



HOUSE OF LORDS

COVID-19 Committee

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2nd Report of Session 2021–22

# **Towns and Cities: Local Power is the Path to Recovery**

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### *COVID-19 Committee*

The Select Committee on COVID-19 was appointed on 13 May 2021 to consider the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social wellbeing of the United Kingdom

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The Members of the Select Committee on COVID-19 are:

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<a href="#"><u>Baroness Benjamin</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho</u></a> (Chair)
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### *Declaration of interests*

See Appendix 1.

A full list of Members' interests can be found in the Register of Lords' Interests:

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Towns and cities are vital to the social and economic wellbeing of the UK, as they provide many of us with the building blocks for our lives—housing, public transport, green spaces, workspaces, public services, leisure opportunities. If towns and cities become dilapidated, with poor housing and green spaces, limited public transport, public services, and leisure opportunities, it is inevitable that people’s wellbeing will suffer. If towns and cities are vibrant, with a plentiful supply of high-quality housing and green spaces, reliable and affordable public transport, and a wide range of public services, workspaces and leisure opportunities, people’s wellbeing will tend to improve and people may feel better about themselves and their lives.

Towns and cities are at the very heart of our country, with approximately 55% of the population living in these urban areas, and these areas representing approximately 60% of the economy on a jobs and output measure.<sup>1</sup> This is why our inquiry has concentrated on towns and cities, and specifically on larger towns and smaller cities—defined as cities outside London and the 11 core cities of Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of towns and cities to re-building and reimagining our country in light of the pandemic, is fundamental. We heard time and again that the most successful towns and cities blend housing, retail, workplaces, and leisure, and this is at the heart of our proposals for towns and cities. While we acknowledge that towns, smaller cities and larger cities will all require a different approach, we hope that our report, and its recommendations, will provide a proposal for the vibrant, sustainable towns and cities of the future that can help improve social and economic wellbeing.

Underlying our plan for the future of towns and cities is a need to empower town and city leadership. We want to see:

- The UK Government outlining, in its Levelling Up White Paper, its plans for further financial and legislative devolution of powers, to enable local authority leaders to deliver regeneration policies tailored to the needs of their specific areas;
- The Treasury Select Committee and Lords’ Economic Affairs Committee undertaking a detailed inquiry into the potential for introducing a new hypothecated online sales tax, paid by the consumer, to balance decreasing revenue from business rates;
- The UK Government introducing three-year rolling local government financial settlement, at an increased level; and
- The UK Government agreeing with the Local Government Association to create an improved resource equalisation scheme.

As we noted above, our most successful towns and cities have a strong blend of housing, retail, workplaces and leisure opportunities. To bring about this blended approach in all our towns and cities, we want to see:

1 [Q 2](#) (Andrew Carter)

2 Core Cities UK, ‘The 11 core cities’: <https://www.corecities.com/cities> [accessed 4 November 2021]

- The UK Government providing financial support to local authority leaders to enable the establishment of work hubs, pop-up retail units and arts and culture provision in our towns and cities;
- The UK Government working with local authorities to develop a blended approach to housing in our towns and cities; and
- The UK Government working with local authorities to develop a blended approach to public service provision in our towns and cities.

We want to see tackling inequalities at the heart of local authorities' regeneration plans by:

- Developing a method for actively engaging with the different groups, communities and neighbourhoods within their towns and cities, and ensuring that these views are acted upon in developing their regeneration plans;
- Ensuring that investment in housing, public transport, public services and green spaces in town and city centres, is matched by the same investment in housing, public transport, public services and green spaces in those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind; and
- Developing a process for mainstreaming the consideration of inequalities when assessing proposals for improving housing, green spaces, public transport provision and public services, and ensuring that the views, and needs, of specific groups and communities are at the heart of the decision-making process.

Our inquiry has explored the impact of COVID-19 on towns and cities, and how it has changed our relationship with, and the dynamic within, those urban areas. It has concentrated on the long-term impact of the pandemic on large towns and smaller cities, focussing particularly on housing and green spaces, the changing nature of employment and public transport provision. Building on the evidence received from businesses, town planners, transport providers, think tanks and academics, we then explored, with local authority leaders, the potential to develop and implement an innovative proposal for the future of our towns and cities.

As with our previous work, policies relating to many of the issues discussed in our report, including housing, transport and local government, are largely devolved in the United Kingdom. We heard evidence from businesses, town planners, public transport providers and local authority leaders across the UK, but our conclusions and recommendations focus on the situation in England. While addressing our recommendations to the UK Government, we believe that the governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales will find our report useful in considering the future of towns and cities, and their role in shaping this future.



# Towns and Cities: Local Power is the Path to Recovery

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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### The Committee, its remit and previous work

1. Following its appointment in June 2020, to consider the long-term implications of the pandemic on the economic and social wellbeing of the UK, the COVID-19 Committee invited individuals and organisations from across the country to share their hopes and fears about what the pandemic might mean in the long-term for their daily lives.<sup>3</sup> We asked people to look several years into the future, and tell us about the challenges that we will need to overcome and the opportunities to do things better post-pandemic.
2. Eight broad themes emerged from our work:
  - Inequality and poverty;
  - Digital technology;
  - Children and young people;
  - Work and employment;
  - Mental health and wellbeing;
  - The environment;
  - The built environment and green spaces; and
  - Healthcare and social care.
3. During our first substantive inquiry, we explored how our rapidly increasing reliance on digital technology, accelerated by the pandemic, may have a long-term impact on our economic and social wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> This work was followed by a short inquiry considering how issues such as school closures, reduced opportunities for social and leisure activities outside the home and home working or furlough had impacted parents and families.<sup>5</sup>

### Towns and cities

4. Many towns and cities were already struggling before the COVID-19 pandemic, unable to attract higher-skilled, higher-paid work, with increasing numbers of empty retail units, and decreasing footfall. On average, town and city centres lost 8% of their shops between 2013–2018. Some towns and cities, such as Stoke on Trent and Blackpool, lost 20% of their shops,

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3 COVID-19 Committee, ‘New Committee asks people to share their views on life beyond COVID-19’ (1 July 2020): <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/460/covid19-committee/news/115318/new-committee-asks-people-to-share-their-views-on-life-beyond-covid19/>

4 COVID-19 Committee, ‘Living online: the long-term impact on wellbeing’: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/742/living-online-the-longterm-impact-on-wellbeing/>

5 COVID-19 Committee, ‘The long-term impact of the pandemic on parents and families’: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1121/the-longterm-impact-of-the-pandemic-on-parents-and-families/>

while major cities, such as Sheffield and Southampton, were also amongst the worst affected (17.8% and 15.8% of shops closing, respectively).<sup>6</sup>

5. In 2018, almost 85,000 retail jobs were lost in the UK, and in the first half of 2019, almost 12% of shopping locations—high street shops, shopping centres and retail parks—were empty.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, 25,700 shops closed their doors, leaving high streets with the highest number of empty retail outlets in five years.<sup>8</sup> This was part of a longer-term decline, with 50,000 fewer shops on our high streets in 2019, compared to 2009, and a 20% drop in the number of visitors to our high streets in the same period.<sup>9</sup>
6. This decline in our towns and cities was severely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with lockdown restrictions leading to a decrease of over 80% in footfall in towns and cities,<sup>10</sup> and over 17,500 chain stores and other venues closing in Great Britain in 2020.<sup>11</sup> Towns and cities have also suffered as online retail sales have grown during the pandemic, with online sales reaching 30% of total sales in April 2020. Even in July 2021, when restrictions had been relaxed, online retail spending sales were at 27.9% of total sales, significantly higher than the pre-pandemic figure for February 2020 (19.8%).<sup>12</sup>
7. As we heard in our *Beyond Digital* inquiry, towns and cities have also been impacted by significant job losses in retail and hospitality, with the retail sector, for example, seeing nearly 180,000 jobs lost in 2020<sup>13</sup> and the Centre for Retail Research estimating that there could be up to 200,000 jobs lost in 2021.<sup>14</sup>
8. The decline in town and city centre retail businesses, decreasing footfall and increasing online sales have exacerbated the number of empty retail units on our high streets. Taken together, these trends risk the future of our town and city centres unless we take urgent action to give our urban areas a new purpose.
9. This need for urgent action to regenerate, renew and revive our town and cities is why we decided to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on urban areas, and suggest a proposal for the future of these areas. While we acknowledge that towns, smaller cities and larger cities will all require a different approach, we trust that this report, and its recommendations, will enable all local authority leaders to reimagine their towns and cities to create sustainable local communities.

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6 'High street crisis deepens: 1 in 2 shops closed in five years', *The Guardian* (30 January 2019): <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2019/jan/30/high-street-crisis-town-centres-lose-8-of-shops-in-five-years/> [accessed 18 October 2021]

7 'What is driving the collapse of high street shops', *The Week* (7 November 2019): <https://www.theweek.co.uk/104224/what-is-driving-the-collapse-of-high-street-shops> [accessed 21 October 2021]

8 *Ibid.*

9 BBC News, 'How to save the UK's crisis-hit High Streets', (13 January 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51094109> [accessed 21 October]

10 Retail Gazette, 'UK footfall drops to lowest level on record', (15 April 2020): <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2020/04/uk-footfall-drops-to-lowest-level-on-record/> [accessed 4 October 2021]

11 BBC News, 'Pandemic impact 'yet to be felt' on High Streets', (14 March 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-56378667> [accessed 4 October 2021]

12 ONS, 'Retail sales, Great Britain: July 2021', (20 August 2021): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/july2021> [accessed 4 October 2021]

13 BBC News, 'Worst year for High Street job losses in 25 years', (1 January 2021): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-55501049> [accessed 25 November 2021]

14 *Ibid.*

10. Towns and cities are vital to the social and economic wellbeing of the UK, as they provide many of us with the building blocks for our lives—housing, public transport, green spaces, workspaces, public services, leisure opportunities. If towns and cities become dilapidated, with poor housing and green spaces, limited public transport, public services, and leisure opportunities, it is inevitable that people’s wellbeing will suffer. If towns and cities are vibrant, with a plentiful supply of high-quality housing and green spaces, reliable and affordable public transport, and a wide range of public services, workspaces and leisure opportunities, people’s wellbeing will improve and people will feel better about themselves and their lives.
11. As Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, leader of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, explained:
 

“High streets are an important barometer of how people feel about their lives. If the high street looks prosperous, they feel okay about the place. If it does not, it is like an indictment of where and how they live their life. Therefore, we all have a duty to do our best by our high streets.”<sup>15</sup>
12. Andrew Carter, Chief Executive of the Centre for Cities, agreed, noting that “whenever you ask people you find that the state of their high street really matters.”<sup>16</sup>

### The future of towns and cities

13. The importance of towns and cities to re-building and reimagining our country in light of the pandemic, is fundamental. Our aim with this report is to create a proposal for the vibrant, sustainable towns and cities of the future that can help improve social and economic wellbeing.
14. A vital first step towards implementing our plans for the future of towns and cities, and for improving the future of our urban areas, is empowering town and city leadership. We believe that a new relationship between central government and local government is crucial, to allow local authorities to take the decisions and actions needed to allow their towns and cities to flourish. For too long local authorities have been held back—lacking the resources, powers, finances, and ultimately the freedom—to take the lead in regenerating their urban areas.
15. We want to see the UK Government outlining—in its Levelling Up White Paper—its plans for further financial and legislative devolution of powers, to enable local authority leaders to deliver regeneration policies tailored to the needs of their specific areas. Beyond the need for further legislative devolution, we believe that the existing general power of competence provides local authority leaders with the potential to take on additional responsibilities, and the power to implement far-reaching regeneration projects in their towns and cities. As such, we want to see the UK Government actively encouraging local authority leaders to use the general power of competence, and providing comprehensive guidance for its operation.
16. Throughout our inquiry, we have been focusing on the long-term impacts of the pandemic on towns and cities, and have asked local authority leaders to concentrate on their plans for the long-term recovery of their urban areas. However, as local authorities have already seen significant cuts to

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15 [Q 59](#) (Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe)

16 [Q 8](#) (Andrew Carter)

their budgets since 2010, we cannot expect them to continue to accomplish more and more, with ever decreasing budgets. Rather, we believe that the regeneration agenda necessitates a comprehensive re-examination of the local government settlement. We want to see central government take this opportunity to introduce a three-year rolling local government financial settlement, at an increased level. An increased three-year settlement would balance local authority leaders' need for flexibility, with a sense of the urgency required in implementing regeneration projects.

17. Local authority leaders have stated time and again that the current competitive bidding process for additional funding from central government is unsatisfactory. Local authorities are often expected to submit funding bids to very tight deadlines, with equally tight deadlines for spending those funds. We believe that local government leaders should be given the opportunity to focus on the long-term regeneration plans and projects for their areas, rather than having to find short-term projects that fit specific funding criteria, but not the needs of their local area. As such, we want to see the UK Government agreeing with the Local Government Association to create an improved resource equalisation scheme, to ensure that additional central government funding is targeted at the towns and cities in most need.
18. We believe that it will be impossible to bring about the recovery of our towns and cities without a complete overhaul of the current business rates system. Our declining high streets, alongside the falling demand for office space, cannot continue funding the local government settlement. And without a sufficient local government settlement, local authority leaders' efforts to regenerate their towns and cities will struggle to succeed. However, we acknowledge that business rates are a large part of a business's costs, and businesses in towns and cities across the country are already struggling, and will continue to struggle, without long-term business rates relief, or a restructuring of the current system to charge small businesses a nominal amount.
19. Under the current system of local authority finances, it is impossible to both decrease the business rates collected from small businesses on our high streets, and also provide local authority leaders with extra revenue, through an increased local government settlement to fund the recovery of our towns and cities. As such, we believe that the only realistic solution is to explore options for reforming the current business rates system. Any reform of the business rates system must also level the playing field between online and offline retail sales, ensuring that online sales also contribute to the local government settlement.
20. Following its inquiry on the impact of businesses rates on business,<sup>17</sup> we would encourage the Treasury Select Committee to update this work in light of the pandemic, as well as encouraging it and the Lords Economic Affairs Committee to undertake a detailed exploration of the potential for introducing an increased VAT rate on online sales or a hypothecated online sales tax. Such a tax would be paid by the consumer and would apply to all digital initiated sales. We believe that even a small, single percentage, increase in VAT on online sales could fill the gap in local government finances resulting from decreasing business rates collected. A slightly larger increase could provide local authorities with the funds to attract, and keep,

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17 Treasury Committee, *Impact of business rates on business* (First Report, Session 2019–20, HC 222)

sole traders, repair shops and micro-businesses in town and city centres by offering business premises with zero business rates.

21. While we believe that the regeneration of town and city centres is vital to the wider recovery of towns and cities, we want to see this matched by a commitment to, and investment in, those neighbourhoods most in need. As such, we want to see the UK Government work with local authorities to develop a two-pronged, blended approach to urban regeneration and renewal. The first part of this approach will focus on developing new opportunities—pop-up retail units, work hubs and arts and culture—in towns and cities, while the second part will concentrate on investing in housing, public services, public transport and green spaces in town and city centres, as well as in those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind.
22. Underlying this blended approach to the regeneration of our towns and cities, we want to see local authorities developing a new approach to tackling inequalities, where those who are most vulnerable in our communities are active partners in developing the investment plans, and projects, that will change their lives. We believe that vulnerable groups, communities and neighbourhoods should be supported to take a lead in shaping their future, rather than having regeneration plans imposed upon them. It is only by engaging fully with specific groups and communities that we can hope to develop the services and practices that could prove to be of most help to them.
23. Working with vulnerable groups, communities and neighbourhoods, we want to see local authorities using our proposed blended approach to the regeneration of our towns and cities as a vital first step to tackling inequalities, and ensuring that no communities are left behind. We want to see investment in town and city centres matched by a commitment to, and investment in, those neighbourhoods most in need. We believe that focusing funding on those neighbourhoods most in need is a vital step to tackling inequalities between different areas and communities within towns and cities, and putting right the historical wrong of under-investment in these neighbourhoods.
24. In addition, we believe that more must be done to show that we value our local authority leaders. Throughout the pandemic, local authority leaders have acted swiftly and decisively to support their communities, proving the value of local government, and it is now time to give them the support to develop as leaders, to safeguard the long-term future of those same communities. We would encourage local authorities to invest in their current, and future, leadership by providing additional training, support and mentoring. We want to see local authority leaders having the time, resources and support to become the very best leaders, as “good leaders create followers, but great leaders create leaders”.<sup>18</sup> We want to see a culture develop whereby investing in leaders is valued in and of itself, but also as a vital step to creating the leaders of the future.
25. Beyond providing training and support for current, and future, leaders, we want to see local authorities take decisive action to improve diversity amongst their leadership. We were impressed by the local authority leaders that gave evidence to us, and our call for improved diversity is in no way a criticism

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<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

of current local authority leaders. Rather, we believe that improved diversity amongst local authority representatives, and leaders, will improve the representation of all communities within towns and cities, and strengthen the belief amongst all groups and communities that local authorities represent, and work for the benefit, of all their constituents. As such, we would urge local authorities to revise their frameworks for encouraging diversity amongst local authority members, particularly given that the pandemic has highlighted inequalities, meaning that increasing diversity amongst local authority leadership is more urgent than ever.

26. Action to tackle inequalities must not only be targeted at specific neighbourhoods, but must be mainstreamed throughout local authorities' regeneration agenda. When local authority leaders are developing their plans for improved housing, increased green spaces, increased public services, and improved public transport provision it is vital that they ensure that they are accessible to, and meet the needs of, different groups and communities within their towns and cities. Different groups and communities, such as older people, disabled people and people from minority ethnic communities, in different areas will have different needs, and there is no one-size fits all approach to creating open and accessible town and cities.
27. Local authority leaders should also use their regeneration plans as a chance to introduce specific schemes to ensure that the new opportunities in towns and cities—work hubs, pop-up retail units, arts and culture opportunities—are targeted at the needs of specific groups and communities. The exact projects most suitable to meet the differing needs of specific groups and communities will be different in different areas, and there is no one-size fits all approach for all towns and cities.

## CHAPTER 2: KEY RISKS TO TOWNS AND CITIES

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### Town and city leadership

28. We were impressed by the local authority leaders that gave evidence to our inquiry. They demonstrated their personal visions—often inspiring—for their respective localities. Local government must be central to driving forward the recovery of our towns and cities, and at the heart of this must be the visions of the future articulated by local leaders. However, if local government leaders struggle to realise their vision, because of a lack of power, resources, time or money, this could have a catastrophic impact on the future of urban areas. Towns and cities can only ever be as good as their leaders, and those leaders can only work within the parameters given to local government by central government.
29. During our oral evidence sessions, we questioned local authority leaders whether they have had the time to consider the long-term implications of the pandemic for their towns and cities, given the need to keep on top of the constantly changing COVID-19 situation in their area over the last 18 months or so. While local government leaders have been planning for the longer-term future, Alderman Stephen Martin, Mayor of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, proposed that local leaders need more time. He noted that there is a pressure and:
- “There is this focus at the present moment on time: “We need to do this; we need to do that. We have to make sure we get our quick wins”. Those are important in terms of building that confidence, but, if it takes a further period of time to bottom out where we are going to end up with Covid and the outworkings of it, it is time well spent. We should gather evidence and consider our next steps, as opposed to jumping in and making a commitment or rushing a programme out the door, only to find that was resource we could have used better in 12 months’ time”.<sup>19</sup>
30. Throughout the pandemic, local authorities have been required to act swiftly and decisively in extremely difficult circumstances. There is now a need to consider the long-term consequences for towns and cities. Local authority leaders must be given the opportunity to start to develop, and implement, policies that aim to rebuild their towns and cities in the long-term. There is a significant risk that in the rush to be seen to be reacting to the pandemic, and its impact on their area, local authorities will, because of funding deadlines, feel obliged to spend money and resources on projects that they will then come to regret. It is, therefore, vital that local government leaders are given the time, resources and support to determine what interventions are needed in their areas, without feeling under pressure to act immediately.
31. One size does not fit all and runs the risk of short-changing local communities all over the country because those at the centre do not and cannot understand their diversity. Central government cannot be expected to be the expert on each and every town and city across the country, and Whitehall civil servants cannot be expected to know what policies will work in Birkenhead

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19 [Q 80](#) (Alderman Stephen Martin)

or Brighton, Torquay or Tadcaster, Welling or Wolverhampton. As Andrew Carter described, we have a model:

“where everything turns towards Whitehall and we have to always look to Whitehall and to government for permission or funding in some form to do anything of any note in our places, which is debilitating for those places.”<sup>20</sup>

32. As such, the current system risks tying the hands of local government, with central government funding projects that may be suitable for some towns and cities, but not all urban areas. Or conversely, refusing funding applications for projects that may not be suitable for most towns and cities, but may be exactly what is needed in specific urban areas.

33. When local authority leaders have a clear plan for the future of their towns and cities the current funding model, in which local authorities are provided with annual settlements, does not allow, let alone encourage, strategic long-term planning and policy development. As Councillor Carl Smith, leader of Great Yarmouth Borough Council, stated:

“ ... We keep getting one-year settlements. We need a four-year plan. You have asked us today about our plans three to five years forward. We need to know where our funding is coming from and how we are being funded.”<sup>21</sup>

The current system, therefore, risks encouraging local authorities to adopt a pattern of short-term planning, with no long-term strategic thinking about the future of their towns and cities.

34. Beyond the one-year local government settlement, the current additional competitive funding streams for local authorities are often launched with very tight deadlines, meaning that local authority leaders are expected to prepare bids at very short notice, as Councillor Hinchcliffe stated:

“I would like to see less of us being given a few weeks’ notice under the national levelling-up fund to bid for one project that everybody and his dog has to be involved with in terms of politicians. That just leads to more politics and less long-term thinking.”<sup>22</sup>

35. Lisburn and Castlereagh Council agreed, emphasising that local authorities should be given “more lead in time” as:

“developing large projects requires additional resource (both in terms of staff and finance) as well as upfront investment just to get to the stage where a viable bid can be made for funding.”<sup>23</sup>

36. The current bidding system for additional funding risks diverting limited local authority staff resources to work on bids that may or may not be successful, rather than working on projects to regenerate the specific town or city. Moreover, as the deadlines for submitting bids for competitive funding streams are often very tight, local authorities sometime have little choice but to submit an application for funding for a project that fits the required

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20 [Q 17](#) (Andrew Carter)

21 [Q 65](#) (Councillor Carl Smith)

22 [Q 65](#) (Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe)

23 Written evidence from Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council ([PTC0049](#))

criteria, rather than the needs of their local area. Councillor Rob Stewart, leader of Swansea Council, explained:

“I am very keen that at a local level we get more powers to control our destiny in terms of knowing what it is our communities need to be successful, rather than bidding... In the recent community renewal fund process, the deadlines were so restrictive that we had to get the bids in by mid-June. They had to be projects that could be delivered by next March, so that constricts very deeply what you can do to be strategic, because then you have to find something that fits the criteria, rather than actually doing something that is the right thing to do.”<sup>24</sup>

37. The current competitive funding system also risks diverting funds to those local authorities who are most adept at submitting applications, rather than those towns and cities that need those funds most, or where those funds could make the biggest impact. Councillor Stewart also raised concerns that new government funding has a tendency to follow previous government funding:

“Often, as long as you have had funding, you get more funding; if you do not get it, you do not get it.”<sup>25</sup>

Any approach where those already benefitting from central government funding are likely to receive more funding, and those that have been unsuccessful will continue to be unsuccessful, risks creating a two-tier system of towns and cities. Those towns and cities that receive multiple funding packages will have opportunities to undertake regeneration projects, while those who are consistently unsuccessful will be left behind.

### Accelerating trends

#### *Retail*

38. As with our inquiry exploring the impact of the pandemic on our reliance on digital technology,<sup>26</sup> much of the evidence on the pandemic’s effect on towns and cities has reiterated that COVID-19 has accelerated existing trends, rather than necessarily creating new or unexpected changes.
39. Online retail sales have been growing steadily over the last 20 years or so, with online sales increasing from 2.8% of total sales in the UK in November 2006 to 18.9% of total sales in February 2020. As a result of the pandemic, by April 2020, online sales had reached 30% of total sales.<sup>27</sup> While online sales levels have fluctuated throughout the pandemic, as restrictions have been tightened and relaxed, it is worth noting that the proportion of online retail spending sales was 27.9% in July 2021, significantly higher than the pre-pandemic figure for February 2020 (19.8%).<sup>28</sup>
40. As with online retail, the demise of national and international brands and increasing empty retail units on high streets, was already a problem pre-

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24 [Q 80](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

25 [Q 86](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

26 COVID-19 Committee, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World* (1st Report, Session 2019–21, HL Paper 263)

27 BBC, ‘The curious origins of online shopping’, (27 June 2020): <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200722-the-curious-origins-of-online-shopping> [accessed 4 October 2021]

28 ONS, ‘Retail sales, Great Britain: July 2021’, (20 August 2021): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/july2021> [accessed 4 October 2021]

pandemic. Research by PwC showed that in the first half of 2019, there was a record net loss of 1,234 stores from Britain's 500 top high streets. In the same period, there was a total of 2,868 store closures, the highest number in the preceding five years.<sup>29</sup> PwC's research for 2020 suggested that more than 17,500 chain stores and other venues had closed in Great Britain in 2020. The statistics, which include hospitality and leisure, but not independent retailers, recorded 17,532 closures and 7,665 store openings, resulting in a net loss of 9,877 outlets.<sup>30</sup> This was the worst annual decline in more than a decade.

41. Exacerbating, and exacerbated by, the issues of declining high street retail businesses, increasing online sales, and increasing remote working (discussed below) is the current business rates system. Business rates are a large part of a business's costs, and while the UK Government has announced a 50% reduction in business rates for pubs, cinemas, restaurants and hotels for 2022–23,<sup>31</sup> this does not tackle the underlying concerns about the business rates system. Businesses in towns and cities across the country are struggling, and will continue to struggle without long-term business rates relief, or even a complete overhaul of the current system to charge small businesses a nominal amount.
42. However, as business rates fund a large part of the local government settlement, any reduction in business rates—because of the decline in the high street, the end of growth in office space, or business rates relief for small businesses—risks the recovery of our towns and cities. Local authority leaders are not miracle workers, and cannot be expected to regenerate and renew our towns and cities with insufficient funding.
43. Linked to both increasing online retail and increasing empty retail units in town and city centres is decreasing footfall within urban areas. Statistics show that during the first week of lockdown in March 2020, footfall on high streets in the UK fell by 84.4%, compared to the same week in March 2019.<sup>32</sup> In April 2020, footfall on UK high streets decreased by 81.8%, compared to April 2019.<sup>33</sup> Following the reintroduction of lockdown restrictions in England in November 2020, footfall levels fell by 75%, compared to November 2020.<sup>34</sup>
44. Councillor Margaret Davidson, leader of Highland Council, noted that for Inverness: “The biggest and immediate impact if you walk into our city at the moment is that the footfall around the city is 60% of what it was, and it will take some years to return to where it was.”<sup>35</sup>

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29 PwC, ‘Store openings and Closures: H1 2019’: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/industries/retail-consumer/insights/store-openings-and-closures-h1-2019.html> [accessed 5 October 2021]

30 BBC News, ‘Pandemic impact ‘yet to be felt’ on High Streets’, (14 March 2021): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-56378667> [accessed 4 October 2021]

31 BBC News, ‘Budget 2021: Business rates cut for shops, restaurants and gyms’, (27 October 2021): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59061217> [accessed 15 November 2021]

32 Retail Gazette, ‘UK footfall drops to lowest level on record’, (15 April 2020): <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2020/04/uk-footfall-drops-to-lowest-level-on-record/> [accessed 4 October 2021]

33 Insightdiy, ‘BRC Data Reveals Record Footfall Decline In April’, (18 May 2021): <https://www.insightdiy.co.uk/news/brc-data-reveals-record-footfall-decline-in-april/8468.htm> [accessed 4 November 2021]

34 ‘Footfall down 75% as England’s lockdown takes toll on retailers’, *The Guardian* (10 November 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/09/footfall-down-75-per-cent-as-england-lockdown-takes-toll-on-retailers-covid> [accessed 4 October 2021]

35 [Q 53](#) (Councillor Margaret Davidson)

45. It is almost impossible for any of us to accurately foretell what long-term impact the pandemic will have on footfall in our towns and cities, and it is only in the next five or ten years that we will learn if Councillor Davidson's prediction will become a reality.
46. The decline in high street retail businesses, decreasing footfall and increasing online sales have exacerbated the number of empty retail units on our high streets. Taken together, these trends risk not only the viability and vibrancy of our towns and cities, but their very future.

### *Work*

47. As with the increase in online retail and increasing empty retail units in town and city centres, there was already a trend for increasing home working. Home working was relatively rare in 1981, when only 1.5% of those in employment reported working mainly at home. By 2019, the proportion of workers mainly working from home had trebled to 4.7%.<sup>36</sup> The pandemic dramatically increased home working rates in the UK, with 46.6% of people in employment doing some work at home in April 2020.<sup>37</sup>
48. Of those who did some work from home, 86.0%, did so as a result of the pandemic. More than half of people living in London (57.2%) did some work at home, compared to just over a third in the West Midlands (35.3%) and Yorkshire and The Humber (37.6%)<sup>38</sup>. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland saw broadly similar proportions of home workers (approximately 40%).<sup>39</sup>
49. This varying geographical ability to work from home will mean that any increasing trend towards home working will also have a varying impact across towns and cities in the UK. Andrew Carter highlighted that:
- “the obvious draw from that is that it will have a big implication for places like Brighton or Reading, but it will not have such a significant effect in places like Burnley and Blackburn simply because of the quantum of working from home and the ability to do so over time.”<sup>40</sup>
50. Despite the differing rates of home working in different towns and cities across the UK, even a relatively modest increase in the number of people working from home for part, or all, of their working week could have a significant impact on town and city centres. In our previous inquiry, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World*,<sup>41</sup> we heard that increased home or hybrid working would have a knock-on impact on those cafes, shops and other businesses that depend on custom from commuters, with Josh Abey, a Researcher at the Fabian Society, stating that: “City centres have been a

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36 Wiserd, *Homeworking in the UK: Before and during the 2020 lockdown* (August 2020): [https://wiserd.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Homeworking\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_Report\\_Final\\_3.pdf](https://wiserd.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Homeworking_in_the_UK_Report_Final_3.pdf) [accessed 4 October 2021]

37 ONS, ‘Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK: April 2021’, (8 July 2020): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuk/april2020> [accessed 4 October 2021]

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 Q 3 (Andrew Carter)

41 COVID-19 Committee, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World*, (1st Report, Session 2019–21, HL Paper 263)

large source of concern over the pandemic because of service jobs that served commuters no longer being needed.”<sup>42</sup>

51. As such, even a relatively small increase in long-term home working risks the long-term viability of town and city centre businesses, such as cafes and coffee shops, that depend on a constant, consistent supply of commuters and office workers. Any further reduction in town and city centre businesses, alongside the reduction in footfall, could threaten towns, cities and high streets as we know them.

### *Public transport*

52. The COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic impact on public transport, with train use dropping to 5% of pre-pandemic numbers during the first lockdown.<sup>43</sup> With many key workers and low-income groups reliant on bus travel, the proportion of bus journeys during the pandemic remained higher than rail, with bus journeys at 10% of pre-pandemic levels.<sup>44</sup> While passenger numbers have increased as restrictions have eased, with train use being at 60–70% of pre-pandemic numbers in October 2021 and bus journeys at 64–88% of pre-pandemic levels throughout the same month, it is clear that passenger numbers will not automatically return to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>45</sup>
53. Those changes in retail and working habits described above, will have a knock-on impact on public transport use. As John Birtwistle, Head of Policy, UK Bus at FirstGroup, described:

“We are seeing passenger numbers return... we can see an easy route to 80% to 85%, and maybe as high as 90%, returning, but getting beyond that is looking very difficult. This is due not just to the change in the way that people are working, but to changes in shopping and leisure habits.”<sup>46</sup>

54. David Cowan, Director of Commercial Operations at Translink, agreed, emphasising the importance of commuters to the financial viability of public transport services:

“In Northern Ireland, we have got back to about 50% to 60% of our pre-Covid numbers. We can see a route, probably quite easily, back to around 80% if the social distancing issue is removed. The big question for us is what will happen with the commute. Our old model was based on high utilisation at the peak. That then cross-subsidised a lot of the other services that we run. The big question is how many people will come back on that morning commute.”<sup>47</sup>

55. While it is positive that public transport providers can see a relatively easy route back to 80–90% of pre-pandemic passenger levels, it is extremely

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42 Oral evidence taken as part of the Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World inquiry (Session 2019–21) [Q 83](#) (Josh Abey)

43 ‘Mind the gaps: Will we go back to public transport after covid’, *The Guardian* (20 March 2021): <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/mar/20/mind-the-gaps-will-we-go-back-to-public-transport-after-covid> [accessed 4 October 2021]

44 *Ibid.*

45 Department for Transport, *Transport use during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic* (updated 24 November 2021): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-use-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic> [accessed 4 October 2021]

46 [Q 40](#) (John Birtwistle)

47 [Q 40](#) (David Cowan)

concerning that both John Birtwistle and David Cowan have emphasised the difficulties in reaching 100% of pre-pandemic passenger levels. Even a small reduction of 5% or 10% in passenger levels will have a significant impact on the viability of public transport services.

56. John Birtwistle explained that any prolonged reduction in passenger numbers would lead to reduced incomes for public transport providers, limiting their ability to invest in new vehicles, new services and new technology. Norman Baker, Adviser to the CEO at the Campaign for Better Transport, suggested that:

“... unless we see a return to numbers on public transport over a two-or-three-year period, we will unfortunately probably see... services being cut, subsidies being cut, and the reversal of what we have seen over the last 20 years as we have moved towards public transport.”<sup>48</sup>

57. Any long-term reduction in the number of public transport users risks the viability of public transport provision in our towns and cities, potentially leading to a further reduction in public transport services. Such a reduction in public transport services would inevitably lead to a further reduction in passengers, which would in turn lead to further cuts to services, and create a vicious circle of decreasing passengers and decreasing services. While this, in itself, would be harmful to towns and cities, it would also exacerbate inequalities in urban areas, widening the gap between those with access to a car, and those without. Norman Baker noted that:

“Some 24% of people do not have a car, and 40% of those on low income do not have access to a car. Potentially, you are worsening societal outcomes by moving towards more car travel and less public transport travel.”<sup>49</sup>

### *Green spaces*

58. One of the key findings of our first piece of work was that the pandemic had increased people’s appreciation of, and demand for, access to green spaces. Natural England’s People and Nature Survey shows that during the initial COVID lockdown, four in 10 adults reported spending more time in nature than before the pandemic, and some inner-city parks experienced an almost 300% increase in visits during the initial COVID-19 lockdown.<sup>50</sup> Research undertaken for the National Trust shows that easy access to quality green space has become an essential need for urban dwellers, with almost two-thirds of people stating that they have appreciated local green spaces more due to COVID-19.<sup>51</sup> Such an increase in demand for green spaces is to be welcomed, but risks creating a situation where urban green spaces struggle to cope with increasing visitors, without increasing funding and improved infrastructure.
59. The pandemic has also exposed deep inequalities in accessing green spaces. According to the National Trust, there are 295 deprived neighbourhoods,

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48 [Q 39](#) (Norman Baker)

49 [Q 42](#) (Norman Baker)

50 Nature England and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘Public love for nature during Covid-19 highlighted by new survey’, (30 September 2021): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/public-love-for-nature-during-covid-19-highlighted-by-new-survey> [accessed 4 October 2021]

51 National Trust, ‘New research shows the need for urban green space’,: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/new-research-shows-the-need-for-urban-green-space> [accessed 4 October 2021].

home to 440,000 people, that are grey deserts, with no trees or accessible green spaces. Its study found that Black and Asian people visit natural settings 60% less than White people.<sup>52</sup> Natural England's People and Nature Survey also showed clear inequalities in the opportunities to engage with nature, with one in three adults not having visited a natural space in a two-week period and one in five adults not having visited nature in a month. Those adults living in an area of high deprivation, those with low incomes, a lower level of education or those who are unemployed are less likely to access nature and green spaces. Older people, people from minority ethnic groups and those with a long-term illness or condition were also less likely to have visited a natural or green space.<sup>53</sup>

60. Access to green spaces is vital to the health and wellbeing of children and young people, with statistics showing that 83% of children believed that being in nature made them very happy. The same survey of children and young people showed that 60% of children had spent less time outdoors during the pandemic, more than double the proportion that had spent more time outside (25%). As with adult access to green spaces, children's access to green spaces during the pandemic varied across the population, with 71% of children from minority ethnic communities reporting spending less time outside, compared with 57% of White children. 73% of children from households with annual incomes below £17,000 spent less time outdoors, compared with 57% from households with an annual income above £17,000.<sup>54</sup>
61. Unless specific action is taken to tackle unequal access to urban green spaces, any increasing demand for green spaces risks exacerbating these existing inequalities. People living in affluent areas with a plentiful supply of urban parks and green spaces will increase their use of these spaces, while people living in less affluent areas with a limited supply of urban parks and green spaces will be left behind.

### Inequalities

62. There is a significant risk that the accelerating trends identified above will increase inequalities in our town and cities. Increasing empty retail units in our town and city centres risks limiting the services available to those who cannot access services beyond their local high street. Older people and those with mobility issues may struggle to access services dispersed across a large area, compared to the traditional cluster of services in a town or city centre. People with lower incomes may find it difficult to justify the cost of multiple journeys to access services, rather than a single journey to a town or city centre. Declining town and city centre services are an even greater risk for those who cannot access essential services and retail opportunities online. We explored digital inequality in detail in our report, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World*,<sup>55</sup> and found that those who continue to rely solely on offline services risk being restricted to narrower and more expensive choices.

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52 *Ibid.*

53 Natural England and Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 'Public love for nature during Covid-19 highlighted by new survey', (30 September 2020): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/public-love-for-nature-during-covid-19-highlighted-by-new-survey> [accessed 4 October 2021]

54 Natural England, *The People and Nature Survey for England: Children's Survey* (7 October 2021): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-child-data-wave-1-experimental-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-childrens-survey-experimental-statistics> [accessed 19 October 2021]

55 COVID-19 Committee, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World* (1st Report, Session 2019–21, HL Paper 263)

63. Varying rates of home working across the country risk creating inequalities, both between, and within, towns and cities. As stated by Andrew Carter above, there is already a two-tier system of home working in towns and cities, with the ability to work from home concentrated in more affluent areas. In less affluent towns and cities, such as Burnley, Blackpool and Stoke on Trent, far fewer people work in occupations where it is possible to undertake that work from home. While lower levels of home working may help to shore-up footfall and spending in town and city centres, it may also help to entrench levels of lower paid work. Affluent areas that already benefit from higher levels of higher paid, home working occupations are likely to continue to attract this kind of work, while those areas with lower paid, workplace-based occupations, will continue to see an increase in this kind of work. As such, any increase in home working risks entrenching the polarisation of affluent and less affluent towns and cities across the country.
64. Within towns and cities, increasing rates of home working also risk increasing existing inequalities. As we heard in our *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World* report, increasing home working risks disadvantaging women and increasing gender inequalities.<sup>56</sup> Increasing home working may also have an impact on socio-economic inequalities, as even when home working was mandated by the government, it was far more prevalent among higher earners, with more than 80% of workers in the top earning quintile working from home some or all of the time during the pandemic, compared to less than half in the bottom quintile.<sup>57</sup>
65. As discussed briefly above, any long-term reduction in public transport provision risks increasing inequalities between those who can and cannot access a car. As town and city centres decline, car drivers will continue to be able to access all retail opportunities and essential services regardless of location. Those dependent on public transport will only be able to use shops and services that are accessible by public transport, providing them with a far more limited choice of services and shops. Some groups in particular, such as those on lower incomes who cannot afford to run a car, those too old to drive confidently and those with disabilities or medical conditions that limit their ability to drive, will face potentially increasing inequality. As many of these groups already have lower incomes, it would be difficult to mitigate the impact of a reduction in public transport services by, for example, using more expensive transport methods, such as taxis.
66. There is a wealth of research that shows that some groups and communities struggle to access urban green spaces, with unemployed people, people with low incomes, older people, people with long-term health conditions and people from a minority ethnic group, being less likely to access these spaces. The current increasing demand for urban green spaces risks exacerbating these existing inequalities as people who already have access to urban green spaces will increase their use of these spaces, while people who cannot easily access urban parks and green spaces will continue to struggle to access these spaces, and risk being left behind.

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56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 3: KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOWNS AND CITIES

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### Town and city leadership

67. Reimagining our towns and cities, in light of the pandemic, brings an opportunity to empower local government leaders, and to put local authorities at the very heart of that regeneration. Throughout the pandemic, local authority leaders have acted swiftly and decisively to support their communities, proving the value of local government, and it is now time to give them the power to act decisively to safeguard the long-term future of those same communities.
68. We believe that the pandemic has provided a perfect moment to reconsider the relationship between central government and local government, and reset the devolution agenda. Now is the time for central government to disentangle the apron strings and allow local authority leaders to make decisions in the best interest of their own areas. As Councillor Stewart, stated, this is a chance for local authority leaders to “get more powers to control our destiny.”<sup>58</sup>
69. We want to see local authority leaders empowered to change their towns and cities for the better. The Government’s upcoming Levelling Up White Paper is an opportunity for central government to show its willingness to bring power closer to the people, by outlining its plans further devolution. However, we would encourage local authority leaders to use their existing general power of competence to take on additional responsibilities. This wide-ranging power, in practice, gives local authorities an opportunity to expand their services and support beyond those areas traditionally seen as the responsibility of local authorities. There is scope here for local authority leaders to truly innovate.
70. We believe that the resetting of the relationship between central and local government is an opportunity for Whitehall to be unequivocal in its support for, and encouragement of, the use of the general power of competence. We want to see the message disseminated loudly and clearly that central government champions the use of the general power of competence, and we believe that Whitehall should work with the Local Government Association to issue guidance notes on its operation.
71. We are under no illusion that empowering local authority leaders alone will solve all problems faced by towns and cities, and believe that this is one of a number of actions required to bring about the regeneration of our urban areas. We also acknowledge that there is a risk that further divergence between different towns and cities may cause additional issues. The very purpose of devolution, and empowering local authority leaders, is to allow different local authorities to implement different policies, depending on the needs of their towns and cities. More responsibility and power at a local level will inevitably create different approaches in different areas, potentially leading to increasing inequality between different geographical areas. Despite this, we believe that the benefits of empowering local government leaders to implement policies to meet the specific needs of their communities outweigh the risks of implementing different policies in different areas. There is no one-size fits all solution to the regeneration of our towns and cities, and central government’s approach to devolution must reflect this. As such, we believe that now is the time to re-set the relationship between

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58 [Q 80](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

central government and local government to ensure far less power resides in Whitehall at the expense of local diversity and vibrancy.

72. Since 2010, local authorities have seen a significant reduction in their budgets and it is unfair, and unrealistic, to expect them to continue to achieve more with less money. We cannot expect local authority leaders to renew, regenerate and revive their towns and cities when current budgets have left them struggling to provide basic services. As such, we believe that the recovery of our towns and cities is a moment to reconsider the current local government financial settlement to introduce a new settlement that can help, rather than hinder, local government leaders' attempts to renew their urban areas.
73. Local authority leaders need financial stability, and increased funding, to undertake the long-term, strategic planning required to ensure the long-term viability and prosperity of our towns and cities. As such, we believe that central government must grasp this opportunity to introduce a three-year rolling local government financial settlement, at an increased level. An increased three-year settlement would balance local authority leaders' need for flexibility, with a sense of the urgency required in implementing regeneration projects.
74. Beyond being a chance to introduce a new local government settlement, the regeneration of our towns and cities is also an occasion to reconsider the additional funding streams available to local authorities. We want to see the end of competitive bidding processes for additional funding from central government to local government. Local authority leaders should no longer be required to spend time on competitive bids for funding, that could be spent developing regeneration projects for their areas. Additional funding from central government should, instead, be allocated to towns and cities according to their needs. For example, additional funding for economic development and entrepreneurship should be focused on those towns and cities where the High Street is struggling, and additional funding for creating new green spaces should be concentrated on those towns and cities that lack such facilities.
75. We want to see additional funding from central government targeted at those towns and cities in most need, and believe that the UK Government should agree with the Local Government Association to create an improved resource equalisation scheme. Such a scheme would identify those towns and cities in greatest need, and would provide a formula for distributing funding to those areas. This approach would ensure that additional funding goes to those areas that are in most need, not those that are most adept at completing competitive bids, and provide local authority leaders with increased funding, while retaining their freedom to spend the additional funds according to the needs of their area.
76. We also believe that there is an urgent need to overhaul the current business rates system. Our declining high streets, alongside the falling demand for office space, cannot continue funding the local government settlement. And without a sufficient local government settlement, local authority leaders' efforts to regenerate their towns and cities will struggle to succeed. We acknowledge that business rates are a large part of a business's costs, and businesses in towns and cities across the country are already struggling, and will continue to struggle, without long-term business rates relief, or a

restructuring of the current system to charge small businesses a nominal amount.

77. Under the current system of local authority finances, it is impossible to both decrease the business rates collected from small businesses on our high streets, and also provide local authority leaders with extra revenue, through an increased local government settlement to fund the recovery of our towns and cities. As such, we believe that the only realistic solution is to explore options for reforming the current business rates system. Any reform of the business rates system must also level the playing field between online and offline retail sales, ensuring that online sales also contribute to the local government settlement. We want to see the Treasury Select Committee and the Lords' Economic Affairs Committee undertaking a detailed exploration of the potential for introducing an increased VAT rate on online sales or a hypothecated online sales tax. We believe that such a tax should be paid by the consumer and should apply to all digital initiated sales.

### **Accelerating trends**

78. As with the risks identified in the previous section, much of the evidence on the opportunities for towns and cities emphasised that COVID-19 has accelerated existing regeneration plans, rather than necessarily creating completely new regeneration ideas.
79. Alderman Martin noted that:

“We have talked about escalating and accelerating an awful lot over the last 15 months, and that has certainly been very much an aspect of the council experience. As leaders of place, councils had already been thinking about how we can repurpose our city centres and respond to longerterm trends that were already evident on the high street. As part of that, this evolution, in effect, has been ongoing ... The circumstances are different, but a lot of the same issues were coming to the fore.”<sup>59</sup>

### *Retail, residential, office and leisure space*

80. Many witnesses highlighted the importance of reconsidering the blend of retail, residential, office and leisure space that will be required in town and city centres, with the consensus seeming to support more leisure and residential space, with fewer retail units and smaller office spaces. Councillor Stewart submitted that:

“ ... the four building blocks are retail, leisure, housing and office space in your city centre. The split between those and where you mix that in your city centre has moved probably a little bit away from retail and more towards leisure, office and housing as a result of some of the changes from Covid ... .”<sup>60</sup>

81. Councillor Hazel Simmons, leader of Luton Borough Council, also suggested that there is a need to reconsider the mix in town and city centres, to ensure that they are less reliant on retail.<sup>61</sup> This view was echoed by Councillor

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59 [Q 74](#) (Alderman Stephen Martin)

60 [Q 76](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

61 [Q 75](#) (Councillor Hazel Simmons)

Lucille Thompson, leader of Winchester City Council, in her views on the future of Winchester city centre:

“Yes, there will be some retail, but there will also be open space and there will be performance space—areas where the community can get together or events can take place. It is all about building that into city centres which, if shops close, could otherwise be dead... It is about creating that mix, so that you have people living there and obviously using the open spaces and the event space, and visiting the shops and restaurants when they are open, too.”<sup>62</sup>

82. Beyond local authority leaders’ plans for diversifying the use of space in towns and cities, there is also an opportunity for local communities to rethink their use of space in urban areas. The Committee believes, despite the challenging times faced by towns and cities, that it is important to recognise that the pandemic has created opportunities to reinvent community spaces and community-level activities in our urban areas.
83. Out of necessity, communities established mutual aid groups, peer support groups and new community hubs to support the most vulnerable in society. Community groups also transformed the delivery of arts and culture—organising outdoor film screens and theatre performances, and bringing arts to those who were isolated, such as performing in the car parks of care homes. This innovation must not be lost in the rush to ‘return to normal’.
84. Rather, we want to see increased opportunities to reinvent community spaces and community-level activities in our towns and cities. However, in contrast to communities having to transform their activities with little support during the pandemic, we want to see community groups provided with training, funding and practical support to maximise their ability to try new, innovative ideas and to be sustainable.

### *Culture and the arts*

85. Beyond reconsidering the blend of retail, residential, office and leisure space in town and city centres, witnesses stressed the potential of arts, culture and the creative sectors to regenerate urban areas. Councillor Stewart noted that:
 

“Some members will know that we bid for City of Culture, and were unsuccessful, just before the pandemic. We have decided to deliver the City of Culture ambition anyway. That means we are delivering a 3,500seater capacity arena, which will open in a couple of months’ time, Covid allowing. That is another reason for people to come and visit our city centre.

... As I mentioned, we have our large arena complex opening, which will deliver 220 events a year in Swansea. That is 220 days a year when people will come to visit Swansea when they previously did not.”<sup>63</sup>
86. Alderman Martin described how Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council had reinvented its arts and culture offering, including attracting new audiences:
 

“We have a museum here in Lisburn and it is the centre of the city, but the footfall would have been perhaps less than we would have expected,

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62 [Q 58](#) (Councillor Lucille Thompson)

63 [Q 75](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

given its location. The pandemic required everybody, in effect, to think differently. We engaged new technology and went online, and the feedback from that has been phenomenal. ... One of the things that came from that was that the talks associated with it, which are not necessarily something that people who are not involved in these things would devote an hour or two to viewing, actually got great viewership online, because people thought, “That sounds interesting. I have a free half an hour here. I can come back to it and watch it”. We reached a lot more people because of that, so there was an impact that we want to hold on to—connecting to people who perhaps just would not have engaged with the arts beforehand, and increasing that understanding.”<sup>64</sup>

87. He also explained how the council had changed its ways of working during the pandemic to bring arts and culture to residents in more innovative ways, highlighting the role of technology in providing new arts and culture opportunities:

“Our community arts team did a great outdoors exhibition and, during the height of Covid, went round our residential care homes and did an outside play, which was put on a PA system and broadcast into the nursing home. You can think outside the box there, but in terms of the technology, that is an enabler for us going forward for our creative and cultural output.”<sup>65</sup>

88. Councillor Stewart noted that the regeneration agenda not only has the potential to use culture to bring people back into town and city centres, but also to create jobs and encourage arts and culture practitioners to return to town and city centres:

“ ... We are taking the opportunity as well, as part of this build back better strategy, to bring a lot of our cultural venues back into use and to turn over some of the commercial space to cultural enterprises—opening up mini-galleries and supporting artists to take on premises without the costs they would otherwise face. We are trying to boost the grassroots-level cultural innovation that is there.”<sup>66</sup>

89. While we agree that arts and culture, and particularly attracting arts and culture practitioners back into town and city centres, can provide an opportunity to increase vibrancy in town and city centres, we would also sound a note of caution. Any increase in arts and culture practitioners living and working in town and city centres must be balanced against the risks of pushing out other groups, communities and facilities, and local authority leaders must be alive to the risks of gentrification.

### *Retail*

90. Witnesses highlighted the possibility of repurposing empty retail units to create more vibrant towns and cities, and we believe that empty retail units could be transformed into creative hubs to bring cultural and creative opportunities to town and city centres. We want to see local authorities supporting cultural, creative and community groups to transform empty retail units into creative, community hubs.

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64 [Q 83](#) (Alderman Stephen Martin)

65 *Ibid.*

66 [Q 83](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

91. Local authority leaders emphasised the potential to repurpose empty retail units, by creating housing on the upper floors of high street buildings, with retail, leisure, food, public services and workspaces on the ground floor. Councillor Smith stated that the council’s “focus in the town centre has always been to reidentify it to bring housing on the top floors.”<sup>67</sup> This view was echoed by Councillor Stewart, who stated that having residential space on top floors and commercial space on the ground floor is a common sight in London, and that Swansea Council will be working to replicate this in its area.<sup>68</sup>
92. Local authority leaders also proposed that there is a chance to use empty retail units to bring public services back into town and city centres. Councillor Smith stated that Great Yarmouth Council had already brought a university campus into an old building in the town centre, as well as moving the library to the town centre.<sup>69</sup> Councillor Simmons noted that as Luton had lost large town centre stores, the council is now considering how it can “work to offer public sector health facilities and retail in the same building.”<sup>70</sup> She suggested that combining commercial and public services may help to attract people back to the town centre and alleviate some of the financial pressures of renting a large, town centre property. Councillor Stewart was of a similar opinion, stating that in future there will probably be more public and government services on high streets because they can increase footfall in town and city centres and ensure that those services are easily accessible.<sup>71</sup>
93. Witnesses described the potential of pop-up businesses to bring vibrancy to town and city centres, by filling empty retail units. Andrew Carter explained how some developers are already “providing space as part of developments that provide meanwhile use or pop-up spaces, spaces for different uses, on peppercorn rents... to bring some of that vibrancy back.”<sup>72</sup> Local authority leaders agreed, with Councillor Stewart explaining that in some of the buildings it has acquired, Swansea Council is:
- “ ... trying to give meanwhile use to some of the units before we find longerterm tenants for them, as part of the regeneration. As we demolish areas to create new public spaces, we are creating new temporary spaces that we will develop later down the road, and we are offering plots in those spaces for popups and others. We see it as a good way to encourage businesses to start up and to help them grow to a scale where they can then go into a formal unit and grow further from there.”<sup>73</sup>
94. Alderman Martin was of a similar opinion, noting that pop-up units “are brilliant, particularly for young people or people who are perhaps returning to the workforce” as “they can be an opportunity to test the waters.”<sup>74</sup> He believed that local authorities should facilitate the creation of pop-up units and “should not be afraid of risk or things going wrong.”<sup>75</sup>

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67 [Q 52](#) (Councillor Carl Smith)

68 [Q 79](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

69 [Q 52](#) (Councillor Carl Smith)

70 [Q 78](#) (Councillor Hazel Simmons)

71 [Q 79](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

72 [Q 8](#) (Andrew Carter)

73 [Q 75](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

74 [Q 78](#) (Alderman Stephen Martin)

75 *Ibid.*

*Work*

95. While any long-term change to working patterns has the potential to impact the demand for office space in town and city centres, office space will still be needed, as Councillor Hinchcliffe explained:

“On the office space question, the alternative view is that we have limited grade A office space in Bradford, so we are investing in some grade A office space, and that is still valid after the pandemic. Some of the places that have lots and lots of office space will be downsizing... but they need somewhere to downsize to, otherwise we will lose them completely from the district. It is about getting the most appropriate spaces for them to retain them in the district even if they downsize from their existing sites now.”<sup>76</sup>

96. Craig McLaren, Director at Royal Town Planning Institute Scotland, also suggested that companies will still require some office space, and warned against overemphasising the impact of home working on property in town and city centres:

“... although we have all been moving to this hybrid model and people have been working perhaps two or three days a week, companies will probably still need an office that is available Monday to Friday at least and from 9 to 5, so it might not have as big an impact on the property sector, and the correlation might not be exact because people will still have the office. They may well downsize, but some of them may be tied into longer-term leases or they may own the building themselves. The impact of working from home will not correlate exactly with the impact on the property side in cities and towns.”<sup>77</sup>

97. Beyond the traditional office, there are other opportunities to attract workers back to town and city centres. In our first substantive inquiry, exploring the impact of our increasing reliance on digital technology on our wellbeing, Professor Abigail Marks, Principle Investigator with the Working@home Project, believed that there is a need for community hubs to allow those with insufficient space or infrastructure at home, to work remotely away from their organisation.<sup>78</sup> During our current inquiry, Joe Fitzsimons, from the Institute of Directors, explained that there is an increased appetite for co-working and collaborative spaces: “About a third of our members have talked about moving towards co-working spaces, which is another potential area of growth for high streets and city centres ...”<sup>79</sup>
98. Rooney Anand, from WorldSkills UK, also supported the creation of city centre work hubs to allow those who cannot work from home to benefit from any increase in remote working. Empty retail units could be rejuvenated by being turned into city centre work hubs, and employees could benefit from being given: “... the infrastructure they need, like wi-fi and a printer, on a pro-bono or very low-cost basis, to give them the chance to work from home if they do not want to work in their dwelling.”<sup>80</sup>

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76 [Q 52](#) (Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe)

77 [Q 5](#) (Craig McLaren)

78 COVID-19 Committee, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World* (1st Report, Session 2019–21, HL Paper 263)

79 [Q 32](#) (Joe Fitzsimmons)

80 [Q 23](#) (Rooney Anand)

*Public transport*

99. We have heard of the risks to passenger numbers, the financial viability of public transport services, and ultimately, the long-term future of public transport provision in town and cities. These risks may be mitigated by using regeneration to reconsider the traditional provision of public transport, in favour of a more reliable and sustainable model, that supports the recovery of town and city centres.
100. Prior to the pandemic, public transport provision was predicated on supplying peak demand to transport large volumes of people to and from their workplace during the morning and evening rush hours, we now have the chance to design differently. As people work more flexibly—both in terms of hours and location—there is an “opportunity for public transport to rethink its networks around the city.”<sup>81</sup> David Cowan, Director of Commercial Operations at Translink, agreed, stating that: “ ... we have to look at alternative services... We have to think about more orbital routes, different types of connections ...”<sup>82</sup>
101. John Birtwistle advised that the public transport industry will have to be innovative to react to changes in working, shopping and leisure patterns.<sup>83</sup> These behavioural changes provide the public transport sector with an opportunity to reimagine public transport, providing residents with different services to meet their differing needs. Public transport providers and local authority leaders should work together to ensure that public transport becomes a key element of the regeneration of town and city centres, supporting local authorities’ emphasis on providing residential, work, retail and leisure opportunities in town and city centres.
102. The reimagining of public transport provision is also a chance to reconsider both central, and local, government’s funding of these services. In October 2021, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced that English city regions would receive £6.9 billion over five years, to improve public transport.<sup>84</sup> While we welcome this additional funding, we believe that additional funding to improve, and reimagine, public transport services should be distributed to all towns and cities, not merely city regions. Providing additional funding to city regions, without similar provision for other towns and cities, risks creating a two-tier system of public transport in our urban areas.
103. Whether within current budgets, or using additional funds from central government, local government leaders may decide that the importance of the future viability of public transport services, and their potential role in the regeneration of towns and cities, means that they should be subsidised. Different local authorities may decide to subsidise public transport service in different ways, depending on the needs of residents and visitors in their area. For example, some local authorities may decide to subsidise:
- Weekend and evening services to encourage residents and visitors to come to town and city centres when those areas, and public transport services, are traditionally very quiet;

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81 [Q 39](#) (Professor Nick Tyler)

82 [Q 40](#) (David Cowan)

83 [Q 40](#) (John Birtwistle)

84 BBC News, ‘Budget 2021: English city regions to get £6.9bn for public transport’, (23 October 2021): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59017503> [accessed 25 October 2021]

- Services from suburbs and surrounding villages into town and city centres, to encourage residents to use public transport, rather than their cars, to travel into the town or city centre; or
  - Weekly or monthly tickets, to encourage residents to make regular visits to their local town or city centre.
104. Even with additional funding or subsidy, the only way in which public transport can play a key element in the regeneration and renewal of town and city centres is if there is a renewed emphasis on public transport access to town and city centres, with passengers being taken to the very centre of towns and cities. Public transport provision must not only go to the heart of town and city centres, but must also not be pushed into the derelict or unattractive corners of town and city centres. Bus stations, trains stations, tram stops and bus stops must be provided in those areas—near shops, cafes, restaurants, theatres, cinemas, football stadia, parks—where residents and visitors want to spend their time. There is little purpose, and little regenerative benefit, in investing in new public transport services if they take passengers to the edge of towns and cities or to those areas that have little to offer residents and visitors. To attract more passengers to use public transport, and therefore visit our town and city centres, public transport must be seen as a fundamental aspect of our urban areas.
105. We believe that the recovery of our towns and cities provides an occasion to reconsider the current planning system to make public transport provision a focal point in our towns and cities. An amended planning system should safeguard, and strengthen, the provision of town and city-centric public transport. As John Birtwistle suggested:

“We need to ensure that, when we are planning for future developments, they are not these monolithic, car-centred, out-of-town facilities that people do not stand a chance of being able to serve with a commercial bus service and which, in the current environment, local authorities are unable to subsidise a service to run to.”<sup>85</sup>

106. David Cowan agreed, stating that:

“we have too many housing or shopping developments that you cannot access easily by bus. That is easily fixed by building that into the process... A key issue is land use and public transport being planned together.”<sup>86</sup>

### *Green spaces*

107. The regeneration of towns and cities is a chance to improve the provision of, and access to, urban green spaces, by improving existing urban parks, creating new parks, as well as creating small parklets and other open spaces. As Councillor Hinchcliffe described, Bradford District Council has been building new play areas, creating new parks, and putting more money into the maintenance of paths,<sup>87</sup> while Councillor Stewart noted that Swansea Council had delivered 31 park improvements and play areas.<sup>88</sup> It is vital that the provision of urban green spaces is not merely increased in those areas

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85 [Q 47](#) (John Birtwistle)

86 [Q 47](#) (David Cowan)

87 [Q 57](#) (Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe)

88 [Q 77](#) (Councillor Rob Stewart)

that already benefit from a plentiful supply of open spaces, but rather, is targeted at those geographical areas and communities that lack access to green spaces.

108. Councillor Simmons described how Luton Borough Council is developing a new town centre park, as well as working to ensure that more people are using the parks in Luton.<sup>89</sup> The recovery provides local authority leaders with an opportunity to assess who is, and is not, using the parks, play areas and green spaces in their towns and cities, and try to discover the barriers for those not using urban green spaces. It is only by asking residents why they are not using urban green spaces, that they can be improved, and these barriers dismantled.
109. Beyond understanding the barriers to accessing green spaces, regeneration has the potential to improve the condition of all urban green spaces to ensure that high-quality urban green spaces are available to all. For too long some areas have enjoyed well-maintained parks and play areas, while other have had to make do with dilapidated, poorly maintained green spaces. As Councillor Thompson highlighted: “... residents’ wish to have access to open space, and not just any old open space like a cruddy old pavement or path to walk down, but high-quality open spaces.”<sup>90</sup>
110. Councillor Thompson also emphasised that Winchester City Council will now be building in the need for open spaces into its local plan, with any new developments having to have good open space that is accessible to everyone. The regeneration of town and cities is an opportunity to amend current planning policies and guidelines to ensure that the provision of public green spaces and open spaces becomes a prerequisite for any new developments—housing, hospitals, schools, retail parks, workspaces, train stations—in towns and cities. Local authorities may wish to be bolder still, and amend planning policies and guidelines to ensure that when empty retail units are converted into housing, premises for public service provision, pop-up units or town and city centre work hubs, that there is an expectation that any such conversion will create new urban green and open spaces, such as publicly accessible parklets, play areas and courtyards.

### Inequalities

111. Given that the most vulnerable in our communities were hardest hit during the pandemic, tackling inequalities is vital to the country as we begin to emerge from the pandemic. We recognise that those who are marginalised in society are not a homogenous group and witnesses explained the great disparities faced by each of the local areas. Local authority leaders, working closely with local communities, must therefore grasp the opportunity to develop new ways of working together to identify and support vulnerable members of society.
112. To ensure that towns and cities meet the needs of those whose experiences lead to disadvantage, we believe that no decisions should be made without the participation of vulnerable groups. Those whose experience of disadvantage and discrimination—for example an isolated single parent with a disabled child; a Black care worker unable to work from home—should have a significant role in shaping the services and practices that could prove

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89 [Q 76](#) (Councillor Hazel Simmons)

90 [Q 56](#) (Councillor Lucille Thompson)

to be of most help to them. The recovery of our towns and cities provides local authorities with the perfect opportunity to reconsider their approach to regeneration, and put the views of specific groups, communities and neighbourhoods at the heart of their recovery plans.

113. We believe that our blended approach to the recovery of our towns and cities provides a perfect opportunity to put tackling inequality and disadvantage at the heart of local authority leaders' plans for their towns and cities, but only if developed in conjunction with those groups it aims to benefit. We have emphasised that while we believe that the regeneration of town and city centres is vital to the wider recovery of towns and cities, we want to see this matched by a commitment to, and investment in, those neighbourhoods most in need. As such, we have suggested that local authorities should develop a two-pronged, blended approach to urban regeneration and renewal. The first part of this approach will focus on developing new opportunities—pop-up retail units, work hubs and arts and culture—in towns and cities, while the second part will concentrate on investing in housing, public services, public transport and green spaces in town and city centres, as well as and those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind.
114. We believe that focusing funding on those neighbourhoods most in need is a vital step to tackling inequalities between different areas and communities within towns and cities, and putting right the historical wrong of under-investment in these neighbourhoods. As described in more detail elsewhere in the report, we want to see investment that will make a practical difference to the lives of people living in these neighbourhoods—better housing, better public services, better public transport services. However, we believe that only the residents of those neighbourhoods themselves can fully understand the most suitable services and facilities for their area, and local authorities must work with these communities when developing their investment plans.
115. We believe that action to tackle inequalities must not only be targeted at specific neighbourhoods, but must be mainstreamed throughout local authorities' regeneration agenda. We have explained above how some accelerating trends, such as the demise of town and city centres and any reduction in public transport provision, will have a disproportionate impact on specific groups and communities. Local authority leaders have the chance not only to reverse those accelerating trends, but also to mitigate their current, and future, effect by ensuring that the needs of specific groups and communities, are at the forefront of their regeneration plans.
116. We want to see local authority leaders using the renewal of their urban areas as an occasion to create towns and cities that are open and accessible to all. As such, when local authority leaders are developing their plans for repurposing retail units, repurposing workspaces, developing sustainable public transport and developing green and open spaces it is vital that they ensure that they are accessible to, and meet the needs of, different groups and communities within their towns and cities. Local authority leaders should also use their regeneration plans as a chance to introduce specific schemes to ensure that the new opportunities in towns and cities—work hubs, pop-up retail units, arts and culture opportunities—are targeted at the needs of specific groups and communities. The only way to ensure that the needs of specific communities are at the heart of the regeneration agenda, and are fully met by specific projects, is by actively engaging with them.

## CHAPTER 4: THE FUTURE OF OUR TOWNS AND CITIES

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117. When discussing the future of towns and cities, urban areas are often framed as places to be ‘saved’ or ‘protected’. However, the seismic changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic means that we must reimagine the towns and cities of the future, rather than pining for the urban areas of the past. As Alderman Martin asserted “there is no going back” to our pre-pandemic towns and cities, rather “we must accept change.”<sup>91</sup>
118. Any attempt to revert to business as usual in towns and cities after the pandemic is likely to be like trying to stop the tide. Rather than looking backwards, we must all—central government, local authorities, businesses, and residents—look forwards and work together to recreate our towns and cities into the vibrant places that they can, and should, be. We believe that the pandemic offers fresh opportunities to create towns and cities that will thrive in the future.

### Town and city leadership

119. Before discussing our vision for increasingly empowered local authority leaders, we would like to highlight the importance of diverse local authority leadership. It was a breath of fresh air to hear the views of local authority leaders from across the UK, and we were heartened to see that four out of the seven leaders giving evidence were women. Progress has been made in developing diverse local authority representatives, and leaders, but there is still work to be done. We were impressed by the local authority leaders that gave evidence to us, and our call for improved diversity is in no way a criticism of current local authority leaders. Rather, we believe that improved diversity amongst local authority representatives, and leaders, will improve the representation of all communities within towns and cities, and strengthen the belief amongst all groups and communities that local authorities represent, and work for the benefit, of all their constituents.

### *Empowering local authority leaders*

120. We have received insufficient evidence to create a comprehensive proposal for further legislative devolution, however, we believe that the UK Government must take the opportunity offered by its upcoming Levelling Up White Paper to explain its plans for further legislative and financial devolution of powers.
121. Beyond the devolution of further legislative powers to local authority leaders, we want to see those leaders using their existing general power of competence to take on additional responsibilities, and transform their towns and cities. We believe that this power gives local authority leaders an opportunity to implement innovative regeneration projects. Different projects will be suitable for different towns and cities, depending on the needs of individual communities, but local authority leaders may want to consider ideas, such as:
- Providing specific support for first-time buyers and key workers to buy property in their area;
  - Providing loans to companies to support their expansion or relocation;
  - Providing grants to encourage start-up businesses to fill empty shops in the town or city centre; or

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91 [Q 74](#) (Alderman Stephen Martin)

- Establishing a fund to promote solutions identified by members of the community to problems highlighted by local residents.

122. However, local authority leaders will only use the general power of competence, and be confident of the limits of this power, if central government supports, and encourages its use. We want to see the UK Government issue a statement to all local authority leaders actively encouraging the use of the general power of competence. We also believe that the UK Government should work with the Local Government Association to issue guidance notes on its operation.

#### *Local government finances*

123. We want to see all local authority leaders empowered to develop long-term strategic plans for their areas. As such, we believe that the recovery of our towns and cities is an unmissable opportunity to introduce a new system of local government financial settlements. We want to see local authority leaders given increased funds and financial flexibility, through the introduction of a three-year rolling local government financial settlement, at an increased level. We believe that such an increased settlement would improve financial security, and allow local authorities to plan for the long-term future of their towns and cities.

124. Our proposal is for local authority leaders to have the financial security, and flexibility, to undertake ambitious regeneration projects, such as:

- Re-starting to build town and city centre council houses;
- Creating town and city centre integrated transport hubs; or
- Redeveloping town and city centre canal side or riverside areas to improve access to nature.

125. Beyond the introduction of an improved local government settlement, we want to see a new system replacing the current system of bidding for additional funding streams available to local authorities. We believe that additional funding from central government should be targeted at those areas of most need. For example, additional funding for economic development and entrepreneurship should be focused on those towns and cities where the High Street is struggling, and additional funding for creating new green spaces should be concentrated on those towns and cities that lack such facilities.

126. Additional central government funding will have the largest impact possible where it is targeted at those areas in most need. To make this a reality, we want to see the UK Government agreeing with the Local Government Association to create an improved resource equalisation scheme. Such a scheme would identify those towns and cities in greatest need, and would provide a formula for distributing funding to those areas. This approach would ensure that additional funding goes to those areas that are in most need, not those that are most adept at completing competitive bids, and provide local authority leaders with increased funding, while retaining their freedom to spend the additional funds according to the needs of their area.

127. An improved resource equalisation scheme would provide a transparent method of assessing those towns and cities in most need, and ensuring that additional central government funding focuses on these areas. Those areas

assessed as being in most need would then have additional funding to invest in the regeneration of their towns and cities. While the regeneration projects required will differ from one town or city to the other, they may include ideas, such as:

- Creating parks, play areas, parklets and public courtyards, in areas that lack green and open spaces;
- Supporting business to increase employment opportunities, where the job market is struggling; or
- Rejuvenating properties on the high street, in areas where the high street is run-down and unattractive.

### *Business rates*

128. It will be impossible to bring about the recovery of our towns and cities without a complete overhaul of the current business rates system. Our declining high streets, alongside the falling demand for office space, cannot continue funding the local government settlement. And without a sufficient local government settlement, local authority leaders' efforts to regenerate their towns and cities will struggle to succeed. We acknowledge that business rates are a large part of a business's costs, and businesses in towns and cities across the country are already struggling, and will continue to struggle, without long-term business rates relief, or a restructuring of the current system to charge small businesses a nominal amount.
129. Under the current system of local authority finances, it is impossible to both decrease the business rates collected from small businesses on our high streets, and also provide local authority leaders with extra revenue, through an increased local government settlement to fund the recovery of our towns and cities. As such, we believe that the only realistic solution is to explore options for reforming the current business rates system. Any reform of the business rates system must also level the playing field between online and offline retail sales, ensuring that online sales also contribute to the local government settlement.
130. Following its inquiry on the impact of businesses rates on business, we would encourage the Treasury Select Committee to update this work in light of the pandemic, as well encouraging it and the Lords Economic Affairs Committee to undertake a detailed exploration of the potential for introducing an increased VAT rate on online sales or a hypothecated online sales tax. Such a tax would be paid by the consumer and would apply to all digital initiated sales. We believe that even a small, single percentage, increase in VAT on online sales could fill the gap in local government finances resulting from decreasing business rates collected. A slightly larger increase could provide local authorities with the funds to attract, and keep, sole traders, repair shops and micro-businesses in town and city centres by offering business premises with zero business rates. We would like to see some local authorities implementing a zero business rate for sole traders and micro-businesses as part of a pilot project to understand its implications for local authority finances.

### Accelerating trends

131. Witnesses have emphasised the importance of town and city centres, and the potential link between towns and cities and the wellbeing of residents. If towns and cities become dilapidated, with poor housing and green spaces, limited public transport, public services, and leisure opportunities, it is inevitable that people’s wellbeing will suffer. If towns and cities are vibrant, with a plentiful supply of high-quality housing and green spaces, reliable and affordable public transport, and a wide range of public services, workspaces and leisure opportunities people’s wellbeing will tend to improve and people may feel better about themselves and their lives. Councillor Davidson described how Highland Council’s plans for Inverness would focus on “city centre first”<sup>92</sup> to prevent the hollowing out of the city. She went on to explain that the plan would: “ ... very clearly reinforce city centre first and look for housebuilding and accommodation in the city centre so that we rebuild the city centre.”<sup>93</sup>
132. While we support the sentiment behind developing a town and city centre first approach to the regeneration of our towns and cities, we do not want to see investment concentrated solely in central areas, to the detriment of other neighbourhoods. We believe that there is a need for local authority leaders to develop a two-pronged approach to the renewal of our towns and cities.
133. We suggest that in developing housing, public transport, access to green spaces, and the provision of public services, the renewal of our towns and cities should concentrate on those neighbourhoods that have not benefitted from previous regeneration projects. We want to see local authorities developing a system for identifying those neighbourhoods that face the greatest challenges, and undertaking assessments to ensure that all regeneration policies have a positive impact on these neighbourhoods in need.
134. Secondly, we want to see local authority leaders investing in creating lively, vibrant town and cities that offer new opportunities—arts and culture, pop-up retail premises, work hubs—for all residents. The aim of such investment should be to turn towns and cities into destinations that attract residents and visitors alike. We want to see towns and cities become places that people want to visit beyond just going to their workplace or the local supermarket or shopping centre. Councillor Stewart described Swansea Council’s plans to turn the city into a destination, attracting visitors for a multitude of purposes:
- “ ... cities such as Swansea need to become destinations in the way, perhaps, that London is, so that people do not choose to go there just to work or to live but for numerous purposes; they tie them all together and have a great time while they are there.”<sup>94</sup>
135. We want to see local government leaders develop new, different reasons for people to visit towns and cities, such as:
- Sports events;
  - Live music events;
  - Theatres and cinemas;

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92 [Q 53](#) (Councillor Margaret Davidson)

93 [Q 56](#) (Councillor Margaret Davidson)

94 *Ibid.*

- Food markets; or
- Seasonal events.

### *Culture and the arts*

136. A vital part of attracting residents and visitors back into towns and cities is providing a strong, diverse arts and culture offering in urban areas. We want to see local authority leaders working with existing arts organisations and private business to increase the cultural provision in their towns and cities. Different projects will be suitable for different areas, but local authorities may want to consider potential ideas, including:
- Converting existing buildings in their town or city into smaller venues, such as, rehearsal spaces and small performance spaces; or
  - Working with existing businesses in their town or city, such as pubs, to create mixed-use premises. For example, a pub with a small performance space for gigs or plays upstairs.
137. We also want to see local authorities using their existing arts and culture offering to attract new audiences, and ultimately encourage more people to visit towns and cities. However, not all arts and culture opportunities should be delivered by local authorities directly, and we want to see them working with creative and community organisations to deliver the activities that are most suitable for their area. Again, there is no one-size fits all approach, but local authorities may want to explore ideas, such as:
- Offering activities for children and families at weekends, rather than just during school holidays, to encourage greater use of museums and galleries;
  - Encouraging local clubs, societies, schools and colleges to make use of galleries and museums, during quieter mid-week periods; or
  - Organising evening events—talks, gigs, children’s craft events, craft fairs—to attract evening visitors to the museum or gallery, and ultimately to the town or city.
138. We believe that the recovery of towns and cities has the potential to bring arts and culture practitioners back into town and city centres. We would like to see local authorities providing specific support for artists, musicians, theatre practitioners and other creative professionals, such as:
- Financial support to convert empty retail units into mini-galleries or workshops;
  - Subsidised use of rehearsal spaces in towns and cities, particularly those created by converting empty retail units; or
  - Financial support to establish creative co-operatives to take on larger premises in towns and cities.
139. In providing support to bring arts and culture practitioners back into town and city centres, we would like to see local authorities being mindful of the needs of other groups and communities, to ensure that they are not pushed out of town and city centres. We believe that local authority leaders must be

alive to the potential for increasing arts and culture practitioners living and working in town and city centres to lead to gentrification, and believe that action must be taken to mitigate this risk.

### *Housing*

140. Too many towns and cities are being hollowed-out by increasing numbers of holiday and short-term lets, leaving residents without an adequate supply of housing. We want to see local authorities developing policies to safeguard the current housing supply. In those areas that are particularly affected by a proliferation of holiday and short-term lets, we believe that local authorities should introduce particular planning regulations to:
  - Limit the number of holiday and short-term lets in a geographical location;
  - Limit the number of days for which a property can be used as a holiday or short-term let; or
  - Introducing a licensing scheme for holiday and short-term lets.
141. Beyond safeguarding the current housing stock, we want to see a blended approach to housing in towns and cities, with thriving town and city centres, where residents of all kinds—students, young professionals, families with children, and older people who require additional support—have all returned to living in town and city centres. However, this return to town and city centre living should not come at the cost of pushing other activities, such as retail, work, leisure and public services out of town and city centres. Rather, we want to see a blended approach, where residents have returned to town and city centres, but local authorities have also invested in other neighbourhoods, that have not benefitted from investment in housing.
142. While we acknowledge that transforming commercial properties into residential properties is not without its challenges, we believe that it is a vital step towards increasing resilience and stability within towns and cities.
143. Our proposal for the future of towns and cities is not one of empty retail units turned into low-quality, high-density, sub-standard housing. Instead, we want to see empty retail units developed into high-quality, affordable housing, with some available for rental and others sold as affordable housing. There is no one-size fits all approach to bringing residents back into town and city centres, and what works in one town may not work in another. We would encourage local authority leaders to explore with developers all potential options, including:
  - Transforming larger empty properties into student accommodation, affordable flats for first-time buyers or supported accommodation for older people;
  - Converting the upper floors of empty retail units into spacious, high-quality, maisonettes, for young professionals, and new families, either for sale to first-time buyers or available for affordable rents;
  - Demolishing low-quality, empty retail units and transforming those town and city centre plots into townhouses, suitable as family homes or small residential homes for older people; or

- Building council houses on any pre-existing, or newly-created town and city centre plots.
144. As we explained above, we want to see any increase in investment in town and city centres, matched by increasing investment in those neighbourhoods that have not previously benefitted from regeneration funds. As such, we want to see an increase in investment in housing targeted at those neighbourhoods at risk of being left behind. The exact nature of that investment will depend on the specific needs of individual neighbourhoods, but may include:
- Improving existing housing, by installing double-glazing, new heating systems or improved insulation;
  - Building larger properties to tackle overcrowding amongst families; or
  - Demolishing or remodelling estates that are no longer fit for purpose and building new homes that meet the requirements and aspirations of the existing residents.
145. Any increase in residential properties in town and city centres, will also necessitate an increase in public service provision in town and city centres. As such, local authorities should consider using the ground floor of empty retail units (and particularly those that have seen their upper floors converted into residential premises) to provide public services. Ground floor units (depending on their size) could be converted into:
- Libraries;
  - Leisure centres;
  - GP surgeries; or
  - Community health centres.
146. We would also like to see local authorities exploring the opportunities for bringing schools to town and city centres, and working with further and higher education providers, to bring colleges and university campuses into these areas too. Returning public services to town and city centres would increase the provision of essential services in those areas (particularly if we see increasing number of residents) and increase footfall in town and city centres.
147. As with housing, any investment in town and city centre public service provision, should be matched by investment in public services in those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind. Again, the exact nature of that investment will depend on the specific needs of individual neighbourhoods, but may include:
- Safeguarding the future of a community centre or youth club;
  - Improving the playing fields at a primary or secondary school;
  - Converting an older library building into a new, upgraded library or community centre; and
  - Building a new leisure centre, in a neighbourhood that lacks these facilities.

*Workplaces*

148. Increasing the provision of essential services in town and city centres will increase footfall, but as witnesses emphasised, there is a need to create as many reasons as possible for people to visit their town or city. As such, we believe that central government should work with local authorities to create a network of work hubs in towns and cities. These hubs would allow those who cannot work from their own home to benefit from remote working opportunities, would increase footfall in town and city centres, would provide more customers for town and city centre shops and cafes, and would fill empty retail units.
149. Work hubs may look very different in different towns and cities, depending on the size of the particular town or city, the demand for such spaces and the empty premises available. Depending on the nature of their specific areas, local authority leaders may want to consider:
- Converting empty retail units into small, work hubs, where individuals can book a desk for a certain number of days each week or month;
  - Creating additional work space or small meeting rooms in some of their existing buildings, such as leisure centres and libraries; or
  - Converting larger empty premises (such as department stores) into collaboration spaces that can be hired by companies when they require a space for large meetings, team-building days or for whole teams to collaborate on a specific project.
150. To ensure that workers fully benefit from the potential of work hubs in towns and cities, it is vital that these spaces are subsidised for those on lower incomes, allowing all those who want to use work hubs to use them. Such a subsidy would also ensure that work hubs have as much impact as possible on town and city centres, by increasing footfall and increasing the potential spend of those using the work hubs.

*Retail*

151. We want to see local authority leaders creating thriving town and city centres by encouraging new businesses to open in their area by providing empty retail units for a peppercorn rent to new, and pop-up businesses. New and pop-up businesses would help to create high streets that have a healthy blend of national and international chain stores, local independent businesses and new, emerging businesses. Any support provided by local authority leaders to new, pop-up businesses would benefit their areas by:
- Occupying empty retail units, which bring back vibrancy to the high street;
  - Giving local residents the opportunity to experiment with new business ideas without the need for substantial financial risk; and
  - Giving business owners the time, space and opportunity to grow their business before taking on a larger retail unit.
152. Our proposal is not of town and city centres with a merry-go-round of pop-up businesses opening and then closing within six months because of a lack of support. Rather, we want to see local authorities introducing a

package of tailored support for new and pop-up businesses to ensure that those businesses that are viable survive and thrive. We also want to see local authorities introducing a system to support successful pop-up businesses into permanent premises in town and city centres, therefore ensuring that new businesses can take up the pop-up retail units.

153. There is no one-size fits all approach to encouraging new and pop-up businesses and different towns and cities will have different needs and wants. We would encourage local authority leaders to explore with businesses all potential options, including:
- Creating a specific space for pop-up food and retail businesses , similar to the Corporation Market in Cardiff, Pitt Market in Edinburgh and Baltic Market in Liverpool;
  - Supporting new pop-up food businesses by establishing a food court or street food market with stalls available for new businesses for nominal rent;
  - Taking on the responsibility for a large empty unit, such as an empty department store, and offering new and pop-up businesses concessions in the store for a peppercorn rent; or
  - Allowing businesses to share an empty retail unit to share costs, for example, with a pop-up café during the day and a different, pop-up restaurant in the evenings.

#### *Public transport*

154. We want to see a reliable, affordable and sustainable public transport model that supports the recovery of towns and cities, and believe that local authority leaders working should work with public transport providers to develop reimagined public transport services. Public transport provision will no longer just be concentrated on transporting commuters to their offices early in the morning, and back home in the evenings. Rather, we want to see public transport services that meet the needs of the wider local population, and reflect the reasons why people visit towns and cities.
155. There is little purpose in trying to develop more reasons for residents and visitors to come to towns and cities (as described above), if public transport provision cannot meet these additional needs. If local authority leaders want to improve the leisure and cultural opportunities in their urban area, there is a complimentary requirement to improve evening and late-night public transport provision. If local authorities want to attract residents to come to their town or city centre at the weekend, there is a corresponding requirement to improve Sunday public transport services. The exact public transport services required in each town and city will depend on the extent of existing services and the priorities of local government leaders, but we would like to see the expansion of services, such as:
- Frequent evening services;
  - Frequent Sunday services;
  - Frequent, reliable services between town and city centres and suburbs and surrounding villages; and

- Frequent services between town and city centres and out-of-town facilities, such as train stations and large hospitals.
156. We want to see improved public transport provision playing a key role in the recovery and regeneration of towns and cities. To enhance the regenerative potential of public transport provision, there is a need for a renewed emphasis on public transport access to town and city centres. People will only visit towns and cities if public transport can take them to the very centre of towns and cities.
157. To maximise the impact of public transport on the regeneration of towns and cities, local authority leaders should work with public transport providers to ensure that public transport takes residents and visitors to where they want to go. If local government leaders are increasing the reasons for people to visit their local urban areas, this must be matched by an increase in public transport infrastructure in those areas. If local authority leaders open a new music arena or sports stadium, there is a complimentary need for more bus stops or tram stops in that area. Bus stations, train stations, tram stops and bus stops must be provided in those areas where residents and visitors want to spend their time, such as:
- Arenas and music venues;
  - Sports stadia;
  - Food markets and street food hubs; and
  - Parks and green spaces.
158. As with housing and public services, we believe that any increase in public transport services serving town and city centres should be matched by increased investment in public transport provision in those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind. The exact nature of the investment in public transport provision will depend on the needs of the specific neighbourhoods, but may include:
- More frequent services between the specific neighbourhood and the town or city centre to improve access to jobs and leisure opportunities;
  - Discounted tickets for families to encourage them to visit the town or city centre at weekends or during the school holidays; or
  - Public transport services that serve the whole neighbourhood, rather than one main bus stop, to improve links between the specific neighbourhood and the town or city centre.
159. As the expansion of public transport services, in both individual neighbourhoods and the town or city centre, may not be commercially viable, we would like to see local authority leaders explore the possibility of subsidising specific services, as part of their wider regeneration efforts. The type of public transport services that should be subsidised will differ according to the priorities of different local authorities and the needs of different towns and cities. However, we believe that local authority leaders should consider subsidising services, such as evening services, Sunday services, and services from town and city centres to out-of-town locations; as

well as subsidising specific tickets, such as frequent traveller tickets, weekly tickets and monthly tickets.

160. We also want to see local authorities, working with public transport providers, to develop intermodal ticketing and payment systems. This would allow passengers to buy one ticket or make a single contactless payment, for one journey, regardless of how many different modes of transport are used for that journey. For too long public transport in our towns and cities has been fragmented, with different bus and train companies requiring different tickets, forcing passengers to wait for a service from the correct provider or buy another ticket.
161. Public transport must become a simple and hassle-free way of travelling in, and around, our towns and cities, if it is to have any chance of thriving in the future. Moreover, as attracting residents and visitors into our towns and cities is critical to their recovery, we cannot allow an overly complex, fragmented public transport system to hold them back. As such, we want to see local authorities, public transport providers and the UK Government working together to explore the potential for intermodal ticketing systems in our towns and cities.

### *Green spaces*

162. As we explained in Chapter 2, access to green spaces is vital to our health and wellbeing, but it is also an important symbol of the kind of towns and cities we want to see in the future. Meeting the UK's climate targets, and reaching net zero by 2050 is not just about reducing carbon emissions, but also about considering, and creating a new blueprint for what a net zero town or city should look like. We want to see increased, and improved, access to green spaces being considered hand in hand with the wider efforts to tackle climate change and reduce our carbon emissions, and believe that nature, green spaces and biodiversity must be at the heart of our plans for the future of our towns and cities.
163. We believe that our efforts to reduce carbon emissions should not only improve the long-term health of our planet, but also be seen as a catalyst for creating 'greener' towns and cities. As such, we set out our proposals for increasing the supply of, and access to, green spaces in our towns and cities, but want local authority leadership to see this as the first step towards creating green, net zero towns and cities.
164. We want to see all towns and cities with a plentiful supply of high-quality, accessible parks, green spaces and open spaces. We believe that local authority leaders should invest in improving existing parks and play areas, ensuring that every park and play area is open, accessible and welcoming, and has facilities that will encourage the increased use of parks and play areas, such as:
- A paddling pool;
  - Picnic area
  - Cafe;
  - Toilets; and
  - Outdoor fitness equipment.

165. Beyond improving existing green spaces, local government leaders should undertake a programme to increase parks, parklets and play areas in their urban areas. Some types of green and open spaces will be more suitable for some towns and cities, than others, depending on existing provision and geography. For example, if a town or city already has large parks, it may be more suitable to create smaller parklets and outside courtyards, or if a town has many smaller open spaces, but no access to large green spaces, it may be possible to improve access to a waterway, such as a river, stream or canal.
166. We want to see local authority leaders being innovative in their approach to developing new green and outside spaces, exploring options, such as:
- Repurposing derelict land into parks, playing fields or play areas;
  - Converting parts of pedestrianised streets into parklets to increase and improve greenery;
  - Converting small unused plots, yards and storage space into parklets and courtyards; or
  - Demolishing derelict or dangerous buildings to create courtyards, parklets or allotments.
167. While improving the condition of existing green spaces, and increasing the supply of green and open spaces, is vital to the recovery of towns and cities, the long-term regeneration of urban areas will depend upon safeguarding the long-term future of green and open spaces. We want to see local authority leaders amending their planning policies and guidelines to ensure that all new developments—residential, commercial or public service—will build in the need to provide green or open spaces that are open and accessible to all. New housing developments in particular, whether flats, houses or new housing estates, should include good-quality play areas, that are open and accessible to all children and young people. We want to see local government leaders using their planning policies and guidelines to encourage the development of more innovative green and open spaces, such as:
- Housing developments with rooftop gardens or allotments;
  - Libraries, community centres and GP surgeries with a small community garden, that is open and accessible to all; and
  - Bus stops surrounded by a small courtyard or parklet.

### Inequalities

168. Our proposal is for a new approach to tackling inequalities, where those who are most vulnerable in our communities are active partners in developing the investment plans, and projects, that will change their lives. Attempts to tackle inequalities by imposing answers on communities as not worked, and will not work. Rather, we believe that no decisions should be made without the participation of vulnerable groups. Those who face disadvantage and discrimination must have a role in developing the services and practices that could prove to be of most help to them.
169. We want to see the regeneration of our towns and cities making a real difference to the lives of all residents, not merely those who already enjoy many of the benefits offered by our urban areas. We want to see local authorities

using their recovery agendas to close the gap between the more advantaged and disadvantaged communities within their towns and cities. There is little purpose, and even less regenerative benefit, in investing in the same areas of our towns and cities over and over again, while other neighbourhoods are forgotten. We cannot allow this to be another missed opportunity to tackle the stubborn inequalities that in our towns and cities.

170. Working with vulnerable groups, communities and neighbourhoods, we want to see local authorities develop a blended approach to the regeneration of their towns and cities. Such an approach must ensure that investment in town and city centres is matched by a commitment to, and investment in, those neighbourhoods most in need. As such, we suggest that local authorities should develop a two-pronged, blended approach to urban regeneration and renewal. The first part of this approach will focus on developing new opportunities—pop-up retail units, work hubs and arts and culture—in towns and cities, while the second part will concentrate on investing in housing, public services, public transport and green spaces in town and city centres, as well as and those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind. Only the residents of these neighbourhoods fully understand their needs, so local authorities must put the views of residents at the heart of the process for developing investment plans and regeneration projects within these neighbourhoods.
171. We believe that focusing funding on those neighbourhoods most in need is a vital step to tackling inequalities between different areas and communities within towns and cities, and putting right the historical wrong of under-investment in these neighbourhoods, but only if developed with those communities that they are aiming to benefit. Action to tackle inequalities must not only be targeted at specific neighbourhoods, but must be mainstreamed throughout local authorities' regeneration agenda. We have explained that some accelerating trends, such as the demise of town and city centres and any reduction in public transport provision, will have a disproportionate impact on specific groups and communities. Local authority leaders have the chance not only to reverse those accelerating trends, but also to mitigate their current, and future, effect by ensuring that the needs of specific groups and communities, are at the forefront of their regeneration plans. We believe that the only way of putting the needs of specific groups and communities at the heart of the regeneration agenda, is by listening to them.
172. We want to see local authority leaders using the renewal of their urban areas as an occasion to create towns and cities that meet the needs of all groups and communities. For too long some groups and communities have been expected to live in unsuitable housing, with no access to green spaces, poor public transport links and sub-standard public services. This cannot be allowed to continue.
173. Local authority leaders must ensure that in developing their plans for improved housing, increased green spaces, increased public services, and improved public transport provision they listen to, and meet the needs of, different groups and communities within their towns and cities. Different groups and communities in different areas will have different needs, and there is no one-size fits all approach to creating open and accessible town and cities. However, we believe that local authority leaders should explore:

- Developing housing that meets the needs of different groups and communities;
- Expanding public service provision that meets the needs of different groups and communities;
- Ensuring that public transport is accessible to different groups and communities;
- Renovating existing, and creating new, green spaces that are accessible to different groups and communities; and
- A flexible and creative approach to the use of existing space.

174. We also want to see local authority leaders using their regeneration plans as a chance to introduce specific schemes to ensure that the new opportunities in towns and cities—work hubs, pop-up retail units, arts and culture opportunities—are targeted at the needs of specific groups and communities. Again, the needs of specific groups and communities can only be targeted, if they are understood. As such, we want to see local authorities actively engaging with different groups and communities to develop a real understanding of their needs. The exact projects most suitable to meet the differing needs of specific groups and communities will be different in different areas, but we want to see local authority leaders consider:

- Providing additional financial and business support, and business mentorship for specific groups and communities to take up a pop-up retail unit;
- Providing additional financial support to establish a town or city centre that meets the needs of specific groups and communities; and
- Providing additional financial support to establish a creative hub that meets the needs of specific groups and communities.

## CHAPTER 5: CHANGES TO BRING ABOUT THIS FUTURE

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### Town and city leadership

175. As we explained in the introduction, our proposals for the future of towns and cities focuses on many policy areas that are largely devolved in the United Kingdom, such as housing, transport and local government. Despite hearing evidence from businesses, town planners, public transport providers and local authority leaders from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, our conclusions and recommendations focus on the situation in England. Nevertheless, we believe that the governments of, and local authority leaders in, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will find our report useful in considering the future of towns and cities, and their role in that future.
176. Empowering local authority leaders is vital to bring about the changes we wish to see in our towns and cities. Throughout our inquiry we have heard that different towns and cities have been affected differently by the pandemic, and will need different measures to recover. There is no one-size solution that will work for all towns and cities across the UK.
177. Local government leaders are in a far stronger position to understand the needs of their own areas and residents, rather than central government civil servants. Central government should see itself as an enabler of recovery, providing local authority leaders with the powers, resources and responsibilities to set their own direction for the regeneration of individual towns and cities across the country.
178. We have received insufficient evidence to create a comprehensive proposal for further legislative devolution, however, ***we believe that the UK Government must take the opportunity offered by its upcoming Levelling Up White Paper to explain its plans for further legislative and financial devolution of powers.***
179. Beyond the need for further legislative devolution, we believe that the existing general power of competence provides local authority leaders with the potential to take on additional responsibilities, and the power to implement far-reaching regeneration projects in their towns and cities. However, central government must support, and encourage, its use to enable local authority leaders to make full use of the general power of competence.
180. ***The UK Government should issue a statement to all local authority leaders actively encouraging the use of the general power of competence, and should work with the Local Government Association to issue detailed guidance notes on the operation of the general power of competence.***
181. Throughout our inquiry, we have been focusing on the long-term impacts of the pandemic on towns and cities, and have asked local authority leaders to concentrate on their plans for the long-term recovery of their urban areas. However, as local authorities have already seen significant cuts to their budgets since 2010, we cannot expect them to continue to accomplish more and more, with ever decreasing budgets. Rather, we believe that the regeneration agenda necessitates a comprehensive re-examination of the local government settlement. Local government leaders have stressed time and again that the current system of one-year local authority settlements restricts their ability to undertake long-term planning. How can we expect

local authority leaders to plan the long-term regeneration of their urban areas over the next five, ten or twenty years, if the annual funding settlements only allow them to plan from year to year?

182. While local authorities, like everyone else, have been required to put in place short-term, emergency measures to deal with the pandemic, it is now time to consider the long-term impacts of the pandemic, and how they can be overcome. Local authorities can only do this, if they are given sufficient long-term financial certainty from central government to allow them to plan for the long-term future.
183. ***The UK Government should introduce a three-year rolling local government financial settlement, at an increased level, to replace the current system of one-year settlements, to allow local authority leaders to develop, and deliver, long-term plans for their urban areas.***
184. Local authority leaders have stated time and again that the current competitive bidding process for additional funding from central government is unsatisfactory. Local authorities are often expected to submit funding bids to very tight deadlines, with equally tight deadlines for spending those funds. As a result, these funds are often spent on projects that fit the funding criteria and timescales, but that may make only a negligible impact on the local authority's plans to regenerate their area.
185. We believe that local government leaders should be given the opportunity to focus on the long-term regeneration plans and projects for their areas, rather than having to find short-term projects that fit specific funding criteria, but not the needs of their local area. As such, we want to see the UK Government agree with the Local Government Association to create an improved resource equalisation scheme, to ensure that additional central government funding is targeted at the towns and cities that are at the greatest risk of being left behind.
186. ***The UK Government should end the competitive bidding processes for additional funds, and agree with the Local Government Association to create an improved resource equalisation scheme, as a transparent method of assessing those towns and cities most in need, and targeting additional central government funding at those areas.***
187. We want to see the recovery of our towns and cities used as a catalyst for exploring the options to reform the current business rates system and level the playing field between online and offline retail sales. ***Following the Treasury Select Committee's inquiry into the impact of business rates on business in October 2019, we believe that the time is right for that Committee to update this work in light of the pandemic, as well as for it and the Lords Economic Affairs Committee to undertake a detailed exploration of the potential for introducing an increased VAT rate on online sales or a hypothecated online sales tax.***

### **Accelerating trends**

188. While we believe that the regeneration of town and city centres is vital to the wider recovery of towns and cities, we want to see this matched by a commitment to, and investment in, those neighbourhoods most in need. As

such, we want to see the UK Government work with local authorities to develop a two-pronged, blended approach to urban regeneration and renewal. The first part of this approach will focus on developing new opportunities—pop-up retail units, work hubs and arts and culture—in town and cities, while the second part will concentrate on investing in housing, public services, public transport and green spaces in town and city centres, as well as and those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind.

189. We want to see the UK Government supporting local authority leaders to establish work-hubs, pop-up retail units and arts and culture provision in our towns and cities. While the UK Government will provide much of the funding for establishing these initiatives, we believe that local authority leaders should have the freedom to use these additional resources in the most suitable way to meet the specific needs of their particular urban areas.
190. ***The UK Government should provide financial support to local authority leaders to enable the establishment of:***
- ***Work hubs in towns and cities;***
  - ***Pop-up retail units in towns and cities; and***
  - ***Arts and culture provision in towns and cities.***
191. We want to see the UK Government working with local authority leaders to encourage a blended approach to housing in towns and cities. While we believe that bringing residents back to town and city centres is key to the wider recovery of towns and cities, we also do not want to see retail, workplaces, leisure opportunities and public services, pushed out of our town and city centres. We want to see the UK Government providing financial support to convert commercial properties into residential properties, as well as building homes on derelict sites in town and city centres. We also want to see this investment in town and city centres matched by investment in housing in those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind. We believe that local government leaders should have the freedom to use these additional resources in the most suitable way to meet the specific needs of their particular urban areas.
192. ***The UK Government should work with local authorities to develop a blended approach to housing in our towns and cities. We want to see the UK Government providing increased financial support for the conversion of commercial properties into residential properties and building homes on derelict sites in town and city centres, as well as matching investment in those neighbourhoods in the greatest need.***
193. Any increase in residential properties will also necessitate an increase in public services, and an increasing investment in public service provision. We want to see the UK Government working with local authorities to develop a blended approach to public service provision in towns and cities. We believe that the UK Government should provide local authorities with increased funding to invest in public service provision in town and city centres, and those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind. Local government leaders should have the freedom to use these additional resources in the most suitable way to meet the specific needs of their particular areas.

194. ***The UK Government should work with local authorities to develop a blended approach to public service provision in urban areas. We want to see the UK Government providing increased financial support for the provision of public services in town and city centres, as well as matching investment in those neighbourhoods in the greatest need.***
195. Public transport provision is a key element in the regeneration of our towns and cities, that cannot be overemphasised. As such, we believe that recovery of our towns and cities is an unmissable opportunity to explore the options to introduce an intermodal ticketing and payment system to make using public transport as easy and simple as possible. ***encourage the Transport Select Committee to examine the potential options for introducing intermodal ticketing and payment systems for public transport in our towns and cities, alongside its potential impact on passenger numbers.***
196. We want to see the UK Government, working with local authority leaders, to develop a blended approach to public transport provision in towns and cities. While we believe that making it as easy as possible for residents, and visitors, to travel into town and city centres is vital for their recovery, we also want to see increased public transport provision for those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind. As such, we want to see the UK Government providing local authorities with additional support to improve the public transport network in town and city centres, and specific neighbourhoods in most need. Local government leaders should have the freedom to use these additional resources in the most suitable way to meet the specific needs of their particular areas.
197. ***The UK Government should work with local authorities to develop a blended approach to public transport in urban areas. Such an approach should ensure that public transport provision within town and city centres, and within neighbourhoods in the greatest need is prioritised, with central government investment to ensure that public transport provides a regular, reliable and affordable service in these areas.***
198. As demand for green spaces has grown, so has the funding spent on these spaces declined, as local authorities face greater pressures on already strained budgets. We believe that the UK Government must provide local authorities will additional funding, to improve the condition of current urban green spaces and create new town and city parks, parklets and play areas. We believe that this additional funding should be focussed on town and city centres, as well as those neighbourhoods in greatest need. Local government leaders should have the freedom to use these additional resources in the most suitable way to meet the specific needs of their particular urban areas.
199. ***The UK Government should provide local authorities with additional funding to improve the condition of existing urban green spaces, and create new parks in town and city centres, and those neighbourhoods in the greatest need.***

### **Inequalities**

200. We have been unable to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the complex inequalities in our towns and cities, but believe that tackling existing inequalities is vital to create vibrant, sustainable towns and cities of the

future. Existing inequalities, and their impacts, will differ from one town or city to another, and the action required to tackle these inequalities will also differ from one town or city to another. As such, we are not in a position to make detailed, prescriptive recommendations to tackle inequalities in all towns and cities, but rather make recommendations that should provide both local and central government with food for thought. We believe that inequalities in our towns and cities deserves further, detailed consideration, and hope that another Select Committee may undertake further work on this topic.

201. ***We encourage the Women and Equalities Select Committee to undertake a detailed inquiry exploring inequalities in our towns and cities.***
202. We want to see local authorities developing a new approach to tackling inequalities, where those who are most vulnerable in our communities are active partners in developing the investment plans, and projects, that will change their lives. We believe that vulnerable groups, communities and neighbourhoods should be supported to take a lead in shaping their future, rather than having regeneration plans imposed upon them. It is only by engaging fully with specific groups and communities that we can hope to develop the services and practices that could prove to be of most help to them.
203. ***We encourage local authorities to develop a method for actively engaging with the different groups, communities and neighbourhoods within their towns and cities, and ensure that these views are acted upon in developing their regeneration plans.***
204. We want to see local authorities putting action to tackle inequalities within their towns and cities, at the heart of their recovery agenda. We believe that our proposed blended approach to the regeneration of our towns and cities is a vital first step to tackling inequalities, and ensuring that no communities are left behind. We want to see investment in town and city centres matched by a commitment to, and investment in, those neighbourhoods most in need. We believe that focusing funding on those neighbourhoods most in need is a vital step to tackling inequalities between different areas and communities within towns and cities, and putting right the historical wrong of under-investment in these neighbourhoods.
205. ***We encourage local authorities to ensure that investment in housing, public transport, public services and green spaces in town and city centres, is matched by the same investment in housing, public transport, public services and green spaces in those neighbourhoods that risk being left behind.***
206. Action to tackle inequalities must not only be targeted at specific neighbourhoods, but must be mainstreamed throughout local authorities' regeneration agenda. When local authority leaders are developing their plans for improved housing, increased green spaces, increased public services, and improved public transport provision it is vital that they ensure that they are accessible to, and meet the needs of, different groups and communities within their towns and cities. Different groups and communities, such as older people, disabled people and people from minority ethnic communities,

in different areas will have different needs, and there is no one-size fits all approach to creating open and accessible town and cities.

207. ***We encourage local authorities to develop a process for mainstreaming the consideration of inequalities when assessing proposals for improving housing, green spaces, public transport provision and public services, and ensuring that the views, and needs, of specific groups and communities are at the heart of the decision-making process.***
208. Local authority leaders should also use their regeneration plans as a chance to introduce specific schemes to ensure that the new opportunities in towns and cities—work hubs, pop-up retail units, arts and culture opportunities—are targeted at the needs of specific groups and communities. The exact projects most suitable to meet the differing needs of specific groups and communities will be different in different areas, and there is no one-size fits all approach for all towns and cities.
209. ***We encourage local authorities to develop schemes to ensure that the new opportunities offered by the regeneration of their towns and cities—work hubs, pop-up retail unites, arts and culture provision—are targeted at the needs of specific groups and communities.***

## APPENDIX 1: LIST OF MEMBERS AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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### Members

Lord Alderdice  
 Baroness Benjamin  
 Lord Elder  
 Baroness Fraser of Criagmaddie  
 Lord Hain  
 Lord Harris of Haringey  
 Baroness Jay of Paddington  
 Lord Kamall\*  
 Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (Chair)  
 Baroness Morgan of Cotes  
 Lord Pickles  
 Baroness Young of Hornsey  
 \*Member until 17 September 2021

### Declarations of interest

Lord Alderdice  
*Retired NHS medical practitioner with a small research and risk analysis company (not paid for any work in relation to COVID-19)*

Baroness Benjamin  
*No relevant interest to declare*

Lord Elder  
*No relevant interest to declare*

Baroness Fraser of Criagmaddie  
*Board Member, Creative Scotland*  
*Chief Executive Officer, Cerebral Palsy Scotland*  
*Trustee, Neurological Alliance of Scotland*  
*Chair, Scottish Government National Advisory Committee for Neurological Conditions*  
*Board Member, Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)*

Lord Hain  
*No relevant interest to declare*

Lord Harris of Haringey  
*Chair, Toby Harris Associates*  
*Chair, National Trading Standards (until end-September 2021)*  
*Chair, Independent Reference Group, National Crime Agency*  
*Chair, National Preparedness Commission*  
*Chair, Fundraising Regulator*  
*Independent Reviewer, London's Preparedness for a Terrorist Attack*  
*Chair, General Dental Council (from October 2021)*  
*Co-President, London Councils*  
*Board Member, Resilience First*  
*President, Institute for Strategic Risk Management*  
*Member, APIS Advisory Board (May to September 2021)*  
*Board Member, Cyber Security Challenge UK (until end-April 2021)*

Baroness Jay of Paddington  
*No relevant interest to declare*

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (Chair)

*Chair, We Transfer*

*Director, Twitter*

*Non-Executive Director, Chanel*

Baroness Morgan of Cotes

*My husband, Jonathan Morgan, is a councillor and Leader of Charnwood Borough Council*

*First Group who gave evidence to the Committee are a client of Grayling where I am a member of the UK Advisory Board*

Lord Pickles

*President, Enterprise Forum*

Baroness Young of Hornsey

*Chancellor, University of Nottingham*

*Co-chair, Foundation for Future London*

A full list of Members' interests can be found in the Register of Lords' interests:  
<https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-interests/register-of-lords-interests/>

## APPENDIX 2: LIST OF WITNESSES

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Evidence is published online at <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1229/the-longterm-impact-of-the-pandemic-on-towns-and-cities/publications/> and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074).

Evidence received by the Committee is listed below in chronological order of oral evidence session and in alphabetical order. Those witnesses marked with \*\* gave both oral and written evidence. Those marked with \* gave oral evidence and did not submit any written evidence. All other witnesses submitted written evidence only.

### Oral evidence in chronological order

*	Andrew Carter, Chief Executive, Centre for Cities	<a href="#">QQ 1–17</a>
*	Mark Hayward, Chief Policy Adviser, Propertymark	<a href="#">QQ 1–17</a>
*	Craig McLaren, Director of Scotland, Ireland and English Regions, Royal Town Planning Institute	<a href="#">QQ 1–17</a>
*	Nye Cominetti, Senior Economist, Resolution Foundation	<a href="#">QQ 18–37</a>
*	Kate Cox, Chief Marketing Officer, Money Penny	<a href="#">QQ 18–37</a>
*	Joe Fitzsimons, Senior Policy Advisor, Institute of Directors	<a href="#">QQ 18–37</a>
*	Mark Gregory, Director, Centre for Towns	<a href="#">QQ 18–37</a>
*	Rooney Anand, Chair, WorldSkills UK	<a href="#">QQ 18–37</a>
*	Rt Hon Norman Baker, Adviser to the CEO, Campaign for Better Transport	<a href="#">QQ 38–49</a>
*	Professor Nick Tyler, Director, UCL Centre for Transport Studies	<a href="#">QQ 38–49</a>
*	Ian Wright, Head of Innovation and Partnerships, Transport Focus	<a href="#">QQ 38–49</a>
*	David Cowan, Director of Commercial Operations, Translink	<a href="#">QQ 38–49</a>
*	John Birtwistle, Head of Policy, First Bus	<a href="#">QQ 38–49</a>
*	Margaret Davidson, Leader, Highland Council	<a href="#">QQ 50–65</a>
*	Carl Smith, Leader, Great Yarmouth Borough Council	<a href="#">QQ 50–65</a>
*	Lucille Thompson, Leader, Winchester City Council	<a href="#">QQ 50–65</a>
*	Susan Hinchcliffe, Leader, Bradford Metropolitan District Council	<a href="#">QQ 50–65</a>
**	Joshua Artus, Placemaking and Strategy Lead, Centric Lab	<a href="#">QQ 66–73</a>
*	Cannon Ivers, landscape architect	<a href="#">QQ 66–73</a>
*	Lara Kinneir, architect	<a href="#">QQ 66–73</a>
*	Paul Owens, Director, World Cities Culture Forum	<a href="#">QQ 66–73</a>

- \* Olafiyin Taiwo, Chair, Young Planners Network, Commonwealth Association of Planners [QQ 66–73](#)
- \* Ryan Walker, Royal Town Planning Institute’s Young Planner of the Year [QQ 66–73](#)
- \* Lucy Yu, Non-Executive Director, Connected Places Catapult [QQ 66–73](#)
- \* Rob Stewart, Leader, Swansea City Council [QQ 74–88](#)
- \* Hazel Simmons MBE, Leader, Luton Borough Council [QQ 74–88](#)
- \*\* Stephen Martin, Mayor, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council [QQ 74–88](#)

### Alphabetical list of all witnesses

- Abri [PTC0010](#)
- \* Rooney Anand, Chair, WorldSkills UK ([QQ 18–37](#))
- \*\* Joshua Artus, Placemaking and Strategy Lead, Centric Lab ([QQ 66–73](#)) [PTC0046](#)
- Association for Public Service Excellence [PTC0007](#)
- \* Rt Hon Norman Baker, Adviser to the CEO, Campaign for Better Transport ([QQ 38–49](#))
- Professor Michael Batty [PTC0002](#)
- John Birtwistle, Head of Policy, First Bus ([QQ 38–49](#))
- British Beer and Pub Association [PTC0035](#)
- British Property Federation [PTC0015](#)
- \* Andrew Carter, Chief Executive, Centre for Cities ([QQ 1–17](#))
- Centre for Diet and Activity Research [PTC0019](#)
- Centre for Research into Energy Demand Solutions and the DeCarboN8 network [PTC0016](#)
- Coalfields Regeneration Trust [PTC0004](#)
- \* Nye Cominetti, Senior Economist, Resolution Foundation ([QQ 18–37](#))
- Core Cities UK [PTC0027](#)
- Cornwall Council [PTC0045](#)
- \* David Cowan, Director of Commercial Operations, Translink ([QQ 38–49](#))
- \* Kate Cox, Chief Marketing Officer, Moneypenny ([QQ 18–37](#))
- Martin Crookston, independent strategic planning consultant [PTC0008](#)

- \* Margaret Davidson, Leader, Highland Council  
([QQ 50–65](#))
  - District Councils’ Network [PTC0029](#)
  - Field in Trust [PTC0034](#)
- \* Joe Fitzsimons, Senior Policy Advisor, Institute of Directors ([QQ 18–37](#))
  - Professor Gianni De Fraja, University of Nottingham [PTC0037](#)
  - The Friends of Finsbury Park [PTC0028](#)
  - The Gardens Trust [PTC0013](#)
  - Jessica R. Gates [PTC0018](#)
  - Greenspace Scotland [PTC0012](#)
- \* Mark Gregory, Director, Centre for Towns ([QQ 18–37](#))
  - Groundwork UK [PTC0024](#)
- \* Mark Hayward, Chief Policy Adviser, PropertyMark ([QQ 1–17](#))
  - Heart of London Business Alliance [PTC0025](#)
  - The Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice & Place, University of Liverpool [PTC0009](#)
- \* Susan Hinchcliffe, Leader, Bradford Metropolitan District Council ([QQ 50–65](#))
  - Historic England [PTC0041](#)
  - Impact on Urban Health [PTC0031](#)
  - Industrial Communities Alliance [PTC0004](#)
  - Institute for Economic Affairs [PTC0023](#)
  - Institute of Licensing [PTC0017](#)
  - Institute of Place Management and the BID Foundation [PTC0042](#)
- \* Cannon Ivers, landscape architect ([QQ 66–73](#))
  - Professor Tom Kirchmaier, London School of Economics and Political Science [PTC0011](#)
- \* Lara Kinneir, architect ([QQ 66–73](#))
  - The Land Trust [PTC0026](#)
  - Dr Ian Mell, University of Manchester [PTC0021](#)
  - Dr Hannah R. Marston, Open University [PTC0018](#)
- \*\* Stephen Martin, Mayor, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council ([QQ 74–88](#))
  - Dr Jesse Matheson, University of Sheffield [PTC0037](#)

- \* Craig McLaren, Director of Scotland, Ireland and English Regions, Royal Town Planning Institute ([QQ 1–17](#))
  - Midland Parks Forum [PTC0030](#)
  - Dr Deborah J. Morgan, Swansea University [PTC0018](#)
  - MRC Epidemiology Unit [PTC0019](#)
  - National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces [PTC0003](#)
  - Office for National Statistics [PTC0043](#)
  - The Parks Management Association [PTC0005](#)
- \* Paul Owens, Director, World Cities Culture Forum ([QQ 66–73](#))
  - Dr Sarah Price, University of Sheffield [PTC0020](#)
  - Rail Delivery Group [PTC0048](#)
  - Dr Jonathan Reades, Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, University College London [PTC0008](#)
  - Dr James Rockey, University of Birmingham [PTC0037](#)
  - Scottish Futures Trust [PTC0033](#)
  - Professor J R Shackleton, University of Buckingham [PTC0023](#)
- \* Hazel Simmons MBE, Leader, Luton Borough Council ([QQ 74–88](#))
- \* Carl Smith, Leader, Great Yarmouth Borough Council ([QQ 50–65](#))
  - Social Market Foundation [PTC0044](#)
- \* Rob Stewart, Leader, Swansea City Council ([QQ 74–88](#))
- \* Olafiyin Taiwo, Chair, Young Planners Network, Commonwealth Association of Planners ([QQ 66–73](#))
- \* Lucille Thompson, Leader, Winchester City Council ([QQ 50–65](#))
  - Professor Vanessa Toulmin, University of Sheffield [PTC0020](#)
  - Robbie S. Turner [PTC0018](#)
- \* Professor Nick Tyler, Director, UCL Centre for Transport Studies ([QQ 38–49](#))
  - UCL Virus Watch [PTC0014](#)
  - Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, University of Essex [PTC0006](#)
  - UK Music [PTC0022](#)
  - Carmen Villa-Llera, London School of Economics and Political Science [PTC0011](#)
  - Visit Britain [PTC0038](#)

- \* Ryan Walker, Royal Town Planning Institute's Young Planner of the Year ([QQ 66-73](#))  
Dr Meredith Whitten, London School of Economics & Political Science [PTC0021](#)
- Dr Gemma Wilson-Menzfeld, Northumbria University [PTC0018](#)  
Work after Lockdown [PTC0032](#)  
Christopher Worman MBE [PTC0001](#)
- \* Ian Wright, Head of Innovation and Partnerships, Transport Focus ([QQ 38-49](#))
- \* Lucy Yu, Non-Executive Director, Connected Places Catapult ([QQ 66-73](#))

### APPENDIX 3: CALL FOR EVIDENCE

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The COVID-19 Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the long-term impact of the pandemic on the UK's towns and cities.

The inquiry will consider how the last year has changed (or might, in future, change) inequalities between and within places, focusing on larger towns and on cities outside of the 12 core cities.<sup>95</sup>

The inquiry will focus, in particular, on the long-term impact of the pandemic on:

- Housing and green spaces
- The changing nature of employment
- Public transport

We welcome written submissions on any or all of the questions below. The deadline for submissions is 30 June 2021.

#### Housing and green spaces

- What is the long-term impact of the pandemic likely to be on housing and green spaces in towns and cities?
- How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?
- How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?
- What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any increasing inequalities?
- How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in housing and green spaces?

#### The changing nature of employment

- How will the pandemic change the nature of employment? And what will be the long-term impact of this change on towns and cities?
- How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?
- How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?
- What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any change in the nature of employment?
- How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in employment?

#### Public transport

- What is the long-term impact of the pandemic likely to be on public transport in towns and cities?
- How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?
- How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?
- What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any increasing inequalities?

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<sup>95</sup> Core Cities UK, 'London and the 11 Core Cities': <https://www.corecities.com/cities> [accessed 8 November 2021]

- How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in public transport?