

HOW TO WIN THE TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION GAME

BE News and Davitt Jones Bould assembled a panel of regeneration experts at UKREiiF last week to discuss how the UK's towns and cities can turn their fortunes around

THE PANEL

Stephen Chalcraft, partner, DJB

Nick Gerrard, growth and prosperity programme director, Blackpool Council

Edward Highfield, service director for skills and regeneration, Kirklees Council

Paul Holcroft, development director, Moda Living

Vivienne King, head of real estate social impact, The Good Economy

Stuart Longbottom, head of service asset management, Bradford City Council

Gill Marshall, head of stakeholder engagement, Rural and Urban Strategic

Matthew Needham Laing, partner, DJB

Andrew Pratt, chairman/director, Rise Homes/The Ringley Group

Warren Taylor, director, City heart

Paul Westwood, design director, RIOS

Elizabeth Wright, senior development manager, Muse

Liz Hamson, editor-in-chief, BE News



As anybody with eyes to see knows, the UK's town and city centres are in trouble. That doesn't apply to every centre in every part of the country, but it cannot be denied that even once modestly prosperous places are looking tired, with vacant retail units and shuttered or increasingly shabby public facilities and spaces. Austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of ecommerce, among other issues, have taken their toll.

However, some towns and cities are managing to turn their fortunes around. It was with this in mind that *BE News*, together with Davitt Jones Bould (DJB), brought together a panel of leading regeneration experts, from both the public and private sector, at last week's UKREiiF conference to discuss how to win the town centre regeneration game.

Here we share the edited highlights of what was a lively, wide-ranging debate.

QUESTION: What is the starting point for developing a robust regeneration strategy?

WRIGHT: It's about going back to what the need is and where that need exists. People need to live in large towns and cities, they need to access services and they need to work.



GERRARD: But how do you think as a society that we're adjusting to the post-Covid world? Some companies are moving out of offices and some are forcing them to come back. So how's that going to play itself out? What that experience really showed us was that you don't need to live in a particular place or that you can live where you want to live and work from there. I don't think we've worked that out yet.

HOLCROFT: We found it very interesting during lockdown how much need there was for social interaction from our residents. In a post-Covid world, that has led us to really focus on how we create communities. If you are in an apartment, you don't have a private garden. I think the public realm, that placemaking, the spaces between buildings, is as important as the building, if not more. It is something our residents are crying out for.



It's about going back to what the need is and where that need exists

Elizabeth Wright



Elizabeth Wright



Nick Gerrard



Paul Holcroft



Vivienne King



Warren Taylor



Edward Highfield



What everyone tells me is that when lockdown happened, people lost their sense of place

Vivienne King

QUESTION: So what we're saying is that creating a sense of community remains at the heart of regeneration?

KING: This isn't restricted to residential; this is a cross-sector story. What everyone tells me is that when lockdown happened, people lost their hubs, they lost their community, they lost their sense of place. It's about health, leisure, hospitality... it's everything. It really spreads right out into all of the services that we as a real estate industry have a responsibility for providing.

What's really refreshing is that we're not thinking now about putting up a building

full-stop; we're actually thinking about creating a community.

QUESTION: If strategies need to be focused so tightly on all aspects of a community, does that mean that councils need to play a leading role?

TAYLOR: Wigan is a great example of where it's bringing together all those threads. The council has been brave and bought a shopping centre because it had to do something to regenerate a failing town centre. We are now delivering new homes for Wigan town centre. We're providing a

whole spectrum of affordable and shared ownership properties, as well as homes for sale. Importantly, more people will live in the town centre. We're putting in food courts, a hotel, a cinema and leisure facilities, with that public realm connecting all of those components together.

HIGHFIELD: Developers want long-term strategic partnerships with willing local authorities. There is patient funding there. I think increasingly that it is about sharing of risk. I was involved in the biggest deal with L&G and they were absolutely looking for that partnership with the local authority



to de-risk it a bit. I'd add that there's only so much risk the local authorities can bear.

QUESTION: Is there a role for councils to build a new generation of council housing?

MARSHALL: We talk about social housing, but what's wrong with calling council housing council housing? What was wrong with the the time when working-class people [lived in them] before Margaret Thatcher sold them. If we started on a return of council homes for local people, would that upset the appcart with the investment funds or offices?

QUESTION: Purpose-built student accommodation has weathered the storm pretty well recently, but is 'studentification' still an issue?

PRATT: We have a really interesting issue with demographics in our country. With one of our schemes, we thought most of the occupiers or residents were going to be youngsters, looking to actually build some equity up so they could go and buy their first houses, but every single apartment went to an international student. You're going to get a different shape of regeneration if you're actually just building schemes that international students take.

QUESTION: Are there any advantages to working in areas that have seen such dramatic decline?

LONGBOTTOM: If you take Bradford, for example, the reason the opportunity is there is because there's been significant market



We talk about social housing, but what's wrong with calling council housing council housing?

Gill Marshall





Stephen Chalcraft



Paul Westwood



Matthew Needham Laing



You've got to improve people's lives and that means creating jobs, increasing productivity, actually providing better help

Stephen Chalcraft

failure. You can actually put together a large piece of land because the value is gone. You can't do that in Dorchester or Cheltenham. You can't do it in Harrogate. You've got an opportunity to create something. I don't think it's an imperative, but it does help.

WRIGHT: It helps, but there are certainly many places that Muse has been looking at in the south of England, for example. Everyone thinks about the stereotypical beautiful towns in the shires. But it's not all like that at all. There is need there. But often there might be political divides that make it a challenge, but once you get into it, once you start understanding what the needs are, it's not actually very easy at all.

QUESTION: Is there any danger that we focus too much on physical regeneration to the detriment of societal renewal?

CHALCRAFT: In Manchester, we've been very successful in terms of physical regeneration, but we've actually not created the better lifestyles or wellness that we need to actually create social impact. But there is now a lot of emphasis on building better homes, on nature, on wellbeing and so on, so I think that is good news.

You've got to improve people's lives and that means creating jobs, increasing productivity, actually providing better help.

WESTWOOD: A lot of the time when we're talking about kind of these post industrial towns there are also themes around low productivity and low growth. Why don't we think more about new types of industries that could be attracted to these places? That could be about how you generate a green revolution. These old industrial towns need a sense of purpose and a future.

QUESTION: Is there also a danger that we concentrate on building shiny new commercial buildings and forget about older properties?

NEEDHAM LAING: You could end up with a massively bifurcated market where you've got some very energy-efficient, carbon-neutral buildings which are attractive to occupiers, and you have an increasingly large stock of secondary properties which are not energy efficient and are expensive to maintain. There is a real danger of this happening and affecting all types of business. It is a serious problem from a property perspective. □



**For more information on
BE News content solutions events,
please contact:
sian@benews.co.uk**