

Research Briefing

16 May 2024

By Matthew Ward

# High Streets (Designation, Review and Improvement Plan) Bill



## Summary

- 1 Background
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- 3 Progress of the Bill (Commons)

Number

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## Summary

The [High Streets \(Designation, Review and Improvement Plan\) Bill](#), bill 25 of the 2023-24 session, was introduced to Parliament by Conservative MP Jack Brereton on 6 December 2023 as a Private Members' Bill, presented to Parliament through the ballot procedure. The Government is supporting the Bill.

The Bill's second reading in the Commons was on [Friday 26 January 2024](#) and its committee stage was on [Wednesday 13 March 2024](#).

[Remaining stages of the Bill](#) in the House of Commons took place on 26 April 2024, where Bill was passed unamended. Second reading of the Bill in the House of Lords is scheduled for [17 May 2024](#).

[Explanatory Notes for the Bill](#) have been published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

### What does the Bill do?

The Bill would require local authorities in England to designate streets as high streets, either a single high street, or a network of high streets.

Local authorities would be required to publish an improvement plan setting out proposals for the preservation and enhancement of designated high streets. Local authorities would be required to review these plans every five years and to consider them when exercising planning functions.

[Analysis undertaken by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities](#) on the anticipated financial implications of the Bill states that projected public expenditure resulting from the Bill's proposals would be no greater than £26 million every five years. The government have committed to funding the cost of up to three designations per local authority.

The Bill applies to England only.

### Issues facing high streets

UK high streets and town centres have faced many problems in recent years, many of which can be linked to the changing face of the retail industry, though it is also important to remember retail shops are only one component of high streets. [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) data](#) indicates that in March 2020, around one third of addresses on British high streets were retail shops, while over half were residential, 10% were offices and 2-3% were leisure or community facilities.

The [Centre for Retail Research](#) has described the British retail industry as facing a “permacrisis” since the 2008 financial crisis, as a result of factors such as the rise of internet retailing, changes in consumer preferences, and store closures and other changes on the high street, many of which have been accelerated by the Coronavirus pandemic.

## High street policy and funding for high streets

Government policy to support high streets is set out in the strategy for high street regeneration [Build Back Better High Streets](#), published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in July 2021.

Challenges faced by high street retailers and associated problems of town centres have seen the creation of several initiatives and funding schemes designed to help high streets and town centres redevelop and adapt to a new era when traditional retail may no longer be the focal point of town centres. These include the Future High Streets Fund, High Street Heritage Action Zones, the Long Term Plan for Towns and High Street Accelerators, as well as the creation of the [High Streets Task Force](#), an organisation composed of high street experts providing tailored guidance, support and resources to local authorities on high street issues.

## Reactions

The bill has received support from Members across the House and from the Government, though has been [criticised by the Local Government Association](#) (LGA) as being “an unnecessary bill” and “a distraction from what councils really need to protect and enhance the future of their high streets.”

# 1 Background

## 1.1 Overview

The [High Streets \(Designation, Review and Improvement Plan\) Bill](#), bill 25 of the 2023-24 session, was introduced to Parliament by Conservative MP Jack Brereton on 6 December 2023 as a Private Members' Bill, presented to Parliament through the ballot procedure. The Government is supporting the Bill.

The Bill would require local authorities in England to designate a street or a network of streets in their area as high streets, and to then develop and publish an improvement plan for those high streets. Improvement plans should detail plans for the preservation and enhancement of designated high streets.

Local authorities would be required to update these improvement plans at least once every five years. The government have stated they will issue guidance on the development of high street improvement plans “once the Bill has received Royal Assent.”<sup>1</sup>

Jack Brereton has described the purpose of the Bill as:

...to place a duty on local government to pause to consider properly what can be done, and to develop an action plan that can be delivered and that will work toward getting our high streets back on track.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Issues facing high streets

UK high streets and town centres have faced many problems in recent years, many of which can be linked to the changing face of the retail industry, though it is also important to remember retail shops are only one component of high streets. While the Office for National Statistics define a high street as “a named street predominately consisting of retailing, defined by a cluster of 15 or more retail addresses within 150 metres”, ONS data indicates that in March 2020, around one third of addresses on British high streets were retail shops,

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<sup>1</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 552](#)

<sup>2</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 529](#)

while over half were residential, 10% were offices and 2-3% were leisure or community facilities.<sup>3</sup>

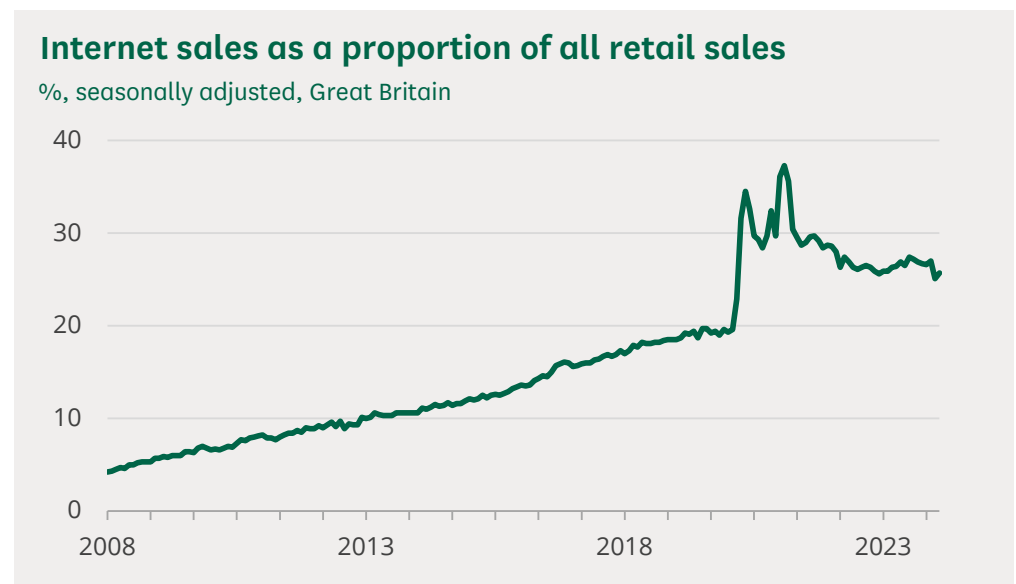
The Centre for Retail Research, an independent retail research organisation, has described the British retail industry as facing a “permacrisis” since the 2008 financial crisis, as a result of factors such as the rise of internet retailing, changes in consumer preferences, and store closures and other changes on the high street, many of which have been accelerated by the Coronavirus pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

## Shopping online

It is argued that increased shopping online has been detrimental to high streets and physical retailing, through curbing potential sales of many previously-viable high street stores.<sup>5</sup>

Online retail sales have increased from around 5% of all retail sales in 2008 (the earliest ONS data available) to around 20% in 2019, increasing to 28% in 2020, 31% in 2021, before falling to 27% in 2022.

The proportion of all retail sales happening online increased significantly in March 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, shown in the chart below. These figures include all online retail sales, including for retailers with physical stores, such as online supermarket orders. Internet sales were slightly below 20% of all retail sales pre-pandemic, and reached a record high of 37% in February 2021. Internet sales as a proportion of all retail sales have generally fallen since February 2021, though have remained above pre-pandemic levels.



Source: ONS, series [MS6Y](#)

<sup>3</sup> ONS, [High streets in Great Britain: March, 2020, 10 August 2020](#)

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [The Crisis in Retailing: Closures and Job Losses](#)

<sup>5</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [The Crisis in Retailing: Closures and Job Losses](#)



Despite the growth in online retailing, some have argued that this is less correlated to the health of high streets than other, local factors.

A 2023 report published by the Centre for Cities argues that the growth of online retailing is not necessarily correlated with the declining fortunes of the high street and physical shops, stating “the strength of the high street” is more closely linked to other, local factors, such as “levels of disposable income and the strength of the local labour market.”<sup>6</sup>

The article points to large numbers of empty shops in cities like Newport and Stoke, despite lower prevalence of online shopping in these cities, though points out that specific types of high street shops, such as clothing retailers, are especially vulnerable to the rise of online shopping.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, a Centre for Retail Research article states that, in general, deprived towns “will have an unhealthy high street.” The article argues that updating high streets in deprived towns through “better design and redevelopment” may help, though such changes will “probably not be sufficient to revitalise a moribund town centre”, which requires “work, jobs, offices, universities and colleges.”<sup>8</sup>

## Shop closures

Prior to the pandemic and cost of living crisis, the UK retail sector was already experiencing challenges from store closures, after a decade of “permacrisis” following the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>9</sup>

The Centre for Retail Research summarised the challenges in the retail sector leading to store closures as follows:

- “Rapid debt-fuelled expansion” of shops in the 2000s, which pushed town and city centre rents to “astronomical levels.”
- Low profitability caused by high costs, slow growth in sales and squeezed profit margins.
- Lack of preparation and low investment in stores and weak forward planning to meet the challenges of the new retailing.<sup>10</sup>

These longer-term trends have been exacerbated by the pandemic and cost of living crisis. The Centre for Retail Research have stated that post pandemic, consumers have “got out of the habit of high-street shopping or

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<sup>6</sup> Valentine Quinio, [Three years on from lockdown: has the pandemic changed the way we shop?](#) Centre for Cities, 23 March 2023

<sup>7</sup> Valentine Quinio, [Three years on from lockdown: has the pandemic changed the way we shop?](#) Centre for Cities, 23 March 2023

<sup>8</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [What Happens to the High Street?](#)

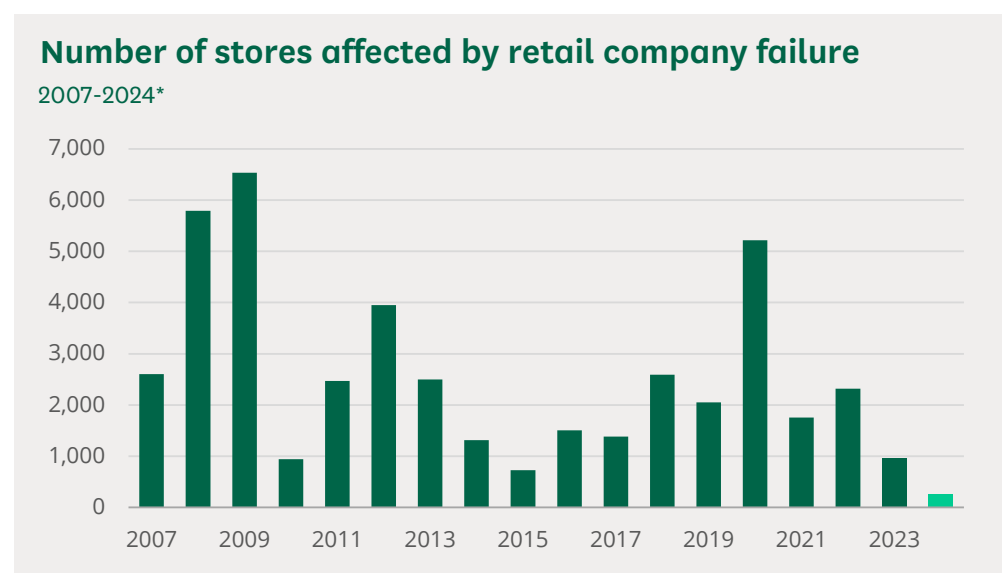
<sup>9</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [The Crisis in Retailing: Closures and Job Losses](#)

<sup>10</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [List of Major Retail Failures 2008 to end-2019](#)

even visiting a store”, such that in 2023, “customer footfall was 10% lower than in 2019, and in major cities even less.”<sup>11</sup>

Data from the Centre for Retail Research indicates there were notably high levels of store closures in 2008 and 2009, following the financial crisis, and again in 2020, following the coronavirus pandemic, describing 2020 as “probably the worst year for retailers for 25 years.”<sup>12</sup> The number of store closures slowed significantly in 2021, before increasing again in 2022, with the number of store closures increasing by 31% between 2021 and 2022, partly a result of the sharp increase in consumer prices.<sup>13</sup> The number of store closures in 2023 was 971, the lowest number of store closures since 2015, though this was a result of 62 businesses failing, the highest number since the Centre for Retail Research began collating this data in 2007.

For more information on trends in high street store closures, see the Library briefing [Retail Sector in the UK](#).



\* Data for 2024 is up to end of March 2024

Source: Centre for Retail Research, [Who's Gone Bust in UK Retailing in 2007-2024?](#)

## Empty shops

The Local Data Company (LDC, a retail and leisure data company) collects information on retail and leisure businesses in town centres in Great Britain.

Data from the LDC indicates that the rate of vacant retail and leisure units increased steadily in 2020 and 2021, as the effects of the pandemic became manifest, from 12.2% in Q1 2020 to a high of 14.5% in Q2 and Q3 2021. While

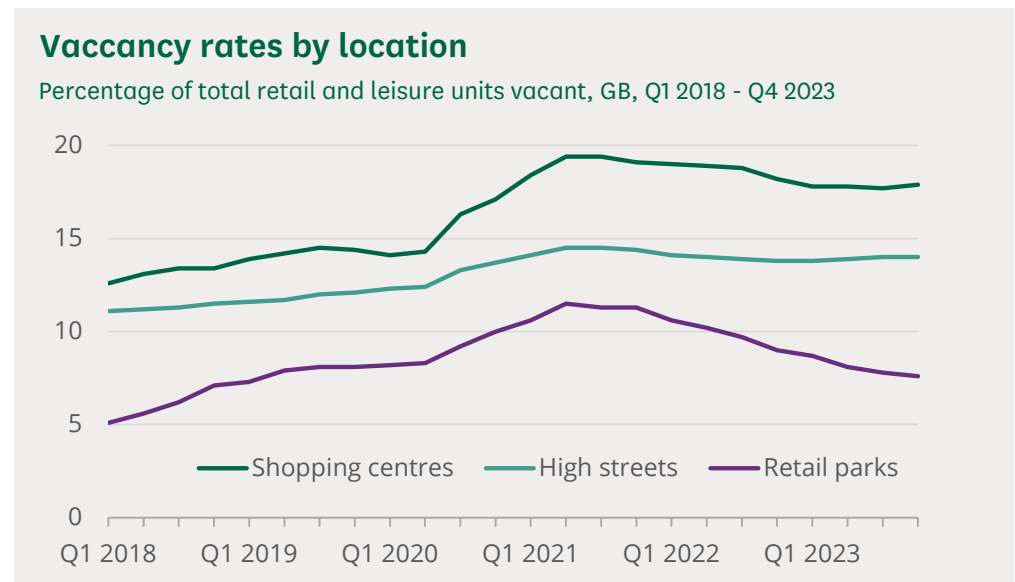
<sup>11</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [The Crisis in Retailing: Closures and Job Losses](#)

<sup>12</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [The Crisis in Retailing: Closures and Job Losses](#)

<sup>13</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [Who's Gone Bust in UK Retailing in 2007-2024?](#)

vacancy rates fell in five successive quarters following Q3 2021, they remain above pre-pandemic levels.

Vacancy rates vary considerably depending on the type of retail location--vacancy rates on high streets are generally close to the national average, while vacancies in shopping centres are generally much higher and vacancies in retail parks are much lower. In October-December (Q4) 2023, 14.0% of high street retail and leisure stores were vacant, compared to 7.6% of stores in retail parks and 17.9% in shopping centres.



Source: [Local Data Company](#)

Retail parks were most resilient to store closures during the pandemic, with vacancy rates now below pre-pandemic levels. The ongoing resilience of retail parks has been attributed advantages they hold over high street locations, such as accessibility by car, hosting both a diverse range of retailers and a high proportion of retailers classed as essential during the pandemic and playing a “fundamental role in many retailers’ click and collect supply chains.”<sup>14</sup>

The continued move to provision of services online by banks, betting shops and estate agents has had a particular impact on high street vacancy rates. Online provision has meant these businesses have reduced their number of physical locations, which has a knock-on effect for other types of business, as consumers have fewer reasons to visit high streets.<sup>15</sup>

## Shifts in retail locations and consumer expectations

The extent of shop closures and the type of stores that have closed, has also led to high streets and town centres having a lack of identity and a defined appeal to shoppers.

<sup>14</sup> Deloitte, [What next for the high street? Part one: The way things are now](#), January 2021, pg. 4

<sup>15</sup> PwC, [Plenty of positives but a need for caution: Store openings and closures H1 2023](#)

Supermarkets began to shift operations from town and city centres in the 1960s and 1970s to out of town locations, to take advantage of lower rents and greater accessibility by car. The Centre for Retail research has said this led to these vacant sites being taken over by “growing multiple chain stores”, though the failure of many of these well-established, brand name, retailers over the last ten years has “reduced the attractions of the high street.” This is particularly true of department stores and fashion retailers, which had previously acted as “magnets for the high street.”<sup>16</sup>

The British Retail Consortium, the trade body for the retail industry, have argued that post-pandemic, retailers have to “react to a fundamental shift in attitudes towards consumerism.”<sup>17</sup>

High streets have as a result seen a change of use from premises that specialised in retailing goods to shops that provide experiences and services that cannot be sourced online (such as stylists, repairs, cafes) rather than simply browsing space.<sup>18</sup> The Local Data Company reports that in the first half of 2023, the UK saw net gains in the number of barber shops, nail salons and beauty salons, compared to an overall net loss of 4,000 retail units.<sup>19</sup>

The Centre for Cities have predicted successful high streets of the future, in addition to shopping, will have to offer “what we cannot find at home or online, by moving away from over reliance on retail towards the ‘experience’ leisure economy.”<sup>20</sup>

## 1.3

# High street policy and funding for high streets

## Government Strategy for high street regeneration

Government policy to support high streets is set out in the strategy for high street regeneration [Build Back Better High Streets](#), published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in July 2021.

Challenges faced by high street retailers and associated problems of town centres have seen the creation of several initiatives and funding schemes designed to help high streets and town centres redevelop and adapt to a new era when traditional retail may no longer be the focal point of town centres – some of these funding schemes are described in more detail below.

In addition to funding schemes, the Strategy also outlines policies to repurpose and find occupants for empty high street buildings, create “safer and cleaner” high street spaces and to help celebrate pride in local

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<sup>16</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [What Happens to the High Street?](#)

<sup>17</sup> Faye McConnell, [The High street is not dead, it just needs a new purpose](#), British Retail Consortium, 20 October 2022

<sup>18</sup> Centre for Retail Research, [Store of the Future](#)

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Ellson, Barber shops boom as vanity drives rise in male grooming, The Times, 24 October 2023

<sup>20</sup> Centre for Cities, [High streets recovery tracker](#), 1 May 2022

communities. It also brings together measures from a range of policy areas relevant to high streets, including for example planning reform – the Library briefing, [Planning in England: Permitted development and change of use](#) discusses these reforms in more detail – and business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses.<sup>21</sup>

The Levelling Up Housing and Communities Committee in its report, [Supporting our high streets after Covid-19](#) (10 December 2021), welcomed many aspects of the strategy, such as the Government’s commitments to continue flexibilities introduced during the pandemic, such as changes to pavement licencing rules for outdoor hospitality. However, the Committee thought that some aspects of the strategy would “thwart the development of holistic, comprehensive strategies” for high streets. In particular, the Committee was concerned about the “absence of a plan for ensuring local authorities have the capacity to develop effective place partnerships and place leadership”, the competitive nature of town centre funding streams and about extended permitted development rights.<sup>22</sup>

The Committee’s recommendations included a number of principles that successful high street strategies should consider, noting that successful strategies will be “planned in the round in collaboration with local authorities, the business community (including Business Improvement Districts), property owners, and the local community”. It recommended that the Government publish annually a list of which areas have strategies for their high streets and town centres and when they were last updated.<sup>23</sup>

## Future High Streets Fund

The Future High Streets Fund was first announced the [2018 Budget](#), with the then Chancellor Philip Hammond stating “if Britain’s High Streets are to remain at the centre of our community life, they will need to adapt.”<sup>24</sup>

A new policy was announced to address this issue – the Future High Streets Fund, outlined in the policy paper [Our Plan for the High Street](#), published alongside the 2018 Budget.

Funding was awarded on the basis of a competitive bidding process, with local areas invited to submit proposals setting out the “overall vision” of how they will transform their town centres and high streets.

The Fund did not make awards to local areas seeking to expand traditional retail on their high streets, and was intended to fund capital projects such as:

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<sup>21</sup> 75% business rates relief for eligible retail hospitality and leisure businesses has since been extended to 2024/25. HM Treasury, [Autumn Statement 2023](#), 22 November 2023.

<sup>22</sup> House of Commons Levelling Up Housing and Communities Committee in its report, [Supporting our high streets after Covid-19](#), HC 47, 10 December 2021, para 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> House of Commons Levelling Up Housing and Communities Committee in its report, [Supporting our high streets after Covid-19](#), HC 47, 10 December 2021, para 57.

<sup>24</sup> HM Treasury, [Budget 2018: Philip Hammond's speech](#), 29 October 2018

- Improving transport access to town centres.
- Improving vehicle and pedestrian flow in town centres.
- Congestion relieving infrastructure.
- Infrastructure to facilitate new housing and office space.
- Projects that seek to substitute under-used and persistently vacant retail units into residential units.

101 towns were shortlisted in 2019 to progress to the “business case development phase”, of which 72 were awarded funding. Details on funding awarded by region are shown in the table below. The fund applied to England only.

<b>Future High Streets Fund, awards by area</b>		
	£ millions	% total
North West	168.6	20.1%
West Midlands	145.9	17.4%
South West	138.3	16.5%
North East	98.4	11.7%
East Midlands	80.1	9.5%
Yorkshire and Humber	78.9	9.4%
London	56.5	6.7%
South East	49.2	5.9%
East	23.9	2.8%
Total	839.8	100.0%

Source: [Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities](#)

## High Street Heritage Action Zones

Part of the Future High Streets Fund was reserved to support high streets in conservations areas – this was combined with funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the National Lottery Heritage Fund to form a £95 million fund.

£92 million was available via an open bidding process, and open to applications from high streets within conservations zones, with applicants invited to submit applications for funding to be used to “improve the physical realm around the high street, and support activities that encourage people to engage with heritage” and convert disused and underused historic buildings into retail outlets, office space and housing.

£3 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund was used to fund a cultural programme to “engage people in the life and history of their high streets.”<sup>25</sup>

The programme was delivered by Historic England.

## High Streets Task Force

The High Street Task Force’s role is to “strengthen local leadership in high streets and town centres in England”, through “providing information, advice, training, knowledge and data.”<sup>26</sup> It is run by the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University on behalf of the government.

The High Streets Task Force was launched in July 2019, following an announcement in the government policy paper [Our Plan for the High Street](#). The High Street Task Force was in response to recommendations made by an expert panel on the high street, which was asked to diagnose issues facing high streets and town centres and advise on practical measures for government to undertake. The panel’s recommendations were published in December 2018 in [The High Street Report](#).

The Task Force has published various resources under the umbrella [A Routemap to Transformation](#), designed to address challenges faced by town centres in redefining the role of high streets following the coronavirus pandemic.

Since 2020, The Task Force has visited over 130 places, working on “long-term planning and transformation efforts.”<sup>27</sup>

## Long Term Plan for Towns

In October 2023, the government announced the Long-Term Plan for Towns, selecting 55 towns to receive £20 million in the form of a “ten-year endowment style fund.” 20 additional towns were added in the 2024 Spring Budget.<sup>28</sup>

Selected towns are required to develop a ten-year “Long Term Plan for their town” to set out “the town’s vision and priorities for investment and regeneration, aligned to themes of safety and security, high streets, heritage and regeneration, and transport and connectivity.” Towns are also required to establish a Town Board, composed of community leaders, employers, local

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<sup>25</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and MHCLG, [£95 million to revive historic high streets](#), 14 September 2019

<sup>26</sup> The High Streets Task Force, [Who are the Task Force?](#)

<sup>27</sup> The High Streets Task Force, [Task Force report shows local partnerships are key to unlocking high streets potential](#), 10 October 2023

<sup>28</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, [Our Long-Term Plan for Towns](#), October 2023, pg. 14

authorities, and local MPs to “develop a shared vision for their town and oversee the funding together.”<sup>29</sup>

The table below shows selected towns by region and country. 75 towns have been selected, 65 of which (87%) are in England.

Long-Term Plan for towns, selected towns		
	Number	% total
North West	13	17%
East Midlands	10	13%
Scotland	10	13%
Yorkshire and Humber	9	12%
North East	7	9%
East of England	7	9%
West Midlands	6	8%
Wales	5	7%
South East	5	7%
Northern Ireland	2	3%
South West	1	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, [Our Long-Term Plan for Towns](#), October 2023; HM Treasury, [Spring Budget 2024](#)

## High Street Accelerators

In December 2023, it was announced that 10 areas would take part in a pilot High Street Accelerators programme, designed to create partnerships between residents, community groups, local authorities and businesses that “empower residents and community organisations to work together on long-term regeneration plans.”<sup>30</sup>

£2.37 million will be split equal with the 10 participating areas. Each area will also be eligible to apply for a share of up to £5 million to “improve their high streets’ green spaces and create more pleasant environments for residents to meet and socialise.”

A list of the 10 areas included in the pilot programme has been [published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities](#).

<sup>29</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, [Our Long-Term Plan for Towns](#), October 2023, pg. 14

<sup>30</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, [High streets levelled up with £7 million funding boost](#), 6 December 2023



## 1.4

## Stakeholder views on the Bill

The Local Government Association (LGA), the national membership organisation for local authorities in England and Wales, published [a briefing on the Bill following its committee stage](#).

The LGA was broadly negative in its appraisal of the of the Bill, raising concerns regarding the capacity of local authorities to comply with its provisions, as well as its potential impact on high streets, describing it as “an unnecessary bill” and “a distraction from what councils really need to protect and enhance the future of their high streets.”<sup>31</sup>

The LGA briefing raises specific objections to the process of local authorities having to designate high streets, arguing this “forces councils to choose amongst different towns and provincial high streets.” The briefing also objects to the five-year designation period, arguing this creates “artificial time periods for review that are not aligned with local priorities” and that over time “local authorities high street priorities may fluctuate” as some high streets may begin to perform well, while other may require support and intervention from local authorities, regardless of their designation status.

The briefing also points to the designation process as duplicating existing responsibilities and processes undertaken by local authorities in their role as local planning authorities. The LGA also highlighted that local authorities “already designate high streets and major retail centres in their local plans, which any future development must have ‘regard to’” and applications for planning permission are decided against. Further the government’s National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF), which sets out national planning policies that local planning authorities must take into account in preparing their local plans, already “includes a chapter on ‘ensuring the vitality of town centres’”

The briefing also argues that the requirement for local authorities to produce improvement plans comes at a time when “tools available to them to make improvements continue to be blunted because of the continued erosion of planning controls.”

Similar concerns regarding local authority capacity were also raised in an [article published by Alessandro Graciotti](#), an academic researcher at the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, following the Bill’s second reading.<sup>32</sup>

While Graciotti’s article endorses the principle behind the Bill, stating it is “commendable that MPs are exploring solutions to address the challenges impeding high street regeneration”, it also argues the Bill would “exacerbate

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<sup>31</sup> LGA, [High Streets \(Designation, Review and Improvement Plan\) Bill, House of Commons, Committee Stage](#), 14 March 2024

<sup>32</sup> Alessandro Graciotti, [MPs debate high street review and improvement plans](#), Institute of Place Management, Manchester Metropolitan University, 15 February 2024

the pressure on councils” and that “top-down approaches centred on councils’ authority have been found to hinder successful high street regeneration.”<sup>33</sup>

Graciotti argues successful high street regeneration should have involve a range of stakeholders, and “prioritise the formation of partnerships in (re)developing designated town centre areas” based around a “grassroots form of governance structure.”

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<sup>33</sup> Alessandro Graciotti, [MPs debate high street review and improvement plans](#), Institute of Place Management, Manchester Metropolitan University, 15 February 2024

## 2 What the Bill does

The Bill would require local authorities to designate streets as high streets, either a single high street, or a network of high streets.

Local authorities would then be required to publish an improvement plan for the designated street or streets, setting out proposals for the preservation and enhancement of designated high streets. Local authorities would be required to review these plans every five years and to consider them when exercising planning functions.

Analysis undertaken by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the anticipated financial implications of the Bill states that projected public expenditure resulting from the Bill's proposals would be no greater than £26 million every five years.<sup>34</sup>

The Government have committed to funding the cost of up to three designations per local authority; designations of a network of more than three streets would be done on “a voluntary basis” and would not result in further funding.<sup>35</sup> A money resolution to authorise expenditure in relation to the Bill was passed 5 March.<sup>36</sup>

[Explanatory Notes for the Bill](#) have been published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

### 2.1 Clause 1 – Designation of high streets

Clause 1 concerns the designation of streets as high streets.

This clause would require local authorities to designate a street or network of streets as high streets. This states that streets may be designated as high streets “only if the local authority considers that the street is important to the local economy because of a concentration of high-street uses of premises on the street or streets.”

A street may not be designated as a high street if the “local authority considers that its importance derives principally from goods or services purchased in the course of business.”

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<sup>34</sup> [High Streets \(Designation, Review and Improvement Plan\) Bill, Explanatory Notes](#)

<sup>35</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 12](#)

<sup>36</sup> [HC Deb 5 March, c 807](#)

The designation of a high street, or high streets must be reviewed every five years.

The clause would also require local authorities publish a public list describing and map showing streets covered by the designation.

## 2.2

### Clause 2 – High street improvement plans

Clause 2 concerns high streets improvement plans and the timetable for their publication.

This clause states that an improvement plan must contain information about the condition of the designated high street or streets, the importance of the street or streets to the local economy, and proposals for the “preservation and enhancement of the street or streets.”

The clause states that a draft improvement plan must be published within six months of a street or streets being designated; a final version must be published within 12 months of a designation.

Local authorities would be required to undertake at least one review of their improvement plans five years after a finalised version is published.

This clause would also require local authorities to undertake consultations ahead of the publication of draft improvement plans and revised improvement plans.

## 2.3

### Clause 3 - Planning functions: duty to have regard to high street improvement plans

Clause 3 would require local authorities to have regard to improvement plans when exercising planning functions, which include the preparation of local plans and decision-making on planning applications, that affect designated high streets.

Planning functions are defined as functions conferred on local authorities under:

- Part 3, 7 or 8 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, or

- Part 2 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.4 Clause 4 – Regulations under sections 1-3

Clause 4 would give the Secretary of State the power to make regulations for the purposes of clauses 1, 2 and 3.

Regulations that relate to who local authorities must consult when designating a high street or preparing an improvement plan would be made by statutory instrument subject to the negative procedure.<sup>38</sup>

Regulations that amend the list of planning provisions in clause 3 (planning functions that the local authority would be required to consider their high street improvement plan when exercising), would be made by statutory instrument subject to the affirmative procedure.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.5 Clause 5 – Interpretations

Clause 5 defines various terms used in the Bill.

Local authority is defined as including:

- District councils in England
- County councils in England for any area for which there is no district council<sup>40</sup>
- London borough councils
- The Common Council of the City of London
- The Council of the Isles of Scilly.

“High street use” is defined as encompassing use as shops, offices, providing services to the public, the sale of food and drink for immediate consumption,

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<sup>37</sup> These sections relate to the powers of local planning authorities to control development in their area, including by granting planning permission for new developments (new builds), “material” changes of use, as well as preparing local plans which set out their priorities and policies for the local development / land use in their local area. For further information on the planning system in England, see the Library briefing [Overview of the planning system \(England\)](#)

<sup>38</sup> UK Parliament, [Negative Procedure](#)

<sup>39</sup> UK Parliament, [Affirmative Procedure](#)

<sup>40</sup> This classification covers unitary authorities that are county councils. The provisions of the Bill do not apply to county councils in two-tier areas: the responsibilities fall to district councils in those areas.

public entertainment, communal halls, and manufacturing that can be carried out close to the other uses.

“Street” means a street, within the meaning given by section 48(1) of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, to which the public have access on foot.

## 2.6

### Clause 6: Extent, commencement and short title

The territorial extent of the Bill (i.e., the legal jurisdiction of which it forms part of the law) is England and Wales, though the application of the Bill (i.e., where it has practical effect) is England only.

Clause 6 states that clauses 4 and 5 would come into effect on the day the Bill is passed, while clauses 1-3 would come into effect on a day appointed by the Secretary of State. Different days may be appointed for different purposes or areas.

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## 3 Progress of the Bill (Commons)

### 3.1 Second reading

The Bill's second reading took place on Friday 26 January 2024.<sup>41</sup>

Sponsoring the Bill, Jack Brereton (Con) described the purpose of the Bill as:

...to place a duty on local government to pause to consider properly what can be done, and to develop an action plan that can be delivered and that will work toward getting our high streets back on track.<sup>42</sup>

Brereton went on to say the Bill would bring:

...focus to our high streets, ensuring that local authorities think about the challenges they face and work with those who have an interest in our high streets to look at how we can begin to reverse their decline.<sup>43</sup>

The Bill received support from Members across the House and from the government.

Matt Rodda (Lab) urged flexibility in the Bill, as concentration on a defined area could lead to “a risk of displacement activity and concentrating on a small area” and that “many adjoining streets can benefit from this kind of measure.”<sup>44</sup>

In response, Jack Brereton agreed that “side streets that make up the high street are just as important, and we do not want to see displacement” and that “local government should make the designation according to local circumstances, as long as an area is important to the local economy because of a concentration of high street uses.”<sup>45</sup>

Gavin Robinson (DUP) praised the Bill allowing local authorities to designate a network of streets, rather than just one, as this would accommodate “high street areas that go beyond one street.”

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<sup>41</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 528-555](#)

<sup>42</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 529](#)

<sup>43</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 531](#)

<sup>44</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 531](#)

<sup>45</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 531](#)

Fiona Bruce (Con) lent her support to Bill, saying it would “ensure that towns have a thought-through regeneration plan which is based on local people’s priorities.”<sup>46</sup>

Liz Twist (Lab) also spoke, saying ensuring the ongoing health of high streets “needs backing from all levels of government, and local authorities certainly have an important part to play”, though criticised the current government’s overall efforts to support high streets as having “involved a begging bowl approach that has pitted communities against each other, with old pots of money discontinued, packaged up and resold as new.”<sup>47</sup>

Dr Kieran Mullan (Con) commended the Bill, saying it recognises the reality of high streets facing “unprecedented challenges in the wake of evolving consumer habits and economic shifts” and “takes a proactive approach to try to breathe new life” into town centres and high streets.<sup>48</sup>

Mullan went to raise concerns regarding the designation process, arguing guidance should ensure “the selection of high streets gives some consideration to those that will be of most benefit”, rather than allowing local authorities to choose the “rosiest high streets, with the best possible outcome already on the table.”<sup>49</sup>

Jacob Young (Con), the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing the Communities, clarified that local authorities would have to “identify streets of specific economic, social and cultural importance in their area, assess their condition, and come up with plans to preserve and enhance them.” He also stated the government would issue guidance on the development of high street improvement plans “once the Bill has received Royal Assent.”<sup>50</sup> Young also confirmed the Bill had the “Government’s full support.”

## 3.2 Committee stage

The Bill’s committee stage took place on 7 February 2024. 22 amendments were tabled beforehand, all by the sponsoring Member.<sup>51</sup>

All but three of the amendments related to the number of streets that can be designated as a high street.

Initially the Bill required the designation of a single street or a network of up to three streets. The upper limit of three streets was removed, with 19 of the 22 amendments changing the text of the Bill to account for this change,

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<sup>46</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 539](#)

<sup>47</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 547-48](#)

<sup>48</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 544](#)

<sup>49</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 544](#)

<sup>50</sup> [HC Deb 26 January 2024, c 552](#)

<sup>51</sup> [High Streets \(Designation, Review and Improvement Plan\) Bill, Amendment Paper](#)



allowing the provisions of the Bill to apply to a street or a network of streets, with no upper limit on the number of streets in a network.

Explaining this change, Jack Brereton (Con) said:

Originally, it was intended that there should be a minimum of one and a maximum of three. That was done to ensure the number of designations did not become too onerous on local authorities. However, following discussions with the Department and a number of colleagues and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough, who is serving with us on the Committee today, it has been agreed that we should remove the upper limit and give discretion to local authorities. Importantly, that reflects the fact that we have local authorities of varying sizes, with some having many more high streets than others.<sup>52</sup>

Clarifying this change, Jacob Young (Con), the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing the Communities, said it would allow local authorities to “ensure that high streets made up of a crossroads or a flow of streets are not overlooked or misrepresented.”<sup>53</sup>

Young went on to speak on the rationale for this change, saying:

Although the Government are clear that designations should be focused on those high streets that would benefit the most from an improvement plan, we recognise that many local authorities will have a large number of high streets in their area and it would be inappropriate for us to prevent them from designating more high streets if they wish to.<sup>54</sup>

On the issue of funding implications for the removal of the upper limit, Jacob Young went on to point out that designations of a network of more than three streets would be done on “a voluntary basis” and would not result in further funding:

The Government have committed to funding the cost of up to three designations per local authority. The Bill will allow local authorities to designate further high streets on a voluntary basis. However, there is no expectation that local authorities should do so and they will need to fund the costs of designating and developing improvement plans for any high streets beyond three.<sup>55</sup>

Three amendments did not relate to the number of streets that can be designated as part of a network of streets – amendments 9,10 and 17.

**Amendments 9 and 10** amended the text of Clause 1, line 5, clarifying the meaning of “designation day” – the day on which a street or network of streets would be designated as high streets.

Clarifying these amendments, Jacob Young said these amendments require local authorities “to maintain the stipulated number of high street

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<sup>52</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 6](#)

<sup>53</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 12](#)

<sup>54</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 12](#)

<sup>55</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 12](#)

designations on designation day and at all times afterwards”, with designation day taking place six months after the relevant section of the Bill comes into force. This date may not be the same for all local authorities, as “the Secretary of State may commence the clause on different days for different purposes or areas.”<sup>56</sup>

**Amendment 17** amended the text of Clause 2, line 21, to clarify that a local authority must, at least once, carry out a review of an improvement plan over a 5-year review period and prepare and publish a revised version “if it considers that changes are necessary or desirable.”

Clarifying this amendment, Jacob Young (Con) said it would help “ensure that improvement plans remain relevant and meaningful documents without placing over-onerous requirements on local authorities,” as previously local authorities could vary a designation, without a requirement to review the associated improvement plan.<sup>57</sup>

The Bill’s amendments received support from Members across the House.

Jo Gideon (Con) spoke in favour of the removal of the limit on the number of streets that can be designated as part of a network of streets, saying:

...Stoke-on-Trent is a classic example of why amendment 1 is so important, because it allows for more than three streets to be designated. Stoke-on-Trent is a city of six towns, each with its own identity and network of streets, and it is hugely important that the symbiotic relationship of streets is recognised by designating networks.<sup>58</sup>

Jane Hunt (Con) spoke approvingly of the Bill as a means of helping create a “post-internet town centre”, arguing:

We need to create town centres that are more of a destination for entertainment, as well as for shopping and all the other social life aspects of a town centre, because that way we get a smaller footprint and a greater concentration of shops and facilities in an area, and the Bill will help to create that. I can see a future now for our town centres.

Paulette Hamilton (Lab) expressed concern regarding the financial implications of the Bill for local authorities, stating:

I worry that by designating this power and responsibility to local authorities, we are letting the Government off on failing to properly fund the regeneration of our high streets... the money to preserve and enhance the high streets that are at the heart of our communities should not have come from a private Member’s Bill, but from the Government themselves.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 13](#)

<sup>57</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 13](#)

<sup>58</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 9](#)

<sup>59</sup> [HC Deb 13 March 2024, c 8](#)

## 3.3 Remaining stages

The Bill's report stage and third reading [took place on Friday 26 April 2024](#). The Bill was passed unamended.

The Bill's sponsor, Jack Brereton (Con) described the provisions of the Bill as “muscular localism”, arguing the Bill would provide “the focus and direction that our high streets desperately need” and directly address “the absence of a plan for ensuring that local authorities have a capacity to develop effective place partnerships and place leadership”, a problem highlighted in the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee report [Supporting our high streets after Covid-19](#).<sup>60</sup>

Brereton also addressed concerns that the Bill would burden local government with additional work and responsibility, saying:

I completely understand the reaction that local government often has when it feels as though it is being told it needs to do more... That is why I stress that the Bill seeks to get local government not so much to do more as to co-ordinate what it does better, with wider input and agreement, and a wider contribution of effort, in implementation and delivery from a range of interested partners in our high streets, ranging from community groups to our high street businesses.<sup>61</sup>

Brereton also spoke in favour of MPs being involved in the designation and review process, saying:

... we as Members should be active participants in agreeing local designations, contributing to reviews, and compiling or commenting on improvement plans for our areas... Members should be closely involved in helping to deliver on improvement plans, developing place partnerships that enjoy local support, leveraging both local and/or national funding and optimising the co-ordination of existing funding towards a compelling sense of direction for our high streets.<sup>62</sup>

Several Members spoke in support of the Bill.

Darren Henry (Con) described the Bill as “vital” as it “provides that local authorities must not merely review a high street every five years but actively lay out an improvement plan”, which would put pressure on local authorities “to ensure that our high streets are fit for local communities.”<sup>63</sup>

Nickie Aitken (Con) said the Bill “presents an ambitious and necessary plan to reawaken our local high streets” and would encourage local authorities to work more with local businesses and stakeholders to “develop new ideas, to

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<sup>60</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1242](#)

<sup>61</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1242](#)

<sup>62</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1240](#)

<sup>63</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1249](#)

encourage growth and to tackle the obstacles facing our high streets today.”<sup>64</sup>

Dame Maria Miller (Con) also complimented the Bill, saying it “promotes a way for our local authorities to ensure that they do the utmost to support our high streets and make the most of them as a way of creating successful communities for the future.”<sup>65</sup>

Justin Madders (Lab) described the Bill as “refreshing” as it “recognised that local authorities are the best vehicle to make decisions about their local areas.” Madders went on to express concerns regarding the implementation of improvement plans, amid financial pressures on local authorities, saying:

... after a high street is identified and an improvement plan is made there appears to be no mechanism for the allocation of resources to ensure these plans are implemented. Given that council budgets have been stretched to breaking point since 2010, I see little scope for any improvement in the foreseeable future.<sup>66</sup>

Madders concluded by lending support to the Bill, though said “much more needs to be done to deliver the change we all want to see.”<sup>67</sup>

Jacob Young, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, said the Bill “forms one part of a broader strategy to help regenerate and level up our high streets” which includes “other Government interventions”, including the Long-Term Plan for Towns, high street rental auctions.<sup>68</sup>

Young also said that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities had “already begun outreach with local authorities on the guidance and will continue to work with local authorities and other stakeholders as the guidance is developed” and would “ensure that local authorities have the extra funding they need to be able to deliver the measures in the Bill effectively.”<sup>69</sup>

Second reading of the Bill in the House of Lords is scheduled for [17 May 2024](#).

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<sup>64</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1253](#)

<sup>65</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1255](#)

<sup>66</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1258](#)

<sup>67</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1259](#)

<sup>68</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1261](#)

<sup>69</sup> [HC Deb 26 April 2024, c 1262](#)

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