of Parliament for Northampton South, Chair of the Devolution APPG.
<b>Speakers</b>	<b>Valentine Quinio</b> , Senior Analyst at Centre for Cities <b>Sonia Cubrilo</b> , Director of IntoPlaces & Fellow of the Institute of Place Management <b>Cllr Fraser Tinsley</b> – Chartered Town Planner and Councillor on Durham County Council

## NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

Chair of the APPG for Devolution, **Andrew Lewer MP** convened the meeting and gave background on the group and previous focuses. He noted the LUHC Committee has investigated some of the group's previous topics including wider union devolution as well as more localised English devolution including the future of the high streets specifically after the pandemic. Local government has had a period of austerity which has had an impact on the ability to develop communities through residential and commercial development.

Andrew introduced **Valentine Quinio**, Senior Analyst at Centre for Cities.

Valentine introduced herself and explained that the Centre for Cities is a research body and think tank which examines how to improve economic performance of cities across the UK. The Centre for Cities has looked into high streets particularly before the pandemic, looking specifically at the geography of the streets.

She noted more recent research looks at the impact of the pandemic on the high streets. This research modelled the shape of recovery necessary. The high street refers to a collection of high streets which all have unique issues and while some have been struggling with empty shops and lower footfall, some have been doing well, therefore lessons need to be learned from places that are thriving.

Three points emerged from the research. Firstly, the pandemic has turned the performance of the high street on its head. Places that were doing well before have taken the biggest hit. Previous reliance on commuter and weekday spending has declined as work from home becomes more popular.

The second point is that the shift to online shopping has become larger and has significantly impacted fashion and retail sectors. Covid accelerated trends which were already happening. She noted that high streets and city centres have largely bounced back, but challenges that face high

streets still vary across the country. Although there has been a return to the office, it is still not at the same level pre-pandemic, thus presenting a challenge as to how to address the 'new normal'. Performance of the high street needs to be considered in the context of the wider economy.

Thirdly, some places where retail and fashion are the dominant sectors, need to incorporate the experience economy to improve the resilience of the high street.

Andrew thanked Valentine and introduced **Cllr Fraser Tinsley**.

Fraser explained he is a County Councillor representing a former mining town in County Durham with a population of around 10,000 people. It is a 'Red Wall' area, and the High Street is in an area which ranks with the highest levels of deprivation in England.

He noted the high street has the classic signs of high street decay with vacancies at 15-20%, vast underutilisation, a proliferation of Hot Food Takeaways, and anti-social behaviour and crime.

He advised he is a Chartered Town Planner with over 20 years' experience and identified three key themes of addressing high street decay. Firstly, there is a need to address changing space usage patterns. Currently, existing economic activity could occur in 50% of floorspace in his area, pointing to a clear need to downsize or repurpose. His hometown of Willington town did wholesale urban regeneration post-war in the 1960s. There is fragmented ownership patterns in many of our particularly smaller town High Streets are a major impediment to repurposing. Devolution offers the potential to speed up site assembly and revisions to Compulsory Purchase Orders.

Secondly, there are opportunities from crisis. The reality is that there are three key crisis or challenges in our urban space and by overspill rural space High Street. Commercial Activity in High Streets need to be condensed. There are opportunities for Housing to replace commercial floorspace. Compared to the average European country, Britain today has a backlog of 4.3 million homes that are missing from the national housing market as they were never built. The UK is falling short on the previous 300,000 homes constructed each year target. Multiple house builders are ready to move into these areas to build more homes alongside housing associations and devolution has an opportunity to shape this. In relation to net zero over 30% of existing housing stock in many areas is terraced meaning EV charging is difficult, thus presenting an opportunity to repurpose high streets for communal charging points or carshare which can increase footfall in town centres.

Lastly, although there are common issues between high streets, an effective solution is different in different contexts. His experience is that initiatives in towns a few miles apart can have very different outcomes. Local communities require tools including funding and legislation, as well as capacity through professional support. He noted that bidding culture is wasting resources. Levelling Up Bid. A needs-based approach assessed at Mayoral level would be beneficial.

Mechanisms are currently not effective, particularly at the small-town level, to deliver fundamental change. The damage to a community from a failing High Street are underestimated in terms of wellbeing, cohesion and community pride. Conversely the benefits of effective intervention are also underestimated.

Action is required at National, Mayoral and local level. One of the main benefits that devolution can bring is Mayoral Authorities putting the tools in the hands of local communities. Many of the areas with the worst issues have the least community capacity to address them. That's the key challenge for devolution to address.

Andrew thanked Fraser and introduced **Sonia Cubrilo**.

Sonia noted that devolution has had some impact and benefits transferring powers and funding from Whitehall to the Town Hall or Combined Authorities, but the real question is, is that power meaningful and effective to bring about place based change?

She explained that IntoPlace and the IPM/High Street Task Force (HSTF) are finding that current models of devolution do not go far enough. Every high street and town centre has a unique set of

challenges, although 'symptoms' may look the same (vacancy, falling footfall, crime and ASB etc.), solutions need to be different and bespoke to that place.

An example of this from HSTF is the Place Making Programme. They fall into two camps, those which are well-attended because the local authority is tuned into the movers and shakers in a place and those where few turn up. One organisation working with the HSTF said there are no local events organisers, but further research highlighted there were in fact many. This points to a disconnect between place and the local authority.

There currently exists a very prescribed and formulaic approach in regard to how place is viewed. Local Authorities commission big consultancies to produce glossy masterplans and ask the community if they like it. There is an emphasis placed on building something for the sake of it, leading to some places being left behind.

For many of our town centres this simply isn't impactful. This approach persists because of a lack of professional understanding and skills both within elected members and officers around genuine cross sectoral place transformation measures – so funds and powers can be transferred but unless there is a clear and recognised path to ensure those funds and powers are used in the right way at a community place level then outcomes will be suboptimal.

What we are finding is that:

- Change is being pursued but is not consistent with best practice and challenges and interventions are not local enough.
- There is way too much emphasis being put on strategy and not action.
- Building relationships with business and maintaining community engagement is not valued by a majority of local authorities.
- The role of local place leaders and their visions is not respected.
- --and there are too few resources allocated to bring about changes required.

Devolved high streets need place management and leadership capacity and capability. At the moment this is patchy across England. There are lots of examples of the deficit across the country and Council's that we are working with.

What should devolution for high streets mean? It should be about supporting local place leadership, through multi-sector partnerships made up of key local interests, setting local visions that address challenges/opportunities as well as overseeing the day-to-day management and activation of place.

Devolution needs professional place management capacity - so that visions are delivered. Look at what BIDs achieve with their place management capacity. There are lots of examples of the positive difference place leadership and management can make. This type of devolution needs the support of a professional body for place. There is evidence of this approach working well in Aldershot, Altrincham, Bristol, Holmfirth and Shrewsbury.

Sonia spoke of her experience of Altrincham's successful regeneration, From a starting point where in 2010, during a recession, the town was named as the worst town in the country with more than 30% vacancies, of which 99% were in private ownership. With a plethora of neglected, vacant and boarded up buildings, stalled developments, empty prime sites, a lack of investor confidence and the Trafford Centre nearby, Altrincham was beset by apathy and a lack of vision, leadership or appeal. Crime and anti-social behaviour were increasing, independents were going under and socially, culturally and economically, the town was hitting rock bottom, described as a 'complete cauldron of despair'.

Though the Council had a masterplan for Altrincham, which delivered new residential units in the town centre, a cinema and ice rink, none of these changes fundamentally changed the heart of the town centre. The Council recognised it couldn't solve all the issues Altrincham were suffering at the time and it fundamentally had to rethink the regeneration plans to build wider ownership and find local solutions to its problems.

The council made a call to action to key town stakeholders – resident’s groups, civic community, landlords and businesses to start to re-imagine what the town centre should be. Altrincham, who had been given Market Town status in 1290, and the group looked all aspects of the town, including its architecture, economy, history, unique selling points, competitors and problems. The past informed the future and focused them on developing a vision of a Modern Market Town which has buzz: "A town centre which is easy to use and is a vibrant place where small independent businesses can thrive alongside major chains providing a destination experience".

These discussions led to a broader partnership under ‘Altrincham Forward’, a partnership of public, private and community, based on the high street, and became a pivotal tipping point for a renewed confidence and belief. A strategy and operational plan covering Economy, People and Place was developed, driven and led by the people from the community and facilitated by the council. New relationships, new conversations and working groups, a new landlords forum, and new momentum led to a £.05m private investment and £120,000 of public money as things started to change; an Enterprise Hub launched, environmental projects underway, together with a rich programme of community events.

By 2013, Investors regained interest, units were being improved and let again, public confidence was rising, small businesses started re-emerging, the market was redeveloped for and by independent food businesses, and the decline in town centre footfall reversed. The cultural view of Altrincham changed. This momentum continued, with a successful BID secured in 2015, the redevelopment of the hospital, and investors who had left started to return. From being top of the wrong table in 2010, seven years later vacancy rates had reduced by 73%, the market generated £1m in VAT for the Exchequer and was a significant contributing factor to the change in perception. Local spend increased massively and the town has seen a major and sustained increase in footfall. External developments got underway such as the transport interchange, the hospital and mixed, high quality residential/business investment, providing important landmarks of purpose. All this work by the people of the town was recognised when Altrincham won the Great British High Streets Award in 2018.

Sonia explained that the key learning of essentials for place transformation was that “People make Places and by working collectively together they can transform a town in a few short years” .... not having to wait for physical master plans that can take up to 10 to 20 years to make a real difference.

- Leadership - this is fluid, changes as the journey progresses, and must be collective in nature.
- Energy, enthusiasm and trust in this collective team are the bedrocks on which things develop.
- Sharing knowledge constantly, experts can be helpful to get discussions started, blending this with local knowledge.
- Encouraging partnership working can unlock additional resources, expertise and funding for town centres.
- communication must flow widely, openly and quickly, it can't get held up by cumbersome sign offs and approvals processes.
- Ensure young people don't feel excluded from and disenfranchised by the decision-making process, it is their future, they bring ideas and new thinking.
- The coordination role is vital - from planning, infrastructure, knowledge sharing to communications.

In addition, we shouldn’t underestimate the power of communities – give Community acquiring Public Hall through crowd funding in Stretford as an example.

Andrew thanked Sonia and opened the **discussion and question and answer section**.

Andrew asked the panellists if they have had any interactions with Business Improvement Districts (BID) and what they see the future role of that body.

Sonia referenced the previous example of Altrincham and that the businesses would have said no to a BID but that increasing the foot traffic was more beneficial. Four years later the BID is going quite well.

Andrew asked if the money helped with the market restoration?

Sonia said that the market was a product of stakeholder consultation to try and develop a mini-Covent Garden of sorts. The Council helped facilitate that process. The provider had never delivered something like this before and although there were risks attached, it worked out well.

Valentine noted that BIDs are usually successful structure as it helps to bring together smaller community voices that may not have a way to express their interests otherwise. The process also helps share good practice.

Fraser said that BIDs allow for more effective communication. Devolution is key to successful community building and BIDs should be transformed into a bigger more strategic process.

Andrew asked about the difference consumer spending power versus the fabric of the local high street?

Valentine said flourishing high streets either have residents that live nearby or that it is the place where people based further away come to shop. A key part of successful high streets is making them accessible.

Andrew asked about the types of consumers who are central to successful highstreets.

Valentine noted that there are day-time consumers and night-time consumers, as well as weekend consumers. As day-time consumers are not as frequent compared to pre-covid levels, catering to night-time and weekend consumers has been more successful in some areas.

Fraser added that in his area the town centre is not open when locals want to use it. To draw those in from further afield there needs to be a draw, something people want or need to incentivise them to visit.

Sonia said there is evidence that that trend is changing. Projects undertaken in Manchester surveyed footfall and consumer patterns and the results led to a change in opening hours. Being more multifunctional draws more people in.

Andrew opened the floor to online participants. **Kamal Panchal, a Senior adviser on transport for the LGA**, asked a question about the HSTF and partnerships. He noted that reaching out to elected members has been lacking in the HSTF and expressed his concerns about this given the HSTF makes decisions about funding.

Sonia replied that the HSTF does placemaking programmes to include elected members or council leaders take part. She said she would take the observation back as an action point.

Andrew noted Fraser's point about the downsides of bidding for levelling up funding and asked if the Share Prosperity Fund was any better?

Fraser said the fundamental problem is that a bids-based culture raises expectations and that a large amount of resources went into the bid with, on that occasion, an unsuccessful outcome.

Valentine agreed with Fraser that the funding process is fragmented. Flexibility is needed for local leaders to attribute the funds to the appropriate project of community need.

Sonia said the same energy and resources put into bidding should be put into understanding who local stakeholders are. Andrew agreed and noted that those in Whitehall likely do not understand the local needs of communities. Andrew noted Warwickshire Town's best practice for high streets suggested in the meeting chat.

Andrew asked what the future of the high street will be to the panellists. Sonia said people will want to see more services and sectors on their doorstep meaning local highstreets have a positive future. There is a need for multifunctional high streets.

Valentine said there is a positive outlook for high streets as they have survived the past three years. Striking the right balance of retail, experience, and other sectors will be essential to high street survival in the years ahead.

Andrew thanked all the participants for their insights and contributions and closed the meeting.