

Policy Paper 162

REVITALISING TOWN CENTRES & HIGH STREETS



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Revitalising Town Centres and High Streets

Executive Summary

Liberal Democrats understand that town centres and high streets are the beating heart of communities up and down the country, places that people love and become attached to, places that give a sense of local pride and places that can support the local economic, social and environmental needs.

Liberal Democrats recognise that many town centres and high streets have been allowed to go into disrepair, with empty shops, cracked pavements, traffic jams and waste strewn across the streets.

As Liberal Democrats, we believe that, to create a successful town centre, it must be:

- Fair: Welcoming spaces that are socially inclusive and accessible to everyone.
- Economically successful: Places that feel alive with opportunity, where independent businesses thrive day and night, weekday and weekend and resilience is built through a diversity of uses.
- Social: An opportunity to connect, for all ages and backgrounds, with activities and infrastructure that supports health, wellbeing and community pride.
- Local: Rooted in the needs of local people, supporting local businesses, and creating meaningful jobs, especially for young people building their futures.
- Sustainable: Designed for the future with clean transport options, green spaces, and with inbuilt climate resilience.

- Clean and safe: Environments where people feel secure and comfortable spending time and where businesses have the confidence to locate.

Liberal Democrats wish to reimagine town centres, not as relics of the past but as places for everyone to live, connect and belong, places that inspire local pride today and for generations to come.

The rest of this paper sets out our proposals for revitalising town centres and high streets in England.

Reducing Vacancy Rates

- A temporary emergency cut to VAT.
- A review of the cumulative effects of taxation on the high street.
- Improving access to competitive energy deals.
- Reforming business rates to reward occupancy and community value.
- Making it easier to identify and contact landlords, especially those from overseas.
- Strengthening the Town Centre First principle in national planning policy, including an 'Out of Town Levy'.
- Encouraging homes above shops.

Creating the Spaces the Community Wants On and Offline

- Making it easier to convert vacant units into community hubs, without full planning change of use.
- Creating a national digital infrastructure designed to support local enterprise, a platform that can be available for local adaptations and branding.

- Giving councils powers to designate Independent Shop Zones within their local plan, locally defined areas that protect and champion small, locally owned businesses.

Creating Distinctive Design and Better Accessibility

- Promoting public transport and active travel options.
- Reviewing the impact of parking charges to provide guidance for councils to support more flexible, targeted approaches that can support footfall, in particular during evenings and weekends.
- Making dedicated funds available for local authorities that want to deliver high-quality high street pedestrianisation projects.
- Establishing a National Centre for Design and Placemaking to support local authorities through providing design support, guidance, and training for local authorities, championing good design and sustainability across all regions.
- Initiating an annual national 'Amazing High Streets' competition to celebrate the outstanding design of public spaces.

Driving Footfall and Bringing High Streets to Life

- Establishing a High Street Culture and Community Fund delivered in partnership with the Arts Council and local authorities to give ongoing support to community-led cultural initiatives and local events.
- Establishing a national Incubator Fund to support the creation and early-stage development of locally designed festivals.
- Backing creative start-ups and cultural enterprises.

Tackling the Lack of Sustainable Investment

- Establishing High Street Improvement Districts led by a locally-agreed board representing the cross section of interests, including representation from the local council, which would be charged with creating a long term vision for the town centre, supported with a joined-up roadmap, curator and communication plan.
- Creating a 'High Streets Back Home' scheme as a defined and accessible route for people to give back, to invest in the future of their community, whether by supporting community asset purchases, restoring heritage buildings or backing local enterprise space.

Tackling Safety, Anti-Social Behaviour and Shoplifting

- Building features that discourage anti-social behaviour (such as strategic lighting) into the design of town centres.
- Supporting small businesses to invest in CCTV.
- Offering digital tools as collective procurement bundles, making them accessible for small businesses, such as a WhatsApp instant alert system for businesses, BID teams, and community wardens that flags offenders, patterns, and risks in real time.
- Calling on the National Crime Agency to establish a dedicated unit to liaise with local authorities and police forces to take on organised shoplifting gangs.

1 Background: The Changing Role of the High Street

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 High streets and town centres are the beating heart of communities up and down the country, places that people love and become attached to, places that give a sense of local pride and places that can support the local economic, social and environmental needs.

1.1.2 Whether it is a bustling Liverpool neighbourhood, a coastal town in Cornwall, a market town in Surrey, a former mill town in Yorkshire or a community in the Welsh valleys, the high street is where people feel at home, their community.

1.1.3 When people talk about their local high street, they do so with strong feelings – of the butcher who knows their name, the pharmacist who quietly delivers their medicines, the bench where they watched their children play or the café where they meet friends every week.

1.1.4 Increasingly, people are expressing anger at how their high streets have been allowed to go into disrepair, with empty shops, cracked pavements, traffic jams and waste strewn across the streets.

1.1.5 The traditional UK high street and town centre has undergone significant structural economic and social change in recent decades, challenging its place in the heart of the community:

- **Residential shifts** from town centres to suburbs, means much of the population is now living away from the high street, creating a

physical barrier that has reduced footfall and increased car dependence.

- **Retail homogenisation**, chain retail stores, out-of-town shopping centres and online retail have created places that people simply are not enjoying and, therefore, not visiting.
- **Structural decline** particularly in former industrial or coastal towns, have experienced up to 50 years of structural decline, due to changes in types of employment, decline in tourism, and underfunded local authorities. in former industrial and coastal
- **Public realm deterioration** – including cracked pavements, poor lighting and empty shops – has eroded public confidence.

1.1.6 But if we only talk about the transformation through data, statistics, planning and tax laws, we are missing the point. People want places where they can feel at home.

1.1.7 People want places that meet the full range of our human needs, places that are unique to our local area. high streets with recognisable stores and quirky independents. Seats where we can rest, trees that lift our moods, clean streets, spaces to work, access healthcare and meet others. Safe places to see local festivals, performances and markets. What we need and expect from our high streets and town centres has changed and we need to develop policies to support these evolving needs.

1.1.8 Yet despite these challenges, people still speak about their high streets with affection and strong emotion. The desire for places to feel at home, connect with others, and meet daily needs remains deeply rooted. Revitalising high streets is not simply an economic question; it is about restoring social infrastructure, local identity and civic pride.

1.1.9 To shape policies that work, we must recognise both the historical role of town centres and the evolving needs of the communities they serve.

1.2 A Liberal Vision for the High Street

1.2.1 High streets and town centres are the heart of our communities.

Across the country, from bustling urban hubs and flagship city high streets to quiet rural high streets and historic market towns, they can be spaces where people come together, where local economies grow, and where the unique character of each place shines through.

1.2.2 They reflect our local identity and heritage, places where, for generations, we have met, marched, shopped, celebrated, and supported each other. But, today, what we need from our high streets has changed and our town centres must adapt to meet our new needs.

1.2.3 We must create places that are for the community, by the community, spaces that are inclusive, thriving, and resilient, welcoming those from near and far. Every high street should have its own vision, developed locally to address its challenges and strengths. But, as Liberal Democrats, we believe that to create a successful town centre it must be:

- Fair: Welcoming spaces that are socially inclusive and accessible to everyone.
- Economically successful: Places that feel alive with opportunity, where independent businesses thrive day and night, weekday and weekend and resilience is built through a diversity of uses.
- Social: An opportunity to connect, for all ages and backgrounds, with activities and infrastructure that supports health, wellbeing and community pride.

- Local: Rooted in the needs of local people, supporting local businesses, and creating meaningful jobs, especially for young people building their futures.
- Sustainable: Designed for the future with clean transport options, green spaces, and with inbuilt climate resilience.
- Clean and safe: Environments where people feel secure and comfortable spending time and where businesses have the confidence to locate.

1.2.4 We must reimagine town centres, not as relics of the past but as places for everyone to live, connect and belong, today, places that inspire local pride today and for generations to come.

1.3 Different Types of High Streets

1.3.1 There are many different types of high streets and town centres, each of which has its unique characteristics and challenges. While there is no absolute definition of each of these, if we are to revive the high street, we need to consider the experience and solutions for each of these.

- Flagship High Street (e.g. Oxford Street, London; Prince's Street, Edinburgh; City Centres in Manchester and Glasgow). Regional destinations with high investment, flagship stores and well connected.
- Market Town High Street (e.g. Frome, Somerset; Skipton, North Yorkshire; Stockton-on-Tees, County Durham). Centres for surrounding communities, increasingly challenged by out-of-town retail parks.
- Local and Neighbourhood High Street (e.g. Richmond, London; Moseley, Birmingham) within or close to a larger city, meeting needs of a local community.

- Rural Village High Streets (e.g. Wye, Kent; Crickhowell, Powys; Somerton, Somerset) Key to local community, central role for surrounding villages).
- Coastal Towns (e.g. Great Yarmouth, Norfolk; Blackpool, Lancashire). Towns built around pleasure beaches, piers and theatres, suffering economically as domestic tourism declined.

2 Reducing Vacancy Rates

2.0.1 Many high streets and town centres have been designed around the shopping experience, with space and frontages overly reliant on pure retail space. The High Street Task Force estimates that there is an oversupply of retail space in 40per cent of cases.

2.0.2 In recent decades, high streets have faced increasing competition from new retail formats:

- Out-of-Town retail parks have attracted a number of retailers with lower rents and business rates. Although the business rates multiplier was introduced to rebalance the system, lower rateable values per square foot still mean retailers operating in these areas see significantly reduced costs. In addition, these parks often double as delivery hubs for large retailers, with customers collecting orders due to ease of parking.
- The rise of online shopping has intensified the shift from high-street retail sales. Almost a third of all retail purchases now take place online, where lower overheads enable cheaper pricing and many consumers prefer the convenience of delivery and click-and-collect.

2.0.3 Vacancy rates have increased in recent years and are estimated at an average of 13.9per cent in Q2 2023 by the British Retail Consortium. Empty, boarded up retail units can create a sense that 'this place is failing.' Add graffiti, fly-tipping and vandalism to the mix and the feeling of neglect gets deeper. People notice.

2.0.4 High vacancy rates are driven by business closures, rising costs and poor incentives for landlords to repurpose or re-let units.

2.1 Supporting Small Businesses through Reduced Costs

2.1.1 High street businesses are property and people intensive, meaning their operating costs are disproportionately tied to three main factors: rent, business rates, energy bills and staffing. These costs cannot be avoided and have risen significantly in recent years and now present a serious challenge to ensuring a thriving, diverse high street.

2.1.2 Rising energy bills have become a significant concern to high street businesses, who report that they cannot access the government energy support policies. To date, these policies have prioritised 'energy-intensive' industries like manufacturing, overlooking high street businesses in retail, hospitality and leisure, despite the dependency on warm welcoming spaces, from café seating areas to retail changing rooms, to attract people. In addition, many hospitality businesses are currently unable to access the most competitive tariffs in the private energy market, leaving them disproportionately exposed to high and volatile energy costs. This structural disadvantage reduces resilience across a sector already operating on tight margins.

2.1.3 In many parts of the country, rents have gone up considerably, with the cost per square foot becoming unaffordable for businesses operating on small margins, as many in retail and hospitality do.

An Emergency Cut to VAT on Hospitality

2.1.4 We would immediately cut VAT from 20 per cent to 15 per cent for hospitality, accommodation, and attractions for the period until April 2027, boosting struggling high streets and slashing prices for hard-pressed families. This would cost around £7.5 billion which would be funded by a

windfall levy on banks. We expect around 50 per cent of the VAT cut for hospitality, accommodation and attractions to be passed on to consumers, delivering an average saving of around £135 per UK household in total between November 2025 and April 2027.

Addressing the cumulative tax burden

2.1.5 The National Insurance increase has had a disproportionate impact on high street businesses, which tend to employ more local, lower-to-middle-income staff. These staff costs form a larger proportion of overheads than in many other industries and, unlike tech or professional service firms, the roles cannot be automated or offshored. Therefore, the increase in NI makes the payroll costs become less affordable. This additional cost was added onto high levels of business rates, VAT and other taxes. To tackle the specific tax burden challenges facing high street businesses we recommend the Treasury conducts a cumulative tax burden assessment, particularly as it relates to high streets in recognition of their vital role in communities.

Access to Competitive Energy Rates

2.1.6 High street businesses, in particular hospitality businesses, need access to fair, competitive energy deals. Liberal Democrats would open up access to these rates for high street businesses and have written to the Competition and Markets Authority to request a formal investigation into the barriers they face in accessing these rates. We would also support community energy schemes, enabling energy purchase agreements as a group of high street operators. (For our wider policies on energy, see Policy Paper 160 *For People, For Planet*).

Access to a skilled workforce

2.1.7 Thriving high street shops and hospitality depend on the recruitment and retention of a talented workforce. To support this and ensure shops on the high street have access to the skills they need, we will:

- Reform the Apprenticeship Levy to give small businesses real flexibility when taking on young people in their first jobs. This will help them build skills, as well as offering local people long-term career paths within their local communities (see also our wider policies on skills in policy paper 159 *Opportunity for All*).
- Introduce a Youth Mobility Scheme with the EU, enabling young workers to come to the UK and fill the labour shortages sectors like hospitality, retail and tourism, strengthening local economies and supporting local businesses.

Business rates reform

2.1.8 The High Streets Working Group recognises that changes to the business rates system are a much wider issue than our direct remit. However, we also recognise that the future success and resilience of our high streets can be impacted by how business rates are structured and applied.

2.1.9 We would propose the following principles to ensure that any reform to business rates supports the modern high street with its diversity of uses by:

Supporting Occupancy and Local Economies

- Provide lower operating costs for small traders and local independents by offering greater flexibility for early-stage businesses.
- Reform thresholds and rate bands to avoid sudden jumps in cost for small businesses.

- Allow local authorities greater flexibility to apply targeted reliefs that reflect local economic conditions and priorities.

Rewarding Occupation and Community Value

- Ensure holding property empty is discouraged with a particular effort to prevent long-term vacancy
- Provide targeted business rate relief for new businesses, particularly start-ups, social enterprises and locally-rooted businesses that take on empty properties, subject to trading activity and transparent ownership.
- Provide relief for an expanded definition of community value to include cultural, youth, leisure and social uses, and link business rate reliefs to demonstrable local benefit.
- Provide enhanced relief for premises within primary shopping areas of high streets and town centres which compares favourably with locating out of town sites.
- Close loopholes that incentivise landlords to lease property to shell companies or businesses with no credible trading activity, enabling local councils to impose penalties on landlords who repeatedly lease to non-compliant or criminal operators.
- Tighten anti-money laundering (AML) duties for commercial lettings, requiring landlords and agents to carry out proportional, risk-based AML checks, aligned with banking standards and to report suspicious activities.

2.2 Encouraging Landlords to Fill the Space

Landlords Register with Mandatory UK contact numbers

2.2.1 Many town centres are shaped by fragmented property ownership, often held by multiple landlords with little connection to the area. The result is a disjointed patchwork of uses that can feel confusing and uninviting – spaces that don't clearly serve the needs of the community or offer a compelling reason to visit

2.2.2 According to Powertochange.org, even though private individuals own the majority of high street properties, vacancies are disproportionately found in units owned by large corporate landlords: private individuals own only 21.7 per cent of vacant units, whereas limited and public limited companies own 61.3 per cent. Powertochange.org suggests this is because large corporate owners often prioritise protecting long-term asset valuations over securing immediate rental income. As long-term investors, they can afford to absorb the cost of an empty property if doing so helps maintain or enhance the asset's capital value.

2.2.3 Overseas and institutional investors can present specific challenges. Many are disconnected from local contexts, operate through bureaucratic asset management chains, and are slow to act, increasing the likelihood of long-term vacancy and undermining vibrancy.

2.2.4 While registers of ownership now exist, in practice it can still be very difficult for local councils to contact owners and bring property back into use. We would require that every commercial property on a high street or in a town centre has:

- A named owner or responsible organisation registered in the UK (via Companies House).
- A UK telephone number that guarantees direct contact with the decision maker responsible for the property.

- Linked Land Registry and Companies House records, including beneficial ownership data maintained for each commercial property, allowing councils to easily identify and contact those who ultimately own and control the premises.

Simplification of High Street Rental Auctions

2.2.5 Since December 2024, local authorities have had new powers to require landlords to let out long-term vacant high street properties through High Street Rental Auctions (HSRAs). These apply to units in designated town centres that have suitable high street uses, have been vacant for 12 months (or 366 days over two years), and can show potential social, economic or environmental benefit.

2.2.6 Before reaching the auction stage, councils must designate an eligible area, serve a letting notice, carry out a property survey, and then follow a detailed 12-week statutory process that includes marketing and bid assessment. If the landlord still does not act, the council may let the property on their behalf.

2.2.7 HSRAs could play a major role in bringing empty shops back into use, but procedural complexity, financial risk and limited commercial property expertise mean many councils currently feel unable to use the powers.

2.2.8 We propose simplifying and de-risking the process, supported by the National Centre for Design and Placemaking (see section 4.3), to make HSRAs more usable. This would include:

- Access to specialist commercial property and legal advisers, and standardised templates avoiding costly external consultants.

- Clearer guidance and optional review panels to help councils assess eligibility.
- A government-backed cost guarantee to cover upfront survey and legal expenses for schemes considered eligible.

Strengthened town-centre-first planning

2.2.9 Out-of-town retail parks and spaces often enable businesses and public services to reduce costs by moving away from town centres. To ensure town centres remain the heart of the local community, we will strengthen the **Town Centre First** principle in national planning policy:

- Strengthen town centre planning protections so that all applications outside of town centres for retail and leisure development above 500 square metres not provided for in the Local Plan are required to demonstrate no suitable, available and easily accessible town centre site exists (excluding green spaces) and should be refused where there are adverse effects on the vitality and viability of the town centre.
- Public services will be encouraged to locate key services such as GP surgeries, health and diagnostic centres, pharmacies, courts, small-scale sports facilities and social care facilities within or on the edge of town centres, unless there is a clear and evidenced reason why this is not desirable for the local population or feasible. Where facilities already exist in town centres, they should be maintained and improved, not relocated out of town.
- Large-scale retailers, leisure and food-and-beverage operators seeking to develop out-of-town sites will pay an 'Out of Town Levy', a contribution designed to support footfall and investment in the high street. This would be administered through the High Street Improvement District (HSID – see section 6.2) and reviewed

regularly to ensure the incentive remains effective. This would be removed or discounted if the retailer or food-and-beverage operator could demonstrate a presence on the high street.

- Local planning authorities will work with public sector organisations, HSIDs (see 6.2 below), and local communities to identify suitable sites and ensure town centre sites are provided when possible.

Encourage homes above shops

2.2.10 People living in the town centre can bring everyday life back to our high streets. They create year-round vibrancy, help sustain local shops and services and make places feel safer through natural activity and presence.

2.2.11 There is an opportunity to increase the number of people living in the town centre by converting empty space above shops into housing.

2.2.12 The scale of the opportunity is substantial. Historic England research suggests 120,000 homes could be created solely by converting vacant historic retail buildings, while the Federation of Master Builders estimated in 2017 that between 300,000 and 400,000 homes could be delivered above shops.

2.2.13 Despite this potential, many of these buildings, in particular listed buildings, remain empty because landlords face high conversion costs and complicated consent requirements.

2.2.14 To unlock this opportunity, supporting both the town centre and addressing the housing crisis, we would:

- Introduce a zero charges policy exempting residential conversions over shops in town centres from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Planning Obligation (S106) payments, tasking Homes

England with funding any environmental mitigation and local infrastructure requirements triggered by the development.

- Establish a Historic England Taskforce and create a Design Code that removes the need for Listed building consent for converting Grade II listed buildings to residential use above the ground floor.
- Reinstate a zero rate of VAT for the conversion of historic town-centre properties to residential use above the ground floor.

3 Creating Spaces the Community Wants On and Offline

3.0.1 People today expect more than just shops from their high streets and town centres. They are looking for connections, somewhere that they can grab a coffee while working from home, meet friends for a celebratory dinner, pop out for a few drinks, drop into an exhibition, get a haircut, attend a Pilates class, collect parcels and more.

3.0.2 But, too often, the vital services people need and expect in town centres, such as GPs, health centres, vets, pharmacies, beauticians, and cobblers are pushed out of town centres due to cost and convenience, making the overall experience less productive. We need to balance the needs of experiences and these required services.

3.0.3 Modern life also requires convenience and integration between online and offline experience. People expect click-and-collect, free Wi-Fi, contactless/mobile payments and apps to assist with parking and wayfinding. This can be difficult for independent retailers who can sometimes lack access to the skills and resources to deliver these.

3.0.4 More people than ever work irregular hours and juggle responsibilities, with less time to browse. They increasingly seek access to goods and services outside traditional retail hours, particularly in the evenings, yet many high streets are not set up to meet this demand.

3.0.5 The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated the issues faced on the high street as there is less disposable income both within the town and the surrounding area, making paid for activity less accessible.

3.0.6 For centuries, the high street provided indoor and outdoor community space that was the heart of the community. Indoor spaces such as local pubs that were the heart of the community, a warm, familiar space where people met friends, shared stories, held union meetings, debated local issues and offered space to talk to those from different social circles. They were usually found on or near the high street and were part of the town's social infrastructure, supporting trade, travel and offering lodgings.

3.0.7 Many high streets no longer provide the social and civic infrastructure people need: public toilets, community hubs, cultural venues, indoor and outdoor leisure, children's play areas, banking services, education space, and accessible health services. At the same time, certain uses – such as betting shops, payday lenders and clusters of takeaways – can deter footfall and undermine vibrancy.

3.0.8 High streets need to offer the services people rely on daily. The rest of this chapter sets out our proposals.

3.1 Community Hubs

3.1.1 We want to make it easier to convert vacant units into **community hubs**, without full planning change of use. We will make it easier to turn empty shops and buildings into community hubs, flexible spaces that provide solutions to local needs, from post offices and workspaces to play areas and cultural venues:

- National policy would define 'community hubs' as a broad, flexible use encompassing spaces for social, educational, cultural, leisure and small-scale commercial activity.

- Uses for these community hubs should then be defined locally ensuring it meets local needs and priorities, examples of which could be services such as post office counters, police station counters, ATMS, community halls, creative space, indoor markets, education space, workspace, small-scale sport, study space, children's soft play and public toilets.
- Community hub space could be created without requiring a full change of use community hub uses in specified town centre areas, making transformation quick and affordable.
- The use of High Street Rental Auctions for these purposes should be made easier.

3.2 Digital Integration and opportunity through national platforms

3.2.1 Small, independent high street businesses and start-ups must be able to compete fairly in the digital economy. Currently, many do not have the funds to develop online and delivery platforms that could support their offer.

3.2.2 We will create a national digital infrastructure designed to support local enterprise, a platform that can be available for adaptations and branding by the local High Street Improvement District (see 6.2 below) to meet community needs. This system will provide the tools and technology small businesses need to sell, deliver, and engage customers online, while keeping value within local economy for example:

- Enabling online sales for collection in store or advance booking for leisure activities.

- Enabling shared delivery and collection networks, helping reduce costs and emissions.
- Ordering from local suppliers, such as local farm produce.
- Integrating local payment systems linked to key facilities e.g. public toilets, delivery lockers.

3.2.3 In addition, high streets are one of very few spaces where we can provide intergenerational opportunities, spaces where older people who may have the time, can share skills, knowledge and experience by volunteering and offering mentoring for younger generations.

3.2.4 We therefore propose to support local communities that plan:

- Relocation of relevant outpatient health services from remote hospitals to town centres. This will both make health services more accessible and encourage visits to town centres.
- Promote Events where older people can share skills with younger ones e.g. craft activity events, where skills can be passed on, especially where the skill has few people practising it.
- The provision of public, either provided directly or through a community toilet scheme, where businesses receive a financial incentive to make their facilities available to the public

3.3 Diversification – Independent Shop and Leisure Zones

3.3.1 Local businesses, start ups, local food producers and SMEs can bring significant benefits to high streets. They help create warm, welcoming destinations that people want to spend time and, by supporting local entrepreneurs and businesses we can ensure that the economic

benefits of town-centre spending stays within the local community, strengthening the local economy.

3.3.2 Independent Shop and Leisure Zones are designated areas within a high street or town centre that put independent shops, makers and small local businesses at the heart of the experience. By giving these businesses the space and support they need, these zones can help restore the unique character of high streets, making them places people feel proud of, connected to and excited to visit.

3.3.3 We will give councils powers to designate independent shop zones within their local plan, locally defined areas that protect and champion small, locally owned businesses. The need for and size of these locations would be defined locally. These areas will:

- Be protected in planning policy from the entry of chain or formula businesses, ensuring independent businesses can find affordable, suitable space within the area
- Have access to specific funding sources such as grants for shopfront improvements, start-up support and access to digital platforms (see section 3.2).

3.4 Evidence shows that deprived communities have significantly higher densities of fast-food outlets than more affluent areas, exacerbating health inequalities; we will strengthen local councils' planning powers to manage unhealthy clustering and support healthy-food access in town centre planning, for example by making it easier for them to occupy vacant units.

4 Creating Distinctive Design and Better Accessibility

4.0.1 Getting to and from the high street can be difficult, particularly in rural areas and market towns. Many town centres are undermined by a lack of well-integrated and reliable public transport options. In many instances, bus services have been reduced and infrastructure for walking and cycling is limited. Driving remains a vital lifeline for residents who live far from local centres.

4.0.2 This has a particularly significant impact in the evenings, when public transport options are minimal or non-existent, effectively limiting access for non-drivers and contributing to social exclusion.

4.0.3 High streets must be accessible for those arriving by car, on foot, by bike, or via mobility aids. Poorly designed streetscapes can create tensions between different users, including drivers, pedestrians, cyclists, delivery vehicles and disabled people. This in turn leads to congestion and spaces that feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Families, older residents and those with disabilities frequently report that current layouts do not meet their needs.

4.0.4 A balanced approach is required. Cars will continue to play a crucial role, especially in rural and semi-rural communities, but streets must also be designed so that everyone feels welcome and safe.

4.0.5 We believe that it is essential that high streets are open to everyone – easy to reach, safe to enjoy and full of life. A balanced approach is needed so that every person, whether they travel by bus, train, bike, car, or on foot, should be able to reach and enjoy their local high street easily and safely.

4.0.6 That means improving lighting, crossings, pavements, seating and signage; supporting accessible drop-off and parking; and ensuring active travel routes are practical, continuous and well-maintained.

4.0.7 No two places are the same. An urban city centre faces different challenges from a rural market town. That's why we believe local people should shape local transport decisions. By enabling local authorities to plan transport and public realm improvements with communities, not imposing changes upon them, we can create high streets that are accessible, inclusive and work for the local community.

4.1 Improved Accessibility for Towns and High Streets

4.1.1 We strongly back public transport and active travel options when they are available and call on local authorities to create plans that improve access to town centres and high streets through reliable and affordable public transport, safe pedestrian and cycling routes, and integrated ticketing that makes sustainable travel easier and more attractive.

4.1.2 Better buses, trams and rail links can boost our local high streets and ensure people have reliable access to the services they rely on. We would give local authorities and communities the powers and funding they need to improve local transport, protect rural routes and create flexible alternatives where traditional bus services aren't viable (see also policy motion *Building a Transport Network Fit for the 21st Century* (2023)).

4.1.2 While we continue to prioritise and promote active travel as the healthiest, greenest and most community-friendly way for people to access their town centres, we also understand that many people, in particular in rural areas where public transport is limited, are dependent on the car to get into town. At the same time, years of government funding cuts have left

councils increasingly dependent on parking revenue simply to keep essential services running.

4.1.3 High or inflexible parking charges can deter visitors and weaken efforts to support high street businesses. To help strike the right balance, we propose a review of the impact of parking charges to provide guidance for councils to support more flexible, targeted approaches that can support footfall, in particular during evenings and weekends. This could include simple but powerful measures such as 30 minutes free parking for local residents, following successful models at different authorities across the country, to encourage quick trips and everyday shopping while continuing to encourage and invest in sustainable travel.

4.2 Pedestrianisation

4.2.1 We will make dedicated funds available for local authorities that want to deliver high-quality high street pedestrianisation projects alongside their local communities as we know car-free high streets can deliver increased footfall, improved air quality, and a better overall visitor experience. It is of course important that parking remains available and convenient but located off the main high street wherever possible to keep central spaces safe, welcoming, and pleasant to walk.

4.2.2 While it is important that local communities define their local space, we would provide support through placemaking principles that we would encourage councils to ensure that they can:

- Increase the number of electric vehicle charging points in public car parks to make cleaner driving easier and more practical.

- Provide space and infrastructure to host the events programme and markets that should be defined locally and that we consider essential to the vitality of the high street.
- Improve Environmental Resilience (biodiversity/shade /flood resilience) and provide green space (see Policy Paper 160 *For People, For Planet*).
- Ensure access to essential facilities expected by their community, including prominently located and accessible public toilets (even if pay-to-use) as well as Changing Places toilets.
- Provide additional amenities such as water fountains, clocks, play features and seating.
- These schemes should always be accompanied by accessible nearby parking and improved transport connections so no one is left behind.
- Expand accessible design features such as step-free access, dropped kerbs, tactile paving, clutter free pavement, automatic doors and inclusive toilets.
- More homes in the town centre can increase demand for public transport, justifying and supporting increased investment in this area and reducing the reliance on the car.
- Support freight consolidation hubs, last-mile delivery and reduced large-vehicle intrusion.
- Promote secure cycling infrastructure (cycle lanes, storage and repair) and well-managed micromobility schemes.
- Support local markets, from farmers markets to craft markets, to enliven the space and support local suppliers.
- Enhance wayfinding, storytelling and visitor information to support tourism.
- Deliver Wifi hotspots throughout the high street.

- Incorporate features, events and public art that are visually compelling and create places of interest that people are proud of, take photos and share.

4.3 National Centre for Design and Placemaking

4.3.1 Across the country, many local authorities lack the structure, planning and design expertise they need to create and protect high-quality, beautiful environments. Liberal Democrats will act to rebuild public planning expertise, celebrate great design and put pride back into place-making by bringing back a National Centre for Design and Placemaking (based on the former Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) to support local authorities:

- This body will provide design support, guidance, and training for local authorities, championing good design and sustainability across all regions.
- It will equip councils with the legal, commercial and technical capacity to engage confidently and consistently with landowners and developers, ensuring space on the high streets is fully utilised, meets high design standards, reflects local priorities and delivers benefit to the community
- It will work with councils, developers, and communities to ensure new developments retain their local character and enhance civic pride.

4.4 Celebrating Amazing High Streets

4.4.1 We will introduce an annual national 'Amazing High Streets' competition to celebrate the outstanding design of public spaces which will:

- Recognise the best public realm improvement, from benches, signage, and lighting to planting and façades.
- Celebrate British craftsmanship, and locally-led design.
- Encourage collaboration between local artists, architects, and communities to create streets that reflect local heritage and character.
- Encouraging local design codes to promote beauty, sustainability, and inclusivity, ensuring every high street improvement contributes to a coherent sense of place.

5 Driving Footfall and Bringing High Streets To Life

5.1 Festivals, Events, Markets and Culture

5.1.1 When people speak about what they want from their high streets, they don't just talk about shops, they talk about atmosphere, creativity, community and fun. Arts and Culture can bring all of these to town centres, building shared experiences and creating a local identity.

5.1.2 Yet in recent years this sector has been undervalued and underfunded. Cultural organisations have often been the first to face cuts, reducing opening hours or closing their doors completely.

5.1.3 Cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, small theatres, music venues and heritage centres, play a powerful dual role. They can tell the story of an area, increasing local pride and a sense of belonging, while also acting as the aforementioned community hubs, where classes, clubs, events and support groups bring people together.

5.1.4 But culture doesn't have to hide behind closed doors. High streets can come to life with regular, scheduled street performers, outdoor cinema, art trails, busking zones and seasonal festivals. Closing the streets for celebrations draws people in, supports local cafés, bars and restaurants and creates memories.

5.1.5 Permanent and temporary street art, from installations to murals can spark curiosity, surprise passers-by or simply highlight local history and stories, making people smile. Meanwhile, empty shops can be reimagined as pop-up galleries or creative studios, keeping the town centre active and vibrant.

5.1.6 Demand for leisure is also growing. Weekly markets, farmers' markets, craft markets, food festivals and creative workshops can support the local economy and generate footfall. Cinemas, children's activities and new forms of 'competitive socialising' give people more reasons to visit during the day and into the evening.

5.1.7 Arts, culture and leisure activities can also play a critical role in boosting a safe night-time economy. It offers alternatives to alcohol-led venues, ensuring that the high street doesn't close at 5pm or becomes unwelcoming after dark. Cinemas, theatres, galleries, live music spaces, eventing classes and family-friendly activities draw a wider mix of people into the high street, increasing footfall, strengthening community presence and reducing opportunities for crime.

5.1.8 Tourism can bring much-needed footfall, but it must be well-managed. Visitors rely on wayfinding (clear signage, maps, trails and plaques) to explore local stories. However, tourism is highly seasonal, and an over-reliance on gift shops can damage the character that makes a place special in the first place.

5.1.9 We believe theatre, music, arts and culture are essential to the life and prosperity of our high streets. A thriving cultural presence, from festivals, public art and music to theatre and street performance, can transform town centres into vibrant, inclusive destinations full of opportunity.

5.1.10 To address this issue we would:

Establish a High Street Culture and Community Fund

- This would be delivered in partnership with the Arts Council and local authorities to give ongoing support to community-led cultural initiatives and local events. Grants would prioritise projects that

promote inclusion and opportunities for young people. They would give ongoing revenue support for a five year period to ensure the ability to plan and develop ideas.

Develop an Incubator fund for locally developed festivals

- We would establish a national Incubator Fund to support the creation and early-stage development of locally designed festivals. Many towns have traditions, talents and stories that deserve to be celebrated, yet lack the initial resources to turn good ideas into established events. The fund would provide the early support needed to get the festivals started and to showcase what the community is proud of.
- This fund would provide small, time-limited grants to support the launch of a new festival, while organisers build the skills and partnerships to create a sustainable event. Grant support would taper over a defined period, dependent on the proposal but likely to be between three and five years, to encourage events to be self-sustaining.
- These festivals can bring moments of celebration and pride in local talent, stories and community, increasing footfall, draw in tourism and support small businesses.

Back creative start-ups, leisure activities and cultural enterprise

- Enable the local authority to encourage the use of vacant units for studios, performance spaces, exhibitions and pop-up galleries through high street rental auctions (see 2.2.5) and alternative, meanwhile use of space.

6 Tackling the Lack of Sustainable Investment

6.0.1 For a sustained period of time, local authorities have been forced to do more with less. Years of deep and sustained cuts have left councils needing to make impossible choices about which services to protect and which to let go. As statutory pressures in social care, housing and SEND have grown, discretionary services, the very things that make a town centre feel cared for and vibrant, have been steadily stripped back.

6.0.2 Libraries, leisure centres, youth spaces, public toilets, the very places that meant people spent time on the high street have been cut back and, in many instances, closed altogether. At the same time, cuts to street cleaning, lighting, park maintenance and community policing have left many high streets looking and feeling neglected. What used to be the heart of our community too often feels like a space that's been forgotten, places that people do not feel safe in.

6.0.3 It is not just about capital infrastructure, it is about how the place and people using it feel. A run-down high street sends a message: that no one cares, that investment has passed this place by, that the community is no longer a priority. It undermines local pride, damages the local economy, and fractures the sense of belonging that strong town centres create.

6.1 A Broken System of Investment

6.1.1 When councils do try to revive their high streets, they face a competitive funding system designed for headlines, not for long-term benefit of the community. Pot after pot, from Levelling Up to Future High Streets to Public Realm Investment Fund, have forced local authorities into

winner-takes-all contests, scrambling to produce bids at short notice for one-off capital projects.

6.1.2 Many of the best-thought-out proposals never receive a penny. Others secure funding for capital upgrades but with little or no revenue support to maintain them or bring ongoing vitality to the area. As a result, too many new public realm schemes become 'white elephants', attractive for a year or two, then slowly deteriorating because the funding stopped at the ribbon-cutting.

6.1.3 This cycle is wasteful, demoralising and unsustainable. It keeps communities dependent on central government whims rather than empowering them to shape their own future. The Liberal Democrats believe that local communities know best how to make their high streets and towns successful so we support funding models that enable long-term and locally led revitalisation.

6.2 High Street Improvement Districts (HSIDs)

6.2.1 Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have done valuable work for two decades. They've helped drive footfall to the high street, deliver small-scale infrastructure improvements and strengthen the business voice.

6.2.2 However, as we have highlighted, the role of the high street is more complex and more interdependent. BIDs can focus narrowly on retail and business benefits, overlooking the wider role of culture, tourism, and community life in making places inclusive and sustainable.

6.2.3 That's why we propose High Street Improvement Districts (HSIDs), not as a replacement for BIDs, but as a supporting structure around them that builds on their strengths while widening the focus to include business,

culture, tourism, community organisations, landlords, SMEs, health facilities and residents.

6.2.4 HSIDs would be led by a locally-agreed board representing the cross section of interests, with the local council or equivalent playing a central role in both establishing its membership and having ongoing representation at the Board. They would be charged with creating a long term vision for the town centre, supported with a joined-up roadmap, curator and communication plan. A key responsibility would be regularly engaging with the community to identify gaps in the high street and attract the businesses, services, and initiatives needed to fill them.

6.2.5 They will be funded through a mix of local and government investment:

- A contribution from existing BID levies.
- Tourism and accommodation contributions, including hotel and short-term let accommodation levies or tourist tax.
- Community investment schemes such as High Streets Back Home (see section 6.3).
- Landlord contributions, a small ongoing charge that recognises their financial benefit from improved public realm and increased footfall.
- Government HSID Grants, unlocked once a local vision is agreed and a curator appointed, providing revenue funding to support the resource.
- Central government five-year capital and revenue grants, based on delivery of agreed milestones and outcomes.
- 'Out of Town' Levy (see section 2).

6.2.6 With dedicated funding, local leadership and long-term investment plans, HSIDs ensure every high street has the capacity and the power to shape its future.

6.3 High Streets Back Home: A New Source of Hope

6.3.1 Every town has its story of people who grew up locally, built successful lives elsewhere, and still feel deeply connected to the place they came from. 'High Streets Back Home' taps into that emotional bond.

6.3.2 It creates a defined and accessible route for people to give back, to invest in the future of their community, whether by supporting community asset purchases, restoring heritage buildings or backing local enterprise space.

6.3.3 This is not just a funding mechanism. It's a way of giving back to your roots where your contribution can make it a better place for current generations.

7 Tackling Safety, Anti-Social Behaviour and Shop Theft

7.0.1 The creation of safe, confident high streets should be an integral part of all the policies that we have proposed.

7.0.2 In towns with high vacancy rates, many residents say they feel unsafe in the evenings, citing crime, public urination and anti-social behaviour. Reduced community policing and fewer public toilets, alongside wider social and economic pressures, has contributed to rising anti-social behaviour and shoplifting, undermining confidence among visitors and businesses – especially where visible policing is limited.

7.0.3 Housing above shops can help make high streets safer by bringing more people into the area throughout the day and in the evening. Residents can provide natural 'eyes on the street' and well-maintained, lived-in spaces can deter antisocial behaviour. The added footfall that residents provide can add to a vibrant space with lower opportunities for crime

7.0.4 As part of the **design** of the high street, include a desire for:

- Features that discourage ASB – strategic lighting, community murals to replace shutters that are graffiti targets.
- Housing above shops (section 2.2.14), bringing natural surveillance and footfall
- Pop up spaces or markets in dead spots and in the evenings.
- Community design competitions, giving local ownership and reward.
- Public Toilets and / or Community Toilet Schemes.

- Leisure and sports activities for young people.

7.0.5 As part of the new funding routes, give the option to fund and manage:

- Grants and loans for small businesses to invest in and roll out CCTV.
- HSIDs to have the ability to set up small specialist teams that focus exclusively on shoplifting, sharing intelligence across shops and giving visible presence.
- Funding for HSIDs to tackle persistent offenders by agreeing time-limited exclusion zones with the police that are linked to offers of training or work placement for the offender.

7.0.5 As part of the **centralised digital support**, offer tools as collective procurement bundles, making them accessible for small businesses

- A shared platform logging data (time/type) to plan AI enabled CCTV for inside shops, not gathering personal data but flagging known shop theft behaviours e.g. concealment.
- A WhatsApp instant alert system for businesses, BID teams, and community wardens that flags offenders, patterns, and risks in real time.
- A card payment mechanism to enable local authorities to recoup the cost of providing toilet facilities.

7.0.6 Liberal Democrats of course also prioritise a greater focus on community policing. We have proposed a 'Police Counter Promise', guaranteeing a staffed police desk in every community. Only then can public confidence be rebuilt, with a visible police presence focused on tackling the crimes that matter most to local people.

7.0.7 We also call for the National Crime Agency to establish a dedicated unit to liaise with local authorities and police forces to take on organised shoplifting gangs.

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Further copies of this paper can be found online at

<https://www.libdems.org.uk/members/make-policy/high-streets-and-town-centres>

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