

**TOWARDS A SUBURBAN RENAISSANCE: THE SUBURBAN TASKFORCE  
CALL FOR EVIDENCE: AN INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE OF THE SUBURBS**



**EVIDENCE SUBMISSION AUTHORS**

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**INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF THE EVIDENCE**

The Institute of Place Management (IPM) at Manchester Metropolitan University is the professional body and learned society for people who serve places. We represent professional place managers and leaders in local authorities, Business Improvement Districts, and other place partnerships, as well as consultants, academics and policymakers. We publish the Journal of Place Management and Development (an international, peer-reviewed journal), and deliver post-graduate training programmes (including the MSc Place Management and Leadership). The IPM is the lead partner of the government-funded High Streets Task Force.

Current debates on how to revive high streets and centres mainly concern what is happening in larger town and city centres, with little commentary or guidance for smaller centres, even though before the impact of the current COVID19 lockdown measures, there is evidence people already wanted more from their local high street<sup>i</sup>. Clearly, commentary and analysis throughout 2020 turned to focus on the impact of COVID19 on high streets and town centres. The pandemic has caused a massive reduction in footfall, particularly in city centres, but, at the same time, elevated the importance of suburban and district centres, which meet the needs of their catchment communities<sup>ii</sup>. Given that, under 'lockdown', people are beginning to rediscover their locality and are using centres within walking distance of their homes more frequently, it is timely to reconsider the role and function of suburban centres. With people also noticing the health and environmental benefits of reduced commuter traffic<sup>iii</sup>, adding to the well-documented benefits of walking and cycling, we might now reinforce such positive developments through a commitment to strengthening suburban centres to embed ties to localities developed during lockdown.

The evidence presented below represents the IPM's response to Suburban Taskforce's questions concerning policy mechanisms and interventions to support the sustainability of suburban areas,

with a particular focus on the vitality and viability of suburban centres and high streets. Whereas the 2019 House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee Inquiry into High streets and Town Centres in 2030<sup>iv</sup> identifies a number of valuable recommendations more generally, suburban centres face a number of specific unique challenges, compared to major town and city centres. Another important consideration relates to a more recent call for evidence regarding the impact of COVID19 on local high streets, which has had a particular impact on the suburbs<sup>v</sup>. Consequently, the evidence presented below begins to address the challenges identified by the Suburban Taskforce in relation to how existing policies have distinct spatial implications for suburban centres, and provides recommendations to promote suburban centres as more liveable and sustainable places. The IPM's evidence, therefore, addresses the following questions:

- A. What are the governance implications arising from these challenges and opportunities?
- B. What existing policies or policy 'silences' have the most significant impact on the suburbs?
- C. What new policy reforms or new policy initiatives could be deployed to assist in the creation of suburbs, which are thriving, sustainable and inclusive?

The evidence draws on research and data analysis since 2015 conducted by the IPM, which identifies the most important policy considerations in relation to the future of suburban centres. This includes the IPM's *Multifunctional Centres Report*<sup>vi</sup>, the ESRC funded *High Street 2020 Project*<sup>vii</sup>, the Innovate UK funded Bringing Big Data to Small Users Project<sup>xvii</sup>, the IPM's *State-of-the-Art Review of Business Improvement Districts in the UK*<sup>viii</sup> (commissioned by The BID Foundation, 2019), and two projects conducted in partnership with Manchester City Council - *Vital and Viable Neighbourhoods Programme*<sup>x</sup> and the INTERREG funded *Area Based Collaborative Enterprise ABCE Cities project* (State of Place Study<sup>x</sup> and Action Plan<sup>xi</sup>). Furthermore the IPM collated evidence for Sir John Timpson's (2018) High Street Report, published in the report *High Street 2030: Achieving Change*<sup>xii</sup>.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support is needed to promote the evolution of public-private centre place management models within suburban centres (with varying degrees of formality, where appropriate).
- The role of suburban centres should change to a multifunctional rather than a retail-focused perspective.
- New research is required to map out existing networks and partnerships in suburban centres, to identify existing and gaps in capacity to facilitate engagement and accountability.
- Local government officers, elected members and other place managers should be encouraged to develop their place leadership skills.
- There is a need to review how Combined Authorities and LEPs are genuinely accommodating place-centric approaches, which acknowledge more blended forms of ownership and collaboration in local arrangements for economic development, and how existing regional instruments might better support emerging networked and locally anchored types of initiatives that promote inclusive growth, innovation and regeneration at a local scale.
- There is a need to strengthen relationships between BIDs and LEPs, which are currently weak, outside of the major cities.
- More training and support is necessary to enable place partnerships to achieve a transformative impact on suburban centres, with support for representatives from across the public, private and voluntary sectors to access this training, gain qualifications and continuing professional development.

### **A. What are the governance implications arising from these challenges and opportunities?**

#### 1. How can policies, policy-thinking, or policy networks adapt to the needs and goals of suburbs?

Unlike major town and city centres, the governance arrangements for suburban centres remains a neglected and under-researched concern. Whereas Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are an established model for managing urban centres, there are only 320 in operation in Great Britain, whereas there are an estimated 7000 high streets<sup>xiii</sup>. Outside of Greater London (which accounts for 20% of all BIDs in the UK), major town and city centres are most likely to have established a BID. Indeed, 79% of BIDs classify themselves as 'Town Centre' BIDs incorporating some or all of the core commercial area of a town or city centre. Some of the larger city centres (e.g. Leeds, Newcastle-upon-Tyne) have just one central BID, whereas in others a number of BIDs may be established in different quarters of the city centre, reflecting the different interests and activities in these areas (e.g. in Birmingham there exists the Retail BID Birmingham, Colmore BID, Westside BID, Southside BID and Jewellery Quarter)<sup>xiv</sup>. This is in contrast to practice in some European cities where there is a far greater proliferation of BIDs; for example, Amsterdam has established 60 neighbourhood level BIZs (or Business Investment Zones in the Netherlands), based on the British model<sup>x</sup>. By contrast, across central London, almost 20 BIDs operate in adjoining areas across the central activity zone.

Thus, in the UK there seems to be a prevailing view BID's are simply an unviable option for smaller centres<sup>vii</sup>. Whilst even though more formalised place management structures such as BID's are unlikely to be found in suburban centres, evidence however suggests that more informal, volunteer-led place management mechanisms that exist in smaller centres can still deliver effective interventions to improve the place in question<sup>xv</sup>. Moreover, IPM analysis indicates that 10% of existing BID's are not located in town/city centres; such BID's can be classified as 'Industrial and Business Park BID's', usually in a defined industrial estate or area, or a designated business park. Although they vary in scale, generally this type of BID has fewer levy payers than town centre BID's, has smaller budgets, and can be very focused over a relatively small area<sup>xvi</sup>. Such BID's are usually located in 'off-centre', more suburban locations, and this fact, coupled with the preponderance of BIZs in cities such as Amsterdam, raises some interesting questions.

First, what governance arrangements are appropriate in a suburban context? Could the BID concept, therefore, be extended into suburban areas; either in the form of comparable independent community-oriented versions of 'Industrial and Business Park' BID's, or using the analogy of a 'hub and spoke' airline network, having a constellation of smaller suburban BID's as satellites of a bigger, more established 'Town Centre' BID. Alternatively, are other, less formal management mechanisms more appropriate for suburban centres?

Second, what existing networks and partnerships are in place to manage change within suburban centres, and how effective are they in terms of their impact on vitality and viability? IPM research into 10 suburban centres in Manchester<sup>ix</sup>, for instance, reveals only two suburban centres (Northenden and Withington) possess an established cross-sector local network engaged with managing the development of their local centre. Although six centres possess a local traders association (LTA), local action remains poorly supported and uncoordinated.

Support, therefore, is needed to promote the evolution of public-private centre management models within suburban centres (with varying degrees of formality, where appropriate). Such networks would be qualitatively different to those found in larger city or town centres, perhaps smaller in scale, with greater engagement with independent traders and community scale organisations<sup>xii</sup>. Greater clarity is needed, therefore, on how place management structures can be developed within a suburban context.

## 2. Are there any examples of approaches to policy, regulation or stakeholder networks that are sensitive to these challenges?

The challenges facing suburban and district centres is the focus of two projects involving a partnership between the Institute of Place Management (IPM) and Manchester City Council, Vital and Viable Neighbourhoods<sup>ix</sup> and the INTERREG funded project, Area Based Collaborative Enterprise (ABCE)<sup>x</sup>. These projects aim to develop a better, evidence-based understanding of the key factors the local authority and its partners can influence to create more vital and viable suburban and district centres.

Through the Vital and Viable project, a network of automated Springboard footfall counters were installed in 10 centres located outside the city centre, complemented by in-depth studies into five localities. Through this data, we were able to establish each centre aligned with a multifunctional footfall signature<sup>xvii</sup>, although the volume of activity between each centre differed greatly, varying from centres mainly serving the convenience needs of the immediate local catchment, to suburban centres which attracted footfall from a much wider area. In addition to establishing the functionality of each centre, the data also provided a measure against which to monitor the impact of

interventions. For example, we were able to demonstrate how additional market days in Harpurhey (North Manchester) and Gorton (East Manchester) aligns with sustaining and even growing footfall. In addition, the data reveals how the trialling of late night opening in Withington (South Manchester) contributed to a 30% increase in footfall compared to an average Friday, with local independent traders reporting record takings. Understanding how suburban centres function, therefore, is a vital step to avoid misalignment between action plans and subsequent investment decisions, and the actual requirements of specific centres.

At a strategic level, the data underscores Manchester City Council's objective to create a community hub in Harpurhey, a centre at the heart of a relatively deprived district. The co-location of a shopping precinct, traditional market, and large grocery store serves the retail needs of the community quite well. The area, however, benefitted from targeted investment and regeneration projects, creating new health, education, leisure and public services adjacent to the main shopping area. The accumulation of these activities and employment anchors in one place generates synergies between co-located activities, making Harpurhey, contrary to external perception, the busiest district centre in the city out of the ten we are monitoring. The transformation of Harpurhey into a multifunctional centre, demonstrates the successful application of a "community hub" in an area where private development is not forthcoming<sup>ix</sup>.

Lockdown, rather than rendering this work redundant, reinforces the need to extend and develop support for suburban centres. In this context, Manchester is now in a good position to make informed decisions post-COVID. A good example is that with the footfall counters still running, we were able to establish that footfall in the city's suburban and district centres fell by 53%, compared to the national figure of 84% (and as high as 90% in major city centres, like Manchester). Although still a significant drop, this figure resonates with reports from other local authorities, where local convenience stores are continuing to provide everyday needs, and have remained busy to serve both local communities and key workers. This does not just include national chains, but also smaller convenience and independent food traders. In Withington (South Manchester), for example, the independent greengrocers, bakery, and a store selling package free items all reported doing well during lockdown, with suggestions local residents who found empty shelves in the big supermarkets started using the local traders instead. Subsequently, this has enabled traders to respond proactively to lockdown, to self-organise and promote both home-delivery services and online sales for both food and non-food items, together with the consolidation of online social media branding to promote the local offer.

Whereas many major centres across the UK have footfall counters, other than the outer London boroughs, it is rare to find the systematic collection of data in suburban centres. The approach taken by Manchester to fund a network of counters, therefore, is highly innovative, generating hard evidence to support decision-making. In addition, the sharing of data locally in Withington, for example, has proved vital in consolidating and building capacity of local collaborative networks, indeed, directly leading to the formation of a new local traders association.

Manchester City Council and the IPM are continuing to work in partnership as part of an INTERREG project ABCitiEs, working with partnerships in four other European locations to exchange knowledge on how area-based collaborative enterprise can be more effectively facilitated within local and regional policy instruments. In current Regional Structural Programs, for example, the emphasis on innovation and access to funding, overshadows the importance of networked and locally anchored entrepreneurship for inclusive growth. By capturing the local learnings systematically, identifying critical success conditions and sharing these across regions in Europe, improvements in policies that

foster ABCE can be made. The project is now delivering important recommendations for improving the policy instruments in European regions, harnessing collective entrepreneurship as an effective means to improve SME competitiveness and place development.

### **B. What existing policies or policy ‘silences’ have the most significant impact on the suburbs?**

Existing national guidance to protect all centres from out-of-town retail – Town Centre First - clearly has not worked, having a detrimental impact on local centres, long before the additional impact of online shopping and COVID19. It is not surprising the decline of high streets provoked numerous responses from both within and outside of government, from The Portas Review, Future High Streets Forums 1 and 2, Grimsey 1 and 2, and latterly Sir John Timpson’s High Street report. Although these reports and reviews are welcomed, the plight of suburban centres remains neglected. This policy silence is perhaps not surprising, given the paucity of research on suburban centres<sup>x</sup>. Sitting near the bottom of the retail hierarchy, perhaps many decision-makers assume they are not important, or will simply sort themselves out.

A key challenge, however, is the review of the planning system, which came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020. The revisions helpfully provide for more flexible use-classes (for instance, office, restaurants and retail are now all under a new use class E). Renewed interest and support for local centres is an opportunity that should not be overlooked<sup>xviii</sup>, but the reforms also include changes such as the new permitted development right to demolish vacant commercial property and construct housing. Although we welcome local authorities to accommodate mixed-use/zonal planning and residential development, the potential loss of development control powers within local government now poses a threat of centres becoming lost to housing. We would suggest this presents a particular challenge for suburban centres, which face additional pressure to accommodate housing targets, where opportunities for greenbelt development is restricted.

Another challenge relates to how existing regional economic development and industrial strategies operate. For instance, although there is substantial policy support for SME development, this mainly targets high-tech start-ups and cultural industries, whereas traditional, low-tech SMEs remain unsupported. This is especially the case for retail, which receives practically no support, other than discretionary Business Rates subsidy. This brings into question the effectiveness of the existing business support infrastructure and its ability to support the capacity of traditional place-anchored small businesses to contribute to place-based change. Regional policy instruments such as the Local Industrial Strategy (LIS), led by Mayoral Combined Authorities or Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), might promote strategic alliances and co-ordination between government and the business sector, but are almost entirely lacking in relation to supporting place-anchored small-business networks, as we might find in suburban centres. There remains a concern, therefore, about a growing misalignment between (sub)regional strategy, and the needs of place.

LEPs, for example, should work with place partnerships to understand more about the place-specific needs of businesses and work with place partnerships to deliver business support. One key issue highlighted in the IPM’s ‘State-of-the-Art’ report on BIDs relates to the relationship between BIDs and Government at various spatial scales. At a national level, we would argue that BIDs are important organisations to national government, as they have the potential to transform the trading environment of town centres, industrial parks, districts and quarters, or rural areas, for the benefit of businesses, as well as those that live, work or visit these locations. BIDs are now an established and legitimate form of urban management and governance and could have a more significant role to

play in supporting, for example, the emphasis on place in the Government's Industrial Strategy. In the many locations where BIDs have a valuable role to play in place management, we recommend that national governments consider them, *alongside* local authorities.

Going forward, there is a need to review how Combined Authorities and LEPs are genuinely accommodating place-centric approaches, which acknowledge more blended forms of ownership and collaboration in local arrangements for economic development, and how existing regional instruments might better support emerging networked and locally anchored types of initiatives that promote inclusive growth, innovation and regeneration at a local scale. Given the types of agglomeration found in traditional high streets might include retail, leisure, commercial services, small producers and other place-based non-business anchors and stakeholders, the frailties exposed in the existing knowledge creates a particular challenge in terms of understanding the revitalisation of suburban and district centres. We would also recommend the strengthening of relationships between BIDs and Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs), which are currently weak; outside of the major cities, BIDs are rarely involved in LEPs. This is a serious omission as every BID represents a local network of hundreds of businesses, crucial to the achievement of current political ambitions, such as a modern industrial policy and stronger towns. Ensuring that BIDs are better integrated into wider economic development, regeneration and policy development (which would benefit from the BIDs' active and regular engagement with a large number of businesses) is, we would argue, an important priority.

### **C. What new policy reforms or new policy initiatives could be deployed to assist in the creation of suburbs which are thriving, sustainable and inclusive?**

Following a decade of austerity, and now facing the uncertainties of a post-Brexit/Pandemic future, many municipalities starved of investment are beginning to experiment with alternative models of local economic development, engaging think tanks such as Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), and the New Economics Foundation (NEF). In short, these ideas concern the extent to which agents of local change can shift the balance of their local economy from systems that extract value from local economies, to those that generate and circulate value within a locality. Notable is CLES' Preston Model<sup>xix</sup>, which ties the municipality's procurement strategy to local companies and worker co-operatives in an effort to reduce leakages from the local economy. Another key concept is the Foundational Economy<sup>xx</sup>, which challenges the prioritisation of business support for high-tech growth, and instead calls for greater focus on supporting the mundane production of everyday necessities, goods and services consumed by all (regardless of income and status) because they support everyday life. Hence, interest has been reignited in policies to support the strengthening of place based anchors through community ownership of land and property assets, social enterprise and cooperatives, cross sector partnerships between place based anchors or other embedded local stakeholders (local government, health institutions, universities, civic organisations), and ties with locally embedded SMEs committed to places.

In many European cities, local entrepreneurs are joining forces in new types of collective ventures, in order to pursue common interests: business development and a more attractive business environment. In such collectives, entrepreneurs engage in shared investments, collective branding of their suburban, district and neighbourhood centres, improving shared public space, etc. Local government is beginning to recognize the value of such collectives in terms of adding capacity to efforts to improve places, and is developing policy measures to facilitate them. This rising phenomenon of Area-Based Collaborative Enterprise (ABCE) is a possible solution to the challenges

caused by structural forces such as economic restructuring, globalization, socio-economic changes in labour markets, austerity, and the challenges of everyday place development. Shared action offers benefits in terms of job creation and competitiveness. Moreover, ABCE fosters local value capturing and regeneration since local collaborative enterprises are often strongly intertwined with their neighbourhood, and committed to social goals, such as strengthening neighbourhood liveability, or reinforcing social ties between local stakeholders. Fostering collaborative entrepreneurship can thus support inclusive growth, cooperation and cohesion.

Consequently, in Manchester, under the auspices of the ABCitiEs project, the City and the IPM are currently mapping out local capacity across the city's district and suburban centres, and together have established an Action Plan<sup>xi</sup>, which will over the next two years at a citywide level. Ultimately, the work with the IPM underpins [Manchester City Council's Local Plan](#) review, to accommodate new policy guidance, which will emphasise how the city can encourage businesses, service providers, community groups and other actors to work collaboratively to improve the vitality and viability of suburban and district centres. Under consideration, therefore, are measures such as supporting independent start-ups with tax breaks and support for LTAs to work more closely with other place-based groups and stakeholders. Manchester is also exploring additional funds to pay and train council officers who can build up local partnerships. Innovative recommendations for planning policy to support collaborative working in centres will be tested through consultation as part of this work and through the regional planning policy document the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework. In summary, the recommended policy guidance will consider the following:

- Policy should consider first the character and individual needs of each centre.
- Work should be undertaken to develop targeted and place specific interventions to build local collaboration.
- Work should be undertaken to increase local capacity to effect change in areas of the city where existing capacity is low.
- Efforts should be devoted to enhancing existing local collaborative networks, through training and guidance for council officers on place leadership and data analysis.
- Monitoring data on centre performance should be collected and shared with partners so that they can form evidence based actions.

Although many municipalities within the UK beginning to entertain the notion of place-based development, evident in the increasing number of Place Directors within local administration, there remains concern about a lack of capacity and knowledge in relation to what constitutes place-based development and place leadership. At worst, the shift to place-centric approaches may only signal a surface change, without any significant institutional or policy reform. The High Streets Task Force, however, is now providing guidance and training in areas such as place leadership. Its use of embedded experts, data and capacity building to seed good practice into places that are struggling is innovative and will make a difference that funding alone cannot achieve. In addition, the IPM as the professional body supporting the place management sector provides further training and education in place leadership. Place leaders, regardless of their spatial context, across public, private and voluntary sectors should be supported and encouraged to access this training, attain qualifications and regularly engage in continuing professional development.



## CONCLUSION

What is not under question from the above is the importance of suburban and district centres in planning policies and sustainable development. These centres need to steer away from mono-functional, retail-focus, to emerge as multi-functional ones, supporting leisure and recreation, employment, tourism, heritage, culture, housing, employment, education, health and wellbeing, as well as retail, thus becoming resilient to anticipated future economic changes. As such, there is a clear requirement for centres to adapt to ensure that they meet this challenge and for policy and decision-makers at a national and local level to give greater consideration of how they can support such transformation.

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<sup>i</sup> Sustrans (2016) *Reducing car use: What do people who live and drive in cities and towns think?* Available online: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/5501/final-reducing-car-use-report.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> High Streets Task Force (2020) *Review Of High Street Footfall July 2019 - June 2020*: Available online: <https://hstfprodwebsite.blob.core.windows.net//media/b5dnkp4z/hstf-footfall-report-2020-for-publication.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> RSA (2020) *Brits see cleaner air, stronger social bonds and changing food habits amid lockdown*. Available online: <https://www.thersa.org/press/releases/2019/brits-see-cleaner-air-stronger-social-bonds-and-changing-food-habits-amid-lockdown>

<sup>iv</sup> House of Commons (2019) *House of Commons: Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee: High Streets and Town Centres in 2030*: Available online: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1010/1010.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> House of Commons (2020) *House of Commons: Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee: Supporting our high streets after COVID-19*: Available online: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/446/supporting-our-high-streets-after-covid19/>

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<sup>ix</sup> Millington, S and Roberts, G and Steadman and Parker, C and Quin, S and Ntounis N (2020) *Vital and Viable Manchester District Centres* (Institute of Place Management, Manchester). Available online: <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=1ed925dc-9e95-464c-a3ff-9f77285f0067>

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<sup>xi</sup> Millington, S and Findley, K and Roberts, G (2020) *Area-Based Collaborative Entrepreneurship in Cities: Action Plan City of Manchester*. Project Report. INTERREG Europe. Available online: [https://www.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/tx\\_tevprojects/library/file\\_1601459299.pdf](https://www.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/tx_tevprojects/library/file_1601459299.pdf)

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