



## Covid-19 Committee

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

Wednesday 14 July 2021

3 pm

Members present: Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (The Chair); Baroness Benjamin; Lord Elder; Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness Morgan of Cotes; Lord Pickles.

Evidence Session No. 5

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 66 - 73

#### Witnesses

[I](#): Joshua Artus, Placemaking and Strategy Lead, Centric Lab; Cannon Ivers, landscape architect; Lara Kinneir, architect; Paul Owens, Director, World Cities Culture Forum; Olafiyin Taiwo, Chair, Young Planners Network, Commonwealth Association of Planners; Ryan Walker, Royal Town Planning Institute's Young Planner of the Year; Lucy Yu, Non-Executive Director, Connected Places Catapult.

## Examination of Witnesses

Joshua Artus, Cannon Ivers, Lara Kinneir, Paul Owens, Olafiyin Taiwo, Ryan Walker and Lucy Yu.

Q66 **The Chair:** Good afternoon. I am Martha. I am the Chair of the Covid-19 Select Committee. Thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. I have six colleagues with me, who I am sure will introduce themselves when they ask you some questions. As you know, we have been looking at the future of larger towns and smaller cities as part of our wider remit as a committee to look at the long-term implications of Covid.

You are all smart people, so it will not be a surprise for you to hear that it has been very hard to get people to imagine two to five years out, beyond the situation that people are dealing with right now. That has been true of people we have talked to, from the health service to education and digital services, and now in the towns and cities work that we have been doing.

We are thrilled to have you guys, because we know you have been looking into your crystal balls a bit more than perhaps others have had the time and space to do, so we would really love your imaginative and creative thoughts about which trends, as a result of this pandemic or even because they were there anyway, are speeding up, and any crazy, imaginative things that you think are happening anyway. We want to understand more about them in order to have a bit more of a future-facing backdrop to the work that we are doing.

We really want to be making constructive suggestions, rather than doing an analysis of what is happening right now. As you can imagine, when we are talking to local council and town leaders, a lot are still dealing with the fallout of everything from the last year and a half, so I really urge you to cast your minds forward, if you can, and to give us your perspectives on the future.

It would be super-helpful for my colleagues and me to hear from each of you where you come from, what the organisation that you represent does and a little bit about you.

**Lucy Yu:** Hello, everyone. I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak at this much-needed inquiry and very important committee. I am very much looking forward to hearing from fellow speakers as well. I am a non-exec director at the Connected Places Catapult, which is the UK's innovation accelerator for cities, transport and places. We provide what we describe as innovation as a service, and one of our key roles is creating innovation hubs and convening different people and organisations, matching hungry public institutions, businesses and infrastructure providers with innovation-rich suppliers. In doing so, we spark new relationships and encourage innovation and economic growth.

**Olafiyin Taiwo:** Thank you very much. It is a pleasure to be here. I am the chair of the Commonwealth Association of Planners young planners network. The Commonwealth Association of Planners has over 27

member institutes and over 40,000 planners from different countries within the Commonwealth.

The association's main remit is to promote planning as a fundamental part of governance and creating sustainable human settlements. Within my capacity as chair of the young planners network, we ensure that young professionals, particularly young planners and other built environment professionals, have the opportunity to exchange ideas. We create platforms to share knowledge, experience and innovative solutions and ideas about what is going on in different countries, as well as looking at how we can ensure that the voices of young planners and professionals are being heard in policy corridors and in corridors of power, not as passive but as active participants.

**Ryan Walker:** I am the RTPI's young planner of the year for 2021, which is a fantastic honour. I am also honoured to be here today, so thank you for having me along. In case you have not been able to work it out from the accent, I am originally from Belfast. I studied there and, for the last couple of years, I worked in the Republic of Ireland and have recently moved just around the corner from you, to Pall Mall, working in London. You have potentially heard from some of my other volunteer colleagues within the RTPI, but we are the UK's largest planning body that provides chartered membership through the planning profession.

**Paul Owens:** Hello, everybody. It is nice to be here. Thanks for inviting me. I am a cultural consultant. I advise city governments on cultural development. I also work with the Mayor of London as the director of the World Cities Culture Forum, which is 40 big global cities that get together to advocate for culture as a central part of the future development of our cities.

**Joshua Artus:** I am part of Centric Lab. We are an independent neuroscience research lab creating solutions to elevate public health. We partner with public, private and third sector organisations to embed intersectional urban health research into places, projects and policies that focus on improving health outcomes, particularly for lower-income and marginalised communities. About 75% of our work is in the UK but we have worked abroad for large real estate organisations, for example, in the United States, as well as in Slovakia. Our work is primarily focused here in the UK. It is a pleasure to be here and I hope I can help open some minds to what is possible.

**The Chair:** Great—that is exactly what we are looking for.

**Lara Kinneir:** It is very nice to meet you all. I am here under the hat of design cities lead at the London School of Architecture. The London School of Architecture is a new school, based in London, but we work internationally. We are a new school for a new century, designed for students with independent minds, not independent means. We are very much focused on making sure that the industry is as open and accessible as possible, because that has been a problem in the past and has its legacy issues.

I am a ministerial adviser for the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, so you have another person from Belfast on this call. At the minute, I am doing some work with them on the idea of community wealth, particularly in light of the pandemic, which might come up in this discussion today.

**Cannon Ivers:** I am a landscape architect for a company called LDA Design. I am a director in our London office. We design parks and public spaces and have been involved in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, as it is known now. I am currently overseeing the work at Strand Aldwych, which, as Paul mentioned, has tapped into the cultural network around the world to bring that to life. I am also a teaching fellow at the Bartlett School of Architecture, which is part of UCL. Finally, I have written a book called *Staging Urban Landscapes*, which is the culmination of 15 years of research looking at how public spaces are increasingly used as platforms for events, installations, cultural engagement, cultural expression and bringing people together to build communities around our public spaces.

Q67 **The Chair:** There is lots of varied experience there that we really hope to tap into. Thank you for giving us that quick backdrop. I would like to start by asking—and anybody can jump in; I think you will all have perspectives—what you see as the innovations or trends coming out of the pandemic that will affect the way we build our towns and cities. What can we do actively to make sure that they are the best towns and cities that we can build, rather than just accepting the trends?

I am really interested in things that are innovations because of the pandemic, trends that have been hastened or ideas that you now see as essential because of the pandemic, bearing in mind that our remit is about the implications of this pandemic as opposed to just things that might have been happening anyway. We are also very firmly rooted in thinking about social and economic well-being. All the themes of social and cultural interaction that we are talking about are fundamental to our thought. Who would like to give me some of their innovative thinking?

**Lucy Yu:** We at Connected Places Catapult would identify a few themes. The first is a move towards to a more distributed labour market. Before the pandemic, remote working was possible in some industries, but the pandemic has shown us that there are parts of the economy that can function reasonably well without any in-person interaction at all, so that is a shift that we have seen. We anticipate that we will see more in-person economic activity resuming, particularly anything to do with creative communications and creative industries, where there is some kind of shared purpose and where having people in proximity is beneficial.

We expect to see more office real estate configured towards maximising creativity and collaboration, rather than maximising numbers of desks. We picture local co-working spaces, which would almost be an office between head office and home office. These would be local hubs to enable people to have that in-person interaction and to allow people to

communicate with others, but to do so in locations that are closer to their local communities.

A second trend that we have seen, if I can describe them in this way, is homes that people want to be locked down in. We are starting to see people choosing to live further away from urban centres. Prior to the pandemic, when people were making decisions about relocating away from larger urban centres, they might still have limited the distance they were prepared to live at to what we would consider a traditional commuter belt.

People are now entertaining the idea of potentially living further away from those larger urban centres, because they anticipate that they will have a new working pattern in which they are travelling into offices maybe only one or two days a week. On that basis, they are happy to entertain having a longer commute. They are looking for properties that will meet the needs of this new working pattern better, so they are looking for rooms that could be converted to a home office, for instance.

Critically, they are also looking for very good digital connectivity. That is absolutely non-negotiable now for the future. Locations that we might have talked about in the past as being digital hot-spots are now a critical consideration for people when they are thinking about where they are going to live and how that will support their future working patterns.

A third trend that we are seeing is new patterns and modes of mobility. The pandemic has accelerated a lot of infrastructure trends and innovation that we might have seen anyway but that would probably have taken a lot longer to deliver. For example, we had the mayor of Melbourne on our podcast recently at the Connected Places Catapult. She talked about introducing 40 kilometres of protected cycle lane infrastructure during the pandemic and commented that, in ordinary times, that might have taken up to eight years to introduce.

We have seen a lot of examples of this type of infrastructure being brought in and in a very accelerated fashion. Sometimes there has been some user pull, but in other cases it has been deliberate policy or it is an attempt to nudge people towards different behaviours. In the UK, low traffic neighbourhoods would be a good example of that.

Alongside that, we have seen new modes start to be introduced. In the UK, we have seen a commitment from the Government to 50% of journeys becoming active transport over the next few years—walking and cycling in particular. We have also seen the introduction of trials of new modes such as e-scooters. There is a lot of innovation in infrastructure, and modes and patterns of mobility.

Related to that, we are starting to see the emergence of hub-and-spoke patterns of mobility. This is the idea that people will be based in a particular community and maybe travel within a 15-minute city or a local radius for a lot of their amenities, but then, potentially, make further

trips into urban centres and longer-distance trips on a more occasional basis.

**Cannon Ivers:** I would hang these on three key themes—people, place and the environment. The pandemic has brought into focus for people the importance of outdoor space and accessibility. Oftentimes, particularly during lockdown, if you had access to any kind of nature, you began to really appreciate every quality of it in a way that had not been seen before. That is related not just to green space but to high streets and local streets.

We are increasingly seeing a shift in the balance between spaces for people and spaces for the car, particularly in city streets. In London, we are seeing a significant change in widening footways and going on road diets in order to create more accessible movement corridors for people with mobility issues but also just general space for social distancing. That is a point that we can leverage. We continue that trend, which was already in place but which the pandemic has accelerated, by creating more usable space for people in streets that still have to function by allowing cars in. The point about road diets is an important one.

We need to recognise the involvement of communities in the shaping of places. That is a segue between people and places. The idea of co-creation and co-production that Lucy was starting to allude to is bringing people into the process of creating their communities and the spaces in which their communities will function.

On the idea of environment, a trend that we are increasingly seeing is an understanding of the importance of bringing nature into cities. Everyone knows that that it is important, but we now have measurable, tangible evidence of the benefits of nature to well-being, to social and community cohesion, and to the environment in air quality and noise pollution terms. There are ways in which we can bring in street trees and planting that absorb storm events. We have a fluctuation in the kinds of storm events that we have due to the climate crisis, where we have wetter winters and hotter, drier summers. Working out ways to work with the backdrop of the climate emergency is important.

People, place and environment are the three key trends that have been accelerated by the pandemic and that we can leverage to create vibrant cities and towns in the future.

**The Chair:** Can you just be even more specific and give an example of something that would, in your opinion, represent that kind of innovation or imagination?

**Cannon Ivers:** We are doing a lot of work in London looking at how streets can be reconfigured to make more space for people during the day, with alfresco tables and chairs that bring the life of the inside of the building out into the street. Where are the practicalities in making that work? That is not just London-based; it is happening with the pedestrianisation of George Street in Edinburgh. We are doing a lot of

work in Newcastle, which is really looking through the lens of the high street as the lifeblood of those towns, to create more space for people and therefore a more vibrant public realm.

It is about understanding the carriageway widths that you absolutely need. What is the minimum carriageway width that you need to make it function for deliveries and services? How far can you tighten that to make your footpaths wider? Can you bring in planting and street trees in key locations where you have active frontages that need more separation from the car? That is a very practical suggestion about how you can improve the public realm and streets for people.

On the notion of place, it is about having genuine engagement and finding ways to engage with initiatives that are already taking place in those communities, whether it is reaching into art agencies or creative agencies that have a footprint in a locality, which can begin to write their own narratives and to bring a story about, and a life to, that public space.

The environment is a key one. We must find ways to get street trees into all our streets, and that is often driven by utilities. We need to create enough space to get trees into the ground. It is then about maintenance. Once you have the impetus and you have done the infrastructural works to get the trees in the ground, how are they maintained? How can they be looked after and cared for? The same goes for getting planting in. They seem easy on the surface, but a huge amount of heavy lifting is needed to make some of these infrastructural changes.

The pandemic has accelerated the changes to roads and streets and those configurations in cities so much. We needed the pandemic to really push that forward.

**Ryan Walker:** Following on from what Cannon said about potential tangible outputs, these are not necessarily projects that I have worked on specifically, but I have been carrying out research across the UK, Ireland and further afield, and trying to pick up on those points. I totally agree with everything that has been said.

It is really important now that we take a bit more of a localised approach to planning our towns and cities, under the guise of trying to re-democratise our town and city centres. We realised that when the streams of office workers left the cities they became quite a vacuum of their former selves. If we want to focus less on the commute and more on the community, and to get people back into town and city centres, we need to give them ownership over that space. A lot of that ties in with stewardship as well.

I have picked up on a couple of examples that look at this localised and place-based, small-scale infrastructure that pulls people into it. People-centric design is quite innovative, even though the mechanism of that might not seem so innovative, and it really works. In Melbourne, they created an "adopt a tree" approach. We know that we need people to connect more with nature, whether for climate reasons and a biodiversity

boost, or for mental health. A really important rule has already been mentioned by some of the previous speakers. In Melbourne, the “adopt a tree” strategy meets the immediate concern, but the maintenance and management of it is also important.

In Melbourne’s urban forest strategy, they had 70,000 trees ready for adoption. When you go online, you can adopt a tree, which is then tagged so that you know where your specific tree is. You can track its growth online and see the carbon offset that it has achieved. There are also wider local contributions to it. Tying into today’s market, you can share your tree’s metrics on social media, so it gives ownership at the local level. It looks at dealing with issues of maintenance, management and stewardship, as well as bringing communities back into their local area and re-democratising it.

When I was looking at it online, I found a funny quirk. If you happen to be out walking on the street and see that your particular tree has been damaged in some way, shape or form, you can email the local council, which will come out to look at it. The way they frame that is sending a love letter from your tree to the local council. It is quite innovative even in the language and terminology that it is using in order to increase engagement and participation with the community; it is thinking slightly outside the box.

As an even more local example, the practice that I worked in previously was very heavily involved in the Connswater Community Greenway in Belfast. It was created before the pandemic. It was an area of Belfast that was in high multiple deprivation measures, and there were a lot of public parks that were connected throughout the city. They pulled them together and opened them up 24/7. It was a really good design in terms of the landscape architecture and the urban design to integrate that within the community.

Moving forward and as part of the pandemic, they are now doing “adopt a tree” to try to get more people following the same pattern as Melbourne and taking ownership of their local parks. They came up with some quite intuitive techniques, including “buy a T, adopt a tree”, where you got a T-shirt with a picture of a tree and its number on it.

**Q68 Lord Pickles:** Ryan, I am really sorry to interrupt. It is really interesting but, as you rightly said, “adopt a tree” was happening and your practice was engaged in that community before the pandemic. What we are really interested in, and I hope you do not mind me interrupting, is what difference the pandemic has made to existing trends. I can understand that the tree thing might be accelerated, but we want to know about the space within towns and cities.

Will it be different? Will the mixture be different? Will the office be different? Will offices and shops need to have a particular kind of construction in order to make them resilient to future pandemics? Will the trend of moving away from cities be accelerated? How can we attract people back into the city? Those are the kinds of questions that we would

be really grateful to you for addressing, if you would not mind.

**Ryan Walker:** I guess I was just positioning that, and apologies if it did not come across that way, but it was about creating the right environment in towns and cities. Post the pandemic, people have more of an appetite and a demand for that connection to green space within their town and city centres, which can bring them in, so that it is not necessarily just about the workers; it is about creating those residential communities as well.

We know that there are difficulties in terms of the potential loss of people, which has been framed as the Armageddon of towns and cities. Some of the initiatives that I just mooted are about creating environments that would make it more attractive. Post the pandemic, people have realised that they want those kinds of amenities within their immediate environment to keep our towns and cities more resilient and populated.

**The Chair:** I would reiterate Eric's point that we are particularly interested in the things that the pandemic should change about towns and cities, and how we can make that happen, or things that are changing and what we can do about them. Please try to keep that framing.

**Lara Kinneir:** I agree with everything that previous speakers have shared so far. I would like to focus on the "how" rather than the "what" for a little bit, and then lead us into what the outcome might be in our towns and cities. The "how" is a critical aspect of what we have seen during Covid.

There is one quote that has been the focus of my work during this past year, which is focused on what we can learn from Covid. It goes as follows: "Every attempt to write a new human story converges upon just one mundane, heart-breaking problem. How shall we come together, work together, create together? How shall we organise?"

We have seen during Covid that people have been organising in very different ways, and I see this as a huge opportunity. I would like to talk about mindset being an opportunity, but also that money is our biggest challenge.

In terms of mindset, across the built environment industry we had reached a saturation point of people having ideas but not knowing how to implement them or not having the skills or the faculties to act upon them. We saw across the world during Covid an outpouring of action and a remarkable response to urgent need, from meals for people at risk to emergency accommodation for rough sleepers being solved overnight. At the heart of these responses, more often than not, was successful collaboration, with innovative ideas for multidisciplinary working, and delivery methods and means of communicating that cut across the usual red tape. That happened at government and at grass roots levels. I see it as a huge opportunity that people have had a change in mindset and had

the impetus to act upon it, and I am really interested in how that can be sustained and encouraged for the long term.

There are a few ways in which we can look at sustaining that mindset. First, Covid has made us question the impact of what we do in our everyday lives, in our offices and as a country. We need a much more robust evidence base as to what our impact might be in towns and cities.

Secondly, we need to revolutionise the skills that we all have in the built environment industry, so that we are not only skilling up and skilling differently the current practitioners, but looking at the next generation.

Thirdly, we have a host of new tools that we can embrace, particularly digital tools, and a lot of people on the call have already mentioned how some of those tools have been embraced through necessity during lockdown—for example, the House of Commons meeting digitally. Who would have thought that would have happened in the space of a couple of weeks, had that been thought about previously? There have been many examples of that, and that, again, needs to be resourced so that we can continue doing that, alongside meeting in person when the time is right.

The final tool that we could look at is some of the regulations that would go about supporting us working cross-disciplinarily. I will give one example. The British Standards Institution has launched a new project to create the first set of guidance for the design of the built environment to include the needs of people who experience sensory and neurological difficulties. That was announced in October 2020. That was quite a quick announcement, but the background to that is a lot of research that went on over the previous five years. It was able to act upon that much more quickly, because of what we saw during Covid. That was a very quick run-through of how we might try to sustain mindsets.

I also wanted to mention the challenge of money, because we know that that will be huge across government at every level and across grass-roots organisations. It has always been a challenge when you are working at town and city scales. I used to work in the GLA and its one-year fiscal budgets were incredibly challenging, because the design of places is far longer than a year, and the impact that you can demonstrate when you get to implement any design in a place needs a lot longer than a one-year fiscal budget.

I would be interested in looking at how different methods of funding could evolve in the light of Covid. There are lots of people on this call who will have much more experience than me in this, but taking in the model of the development corporations or of Business Improvement Districts, which allow for budgets to be set aside and kept for anyone else who needs that money over a longer term, could be really critical.

Looking a little further afield, there are examples in other countries that have taken a different approach to money and its value on places, towns and cities. New Zealand, for example, has started a process looking at how it can have GDW instead of GDP, the “W” being well-being.

Argentina has recently done a very interesting deal, where it has swapped some of its debt with environmental actions. Closer to home, we have some mechanisms that are ripe for renewal, such as the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106, which continue to be very troubling processes when people are trying to deliver good design to create good places.

What might we see in towns and cities if we try to keep this mindset going? There will be a lot more focus on the hyperlocal. Coming together in towns and cities will be critical, and the role of cultural institutions in that is vital. Cities will probably become like theatres; people will want to play out to a much greater degree than before, because we probably took it for granted. From places like Somerset House courtyard to the Halifax wool market, there are examples up and down the country of where existing institutions need to be supported so that they can be part of our theatre.

From speaking to a major developer this week, I found that a lot of developers are looking at how they can create shared space in a way that is very different from what they did prior to Covid. One developer is looking at creating co-working labs, because science and tech projects will always need to come together at some point. It is a core focus for a lot of developers to create science and tech laboratories within cities, because they know that that is a bit of a safe bet compared to some of the shared space offers that we have had up to now.

***Olafiyin Taiwo:*** A lot of my points have been mentioned, but in addition to what everyone has said, we have seen some innovative trends that have emerged. Part of it has been the creation of walkable streets. That has been an improvement. For example, there is now more access to walk around high streets. They used to be for both pedestrians and vehicles, but now it is pedestrians alone, and that has allowed access to these areas.

With that has come heritage regeneration. In order to ensure that continuous business as usual with high streets in cities and towns, what has taken place is heritage regeneration and the retelling of the story of the place, just to be able to attract more people to the place and to ensure that there is respect for what it delivers. We have seen that in Poole, Dorset, which is one area where that has been experienced.

Leisure equipment has been created in parks, because there was no access to leisure centres in some areas. That has enabled community development and engagement that did not exist prior to Covid. In several parks across the nation, there is this equipment to ensure that residents can engage with each other and talk in an open space. That has led to the reuse of our public space, which has come through as a result of Covid.

In addition, from a planning perspective, what did not start with Covid, but its use started in Covid, is locally integrated infrastructure; infrastructure was created for a particular purpose but could serve an

alternative use. This was trialled by Professor Morphet at some point, but it was useful during this Covid period. We could see that community centres were reused for Covid. Libraries were reused as clinics. This is part of what she had said earlier could happen, but during Covid it was the first time that the use of such places came into being.

One thing that has come up as a result of Covid has been a multidisciplinary approach to city building, community development and planning. We have seen all the built environment sectors working together during Covid, in a way they never did before, to ensure that sustainability of life within cities and towns. That is one good thing.

Finally, there has been a blend of visionary concepts. In the past, we have had smart cities, resilient cities and sustainable cities. During Covid, we were able to see the disadvantages of each of these concepts and to benefit from their advantages. Going forward, it has created an opportunity for us to merge all these concepts and to identify how we can maximise the benefits and the resources available.

**The Chair:** Those were really interesting thoughts. It would be super-helpful, when answering, if you give specific places that have done something differently as a result of the trends you are talking about, so that we can be as specific as possible.

**Paul Owens:** I just wanted to point to two really big opportunities that this crisis has revealed. The first is about cultural organisations and town centres. Here is an interesting fact for you: 75% of the Arts Council's NPOs, which are the organisations that it regularly supports, of which there are 800<sup>1</sup>, are either on high streets or within a five-minute walk of high streets.

During the pandemic, cultural organisations have rediscovered their social and civic purpose. Even though there were lockdowns, they closed their programmes and have been in financial crisis, they have had to reach out to their audiences and to communities across cities in different ways. They have built new relationships and new audiences as part of this.

The civic power of cultural organisations is there to be used in the renewal and in the next two to five years, and it is particularly important for the future of high streets. High streets were in trouble even before the crisis, and we will have to reinvent the different uses of high streets in every town and city.

Cultural organisations will be crucial in that, but they have to build on what they have learned about opening up. Rather than these being individual, closed institutions, we will see what is already happening in Stoke-on-Trent, for example, where the New Vic Theatre has just published its programme for next year, and 50% of the work is happening outdoors,<sup>2</sup> in and around the high street and across the city.

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<sup>1</sup> The witness later confirmed that there are 828

Similar to what Lara said, we are talking about the city itself almost becoming a theatre and attracting people in new ways. I think of cultural organisations as chess pieces for the future of the city centre and the high street. That is within our grasp and is totally possible to do. It does not take a huge amount of new investment. The structures are often there, as is the talent, so that is one thing.

The second interesting thing is that particularly younger artists and creative people have, over the last 18 months, been able to see a career for themselves that does not necessarily involve them moving to London, Los Angeles or Paris. They can see themselves being successful as game designers or theatre professionals, and operating not necessarily in large cities but making an interesting creative contribution to the place they are in. This is a huge opportunity to attract this new generation of young, often diverse, talent to come to or, if they are students already, to stay in the UK's smaller and medium-sized towns and cities.

As Lucy was saying, everything is moving in that direction. Given that there will be more local working hubs, it will not take much to attract them. Just with being able to get somewhere that is reasonably priced and where they can meet other creative people, lead meaningful lives and engage in local development, they will be there like a shot.

It is interesting—and this is being talked about in different countries—that people have harked back a bit to the New Deal time and to something in America called the Federal Art Project, which was a programme to support particularly younger creatives to move to particular parts of America and contribute to public works. Reviving an idea like that, with a mixture of public and private money, is very possible and feasible, and could be done tactically to attract people to places outside the usual large cities.

**The Chair:** I love the notion that cities can become theatres. I was on the board of the Donmar Warehouse in London for a while and we were definitely thinking about how to bring the city in more. I hope the pandemic will do that, exactly as you describe.

**Joshua Artus:** I will set myself a timer for 60 seconds and be as quick as possible for everyone. One of the key trends we noticed at the beginning of the pandemic was people searching for information about their local environment. Soon after it started, Centric released what we called the urban health index for London, which was a tool that brought together environmental data that was geospatially located. We were able to then look at how healthy an area was, based on its prevalence of environmental factors such as air, noise, light and heat pollution.

We continued this, and this is not just to talk about us but we have found over the past year that community group after community group has been seeking information about what is going on in the local area. Making data that is sitting somewhere more accessible is an important and

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<sup>2</sup> The witness later clarified that the 50 per cent figure may be incorrect

emboldening trend to empower. It is not about the data, but about how you translate data into information and build cultures of information, so that they become knowledge pools.

One thing that we have observed is people's desire to engage more with the environment around them, and we can see organisations both here, such as Choked Up, led by three young women from south London, and around the world. Vancouver established an urban health metrics board and made it available to all members of the city to understand what was going on. It also held the city itself accountable for what was going on. The Guy's and St Thomas' newly rebranded organisation called Impact on Urban Health also released an urban health index; it followed up with an apology, saying, "Sorry, we didn't mean to get your name".

We have been seeing a desire to provide information about the environment and health in a more equitable manner, and that is an opportunity to drive forward. That echoes Lara's point on creating more digital infrastructure that is accessible and equitable to people at all levels. I will stop there. I have more to say later, I hope, but that is it for now. Sorry that it was two minutes, not one.

**Lucy Yu:** Several people now have highlighted the opportunity that our smaller cities and towns have here. Paul very articulately made a point about perhaps professionals no longer feeling that their careers are tied to living in or near London. I just wanted to emphasise that the ability to convert this opportunity is really dependent on the support available to the place leaders in these smaller cities and towns.

I wanted to highlight one example, which is the work that the Connected Places Catapult has done with the Belfast region. There are a couple of people on the call from that area. We worked very closely with place leaders in Belfast over a period of three years from 2016 to 2018, really supporting them to grow their confidence and grow business innovation in the region. Ultimately, that ended up with convening six local councils, two universities and various private sector allies, bringing them together and securing the Belfast region city deal, which has resulted so far in over £1 billion of public and private investment in the innovation economy in the Belfast region.

Support to place leaders in these smaller cities and towns will be one of the things that really makes the difference between capitalising on the opportunity that we now have in front of us and perhaps not managing to maximise it.

**The Chair:** Cannon, I would like you to illustrate a bit about what we are trying to get to through the project you have been doing in Stevenage. Could you tell us briefly about how that has changed as a result of the pandemic? That would be a good illustration of some of the ideas that we are trying to get to.

**Cannon Ivers:** Stevenage, as you may know, was the first pedestrianised post-war new town, built in the late 1950s. It just stayed

as it was until recently. We have been working to come up with a masterplan vision. This was pre Covid and was accelerated through Covid. At the heart of that was understanding major infrastructure for mobility—where people arrive and where they are trying to get to.

From there, it led to thinking about a series of clear streets and spaces, and making sure that the spaces and the streets had a particular character and function that responded to the uses in the community. I have mentioned green streets, with street trees and rain gardens, which capture rainwater and bring biodiversity and different species into the city, cooling it and making it healthier to be in.

How you create a vibrant high street is really important. We are in a situation where a lot of key anchor stores, such as Topshop and Gap—the ones that really hold those big high streets together—are closing. There is a question that I cannot answer, but what is the future of those big units? Maybe some of my esteemed colleagues on the call can answer. What is the answer in terms of the large-floor-plate anchor units that hold the street?

One thing that came about as a positive with Stevenage is looking at what it already had and finding out ways that it can make that better. It has a historic town square, as seen in many other towns of this nature, which has certain elements to it but that over time has been eroded. It has been more cluttered. Seats have come in that do not really function, and light columns that do not work.

This is where some of Paul's work on culture becomes really important, working with architects and designers to clear that out and to create a platform, as in creating a stage or a public space that can be used by the community to host events that really bring some life into it.

**The Chair:** How has this changed as a result of Covid? Is there anything in the project that has been adapted or is different as a result of what has been happening, or is it just that, as you say, things that you were doing have accelerated?

**Cannon Ivers:** A lot of the work that we were undertaking was pre Covid. What I would say has changed as a result is how they are starting to think about using that space, because there will be a hunger to get people back into the town centre and retail streets. For the people who are behind the scenes trying to breathe life into the town centre, it is about what kinds of activities you can bring into existing squares that will attract people back in and allow them to have a sense of vitality in their towns and cities again.

**The Chair:** Thank you. I just was not clear about whether you had adapted things.

Q69 **Baroness Morgan of Cotes:** Without knowing it, Cannon has just set up my question. We have heard fascinating contributions about how things are changing. I would like to know what will happen to the buildings in

these cities and towns. Cannon has just suggested that some of the retail spaces are now too big, and there may be less retail anyway. We heard evidence yesterday that some of our high streets, frankly, need to be knocked down and started again.

Do those of you involved in the property world see retail or office space being converted into residential? Paul rightly talked about the growth in culture. We heard from transport operators about more leisure use in cities, but does that mean that the buildings have to change?

Lara, you mentioned developers. I would be interested to know, but it cannot all be about government funding. Private investment in buildings is important in revitalising cities and towns. What are you hearing from investors that they are prepared to do in relation to investing in our towns and cities? We have Ryan from the RTPI, and Lara and Olafiyin, but it is open particularly to those who look at investment and use of buildings.

**Olafiyin Taiwo:** To answer Nicky's question directly, one of the major funders for a lot of the buildings has been the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It has been a major funder of regeneration activities with regard to buildings. There has been concern about whether these buildings would retain their use as commercial or change to residential. One thing that has been certain throughout the conversations with developers and property owners is that, if there are other economic activities that have been attracted to the town centre, the business activities will be sustained in some areas.

For example, I am working on the heritage regeneration project in Poole, Dorset, which was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. There are some properties there which the developers are going to demolish and rebuild, but they will maintain the heritage status of the building and make sure that the new building retains that style. Some buildings will be demolished by developers, as they are not fit for purpose now and are very dangerous even as standalone buildings, and will be rebuilt for accommodation. The conversation is still about the extent to which they will retain the heritage element, since Poole is a tourist area, in order to ensure that tourism can still bring in economic activity to the city centre.

**Ryan Walker:** A key point is that we should not necessarily cry the death of cities due to the loss of retail on our high streets. Looking at it from a historical point of view, it is a relatively short infatuation that we have had. It is also focused on unsustainable levels of consumption. A movement of our towns and cities, and the spaces and buildings that comprise them, that starts to look at what we have done in the past, when they had more of a role in the provision of community hubs and local spaces for the exchange of ideas, products and relationships, is really important.

The key thing that we should be worried about with the closure of office spaces and retail in particular is in relation to workers. Especially with an increase in the digitalisation of the job market, there will be more job

losses, and that is where our cities and towns need to come in to facilitate upskilling and training within the job market.

Looking at the other side, the reuse of buildings, my experience over the last couple of months, working within planning, is that clients are very focused on quality, not just of the office space itself and the provision that we have out there but its internal and external facilities.

For example, we have a lot of interest coming in at the moment for large-scale office buildings in the city and other areas that are concerned about the end-of-trip user experience. They will potentially even lose a floor of office space, because they know that, throughout the week, a lot of their workers will be working two, three or four days, so there is a bit of spare capacity. How can they change that capacity and turn it into places with high-quality parking facilities that are integrated and secure, and places that have good shower and changing facilities? We also have some people who are looking at creating yoga and meditation space within their office space. It is all about the office workers' and other commercial occupiers' use and quality of experience.

In terms of the configuration of floor space, we are finding that a lot of people are looking to create much larger, flexible floor plates within office buildings, just to fit in with the whole idea of offices having better circulation, being much more modern and coming up to speed with what people want.

That market is quite hot at the moment, and there is a lot of interest within commercial properties to make sure that they are attracting those occupiers who are demanding those things. That is something that the market is having to come forward and adapt to, and I think that is a good thing. It is not just for the internals but for the externals. Is there an opportunity to create balconies that could be greened so that people can go out on breaks, or to create a new plaza outside the office building? It is all about that wider holistic approach to the package for those buildings, and not necessarily who goes inside them.

**Lucy Yu:** To address what these spaces could be repurposed for, we have seen two changes in consumer habits in the pandemic. One is a shift from spending in city centres to local high streets, and the other is a massive acceleration of e-commerce. There was a steady growth until last year, and then a huge increase.

We are seeing, off the back of that, increased demand for and interest in warehousing and distribution centre space in areas that have strong transport connections, such as the areas we are describing, which may now have empty retail units. This is moving away from, for instance, light industrial estates and business parks, with increased interest in these types of locations. An example of this would be Amazon in the US, which has been acquiring some shopping centres to repurpose them as distribution centres.

We are hearing similar demand for dark kitchens, for example, which work alongside takeaway delivery apps, as well as interest from businesses such as vertical farms in using some of this empty space for these types of applications in places that have strong transport connections.

**The Chair:** I just want to make a bit of a presumption, perhaps, for some of you. Please do not feel that just because we are a Select Committee you have to reply in terms that you might think we want to hear. We really want to tap into your imaginations. We are trying to get ideas, such as Lucy's about vertical farms, for how we can use spaces in a different way. This is your moment to sell your ideas. Forget about it being Parliament and a bunch of people who sit on a Select Committee, because what we really want to hear from you is what we cannot get from other people. We have heard about remote working and the changing nature of the high street. We want the exciting visions that you all have through the work that you are doing. I am giving you licence to be as imaginative and creative as I know you all are.

**Lara Kinneir:** I have one short-term and one long-term thought. On the short term, we have already seen it. Developers are changing ground-floor facades and putting in opening vertical windows. That change is happening at that very small scale. We will see something that we saw with the indoor smoking ban, which had a huge impact on the high street and non-private spaces, where people poured out into the street to have their cigarette. It allowed for urban gardens to be created. We will see more of that, because of the public health issues that we have seen in the last year.

On a bigger scale, the other thing that we have seen, which I am seeing more developers respond to, is the human need to connect. I have been lucky enough to have kids at school, so I have been able to still connect with the community by taking my kids to school and picking them up. Lots of people have not had that, so developers are really starting to take seriously the need for spaces to provide that human contact, beyond them having to buy a cup of coffee or to buy something in a shop. More value will be put on that, because ultimately it will create a better, more diverse space if they have people coming to connect beyond the cost of a cup of coffee.

I know that some of the big development sites in London, especially around Tottenham Court Road, have already started looking again at their commercial and F&B leases, because they know that it is too much of a risk to open a new development in the centre of London and put their eggs just in that basket of F&B. They are looking at things like homework clubs, which are spaces that are open to everybody and not put at the back of the development, which is what we have seen up to now.

GP surgeries and other social infrastructure services are often not on the front of a new development, because that is not seen as being the glossy look that they want. I really hope—and I can see some indicators—that

they will be putting people first and that those sorts of uses will be on the front of new developments.

**Q70** **Baroness Benjamin:** Thank you, everyone, for being here. Listening to your thoughts and hearing about what you are all thinking has been really inspirational. I am sure that there is more to come, as Martha has said. As we have all hinted at, culture is food for the soul. Creativity in people's lives is essential. Many of them have been starved of that cultural link and that togetherness from having to do a lot of things online. A lot of people are now thinking differently about how we connect, especially with children, in order to understand the well-being of people who have been starved of culture. I know that the Birmingham Rep has repurposed part of its building for a creative and cultural centre.

When you were speaking, it reminded me of 20 years ago, when I was on the Millennium Commission. Cultural centres such as the Bernie Grant Arts Centre, Rich Mix and the Stephen Lawrence Centre were all set up with money from the Millennium Commission to help local communities to connect together and be creative, especially for young people.

It was interesting hearing you speak, Paul, because you reminded me of those days. If we are going to rethink how we connect with culture and engage with young people especially to find new careers, where is the money going to come from? You mentioned private and public money, but we had the Millennium Commission, which set up a lot of these cultural centres in the past. Where should we be looking for the money? Where is it going to come from and how will the cultural and creative industries play a real part in regenerating towns and cities? Paul, you have talked about this quite deeply.

**Paul Owens:** It is a very good question. The organisations I was talking about are going through a financial crisis. A lot of them are surviving only because of the Culture Recovery Fund and are in receipt of those funds. In future, we have to look at a whole range of sources for this kind of funding. We need to look at how we use the property market as a way of directing funding to these kinds of social and educational uses, and there is a long history of doing that in the UK.

I did some work for the Arts Council about two years ago, trying to look at how we might be able to move forward from simple Section 106 agreements to particular percent for art funds and things like that. We did not really make much progress on that, but it is essential that it comes through the channel of property investment and the value that is created through property investment being channelled back into the local area.

There is another thing that is really important, but which is largely untapped in the UK. I say this as a board member of the Achatas Philanthropy Foundation, which tries to increase private funding of the arts. There is a relatively low level of investment and giving from local businesses into such things. Nevertheless, I believe there is an appetite for it, as long as the connections are made. That area needs to be developed.

In the USA, they draw on large-scale philanthropists. I talked about the Federal Art Project. There is a very big project in New York called Creatives Rebuild New York, which is funded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies.<sup>3</sup> We should be looking to philanthropy as well.

There is no single simple answer, but there is a range of local and national sources that we can look to in the future. A lot of this depends on leadership and co-ordination, with the leaders in the cities being able to work together with the public, private and civil society to pool and direct resources.

**Baroness Benjamin:** It was the Government who set up the Millennium Commission, so is it a government role to bring everybody together?

**Paul Owens:** The Government have an important convening role, but the days of the historical, municipally led approach to cultural provision and funding are over, which is not necessarily a bad thing. The Government have an important role in the future but more as a convenor. There are untapped sources out there.

**Cannon Ivers:** I just want to make the point that culture does not need a building. The building is often the big cost. This chance for us to see public spaces as stages for cultural expression is very valid now. People want more space, fresh air and better ventilation, because they are mindful of what we have learned.

Thinking outside the box and going back to the invitation that we had to offer ideas, I wonder if there is a mechanism to write cultural programming into planning policy, in the same way that we have metrics to deliver a certain amount of play space and green space. Could it be a requirement for developers that are building these new communities to have to have a mechanism that demonstrates their capacity to programme their spaces with cultural events, to reach into local neighbourhoods and to find the institutions that are already doing it, whether it is dance, performance or public art? They would have to demonstrate that they can do that, and it would be a planning condition that has to be discharged before they get planning consent. That seems to me a way in which you could triangulate some of the elements that are already part of planning policy, but also access the vitality and vibrancy that we know culture brings to places.

**Paul Owens:** I completely agree with that. Support is not just money; it is all kinds of other things. So much of the work that I do—and more so post pandemic—is just about co-ordination and about local actors working together and collaborating. The great thing about the opportunity from the experience of the pandemic is that all kinds of new relationships have

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<sup>3</sup> The witness later clarified that Creative Rebuild New York receives no funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies, but does receive support from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and Ford Foundations, as well as its relationship with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

been formed and there is a new understanding of what people can do together. There is a huge opportunity there.

**Joshua Artus:** Can I just wedge a point into Paul's comment about local forms of money? A fantastic report came out of the US from the Drexel University URBN Center, which I can follow up with in a note, which talked about community wealth building. It found that, when municipal pension funds invested their funds outside their local regions in order to get the annuity returns, it was a less effective use of money than investing the money locally in issues to address social inequities.

I am not a money person, but arguably local pension funds putting their money into more secure assets elsewhere is leading to short-term inequities, whether health, social or economic. How do we keep people's pension money benefiting themselves in the short and long term? It is, arguably, no good hoping to have a pension payout when your life sucks. There is a brutal line to that. I can follow up with that report, if anyone is curious. It is a fantastic piece of work that came out by leading urban researcher Bruce Katz, based in the US.

**Olafiyin Taiwo:** There is an organisation in Barking and Dagenham called Every One Every Day. It is funded by multiple philanthropic organisations and government bodies. Its remit is to ensure that all residents are engaged in one project or another. It serves children, adults and people with disabilities. It ensures that there is access to recreation and leisure. It is an example of an organisation that is already there. It was delivering that pre Covid, which is why I did not refer to it. It is an organisation that can go on in its work and share. It has built on the experience from Canada and from several American states in order to create this project. It is a pilot project in Barking and Dagenham that is going on.

Q71 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Can I turn to a totally different subject, which is the whole issue of public health, where local leaders have certainly had to pick up a completely different set of problems after the pandemic, and will, presumably, be thinking about new ideas? I suppose this is particularly directed at Josh, if he could help us with this.

We talked to a council leader yesterday who said that during the pandemic she had spoken every day to the local director of public health. This is a very important responsibility. We all know the figures and the problems that have shown up about urban infection rates. What new ideas and new possibilities are there in the public health sphere to be used in cities and towns?

**Joshua Artus:** That is a great point to bring up. The first issue that needs addressing is how we look at health. Traditionally, we have looked at health from a very individual and perhaps sociological point of view, which means that we question people's health on the food that they eat, the exercise that they do and the lifestyle that they keep.

However, the pandemic highlighted the role of the infrastructure, the system, the ecological environment, and people's influence on their health, by which we mean their exposure to factors such as air pollution and the level of commuting that they had to do. In May 2020, Centric put together a study that looked at the correlation between what we call environmental stressors, such as air and noise pollution. We have a scale that identifies the amount of stressors present in an area and the health risks that they provide. It showed us that there was an overlap and a correlation beyond reasonable doubt that the disproportionate number of deaths that were occurring in London correlated to the areas of disproportionately high levels of stressors.

From the pandemic, we need to grow our understanding of health as a systemic issue, and that means making it an urban planning issue, because the factors that are contributing to these inequities of exposure to air pollution are related to the management of our public realm and activities.

We talked earlier about permitted development rights. I cannot give this quantitatively, but I can give it qualitatively. With permitted development rights, and certainly in major cities, we have seen commercial or light industrial spaces placed with residential. Arguably, we have displaced that physical resource to an area further away, meaning that people needing to access that resource have had to travel further, often pushing people into cars or making access to that resource harder.

There is a risk that, if we continue to just build homes instead of having even the hard infrastructure, all we will do is increase people's distance from spaces, so there is a question about how we allocate resources in order to reduce factors such as air pollution. While low-traffic neighbourhoods are good, they do not change the need for movement.

In engaging with community groups, Centric has found certain concerns that low-traffic neighbourhoods have displaced traffic to slightly higher-population streets, but people also live on high streets. They often live in homes that can have single-pane windows and that are owned by dodgy landlords who do not want to replace them. We are finding a gross inequity coming from there, so we have to measure how we look at reducing the need for travel, rather than trying to displace the vehicles.

When looking at health ecologically and from a system point of view, it becomes an urban planning issue. From a public health point of view, it is very interesting that GPs do not ask, "Where do you live? What's like around your area? Tell me about your daily work pattern".

Two years ago, my business partner met with Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, whose daughter, I think we all know, passed away, the third reason being air pollution. She was never asked, "Where do you live?" It was always, "Your daughter must be different. Your daughter must be"—this or that.

GPs do not ask these questions. We have more points to address the urban environment as a point of understanding. Rather than being classist or even structurally racist and saying, "You don't eat the right foods, according to my version of health", we should be addressing it by going, "You're in an area like this. This is what we need to start tackling".

That sets the scene and the problem. For too long, we have addressed health on an individual basis and not enough on a systemic basis. Maybe an exciting solution—bear with me on this slightly esoteric comment—is to treat the city like a body. The body reacts in real time to factors around it. That is our main route of investigation. Through the field of neuroscience, we can understand how the central nervous system responds to stimuli et cetera. If we treat it like that, the body reacts and produces a response in order to make sure that you can function as a human being. You can function, think and breathe and, behind the scenes, all these things are going on. The problem with cities is that they are continually static and the problems build up.

If we think quite futuristically and ambitiously, why, if we have this great opportunity of smart city sensor networks, are they not collecting air pollution data across a city, as well as things like noise pollution data? These are two things that are insidious in our daily experience.

Heat will also be an increasing problem with climate change. Why is a city's infrastructure not able to be dynamic enough to respond to that? Why can canopy shelters not roll out when we know the heat is going up? Why are there not more ventilation shafts that breath cleaner air into certain areas?

There is an opportunity, which may be futuristic blue-sky thinking, to think about how we combine smart city technology with hard infrastructure and good capital expenditure on this almost industrialised mechanical engineering, as well as the science of what we need from a public health point of view. That is one of the crucial things.

If there is one small key takeaway, it would be that there is no definition of health in the National Planning Policy Framework, which leaves it open to poor, biased or even prejudicial interpretation. This means that, as this scales down the different local planning guides, it is very abstract.

Arguably, we need a biological definition of health that is based on the urban environment, not the social environment. The crucial thing would be for clinical commissioning groups to have a more dynamic engagement with planning authorities and an awareness of how health and place are related on a biological, not sociological, level.

That is the main point. There are a couple of other points, but I will stop there, unless people want me to talk about the fact that there are no new unemployment rights for low-income workers, who are the most affected. We have had the pandemic, but now what? There is an opportunity to do something at a policy level.

**Baroness Jay of Paddington:** We have taken some evidence about that, but that is a very interesting way of looking at it, so thank you. It is certainly a different one. Ryan, you were nodding there. Do you want to add to the points Josh has so helpfully made?

**Ryan Walker:** I do not have much. I am in total agreement with what was being said. The most important form of healthcare is preventive healthcare. When we are looking at our town and city centres, what can we do to remove any exacerbation of health issues that might be prevalent there? As mentioned by Josh, we know that there are systemic inequalities as well.

How this is done in a civic forum, I do not necessarily know, but it is about a repositioning of our urban values and what we want to get from living in those urban spaces of towns and cities. That might mean looking at a health and happiness index, which has been mooted before, as something that we can get wider civic partners, public and private, to buy into, rather than just a gesture. In terms of tangible outputs, there has been increasing interest in urban mental health strategies. After the last year that everyone has lived through, it touches upon everyone, and it would be quite important and interesting to reflect on any insight that comes from that.

Q72 **Lord Pickles:** I have a very simple proposition. For the past 30 years, the number of people living in city and town centres has been measurably going down. What effect will the pandemic have on that? People have found towns and cities to be a place to visit. They visit for work, for shopping or for leisure. Two out of three of those are likely to diminish, so even if the number of people working in offices reduces by 12% and the number of people going into towns by 18%, that will have a big effect.

How are we going to avoid the kind of decimation of city centres that we saw in the United States? I am thinking particularly of towns around Detroit or Baltimore where no one visits, no one wants to set up a business and no one wants to live. Ryan, this is right in your backyard. Explain to me how I am wrong.

**Ryan Walker:** I will not explain how you are wrong, but I will try to come up with an answer for it in some way, shape or form. It will not necessarily be the easiest challenge set this afternoon. One way of addressing that might be to look at why people are moving out of towns and cities, and the attraction of moving elsewhere—pulling in those core elements and components and trying to reintegrate that into our towns and cities.

To give you an example, during the pandemic one of the islands in the Republic of Ireland had managed to install hyper-quick internet connectivity and was positioning itself by saying, “Come here to live. It’s calming. It’s green. It’s relaxing. You can be a gamer. You can be a graphic designer. There’s life here on the island beyond being a sheep farmer”—or whatever else. There were people who are attracted to that.

Again, we have to ask why. Why can we not have that same experience in our town and city centres? We are not going to go back to the same quantity of retail that there has been over the past couple of decades. That is a phase that has moved on, so how do we reposition those town and city centres?

There is no shiny silver bullet that will solve it, but it will be a process, as we said before, of making those town and city centres much more enjoyable spaces that are focused on community and where there is a significant increase in urban biodiversity—towns and cities that improve your health, your mental health and your well-being.

From a practical point of view, a lot of attracting people in is down to affordability. There have been quite good planning methods that try to capture that and to put it into policy in affordable housing terms. We need to keep working on the financial security, affordability and inclusive accessibility of towns and cities to get people back into them. It is great having it all on paper, but how we enact that will be a process of policy and creating place in the short term to attract people.

**Lord Pickles:** Josh, tell me why anybody would want to visit a town or city centre.

**Joshua Artus:** Did Jean-Michel Basquiat have to apply for planning permission to do an exhibition in New York in the early 1980s? He did not. With regard to an earlier question on what we do with the properties, before Centric Lab I was a founding employee of a company called Appear Here, and I have always been involved in connecting creative classes to vacant buildings.

I can tell you that anyone can take an empty space—it does not matter what condition it is in—and create something from it, but there is the prohibitive nature of equality, of treating everyone the same on the high street. It does not matter if you are an SME or a multinational business; the way you can access that real estate is the same.

If we had a different policy structure that allowed young creators to access a space with provided insurance, without having to pay business rates for a certain period, and without having to be charity because of the legal loopholes there, you would find people using space.

Every post-industrial city that grew did so through music and through bands taking over small stores and punking their way through. It came from the arts but because they were able to and were not prohibited. People are creative. People want to do things, but there are a million things in their way. We should work not for equality but for equity, which means that some people are treated differently to make up for the shortfall. If you make things happen, people will come.

**Lara Kinneir:** People are moving because they want space, freedom and opportunity, as a number of people have said before me. I know a lot of people who have moved out of London, especially with young kids,

because they want more flexibility and more space, and cannot afford it in central London. I think we will see a return to inner-city living, because there will be the vacancy.

A tricky topic but one worth mentioning is that we are at risk of seeing some counter-regeneration and counter-gentrification. Those who have been able to move have been able to do so because they have the means to do so. That means that people who are left are at a disadvantage in many ways.

**Lord Pickles:** That is absolutely right. I am not entirely convinced that the Field of Dreams policy, "Build it and they will come", will help somebody like that, even slightly.

**Lara Kinneir:** There will be a series number of challenges to those who have been left behind and cannot get on a train to Bristol or Stroud, or wherever else. There has been an amazing ripple across to the West Country by people I know who are moving out, but is that not what we are trying to address to make sure that we are evolving our approaches so far?

I will go back to what was said about cultural institutions. The Bernie Grant Centre and Rich Mix were the right approach at that time. It is not the right approach now. We will need a lot more of a peppering of cultural infrastructure across smaller towns and high streets as opposed to the big glass buildings that we have had. That is a challenge, especially to places such as the Olympic Park, which are just building some of those big cultural institutions. How do we make sure that they get out of the buildings to the towns and high streets where people have been left and not been able to move out of the city?

**Cannon Ivers:** I wanted to make a point about the amount of nature and the proximity to green space in cities, and I hope to triangulate to the question on public health. I am referencing from a book called *The Nature Fix* by Florence Williams. She makes the point that poverty is visible from space. If you think about that and really try to let that land, it is driven by how much green you see.

If you take a leaf out of what Singapore has done as a city, it has a planning policy that says that any new building or new development has to deliver more green space than was there previously, which has resulted in all the extraordinary things that you see happening in the city. I am hopeful for cities. I am more optimistic, because ultimately it will be the most sustainable way of living. We are not going to be reliant on the car and all the facilities will be there. The element of bringing more nature into cities is a huge opportunity.

**Lord Pickles:** If Gap and House of Fraser go, and if lots of people are not going into offices, I can see a kind of greenery taking place inside inner cities, but it will be tumbleweed. We want to know what government needs to do to ensure that the centres of our towns and cities are vibrant, attractive places for people who want to return and be part of it.

It might be about wanting to live there or for leisure. We want to look at not a Field of Dreams possibility, but what practical things we can do.

**Cannon Ivers:** I agree. We are in a moment where we definitely need to pivot away from those large anchor stores. We have been so reliant on retail in our towns and cities as a method of bringing in people to shop. That is not to say that it is dead in the water. It is about how you create flexibility, going back to Josh's point.

Could those large floor plates that we have be one thing during the day that functions for that use? Could they be libraries in the day and then turn into a night use that brings vitality to the evening? Oftentimes, you go to a high street and it is dead at night, so is there something that we could unlock that makes it easier for places to be more flexible and have day-to-day use that can then shift into something that brings that vitality to the evening economy as well?

You are right that there are huge challenges. I hold my hand to that, but finding ways to bring more nature into cities will also make a massive investment in the long term.

**Lara Kinneir:** In response to your question, government needs to change land value. That is how we will make the changes that we are all suggesting here. That is currently what determines a lot of what happens in towns and cities. How can we change it? I would point to Professor Yolande Barnes at UCL Bartlett Real Estate Institute, who talks about a slow-burn model as opposed to the quick return that has been dominating land value for quite a number of years. Slow-burn seems to be a bit of a solution.

**Lord Pickles:** I understand that and, while I do not want to mix metaphors, the rug has been pulled away. A lot of these big landlords will not be able to get firms to take up the leases. At the moment, they are sat on a load of property that is almost certainly undervalued, so how do you deal with that?

**Olafiyin Taiwo:** To be honest, it will take a lot of collaborative working for us to really achieve something with what is left. One of the things we need to start considering is the 24-hour economy, as was done in South Korea and its high streets. How can we assure that there is life going on 24/7 and something that can attract different demographics to the area? That is a very important issue that we need to start considering. They did it to resurrect their economy, but we can also learn from that and look at what we can do in the UK.

We need to start thinking about drawing investment from the private sector and philanthropic organisations, which we have discussed, and looking at what we can do when ideas are coming forth. If money or access to finance is not a problem, creativity knows no bounds; we are aware of that. A lot of research has been done on the resurrection of the high street in city centres. When Manchester had to regenerate its city centre to ensure that it was successful, it achieved 70% resurrection of

its high street, considering how derelict it was in the past. It is about considering how we can collaborate to attract funding and ideas. We definitely need to redesign the functionality of high streets.

**Q73 Baroness Fraser of Cragmaddie:** One benefit of coming near the end is that I can pick up on a couple of things. I am really glad that, in that last question, we got to inequalities. Listening to all the discussions, I am very struck that a number of you have mentioned collaboration. Lara, you talked about human connections being really important. You also mentioned that people who could move were perhaps in a fortunate position to be able to move. Lucy, you said that some parts of the economy can function like this, including the Houses of Parliament, but there are many people who cannot.

I am thinking about inequalities in age. We have had evidence to this committee about the age profile of cities, and how the pandemic has potentially changed that. Pre Covid, young people wanted to come to the city to work, socialise, live and make new connections. Once you have grown up, got married and started to have a family, you might choose to move elsewhere, if you can. I am just struggling with thinking about how we square the circle in this new world of being able to find places where people of all ages, from different parts of the labour market and the economy, can physically meet to collaborate.

I love Paul's comment about cultural organisations as chess pieces. It is a great comment, but I am not sure I understand what you mean by that. How do we encourage people to shape new cities and towns, so that we are not in a situation where we expect government, business owners or people who are probably in quite fortunate positions to just make the decisions? How do we find that lab space to enable people to build it for themselves, rather than "We build and they come"?

Lara and Paul, I might start with you, because I have quoted you, and maybe Lucy, but others should feel free to chip in. Paul, can you tell me about cultural organisations being chess pieces and what that means?

**Paul Owens:** I was referring to the fact that you can have quite a lot of cultural organisations in city centres that are not necessarily fully integrated or engaged with the public space and the economic life of the city centre, and just trying to open them up more and get them to work together. That was happening before the pandemic and has been accelerated through the pandemic.

I am very conscious that, behind your question, there is the suggestion that we need to avoid a paternalistic approach where we will build it and they will come. There are lots of examples in the UK of cultural organisations or groups working with different parts of the community in that kind of collaborative co-designing way. There is a very interesting organisation in Manchester called the Manchester Arts Sustainability Team, which is 30 organisations that work with young people, community groups and government agencies to address climate change issues and to

think about what kind of city we want to live in, in a more sustainable way.

Artists and cultural organisations are quite good at trying to create those kinds of neutral public spaces where people can meet on common terms to design and think about their future. There is a great project called Climate Conversations, which is a series of vox-pops and discussions that are online and try to do that. There are lots of individual examples of that.

I am not sure that that addresses some of the systemic problems that we talked about, but it is certainly a step in the right direction. Activating artists and cultural organisations as part of a deliberative process of thinking about the future of our cities is hugely important. As I said right at the beginning, the people are there. The organisations and the relationships are there. They just need to be activated.

**Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie:** I agree that cultural organisations are on their knees at the moment and just surviving. I have to declare an interest: I am on the board of Creative Scotland. We have been looking at place-based support, but again I fear that that is a funding body making decisions, potentially. Lara, to square the circle of how we enable collaboration on a more local and more human level, what does the future look like?

**Lara Kinneir:** This is core to the work that I am doing at the minute. I have been looking at the London curriculum that is taught across primary schools in the capital and at how kids are taught about particular historical moments in the development of the city but not taught about the how. Who was involved? Was it a planner, a transport engineer or a philanthropist? I am really interested in how we can make real to our kids the roles that various people have in shaping the city, not just what happens and when.

That could follow through to the citizenship curriculum that happens in secondary school. Where do we teach our young people that they are a fundamental part of shaping the city? Where do we equip them to do that? There is a huge gap in our education in ensuring that they can be active participants.

It is never a case of bringing community groups together on their own. We have examples of that and it works, but we are still hitting a fundamental issue of us against them, and that is repeated across the country when it comes to city and town high street issues. It is a process of conflict between people's different views, wants, desires and futures that they want, so how can we bring people together so that it is not us against them?

It is about creating citizen assemblies that include professionals as well as young people, community groups, politicians and local authority officers. It is only when you get that very cross-public, private and third sector community that we will be able to shape things in a very different

way. That is the future that I really hope we can get to. That is the sort of cross-disciplinary, cross-industry working that I am pushing hard on at the minute.

**Lucy Yu:** I wanted to draw a quick link to a 2019 Lords committee just before the pandemic, looking at the regeneration of seaside towns and communities. We have talked a lot about opportunity on this call. There are also some good links across to that committee. One of the findings from that committee—I hope I am getting the language right—was that they had been neglected for too long, along with a view that Freeports and innovation around ports could be a great opportunity to revitalise those regions. I just wanted to flag that possible link as well.

**Joshua Artus:** I wanted to give two really inspiring examples that we can look at. There is an organisation in the US called Depave. It says, “Depave empowers disenfranchised communities to overcome social and environmental injustices and adapt to climate change through urban re-greening”. It is an initiative that brings together members of the public to identify areas in their local environment that no longer need to be pieces of hard infrastructure. It is a great organisation and feeds into the next one that I want to recommend.

Living Lots NYC was built out of what is called the 596 Acres team, which refers to 596 acres of wasted space in New York City. New York’s land ownership model is slightly different, and it made a register of the landowners of these vacant spots. They were sitting there as redundant spaces, and it enabled people to go, “Hang on. I can do something with that piece of land”. The local municipality was able to offer a form of indemnity to the landowner that, for a short time, that piece of land could be converted into a form of urban park, for example.

Here are two local policy initiatives supported by a piece of technology and a little bit of capital to help support organisations doing something in their local environment. You have to create the infrastructure for people to imagine. You cannot just go, “Good luck”.

I just want to highlight the work of Cassie Robinson from the National Lottery Community Fund, which is based on enabling communities to imagine the future. We cannot create a future if we cannot imagine it. The work that she has been doing is funding organisations to help people imagine what the future can be like. They can then go, “Hang on. There’s an empty lot over there; there’s an empty shop over there. The two of us can come together”. There is a mental mechanism that is needed before a financial and an economic one.

I hope that those two examples from the States can help us think about investing in people’s minds, not just property owners’ pockets.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That feels like a good place to draw us to a close. I know it is hard in these sessions, because there are so many of us and we have lots of different angles that we are coming from, but I appreciate very much your help in helping us think through this important inquiry.

I particularly take away what you have said about collaboration and green spaces. I am struck by some of the future-facing ideas, from farming through to 24-hour high streets. If you want to follow up with anything written, we would always be very happy to receive it. Thank you and have a good rest of the day. More importantly, I hope that you all get some fun and excitement in fabulous towns and cities all over the country this summer, as we start to open up again. Thank you.