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Committee for The Executive Office

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High Street Task Force: Executive Office

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We also looked briefly at a previous incarnation of the high street task force in Northern Ireland and existing similar initiatives in other jurisdictions; in particular, we focused on the English, Scottish and Welsh high street task forces. We followed that up with engagement with individual stakeholders. A broad range was involved, including Retail Northern Ireland, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Hospitality Ulster, the Institute of Directors (IoD), the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium (NIRC), the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NICCI), the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), Belfast City Council and the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NICICTU). Perhaps one of the most important things about that engagement was the high degree of consensus amongst that broad range of stakeholders on the issues to be addressed. You summed them up, Chair, in your opening remarks. It is recognised that our town and city centres face a range of economic and social challenges. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated many of those problems, many of the challenges are long-standing and predate the pandemic. They stem from factors such as the financial crisis back in 2009, prolonged underinvestment in some of our infrastructure and, of course, changing patterns of retail and consumer behaviour. Again, we have seen some stark examples of that, even in recent days, in some of the announcements that have been made.

Stakeholders are clear that the situation calls for a strategic response. They recognise that there are no quick fixes on the high street, although there are things that need to get under way urgently. It needs Departments and local government to work in partnership to deliver a vision for sustainable town and city centres as thriving hubs for the retail, services, hospitality and residential sectors — that is much more of a mixed economy than we have perhaps seen in some high streets in the past — and to view them as places of communities or ecosystems, not just as single sectors.

We also looked at established and successful good practice elsewhere. Again, common themes or elements emerged quickly. First, successful task forces all have a long-term vision and a strategic approach to delivery. They all have at their centre local civic leadership and capacity. Local government really has a key role to play in this. They have a role in contributing to and influencing policy and see access to Ministers as important. They have a role in what we often call "joining up", which is bringing together a range of programmes and initiatives, new and existing, to increase their synergy and efficiency. That was particularly strong in the Welsh task force. They will have a role in the production of guidance and best practice and a direct delivery role in projects and funding schemes. Common to all successful task forces is that broad range of functions: everything from influencing policy and strategy through to direct delivery at street level. That is quite a challenge.

The next step that Ministers asked us to take was, before Christmas, to establish a reference group — a sort of prototype task force, if you like. That involved colleagues from Retail Northern Ireland; Hospitality Ulster; the Business Alliance, which is CBI, IoD and the Chamber of Commerce; NILGA, representing local government; and the relevant Departments that I mentioned. That reference group was asked to develop terms of reference for the task force proper, to advise on additional membership, to examine in a bit more depth the Scottish, Welsh and English task force approaches and then to make recommendations to TEO and, in due course, the Executive. The expectation was and remains that additional group members will be added and that the group will transition into the full high street task force in due course.

Ministers helpfully provided a steer to inform the group's work. That had a number of elements. First, Ministers endorsed the need for a vision and asked for that to be developed in the following terms: to focus on a strategic response to the economic and social challenges, with Departments and local government working in partnership, and to promote sustainable developments in town and city centres as thriving hubs for the retail, services, hospitality and residential sectors. That is very much in line with what we had seen in existing good practice. Secondly, they asked for a bespoke approach particularly tailored for Northern Ireland, rather than just lifting a model from somewhere else and replicating it. They pointed us towards the Scottish task force as a good place to start in drawing up a template, but we were not limited to that. Thirdly, Ministers emphasised that in the scope of the work we should include all towns, cities and villages to recognise the importance of rural communities in Northern Ireland but that we should not overlap or duplicate the existing city deals initiative in any way and should instead seek to complement it.

On structure and governance, Ministers made it clear that they did not see the need for a quango or formal body to be established; rather, the task force should be an informal structure but one that needs to operate within a clear governance framework of programme and project management, learning from some recent lessons in that regard. It should have a project board chaired by the junior Ministers and would include key stakeholders as full project board members. Again, Ministers

emphasised the importance of co-design and full participation. It is certainly not something that we will merely consult stakeholders on.

The reference group endorsed that mission and pursued it with alacrity. It met four times before Christmas, and, again, there was a high degree of consensus among the members. I am grateful to all of them for their positive and constructive engagement, particularly at such a difficult time for their sectors and many of their members. They provided recommendations to Ministers that built on the initial scoping paper and reflected the steer given by Ministers. That is still under consideration, and Ministers are looking at it carefully. They have, however, given some indications of their emerging thinking and asked me to share with you their thoughts on the vision, role and membership of the task force proper.

First, on the vision, Ministers accepted and endorsed the form of words that the reference group offered. It is a pithier version of what I talked about, and it is this: sustainable city, town and village centres that are thriving places for doing business, socialising, shopping, being creative and using public services, as well as being great places to live. Secondly, Ministers looked at the five functions that were recommended by the reference group and agreed that they were all required, with one important caveat. Those functions are COVID-19 recovery; influencing policy and strategy; developing capacity; developing and promoting good practice; and driving and supporting intervention and investment. The important caveat is that Ministers have decided that, given the urgency, the immediate work on COVID recovery as it relates to the high street should be taken forward by the existing Executive COVID-19 task force. That will leave the high street task force to concentrate on the other four functions, which are rather more strategic and long-term. Of course, the two task forces will work closely together. Thirdly, on membership, the reference group did not recommend any additional members beyond those in the group. However, Ministers have decided that it is important for the task force to have a broadly based membership to reflect the breadth of vision that they have set for town and city centres. Therefore, they are actively considering additional membership from local government, the universities, the voluntary and community sector, the culture and arts sector, tourism and the housing sector. They hope to reach a conclusion on that soon.

Ministers have also asked us to look beyond the British Isles to Europe and, indeed, beyond, because there are international examples of innovation and good practice that we can draw on in the work of the task force. They have emphasised that sustainability will be a very important theme of the work. The task force needs to equip itself with experience and expertise in that area, and, of course, we will draw on our colleagues in the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) for that and, indeed, other competences. Ministers have confirmed that the task force will be jointly chaired by the junior Ministers. Finally, Ministers are keen that the task force begin its work very quickly. They indicated that, once the final membership is agreed, they will move quickly to convene the first meeting and set out a timetable for the work as a matter of urgency.

That was a quick canter over the ground. I am happy to add light and shade to it as best I can.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK, Chris. Thank you very much for that report and update on the high street task force. I reflected that, pre COVID, the high street was on its knees. COVID has pushed it on to its back completely, and businesses feel bewildered and disorientated in trying to adjust. I understand that, inevitably, given the COVID situation and the speed at which it has impacted on the high street, the Executive task force obviously will take over the COVID recovery element in the early stages. A lot of the issues for the high street predated COVID and will continue when COVID has gone. Is there an assurance that work by the Executive task force will not usurp or prevent the work of the high street task force so that it can continue to do its work, with the COVID task force work dovetailing into it?

Mr Stewart: I am happy to reassure you on that point, Chair. That is exactly how Ministers see it. They recognise that the high street task force is strategic. They have not reached a firm decision yet, but it would not surprise me if they cast that work into a three-to-five-year time span. It will certainly go beyond the current Assembly mandate. Hopefully, we will see the back of COVID and the back of the COVID work long before then. However, there is recognition that the high street task force work, whether we like it or not, starts off in a COVID context. To a degree, it will be shaped by the COVID-influenced world that, unfortunately, we dwell in now.

You rightly say that the problems of the high streets have been generating for 10, 15 or 20 years. I am not saying that it will take 20 years to make progress on them, but it will certainly take well into the next Assembly mandate and perhaps even beyond that. A lot of work must be done to undo the years of change. It is extremely challenging and difficult.

I am conscious that, from time to time, it might sound as though we are signalling that we will abandon retail: absolutely not. Retail will continue to be important, a key element in our high streets. All the stakeholders recognise — Glyn Roberts and colleagues have been very positive and supportive about this — that there is a future for retail and it needs to be secured. It is, however, a different future. The high street retail offering will simply not look like it did even 18 months or two years ago, and we have seen that change very much accelerated by COVID.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Northern Ireland is running many years behind other places. You mentioned that there are a lot of examples from the Welsh and Scottish work, and you broadened that out to other European examples. I have been told of some good practice in North America and Canada. From your initial look at those places, what sort of things did you see happening, without getting into a huge amount of detail? What type of things are their task forces doing that our task forces could start to replicate?

Mr Stewart: Ideally, we would have an eclectic mix of all the best bits of all of them. Colleagues in all three task forces were extremely helpful and candid with us in telling us what, they thought, worked well and what did not work perhaps as well. The English task force, which, it reminded us, is a UK-wide task force, produces some things that we can draw on, particularly in good practice. Rather than reinvent that, we can simply take it and tailor it for local use. You might describe the English one as the Rolls-Royce. It is the largest, best established and, certainly, the best funded, with a multimillion-pound budget that we can only aspire to. However, the people on that task force were candid enough to say that size almost makes them victims of their own success. They find it difficult, from time to time, to get the access to Ministers that they would like, which, in a smaller jurisdiction, might come a little more easily.

By contrast, Welsh and Scottish colleagues told us that, as smaller jurisdictions, they have exactly that. They enjoy closeness to their Ministers. One of the best elements in Wales is the strength of the partnership with local government. The Welsh task force has around about 25 people. About five of them sit in central government, largely working on policy and strategy. The other 20-odd are not formally seconded or loaned but are based in local government. They work closely with local government, and that allows them to do two things: first, to join up the existing programmes and projects that can sometimes be repurposed to add value; and, secondly, to use the effectiveness of their direct intervention on the ground if it happens at that local government level. The situation in Scotland is similar, but their approach is very sophisticated.

There is an interesting common element to all three, and that is a person whose name is Phil Prentice. The Committee might be interested in hearing from him at some stage. He is originally from here — he is an Armagh man — but he has lived in Scotland for 30 years. He is a leading light in the Scottish task force and an adviser to the English and Welsh task forces. He is a wonderfully open and candid straight talker who was very helpful to us when we were doing that work.

If we aspired to the priority that is afforded to the English task force, that would be great. However, if we can draw on the sophistication of the Scottish approach and the strong partnership with local government in Wales, those would be two good building blocks for here.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Finally from me, has any thought been given to projects that are close to what a high street task force could influence that would let them develop without having to first give it some thought? For example, in Downpatrick, which is in my constituency, there is a large piece of land near the town centre that the Department for Communities and the council are redeveloping. They are building up designs and working quite well. If that is happening — it is a live project that will rejuvenate the high street in Downpatrick — could the task force and those who are doing the work in the Executive Office look at a real-time project rather than have a task force make decisions, have ideas or give directions in a year or six months, when that project is eight to 10 months in? There could be a spend of tens of millions of pounds to redevelop it, but it would be good if it could be used as a prototype to get the full thrust of the agencies that are involved. It is an example of a project that is ready to go.

Mr Stewart: Your question contains a valid point. I was a little surprised at the extent to which all the task forces had a direct intervention role. As they said — this is your very point — "Once the concrete is in the ground, it is too late to influence something. You need to get in there before that". All three were strong on the need for the task force to challenge blight or a lack of development where it occurs. They are all absolutely mustard about where they see somebody landbanking without adding value but holding up development, so they tend to intervene to try to trigger something.

How quickly we can get the task force up and running to the point where it is influencing real projects remains to be seen. There is a challenge and an opportunity in that. We are not setting up a new formal body, so the task force will not be a creature of statute. We do not need the time that would be required to do that, so we could move a little more quickly. The challenge, which, at the same time is an advantage, is that, as an informal body, the task force has to work through others. Therefore, where it influences spend or spending money, it will be council or Department money. Again, that is quicker than bidding for budgets and waiting for the outcome of budget rounds to see what you have. Likewise, council planning powers will need to be brought to bear on projects that are perhaps out of kilter with a task force's vision. Again, it is not that the task force has a raft of new powers in its hands, but, on the other hand, we do not have to wait for that raft of new powers. The planning powers are with the councils, and the task forces will work in partnership with councils. The idea is that the task forces will hit the ground running and will start to influence projects in real time.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. I may come back to you on that to see whether there is any connection. It may be another 12 or 15 months before that project starts to deliver on the ground, but it would be good to get that expertise.

Mr Beattie: That was a fascinating briefing, Chris. I will carry on a little with what Colin said. I am just trying to get a better understanding. One of the things that you said or words similar to those you used is that the high street in 20 years will be nothing like the high street today. Can you give us an example of that? What do you mean? What are the high street task forces in England, Scotland and Wales delivering that we would see as a physical change to our high streets and to how they work?

Mr Stewart: They would point to two factors. All three task forces said that there was a need for what you would call, in broad terms, anchor tenants. If the anchor tenant is no longer the big-name high street retailer or department store, you need a different anchor tenant. That might be a different type of retail, it might be a mixed development of housing and retail or it might be a new public service hub. However, it has to be something that starts to change, shape and drive the place or the ecosystems or dynamics of what is there. It has to be something that gives a citizen a reason to be on that high street. It might be because they live there, socialise there or access and consume public services there. It is a broader range of reasons than just that that is where the big department store is. That will no longer be enough.

The other thing that they would say is that — this sounds a bit pejorative, so forgive me — the days of the identikit high street are over. The idea that you could walk down any market town anywhere in these islands and see the same retail brands is changing. An awful lot of that is going online. The successful high streets that they point to are all bespoke; they all look different. The local example that came up quite often — I am not sure whose constituency it is in — is Newtownards. I am told that Newtownards is thriving. It is not right now because everything is closed, but, in the period between the restrictions, Newtownards was still doing very well, as were some other towns, while some others were not.

Phil Prentice illustrates that with a personal anecdote. He has lived in Glasgow for 30 years but still buys his clothes in McCalls of Lisburn — perhaps I should say that other high street retailers are available — because he says that there is unique local offering there. There is something there that, he feels, he cannot get online or anywhere else, be it a level of service or a particular brand that he wants to access. He says that that is where success is in retail. It is as crude as this: it has to be something that you cannot get online. Of course, it is easy to say that, but it is challenging to provide it. However, there are lots of examples of people doing it successfully.

The plans will be different. We will see different master plans for somewhere like Belfast, which, of course, would be unique anyway. Belfast will look different to Banbridge, and Banbridge will look different to Belcoo. We need something that works in each of those locations and in other locations. The work of the task force is to ensure that we have the capacity to provide the support and the wherewithal and, where that is not happening, to drive the change if it needs to be done.

Mr Beattie: Chris, that is interesting. Will there be a real drive, then, towards town centre living or above-shop living? That is clearly a thing in Belfast, but it is less of a thing in Lurgan or Portadown. Will the task force look at increasing that?

Mr Stewart: Yes, is the short answer. That has certainly featured strongly in all the task forces to date. There is a contrary COVID dimension to that element, at least right now. I do not know whether it is correct because I have not seen the evidence, but I have heard anecdotal reporting of house prices

dropping in town and city centres because, as a reaction to COVID, it is thought that there is not so much demand for city-centre or town-centre living. One would hope that that would be a transient phenomenon and that we will see town and city centres being envisaged differently and — much more so than has been the case in the past 20 years — being seen as places in which to live and partake of all those other activities.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Chris. I guess that I am with you on that. I have one other brief question. Looking at the list of those whom you have engaged with so far, I notice Belfast City Council. I understand why you would do that, but you do not seem to have engaged with the other council areas, which, you will know, are very bespoke. In the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, which takes in Portadown, Lurgan and Banbridge, the high street in Lurgan is plagued with division. You can literally walk into Lurgan and say, "This is the half of High Street in Lurgan that I will shop on, and that is the half of the street that I will not shop on". Is that division being looked at? Are you trying to link with other agencies to see how we can formulate a town-centre policy to mitigate division such as that in Lurgan?

Mr Stewart: Absolutely. I remember Lurgan fondly because I walked that very High Street for two years when I worked there. I understand the phenomenon that you refer to. The initial engagement was through the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and directly with Belfast City Council, who approached us. We need to find the right way to get the full range of council involvement, so we have had conversations with colleagues in the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). Whether it is done through SOLACE, as the umbrella organisation, along with NILGA or with individual councils is for Ministers to decide. However, they are absolutely of the view that we need a great deal of council involvement.

Your description of Lurgan underlines the need for the lead on the matter to be local in shaping interventions or master plans. You are absolutely right: getting the answer right for somewhere like Lurgan requires people with the insight and knowledge that civic leadership there would have; people who are familiar with the community and the challenges that it faces and have enough knowledge and nous to develop a solution that would work in Lurgan. It is not something that officials sitting at a desk at Stormont are likely to get right; it needs local input.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for that information, Chris. We all concur that there is no quick fix. We have all witnessed the decline of our high streets, and we need to protect fully the small and family-owned businesses at the heart of our communities. I am mindful of the sterling overarching work of Retail NI and Hospitality Ulster, the Chamber of Commerce and NILGA in all constituencies. I do not want to cast aspersions on the work of any of those groups. However, if we are serious about tackling regional disparities and inequalities, why are all the organisations in the reference group — Retail NI, Hospitality Ulster, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and NILGA — based in Belfast? Perhaps it is little wonder that the council that was engaged with was Belfast City Council. However it came about, perceptions can become realities.

When you were talking about expansion as we move from the reference group into task force membership, I was glad to hear you mention the voluntary and community sector and cultural and community arts, as we have a fantastic community arts organisation — Studio 2 — in Skeoge in Derry. I know that everybody can say likewise about organisations in their area. You also talked about local government and tourism. However, I am concerned, and this is not the first time that I have raised the issue. When we talked initially about the task force, I asked for consideration to be given to the north-west. We have a fantastic city centre initiative in Derry. Retail NI and others do sterling work in representing all areas. However, as Doug said, each area has its unique differences. I know that you cannot have everyone from every city on the task force, but you have overarching views as to where regional disparity needs to be addressed and attacked. Establishing the membership is, "Good work, but must do better". Chair, the Committee raised the issue before the reference group was established, but I am concerned that our views on the matter seem to have been ignored.

Mr Stewart: Thanks, Martina. I understand the point that you make, but you will forgive me when I make the obvious caveat that decisions and membership are a matter for Ministers. I also understand the importance of avoiding any perception that this is a Belfast-dominated enterprise or that it will focus only on Belfast.

There are two important reasons for avoiding those perceptions. You gave the first: we need to deliver the task force for every city, town and village centre in Northern Ireland. They are all different and have different needs. Secondly, we talked about good practice in other jurisdictions, including

internationally. There is also good practice here, and you mentioned good practice in the north-west. There is, therefore, good practice locally. We need to get out, find it and bring it into the task force.

I assure you that, to whatever extent I am involved in it, the doors of the task force and the Department will be open. I look forward to engaging with stakeholders who have a better insight into the needs of the communities that they serve and can give examples of good practice that we can replicate elsewhere. I am more than happy to try to make up for the deficit, and I am happy to be guided by you on which doors we should knock or email accounts we should access.

Ms Anderson: I appreciate that response, but you will appreciate that, in my role as a Derry MLA, I will stand up for Derry at every opportunity, as will every other MLA for their constituency. I do not want people to be engaged with just as stakeholders; I would like them to be round the table for the shaping of decisions. That is an ask that you will probably get from many constituencies. I appreciate what you said about taking that into account. Hopefully, it can be taken into account when the membership of the task force is formulated and decided on.

I do not know whether you have looked at the voucher scheme or if you can influence it. There was a fanfare when it was announced, although it was announced before the restrictions. However, due to a lack of preparedness and planning by the Department for the Economy, it had to hand back £90 million for a failed scheme. We know that town centres are not open and that there is no footfall, but, with a little imagination, we could have found a way. We all go online, and many stores are online. We could have tried to see how we could access it online. Has that work been done by the task force, even in its reference group phase? Will there be engagement with the Department for the Economy on that?

Has the task force or others submitted alternative proposals and schemes to the Department for the Economy so that it can go to the Department of Finance and show how that money could be spent? That is revenue that our retailers, shops and local small businesses could have done with. However, we had to hand it back through, perhaps, a lack of imagination or someone not having the foresight to see that shops would, understandably, be closed but a scheme could have been developed to spend the money. I am concerned that the opportunity for our city centres has been lost.

Mr Stewart: Unfortunately, I cannot comment on that scheme, simply because I was not involved in it.

The short answer to your broader question is no, that is not something that the reference group focused on. That is not to say that the reference group did not take a strong interest in COVID recovery or, as you might term it, COVID survival: it did. The group's clear view was that that was the top priority. Ministers have indicated that they recognise and agree with that but are minded for that strand of the work to be taken forward by the existing COVID-19 task force. The main reason for that is the very one that you have given: it needs to start right now. It cannot wait even for a high street task force to be established. Colleagues on the other side of the Department, under the leadership of Jenny, as the head of the Civil Service (HOCS), will consider those issues. Members of the reference group and, I am sure, in due course, the high street task force proper will continue to take a strong interest in that and will want to be involved. It is not something that they will wash their hands of and say that they no longer have an interest; they do. They will want to work closely with the COVID-19 task force to find answers to the challenging questions of the best way to use resources and where the immediate need is.

Ms Anderson: Chair, perhaps we could write to the Committee for the Economy to find out whether it has been exploring potential schemes with the Department. Anyone with a little time and foresight should have been able to come up with a scheme that would have delivered that money to our high streets. It would be good for us to get more information on that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We will certainly ask that question.

Chris referenced the fact that Jenny Pyper has the task force. That gives us an almost 'Blue Peter' moment: she is coming up next, so we will be able to ask her.

Trevor Lunn, I see that you are there for some questions, if you would like to ask them.

Is Trevor there? I do not see him on any of the screens. Maybe he is in his kitchen making a cup of tea, or maybe he is on a phone call. We will give him another second or two. If he hears this, he can switch on his microphone.

Mr Stewart: He endured me for years in the Education Committee, Chair; maybe he has had second thoughts.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Maybe he is about two miles down the road running away at this stage.

We have to move on because —.

Mr Lunn: Can you hear me now?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Excellent. There we go, Trevor. We gave you a good bit of time to come on board with your questions.

I think that he has hit the exit button and has dropped himself offline. I am sure that he can write to you to ask pertinent questions.

He is back with us again. You have one final go, Trevor. If you want to ask your questions, fire on.

Mr Lunn: Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We can indeed. We can hear and see you.

Mr Lunn: Hallelujah.

Chris, I was going to ask you to give us an example of a successful high street in Northern Ireland, but, very helpfully, you did. You reminded me about Newtownards, which is quite a success story. I was there before the lockdown for an afternoon, and it was buzzing; it was great. There might be room for a case study there.

Lisburn chamber of commerce has worked at that for years. It recently had an expert across from England, I believe, who gave us all a very inspirational talk. His main theme was an emphasis on food and drink and the evening economy. He was very hot on that. He examined the town centre and gave a lot of praise to a small scheme just off Bow Street. Unfortunately, it closed within a few weeks. It was not a bad example; it was just hit at the wrong time.

The evening economy translates to town-centre living, which has already been mentioned. It also translates into licensing laws, with the ability of pubs to open to operate in a continental way when we get continental weather and, particularly, for people to be able to spill onto the pavement. I think that they can do that only in certain towns or cities in Northern Ireland, although not Lisburn. Will the task force take those factors into account?

Mr Stewart: Thanks, Trevor. The short answer to all those questions is yes. We were hearing the same things. I mentioned Newtownards, and, in case I annoy lots of other MLAs, I am sure that there are other successful examples across Northern Ireland. We need to get under the skin of that and find out why Newtownards and other towns are successful and working well while others are not.

What is the difference? I think that the answer is likely to lie, as you said, in that multidimensional addressing of needs and the specification of a way forward. One of the key messages that we heard was: do not just think of this as being about a particular sector or even groups of sectors. Success comes from having a strong sense of place or identity. It is about the whole of a town centre or high street. I do not like the term "high street task force". It tends to make you think — at least, it tends to make me think — mainly of retail. It is broader than that when you consider the sectors and activities involved and, indeed, when you consider it geographically. It is about town centres and community centres and about how they function throughout the day and in the evening, as you said, and in all dimensions. That is the key. It is about getting something in the centre that gives the citizen a reason to go there and to stay there.

We can no longer build a city-centre economy by someone going in to access a department store and then leaving again. There has to be a reason for a citizen to invest his or her time and money in coming into a city or town centre and staying there and consuming a range of services. Those will be residential services because they live there, retail services because their immediate needs are being met because they live there, or they may come in to access the evening economy for food and drink and arts and leisure. It is a much more mixed economy than our vision has been in the past. It was

illustrated starkly by some of the stakeholders that a diverse, multidimensional economy maximises your chances of success. By contrast, having a monoculture that depends purely on one sector increases your risk of failure.

Mr Lunn: Yes, indeed. I will give you one other example of a thriving high street, because I will be eaten alive if I do not: Hillsborough, which is part of Lisburn. Perhaps it is due to the historic royal palace and the fact that Hillsborough Main Street and the Hillsborough area has three or four excellent restaurants and a couple of pubs. It is quirky and unusual. I think that you said that they do not all have to be the same, and Hillsborough has some really pleasant small and unusual shops. There are different ways of going about it.

I like what you say, but I have heard a lot of it before, going back to when I was chamber president in Lisburn, which, I can tell you, was not yesterday. Various attempts have been made to do this. This one sounds a bit more organised and perhaps with resources to be applied to the problem. Something needs to be done. Thanks for your presentation.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thanks very much for that, Trevor and Chris. That brings to an end members' questions. Thank you for coming along today and for being one of the first witnesses in the past number of weeks to fit right into your allocated time. It is just about to strike 3.00 pm, which means that we are on time this afternoon.

We appreciate the update. We hear regularly, from every constituency, the problems facing retail and from those interested in the high street. That is why we are so interested in the work of the task force. We see that there can be tangible assistance from it and from the pooling of resources and thought. Thank you for your attendance today.