

Roundtable - Regenerating Town Centres and Boosting the High Street

with Mark Robinson, Head of Regeneration at NewRiver REIT & Former Chair of the High Streets Taskforce

Chaired by Lauren Edwards MP
Portcullis House & Online via zoom



Mark Robinson

Introduction

This week the PLG convened its final roundtable of the year to explore the critical themes of regenerating town centres and revitalising high streets. Chaired by Lauren Edwards MP, and attended by a diverse group of experts spanning sectors such as placemaking, local government, investment, academia, and planning, the session provided a robust platform for discussing the challenges and opportunities in reimagining our urban spaces.

The discussion opened with a compelling challenge from Mark Robinson, highlighting that high streets are often treated as isolated problems rather than as reflections of deeper, community-wide issues. Addressing these underlying causes, he argued, requires a shift from "sticking-plaster politics" to genuine partnership-driven, place-based solutions.

The group emphasised the importance of fostering long-term visions for town centres, meaningful community engagement, and practical activation steps that can build momentum for wider transformation. Case studies, such as Chatham in Medway, were cited as examples of both successes and lessons, showcasing the need to balance social infrastructure, economic priorities, and planning policies.

From debates on the evolving role of high streets to the significance of embedding affordability and accessibility into regeneration strategies, the roundtable underscored a shared commitment to creating thriving, resilient town centres that meet the needs of their communities. This document summarises the key takeaways from the discussion, highlighting actionable insights and forward-looking strategies.

Key Takeaways

- High streets serve as a barometer for the wellbeing of local communities, reflecting broader social and economic challenges. Addressing issues like deprivation, inequality, and lack of local opportunities is fundamental to effective regeneration. Simply focusing on aesthetics or minor improvements risks becoming a sticking-plaster fix that does not address the underlying drivers of wellbeing. A holistic approach, centred on improving livelihoods, wellbeing and opportunities for residents, is critical to creating lasting change.
- The best regeneration projects come from locally-led partnerships that bring together local authorities, businesses, charities, and communities. Partnerships that are tokenistic, where decision-making is centralised or disconnected from the community, often fail to gain traction. Real success comes from listening to local voices and empowering communities to co-create solutions tailored to their unique needs and aspirations.
- A clear vision tailored to the specific needs of an area is essential for regeneration. Template-driven, modular masterplans often fail to resonate with local populations or address the particular challenges or harness the particular opportunities of a place. A bespoke vision, co-designed with the community, fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that redevelopment aligns with local priorities, be those cultural identity, economic aspirations, or environmental considerations.
- While large-scale projects take years to materialise, small, tactical interventions—such as pop-up shops, art installations, or community events—can generate immediate impact. These initiatives help build momentum, attract footfall, and demonstrate the potential of underused spaces. The pandemic highlighted the value of "tactical urbanism," the idea of citizen-led, low-cost, temporary improvements to communal spaces, which showed how even modest, low-cost changes can enhance the vibrancy and utility of public spaces.
- With the decline of traditional retail and the collapse of anchor tenants, such as department stores, high streets must evolve beyond commerce. Incorporating cultural hubs, health services, leisure facilities, and green spaces can create a more diverse and sustainable town centre experience. By prioritising these elements, town centres can become places where people live, work, and connect, rather than solely shop.

- Integrating housing into town centres is a key strategy for boosting footfall and fostering community connections. Mixed-use developments, which combine affordable housing with retail and cultural spaces, can help town centres thrive. However, challenges remain in ensuring these schemes are financially viable while meeting affordability and environmental standards. Strong political commitment is needed to unlock funding and incentivise developers to deliver homes that serve local needs.
- Outdated planning laws, complex Biodiversity Net Gain requirements, and overly rigid licensing policies can delay or derail regeneration efforts. For example, SME developers and local entrepreneurs often face high costs and red tape, discouraging investment in smaller-scale, community-led projects. Simplifying these processes and introducing more flexible frameworks is essential for accelerating progress.
- Regeneration must avoid creating spaces that feel exclusionary or gentrified, pricing out existing communities. Ensuring developments include affordable housing, accessible cultural activities, and low-cost retail options is vital. Additionally, levelling up efforts must balance investments across regions, avoiding a focus solely on metropolitan areas at the expense of smaller towns and rural communities.
- Successful regeneration efforts depend on high-quality transport links, digital connectivity, and social infrastructure, such as healthcare and education facilities. Without these, residents may struggle to access town centres, limiting their effectiveness as vibrant community hubs. Investment in infrastructure ensures that town centres are not only accessible but also welcoming to all demographics, including families, older adults, and individuals with disabilities.
- Regeneration on a large scale demands strong political leadership and a willingness to make bold, decisive choices. From reforming planning laws to empowering local councils through devolution, national and regional leaders must create an enabling environment. Political support can ensure that local authorities and community groups have the resources, autonomy, and confidence to pursue transformative projects.

Issues raised

- Regeneration efforts often overlook the critical role of transport, digital connectivity, and social infrastructure. Policies must prioritise investment in accessible public transport, broadband, and community services like healthcare and education to ensure town centres can thrive as inclusive, functional spaces for all demographics.
- While integrating housing and non-retail amenities into town centres is a priority, making such developments financially viable remains a challenge. Policies that incentivise mixed-use schemes—through funding, tax relief, or planning support—are needed to ensure affordability, environmental sustainability, and alignment with local needs.
- Current planning laws, and other regulations such as licensing policies create barriers to regeneration. These regulations are often complex, inflexible, and disproportionately burdensome for SMEs and community-led initiatives. Streamlining these processes and introducing more adaptive policies could enable faster and more innovative redevelopment.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.

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