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Parliamentary Inquiry Response

Revitalising High Streets - Written Evidence

Dr Joseph Owen, Professor Nicky Marsh, and Dr Emily-Rose Baker

Written evidence submitted by the University of Southampton [RHS 143]

Executive summary

- This submission draws mainly on research from the AHRC-funded And Towns research, which explored pride in place, community engagement, cultural heritage, and urban regeneration across seven English places. Our evidence suggests high streets are important sources of pride and place attachment.
- Regeneration was most effective when it built upon existing cultural activity and local knowledge. Promising examples involved creative reuse of vacant retail space and support for organisations embedded in their communities.
- We found that many of these initiatives remained financially precarious, often relying on a patchwork of public funding, low rents, and voluntary effort. Greater recognition and support are needed to understand the contribution of community and cultural organisations to the development of high streets.
- Our evidence suggests that successful regeneration depends upon local capacity and meaningful community involvement. Programmes were less effective when they relied on imposed visions, standardised approaches, or consultations that were unable to reflect local histories and identities.
- High streets matter because they are places where people feel visible and recognised. The efforts to revitalise them should strengthen the social infrastructure and local relationships that underpin pride in place.

About the evidence

1. We are researchers at the University of Southampton. We have led projects for the Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities (SIAH), including Feeling Towns, which explored pride in place, community engagement, and urban regeneration in towns and small cities. This AHRC-funded work is part of the And Towns projects, which hosts policy resources and practical toolkits.

2. We are submitting this evidence because our research has sought to understand what pride in place means to different communities. We worked with policymakers, heritage organisations, and arts practitioners to understand how pride could be meaningfully evaluated in towns and cities. We spoke with more than 500 people across seven locations and generated place-specific data on how relationships in communities were felt and comprehended.

What factors and approaches have led to successful high street regeneration in different parts of England?

3. First, what was not successful. We found that “cultural reanimation”—an idea that aspires to radical transformation and which relies on celebratory, one-off events such as City of Culture—tend to work within assumed narratives about places. These narratives often begin by stigmatising areas and end with gentrification or a set of short-lived metrics that only measure the spectacle of an event. In such instances, the concerns of local cultures and low-income populations are marginalised, displaced, or occluded altogether. We recommend that short-term “boosterism” and place-promotion initiatives be replaced with policies that pay very close attention to the rich, diverse, but profoundly precarious culture that exists in public places and high streets, and which focus on the longue durée of regeneration rather than a short-term fix.

4. Yet we found that a jigsaw of funding, very low rents, and an enterprising community had allowed for creative takeovers of former retail space. Spaces such as these included the Powerhouse in Hereford, Creative Kids in Bournemouth, and TOMA in Southend, all of which were active, inclusive, and generative in their practice and commitment to the local area. These ventures were aware of their importance to the community as much as they were attuned to their precarious position within that community. We recommend more financial and administrative support for these enterprises and a more embedded recognition of their social value.

5. Some of the most vibrant forms of alternative economies emerge from the creative repurposing of emptied high street shops. As stated above, we found many examples where former retail spaces had become cultural and community assets that contributed to local economic and social life. In the targeted support for the temporary and long-term reuse of vacant high street property by cultural and community organisations, we recommend that these uses are established as legitimate components of regeneration rather than interim solutions pending commercial occupation.

What conditions allow for such approaches to be replicated in other areas?

6. We found that the tight timescales and conditions attached to central government funding, together with the diminished capacities of many local authorities, meant that councils often turned to external consultants, providers, and pre-existing plans in ways that did not always meet the needs of local communities or reflect the specific identity of a place. We recommend that funding programmes include training resources that focus on co-creation and diversity, as well as support for developing tenders that ask critical questions about place identity and meaning.

7. We found that creative entrepreneurs already located in a place were often better able to support relationships. They were sensitive to the histories and identities of a place and could prioritise the needs of existing creative communities. We recommend that consultation processes for regeneration explicitly engage local organisations that can evaluate opportunities for creative practitioners and businesses to help communities maintain connections with their pasts and have a say in plans for their future.

8. Research in Sandown on the Isle of Wight found that a lack of a strong, shared vision from the local authorities, businesses, and residents was a significant barrier to transformation. There were clear signs of an active and engaged community but limits to how that community was empowered to help develop and deliver a vision for the town. Our evidence suggests that successful regeneration requires mechanisms that allow communities to shape and contribute to long-term visions for their places.

9. We also found that councillors, arts organisations, and local authorities would benefit from more opportunities, research, and development to develop their own skills and expertise. Strategic partnerships, mentoring, and training can help to address uneven capacity and strengthen local regeneration activity.

10. Research undertaken with the National Trust at Avebury World Heritage Site as part of the LoGaCulture project demonstrated that the feeling of a place and its heritage is shaped by intangible factors. Perspectives from local communities and visitors to Avebury showed that while buildings and landscapes condition how a place feels, so too does its “spirit”: its emotions, memories, relationships, and cultural practices. Place identity is formed through a matrix of built and emotional elements. We recommend protecting and strengthening the affective and physical dimensions of place, which can be only fully understood in dialogue with the local people who inhabit them.

What impacts can improvements to a high street have on community pride and people's sense of belonging?

11. Our peer-reviewed research found that high streets are important sources of pride in place. Polling discussed in our work found that the majority of respondents agreed that green spaces, fellow residents, and high streets were important for generating local pride. Feelings of pride varied between places and neighbourhoods, however, and those with less financial security expressed diminished levels of pride and place attachment.

12. We understand pride in place not only as satisfaction with local areas—how these places look, how they function, and how they are perceived by others—

but as a variety of felt, emotional, and relational responses people have about where they live. Pride functions as a targeted ambition for local governments and as a signifier of community identities. We argue that pride requires an understanding of the relational and collective dynamics of communities, the histories of places, and the individuals who identify with those places.

13. In Ledbury in Herefordshire, volunteers were proud of the international reputation of the Poetry Festival and of the presence of the festival on the high street, including increased signage in the town and at the train station. This finding showed that some sources of pride were predicated on being recognised by others, namely that Ledbury's high street had been featured nationally as one of the best places in the world for Christmas shopping.

14. Our evidence showed that pride, belonging, and cohesion were present when people felt they had been seen and recognised, when they volunteered, and when they came together to meet shared goals. High streets should be understood as economic assets but also as sites of visible collective identity.

15. We recommend the use of creative methodologies as a means of reimagining high streets in order to improve community consultation. This approach could include workshops that support more imaginative uses of buildings, the development of local small businesses and Community Interest Companies, and the inclusion of grassroots organisations in project development.

How effective are the Government's plans to address current challenges on high streets across England?

16. Our evidence suggests that successful regeneration depends on more than physical improvements to place. We found that the social capital and infrastructures necessary to maintain and grow possible futures have been hollowed out by prolonged reductions in local capacity. We found that the lack of local leaders and meeting places, and the limited possibilities for local voices to be heard, have left deep-seated cultures of distrust that need to be understood at the grassroots level.

17. We recommend that regeneration policy places more emphasis on community participation, local capacity-building, and social infrastructure. We found that local people often wanted more opportunities to shape and imagine the future of their places and that successful interventions emerged when communities were empowered to participate in these processes.

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