



Built Environment Committee

Corrected oral evidence: High streets in towns and small cities

Tuesday 30 April 2024

10.45 am

[Watch the meeting](#)

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. 9

Heard in Public

Questions 143 - 160

Witness

[I](#): Mark Robinson, Chair of the High Streets Task Force.

Examination of witness

Mark Robinson.

Q143 **The Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the House of Lords Built Environment Select Committee. This is our ninth evidence session in our inquiry into high streets in towns and small cities. Today, we welcome our witness, Mark Robinson, who is the chair of the High Streets Task Force. Mr Robinson, we will ask you a series of questions. My name is Daniel Moylan. I chair this committee. I am not going to introduce the other members of the committee individually at this stage. You will notice that three of them are attending remotely, and we may be joined—again, remotely—by our specialist adviser, Dr Sarah Montague. However, I will introduce them when they ask a question.

If you are ready, I will start. What has the High Streets Task Force delivered and do you think that it has achieved its objectives?

Mark Robinson: Thank you for the honour and privilege of being asked to address the committee. It is worth clarifying that I am the chair of the task force. It is a non-exec position that is there to run a board and to run scrutiny of a programme on behalf of stakeholders—ultimately, DLUHC. My day job, for want of a better expression, is that I run a property investment business that specialises in investing in and regenerating town centres. Both my day and night jobs are very committed to this space, but my role with the task force is as a non-executive as opposed to an executive who has been, frankly, doing the work.

It is worth setting out what the task force was set up to do to give some context for success or otherwise. It was set up following the report by Sir John Timpson in 2018. He made a number of recommendations, one of which was to have a standing task force to provide expertise and capacity to government to bring forward the place-making agenda. It was set up in 2019 with the idea of it running until 2024, so it is a five-year programme that will shortly come to an end.

The cadence of it was as follows. A process was run to select a partner to deliver it. It was an open tender and open procurement. The procurement, which was won by the Institute of Place Management with Manchester Metropolitan University and a further 11 consortium members, was to deliver a programme that was designed, with DLUHC, with the following four aims. One was to boost local authority capacity in place management. One was to boost expertise in place management. Thirdly, it was to increase co-ordination, both locally and nationally, across place-making. Fourthly, it was to share data and knowledge on high streets. They were the aims that the task force set out to meet and that, fundamentally, the board is there to try to ensure that the executive has delivered.

Starting in 2019, 10 pilots were set up. Then, obviously, we quickly ran into Covid. The idea was that 150 places would benefit from an intervention from the task force, which was, frankly, set back on its heels

by the advent of Covid. That was clearly an enormous shock for everybody worldwide but, for a five-year programme, taking in effect nearly two years out of that programme has been an interesting challenge for the executive. It is a credit to them that they have delivered an intervention and advice to 150 places in a much truncated scenario.

The investment that the Government made in the programme was initially just under £9 million. There was a small top-up for additional work—under £100,000—to assist with Covid recovery. Recently, there has been an extension for three months to make sure that we deliver the full spec of works to the 150 places.

It is interesting for me to comment on the role of the task force and its set-up because the board, with me as chair, was selected only after the mandate had been won by the IPM and the initial programme had started. I applied and was then selected to chair the committee in July 2020, in the middle of Covid. So, in a way, although I have been proud to chair the task force, I have no dog in the fight when it comes to talking to you about what has worked and what has not worked and to giving you a fair, balanced view of the many successes and some of the lessons that we have learned.

I turn specifically to those four points. On boosting local authority capacity, in sheer bulk, we have provided over 4,500 hours of expert advice to local government that otherwise would not have existed. In terms of place-making skills, we have engaged with 400 organisations in addition, including 150 local authorities, to help them with their place-making skills. That has been assisted with programmes to improve place-making, leadership, partnership and design.

Co-ordination is something that I threw myself into helping with. I felt that it was an important role that the task force could have, representing the wider industry opposite government with DLUHC and with politicians. That came to bear very quickly in Covid when we were thrust into committee meetings chaired by the Minister at the time from BEIS; we were interfacing with people like the BRC and the BPF. I know that these are organisations that have also given evidence. We co-ordinated and collaborated to try to make sure that the very real physical response to Covid on our high streets, which were especially damaged, was co-ordinated across all bodies. I think that it was important and valued that there was a voice for place-making because place-making ties everything together. Otherwise, you have landlords arguing their case, local government arguing its case and occupiers arguing their case. We were able to give a dispassionate, professional view backed by data about what was going on and a path out of Covid.

Those were the objectives. I think that we have achieved the objectives in terms of numbers of interventions. The satisfaction approval for most of the programmes—we may talk about this later with further questioning—has been in excess of 90%. By that, I mean “satisfied” or “very well satisfied”. It has been delivered more or less on budget, with a small extension, and more or less on time, with a small extension. Given

the challenges that the task force executive faced due to Covid, that is a credit to the team.

Q144 **The Chair:** Thank you. You mentioned that you were sponsored by BEIS, which has a new name now. The Government's place-making capacity is, as I understand it, located in DLUHC. What was the co-ordination with DLUHC and the place-makers and planners who are resident there?

Mark Robinson: I only referred to BEIS in respect of the Covid response because that was led by BEIS.

The Chair: I see.

Mark Robinson: The task force is very much a creation of DLUHC and the executive has been reporting into DLUHC. As chair, I have been reporting into deputy director level, and occasionally Minister level, about our progress. In that, I have been taking the opportunity of that third piece of increased co-ordination and using the opportunity of being a respected voice, as I hope and believe we are, within government to advise on policy development and comment on policy privately—that is, not campaigning—in order to help further the case of better things happening in our towns and cities.

The Chair: Thank you for that clarification.

Q145 **Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe:** Welcome. My question very much follows on from that. What types of support by the High Streets Task Force do you think have had the most impact, bearing in mind that there are an awful lot of other players in this space and in this game? I would particularly like to know how you are measuring it. I know that you have the 20 evaluation points and are now working, I believe, with PWC, but so many of the things that you need or want to do are inevitably longer-term. How are you measuring that and what then happens—that is, the initial impact then the impact further down the line—so that you know whether it has actually made a difference?

Mark Robinson: The impact has been manifest and manifold differently in every place. One of the things that I am personally passionate about and that I know that the task force is passionate about is not having a one-size-fits-all solution for place. One of the challenges we have is that we created these clone towns that all look exactly the same. Each solution of place has to be crafted in a different way.

There are principles that have been methodically applied by the task force executive to try to put in place a suitable level of support with a differing outcome. Put simply, what happens initially is that an expert is parachuted into place, for want of a better expression, and delivers an "understanding your place potential" report. That is typically done by convening a meeting led by local authorities but they are very much encouraged to reach out to other place-based stakeholders to make sure that a good cohort of people who care about and understand the place are in the room. Then there can be a diagnostic of the challenges that the place has. That expert will then make a recommendation on further help

that is needed; this can be mentor-type support, where it is about bringing people together and driving this common purpose, but, more often than not, it is a very specific challenge and expert help has been prescribed.

That is the specific help for places but, in addition to that, there have been a number of programmes, such as on developing place leaders. Place leadership has been found to be deficient so we have had a programme to support place leadership. There is a place-making programme to give people skills on how to change place, especially in the short term, and how to make difference happen quickly. In addition to that, there has been a programme called "Developing a Shared Vision". Every town has at least three master plans, which are largely worthless, but very few places have a vision and really understand where they want to take the place.

How has that been measured? It has been measured by the 20 points you mentioned. At the end of the day, the one that we hold ourselves largely accountable to is the satisfaction survey. "Understanding your place potential" was 88%. All the others are in excess of 90%, other than "Developing a Shared Vision"; perhaps we can talk about some of the learnings and the things that did not work as well because that might be one of them.

In addition to that, there are exit interviews when we have finished the programme. When we finish the five days of help—it is only five days of help that we provide to places—an exit interview is undertaken by the task force. As chair, I have put myself out there on an ad hoc, anecdotal basis to be available to local leaders. If they are not happy, I have been able to give feedback in real time. I have also, frankly, been able to ask places to pull their socks up when they have not been engaging with the task force for whatever reason; it may be lack of capacity but, again, we can talk about that later.

There has been the quantitative 20%; there has been the qualitative, "Are you satisfied?"; then there has been the follow-up interviews plus my work as chair to make sure that all the stakeholders we have engaged with feel that they have been listened to and that their advice and feedback have been taken on board.

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe: What about subsequently? How will you know five years or 10 years hence? That seems to me always to be one of the problems with a short-term initiative.

Mark Robinson: I could not agree more. That is the challenge. As I described, when it was set up, it was of its time and of its place. The best way to describe this is that there has been, and there continues to be, debate about what a future task force, for want of a better expression, might look like. Many people have thought that looking to help 150 places is spreading the jam too thinly; I think that there is a case for that if a new task force is put in place. It is about trying to raise all the boats on the same tide and get everybody to a base level of understanding.

Unfortunately, it is incredibly difficult to say, "Because the task force has intervened, footfall is up 20% and vacancies are down by 15%". There are places where that has happened but it is hard to justify that as being solely the task force's impact.

The question you are asking is, "As we come to an end, how will we measure its ongoing effectiveness?" Its effectiveness will be measured only by what policies and subsequent structures are put in place to continue and build on the work; that is still not settled, unfortunately.

The Chair: Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer is joining us remotely.

Q146 **Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer:** Your annual report was very positive but you have just referred to one of the lessons learned in that the jam was spread too thinly. Can you expand on other lessons that you have learned as a task force and things that you think the recipients, or your partners, were not happy with and which you would look to change for any future work in this area?

Mark Robinson: Yes, more than happily. There are a number of levels to answer that question on. What holds back change in place-making and place is something we have learned. This is present in most places. Over 50 percent of places displayed one of these lackings, for want of a better expression. One is a lack of meaningful place-based partnerships. Can we have a programme to address that? Another is place-based activation. Too many places have long-term plans for change and forget to do something immediately. Given the challenge caused by Covid and, frankly, the need for levelling up, we need to be getting on and doing stuff, so place-based activation is important and often found wanting. I have already referred to vision being missing.

The barriers to achieving the change that we wanted to achieve as a task force were that the programme was set up to work exclusively through local authorities but encouraging them to engage with other stakeholders—that is, getting them into the room to build on the shared understanding of place and deliver change for place. That can be problematic. I do not need to tell anybody about the lack of funding for local government. Often, it is the place-based services that have been sacrificed when the priority or statutory requirement is children's and adult's social care, for example. We have been looking to engage in teams that have been very much cut back over the past 14 years, and that has led to problems. There are problems of siloed working within local government. There is a lack of leadership in some places as well. These have been impediments to getting everybody up to the same base level.

Another thing I noted in a letter I sent to the Secretary of State—frankly, it is the main reason why we needed the extension—is this: to set up an "Understanding your place potential" meeting, first, we need good engagement from the local authority. It needs to spend the time and effort to get other people in the room; that requires capacity, time and liaising with an awful lot of diaries. What tended to happen is that a

government funding regime will be announced, and it will be a competitive tender. Basically, everybody in the place-making capacity in that local authority will be heads down writing a submission. The worst example of that, being brutally honest, was during the short Truss reign where there was an idea of having investment zones. They have merit in themselves but pretty much every authority was invited to submit an application for investment zones in any town that they wanted. That took capacity completely out of local government. We had months of meetings that had been set up months in advance but got delayed; it took literally three, six or nine months to get them back in place. That is one of the reasons that led to the delay in the programme as much as anything else.

As to things we would do differently, I can talk about some recommendations later but we are a big advocate of cohort-based learning. That did not really form part of it. Neither did celebrating successes—that is, having a forum and platform to celebrate what has gone well in place. These are things that we would do differently, for sure. On the programme itself, as I mentioned, the visioning workshops did not land well to start off with. Initially, they were very intense with one place and, again, slightly because of capacity and slightly because of timing, we did not get the interaction with places. We have broadened it out. It is now cohort-based learning where people sit in a room, learn from each other and have the Design Council working with them to learn together, which has landed much better. We have gone from a 36% approval rating up to 78% in that timeframe. Again, it is a credit to the task force executive and their partners, the Design Council, that they have been dynamic enough to change the programme if it was not working—because it was designed pre Covid, for example—to deliver something that has value and meaning.

There was a small investment in providing dashboards for all the high streets in the UK. Again, there has not been enough capacity in local government and or the amount of money to develop those to make them successful. I hope that gives you a good idea of some of the challenges we have faced in delivering the programme, which has been a success overall.

Q147 The Chair: Before we move on, I notice that quite a lot of our questions are a bit negative. They are asking about problems and so on. Lady Miller's question was about what you would do differently. What positive lessons did you learn that you can share with us? I do not mean process ones; you have described the importance of getting the process right and the right people in the room. What positive lessons about place do you think you learned that we could ponder for our report?

Mark Robinson: It is quite interesting. I have described the task force's main meat and potatoes of the programme but, in addition to that, we have two programmes running. One is the sector leaders group; it is a representative group of all the main bodies, which have the opportunity to sit in front of a Minister or a senior civil servant. There is good interaction and feedback through that. The other is the professional research and data group, which has been providing real-time, dynamic

data about what is going on. That information has been provided to DLUHC as well.

One thing we keep coming back to is that places work better where there are real place-based partnerships and not everything is forced through the lens of local government. They do not have the capacity and are not necessarily always the right people. It is about having proper place-based partnership with the appropriate leader; for that, you need a leader. We need to develop leaders who understand place and have the vision and the skills to drive change and corral people. They are the two main things that we have learned.

The reassuring thing is that the feedback we have given to government—I go back to the third element, co-ordination—has been picked up. We are not the only voice advising DLUHC about some of these changes but, if you look at the “Hunger Games”-style approach to bidding for discrete pots of capital that represented the future high streets fund and LUF money, the policy development that seems to have come through in the long-term plan for towns and the high street accelerators is very much based on the things that we have learned and have given evidence to DLUHC on.

Back to the earlier point, what is the long-term legacy? I hope that the long-term legacy has been a couple of long-term programmes that are better set up than the previous short-term programmes. I also hope that this collaborative way of working with government and a respected outside body of place-makers has led to better policy development; that is something I would very much like to see continue in some format.

To give you some specific examples, there are only 10 high street accelerators. It is a small programme. They have £200,000 each and are all about promoting place-based partnership. It is not regeneration or redevelopment. It is about bringing together people who care about place and giving them the skills—and a little bit of revenue capital—to make change. The long-term plan for towns fund also hypothecates a quarter of the money towards revenue funding. At the end of the day, one of the fears about some of the levelling-up money is that we are creating these buildings but there is no revenue capital to have them occupied and run.

As we have gone through the five years, there has been this engagement. It has increased. It has become almost a “broad church” approach to engaging in policy development. I think that, as a result, policy development is in a better place than it otherwise would have been.

The Chair: Lady Andrews is joining us remotely.

Q148 **Baroness Andrews:** Good morning, Mr Robinson. We have heard some very interesting stuff. This will sound like a negative question, I am afraid, but I hope you can turn it into something positive. I want to drive down into the barriers a bit.

You identify from among your 250 elements five big barriers. They sound

intractable. They concern leadership, funding, community vision and engagement, lack of spatial development and lack of a grip on what constitutes place. You have also been critical of the failure of master planning. Given that those are such fundamental issues, what are you most optimistic about in terms of local authorities—even those that lack the capacity to take advantage of what you have been offering? What can they get hold of that will make a difference, irrespective of the government problems? The question of sustainability is absolutely fundamental to permanent change. How optimistic are you that some of this can be supported and developed in the worst environments, as it were?

Mark Robinson: There are a couple of really interesting questions there; I will try to take one after the other.

There are an awful lot of challenges. How can we even get our arms around them? Well, I think that there are an awful lot of challenges facing the UK full stop at the moment, so we have to do our best. Accelerating the role of place not just within regeneration but within everything, with it being a foundational point of outcome in people's lives, is better understood than it otherwise would have been. A good example is the fact that Professor Cathy Parker, my colleague on the executive, has been given an MBE—the first ever place-maker recognised. That is a change. It is a thing that is now being recognised, which is super important; it is a real reflection of the work she has done and how the industry and what we do is better recognised.

Take Caroline Simpson, the chief executive of Stockport Council. Her business card says, "Chief executive and place leader". The difference that place can make is recognised in a way that it was not five years ago; we need to increase that. At the end of the day, it is very tangible when you look at place, but it is also about the intangible—how we feel about place. How we feel about ourselves is often driven by how we feel about place. I could go on and on about that but I will put it aside for a second.

Sustainability is a hugely important question. If I am honest, it probably was not baked into the original programme enough. There are two things that I have been encouraged to see in the industry; when I say "industry", I mean the public and private sectors and people who are actively trying to make places better. One is that sustainability and net zero are far higher up on the agenda than they were five years ago. The other thing is social impact, which is closely tied to sustainability.

I personally feel that high streets are the answer to both those issues. Making local services, good jobs, activities and culture available to people in their close environment—I am dancing around calling them "15-minute cities"—is not a bad concept. I know that it carries all sorts of connotations and conspiracy theories but making all the services that one needs to thrive in one's life available nearby is, to me, core to solving our problem with sustainability. It is about not having to drive for an hour to get what you need. If you can walk there, get public transport or take a bike, that leads to sustainability. At the end of the day, 39% of all carbon

arises from the built environment, so we are key to helping our net-zero targets as well.

Enterprise is also super important. How do we drive growth? Through small businesses. How do we get more small businesses opening up on the high street and above shops on the high street? Again, there have been some positive steps around this. High streets are often thought of as charity cases full of charity shops but they are the key to changing some of the fundamental difficulties that we have in the UK at the moment.

From a transport point of view, there is an interesting challenge. Most of our shopping centres and town centres were predicated on car-borne shoppers visiting and being funnelled into multi-storey car parks, which were built post war out of reinforced concrete. If maintained, they had a 25-year life span. They are now 50 years old. They have not been maintained and are starting to fall down. Replacing a multi-storey car park—most towns have two, if not more—costs between £25 million and £50 million. We will have to start making some fundamental changes in terms of what we want our places to be, how we get there and active travel because, frankly, it is a challenge that will not go away. It is with us now.

Q149 Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Good morning. Thanks for coming to see us. I am interested in how you chose the high streets that received your support. Can you share with us what criteria were used? How many were turned down? I imagine that you were heavily oversubscribed.

Mark Robinson: That is a very fair question because, obviously, there has been criticism of a number of the place-based initiatives and how they were selected. I have checked this. As I said, it happened prior to my involvement with the task force, but I am assured by the executive and DLUHC that it was done purely on a needs basis. Basically, it used indices of multiple deprivation scaled for number of shops, because there was no point in having an intervention in a place that was too small. That gave a list of 150 target places; those are the 150 that were selected. There was not a backlog of people who wanted to get on the—

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Were they selected by your task force members, by you or by civil servants?

Mark Robinson: Forgive me but I believe—again, I was not involved at the time—that they were selected by DLUHC based on criteria agreed with the task force and stuck to. I do not think that there was any shenanigans around the selection.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: I was not even hinting at that. I am just curious because it was not an easy decision to take, I would have thought.

Mark Robinson: No.

The Chair: So it was not a bidding process?

Mark Robinson: No, it was not.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: I think that we have a question about the future of the task force so perhaps I will come in on that later; I do not want to steal anybody else's thunder.

The Chair: Excellent.

Mark Robinson: As I said, I am happy to be openly critical about the bidding processes that have led to the allocation of some money.

The Chair: Did any of the intended recipients say that they did not want to take part?

Mark Robinson: Yes—a very small number. One or two have required a bit of nudging to better understand the help that we were going to supply, but a couple were swapped out during the process.

Q150 **Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** How much of the work of the task force is in the public domain? Do you publish a report saying who you are talking to and what decisions you have taken?

Mark Robinson: Yes. In creating these “understanding your place potential” visits, we have been encouraging through that process to advertise the fact that the task force is visiting a town. Sometimes, you get resistance from local government wanting quietly to take off a bit of expertise, but they work better when they have been publicly open forum. The reports, generally speaking, are in the public domain; most have been publicised. It has led to a bit of friction and criticism in some places. The experts are experts; they are not there to endorse wholly everything that is going on. There has been a bit of tough love; that has led to public scrutiny and change in local policy, which can only be a good thing.

Q151 **The Chair:** Has there been commonality in the issues that have inspired criticism?

Mark Robinson: Again, it is a lack of realistic place-based partnerships and lack of vision.

The Chair: When you say “criticism”, do you mean stakeholders’ and public criticism of what the task force was doing in a particular location?

Mark Robinson: Let us discuss the criticisms of the task force because nobody is perfect. When you have a satisfaction score that is in the high 80s—

The Chair: Sorry, what I am interested in is not individual criticisms but whether there were common features to the criticisms.

Mark Robinson: There is clearly a bell curve of satisfaction with the programme. At one end, we had places that just did not have the capacity, the expertise and the time to engage with us properly. They therefore got less out of it and, as a result, have been less satisfied with

the intervention. At the other end, the problem almost the complete opposite. There are local authorities that are very invested in place, have an excellent team and really are on it. Perhaps the reaction is that this is a bit "Dick and Jane". They say, "We're already on this journey. In fact, we're way beyond the help you can provide us with".

Those are two examples of, when you are providing a programme to try to help 150 places, why outliers at either end might not be so satisfied with the programme.

The Chair: What about public criticism? You produce a report that is made public. People in that locality read it. How did they respond?

Mark Robinson: It has generally been quite positive because it has stimulated a debate. If there has been a critique of local policy-making or local initiatives, more often than not, the underlying comments in the local press are supportive of the fact that an independent expert body has gone in and talked a bit of sense.

Q152 **Lord Mawson:** I would like to push you a bit.

Mark Robinson: Yes, please.

Lord Mawson: I have had the privilege of working with some very good local authorities but also with what you would have to call basket cases. Are local authorities really up to the job? Can you give us some practical examples? This has been quite general and "processy". Can you give us real examples of what you have experienced in one or two places, with an example of a thing just not working and an example of something good and people really making it, so that we can get into the detail of what good looks like and what a hopeless state looks like? It is fascinating that, in the paperwork, you are wary—quite rightly—about the inability of local authorities to learn about collaboration and all that. We have had 15 years of partnership agenda and training—a whole range of stuff. Can you explain what it actually looks like in granularity to help me understand that?

Mark Robinson: There is a load of evidence. The task force's executive, who have been in the room with local authorities, have provided me with a list of places and challenges. It might be appropriate to share that in writing because I do not want to speak to places I have not personally been involved in. What I can do, to speak to your point, is talk about—

The Chair: Written evidence after the meeting would be very welcome if you are able to produce it. It gets the same weight as the evidence that you give in person.

Mark Robinson: I can give you a couple of lived examples of places that I am aware of. Wirral Council in Liscard was struggling with a governance structure to make change happen in that place. One of our experts, Sonia Cubrilo, went in there and used best practice across the UK to suggest to them a structure for bringing people together to make change happen in that place. It has gone on to be held up as a best-case exemplar of place-

based partnerships; it has been used for training for the high street accelerators, for example.

When Diane Cunningham, the expert, was brought into Blackpool, one of the big consultancies was doing one of these master plans. It may or may not have ended up like every other master plan, which is sometimes master planning by Tippet: the recommendations are the same; you just change the town name at the top. The involvement of Diane, as an expert who was able to be in the room with the paid consultants, made sure that the report that was delivered for Blackpool was much more tailored to the challenges and opportunities of place. Those are a couple of examples that I am aware of.

For Ellesmere Port, what I should do is celebrate the consortium members with the task force as well. It is not just the Institute of Place Management or the Manchester Metropolitan University. We have the RTPI, the Design Council and the Landscape Institute. They were able to bring some expertise to bear on a town that needed to sort out its place-based infrastructure and understand how to connect the various things going on within that town.

Those are great examples of things that I know have gone well. It would be wrong for me to comment on individual towns that have been a challenge because I have not been in the trenches. I have had to pick up the phone to a small handful of local authorities that have not engaged because they did not have the capacity, did not understand what the task force was meant to deliver or were not making time in their busy diaries to benefit, I hope, from the advice that we provided. In every one of those circumstances, the local authority eventually got it and was grateful for the advice it received.

The Chair: Lady Eaton is joining us remotely.

Q153 **Baroness Eaton:** Good morning, Mr Robinson. You mentioned in passing the five days of expert support. I am sure that the door is not closed at the end of those five days but that seems a very short amount of time for expert advice. Can you explain how that works a bit more? Is the door closed? What access do people have after that official five days to help move a project on?

Mark Robinson: If I may celebrate the dedication of the experts, this is worth less than £9 million. It is less than a thousandth of the overall levelling-up interventions; it is a micro intervention. It is a credit that you have even given this time to investigate it, given the small investment in it. I mentioned a couple of the task force experts. There are tens of them; they are all slightly unhinged place-based lunatics who get paid for five days but probably do 15. I think that, if we did a time and motion analysis of the investment that the experts made to deliver these interventions, the value of the programme will have been a multiple of the amount delivered.

If you think about it, one expert has to do an “understanding your place potential” visit. It is one day but they have to prep for it in advance. They have to spend a day but they often spend a day or two there. They then have to write up a report afterwards. This is a measure of the value that has been generated. If I am honest, it is probably why it is also unsustainable. You cannot keep leaning into an industry to that degree and expect it to keep overdelivering to the extent that it has.

Baroness Eaton: No, but I expect that there has to be some limit when you start or else it would just run riot.

Mark Robinson: To your point, it has been a frustration with many local authorities that have valued the advice. It is a frustration for the task force that there is no feedback loop where we go back and see how things are progressing. Outside of the original programme—I mentioned the fact that the lack of cohort-based learning is something we would do differently—we have done some inset days. We have done them only after four years; we brought everybody back together to do some mutual learning. Those have been hugely valued by everybody. I think that you would want to bake more of that into a future programme and regularly check in with people to see what has gone well and what we can improve on.

Q154 **Lord Mair:** You have touched several times on the all-important question of funding. I want to ask you a bit more about the various government funding schemes and how appropriate they are. We have heard from local authority witnesses that there is a plethora of different funds and that it is all rather confusing and difficult. We also know that the Government have plans to simplify the funding scheme. What are your views about the proposed simplification? Do your experts and mentors, in their advice to local authorities, give advice on how to obtain and apply for funds?

Mark Robinson: It is fair to say that, as a result of the engagement, places have been in a better place to apply for funds. It is not a specific mandate of the task force experts to make places better at bidding for money, although I know that it has helped in certain scenarios—there is no doubt about that.

I am hugely critical of the way the levelling-up funds have been allocated. I mentioned briefly the idea that it is all capital expenditure. There is no revenue funding. We create places, cultural spaces and shared work spaces that will look super shiny, but there is no revenue funding from the local government to embed them. Again, with credit to DLUHC and government, that has changed; it is now baked into the long-term towns fund.

Let me just say that this is a personal opinion. I say this personally—not as the chair of the task force but as somebody who has raised billions of pounds to invest in place. This is me speaking with my other hat on ever so slightly. The bidding culture has been talked about, in creating a “Hunger Games”-style of allocating money, but it is worse than that.

There is this whole industry of a private sector that has been set up to advise and help local authorities to bid for government funding; these bids can run into hundreds of thousands of pounds of cost. The private sector is advising local government on what will score well on Marsham Street, which has nothing to do with the needs of that place. The money then gets allocated and is allocated in too tight a timeframe to be delivered. March 2026 is hanging over everybody for getting these funds allocated; it is incredibly challenging. More to the point, having won the bid based on the advice of consultants, they are not necessarily the interventions that that place needs. There will be quite a lot of change coming through the system where places will have to reprofile to have something that, first, fits within the timeframe, and, secondly, can have the impact that that place needs.

Nobody understands their place better than local people. There is a TED Talk by a guy called David Marquet called "Turn the Ship Around". The takeaway from it is that you need to put the power where the information is. I would add that you need to put the power and the money where the information is. The information is local. They are the people who should be making the spending decisions.

Furthermore—again, to balance the good of what has changed in the past five years of policy-making—the long-term plan for towns fund money has been very permissive in allowing local places to develop their own vision. That is fantastic in its essence but we have almost denuded the ability of some places to think for themselves. There has been this state of shock: "How do we do this?" "Well, what do you think is important?" As a result, they have reached out to some consultants to advise them.

We have a whole infrastructure of place leadership that needs to be built from the ground up again. There are encouraging signs that it is being taken on board but that is another one of the damaging effects of the bidding wars for these small pots of capital.

Lord Mair: What about these plans for simplification? What is your view on them? Are they happening? Is there evidence?

Mark Robinson: Yes, they are happening. You have asked challenging questions and I have been quite critical of some of the government initiatives, but I also recognise the fact that there has been a learning process. High street accelerators and the long-term plan for towns are much better because they are taking those issues on board.

Lord Mair: Is it about bigger pots rather than lots of small pots?

Mark Robinson: The LTPT money is £20 million over 10 years. That is an awful lot of money but it does not take you an awfully long way in a town centre. The fact that it is flexible, can be drawn down on and can be borrowed against empowers places to make these decisions. It empowers places to do what is right for that place, which is a huge improvement.

Q155 **Viscount Hanworth:** I intended to ask whether the task force is actively

involved in developing any funding programmes but I think that you have answered that in the negative, have you not?

Mark Robinson: Yes and no. Because we are a standing task force of experts, with regular meetings with DLUHC, we have not explicitly advised on some of these policies but we have helped. It is fair to say that we have been very involved in the high street accelerator programme, although it is revenue funding as opposed to capital funding; in fact, probably the last three months of the task force's work will be involved in that.

To give you some idea of how thinking has changed, first, it is funding for place. While it has to be distributed through local government, there is strong encouragement for the accelerator board not to be chaired by local government—that is, by a local businessman, a local charity or a local community group. Rather than just atomising the authorities and telling them they have the money, when we launched it, we brought them all together. We had a day of workshopping. There was some feedback in the room that local places were able to approach DLUHC and that, as a result, there was some fundamental change in the structuring of the policy, which I think is brilliant. It is wonderfully dynamic and is a better programme as a result of the cohort-based learning and the listening that DLUHC did in the room when we launched it. I hope that, as it goes over the next 18 months to two years, the programme will be better as a result of the listening, as well as the expertise and support that the task force is providing to the 10 places.

Q156 **Viscount Hanworth:** Some of this is getting back to central government. I would like to pursue a very different question. I have begun to imagine that some of our high streets' problems are attributable to the remote ownership of commercial properties, and that the incentive to invest in the maintenance and enhancement of a property is diminished when the benefits accrue to the tenant and not to the owner. Have you seen any evidence to substantiate that supposition?

Mark Robinson: Sorry, could you ask that again?

Viscount Hanworth: I think that some of the problems of our high streets are attributable to the remote ownership of commercial properties. Yes?

Mark Robinson: Yes.

Viscount Hanworth: The incentive to invest in the maintenance and enhancement of a property is diminished when the benefits from doing so accrue to the tenant and not to the remote owner; that is a supposition. Have you seen evidence to support this?

The Chair: Most commercial properties are let on full repairing leases so that the responsibility for repairs and maintenance passes to the tenant; that will not be true of pop-up shops and things like that.

Viscount Hanworth: In which case, the tenant is not greatly

incentivised to maintain the property.

The Chair: They are because they get a huge bill when the lease comes to an end.

Viscount Hanworth: The structure of ownership is important. I am not quite sure I understand how it is affecting the maintenance and upkeep.

Mark Robinson: Let us take a number of points in that supposition. This is, again, something that I am quite strong on. We do not understand who owns the high street. There is no great statistical understanding of who owns the average high street. An awful lot of supposition is put out there that foreign owners own the high street and these shops are at the bottom end of an Excel schedule. When you look at the available data, that is not often the case. They are often family businesses, absentee landlords who may not live in the locality or an unregistered title.

I have been advocating for—I am told that there is no money—a proper deep dive into who owns the high street. We are advocating policies based on suppositions that it is offshore investors who own the high street. Take Hartlepool, my home town, which has one of the highest vacancy rates in the UK. Not many foreign investors own in Hartlepool. If we can better understand who owns the high street, we will be able to effect better policies and understand the motivations.

I think that your point speaks to motivation. The motivation for an owner to invest in real estate is simply to get a higher rent. The reason for an occupier to invest is to increase their trade and vitality. The two things are not mutually exclusive. I do not think that there is a market failure in who invests. Where there is a challenge is with absentee landlords, to speak to your point. There is not enough financial incentive for them to invest in the real estate; there are vacant rates, of course.

Again, this is a completely personal view. Should there be some form of further incentive to empower local communities, through local government, to compel absentee landlords to bring places into use? I think that there should be. There are high street rental auctions, which are in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act; those are being brought through by government. They will not lead to tens of thousands of shops in the UK suddenly coming into use because they rely on a local authority to become the landlord, in effect, and to lease it out on the absentee landlord's behalf. What it will do, as I have been advised by place leaders, is this: when you have an owner who is being obstructive to change and underinvesting in the property, whatever their motivation is, you can say to them, "If you don't sort this property out, we'll take it into our own hands and let it out". That is an extra tool of local government to make change happen; it will not be widely used but it is a welcome extra tool.

Viscount Hanworth: Are you saying they have that tool?

Mark Robinson: Yes. It is in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

Viscount Hanworth: They exercise it very rarely, I should imagine.

Mark Robinson: It is brand-new. DLUHC is encouraging people to—

The Chair: It requires legislation, which arrived in the House of Lords just yesterday, so it is not available yet.

Viscount Hanworth: I had not realised. I suggest that the notion of foreign ownership is reflective of the absence of landlords—that is, the fact that many are absentees. I am not sure that it makes much difference whether they are foreigners or not.

Mark Robinson: Indeed. Unfortunately, neglect on the high street is not benign. If you do not invest in it, it goes backwards. If you have a vacant shop, it quickly becomes an eyesore. The high street rental auctions are an important tool at the fringes but some more fundamental thought needs to be given to compulsion and fining for non-benign vacancy.

Viscount Hanworth: Thank you. I thought that this was a problem; you have substantiated that.

Mark Robinson: As I said, we do not know who owns the high street.

Viscount Hanworth: Yes, we do not know enough.

Mark Robinson: There is a lot of misunderstanding and, honestly, policy made almost on the hoof imagining that it is foreign investors or whoever. It is not well understood but it could be better understood.

Q157 **Baroness Janke:** You have spoken quite a bit about long-term and short-term issues. On the long-term plan for towns, which the Government set up a towns unit for—they are planning to establish a new high street towns task force later this year—what do you think these organisations should focus on as priority issues, bearing sustainability in mind? By that, I mean endurability and dynamism in the long term. How do you believe we can take those objectives forward through these organisations?

Mark Robinson: It is encouraging that the Government have decided to have a towns unit; it could be the towns and high street unit, but let us not split hairs. Having a place-based unit that, in effect, advises the Prime Minister and the Policy Unit in No. 10 of best place-based policy, specifically the long-term town plans fund—I can hardly ever say it myself; they have to think of a better name, frankly—is a good thing. It is an encouragement. Having a permanent resource that is focused on the issue from a policy point of view is a good thing.

It is underresourced. It has been given to one individual who is doing it two days a week. It could be a much more substantial unit. There are so many levers to make change in place happen—and, frankly, so much money is invested in place—but they are not joined up. Me trying to co-ordinate, as the chair of a small task force, is not sufficient. It needs permanent resource and a team advising government on how best to join

up the dots. I thought that that was what it was going to be but it seems a bit light-touch for that, if I am honest.

The other task force is market-facing—what you might call the high street task force successor of some description. I am not sighted on what it might look like but I am fearful that it will not build on the legacy and learnings of the task force. If it focuses just on supporting the towns unit, what does that say to the other 4,000 high streets in the UK? Where is the collective learning? Where is the best practice? Where is the celebration of success?

I wrote to the Secretary of State last year, knowing that we were entering our last 12 months of the task force, with some recommendations about what a successor might look like. This speaks to—shall we call it the external task force? It is always good to get alliteration in; I call them the five Cs. The first is capacity: to provide expert time to place-makers. It is important that I say place-makers, not local authorities—that is, whoever has needs to make change happen or is the nominated change-maker in a place. It does not have to be the local authority. Give them more expert support but do it in a more focused manner; that was a recommendation.

Speaking to that, I mention call-down. Rather than saying, “We are a task force. These are our skills”, look at the problems that are facing places and put in place experts to speak to those skills so they can draw down on them.

The next is connect. There are multiple interventions from government, as I mentioned, but they are not well joined up. There are some brilliant people across the public and private sectors, as well as in external government bodies such as Homes England and Historic England, but there is not enough connection in place-based policy to make sure that every lever we are pulling is pulling in the same direction.

The next is convene. In the absence of something like the task force, who will bring together the BRC, UKHospitality and NABMA—it represents the markets—to give the wider place-making industry a voice in government when policy is being developed?

Last but by no means least is celebrate, which is important. It is one thing that has been missing from the task force programme and the Government more widely. Pre pandemic, we did the Great British High Street competition, which was fabulous. It was a rallying call for getting places to celebrate what was good in their place, but that has not been picked up. It does not have to be that per se but a successor to the task force that is responsible for celebrating best practice helps learning to become embedded across the UK as opposed to trying just to uplift 55—now 75—towns through the towns unit.

Q158 Lord Bailey of Paddington: Good morning, Mark. In your last answer, you alluded to the answer to the question I will ask. How should the Government ensure that the expertise developed through the exiting

High Streets Task Force is continued and built upon? You started to go down that line in your last answer.

Mark Robinson: Sorry about that.

Lord Bailey of Paddington: No, it is absolutely fine. Develop that theme. How do we keep that going?

Mark Robinson: We have focused on England with the task force, obviously, but we have also been privileged and honoured to be asked to help the devolved Governments with their place-making strategies, certainly in respect of Wales and Northern Ireland. It has happened the other way with Scotland; we have learned a lot from Scotland.

In Scotland, they have the Scottish Towns Partnership, which predates the High Streets Task Force. Phil Prentice, who is the permanent executive I spoke of who might exist in England, sits on our board. If you look at their policy development, everything is joined up and there is a holistic view that speaks strongly to both housing, which we have not mentioned, and sustainability. Having a permanent resource that develops longer-term policy puts Scotland in a better place for making change happen. I think that there should be something akin to that; maybe it is the towns and high street unit.

It would be a shame if the resource that the task force has provided as a funded body outside of government, both to lift capacity in local place-making and to be an evidence-based ear for government in order to help policy, does not continue. My biggest fear, to be really frank—it sounds like I am going to get strung up in the wine bars of Mayfair by all the property consultants here next time I go out—is that, in the absence of having a task force, what will happen is that, when local government needs support to develop place-based policy, it will just go to the same names in Mayfair or Manchester and pay £150 or £250 for yet another report. Some of those reports are pretty generic, if I am honest.

The Chair: I am sure that that is right—I do not know who your experts are, of course—but experts are often the same people who work for consultancies. Why are they getting such a different product?

Mark Robinson: The majority of the experts do not sit in some of the big property consultancies, to be honest. They tend to be niche practices. They tend to be experts, smaller businesses and people with specific professional qualifications. It is different. The important thing is this collective learning piece. If some money is made available for this collective expertise building, as opposed to a single consultant doing a single report for a single local authority, that will be a shame; it will be a misallocation of funds and less effective.

Lord Mawson: You gave the interesting example of Sonia, whom I know. She was practically involved in the Altrincham development, with the lead of Altrincham, and did an excellent job there. She had practical knowledge that she could share, it sounds like, with other people and so on. She is not in some massive consultancy but she has done the

business and understands the detail.

Mark Robinson: That is an absolutely fair comment. It is fair to say that the board, certainly, and the experts are made up of expert practitioners, not expert consultants. There is a big difference in tone and output as a result of that; it is more collaborative, for a start.

Q159 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** Can I go back to a comment that you made earlier in your answer? You talked about the Scottish experience. Does Scotland have a slight advantage in that it is a smaller place in Britain, population-wise, and has a much more cohesive regional effect? Dealing with Scotland is like dealing with London or something, in effect. Does that make the effect of the type of work you are doing more visible in Scotland?

Mark Robinson: That is a fair observation. The answer is yes—100%. It speaks to the role of place-making in devolution, at the end of the day. What you are alluding to, I think, is that it is easier to make policy and make change happen—to coalesce around the right thing for a place—if you are doing it for an area of so big with 5.5 million people, as opposed to doing it for 75 million people across government. If you pull together health, education and transport to make change happen in a region, it will be easier than doing it on a national basis. It is almost impossible to have this conversation without having a wider devolution conversation.

This goes to the slightly philosophical, esoteric comments that I made about putting the power and money where the information is. The secret to making this successful and to funding—we have discussed that at great length—is that funding, expertise, policy-making and policy development have to be done on a properly devolved regional basis.

Q160 **Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** Can I ask one last question? Talking of the task force's future, most people in this building expect there to be a new Government by the end of the year, I think. Have you had any discussions with the Labour Party to ensure that the task force programme continues?

Mark Robinson: That is a fair question; I am happy to answer it honestly. The task force is apolitical. We will happily sit down and share our wisdom with anybody who asks us. Personally, I have had some interaction with the shadow department.

One thing that I think is worth sharing with you—I have consistently said this; I am not claiming credit for it but it has landed—is that I was very concerned about the task force being part of the levelling-up agenda. That agenda undoubtedly carries with it political connotations, given that it was a flagship policy of Boris Johnson. However, the principles and the actual White Paper, which was developed by Andy Haldane, are apolitical. They speak to a longer-term view that we need to change the UK structurally. Lord Kerslake was probably the UK expert on this; he is greatly missed within the industry. What I have repeatedly said to anybody in shadow DLUHC who will listen is, "Don't throw the baby out

with the bath water”, just because it is the other lot’s policy or initiative. There is so much good happening.

As I have tried hard to demonstrate, a lot of positive change has been happening. Policy-wise, we are on the right journey, but it is about enhancing that and bringing more resource to play—not just throwing it out the door because there is a change of colour above the department.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed for your time. We have found it very instructive and interesting. We will switch the cameras off now because that is the end of our session; I ask you to stay in your place for a moment.