

People who live, work and visit as 'the community'

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We started by looking at whether it was possible to define what 'the community' is when considering 'high streets'. The high street is, by its very nature, a hub for a variety of users.

There are the people who live there or nearby, there are the businesses and their employees, and there are the end users.

Do all these different voices need to be heard and should some stakeholders have a greater say in changes?

Nimbyism

Looking at people who live in communities swiftly brought up the subject of 'nimbyism'.

Many of the panel could share an experience of the challenges a well-organised and funded residents' association can cause. However, Julian Hart, senior regeneration manager at Watford Borough Council, believed this was less of an issue on the high street as there are fewer people living there.

Economic benefits and infrastructure

Morgan Reece, a partner at Montagu Evans, endorsed the idea of bringing residential development to the high street but flagged that trying to build a community around it can be challenging.

In Watford, physical constraints have created a focus on increasing residential accommodation in the city centre. Julian highlighted the economic benefit of driving local spend to support retail, along with the advantage of having less need to build physical infrastructure because it's already there.

Alexander Harris, legal director at Browne Jacobson, questioned whether that was always the case. He cited the Earl's Court redevelopment (an 80 acre site), where significant challenges to infrastructure have arisen, with the increase in users on travel networks and energy supplies.

Nalin Seneviratne, a director at Porter Brook & Associates Ltd, reflected on his experiences as the former Director of City Centre Development at Sheffield City Council. He spoke of how there is an underutilisation of Sheffield city centre, which does not make the most of its infrastructure, such as the tram network, and this needs to be brought to the fore.

The local plan aims to increase the city centre population by 20,000 people and engaging with these new residents is key to ensuring that they have a vested interest in the future city centre developments.

Heritage concerns were a potential blocker to the plans due to concerns over development of conservation areas but active engagement with the interested parties proved key in getting projects going and to attracting independent retailers into the city centre.

Human connection

Jessi Haymon-Gorlov, head of property at Patch Places Ltd, believes town centres must move away from focusing on the retail offering to areas such as hospitality.

There needs to be a reason to travel there, which requires a strong vision of what an area can offer and how you can deliver a quality experience. Ideally, there should be a service that you can't access elsewhere to draw people into the area. The panel felt that there was an increased appetite for socialisation and human connection in urban areas following the Covid pandemic.

Morgan believes the key to successfully designing each offering requires creative asset management. Filling too much space with weak offerings should be avoided and more footfall into an area needs to be guaranteed. He strongly believed local authorities should be located in their town centres.

Jez Goodman, senior manager at Cheshire East Borough Council, agreed, pointing out that whilst economic regeneration isn't a statutory function for local authorities, the wider benefits of helping local businesses meant this should be a priority area for local authorities.

He spoke of his experiences in Crewe, where there was regular engagement with business to fully understand the status of projects, even where the council wasn't directly involved.

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