

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Supporting our high streets after Covid-19, HC 37

Thursday 10 June 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 10 June 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Florence Eshalomi; Andrew Lewer; Mary Robinson; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 144 - 161

Witnesses

I: Professor Carlos Moreno, Scientific Director of the Chair “Entrepreneurship-Territory-Innovation”, Panthéon Sorbonne University, IAE Paris; Professor Chan Heng Chee, Chair, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities; Professor Ricky Burdett, Professor of Urban Studies, Director of LSE Cities and Urban Age, London School of Economics.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Carlos Moreno, Professor Chan Heng Chee and Professor Ricky Burdett.

Chair: Welcome, everyone, to this afternoon’s session of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. We are continuing with evidence to our inquiry into supporting our high streets after Covid-19. We can all see that the restrictions placed on retail units and other businesses in the high street have been very significant during the last 12 months, so we are looking today at what impact it is having now and, more importantly, in some ways, what impact it is likely to have in the future and what steps can be taken to alleviate the effect of Covid on the high street.

This afternoon, we are delighted to be joined by three very distinguished professors from around the world. It is the first time that, as a Select Committee, we have had three professors join us for an evidence session, and I will come on to introduce them in just a moment.

Right at the beginning, though, members of the Committee need to put on record any particular interests they have that may be directly relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government



Association.

Ian Byrne: I am still a sitting councillor in Liverpool.

Mary Robinson: I employ a councillor in my staff team.

Bob Blackman: I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I employ a councillor in my office.

Florence Eshalomi: I am also a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Q144 **Chair:** We have put on record matters that may be thought to be relevant to this inquiry, but now over to the important part and our three very distinguished witnesses. Once again, thank you for joining us today. I will ask each of you in turn to introduce yourself and say a little bit about where you are speaking to us from.

Professor Burdett: Good afternoon. My name is Ricky Burdett. I am professor of urban studies at the London School of Economics, where I run a research centre called LSE Cities. I am particularly interested in the relationship between urban form, development infrastructure, social inclusion and environmental equity.

Professor Chan: My name is Heng Chee and my family name is Chan. I am chair of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities in the Singapore University of Technology and Design. I am in Singapore, clearly. I recently started a project on socio-spatial reconfiguration of the city after Covid, which goes with what we are discussing today. My centre looks at the issues that affect cities and urbanisation, including sustainability, the future of work and ageing.

Professor Moreno: Thank you so much for the kind invitation, and greetings from Paris. I am Carlos Moreno, professor at Sorbonne University. I am the scientific director of the Entrepreneurship-Territory-Innovation Chair. My research work with my team is oriented to understanding the mutations in our cities due to climate change and to proposing a new economic model for cities, as well as new services and a new ecosystem for innovating solutions. My recent research has been oriented to the revolution of proximity. With my team, we have been developing the concept of cities and territories of proximity: the 15-minute city and the 30-minute territory.

Q145 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I am sure we will come on to explore all those different issues as we go through our questions. To begin with a very general opening question before coming on to some very specific questions later, the Covid situation has clearly changed what has been happening in our town and city centres and our high streets in the last 12 months, but how fundamental has that change been on city and town centres across the world? Professor Burdett, closer to home in London, what is your take on what the impact has been?

Professor Burdett: Very much responding to your point about what has been happening outside the United Kingdom, there is no doubt that,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

globally, there have been some dramatic changes, particularly in what I would call behaviour patterns and experiences as opposed to infrastructure per se, also because there has not been time to change that infrastructure.

One should not consider the city as just one thing. Cities are like delicate and fragile organisms. They are very different in different parts of the world, and in different parts of the cities themselves. Perhaps we can talk about that later. For example, there are conditions that the pandemic has effected in central business districts around the world, whether it is downtown Chicago, New York or closer to home, which have been incredibly negative in terms of the impacts on retail activity and office attendance.

In similar cities, and I am thinking of New York but also of Asian and Latin American cities, more peripheral areas or what we in the UK might call urban villages in London—the Chiswicks of this world—have, in many ways, shown a degree of resilience and vibrancy. That provides us with many lessons to learn about the importance of exactly the areas that you are looking at in terms of the high street.

You could say, being a little facetious, that the death of the city is highly exaggerated. Very few cities have completely collapsed under the pressures of the pandemic, and many have come back, and are coming back, relatively swiftly. One example, which I am sure Professor Chan will talk about, is that there was an immediate sense at the beginning of the pandemic that cities with people living very closely together, packed in, would be conducive to the spreading of the disease in very negative ways.

In fact, that proved not to be the case, and we will hear more about that. Hong Kong, Seoul and Singapore, as well as Taipei and others—some of the densest cities in the world—dealt with the control of the pandemic perhaps better than sprawling cities in other parts of the world. Again, there are lessons to be learned about efficiencies of how cities are organised and how services can be provided, particularly in healthcare.

A final and critical point that I want to make in this first statement is that the relationship between social inequalities and social exclusion, and where the pandemic has hit hardest, came to the surface in a way that has made some of the deep inequalities in cities around the world very clear to us and, therefore, raises questions of what we can do about that.

Q146 **Chair:** Professor Chan, you were namechecked in that response from Professor Burdett. Would you like to follow up?

Professor Chan: I would like to begin by saying that I agree with everything Professor Burdett said. I will just add a few more comments. Covid-19 certainly has had a fundamental impact on cities and the economy. It has been calamitous for business, as you have mentioned. Schools are shut and kids are now missing school. They are learning



HOUSE OF COMMONS

online, and, as an educationist, I believe something is missing when you only study online.

The pandemic is changing norms as well. Something has changed irreversibly in the way we work. It is not so difficult now to conceive of working from home. In the past, people asked, "How can you be as productive if you work from home?" That has now been challenged.

One of the major issues facing cities and local neighbourhoods is that everyone seems to want to work from home. Looking at the future, you are going to look at a hybrid model. How that hybrid model of working from home works out depends on cities and on companies. Is it three days at home and two at work, or three at work and two at home before the weekend? In China, 90% of people are back at work. When Japan really gets back on its feet, you will find that too. In Seoul and Singapore, younger people want to do hybrid work, but some are raring to go back to the office, and companies will want that.

The point I would highlight is that we can ask ourselves whether the economies of the cities and the local neighbourhoods can afford to have people working from home. That is what reduces footfall and traffic, so we have an issue.

There has also been a forced decentralisation in cities and a redefinition of what the high street is. In some cities, such as London and maybe New York, things are coming back, as Professor Burdett said. There are no dead cities, but there has been a redistribution of activities and a redefinition of high streets. The city centre may have gone quieter. Floorspace has been given up and some rentals have come down, but there has been a rise of neighbourhood towns, which is a phenomenon you spoke about. We see it richly in Singapore, where our neighbourhood towns have come out very strongly.

Singapore has 5.7 million people in high-density, high-rise living. People are packed. We have public housing estates and neighbourhood towns. The planners wanted this idea of the 15-minute city, which we call the 20-minute city, but it did not work quite like that. It was not as thriving. The Covid pandemic has now seen the rise of the neighbourhood, and people are going into them. I can come to examples later, not just in my country, but many cities in Australia are seeing a revival in local neighbourhood towns, whatever names you give them.

There has been a lot of discussion about green parks and a concern with healthcare systems. Every city is now thinking about that and wondering how to do it. Certainly in Singapore, we are thinking very much about that. I agree that inequalities, not just in cities but globally between affluent countries that can afford vaccines and those that cannot, have been demonstrated. Within cities, vulnerable groups are affected, and it really depends on how Governments handle mitigating inequality. We have seen it exacerbated. In Singapore, we are trying very hard and reaching out. My Government are democratic socialists, and there has



HOUSE OF COMMONS

always been a strong people orientation, subsidies for the poor and bringing in the old. I can go into that in detail, but we try to mitigate it. I would say that inequalities get highlighted.

One last point is to answer the question that Professor Burdett raised, which was about how high-density cities handle Covid well. Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei and even Seoul went through the experience of dealing with SARS, and Seoul handled the MERS epidemic. The SARS epidemic put the frighteners on us. All these cities did something about their health system. It trained us to deal with it. It was almost a dress rehearsal for this pandemic, so we did better. I would say that it is not density alone. Density does not determine it. Competent and decisive Government does. Belief in science does. If cities and countries have trust in Government, it does work. Many Asians are quite willing to wear masks. This is challenged a little, and I can see a libertarian streak in some societies. That is fine, but it makes getting everybody to do things much more difficult.

Professor Moreno: In my opinion, the first lesson of this pandemic period is the power of cities in these modern times. We have been living through a health crisis. In order to improve the global situation, we need to stop urban life in all continents. The economic and social crisis is a new reality. The power of the state is the power of cities. The economic power of the state is the economic power of cities. The social crisis in cities is the social crisis of the state. More than ever, for the first time, we are confronted with the century of cities, which is a term used by our friend Saskia Sassen.

At the same time, for the first time in the history of humanity, we need to offer a new, different reason of life to fight against this pandemic crisis. We need to propose, in a few days and weeks, another sociability. At the same time, with the climate change crisis in convergence with the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, we have evidence that we are living today in unsustainable cities. Given that, we need to radically change our urban lifestyle. This is the second lesson.

To change urban lifestyles, we need to propose new relationships between each one of us—the inhabitants of cities—with time and space. With constraint measures and lockdowns, we have been living in another daily time. We have the possibility to discover useful time for living with a new pace in cities. We have been discovering the new concept of proximity by mobility.

For the first time on the whole planet—in Latin America, Asia and Europe—we must change our urban lifestyles and rediscover the material resources in the proximity. We have discovered streets, squares and gardens. We have the possibility to rediscover our neighbours and to live with useful time for ourselves, our families and our friends.

There is a new possibility to shift to other urban lifestyles. This is the success of the 15-minute city, because several policymakers around the



world consider that, today, we could offer this new paradigm to shift our mindset towards rediscovering proximity, useful time and urban spaces, proposing new intensity in our sociability, rediscovering multipurpose functions for buildings and imagining new urban lifestyles with a healthier city.

We have rediscovered the difference between proximity and density. We have the possibility to rediscover the organic density in cities and to avoid proximity. We have the possibility to propose new programmes to develop living buildings in order to develop this new sociability with organic density in cities. Organic density is not an enemy but an ally.

Q147 **Ian Byrne:** This has already been a fascinating session, and we are only on question 1. Thinking specifically during the pandemic, can you give some examples of good practice from places that have protected their high streets successfully through Covid-19, or during other pandemics such as SARS and MERS? Professor Chan, you mentioned such practices in the likes of Singapore, so can I start with you, please?

Professor Chan: We have all been through the terrible pandemic. Business dislikes lockdowns and wants opening up. Governments, whether national or local, have all come up with packages to help those impacted by Covid. National packages range from 10% to 20% of GDP in those countries that can afford it.

In terms of specific measures to support high streets in CBDs or in neighbourhood towns, I will start with Singapore and then talk about Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney, because I have been reading a bit about them. In Singapore, at every crisis, the Singapore Government believe in saving jobs and companies. They say, "We believe this is the best stimulus package you have." There is no point in building infrastructure and so on. It is about ensuring that people keep their jobs and that companies keep operating.

In Singapore, we started something called the jobs support scheme, which was introduced in 2020 during the pandemic. We renewed it this year. What does it mean? The Government subsidise the salaries of workers in every industry to save jobs. The amount depends on the industry.

For instance, in the aviation, aerospace and tourism industry, 50% of a worker's wage was paid for seven months in 2020. Because the pandemic continued, we extended it again in 2021 to 30%. You will see that owners of establishments and businesses will find that they have been helped, and the money goes to pay for workers' salaries. In the construction industry, which we call the built environment industry, 50% was paid for two months and 30% up to March 2021. You give a big chunk first and you start scaling down. If you need some more, you renew it. In F&B and land transport, 30% of wages were paid; it is 10% in 2021, so the money is scaled down.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Last year, the Government also asked commercial property owners to provide rent relief for four months. Owners of malls and shops gave a rent waiver, which is relevant for high streets. It was for four months and, afterwards, it was up to the mall owners. Some were more civic and worked out special rent rebates.

In neighbourhood towns, we have public housing estates. They are not like your council estates; it is not poor housing. We just call it public housing because it is built by the public housing authority. Some of those apartments are now going for S\$1 million. There are shops and establishments there, and the Government waive rent according to how it is prescribed.

There are rent waivers in America as well. I learned that, in cities such as Atlanta, they do a profit-sharing lease. Some landlords will tell the small business, "It is \$15 per square foot up to a certain point, and then it is 5% of your gross revenue, whichever is higher," so there is a change in the way they do the rentals. You can also allow subleasing. There are different ways of looking at this.

You have business rates, and there is a discussion now in Britain around whether they should be cancelled. In Singapore, we have tax rebates that the Government have given. These measures altogether include subsidies for workers, rent relief and tax rebates for companies. There are other little things, but these are the main ideas.

Professor Moreno: In the city of Paris, Covid-19 is, in reality, a new step for developing the resilience of the city in order to propose a human project based on the convergence between ecology, economy and sociability. The lockdown and the different constraints were, in reality, an opportunity for developing the urban common good. In the city of Paris today, the urban common good is a key element for liberation of urban policy in the next two years. In the Covid-19 crisis, the urban common good offers the possibility to reconquer public space or to establish different shops.

At the same time, there is the possibility to foster 100% subsidiary companies of the city of Paris that buy locations and rent them at a price below speculative real estate prices. This is important. This is a company named Semaest, and it has been managing 62,000 locations in the city of Paris. Without this support from the city of Paris, we would have bankrupt bookshops and artisan bakeries. These are powerful actions in the mission statement of the common good for the city of Paris. This is the same urban policy for fostering the local economy; for supporting local jobs, "made in Paris" and local initiatives; and for increasing our participatory budget. The participatory budget of the city of Paris is €800 million per year, which is dedicated to re-localising citizens' projects in order to propose the transformation of the city.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the urban common good is one of the most relevant points. The key words are "regulation" and "regulatory policy",



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and this is a very important difference between Paris, America and other places.

Professor Burdett: It is fantastic to hear Professor Chan talk about the interventionist approach from Singapore, but let us not forget that that is a unique situation of a city state, effectively, where national Government and city government are aligned. In this country, we are very far from that. Understanding issues of responsibility, and fiscal possibilities of raising funds and devolved powers, is critical to what we have heard, and many of us might say it would be wonderful to do that.

Rather than, in any way, adding further detail to what has been said about the economic dimension covered so well by Professor Chan, I want to amplify what Carlos Moreno said. This is nearly implicit in the questions behind the brief of this Committee. Social value is as important as the economic value of the high street. I know that this is said, but how do you describe it and measure it?

Going back to your question, Mr Byrne, the experience abroad of prioritising the commons and what is shared, as Professor Moreno just said, is exactly the platform on which the city of Barcelona is rebuilding itself. For the last five years, Mayor Ada Colau has used the name of her party, Barcelona en Comú, which means “together” or “participatory”, to build from the bottom up, while having a vision for the whole city, which goes to the heart of this question of protecting what I would call not just the high street but the neighbourhood. That shift is very important in everything that we are hearing.

I would add, although we can come back to this later, that the importance of the physical environment, which is what Professor Moreno was getting at, and of ennobling and civilising the street or the small park, and having an elegant and simple bench to sit on so that people can come together, has to be a complementary side to the economic investments to protect the high street and its environs. I would add to the social value, the economic intervention and the question of Governments this fundamental issue of spatial quality, because that is where people want to be and feel dignified being there.

Chair: We will now move on to look at what lessons we can learn for the longer term. I would just ask Committee members to focus on one specific point that you want witnesses to answer. Witnesses, we are going to be a little time-constrained and we want to get through all the subjects. If you could just reflect on that in your answers, that would be really helpful.

Q148 **Mohammad Yasin:** Professor Chan, thinking beyond the pandemic, can you give us some examples of action that has been taken in places outside the UK? Do you expect those actions will allow those towns to thrive well beyond Covid-19 and into the future?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Chan: I will answer this question first by not directing at towns but by saying that, post pandemic, what we should all avoid, and not just Britain, is thinking of the new normal as the old normal. Things are changing. In my city, my Prime Minister has spoken of the virus as being endemic. If the virus is endemic and is there like flu, what do you do? You cannot keep locking down. We will test and track, and we hope that everybody will be vaccinated. I understand that this is what affluent cities and countries can do. London can do this; you are pretty much ahead in your vaccination programme. Vaccination does it. You have to keep borders open and things have to work. That is what we will do.

As Professor Burdett says, we are a country and a city, so we are always thinking of disruption to the future economy. In every industry, the Government have been trying to do something. You teach people about digitalisation and you retrain skills. We have a skills development fund, and the pandemic has digitalised everybody very quickly. I would say that, in your neighbourhood towns, some shops may need this help, which has to be given, looking towards the future.

I want to go back to what Professors Burdett and Moreno have said about the social space. Looking to the future, building that is extremely important. All of us have read urban theory that says you have to create that social space, and that people make that social space. You have to bring people out. You have to bring people to the neighbourhood towns. What makes it enticing is the social life. Is it the park or the bench? What is it? I know that, in Sydney and Melbourne, they are talking of building apartment blocks in neighbourhoods, which enlivens the whole thing. Looking beyond the pandemic, is that a plan? It is about training people and so on. That certainly brings people and footfall. It does not compete with business; it provides business. It is densification: if there are more people in your neighbourhood, that will solve the problem. How do you bring people there?

I will throw out an idea here. In some of your cities, is there a campus nearby? Can the university have satellite campuses that bring students near to your high street? Is that possible? Maybe it is just too expensive. Whatever brings people together helps. It is a social value. Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney all talk about that. People are rediscovering their neighbourhoods. I bet you that Britain's people are rediscovering their neighbourhoods. Let them not lose that particular sense, because they want to help the neighbourhood. They are not rushing to the city or the CBD to buy things; they are buying in their local neighbourhoods. It is fresh, they get to know the people and they want to see them through. This is happening to us in Singapore, too, and we are asking, "What do we do post Covid to keep the sense that they owe it to the neighbourhood?"

As Professor Moreno said, you have to make the place enticing. Can you put in public art? Can there be a performance space somewhere near the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

high street, so that people go there for a reason? You need people to ginger up the high street.

Q149 **Mohammad Yasin:** Professor Moreno, do you agree with Professor Chan?

Professor Moreno: Today, we have a real demonstration that we were not living in normality. In fact, we had already been living with climate change. We had socioeconomic inequalities. This pandemic is a reality and it underlines that we need to move to another way of life. In my mind, this is a big opportunity for developing these new ecological, social and economical changes based on this big bang of proximities. We consider this in Paris. I work with the C40 network of cities against climate change.

That development of proximity is based on how we can reconquer the public space and streets for outside living, how we can develop social links in the public space, how we can develop gender equity, and how we can take care of fragile or elderly people or kids. In reality, last week the Mayor of Paris announced a very ambitious programme to transform urban policy in Paris based on massive decentralisation, with the aim of building new relationships between each citizen and the public space, and developing a green and pedestrian city, local citizen networks and artistic projects.

This crisis provides the possibility to propose a new way to call for citizens to take part in this transformation of urban cities. The pandemic is not only a sanitary crisis; it is also an economic and social crisis. I consider that, today, we have a real opportunity to develop, with local leaders and city policymakers, a level of hyper-proximity. We need to offer another horizon to citizens, different from Zoom, Teams or Skype. We need to re-find humanity in cities, which we had lost. This crisis is an opportunity to rediscover this humanity in cities.

Jane Jacobs said that the only humanity that exists is the humanity that exists when we are in the street, the urban park or the garden. With a common good based on ecological, social and economic activities, which is human-centred, we have the possibility to rediscover the convergence between the urban common good and citizens' activity. There is the possibility for each one of us, as intellectuals, to propose a new road map. The 15-minute city is not a magic wand for transforming cities. At the same time, it is a red line for developing this happy proximity. With this crisis, we have proved that the smart city, technology and digitalisation are only tools. While they are powerful tools, real life is in the streets, in the public space, in the local economy and in the social link.

Q150 **Mohammad Yasin:** Professor Burdett, my question to you is slightly different. Do you have any examples of actions being taken elsewhere that we should be avoiding in the United Kingdom?



Professor Burdett: There are plenty of examples where there has been a kneejerk reaction to one of the core issues that cuts across what has been said by the other two speakers, which is around public transport and the use of the car. I will come back to the question in just one second, but if I take your first question and talk about where the trend has been going anyway in terms of more sustainable cities, it is not by chance that you have Paris and Singapore here—not because of what they did during the pandemic but what they have been doing for years. It is about reducing proximity, maximising use of public transport and minimising use of the private car.

The answer to your question is that, wherever there has had to be a relaxation of the use of the private car to get to work and, therefore, increased levels of commuting, which has happened, broadly, in many cities around the world, it needs to be reined in very quickly; otherwise, people get too used to going back to a pattern. You have to provide a certain amount of time for things to settle, and for people to be able to earn a living and get to their jobs. I would be very aware of that.

You asked me where the negative examples are. We have heard the positive of Paris. Another example is Milan, which has turned itself around in the last three or four years, as well as around the pandemic, and has maintained the vibrancy, where possible, of what I would call its neighbourhood clusters, rather than the high street, both at the economic and the social level.

Q151 **Mohammad Yasin:** In your view, what are the key actions that central Government, local government and the private sector should take to support town centres in the long term in the United Kingdom?

Professor Burdett: Alignment between central Government and city government is needed in order to reduce sprawl, maximise investment—we heard before the words “intensification” and “densification”—and increase the mix of uses. That is a planning issue, particularly in the UK, where existing planning regulations sometimes make that much more difficult than it should be. Insisting that any new development with these higher densities—we are talking long term, and this is probably a central Government-led type of regulation—is dependent not on private car use, but on different forms of green modality, is central to that equation.

Q152 **Florence Eshalomi:** Professor Moreno, you highlighted some of the stuff on the 15-minute city and neighbourhood. Could you give us a brief description of what that is?

Professor Moreno: The 15-minute city is a concept for developing a new urban lifestyle in cities, based on providing access within a short perimeter via low-carbon modalities, on foot or by bike, to the six essential urban social functions. In my research work with my team, we have defined six essential urban functions that are required for a happy proximity: to live; to work in proximity in a decentralised job; to supply;



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to access education and culture; to care for physical and mental health; and to enjoy biodiversity, a green city and water.

We consider that, if we have the possibility to offer maximum access to the six urban social functions, we could, as a consequence, ultimately reduce constraints on mobility. We have the possibility to foster pedestrian and bikeable areas, to shift our mindset to living more and better in the proximity and to develop, in the whole city, this same concept. We want to create a polycentric city. We want to break with functional urbanism based on a segmented city. If we have the possibility to propose, for each citizen living in a city, access to the six urban social functions, we have a polycentric, multcentred city.

For that, we consider it better to use and reuse the buildings that exist today. We have the possibility to develop multipurpose functions in order to offer different functions in the same building. We have the possibility to change the reason for the city and to change the commute of one hour and more, because we have the possibility to decentralise jobs and, at the same time, to develop the love of places, of "my street" and of "my neighbourhood", and to develop a real social fabric.

The 15-minute city is not a magic wand but a journey to develop an ambitious programme based on a big bang of proximity. We need to change four elements: to have, daily, an ecological, low-carbon attitude; to rediscover the vicinity in permanence; to use different materials or resources in the city; to develop solidarity, social links, gender equity and to reconquer public space for democracy and transparency; and to develop citizen commitment and participation in order to foster them to take part in local projects funded by their participatory budget, for example, that transform the local place by tactical or temporary urbanism.

The key word for avoiding densification is to propose a powerful urban policy based on regulation and on the urban common good. This is the role of the local government. This is the 15-minute city concept: a city of proximities, not only for me in segregation, but for each one of us.

Q153 Florence Eshalomi: That is really helpful. Does that 15-minute city concept work everywhere? If we look at the UK, I represent a south London constituency. I have eight underground and six overground stations. If I look at my colleague on the call, Bob Blackman MP, his constituency, which is still in London, does not have the same transport links, so it is about trying to get people to walk, cycle and use all of that within 15 minutes. Does this 15-minute city work in more remote areas and rural or coastal towns, where, across the UK, we are trying to revive the high street?

Professor Moreno: Your question is a very good one. I said that the 15-minute city is a journey for developing a polycentric city. In fact, this is the same case in Paris, because we have the city of Paris and Greater Paris. We need to develop a deal with the private sector in order to define



HOUSE OF COMMONS

how we could redeploy resources for not only living differently but working differently. In the pandemic situation, we have this new opportunity to mix our workstyle with decentralised jobs. This is the same situation with the mall for supplying, because we have the possibility to develop local shops.

I consider that we have the possibility in different cities, with different densities, to develop this polycentric model based on this idea of re-localising several services. This is not a perfect model, because a perfect solution does not exist. The reality of urban life is to reduce constraints, to shift from constrained mobility to chosen mobility, to reduce the reason for making a two-hour round trip every day between my home and the office. We need to propose transforming urban life. Today, in rural areas, we have started to implement the same concept of a 15-minute territory. In rural areas of medium or low density, it is not possible to propose only walking or biking.

In this case, we have a programme that proposes using the car, but car-sharing, electric cars or, with digitalisation, new ways such as on-demand transport or virtual, digital car lanes. In fact, in high, medium and low-density zones, this is a hybridisation of 15-minute cities for very compact urban social functions and a 30-minute territory that offers access to services using, for example, public cars and others. This is a hybridisation of the two models.

Florence Eshalomi: That is really helpful. I am mindful of time, Chair, but it would be good to get some information on the 30-minute one to see how that could help colleagues in other areas across the country.

Professor Burdett: A few weeks ago, we held a discussion at the London School of Economics with Peter Hendy, the head of Network Rail, and Ed Glaeser, an economist from Harvard who Professor Moreno knows well. I am only putting this out there, and putting forward their arguments rather than arguing it myself. There was quite a strong criticism of the 15-minute city around the notion that it could end up with a series of relatively middle-class enclaves that do not connect the wider fabric of the city.

The sort of question that might be asked, which in many ways is what Peter Hendy was getting at, goes to the point just made about some areas being better serviced than others in terms of public transport. Does every neighbourhood have a globally famous Natural History Museum, let alone a sports arena? Where does the metropolitan distribution of different goods come in? I am sure that Professor Moreno thinks about this a lot, but that level of analysis should be part of the discussion, rather than everything being exactly cookie-cutter, the same as everywhere else.

Professor Chan: The 15-minute city is a 20-minute city elsewhere. Melbourne is developing its 20-minute city, as Professor Moreno will know, and we reflected that. It is really about getting all the right



HOUSE OF COMMONS

amenities together. Initially, you have to get schools, jobs, grocers, supermarkets, dentists and doctors within it. The transport system is crucial. If you ask me where it can be located and whether it can be located anywhere, if it is sprawling it will not be 15 minutes, unless you have the transport system. I do not know why coastal towns or areas would be different. When you spread it out, how do you bring the amenities together?

Professor Burdett brought up a very good point: if your neighbourhood is a low-income one, the 15-minute or 20-minute city just keeps you within that area, whereas moving out of that 15-minute or 20-minute city opens up horizons for young people growing up. There are some things that one has to think about there.

We started the 20-minute city simply to decongest the city centre. I am for the 20-minute or 15-minute city, because it creates a social identity. I kept hearing the word "love". I talk of the "lovable city". You want people to have allegiance to and love of their town and neighbourhood.

Let me throw in an idea that I have been playing with: sacred spaces. You have to create sacred spaces in your neighbourhood towns and 15-minute cities. I do not mean religious buildings or spaces, but spaces that are important to you. Generally, they tend to be green. Can you have little parks? They are intimate little spaces and reflective, soulful places, but they speak to the individual. Your town plans must be smart enough that, when they design such places, it can be flexible enough that the individual adopts it and it becomes their own sacred space for whatever reason.

Q154 **Chair:** Professor Chan, you have also developed something called the Smart City Index. Could you explain that for us? Be brief in your answer, as we still have other things we want to explore. Could you say a little bit about it and why it matters?

Professor Chan: The Smart City Index was developed by IMD in Lausanne and the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities in Singapore. We wanted to learn what we could do with it and thought that the Smart City Index was important. Everyone is now talking of smart, but there are so many definitions of it. At the very least, I would say that people emphasise that you have to use technology, but it is not technology as a value in itself. It is technology for sustainability, and technology to make people's lives better. It must impact on people.

Our Smart City Index is different from other smart city indices, because we do not look only at technology. We want to find out what the perceptions of residents are of issues relating to what we call structures and technology applications that are available in the city.

For instance, we would ask them about health and safety. Is there basic sanitation that meets the needs of the poorest areas in your city? Are recycling services satisfactory? Is public safety a problem? Is air pollution



a problem? Are mobility or traffic congestion a problem? Are green spaces satisfactory? There is a whole list of them. Are there opportunities for work? Is information on local government decisions easily accessible? We check out these things with people, so it is a much broader index than just looking at technology or applications for urban solutions. We feel this reflects the trend today of putting people at the centre of things.

Is anyone here from Birmingham? Birmingham came 52nd in the first edition in 2019. In the 2020 edition, it came 40th. London came 20th in the 2019 edition and 15th in the 2020 edition. Manchester was just measured and came out 17th in the 2020 edition. Our index disadvantages big and sprawling cities, because we do a survey of just a number of people. When you have a very big city, some citizens do not know what is going on. In some cities, we found that citizens are very anti-authority. They keep saying no. Smaller cities do much better. In fact, the top three cities in the 2020 index were Singapore, Helsinki and Zürich.

Q155 Florence Eshalomi: We touched on this briefly when we were discussing the 15-minute city. We are having a big debate at the moment in the UK around trying to get people to use public transport and active travel as opposed to the car. What other methods of transportation should we be looking at to try to incentivise people to use high streets and town centres? How does a resilient post-Covid town centre compare with one that provides free parking or with all-singing, all-dancing out-of-town shopping centres that have car parking? I will come to you first, Professor Burdett, since you met Peter and a few others not too long ago.

Professor Burdett: I am sure that Carlos, with his Parisian model, has a lot to say, but one has to connect your question with the bigger issues that we were talking about before. Yes, you may, in the short term, need to relax parking restrictions, but, of course, in the longer term, that would go against everything that we have been talking about—and certainly the three expert witnesses—in terms of more sustainable neighbourhoods within cities.

I would caution very much against that as a long-term solution, and propose finding ways of making public transport safe. We have heard examples of how that can be and is being done, and it is interesting to hear that more and more people in New York City are using public transport—two weekends ago, it went up to 75% of full capacity—for leisure events rather than work. There is an interesting dimension here.

We tend to talk—and we have up to now—about work and commuting patterns, and the issue that Professor Chan mentioned about the shift towards working from home. Let us remind ourselves that that is for a percentage of the working population. A large number of care workers and key workers, whom all of you as MPs represent, do not have that option. It is not a one-size-fits-all solution in any way.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Looking carefully at, say, the implementation of the transport plans of the city of Milan, which I referred to before, with new cycleways and public spaces, and greater variation in the types of activity in some of the central nodes, is essential to getting this right, and certainly not opening the floodgates of allowing free parking, unless it is for a limited period of time. The fact that more people are ready to use public transport in their leisure time and, therefore, perhaps taking more risk but looking to central or city authorities to make sure they are provided with safe forms of transport in buses, trains and the underground, is certainly something that needs to be looked at in the case of UK cities.

Professor Moreno: I agree with Ricky. In fact, I would underline that, if we want to improve urban quality of life, we must reduce the pressure on public transportation and on the singular car. There is an idea of developing a grid city based on this proximity-driven city. As I said recently to Ed Glaeser, we do not go to the museum, the arena or the big hospital every day. We need to identify the essential urban functions that are the core of urban life in terms of daily activities. For that, we consider that the proximity of living, working, supplying, caring, educating and enjoying are the key elements for proposing how to maximise services in a proximity.

In several cases, people do not have a local life. We have lost our local identity. At the same time, we have lost a large part of our urban humanity, because people are always in a hurry, anonymously, and under stress. We want to propose a happy proximity to relax this pressure and to propose a new paradigm to move when we want, not because we have to. It is not a question of isolating inhabitants in their bubble of the 15-minute city. On the contrary, we want to propose a grid city to encourage people to go everywhere, because they want to, without any constraint.

For mobility, I consider that better mobility is public transportation in different modalities. I have several examples around the world, including measures to offer free parking. This is only a temporary action, as it is not possible to have an urban policy of offering only free parking. The real question is about what kind of city we want to live in. We need to define this. If the paradigm is to use my individual car every day, this is very different from proposing a city with transformed public spaces, a city for humans and not for cars, and a low-carbon city. Free parking is a temporary, not a permanent way.

In Greater Paris, our ambition is to develop polycentric public transportation with the new underground and railway lines, and to encourage people to use it. We need to propose measures that encourage people to use public transportation more and more in good conditions. We could offer public transportation for free under several conditions: to the young, the elderly and the unemployed. Free public transportation is an incentivising measure and a nudge that encourages people to use it.



This is not about free transportation in all circumstances, but for several categories of the population. This is the case in the city of Paris. The underground is free for young people, the unemployed and those aged over 65, and under certain conditions. This is not incompatible with the 15-minute city, because we need to offer the possibility of exploring and accessing the proximity, and of living in a decentralised district, while, at the same time, taking benefit from the different locations and services in the city.

Q156 Florence Eshalomi: I am mindful of time, but is there anything that you wanted to add, Professor Chan? I am getting the general steer that all of you are saying that we do not go to free parking and big car parks, but that we promote active travel.

Professor Chan: Let me take it from another angle. Your concern with transportation has to do with the revival of high streets and keeping people coming. What sort of transportation should you have, and how do you incentivise people to come to the city centre? There are those who argue that you should make pedestrian malls, and that is very attractive. It will bring people. They saunter there and you put in other activities. I would just remind us of that. My colleagues all know about this aspect. How do you bus things?

I have read, however, that, in the United States, they try this connectivity between smaller cities, which helps to strengthen cities and make them last better. Can smaller cities in the United Kingdom, and the transport connecting them, connect with each other better, so that people from one city nearby go to another? That is where they will try out new shopping or something. Maybe that is one way to try to enhance numbers for a high street.

My team looked at socio-spatial reconfiguration. I asked them to look at crises and what happens after every crisis, whether it is terrorism or whatever. When cities try to recover, they go for tourism and try to pump that up, so maybe you should focus on that.

Q157 Mary Robinson: We were discussing earlier the impact and potential of densification and how that can help our high street. I want to explore that a little further and ask whether, in creating more housing on the high street, we may be in danger of diluting the range, uses and activities that make town centres attractive in the first place. You may say that there are other uses that could help improve town centres. Professor Chan, you just mentioned tourism. What could be the impact of housing densification on the high street if it affects the range of other uses? Could the identity of the high street be impacted negatively?

Professor Chan: During Covid, some high street shops have closed, so there is space in buildings. People have moved out. In many cities, the rules have been removed, allowing for a change in land use. Planners are encouraging residential units to come in where office units used to be. I have talked to many of our planners in Singapore, and my thinking is



that residences do help the high street. They help businesses. You need people there. We are now trying to bring residential blocks into the central business district, because it is dead at night. How do you ginger that up? You bring in people, who create their neighbourhoods, even in the central business districts. It does not take away from the character. These people bring new life into the high street. It may change the character a little, but the new character might be better.

Q158 **Mary Robison:** Professor Burdett, specifically in London, there have been some issues raised around permitted development. For instance, more people have been moving into some areas that were previously offices, et cetera. How do you see this?

Professor Burdett: First of all, I would frame the answer to your question about London by saying that, if you do not have people around, you are not going to have people going to the high street, so the notion of where they are going to be housed in the city is an urban issue. One has to provide some form of affordable housing and, with Professor Chan in Singapore here, we are all awed by the system that is in place there, with 80% of the population living in social housing. There are many lessons to be learned there. That is relevant in responding to your question: you need to have people there around the 24-hour and seven-day cycle in order to keep the shops and other retail activities there.

I would answer your question around the notion of design. There are plenty of examples, including inner-city Paris, which is one of the densest neighbourhoods in Europe, second only to Barcelona, where planning and designing the ground floor and what happens above it—in other words, in section, not only in plan—means that you can mitigate and accommodate different uses without being in conflict. The best examples of city design can deal with that, without necessarily creating a conflict.

We all know the story of the Corporation of London, which has resisted, for many generations and with some effect, the presence of a large residential population, to allow it the elbow room to modernise and to change. That is a very unique situation of one of the most highly connected global transport hubs anywhere in the western world, which has a DNA as a place of commerce and exchange. Many of the neighbourhoods that you are looking at around the high street do not have those tensions. The mix is desirable, necessary and something that is completely possible to manage within a well-balanced planning framework.

Professor Moreno: We must not forget that the climate crisis contributes today, even if our normal situation is very complicated because we have been living with the pandemic. For our high street, the road map that I have in mind is to continue to transform our lifestyle. We need to have liveable streets. We need to develop a mix of social functions. We need to break with the mono-function in the cities. If we want to have high streets with only shops and commerce, this is not a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

liveable city. We need to have a mix of shops, cultural locations and social housing in order to mix different social functions.

Today, we have a big opportunity with the transformation of our work and lifestyle with the Covid pandemic. In the case of the city of Paris, we have a significant number of ghost towers, not only in the outskirts at La Défense, but in the heart of Paris. We need to transform ghost towers and to mix residential houses, to continue to host offices and, at the same time, to transform the nature of the office in cities. We could have towers that host workers and reduce pressure on public transportation.

We need to develop the high street with the condition of creating a social, liveable and human environment. At the same time, with climate change, we need to preserve biodiversity, the green city and public spaces for kids and for elderly people. We need to reconsider each high street not in terms of commercial business but as a place to live. This is the key word: whether or not we have a place for living.

In several masterplans, we consider only public spaces. We need to consider the interactions between the public space and the private space, and to open several private spaces with multipurpose functions, in order to host activities and to create more interactions for developing artistic activities, exhibitions and cultural activities. For example, in Paris, we have several high streets that are totally connected with internal spaces. The doors of some artistic exhibitions or galleries are totally open and you have the opportunity to be indoors or outdoors, which gives this feeling of a real liveable city.

Chair: We will move on now to look at the very big issue of climate change, which Bob Blackman will lead on. We really need to conclude the session in the next 10 to 15 minutes, so I will ask all our witnesses to focus in that regard.

Q159 **Bob Blackman:** The United Kingdom is hosting COP26 this autumn, and climate change is very much on the agenda in everyone's minds. Looking strictly at high street businesses and government, be it central Government or local government, how can high streets contribute towards being a net-zero contributor?

Professor Chan: I will be very brief here. Since the buildings are already there, I would not ask them in a time of Covid to do anything in terms of changing to more eco-friendly materials. You could introduce ideas like having green mark buildings or green buildings, which are immediate. On the high street, they could do that. It becomes a matter of pride for them to achieve that green mark. Local government or national Government could hand it out, but that is an incentive.

Professor Burdett: I know you want to talk about only the high street, and I understand that, but I would draw a circle of maybe a mile around it. I do not think you can solve the problem of the high street just by



HOUSE OF COMMONS

thinking of what happens left and right of that strip. I know you do not mean that, but that is important.

In order of responses to what a British city could do to address the climate change challenge, the first has already been mentioned by Professor Chan. Most of the urban population in this country live in the building stock that is there. We are building more, but the most important thing is to make better use of what we have. That is a fantastic opportunity for the high street, because it is already there and is probably relatively close to some form of public transport. It may have what used to be a public library or a pub.

You can reuse buildings with great imagination. Just think of how many defunct department stores are being turned into other things in a very exciting way. They are being turned into collective workspaces or other leisure-type activities, so the reuse of these buildings on the high street, which feels like a threat, can, in a country with enormous creativity about it, be a solution.

The second issue that has been talked about and is important to repeat in the climate change context is reducing the need to move, mobility, in forms that create pollution. That really means having things closer together. Professor Chan, Professor Moreno and I are going to repeat that you need to intensify, but you cannot divorce the climate change argument from the one of intensification.

I would end by saying that, as I said at the beginning, the quality of the public experience of moving up and down the high street and the neighbourhood, and having immediately to the left or the right a place where children can play and, therefore, families can live and not feel alien, is also a design issue. There is enormous potential for retrofitting and improving UK cities' high streets. In many ways, they are not up to what this society stands for.

Q160 **Bob Blackman:** My colleague Florence Eshalomi mentioned London. Ricky, you mentioned drawing a mile around the high street. The Greater London area is approximately 40 miles across from one side to the other, and about 50 miles from up to down. I assume that, drawing on your point, you are saying that cities need to be concentrated areas as opposed to urban sprawls. If we are talking about high streets, we have to be talking about neighbourhood high streets as opposed to large conurbations in the centre; otherwise, people will have to travel.

Professor Burdett: In terms of what is interesting about London, as you know very well, and as those of you who have served this city will understand perfectly, it is a city that has never had a wall, except for the City of London and its Roman wall. It has been contained by a piece of legislation from 1943 or 1945, which is the green belt. It is also a city that, because it did not have a wall, has grown with many town centres, such as Chiswick, Greenwich and Barking.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I would answer your question by saying there is very strong potential for intensification and connection. The statistics are that no one lives more than 200 metres from a high street in London. Therefore, one can build on that with enormous efficiency and impact in terms of reducing the need for long commutes, and therefore affecting the climate change question.

Professor Moreno: I have four questions. First, how do customers come to the high street? If we want to reduce future emissions, we need to consider the globality, not only the high street itself.

Q161 **Bob Blackman:** If I may interrupt, how do they carry the goods that they might purchase? Out-of-town shopping is founded on the basis that people will go to the supermarket once a week and fill up their car with goods that they could never carry on public transport.

Professor Moreno: I have a second question: what are the last-mile logistics for supplying the shops? This is a very important question, because the last-mile logistics are a really big problem. We could use trucks but we prefer using bikes with supporting changes. Last-mile logistics are one of the most important problems. We have another problem with e-commerce, which several people use. The high street is used to deliver the things bought through e-commerce.

How do you use the totality of the square metres with multipurpose functions? We could optimise the use of square metres if we wanted to mutualise, optimise or reduce the CO₂ footprint. We have the possibility to develop multipurpose functions in the high street, to develop one-point shops and to transform supermarkets into temporary art exhibitions. This is one of the experiences of the Covid-19 crisis in Paris. We have supermarkets and we had museums that were closed. We proposed that supermarkets hosted artists in order to have an exhibition. These are new ways of exploring these polymorphic uses of square metres.

The high street is green, has water, has the possibility to be pedestrian, and is connected with local residents in order to develop cultural activities, to attract people and to continue to be in this way. I prefer not to speak about smart technologies for reducing CO₂ emissions because this is very usual. I prefer to highlight how we could transform the uses of the high street in order for it to be more flexible and liveable with a reduction in CO₂ emissions by the users and services.

Chair: I am sure we could have explored most of these issues in far greater depth, but we are always a bit time-limited and it is really helpful that all three professors have been prepared to give so much of their time today to help the Committee in thinking through what are big, challenging issues about how town and city centres have responded to the Covid challenge, what the impact will be in the future and how we can better develop our high streets, towns and cities for future generations as well. Thank you very much indeed for coming this afternoon. Your time and your comments are really appreciated and really helpful to the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Committee.