



Key takeaways: Opening Joe Bloggs' Café: How to get more local businesses onto the high street

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Introduction

This roundtable marked the launch of *Opening Joe Bloggs' Café*, a report focused on the practical and policy barriers facing prospective high street businesses. Drawing on contributions from practitioners, policy specialists and place leaders, the discussion moved beyond headline narratives of decline to examine the lived reality of starting and sustaining a business on the high street. Ambition is not lacking. Across the country, individuals remain eager to invest in their communities, yet opaque systems, fragmented support and structural friction deter and delay progress.

The conversation highlighted a gap between investment in physical infrastructure and the comparatively limited attention paid to the “human infrastructure” needed to make high streets function. Complex licensing and planning processes, inconsistent local capacity and a lack of clear accountability undermines and inhibits even the most determined entrepreneurs. At the same time, examples of effective local leadership, partnership working and targeted intervention demonstrated that change is possible where systems are aligned and support is accessible.

For policymakers, this underscored the importance of practical reform. Rather than wholesale reinvention, there is a clear opportunity to remove barriers, improve coordination and empower local actors. The report and discussion offer a grounded set of recommendations aimed at making it easier to open, operate and grow a business on the high street.

Key Takeaways

- **Simplify and accelerate licensing and planning processes**
Lengthy, complex and often inconsistent licensing and planning systems remain a major barrier to entry. Participants highlighted delays, duplication and lack of clarity as key deterrents. Greater alignment between planning and licensing, alongside clearer timelines and statutory response periods, would significantly reduce friction. A more permissive, flexible approach, particularly for low-risk activities, could help unlock entrepreneurial activity without undermining local accountability.
- **Introduce a more permissive policy environment for high street activity**
The experience of the pandemic demonstrated that more flexible, permissive approaches can quickly revitalise high streets. Temporary measures such as relaxed licensing and pedestrianisation enabled businesses to operate and innovate. There is a strong case for embedding elements of this approach permanently, allowing businesses to act first within reasonable bounds and resolve issues retrospectively where necessary.
- **Invest in ‘human infrastructure’ alongside physical regeneration**
While significant funding has been directed toward physical improvements, there is insufficient investment in the people and systems that support businesses. Roles such as “retail Cupid” – individuals who connect entrepreneurs with premises and provide practical guidance – can make a decisive difference. Supporting these functions at local level would help translate investment into tangible outcomes.
- **Strengthen local leadership and place-based expertise**
Successful high streets often benefit from visible, trusted local leaders who understand their area and can coordinate activity. Whether embedded in local authorities, BIDs or community organisations, these individuals play a crucial role in facilitating collaboration and driving change. Policy should prioritise building and sustaining this capacity.

- **Improve access to data on property ownership and high street dynamics**
 A lack of accessible, transparent data on property ownership limits the ability to address vacancy and coordinate interventions. Opening up land registry data and enabling its analysis would support more informed policymaking and local action. Better data would also help identify structural issues and target solutions more effectively.
- **Use financial tools and guarantees to de-risk letting to new entrants**
 Landlords are often reluctant to take on new or unproven businesses. Government-backed guarantees or targeted financial support could help mitigate this risk and encourage more flexible leasing arrangements. This would lower barriers for entrepreneurs while maintaining confidence in the market.
- **Pilot targeted reforms and accept managed risk**
 There is appetite for innovation, but current approaches to piloting policy are often overly risk-averse. Effective pilots should be allowed to fail and generate learning. Testing more permissive licensing regimes or streamlined processes in selected areas could provide valuable evidence for wider reform.
- **Provide greater certainty for businesses**
 Uncertainty around costs, timelines and regulatory requirements makes it difficult for businesses to plan and invest. Clearer guidance, predictable processes and greater transparency would enable more confident decision-making and reduce the perceived risk of entering the market.
- **Support diverse high street uses while retaining a role for retail**
 High streets are increasingly mixed-use environments, incorporating residential, healthcare and leisure functions. While diversification is essential, retail still plays a critical role in many locations. Policy should recognise the need for balance and ensure that appropriate retail space remains available where there is demand.
- **Embed accountability across all levels of governance**
 A recurring concern was the lack of clarity over who is responsible for high street outcomes. Clearer lines of accountability between central government, local authorities and other stakeholders are needed to ensure that funding, policy and delivery are aligned and effective.

Issues Raised

- **Complex and outdated legal frameworks**

The current legal and regulatory environment, including longstanding legislation, creates multiple points of failure in the process of opening a business. These systems have evolved incrementally and are not designed with modern high street dynamics in mind, resulting in inefficiency and confusion.
- **Limited capacity within local authorities**

Many local authorities lack the resources, expertise and staffing required to actively support high street regeneration. This constrains their ability to implement initiatives such as rental auctions or provide ongoing support to businesses, leaving gaps in delivery.
- **Fragmented and short-term funding structures**

High street funding is often complex, short-term and inconsistently allocated. This makes it difficult for local areas to plan strategically or sustain initiatives over time. In some cases, funding appears to be recycled rather than genuinely new, adding to confusion.
- **Inconsistent approaches to licensing and planning across regions**

Significant regional variation in how licensing and planning functions are structured and integrated leads to uneven outcomes. In some areas, overlapping responsibilities create inefficiencies, while in others, a lack of coordination results in delays and backlogs.
- **Barriers created by landlord behaviour and property ownership patterns**

Properties are often owned by individuals or entities with little connection to the local area, reducing their incentive to engage constructively. In some cases, ownership is difficult to trace, further complicating efforts to bring vacant units back into use.
- **Persistent uncertainty around business rates**

Business rates remain a major concern, particularly due to unpredictability in valuation and costs. This uncertainty undermines business planning and investment decisions, especially for larger or more complex operations.
- **Cultural and perceptual challenges at local level**

Negative perceptions of place, sometimes held by residents themselves, can hinder progress. A lack of confidence in the high street can become self-reinforcing, discouraging both investment and engagement.
- **Mismatch between high street size and local demand**

In many areas, high streets are simply too large for current levels of demand. Attempts to maintain their full extent can dilute activity and reduce overall vitality. More strategic consolidation may be required in some locations.

Conclusion

The discussion around *Opening Joe Bloggs' Café* makes clear that the challenges facing high streets are not rooted in a lack of ambition or ideas, but in the systems that shape how those ideas are realised. Entrepreneurs continue to come forward with energy and creativity, yet too often encounter processes that are slow, opaque and misaligned with their needs. Addressing these issues does not require wholesale transformation, but rather a focused effort to remove friction, improve coordination and empower those working at the local level.

For government, the opportunity lies in enabling rather than directing. By simplifying regulation, improving access to data, supporting local capacity and creating a more permissive environment, policymakers can unlock existing potential within communities. High streets are already evolving into more diverse, mixed-use spaces, and policy must reflect this reality while ensuring that the conditions for business formation and growth are in place.

Ultimately, successful high streets depend on people as much as place. Investing in local leadership, strengthening partnerships and ensuring clear accountability will be critical to delivering lasting change. With the right adjustments, high streets can continue to serve as vital economic and social hubs, shaped not just by policy, but by the communities that depend on them.

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



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