



Built Environment Committee

Corrected oral evidence: High streets in towns and small cities

Tuesday 20 February 2024

10.45 am

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Members present: Lord Moylan (The Chair); Baroness Andrews; Lord Bailey of Paddington; Baroness Eaton; Lord Faulkner of Worcester; Viscount Hanworth; Baroness Janke; Lord Mair; Lord Mawson; Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer; Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 – 16

Witness

I: Professor John Tomaney, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning in the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London.

Examination of witness

Professor John Tomaney.

Q1 **The Chair:** Good morning, and welcome to this meeting of the House of Lords Built Environment Committee, which is our first public evidence session on our inquiry into high streets in towns and small cities. Our witness today is Professor John Tomaney, who is professor of urban and regional planning at the Bartlett School of Planning at University College London. He joins us remotely.

Professor Tomaney, as this is our first public session, members of the committee are required to verbally declare any interests. That piece of procedure will punctuate our session; it is nothing to do with you, but is something we are required to do by the conventions and rules of the House. Since I am going to ask the first question, I will start by saying that I do not have any interests to declare that are relevant to this inquiry.

How do you define and limit the scope of what is meant by a high street in a town or small city? Separately, what is the purpose of a high street in a town or small city?

Professor John Tomaney: This is a much more difficult question than it might seem. There is a great variety of high streets, and of towns and small cities, and the role that high streets play can be very variegated.

We know what a successful high street looks like in a town or small city, and we can give an account of that success. It is much more difficult to give an account of the decline of high streets in towns or small cities, because the factors at work there can be quite diverse, and they reflect different trajectories of economic history over time.

For instance, at UCL, we have been doing work in former mining villages in County Durham that have experienced dramatic and very visible declines in their high streets. Even between those villages and small towns, we find quite a variation in the factors at work that explain those patterns of decline.

Traditionally, we could define a high street as a concentration of retail activity that served a local market. Where that retail activity has diminished, or in some cases completely gone from high streets—particularly in some communities we have been looking at—you have gaps in the retail market.

What has come out in the research we have done, and which is really pertinent to the question, is that people regard high streets not just as a place where they access retail services and other things but as a representation of a hub of the community, and a place where the community congregates and coheres in some way. This is an important aspect of the debate about high streets that does not get the attention it deserves.

In the work we have been doing, when we ask people about high streets in their towns and villages, they talk about the loss of services, but the main thing they talk about is the loss of community that surrounds those high streets. That is at the heart of the issue, particularly in what we might call these left-behind places which are attracting a lot of attention at the moment.

Q2 The Chair: Do you think high streets have a role to play in the regeneration of regional economies?

Professor John Tomaney: They do. The high street was an important component of regional economies until comparatively recently in some cases, whereas in other cases the high street has been in decline for a lot longer. They are an important component in a negative sense, because their decline can represent a subtraction of economic output. So they are an important factor in regeneration and regional economic development, but not the only factor.

We can have a form of regional economic development that produces increases in economic output, in which high streets, or former high streets, do not play a very significant role at all. But if we are thinking about inclusive economies, in which people feel they have a stake, vibrant high streets are a very important component of regeneration and regional economic development.

If you have communities that once had a sense of vibrancy about them and that has gone, and economic opportunities are growing elsewhere, those are the sorts of places where discontent can grow. Within a European context, there is a lot of academic research on this idea of a geography of discontent, where people feel unhappy and that the economy and political system are not serving their interests. The decline of a high street is a good predictor of that kind of feeling.

You could have an economic development strategy promoting high-tech industries, knowledge-intensive business services, science and so on, which is producing growth and employment for some people but not really impacting those communities who see their high street in decline. It is an important component of regeneration and of people believing that we have an economy that serves all interests, not just some.

Q3 Baroness Andrews: I have no interests to declare.

Professor Tomaney, can I interrogate you a bit more about the nature of the decline? The narrative around town centres seem to be that of decline without exception. You are talking about the variation in factors that makes it difficult to explain this universally, but are there some universal and common factors? For example, in the north, there will be major post-industrial issues, but in a small rural town in the south-east there will not be the same nature of decline. Could you expand a bit on that, please?

Professor John Tomaney: I agree that you can make a strong case that there has been a pervasive general decline in the high street, but the

rate and nature of that decline is highly variable and is a factor in thinking about what you can do in relation to this problem.

In general terms, there have been important technological changes—such as a shift to online shopping—and important shifts in consumer tastes. There have been broader shifts in the way in which the economy is organised, and a shift to new industrial sectors which has favoured cities over smaller communities.

These are all general factors that affect the high street, but they are intensified in places where the underlying economy is weak. If you are a prosperous commuter town in the south-east of England, well connected to London labour markets, the way in which the high street changes over time is different from if you are a former fishing village or a former mining village, where your basic industry has vanished and nothing has reappeared to replace that on as sufficient a scale.

There is a general decline, but there are also very important local factors. To take your analogy of the north/south divide, even within the north there are important differences. I was in a village in Yorkshire recently, called Gargrave, which has a population of 1,700 people—I looked it up. It has two busy pubs, a supermarket, a fish and chip shop, an Indian restaurant, a café and a pharmacy. If you looked at a similar sized community in south Wales or south Yorkshire, you would be pretty much guaranteed not to find that level of local service. There are important differences between high streets, even within the north and the south.

How do you explain the difference in somewhere like Gargrave? It is well-connected, it has a railway station, it is accessible to places such as Skipton and Leeds, and it is probably a commuter destination and possibly a holiday destination.

What I am getting at is that, beyond what I have said, I am reluctant to offer a general account of why high streets decline, because the nature of decline and success is quite variable.

Baroness Andrews: There are analogies with south Wales. Some high streets in south Wales are thriving, but that is largely because of government intervention.

On the concept of failure, you seem to be drawing a distinction between the need for, and the importance of, the high street and the failure of retail because of the changes in retail. Is that a fair distinction? Can we look at adaptation rather than failure?

Professor John Tomaney: Retail has shrunk in many high streets and is a smaller component of what is left of high streets than it was, particularly in towns and villages, which are the focus of this inquiry, rather than the big cities. But it is not the only factor driving the decline of high streets.

We have looked in great detail at one particular village, called Sacriston, in County Durham, and we did a piece of work with Redhills, a charity in

Durham that promotes community development. Sacriston had a really thriving high street within living memory, and, although it was important, it was based not just on retail. There was a huge amount of what we might call social infrastructure in the village: there were busy churches and chapels, working men's clubs, pubs, a miners' welfare hall, and so on. All these activities brought people to the high street and created what is known in the jargon of retail analysis as footfall—what I would call community—and generated a sense of community cohesion, which people in the village now feel is really lacking. People believe that they are living in a more fragmented community than in the past.

There are still opportunities to regenerate high streets, because there is a demand for social infrastructure, even if it has been run down in recent times. In many of the villages we have been looking at, there are really inspiring examples of local people, through a mixture of voluntary and private activity, trying to take over buildings in their communities—particularly high-profile or historical buildings—and repurpose them in ways that provide social services and social infrastructure, such as spaces for people to convene and so on.

It is not just the retail sector that should attract our attention. We should also look at these other activities. In many ways, policy could play a big role in facilitating the regeneration of high streets based around this kind of activity.

Q4 Lord Bailey of Paddington: I should declare that I am the chair of housing on the London Assembly.

When we talk about a high street for all, where in this country have you seen high streets that attract young people? I often worry that we are hankering after something the people of the future do not care about or have no experience of.

Professor John Tomaney: That is a fair question, and I can point to examples of where that issue has been directly addressed.

In the village of Sacriston, which I mentioned—this comes out of the work that UCL did with Redhills—there has been a very interesting initiative in which community organisations have acquired the old Co-operative building; there was a huge Co-op in the centre of the village that was standing derelict. Community organisations have taken that over and repurposed it for a range of different activities.

One of the principal users of this new space is an organisation called the Sacriston Youth Project, which, as its name suggests, provides services in a community with a lot of disadvantage. It provides low-cost or free out-of-school childcare for families who would not otherwise be able to afford it. This is done on a very large scale in this community, and on a voluntary basis, supported in various ways by philanthropy and other kinds of income. This is a classic example of how young people are being drawn back to a declining high street, because it is right in the centre of the village.

As part of our research, we did a focus group with young people at a nearby school where the children from the village go—unfortunately, there is no longer a secondary school in the village. They spontaneously raised the reopening of the Co-op as something positive in their village that had happened in recent times.

Hundreds of young people in the village have been through the services provided by the Sacriston Youth Project and come into contact with the high street as a result. I talked earlier about inspiring examples, and this is one that I had in mind. It shows a way forward.

I point out that creating this organisation and youth project, acquiring and refurbishing the building, and maintaining the organisation and the services it provides and the community role it plays is an endless, epic struggle. There is a constant battle for resource and there are constant problems to overcome. The people who run these organisations are incredibly effective and entrepreneurial in solving these problems, and what drives them is their commitment to their village and to seeing the high street brought back to life. So it can happen.

I take your point that attracting youth to this agenda is itself a major component. Getting the next generation involved in using the facilities in their own communities is a really important issue, but there are examples of how it is being done. That is not the only one, but it is a very powerful one.

Q5 Lord Mair: I begin by declaring some interests. I am an emeritus professor of civil engineering at the University of Cambridge, and the founding director of the Cambridge Centre for Smart Infrastructure and Construction. I am actively involved as a consultant in various infrastructure projects, as set out in the register of interests.

Professor, you have already spoken about the role of retail and community space. My question is about striking the right balance between these various interests and community uses. Are there certain types of business models or tenancy contracts that can encourage mixed-use spaces on the high street? What role does the planning process have in deciding what shops, services and community spaces are on the high street?

Professor John Tomaney: On your first question, about the types of business models and tenancy contracts, that is not something my team at UCL and I have studied in the work we have done.

The problem of absentee and neglectful landlords is constantly reported, particularly in the most disadvantaged high streets. For instance, there are many vacant properties in some of the high streets we have looked at, and nobody really knows who owns them. So even if you want to bring the derelict property back into use, there is a major effort involved in identifying who owns the property, in order that you can even begin a conversation with them. That is a major issue.

The example I gave earlier of Sacriston Co-op is a case in point. Initially, when the community organisations came together with the idea of acquiring the property, it was not clear who owned it. In the end, Durham County Council offered the property to the community organisations at a nominal rent, and that has been crucial to bringing back to life a very prominent building that was standing derelict in the village. But it took a while for that to be resolved.

The Chair: How did Durham County Council become the owner?

Professor John Tomaney: That is quite a long and involved story. At one time, Chester-le-Street Rural District Council, the previous local authority, had some ownership of the building. Once local government reform occurred and the two councils were merged, it was not clear whether the building was on the asset register of Durham County Council, and so there had to be a legal clarification.

That is just one example, but it is certainly not the most difficult one. In all the villages we have been looking at, there are major buildings in a poor state of repair—in some cases a dangerous state—and nobody really knows who owns them.

The Chair: Is that because the land is not registered, or it is registered but to an owner who cannot be pinned down, such as a Panamanian company?

Professor John Tomaney: There is a variety of reasons. We have not specifically looked at this, which is why I am reluctant to say too much, but we have picked up these sorts of stories during our research.

The second question, about the role of the planning system, is really important. I talked earlier about the multifarious factors producing very uneven outcomes as far as the future of the high street is concerned, even among similar types of places. Planning plays a very important part in that.

As an example, another place we have looked at is a market town in County Durham called Bishop Auckland. It has more potential than other places, in the sense that it is an historic place. It is where the Bishop of Durham traditionally had his palace, and a philanthropist is active in the town and spending his money on quite a large scale. Over time, the main high street, which was quite a large one, and connected to a marketplace, entered a precipitous decline, with all the problems that we have been discussing.

A factor in that decline has been planning decisions taken over the years to create an out-of-town shopping centre within walking distance of the town centre, at Tindale Crescent. It is a classic "retail sheds", at the edge of the urban area, generating a lot of car-borne retail and some leisure activity. In effect, it is now the town centre for practical purposes, so the historic town centre has gone into precipitous decline. To some extent, this is being tackled by a very large and probably unprecedented scale of

philanthropic activity, but that is up against the fact that travel, retail and leisure patterns have now been fixed around a car-borne, out-of-town model. That is going to be a really difficult thing to fix, or re-fix, if you like.

To a large extent, that is a product of planning decisions, and we see it replicated in many communities. You can blame the local planning authority for that, but, on the other hand, they are playing with the cards they have been dealt and the powers they have and where the private sector is prepared to invest and so on. But it is an important issue that again needs attention in this debate.

Q6 Lord Mair: Do you think that many planning authorities do not really understand what is actually needed to make a high street thrive? You have given that example of the out-of-town shopping centre. That is clearly an indication that that particular planning authority did not seem to grasp what is really needed to make a high street thrive.

Professor John Tomaney: The stories around this are quite variegated between places. In this case, big planning decisions were made without thinking through their implications. You can reach a tipping point, where you create a monster, if you like, in an out-of-town, car-borne shopping centre which is now producing congestion in the periphery of the urban area, but you cannot go back from it because that is where the retail and leisure activities are increasingly located. We have spoken to local politicians who talk about trying to create a night-time economy from this out-of-town shopping centre, because they now have to make it work, even if it is at the price of the decline of the town centre.

These can often be small-scale, cumulative decisions which suddenly reach a threshold where you have created something that you now have to make work. That limits what you can do in the traditional town centre. You see variations of this story to a greater or lesser extent in many similar types of places.

The Chair: It is very easy to say that it is an accumulation of decisions by the local planning authority, but it would have had an application to build the out-of-town shopping centre, which it would have had to address on its merits in the context of the local plan. Unless the local plan actually said, "We are going to resist out-of-town or edge town retail development for the good planning reason of preserving our high street", and it had evidence that it would preserve the high street—which is not the same thing, because the high street might have declined in any event, even if this place had not been built—they are not in a position to resist the application.

Professor John Tomaney: That is correct.

The Chair: So it is not quite an accumulation of small decisions; it is a failure to make one big decision that has led to this.

Professor John Tomaney: Yes, but we are talking about decisions made over decades.

The Chair: I appreciate that, but in this case it is not about giving away a little here and a little there; they could have prevented this happening, if they had foreseen it, through a robust local plan, and that is a big decision.

Professor John Tomaney: You are correct; that is true. But in the case of this particular development, like many others, it started as a few retail outlets and then additional planning permission was given for further activities to take place, and then all of a sudden, it was a major space on the outskirts of the town.

I agree with you that the decline of the town centre is something that might have happened anyway, but these planning decisions, however they were taken, have probably accelerated and deepened the problems of the town centre, although they are not the sole cause of them.

In answer to the question I was asked as to whether planning plays a part in these outcomes, the answer has to be yes. You could have a plan that prioritised the protection of town centres, but that has not been the case for many decades—which is what we are talking about here—and we are now living with the consequences of that.

Q7 **Lord Mair:** I have one final question about community space. The planners are probably more preoccupied with applications for new retail and those sorts of developments, but to what extent do they consider the community space requirements and making that a priority?

Professor John Tomaney: It has not been much of a consideration over time, and more and more interest is growing around the importance of what is referred to in academic literature as social infrastructure. For instance, the European Union's high-level expert group on the future of cohesion policy is publishing its report in Brussels, and that will talk a lot about the importance of social infrastructure as an instrument of urban and regional regeneration, to go back to the opening question.

Over decades, perhaps generations, there has been a lack of concern with social infrastructure, but it has emerged recently as something that policymakers are showing more interest in. I point to the work of the Local Trust, which has been very useful in looking at this issue.

Q8 **Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe:** I do not have any relevant interests to declare.

I want to ask a question associated with community space and Lord Bailey's question earlier about young people. Thinking of your specific example of Bishop Auckland, which is quite a graphic example in one sense, what has happened to the preferences of young people in that area? Have they gravitated to the social spaces of the retail sector, or have they been completely abandoned?

Professor John Tomaney: They gravitate to the social spaces in these out-of-town shopping centres—Costa Coffee and those kinds of spaces are important. The major complaint of those involved in community

activities in the places we have been looking at is the absence of space for young people to congregate, meet and socialise, and even to learn outside of school. From the testimony of the people we talk to, we learn that that has disappeared in quite a short space of time.

Organisations such as the Sacriston Youth Project have effectively been formed to fill gaps that have emerged over recent decades, and that is a really big issue. Some organisations we talk to say that they are involved in this kind of activity as a response to rising problems and anti-social behaviour, particularly among young people, but also as a way of diverting young people from getting into contact with the criminal justice system and so on.

There is a real problem here. There are people trying to do something about it, but it is a very large problem, and the way we are configuring our communities and settlement structures militates against the sorts of spaces that would be attractive to younger people. Some issues are compounded because of the transport offer in smaller communities, particularly outside the big cities, where access to various social and community infrastructure can be really tricky because of poor public transport; that particularly affects young people.

The Chair: This is fascinating, but my unpopular role is to keep things moving to time. I am going to ask members and Professor Tomaney to be a little brisker as we move forward.

Q9 Lord Faulkner of Worcester: I have no relevant interest to declare in this inquiry.

I am going to pick up on the last thing you said, Professor, which relates to transport infrastructure and the provision of public transport. What do you think would work to make the high streets better supported?

Professor John Tomaney: In the communities we have looked at closely, better public transport would make a big difference, particularly in relation to opportunities for young people. Many of the villages we have been looking at are poorly connected to the places where retail and community resources are available. People rely largely on buses, unless they can drive; these are very car-dependent communities, but rates of car ownership are comparatively low. There are major problems in not addressing that issue.

In many part of England, addressing those problems is really difficult because of the inability of public authorities to regulate public transport services. There are shifts around this at the moment, but they are not sufficient to fundamentally tackle these problems.

By contrast, if you go to somewhere such as south Wales, where you have a range of communities, including small towns, and former mining villages—it is not dissimilar to County Durham, which I have been talking about—you will see a much more interesting attempt to develop an integrated public transport system that can connect people, including the investment in the South Wales Metro.

Transport is a crucial gap. There is very limited ability on the part of public authorities to regulate and plan integrated public transport in ways that would help solve these problems.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Presumably that goes for subsidising bus services too.

Professor John Tomaney: It has to. Post-Covid, a degree of subsidy is still in operation, but long-term planning is required, and that is severely absent.

Baroness Janke: I have no interests to declare.

I am interested in the issue of the car. Whenever I have been involved in community issues about high streets or the viability of commercial developments—for example, in districts—car use always comes up, although we are constantly being urged to stop using cars and to use public transport. First, as you have said, public transport is not always readily available. Secondly, cars are very convenient, and people will go to other, competing shopping centres with car parking if it is not available. What are your thoughts on the importance of car use, and facilities for parking, in making areas more energised and sustainable?

Professor John Tomaney: This is an important question and point. Outside the very big cities, we have effectively formatted our settlement structure around cars and car-borne transport. Many of the villages, towns and smaller cities we have been looking at are very difficult to get around without a car. It is a difficult thing to retrofit. If your life is organised around cars—getting to work, or dropping the kids at school because there is no school in your village and so you have to take them elsewhere—it is a very difficult thing to unpick.

At the moment, one of the big, politically contentious issues in County Durham is free car parking. The idea is that free car parking underpins local high streets. Durham County Council has recently introduced car parking charges, which has proved incredibly contentious. One of the big issues in the mayoral election currently going on in Teesside—a collection of small cities, towns and villages—is free car parking. That is evidence of how important this is.

It is very easy to say that we should have settlements based around better public transport, but that is a long way off, and people will continue to use their cars in the meantime. There are no easy answers to this. However, a crucial component in thinking about the future of the high street must be a better, cheaper and more reliable bus system in places where you do not have railways, trams and so on, outside the big cities.

Q10 **Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer:** I have no interests to declare in this inquiry.

Professor, who should be responsible for managing the high street? With regard to the issues you have highlighted, if that were a different

authority from the one responsible for car parking, for example, who should be co-ordinating this, or should it ideally be the same body?

Professor John Tomaney: We have looked at the problem of declining high streets through a national lens. We have had a series of national task forces, investigations and policy responses off the back of that, which, in my view, produced generic solutions to what are often fine-grained and highly localised conditions. The devolution of decision-making in these areas is crucial to tackling these problems. Combined authorities in England potentially have the capacity to plan and act in a strategic way in relation to this.

We can see some benefits of a more devolved and strategic approach in places such as south Wales, where the Welsh Government, Transport for Wales, and the Cardiff Capital Region are co-operating on a plan of a type that you do not see in many parts of England. The strategic oversight and connections can be managed at that level.

There is a strong case for devolving down action to the communities themselves, but action in one local high street can have implications for what is possible in another local high street nearby, so there needs to be some strategic oversight of that. The answer is meaningful devolution, particularly to combined authorities.

Q11 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** Listening to you speak, Professor, it could seem like a high street is secondary to the condition of that community, and that would drive what that community would ask for. I am very interested in the difference between what a poorer community and a more affluent community would want. Here in London, we have thriving high streets because the community can afford them. A few high streets are thriving because of their proximity to the park, where people leave their children in the park and go to the high street. In your studies, have you seen a difference in what a community would want? How would the Government give different communities different sums of money to achieve different outcomes?

Professor John Tomaney: That is a big question. I agree that the solutions are a lot easier if you have a thriving local economy. Is the high street a reflection or a cause of a thriving local economy? The answer to that is different in different places. It can be in London, but the high street itself is a driver of broader economic activity within the community. That is less the case in poorer communities scattered around the UK, which reiterates the central theme of what I am saying: that there is a great deal of variety, to which we need diverse responses.

In the communities we have been looking at, people want a thriving high street; that is very common. Their ideas about what they want on the high street and how that should be funded and managed are not always clear, because there is a variety of different interests. A lot of work needs to be done in these communities to understand exactly what would work in each given circumstance.

I have given some examples of success. The question is: how do you extend that success in those places so that people feel that their high street is improving? If a Government can create the conditions under which people feel that their high street is improving, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities, they will have achieved something very important, and they will go some way to redressing the sense of being left-behind that arises when you see your high street disappear in the space of a generation.

Central government cannot fund everything in these places, particularly in the current fiscal environment, but it can enable people who are seeking to make a difference in those communities to do so much more effectively than is the case at the moment. That is where the opportunities lie.

Q12 **Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe:** My question follows very neatly on from that. It is about the Government's levelling-up policies and measures supporting high streets. How do you evaluate those and what is often perceived to be a plethora of funding initiatives? We have the towns fund and the long-term plan for towns, but there are many others. Could you say something about how that funding responds to the variety of needs? You have been making quite an interesting point about how various the needs are.

Professor John Tomaney: In theory, these funds are there to respond to this diversity of needs, but, in practice, that does not happen. There are two central difficulties.

The first issue is that there are too many of these funds, around not just towns but levelling up more generally, and co-ordinating these activities becomes a major effort.

The second issue is that, very often, the most disadvantaged places are competing against each other for these funds. Huge amounts of effort go into bidding for funds that sometimes are not won. Communities can become very disillusioned and cynical in this process, which fuels further the feelings people have in disadvantaged communities that the system is weighted against them.

These are two key issues that need to be addressed when thinking about levelling up—if we are going to continue to use that term; I do not know whether we are—and urban regeneration more generally.

You asked how I evaluate all this, and I would say poorly. If you think back to the rhetoric that surrounded levelling up when it appeared in 2019, immediately after the last general election, and the long delay that led to the production of the White Paper, and if you look at the extent to which the White Paper is being enacted and implemented, you find that progress is very slow in a context where needs are very pressing. There is great space to improve all this. Part of the improvement will come from having fewer centrally determined funds and more devolution of power

and resources to combined authorities, where the capacity needs to be located to address these issues.

Q13 **Lord Mawson:** I declare my interest with Barratt Developments plc, Istock plc, the NHS, Surrey County Council, and North West Surrey Alliance, which includes four local authorities. I am also involved actively in a number of infrastructure projects around the country.

There are two parts to my question. How is the regeneration of high streets in towns and small cities different from the regeneration of big cities? You mentioned the importance of local entrepreneurs. I presume from what you were saying that you mean business and social entrepreneurs. How well do you know these entrepreneurs? Have you worked with any of them over time and watched what happens to them? In your experience, is the machinery of the state helping them or undermining them?

Professor John Tomaney: On regenerating high streets, there are big differences in scale between big cities and towns and smaller communities; there is no question about that. You can segment a larger market more easily and provide all kinds of niche products and services to meet higher-income communities than you can in the kinds of communities that we have been studying. Another important difference is that the levels of infrastructure are typically higher in large cities than in smaller communities—we talked about the transport problems earlier. All these shape what you can do.

I am not denying that there are disadvantaged places in big cities as well, but the way you tackle the problems of those disadvantaged places is quite different in, say, Hackney and Hartlepool. They may be struggling with somewhat similar issues, but the contexts are radically different.

As part of our work, we ended up bringing together community organisations in Tottenham and Sacriston—the village we have been working in—to share thoughts and ideas about how they are tackling the problems. There was an agreement that there are a lot of common problems, but the contexts are very different.

On entrepreneurs, I do know quite a lot of these people. I sit on one or two boards and see these things close at hand. Typically, the local and national state will be seen as part of the problem rather than the solution for many of these organisations. There are lots of anecdotes about the way in which attempts to do things locally, in an entrepreneurial way, and usually with a very strong social component, run up against bureaucracy, officialdom and inflexibilities. That is not just with the state; sometimes it is with philanthropic organisations, which mean well but do not understand the communities in which they are seeking to fund projects. There is quite a lot going on there.

My view is that some rethinking needs to take place within local authorities, government and combined authorities around seeking to be enablers of this kind of activity, rather than regulators or funders. Many

of these organisations want a can-do attitude, which they will get sometimes but not always. There is great space to do things better.

The Chair: Making myself unpopular again, and bearing in mind the time limit we set ourselves, please can we keep the answers to the next few questions as brief as possible. This is no criticism of you, Professor Tomaney; you have not gone on too long, and everything you have said has been fascinating, but we are working against the clock to some extent, because we have some other business to deal with after we conclude the evidence-taking.

Q14 **Baroness Eaton:** I have no interests to declare in the subject today.

I have found the conversation so far fascinating. My question is related to things you have already mentioned in answer to Lord Bailey, when you said how important it was that poorer communities see improvement in their high street, and in answer to Baroness Warwick, when you talked about the difficulty of similar types of disadvantaged communities competing for resources.

How can we ensure that high street regeneration addresses inequalities, rather than exacerbates them? That must be very difficult, because the retail element requires rather more affluence for that side to work. How do you balance that particular aspect?

Professor John Tomaney: This is a huge question, and the Chair says that we do not have time to answer it. Very briefly, this is why the idea of social infrastructure is so important; infrastructure that can be used by the whole community—sometimes referred to as universal basic infrastructure, for which there is emerging academic research—and which is located in the communities where people live is key. That is an idea that I would be happy to talk to you more about.

I would stress that the provision of universal basic social infrastructure in these disadvantaged communities is key, and the high street is where it should often be located. That is something we need to think more about. I could show you examples of this from our own research and take you to places where it is working.

Q15 **Baroness Janke:** My question is about future developments in our high streets and how you ensure resilience and sustainability. What factors is it important to build in to high streets? Within that, what do you see as the success criteria for high streets, and is there a model? I realise that they are all very different and have different demands, but are there common features you would use to evaluate how successful they are?

Professor John Tomaney: On resilience, I would point you to my previous answer. First and foremost, the high street is a location for the provision of universal basic infrastructure, in many cases funded by the state but in other cases provided by a range of other actors. That underpins the resilience of the high street. It would be something the high street could build on anywhere, whether it is prosperous or disadvantaged. I would keep coming back to that. How you do this will be

highly variable between places. It needs a lot of autonomy at the local scale to be able to do this.

How would we measure progress? In the levelling up White Paper, there is talk about pride in place and measuring it and so on. That is getting at something relevant, but I am a bit sceptical about whether you could have a national survey to measure how much pride people feel in their place. The key measure is the idea of people using the wider social space that their high street provides, and not in the conventional retail footfall sense. We perhaps need to work on how to put a number on that, in order to convince the Treasury and others that this is important.

Ultimately, it is a feeling. It is about the emotions people have towards their communities, which is very hard to put a number on but is key. If people feel that their high street is a place they want to spend time in—not necessarily because there is stuff to buy, but because there are people they want to meet—that is key.

Baroness Janke: Having a bit of a background in local government, I have found that the whole issue of sustainability becomes a very big issue once government or local authority funding dries up. Given that that is a factor that has to be taken into account, how would you consider resilience to be created in those sorts of circumstances?

Professor John Tomaney: In the most disadvantaged places and the places where the high street is in the most severe decline, the state has to be present. The state cannot fund some start-up thing and then leave; it has to be there for the long run, whether that is the local or central state.

Many of these communities had very vibrant high streets and were once rich in social infrastructure, but they have experienced generations of running down, and that rundown has accelerated over the most recent period. In the past, this social infrastructure and these vibrant high streets were generally underpinned by locally rooted, strong industries which are now gone—coal mines, steelworks and factories of one kind or another. Without that, there is a gap. The only organisation that really has the resources and scale to help is government, but government does not necessarily have the answers. I think the future lies in creating a partnership between communities and enabling communities to solve their own problems.

Q16 **Viscount Hanworth:** I have no interests to declare.

What lessons can we learn from examples of regeneration that have happened abroad, and what lessons can we learn from examples where detrimental developments have occurred?

Professor John Tomaney: We can learn lessons from abroad, but we have to learn them very carefully, because, as I have been stressing, context is really important. The problems we are discussing are evident in virtually every country in Europe and North America—these debates are being had everywhere.

In France, the French Government have undertaken a massive wave of policy to address the problems of small communities and the decline of their high streets, because it was a factor behind the gilets jaunes protests a few years ago. The French state is very interested in this.

In Italy, the Italian Government have been looking at the problems of what they call inner areas, such as the more remote and more mountainous communities. There are lots of lessons to be learned.

Similarly, in Spain, the emptying out of interior Spain and the concentration of the population in the major cities on the coast troubles policymakers there, and there is a huge diversity of responses because Spain is a highly devolved country.

There are lots of lessons in the United States. For instance, there is very interesting work coming out of the Brookings Institution on what is going on in rural America.

There is a lot of evidence to be drawn from abroad, but the lessons have to be learned very carefully, because governance, economic and cultural contexts are different. But that does not mean that we cannot learn lessons and share experiences.

Viscount Hanworth: As far as detriment is concerned, I had in mind the hypermarkets in France. Apart from that, to what extent does success depend on having the appropriate agencies that can take a holistic approach to regeneration?

Professor John Tomaney: It is crucial, and that is a major gap in the UK context when you compare it to other national contexts. We lack sufficient authority and resource at that strategic regional scale which can do a lot of this co-ordination. That is why devolution is an important component of the answer. Devolution is not the whole answer, but it is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for addressing the problems that we have been talking about.

The Chair: We are very grateful for your time and your answers, but we are also very happy to take any written evidence that you would like to give us; it has equal weight with the personal evidence.

There are two particular topics on which it would be very helpful if you were able to assist us. One would be pointing out a small number of carefully selected international examples, of success or failure, where there is literature-based evidence that we could see and study. We are not proposing to travel to the United States—although it would be nice if the House of Lords would send us off on a global tour.

The second topic is this very interesting concept of universal basic infrastructure. If you were able to give us an account of that, or at least point us to the literature that you said existed, it would allow us to understand that concept somewhat better.

Kate Wallis, our clerk, will follow up with you on those, and indeed on any

other matter that you would like to add; there is no limitation or restriction on this. But those two would be particularly interesting, especially if we could narrow down the international examples to a small number that we could study. That would be helpful.

Professor John Tomaney: I can certainly help you with both those things. If you cannot make it to the US but you can make it to County Durham, I would be happy to introduce you to some interesting folk there.

The Chair: Thank you for your time. It was very good of you.