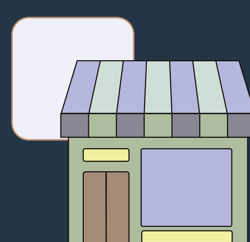
Policy Liaison Group
Housing Delivery
& Growth

Opening Joe Blogg's Cafe

How to get more local businesses onto the high street



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Foreword - Patrick Hurley MP

High streets are an important part of our local economies and our civic life. They are where many small businesses start, where people take risks, and where jobs are created. When they work well, they provide opportunity and stability. When they struggle, it is often because the ecosystems around them are not functioning as they should.

This paper begins from a simple observation: people still want to go to their High Streets and Town Centres, both for recreation and retail. Despite rising costs, online competition and economic uncertainty, there remains a steady flow of entrepreneurs who are prepared to invest their time and money into local high streets, and a steady flow of members of the public who are prepared to fulfil the other side of the equation.

What they face, however, is – for shop owners – a process of opening up that is more complex and more risky than it needs to be; and – for the public – a revealed preference that prioritises the financial benefits that come from systemic incentives favouring retail parks, online shopping and big box retailers.

One of the useful contributions in this report is its examination of how local authority structures shape economic outcomes. The analysis of planning and licensing committee overlap may appear technical, but it raises an important question. As devolution progresses and more powers sit locally, we need to ensure that new institutional design supports the outcomes that local residents have been telling politicians they want.

The evidence presented here does not claim to be definitive, and it is right to be cautious about drawing firm conclusions. But it does suggest that structural decisions have economic consequences. Before embedding particular approaches into national policy frameworks, it is sensible to understand how they operate in practice and what impact they may have. Let's test things out or pencil approaches in, rather than commit early on to systems that might not work well. Better still, let's learn from the successes outlined in this report and repeat them where appropriate. Let's avoid reinventing the wheel if at all possible.

The sections on commercial property are equally grounded in lived experience. Lengthy lease negotiations, high legal costs, personal guarantees and slow dispute resolution processes all increase the cost of entry to the high street. For established operators these may be manageable. For first-time or smaller occupiers, they can be prohibitive.

From personal experience, I can confirm that the approach to Community Asset Transfer and High Street Rental Auctions is patchy across the country, with best practice not being followed across the board, and capacity to undertake meaningful progressive change limited through officer understanding and experience, as well as political will. If we are serious about inclusive growth, then getting over these barriers matters. The ability to start a business on the high street should not depend on access to significant personal capital or the capacity to absorb months of delay or the whims of a council officer or the lack of interest of a property owner.

The policy proposals in this paper are practical rather than ideological. Retail-specific lease reform, statutory timeframes for transactions, low-cost arbitration, and a government-backed lease guarantee scheme are all targeted measures. They are intended to reduce friction in the system and rebalance risk between landlords and occupiers.

The report also makes a case for funding local "vacancy brokerage" roles and supporting partnerships that bring together councils, businesses and community groups. The examples included show that progress often depends less on a single large intervention and more on consistent coordination and relationship-building over time. There is also a broader point about regeneration funding. Investment in physical infrastructure is important, but places are shaped by people. Entrepreneurs, community organisations and local leaders are central to whether high streets adapt successfully. Policy needs to reflect that.

My own Southport constituency is an exemplar here. Lord Street, the main thoroughfare through the town, has a much-loved and historic façade dating back to the 1800s, complete with glass verandas and porticos, wrought iron arcades, and gardens that bloom with colour every Spring. And yet it feels down at heel. The two main department stories have both closed in the last decade, and their entrances are now blocked with the evidence of rough sleeping - duvets and plastic bags. The main arcade – Wayfarers – struggles to fill its units. Positive change is now happening, but it's a town centre that had been neglected for too many years, and feels like it has seen better days.

Systemic changes to encourage entrepreneurship, community ownership, removal of red tape, reform of taxation – these would all go a long way to help rejuvenate and renovate my own town centre, just like they would elsewhere in the country.

As government continues to pursue devolution and economic reform, high streets should form part of that conversation in a practical way. That means looking carefully at how institutions function, how property markets operate, and where small changes could unlock meaningful activity.

The aim is not to preserve high streets in a fixed form. They will continue to evolve. The task is to ensure that the systems surrounding them are proportionate, modern and fair.

If we can make it easier for viable businesses to open and grow, we strengthen local economies and widen opportunity. That is a goal that should transcend party politics, and it is one worth pursuing with focus and seriousness at all levels of government.

The 'Generalist's Premium': Institutional variance in licensing policy - Laurie Wilcockson

Introduction

In November of 2025, the government dropped its National Licensing Policy Framework (NLPF). Created as a licensing equivalent of the National Planning Policy Framework, it hopes to be "a tool for enabling innovation and investment, not just managing risk"[1].

Licensing policy has been essentially consistent since 2003, and it generally runs pretty well. This was shown to be the case in the consultation on *Reforming the licensing system*, which ran through October 2025[2]. The consultation's call for evidence received over 2,000 responses, and of those the headline figures were that 46% of respondents thought the proposed reforms would have a net negative impact on public safety and/or crime, while 47% thought they would have a net negative impact on public health. This must mean that things are in relatively good shape. The government heard these concerns, and drastically cut down the scope of its reforms for its NLPF.

These reforms essentially sought to streamline the licensing process and bring it into closer step with other similar council arms - namely planning, community cohesion, tourism and cultural policy. One of these particularly stood out to me. Planning and licensing operate in entirely distinct pathways, with separation the statutory norm. Planning authorities, officers and committees follow their path, while licensing authorities, officers and committees follow theirs. But to anyone with much experience of working with councils that might seem slightly at odds with the reality. After all, most councils only have so many councillors active enough to be closely involved in committee business. With greater devolution and a huge amount of local authority transition on the horizon, I thought it best to interrogate this hunch of mine. Are planning and licensing really that separate? And does it matter if they are?

The broad sweep:

I decided to look at this in some detail. I took 45 local authorities at random, five from each of the nine English regions, and broke down how many councillors sat on both the planning committee and licensing committee. This data was accurate as of January 2026. *Figure 1* reflects the proportions of planning committee members who also sit on licensing committees.

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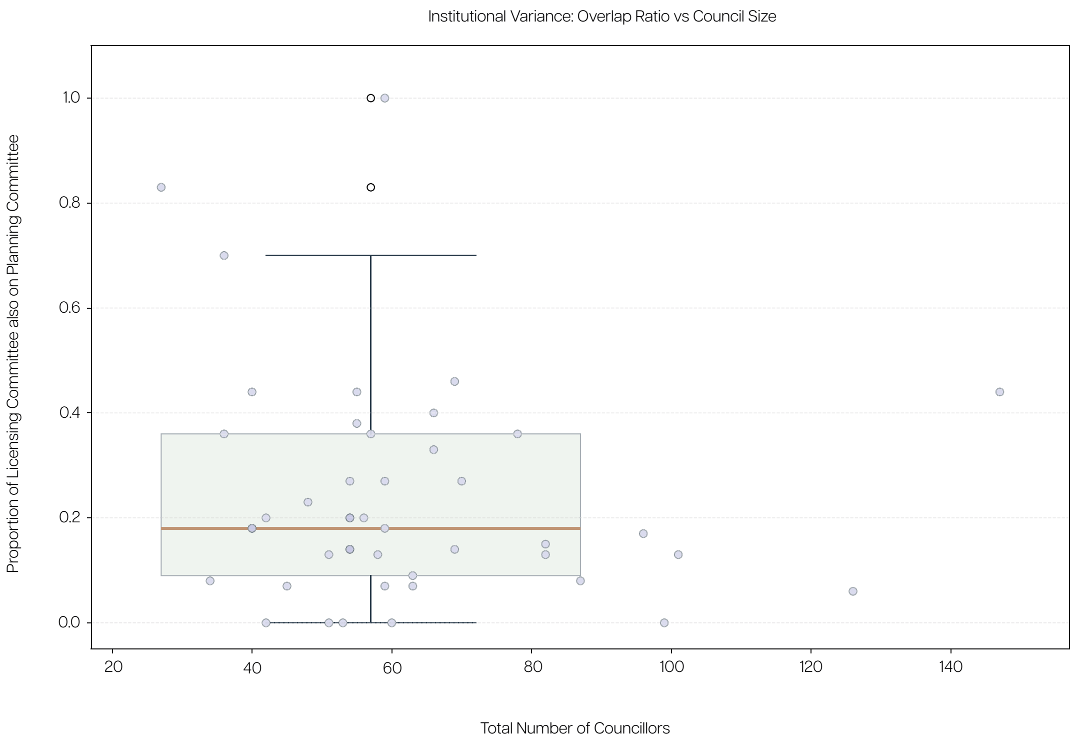
1 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-licensing-policy-framework-for-the-hospitality-and-leisure-sectors/national-licensing-policy-framework-for-the-hospitality-and-leisure-sectors-web-version

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/reforming-the-licensing-system



What was noticeable was that there were drastic variations. Redcar & Cleveland Borough council shares licensing and planning responsibilities across both councils, for instance, so its 'overlap ratio' (the proportion of planning committee members also sitting on the licensing committee) was 1, over five times the median. Two of the three councils with ratios larger than 0.5 were also two of the smallest in terms of total number of councillors. Interestingly, even where there are really large councils (mainly county-unitary councils) the ratio is fairly consistent.

Why is this important? This information is curious, but how does it translate into informing policy decisions?

Put simply, it is important to understand this variance because we are in the midst of a significant amount of change in how our local authorities are run, as more and more councils trend towards unitary councils, and devolution allows greater empowerment of our local authorities. If there is major institutional variation in how local authorities approach their licensing committees, it is important to understand what the cause for that is, and what impact that may have. It seems likely, based on the data above, that the more councillors a local authority has, the less institutional overlap it will have between licensing and planning. This is at odds with the government's desire to see greater cross-pollination as expressed in the National Licensing Policy Framework. It seems likely that just on a human basis, having a councillor sit on both committees would have some efficiency gain in terms of knowledge and shared strategy, but simultaneously, these people likely have jobs, caring responsibilities and personal lives. Too much overlap will erode bandwidth.

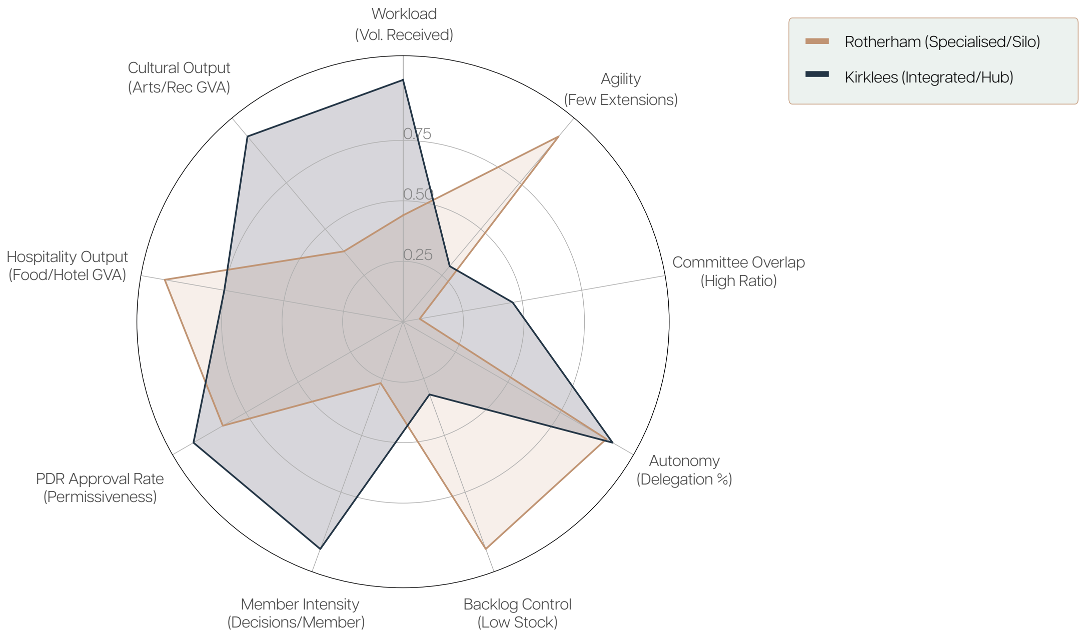
Case study deep dive:

To play with this idea, I decided to look at two councils that ought to be quite similar, but with different institutional makeups. This was Rotherham and Kirklees, both Metropolitan Districts in Yorkshire & the Humber. Rotherham is slightly smaller, and therefore has more councillors per person, but not by much: 22 per 100,000 versus 16 for Kirklees. Notably, in Rotherham, only one of its councillors sits on both the licensing and planning committee out of 29 across both, while in Kirklees it's 6 across 16.

What was clear was that the two councils performed very differently in its planning committee activity. I decided the best way to visualise this was by building out a personality map, visible in *Figure 2*. Here, the following metrics are used:

- Workload (Applications Received): Volume of new cases entering the system. High scores indicate a larger number of applications per quarter.
- Agility (Few Extensions): Speed of process. A high score means the council requires fewer legal extensions to meet deadlines.
- Committee Overlap (High Ratio): Our 'overlap ratio'. A higher score indicates higher overlap between councillors on planning and licensing committees.
- Autonomy (Delegation %): The level of trust in professional officers. High scores indicate that only the most controversial cases reach the elected committee.
- Backlog Control (Low Starting Stock): The ability to clear the "pending" tray. High scores indicate the council consistently starts each quarter with a clean slate.
- Member Intensity (Decisions/Member): The "burden of office". High scores indicate that individual councillors are processing a massive volume of decisions.
- PDR Approval Rate (Permissive Bias): Institutional stance on permitted development. High scores suggest a "pro-growth" or permissive regulatory culture.
- Hospitality Output (Food/Hotel GVA): The economic contribution of the local dining and accommodation sector per capita. A higher score might suggest a stronger traditional hospitality economy.
- Cultural Output (Arts/Rec GVA): The economic contribution of arts, entertainment and recreation. A higher score might suggest a stronger 'night-time economy'.

The Full Spectrum: Institutional Structure vs. Economic Output Comparing Rotherham (Silo) and Kirklees (Hub) Models

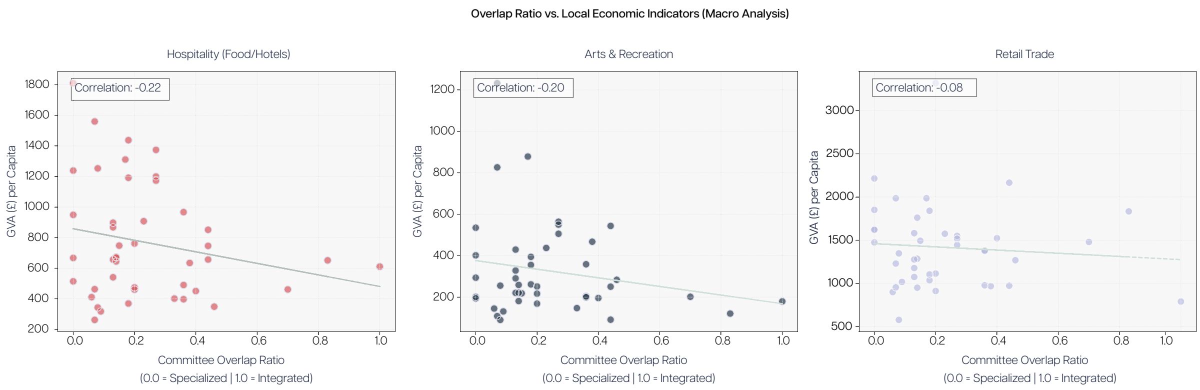


Kirklees and Rotherham show two different models at play. Kirklees has a notable overlap ratio, implying a generalist approach to senior councillors. Councillors can do both, is the attitude essentially held (likely entirely by accident and institutional osmosis over time) by the authority. In contrast, Rotherham's is a specialist model. A planning committee member is an expert in planning, a licensing committee member is an expert in licensing. We can create two schools of thought here:

- The Bandwidth Model
    - 'Specialist' councils such as Rotherham allow for senior councillors to have more time to focus on particular issues, cases and strategies, which might increase the efficiency of a council, as well as reduce its likelihood of facing legal errors, and perform better in terms of its agility (i.e. meeting its deadlines on time).
- The Expertise Model
    - Meanwhile 'generalist' councils like Kirklees treat councillors as a cross-pollinatory asset. A councillor who understands the *planning* impact of an application (whether through knowing the history of the property and its stakeholders, or through better understanding of the approach through broader experience), might be better placed to make a judgement on its licensing. Policies join up, and the council with regards to planning and licensing acts as a strategic entity, rather than two silos. This ought to lead to better place-stewardship, and a more curated local environment.

Evidence of Impact:

Using these models I returned to my broader list of councils, and mapped out their institutional variations against certain retail indicators - namely, gross value add per capita (GVA) for hospitality (food and hotels), arts and recreation, and broader retail[3]. This is represented in *Figure 3*.



What this shows is a definite negative correlation between overlap ratios and GVA. Of course, an obvious caveat is that the correlation here is *weak* and swayed hugely by the *most specialist* councils. This means that the following two statements are true at once.

The evidence currently suggests that if the government seeks to better align planning and policy outcomes, there is a case against doing this through permeation in the local democratic process.

That evidence is itself limited in scope, risks drawing conclusions too quickly, and runs the risk of confusing correlation for causation.

My case to government is this: the NLPF might well be right to encourage more dissemination between policy and planning. Certainly, it *feels* like it's a good thing. But my admittedly limited evidence suggests that in fact specialism leads to better outcomes, and as devolved authorities grow in strength, government needs to be conscious not to override the bandwidth of local councils too significantly. More research is necessary before there is a convincing case, but my concern is that greater overlap may lead to a 'generalist's premium'.

3 I had to exclude Buckinghamshire County Council and North Northamptonshire Unitary Council here as both authorities are too new to have data in the retail indices for the years covered (2013-2017).

Opening a shop should not be a Darwinian struggle for survival - Mark Robinson

In our last paper, I made the case for investment, not charity, in our High Streets. Arguing that addressing the challenge of boosting inclusive growth can only happen from the ground up in our High Streets and local places, so it's fitting that our second paper should focus on the drivers of this growth, and indeed 60% of the employment and 52% of the private sector turnover (Gov.uk) Small & Medium Enterprises (SME's) and community enterprises that also play such an important role in terms of vibrancy and amenity in every neighbourhood.

The Business and Trade committee, in February, produced an excellent report[4] on the post-pandemic challenges facing High Street businesses, offering 10 recommendations that would boost the viability of local enterprises. This paper, however, will drill down into property-specific challenges and opportunities and make specific policy recommendations that address problems identified by real High Street occupiers, who have been kind enough to share their time and frustrations with me.

My guides' entrepreneurial credentials are far removed from the cliché of someone bootstrapping a business from a kitchen table. Vanessa is a former airline CEO with an MBA from London Business School who has founded StretchLife[5], and Tom was an award-winning journalist with The Washington Post and Economist who founded Balham's Backstory Books[6]. If it's this hard for them, what hope for the rest?

Before we go on...

I have to mention business rates. It's the subject of many papers and much lobbying, and it's futile to add anything here other than to highlight that Vanessa and Tom's business rates have gone up over two years by up to 163%. I found this shocking, as did they, as they assumed from Rachel Reeve's budget "narrative" that they were getting a discount.

Personally, I feel that any tax so addled with subsidies, rebates and negative incentives is clearly not fit for purpose and fails the most basic of Adam Smith's canons of taxation – equity. Per the Labour manifesto, replace it with something fit for purpose.

However, the main impediment to opening a business on the High Street is our antiquated property market, which acts as a hidden tax on enterprise, consumes capital, time and energy before keys are handed over, and exposes brave "strivers" to unacceptable and largely avoidable risk.

Specifically, this relates to the complexity of the leasing process, which is far simpler in other countries, the delays built into the system as a result and the unreasonable financial demands put upon potential occupiers by landlords stuck in normal operating procedure and oblivious to the general vibrancy of the local High Street v chasing the highest rent from the "best" tenant.

4 https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/51536/documents/285925/default/
5 https://www.stretchlife.com/
6 https://backstory.london/

Two stories, separated by 30 minutes on the Northern Line, illustrate the challenge clearly. Tom Rowley left an award-winning career in international journalism to open Backstory Books on Balham High Road. Vanessa Lenssen, a stellar businesswoman, launched StretchLife, a chain of assisted-stretching studios, across two London high streets. Both brought formidable business experience, substantial personal capital and the kind of tenacity that most aspiring entrepreneurs quite reasonably lack. Both found the process of getting a key in a door needlessly punishing.

Vanessa spent over a year searching for her first studio, hampered from the outset by a basic failure in our commercial property market: the absence of any transparent, accessible listing system for smaller units. When she did find suitable spaces, she was strung along by landlords for months, in one case, four and a half months of presentations, board approvals and promises, before being told the space had gone to a "more stable" tenant at the eleventh hour. That same landlord came back to her twice. When she finally secured her first studio, the landlord was based overseas, refused to communicate directly, and instructed a solicitor who then took a month's leave mid-transaction. Five and a half months elapsed between the first viewing and receiving the keys. Legal costs ran to approximately £6,000–£7,000 against first-year rent of £30,000: an extraordinary cost of entry before a single client had walked through the door. Personal guarantees were demanded; she declined to provide them.

Tom's experience was different in character but near-identical in cost. He was taking an assignment of the final two and a half years of an existing lease from a national retailer – an uncomplicated transaction by any commercial measure, with all parties agreeing the headline terms quickly. It still took six months to conclude, absorbing three sets of lawyers and three sets of surveyors. As Tom reflected: "There was no reason it should have taken that long other than the fact that these things always do, or so I was told." Unwilling to lose the make-or-break Christmas trading window, he moved in before the exchange of contracts, a calculated gamble that most new entrants could neither afford nor survive if it went wrong. The true cost was not the legal bill but the six months of delay itself: capital tied up, stock orders deferred, staff recruitment held back. Four years on, Tom is still paying the price. He has been locked in a rent-review dispute for fourteen months, with surveyors, solicitors, and a court filing now involved. The system provides no fast, low-cost mechanism for resolving such disagreements.

Beyond the transactional grind, both described a system in which every default is set against the occupier. Vanessa found the lease documentation "Victorian and antiquated" and was repeatedly advised by her own solicitor to concede contested points rather than fight them, simply to keep the transaction moving. She took occupation of a unit the landlord had failed to properly divide before handover; arrived to find no water supply despite a functioning bathroom; suffered two floods in the first year with no meaningful landlord response; and was told by the Valuation Office it would take several months to update its records after the unit division – and that she should pay rates on both halves in the meantime. She declined. It is hard to imagine how a less experienced entrepreneur would have navigated any of this. Neither received meaningful support from their local authority. Tom noted, with admirable restraint, that his primary interactions with Wandsworth Council across three and a half years of trading had been invoices and enforcement letters, including an unannounced food safety inspection on his busiest trading day of the year. Vanessa's business in Islington sits in a geographical no-man's land between two Business Improvement Districts. The relevant BID declined her repeated requests for associate membership on the grounds that doing so would set a precedent: if they admitted her, they would have to admit everyone. The result is that a growing, employment-generating business on a live high street receives none of the collective marketing, corporate outreach or event programming that businesses on the other side of the road enjoy. Her business rates have also risen by £250 a month despite the government's headline reduction for the leisure sector, because the Valuation Office has simultaneously revalued her rateable value upwards. These are not abstract frustrations. They represent the cumulative friction that determines whether a promising business survives its critical first three years.

To provide an actionable focus to my paper, I have focused on three areas that would have helped my case studies, and clearly those less equipped to master the labyrinth of taking space on the High Street. I have referenced where we have gone wrong, best practices from abroad and an actionable policy idea to be investigated further:

1. Commercial lease reform

It has long been known that the existing lease model in the UK is not fit for purpose for smaller occupiers. Initiatives like The Law Society's Model Commercial Lease (MCL), introduced in 2007, despite being very owner-friendly, failed to gain traction and covered all leases. I am calling for a retail-specific leasing process as adopted in Melbourne under the Retail Leases Act 2003, rather than comprehensive reform across sectors, it would focus on retail, community and hospitality uses. A more ambitious goal would be to move towards the French "3/6/9" system, where average transaction costs are €1,000 v £5,000 in the UK and are concluded in days rather than months.

To move this forward, the Law Commission's recent work on security of tenure (the "1954 Act") is a study in how not to do things. Turkeys rarely vote for Christmas! The industry, owners, and occupiers should come together and issue a memorandum of understanding based on best practices from abroad. The lawyers can then be told to make it work rather than concoct reasons to maintain the status quo.

2. Statutory timeframes for transactions backed by arbitration

Closely aligned to this would be statutory timeframes for concluding transactions; six months is simply unacceptable to document even today's labyrinthine system. Tom's uncontested assignment took 6 months, and he took occupation early, at his own risk, in order to be open in time for the all-important Christmas trade.

Lease reform would resolve this; however, as a transition, a statutory limit or timeframes, with low-cost, quick resolution through an expert or arbitration, would unglue the system. Again, in Victoria, the Small Business Commissioners fulfil this role, or the Property Ombudsman (TPO) scheme in the UK could be reimagined and put on a statutory basis to deal with SME property disputes too.

3. Funding and guarantees

It is unlikely that I will ever write a paper where I don't reference increased devolution as part of the answer. At a regional level, when compared to Europe, we have little in the way of regional banking focused on supporting enterprise in their region. Newcastle Building Society has done great work in bringing financial services to the High Street, but it falls a long way short of the "Sparkassen" savings banks across Germany.

A direct intervention to bridge the "risk" gap between the aspirations of potential occupiers and owners with mortgages to pay would be a government-backed SME lease guarantee scheme. Building on existing British Business Bank structures, a simple guarantee instrument that substitutes for personal guarantees and excessive rent deposits – allowing a creditworthy new business to substitute a state-backed guarantee for the balance-sheet proof landlords currently demand. Limiting to a first loss of 3 months rent, the risk of default and loss would be offset by the increased tax from employment, VAT and (sadly) business rates.

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High street renewal: Partnerships to build places - Diane Cunningham

There is plenty of rhetoric about failing high streets, but there are also many examples where good work is being done despite challenging conditions. Key to success is how partners are brought together, and the high street is managed.

Streatham in south London and Wavertree in Liverpool are two examples. They are similar in that they are both long high streets on busy roads, but they have different challenges and are taking different approaches.

Streatham – collaboration to support a functional high street

Streatham High Road holds the title of Europe's longest continuous high street. It has a mix of leisure uses, plus a mix of independents and chains. While it retains some art deco grandeur from its past, it is essentially a busy, often congested arterial route through south London.

Its neighbours have grown and evolved while often being seen as more desirable places to live but Streatham has also evolved via partnerships.

Sometimes in the quest for improvements on a major scale we overlook the places that are serving their community well without fanfare. Streatham's high street in being functional rather than remarkable is doing just that.

What Streatham is doing well

A BID was formed in 2013 with the aim of making Streatham a more pleasant place to spend time, to encourage people to stop off rather than pass through.

There has been work to soften the edges of the busy A23 with tree planting and branded parklets. Banners add to the place branding, helping to make Streatham identifiable.

The BID is part of a complex mix of stakeholders from Transport for London (TfL), Lambeth Council and the Met Police to community groups like Streatham Action, but it is playing a pivotal role.

Some of the ways this is happening are:

- The BID has a clearly defined operating agreement with the council, so it's clear who does what and to what standard.
- Communication with all the groups has proved invaluable. The key is understanding what each does, what the issues are, what could be done better and making sure the stakeholders know each other.
- The focus is on local, building relationships between the high street, its residents, businesses and amenity providers, creating a sense of pride and loyalty so that people want to support the area and use it above other places.
- Streatham BID's work with levy payers, is visible, approachable, responsive and acts as a connector introducing businesses to each other and to others who can resolve their issues.
- TfL add a layer of complexity to work in Streatham. As manager of the road network, permissions must be sought for lighting, parklets and temporary installations. This takes time to understand and only by building a relationship between parties can the BID delivery for its levy payers while TfL keep the road running.

Social media and communications, such as newsletters, are used to build relationships and help levy payers understand what they pay for.

The BID levy covers much of the work carried out but grants and government funding are still needed and much of this income will come from the local authority. A recent project on Streatham Green has been developed in partnership and council officers are supportive in a borough with several BIDs.

The BID essentially acts as the translator across organisational cultures and as a delivery partner for the council.

There is still much to be done, and it is still a far from perfect system, but Streatham has a very low vacancy rate given the length of the high street and the BID is now in its third term which are both indicators of a successful approach.

Wavertree – Community, public and private sector working to drive change

Wavertree is similar to Streatham in that it's a long high street on a busy main road into Liverpool city centre. There are problems with traffic and parking, and not many places for pedestrians to cross. Unlike Streatham, it has a high vacancy rate.

While Wavertree is a conservation area, this has not been enforced, so buildings and the public realm have declined. It's a mix of affluence and deprivation, which puts it outside the criteria for most government or local authority funding.

Despite this, a partnership of community groups, public and private sector has been driving change.

This includes the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, the universities, Wellington Yards, Love Wavertree CIC, and The Wavertree Society.

What Wavertree is doing well

Footfall is concentrated at either end of the high street, so the focus is on building where there is already activity rather than trying to revive parts with little to no activity.

At one end, the beautiful former town hall building has been converted into a restaurant and event space. Here, there are functional businesses such as a chemist and a supermarket.

At the other end, there is the Grade II-listed Wavertree Library and the emerging Wellington Yard, which is a repurposed industrial park with a focus on makers' spaces.

To help attract people to the High Street, 30% of Wellington Yard's tenants have a public retail offer. The owner targets young businesses and people who can invest in growing them, with the aim that it will have a ripple effect on the run-down properties on the High Street and diversify the offer.

Wavertree received support from the government's High Street Task Force between 2022 and 2024, which was a catalyst for forming the Wavertree High Street Task Force. The group is formed of residents, community organisations, the ward councillor and council officers.

The Love Wavertree CIC has been instrumental and is working with residents, the council and the highways team on the High Street Task Force recommendations, including road improvements while Wellington Yard is an example of the private sector having a vision and the investment to make something happen and hoping that this will be a collective effort.

Together, the organisations reflect the huge amount of love and care there is for Wavertree at a local level.

A new approach

In 2023-4 Liverpool City Council changed their structure to a Neighbourhood Model. Where services were previously centralised, with no designated town centre managers, the city is now split into 13 regions, each with a neighbourhood manager.

The hyper-local model sees the council's Neighbourhood Manager chairing Wavertree's Task Force. This allows for quicker escalation routes on local issues and more opportunities for collaborative working.

It means a single approach for all partners to provide insight and has led to high levels of business and community engagement in addressing issues such as anti-social behaviour and health issues.

There is still a need to get more businesses involved to balance community and commercial activities and for more understanding between the public and private sector to manage expectations around the pace of change.

Like Streatham, there is still much to do in Wavertree, and no partnership is perfect, but it is moving towards a more coherent driving force.

Final tips for successful partnerships:

- Have shared objectives and be clear about partners' roles and that values align.
- Maintain relationships for the long term.
- People don't see borders, be it ward boundaries, BID areas or policies such as planning and street cleaning, so partnerships need to stretch beyond boundary lines to deliver effective change.
- Local authorities need to accept that they can't always act quickly enough.
- One change cannot transform a high street, for example, more police do not make for a safer town centre; it requires a multi-partner approach.

People still want to open shops, so how do we make it easier? - Graham Soult

Let's start with an important observation that often gets overlooked in the national debate around high streets.

People still want to open shops – despite what you might read in the tabloids. I know that to be the case, because I spend my time as a retail consultant meeting with and supporting them. I talk to fledgling indies who could, with the right support, grow into the household names of the future. There are still plenty of multiples on the expansion trail as well, albeit often in more select locations than in the past.

Sometimes I'll meet a person with a promising side hustle, looking to take the leap into a full-time operation; an experienced indie hoping to gently expand into a second location; or a charity or CIC looking to turn a neglected property into something that gives back to the community.

So, the ambition is still there – but sometimes there's a lack of clarity about where and how to begin turning that ambition into something real.

The start of the journey

In my earlier essay for this campaign, I argued – as I regularly do – that the high street is evolving, not dying. But for evolution, we need a steady flow of new entrants. So, how easy is it for someone to open a shop today? Certainly, I've lost count of how often someone says to me, "Graham, I'd love to open a shop, but I just don't know where to start."

They may be unsure whether they are looking at the right location; whether the rent being quoted is realistic or negotiable; who actually owns the building; or even who they can trust for advice. Underpinning all those questions is a fear of "What if I get it wrong?" Inevitably, topics like business rates, staffing and online competition are always part of the conversation. However, the decision to take on a shop unit is, based on what I see, also local and human. It's about having the confidence to follow a dream.

Unblocking the barriers

In Durham, and a range of other places, I've undertaken what you might call a "vacancy brokerage" role. I describe this as Retail Cupid, on the basis that it involves matchmaking between empty shops and the businesses that want to occupy those Premises.

First, it's about working out which units are genuinely vacant and available, and, at the same time, building relationships with the landlords and agents on the ground. It also means understanding how the attractiveness of particular streets and pitches is shifting, and what uses might work best where. Then, it's about introducing would-be occupiers to spaces that match their intended offer, ambitions and budget.

In practice, this process is, at its heart, about something I mention a lot – forging relationships. Nurturing trust, sparking conversation, and providing reassurance.

On many occasions, I've met prospective shopkeepers who are keen, but still holding back. Maybe they've spotted a unit they like the look of, but are unsure about footfall or lease terms. Sometimes they're worried that the property gatekeeper they approach won't take them seriously. Too often, unfortunately, they've already tried to talk to the agent on the "To Let" board but haven't heard anything back.

Relationships sometimes get stuck in the opposite direction too. Landlords – especially ones based locally, and who are more invested in a place – are often more open to indie occupants than you might expect, but don't necessarily know who is out there looking. So, without some prodding, these conversations drift, or don't even start. Yet, with someone helping to bond the key stakeholders together – the human glue, if you like – I see how possible it is to get everything moving.

Sometimes it's as simple as suggesting an alternative location where the rent is lower, or the neighbouring traders more complementary. Other times it's making a phone call to unblock a stalled conversation, saving weeks of to-ing and fro-ing. On occasions, it's just being honest with the people I meet about what is realistic, and helping them avoid a costly mistake.

Tackling vacancy often just needs people to talk to each other.

Same questions, different locations

What strikes me on my travels is how often the same conversations crop up wherever in the country I happen to be working.

During workshops and one-to-ones I've held recently with independent traders in the South East, I've heard many of the same concerns that I do in the North East. Business owners ask me whether I think they're trading in the right location. They want to understand how to drive more footfall, by harnessing online channels but also by collaborating with their business neighbours. They may be unsure about who can give them a straight answer about what they need to do to trade more effectively. Most of all, and almost without exception, they want the shop that they have invested so much into – money, energy, time, sweat – to succeed.

These business owners are surrounded by different organisations with good intentions and useful advice to share – councils, business improvement districts, Growth Hubs – but they do often struggle to identify a trusted point of guidance when it comes to questions around retail premises.

Why this matters for inclusive growth

This report is framed around the idea of inclusive growth. On the high street, that can sound somewhat abstract. In practice, it's simply about who feels able to step forward and trade. So, if we're serious about promoting inclusive growth, we need to look closely at who actually makes it on to the high street.

Inclusive growth is not just about sustaining existing small businesses, though that is obviously important. It's about teasing out the next generation of retail entrepreneurs, and making sure that someone with a creative, viable idea can see the way forward. In practice, as I've argued here, what can make a difference is clarity over what opportunities are actually available; constructive relationships between the key players in the place; and someone on the ground who can understand both the property landscape and the people and ideas that can reshape the high street.

As we have seen under successive governments, we're often willing to fund buildings, public realm and capital projects. Yet, funding the people who connect, inhabit and animate those places is just as important, but perhaps less eye-catching in a government press release.

Of course, none of what I am advocating for means that the big structural issues go away. We all recognise that business rates, policing and local authority funding all shape the environment in which businesses operate. Yet, if that environment were more conducive, there could be even more retail entrepreneurs than there are now. In the meantime, by improving the mechanics of opening a high-street business, we make the process easier for everyone to navigate.

Shaping evolution, not fighting decline

High streets have always changed, but people wanting to trade in these places is a constant throughout history. The question now is how we can make that journey from idea to practice easier.

If inclusive growth is to mean anything, it must embrace those small, practical interventions that can turn uncertainty into action and empty shops into sources of potential, not signals of blight.

Sometimes that intervention is, indeed, a policy reform. Sometimes it is funding. And sometimes, honestly, it is simply someone saying, "Let me introduce you."

We talk a lot about capital investment in our high streets – and, of course, we do want to create physical environments that are attractive to visit and trade in. However, we should talk just as seriously about the retail entrepreneurs with the good ideas – and the people who can provide support and capacity to help turn those ideas into open shops.

Asks to Government

- For the government to undertake an economic impact assessment on committee structure variance before NLPF guidance is embedded in devolution deals.
- For the government to consult on retail-specific commercial lease reform with a view to shifting towards the France 3/6/9 model.
- For the government to legislate for statutory timeframes for commercial lease transactions, backed by low-cost binding arbitration via a strengthened The Property Ombudsman-style body to unblock delays.
- For the government to establish a government-backed SME lease guarantee scheme through the British Business Bank to replace personal guarantees and excessive deposits, de-risking high street occupation.
- For the government to fund local “vacancy brokerage” roles nationwide to match empty units with prospective occupiers.
- For the government to shift regeneration funding towards people as well as property, by allowing Towns Fund-style programmes to include multiple-year revenue support
- For the government to require joint high street action plans as part of Local Transport Plans and Local Plans.
- For the government to broaden regeneration funding eligibility beyond deprivation indices to allow high vacancy or strategically locally important high streets to access targeted capital beyond certain vacancy rate thresholds or footfall decline metrics.

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