



Built Environment Committee

Corrected oral evidence: High streets in towns and small cities

Tuesday 7 May 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; Lord Mair; Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer; Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe.

Evidence Session No. 10

Heard in Public

Questions 161 - 172

Witness

I: Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development and Regeneration Manager and Deputy Town Clerk, Frome Town Council.

Examination of witness

Peter Wheelhouse.

The Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the House of Lords Built Environment Select Committee. This is the 10th evidence session of our inquiry into high streets in towns and small cities. This morning, we welcome Peter Wheelhouse, the economic development and regeneration manager and deputy town clerk at Frome Town Council.

My name is Daniel Moylan. I chair the committee. I will not introduce the members of the committee who are joining us today—in person, or remotely, as you are, Mr Wheelhouse, given that there are rail strikes and transport is difficult—but I will mention their names as they ask questions. Our first question for you comes from Lady Warwick of Undercliffe.

Q161 **Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe:** Good morning, Mr Wheelhouse. You are very welcome. Looking at the information that we have had so far on Frome, you have obviously had some success in Frome in ensuring the success of your high street, and you demonstrate that in your backdrop as well. We understand that you now face further challenges, which might be rather more difficult to overcome, but could you start this morning by telling us, given your past experience, your top three recommendations for success?

Peter Wheelhouse: Of course. I will start by saying that it is really important to nurture social enterprise and support entrepreneurs with a social conscience. I will give you a very brief example. Over a decade ago, we started to work with a local entrepreneur with a social conscience, a gentleman called Gavin Eddy. He had already given birth to a new artisan shopping quarter in Catherine Hill in the town by making shop space available at relatively low rents.

With The Frome Independent, which is one of our gems in Frome, he started with a small artisan flea market, but he had an ambition to turn the whole town centre into a market. At the time, Frome Town Council and the then Mendip District Council got behind that initiative. We pump-primed it financially and enabled some fairly heavy traffic streets to be closed so that the market could go ahead. The Frome Independent is now on its own two feet. It is probably the largest curated street market in the south-west, with about 240 traders when it trades. It attracts around 60,000 visitors per annum. It has incubated countless new businesses and is probably worth around £2 million per annum to the local economy. We continue to nurture it. So that is number one: nurturing social enterprise and supporting entrepreneurs with a social conscience.

Number two is about making town centres pedestrian friendly. Our experience with The Frome Independent has shown the benefits of making streets traffic-free, at least for some of the time. It changes the atmosphere of a place and encourages people to socialise, and probably spend more time in a town than they would normally do. We have tried

to build on that in recent years by making changes to the public realm. Key to that is our neighbourhood plan, which created the important policy context for change. So that is number two: it is about making town centres pedestrian friendly.

Finally, number three is being prepared to partner. It is not always necessary for the public sector to take the lead. A quick example of that is the work we have done with the Cheese & Grain, which is also run by a social enterprise. It is now a very successful venue, putting on everything from live music to bingo to roller skating, but it was not always the case. Just over a decade ago it was looking really tired and desperately in need of investment. The town council stepped forward and invested over £500,000 in its refurbishment. A few years later, together with other partners, it invested another £130,000 in a recording studio. The Cheese & Grain is now a beacon, not just for Frome but for the surrounding region. Many people come to the venue and to Frome to experience what the Cheese & Grain has to offer. They stay and spend money in the local independent shops. Two years ago, it hosted a concert by Sir Paul McCartney. The recording studio has produced eight commercial albums.

Those are the three: first, nurture social enterprise; secondly, make the town centre pedestrian friendly; and, thirdly, be prepared to partner.

Q162 Lord Bailey of Paddington: Good morning, Mr Wheelhouse. Historically, you have had some success in the high street, but vacancy levels have begun to rise again. Why do you think this has happened, and what do you think would give the high street more resilience?

Peter Wheelhouse: There are two things affecting Frome. Frome is not alone in this; other market towns are experiencing these things. The first thing is that we have lost three banks and our central post office. Not only did that result in empty premises and took away some of the footfall, but it has impacted on retailers and other businesses that need to deposit cash.

Unfortunately, the LINK scheme, which operates nationally and supports banking hubs, is not open to Frome because we still have one bank left on the high street, the TSB. So we are currently joining forces with a local community group called Prosper Frome to explore the potential of setting up a community post office in empty premises in the town centre.

My feeling is that either a relaxation in the rules relating to the LINK scheme and/or an extension of the support available for rural post offices to cover market towns that support a significant rural hinterland, which is certainly the case in Frome, would be really helpful. That is one of the first things that we have been impacted by. You have heard some of the things that we are trying to do to address it.

The second thing—again, we are not alone in this—is that there has been a revaluation of commercial property. Many of the shops in the town centre, being quite small, were below the threshold for paying business rates, which acted as an incentive for retailers to give it a go, but

rateable values have risen, in some cases beyond the threshold. A national scheme of universal small business rate relief, of up to say three months for small businesses, would act as a significant incentive and might just tip the balance in the viability of pop-ups. We know that pop-ups are becoming increasingly popular across the country. There is a growing interest in pop-ups in Frome as well.

However, we have shown resilience despite those events. Only a few months after the banks closed, new occupiers were found for the spaces and other empty properties that we reported back in December. Those spaces are now being filled. You may ask why. I think it is because Frome is a place where businesses still want to be, despite the challenges, because it remains an eventful place year-round, generating significant footfall, and we continue to work very hard to ensure that Frome remains an eventful place.

Hopefully, that is a useful insight into some of the issues that we have faced and some of the recommendations that we would put forward.

Q163 **Baroness Andrews:** Good morning, Mr Wheelhouse. I see that you have invested heavily in your historic buildings, which I presume have been repurposed. What impact has that had on reinforcing the character? Could you have done it without the external funding?

Peter Wheelhouse: In many cases we had to make use of our borrowing facility, and the precept at local level. We do not have direct access, unfortunately, to many of the grants that principal authorities have. In particular, the investment that we have made in the Cheese & Grain, our live music venue, has made a very significant difference to footfall and to the character of the building. It was traditionally built as a market hall, and we have tried to retain its industrial character. That has really made a difference. We have not invested in many other buildings in the town centre, but we believe that our investment in the Cheese & Grain has acted as a particular catalyst. Those are my views on that.

Q164 **Baroness Eaton:** Good morning. We have heard that local leadership is key to improving high streets. What conditions have supported the growth of local entrepreneurs and leaders in Frome?

Peter Wheelhouse: I think it is fair to say that the town council has provided a particular kind of leadership. I would sum that up as being an enabling force, enabling the community to deliver. Over the last decade, that has been a central philosophy of the council, promoted by our councillors. The work we did with The Frome Independent and the Cheese & Grain are examples of that, but there are more. As well as providing funding to support capital projects, the town council has provided community grants that have enabled local organisations to build their capacity. Another condition that has supported Frome town centre's entrepreneurial success is relatively low operating costs made possible by supportive landlords, with whom Frome Town Council continues to collaborate.

Q165 **Baroness Eaton:** Thank you. I have a second part to my question. You

just mentioned collaboration. Could you say a little more about the collaboration that you have had with local businesses and local communities to make the high street more attractive?

Peter Wheelhouse: Of course. The first area that we have become involved with is convening. Over many years the council has acted as a convener. So many of our town centre businesses are quite small. They are very busy independents working all hours, and they have not had the capacity to play a convening role. So we have helped to bring businesses and community organisations together and to provide the facility for sharing and developing ideas. Convening is one way in which we have collaborated.

The second way is in animating the town. We feel that part of making a town centre more attractive is to animate it and ensure that there are things going on. We have worked with traders to put on various events over the years. A recent example is Frome Busks, a busking event that has provided a platform for local young musicians to raise their profile, and at the same time to entertain visitors to the centre. Another innovative concept that we have pursued is a night market, which we collaborated with The Frome Independent on in November last year, and that drew in the crowds.

Another point to make is that we have worked, and continue to work, with local residents and retailers to transform various spaces in the town centre. We are not talking about huge expenditure; we are talking about investment that can make a difference in those spaces, such as planters, new lighting, street art—that kind of thing. The essence of the collaboration is that the community provides the ideas and the council enables the things to happen by engaging with Somerset Council as the local planning and highway authority. We also get involved in underwriting the investment in those spaces. There are three key areas: convening, animation and transforming spaces.

Baroness Eaton: Thank you. That is most helpful.

Q166 **The Chair:** Have you had to persuade landlords to give the low operating costs that you refer to, or have they come forward voluntarily to do so?

Peter Wheelhouse: My view is that they have done so voluntarily. As I mentioned earlier, there are a number of landlords who we feel have come to this with a social conscience. They want to make a difference to the locality and so have been prepared to do so voluntarily. So we are quite fortunate, but the key is to ensure that they are supported as much as possible. We have done that by getting involved in supporting events that will help to generate footfall for those premises.

The Chair: It could be in their long-term financial interests as well. One takes the example of curated high streets such as Marylebone High Street, where the landowner, who happens to own the whole street, chooses tenants in order to get a mix that increases footfall overall, not necessarily the tenants with the highest rents or the most secure covenants.

Peter Wheelhouse: Yes, that is right.

The Chair: That brings us neatly to the question from Lady Miller.

Q167 **Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer:** Good morning, Mr Wheelhouse. I declare an interest as a former Somerset county councillor. I was very appreciative of the paper you sent in about reinvigorating Frome. I thought it was really helpful to the committee, and I am sure we will refer back to it. What do you think the town council brings to the table that the private sector cannot?

Peter Wheelhouse: We have worked and are continuing to work with the local community to co-design a vision for the town centre that can encourage investment. I believe that we are able to do so successfully because, over a number of years, through engagement, we have built quite a bit of trust with many parts of the community. People naturally look to the council as a civic leader. I think that is one facet that the town council brings.

I also believe that we have created a sense of place that everyone can own and benefit from, and which we continue to promote through our marketing channels. In particular, we have enabled Frome to become known as a lively, eventful place with a strong sense of community. That has brought investment into the town and commercial success for local businesses, as well as delivering more things that local people and visitors to the town can experience. We also have the ability to take risks in a way that the private sector cannot. We do not have to make a profit; we only need to demonstrate to our local community that our investment has had a positive impact on the town.

We have been able to invest in the public realm in a way that the private sector may have difficulty doing. We have done so already. Our revamp of the market place a few years ago, for example, created an outdoor event space and made the centre more pedestrian friendly. That was financed by the sale of some land in the town, as well as a grant from the then Somerset County Council. With the financial pressures that the principal authority is now under, we are now investing in the cleanliness of the town centre by employing a town centre ranger. They are beginning to have an impact. Those probably sum up the ways in which we may bring something that the private sector cannot.

Q168 **Lord Mair:** In your very interesting paper, you identified the increasing mix of uses on the high street as a way to boost footfall. What is the ideal mix of uses, and the role of public services in that, in your view?

Peter Wheelhouse: Increasingly, people seek experiences. We know that from a lot of market research that has been done across the country. In Frome, we believe that for the town to continue to be successful it is important that those experiences are catered for. We support the development of our cultural venues and the use of various open spaces to enable people to enjoy cultural experiences when they visit. That includes tapping the potential of indoor public spaces.

The library in Frome is an interesting case in point. Currently, it is only open to the public nine to five on Monday to Saturday. It is not open on a Sunday. We are in discussion with Somerset Council about how the town council can take the library on and enable community and cultural uses of the space in the evenings and at weekends, which we believe will create another reason for people to visit the town centre. Experiences are important. Despite the fact that so many services have gone online, we know from our engagement with the local community that people really value face-to-face contact in places that are accessible, such as the town centre.

There has been an interesting development in Frome. With traditional public services under pressure, the third sector, supported by the town council, is playing a growing role. Some innovative approaches have been developed that, among other things, address the high cost of living. I will give you a couple of quick examples. SHARE Frome is an organisation that occupies a shop in the high street. We call it a library of things. It has over 800 items that can be borrowed at a relatively low cost—everything from power tools to camping gear, kids' costumes and candy floss machines. There is a real variety of things.

We were the first town in the country, back in 2016, to establish a community fridge, which makes surplus food from local supermarkets and other businesses available to everyone—around 100,000 items a year. It is still going strong. The function is not only to address food waste; it has become a hub and a meeting place. In many cases it is an event in the day for many people and something for them to look forward to.

Turning to other services, there is an interest in bringing under one roof a number of community organisations to provide advice and other practical services in the community. We are currently investigating how vacant shops and other premises can be used for that purpose.

Last but by no means least, housing has an important role to play. Not only does residential in town centres reduce the need to travel, but it can enhance footfall, especially in the evenings. The historic built fabric of Frome does not lend itself well to the conversion of properties to residential, but on the edge of the town centre we have a former industrial site at Saxonvale. It is a 10-acre site. That is a real opportunity to deliver residential accommodation as well as some new workspaces.

Hopefully, that gives you a feel for the kind of mix that we are looking at in Frome. We believe it will lead to success. It includes services on the high street, but maybe of a slightly different complexion from the public services that people are used to.

Q169 **Lord Mair:** Thank you. That is very interesting. You mentioned the Saxonvale development. How do you think that will impact your mix? How do you balance residential with commercial units?

Peter Wheelhouse: There are two competing schemes to redevelop the site. They are different, but both propose significant residential

development. In one scheme, there are 300 houses with 24% affordable. In the other case, there are 182 houses, with 50% affordable. Both propose non-residential space in different volumes. This is a really important element and one that we have promoted strongly.

Our surveys of local businesses over the years have demonstrated that businesses value a presence in the town centre. We are keen to encourage as much of that as possible to enable their development. The kind of thing that they are interested in, of course, is proximity to shops and other facilities. We hope that Saxonvale will increase the proportion of the town centre given over to residential as well as non-residential uses to meet the growing demand from local businesses to be in the town centre.

Lord Mair: Will the commercial elements of Saxonvale extend your town centre so that you have a larger town centre, or will it be an adjunct, so to speak, and separate from it?

Peter Wheelhouse: It is a really interesting question. Neither of the two schemes that have come forward is proposing retail, because we collectively want to protect the vitality of the existing retail centre. My belief is that Saxonvale will not become a new retail element to the town centre. What it will do is support the development of the commercial centre. We may even see the return of food retail and other essentials to the town centre to cater for that new residential community coming to the existing retail centre of the town.

One could say that Saxonvale will complement the development of the existing town centre rather than replace it. In many other centres up and down the country I know there has been concern about commercial development on the edge of town centres. In this instance, our belief is that the impact will be positive.

Lord Mair: You referred to the shared fridge. It is open to everybody and not simply those on benefits, as you describe it.

Peter Wheelhouse: Correct. That is right.

Lord Mair: Did you have difficulty in persuading supermarkets to make their food accessible on that basis? My understanding is that they are reluctant to do so, and that they would not want people who are not on benefits to have access to surplus food.

Peter Wheelhouse: Our experience in Frome is that most, if not all, of the major supermarkets have embraced it very positively.

Lord Mair: Good. Thank you.

Peter Wheelhouse: They see it as a way of cutting waste in their own organisation. Our experience is positive.

Q170 **Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** Good morning, Mr Wheelhouse. May I say what interesting answers you are giving to our questions this morning?

Are there any specific challenges that town councils face in obtaining funding for high street regeneration? I then have a rather more specific question about Frome. What is your relationship like with Somerset Council?

Peter Wheelhouse: There are some challenges. Just to set the scene, town and parish councils do not have access to business rates income or revenue support grant from the Government. They are largely dependent on issuing an annual precept, which is charged to council taxpayers to raise funding. They can borrow, but the repayments are funded through the precept. We are pleased that the Government have extended access to the community ownership fund to local councils. We welcome that, broadly, but we believe that the Government should go further and open up other grant funding opportunities—for example, levelling-up funding, which, currently, is only available to principal authorities.

I am sure that this point would be echoed by our national body, the National Association of Local Councils. Recognising the professionalism, expertise and track record of town councils in regeneration and acknowledging the intimate knowledge that they hold of their communities' needs would be a real fillip to high street regeneration. My belief is that local councils should be allowed to bid directly for central funding for high street regeneration in the future.

It is early days in our relationship with Somerset Council, in the sense that Somerset is a new unitary council. There is a clear appetite in the town council to develop a positive working relationship with Somerset Council, and I believe that there is a clear desire at the highest level in Somerset Council to reciprocate. I will give you an example of how we are working with Somerset Council. My team works closely with the cultural services director and her team to develop a co-designed vision for part of the town centre where Somerset Council is currently the principal landowner, an area known as Frome Riverside. It encompasses the town centre's main car park and several cultural venues alongside the River Frome. We are working with Somerset Council at the moment on some plans to enhance those venues and to make Frome Riverside a more exciting cultural destination. So far, so good.

Part of the plan is for devolution of some of the assets in that area and elsewhere. Progress is slow on that at the moment, which is a little disappointing, but we recognise that it is a really difficult time for Somerset Council as senior councillors and officers work through a financial emergency. We have to make some allowances for that at the moment.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Is it not the fact that Somerset Council is what one might call a traditional party-political body, whereas Frome is run entirely, I gather, by your Independents for Frome councillors, who have seen off all the political parties that have stood there?

Peter Wheelhouse: Yes, there is that difference between the two bodies. However, when it comes to regeneration, my belief is that across

the two bodies there is consensus that we need to work together, which is heartening.

Q171 **Viscount Hanworth:** I wish to explore the matter of cars versus pedestrians. I shall do so by asking questions about specific routes through Frome, but these are also generic questions. Catherine Hill, I discern, is up and over and runs, I believe, through the heart of the town. It joins two other roads, the A362, the big trunk road, and another major road called Bath Hill, the B3090. I have three questions in respect of each of them. First, can you exclude traffic from Catherine Hill? If you did so, how would your citizens and commercial interests react?

Peter Wheelhouse: Catherine Hill is not used very much as a through route. The more important route through the town centre is the Market Place, which is on the B3090. I do not believe it would be possible to completely ban traffic from Catherine Hill. Clearly, the businesses along that street require access for deliveries, in particular. Being a relatively historic part of the town centre, the old buildings that are serviced by the businesses there do not have rear service areas and things like that. Deliveries have to come up the main street.

It is a space shared equally by vehicles and pedestrians, which seems to work quite well. I think it probably should remain with some access to traffic, but I do not believe it is a big issue when it comes to traffic in the town. The bigger issue is in the Market Place, which probably has in the region of 10,000 vehicle movements per day.

Viscount Hanworth: This is Bath Hill, is it?

Peter Wheelhouse: Bath Hill runs into the Market Place, correct.

Viscount Hanworth: Essentially, there are rather few private cars using Catherine Hill. Is that correct?

Peter Wheelhouse: That is correct. It is not a popular through route.

Viscount Hanworth: As regards Bath Hill, if Somerset Council was amenable and had plenty of money, would it be possible to build a bypass, as they used to do in the 1960s and 1970s, to alleviate all that hazard? I believe this is where you have difficulty with pedestrian crossings, and, even there, Somerset Council is unwilling to provide the wherewithal to produce the crossings. Am I correct in that supposition?

Peter Wheelhouse: That is correct. The town already has a bypass, but we find that a lot of traffic finds its way into the centre of Frome.

Viscount Hanworth: From Bath Hill?

Peter Wheelhouse: Bath Street and Market Place, yes. We believe that a holistic movement strategy is necessary for the town, which will reduce the amount of traffic coming into the centre. For example, there is a need to look at how HGVs move around the town, and private vehicles. We have been working to try to get Somerset Council to put funding into

developing a movement strategy and will continue to push hard for that, because that is the only way in which we will successfully address the need to make the town centre more pedestrian friendly.

Viscount Hanworth: What would that strategy consist of?

Peter Wheelhouse: It would need to have much stricter rules on the movement of HGVs in the town, and for that to be properly enforced. That is a big issue in the town centre. We would need to look at ways of finding new crossings across the River Frome. One of the barriers to progress is the limited number of crossing points over the River Frome. That has to be addressed in order that we can limit the amount of traffic that comes into the centre of town.

Viscount Hanworth: We need to make sense of this. You would not restrict private cars in respect of that road.

Peter Wheelhouse: It is worth exploring whether there are times of the day or times of the week when we could introduce restrictions, but I think it needs to be looked at very carefully.

Viscount Hanworth: Thank you.

The Chair: It is a little unfair on Mr Wheelhouse to ask him to articulate a strategy, when the development of a strategy for traffic requires a considerable amount of work that it is clear the town council has not yet done. Indeed, Somerset would have to do a large part of it as well.

Q172 **Baroness Andrews:** Thank you for your excellent paper, Mr Wheelhouse. You talked about not having fiscal access to some of the big grants. What changes would you recommend to planning laws that impact negatively on you?

Peter Wheelhouse: I do not have anything negative to say about the various instruments that have been applied. I wanted to talk in a positive vein about some of the things that have happened. The new Class E, for example, which was introduced under the Business and Planning Act 2020, has amalgamated various earlier use classes and has made a difference. The fact that planning consent is not needed to move between retail, hospitality, office and other uses means that businesses now have much greater freedom to establish in the town centre without the barrier of planning red tape. My belief is that the speed with which properties have turned over from one business to another since the pandemic is, in part, down to that measure. It has kept things moving at a pace that can only be positive for the town centre.

The Chair: Do you regard Class E as positive in its effects?

Peter Wheelhouse: In Frome, I believe it has had that impact. That is correct. The other thing I want to pick up on is permitted development rights. We know that the Government expanded permitted development rights to allow buildings in other uses—for example, offices—to be converted to homes without planning permission. At the time when the

change was introduced, I am aware that it was cited as a measure that would make a difference in town and city centres in enabling empty properties to be repurposed. It has had some impact. We have seen some examples of places above shops that have been converted. They were previously empty and, in some cases, derelict, so there was a benefit there.

However, there are not many examples of that, which is probably a reflection of the fact that many of the properties in the town centre are old and expensive to convert. In a town such as Frome, which has an historic fabric, the impact of permitted development rights is negligible. In other towns I suspect there might have been more of an impact.

The Chair: Thank you indeed, Mr Wheelhouse. We have found your evidence very instructive and illuminating. We are grateful to you for the time that you have given to us this morning. With those comments, and with a final congratulation on your splendid background, I call this evidence session to a halt.