

Rebuilding the High Street with the politics of care

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An economy that removes agency from communities should not be surprised when people disengage from politics. That is why warnings that Labour risks electoral wipe-out unless it improves Britain's high streets, [to which I referred yesterday](#), really matter.

High streets are not simply commercial zones. They are where people experience whether they have any say in shaping the places they live. When they empty out, what disappears is not just shops, but presence, participation and a local voice.

The [government's answer is the Pride of Place scheme](#), which is allocating £5bn of spending across 330 local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland; even though this would appear to abuse the powers of the devolved governments in the last two countries. Let's be clear: that funding acknowledges that something has gone badly wrong. However, local business leaders are already saying that what is missing is not just money, but practical support, and the ability for communities, through their councils, to decide how local economic space is used, the absence of which exposes a number of issues which need to be addressed.

Firstly, the biggest obstacle to community agency on the high street is ownership. When property is held primarily for speculative gain, local people have little influence over whether spaces are used, left empty, or priced beyond local needs. Councils then become supplicants, negotiating with owners who have no stake in community wellbeing. Compulsory purchase orders could change that balance of power. They would allow communities, through democratic institutions, to recover control over places that structure everyday life. Without that, regeneration is always dependent on private permission, and that is never going to be supplied to regenerate our towns and cities in the way now required.

Secondly, public or community ownership would then make it possible to ask a different question, which is not "what is most profitable here?" but "what is most useful?" High-street units could become community centres, locations for advice services, micro-retailers offering affordable essentials, training providers, adult learning hubs,

and centres for charities working in circular economy models such as 'libraries of things' and repair projects. They could also host youth services and small start-ups that are rooted in local needs rather than external investment cycles. These are not marginal activities. They are how people build networks, skills and mutual support. Agency grows when people can act together in such visible, shared spaces, of which there is a decided shortage at present, whilst High Streets stand empty.

Thirdly, these spaces could provide routes into work that are connected to community life rather than detached from it. Paid training, apprenticeships and placements in retail, digital services, maintenance, logistics and community enterprise would allow young people to contribute to, and benefit from, the places they live. Skills matter, but so does belonging. Employment that strengthens local institutions builds both income and attachment, reducing the sense that opportunity only exists elsewhere and the need for a person to leave their locality to find opportunity.

This is why the politics of care cannot be reduced to spending on services after harm has occurred. Care, in economic terms, is about whether people have the means to participate in shaping their futures. When communities lose control over property, training, employment and services, they are turned into passive recipients of policy rather than active agents within it. The consequences are being seen now in our High Street.

What follows is that regeneration cannot be delivered as a centrally managed programme of improvements. It must be built around local decision-making, long-term planning and shared ownership of outcomes. Competitive bidding for short-term funds does not build agency. It encourages councils to chase projects rather than develop coherent local strategies.

There is also a democratic dimension that should not be ignored. When people feel that decisions about their towns are made elsewhere, whether by distant investors, national chains or remote departments, trust in politics erodes, participation declines, and cynicism grows. High Streets then become the physical evidence of political exclusion.

If Labour fails to rise to appropriately this challenge, it will not be because communities are asking for too much. It will be because they will have been unwilling to shift power as well as money. Pride of Place could be an opportunity to do exactly that and to give councils and communities the tools to shape local economic life rather than merely react to its decline. Regeneration, in this sense, is not about restoring consumption. It is about restoring agency, dignity and collective capacity. Without those, no amount of funding will rebuild trust, participation or long-term prosperity.

This article has been co-authored with James Murphy, who worked in local authority

planning before joining Funding the Future. He also volunteered with a community charity running a 'Library of Things' whilst at the University of Leeds.