

# HIGH STREET TASK FORCE- CALL FOR EVIDENCE

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Response to Consultation

Online Submission

Date 6 December 2021



## ABOUT NIFHA

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, formed in 1977, is the representative body for Northern Ireland's 20 registered housing associations.

Our members are all not-for-profit organisations. Together, supported by the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive, they provide just under 56,000 social and affordable homes.

Housing associations access private finance to effectively double the number of homes they could build with government housing association grant alone.

Housing associations also deliver high quality care and support to help people stay as independent as possible.

Working in partnership with other organisations, they also invest millions each year in community services and facilities.

Our sector employs more than 3,200 people and manages housing assets worth £4.5 bn.

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to comment on this Call for Evidence- High Street Task Force.

## PART 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Executive Office formed the High Street Task Force (HSTF) to identify the challenges and issues that our high streets face and to oversee the development of solutions and actions that can be taken to support our high streets.

The vision is *"Sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services as well as being great places to live."*

Our high streets are more than places to shop- they are a focal point for the community and the HSTF membership will use its networks to ensure a balanced approach that reaches across the entire region. It is understood that it cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. Every high street is different. They each have their own character and personality, with traits as unique as the village, town, or city where they are located, and they will need bespoke local solutions.

## PART 2: CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

### THEME 1: PARTNERSHIPS

The HSTF will seek to encourage partnerships with public, private and third sector partners, locally, regionally, and nationally. This could require the consideration of:

- Government, local authorities, the wider public sector, businesses, and communities must put the health of village, town, and city centres at the heart of decision making and deliver the best local outcomes, align policies and target available resources to prioritise town centre sites, encouraging vibrancy, equality and diversity.

- Champions are needed to lead the way forward and to involve those who live and work in our town centres in the decision making.
- More coordination and joined-up working, partnership and reorganisation of the key statutory functions is needed to bring about effective change more quickly.
- Correct powers, appropriately devolved, need to be in place to deliver interventions.
- A recognition that this a long-term approach.
- Our councils have a key role in the localism agenda and the Executive need to consider the devolution of regeneration and other powers to them so that they can play a fuller role in the recovery process.
- We need interim solutions.
- We need to determine what has worked well and has not worked.

## THEME 1: QUESTIONS

1. What are the key issues for partnerships? **Not answered**

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

**Any abandoned, empty, and neglected buildings should be compulsory purchased.**

3. What changes to legislation, policies, processes, or procedures could transform partnerships on the high street? **Not answered**

## THEME 2: FOLLOW BEST PRACTICE

The HSTF approach to developing best practice is to assess good practice from other places and adapt this so that 'best practice' becomes a unique 'right practice' for our local high streets. This could require the consideration of:

- Looking at best practice locally, nationally, and internationally.
- The importance of community planning, in which public sector organisations work in partnership with the private sector, local communities and the community and voluntary sector to identify and solve local problems, improve services and implement a shared vision for promoting the well-being of an area.

## THEME 2: QUESTIONS

4. What is best practice for the management of the high street? **Not answered**

5. What expert help is needed to develop best practice? **Not answered**

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

**Do not over plan... encourage commercial activity and make it happen quickly. The infrastructure is there already.**

## THEME 3: INVESTMENT

The high street needs ways of dealing with investment that will support innovation, help renewal, and create thriving high streets. Investment is not only needed for buildings and digital infrastructure, but also for developing people and communities. This could require the consideration of:

- More specific funding streams and schemes are required to promote and encourage residential living
- Funding streams and workforces should be aligned.
- Specific funding schemes to promote and encourage wider provision of community services.

- A better understanding and clarity on the availability of funding streams.
- Place-based budgeting.
- The residential Urban Development Grant scheme should be revived.
- More focused funding for village, town and city centre promotions.
- Incentives to deal with long-term vacancies.
- Clarity on priority investment area(s) is needed.

### THEME 3: QUESTIONS

7. What are the key issues for investment?

Rates bills need to encourage commercial activity. Tax breaks for using empty space. No Vat on refurbishing buildings.

8. Is information on funding easy to find? **Not answered**

9. Which of the following funds would support the development of the high street? Pick as many or as few as you wish.

- High Street Transformation
- Residential Living
- Urban Development Grant
- Other (Please comment below)

### THEME 4: PLANNING

In addressing planning for the high street, our challenge will be to contribute to the delivery of a fair and inclusive planning system for people, communities, and businesses. This could require a review of the planning system, its impact on the high street and the consideration of:

- Village, town, and city centre masterplans.
- Promoting a “Town Centre First” principle to encourage the public sector to continue to invest in town centres and help communities thrive.
- More flexible planning policies are required to enable repurposing.
- Strong diversification of town centres is needed to include, but not limited to: housing, community uses, leisure, offices and outdoor spaces.
- Actions are needed to address vacancy and dereliction on the High Street.
- A five-year moratorium on major out-of-town retail applications should be considered.
- A stricter “town centre first” approach, more Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and a joined-up approach to regeneration.
- An approach to increase population living and working in our high street.

### THEME 4: QUESTIONS

10. Are you aware of village, town, and city centre masterplans? **Not answered**

11. What are the key planning issues?

Too many one-off houses in countryside have left towns and villages empty in the middle. No living above shops and shutters creates ghost towns at night. Planning delays caused by too many one-off home applications. No sustainability in one off houses.

Planning can drive a new and vibrant community back into town centres and develop a housing market that does not push people into the countryside when they need a larger home.

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

- Yes **but too late...**

- b. No
- c. If yes, for how long?

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

Presumption in favour of creating homes above shops, maybe no planning required...

#### THEME 5: PUBLIC REALM

The Public Realm is defined as the space around, between and within buildings that are publicly accessible, including streets, squares, parks, and open spaces. These are the everyday spaces that we move through and socialise within and the places where we live, work and play. This could require the consideration of:

- Creating better ways of delivering Public Realm that are cleaner and greener.
- Public Realm “smart” towns with green spaces that are decluttered, eco-friendly, sustainable, and better connected.
- Promoting high-quality design to ensure that our town centres provide sustainable, attractive, accessible, and safe environments.
- Town centres should be clean, vibrant, and attractive if visitors are to be encouraged to visit and stay.

#### THEME 5: QUESTIONS

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

Cars need to be kept away from Main streets where possible.

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

Needs more usable facilities such as skate parks, benches etc where the public are encouraged into public realm

16. What improvements are needed in your high street?

Less traffic, more activity – skate park etc

17. What is a priority for Public Realm projects in the high street? Not answered

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

No shutters, more activity at night

#### THEME 6: FISCAL - INCLUDING RATES

Fiscal policy is how government taxation and spending policies are used to influence economic conditions. This affects demands on employment, inflation, goods and services, and economic growth. This could require the consideration of:

- Reform the tax system to ensure that sufficient revenue to pay for public services whilst ensuring that the tax burden is fair.
- A fundamental reform and review of commercial and business rates in village, town and city centres. (NI Reval 2023)
- A targeted approach to rates for small businesses.
- Our high streets have the highest vacancy rates in the UK. We need to develop a policy response to address vacancies and rates.

## THEME 6: QUESTIONS

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

Rates bills need to encourage commercial activity. Tax breaks for using empty space. No Vat on refurbishing buildings.

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

Rates for empty buildings. Compulsory purchase. Reduced/nil Rates for new business. Then valued on turnover/profit basis

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

## THEME 7: CAPACITY

Capacity refers to the built, social, spatial, and infrastructural strengths and opportunities to transform to produce significant and measurable change. This could require the consideration of:

- A capacity mapping and pilots exercise similar to that undertaken by the HSTF in England should be developed for our region, utilising Ministerial Advisory Group data and knowledge, and resourced and contemporised by HSTF funds. This should be council area coordinated and community led.
- Greater High Street inclusion for Community Wealth Building Pilots, community planning, with greater formal and allocated cross-departmental investment in each. Community Wealth Building Pilots are an investment model to enable local communities to increase co-operative asset ownership, anchor jobs and resources locally, and ensure local community economic stability and democratic control.
- Develop HSTF capacity by investment in hubs by location, and, if desired at community level.

## THEME 7: QUESTIONS

22. What is the priority for capacity mapping and pilot exercises? **Not answered**

23. What capacity skills need to be developed? **Not answered**

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

- a. Community funds
- b. Locality budgets
- c. Sector schemes
- d. Expert advice
- e. Workshops
- f. Collaborative approach
- g. Other (Please comment below)

## THEME 8: ENERGY, CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Our environment is our most important asset and is crucial to each and every one of us. It is one of the main reasons that people from other countries and regions visit, bringing money into the local economy. It affects our economy, our health and well-being, and it facilitates social interaction. Building, through construction, renovation, and repurposing, also plays a key role in emissions reduction. This could require the consideration of:

- The carbon impact of interventions during design, to reduce the carbon footprint and increase sustainable development.

- Carbon reduction measures in existing and future infrastructures in our high streets should be dynamically addressed.
- Blue-green infrastructures, which are strategically planned networks of natural and semi-natural areas to enhance the biodiversity designed and managed to support a wide range of ecosystem services, could assist with the greening of our urban environments, facilitate better water management, and support safer, cleaner, sustainable spaces. This will allow interconnectivity, provide recreation spaces, and help communities to connect and to thrive economically and socially.
- Examine incentives for repurposing existing buildings to address embodied energy, increase energy efficiency and use of renewable energy.

## THEME 8: QUESTIONS

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

26. What incentives should there be for repurposing buildings? (Tick as many or as few as you wish)

- Environmental grants **Yes**
- Loans **Yes**
- Reduced rates **Yes**
- Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer) **VAT reduction on building work**

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

- Yes
- No

## THEME 9: HOUSING AND OTHER INFRASTRUCTURE

Good quality, affordable and sustainable housing is central to reducing housing stress, homelessness and improving housing solutions for the most vulnerable. This could require the consideration of:

- Policies and strategies to address quality, quantity and availability of housing to encourage people to live in and around high streets.
- We should ensure that these are not just transient communities but that they are attractive to families.
- We should consider space standards, access to services and the living over the shops scheme.

## THEME 9: QUESTIONS

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

**The location needs to become desirable, with a reason for people to choose a lively interesting town centre rather than a car journey into a suburban development. It needs to commercially stack up and as the planners allow people to build one off in the country the housing market will not develop to make the flat above shops commercially viable. Until a flat above shop can be constructed and then valued to add value to the land/building owner it will not happen.**

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

- Health
- Housing
- Education

- d. Leisure
  - e. Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer)
- All of the above

30. How do we engage communities more effectively? **Not answered**

31. How will housing developments improve areas of deprivation in high streets, rural villages, town and city centres? **Not answered**

#### THEME 10: GETTING TO AND FROM THE HIGH STREET

Getting to and within villages, towns and cities is at the heart of urban regeneration and positively impacts local and regional economies. It unlocks development potential and as a result, many places and communities have seen increased regeneration, investment, and employment. This could require the consideration of:

- Ensure that our town centres are well served with public transport provision and supporting infrastructure.
- Promote policies to encourage walking, cycling and the accessibility and quality of environment. This could link to the 15-minute neighbourhood concept.
- Maintain and improve accessibility to, and within, village, town, and city centres.
- Parking, including issues such as charging, free or time-limited parking, especially in the levelling-up context.
- Reduce the appeal of commuter and out-of-town parking.
- Incentivise employers to promote the use of public transport.

#### THEME 10: QUESTIONS

32. How do you get to your high street? (Tick all that apply)

- a. Walk
- b. Car
- c. Bus
- d. Train
- e. Cycle
- f. Taxi
- g. Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer)

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

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

35. What are your views on high street parking?

#### THEME 11: TOURISM

Tourism is a major contributor to the economic well-being of our villages, towns, and cities. Its development could include:

- A review of policy and regulations including support for hotels.
- Recognising the importance of sustainable town centres to meet the expectations of the tourist of the future. This will mean being able to provide a critical mass of services for accommodation, hospitality outlets and a thriving night-time economy.
- Develop the unique and visitor attractiveness of our high streets and remodel their marketing to reflect that.

## THEME 11: QUESTIONS

36. How do we engage with communities to promote tourism? **Not answered**

37. What changes to legislation, policies, processes, or procedures should be made to develop tourism on the high street? **Not answered**

38. Are you aware of an innovative tourism project that could help your high street? **Not answered**

## THEME 12: DIGITAL HIGH STREETS

Online shopping has impacted our high streets. As well as the opportunities, consideration of the concerns and issues could include:

- Complementing existing business models to allow additional flexibility and resilience to react and survive during what are still uncertain times. Going online will also open up opportunities to reach new markets and new consumer demand.
- In addition to online innovation and diversification, the high street needs to be offering something different that cannot be delivered or experienced online.
- We need data-driven insights into the social media conversations that matter with ways to understand the audience and how to make better connections to reach them, such as their preferences.
- Promoting local products, services, and trades.
- Considering the potential for strategies such as data and IT training.

## THEME 12: QUESTIONS

39. What aspects of a digital high street are important? **Not answered**

40. What digital innovations would help your high street? **Not answered**

41. What more needs to be done to improve digital skills? **Not answered**

## THEME 13: RURAL SETTLEMENTS

Rural development is vital not just for individuals in rural areas but also for economic growth. Rural development will help improve productivity and stability in social and economic development. It enhances the quality of life and financial well-being of individuals, specifically those living in rural areas, but it also has major impacts on those in urban environments. This could require the consideration of:

- Providing support for rural settlements, including consideration of the social, environmental, and economic role of settlements in a new era of connected working.
- Maximising the opportunities of the Department for the Economy-led Project Stratum that will bring high-speed broadband and connectivity to rural settlements.
- Invest in and provide a tailored and seamless approach.
- Village high street development

## THEME 13: QUESTIONS

42. What changes to legislation, process and procedures are needed for village developments? **Development should be limited to villages not anywhere and everywhere across the countryside**

43. How could funding for rural settlements be made easier? **Not answered**

44. What innovative initiatives would improve village economies? **Not answered**

## THEME 14: PEOPLE, LOCALISM AND WELL-BEING

Places need to be compelling, to encourage communities to support economies, products and services that promote and improve the health and well-being of residents and the wider community. People need to feel connected, and community networks can support these links. This could include:

- The High Streets Task Force in England describes this regeneration framework as four Rs: repositioning, reinventing, rebranding, and restructuring. These 'four Rs' require a new vision, a changed offer to consumers, better stakeholder communication and changing the governance of our high streets.
- Part of the solution to this challenge lies in fully developing and implementing the concept of 'localism' to repurpose our village, town, and city centres as unique hubs at the heart of our community.
- Localism is not just about supporting independent retailers; it is also about empowering people and communities to reshape and repurpose their local villages, towns and city centres and reinvigorate the leadership model.
- Considering the impact of the Living Wage on equality and on people wanting to work on the high street.

#### THEME 14: QUESTIONS

45. Are you aware of any initiatives that would improve localism in your community? **Not answered**

46. What is the most important aspect for creating well-being in the community? **Not answered**

This consultation offers an opportunity to inform what changes for a reimaged urban centre we would like to see for example using empty retail space is a chance to reinvigorate our urban centres and an opportunity to ensure mixed use and mixed tenure occurs.

The Covid pandemic has changed aspects of apartment living for example there is now an increased need for green space.

Investment in infrastructure is needed and not just physical infrastructure like water, wastewater, transport etc but would have to include access to health and education.

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#### Submitted on behalf of NIFHA by:

**Tracey Ellis**

Policy and Practice Officer

[tellis@nifha.org](mailto:tellis@nifha.org)

[074 9862 1530](tel:07498621530)