



Housing Delivery
& Growth

How tech and innovation can create thriving high streets



Policy Report

September 2026

Boosting Britain's High Streets



About

The Policy Liaison Group for Housing Delivery & Growth, run by College Green Group, brings together industry leaders, experts and parliamentarians to shape effective, cross-cutting solutions to some of the UK's most urgent challenges.

With support from a cross-section of MPs and peers, we provide a platform for practical, high-impact engagement between policymakers and sectors ranging from housing, planning, technology, investment and development.

Our Boosting Britain's High Streets campaign explores innovative policies and practical solutions to help high streets adapt, thrive and remain central to community life. It examines ways to repurpose vacant spaces, encourage diverse high street uses beyond retail and harness new technologies to revitalise local economies.

At the heart of this campaign is a commitment to ensuring high streets remain vibrant, sustainable and resilient. By promoting innovation, flexible planning policies, targeted investment and new business models, we will help shape a high street renaissance that balances economic vitality with social value.

This report examines how better data, practical technology, digital planning, new retail models and improved logistics can support that transition, while recognising the continuing importance of physical places, human interaction and local character.

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- ▶ **Lord Walker** of Broxton OBE
- ▶ **Mark Robinson** - Chair of Fellows, Radix Big Tent and former chair of the High Street Task Force
- ▶ **Diane Cunningham** - Director, The Assembly Line
- ▶ **Kelly Cohen Navon** - Chief Commercial Officer, Fetch Analytics
- ▶ **Thomas Rossington** - Customer Success Team Lead, Fetch Analytics
- ▶ The teams at **Tonkotsu** and **Rita's Reign**



Foreword

By Lord Walker of Broxton OBE

Britain’s high streets are enduring one of the most profound periods of transition in their history. The ways people shop, work and spend their leisure time have shifted, but our town centres remain essential to community life.

Having led Iceland and served as the government’s cost of living champion, I know first-hand that protecting these hubs requires bold commercial innovation alongside a clear national strategy. We have demonstrated how retail can directly support struggling households through practical measures like interest-free microcredit via the Iceland Food Club and targeted discounts for older shoppers. Successful high streets must combine this focus on local value with a healthy mix of hospitality, housing, culture and civic spaces.

This report by the Policy Liaison Group for Housing Delivery & Growth provides a clear, evidence- and experience-led agenda to help local economies adapt and thrive. By examining mobile-location data from English towns and city centres across a number of years, the research shows that to direct public investment effectively, local authorities and ministers need consistent measures that capture trends at the earliest possible opportunity, so they can provide the appropriate intervention.

Practical technology and data are essential tools in this transition, but they must support human interaction and local character, rather than replace them. Helping independent small and medium-sized enterprises adopt proven digital tools, modernising planning processes to quickly repurpose vacant units and recognising last-mile logistics as core infrastructure will give businesses the agility they need.

Ultimately, the health of our high streets is about more than footfall or economic activity; it is something people experience every day. Whether a local high street feels vibrant and welcoming, or in decline, can shape how people feel about their community and, more broadly, whether they believe their quality of life is improving or getting worse.

By combining national policy support with local commercial flexibility, we can secure a resilient, vibrant future for our high streets. I welcome this report and encourage colleagues across Parliament and government to consider its recommendations.

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Executive summary

Britain's high streets are adapting to significant changes in how people shop, work, travel and spend their leisure time. Retail remains an important part of this picture, but successful town centres increasingly depend on a wider combination of uses and activity.

Technology and innovation can play a pivotal role in supporting this transition. For example, better data can improve understanding of how people use town centres; digital tools can make retail more convenient; technology can help businesses compete and connect with customers; and improved logistics can integrate physical stores with the convenience of online shopping.

The evidence in this report demonstrates the importance of taking a place-based approach. Analysis of 27 English town and city centres, using mobile-location data across comparable spring periods from 2024 to 2026, examines footfall, dwell time, catchment and other key metrics, with the ability to compare findings between different locations.

The results reveal markedly different trajectories. Some centres are attracting more visitors and encouraging longer stays, while others are experiencing increased footfall but shorter visits. A further group is seeing fewer visitors while retaining or increasing dwell time. These differences point towards different local challenges and require different responses from all tiers of government. As a result, national and local governments should have access to consistent measures that show how people use places and how those patterns are changing over time.

The report also examines how technology can support the businesses and places that make high streets successful. Practical technologies such as real-time stock visibility, click-and-collect, customer relationship management, digital marketing and social commerce can help smaller retailers compete with larger businesses. Visitor data can help businesses understand their customers and help town centre partnerships identify gaps in provision, plan events and attract complementary uses.

At the same time, digital planning and consultation capabilities can improve the speed and quality of

decision-making through more inclusive public engagement, while reducing the administrative burden on local authority planning departments.

Moreover, better use of data can strengthen social value and enable local authorities to target investment more effectively. Last-mile logistics are already shaping the future of the high street, with SMEs able to leverage the technology and infrastructure they bring to strengthen the resilience of existing premises while diversifying and expanding their customer base.

Whatever the innovation, the human dimension remains central. Technology should complement knowledgeable staff, distinctive places, community participation and the experiences that encourage people to spend time in town centres. Physical and digital retail increasingly operate as parts of the same customer journey, making consistency, convenience and service increasingly important.

The policy recommendations in this report therefore focus on practical innovation, better evidence and greater local flexibility. We call for more consistent access to high street data, support for SMEs adopting proven technology, more adaptable planning and regulation, greater local control over investment, recognition of logistics and accessibility as high street infrastructure, and an evidence-led approach to public investment.

Together, these measures can help high streets respond to changing patterns of demand while strengthening the physical, economic and social qualities that make individual places successful.

Policy proposals

Better data has practical implications beyond evaluation. Local authorities, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), landlords, investors and businesses increasingly need to understand who is using their high street, when they visit, where they come from and how long they stay.

This information can inform decisions about opening hours, events, transport, public realm, retail mix, vacant premises and investment. It can also help identify whether an intervention is having the intended effect. For example, an event may generate a short-term increase in footfall without changing longer-term patterns of engagement. Another intervention may attract fewer additional visitors but encourage significantly longer stays and greater spending across a broader range of businesses.

A consistent approach to measurement would make these differences easier to identify and provide a stronger evidence base for targeting investment. The seven policy recommendations which follow are designed to put this approach into practice.

1. Use consistent data to evaluate public investment

Government should establish a consistent Town Centre Vitality Framework to allow local authorities to evaluate publicly funded interventions. At a minimum, this should include total visits, change

in visits, average dwell time, change in dwell time, geographic catchment, visits relative to the local population and direction of travel over comparable periods.

The framework should be applied before investment, during delivery and after completion. Success measures should, however, be agreed locally. For example, a district centre undergoing substantial redevelopment may not be expected to increase footfall immediately. Early outcomes could instead include increased dwell time, improved catchment, reduced vacancy or greater activity across a wider range of uses.

This would allow government to assess whether investment is changing underlying performance rather than simply measuring whether individual capital projects have been completed.

2. Create a system of early-warning indicators

The data provides the basis for a simple Early-Warning System for local, strategic authorities and national government. Centres showing falling footfall and falling dwell time over successive comparable periods should receive the greatest attention, as this combination may indicate sustained deterioration.

Centres where footfall is falling but dwell time is increasing require a different response. Further investigation should consider changes in visitor profiles, retail mix, leisure activity, accessibility and vacant space. Conversely, centres where both footfall and dwell time are increasing can provide evidence of successful local conditions and interventions.

A national, regional or local monitoring system could therefore identify strengthening centres, stable centres, centres showing mixed signals and centres experiencing sustained decline. This would enable earlier and more targeted intervention.

3. Extend long-term, flexible funding to transformation

The different trajectories identified in the data support a flexible, locally led approach to investment. Solihull and Sutton-in-Ashfield, for example, have recorded strong growth in both visits and dwell time, while other centres have attracted more visitors but seen average stays shortened. A smaller group has experienced declining visitor numbers. These differing circumstances require different interventions, rather than a uniform set of prescribed projects.

Government should build on the long-term and locally flexible approach established through Pride in Place by extending these principles to town centre investment more broadly. Funding should reflect the different trajectories of individual centres, giving local and strategic authorities sufficient time and flexibility to establish a baseline, develop interventions, measure outcomes and adapt their

approach. A five-year funding framework, linked to agreed outcomes rather than prescribed projects, such as increased high street activity, would provide the flexibility needed to respond to local evidence and changing market conditions.

This should build upon the greater freedoms provided through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, enabling local and strategic authorities to take a longer-term, place-based approach to reshaping centres. Where retail demand has structurally declined, authorities should have greater freedom to repurpose underused space for housing, healthcare, education, leisure, culture, workspace, hospitality, community facilities and civic uses, alongside creating the conditions for a stronger retail offer.

4. Modernise planning and regulation to help high streets adapt

Planning policy should better reflect the pace at which town centres evolve. Government should accelerate digital planning reforms, simplify change-of-use processes and encourage greater flexibility in repurposing vacant premises.

Digital consultation platforms should widen public participation while ensuring residents who are less digitally engaged remain fully included. Faster planning decisions would enable high streets to respond more quickly to changing consumer demand, reduce long-term vacancies and support investment in mixed-use developments. Modern planning should facilitate continuous adaptation rather than preserving outdated retail models that no longer reflect how people use town centres.

5. Recognise last-mile logistics as part of high street infrastructure

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) should recognise high street micro-logistics hubs as an important part of local infrastructure, encouraging local authorities to make better use of underutilised assets such as council car parks and vacant retail units for shared micro-fulfilment. This would support retailers in combining physical stores with local collection, returns and delivery services, while making more efficient use of existing town centre space. Additionally, the government should introduce



a standardised national regulatory framework for autonomous delivery vehicles through the proposed Low-speed Zero Emission Vehicle (LZEV) classification. This should provide a clear baseline for local authorities while enabling them to license, monitor and, where appropriate, set local limits on pavement robot deployment. Such an approach would provide regulatory certainty for businesses while ensuring deployment remains proportionate and responsive to local circumstances, consistent with the powers provided by the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026.

Local transport authorities should also provide dedicated loading and collection bays for zero-emission last-mile delivery vehicles and merchant collection services, particularly around key retail corridors. Protecting kerbside space for these activities would help reduce congestion, support efficient deliveries and collections, and enable retailers to integrate local logistics into their wider high street operations.

6. Create a more flexible regulatory and fiscal environment for high street innovation

Government should reduce unnecessary regulatory barriers and give local and strategic authorities greater flexibility to support innovation on the high

street. Licensing, permitting and local approval processes for pop-up events, demonstrations, outdoor trading and community activities should be simplified and made more proportionate, particularly for small businesses.

Greater local fiscal flexibility should complement this, building on the powers included in the Devolution and Community Empowerment Act for mayoral strategic authorities to retain a proportion of business rates. This would enable local leaders to incentivise investment in digital innovation, improve customer experiences and bring vacant premises back into productive use. Local economies face different challenges and opportunities, and a more flexible framework would allow places to develop solutions that reflect the character and needs of their high streets.

Greater attention in this area would support more experience-led and distinctive town centres, recognising that people increasingly visit high streets for experiences as well as purchases. Events, activities and innovative retail formats can generate economic activity, strengthen local identity, increase repeat visits and help independent businesses compete with larger retailers.

7. Help SMEs adopt proven retail technology

Government should establish a national programme to help independent retailers and SMEs adopt proven, affordable technologies that strengthen physical retail. Support should prioritise practical solutions such as real-time stock visibility, integrated click-and-collect, customer relationship management, digital marketing and social commerce.

Grants, tax incentives and practical advice should focus on technologies with clear evidence of improving productivity, customer experience and business performance, rather than encouraging investment in unproven innovations. Giving smaller retailers access to the digital capabilities routinely available to larger chains would improve competitiveness while preserving the diversity and distinctive character of local high streets.

How can we use modern technology to accurately measure a town centre's vitality? A useful starting point is to understand how many people are visiting, how long they stay and how those patterns change over time. Analysis of 27 town centres across England's nine regions, using consistent mobile-location data for March, April and May between 2024 and 2026, can demonstrate to local authorities whether their interventions - or indeed lack of intervention - have had an impact on town centre vitality.

Research: What visitor data can tell us about town centre vitality

Thomas Rossington, Fetch Analytics and George Beard, Policy Liaison Group for Housing Delivery & Growth

The analysis focuses on three core measures: **total visits**, **average dwell time** and **visits per square metre**, the latter of which indicates the intensity of visitor activity within the defined town centre location. Comparing the same three-month spring period each year reduces seasonal variation and allows each centre to be assessed against its own trajectory.

The results show substantial differences between locations. While most centres experienced growth in visitor numbers between 2024 and 2026, changes in dwell time were more mixed. Looking at these measures together provides a more informative picture of how town centre use is changing.

What the data tells us

The latest data shows substantial growth in visitor numbers across much of the sample. Between Spring 2024 and Spring 2026, 22 of the 27 centres

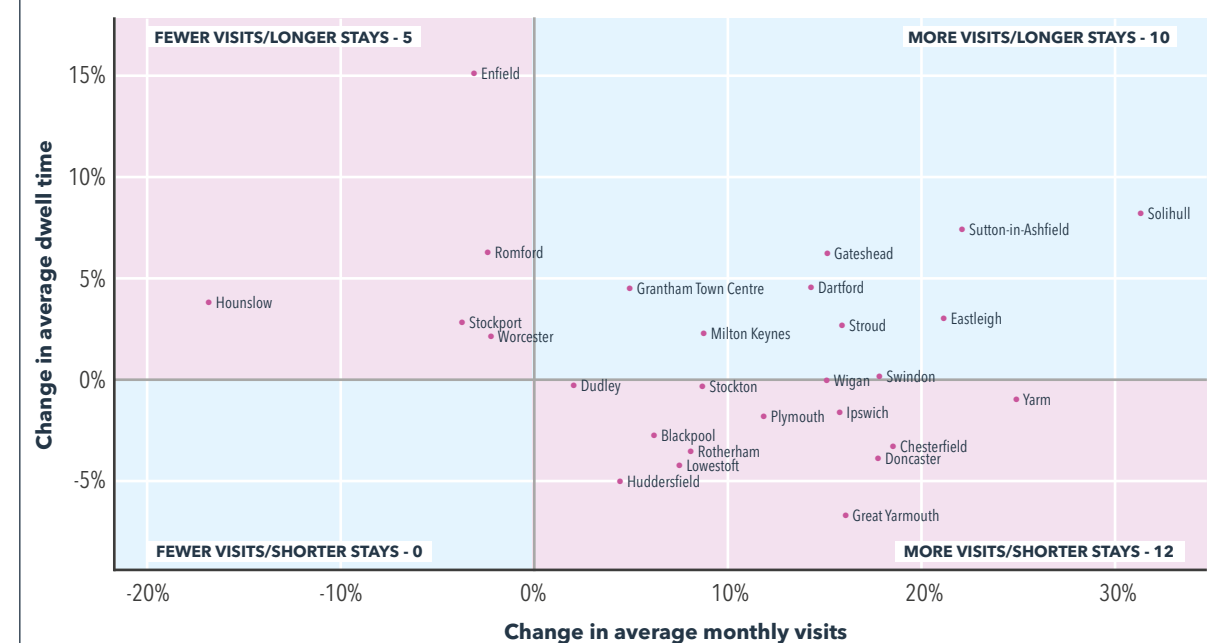
recorded higher average monthly visits. Solihull recorded the strongest increase, at approximately 31%, followed by Yarm (+25%), Sutton-in-Ashfield (+22%), Eastleigh (+21%) and Chesterfield (+18%).

As we see in Figure 1, ten centres combined increased visits with increased dwell time. Solihull recorded particularly strong growth, with visits increasing by 31% and average dwell time increasing by 8%. Sutton-in-Ashfield recorded a 22% increase in visits alongside a 7.5% increase in dwell time. Eastleigh, Gateshead, Stroud, Dartford and Grantham also recorded growth in both measures.

A further group recorded increased visits alongside lower dwell times. This includes Chesterfield, Doncaster, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich, Lowestoft and Rotherham. Meanwhile, five centres recorded fewer visits while dwell time increased: Enfield, Romford, Worcester, Stockport and Hounslow.

How are town centres changing?

Percentage change in average monthly visits and dwell time from Spring 2024 to Spring 2026: axes cross at zero.



Source: Fetch Analytics/College Green Group. Spring - average of March, April and May. Coverage: 27 town centres

Figure 1 - Percentage change in average monthly visits and dwell time, comparing Spring 2024 to Spring 2026

Great Yarmouth provides another example which warrants further investigation. Average spring visits increased by approximately 16% between 2024 and 2026, while dwell time declined by approximately 7%. Hounslow presents a different pattern, with visits falling by approximately 17% and dwell time increasing by approximately 4%.

These different combinations provide important evidence about how centres are changing. Higher visitor numbers indicate increased activity, while longer dwell times indicate that visitors are spending more time in the centre. Where the measures move in different directions, the data provides a starting point for understanding the reasons for that change and, importantly, the type of intervention that may be appropriate.

Depending on the local circumstances, this could include investment in transport and accessibility, public realm and physical infrastructure, cultural and leisure activity, the retail and hospitality offer, or wider changes to the mix and use of space. The value of combining these measures is that it can help policymakers move from identifying where change is occurring to asking what type of response

is most appropriate for the particular challenges and opportunities facing each centre. The data can be analysed by day, or even by the hour, allowing local authorities to assess whether specific interventions - whether on a particular day or as part of the night-time economy - are having the desired impact.

The scale of change varies considerably. Some centres have experienced rapid growth, while others have remained relatively stable or recorded declines. While it is not always possible to attribute these trends directly to individual interventions, they provide a useful indication of how targeted investment and active management can influence a town centre's performance.

In Solihull, for example, the local authority and Touchwood, a major shopping destination, have worked closely to create a more active and engaging destination, introducing a range of community-focused events spanning music, theatre and art. This activity sits alongside strong commercial performance, with retail occupancy at the centre reported to have reached 98% in 2024, following the arrival of major brands such as Levi Strauss, Mango and Oliver Bonas.

The example highlights the value of collaboration between the centre’s operator, Ardent, and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council in supporting footfall, activity and commercial performance. Importantly, this success is not simply the result of events and programming, but reflects a broader approach to creating a centre that responds to local needs while providing the right conditions for businesses to thrive.

By combining a strong retail offer with spaces and activities that give people reasons to visit, spend time and return, Touchwood demonstrates how well-designed and actively managed assets can create a virtuous cycle of footfall, dwell time, occupancy and investment. Planned improvements to wayfinding could strengthen this further by reducing friction between key landmarks and destinations, making the wider town centre easier to navigate and encouraging visitors to explore for longer.

More consistent data analysis, through measures such as a Town Centre Vitality Framework, would provide a valuable opportunity to gain a better understanding of which interventions are having the greatest impact at an increased scale, helping local authorities and operators to identify what works, learn from what does not and target future investment more effectively.

The direction of travel

Analysing year-on-year, data demonstrates the value of looking at trajectories rather than isolated measurements. Figure 2 opposite shows that between Spring 2024 and Spring 2025, 10 of the 27 centres recorded lower visitor numbers. Between Spring 2025 and Spring 2026, this fell to four.

Individual centres demonstrate why this matters. Great Yarmouth recorded a 2.5% decline in visits in 2025 before increasing by 19.1% in 2026. Plymouth moved from a 2.2% decline to a 15.4% increase. Hounslow followed a different trajectory, with visits declining by approximately 9% in both years. These patterns have different implications for policy. A centre experiencing one year of decline followed by strong recovery presents a different situation from a centre experiencing repeated deterioration. Consistent data allows policymakers to identify those differences.

The intensity of activity within the high street

The Spring 2026 data also allows visitor activity to be considered in relation to the physical size of each defined town centre location. Average visits per square metre provide an indication of how intensively each area is being used and allow relative comparisons to be made across these town centres.

There is considerable variation across the 27 centres, as shown in Figure 3 (overleaf). Enfield records the highest level at 14.3 visits per square metre per month, followed by Hounslow at 12.1, Yarm at 11.2, Gateshead at 10.8 and Eastleigh at 9.3. At the lower end, Grantham records 3.3 visits per square metre, followed by Milton Keynes at 3.7, Stroud at 3.8 and Huddersfield at 4.8. The median rests at 6.4.

For policymakers, the measure can therefore help identify how intensively different town centre areas are being used and whether the physical footprint of a centre is aligned with current patterns of activity.

Tracking Blackpool’s visitor economy

Blackpool Council has increasingly used data and insight to inform decision-making and strategic planning, with a focus on attracting visitors from across the North West to increase tourism, engagement and economic activity. To better understand visitor behaviour, the council analysed several key locations across Blackpool, including retail destinations such as Houndshell Shopping Centre and major tourism assets including the Promenade and Pleasure Beach.



The direction of travel			
Annual percentage change in average monthly visits. Green indicates growth, red indicates decline.			
REGION	TOWN CENTRE	2024-25	2025-26
East Midlands	Chesterfield	+5.5%	+12.0%
	Grantham Town Centre	-4.1%	+9.5%
	Sutton-in-Ashfield	+8.0%	+13.1%
East of England	Great Yarmouth	-2.5%	+19.1%
	Ipswich	+0.3%	+15.5%
	Lowestoft	+7.2%	+1.3%
Greater London	Enfield	-4.3%	+2.9%
	Hounslow	-8.8%	-8.9%
	Romford	-0.8%	-1.3%
North East	Gateshead	+3.3%	+11.5%
	Stockton	+1.5%	+7.1%
	Yarm	+10.9%	+12.7%
North West	Blackpool	-1.7%	+8.3%
	Stockport	+2.2%	-5.8%
	Wigan	+2.8%	+11.9%
South East	Dartford	+5.0%	+9.2%
	Milton Keynes	+3.7%	+4.9%
	Eastleigh	+18.1%	+2.6%
South West	Plymouth	-2.2%	+15.4%
	Stroud	+5.3%	+10.2%
	Swindon	+5.6%	+11.4%
West Midlands	Dudley	-1.4%	+3.6%
	Solihull	+10.2%	+19.3%
	Worcester	+4.7%	-6.6%
Yorkshire and Humber	Doncaster	+1.4%	+16.2%
	Huddersfield	-0.9%	+5.5%
	Rotherham	-0.1%	+8.3%

Source: Fetch Analytics/College Green Group. Spring - average of March, April and May. Percentage change = (current year ÷ previous year) - 1

Figure 2 - Annual percentage change in monthly visits

Using the available data, the council assessed visitor activity through metrics including footfall, dwell time and visitor catchment. This enabled a detailed analysis of performance across key locations, while historic data provided comparisons on both a year-on-year and month-on-month basis. The analysis identified areas experiencing growth and highlighted opportunities for increasing future engagement.

Overall, the analysis showed that Blackpool experienced increased footfall in 2022 compared with 2021, with the Winter Gardens recording the largest growth among the key locations. Data also demonstrated the positive impact of extending the Blackpool Illuminations into October, November and December, with the area recording strong year-on-year increases in footfall during the extended period. Together, these insights demonstrated positive growth and provided evidence to support future strategic planning.

Where is activity most concentrated?

Average monthly visits per square metre, Spring 2026. Town centres ranked from highest to lowest intensity.

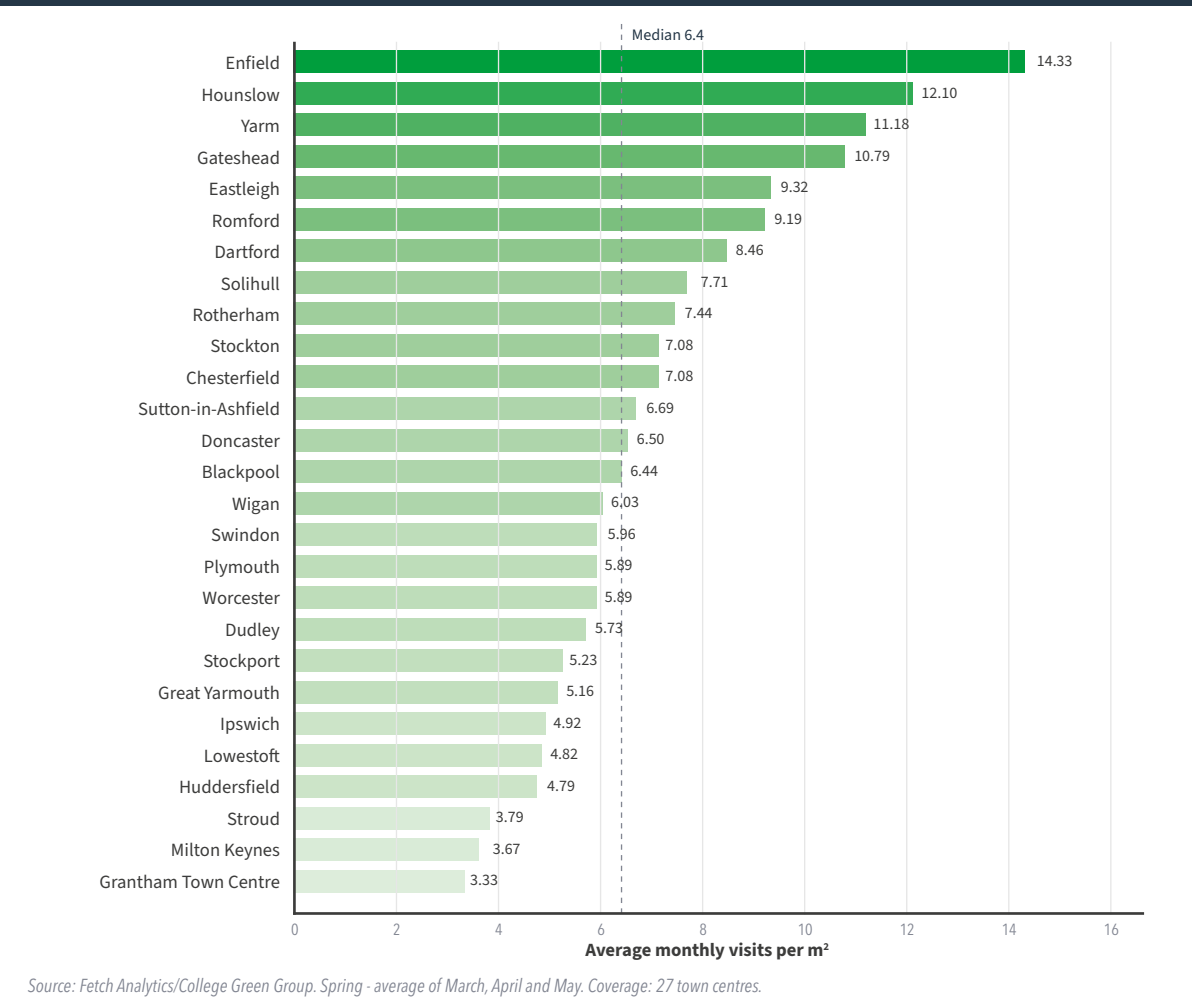


Figure 3 - Average monthly visits per square metre, Mar-May 2026

Supporting Cheshire East's Town Centres

Cheshire East Council oversees 11 town centres across the North West and needed a consistent, data-driven approach to monitor their performance. Teams across Economic Development, Regeneration and Planning required reliable visitor insights to support ongoing projects, strategic decision-making and funding applications.

The council wanted to assess each town centre using a range of visitor behaviour metrics, benchmark performance against historical data and receive monthly reports that could be easily shared with internal and external stakeholders. A key requirement was to present complex data clearly while providing actionable insights across multiple teams.

Fetch Analytics developed bespoke monthly reports tailored to the council's requirements. These included key metrics such as visitor numbers, dwell time, catchment origin maps and visit frequency. Each metric incorporated year-on-year and month-on-month comparisons, enabling the council to track changes over time and identify trends in individual town centres.

The approach has enabled the council to monitor all 11 town centres regularly through a consistent set of measures. Importantly, the data has also supported successful funding applications, demonstrating how robust visitor intelligence can strengthen the case for investment and help shape the future development of town centres.

Research methodology

- ▶ **Data source:** Fetch Analytics' mobile-location methodology uses aggregated and anonymised mobile GPS signals to generate measures of movement, footfall and catchment. These measures provide indicators of visitor behaviour and patterns of activity within defined areas.
- ▶ **Time period:** For each centre, the analysis calculates average monthly visits and equivalent dwell-time measures across March, April and May in 2024, 2025 and 2026. This provides a consistent Spring-on-Spring comparison across three years.
- ▶ **Locations:** Three town or district centre locations were selected from each of the nine English regions, providing a geographically balanced sample of 27 locations. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were excluded from the analysis to maintain a consistent policy context, given the devolved nature of high street and town centre related policy.
- ▶ **Limitations:** The data should be treated as an indicator of visitor behaviour rather than a literal census of every person entering a centre. Sampling, device coverage and changes in mobile behaviour may affect absolute values.
- ▶ **Geofenced locations:** Each town centre is represented by a geofence drawn to reflect its core retail footprint. Visitor counts and dwell time capture activity within that defined area. Where a boundary is tightly drawn or where regeneration has shifted activity beyond it, the figures reflect the footprint as mapped rather than the centre as a whole. Year-on-year movement should therefore be read as change within the defined area.
- ▶ **Policy interpretation:** The principal value of the data lies in identifying consistent patterns and changes over time. It should therefore be considered alongside other local evidence, including vacancy rates, business performance, planning, transport, economic and qualitative data when assessing performance and informing investment decisions.

It was a privilege to chair the High Street Task Force from 2020-24; I inherited a strong board and a delivery consortium, expertly led by the Institute for Place Management. The credit for delivering a complex governmental, multi-year, multi-location (149!) project on budget and on time really does rest with others. I learnt more than I could share and made lifelong friends along the way.

The only downside was having to deal with proptech entrepreneurs.

Honestly, they were an absolute menace. I had to put in place a triage system not just for meeting requests, but also a process for letting them down gently about why I wouldn't recommend that the government adopt their unique and revolutionary technology. Which was invariably, in their not very humble opinion, the sole way to save the high street.

Essay: The high street wasn't broken by the internet

Mark Robinson - Chair of Fellows, Radix Big Tent and former chair of the High Street Task Force

Mis-diagnosing the problem

I'm not anti-entrepreneur; I am one myself, and my last PLG paper sets out actionable policies on how government can increase enterprise on the high street, which is a key to urban renewal and growth. However, proptech evangelists were mostly people with solutions looking for problems to solve, and they based their worldview on an assumption I don't share - that the internet killed the high street and that it was a solo hit job.

The problems of our town centres are complex and intergenerational, which is why there is no one solution. However, in purely trade-diversion terms, out-of-town retail, category-killing hypermarkets

have demonstrably had a more negative impact on individual places than Amazon's Jeff Bezos.

This misdiagnosis of "what broke it can fix it" and, frankly, an obsession with novelty over customer need, led to some incredibly poor technology investments. These ranged from over-spec'd websites and apps no one used to physical infrastructure (anyone remember iBeacons?), in-store interactive displays and online/physical hybrid marketplaces. Many of these "innovations" have failed, including, sadly, ShopAppy, and as Lara Marrero (Retail Leader at Gensler) has said, "We are now spending more money taking failed tech out of retail than we put in."

The green shoots of technology

However, clear use cases for technology on the high street are emerging, more often than not enhancing the existing strengths of place, community, convenience and experience, or democratising data to empower stakeholders in better consultation and decision-making.

In respect of the planning process, Built-ID has a long-established record of promoting community consultation during the development process. These digital tools can help democratise planning, allowing communities to participate in consultations online, giving local residents a stronger voice in shaping their town centres, with the important caveat that those who are not digitally native are not excluded.

In the public sector, using technology to speed up and modernise the planning process is essential to delivering much-needed growth. The recent appointments of Ben Alexander as Chair of the Planning Inspectorate and Graham Stallwood as Chief Executive, with digital transformation a clear priority for the organisation, underline the importance of putting technology at the heart of this effort.

For too long, social value has been an afterthought in the procurement process, rarely aligning with real need. Platforms such as Yemetech are showing how technology can better target, co-ordinate and measure the impact of social value commitments, which, to date, have often been performative. Physical retail will always lag behind online in terms of customer behaviours: the average shopper will shuffle off, mumbling an embarrassed apology to a member of staff looking to help them, but will share their most intimate secrets with tech giants, sometimes without even knowing it! But at least visitor behaviour platforms including Fetch Analytics, as demonstrated in this report, can now

show where visitors come from, how long they stay and which interventions are most effective at increasing high street engagement.

In terms of customer convenience, digitised whole chain inventory management and stock availability mean that, by checking online, trips to the high street can be planned with more confidence, with physical retail influencing 90% of all retail spending, according to CACI, via showrooming or click-and-collect.

The elephant in the room

In the future, a retail agent won't be a bloke who leases a shop; it'll be your online agent who does all your shopping and arranges delivery, or so I have read. However, I genuinely feel that the stalling growth of e-commerce reflects the physicality of shopping that people enjoy, whilst, of course, doing other things that can't be replicated by a bot.

In the case of AI, it will either wipe out architects or, perhaps, free them from the drudgery of basic draughtsmanship, allowing them to be more creative.

Sadly, however, what AI has already done is empower NIMBYs ("not in my back yard") as never before to object to much-needed housing, with, frankly, top-class objections. Any tech-enabled planning regime of the future will have to clearly navigate between the opportunity for wider, quicker consultation and the danger that AI is weaponised against it, demanding more resources from hard-pressed planning departments.

Back to the future

But as is often the case, the secrets to a thriving future are echoes from the past. Last-mile logistics is a costly business for retailers, and perhaps the solution is these old-fashioned things with four walls and a window at the front, allied to low-cost, sustainable delivery? It was Tesco, and their like, that did for Albert Arkwright and Granville on his bike, when supermarkets replaced local grocers. Perhaps delivery apps, aligned with real existing stores, might be a growing part of the high street of the future.



Case studies: Technology at both ends of the high street

From a two-stall street food business to a multi-city restaurant group, Deliveroo's partners show what happens when small and growing operators get early, low-cost access to technology: they use it, then build on it. Rita's is a family-run business founded by Rita, who grew up in Kumasi, Ghana, and her husband Darren. The family spent years running burger vans outside Old Trafford before launching their own stall, fusing Ghanaian and Jamaican recipes. Today they trade from two sites in Manchester: a bustling stall in Piccadilly Gardens and a second site on the Bayley Industrial Estate further east.

For a business this size, Deliveroo has effectively been the on-ramp to digital tools the family would otherwise have had no capacity, or budget, to try. Deliveroo research found that a third of hospitality businesses say a delivery platform is the first piece of technology they adopt, and that 40% went on to adopt further digital technology as a result. Rita's fits the pattern: the family now reads Deliveroo's missing-item and feedback data closely enough to have redesigned their packaging, tracks ratings between their two sites competitively, and has changed opening hours at the Bayley Street site - trading the breakfast trickle for the lunch rush after spotting the pattern in their order data.

There is also a marketing element to this tech adoption: customers can discover the stall before they've ever walked past it, and Rita's have noticed customers seeking out their Piccadilly Gardens stall in person having first ordered online. They're not alone - over half of Deliveroo's restaurant partners report increased dine-in revenue as a result of their relationship with Deliveroo.



What they haven't yet automated - admin, invoicing, marketing, a 'proper' website - is where the next wave of support should land. That's a gap, not a failure: a family that has absorbed one piece of technology fluently and is ready for the next, given affordable tools and time to adopt them.

Tonkotsu shows where that road leads.

Founded by Ken and Emma in 2012 after sold-out ramen pop-ups, it has grown into a multi-city group whose delivery operation now runs on a genuine tech stack: UrbanPiper pushes menus to Deliveroo and other platforms, StoreKit handles click-and-collect and pay-at-table, and weekly Deliveroo data on speed, missing items and average order value feeds straight into their own business intelligence system.

When their account manager flagged that there was an opportunity at lunch time to drive more customers with a cheaper option, Tonkotsu responded within days with a lower-priced lunchtime bundle. Deliveroo research found that 52% of partners said Deliveroo's management information had directly supported their business - Tonkotsu is a case in point.

Even a business this tech sophisticated is still stitching some things together behind the scenes; automating this many parts of an operation brings its own integration headaches. But the direction of travel is the same as Rita's: technology adoption, once started, compounds. One's just getting going with tech, the other's further along - but it's the same journey. Deliveroo's role isn't to hand either of them a finished tech stack - it's to be an accessible tech partner that gets high street businesses using data and digital tools to help them thrive.

Online retail was once blamed for causing the death of the high street, but have the tables now turned as technology drives physical store visits, builds closer customer connections and streamlines in-store experiences?

Essay: Tech and the high street - the good, the bad and the human

Diane Cunningham - Director, The Assembly Line

According to the Retail Disrupted podcast (episode 123), despite the popular perception that Gen Z only shop online, actual shopping behaviour shows otherwise. Social platforms like Snapchat are used for discovery and virtual try-ons, but purchases are made in-store.

The Snapchat content Gen Z is consuming is designed to get people into physical stores, and shopping trips have become a social event.

There are other examples too of high street businesses using digital and social media to drive footfall. Luxury department store Selfridges has 1.2m followers on its Instagram account and uses it to promote in-store events and products, connecting digital and physical together.

And it's not just the big brands; some small, independent high street outlets are building a following and driving customer loyalty through social media.

For example, a Pilates studio in London used social media to document its opening. It developed a human connection with customers through showing the journey it was on, building up the excitement towards the opening date and gaining a following of over 3,500 on Instagram.

It was personal, showing the hard work beyond what clients see and then transitioned to profiling teachers, pop-ups and partnerships once it was open and established.

The power of social media in driving footfall demonstrates that building a relationship between the customer and store or brand can be a powerful tool.

In-store tech driving efficiency

In-store technology is also being harnessed to make the shopping experience easier. Retail brands Uniqlo



Image: Marks & Spencer. Beauty, Pantheon store, Oxford Street

and Decathlon use similar self-service checkout tills. No scanning barcodes and unexpected items in the bagging area, everything is simply placed together, in a special bucket which automatically reads the tags. It's quick, efficient and removes the annoyance (and, potentially, lost sales) inflicted by poor self-service options.

Uniqlo has also made its click-and-collect contactless in some of its stores. You scan a barcode, and then a lift brings your item to you. However, returns don't yet have quite the same slick feel.

While in-store click-and-collect is quick, returns are via Royal Mail and incur a fee, making the experience feel disconnected between the store, brand and online.

Where have the people gone?

A potential risk for retailers is that shop floors are getting sparse. The increasing use of automation can dehumanise the shopping experience and is reducing the number of staff in-store with product knowledge.

Having knowledgeable staff on the shop floor can go a long way to supporting a purchase and customer experience where the purchase is more than just transactional.

In 2023, northern supermarket chain Booths announced it was removing nearly all of its self-service checkouts in response to customer feedback and a perception that it serves customers better with staffed checkouts.

Retail frustrations

Consistency is crucial, whether online or in-store. Slick websites need to be matched by the in-store experience. Similarly, if people see the store and think it's amazing, but find the website glitchy, it can lose customers.

M&S has recently completed a refurbishment of their Pantheon store on London's Oxford Street. The result is a store with a more striking look with digital screens providing outfit inspiration which feels very different to a 'traditional' M&S store.

Comments on Instagram focus on 'the vibe changing', but this is something that is yet to be matched by the look and feel of their social channels.

Online and in-store retail are also only as good as what they can actually sell. A retailer can have the most sophisticated app or website for viewing and testing products – placing furniture in your home, testing paint colours or trying on make-up, for example – but if what you want is out of stock, the sale might be lost. Similarly, if the ordering system or checkout is clunky or complex, or if there are long queues, customers may not return.

There are further lessons for retail from social media: harnessing data from users. Retailers have long used loyalty cards and self-scan data to personalise discounts and keep customers coming back, and with wider use of geo-tagging, this is now more targeted.

There are also several data platforms from BT and Huq to the Greater London Authority's (GLA) High Street Data Service and Fetch Analytics featured earlier. Operating at a place level, they can provide users with a wealth of data on when the town centre is at its busiest, who is using it and which businesses are visited. This provides businesses with the opportunity to tailor offers, adapt opening hours and help in tracking empty units and finding new occupiers.

The role of traditional marketing

London's Oxford Street and other city centre stores may be at the cutting edge of retail, but there is less tech on display on local high streets. Here, you often find that it is analogue marketing which is successfully driving footfall.

Upper Street in Islington is an example. When Arsenal won the Premier League, local stores were quick to respond with window displays congratulating the team, and one café was offering a free drink for customers wearing an Arsenal shirt.



It added to the celebratory feel along the high street. It's 'old-fashioned' marketing, reactive, specific and gives retailers something visual to put online.

The basics of marketing still apply - where are your customers spending their time - social media, web, in person - and meet them there. It's not using tech for tech's sake but using it to build a relationship and serve customers better.

The best of both worlds

The human connection is still important. Investment in and visibility of staff helps connect with the brand and build engagement with customers.

Physical and digital retail need to align; they can't feel like different stores. In-store, architecture, design, wayfinding and visual display are also all important in creating an experience.

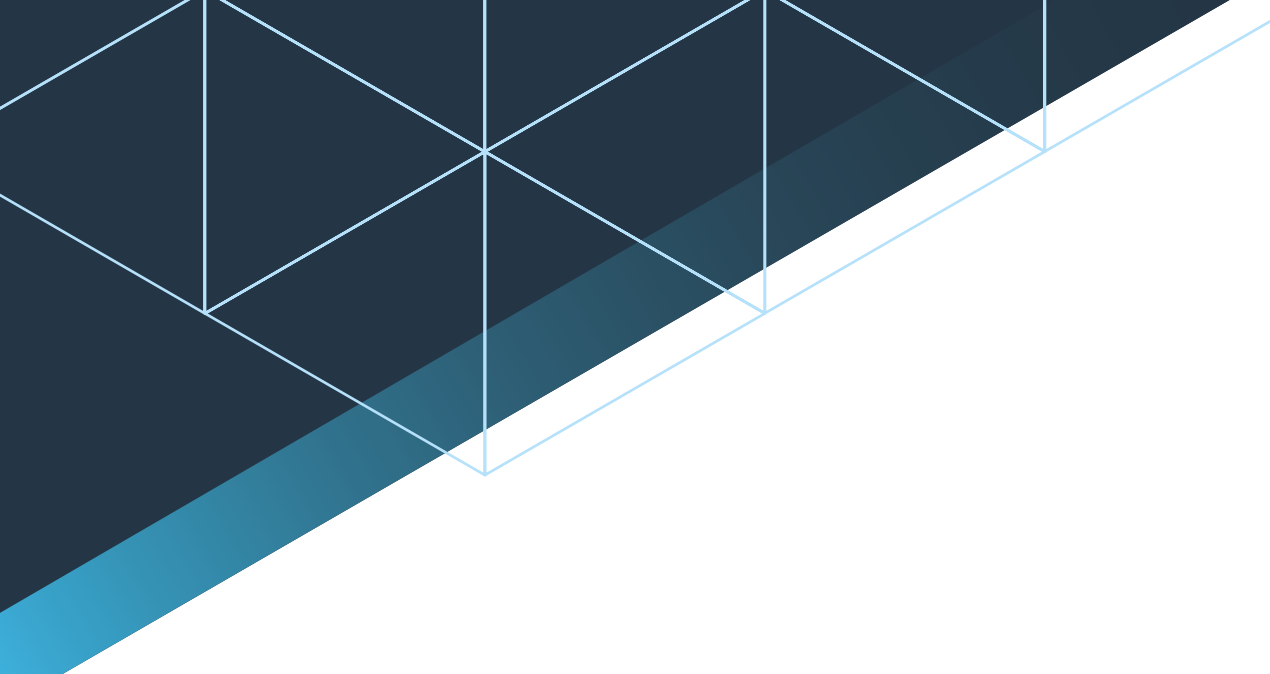
Stores have to be exciting and offer an experience that is worth visiting. This can be as simple as knowledgeable staff, good levels of stock and visually exciting displays that make customers want to engage with the brand. Technology can help with all of these.

Think of the buzz on entering London's Selfridges store - it's lively, there's activity happening, ticketed pop-ups, restaurants and a cinema. It's so much more than a traditional retail shop. Yes, it's a huge store, but smaller retailers can still implement many of the same ideas.

Ultimately, the future of high street vitality will depend on how well retailers bring technology, physical spaces and human interaction together. Digital channels can create discovery, build anticipation and encourage people to visit stores, while technology in-store can make shopping faster and more convenient. But the strongest experiences still depend on the people, atmosphere and expertise that give physical retail its value. Retailers that use technology selectively, while investing in staff, stock, design and customer service, can create stores that people want to visit.

The high street has an opportunity to turn technology to its advantage - using digital to strengthen the connection with customers and physical spaces to give that connection somewhere meaningful to happen.





Conclusion and summary of policy proposals

Britain's high streets are changing. The evidence and insight presented in this report show that individual town centres are experiencing very different patterns of activity. Some are attracting more visitors and encouraging longer stays, while others are experiencing increased footfall but shorter visits or declining visitor numbers alongside longer dwell times. This variation reinforces the need for policy that is evidence-led, locally tailored and focused on adaptation rather than preserving a single model of the high street.

Technology and innovation have an important role to play in that transition, but the strongest opportunities are those that respond to clear needs and strengthen the qualities that make physical places successful. Better data can help policymakers understand how centres are being used and whether investment is delivering results. Digital tools can help smaller businesses improve productivity, convenience and customer relationships. Used right, they can make it easier to adapt buildings and engage communities, while improved logistics can connect physical premises to the wider retail economy.

The policy proposals in this report therefore focus on creating the conditions in which high streets can adapt and thrive. They seek to combine better evidence, practical technology, flexible investment, adaptable planning and regulation, and greater local control. They also recognise that technology should strengthen, rather than replace, businesses, services and experiences that give high streets their value.

Summary of policy proposals

- 1 Establish a consistent Town Centre Vitality Framework for measuring town centre performance,** including visits, dwell time, catchment, activity relative to population and changes over comparable periods. Measures should be used before, during and after investment, with locally agreed outcomes reflecting the circumstances of individual centres.
- 2 Create a national early-warning system** using consistent indicators to identify centres experiencing sustained growth, stability, mixed signals or decline. This would enable earlier investigation and more targeted intervention, with responses informed by wider evidence on vacancy, business performance, accessibility, planning and the local economy.
- 3 Extend long-term, flexible funding to town centre transformation.** Government should build on the long-term and locally flexible approach established through Pride in Place by extending these principles to investment more broadly. A five-year funding framework, linked to agreed outcomes rather than prescribed projects, would give local and mayoral strategic authorities the time and flexibility to establish baselines, test interventions, measure outcomes and adapt their approach.
- 4 Accelerate digital planning reforms, simplify change-of-use processes and provide greater flexibility to repurpose vacant premises.** Digital consultation should widen participation while ensuring that those who are less digitally engaged are not excluded. Planning and regulatory systems should enable high streets to adapt more quickly to changing demand and support a broader mix of uses.
- 5 Recognise last-mile logistics as high street infrastructure,** by enabling the use of underutilised town centre assets, establishing a clear national licensing framework for autonomous delivery and protecting dedicated kerbside space for zero-emission deliveries and collections.
- 6 Create a more flexible regulatory and fiscal environment for high street innovation,** reducing unnecessary barriers to pop-ups, outdoor trading, demonstrations, events and community activity, with proportionate processes that work for small businesses. Greater local fiscal flexibility should enable local and strategic authorities to support investment in digital innovation, customer experience and the productive reuse of vacant premises. This would help create more distinctive, experience-led high streets that generate activity and strengthen community connections.
- 7 Establish a national programme to help independent retailers and SMEs adopt affordable, proven technologies** that strengthen physical retail. Support should prioritise practical tools such as real-time stock visibility, click-and-collect, customer relationship management, digital marketing and social commerce, with grants, tax incentives and advice focused on demonstrable improvements in productivity and customer experience.

Taken together, these measures would give government, local authorities, businesses and communities better evidence and greater flexibility to understand what is changing, respond to local circumstances and invest in what works.

The future high street will not be defined by technology alone. Its success will depend on the interaction between physical places, businesses, people, services and digital tools. Technology can provide better information, greater convenience and new ways to connect with customers, but thriving high streets will continue to depend on the human experiences that give people reasons to visit and return.

About the contributors

Mark Robinson

Chair of Fellows, Radix Big Tent and former chair of the High Street Task Force

Mark is a high-profile leader in retail property, regeneration and placemaking. His position was recognised when he was appointed to lead the government's High Street Task Force in July 2020, following his role as Revo President in 2019.

Over three decades, Mark has worked across all aspects of the industry as an adviser, investor/developer and occupier. In 2008, he co-founded Ellandi, a business that undertook more than 50 projects across the UK with a value in excess of £2.0bn. Following the acquisition of Ellandi by NewRiver REIT, Mark has continued to focus on strategic leadership, regeneration and placemaking, and is now the founder of MR.P Strategy, a leadership consultancy working with organisations across the property, regeneration and placemaking sectors.

Mark has successfully built teams and joint ventures that have won industry accolades for diversity and inclusion, entrepreneurialism, public/private partnerships and workplace culture. He is a passionate advocate for the role of community in repurposing our future places, responding to the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing market.

Diane Cunningham

Director, The Assembly Line

Diane is a highly experienced project director and consultant for places. As director of The Assembly Line she provides strategic advice and project management which helps high streets, markets and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) become more resilient as places change.

Working with the public, private and third sector she supports enterprise, develops commercial and operational plans to bring buildings back to life, leads marketing campaigns and constructs place visions, strategies and action plans through engagement with a diverse range of business and institutional stakeholders.

Diane was appointed as an expert to the government's High Street Task Force (2020-24) and sat on the inaugural London Markets Board, created to protect the capital's street markets.

She is a Fellow of the Institute of Place Management, awarded to those who have had a considerable impact upon place management.

Kelly Cohen Navon

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Kelly Cohen Navon is Co-founder and Chief Commercial Officer of Fetch Analytics, the company behind Terain, a location intelligence platform. She leads commercial growth and client relationships across the UK and South Africa, while working closely with the product team to align Terain with evolving market needs. Previously, Kelly was Head of Network Expansion Services at Stellr, leading integrations with global technology companies including Google, Microsoft, Apple and Uber. She holds an MBA from GIBS Business School.

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George Beard

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George has more than a decade of experience advising organisations across the built environment on planning, construction, place and innovation. He is Head of Public Affairs at Westminster-based consultancy College Green Group and supports the work of the Policy Liaison Group for Housing Delivery and Growth.

His work spans strategic communications, stakeholder engagement and policy development, advising organisations from FTSE 100 companies to SMEs.



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