



High Street Task Force: Call for evidence

RTPI Response to the High Street Task Force

December 2021

The Executive Office formed the High Street Task Force to the challenges and issues that our high streets face.

The following sets out RTPI Northern Ireland's response to the call for evidence.

This Call for Evidence is the first stage of an ongoing public engagement process. Responses to this Call for Evidence will inform a draft report and a final report to be presented to the Executive by spring 2022.

[Call for Evidence – High Street Task Force | The Executive Office
\(\[executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\]\(https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk\)\)](https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/call-for-evidence-high-street-task-force)

The RTPI has long called for the adequate resourcing of the planning system for it to achieve its full potential in addressing the complex and challenging issues it faces. A well-resourced, plan-led, positive planning service can deliver corporate objectives, which, if effectively organised, can help achieve local and regional goals and ambitions.

Corporate management teams provide leadership, vision and priority setting for areas by shaping the strategic operational direction and investment decisions of councils and the Executive. The implications of these corporate decisions on new investment, infrastructure, development activity, local services and policy delivery are significant, particularly at this time. The RTPI believes that making the role of the Chief Planning Officer a more prominent and strategic position within councils would positively influence the outcomes of planning and support good growth and a balanced recovery.

It is vital in discussing the future of our communities and high streets that we recognise that no two places are the same, they will face different challenges and offer different opportunities. This must be recognised in planning policy and practice. For example Belfast centre will require a different approach to Carrickfergus etc.



1 What are the key issues for partnerships?:

Partnership working is needed at all levels and should be supported and properly resourced, for effective results. Committed partnership working and the meaningful involvement of local communities is vital to ensuring needs, aspirations and ideas are taken into account and reflected in decision-making. Equally, proactive, up-front partnership working to align funding, investment and project delivery is essential to maximise benefits, prevent delay and wasted resource.

2 What powers should local partnerships have to make them more effective?

See below

3 What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures could transform partnerships on the high street?

While powers, legislation and process are all important aspects of effective partnership working, consideration must be given to established culture, ways of working and the need for a behaviour change in practicing partnership working. The various Centres for Behavioural Change across the UK, usually based within Universities, produce interesting information on issues such as productivity and organisational well-being etc. For example; Wales Centre for Behaviour Change. Learning from this could be helpfully deployed in any approach to partnership working.

Theme 2 - Follow Best Practice

4 What is best practice for the management of the high street?

The planning system is vital in promoting and shaping individual place quality, value and delivering distinctive sustainable places and communities, working in partnership with stakeholders. However, places experience different pressures, challenges and require different policy and practice approaches. The planning practitioner's skill, experience and judgement are key in understanding and delivering placemaking on this basis.

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5 What expert help is needed to develop best practice?

Each place will have different circumstances and need to deal with a variety of issues, every place is likely to need a combination of solutions and responses. Planners are skilled in drawing the various solutions together to enable them to work as a whole for the particular place. Whilst every high street needs a bespoke response, there is a great deal of best practice available to support this work. The RTPI plays an important role in promoting best practice, championing the very best examples of planning and planners from around the UK:

- See the RTPI Awards. <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/events-training-and-awards/awards/rtpi-awards-for-planning-excellence/>
- The RTPI is a member of the England High Streets Task Force which has a number of resources available on their website including increasing footfall and responding to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/resources/>
- Commissioned research, based on evidence can be a useful guide in developing best practice. For example, the Welsh Government have recently published research into town centre renewal, based on a number of different case study towns. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-07/small-towns-big-issues-independent-research-report.pdf>

6 What changes are needed to legislation, procedures and processes to improve best practice and transform community planning on the high street?

Meaningful engagement and participation are important factors in developing best practice and encouraging community involvement. Reviewing engagement processes and tools can be a useful exercise. We have supported the Minister for Infrastructure's Planning Engagement Partnership, which is due to publish a report on recommendations. This will provide recommendations to support the work on community involvement on the high street.

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Theme 3 - Investment

7 What are the key issues for investment?:

This relates to Theme 1 (Partnership) working collaboratively with other agencies and sectors, to align strategic goals, indicators and investment priorities is essential. In some situations, to enable private investment in high streets requires the public sector to act to 'de-risk' key sites, or bundle sites together to make them attractive / suitable. Councils are key actors in facilitating this, building on their planning powers. There are many success stories across the UK and Ireland where this has taken place with local authorities as the natural leads. However in Northern Ireland, the Councils do not have all the powers to enable them to act effectively. The long awaited transfer of regeneration powers to councils would be a key tool to enable this.

8 Is information on funding easy to find? Is information on funding easily found?:

No comment

9 Which of the following funds would support the development of the high street?:

Initiatives that support local innovation, focus on developing underused premises, encouraging improved services and sustainable connectivity and transport must be supported. The key point to raise about funding streams is that they must be able to work together to provide a cohesive approach to regeneration.

Theme 4 - Planning

10 Are you aware of village, town and city centre masterplans?

Yes

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11 What are the key planning issues?:

The planning system sets the context for development and creates the enabling conditions for a sustainable and healthy built environment. Through strategic spatial planning, the system can ensure that all residents and businesses have a good level of access to services and infrastructure, resources are appropriately accounted for in development decisions, and that new developments make efficient use of resources and technologies. Planning can also address potential negative impacts of development which can be harmful to human health.

The role of planning is to look to the long term and act in the long-term public interest, making a balance between competing interests and setting the framework and decisions for a sustainable future. Planning needs to be positive i.e. facilitate health and wellbeing, social equity and climate mitigation; not just growth at any cost. For this reason, we need a shift towards 'outcome-focused' planning that is rooted in sustainable development. Planning offers an effective process to facilitate a sustainable future for Northern Ireland. However, it needs to be invested in, supported and strengthened to be able to deliver. While there are a number of planning 'tools' to support our high streets, such as Simplified Planning Zones or Local Development Orders etc., regional policy already supports a town centre first approach:

NI Regional Development Strategy 2035 "Support and strengthen the distinctive role of Belfast City Centre as the primary retail location in Northern Ireland. Belfast City Centre has developed its regional shopping offer. A precautionary approach needs to be continued in relation to future major retail development proposals based on the likely risk of out of centre shopping developments having an adverse impact on the city centre shopping area".

NI Strategic Planning Policy Statement "6.273 Planning authorities must adopt a town centre first approach for retail and main town centre uses". "6.281 Planning authorities will require applications for main town centre uses to be considered in the following order of preference (and consider all of the proposal's catchment): · primary retail core; · town centres; · edge of centre; and · out of centre locations, only where sites are accessible by a choice of good public transport modes".

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This suggests a disconnect between regional policy and decision making on the ground, which would require further investigation and consideration of both reasons and solutions for this before employing tools, or delivering projects etc.

General comment: The following may be of interest:

- Cork City Council, in the Republic of Ireland has won several design awards, in particular the “Clonakilty 400” Masterplan. Masterplans | Cork County Council Plans (corkcocoplans.ie)
- Belfast Buildings Trust - Use, Reuse, Regenerate A Policy Proposal for High Street Regeneration.
- The 15 minute neighbourhood concept is attracting much interest and discussion, heightened by the pandemic. The model aims to encourage regeneration, improving social cohesion, thriving communities, health and well-being, while reducing the use of motor vehicles and promoting more sustainable living. This place-based approach essentially promotes the idea of residents of all ages and abilities being able to “access their daily needs (housing, work, food, health, education, and culture and leisure) within the distance of a 15 minute walk or bike ride,” At its heart lies the notion of sustainable, efficient, accessible and connected places where local residents can access daily goods, services and places by a short walk or cycle, or without the use of a motor car. Places support community bonds and social cohesion, where dwellers feel part of a community and through participation in decision making have a feeling of ownership within their local area.

12 Would you support a temporary ban on out-of-town retail developments?

Edge of town and out of town destinations are easy to reach by car and have become favoured locations due to convenience and are often the default choice of many time-poor households. RTPI NI would recommend the strong pursuit of the existing town centre first policy approach, which aims to support thriving and vibrant high streets. This could be strengthened by the use of Ministerial call-in procedures if a council was minded to approve out of town retail provision. RTPI NI believes that it is vital that a sustainable public transport and active travel provision are considered as an integral part of the high street. These matters cannot be considered in isolation if we are to properly address climate change.

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13 What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures could transform high street planning for the better?:

Town centres are vital economic, community and social hubs. The closure of non-essential businesses, as a result of the pandemic, has had a significant impact on many high streets and town centres. However there are also examples, where local businesses have been able to thrive due to their ability to be more flexible to respond to the pandemic. A long term, holistic, plan-led approach to the integration of high-quality homes, including affordable homes, and the repurposing of vacant commercial space for uses which support community resilience and environmental sustainability is important. Planning can support local neighbourhoods to shape development, retain their identity and encourage community involvement in the planning process. Tools to enable communities to engage in informing policies should be invested in to strengthen plan making. It is important that a range of engagement mechanisms are used to reach as many parts of communities as possible. New mechanisms for digital engagement will facilitate engagement with many groups who traditionally do not engage with the planning process, including young people.

Theme 5 - Public Realm

14 What are your views on the high street environment?:

We should not operate on the principle that ‘any investment is good investment’, as this can leave a lasting negative legacy. Space around development needs more attention from planners and developers. Highway schemes also have a significant impact on the high street environment and well-designed user-friendly transport schemes need to be included, particularly those which promote pedestrian access.

15 What could be done to change the perception of the Public Realm?

Improved public engagement, participation and involvement in processes.

16 What improvements are needed in your high street?:

No comment

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17 What is a priority for Public Realm projects in the high street?:

See above (14 and 15).

18 What would make town-centre living more attractive?:

No comment

Theme 6 - Fiscal - including rates

19 What tax and rating reforms are needed to help stimulate the high street economy?:

No comment

20 What actions should be taken to reduce vacancy rates on the high street?:

A well-planned high street which is an attractive place to spend time in, for example investment in seating and informal space, as well as being child-friendly, encourages people to spend more time and in turn will attract business investment.

21 Do you believe that legislation is required to change fiscal policy?

No comment

Theme 7 - Capacity

22 What is the priority for capacity mapping and pilot exercises?

No comment

23 What capacity skills need to be developed?

No comment

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24 What should be created to support the development of high street capacity?:

No comment

Theme 8 - Energy, Climate Change and Sustainability

25 What actions should be adopted to provide greener urban environments?:

No comment

26 What incentives should there be for repurposing buildings?

No comment

27 Should existing buildings, including our heritage assets, play an enhanced role in transforming the High Street?

Yes

Theme 9 - Housing and Other Infrastructure

28 What strategies are needed to encourage people to live in and around the high street?

No comment

29 What key services should be available for high street residents?

The 15 minute neighbourhood concept is attracting much interest and discussion, heightened by the pandemic. The model aims to encourage regeneration, improving social cohesion, thriving communities, health and well-being, while reducing the use of motor vehicles and promoting more sustainable living. This place-based approach essentially promotes the idea of residents of all ages and abilities being able to “access their daily needs (housing, work, food, health, education, and culture and leisure) within the distance of a 15 minute walk or bike ride,” At its heart lies the notion of sustainable, efficient,

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accessible and connected places where local residents can access daily goods, services and places by a short walk or cycle, or without the use of a motor car. Places support community bonds and social cohesion, where dwellers feel part of a community and through participation in decision making have a feeling of ownership within their local area.

30 How do we engage communities more effectively?

No comment

31 How will housing developments improve areas of deprivation in high streets, rural villages, town and city centres?

Housing development will not necessarily support local high streets, villages, towns or cities, given established behaviours which include the use of the private motor vehicle to access goods and services at different locations, online shopping, established commuting patterns etc. Housing development should be located where there is a need, within established, well-connected communities.

Theme 10 - Getting To and From the High Street

32 How do you get to your high street?

No comment - N/A

33 What would make your journey to and from your high street easier?

No comment

34 What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures would encourage walking and cycling?:

The Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 and the accompanying guidance is an interesting case study on how to establish active travel into policy and practice. The planning system can play a key role in encouraging active travel through identifying new opportunities and facilitating infrastructure investment. Active travel is often impeded by a lack of safe and accessible infrastructure and established patterns of car use. Any new development (of all types) should integrate active at the very start, to avoid the establishment of habits such as reliance on the private car. Providing active travel infrastructure requires

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community engagement to identify where active travel is most needed, spatial planning, funding for infrastructure and stakeholder coordination.

35 What are your views on high street parking?:

No comment

Theme 11 - Tourism

36 How do we engage with communities to promote tourism?

No comment

37 What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures should be made to develop tourism on the high street?:

While the tourism industry clearly has an important role to play in the NI economy, creating opportunities and economic benefits for communities and the local area, it equally can attract high visitor numbers, congestion and traffic pollution etc. which can have an overbearing impact on smaller places, requiring careful planning and management. 'Low value tourism' can place pressure on local services and infrastructure but contribute comparatively little to local business, suggesting there is a balance to be found.

38 Are you aware of an innovative tourism project that could help your high street?

No comment

Theme 12: Digital High Streets

39 What aspects of a digital high street are important?:

Digital connectivity along with more local living (supporting local high streets etc.) is now more important than ever to support a thriving local high street and help to reduce carbon emissions.

40 What digital innovations would help your high street?:

No comment

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41 What more needs to be done to improve digital skills?:

No comment

Theme 13 - Rural Settlements

42 What changes to legislation, process and procedures are needed for village developments?:

The elements of living locally in rural areas might include, but are not limited to:

- Focus housing development within established, well connected communities;
- Developing digital infrastructure to support local productivity, services, enterprise and communities;
- Improving sustainable and inclusive local bus and rail services;
- Investing in active travel networks where suitable which provide connectivity to centres of services and public transport hubs;
- Encourage investment initiatives which focus support services in sustainably accessible centres, including post offices, banking services, community and public services.

43 How could funding for rural settlements be made easier?:

No comment

44 What innovative initiatives would improve village economies?:

The RTPI's Living Locally in Rural Areas paper looks at this issue bringing together innovative practice and highlighting opportunities for the future. This paper will be published shortly.

Theme 14 - People, Localism and Well-being

45 Are you aware of any initiatives that would improve localism in your community?:

No comment

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46 What is the most important aspect for creating well-being in the community?:

It is important to define the term well-being in a Northern Ireland context. This should be done in an inclusive and meaningful way to ensure all members of all communities are represented. This would then set an evidence base on which to develop indicators, goals and ambitions against which well-being in Northern Ireland could be monitored.

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A well-resourced, plan-led, positive planning service can bring together objectives across services