



Covid-19 Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: The long-term impact of the pandemic on towns and cities

Tuesday 13 July 2021

9.45 am

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Members present: Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (The Chair); Lord Alderdice; Baroness Benjamin; Lord Elder; Baroness Fraser of Craigsmaddie; Lord Hain; Lord Harris of Haringey; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Lord Kamall; Lord Pickles; Baroness Young of Hornsey.

Evidence Session No. 4

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 50 - 65

Witnesses

I: Margaret Davidson, Leader, Highland Council; Carl Smith, Leader, Great Yarmouth Borough Council; Lucille Thompson, Leader, Winchester City Council; Susan Hinchcliffe, Leader, Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

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Examination of witnesses

Margaret Davidson, Carl Smith, Lucille Thompson and Susan Hinchcliffe.

Q50 **The Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the House of Lords Select Committee on the long-term implications of Covid-19. Welcome to all our witnesses this morning. Thank you very much for joining us. As you are aware, we are the Select Committee focused on the longer-term implications of the pandemic. We are looking two to five years out and we really appreciate your help in enabling us to understand more about the implications in your towns and cities.

This is our third or fourth inquiry in the time we have been constituted, which is just over a year. In today's session we are starting to talk to city and town leaders, and we are very interested to understand more. We have talked to people in infrastructure and to planners, property and transport people, but we have not yet talked to city and town leaders, so this will be very important for us today.

We are being broadcast and recorded, so people should keep themselves on mute when they are not speaking. I have eagle eyes, so I will watch, and if you want to speak, please wave at me, raise your hand or make an alarming sound and I will try to come to you. My colleagues and I have questions that I think you will be aware of, so we will make sure that we come to all of them. Please keep answers as brief and to the point as you can. We want to cover a lot of ground today and get to all our questions. Forgive me in advance if I interrupt you to try to keep us moving. I know that my colleagues will be keen to get through everything that we want to talk about.

The only thing for me to re-emphasise—and I realise this is hard, especially for you who have been dealing with such a hideous period—is that we are trying to look at the impact of Covid on the long-term social and economic well-being of the country. We do not have to look at a dissection of what is happening now. We are trying to unpick what would probably have happened anyway versus what the pandemic has hastened or changed and, crucially, what we can do about it. We want to be helpful in building the best possible future for your towns and cities. Please give us the ideas so that we can give them some air and oxygen for you.

I want to kick off with a starter question, which is relatively simple but probably one that gets to the heart of quite a lot of things. I cannot imagine what it must have been like doing some of your jobs over the last year. I am interested to know whether you have even had time and capacity, or whether you plan to have time or capacity, to think about the longer-term 15 to 24-month view. Have you done any thinking already about the longer-term implications? If not, do you have any plans to? If you do not, why do you not have any plans to? It is not meant to be a critical question. We are interested in whether or not you do.

In answering that question, we will go around so that we can introduce our witnesses. I will call on you in this order: Margaret, Lucille, Susan and Carl. Please give me an answer to that question but also briefly say

where you come from. We have seen your evidence, so we know a bit about you, but it would be great to put names to faces.

Margaret Davidson: Thank you for the honour of starting. I have been the leader of the Highland Council for the last five years, so I have seen it before and will see it into the immediate future anyway. We have said that we had plans for our city. They are not where they need to be at all anymore. We have to look to the future, because things have changed. Covid has brought us all the health impacts of everywhere else and now we have very high infection rates, which is very worrying.

However, the world is changing, Covid is changing us, and we need to be ready for that and to be very clear about the issues that we pick up on. We are doing a brand-new city investment plan, attracting investment into city. Crucially, so that we take everyone on the bus, we are working very closely with Skills Development Scotland and everyone to see how we can equalise that. We have lots of very low-paid jobs in the Highlands.

Lucille Thompson: Good morning, everyone. I became leader of Winchester City Council in 2019, so we had a relatively short period before the pandemic hit. As Margaret said, the pandemic has been quite a watershed in where we were and where we are now, but we are very fortunate in that we have started to do some of the early work on refreshing our local plan. In recent months we have been consulting on our strategic issues and priorities document, and we have had a call for sites. It means that because we are developing our local plan at this critical stage we can write in policies that the pandemic has proved we need. For instance, there is more emphasis on open space, ensuring that our homes are built sustainably, as close to zero carbon as possible and in sustainable locations. I think that will be a real help going forward, because we are able to design policies around that.

We have done quite a lot of consultation on a big project we have in the centre of Winchester city itself, the Central Winchester Regeneration scheme. We are at critical point there where we want to use the regeneration to help our high street to recover in the long term by building homes, creating public open space and making it permeable and always with an emphasis on what is good for the environment. We want to build in a green economic recovery and ensure that our building programmes are as close to zero carbon as we can make them and that we have more walking and cycling within the city itself. We declared a climate emergency when we took control of the city council in 2019 and now we see the benefits that we all saw during the lockdown of fewer cars on our street, much better air quality and more people out walking and cycling. We want to build on those for the future.

Susan Hinchcliffe: I am leader of Bradford council and have been since 2016. That includes the great city of Bradford but also the fabulous towns of Keighley, Shipley, Bingley and Ilkley, so we have a bit of everything in Bradford.

On whether we have had time to think about things, we were doing better before the pandemic. We were starting to see income levels increase and unemployment rates go down, but the pandemic has meant that unemployment has almost doubled now for young people and older people, and that is a real concern for us. We have a West Yorkshire economic recovery plan, which is now part of the new mayoral devolution deal for West Yorkshire. We also have a specific Bradford economic recovery plan that we have been working on throughout the pandemic.

We know what we need to do. We have our local plan, like Lucille, that is halfway through, so that has adjusted our thinking a little bit on some of that. We are just about to start a development framework to make sites more user friendly for inward investors.

But generally the same things that needed to happen before the pandemic need to happen now. We need investment in skills and transport, and for me the third thing is always culture. Cultural investment is even more important now in bringing people together, showing ourselves, and people experiencing Bradford district as the great place it is. Culture enables us to do that and it helps with inward investment.

The Chair: Susan, that is a great start. We will come back to all those questions and we have some specific ones about culture, as you may be aware.

Q51 **Lord Pickles:** I have a question about the local plan. When you started on that process pre-pandemic you were likely to see certain trends. Have you seen anything accelerate or happen earlier than you might have anticipated because of the pandemic? Is there anything that was part of the local plan that, post-pandemic, you would not do now? What new things have come about that will make the city different? I will also indulge myself and say that it is always good to hear from Bradford.

Susan Hinchcliffe: It is great to see a predecessor of mine on the call, so thank you. The local plan is a big topic. The main thing is that our housing delivery numbers are down to a third of what they were anticipated to be. How we accelerate housing delivery from now will be a challenge for us, and that needs to be tackled. I do not wish to take up too much time. If you want to talk about high streets, that is a big question and I am happy to talk that, but I could talk for quite a long time on high streets, so apologies.

The Chair: We will come on to that as well, Susan, thank you. Perhaps you can think of those points later. Finally, Carl, thank you.

Carl Smith: Good morning. I have been leader of Great Yarmouth Borough Council since 2019. The council prepared a recovery plan in July 2020 recognising that there was going to be a need to support the economy in the short term but not to lose sight of the need for medium and longer-term plans to ensure that the structural economic issues identified pre-Covid continue to be addressed.

We have split that into three themes: economy—having the right solutions in place to support our economy to recover and adapt either through direct interventions or through business support and advice; community—supporting our communities by building on the social capital generated through this crisis and building existing and new infrastructure to address social issues and recreate pathways to employment and future career opportunities; and organisational—new ways of working as we are today in this virtual meeting.

The council has been delivering against the plan since it was published in June 2020, with Great Yarmouth's Economic Development Committee monitoring progress and outcomes. Grants we awarded during the pandemic totalled £63 million, and 70% of them went towards the tourist industry, which has been the lifeblood of Great Yarmouth. Without that support from government, many of those businesses would have failed. Thankfully, we are now looking at a thriving summer season, with the vast majority of those businesses having survived and looking forward to a good year here at the seaside in Great Yarmouth.

Q52 Lord Pickles: People tend to plan five or seven years ahead. On that planning horizon, are there things that people were thinking of doing that now seem inappropriate? It might be to do with the town centre or the mixture of office space and residential. Has the pandemic changed your thinking? It is a fairly easy question, but maybe the answers are not so easy.

Lucille Thompson: Thank you, Lord Pickles. One of the big differences that we have found is that prior to the pandemic we were concentrating on providing grade A office space within Winchester itself. That has completely gone down the pecking order, because we need to understand how future working will pan out. We still need office space within the town, but do we need large office development? If we do need it, we have space to do it, but we are taking a breather on that because at the moment it is unclear whether people will want to return to offices five days a week or whether there will still be a demand for much more online working. From our point of view, online working is a great sustainable way to work. It is also wonderful to see people face to face, but I suppose I am saying that we cannot predict how working patterns might change. That has been one of the big differences.

Carl Smith: It is nice to see you again, Lord Pickles. I met you a few times when you were in Great Yarmouth with Brandon in his early days as an MP.

Our local plan has just been signed off and we are not looking to make any changes. Housebuilding on greenfield sites here is still buoyant. Our focus on trying to make brownfield sites viable has not changed, but our focus in the town centre has always been to reidentify it to bring in housing on the top floors, bring a university campus into an old building in the town centre, and move the library in there as well. Bringing that footfall in will hopefully create more business to bring it back to life in a completely different, regenerated way.

Thankfully we have the town deal funding and the future high street funding to go along with that. We had the plans in place and just needed the funding. We applied for that funding and got it, so we hope we can now move forward buoyantly through this decade and regenerate our town centre. In fact, our new £6 million market is under construction in the town centre and will be open in March next year, and we have a brand new £26 million leisure centre being built on the seafront, which will be open in the summer of next year. We are looking to health and well-being, education, housing, everything, in Great Yarmouth in our local plan, which has not changed.

Susan Hinchcliffe: On the office space question, the alternative view is that we have limited grade A office space in Bradford, so we are investing in some grade A office space, and that is still valid after the pandemic. Some of the places that have lots and lots of office space will be downsizing, for the very reasons that Lucille talked about, but they need somewhere to downsize to, otherwise we will lose them completely from the district.

It is about getting the most appropriate spaces for them to retain them in the district even if they downsize from their existing sites now. It is not just about attracting new ones but about making sure that we are still appropriate for our existing employers in the district.

Q53 **Lord Pickles:** I will ask a very quick question of Carl, because tourism plays an important part, as it does in Bradford with Haworth and Ilkley and the like. Have you come to a view about visitor accommodation for the numbers and the quality? Does it feel that this period of going for staycations might be a more permanent way of people taking holidays?

Carl Smith: We have a wide variety of accommodation in Great Yarmouth, from big holiday parks, self-catering and touring to four-star hotels, but we also have some issues with selective licensing, especially HMOs that seem to be creeping up, and we are trying to sort them out. We have found that that is an issue when going out during the test and tracing, which we have done a lot of in Great Yarmouth in the pilot scheme with the Department of Health, especially just off our seafront in old guesthouses that have been turned into houses in multiple occupation. We feel that sometimes people are just brought here, dumped and left to their own devices, and we have some issues there.

But as I said, we have a vast array of accommodation for people to come to, and I think that people will look at staycations now, especially for the next few years. We know that the pandemic is not over and we will be promoting Great Yarmouth as a place to come and enjoy your holidays. We have 11 miles of marvellous beaches and so much for people to come and see: heritage, culture, and we are right on the Norfolk Broads. We have everything to offer people to come to Great Yarmouth. All seaside towns, and inland ones—we have some marvellous cities—are great places to visit. We should be pushing it forward that Great Britain is the place to visit wherever you are.

The Chair: Margaret, do you want to add something?

Margaret Davidson: What are we not doing that we were doing before the pandemic? The only comments I can relate to are about office buildings. We had rather too many big glass palaces on the outskirts of the city and they will not be a priority for us anymore unless we can find new clients. We are trying to attract more in the life sciences sector to come to Inverness, which has a really thriving industry around the university at the moment. For us it is about renewing our efforts, and we have huge opportunities if we can grasp them.

The focus for us right now is very much on reviewing our investment, but we also have huge difficulties. We have lost in the region of £40 million or £50 million a year of EU money, and we have to be very clear that we can replace that with some of the shared prosperity fund. This is of lifeblood importance to the Highlands, and at the moment the metrics that have been used have served us poorly. They do not recognise the sparsity of population we have in some places. We have a thriving city, but we have areas of the Highlands that will lose 25% of their population over the next 20 years unless we do something dramatic to help them thrive.

It is about renewal and growth. Our local plan is really important and it is right to concentrate on that. For us, there is an extra emphasis on city centre first to prevent us hollowing out our city and people sticking to the edges. Local neighbourhoods, yes, but city centre first.

The Chair: Thank you. I will not take up too much more time, but I want to make sure that we have captured your thoughts on what the pandemic has changed in your towns. You have talked a bit about the way you have been thinking about the planning and some of the ideas that you have. Less about the ideas for the future, I am interested to know what specifically you think the pandemic has changed as opposed to the trends that were already in motion or which the pandemic has sped up. I want to make sure that we have captured those thoughts.

Susan Hinchcliffe: One thing I did not mention was people's appetite for green space. There has been an accelerated and invigorated call from the public for more green space everywhere. We have had to put more money into the maintenance of paths and everybody has found their local area. People are looking for more urban parks, and more investment in parks.

The Chair: Would anybody else like to add anything that they feel has changed or changed course?

Lucille Thompson: I echo what Susan has just said. There is a real emphasis on what the council is doing to provide more open space, and we are building that into any plan and housing development that we are about to embark on. But the real change for us is that we used to be very much a commuter town into London, and we used to see a huge exodus of our residents catching the train from Winchester going up to jobs in

London. Of course, that has completely finished now, and while there might be a bit more of a recovery in that, we do not know what form that will take. That is another huge change for us.

Secondly, the drive to go online has pushed the digital revolution forward in leaps and bounds. We as a council were looking at putting a lot of our services online, but it has pushed us to do that and to roll it out far more quickly than perhaps we would have done without the pandemic. Our retailers in the high street and our businesses have been forced to look at their business models and develop new ways of working. One of them, of course, has been the offer of the online shop, which I think has been almost a revelation for some of them.

Susan Hinchcliffe: One negative thing—we have been talking about positive change—is that health inequalities have been massive. There is much greater focus now, regionally and locally, on how we grapple with some of those health inequalities. Our black, Asian, minority ethnic communities have been worse affected than other communities, and we are actively trying to address that, but it is a huge challenge. It was already there, but the pandemic has brought it out much more to the fore, I think nationally as well, but it cannot be ignored now.

The Chair: Thank you. Yes, that is something we have heard again and again in these inquiries.

Margaret Davidson: The biggest and immediate impact if you walk into our city at the moment is that the footfall around the city is 60% of what it was, and it will take some years to return to where it was. We need to change what is going on in our city. At the moment, we have bought commercial spaces and we are turning them into flats. We are trying to rebuild a city centre community that had been blocked out for many years. We are trying to build a new city centre community that will use the facilities. There will be increased food offers right around the place.

I very much relate to what, I think, Lucille said about the culture sector and how important that is. Everyone is missing it. That is why we have a night-time economy in the Highlands. People come into the cinemas, the shows, the restaurants and, increasingly, to our traditional music scene, which was thriving and is now thinking, "Are we going to survive?" We need to invest in that to encourage people to come back and to spend some of their cash in the city.

Green space is not short in the Highlands and we have attracted a lot of people to live up here. They want to live in the home-working, green space environment, as I do—I can look out at Loch Ness from here—but that has accelerated the disparity between those on low wages who cannot afford a mortgage and those who come in who can afford an expense account. House prices here have started to rocket and we have a real difficulty with house prices. All this is against the backdrop of health and education inequalities that have increased over the pandemic, and we must never forget them. We have to concentrate on them or the foundations will not be in.

Q54 **Baroness Benjamin:** I was interested that none of you mentioned homelessness. We know that homelessness was a huge problem before the pandemic and that it has been exacerbated even further during it. What plans do you have to deal with homelessness? What sort of priority are you giving that problem? Carl, you talked about people being dumped in your area. Is that something that you are dealing with? I am interested to hear from Margaret and Susan about how you are dealing with this.

Carl Smith: At the start of the pandemic we knew that we had about 17 people rough sleeping. During the pandemic it rose to about 78, and we managed to get all of them into accommodation through Everyone In. We found that some people had been sleeping on someone's sofa, and once the pandemic started that family decided they did not want them anymore. We would not have classed them as homeless but transient, and we managed to find accommodation for all of them.

We have a problem with accommodation in Great Yarmouth. The quality of housing links closely with health and well-being and we are working closely with our CCG on a prevention agenda. The big thing is absent landlords and a lack of visibility. We are buying up houses to try to raise the standards of the private rented sector market, but we need more help because the cost of doing this is greater than the return.

We have a housing deal paper now that we are working through to do this. We have an estate right in the middle of the town, only a stone's throw from where I am sitting, that is badly in need of regeneration for houses. There is lots of antisocial behaviour around there. We have the deal, but we need to get the funding for that. There is such a negative value on the land, which is the problem that a lot of councils have. We have the space, but the land value is still negative for developers. We are working with Homes England and we have a housing strategy to try to move forward.

We need to give people aspirations, good-quality housing, good education, good jobs, so that we can keep the skill sectors in our towns. We have a lot to offer here with offshore wind. It is a massive project and we are situated ideally for that with our deep-water harbour. We want good-quality housing, as I said, and we are working with our partners to make sure that we deliver on that.

At the last count I believe we had about nine people rough sleeping on our streets, so we have done really well but we are continuing to try to deal with that. We are in the process of building 30 one-bedroom apartments. We have mobile units to move them forward, and then we can put them into that housing and try to get them into jobs. That is important: working with them and with the partners.

The Chair: I ask witnesses to keep their answers to supplementary questions very brief. As I said, we want to cover a lot of areas. Thank you very much for trying to clarify points quickly.

Baroness Benjamin: Susan, can you tell us how you are dealing with

homelessness?

Susan Hinchcliffe: Even before the pandemic we had doubled our investment in Housing First, which is about dealing with rough sleeping and not just getting people a home but wrapping support around them to keep them in sustained accommodation, because that is the hardest thing to do. These are essentially very vulnerable people, and the real challenge is how to help them to sustain a tenancy over time, because they need a lot of social care support.

Given that there have been a lot of cutbacks in public services over the years, that is the most challenging thing to do. There are some very vulnerable people in our society who will need support, and we have to be able to invest in them to get them on the right path again. I think that will be the challenge for all councils. Housing First is a very good model, and I recommend it.

Margaret Davidson: With us it is similar but different. We have very few roofless people. We have very good housing support officers who find them and get them into temporary accommodation, although sometimes their lifestyle is their own worst enemy, as all of us know. I very much relate to the need for social care support. After 10 years of austerity, that is very difficult to sustain. We are like hamsters on a wheel up here. We cannot get the houses built fast enough.

The need is huge, our waiting list is long, and people stay too long in temporary accommodation. We have to persuade the Scottish Government to keep up their investment in housing and for us to deliver as fast as we can, and we really are. We are known as good deliverers. However, at the same time our biggest problem, which sounds silly in the Highlands, is land availability. A lot of the land around the city that is zoned for housing is sitting on balance sheets and is not available for the council to get into to do the social building alongside the open market stuff.

Lucille Thompson: In Winchester we have a very strong new-build programme of council housing and we are providing all sorts of tenure: social rent, submarket rent and shared ownership. Land is incredibly expensive. We are only an hour away on the train from London, so you can appreciate that. We manage over 5,000 of our own properties, which we are very pleased to do. We have a number of agencies that help with rough sleeping and the homeless. One is a night shelter that we are very pleased to have in the city itself. We also work with a charity called Trinity, which has a day centre but has recently opened a block of accommodation to provide the help and support that the most vulnerable need. People are moving into those units right now.

Echoing what the other council leaders have said, the Everyone In programme was brilliant. I think we all welcomed that and we were able to get everybody off the streets with that. Going forward, we need financial and other support to be able to help these individuals, because homelessness is a very complex issue that involves a number of different

authorities. At the moment, we are seeing everybody's budgets being cut, and it is likely that the people who need the most help will fall through the cracks.

The Chair: Sorry, Lucille, I will have to draw this to a close. We are not even out of question 1 and we have eight questions we want to get through. I will ask Baroness Jay to come in and ask a very brief supplementary, maybe directed to one person. That would be fantastic. Thank you.

Q55 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** I was surprised at the beginning that in reply to the specific question about what had changed vis-à-vis Covid no one mentioned health, and then Susan mentioned it. You might want to come back to this question later, and I am quite happy to park it, but now that the local authorities have so much more responsibility, particularly for liaison on public health programmes, how has that changed with the pandemic? Susan, could you respond, specifically because you raised the point particularly about health inequalities? I am interested in the new responsibilities that local authorities have for public health liaison with the health authorities.

Susan Hinchcliffe: I am so glad that public health was put into local authorities. I do not know how we would have managed if it was apart from us during this difficult time. I think it was a really good move by government to put us together. We have absolutely relied on our director of public health over the last 18 months. I have had daily meetings with her to make sure that we are doing the right thing, asking for the right health advice and giving out the right messages. I think that has been really beneficial.

If you look at the country, you can see that the areas that are most disadvantaged have suffered most with high infection rates for the longest time. It gives us, local and national government, more imperative to focus on things like childhood obesity and diabetes—all the things that have impacted on the pandemic but that also impact on people's life chances and lifespans normally. I think we all have a real imperative to tackle that now. It is the driving force that we, and every agency, have in Bradford. We are all on the health and well-being board, doing what we can in our authorities to tackle that and to make a real shift on that. If everybody is prosperous and leads a healthy life, that is great.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I think you have frozen, Susan. Have you finished speaking? That is okay. In a bizarre way, I think what I am asking you is whether the pandemic has produced a positive initiative.

Q56 **Lord Kamall:** I know that some of you have already touched on this. Many of you will have local plans, some ratified, some not, and some of you talked about a recovery plan. Can you tell me a bit about your local plan? You do not have to go through it in detail, but, specifically, what about the pandemic has changed your thinking on the local plan? What assumptions have been challenged?

Probably more specifically—I think it was Lucille who touched on this—

given that some people are predicting a long-term trend for remote working, how do you expect that to feed into any changes in your local plan, or do you think that your local plan already takes account of that? Whoever wants to come in, please raise your hand electronically or wave at me.

Carl Smith: Very little has changed for us. The town centre was already suffering from lack of footfall, and structural changes were needed to improve the environment and transport hubs and to promote green infrastructure, as well as to build strong skills and create jobs. We were already working closely with our communities and recognised the importance of the arts, culture and heritage as being intrinsically linked to our economic recovery and wider well-being. The only change is perhaps the greater emphasis on health and well-being, in particular for promoting healthier lifestyles. As I mentioned earlier, we have a £26 million investment in a new health and fitness centre on the seafront, recognising the need for affordable, accessible facilities for local people.

Lord Kamall: Carl, sorry, can I stop you there? You had that anyway, did you not? Has anything changed?

Carl Smith: Not really. We already had the plans in place, so we are just moving on with our agenda. We have the funding now to move forward with that. That is the big thing that has changed, really: the funding that has come through from the town deal fund and the future high street fund, and being able to move forward with all the shovel-ready plans. We are also moving forward with an offshore maintenance campus, which we have just started work on, which will bring 600 jobs into the town through offshore wind and green energy. That is another important way forward. We are accelerating our agenda, but plans really have not changed.

Lord Kamall: Thank you. Margaret, could you talk about your local plan? Has there been any impact from what has happened in the last 15 months on your thinking about the local plan? Perhaps you can also touch on the issue of remote working.

Margaret Davidson: We were two-thirds of the way through what we call the Inner Moray Firth local development plan, and along came the pandemic. We are now taking a different approach to a lot of it. It is going out shortly for another round of public consultation, but it will very clearly reinforce city centre first and look for housebuilding and accommodation in the city centre so that we rebuild the city centre.

We are also looking in the plan at the suburbs and the surrounding villages, of which we have many. We need to have much more place planning, as we are calling it up here. We need to ensure that there is a neighbourhood there for people and that we are not just building house after house after house, which, I will be perfectly honest, is what we have done for the last 10 years. There are some villages where there is no shop but they are getting another 350 houses, and we cannot go on like

that. We need to be acutely aware of that and build community where we are building houses.

At the same time, we are suffering from a lack of availability of land, so we need some new policies—I suspect they will have to be at Scottish Government level—on freeing up some of this land, whether that is via a land tax or looking at ways of persuading developers to free up some of their land for development. Compulsory purchase is not the option that anybody chooses. It takes too long, it is hugely complex, and you fall at the last hurdle if you are not careful.

There is quite a lot of change coming in our local plan, plus it had nowhere near enough about climate change in it. Everything we do has to have climate change at its heart, and we have to be far more thoughtful about what we are doing.

Lord Kamall: I know that climate change and other issues are important, but I will come to Susan and Lucille and ask specifically about their local plans. The question is how developed they were, but that is not really the question I am asking. It is really about what has changed over the last 15 months that has made you go back to the local plan and say, “We have to change this”? Please touch on whether remote working has had any input into your changes.

Susan Hinchcliffe: The biggest driver behind what goes into our local plan is government policy, and that has changed quite a bit over the last few years. We had to pause ours for a year while one of the MPs called it in. Nothing changed on it, but we still had to have it paused. Government is a massive influence on our local plan regardless of what our local need is. A lot of the things that we were considering have to be accelerated now. Retail had already started to decline, and we need to have a response to that. We do have a response to that, and I am sure there will be an opportunity to go into that later.

Going back to my point about green space, we are accelerating our strategy for 15-minute neighbourhoods so that there is something around you wherever you are and you have a community, a neighbourhood. That was not as much of a focus before the pandemic as it is now. It is important to make sure that people have easily accessible green space, transport, culture—everything they need within a 15-minute journey at the time from where they are. I point you to Saltaire, which is a Victorian place that is very sustainable. It has exactly that: it has a 15-minute neighbourhood and it is all sustainable and green. We sometimes need to go back to some of the lessons of the past to build sustainable places of the future.

Lord Kamall: Thank you, Susan. Lucille, I know you touched on the local plan and remote working. Can you elaborate on that a bit? What specifically in the last 15 months has caused you to change your plan, and what changes are you suggesting or thinking about?

Lucille Thompson: As I said at the very beginning, we are at a critical phase. We are in the process of producing and updating our local plan, so from that point of view the pandemic came at the right moment. Things that have changed are the residents' wish to have access to open space, and not just any old open space like a cruddy old pavement or path to walk down, but high-quality open spaces. We will be building the need for that into our local plan. Any development that takes place has to have good open space that is clearly accessible to everybody.

We like the idea of the 15, 20-minute neighbourhood. That is absolutely fine for those living in the city itself, but it is more of a challenge when you get out to the rural areas where, as other people have mentioned, there is sometimes not even a shop. That is why our local plan will concentrate on more sustainable living. Any development has to be sustainable and there have to be amenities around or amenities have to be built within that development. Those are the things that have really changed, as has the public's perception. People have enjoyed being out during lockdown and using the open space and going to areas which perhaps they had not explored before. They want to see those improved and they recognise the need for that.

It is crucial that when we are developing houses, for instance, there is a space for online working and it is not just somebody's bedroom. That is difficult to achieve, but going forward I think that is probably what we are all going to need.

Q57 **Baroness Young of Hornsey:** Welcome to our witnesses. I want to drill down into some of the issues that have already been raised. Some of you have talked in a bit of detail about things such as green spaces, but I am interested to hear about the impact that the last 15 months has had on your thinking and planning for four different areas: increasing access to green spaces for residents; providing more walking and cycling infrastructure; creating more community facilities; and, an area that some of you have mentioned, creating the 20 or 15-minute neighbourhoods.

Margaret, what does the idea of creating 20-minute neighbourhoods mean in the context of where you are in the Highlands? In particular, how feasible is that, and has that entered into your thinking? Also, in light of some of your earlier comments about housebuilding and so on, what in your thinking on creating more community facilities has changed as a result of what has happened in the last 15 months?

Margaret Davidson: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this again. What I have seen and found to be most successful in the Highlands is when communities take control of their green spaces. I am privileged to live in a village where we purchased our forest, over 2,000 acres of it, and there are only 150 of us in the village. We purchased it from the Forestry Commission 20 years ago and it has been a massive success, it really has. It has been unbelievable. Wherever I have seen communities take over land or assets I have seen success, albeit different degrees of it, but I have not seen a failure. There is an inherent

commitment in communities to improve things for their children and for the next generations after that, and they really do. I think it is a key issue.

We are working with developers to talk about how they can transfer this to communities as well as how they can help to sustain it. I do not want communities trying from year to year to raise money to pay someone to do the maintenance in a certain area. We are talking to them about sustainable community-owned assets, and I think that is where we need to go, but we need to make it easy for people. I want everyone who takes an asset from the council to be interviewed and to be asked, "How was it for you?" The usual answer is, "Too much bureaucracy and the legal department held us up for nine months". I hear that too often, and we need to deal with that to make it simpler for people to do it and to share the success stories.

The other thing that we have not invested in well enough is our long-distance walkways. The Highlands is threaded through with them and we have just kept them going. They are solid gold threads, and if we get it right and promote this to people we can get our tourism industry back off its knees. Also, the number of local people who will do it as a life experience is huge. We need to change our focus on community outdoor spaces.

Baroness Young of Hornsey: What about other kinds of community facilities? Has your thinking developed on that as a result of the last 15 months or so?

Margaret Davidson: It has. We are looking to almost retrofit some developments into some of the villages where we have just been building houses. There is no doubt about it, but it is quite difficult to attract people to run a shop that will never pay, and we need to think about that. Community facilities have usually done well. People are good at village halls and there has been some community investment, but good solid recreational facilities need investment. If you understand the capital programme that we have with 202 schools sitting there needing maintenance, you will see that it is very difficult to invest in all-weather pitches, which is what you need on the west coast. We need some focus on that.

We need will from the UK and Scottish Governments to make it easier to access capital and to look at the loan repayments. We have loads of people offering us money. They want to invest; it is not an issue. But the loan repayments will cripple us unless we find better ways of dealing with this. We have some macroeconomic problems that we have not cracked by any means.

Baroness Young of Hornsey: Thank you very much. Susan, you mentioned some of the inequalities, particularly in health and in the different communities within Bradford, which is a very diverse area. How does this sit with thinking, for example, about increasing access to the green spaces that you have identified? How does it work in relation to the

inequalities that emerge perhaps around walking and cycling? What thoughts have you had as a result of the pandemic about how you address some of these inequalities in provision?

Susan Hinchcliffe: It is a big question, but I will keep my answer to the public space that you talked about. We have got on with building new play areas. For example, two parks have opened in inner city areas recently and they are absolutely rammed with children all the time. It shows the absolute need for that and it is gratifying to see. Things like school streets have started. It may be a bit bolder to be closing off streets at pick-up and drop-off times for schools so that parents have to park further away and walk to the school for the last bit and walk their children away from it. Schools have loads and loads of cars around them when it is kicking-out time. That is not good for their health with the fumes—

Baroness Young of Hornsey: Sorry to interrupt you, but I just want to clarify something. Were the plans for the closed streets and the playgrounds already set in motion before the pandemic, or is that something that you have come to as a result of it?

Susan Hinchcliffe: We were thinking about it. We probably would not have been bold enough to do it before the pandemic, but I think that people now have a much greater appreciation that walking, pedestrianisation, is healthier for people than having to take your car right to the gate all the time.

You are right: we did start some things before, like the transforming cities programme. It is about taking out some major roads in the city centre and turning those into parks. It sends out the message that green space and pedestrians will probably be of more significance to people in the future than making sure that the car can go everywhere. I have to say that it is not the most popular thing with everybody. We have cycle lanes now in some major roads that people do not like, and they sit there counting how many cycles they see on that road every day. But you have to put the infrastructure in to give people the confidence on a bike and to start using it. It is a real shift in mode that we are trying to promote, but it is painful for some people.

We also have a clean air zone coming into Bradford. It is a government directive that we have to do that, but that is also quite a shift in thinking. We are changing as a society, and government as a leader and any politician will find that difficult with the electorate going forward, but we will be judged in 20, 30 years' time on whether or not we did the right thing, so we are trying to do the right thing.

Baroness Young of Hornsey: I think you referred earlier to the 15 or 20-minute neighbourhood. Was that set up before and, if so, have you modified the way you have been thinking about that as a result of what has been happening?

Susan Hinchcliffe: It is not something that I talked about before the pandemic, but I am talking about it now. It has been identified as being more important, so we are investing more in that in our local plan now. Yes, I suppose it is post-pandemic.

Baroness Young of Hornsey: Thank you very much. I will ask Lucille to come in and talk about some of the areas that I have mentioned, particularly the 20-minute neighbourhoods and the walking and cycling infrastructure.

Lucille Thompson: Thank you. Picking up a point that Susan has just made, in local government it is difficult to start closing roads and asking people not to drive their cars into the centre of town. We have been pushing that very strongly. Of course, we are not a highways authority. We have to work with the county council on this, and it has been running a number of pilot schemes. We have created a pedestrian-only space in an area called The Square in Winchester. It has lots of cafes. They have been able to put tables and chairs outside when the restrictions allowed them to, and that has been a huge success. But asking people not to drive through the centre of town is quite difficult. We now have a body of residents who are in favour of these measures, and it is a question of looking to those members of the public to come forward and say, "Yes, this is a good idea. We need cleaner air and we need to carry on with these measures".

On walking and cycling, we very much want to promote this in the local plan, and in any housing development. We opened one of our affordable housing schemes only last week in an area called Kings Worthy, which is a village a couple of miles outside Winchester, and we are using our CIL—community infrastructure levy—money to provide a fantastic cycle and walking path, which will link the development to the centre of that village and the amenities, the school, the scout hut and all that.

Certainly that is all part of promoting the idea of a 15 or 20-minute neighbourhood. We are very keen for that to be a key element of our local plan. We are at a stage in our local plan where we could put all these things in. Yes, the 15 or 20-minute city was something that we were talking about pre-pandemic, but because of what has happened during the pandemic it has become more evident that we can do this, and we need to do it for the sustainability of our communities.

Baroness Young of Hornsey: Carl, if you have any comments on any of those areas, I would be interested to hear what you have to say, particularly on health, which I think you mentioned earlier as being one of the issues, such as adopting healthy lifestyles. What on this list that you have thought about could help you to do that?

Carl Smith: We have already delivered a cycling and walking strategy over the last 12 to 18 months, and we are also part of the Government's e-scooter trial with Ginger, which we are currently using around the town. We are looking to create more green corridors alongside new public realm, and this is all being delivered through the town deal fund

development. We have already looked at that and have delivered. Even here at the council, we have replaced vans with cycles for people to use and go about in. I know the marshals use them, and our environmental officers use them, so we are looking at ways in which we can develop that.

We may be lucky in that we are a small borough and it is not far from one end to the other, mileage-wise—maybe 15 miles from top to bottom—so it is easier to get around than it may be for some of my colleagues on the call today, especially those living up in the Highlands of Scotland, which obviously puts more pressure on them. We are working with our neighbourhoods and our parish councils. We have all that in place, and creating that healthy lifestyle is important for us in Great Yarmouth.

Q58 Lord Harris of Haringey: This has been interesting and very helpful. Several of you have talked about creating car-free spaces and creating extra green space, and you have talked about the changes that will happen partly because jobs have moved but also because people's shopping habits have changed. There is a danger, in my experience, that you might end up with zones that are essentially dead at certain times of night and sometimes day, which raises safety issues, security issues, concerns, nervousness, and so on. I would be interested to know how you intend to respond to that and how to avoid that in the future.

Carl Smith: In our town centre we are bringing in housing and a university campus, which will bring students in, and the library has been moved in there, making that community hub. We are also investing heavily in CCTV. We have a new CCTV system going in for security. We are trying to tick all the boxes to make sure that we can cover everything—employment, housing, education—and bring it all into the town centre, which then will increase footfall, we think by maybe 70%.

Hopefully that will then bring more shops into the town centre, whether they are major chains or small independents, which we work with in the town next to Great Yarmouth, which is Gorleston, which is part of the borough. There are lots of independent little shops along there that have done well working remotely or selling remotely during the pandemic and are now opening up and continuing to trade successfully.

Margaret Davidson: Carl just said it. It is about making these places a hub, taking local control of them if you can, and keeping them alive into the evenings, whether that is through fitness, leisure activities and other entertainments, or just communities using the space for whatever they want to do, and I am always astonished at what people want to do.

It is about taking control of them and not letting them die, not letting them close their doors at 5.30 pm and just becoming places that kids use as a skate park and then it just accelerates away from that. It is about people having active local involvement in what is going on in their own communities and trying to take control of that. It is also about making other things part of the same thing. Maybe if you have a good village hall

or community centre, part of it can be let to someone to make a commercial enterprise so that the whole thing is still working for more hours a day than the nine to five. It is about moving sideways, and getting people to take control.

Susan Hinchcliffe: I agree with colleagues. We are investing much more in leisure. For example, we have a 4,000-seat live music venue opening next year. In housing, we have a site that we have relieved the market of—we have moved the market further into the city centre—and we will build housing on that as well. The more people coming in, the more they can self-police the space. We are having a live conversation, because obviously we are closing more roads off and we need to make sure that they are safe places where people want to go. That is a valid question.

Strong urban design and parks design are important. We have one city park out here. We have a huge urban space, where we closed the road off many years ago, and it is a place where everybody in Bradford comes together when the fountains are on. It becomes a massive paddling pool where all sectors of the community come together. Water and green space can make a huge difference, but you have to know what you are doing. It is quite a specialist skill.

But you are absolutely right: you cannot just close it off and expect it to be successful. It will not be.

Lucille Thompson: We have opened a brand-new leisure centre in the last month and it is becoming a great community hub. It is huge improvement on our previous one, which was very tired.

It is all about building in a mix. In central Winchester, which I talked about earlier, when we get round to building there will be a mixture of homes. Yes, there will be some retail, but there will also be open space and there will be performance space—areas where the community can get together or events can take place. It is all about building that into city centres which, if shops close, could otherwise be dead. In Winchester, we have a strong food and beverage sector. A lot of it has already come back, and we are hoping that we can build on that.

It is about creating that mix, so that you have people living there and obviously using the open spaces and the event space, and visiting the shops and restaurants when they are open, too.

Q59 **Baroness Fraser of Cragmaddie:** I have the lovely blue-sky question. You have all talked about your plans, and you have talked about the impact that funding or political decisions might have on those plans. You have also all talked about building leisure centres or whatever it is. I want you to blue-sky think and give us an idea of what your high street will look like in two to five years' time if everything works the way you want it to work.

You all come from very different towns and cities, which is wonderful. I will start with you, Susan, because you have already confessed that you could talk about high streets for a long time, which is lovely. You have

also talked about there being a difference between, for example, Bradford and Ilkley. How do you see the high streets there? How would you like them to look in two to five years' time?

Susan Hinchcliffe: High streets are an important barometer of how people feel about their lives. If the high street looks prosperous, they feel okay about the place. If it does not, it is like an indictment of where and how they live their life. Therefore, we all have a duty to do our best by our high streets.

How would I like it to look? We are investing a lot in leisure and bringing the markets down to the city centre, with more housing, a live music venue, one city park, office space, and transport. Transport is a key thing for us. Bradford is the biggest city in the country that is not on a main train line. Therefore, we have been campaigning for some time to get us a stop as part of the new northern powerhouse rail. If you cut off a big city like Bradford, which has 537,000 people in the whole district, that is not healthy for any of us, so we want to be better connected to our neighbours.

I would like us to be easily accessible and well-connected with our neighbours. I want to see young people finding this to be a space where they can be and can enjoy themselves, so a lively space. I want to make sure that it is a cultural hub where everybody feels they can come and get something to furnish and sustain their cultural existence. I want them to be places where people come together, like the massive fountains I mentioned that we have outside where people congregate every weekend with their children.

That is indicative of how I would like all our town and city centres to be: places where everybody feels they can come, places where cohesion happens, places where everybody feels that they own part of it and therefore speak positively about it to other people. Is that good enough for blue-sky thinking?

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: That is lovely. I want to come and live in that place.

Susan Hinchcliffe: I am creating that place.

Q60 **Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie:** My supplementary is this. What differences do you see between Bradford and the smaller towns like Ilkley, for example? What will their high streets look like compared to Bradford's high street?

Susan Hinchcliffe: Ilkley is a very successful town. Going back to Saltaire, that has lots of things that you would want in a sustainable place. It has good parkland. It is right on the edge of the moors. It has a river running through it. It has beautiful walkways. It has great small shops—nothing too enormous, so more affordable—great public rail and an affluent community that likes to spend time there, and it is a tourist destination. People spend money there.

Ilkley is quite a successful place. I would not want to put a massive grade A office block in the middle of it, for example, because that would spoil it. It is just about evolving Ilkley rather than completely reinventing it, because it does not need reinventing. The council bought a shopping centre development there, right next to the car park that we own, just to make sure that in the future we have some control over that place so that people cannot come in and spoil it. But it is a very successful place already. A lot of it is listed, and I would not envisage spoiling that at all. The classic nature is part of its charm and its tourist attraction.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Carl, you mentioned the importance of tourism to Great Yarmouth. I pose the same question to you, but ask you also to think about retail. I think you mentioned earlier the difference between Yarmouth and Gorleston, and between chains and maybe independent retail. In your blue-sky thinking, how do you see the high street in those different areas in your area?

Carl Smith: In the town centre is our historic marketplace, which we are now transforming with the town deal fund and the future high street fund. We are building a new covered £4.6 million market there, which will open soon but we want to bring that into a hub.

It is important that whatever schemes you do, wherever you are in the country, you take your residents along with you. Do not just think that you have to do something. We recently did a community consultation. We got an incredible 26,000 responses, and an above-average 13% of respondents came from the younger people in the town. They supported our year-round economic vitality and community well-being plan, which was the really big thing that came out of that survey. We were pleased that they found time to support us.

There is also our visitor thing. Today we have been awarded £10 million from the national Heritage Horizon Awards for our iconic greenhouse, as we call it, in our winter gardens on our seafront, which we are very pleased about because we can now transform that amenity and bring it back into our visitor economy.

We see the two towns as completely different. Gorleston residents do not want to become like what they call "tacky Great Yarmouth". They see Great Yarmouth as the seaside resort and Gorleston as the more genteel. We have a beautiful beach in Gorleston; it was featured in Danny Boyle's film "Yesterday". It has lots of independent little shops, a marvellous beach, a beautiful seafront and a clifftop area that people can walk along. Then there is Great Yarmouth that has all the tourist attractions to bring people in.

It is important you take your communities with you, as we have done, and engage with the communities to make sure that they understand where we are going. It is quite easy to say that we will spend £10 million on something, but unless you get the community focused and involved at the start, it is harder to bring them along later. We have had these plans in place now for years and we are now starting to deliver on them.

Thankfully, the responses we are getting from our residents has been absolutely fantastic.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Do we take it from that that if you get your £10 million, Great Yarmouth will be lovely and Gorleston does not need anything fixed? Is your dream for Gorleston to be as it is?

Carl Smith: No, we will now go out to consultation with the residents of Gorleston to see what they want for Gorleston so that we can bring them forward as well. We do not neglect anywhere. We have Hemsby just up the road, another vibrant seaside resort. A private independent firm there, Richardson's, has invested £4 million in its holiday resort. The chief executive and I visited there not so long ago to see the fabulous transformation there, with all the lodges that Richardson's has put in for visitors.

We have a wide spectrum. We consult with all our residents right across the board, and that is important; we consult, see what they want, and then move forward.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Margaret, I will come to you, because obviously Inverness is different again from either Bradford or Great Yarmouth, or even Winchester. I note that you have already mentioned city centre first and rebuilding the night-time economy and the city centre community. Getting away from the plans that are currently in place, how do you want Inverness to be? What does it look like in two to five years' time, in your dreams?

Margaret Davidson: In my dreams—and I do have them; I have them when I go in and have a look at what is happening now—we will all have a lot of commonality happening right through the country. There are certain moves that are in the spirit of the nation now from the top to the bottom. Remember: we are at the end of just about every supply chain. I think there will be more people living in our cities and more people eating and drinking in our cities. We will recreate the night-time economy. However, I will talk to you about the things that worry me.

Inverness will come back. It will take longer than we think, and it will take considerable investment, but I do not want to have the city centre of Inverness thriving but some of the other parts of the city not thriving. We have far too high drug use here in the Highlands. Scotland has the highest suicide rates in Europe. This is not something to commend. We have to face up to it, and we have to do what we can to take people with us and to decrease the inequalities in our communities, which are still there and have been accentuated by the pandemic.

I worry for places like Wick where they are losing population, where parents send their children away because they do not believe they have the opportunity to live and work if they are to make a success of themselves. We have to turn that around, and we have to give huge concentration to doing that, which brings me back to where I always start: if we lose all our European money—we were a transitional region—

and we do not get our share of the shared prosperity fund, which worries me enormously, we will go backwards, not forwards, and I will look with envy at some of the other cities down in England.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Lucille, I will come to you down in leafy Hampshire. You have spoken a lot about not concentrating on grade A office space, for example, and the change from commuters leaving Winchester and going up to London and how that might impact on Winchester. I am interested in the difference between the major town or city and the villages around it. Margaret has just mentioned Wick, which is in huge contrast to Inverness. From your perspective in Winchester, what does the high street look like in two to five years' time in your dreams?

Lucille Thompson: Following on from Margaret, we have a very different scene down here. As I have mentioned, Winchester is a very affluent area on the whole, although we have pockets of deprivation and certainly health inequalities, which we are trying to address. But we also have our market towns out in the district. They all have their own individual characters. A lot of them have historic and listed centres where independent shops thrive. I would love them to have adequate transport links. We are not the transport authority, the county is, but the market towns need good public transport links to get out and be able to visit other market towns, or even come into Winchester. That would be one of my dreams: that they all had a good bus service and that they could hop on a bus and get their children to school or whatever.

In Winchester, we have already produced a high street priorities plan, so we are looking at what will happen in the next year, which also involves the market towns. But we have a strong cultural offer here, too. We have the cathedral, the historic high street, the Great Hall at the top of the high street, and we need to build on this.

I would hope that in five years' time we will have some great housing, which we have provided, and affordable housing, particularly for the younger sections of our society, because we tend to lose all the youngsters. Even though we have three universities here on our doorstep, the vast majority of youngsters go off because it is an unaffordable place for them to live and to find somewhere either to rent or to buy. It is impossible, so they all disappear, but they tend to come back in their late 30s and settle and have their children. We have great schools and a great offer.

I would like to see the high street continuing its vibrancy. I hope that the night-time economy will come back. I hope that we are able to redevelop the bit that needs it. We have been talking about it for the last 20 years and we need to get on with it. We need to create a younger vibe in the town to attract younger people in, because that is the future. Hopefully they will be able to live, work and play within the city centre, and be able to get on a bus and visit the market towns too, which have a different offer. They are all lovely market towns to visit and have great

independent shops and things to see. That is what I would hope for our future.

Q61 **Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie:** I just want to pick up on that. Some of the evidence we have already seen seems to say that smaller towns and villages with independent retail are weathering the storm better than city centres with chains. Nobody has dug into that, and I wonder whether that relates to something Susan mentioned earlier about high streets. We want high streets to look prosperous, so how do high streets look prosperous?

Lucille Thompson: It is all about not having boarded-up shops. It is about putting something else in those spaces. In Winchester, we have been fortunate. Even during the pandemic, one or two independents set up, and we had a general store that sold fruit and veg and did takeaway coffees. We have also seen a number of other independent businesses move in, but we have lost Debenhams and Laura Ashley and a number of other high street staples. The Laura Ashley store has been relet; we have a new shop in there. It is all about new businesses coming in or doing something else with those empty shops so that they do not look unkempt.

Susan Hinchcliffe: Property is a big issue. In anything to do with retail, property is a problem. Core cities have high rents and rates, and smaller towns have lower rents and lower rates, although it is still a considerable amount for them. It is so much easier now to set up a business online than it is to have bricks and mortar. It is so much cheaper.

I have been grappling for years with trying to get the property industry to be part of a solution. That may already have happened, but there probably needs to be a write-down in the property industry nationally, because their assets are valued too highly. Owners do not want to bring down their rents, because it devalues their assets, which also impacts on our pension liabilities in terms of pension pots, and so on.

Property values are a major national issue that I know we have all tried to grapple with over the years; different agencies have tried, and I have tried, in different guises, before I was a politician. It is the property industry writ large. Tackle that and you tackle the structural issues of the high street. You cannot just change a shop into something else. You will need to knock it down, and that requires a lot of investment from national government into local and regional government. Nationally, we have too much retail space, and we would all say that. Our high streets have been designed for an age when we had lots of people going into their nearest town centre and lots of shops were needed. Online trading has changed that for ever, and that is a structural change that we are all grappling with now.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Thank you, Susan. That is a key point.

The Chair: We have about half an hour left and we are about half way

through our questions, just to be clear. I ask members if they will ask supplementaries to keep on point and stay to the question for our witnesses, please. It would be great to get through as many as possible. If we have other points to make, we can take written evidence from you, which would be very kind of you.

Q62 Lord Alderdice: In view of the time, I will try to put the question and ask each of you to take one bite of the cherry to respond to it. It is a question with two parts to it.

You have been talking with Baroness Fraser about the two to five-year vision of things. Can I take it a little bit further into the future, which is always very difficult for us today in general but also as politicians with a mandate, to five to 10 years? What changes do you see as a result of the pandemic, and other things, that you are really excited by, and not just excited but realistic?

For example, there has been quite a lot of talk about getting more tourists into some of your towns and making sure that your towns are accessible to people, but at the same time making them pedestrian-only or cycle-only, which is quite difficult for tourists who do not want to park miles away or who do not know how to do it. It is also a problem for elderly people. It is okay to talk about cycle lanes if you are up to 55 or 60, but the further along you get after that the more problematic it is to get in and out, particularly if you are going to shops and buying something, you have to carry it and there is no possibility of getting your car in.

What are you excited about in the five to 10 years, and could you also address some apparent contradictions between what we would like to see? Some of these things appear to me to be a bit contradictory, such as more of us getting access but closing down some kinds of access, particularly for elderly people or tourists who we want to see included in all this.

Margaret Davidson: Thank you for that. With regard to five to 10 years' time, we have a major project under way now, with our city region deal, to convert the castle into a tourist attraction and to celebrate our heritage and our lifestyles. I see that absolutely thriving. I see us as the centre for green tourism. We will have terrific tourism right throughout the Highlands, but it will be more thoughtful than it has been and it will be very green in what it is doing.

I want to see a major improvement in transport. You talked about access to the city centre. It is an issue now and it will become more of an issue unless we get much better at solving it. Maybe it will be park and ride, maybe some free buses around the area, something to be more thoughtful about to enable people to take their purchases back to wherever their transport is, as well as bringing in the young and the elderly to live in the centre of the city. Why would you not have the elderly living in the centre of the city? Why cannot the sheltered and protected housing be much closer to the coffee shops and the cinemas so that they can spend a life of quality with their friends? As a member of

the post-war baby boom myself, I hope we get this right in the next few years.

My daughter lives in New Zealand's South Island on the outskirts of Christchurch. They had a major earthquake in 2011 and I have watched them rebuild their city. They have rebuilt their city on local businesses—the number of small local brewers is mind blowing and they are all thriving—but the biggest thing of all, which has involved families, has been free outdoor recreation facilities. They have the most fantastic play park area—the Margaret Mahy playground—right on the edge of the centre of their city. It is a mecca for every child in the South Island and it has full disabled access. It is a fantastic thing to see and it brings people in. The city is beginning to thrive and the culture is driving it.

Lord Alderdice: Thanks very much indeed. Susan, I will ask you the same question. I will not require you to think about what it might mean if there was an earthquake between now and five to 10 years' time, but what excites you, and how are you going to deal with these conflicting issues?

Susan Hinchcliffe: When it comes to accessibility, disabled parking needs to be accommodated in any scheme. The previous councillor mentioned park and ride and so on. Those are all things that we are incorporating into the future planning of our city and town centres. Going a little bit further back than that, you are talking about five to 10 years' time. There is no point in me creating fantastic town and city centres unless people have money to spend there. I see my role as leader as making sure that we get as much investment into skills, transport and culture as possible.

Those are the three things that I always go on about. The more investment I put into those the better, because that will make people more successful; it will make them able to set up their own businesses in the city and town centres.

We are a very entrepreneurial city, and the youngest city in the country. I see the role of government as creating the right environment for people to flourish and prosper, and then our town and city centres will be able to sustain themselves. Unless I do that, however well I create them they will not be able to sustain themselves. It is about investing in people, at the end of the day.

Lord Alderdice: Carl, what do you think about five to 10 years ahead? What gets you excited and how do you deal with the costs?

Carl Smith: I am very excited in Great Yarmouth because of all the things we have going on. We will have quite a different landscape here in the next few years. We have a new third river crossing coming, which will link up our energy park with our outer harbour and, we hope, bring 650 new jobs into the town. Our walking and cycling infrastructure plan is really important.

But it is not just about Great Yarmouth; it is how we link up with the rest of Norfolk and beyond. We are looking at rail improvements, a new bus interchange, the e-scooters that we already have. We have a train that runs from Hemsby right the way into Great Yarmouth, bringing in visitors to save them bringing their cars into the town centre, and these are linked together. But I agree with you; we have an ageing population in Great Yarmouth who live in the villages and we have to think of them, as you rightly say. How do they go to the shops? They cannot jump on an e-scooter and carry two bags back from the local supermarket.

We have to balance all that as well, so it is important that when we look at the transport and infrastructure that is all taken into account. We are part of Norfolk, which is one of the most rural counties in the country and a massive area with little villages in it. It is important that they are all linked into this. It is so easy at the moment to jump in your car and go everywhere, so it is about changing people's mindsets. How do we move into that green transport area with electric cars and put in the infrastructure to charge them up when you come into town?

I am really excited with what will happen in Great Yarmouth in the next five to 10 years, because we have the plans and we now have the funding, which will bring in an enormous amount of investment. The town deal itself looks like it will bring in at least £61 million worth of private investment on top of the £20 million we have from the town deal fund.

Lord Alderdice: Thanks very much. Lucille, beyond the electoral mandate, what are your thoughts about five to 10 years' time?

Lucille Thompson: I have mentioned a number of things going on in Winchester or that we are planning for now—for instance, the central Winchester regeneration where we hope to create a vibrant young centre just off our historic high street. I think it will take 10 or maybe even more years to develop that. Our plans need to be flexible so that we can take on board any new developments that might be thrown at us, because who knows what will happen even a year down the line let alone in 10 years' time? We have a number of park and ride sites, but we are building another one on the edge of the city. It is opposite our new leisure centre with the help of a £5 million grant from our local LEP. That will have lots of EV charging points and a green roof on it.

I have mentioned public transport. It is really important that we have a very good public transport offer. We are lucky to have our own train station at the top of the town, which lots of people make use of. Of course, we do not know what the future will hold for that, but at least we have it. Any development, of course, will need to include some form of transport for disabled people and the ability for them to get in and out. That will be critical.

Q63 **Baroness Benjamin:** The pandemic has really flagged up the importance of culture, music, dance, poetry, art and design. We all know that creative culture feeds the soul and is vital to our well-being. It is a perfect way to deal with depression and anxiety, but not being able to be

together in theatres or cultural spaces over the last 15 months means that many people have set up cultural groups such as choirs, mostly online, with street theatres visiting and entertaining the lonely and the vulnerable at social distance.

But, at the end of the day, the need for physical togetherness in theatres, communities and cultural centres is essential. Birmingham Rep, for example, has repurposed part of its building into a children's creative art centre, so that children, especially those from deprived backgrounds, can experience the art of creative learning. How does culture fit into your future plans? What role do you believe the cultural and creative industries can play in reviving towns and cities, and how can they be supported? To what extent can they support building back after the last 15 months?

Carl Smith: Thanks for the question. We already have a culture, heritage and tourism strategy, and we are very proud of our culture and heritage. We got the £10 million grant this morning from the National Lottery, and we already had a grant for £2 million two or three years ago for our Venetian waterways, which are on the other end of the seafront and have now been restored to their 1920s glory. We work really well with our culture. We have the Hippodrome Circus here, the only purpose-built circus in the country, which is full. It has good bookings. We are working really hard. We have our fire and water festival coming up in the autumn, and we have some big plans coming forward to make sure that brings people out and gets them back together.

People have been indoors for 15 months now and I am sure they will want to come out and see the culture, art and heritage that we all have to offer and deliver for our residents right across the country.

Lucille Thompson: I think I have already mentioned that we have a really strong culture offer and creative offer in our city. In the autumn we will be hosting the very first Winchester design festival, which will showcase all the opportunities that we have for design and the creative industries here. Our visitor numbers are driven by our cultural offer and what we have in the city: the cathedral, historic high street, the Great Hall, Wolvesey Castle. We have lots and lots to build on. Four or five years ago we set up the Hampshire Cultural Trust and we are a key partner in that. They put on exhibitions and events and they run a number of museums around the county, not just in Winchester. I think we have a very strong cultural offer and we will look to build on that to draw visitors back to our high street.

Baroness Benjamin: Margaret, how are you working with the creative industries in your area?

Margaret Davidson: Highlands culture is very identifiable. We are extremely strong with that, but it is a struggle to invest. The fuss and bother I have had recently about building a piece of artwork on our river has shown how difficult it can be on occasions. We have to take people with us. They have to understand just how important this is to them. Maybe right now is the time to do it, when so many of them are missing

many of the things they have taken for granted. We need to do it, and to do it right across the Highlands and not just in our city. It is absolutely the centre of our well-being. I am convinced of that.

Baroness Benjamin: Susan, what about in Bradford? What cultural activities do you have for children especially and young people?

Susan Hinchcliffe: I agree with everything you said, Baroness Benjamin, in your opening remarks. Culture feeds the soul; it makes young people see what talents they have and brings people together. After a period when we have all been isolated, it is vital. It is one of my big three when it comes to strategy.

We have a summer coming up with lots of events and animation in our town and city centres, which will help with the regeneration issues that we have just been talking about. We are bidding to be City of Culture in 2025, and today we have a full council and cross-party support on one motion that we will all speak positively about, hopefully, because we all want this to happen as we believe in it so much. It is so important, and we are investing alongside the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund in making sure that it is a big part of our economic recovery and social recovery going forward.

Baroness Benjamin: Good luck to you for 2025. Thank you.

Q64 **Lord Hain:** Thank you for your fascinating contributions. As a committee, we have taken a lot of evidence on the rapidly increasing deepening inequalities as a result of the pandemic, whether it is lack of online use of an effective kind or health inequalities and so on. What can you do in your own cities and towns to address that, both within them and between them? Towns seems to have suffered more than cities, but cities have obviously had other problems. Again, please be extremely brief, but it would be interesting to hear from you about that.

Susan Hinchcliffe: It is a massive subject. I have already said quite a lot about health inequalities, and giving people the opportunity to make sure that they can move up in life and get more money, more income, for themselves and their families is an absolute driving force for me. That is the thing that will solve health inequalities.

One project I would mention is Born in Bradford, which is the biggest global longitudinal research programme in the world and has tracked young people from the beginning of their lives to the age of 13. It has found some very important health interventions that can make a big difference. Glasses for Classes, for example, has come out of that; it makes sure that young people get the glasses they need to be able to concentrate in class early on.

I would point you to the research by Bradford Royal Infirmary, Bradford University and Leeds University. Having the data to understand what drives health inequalities and what interventions we can make is very important for government policymaking. It is something we are learning

from locally, but I am keen for policymakers nationally to learn off that as well.

Lord Hain: Sorry to interrupt, Susan, but what about digital access? If the future is hybrid, both virtual and physical, what are you doing, and what do you want from government, to address that?

Susan Hinchcliffe: That has been a major issue during the pandemic. We had to buy 3,000 laptops for our young people, but we have 140,000 children in Bradford and we are not short of young people. Some of my colleagues are short of young people, but we have loads of young people, which is great but they need better access to IT. It is not just that, however. They also need space to learn. We have lots of multigenerational households that are tight on space, has been an issue during the pandemic of course, because if one person gets the infection, everybody in the household gets it. We have to ensure that we have more housing so that people can have their own space.

The digital divide is real. There are lots of stats that show that it is hugely damaging to disadvantaged communities and resolving that issue does need a national strategy and local funding.

Lord Hain: Margaret, I saw you nodding. Could you say what you can do as a leader to address these issues?

Margaret Davidson: Susan is absolutely on the money. It is about skills. It is about giving our young people ambition and paving that road out of poverty with education. We all need to do that.

Having said that, the broadband issues in the Highlands and Islands are absolutely appalling. We still have places with almost nothing and we are still looking at 2025-26 before we get people on to decent broadband. That is just too long. I have been working frequently with both Governments to try to get them to co-operate so that we have a system in place that will be one of the fundamentals for our future. I repeat what I said: Susan is on the money; it is about skills.

Carl Smith: Here in Great Yarmouth, life expectancy can differ by 10 years within a three-mile radius. I have already mentioned that we have an area of deprivation that is in the top 10 in the country, so we think it is very important that we work with our partner agencies to deliver. Inequalities exist not only in skills but in areas of health such as mental health and loneliness, and especially through exploitation, which I mentioned earlier—people are being brought here to work and just dumped.

We found a lot of this during the pandemic while visiting HMOs through the test and trace system. It is very important that a package can be put together to help people who were brought into this country and just left to their own devices. We, as local councils, then have to take on the responsibility for the wraparound services required. It all takes funding.

We are trying and we are getting to it, but those are the issues moving forward.

Lucille Thompson: In Winchester, we are working with a number of nearby neighbouring district authorities to create a youth hub where we will help young people to fill out application forms, apply for jobs, and give them the sort of encouragement and skills they need. I mentioned that we work alongside the charity Trinity and give them large grants. Trinity provide advice and skills to help people move into the job market.

I have mentioned that we are providing housing throughout the district, and we have recently agreed the plan for 70-odd homes. They will be a slightly different type of offer for tenants; they will be very small units and they will be primarily for lower paid and possibly key workers.

I think we are doing quite a lot to help out with the inequalities that we have, because—

Lord Hain: Sorry, can I cut across? You mentioned youth hubs, will that include broadband facilities to enable them to do their studies there or whatever?

Lucille Thompson: They will certainly help them to gain digital skills as well. Yes, it will help all of that so that they are able to apply for jobs, be prepped for interviews and be ready to take up the positions when they are offered.

Q65 **The Chair:** Thank you. I appreciate that brevity. It has been a wide-ranging session, so thank you so much for bearing with me with interruptions and trying to get to all the questions we wanted to ask you.

I want to close with specific recommendations that we could make to government to help with all the aspects that you are trying to think about on that two to five-year timeframe. You have made some suggestions already, and clearly the funding structures you have described to us are a central part of all this. As Susan said, everything is led by government policy anyway, but I am interested in whether there is anything else specifically that you would like, maybe support, from the Government to help you to deliver on the things you have described today.

Margaret Davidson: We need fair and objective distribution of the shared prosperity fund and the levelling-up fund right across the country, plus government help with easing our loan repayments and easing us into the ability to invest more ourselves. Local authorities, certainly in Scotland, can borrow. Paying it back, of course, is the issue. For us, it comes down to borrowing powers and the length of the repayment of loans.

Carl Smith: For us, it is security of future funding. We keep getting one-year settlements. We need a four-year plan. You have asked us today about our plans three to five years forward. We need to know where our funding is coming from and how we are being funded. That is very

important for local authorities, whether they be lower tier, upper tier or unitary.

Lucille Thompson: I echo that. Local government funding from government has been absolutely cut to the bone. Last year, during the pandemic I had to introduce an interim budget, because we were in the red by the tune of £10 million. To put proper plans in place, we desperately need a proper funding model that is sustainable and does not push us into areas that we are not really familiar with in order to raise money to keep the services going.

There has been a huge acknowledgment from government that local government has really performed during the pandemic, and that has been great, but we need the funds to be able to continue to do that. That is my message.

Susan Hinchcliffe: We need funding, money, please, obviously. I would like to see less of us being given a few weeks' notice under the national levelling-up fund to bid for one project that everybody and his dog has to be involved with in terms of politicians. That just leads to more politics and less long-term thinking. I would like a real, honest partnership with government about how much infrastructure money we have to spend and what our investment plan should be for the next few years. I want our two lots of funding, national and local, to come together for the next few years to give us the opportunity to deliver some of the blue-sky things that we have been talking about today. That is very important.

I want to see more funding for more skills, for more people to get the qualifications they need to have a good start in life. We have had already had two economic shocks in the last 10 years, and inevitably there will be more. People have to be resilient in an economically fragile climate, so we need more skills and more skills funding. You cannot invest enough in our people. They are our biggest asset in a global economy, so let us make sure that they are as skilled and qualified as they can be.

The Chair: That seems like an excellent note to end on. I declare an interest. As chancellor of the Open University I always like hearing about investment that could help to build our skills and resilience. Thank you very much indeed for all your time. It has been very interesting. We wish you much luck over the next few months as we crawl slowly out of all this. I appreciate your candour and your time this morning.