



High Streets in Towns and Small Cities

Public Inquiry Submission

FAO: Built Environment Committee

Foreward

Morecambe Town Council welcomes the opportunity to provide its perspective to the Inquiry, to ensure the Committee fully understands the difficulties of pressures placed on high streets in Morecambe and towns across the UK.

The Council hopes its responses to the eleven questions below will contribute to more effective scrutiny of public policy and funding, and crucially provide parish and town councils with increased power to mobilise and facilitate their communities to access more direct funding opportunities to transform their declining high streets.

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, high streets were once bustling commercial hubs characterised by a diverse array of shops, markets and businesses lining the main thoroughfare of towns and cities. They served as the primary centres for local trade, commerce, and social interaction, with merchants, artisans, and craftsmen selling their goods and services to local residents and visitors alike. High streets were often vibrant and crowded, filled with pedestrians, horse-drawn carriages, and carts transporting goods. As high streets evolved due to industrialisation, urbanisation, and technological advancements, a shift was seen in the rise of department stores and chain retailers which began to dominate high streets. Alongside department stores, there continued to be a variety of speciality shops, street life, and entertainment, and high streets remained central to the economic and social life of their communities. Those high streets evolved to reflect broader social changes, including shifts in consumer behaviour, the welcomed change in roles of women, and the growth of leisure activities.

In recent decades, local authorities have lost touch with how to place shape their towns effectively, communities have forgotten how to interact with public space, and high streets have struggled to keep pace with evolving consumer needs and behaviours.

Place shaping cannot be achieved alone, and we must remember that any space can become a place. Towns and high streets need the right people around the table, with enough passion, creativity, and boldness, to look beyond the homogenisation of high streets in recent years, to re-energise the landscape. With a little imagination, our high streets could become places where we go to actively engage with other people in our communities; places where shopping is just one small part of a rich mix of activities including working, sharing, exchanging, playing and learning new skills. As the hub of our communities, the high street could become the place where we begin to build a more sustainable world.

This report contains a range of policy solutions and actions to transform our high streets.

Q1. How do you define a high street in a town or small city and what is its purpose?

Response:

The purpose of a high street is multifaceted:

Commercial Hub

High streets traditionally serve as the primary commercial nucleus in a town, hosting a variety of shops, restaurants, cafes, and services. They provide a central location for retail businesses to attract customers and generate economic activity.

Social Gathering Place

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

Cultural Center

High streets may feature cultural amenities such as theatres (including outdoor platforms or performance spaces), art galleries, museums, and historical landmarks. These establishments contribute to the cultural identity of a place and provide opportunities for residents and visitors to engage in artistic and cultural activities.

Pedestrian-Friendly Environment

Well-designed high streets prioritise pedestrian access and safety, offering pavements, crosswalks, and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. This encourages walking and cycling, reduces reliance on cars, and promotes a more sustainable and healthy mode of transportation.

Economic Vitality

A vibrant high street contributes to the economic vitality of a community by attracting tourists, supporting local businesses, and creating employment opportunities. A thriving high street can stimulate economic growth, enhance property values, and contribute to the overall prosperity of an area.

Historic and Architectural Character

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

Overall, high streets play a crucial role in shaping the identity, economy, and social life of a community, serving as dynamic urban spaces that accommodate a variety of functions and activities. Within Morecambe, there are multiple smaller high streets serving different

populations (such as Regent Road in the West End, and Princes Crescent in Bare), each with different roles to play according to demographics, proximity to infrastructure, and indices of deprivation.

Q2. What should be included on high streets to meet the needs of the whole community?

Response:

The levelling up agenda plays a crucial role in the future of high streets. Problems are currently felt in boarded up shops and run down town centres. Whilst the solution will vary from town to town and high street to high street depending on location, situation and community need, fundamentally shared spaces need to be safe and clean. For a high street to effectively serve its purpose as a vibrant and thriving commercial and social hub, it must restore pride in place and address the hyper-local roots of deprivation in order to effect long-term change. The practical interventions to kickstart levelling up are not well understood, or shared, and consultation should be at the heart of establishing common features such as:

Diversity and Variety

A wide variety of shops, restaurants (indoor and outdoor), cafes, bars, and services catering to different needs and preferences, ensuring a vibrant and dynamic commercial environment.

Pedestrian-Friendly Infrastructure

Well-designed pavements, pedestrian crossings, and safe crossings for cyclists, encouraging walking and cycling and creating a pleasant environment for pedestrians.

Attractive Public Spaces

Seaside resorts and towns should be more than a forgotten destination with a beach and slot machines.

Public realm cannot be underestimated or under funded. Appearance and presentation of public realm have an overall influence on the perception of a destination and a continuous dedicated programme of improvement work is vital to achieve a great town centre experience, which meets the basic needs of feeling safe and welcoming, and exceeds expectations for animating spaces that ensures visits are interesting, unique, enjoyable, and memorable.

Well-maintained public spaces such as parks, plazas, and seating areas should be maximised where people can relax, socialise, and enjoy outdoor activities.

Street Furniture and Amenities

Benches, streetlights, outdoor games, waste bins, and other amenities that enhance comfort and convenience for visitors and shoppers.

Historic and Architectural Character

Preserved historic buildings, architectural landmarks, interpretation boards, and streetscapes that contribute to the area's unique character and charm. Quality placemaking and optimisation of key assets, ensuring growth does not have a detrimental impact.

Accessibility

Easy access to public transportation, parking facilities, and bike racks to accommodate visitors from different areas and modes of transportation.

Events

Cultural led regeneration should be at the heart of all future high streets.

Regular events, festivals, markets, and cultural activities that attract visitors, promote local businesses, and foster community engagement.

Activations and Recreation

A 2023 report from think tank *Onward Levelling Up Locally*¹ advises the days of retail-driven high streets have passed. The future lies in creating spaces for shared social experiences (eg bowling, laser tag, gaming cafes, escape rooms, climbing walls, boutique cinemas, ice rinks etc) both paid-for and free, intermingled with remaining retail and amenities, built into the main arteries of a town rather than around the periphery. This will both provide more rounded experiences for visiting tourists and encourage greater footfall from residents - the regular presence of the latter being the key to the success or failure of UK high streets.

Cleanliness and Safety

Regular maintenance and cleansing to ensure a welcoming and safe environment for visitors and residents alike.

Green Spaces and Landscaping

Incorporation of planters, trees, and landscaping elements to improve air quality, provide shade, increase biodiversity, and enhance the aesthetic appeal of the street.

The *Levelling Up Locally* report identifies a direct correlation between the appearance of the public realm and the prevention and reduction of anti-social behaviour; the importance of events in helping town centres adapt to a post-retail driven high street; and how local community groups are best placed to provide long-term support to the most vulnerable members of communities in areas of real poverty. These three (of five) key areas were identified as key areas for councils to focus on to support the levelling up agenda from the bottom up, increasing pride in place, quality of life, and the things which are the foundations of economic development in the long term.

Wi-Fi and Digital Connectivity

Providing complimentary Wi-Fi and robust digital infrastructure fosters digital connectivity, facilitates online commerce, and enhances interactive experiences for visitors. The evolving landscape of the digital sector enables remote work from any location. Major

¹ <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Levelling-Up-Locally-Onward.pdf>

corporations increasingly embrace a gig economy model, opting to engage multiple freelancers distributed globally, rather than maintaining full-time, in-house design teams. This provides opportunities for towns such as Morecambe to attract the self employed who would not need to rely on any the precarious changes of seasonality in a seaside resort.

Human interaction is also a key component of digital services, particularly in places such as Morecambe with a dominant demographic with less digital familiarity and capability. Ultimately, people make places, and each solution needs to be focused on both the current and future populations of each town.

Overall, a successful high street should be well-planned, inclusive, and responsive to the needs and preferences of its community, offering a mix of amenities, activities, and experiences that make it a vibrant and attractive destination for all. The provision of spaces designed for flexible-use should be prioritised in order to provide increased opportunities for pop-up services such as banking, and healthcare providers, which could occupy a limited-time temporary shop front for a temporary period - this provides future-proofing and ability to respond to immediate needs without delay.

Q3. What are the obstacles to bringing underused property on the high streets back into use?

Response:

Bringing underused property on high streets back into use can be challenging due to several obstacles:

Economic Challenges

High streets may face economic downturns, changing consumer preferences, and competition from online retailers, making it financially challenging for property owners to invest in revitalising underused properties.

Vacancy and Neglect

Properties may remain vacant or neglected for extended periods, leading to deterioration of infrastructure, which can deter potential investors or tenants.

Regulatory and Planning Hurdles

Complex planning regulations, zoning restrictions, and bureaucratic processes may hinder efforts to repurpose or renovate underused properties, leading to delays and increased costs.

Financial Constraints

Property owners may lack the financial resources or access to funding needed to renovate or refurbish underused properties, especially if they require extensive repairs or upgrades.

Incentives

There may be a lack of financial incentives for property owners to invest in areas, especially if they experience high levels of crime and anti social behaviour and local agencies are not able to demonstrate improvements or regeneration efforts.

Ownership Fragmentation

High streets often have fragmented ownership structures, with multiple landlords owning different properties, making coordination and decision-making challenging for redevelopment efforts.

Lack of Vision and Coordination

The absence of a clear vision or coordinated strategy for high street revitalisation among stakeholders, including local authorities, property owners, businesses, and community groups, can hinder efforts to bring underused properties back into use.

Market Demand and Tenant Mix

Limited market demand for certain types of businesses or tenants may make it difficult to attract occupants for underused properties, especially if they do not align with the area's demographic or economic profile.

Perception and Image

High streets facing decline or neglect may suffer from negative perceptions, deterring potential investors or tenants who may perceive the area as undesirable or unsafe.

Lack of Localism

The absence of localism has hindered high streets by depriving them of community-driven initiatives and tailored solutions that could address their unique needs and challenges. Without local involvement and decision-making, high streets may struggle to adapt to changing local circumstances and miss out on opportunities for innovation and revitalisation that could help them thrive.

Addressing these obstacles often requires collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders, including local authorities, property owners, developers, investors, and community organisations, to develop holistic strategies that address economic, regulatory, and social challenges to high street revitalisation.

Q4. Who is involved in ensuring a thriving local high street and does the current structure of Government support facilitate those groups in working together?

Response:

Ensuring a thriving local high street typically involves collaboration among various stakeholders, including:

Business Owners and Retailers

Business owners and retailers operating on the high street contribute to its vibrancy by offering goods and services, attracting foot traffic, and creating a diverse retail environment.

Property Owners and Developers

Property owners and developers own, manage, and invest in high street properties. They are responsible for maintaining and upgrading buildings, leasing space to tenants, and potentially redeveloping underutilised properties to enhance the high street's appeal.

Tourism and Hospitality Industry

The tourism and hospitality industry can contribute to high street vitality by attracting visitors, promoting local attractions, and providing dining, entertainment, and accommodation options.

Transport and Infrastructure Providers

Transport and infrastructure providers, including public transit agencies and utility companies, ensure accessibility and essential services on the high street, such as public transportation, utilities, and waste management.

Government Agencies

Various government agencies at the national, regional, and local levels may be involved in supporting high street revitalisation efforts, providing funding, expertise, and regulatory frameworks to facilitate economic development, placemaking, and community engagement.

Local Government

Local authorities play a crucial role in high street management, urban planning, infrastructure development, and regulatory oversight. They may provide support through policies, funding, and initiatives aimed at revitalising high streets.

Parish and town councils, as the closest tier of local government to communities, play a vital role in collaborative planning, design, and implementation, being an advocate for positive change.

Other than adopting a condescending or dismissive attitude towards local parish and town councils, elected officials of Principal Authorities and MPs should mobilise and empower them to take an active role in shaping their towns. Unfortunately in reality the alternative is a protracted wait for top-down directives that may never materialise and only serve to stifle initiative, dampen enthusiasm, and perpetuate a cycle of inertia that hampers progress.

Local Skills

The shift in working culture accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has led individuals to recognise that they no longer need to be physically present in major urban centres throughout the workweek to secure employment. This paradigm shift has propelled the adoption of remote work and satellite work models. Consequently, individuals are increasingly establishing businesses in smaller towns, leveraging occasional visits to cities for necessary engagements, while enjoying the cost-saving advantages of lower overhead expenses.

Towns like Morecambe should capitalise on this emerging trend by positioning themselves as year-round economic hubs, not solely reliant on tourism. The post-COVID downsizing of office spaces by companies highlights an opportune moment for towns to attract larger businesses. Public sector organisations like HMRC, once concentrated in major cities like London, are now exploring options in towns like Telford and Harrogate. Morecambe and similar areas can showcase the benefits of working in a town setting, offering a balanced lifestyle that includes leisure activities like strolling along the promenade or enjoying a dip in the sea after a productive workday.

Ensuring the retention of younger generations and attracting new talent is also crucial for the vitality of towns. Collaborating with the education sector and engaging with younger demographics is essential to shape decisions that align with their aspirations, to ensure they are engaging with (and take pride in) their future spaces.

Community Groups and Residents

Community groups and residents often advocate for local interests, participate in community events, and support initiatives to enhance the high street's amenities, cleanliness, and safety.

Some communities feel marginalised by their Principal Authority, which often fails to actively engage residents and local parish and own councils in shaping the future of their towns. Residents have invaluable firsthand knowledge of their neighbourhoods, including their history, culture, assets, and challenges. This insight enables them to identify opportunities for improvement that reflect the unique character and needs of their community. Engaging them in placemaking projects can strengthen social ties, foster social cohesion, and promote inclusivity by bringing people together to collaborate on shared goals. By creating opportunities for interaction, dialogue, and collaboration, the placemaking process fosters a sense of ownership, pride, and collective responsibility for the local environment.

Neglecting to engage local communities in the process of place shaping can prove to be a significant oversight, primarily because it is the residents themselves who possess the essential ingredients for success. Whether it's revitalising a vacant shopfront, activating public spaces, or promoting local businesses, community-led initiatives are often more responsive and contextually appropriate than top-down approaches imposed by external entities. From skilled artisans capable of crafting captivating marketing materials to enterprising shopkeepers eager to establish businesses that cater to unique local needs - such as bespoke dressmakers, artisanal bakers, and expert cobblers - communities are brimming with untapped potential waiting to be harnessed.

By embracing a grassroots approach to place shaping, one that recognises and celebrates the talents, aspirations, and contributions of community members, we unlock a wealth of creativity, ingenuity, and passion that can breathe new life into our towns. When residents are given the opportunity to lend their voices, talents, and expertise to the process, they become invested stakeholders in the transformation of their surroundings, driving sustainable growth, fostering social cohesion, and nurturing a sense of collective pride and ownership while also envisioning a future that preserves and enhances what makes their community special.

In essence, the true success of place shaping lies not in bureaucratic red tape, but in the collaborative efforts of those who call a place home. By empowering communities to shape their own future, we unleash a wave of innovation, entrepreneurship and civic

engagement at a hyper local level that holds the promise of vibrant, inclusive, and resilient neighbourhoods for generations to come.

Q5. What role does the planning process have in determining the success or failure of the high street locally and is it fully able to address the challenges high streets face?

Response:

The planning process plays a significant role in shaping the success or failure of the high street locally. Planning decisions regarding land use, zoning, regeneration and development regulations, and infrastructure can directly impact the vitality, attractiveness, and functionality of high streets. However, the planning process, and planning officers, alone may not be fully equipped to address all the challenges that high streets face, and may not understand how best to consider applications in order to optimise high street regeneration and attract inward investment. Sometimes, the status quo of planning departments which have existed in failing towns for several years, may well be a contributing factor to the lack of investment outcomes achieved in an area.

While planning can influence aspects like the mix of retail, commercial, and residential spaces, pedestrian access, transportation infrastructure, and urban design, it often operates too stringently within regulatory frameworks and budgetary constraints that limit revisions of local plans, restricting the flexibility of responsiveness of local authorities to changing market dynamics and community needs.

Further, when addressing planning matters, there is often little consideration given to non-material planning matters in order to place further conditions on local developments that can help address social issues locally such as homelessness or crime, which may require a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to the planning of buildings and public spaces involving multiple stakeholders beyond the planning authority.

Therefore, while the planning process is crucial for setting the groundwork for high street development and revitalisation, its effectiveness may be enhanced when integrated with broader strategies that leverage community engagement, economic incentives, public-private partnerships, and targeted interventions to address the multifaceted challenges facing high streets.

Q6. What has been the impact of national level planning policies regarding high streets in the last five years and are any changes required?

Response:

In the last five years, national level planning policies regarding high streets have aimed to address various challenges facing town centres. Some key impact of these policies include:

Town Centre First Approach

Planning policies have encouraged a focus on town centres and high streets as the primary locations for retail, commercial, and leisure activities. This approach aims to support vibrant and sustainable urban centres while discouraging out-of-town development that can undermine the vitality of high streets.

Land Use Flexibility

There has been a push for greater flexibility in land use planning to accommodate diverse uses within high streets, including mixed-use developments that combine residential, commercial, and cultural spaces. This flexibility aims to adapt high streets to changing consumer preferences and economic trends.

Support for Local Economic Growth

National planning policies have sought to support local economic growth by promoting investment in high streets, encouraging entrepreneurship, and facilitating the adaptive reuse of vacant or under-utilised properties. This includes measures to streamline planning processes, provide financial incentives, and create supportive regulatory environments.

Focus on Placemaking

There has been an increased emphasis on placemaking and design quality in planning policies, aiming to create attractive, accessible, and well-designed high streets that enhance the overall quality of life for residents and visitors. This includes promoting high-quality urban design, public realm improvements, and the creation of vibrant public spaces.

While some places have had a positive impact in some areas, there needs to be an ongoing review to identify any necessary changes or refine current approaches, particularly in areas where current policies are not working. Challenges that still need to be overcome with greater planning control and enforcement include:

Vacancy and Dereliction

Despite efforts to support high streets, vacancy rates and dereliction remain significant challenges in many areas. Policymakers may need to explore additional measures to incentivise property owners to bring vacant properties back into use and address issues of blight and neglect.

Support for Independents

National planning policies could further prioritise support for independent retailers and small businesses, which often struggle to compete with larger chains and online retailers. This may involve targeted initiatives such as business rate relief, affordable workspace provision, and support for local entrepreneurship.

Greater efforts could be found in also supporting a local circular economy, with larger retailers and businesses realising tax advantages for using a proportion of local suppliers and working more closely with local communities to support the neighbourhoods they are based in.

Enhancing Engagement

There is a growing recognition of the importance of community engagement and empowerment in shaping the future of high streets. However, representations made by local parish and town councils are often overlooked by Planning Authorities, particularly in relation to community sentiment, when there may not be any material planning considerations defined, but significant concerns and legitimate challenges to the high

street that may be faced if, for example, a national retailer was to base itself in amongst a cluster of local independent shops, with the infrastructure to price competitors out of the market. Policymakers need to strengthen mechanisms for involving local communities in the planning process, ensuring that their voices are heard and their priorities are reflected in decision-making.

Consideration should also be given to provide local authorities, as land owners, with incentives to best utilise their own property portfolio, and local land, to support opportunities for regeneration, and in instances where there is a clear need for social and leisure regeneration there should be a scheme that can be accessed so that local authorities can offset a social receipt, as opposed to solely being driven by financial pressures which often result in land or assets being sold to the highest bidder, often for housing, irrespective of community need.

Q7. What should be done to ensure that high streets being redeveloped now are structurally and financially resilient for future societal changes?

Response:

To ensure that high streets being redeveloped now are structurally and financially resilient for future societal changes, several key steps should be taken:

Mixed-Use Development

There should be a more robust mandatory framework that developers must adhere to in order to achieve greater mixed-use development that incorporates a variety of functions such as retail, residential, office space, entertainment, leisure, recreation, and functional green spaces. This diversification can make high street more resilient to economic fluctuations and changes in consumer behaviour.

Flexibility in Design

High streets should be designed with flexibility in mind - it is important to understand how buildings, pavements, and walkways may need to be adapted in the future, with greater attention to pedestrianised zones, performance spaces, future developments in technology, smart city initiatives, transportation, business models, and consumer needs.

This may include adaptable building designs, infrastructure for electric vehicles (and e-bikes/e-scooters), and stations for charging mobile phones, and free public wifi.

It is also essential to allocate space for events and markets on the high street. While maximising shopfront occupancy is crucial, there is value in repurposing derelict buildings or undeveloped plots to create new outdoor/indoor spaces. These spaces offer consumers opportunities to engage with their high street, as an extension of their day-to-day life, providing areas to socialise, unwind, exercise, and enjoy leisure activities.

Sustainability

There need to be more sustainable design principles and practices included in redevelopment projects to reduce environmental impact and enhance resilience to climate change. This may include green building standards, energy-efficient infrastructure, and sustainable transportation options.

High streets should integrate elements of the shared economy trend, offering public stations for e-scooters, e-bikes, and amenities like umbrellas (e.g., through Rentbrella schemes). Community "libraries of things" can provide easy access to tools, equipment, and recreational items for occasional use, such as camping gear. Additionally, the installation of community lockers would enable consumers to securely store purchases while navigating the high street.

Local authorities should consider initiatives on the high street to alleviate strain on waste management services and advance the concept of a circular economy. For instance, publicly accessible machines could be installed for individuals to shred their used plastics and transform them into various household items, such as plates or cutlery. This approach not only lessens the need to buy new household items but also fosters engaging and educational experiences with the community space.

Climate change framework should be considered so that it does not limit growth and champions working with local circular economies. A net zero carbon economy cannot be counterproductive to regeneration and growth. Yes, towns need to be environmentally friendly, but they also need to remain vibrant and be able to maintain a sustainable economy.

Q8. How can spacial planning, street design and layout help to drive greater footfall to high streets?

Response:

Spatial planning, street design, and layout play crucial roles in driving greater footfall to high streets by creating attractive, accessible, and vibrant environments that encourage people to visit and spend time. Public servants need the agility to be able to respond quickly to changes in need, and help stakeholders support towns of today, not simply working on concepts that may or may not come to fruition in 5, 10 or 20 years. There needs to be enough to do today so that people come, and feel like they need to return to see the rest of the offer.

Here's how planning can contribute:

Pedestrian-Friendly Design

Creating pedestrian-friendly environments with wide pavements, designated walkways, and safe crossings enhances the appeal of high streets for pedestrians. This encourages people to explore the area on foot, leading to increased foot traffic.

Pedestrianised spaces can also support economic growth of vendors by helping restaurants increase capacity and keep overheads down. Design guidelines should be issued regarding consumer experience, with any outdoor dining stipulating heating use in winter so there is consistency and flexibility of offer throughout the seasons.

Mixed-Use Development

A high street area that creates a lively and diverse environment ensures continuous activity throughout the day and evening, attracting people for various purposes and increasing footfall.

Attractive Public Spaces

Designing attractive public spaces such as parks, plazas, and seating areas along the high street encourages people to gather, socialise, and relax.

Paying attention to the visual appeal and aesthetics of the high street through architectural design, landscaping, street furniture, and lighting creates an inviting and pleasant atmosphere. An attractive streetscape enhances the overall experience for visitors and encourages them to spend more time exploring the area.

Well-designed public spaces serve as focal points for community activities and events, drawing people to the area and boosting footfall.

Cultural and Recreational Facilities

Culturally energised regeneration is the key to successful public space. Triangulation involves layering activities to create a richer experience for visitors and residents alike. Relying solely on individual attractions such as Eden Morecambe is insufficient; instead, the approach must be about integrating various activities to form a cohesive whole that fosters connections among people.

Integrating cultural venues, recreational facilities, and entertainment options such as mini theatres, galleries, cinemas, and playgrounds into the high street area adds to its appeal as a destination for leisure and entertainment. These amenities attract people of all ages and interests, contributing to higher footfall, building consumer confidence, and producing ambassadors for the town.

Programming

Designating spaces for events, markets, festivals, and cultural activities along the high street generates excitement and interest among locals and visitors. Regular events and programming create opportunities for social interaction, entertainment, and shopping, driving footfall and supporting local businesses.

Overall, strategic spatial planning, thoughtful street design, and layout considerations can transform high streets into vibrant, attractive, and dynamic destinations that draw people in, promote economic activity, and contribute to the vitality of urban centres. Local authorities should take a lead to facilitate this type of transformation.

Q9. Has the High Streets Taskforce been effective in providing support and expertise in high street recovery and what should this look like in the future?

Response:

The effectiveness of the High Streets Task Force (HSTF) in the UK in providing support and expertise in high street recovery can be assessed based on various factors, including its impact on local communities, businesses, and the overall revitalisation of high streets.

Whilst the HSTF can provide valuable support and guidance to local authorities, businesses, and stakeholders through resources, workshops, and advisory services, the HSTF has not contacted Morecambe Town Council.

The HSTF has provided expertise to Lancaster City Council in areas such as place-making, retail strategy, town centre management, digital transformation, and helping communities navigate challenges and identify opportunities for revitalisation.

An assessment of impact and outcomes should be undertaken to understand how many parish and town councils the HSTF has directly worked with.

The HSTF should facilitate collaboration and networking among stakeholders at local, regional, and national levels, fostering knowledge exchange, sharing of ideas, and peer learning. This collaborative approach has helped build momentum for high street recovery initiatives and encouraged the adoption of innovative solutions tailored to local contexts. This is not possible without engaging all stakeholders including parish and town councils.

By building the capacity of local authorities and stakeholders to develop and implement strategic plans for high street recovery, the HSTF will empower more communities to take proactive measures to address issues such as vacancy rates, declining footfall, and changing consumer behaviour. Training programs, toolkits, and best practice examples should be made easily available to local parish and town councils to equip stakeholders closest to their communities with the knowledge and skills needed to drive positive change.

Empowering local communities to play an active role in high street recovery efforts is crucial for fostering a sense of ownership, pride, and resilience. However to date, in Morecambe, very few residents will even be aware of the engagement between the HSTF and Lancaster City Council. Future support should prioritise community engagement strategies, participatory planning processes, and co-design initiatives that involve residents, businesses, and other stakeholders in decision-making and implementation. With key metrics to measure outcomes and timelines.

Q10. How can transport connectivity be improved to facilitate better access to high streets and town centres and how should this be funded?

Response:

Transport greatly impacts an area's ability to succeed. The public transport network links and connectivity to Morecambe do not currently offer a service that is fit for purpose, especially with the anticipated arrival of Eden Morecambe.

Transport connectivity plays a crucial role in facilitating better access to high streets and town centres, contributing to increased footfall, economic activity, and overall vitality. Here are some strategies to improve transport connectivity and funding mechanisms:

Public Transport Enhancement

Investment is required to improve public transport networks, including buses, trains, and trams, to provide efficient and affordable options for commuters and visitors. This may involve increasing service frequency, expanding coverage, enhancing accessibility for people with disabilities, and integrating different modes of transport to create seamless connections.

Funding should be explored through public-private partnerships (PPPs), government subsidies, fare revenues, and dedicated transport levies to fund public transport improvements.

Active Transportation Infrastructure

Development and enhancement of infrastructure for walking and cycling is required to encourage active modes of transport and promote healthy, sustainable travel choices. This may include improved cycle lanes, pedestrian zones, footpaths, and bike parking facilities to make it safer and more convenient for people to walk or cycle to high streets and town centres.

Funding can be achieved through government grants, local authority budgets, developer contributions (e.g., through planning obligations), and active travel funds.

Last-Mile Connectivity Solutions

Implement last-mile connectivity solutions, such as shuttle services, bike-sharing schemes, electric scooters, and micro-mobility options, to bridge the gap between transport hubs and high street destinations. These flexible and on-demand services can improve accessibility, particularly for those living in areas with limited public transport access.

Funding mechanisms include public-private partnerships, user fees or subscriptions, advertising revenues, and sponsorships.

Smart Transport Technologies

Deploy smart transport technologies, such as real-time passenger information systems, mobile apps, contactless payment solutions, and integrated travel planning platforms, to enhance the efficiency, convenience, and user experience of transport services. These technologies can help travellers make informed decisions, optimise route choices, and minimise waiting times.

Funding could be found in government grants for innovation and research, private sector investments in technology development and deployment, public sector infrastructure and information boards, and user fees or subscriptions.

Infrastructure Upgrades and Maintenance

Invest in upgrading and maintaining existing transport infrastructure, including roads, bridges, junctions, and parking facilities, to ensure safe, reliable, and efficient access to high streets and town centres, along with ease of access to and from tourist attractions. Regular maintenance and improvements can enhance traffic flow, reduce congestion, and improve the overall quality of the transport network.

Funding would be required from government, car parking fees, infrastructure bonds, nominal fees for park and ride services, and developer contributions for infrastructure upgrades.

Overall, a combination of public and private funding sources, along with innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships, can support efforts to improve transport connectivity and access to high streets and town centres. By prioritising sustainable and inclusive transport solutions, communities can create vibrant, accessible, and thriving urban environments for residents, businesses, and visitors alike.

Q11. To what extent are the Government's funding programmes to support high streets, such as the Town Deals and Future High Street Fund, successful?

Response:

Placemaking should be about place attachment. When communities become involved in shaping where they live, they become attached to it, and fall in love with it, and are protective over it.

Blighted towns and high streets are not a result of low education or employment but rather a symptom of deeper issues. These communities lack engagement and vitality, making them unattractive and forgettable. To revitalise these areas, we need to activate the latent energy within the community itself. By empowering residents to take ownership of their spaces and instil them with life, we can spark positive change and transform these places into vibrant, memorable destinations that people are drawn to.

While it is accepted Eden Project Morecambe will undoubtedly bring attention to Morecambe and accelerate its regeneration, it cannot single-handedly address all the town's challenges or bring about its complete transformation. If no improvements are made in advance of EPM's arrival (and the clock is very much ticking), it runs the risk of highlighting all of the issues with transport infrastructure, and a lack of supporting attractions (as might be partially found on a vibrant high street), which in turn could undermine the success of EPM and its ability to be a catalyst for further positive transformation.

The Government's funding programs aimed at revitalising high streets, such as the Town Deals and Future High Street Fund, have not yielded positive outcomes for Morecambe. Despite these initiatives, the town has not received any direct benefits from either fund. Moreover, the Town Council has been excluded from applying for funding independently, relying solely on bids submitted by Lancaster City Council. Unfortunately, these bids have been unsuccessful, further exacerbating the challenges faced by Morecambe's high street.

The Town Council has also faced obstacles in obtaining copies of the bids submitted and the reasons for their rejection. Despite submitting Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to both Lancaster City Council and the Department for Levelling Up, these requests have been denied, further hindering the town council's ability to understand why the bids were unsuccessful. Lancaster City Council formed an internal Taskforce² in August 2021 to scrutinise its internal procedures relating to its Future High Street Fund bid, which highlighted a lack of engagement with local residents and failure to involve stakeholders such as the Town Council in their bid writing process. Recommendations from this report included that a new Morecambe Area Action Plan be drafted (with full participation of all Morecambe councillors) - to date there has been no further action taken on this front. This is a similar story amongst towns across the country - parish and town councils are not engaged, or empowered, and painfully slow bureaucracy results in little action being taken at all.

Town councils possess the potential to mobilise communities, fostering a unified vision to attract investment and funding for transformative initiatives. However, this potential remains underutilised. With their influential voice and local insight, town councils are well-

² <https://committeeadmin.lancaster.gov.uk/documents/s85276/2%20Final%20Report%20of%20Morecambe%20High%20Street%20Bid%20TG.pdf>

positioned to advocate for and champion their communities, challenging existing norms and driving economic prosperity in the process.

High street bids for public funding should be inclusive and collaborative processes, accessible to all stakeholders. Additionally, these bids should be open to applications from other stakeholders who may have a better understanding of the local needs of the community and visitors, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive and successful town plan. Go Southampton BID worked with Southampton City Council on their successful Future High Street Fund bid. Partnerships such as this should be fundamental to success, and should be mandated.

The exclusion of major stakeholders from the bid process is a significant concern for Morecambe Town Council, highlighting the inefficiency of the current system. The Town Council advocates for increased powers for local parish and town councils to play a more substantial role in shaping the transformation of their future. Parish and town councils should not be frozen out of opportunities to access direct funding from government, and government should not facilitate any mechanisms which enable this (unintentionally or otherwise).

People should be given the opportunity to be the drivers of their neighbourhoods. Often they already have the ideas, and they just need support and collaboration that is led by people not power.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Luke Trevaskis".

Luke Trevaskis, Chief Officer
For and on behalf of Morecambe Town Council