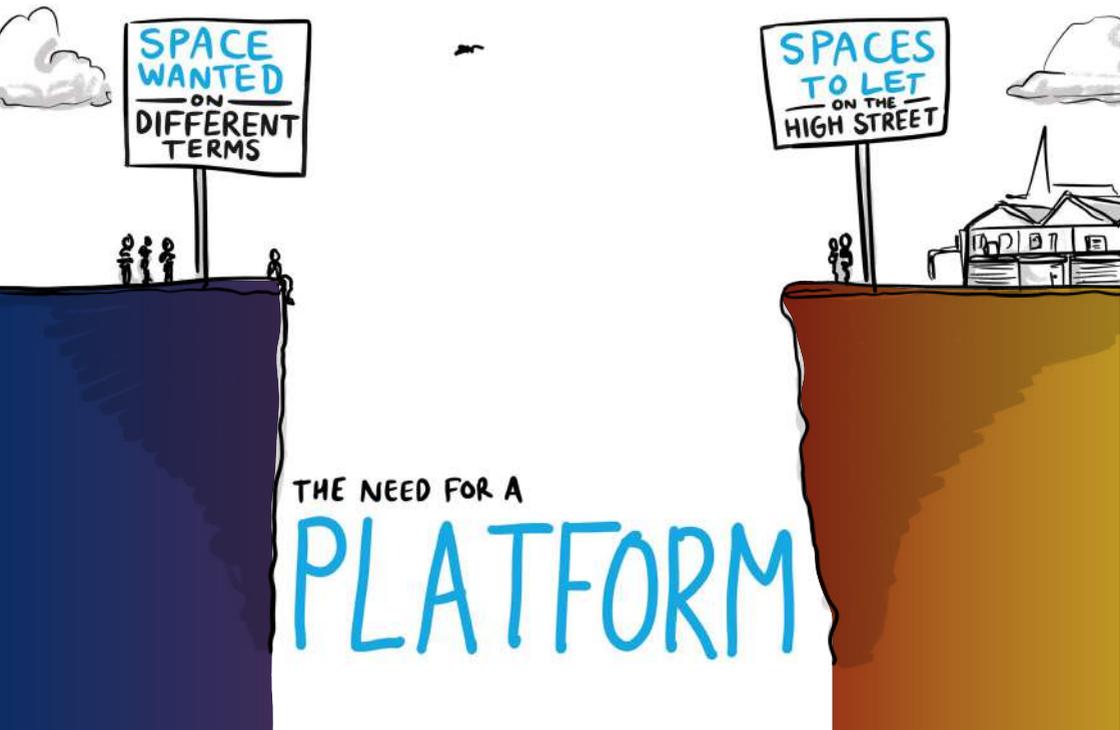


THINK  
TANK  
FOR THE  
RADICAL  
CENTRE

# A PLATFORM FOR PLACES

REVIVING TOWN CENTRES BY CHANGING  
HOW COMMUNITIES ACCESS PROPERTY

by Bex Trevalyan, David Boyle, Frances Northrop, Nick Plumb and Nalin Seneviratne





PLATFORM PLACES  
JUNE 2022

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Please note that the views and proposals expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of all of the individuals or organisations in the group.

## 1. FOREWORD

The Platform Places initiative is a direct response to some of the challenges facing our urban centres and, as consumer habits continue to evolve and the face of retail shifts, seeks to answer the question of what comes next.

Throughout the last year since we first launched the initiative, we have witnessed a genuine shared passion and willingness across town centre stakeholders – from STOs and multi-site occupiers to local authorities and investor landlords – to work together to find solutions that will breathe life back into our towns.

The precise model of delivery will differ from place to place – and over the course of the project we have heard about many inspiring schemes, from Hastings Commons and Bywater’s Smithfield Yard in Belfast to Legal & General’s Kingland Crescent in Poole and the Historic Coventry Trust – but the ability of creative and holistic development to propel economic resurgence cannot be underestimated.

As a law firm working on schemes right across the UK, Shoosmiths is heavily invested in the issue of urban revival and community collaboration, and the need to revive, reshape and open up town centre property. Social behaviours have changed and our town centres must change with them.

With so many stakeholders involved that can be challenging but, in a post-pandemic environment, Platform Places can be a powerful catalyst, encouraging communities, property owners, local and national government to work together in partnership to drive positive social change on our high streets and in our town centres.

This paper is an important aspect of this work. It looks particularly at the public policy developments necessary to revitalise our town centres. It is specifically addressed at those with the power and influence to shape the environment in which decisions are made: national and local politicians, civil servants, financiers and planners, as well of course as the property owners, commercial and not-for-profit tenants, and community groups themselves who give our high streets life.

### SHOOSMITHS

As lead sponsor, Shoosmiths is pleased to support the Platform Places initiative.

**ELLIS GARDNER-BROWNE,**  
Partner, Shoosmiths

**KIRSTY BLACK,**  
Partner, Shoosmiths

**NATHAN REES,**  
Partner, Shoosmiths



## 1. INTRODUCTION

# The challenge and opportunity.

*“Our high streets are not in decline. We just can’t easily get into the buildings and spaces to do the things we need to do to make them thrive.”*

**FRANCES NORTROP**  
Community-led Development Expert

We see amazing things happen in town centres when communities with ideas and businesses can easily and cheaply access property. Various challenges including the rising cost of living, the decline of significant parts of the high street and retail landscape and climate change have sparked imaginative responses by new and existing businesses, to help local people better meet their needs.

From community kitchens to music and arts venues, co-working spaces to local radio stations, community-led wind and solar projects to boxing gyms – these businesses bring people together, infuse neighbourhoods with a strong sense of purpose, and offer participatory services that help people live more affordable, sustainable and joyful lives.

But many such businesses – or ‘Socially-Trading Organisations’ (STOs) as we’ll call them here – say that the lack of access to affordable, secure property is one of the biggest barriers to starting and growing.<sup>1</sup>

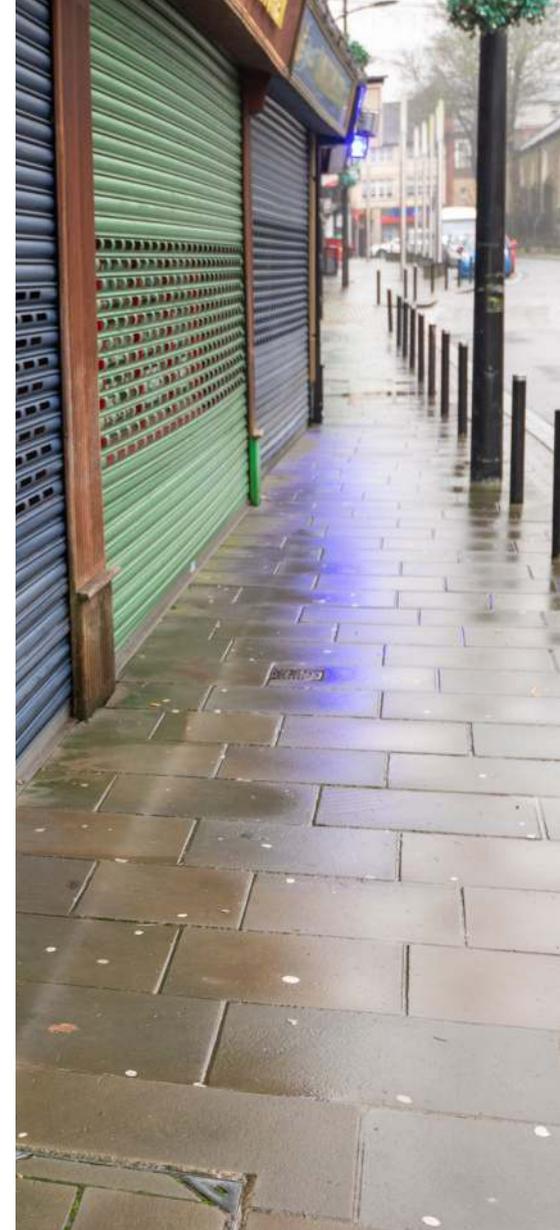
Some asset owners are leading on much-needed innovations here – from national pension funds like Legal & General, to councils like Sheffield, to public authorities like Transport for London. They’re motivated to attract vibrancy, footfall and revenue to town centres, whilst delivering against social and environmental impact objectives.

But many other councils and asset owners lack the incentives, networks or resources to collaborate effectively with communities and STOs to activate their assets.

The bigger picture is a story of fragmented and dislocated town centre asset ownership, which has led to a lack of relationships, dialogue and trust between stakeholders, made more complex by misaligned incentives and needs.

In this context, a group of 25 leaders from asset owners, town and city councils, STOs, lawyers and funders came together in 2021 to identify existing practical solutions to these issues, and routes to scaling them. The proposals outlined in this paper are the product of a long series of conversations between this group.

These conversations have also inspired the vision for a new social enterprise, ‘Platform Places’ – which aims to convene community leaders, councils and asset owners to bring more town centre property into community use, and where appropriate, community ownership, whilst also presenting viable development and investment opportunities.



Please note that the views and proposals expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of all of the individuals or organisations in the group.

1. Illustrated by multiple anecdotes as here: <https://www.ft.com/content/04382248-fbba-4a5a-bcaa-d2772263f0da>, <https://medium.com/@rebecca.trevalyan/life-after-coronavirus-a-new-high-street-is-waiting-if-were-brave-enough-to-reimagine-access-9b123875d6f>

### 3. Specific problems to solve.



*The town centre property system is a complex one, and there are more problems and nuance than we have space for here. But here are some of the headlines:*

**Lack of local relationships, networks and shared vision:** One of the biggest challenges we identified is the lack of local relationships, networks and shared vision between socially-trading organisations, councils and asset owners.

- In 59 per cent of places visited by High Streets Task Force experts, long-term investment plans were compromised by the absence of, or poor quality of, local networks and partnerships.<sup>2</sup>
- Many national and overseas asset owners are geographically and relationally distant from local communities, with nearly 20 per cent of shops owned by overseas investors – making direct relationships difficult.<sup>3</sup>

2 <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/mark-robinson-poor-quality-partnerships-holding-back-high-street-transformation-09-05-2022/>

3. <https://www.egi.co.uk/news/who-owns-the-high-street>

- See the case studies for stories of where renewed local relationships, networks and vision have had transformational impact on town centres.

**Misaligned incentives and needs on rents and security:** Many asset owners, council property teams and STOs have very different incentives and needs when it comes to rents and security:

#### SOCIALLY-TRADING ORGANISATIONS

Some established STOs can pay reasonable rents or revenue share and offer a strong covenant.<sup>4</sup> But many higher impact and earlier-stage STOs are far from being able to do so. Their investment in their communities – whether affordable service provision, resource-intensive training and care programmes or work with vulnerable people – typically gives no headroom for paying market rents and service charges.

- Established STOs often need longer-term security (say 3-5+ years on a lease), so as to be able to take on repayable finance, develop their business and invest in hyperlocal relationships and community-building. But the practice of ‘meanwhile’ space and short-term lets can make this difficult. Meanwhile in Oxfordshire said: “One of our spaces has a three-month rolling lease, but we’re housing 30 STOs and local projects in it – it’s very precarious.”

4. A strong covenant means high certainty that rent payments will be made when due, and is a significant factor in the valuation of any property.

5 1972 Local Government Act (Section 123). At times, individual circumstances may lead to terms being agreed that are “less than best” where local benefit is clear, and the position has been derived following a local competitive process based on social value principles.

#### ASSET OWNERS

- Some asset owners are willing to offer concessionary rents to such STOs, though often only on a short-term basis. These are primarily owners with a local connection, or with social and environmental impact objectives, and with the knowledge that STOs will drive footfall, vibrancy and revenue for their other occupiers.
- But many asset owners are, of course, motivated (or indeed obliged, through corporate governance or financing covenants) to seek market rents and a strong covenant, in order to avoid a drop in their property values. Such owners are more likely to wait for an occupier who is able to pay market rents and has a strong covenant – which can translate to long-term vacancies.

#### COUNCILS

- Although many council regeneration, community and environment departments are motivated to collaborate with STOs to deliver their outcomes, this is often in conflict with council property teams – who have income generation targets as well as a legal obligation to seek best commercial terms.<sup>5</sup>

**High refurbishment and retrofit costs:** The upfront capital costs of making town centre assets fit for STO occupiers and new types of uses is a challenge for both STOs and asset owners.

### STOs

- Traditionally, occupiers have tended to be responsible for their own fit-out costs - from structural works to utilities install - with some asset owners offering rent-free periods in exchange. But STOs typically cannot cover these capital costs without grants and other financial support.

### ASSET OWNERS

- Access to capital can also be a barrier for asset owners in opening up underused spaces for use, whether by STOs or other occupiers. For example, capital might be required to create secondary entrances to open up empty space above shops, or to do building works to meet new fire or energy efficiency regulations.

**Lack of development funding and capacity-building** for STOs looking to access property.

- STO leaders within the Platform Places group named the challenges of personal capacity as one of the barriers to them accessing property. "It's taken me 12 months to negotiate just one lease. Ideally, my time would be funded to secure spaces for my business and my peers - it's basically a whole other job."

- Access to aligned technical expertise was also named as an issue - for example, finding surveyors, lawyers and financial planners who understand the different business, governance and impact models used by STOs.

**Business rates:** There is a consensus among many high street stakeholders, including Platform Places participants, British Property Federation, British Retail Consortium and REVO, that business rates need to be reformed:

- Business rates can threaten the viability of STOs. 100 per cent rates relief is only available to registered charities, and charitable registration is not an option for many STOs, given burdensome cost and reporting requirements. Rates relief for non-profit STOs and social enterprises is by council discretion (between 0% and 100%), depending on the policy that council does or doesn't have in place.
- Some large asset owners have also said their models would be more viable if business rates were lower for occupiers.



## 4. CASE STUDIES: What's already working.



*These case studies are variously driven by communities, councils and asset owners. They all:*

- Feature local networks and partnerships, generally involving all three key stakeholder groups,
- Make it easier for STOs to affordably access property,
- Centre or involve the local community in the vision, decision-making and management.

### HISTORIC COVENTRY TRUST

Initiated by a 2011 campaign to save a treasured local asset, Historic Coventry Trust was created by Coventry residents to “preserve the city’s heritage for the next 1000 years of its history”<sup>6</sup>

Coventry City Council realised this entrepreneurial local trust would be best placed to look after many of the heritage buildings. So they compulsorily bought 27 buildings and sites and asset-transferred them to the Trust.

With funding and expertise from Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF), the assets are being transformed into affordable housing, workspaces, guest houses, galleries and so on.

Seven of these Heritage Development Trusts are now established around the country thanks to AHF and to the leadership of seven different councils.



Image credit: Architectural Heritage Fund, ahf.org.uk

6. <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Heritage-Development-Trusts-helping-create-distinctive-futures-for-our-towns-and-cities/53255>

## BYWATER PROPERTIES – BELFAST PLACEMAKING GROUP

Bywater Properties, a small private developer headquartered in Southern England, has taken an innovative approach to building local trust and making decisions in central Belfast, where it is developing two terraces.

Bywater's leadership team recruited five local community leaders to a 'Placemaking Group', whose role is to make decisions regarding which local businesses occupy the shops, and on what terms.

Bywater has committed to bringing vacant shops and unused upper parts back into use. They've recently launched a mini 'department store' with three floors given over to local makers and artisans.



Photo credits: Bywater Properties

It's a rent-free model – occupiers just cover basic costs like electricity and insurance.

*"The Placemaking Group members understand the context and are well-networked in Belfast, so are better placed than me to make decisions about local occupiers and their needs. It's possible for us to take a low rent on the shops because they're cross-subsidised by the residential above. It makes sense from a business perspective – by bringing vibrancy and footfall to the area, the residential property has a higher financial yield."*

**THEO MICHELL,**  
Principal, Bywater Properties



## SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL – 'COMMUNITY AS ANCHOR'

Sheffield City Council made the central premise of their Future High Street Fund bid about transforming the high street into a social hub.

They acquired one key shop building to house community entrepreneurs – to be a new 'anchor' and bring vibrancy to the high street. They're now looking to acquire more high street buildings for this purpose.

In their £470m commercial development, Heart of City (where the council is developer), Sheffield decided to create a community entrepreneur hub right in the centre. They ran a competition to fill the spaces fairly, and weighted social impact much higher than financial return.

*"I see a really important role for councils here [in taking on the head lease of assets or in playing lead developer], given they can make use of their own covenant strength to deal with the values that the individual asset owners still want to maintain"*

**NALIN SENEVIRATNE**  
former Director of Economic Development,  
Sheffield City Council



**Leah's Yard – Heart of the City**  
Space for community, independent local businesses, social entrepreneurs & makers  
Image credit: Sheffield City Council

## NUDGE COMMUNITY BUILDERS, PLYMOUTH

Nudge began with a group of residents from Stonehouse, Plymouth, who were determined to tackle the 25 percent vacancy rate and anti-social behaviour in their local high street, Union Street.

They identified empty buildings there, and managed to buy and long-lease five of them with a series of grants and loans from Plymouth City Council and other funders, plus £285,000 in community shares to repay the loans.

These buildings have now been transformed into multi-purpose hubs housing tens of STOs: markets, cafes, affordable flats and workspaces, and an arts venue. The business was profitable after three years, with profits reinvested to grow the local business ecosystem.

Nudge has since partnered with Plymouth City Council to bring other assets into generative uses – sparking city-wide culture change in use of assets.



Before and after:

The Clipper pub had been closed for two years when Nudge bought it and transformed it into a community market and cafe (downstairs) and affordable residential (upstairs)

Photo credits: Plymouth Herald and Nudge Community Builders



## LEGAL & GENERAL, POOLE

In a bid to incubate the next generation of local businesses, Legal & General has offered 10 high street shop units to small local businesses in Poole on a rent- and rates-free basis.

Occupiers include a fishmonger, coffee roaster, design studio, surfboard shop, zero waste grocery store, social enterprise art gallery and restored second-hand furniture shop – many of which have been identified and recruited by a local creative resident.

L&G is also doing creative public realm improvements, a local makers market with space for over 15 vendors, and a calendar of 500 curated annual events – and has

established a community partnership with local groups including the council, local educational institutions, charities and NHS in order to deepen engagement and collaboration with the local community, with a focus on local needs.

*“We see these sorts of local businesses and the relationships around them as the future of high street retail. We know that they bring vibrancy, impact and footfall and expect that, in time, most will become paying occupiers – likely on a revenue share model.”*

### MATT SOFFAIR

Research Manager,  
Retail and Leisure Real Assets, L&G

Photo credit: The Ready House and LGIM



## ISLINGTON COUNCIL, AFFORDABLE WORKSPACE

Islington Council own very little high street property, so they've leased a number of assets from private owners, to make them available to local STOs.

For example, they took on a long lease for a property in Finsbury Park high street, and licensed it to Outlandish, a local technology co-operative.

Outlandish operate the building as an affordable workspace for tens of local digital businesses. They don't pay rent, but instead have committed to create a certain amount of employment and training opportunities for local people under-represented in the sector.

Photo credit: Space4



## ONE TO WATCH: COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS

We recommend further exploration of the Community Improvement District (CID) model, which aims to develop town centre level partnerships between community and STO leaders, councils and asset owners. Pilots are being undertaken by Power to Change in seven England-wide locations – **watch this space!**

## MEANWHILE IN OXFORDSHIRE

Launched in early 2021, 'Meanwhile in Oxfordshire' is transforming underused space in Oxfordshire's urban centres, with a view to growing an inclusive economy, amongst other outcomes. The programme was developed by Oxford City Council, with funding secured by the Local Enterprise Partnership from central government's Getting Building Fund.

Lead delivery partners include Makespace Oxford, which has a track record of transforming 'empty and underused spaces in Oxford to create affordable workspaces that nurture connection and support between social enterprises, creatives, makers and doers committed to positive change', and Wild Property, a commercial agent known and trusted by local asset owners. They're supported by an alliance of other local property, grassroots and arts organisations.

So far, the partnership has identified, secured and fitted out 20 buildings, with a further five secured and in the process of being refurbished, supported 30 STOs to access affordable space on a 'meanwhile' basis. The programme will support 112 STOs in total.

*"MiO has been a tremendous springboard for many STOs. The lever of capital grant has made it possible to bring many empty spaces back into use at affordable rates on a meanwhile basis quickly. This is helping to make the High Street more accessible and diversifying the mix. The next step is to adopt and develop alternative ownership and stewardship models that can bring about more systemic change and lock in affordability and social impact in the long term."*

**ANDY EDWARDS,**  
Director of Makespace Oxford

Photo credit: Oxford Mail



## 5. Our proposals.

*Below are five proposals to central government that Radix and Platform Places believe will, if implemented, help to create the enabling environment for these interventions to work.*

### PROPOSAL #1 - LAUNCH CAPITAL AND REVENUE FUNDS

Capital and revenue funds from central government and other funders to:

1. Offer funds to refurbish buildings, incentivising asset owners to come to the table, as with Historic England's Heritage Action Zone funds.
2. Grow a new generation of locally-rooted, impact-first operators and brokers, as with Historic Coventry Trust, Nudge Community Builders and Meanwhile in Oxfordshire.

#### A. We particularly support two existing proposals:

The High Street Buyout Fund (HSBF), as proposed by the community business funder, Power to Change. The HSBF is described as "an agile new fund to help communities purchase assets on the high street, which...at the right scale would:

- Transform over 200 neglected high street properties across the country – individual asset purchases on some high streets, multiple asset purchases in other places,
- Leverage in £250m of commercial and social investment against £100m government grant, with the option of grant repayment after 12 years or the creation of a perpetual fund – making public money go further,
- Support communities by providing revenue support for the development of their activities on the high street.”<sup>7</sup>

**B. The proposal from Architectural Heritage Fund** to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to grow their 'Heritage Development Trust' model, which has already successfully been piloted in seven towns in England. In Great Yarmouth alone, it has brought 17 assets into community use and ownership, creating 25 new residential units, 25,520 hours of training, and £8.4m work for the local economy.

**Precedents:** Scotland has a Land Fund, set up in 2000 to offer grants of up to £1 million, to help communities to access and own the land and buildings that matter to them, as well as practical support to develop projects.<sup>8</sup> This has leveraged public funding too.<sup>9</sup>

7. Nick Plumb, Matt Roche and Ailbhe McNabola (2022), *Why now is the time for a high street buyout fund*, London: Power to Change. <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Take-Back-the-High-Street-report.pdf>

8. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish\\_Land\\_Fund](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_Land_Fund)

9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_community\\_buyouts\\_in\\_Scotland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_community_buyouts_in_Scotland)

10. <https://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/documents/s34654/Community%20Lettings%20Policy.pdf>

11. <https://doncaster.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s21840/i8%20App%20Doncaster%20Council%20Community%20Lettings%20and%20Asset%20Transfer%20Policy%20FINAL.pdf#:~:text=The%20Localism%20Act%202011%20spurred%20Doncaster%20Council%20to,a%20number%20of%20successes%20with%20local%20VCSE%20groups>

12. See page 47 of this link. Section 4 covers the legal aspects:

<https://moderngov.lambeth.gov.uk/documents/g15212/Public%20reports%20pack%20Monday%2004-Oct-2021%2017.00%20Cabinet.pdf?T=10>

### PROPOSAL #2 - SET OUT COMMUNITY LETTINGS POLICIES FOR COUNCILS

Issue Secretary of State guidance to encourage local authorities to adopt community lettings policies - to help council property teams make the case to lease or sell its assets to STOs on favourable terms, to support the delivery of local outcomes. Our proposed process for creating such a policy is to:

A. Map local needs through reference to frameworks like local plans and in dialogue with local grassroots networks.

B. Develop a policy that makes the case for less than market rate 'disposals' of the council's assets, where an occupier or buyer offers clear local social, environmental or economic benefit.

C. Develop a universal decision-making framework, along the lines of the Treasury's business case model.

D. Implement by widely promoting each vacant unit, gathering at least three expressions of interest that detail the STO's impact and revenue-generating potential (whether rent or revenue share), and making a decision using the framework.

**Precedents:** East Hertfordshire,<sup>10</sup> Doncaster,<sup>11</sup> and Lambeth<sup>12</sup> have similar policies in place or are moving in that direction.



### PROPOSAL #3 SUPPORT COUNCILS AS INTERMEDIARIES

Issue guidance and support for councils to act as intermediaries between STOs and asset owners – in particular to adopt practices such as:

1. *Assuming a head lease on an asset to sublet to STOs, as in the Sheffield City Council case study – using the council's covenant strength to allow for values that asset owners want to maintain, while providing access on fair terms for STOs.*
2. *Stipulating that an appropriate element of any new developments to be made available at a genuinely affordable rate for STOs, using Section 106 clauses or otherwise - whilst recognising the need not to materially impact on the financial viability of any scheme.*

### PROPOSAL #4 TACKLE LONG-TERM VACANT AND DERELICT ASSETS (LAST RESORT TOOLS ONLY)

With careful consultation with all stakeholders, continue to explore the proposal laid out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill designed to make procedural changes to the compulsory purchase (CPO) process – to support councils to tackle buildings that are long-term vacant or derelict without a valid reason (such as awaiting planning permission).

If implemented, this should only be used as a last resort tool, for example, where an asset owner has clearly abandoned the property and cannot be found, or is unresponsive after months of communication.

Stakeholders that we have consulted have not reached consensus on the rental auction proposal outlined in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, giving councils the right to let certain vacant premises. We caution that full consultation with asset owners, councils and communities is critical to creating a policy like this in a way that is fair and constructive for all parties.

We also recommend a consultation process around Community Right to Buy, which could have the potential to level the playing field for community trusts and STOs looking to purchase long-term vacant or derelict property (as in Scotland), provided that any such policy has suitable protections for landowners. Here is the rationale for this that was shared by Platform Places participants:

- *STOs and local impact-focussed operators can't access as much capital as fast as private developers. Nor do they (or local authorities) have the rights to take action even where there's a strong case for creating public benefit – for example on Assets of Community Value, or where a property has been vacant for a long time without a valid reason.*

- *A Community Right to Buy, with an extended twelve-month window given to the community looking to purchase, would give STOs and community development trusts crucial time to raise this funding and prepare business plans. Any such policy would, of course, need to make sure that adequate safeguards are included so that landowners are not prevented from bona fide sales - so that properties are not 'sterilised' for 12 months whilst such a process is under way.*
- *Scotland has had Community Right to Buy legislation in place since 2003. In practice it is rarely used, but it does tend to bring asset owners to the table for conversation, with negotiated sales the most common outcome of this process.<sup>13</sup>*

### PROPOSAL #5 - PROVIDE BUSINESS RATES RELIEF FOR STOs

Create a specific business rate relief for regulated STOs (Community Interest Companies and Community Benefit Societies), set at a minimum of 50 per cent of their business rates bill.

This would be less than charities receive, but would make a significant difference to STO viability. The British Property Federation goes a step further, recommending this relief for occupiers across the board, as well as recommending that 100 per cent of business rates be retained by the local authority.<sup>14</sup>



13. Noted in dialogue with a representative from Community Land Scotland.

14. <https://bpf.org.uk/media/4787/bpf-town-centre-investment-zones-policy-proposal-feb-2022.pdf>

This Radix paper has been prepared in partnership with Platform Places sponsors, partners and participants.

Platform Places is a new social enterprise designed through dialogue between asset owners, councils and community entrepreneurs. Please note that the views and proposals expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of the organisations that sponsored, partnered with or participated in Platform Places.



### Sponsors

With thanks to Shoosmiths and Power to Change for sponsoring:



### Co-founding partners



### PARTICIPANTS:

#### Alice Fung

Director, Architecture 00; Member of the Workspace Advisory Group (Advisory body to the Mayor of London and London Local Economic Action Partnership); Mayor's Design Advocate (Mayor of London)

**Allison Herbert** CEO of Bath BID

**Ben Rich** CEO, Radix Big Tent

#### Candice Lemaitre

Commercial Development Innovation Lead at Transport of London

#### Dan Thompson

Writer, artist, and founder of the Empty Shops Network

**David Boyle** Policy, Radix Big Tent

**Ellis Gardner-Browne** Partner, Shoosmiths

**Emily Vermont** Founder and CEO of Indirock

#### Frances Northrop

Associate Fellow - Local Economies at NEF, Director - East End Trades Guild, Director - Totnes Community Development Society, and Consultant to multiple community asset projects

**Gareth I. Jones** CEO & Co-founder of TownSq

#### Ion Fletcher

Director of Policy, British Property Federation

#### Karen Houghton

Regeneration Programme Manager, St Helens Council

#### Cllr Kemi Akinola

(Deputy Leader of Wandsworth Council), MD Brixton People's Kitchen, Founder/CEO Be Enriched, Community leader

**Kirsty Black** Partner, Shoosmiths

#### Liam Kelly

CEO, Make CIC, non-executive director, Magenta Living

#### Mark Robinson

Chair of High Streets Task Force, Co-founder of Ellandi

#### Matt Soffair

Research Manager, Legal & General Investment Management, Real Assets

#### Nalin Seneviratne BSc LL.B FRICS FRSA,

former Director of City Centre Development, Sheffield City Council

#### Natasha Ley

Communications Manager, Power to Change

**Nathan Rees** Partner, Shoosmiths

#### Nick Plumb

Policy Manager, Power to Change, High Streets Task Force board member

**Pawda Tjoa** Senior Researcher, New Local

#### Philip Brimley MRICS

Head of Property, Gascoyne Estates

**Stephen Martin** Senior Estate Manager, Boots

**Theo Michell** Principal, Bywater Properties

**Tim Vaughan** CEO, Moorgarth

#### Vidhya Alakeson

former CEO of Power to Change

### CONVENOR & FACILITATOR:

#### Rebecca Trevalyan

co-founder of Library of Things

### ILLUSTRATOR:

#### Bryan Mathers

Founder of Visual Thinkery



# REVIVING OUR HIGH STREETS

## RADIX BIG TENT

Our political system is failing. Political debate has become polarised and short-sighted leading to a loss of trust not just in politicians but democracy itself. Traditional parties exclude millions, the media is no longer independent, while many think tanks are too narrow in focus and too dependent on corporate sponsorship to promote systemic change.

It is time for a revolution of empowerment to enable us all to take part in political discussion and to shape our responses to the challenges of the future. Radix Big Tent is our answer.

Radix, the think tank for the radical centre and Big Tent, which creates space for non-partisan discussion about big policy issues, are coming together to change the conversation and reframe and revive meaningful political debate. Together, we aim to provoke, develop and promote new conversations about and ideas for the regeneration and renewal of our society.

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Radix Brand and Layout:  
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## CONTACT US

RADIX BIG TENT,  
14 Sandringham St, York, YO10 4BA

hello@radixuk.org  
events@bigtent.org.uk

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www.radixuk.org  
www.bigtent.org.uk



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[www.bigtent.org.uk](http://www.bigtent.org.uk)

[hello@radixuk.org](mailto:hello@radixuk.org)  
[events@bigtent.org.uk](mailto:events@bigtent.org.uk)

14 Sandringham St., York YO10 4BA

Registered Education Charity  
1167393