

Supporting Historic High Streets

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Notes for presentation

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One of the great privileges of my job is that I am invited into communities around the country to help them consider the future of their buildings, spaces, homes and neighbourhoods.

GH history – began as support organisation for communities who then asked us to **“do something about the professionals”**

GH unique position of an **independent enabler** that helps communities, design and regeneration professionals, local authorities, developers, housing associations and businesses work together to design and enable collaborative design processes that bring different interests, sectors and disciplines together to shape their local places.

We do this **through actively supporting live projects on the ground**, and through a programme of **action research** through which we are constantly developing and testing approaches and resources.

Because The Glass-House now has nearly 20 years' experience of supporting this collaborative and inclusive approach to design, another great privilege I have is that I am invited onto a number of panels and advisory groups. These panels bring together a broad spectrum of people with varied experience and expertise, and through these panels we put our heads together to explore both what is happening and what is possible.

I'd like to talk to you about some of the **issues, ideas and anecdotes** that have emerged through both The Glass-House work and my participation on these panels and advisory groups.

I'll share some reflections from

- **High Streets Panel**, convened by High Streets Minister Jake Berry in July 2018
- **Historic England Urban Panel, soon to be renamed the Historic Places Panel.**

TO GET US IN THE MOOD

First, I'd like to start by getting all of you thinking about the high streets that you know and to ask you a few questions:

How many of you

- have visited your local high street in the past week? Month? Year?
- bought something on the high street?
- have used the post office?
- went to a restaurant or café?
- went to a cultural event on your high street?
- went to some kind of leisure or fitness activity?
- accessed healthcare services such as a doctor, dentist, physiotherapist etc.
- had a browse in a bookshop or library?
- met with friends on your high street?
- lingered, sat on a bench or in a public space on or next to your high street?
- accessed public transport from your high street?
- simply walked down your high street on your way to somewhere else?

High streets are very much more than places to shop, and their success does not lie on shops alone.

Shifts in retail activity and how we shop offers us an opportunity to rethink what we want our high streets to be.

Historic high streets hold another layer of opportunity, challenge and indeed responsibility better connecting our high streets to the lives we lead today, we must connect with the past of that place, and both celebrate and respect its physical, cultural, economic and social history.

High streets are incredibly complex beasts. Historic high streets are even more so.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE HIGH STREETS PANEL

At the ministerial High Streets Panel, we explored

- Importance of revitalising our high streets and the many challenges that villages, towns and cities across the country are facing.
- From talking about retails to exploring how we might help both central and local government enable a shift in culture.
- Shift away away from thinking about high streets as retail destinations, and think about the role they can place in creating great places for people.
- Places where we might, live, work and play as well as shop.
- Places where we can access a whole range of activities and services.
- Places where we can connect with other people.

When advising on the recently launched Future High Streets Fund, we championed **a couple of key messages**

- **in order to achieve these great places, local people, organisations and businesses are absolutely crucial, and should be given a place at the table and a role in shaping the future of their high streets and town centres.**
- Importance of combining the **large-scale strategic approach with the small and organic action and activities** that can make a difference. It's that combination of solid and **well-managed infrastructure and locally driven small-scale initiatives** that make places work and keep them interesting. That make them places where people want to be.

Anecdote: TECH TUESDAYS

- Technology surgery space in a coffee shop supported by a local tech company, where people who were having trouble getting their heads round some of the technology they were using, be it phones, tablets, laptops or similar, could come in and talk it through with someone who understood it for free.
- For the coffee shop, it brought new customers in.
- For the IT company, it offered an opportunity to reach out to local people, and to meet some of their social corporate responsibility targets.
- For local people, it was a really useful and accessible service.

But what struck me most about this anecdote is that these Tech Tuesdays started attracting **local young people**, who gradually got more and more involved with helping people with their technology problems. As many of those seeking advice were older people, tech Tuesdays became **a space for different generations to meet in a safe space, and for conversations to happen and new friendships to form.**

- Creating a safe space for young people to interact with adults
- Empowering young people to be the experts in the room
- Offering a fantastic opportunity for the young people in terms of building confidence and in connecting with other generations.
- Providing free accessible support to technophobes

I raise this story because it demonstrates that a **really simple idea** and a willingness to **collaborate and experiment** can create unexpected opportunities and impact within a community, and that the high street offers the perfect stage for these small actions that can make a big difference.

ANECDOTES AND REFLECTIONS FROM URBAN PANEL VISITS

HEREFORD – New Model in Technology and Engineering (NMITe)

When we speak of historic high streets, I'd like to share an example that I encountered on an Urban Panel visit to Hereford. The Urban Panel, soon to be renamed the Historic Places Panel, visits towns and cities in which there are regeneration and /or development plans emerging, within the context of a place of historic value and interest. Our role is to explore the place, ask lots of questions and speak to our hosts about their emerging plans. We act as a critical friend, drawing on the collective experience and range of expertise of the Panel and make recommendations on issues that have been identified as instrumental to maintaining that balance of respecting and enhancing the local heritage while responding to the current needs of the place and people.

Our trip to Hereford saw us looking at ambitious plans to introduce a new university into the cityscape. The university, being developed on a Canadian model, would bring a specialist university with a focus on engineering, and offering a liberal arts and project-based approach to the degree course. Unlike so many other places we have visited, the conversation between the local authority and the university group was about how the university could be integrated into city life by using empty and underused buildings and space dotted around the city centre for their teaching spaces and for student accommodation. Rather than wanting to build a campus out of town, they wanted to make the historic centre their campus, and for the university to contribute to the life and vibrancy of the city. They wanted their teaching workshops to be visible from and contribute to the life of the high street. They wanted the student projects to address real needs and challenges identified by the community, and for the students and university work to contribute to solving local projects and creating new opportunities.

Their approach to building their campus was **not to build everything new, but to help breath life back into existing and underused buildings and spaces, some of which were heritage assets that had struggled to find a contemporary use. By injecting the infrastructure investment into many different small sites, they wanted to actively contribute to its physical regeneration. By scattering student activity and life across a number of small sites within the historic centre, they wanted to encourage students to move about and interact with its people and places.**

ANECDOTES AND REFLECTIONS FROM URBAN PANEL VISITS

ROCHDALE

Another Urban Panel visit took us to Rochdale, home of the co-operative movement. The local government had ambitious plans and was taking forward a number of projects to improve the city centre. One of the most challenging elements of their regeneration strategy had to do with their struggling high street, which runs from the train station to towards their town hall. It is a long and steep road, and while home to a number of fine heritage buildings, was suffering from a number of empty premises and general lack of footfall. There were a number of contributing factors to this. One was the presence of a large shopping centre in the middle of town, which both cut the town centre in half, and in effect created a new high street and shopping district alongside it. Another contributing factor was the recent installation of a tramway that made the connection between the train station and the town centre more accessible. This effectively carried people straight past much of the high street.

Ambitious local plans had already started to address this and there were some interesting plans to support community activity and local enterprise on the high street. There was also a good-sized opportunity site, that would bring a mixed-use development onto a site about halfway along it. In exploring the regeneration of this area with the local council, the **Panel made some observations that could be applied in any number of historic town and city centres.**

- The town had too many high streets within a small area competing for the traditional role of the high street.
- The high street had been taken over predominantly by retail, which was no longer able to sustain it on its own.
- While new transport infrastructure had generally improved accessibility and movement around the town, it had in fact taken footfall away from some sections of the high street
- The decline of the historic high street meant that when arriving at the train station, the threshold to the town appeared tired and uninviting and did not welcome visitors with the best of what the town has to offer. It certainly did not communicate or celebrate the town's rich and interesting history.
- The high street's decline had an impact on local morale and confidence

in their place.

For all of us on the panel, these were issues that we had seen before and that were by no means unique to Rochdale. We were impressed and encouraged by the local leadership that was showing a proactive and experimental approach at a time when so many places seem to be struggling. What we thought could make a real difference was for us to push them to think further outside the box and to use their rich cultural history as a USP in their approach to regeneration as well.

What if, we proposed, given that Rochdale was the birthplace of the co-operative movement, **they made their high street a laboratory for co-operative placemaking**, which invited local people and businesses to work together to create a new kind of high street that celebrated and thrived on cooperative action? What if...

- The criteria for having a space on the high street was to test, demonstrate and celebrate co-operative and collaborative action
- Some of the empty sites were designated for co-operative community-led housing projects
- Empty shops were made available for meanwhile use to test new business ventures and to community-led activities and services?
- Live-work spaces and artists studios intermingled with the retail offer and engaged with the streetscape
- Etc

If invited into the right approach founded on collaborative and co-operative action every person, sector and discipline has something to offer and can play a role in improving and supporting our places.

CHESTER STORYHOUSE

The example of Chester Storyhouse is a fantastic example of that "what if?" approach. What started as a quest to save a local cinema turned into a project, which was all about connecting people with stories and each other?

Notes from [Chester Storyhouse website](#)

Opened in May 2017, Storyhouse is a library, theatre and cinema. Storyhouse had one million visits in its first year. The building was formally opened by Her Majesty the Queen and The Duchess of Sussex, on 14 June 2018.

The pioneering new library within Storyhouse, where members of the community work alongside city librarians, boasts the longest opening hours of any UK public library and is open every day until 11pm. Storyhouse offers over 2,000 activities each year for local marginalised groups, including autism friendly colouring sessions, sewing groups for refugees and regular classes for isolated and older communities.

The organisation houses a highly successful theatre company which has gained national acclaim for its home-produced new stage adaptations, including the first ever version of Enid Blyton's *The Secret Seven*. Storyhouse also runs the country's most successful regional open-air theatre company, **Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre**, in the city's main park, and an open-air cinema, Moonlight Flicks.

Storyhouse produces and is home to a number of specialist festivals each year, including **Chester Literature Festival**, WayWord half-term Festival, **Blink Festival** for new parents, **Love Later Life** and **The Great Get Together** for older communities, Kaleidoscope Festival for adults living with a disability, **Young Takeover**, and the upcoming **Babble** (festival of speaking).

KEYS TO COLLABORATIVE PLACEMAKING

Give **people and communities the agency and confidence to be active contributors and leaders**. People are willing to contribute resources, time and energy to places that benefit them and their families, groups and businesses.

Be willing **to experiment and to see every outcome as a valuable learning opportunity**. There is no so thing as failure if lessons are learned.

Successful place must **bring together activities that bring in resources with those that expend them, and somehow these two things must counterbalance each other for the benefit of people**.

If we are to make our historic high streets and town centres work for people, we have to find ways to **unlock co-operative and collaborative action at the service of those places, but fundamentally also at the service of people**.