

Roundtable report: Community engagement in high street regeneration

11 November 2024

We brought together specialists from the public, private and third sectors to discuss the role and purpose of community engagement in regeneration schemes.

Chaired by Thomas Howard, Partner specialising in regeneration, we considered the need to regenerate our high streets and town centres, the challenges preventing the delivery of those plans, and ideas to overcome those challenges.

We were joined by clients and contacts from Cheshire East Borough Council, Montagu Evans LLP, New Local, Patch Places Ltd, Porter Brook & Associates Ltd, and Watford Borough Council.

With everyone agreeing that no “one size fits all” approach exists, ensuring that bespoke solutions have community support seems obvious, but the discussions highlighted issues in identifying exactly what the community is, and in getting proper engagement to drive a scheme.

Our discussion took place only days after the general election and a series of government announcements. In particular, proposed changes to the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) and Chancellor Rachel Reeves’ statement that big development decisions will be made “nationally, not locally” raised the question of whether community engagement might diminish.

This backdrop of change and freshness added an extra dimension to the discussions, but we concluded that the right kind of engagement still has a vital role to play.

Summary

- City and town centres must move away from over-reliance on retail as it undergoes structural change and embrace a combination of living, working, studying and spending leisure time via regeneration plans. In particular, urban areas should offer a destination for socialisation and human connection that can’t be accessed elsewhere
- Efforts to regenerate high streets are less likely to face local opposition and don’t always require large-scale associated investment in physical infrastructure, while creating new residential accommodation drives new footfall for local businesses and utilities such as local transport networks
- Alternative uses for empty units could include libraries used as community hubs and healthcare provision such as walk-in centres and community diagnostic centres, tying into the NHS’ strategy to move from acute care settings to delivering health services in the community. However, this will incur financial and practical challenges.
- However, it’s also more difficult to develop a sense of community in town and city centre developments due to high density nature, and therefore having a dedicated engagement strategy is important to fostering a sense of ownership among new and existing residents
- Meaningful and timely engagement with residents, visitors and businesses – which factors in the diversity of a community by including young people and individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds – is essential to achieving community buy-in and should happen before any decisions are made rather than to validate proposals. Consideration should be given to issues such as protection and enhancement of heritage and natural assets, access to physical infrastructure, how to attract independent businesses, and reuse of dilapidated buildings.

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