

**BUILDING
COMMUNITY
POWER**
Co-operative Party Conference 2021

HIGH STREETS

Annual Conference 2021

Policy Paper



**co-operative
party**



STORE
CLOSING

Introduction



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Policy Officer

The Co-operative Party's policy is member-led, and builds on the ideas, priorities and lived experiences of our members, movement and communities. Local parties and individual members have taken part in the consultation and contributed their ideas and priorities for Britain's high streets and town centres.

These were all read and discussed by the policy sub-committee of the NEC. Despite the Covid-19 crisis continuing to put a pause on our in-person activities, members have organised discussions online, and the Party centrally and in each region and nation hosted a number of Zoom events on the policy consultation topics with expert guest speakers to enable members from anywhere in the country to engage with the issues.

High streets should be the beating heart of our community. They should be the place we do our weekly shop, pick up prescriptions or grab a coffee. They form the backdrop to our social life, the stage for our community action and the centrepiece of our civic pride.

However, many high streets are struggling. Even before Covid-19, town centres faced many challenges. The past months of lockdowns, uncertainty, reduced footfall and new safety requirements, as well as a financial crash that has squeezed consumer spending, has accelerated this trend. In 2020, British high streets lost more than 17,500 chain store outlets – an average of almost 50 a day.

Shuttered shops are not a new problem – so the solution cannot be a return to the status quo. To unlock the potential of our high streets we cannot simply tinker around the edges. Instead, we need to be radical, putting communities in the driving seat not to save their high streets but to change them completely for the better. ●

Existing Policy

There was broad support for the Party's existing policy in this area, including:

- High street retailers are significantly impacted by online retailers who are able to provide the same products for less because of not having to pay rents or business rates. The tax system has not kept up with changes to consumer habits - the tax take should reflect the location of the customer in the territory in which large values of sales are generated. This could take the form of an online sales or transaction tax, or VAT could differentiate between in-store and online sales to create a more level playing field between online and bricks-and-mortar business.
- The glue that holds the high street together, from post offices to pubs, is too often at risk of closure. While the Localism Act contains important powers for local communities to play a key role to play in the preservation and delivery of local assets and services outside of local authority control, it needs to be strengthened.
- Business rates should be scrapped in favour of a more progressive, much fairer form of business taxation including a land value tax. Until this happens, the tax should urgently be reduced and reformed. High street retailers should not be penalised for offering services to the community such as a free ATM, for example.
- High streets, shopping centres and town centres should be a safe place for communities and retail workers alike. However, there is rising concern about abuse, threats and violence against retail workers as the rate of reported violence with injury has doubled in the last year. The Government should invest in the police to ensure all reports of retail crime are properly investigated and a strong case is made for prosecution. There should be a single, clearly defined offence in law for violence against shopworkers.
- Cash machines around the UK are closing at a rate of 300 a month, and there are over 3,000 communities in Britain that no longer have a single bank branch, especially in smaller towns. These are vital not just for consumers, particularly those who can't or don't want to bank online, but also for SMEs who rely on local branches to manage their business banking.
- To ensure branches are not replaced by phone and internet banking only, new Access to Banking Standard should be introduced to protect the continued existence of the "last bank in town", supervised by the Financial Conduct Authority and penalised when banks fail to uphold that standard, with the funds from any fines spent on financial inclusion and development of credit unions. A review of ATM charges should take place, with a view to reforming them or abolishing charges altogether. ●



New Policy

Statement one: Transparency

Opaque ownership of land and buildings in town centres makes it incredibly difficult for communities to lead local regeneration or shape the character of their town. High rents and profit-seeking absentee landlords mean too often local residents are forced to choose between yet another betting shop they don't want or an unsightly empty unit.

Furthermore, research shows that one fifth of shops are owned by overseas investors. European and other international banks, global real estate investment trusts, other investment funds and wealthy private individuals make up the vast majority of overseas owners of UK shops. Distant disjointed ownership makes it difficult to develop bottom-up, accountable town centre plans – and crucially, the people with the power to shape our high streets are the not people who live there, shop locally, work in retail, enjoy spending time there or rely on its services.

Communities and councils need to know: who owns our high street. Without this, it's impossible for communities and councils to hold landlords and investors to account, or work with them to lead change.

- There should be a publicly available register of ownership, based on Land Registry data, together with a wider rollout of a public beneficial ownership register of all property to identify overseas owners. This was promised by the Government in 2016 but despite being mentioned in the December 2019 Queen's Speech, the Government has not yet announced when it plans to bring forward legislation to implement such a register. As Covid-19 causes the number of vacancies to go up, the appropriate legislation should be brought forward urgently.

Local Parties who supported this (or similar) policy:

- Central England Eastern & Southern Co-operative Party

“INNOVATIVE USE CAN BE MADE OF EMPTY SHOPS, EITHER BY CONVERTING TO DECENT HOUSING OR BY ENCOURAGING COMMUNITY ENTERPRISES, AS HAPPENED IN THE MIDSTEEPLE QUARTER OF DUMFRIES. HOWEVER, IT IS FIRST NECESSARY TO FIND OUT THE OWNERSHIP OF THESE SHOPS, WHICH CAN BE AN ARDUOUS PROCESS, AS LANDLORDS ARE OFTEN HAPPY TO SIT ON EMPTY PROPERTY IF IT IS UNPROFITABLE TO SELL THEM.”

CENTRAL ENGLAND EASTERN & SOUTHERN CO-OPERATIVE PARTY

Statement two: Community power and ownership

High streets are at a critical juncture – their challenges accentuated by Covid-19 lockdowns and uncertainty. It is important that as we rebuild our economy, high streets are at the heart of future local economic development – and in particular that we seek to reimagine our high streets rather than simply rebuilding the status quo.

For too long, this retail-dominated model of our high streets has been driven by property owners and landlords that have never set foot on the high streets over which they have so much influence. This needs to change, if we are to build stable, sustainable high streets fit for the future.

And when communities take control and ownership of their high streets instead, extraordinary things happen.

- The current Right to Bid is weak in terms of supporting community ownership. Recent analysis for Power to Change shows that under the current regime of registering Assets of Community Value (ACV), only 15 out of every 1,000 ACVs ends up in community ownership. Instead, communities should get a powerful new 'Community Right to Buy' as exists in Scotland, so that communities themselves can more easily purchase neglected high street properties, and force the sale of these where they have remained empty or underused for a period of time.
- Compulsory Purchase Powers are usually a last resort measure – but the case for municipal and community roles on the high street is clear and CPOs are a tool which could be used more proactively to secure long-term assets in town centres. The UK should learn from Wales where compulsory purchase powers for local authorities have been strengthened.
- Community asset transfer of local authority buildings into community hands can enable local people to bring new life to the high street. Councils should be supported and incentivised to use community asset transfer powers to give more communities a greater stake in the development of the high street, accompanied by the appropriate support and funds.
- Local authorities should have a new duty to connect community business with vacant properties, including support during negotiations. The current Open Doors pilot linking charities with empty shops is a step in the right direction but should be expanded and given a statutory footing at a local level to ensure activity is sustained.

Local Parties who supported this (or similar) policy:

- Chelmsford Star
- East Lancashire
- Oxfordshire
- Central England Eastern & Southern Co-operative Party
- Kettering and Wellingborough
- Derby, Burton and South Derbyshire
- Bath & West
- Tyneside
- North Wales
- Tees Valley

“RE-IMAGINE OUR HIGH STREETS AS TRUE COMMUNITY SPACES, WHERE UNITS ARE FILLED WITH SERVICES THAT MEET THE NEEDS OF THEIR TOWN, OWNED BY THE PEOPLE WHO USE THEM”

TYNESIDE

Case studies

Nudge Community Builders have been working to renovate and bring back into use empty shops on Union Street in Plymouth. They brought a former pub, the Clipper, back to life as a cafe, market, radio station and music hub. The success of the Clipper helped them take over more empty buildings - the Plot has been opening up since Covid as a space for local businesses and start-ups and are hard at work renovating the Millenium building - a former dance hall, roller disco and even nightclub.

Monkey Park is a social enterprise owned by the local community and working to support local residents to take ownership of and improve their local area. As well as a community cafe, they is a bicycle workshop, space for local businesses to showcase their products, a bakery, a co-working space, and a place where people come together to discuss ways to improve Brampton.

Cafe Independent is a co-operative cafe, music venue and social project on Scunthorpe's high street. It gives young people work experience, training and youth work support, as well as serving as a springboard for community development on their high street.

The Baltic Triangle Area CIC in Liverpool started life in 2010 with the aim of stopping the displacement of creative and digital businesses by developers and market forces. They were able to secure a £4.5 million grant to purchase and refurbish 18 warehouses in a semi-derelict area of Liverpool. After refurbishing them, they opened their doors to Liverpool's best and brightest, creating a thriving and innovative district for the city.

Statement three: Funding high street transformation

The Co-operative Party believes that decisions are best made by those closest to them, and that we can only truly rebalance our economy when we put communities in the driving seat. Levelling up cannot become a byword for a Whitehall power grab, pitting local communities against each other rather than supporting them to transform their towns from the bottom-up.

- All future economic development funding should commit to ringfencing at least 25% for community-led partnerships and projects. Too often, funding is top-down and has very little community involvement – but people who use and understand their neighbourhood are best placed to improve it and should have a stake and say in any changes. Community owned business is more resilient and responsive to local need, and can be a driver for job creation and wider high street regeneration in a way that private business cannot. Direct funding ringfences for community-led initiatives is a route to directly investing in neighbourhoods.
- The Government has launched a number of funds under the banner of “levelling up” – the Levelling Up Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Towns Fund in England and other national funding pots. However, while all these funds are, on the face of it, about rebalancing our economy and political system, they all have Westminster control at their very heart. This needs to change, so that these funds and future funds are devolved.
- The Government's Community Ownership Fund, while welcome, is a drop in the ocean of what is needed to plug the gap left by the end of the Community Pub Business Support Programme and funding gaps that existing community businesses hit hard by Covid face. £150 million will only offer hope to a few hundred – for this funding to be genuinely transformative, the fund needs to be significantly larger – Power to Change for example called for a community buyout fund to start at £250 million.
- Councils should make greater use of the borrowing capacity that they have through the Public Works Loan Board to support well-established community businesses in their local area to grow and take on more responsibility for local economic development. This has been done successfully in places like Plymouth, Hull and Leeds.

“BIDDING FOR MONEY FOR TOWNS – IS A LOTTERY. IT IS ALSO ONE OFF AND DOESN'T PUT THE SUPPORT AROUND PROJECTS – LIKE STAFF, AND OTHER REVENUE COSTS. TURNS COMMUNITIES AGAINST EACH OTHER, FOR EXAMPLE LOCALLY THE LEVELLING UP FUND SURVEY BY THE TORY MP HAS PITCHED TOWNS AND VILLAGES AGAINST EACH OTHER. WITH ONE TOWN SKEWING THE SURVEY TO THE DETRIMENT OF THE OTHERS”

ROTHERHAM

Local Parties who supported this (or similar) policy:

- East Lancs
- Kettering and Wellingborough
- Derby, Burton and South Derbyshire
- Rotherham
- Tyneside

Statement four: Town centre community homes and workspaces

The way we shop is changing, and so an empty retail unit doesn't need to be filled with another shop. A town centre can be a place we live and work – not just a location to shop.

The Government has eased planning rules to make it easier to convert buildings into flats. However, these homes are too often not fit for purpose, or converted by profit maximising developers who care more about their bottom line than they do creating a vibrant and diverse town centre.

However, a different approach to housing in the town centre can deliver mixed communities, enable people who might otherwise struggle to visit a town centre to live within a stone's throw, keep wealth in the local community and support retail workers and others to remain in the neighbourhoods in which they work without being priced out.

Similarly, high streets can be a place to work – affordable co-operative workspace may support those who plan to continue flexible working arrangements post-lockdown as well as nurturing new start-ups and self-employed people.

Both housing and workspace bring people to town centres, increasing footfall and demand for local retail offers as well as helping to prevent antisocial behaviour.

- The Government's expansion to permitted development rights should be reversed, and instead have to go through proper local scrutiny and engagement. Where planned development takes place within defined town centres, developers should have to demonstrate wider community engagement in designing the plans and how the change of use will benefit the wider community. Local Plans should define a cap on the number of retail units that could be converted to homes, as well as the kind of homes that would benefit the area – e.g. older people's accommodation. Current permitted development rights mean developers avoid contributing to s106, affordable housing quotas or minimum space standards – these exemptions on permitted development should be removed.
- The Government's new Right to Regenerate is another cover for the sell-off of public property. Under the guise of community empowerment, this potential new power leaves private property developers and landbankers alone, focusing solely on public land without any criteria established for community benefit. With the UK's biggest house builders sitting on 600,000 plots of land, which are unused despite having planning permission, and far more vacancies in privately owned retail space than publicly owned, the focus must shift from public land to private with genuine community benefit and ownership baked in from the start.

“THERE ARE ACCESSIBILITY STANDARDS FOR BUILDINGS, BUT THEY ONLY COVER CHANGE OF USE. TENANCIES CAN CHANGE FREQUENTLY WITHOUT THE STANDARDS EVER COMING INTO FORCE, AND BUILDINGS REMAIN INACCESSIBLE FOR DISABLED PEOPLE.”

(DIS)ABILITY NETWORK

- The Party’s policy of a “Right to Designate” when public land is being disposed of, similar to the mechanism for designating an asset of community value, should be expanded to cover privately owned commercial and retail property. This would ensure that land is specified in planning frameworks as being for community-led or co-operative housing, and would give communities a first right to bid when property is sold.
- While creating a co-working space has relatively low barriers to entry, the social and physical infrastructure needed to make it a success are less straightforward. Town centres should be a priority in the rollout of superfast broadband and local plans should include affordable co-working and childcare spaces to support flexible working. Co-operative and community-owned models should be supported and promoted.

Local Parties who supported this (or similar) policy:

- Chelmsford Star
- East Lancs
- Dartford & District
- Oxfordshire
- South Hams, Teignbridge and Torbay Branch
- Broxbourne & East Herts
- Derby, Burton and South Derbyshire
- Chorley and West Lancashire Co-operative Party Branch
- (dis)Ability Network
- North Wales

Case Studies:

Leiston Community Land Trust is working with local communities, businesses and other partners to bring about positive change in their town centre. Like most CLTs, they are developing local housing for local people, ensuring people who feel priced out can continue living in Leiston - but they are also working to support local retailers. They are encouraging retailers to fill the gaps on the high street and trying to get other community services to move to the town centre too such as the library, council offices and Citizens Advice services.

The Midsteeple Quarter in Dumfries is a community benefit society breathing new life into their town centre by creating a new neighbourhood with a mix of uses. As well as buying up empty retail premises through community share offers, they are focusing on creative industries workspace and affordable town centre accommodation.

Indycube is a shared workspace and co-working community. Because they’re a co-operative, members don’t just get access to desk space - they get an equal say in how the organisation is run and share a stake in its success. Indycube has coworking spaces in town centres across Wales as well as some locations in England.

Statement five: Community influence

Communities need to play a central role in shaping local priorities around the high street because they know best what their place needs, have a long-term interest in the future of the place and are critical players in changing how high streets are used.

“OVERALL, THERE NEEDS TO BE A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF THE PLACES WE LIVE IN, FROM A HAMLET TO A MEGA CITY. SEVERAL KEY MECHANISMS CAN BE PUT IN PLACE INCLUDING ACTIVE DEMOCRACY, AND CITIZENS HAVING A ROLE TO PLAY IN THEIR COMMUNITY. THAT COMMUNITY CAN BE DEFINED BY THEM AND NOT OTHERS FROM THE OUTSIDE.”

- Community Improvement Districts have shown in places like Possilpark that they are an important way to reconnect communities with the levers that drive economic development in town centres and create an equal partnership of business and community organisations to galvanise action at a local level. Community influence in local decision-making should be enabled through the creation of Community Improvement Districts, or introducing community representatives into the governance of existing BIDs.
- All local economic regeneration funding from government should require bidders to demonstrate effective partnership with the local community and how future governance of projects, if successful in securing funding, will include community organisations.

Local Parties who supported this (or similar) policy:

- Oxfordshire
- South Hams, Teignbridge and Torbay Branch
- Kettering and Wellinborough
- Derby, Burton and South Derbyshire
- Bath & West

Case Studies:

Flo's Oxford is a community owned hub for people to meet, work, play, create, learn, eat and connect. Flo's helps to reconnect communities with the places they spend time, and are also an enterprise support hub helping social enterprises to start up, grow and succeed.

Statement six: liveable neighbourhoods

Town centres are not just a place to shop – they can bring people together for art, music, sport and civic engagement. This means they need to be accessible to all, and a place to spend time even if you don't want to spend money.

Liveability isn't just about access – it is also about safety, health and amenities. From public toilets to good public transport and a focus on tackling antisocial behaviour, this all contributes to making town centres a better place to spend time for everyone. In particular, this year has brought the issue of women's safety in our public places to the fore, and ensuring women are and feel safe on high streets is critical.

The Co-operative Party has ambitious climate change policy, and town centres need to play their part. Reducing traffic improves air quality as well as increasing footfall and opening opportunities for markets, cafés and events outdoors.

- There should be a minimum town centre accessibility standard – incorporating planning policy, urban design and regular engagement with disabled people and local businesses. These standards would be incomplete without the inclusion of accessible public toilets. Any change to a tenancy should require the landlord to make the building meet the minimum requirements on accessibility, while licensing requirements must be changed nationally to enable councils to require premises to made accessible in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 before they can trade.
- Cognisant of our climate crisis and the urgency with which we must address it, low traffic town centres help neighbourhoods play their part – supported by good public transport links, disabled access and greening projects.
- Support should be given to co-operatives and communities with innovative solutions to help reduce carbon – for example, co-operative bike or electric vehicle deliveries could help local shops to deliver their goods to the community for those who want the convenience of shopping online but worry about the carbon impact of delivery vans, and who want to support local business.

Local Parties who supported this (or similar) policy:

- Oxfordshire
- Central England Eastern & Southern Co-operative Party
- Kettering and Wellingborough
- Islington
- Derby, Burton and South Derbyshire
- Chorley and West Lancashire Co-operative Party Branch
- (dis)Ability Network
- Tyneside
- Tees Valley

“THIS WILL HAVE TO TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY SO WE NEED TO INTRODUCE A SERIES OF GREEN INITIATIVES. FOR EXAMPLE, WE NEED TO INTRODUCE A SERIES OF CHARGING POINTS FOR ELECTRIC VEHICLES AND MORE CYCLE LANES. THE SHOPS, WHERE POSSIBLE SHOULD HAVE SOLAR PANELS, AND BETTER INSULATION.”

NORTH WALES

Case study:

The Peloton Liverpool Co-operative is a local community initiative dedicated to promoting safe, accessible bike use in their city. As well as helping individuals access and use bikes, they support last-mile and B2B deliveries and help local businesses use cargo bikes.

This cycle-based delivery system offers businesses a quick, cheap and convenient delivery service, keeps customers shopping local rather than using large online retailers, and helps to remove vans from congested roads. It helps the local high street as well as playing its part in tackling global warming.



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