



Covid-19 Committee

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

Tuesday 20 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 Craigmaddie; Lord Hain; Lord Harris of Haringey; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Lord Kamall; Baroness Morgan of Cotes; Lord Pickles; Baroness Young of Hornsey.

Evidence Session No. 6

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 74 - 88

Witnesses

I: Rob Stewart, Leader, Swansea City Council; Hazel Simmons MBE, Leader, Luton Borough Council; Stephen Martin, Mayor, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council.

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Examination of witnesses

Rob Stewart, Hazel Simmons and Stephen Martin.

Q74 **The Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the House of Lords Select Committee on the long-term implications of Covid-19. Welcome to our witnesses. Thank you for joining us. I can see that somebody is outside in a suit and tie. Rob, that is very bold. I am enjoying the backdrop; I hope you are not sweltering there. It is very nice of you to join us for our last evidence session of this inquiry.

I just have a couple of housekeeping points. We are being broadcast and we are also being transcribed. We have questions to ask of the witnesses, but, if you would like to jump in, please do raise your hand, speak or make a signal, and I will try to come to you.

We are tasked with looking at the long-term implications of the pandemic on economic and social well-being, and we have done a bunch of work over the last year. We have gathered evidence from all over the country about what people thought were the long-term implications; we have done some work on the hybrid world; we have done some work on parents and families; and now we are looking at the future of towns and cities.

We have had a challenge in thinking about the two to five-year horizon. When we were constituted just over a year ago, nobody imagined that we would still be relatively in the middle of this pandemic a year later. We would really appreciate your help in trying to cast your minds as far forward as possible. We want to be constructive and help the Government think about the longer-term view. We know there are funding challenges now. We know you have had an incredible amount to deal with over the last year. But we are really trying to look at ideas for the future, and at innovations and thoughts and views you have on that two to five-year horizon. We would very much appreciate your help with that task.

I am going to ask everybody to introduce themselves quickly. We have seen your submissions and we have seen your bios, so we do not need a long introduction, but we would like to put names to faces.

Hazel Simmons: Good morning, everybody. I am leader at Luton Council. I am very pleased to be here today. My background is in community development. My work throughout the pandemic has been with my local community here. They have been absolutely sterling. I am hoping that the evidence we can provide today will help you with this programme.

Rob Stewart: Thank you for the invitation today. I am the leader of Swansea Council. I also, for my sins, chair the Swansea Bay City Region, which leads on the delivery of the Swansea Bay city deal. I am also the deputy leader of the Welsh Local Government Association and the spokesperson for economic regeneration and inward investment. I am very happy to be here.

Stephen Martin: Good morning. I am the mayor of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. Lisburn and Castlereagh hug the Greater Belfast area, for anyone who is not aware. I know that there are members on the committee this morning who are very aware of Northern Ireland and our situation here. I am delighted to be able to give perhaps a slightly different perspective. Northern Ireland councils operate a little differently from others across the water in how we go about our leadership and discharge our responsibilities. We do not have a statutory role in health, housing or education, but we punch above our weight. I am very much looking forward to the conversation this morning.

The Chair: I would like to start by asking the three of you whether you have had time to even think about the long-term implications over the last year. How have you been doing that planning, if at all? Again, there is no judgment. We are just interested in whether you have had that time. If you have, what do you think the longest-term impacts will be? Again, I am not asking for an assessment of the present; I am really interested in whether you have had a chance to think about the two to five-year horizon and, if you have, how you are thinking about it.

Stephen Martin: The last 15 months have been difficult and challenging for everyone, particularly in local government. With my other hat on, I work for the health service. It was an interesting experience to work for the health service while also dealing with a lot of the issues that were arising from the community.

We have talked about escalating and accelerating an awful lot over the last 15 months, and that has certainly been very much an aspect of the council experience. As leaders of place, councils had already been thinking about how we can repurpose our city centres and respond to longer-term trends that were already evident on the high street. As part of that, this evolution, in effect, has been ongoing.

We have determined over the last 15 months—this is our key takeaway—that there is a need to try to respond to these trends in a way that links into what communities want to see. Members of our council and officers have been considering that longer-term impact and taking all of the research, from sources such as yourselves and other organisations, to see what the best practice is out there. We have also had the challenge here of the impact of Brexit, which is still currently working itself out in real time, and the impact of the Northern Ireland Assembly not being in operation for three years. We have had an almost triple storm to try to navigate. The pandemic happened at a particular moment in time when the Northern Ireland Assembly had only just got back on its feet.

We have a city centre master plan, which was launched in 2019; it runs until 2023. We are right in the middle of that. As a result of the pandemic, we have had to reprioritise and accelerate various aspects of what we were planning to do already, but also to see how we could support the recovery of businesses, particularly within the hospitality and retail sectors. The circumstances are different, but a lot of the same issues were coming to the fore. Our master plan, as fed in by our

members, has been very much focused on future well-being and resilience. Our city centres used to be places where people came together; they have traditionally been that way. We are looking at how we can create that shared space and ensure we bring people back there, for a more sustainable experience.

We have adapted in the face of those challenges, and we see really exciting opportunities coming forward, with different things such as parklets.

The Chair: I am going to stop you there, Stephen, because we are going to look more in detail at the master plan and some of the different aspects that you are looking at. Is there anything else that you would like to highlight at this stage?

Stephen Martin: You mentioned the longer-term impacts. Our view is that there is no going back. We have to accept change. From that perspective, it is about supporting innovation and the diversification of existing businesses.

We have been working hand in hand with our local chamber of commerce. Traditionally, relationships change; they ebb and flow. Our chamber of commerce has worked really well with us in helping to build and strengthen that city centre offer. They basically told us what they needed, and we told them what we could do. We have met somewhere in the middle in being able to take that forward.

We have worked together to overcome the traditional, or what people might have seen as hidden, barriers by supporting a series of small and independent retailers in particular to set up over the last 15 months. That is something that we would have done traditionally, but we have fast-forwarded it. We have also enhanced our outdoor city spaces and made other improvements. It is about recognising that the city centre is always changing and supporting them in what they want to do next.

The Chair: That is great; we can come on to that in more detail when we talk later.

Rob Stewart: We are very similar to Stephen. In Swansea, we are in the middle of a £1 billion regeneration or repurposing of the city centre. Many of the problems that city centres were facing before Covid have been exacerbated now due to Covid, with the failure of many of the high street chains. Again, the repurposing strategy that we have is very similar. It is trying to take on new purposes and new uses for the buildings in the city centre. We have been very aggressive in buying up property during this period, giving us control so that we can deliver a regeneration strategy.

Some members will know that we bid for City of Culture, and were unsuccessful, just before the pandemic. We have decided to deliver the City of Culture ambition anyway. That means we are delivering a 3,500-seater capacity arena, which will open in a couple of months' time, Covid allowing. That is another reason for people to come and visit our

city centre. It is about the very simple plan of getting more people to work, live and enjoy our city centres. Stephen is absolutely right: that is the place they used to be. With the onset of out-of-town shopping and the internet, people have stopped coming for the reasons that they used to. We have to give them new reasons to come to our city centres.

The Chair: I am sorry, Rob. Can I just stop you there? I can see that Lord Kamall has a question. I would also like you to pick up on the separation between what was happening anyway—the trend, as you say, around internet shopping and so forth—and what you feel has really changed because of the pandemic. Syed, what was your question, please?

Q75 **Lord Kamall:** In fact, that was exactly my question. Both of you have talked about some very exciting regeneration projects to meet the challenges of the future, but what specifically from the last 15 months has changed your thinking about that regeneration? Is it just about making sure that it is done or are there any changes to your plans for the future as a result of the last 15 months' experience?

Rob Stewart: I will try to answer that one directly. The significant change has been that it needs to be public sector-led. The market is telling us that, unless the public sector is in there leading some of this, regeneration will not happen, especially for cities like mine. There has been a step back from the private sector during that period. It is important to get those partnerships right, with private and public together, to deliver the regeneration.

Obviously, the way in which we work has changed. We would never have had a meeting like this prior to Covid. This is going to remain, but I am of the opinion that there will be a drift back to office working and a greater mix in the future: people will spend some time at home and some time in the office, depending on the nature of their job. We are not all going to remain at home when we do not have to. It is not one extreme or the other.

The strategy for us has been around this question: if we have less retail in our city centres as a result of the impact of the Covid pandemic, what do we replace that with? Part of our strategy is working with the UK and Welsh Governments to make the environment healthier. We have the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, which places an obligation on us to think long term about the well-being of our citizens. That includes creating better environments for them to work in, live in and enjoy, and it also gives us the opportunity to build better as we are regenerating. Key to that has been the investment that we get through the city deals from both Governments.

Our next phase will be something like the public sector hub, about which we are in detailed discussions with the UK and Welsh Governments. How that hub is used may be different from the way in which we envisaged it before Covid, because, as I said, working practices might be more fluid. We still need people in our city centres working for a period of time,

shopping and enjoying themselves; otherwise, the economies of the city centres will grind to a halt.

Lord Pickles: Rob was very clear about describing the process and bringing things together, but I would really interested to understand what he is going to do with that process.

Rob Stewart: I am sorry, Lord Pickles. Could you be a bit more specific on that one?

Lord Pickles: You have described the process by which you are bringing things together, with the mix between public and private and the various city deals, but you have not really said what you are going to do with it. This is not a criticism, but the committee would be very grateful if you could explain the changes that you think you need to make because of the pandemic and the way we are all going to live. That would be really helpful to us.

Rob Stewart: That is no problem at all. I was always of the opinion, as leader of Swansea, that we needed to play a much more active role as a council in regeneration and in creating wealth, et cetera. For a long period, given that councils in Wales do not have the powers that councils in England have, we had one hand tied behind our back in being able to compete and enter into markets to deliver services.

Specifically, Lord Pickles, what we are doing is taking a more interventionist role. As I said, we have bought up more property. We are moving our functions from outside city centres, or on the outskirts of city centres, into the core of the city centres to create a greater base of people working there, to create a greater mass.

We are building houses for the first time in 40 years. We are building highly energy-efficient housing for students, which is primarily private but again with support from the council, private living accommodation and of course commercial units as well. We are stepping in where the private sector has stepped back or will not step in unless we are with them. We have just announced a strategic partnership on seven strategic sites across the authority with a private partner. I cannot give you the name, unfortunately, because we are still in the standstill period, but signing up that partner to be part of a longer-term recovery journey is a strategic step that we have taken, knowing that we will not be able to do all of the heavy lifting on our own.

Lord Pickles: If there are going to be more houses in the city, and people are going to be living more in town and city centres, what changes are you going to need to make to services and infrastructure? We essentially want to know what town centres are going to look like.

Rob Stewart: From a very simple high-level perspective, yes, we will have more people living there. We have a very low density of people living in Swansea compared to most city centres, at around about 30%. We need to increase that level. Providing affordable housing in the right locations is the first part. We are lucky enough to have two very strong

and growing universities in Swansea, where student numbers have gone from about 22,000 to 30,000. Again, we are working with the private sector to deliver extra purpose-built student accommodation in city centres, helping with the density of living accommodation in city centres. That is already happening. Most of those are now built. They were in trail at the time, but the point is that they are the right answer to some of the Covid problems.

When you get more people living there and you bring the jobs in, because of the new office blocks that we are creating and the new hubs we are creating both for local services and national services, that gives you a greater momentum and a greater amount of footfall for city centres. You then have further reasons for retailers to come back into city centres, to support the economy.

As I mentioned, we have our large arena complex opening, which will deliver 220 events a year in Swansea. That is 220 days a year when people will come to visit Swansea when they previously did not. It is all of those things coming together.

In summing up, cities such as Swansea need to become destinations in the way, perhaps, that London is, so that people do not choose to go there just to work or to live but for numerous purposes; they tie them all together and have a great time while they are there. That is what we are trying to do post Covid.

Baroness Benjamin: Pop-up businesses seem to be a trend on the high street, partly because of high rents and the uncertainty of business. What effects will it have on your long-term plans if this trend of pop-up businesses continues?

Rob Stewart: We are encouraging it, along with the Welsh Government. In some of the buildings that we have acquired, we are trying to give meanwhile use to some of the units before we find longer-term tenants for them, as part of the regeneration. As we demolish areas to create new public spaces, we are creating new temporary spaces that we will develop later down the road, and we are offering plots in those spaces for pop-ups and others. We see it as a good way to encourage businesses to start up and to help them grow to a scale where they can then go into a formal unit and grow further from there.

We are creating some bigger areas for tech businesses to do similar activities, so that we stop the drain of people who are really good entrepreneurs in our universities. These people have often chosen to go and set up their businesses outside of the region or outside of the city, and then we have lost the investment. We are trying to create the circumstances and environment that make it attractive for them to remain here, grow their business here and then contribute to the local economy.

The Chair: Hazel, could you just go back to my question about the longer-term view and whether you have had time to think about it? What

changes are you making?

Hazel Simmons: First, like my colleagues, we are looking at continuing the regeneration projects that we had started before the pandemic. We have set in place a town centre master plan, but I am aware that you have said that we will cover that later.

It might be useful if I told you about the stabilisation of our airport. As you know, Luton owns an airport, and we have been through a difficult time, as all airports and airlines have. Finding a way to stabilise our airport and grow for the future has been a big part of what we have been doing over the last few months. The airport is so important to the town. When the pandemic came in, we immediately lost £30 million. We have worked hard to develop a stabilisation plan with our airport company, and we now have that in place and a future. I just wanted to raise that in setting the future for the town.

We also put in place a Talk Listen Change project, which was based on talking to our BAME communities about the effects of Covid and how the council might change its services to cater for their needs in a better way. That was very successful. That Talk Listen Change report has just come in now, and we are looking at how we might introduce that.

We have regeneration projects. We have applied for levelling-up funding in the town centre to create a gateway to our town to help develop the high street. Our high street will cater for a mixture of services in the future. As everyone else is saying, they can no longer be reliant on retail. Those are the areas that I thought might give you some background on what we have been looking at in Luton.

Q76 **Baroness Morgan of Cotes:** Thank you to our witnesses so far. We have already covered a bit of this, so I am going to try to ask some specific questions, because we are going to explore some other aspects of the changes from the pandemic.

Hazel, first of all, I want to give you an opportunity to point us in the direction of one change that Luton Council has made to the master plan, which you talked about, as a result of the pandemic. Is there a specific thing that you have changed because of the last 15 months?

Hazel Simmons: Yes, there is. We are developing a town centre park. Attached to that will be a Covid memorial photo mosaic, for which we have received funding through the Welcome Back Fund. Not only will that create a fantastic centrepiece to our town centre but it will give the town an opportunity to participate with photographs, et cetera, to bring back memories of people who have passed away or, indeed, the people who have worked through the pandemic. That is probably one change that links directly with Covid and came out of all that has happened over the last year.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Rob and Stephen, you have both talked about your master plans, so I will not go into that. I am just curious to know, as leaders of your councils, at what point you changed, if you have

changed, from dealing with the immediate day-to-day response to the pandemic to getting yourselves, your cabinet and your councillors to think a bit more about the long-term impacts.

Is there something specific that you can point to—that could be a meeting; Hazel has just talked about the plan for a park—when you switched to thinking about the longer term? Or do you still feel that you are dealing with the day-to-day? Rob, perhaps I could ask you first.

Rob Stewart: Formally, it was probably last summer, as we came out of the first wave. As councils, we go to scrutiny panels, similar to these committees, where we get questioned about where our thinking is and what our response has been. We took the opportunity then to talk not just about all the great actions that were taken by the staff to keep people safe but about what we were planning for the next few months in trying to position ourselves so that we were almost ahead of where we thought we might be.

We were trying to think about what the economy would look like further down the road. Would our master plan or other strategies need to be revised? What would we need to do with our five-year plan after the local government elections next year? What do we want to set out for the people of Swansea about how the post-pandemic world would look? We have probably been at that now for about 12 months.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Have you had to revisit that? Have you had a series of meetings? I am quite interested in what it has meant for you, as the leader of a council, in having to recalibrate.

Rob Stewart: Internally, we have gone through it service by service. We have looked at what education will be like and what social care will be like, and then looked across the range of services that we provide from leisure centres through to libraries and all of the wonderful coastline that we maintain. We have looked at every section of the council and tried to ask, "How has the world changed? How is it likely to continue to change? What will people expect once their freedoms are fully restored?" That is the sort of thing that we are doing.

Externally, we are looking at things such as regeneration, which we talked about earlier. Very simply, the four building blocks are retail, leisure, housing and office space in your city centre. The split between those and where you mix that in your city centre has moved probably a little bit away from retail and more towards leisure, office and housing as a result of some of the changes from Covid.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: Stephen, perhaps I can put the same question to you. At what point did you switch to thinking longer term? Have you had to revisit those longer-term assumptions over the course of the last number of months?

Stephen Martin: For us, the council played a role as a facilitator and enabler for the Stormont Executive in the delivery of a number of their

programmes in the immediate response to the Covid pandemic. It showed an awful lot of what the council was already doing through its connections with the communities in its area.

That gave us an awareness that there was perhaps a disconnect with the public in their understanding of what a council did and the things that go on that are unseen—those things that are perhaps talked about and put out there by the council but perhaps do not land with our residents, our businesses and our visitors. It gave us an opportunity to look at the way we communicate with our citizens to let them know exactly what the council does as a first port of call in the community.

From that, the Covid pandemic allowed a section of the population to relook at and reconsider what the council actually does and engage in a different way with it. Some people might look at the civic building and think that is where councillors are doing this, that and the other. The reality is that so much work was being done at that stage. We have presented it better, and in a much more accessible way for our constituents.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: At what point—I am guessing you have, because you talked about your master plan and the changes you have made to it—during the last 15 months did you switch from thinking about supporting citizens with immediate pandemic needs to thinking about the longer-term implications for your master plan? Is there a specific meeting you can point to or a specific discussion?

Stephen Martin: We worked with Ulster University from September of last year. We commissioned a piece of research to start to inform what the longer term might look like. We all look into the crystal ball, and there is an awful lot of information out there in the media. Everybody foresees this and that, but the reality is that none of us knows how this is going to turn out. The reality is that how a council supports its businesses is very much the here and now.

For us, while we have a master plan that runs to 2023, the one change that perhaps has been very relevant is the hyper-localism aspect of it. Colleagues have talked about parklets, and people needed to see those quick wins on their doorsteps. People were working from home and maybe they had more awareness of what was happening on their doorstep. That gave a little bit of additional credibility to local government to be able to deliver on those longer-term objectives.

Baroness Morgan of Cotes: That is very helpful, thank you.

Q77 **Lord Pickles:** In a lot of the discussions we have had prior to this, a number of people talked about the need for change. We have heard about local neighbourhoods and 20-minute neighbourhoods. I am just wondering what practical things you have done. For example, are you thinking about providing more infrastructure for walking and cycling? Are you increasing access to green spaces for residents? Are you creating more community facilities in line with the idea of being able to work

locally? Perhaps you might like to start us off on this, Hazel.

Hazel Simmons: Cycling routes are part of our town centre master plan. As we know, people have been cycling more, so we have decided to expand our cycling routes through the town.

On green parks, I have mentioned the People's Park, which we have already looked at. We are looking at working in our communities on the parks we already have and how we can get people to use them more. That could be about specific picnic areas and that kind of thing. We have just started on that kind of agenda, looking at how we can improve things.

The one thing I know is that the community in Luton responded extremely well to the pandemic and supported each other so well over the 18 months. We want to capture that and continue that. Working with them, we are setting up a fairness task force to look at fairness across our communities. Through that, we want to work with them more on activities, et cetera, and on what we can build to meet their needs, rather than us just assuming that we know what they want, because they have been so clear on their support for each other during the pandemic. That is more the direction that we are probably going to go on this.

Lord Pickles: Rob, you talked about the changing nature of cities, with less retail and maybe replacing that with leisure facilities and more people living in the city. A move towards retail is going to make your economy more vulnerable to a Covid-like disease. In that expansion towards leisure and living space, are you building anything in to make it resilient? Are you doing anything to ensure that it will be able to exist during another pandemic?

Rob Stewart: The answer is yes. It is not as if we are just moving out of one sector and going into the other. I was trying to explain in my earlier answer that, previously, there had probably been more of a focus on retail, but, given the substantial failures in national chains and others, which have left many units in many shopping areas vacant, we had to rethink the mix of leisure compared to retail, housing and office space. It is just the mix that has changed. Getting the mix right gives you that resilience. If you focus too heavily on just one item, you could end up being significantly hit, depending on what challenges you are dealing with.

If you look at the business models that many of the developers will want to explore, it is that mixed delivery. When they make large developments, they will be a mix of retail or leisure, together with housing and office space all in one block. That is the model that many of the developers follow. In that respect, yes, absolutely, we feel that we have built that in.

We are also working on a metro system. The other thing that is important for all of this is to take the change in travel habits that has occurred during lockdown, so that when people come back to the office they are

able to choose an alternative to bringing their motor vehicle in. Far too many areas in the UK, like Swansea, do not have a reliable transit system, be it a bus or a rail network, to give people an option that is affordable and reliable. Again, working with the Welsh and UK Governments, we have well advanced plans for a metro system in the area, bringing together buses and trains. We are up for helping to run, or being partners in running, those services, if that is the right model. It is about us again being in there.

If I could just make a comment on your previous question, there are some specific actions that we have taken for our businesses to shore them up and help them during this. We have launched a local £20 million recovery fund, which is on top of all the other support from both Governments. That is quite a large fund, given the size of Swansea. It is focused on delivering help. There are £10,000 grants with zero contribution from the businesses to help them improve their businesses. We currently have about 350 to 400 applications for that.

For hospitality businesses, we have turned over outside space—pavements, parks and others—to hospitality operators to help them expand and keep their businesses viable. We have delivered 31 park improvements and new play areas; we have spent about £2.1 million on that. We have doubled our active travel routes for cycle networks, and we are now at a level that competes with other European cities.

We are definitely trying to help on three areas: the economy, health and well-being, and communities. Most of these plans are delivered by the local members themselves, so it is at that ultra-local level.

Lord Pickles: We have had a lot of talk about the mix and what town and city centres are going to look like. Are there any physical changes that we need to make to shops or to leisure facilities to make them more resilient to Covid-like pandemics?

Stephen Martin: For us, the immediate priority in our city centre was making sure that we restored confidence among our residents and our workforce that it was safe to go back into the city centre. There was a nervousness around that, and we noticed that in the numbers and in footfall in our city centre during 2020. A big part of what the council did was, at appropriate stages throughout the year when restrictions were eased, to encourage people back into the city centre. Part of that was about giving people that confidence by having measures and noting that to the public.

Lord Pickles: I am sure that is right, but could I ask you to look a little further ahead as we move out of the pandemic? Looking five years ahead, what is your thinking as to what a city centre or a town centre is going to look like?

Stephen Martin: We looked at how we plan our city centre and how we can encourage business in how they take forward their future investment. We are working hand in hand with a number of businesses to see

whether they need to use the space they have currently in a different way and how we can access other resources that they may not be able to tap into, particularly in the independent sector, with independent businesses that perhaps do not have a multinational or resources sitting behind them.

That spatial panning is really very important for how we take that forward. We have a great heritage here in Lisburn. We have the River Lagan right on our doorstep, which is perhaps underutilised. It will be about connecting our city centre to those areas and those open spaces, which will perhaps expand what the definition of the city centre is, by having that more total approach.

Lord Pickles: The committee would perhaps be grateful for an example of changes in your thinking with regard to spatial strategy. Do you have anything you might be able to offer as a specific example?

Stephen Martin: For us, one example is our greenways. There has been a lot going on across the water, and we talked earlier on about the use of our natural environment. We have that, but it was about that connectivity. We worked with our Department for Infrastructure, which has the responsibility for cycleways, to establish a new one at Blaris, which is just outside of Lisburn, to connect it into the city centre. It has proved really popular.

As a dad of three young children, I was probably at fault as well in my lifestyle; I was always busy doing something and I perhaps used the car too often. The pandemic was an opportunity to look and see what was on our doorstep. You explore the places that you represent, on your doorstep, that perhaps you had not been to in a period of time. That refresh, as it were, helped us in how we look at these things. There is a political pressure now from our constituents to ensure that this is on our doorstep.

One thing I would be very mindful of is the need to perhaps do a little bit more in engaging those who do not have access to resources—that could be time, but also financial resources—to do that. These things are never without a cost.

Q78 **Lord Hain:** In two to five years' time, what types of new businesses do you see in, or do you want to attract into, your town and city centres? For example, if we are to tackle climate change seriously, we have to take recycling seriously. Instead of throwing away consumer goods, maybe they need to be repaired; therefore, you need businesses to do that for you—you need computer shops to fix your hardware and advise you on your software. Do you see the need for fiscal incentives from the Treasury—that is where it would ultimately have to come from—to try to attract those businesses of the future? What might those businesses be?

Rob Stewart: We would very much welcome support from the Treasury to help new businesses in the city centre. Our strategy, as part of the city deal, is to create the right environment, as I said, for technical start-ups,

because we think we are very strong in that area. We have really good spin-outs in the area in the life sciences sector and new medical innovations. We would like support to grow those sorts of businesses.

You are quite right. We have huge climate change ambitions and targets to meet, in both Swansea and Wales. We would certainly welcome any support for changing people's habits, making it easy for people to make the changes that are necessary and for businesses to be successful in a circular economy.

One that we are very keen on, as you may be aware, is the next generation of housebuilding. This is about not building houses that are not energy-efficient and ensuring that they are houses that are not only good for the environment but good for the people living in, by reducing or eliminating their energy bills. At the moment, we are working to deliver those sorts of houses. Of course, we can go further. Through the creation of the national forest, a circular economy and a housebuilding network, we can create that pool economy and ecosystem, to deliver the raw materials and the skills, and therefore to deliver the housing. We would very much welcome that.

The final thing I would say is this. On Treasury support and Welsh Government support, we are very keen on local recovery zones being established. This is very similar to the enterprise zones that were so successful in the 1980s in turning the economy around. Local recovery zones would be a really good assistance to towns and cities, to attract businesses back in without the unnecessary barriers to—

Lord Hain: I am sorry to cut across. What would that actually mean? Is that like business rates holidays continuing for ever, and things like that?

Rob Stewart: It could absolutely be an incentive, where business rates are not payable to the same level in those areas. It could also mean that you could qualify for specific grants and assistance in those zones. There are a number of ways in which we could support businesses to take the opportunity to move into the city centre. We know that city centres can often be more expensive to operate in than out-of-town units, which are often cheaper. Those local recovery zones, based around our towns and cities, would be a really good advantage and a super-boost for our city centres.

Lord Hain: Hazel, could I come to you and then ask Stephen to follow, specifically on incentives to get the businesses of the future that are not there now?

Hazel Simmons: Yes, it is quite interesting. We have just lost Marks & Spencer and Debenhams from our city centre, and they are both large store areas. We are looking at how we might work to offer public sector health facilities and retail in the same building in the centre, in an attempt to bring people into the town and to share the cost of renting the property. That is one area that we are looking at: how the private sector and the public sector can work in a better way.

In Luton, having more of the food industry in our town centre—I do not mean takeaway food; I mean restaurants—with different kinds of shops, like Chaiiwala or something that provides tea, et cetera, and having more independent retailers, would change the tone of the area and bring more people back into the town. If we have more of that, alongside more cultural and creative activities in the town, and the development—if we get the levelling-up funding from the Government—of the gateway to the town, which will provide additional housing, it would change the emphasis of our town and allow it to expand.

Lord Hain: Stephen, in five years' time, what businesses will you need? How do you foresee getting them into the centre?

Stephen Martin: Rob and Hazel mentioned earlier the destination-type status for our city centre. That is what we would all want to see: a place where our citizens can come together, and it be a unique place in that sense. What we have tried to do in our own city centre is to offer a distinctive offering. We are so close to Belfast, as you all know, and we have to be complementary to that Greater Belfast region. There is no point being in competition with a larger area.

We have noticed that a lot of our residents who are working from home are now accessing goods and services in the local area, as opposed to spending money elsewhere. We probably have a slightly different opportunity from others, in the sense that, where there has been a flight of workers in certain areas, we perhaps have a deeper—

The Chair: I am sorry to interrupt you, Stephen. Apologies, Peter; I think you need to mute your audio. I am sorry to interrupt you. That is much better. Thank you. Do carry on Stephen. It was hard to hear you.

Stephen Martin: That is no problem. From our perspective, our locality and proximity to Belfast has, in one sense, given us an unexpected opportunity. Many more of our residents are working from home, and therefore need to access goods and services. While we will continue on the independent retail offering, what we would probably ask from Government is around capacity-building, more than anything else.

We talked about pop-up units earlier on. They are brilliant, particularly for young people or people who are perhaps returning to the workforce. They can be an opportunity to test the waters. That should be really strongly encouraged. We have seen that locally, particularly around female entrepreneurship. We want to see that, and we want to be able to facilitate that. We want to be a hub, or a safe place to experiment, when it comes to entrepreneurship. We should not be afraid of risk or things going wrong; the council should be there to facilitate those people to move on. That is the danger area—zero to five years from the start-up of your business. If the council can add that added value, we would be doing well.

On funding to support economic growth, from our perspective the application of that probably needs to be simplified, both in how we go out

and engage with our businesses and in how we access that on a regional and national basis. We are all about targeting the local need; we all want to do that. It is about ensuring that we prioritise that in the right way.

Q79 Lord Kamall: I tend to think in pictures. When, for example, there is a development in a particular area, the public affairs consultants will send out glossy brochures and have an exhibition to show you a wonderful new high street. It is very easy, virtually sitting in Westminster, to look at towns and cities in a monolithic way, but there are variations and real differences between them.

Clearly, you have all faced challenges with chains moving out, for example, but what does this high street look like? One picture I have heard of is that the ground floors will be very much experiential, with local government or libraries, or a combination of coffee shops and workspaces, and the floors above will be housing. Is that a potential vision, or is the vision very different? I just want to get some ideas about what it would actually look like. Will the ground floors be experiential, with a bit of retail and a bit of workspace, et cetera, with the top floors as accommodation? I saw Rob nodding, so perhaps we'll start with him.

Rob Stewart: For us in Swansea, the answer is yes. It is not actually new. If you think about it, when you walk around London, that is what you see. Most of the ground floors are commercial, and then you have residential or office space above. It is about having that mix.

On how the high street will feel, rather than look, you are right in what you said, but of course we want our high streets to be greener as well, and much healthier environments. There will probably be more government services in high streets, as you said, because we are moving libraries into core areas, again because it adds to footfall and because it places that library on a bus route or a place where people can get to it more easily. It is about that place-based planning.

We are looking more at pedestrians, rather than motor cars. We are changing the balance there, because that will help the environment. We have to take the opportunity here to ask whether, coming out of Covid, we can build something better. We will not just deliver the ordinary; we will deliver something special and a place where people really want to be. That is the point. You are competing a lot here, because people now have so many choices on how to shop and what to do. You have to make a compelling case for people to come to your area and spend time in your city or community. That is what we need to do. It is all about place-making, with the right services and the right reasons for people to visit. It is about making it a destination.

Hazel Simmons: When we went out to consult on the town centre master plan, the public clearly said that they wanted safe family areas. That is what they see their town centres being. Creating a centre where you have housing, shops and services seems to be sensible in making a place where people will want to come, where they will want to eat and where they might want to go to a cultural or creative event of some sort.

We are opening up the River Lea, as part of our development in the centre, to give people the opportunity to sit by the river in their town centre, and also to go to the library, if that is what they want to do.

In the past, town centres have always been the place where you went to shop; that is what it was all about. We have to rethink that. We do not want to do away with businesses in our town centres, because people will still want to shop and will still want to eat. It is how you mix that in with other services that they might want. It is about having in the town centre what we have called creative hubs. They are not formulated, but that is what we are thinking: hubs of different things.

That is why I talk about independent shops coming in, because they not only create employment and give entrepreneurs opportunities but bring different services to people. That is the message that came from the public.

Stephen Martin: One part of this that sometimes gets missed is around accessibility. All communities are, in effect, an ecosystem, and they are all connected to each other. Where we are in Lisburn, we are connected to Belfast but also the neighbouring villages of Hillsborough, Moira and Glenavy. They are all connected. In a way, perhaps historically there is an element of competition. People feel like they have to offer the same thing to be able to attract people in. When you operate in a relatively small community such as Northern Ireland, which has nearly 2 million people, synergies exist. We can be unique.

From Lisburn's perspective, as Hazel and Rob said, we will be looking at hospitality, but we also have vacant units that are no longer Disability Discrimination Act-compliant and are perhaps not able to be brought back into use. There may be some interesting decisions to be taken over the next couple of years as to whether they have to be redeveloped in some way or another, rather than simply filled. That is the first point.

Secondly, speaking as someone who is at that stage in life, how do we engage families? We have a great arts service here and we have a city centre management events team that engages and brings people into the city centre through its programme of events, which we have not been able to do through Covid. How do we ensure that that is sustainable going forward? Do we look at small play areas, perhaps? We have talked about outdoor gyms before for our parks. Do we look at how we engage younger people and primary-school children, so that parents can do what they need to do?

There is also a piece around hotdesking and shared space for working. That was a trend beforehand; will that accelerate? If people are working in the city centre maybe two days a week, instead of going to their place of work, will that encourage them to come in at the weekends with their families? We probably still have a bit of work to do on the family demographic.

Q80 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** Last week, we had the Prime Minister's

speech on levelling up. I am sure you were all looking forward to it. It was a little thin on specifics. Indeed, the only one that I could spot was a suggestion of more directly elected mayors or directly elected sheriffs in shire areas. I do not want to get into the rather fun debate about whether directly elected mayors and so on are a good or bad thing. I am more in favour of them than many people.

I am interested in what the powers of either council leaders like yourselves or directly elected officials should be. What would make a difference? It is not clear to me that the speech was really relating to Wales and Northern Ireland, but nonetheless I would be interested in your views there. Councillor Stewart talked about potentially having more commercial powers in terms of influencing what happened and enabling the local authority to take control and directly deliver things. Councillor Simmons talked about wanting more independent retailers. I would be interested to know whether that could be achieved with specific planning powers; you could ban Starbucks in favour of more independent coffee shops or whatever it might be.

I would be interested in this question about what extra powers you would like to manage the transformation of your town centres in the years ahead. Shall we start with Alderman Martin, on the basis that Northern Ireland was not mentioned at all?

Stephen Martin: Given the unique situation here, directly elected mayors may be something that is not on our horizon for a good period of time. In that sense, local government in Northern Ireland is perhaps a real model for how things can be achieved, particularly in a contested society such as ours. We largely leave a lot of the party-political things at the door and focus on what needs to be done in our local communities.

One thing that local government as a sector would like to see—it is not something our Westminster colleagues can deliver—is that regeneration piece. Our councils were reorganised in 2015, and there was a decision made by our local assembly that regeneration authority would remain with our Department for Communities, for their own reasons. As a sector, local government sees this as an opportunity to lead on this through community-based solutions. We have inner-city areas where we feel that regeneration driven by the council can give a real sense of ownership to those who reside and work in these places or adjacent to them. That can give a real sense of confidence back in areas that have perhaps been left behind. From that perspective, it is probably more of a local ask, and we will continue to lobby to get that done.

The one thing that we need, speaking more generally, is time. There is this focus at the present moment on time: “We need to do this; we need to do that. We have to make sure we get our quick wins”. Those are important in terms of building that confidence, but, if it takes a further period of time to bottom out where we are going to end up with Covid and the outworkings of it, it is time well spent. We should gather evidence and consider our next steps, as opposed to jumping in and

making a commitment or rushing a programme out the door, only to find that was resource we could have used better in 12 months' time.

I share the sentiment that we need to build back better to get going and to get that acceleration piece moved on, but there are still elements of this in terms of mental well-being and physical health that perhaps we just have not seen. We have not even bottomed out where we are going to go with it, and so we may wish to shape our future plans slightly differently. That time aspect and avenues such as this, to collect the evidence and then determine where we go with it, will be a big part of what we do next.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Councillor Stewart, you talked about having more flexibility in terms of commercial issues. Do you want to flesh that out? Give us a list of powers that we ought to recommend.

Rob Stewart: One of the powers is already being delivered as part of the Wales Bill that will come into force shortly, but for those who may not be aware, in Wales councils have to rely on a specific power to do something rather than the position in England, where you can do anything as long as it is lawful. To give you a tangible example, in Swansea I can run and own a pub but I cannot build a hotel. In our recent development where we are building an arena and we have a hotel going next to it, we have had to go through a very convoluted procurement route to try to get that facility created.

It is a real sea change for Welsh councils to be able now to do as English councils have been able to do for many years, which is to step into the marketplace, offer services, make investments and do all sorts of things that give us the powers to raise more revenue, diversify more and not be so reliant just on tax-raising powers. It is a really important change.

What more would we like? It is really difficult. I have had a number of conversations with Mr Jenrick and the Secretary of State for Wales, Simon Hart. We need to know more about what levelling up actually means and what the measures will be, to be reassured it is not just a slogan but will actually mean a fairer share of the UK's resources across the regions of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

It is even more difficult in Wales because we have the Welsh Government's policies, which we try to align to, and we have the UK Government's policies. Of course, the UK government policies and Welsh government policies may be different on certain items, and yet we are trying to put together, as Stephen said, a strategic set of deliveries that meet the needs of both Governments.

I am very keen that at a local level we get more powers to control our destiny in terms of knowing what it is our communities need to be successful, rather than bidding. I will give you another tangible example. In the recent community renewal fund process, the deadlines were so restrictive that we had to get the bids in by mid-June. They had to be projects that could be delivered by next March, so that constricts very

deeply what you can do to be strategic, because then you have to find something that fits the criteria, rather than actually doing something that is the right thing to do.

Again, one of the pleas about levelling up, the shared prosperity fund and so on is, "Give us time to understand what the rules of the game are, so that we can plan effectively to give you the best projects to make the best difference to our communities".

Lord Harris of Haringey: To paraphrase, you are looking for more powers to intervene at a strategic level. You are looking, where there is government resource, to be given flexibility as to how you use it, and you certainly want longer timescales for the bidding process to plan the most effective intervention. All Ministers, whatever their party, enjoy having this power to pick and choose which ones go forward.

Rob Stewart: Yes, absolutely.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Councillor Simmons, I am sure the Prime Minister's speech was aimed at you.

Hazel Simmons: I tend to agree with my colleagues. We need some time to think about this and to be sure that there is a genuineness about the levelling up between us all.

It is not about having powers over commercial developments, necessarily; it is having powers that say, "We want to develop our town to the benefit of the people who live here", and sometimes it might be that having that shop there is not the most sensible thing to do. We do not want to destroy business either, so it is how you manage that.

It is also having more powers over how much rent can be charged in town centres. Sometimes that can be a reason why town centres struggle and will struggle to renew when the rents in a town centre are so very high. Having some powers over how much you can charge for something would be helpful.

Q81 **Lord Kamall:** I am sure you recognise that a number of the questions overlap each other, so I am going to ask you to home in on one particular issue, innovation. You can define that how you want. It can be technology innovation or other innovations. One of the witnesses has already said, if you think about the way we are having this meeting now, that will change some meetings in the future; particularly over a distance, they will not have to be in person. What changes and innovations do you think will arise as a result of the pandemic and how you respond to that?

I know there is a lot of overlap with other questions, but I particularly want you to focus on innovation and a time horizon of five to 10 years. I know that is a bit of blue-sky thinking and crystal-ball gazing, but we would like to hear your view on innovation as a result of the pandemic and how that changes in the future.

Rob Stewart: On crystal-ball gazing, if we knew the answer to that we would all be on our way to being millionaires, but I will have a go. The technology that we are all using in our day-to-day lives now, which we have embedded in the way we do things, is going to open up further opportunities going forward for us to cut car journeys, for instance, so that people perhaps will not have to travel to their GPs to get consultations. Some of those things will be done online. Remote delivery of service will increase.

That fits into how transport changes. With the onset of fifth-generation technologies and the opportunities that hang off that technology for things like drone deliveries and driverless cars, we will see an acceleration in how technology is embedded in our day-to-day life and the normality of technology in allowing us to do things in different ways. That is one of the things we will retain longer term from Covid.

Lord Kamall: As a local authority, how do you see your role in that? Do you just sit back and let the market do it, or do you have to play a role in encouraging, for example, better infrastructure and pushing telecoms companies and others to make sure that you have reasonable coverage?

Rob Stewart: It is both. Through things like the city deal, we create the ability for entrepreneurs to create those new innovations and support them to become successful. We then become users and consumers of that.

For instance, at the moment there is a project about to begin on something as simple as smart bins. It is a pretty neat bit of the technology. It allows us, as a local authority, not to have to visit every bin in our local authority. We just go to the ones that are full, so it gives us a benefit and is a better service for the public, because then we do not get overflowing bins in communities or in areas where we have had high footfall because of the good weather. Those neat innovations in technology will continue to be rolled out. We become early adopters of those and we can help that innovation grow and the companies that provide them be successful.

Hazel Simmons: There will be innovations around technology. I do not want to repeat what Rob has already said. We will look to how we use technology in providing services in a better way for our community. That is an obvious thing.

The innovation that sticks for me is how we work with our communities in the future. The pandemic has taught us a different way of working with our communities. In all that we are doing through our 2040 agenda and our whole levelling-up agenda, we are trying to work with our community on what is developed in their town. Whether it be through the fairness task force, the webinars we hold with our faith groups or face-to-face meetings we may have, the way we work and involve our communities in whatever we are developing has to be our biggest innovation in my town.

Lord Kamall: Can I ask you a variation on that? You are very lucky to

have diverse communities in your area. Has your experience of the last 15 months made you think, “I need to interact with that specific community in a different way”, or are you interacting with all communities in a very similar way? I am sorry if that is very abstract.

Hazel Simmons: No, it is across the board. We have always communicated with all our communities, and our communities get on with each other. It is not an issue of that sort. When we talk about communities we talk about them all, but what we might provide for one community might be different to another community. Lots of councils do that anyway. I am thinking of female-only swimming or something of that nature. That will be based on what the communities are telling us they would like. I know, coming out of the research we did around Covid, that one of the things that communities have asked for is more communication.

Stephen Martin: I will keep my contribution on this relatively brief. My two colleagues have covered most of it. That community ownership piece is really important. The community and council are a lot closer together in how they do things. I am really interested to see what comes via our communities and what they want to bring to the table. They may want to take change of our public realm scheme in terms of their own events, creating festivals and their own ambience for everybody to enjoy. Particularly in Northern Ireland, our city centres have a role to play in that shared space. The council can ensure, through good planning and good relationship-building, that we can use the assets we already have in order to make that place alive for everybody.

You mentioned the word “innovation”. Sometimes it gets bandied around in terms of, “This is important. We need to do innovation”. Innovation comes in the unlikeliest places, as you have pointed out with how the pandemic has changed the way we work. We can improve our city centres, but innovation is the key catalyst for how we make sure that this goes forward. It could be innovation in the smallest of ways—just connecting another person to a group or an individual. If we get that right, the basis for a strong economy is right there in front of us.

The additionality around that would be that as a council we are very much part of the Belfast region city deal and a new initiative, the Belfast-Dublin economic corridor. Innovations such as Zoom allow greater accessibility for members, decision-makers and the community. We can work on these things at a high level, but if we do not bring the people who are most directly affected with us, we will not get to where we need to go. I am excited about the potential opportunities that might arise from that more macro-strategic perspective also.

Q82 Lord Alderdice: We have talked about businesses, buildings and innovation and technology, but I would like to ask about what you see in the next five to 10 years as far as people are concerned. Post Maastricht, and in the case of Northern Ireland post the Good Friday agreement, there were lots of workers coming in from various places—within the EU but much more widely than that—and taking up jobs in hospitality, in all

kinds of service industries, in agriculture and so on. It appears that, as a result of the pandemic and indeed other developments, many of these workers have returned home. That has left difficulties, for example, in opening up hospitality and other areas such as agriculture, as I say.

Do you see that kind of change as being semi-permanent, or do you think that it will be possible for people post the pandemic to start to travel for work and so on? Have you in your own three areas noticed this kind of change taking place? Maybe it is taking place in areas other than yours. People who were travelling out of country for work have gone home. Will they come back? If not, how are you going to deal with that?

Hazel Simmons: At the moment getting people back into employment is a big task. In Luton skills are a large part of what I would hope to see improve over the next five years for our local people. We know that digitalisation and things like automation are going to be changes in industry over the next few years. If people do not renew skills or get new skills, unfortunately, unemployment is going to be an issue. My biggest agenda and the agenda that we are looking at through our 2040 plans is around skills development—skills in the aviation industry and skills development in other industries. One of the main areas that we need to focus on is digitalisation and giving people those digital skills to take on new employment.

Lord Alderdice: Rob and Stephen, have you noticed any of the transitory workers disappearing off and leaving gaps in employment in various areas—service, hospitality and so on? If so, will they come back? If not, how will you replace them?

Rob Stewart: We have certainly seen shortages in hospitality in this region. I am not sure whether that is entirely due to Brexit or whether it is because when hospitality was closed, people sought other employment to try to make sure that they could still pay their bills. I still feel very saddened that, unfortunately, we lost lots of really good workers and really good skills due to the nature of the arrangements that are now in place post Brexit. I am not confident that people will return and I feel sad that not only are we losing the skills for our economy, which we will need to work very hard to try to replace and to upskill people in our communities to try to fill these roles, but also we have lost as a nation the ability to work elsewhere. That is really sad.

The Brexit impacts of this are somewhat masked at the moment by the Covid impacts, but longer term, as we get back to more normality, I foresee shortages in lots of areas, specifically in places such as construction and farming. We have seen stories recently of crops going unpicked because of a lack of workers. All of those things are suppressed at the moment by Covid. We will see them to a greater extent as the realities of the new arrangements come to pass.

Lord Alderdice: Stephen, what about you? I noticed that there were lots of supermarkets with shelves specifically of Polish food, for example, because of the number of Polish workers who were coming to work in

Northern Ireland post the Good Friday agreement. Many of them have gone back home again. Have you noticed any of these things? If so, what thoughts do you have about addressing them?

Stephen Martin: From our perspective, to support what has just been said, we are still at the early stages of the outworkings of this, but there has been an immediate impact of both Brexit and Covid on the employment and labour issues. We have noticed it particularly within hospitality. It is hard work in the hospitality industry. It is long hours, but our partners in that sector would tell you that at present it is nearly impossible to recruit, particularly chefs. That seems to be very much sector-specific to hospitality. We are working with them to try to access the skills and the training courses, particularly to get people into that, but that will take time, so there is going to be an interim period, and that is very much related to Covid. You can see how people have gone on different career paths from that, having had a break from that particular industry.

As Lord Alderdice will be aware, we have spent an awful lot of time and energy on our tourism industry. We are very confident and hope that it will come back again. We need a vibrant and thriving hospitality industry and we are very proud of our home-grown product, so we would see that locally as a priority.

Also in terms of Brexit, we have as a community diversified over the last 15 years. That has been very evident by the fact that we have had immigration into Northern Ireland rather than our own people leaving to go elsewhere in the world. That has been a decades long, or perhaps even longer, movement. It was a real benefit to us that we had friends from other parts of the world come and settle here in Northern Ireland.

We are seeing the outworkings of that. Even walking down the high street yesterday, you can see that difference all around you. It has manifested itself in new ventures, businesses and opportunities for us all and changed, more importantly, culturally our outlook on the world. Yes, it has been difficult at times. There have been incidences where that has been a challenge, but we have got there.

We said before about there being no going back. We cannot go back and we need to embrace that diversity that is on offer to us and give them a good Northern Irish hearty welcome when we have that opportunity. We are seeing shortages in particular sectors and we imagine that will continue. The difficulty for us will be identifying that quickly enough and having courses and access to opportunities for particularly young people and those who have perhaps been hardest hit through the pandemic. That is easier said than done. We can put these programmes in place. You talk to our further education colleagues. We can put them in place, but how do we get to a point where we can reach those who perhaps would benefit from it?

You will be aware that HGV drivers is something our council has been focused on over the last two years. We have a cohort of people who want

to get into that industry, but getting past the educational barriers that are hidden sometimes is where the effort and resource need to go for us.

Q83 Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: The previous question about innovation and discussions around people and skills lead nicely on to my question, which is about how you see the role of culture in building back better. Rob, you mentioned at the beginning events and things like that, but there is also the wider sphere of culture and the creative industries, which can often have a role in supporting the development of new skills and businesses. I am going to come to you first, Hazel, because you were the one who mentioned creative hubs in Luton. Could you give us some examples of how you see culture and the creative industries playing a role in how we build back better?

Hazel Simmons: We have a creative leaders group in Luton, which is looking at developing different types of hubs in the town, which people can go along to and experience different sorts of creative media or activities. We are also looking at a new performance venue as part of our levelling-up fund. We have a lot of people in the town with musical skills, but they do not have the options to go out and play outside, so it is about how we develop our communities.

A while ago we developed a cultural quarter called the Hat area. They have hat museums down there, as well as areas where you can portray all the paintings from the town. That has become our cultural hub. We have a big venue that can host performances, but we also have other hubs that provide other facilities.

When we talk about hubs we are talking about hubs of various types of cultures. The creation of these hubs and the development of cultural activities, whether it is the local festival or whatever it is you are developing, is going to be absolutely vital not only for people's mental health but for enabling them to go out and take part in things. The development of culture over the next five years will be very important.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Are your creative leaders council staff? Is this part of a council-led initiative, or are you talking to creative industries locally and wider?

Hazel Simmons: No, it is the creative industries sector. They are leaders from the creative industries. We have council officers that manage the administration and things, but, no, they are leaders from our local community.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Stephen, you have talked about the great heritage of your area. Hazel and you also said about the importance of culture for well-being and mental health. How do you see the role of culture and the creative industries in building back better?

Stephen Martin: The pandemic gave an opportunity for people to re-engage with the arts. Perhaps they would not have had time previously, whether it is families who were managing working from home or people who were furloughed and had additional time on their hands.

Our council took the opportunity to reinvent how we presented our arts offering. We have a museum here in Lisburn and it is the centre of the city, but the footfall would have been perhaps less than we would have expected, given its location. The pandemic required everybody, in effect, to think differently. We engaged new technology and went online, and the feedback from that has been phenomenal. That is largely because people did not realise what was behind those doors.

Buildings were mentioned earlier on, and a focus on buildings sometimes masks what goes on behind those doors. It is about knowing, if you have not had a track record or a background in these things, you can engage with it. You can find out more.

When we talk about culture in Northern Ireland the conversation can go on different tangents, but we are very proud of it. We are very proud of our shared culture and one of the things our council did through that museum offering was to look at how we would mark the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Northern Ireland, which brings with it different tests at a few points in how we do that. It was brilliant how the arts team and the museum team were able to bring together political individuals from different perspectives and put forward a programme that was based on the facts and historic evidence. We were able to produce that and present the narrative around that. That proved really useful.

One of the things that came from that was that the talks associated with it, which are not necessarily something that people who are not involved in these things would devote an hour or two to viewing, actually got great viewership online, because people thought, "That sounds interesting. I have a free half an hour here. I can come back to it and watch it". We reached a lot more people because of that, so there was an impact that we want to hold on to—connecting to people who perhaps just would not have engaged with the arts beforehand, and increasing that understanding.

As Hazel said, we use the outdoors. Our community arts team did a great outdoors exhibition and, during the height of Covid, went round our residential care homes and did an outside play, which was put on a PA system and broadcast into the nursing home. You can think outside the box there, but in terms of the technology, that is an enabler for us going forward for our creative and cultural output.

Baroness Fraser of Cragmaddie: Earlier questions asked whether you had changed things in your masterplan because of the pandemic, and you have just given us two fabulous examples of creative collaboration because of the pandemic, but we are trying to look two, three or five years ahead. Have you made any changes to how you envisage your plan from that creative standpoint because of the successes you have just illustrated to us?

Stephen Martin: Our masterplan is for a four-year period, and those relationships that have been built will spur the conversation for the next masterplan, for which work will begin very shortly for the period post

2023. I would say this as the mayor, but we have a really wonderful arts team, and they do fantastic work locally.

Again, it is this idea of connecting to those who perhaps would not have thought about, or are perhaps embarrassed about, engaging with this type of thought-provoking opportunity. It is about removing some of the hidden barriers and joining the dots. In terms of our masterplan, the next piece of work we will be doing is joining those dots and considering how we can better connect particularly those communities that would really benefit from that engagement, but perhaps thought that they could not. There are myriad reasons why that would be the case, but the opportunity to bring them into the fold and expand what we do is really exciting and we should spend time on it.

In a crisis like this, the danger is that we perhaps leave the arts and creative sector to one side, let it get on with doing what it normally does and do not give it the resource or the attention it requires. We would be remiss if we allowed this moment in time to pass without not just standing still but enhancing what our colleagues in the arts sector do.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: I would agree with you on that, particularly with the discussion we have just around skills and the need for developing new skills. I would really encourage you to think that the creative industries have a role in that. Rob, you have been talking about bringing events to Swansea, but also about how you use space for entrepreneurs and for businesses to grow. Have the creative industries a role to play in this? Have you had any thoughts in your area about how you believe culture and the creative industries can support us to build back better?

Rob Stewart: Yes, absolutely. I agree with you. Culture is not just about creating the new venues and bringing acts to perform in a certain location. What I was referencing in my earlier answer was the fact that we had bid to be UK City of Culture. We had a well-worked-through strategy for how we would deliver that year of culture, with all of the legacy impacts on communities, et cetera, but one of the aspects, which we have delivered in the meantime, has been this new venue—a fantastic new digital arena in the city centre that will open later this year. It is part of a wider strategy.

We have very good and strong heritage claims to be a real City of Culture not just for Wales but for the UK, in terms of Dylan Thomas and our history with the copper industry and Copperopolis. We are taking the opportunity as well, as part of this build back better strategy, to bring a lot of our cultural venues back into use and to turn over some of the commercial space to cultural enterprises—opening up mini-galleries and supporting artists to take on premises without the costs they would otherwise face. We are trying to boost the grassroots-level cultural innovation that is there.

At the more strategic level, we were already looking again at repopulating the region with larger commercial and creative industries. In

terms of the city deal, for instance, we delivered what we called the Yr Egin project, which moved a lot of the creative industries that were based in other parts of the country to locations in Carmarthenshire, just a few miles from Swansea. That is now 90% full in terms of business occupancy. Together with our digital strategy, it has allowed those creative industries to service their customers from a more rural location, so it proved the point that you do not need necessarily to be in London to be successful in the creative industries in terms of media and other stuff. We were already delivering that strategy prior to Covid.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: That was going to be my question. If you were already doing that prior to Covid, what difference has Covid made in your support of, and your working with, the creative industries?

Rob Stewart: Again, the premise underneath all of these questions is that Covid will have changed what you do. For a lot of things it has not necessarily changed what you do but it has speeded up your route to getting there. It has allowed us to make more progress more quickly in some areas and to knock down some of the barriers that people will have seen or perceived to be there. It has changed the way people work and interact, which has allowed a new way of working, innovating and coming together. It has accelerated sometimes the things that we wanted or were aiming to do. It has allowed us to realise our ambitions a little sooner.

Again, we just have to be careful. Not everything that Covid has changed is about the fact that we were doing the wrong thing and we need to do something different now; it is about saying, "Actually, it was the right thing all along, but we now have an opportunity to get on with it or to make more progress".

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Thank you. That is an excellent point.

Q84 **Baroness Young of Hornsey:** There have been very interesting and positive responses to that question about the cultural and creative industries. They were very well thought through. Some of what I want to ask you is based on responses that have been given. I was particularly engaged by what Stephen said about people coming to the arts who would not necessarily have done so before the pandemic. In that instance it is what has changed for those people.

Just to build on that slightly, the arts and the cultural sector is great in many respects, but it also has its own issues around needing to build back better, especially around inequalities and diversity within the sector. It has some really big issues to deal with. I am wondering how these two areas are coming together in your thoughts. How do you connect with communities through the arts? Some of those communities might not have been connecting with the arts and cultural sector before. How do you ensure that some of those communities then have their own voice within that development plan around arts and culture?

What is the potential of sport within that mix? Do you count sport as part of your cultural development? I am thinking about slightly more than just kicking a ball around in a park so you feel a bit healthier. My question is about how you connect with communities, how the diversity of communities is served through the arts and how those diverse communities are able to connect into your arts and culture in the future in a way they might not have done pre-pandemic.

Hazel Simmons: We have a very active community in sport. Football and cricket are probably the most active areas, but there are a lot of other sports that go on throughout the year. My concern is that not enough people are getting involved in sport. I would be encouraging people to get more involved in sport. I do not just mean cricket and football. I am talking about generally the activities that get laid on at the gym, netball or whatever it might be that people are interested in. When you look at the stats, which unfortunately I do not have to hand, there are not enough people involved in them in Luton. That is something I want to address.

Baroness Young of Hornsey: I am sorry to interrupt you. In that case, is there a plan for getting more people involved in sport?

Hazel Simmons: Yes, particularly in areas such as swimming, which we have been working on. We have a trust called Active Luton that the council works with on sport in the town, and we have been talking to them about how we tackle this issue.

Your other question was about the activities in art and creative industries from across our communities. I am told that the creative leaders group is cross-community and that they all input into the agendas that are developed in the town. We have a very strong Mela festival committee; they do a lot of artistic activities at the Mela, and that will be happening in August this year. Our communities in general are involved. Because of Covid, if anything, a lot of activities that normally happen had stopped and they are just beginning to start developing again. People will get back into those, but, as I say, there are areas to work on.

Stephen Martin: You have picked up on a really important point about the support that we have to offer or should be in a position to offer to individual artists. Without supporting them through what has been a very difficult time, how are we meant to sustain the arts and creative sector? We are going to have to take the learnings from this period in terms of the fragility of their ability to do what they do. If they do not do what they do, we as a community and as a wider society miss out hugely.

Some have been able to do things via technology. My daughters and I took up a children's painting class, which was brilliant. That was something that we would not have done, because it was not as accessible within our lifestyle. Again, that was an opportunity we were able to avail ourselves of, but it is not one that others can access. There is a cost to it; there is a digital inclusion piece that is required around that.

It is simple things, such as learning how to play the guitar or a musical instrument. How do you do that and where does that develop to? Sometimes we need to do this without a road map.

Rob Stewart: I will not repeat some of the points that Stephen and Hazel have made, but we have similar aspects. For us, it is also a part of that mix that we do as support when we are repurposing and looking at pop-ups and other stuff. Again, our support goes in to help artists, whether they are setting up their business or need a space to perform or rehearse. We try to put support into that.

It is a wider both educational and positioning piece, because we are the UK's second city of sanctuary. We are the only city in the UK that has embedded the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into the education programmes in our schools. As of December this year we intend to become the UK's first human rights city. Again, it is about setting that environment, so that people from whatever background can come and be supported to learn, to be successful and to be safe in our city, whatever background, whatever colour or whatever religion they are. That is an important and principal piece for us as a city council, to make sure that people understand the sort of environment and community we want to see in Swansea, so that everybody is safe and everybody is supported.

Q85 Baroness Jay of Paddington: What Rob just said has rather illustrated some of the things I wanted to ask you about. One of the issues that has become very clear-cut is the emergence of enormous and broad-based inequalities in our society. There is a great deal of evidence of this nationally. I wonder how it is illustrated in your communities and how in the longer term you can manage to redress it.

As I said, Rob has already talked about some of these things in his last answer. Hazel, you spoke about how you have now set up a fairness task force. I wondered what had stimulated that and what its long-term work was. We have seen stark inequalities in health and that may not necessarily be your priority. What are the other issues that you think a fairness task force or any other instruments you may use can address? Hazel, could you expand on that a bit?

Hazel Simmons: We have a 2040 vision in Luton, which is about ensuring that no one, by 2040, is living in poverty. That is the underlying emphasis of this. We agreed that just before the pandemic and we have not changed that. If anything, it has become more important on our agenda.

On the equalities agenda, the fairness task force is about getting our communities working with us on the equalities within our town, making sure that, initially, all our services are equal and everyone is getting those. The pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on our BAME communities. We are working separately with them on how we might build communication and provide facilities around that. That came out of our research with the university. The fairness task force has not started

yet. It is developed and written up, and we are ready to go. We just have not installed it yet.

Alongside the equalities agenda, we own an airport. When aviation is functioning properly, a large income comes into the town from the airport, and we want to make sure that in future years that income is spent fairly through all of our communities. If we are going to do an infrastructure project, it should be fairly done across the town.

It is about making sure that the whole agenda in Luton is around fairness and how we upskill people and change their living conditions, so that we can help people to get out of poverty, because if we do not solve those issues, we will never deal with the poverty question. It is all bound up in the 2040 vision. I hope that is helpful.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It is very helpful indeed. The 2040 vision is a very wide-based project. Will the task force be the main way of implementing that, or have you got other things in mind as well to try to redress the inequalities?

Hazel Simmons: We have an income team, looking at income and employment, et cetera, and the health and well-being board has now become part of steering our health equalities agenda, so there are three areas that mainly implement it, and it will drill down through the council. What is good about it is that all our partners across Luton have bought into the principle, and we are working with them on this whole agenda, so it has become a town-wide vision now.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: You said your communities have worked very well together. Is this something that they are communally addressing? You said during the pandemic they worked well. Will that continue in the longer term?

Hazel Simmons: We hope so; they are still working together at the moment. It is also about how we work with them over the future. They were absolutely fantastic during the pandemic and still are, providing food for the most vulnerable in our town, et cetera. Many of them have bought into the principles of the 2040 vision. It is long term—it is 20 years—but we have short and medium-term objectives, and we are pretty sure we are on target to meet some of them.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is very encouraging. Good luck. Rob, you talked about how you felt that the public sector in Swansea would need to lead many of these initiatives. Do you want to expand on how the public sector could particularly deal with inequalities? Hazel has described in Luton a very specific programme. Do you have that kind of vision in mind?

Rob Stewart: Yes, absolutely. We do not call it the fairness project, but its aims are exactly the same. It is about dealing with inequalities. We have some of the most deprived communities in Wales and the UK. It is about moving from equality to equity in some of these areas, because not

everybody needs the same to get to the same point. It is important that our services reflect that.

I was very pleased that before Covid, we were able locally to try to eliminate homelessness in the city. We had an "always a bed" pledge: anybody who came into our city was, within a period of about 24 hours, found a safe place to sleep and stay, and was then moved on eventually to permanent housing. The Welsh Government enabled us during the pandemic to lock that in, but our concern is longer term; we do not want to return now to having homeless on our streets again, because we have demonstrated through the pandemic that if we put the resources and effort in, we can eliminate homelessness and support people through those difficult times to become housed and active in our communities again. It is a choice. We have proved it. We can eliminate homelessness, so why would we now go back to doing that? Why would we now put people back out on the street?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: You might because of economic reasons. That is the problem for local government, is it not?

Rob Stewart: You think about the economic loss to us from people who are not in work and are not functioning, contributing members of the community. We have people who still beg on the streets, but the reality that we need to realise is that some of those people begging are housed and are just on low incomes. The people going to food banks now are often people with a job or more than one job, but who still cannot make ends meet.

We have a real opportunity. If levelling up is to mean anything, it means that we have to deal with those people in our communities who are missing out, who are not reaching their potential and who are not getting the opportunities. All of the things we discussed about what we are going to do about the economy, what we are going to do to make our city centres work and what we are going to do on housing, have to mean that the people who do not currently succeed, succeed in future. It cannot be about making people who are already successful even more successful, or only doing that. It has to deal with the problems we are carrying. We have to be brave about this and we have to embrace that. Coming out of Covid gives us the opportunity to do that.

If you look back at a periods of conflict such as the Second World War, the nation took an opportunity there to change the way we dealt with health after the war with the creation of the NHS. We have to be as bold this time, coming out of Covid, to deal with equal inequalities we have in social care. We have a real opportunity to fix social care. Sorry, I know I drifted off there, but it is really important as part of Covid; these are the changes we can make.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is a wonderful ambition. I would ask Rob whether he expects the public sector in Wales and, for the UK, in Westminster to respond to that equally well in terms of the economics and finances needed for local government. I would ask the same question

to Stephen in Northern Ireland. Rob, do you want to respond to that? Are you lobbying hard to fulfil this vision?

Rob Stewart: A very straight answer is yes. This is not a political point; it is a point from local government to national government. My call to both Governments is: give us the resources and the powers to do some of this and we will get on and do it. We have always had the ambition and the desire to do it, but we have been constrained by the lack of powers or the lack of resources.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Stephen, in Northern Ireland you have another problem, of inequalities of the different communities.

Stephen Martin: I would agree very much with what Rob has said about the inequalities that exist and existed pre-pandemic. They have been talked about a lot and we, as political and civic leaders, are very aware of them. Covid has brought that civic leadership very much on the ground and given us a new perspective on what is actually happening on the ground. Robert mentioned earlier that there is no stereotype regarding those who are accessing food banks. We have seen that a lot of our community and voluntary sector were actually doing a lot of what needed to be done. It needed to be co-ordinated and the council was in the perfect position to bring that together.

In terms of disadvantage, exclusion and inequality, one of the things that our council has done is design outdoor spaces to consider those with disabilities, particularly those with sight loss, and looked at the Covid impact in terms of pavement cafes, which is a new issue, and how we can deal with that.

From a Northern Ireland perspective, we have come a long way over the last 20 years. We are very proud of that, but it is built on sometimes fairly shaky foundations. That inequality exists, even from where I sit.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: In general, are you optimistic now that some of those positive things that brought communities together and got people working together in the pandemic can be used going forward to make things permanent?

Stephen Martin: The risk appetite has changed. For local government particularly, we are prepared to go a little bit further. We are not necessarily going to get caught up on the things that we would have got caught up on before. It has changed perspectives. People are spending more time in their communities and realising that half a mile down the road is perhaps a lot more deprived area than they realised. The volunteering aspect of this has been really encouraging.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is actually very encouraging.

Q86 **Baroness Benjamin:** All of you are visionaries looking into the future. You are at the helm and guiding your communities through some choppy waters, as we have heard this morning. What support, if any, do you need from the Government to deliver the priorities and plans that you

have discussed with us today? Hazel, you mentioned that high rents are holding things back. What else do you feel is holding you back? What help do you feel you need to deliver your priorities and plans?

Hazel Simmons: There could be non-competitive funding from the Government, whereby you can look at how you might fund changes in a town, rather than making it go through a competitive process. I am not saying it should not go through a proper process, just a non-competitive process, so that you are not on such strict timescales, as have been referred to by us all today. Government departments talking to each other would also be really helpful.

Baroness Benjamin: What is on your wish list, Stephen?

Stephen Martin: I talked earlier about joining the dots. Our Local Government Association would highlight the fact that, because of our slightly different set-up, we are perhaps at a fiscal and competitive disadvantage compared to other towns and cities across the UK and Ireland. We do not have a welcome back fund, as per the process set out by the London Government for what they wish to do on regeneration, so that levelling up is perhaps a little trickier here. There needs to be that awareness of the local need.

The one key ask from us locally would be about digital inclusion, which is a term that is now very much part of the language. There has been so much learning over the last 18 months, and we want to consolidate that, take the good from it and expand it even further. Some of our young people could buy and sell us in terms of how they use IT, and we need to capture that. That is where the innovation of the future will come from.

Baroness Benjamin: Finally, Rob, I sat on that committee when you presented to become City of Culture. Hull got it, but you did not. We were very impressed with all of the plans that you had. What help do you feel you need with your priorities and plans for the future?

Rob Stewart: As I mentioned before, local economic recovery zones will be really helpful. For levelling up to mean something tangible and to deliver a fairer spread of the UK's wealth across its communities at that level, the Government have to look at the processes by which they assess. Hazel mentioned competitive bidding. Again, generally, government funding follows government funding. Often, as long as you have had funding, you get more funding; if you do not get it, you do not get it.

A tangible example of that is the digital project that we put into DCMS, which was about helping to deliver the best networks across rural communities. Unfortunately, because our population was not large enough, we did not get through the bidding process. That cannot be a fair measure if we are talking about levelling up. I would urge the Government to look at some of the criteria that apply to these things to make it fairer.

My final one would be that the UK Government and Welsh Government have to work together collaboratively, so that we have the working partnership between the two Governments that makes sure that local government can deliver.

Baroness Benjamin: Thank you very much. I love the way you are being so optimistic about the future.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone, for being so brief in those last questions. We have covered a huge amount of ground this morning. I really appreciate how much you guys were trying to look into the future and help us navigate that longer-term horizon. As Floella just rightly said, it felt marginally more optimistic about taking some of the things we have learned over the last year, so I very much appreciate that. I know in our discussions, certainly for me, the word "collaboration" is going to live on. The importance of the creative industries was also great to hear. We wish you lots of luck over the next few months. Thank you for helping us navigate this important topic. Have a great summer, if you are getting a break.