



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Brexit and COVID Issues: Retail NI

17 February 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)

Ms Martina Anderson

Mr Roy Beggs

Mr Cathal Boylan

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Ms Liz Kimmins

Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Mr Glyn Roberts

Retail NI

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We welcome to the Committee, via StarLeaf, Glyn Roberts, the chief executive of Retail NI. The evidence session will be reported by Hansard.

Mr Glyn Roberts (Retail NI): Good morning, Chair. How are you?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Very well, thank you.

Mr Roberts: Thank you for the opportunity to present to you this morning. I want to look at the role of Department for Infrastructure with regard to COVID recovery and where we are with the protocol. With the pandemic and the protocol, many of our members are facing an almost perfect storm of challenges. We have talked about "cliff edges", but I do not know how many cliff edges our economy can fall off. With the pandemic and the protocol, it is important that we adopt a solution-based approach and try to work through many of the problems and challenges that we face.

I will touch on the role of the Department for Infrastructure with regard to COVID recovery. I have tabled a paper and given context on the solutions on which we would like the Department to focus. That is not only with COVID recovery but with the general rebuilding and restructuring of our economy. The Department for Infrastructure will play a key part in the new high street task force. Therefore, it will have a key role not only in helping to recover from COVID and the impact that it has had on our high streets but in helping to shape that 21st-century vision for our town and city centres.

The pandemic has literally torn up all the rules for our high streets and, in many cases, accelerated the pace of change for them. Clearly, not all of that is good as it has directly contributed to a number of large retailers closing their doors or moving 100% online. However, I think that we now need to be in a position in which the new high street task force focuses on the four Rs — repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring — for a regeneration framework for our high streets. Key to all that is

developing the concept of localism, which means repurposing our town and city centres to make them into unique hubs in the heart of our local community. We have seen during the pandemic — indeed, we are still seeing this — that, because of guidelines and regulations, and with the huge growth of people working from home, people are staying local, buying local and, when hospitality was open, socialising locally. That presented an opportunity for many of those traders to try to capture many of those people. However, that has come at the expense of some of our larger cities — principally, Belfast city centre. That poses some interesting challenges for our transport system. When we get to the other side of the pandemic, I think that the role of the office will have to change. We will see more hybrid working and homeworking, although that is not necessarily an option for every business, because some sectors cannot have homeworking, and retail is one of those. What does that mean for public transport and investing in infrastructure in our local towns? City deals were referenced in the last presentation. The key thing about city deals is to make sure that they deliver a modern infrastructure and act as a catalyst for regeneration.

The localism agenda, which we are very keen to advance, is not only about supporting our local independent retailers but about changing the leadership model in our villages, towns and cities. It is about making sure that many of the members whom we represent, the broader business community and civic society play a full role in shaping their towns and their recovery.

I will highlight some of the issues on which we want to engage with the Minister. We fully support the idea of the establishment of an infrastructure commission. Scotland is very interested in exploring a five-year moratorium on superstore applications. Sadly, only this week, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council granted planning permission for a large out-of-town superstore and has completely ignored the "town centre first" planning policy that the Department for Infrastructure oversees and the impact that that will have on struggling independent retailers. Let us not forget that the large supermarkets have done exceptionally well during the pandemic.

Other practical things would include devolving powers for car parking and on-street car parking to councils and giving them greater responsibility. We are dealing with a practical issue with our members in Newry and Lisburn, where, uniquely — obviously, Belfast has it as well — they have paid on-street car parking. To get that changed, they have to go through a very lengthy process and engage with the Minister. In any other part of the UK, that would be sorted by a council, rather than trying to get a Minister to intervene to make changes to car parking in city centres such as Lisburn and Newry. Our members very much want that change to help with the recovery of their city centres.

We need to push for a high-speed rail service between Belfast and Dublin or certainly to improve the current one. A few years ago, that was a very left-field idea, but it is now very much mainstream. The Irish Government have made that a major priority and have looked at its economic viability.

We need to focus on the need to invest in our rural towns. Many of them have an opportunity to bounce back from COVID because, as I said, they have captured so many local people who are working from home and may be doing a bit more with local independents. Maybe there is an opportunity there. At times, many of our members in those small towns and villages feel left behind by city deals and even by that very term. We have to ensure that city deals work for all parts of Northern Ireland. In that context, reviewing rural transport connectivity will be crucial.

The Department for Infrastructure has a key role to play in all that. It also has a list of big projects, such as the York Street interchange, the A6, the A5 and transport hubs — all those things. I know that they might need to be reviewed because COVID has changed things, but I still think that those are priorities, along with our small towns and villages.

On a general point about the economy, I was very struck by what the Health Minister said a few weeks ago when he talked about the importance of the health service and a new vision for it. He said that it should not return to where it was in January 2020 and that something different and better should be done. That is very much what we need to do with our economy and infrastructure. There is no point in our going back to where we were in January 2020. We need to do something bigger and bolder, and we need a broader vision of how we can make Northern Ireland an ecosystem of innovation.

I turn now to where we are with the pandemic. There is absolutely no doubt that we need to adopt a solutions-based approach. We also need to have a laser-like focus on solutions to the many challenges that have been caused by the protocol. There is no doubt that we will need a further extension to the grace periods. Obviously, we are facing one this week. It is not just about extending the grace periods for the sake of it and kicking the can down the road. We need long-term solutions to address those challenges, and one of the solutions that is being pushed very strongly is the Swiss

model. It will be interesting to see whether tomorrow's meeting moves things forward. We are keen to have an input to that meeting, but we have not been asked as yet.

There is an onus on the UK and EU to show continuing flexibility, and it is about ensuring that we have a supply chain. I will touch on what our colleagues from the ports said: a supply chain that provides stability and certainty and avoids cost and delay is crucial for our retail sector as a key part of the supply chain and the just-in-time supply chain process.

We sometimes lose sight of what we want to achieve with all this and get into a very technical and jargonistic process when for us it is really about ensuring that we do not add to the grocery bills of hard-working families, make sure that there is a full range of products and do not add to the problems of those families who have come through a lot during the pandemic.

On the protocol, there is emerging consensus across business, and certainly across our retail and wholesale members, that the best outcome for the overall supply chain will be the implementation of a digital solution from source to shelf, covering the logistical and technical requirements for ensuring compliance with the legislative requirements. That would require a more effective and efficient process through the supply chain and would limit the cost and burden to the industry as opposed to the current process, which is very complicated. It is also about ensuring that we have frictionless goods movement and maintain the availability and price of food products across the NI market.

That was a quick scoot across the houses on a lot of the issues, but, as I said, there is a perfect storm of challenges for our retail sector. The Department for Infrastructure has a central role in recovery with the new high street task force and in making sure that its voice is heard to ensure that we have a supply chain and logistics operation that delivers for Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you very much for your presentation. You are absolutely right when you say that we are in a perfect storm. However, we are also nearly 12 months into the pandemic, and the impact that that has had on our local streets and high streets in particular has been quite devastating. We can be very thankful for some of the independent businesses that have stayed strong throughout. When I look at my local town, we have Wardens and Knotts, which have worked throughout this very difficult time.

You said that you have spoken to your members and that they are keen to have an integral role in shaping the recovery. What does that look like from Retail NI's perspective?

Mr Roberts: Sorry, you broke up there. Could you repeat your question?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Your members have said that they would like to have a role in shaping the recovery. What does that look like from Retail NI's perspective? What would that role be?

Mr Roberts: Whether it is the Programme for Government or the new high street task force, the one big thing that the Executive need to do this time is to change how they view business and broader civic society, seeing them not just as consultees but as full partners. That is why it is important that the Programme for Government is not just seen as a deal between five political parties but as a broader deal with civic society, business, trade unions and so on. It is important that we move from seeing the people whom we represent as consultees to seeing them as partners in growth and in arriving at co-designed solutions. That is why it is important that the new high street task force has a key role to play, with the business, trade union and voluntary sector representatives on it as equal partners with the Department for Infrastructure. They will play an increasingly important role in co-designing solutions. We will see a very different high street at the end of this, but I am optimistic. It will be very much an ecosystem of lots of different types of business, not just retail and hospitality. As I said, we should strip away the jargon and ask, fundamentally, what we want to achieve for our high streets, and it is to make them fun, family-friendly places that people want to visit and to create that experience for them. That is absolutely key. We should make them green places as well, and the role of public transport is important in that. We must make sure that we have strategies for people who want to walk or cycle, and public transport should aim to be people's first option rather than their last. Alongside that, we should make sure that there is affordable and accessible car parking. It is about getting the balance of all that right and making sure that town and city centres are about moving people, rather than just cars.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): You make a number of suggestions in your paper, one of which is:

"As with Scotland, we need a five-year moratorium on out-of-town superstore applications."

Planning can be quite slow anyway, so that moratorium may happen regardless of a policy. Have you any data that reflects success for the recovery of town centres through such a policy, be it in Scotland or elsewhere?

Mr Roberts: The Department for Infrastructure sets the strategic policy for planning, so it has an important voice in all this, and councils have a key role in granting planning permission. However, one key reason that Northern Ireland has the highest shop vacancy rate in the UK — it is not the only reason — is the huge amount of out-of-town retail development that has been granted in recent years. It was deeply unfortunate that Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, only a few days ago, granted permission for a huge out-of-town store, which will take 90% of trade from local stores, in complete contradiction to the Department for Infrastructure's "town centres first" planning policy. In a recovery package, we must ensure that, whatever way it is worked — councils have a key role in this — there is a moratorium on that sort of thing. The last thing that our struggling high streets need is more out-of-town retail development. Out-of-town retail development is like a relic from the 20th century. It belongs in the past. The future is 21st-century vibrant town and city centres, with an ecosystem approach to business and a dynamic and diverse retail and hospitality offering. That is the future, not more out-of-town big boxes in fields; it is about ensuring that we have vibrant town and city centres. The Department for Infrastructure has to make sure that councils cannot just completely push aside the Department's strategic planning policy. Sadly, that is exactly what happened in Antrim and Newtownabbey. The council completely ignored all the evidence with regard to the store. It thought that it would get a quick fix with the short-term jobs boost, but it did not want to know about the impact that it would have on indigenous retailers and in destroying and dislodging existing retail jobs. It was a bad move. We want the Minister to have a more hands-on approach with planning policy and in making sure that councils stay within the law.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. You would like the Department to have more control of planning. Yet, the next bullet point is:

"Devolve on-street car parking and responsibility for local roads to Councils".

I am not sure why you think that councils would be able to do that any better.

Mr Roberts: Our appeal to the councils is that they stay within the law. It is a "town centre first" retail planning policy. It is a relatively simple concept to understand. We want a crucial role for the councils. We are not trying to take powers away from them; quite the contrary. We have been arguing for regeneration powers to be given to the councils. We want them to be responsible for on-street car parking and local roads. We want the councils to play their full role in economic development and COVID recovery. That is where we talk about the concept of localism, which is about changing the leadership model in local areas, communities and towns. If we want to get changes to car parking in Newry and Lisburn city centres, we should not have to go all the way to the Minister's private office to get a meeting. The councils, working with their Chamber of Commerce and local industry, can arrive at a solution. We have to try to make sure that the councils, the Assembly and the Executive, business and wider civic society are pushing in the one direction.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. I would like to look at your proposal on responsibility for local roads. If you have heard any of this Committee's discussions about the challenge that we put to DFI on roads maintenance and so on, you will know that it is not as straightforward as you might think. I might consider the idea of devolving on-street car parking, but I need more information about your thinking on responsibility for local roads, because that is quite a broad statement.

Mr Roberts: It was always envisaged that the regeneration powers would come. Our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) have a much more detailed agenda. Northern Ireland councils have received a very low percentage of spend on the economy and spend on many important services. In many respects, what is the point of giving councils power over planning but not regeneration? For instance, councils trying to get things done in town and city centres constantly have to refer to the Department for Communities, which has regeneration powers. Likewise, if the councils want to make changes to car parking, off-street parking is within their remit but on-street parking is the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure. There is a contradiction there, and we need to resolve things like that.

Our members want to get on and start rebuilding our high streets and their businesses. They are asking themselves what success might look like post pandemic. We have made a call this week re opening. However, it is very clear that, whatever the Executive decide, we may not get a date for the reopening of non-essential retail. That is not to say that the councils and the Executive cannot start to work to make sure that COVID marshals are ready in every town centre, that every town centre and major high street has public hand sanitiser units or that there is COVID compliance — the "scores on the doors" — from businesses. All of that work can start now so that when we get to a point where we can reopen non-essential retail and, hopefully, hospitality — it is all dependent on the regulations and the science — we can hit the ground running. It is important that that preparation is done. It is about the councils working with the Executive and the Department for Infrastructure.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I have more questions but lots of members have indicated that they wish to come in.

Mr Roberts: I can stay on for another 10 minutes, if that is OK.

Mr K Buchanan: I will ask just one question; I will not be selfish, like others. Sorry, Chair.

Your paper mentions infrastructure investment in rural towns Glyn. What does that mean, and what are your ideas? What will you do with that investment fund? What will you invest in?

Mr Roberts: It is about ensuring that there is investment in the infrastructure of town centres in many rural areas. It is about making sure, for instance, that the transport infrastructure supports those towns. It is about ensuring that we level up, if I may use that term, all parts of Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is about making sure that many of our small rural towns are able not just to survive but to thrive, and the Department for Infrastructure has a key role in that.

We have talked quite a lot about "Boris's burrow". I would like to see, and this takes in part of your constituency, the re-establishment of the rail network out to the west. That would be a much better investment than a tunnel between Scotland and Northern Ireland. We have to make sure that the road network supports towns such as Magherafelt, Cookstown and all those mid-Ulster towns that have some fine independent retailers. We want to make sure that the investment in the infrastructure of those towns is there and that they get a slice of the city and growth deal action.

Mr K Buchanan: Finally, you suggest that on-street parking charges and town centre parking could be run by councils, which is the position in Cookstown and Magherafelt. We have been lobbying to have certain charges removed. In Cookstown, for example, free parking is allowed for one hour. Local retail wants to change that to two hours. I appreciate that it is not an issue for today. However, given that going into a shop is no longer a 15-minute operation — hand sanitising, social distancing and queuing mean that shopping takes longer, particularly if a man or woman has a few children with them — that would get people back into the town centre. Are you directly lobbying DFI on parking, whether that is council parking, DFI on-street parking or time restraints on parking, and asking it to make those town centres more user-friendly?

Mr Roberts: Sorry, I did not pick all of that up — the line is not great — but I picked up some of what you said.

When getting our towns and high streets ready for reopening, part of what we are trying to do is, primarily, about giving confidence to shoppers and consumers that our high streets are safe to go back to. Our members have spent millions making sure that their stores are COVID-compliant. However, we have to make sure that the external environment in our high streets and town centres is up to scratch. We tend to forget when we were in or out of lockdown. However, in the two weeks in December when retail and hospitality reopened, I observed that the use of COVID marshals, hand sanitising and "scores on the doors" was patchy. Some councils were doing it better than others. We have asked the Executive Office to ensure that there is a framework for councils to make sure that there is uniformity across the board in all our major towns, city centres and high streets. Retailers are very keen to be part of that discussion and have put forward a number of suggestions. One of the practical things that we would like to come out of tomorrow's Executive meeting is the restoration of click and collect on a strict appointment-only basis. That would be an important lifeline and a first step on the road map for reopening.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Glyn, for your presentation and for taking the time to come to the Committee, albeit virtually. I am conscious of the time, so my questions are about one issue [*Inaudible.*] Will you tell us a bit more about the digital solutions that you mentioned?

Mr Roberts: This is an evolving situation, and it might well change in the next few days. Our membership covers wholesalers, independent retailers and suppliers to the sector, which gives us a unique perspective on the challenges to supply chains. Trying to reduce the paperwork and bureaucracy is key to that. We want a primarily digital-based solution for wholesalers, retailers and logistics that works for them and means that we reduce the paperwork and bureaucracy.

We are talking to our members, and part of the reason why I have to leave in about five or six minutes is that we are bringing some of those members and the AERA Minister together to discuss some of those solutions. All along, we have seen this as a challenge, not necessarily a crisis, and we have always tried to put forward solutions. Of course, we have made progress on things like groupage, second-hand cars and steel. We have to keep that solution-based and problem-solving approach to the front and centre of all of this. We need continued flexibilities from the EU and the UK Government to make sure that there are more derogations and more mitigations. If we can get those and get long-term solutions, I think, to use a typical Northern Ireland expression, that it will eventually collapse into place.

Mr Muir: Solutions that have been discussed most recently include the Swiss-style arrangement for sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) goods. Would you support that?

Mr Roberts: We want to look into that. Certainly, it is gathering momentum, and it will be interesting to see how that moves on after tomorrow's meeting with the vice president. Yes, I think that, potentially, it has legs. Ultimately, if you look at the impact that Brexit has had, you see that, certainly in the first few weeks, there were difficulties and delays, and some products were not available. However, by and large, our members, including our wholesale members, have worked through this. Yes, some products have not been available, and we have seen some delays, but, fundamentally, levels of stock are good. We have made sure, looking comparatively at many of our food retail members' stores, that there is not the same number of empty shelves. That is not to say that there is not a problem or that there is not a challenge. Yes, there is, and we have to try to get that continuing level of engagement. There has to be an extension to the grace period so that we can have that laser-like approach to arriving at solutions and are not just kicking the can down the road.

Mr Muir: Lastly, I will talk about independent retailers. My local independent food retailer is the Mace on Brunswick Road, and that is a nice little plug for it. It is a great store, and it sources a lot of its goods locally. The protocol and the arrangements now in place mean that businesses in Northern Ireland are in a much better place to trade with the EU and GB than businesses in GB. Are you seeing businesses benefiting from that?

Mr Roberts: Supporting local has always been the bottom line for many of our wholesale and retail members, so it is nothing new. There might be the possibility of increased trade for many of those local businesses, and Retail NI has brought many new manufacturers and producers into our membership and tried to connect them to our retail and wholesale members. We have tried to be their route to market. Mash Direct's route to market, quite a few years ago now, was through one of our members in Killyleagh. Of course, at that point, Mash Direct did not have the wherewithal to get into the large supermarkets, so its route to market was through one store. From there, [*Inaudible*] to buy and so on. We have always tried to help those suppliers by connecting them, and I think that we need to do an awful lot more of that. Maybe the one silver lining in all of this is that there will be an increased focus on local and doing even more locally. Hopefully, we can explore more of that.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Glyn.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Mr Beggs is next, but he does not seem to be there. I will bring in Ms Kimmins.

Ms Kimmins: I have a very quick question. We have talked a bit about car parking and enforcement. You will not be surprised that this issue has been raised with me, as a representative from Newry, quite a lot, and I have continuously raised it with the Minister. The business community feels that it is quite unfair that the centre of Newry is an attended parking zone. Over the last number of months, I have been presented with evidence of traffic wardens ticketing cars in almost empty car parks, which I

do not understand. I appreciate that there are enforcement rules. However, ticketing people when there are, say, 100 free spaces, does not help the business community. It is not as though it is a separate management issue.

On the impact of COVID, during the first period of restrictions, when I asked the Minister about relaxing parking enforcement, she responded positively. The councils stepped in and did the same for off-street parking. This time around, I asked again, but, unfortunately, the Minister declined to relax parking enforcement or to reduce fees to try to help support businesses. What are your thoughts on that? Do you think that it would help, particularly given that, as you say, we do not know when reopening will be announced and whether it will be a phased approach? Would that be a good support to businesses?

Mr Roberts: We need to get car parking right. The difficulty that we have had, even before the pandemic, is an overzealous approach by many traffic wardens. This has been a particular problem in Newry city centre. We recognise that they have a job to do. We need traffic enforcement, and we need the turnover of cars in our towns, city centres and on our high streets. A particular problem in Newry and Lisburn is that, as you said, you pay for on-street parking, whereas, in Armagh and Banbridge, your first hour of on-street parking is free. You may think that an hour is not a great deal, but it is a great deal for the traders, particularly for the independent retailers whose customers drop in. It is frustrating, and we are yet to have a meeting with the Infrastructure Minister on this, but it is important. We are not saying that we are in any way against our town centres being much more friendly towards those who cycle, walk or use public transport — we are a big champion of public transport — but giving shoppers that option and choice is crucial. The very simple ask of the Chambers of Commerce and traders in Lisburn and Newry is, "Give us what our colleagues in Banbridge and other surrounding towns have: one hour of free on-street car parking". That would still allow for turnover while putting less onus on shoppers.

I touched on the big out-of-town stores. They do not have traffic wardens. They can ask that bus routes be changed to facilitate them. They pay lower rates per square foot. They have a competitive advantage over many of our town and city centres. If we are serious about this recovery, that needs to stop — it absolutely needs to stop. The frustrating thing, although it is not intentional, is that the biggest impacts that many of the COVID-19 regulations have are on small independent retailers and businesses; not the large supermarkets.

One of the biggest issues that comes to our office relates to click and collect. The supermarkets can sell toys, books and clothes, but independent retailers selling the very same products are closed and cannot even offer click and collect. If we are serious about recovery, we have to make sure that there is a level playing field for town and city centres and large supermarkets, and that is not an unreasonable thing to ask for.

Ms Kimmins: I agree with you, Glyn. My final point on that is that the Newry business improvement district (BID) has done quite a lot of work on this. It recently surveyed local businesses on what their key issues were. The single biggest issue for the wider business community was parking in Newry. In the times that we are living in, the fact that that is still a major issue tells me that something needs to be done soon, and now is the time. Looking at the high street task force and all of the things that have been set up, I think that all of that needs to be fed in and, hopefully, addressed.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Glyn, two more members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. Do you have time to take their questions?

Mr Roberts: Yes, maybe they can ask the two questions together so that I can answer them together.

Mr Boylan: Thanks for the presentation, Glyn. People who have gone back into their local towns are playing a big part. Every penny spent goes directly back into the local economy. How do we capitalise on that and keep the people there? You mentioned the *[Inaudible]* infrastructure investment fund. Will you expand on that? Maybe you could write to the Committee outlining your thinking on that. My final point is on the lack of connectivity in the hubs. I know that you are in a hurry, but will you expand a bit on those, please?

Ms Anderson: Thank you for the presentation. I have loads of questions but will focus on one. It is about the right infrastructure for town centres, including rural town centres, and wanting to support our retailers moving forward. I have had a meeting with you and retailers about the A2 Buncrana Road scheme. I have also met the Department. I know that there are still concerns about the design of the

road. That is an example of where retailers' voices, views and understanding need to be taken into account. Will you comment on that?

Mr Roberts: Thanks, Martina. I hope that you are well.

I believe that our rural towns have a key role to play, not just in recovery but in developing our future retail and hospitality offer and the overall attractiveness of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination and for visitors generally. For instance, each rural town has a vacancy strategy that we work through and develop. The establishment of many more business improvement districts is part of what we want to see. The eight or nine that we have at the minute have played a fantastic role. BIDs put traders back into the driving seat. Rather than coming to MLAs or councillors, they are part of it. As I said at the beginning, it is about making sure that the business community is co-designing the strategy and the solutions and building something very different.

With regard to Buncrana Road, Martina, I understand that things are moving in the right direction. As you know, our asks of the Department for Infrastructure are fairly modest. It just shows the importance of continuing dialogue between the Department for Infrastructure and the business community. For the benefit of other members, we would have had a very good development, and we support the redevelopment of Buncrana Road, but we could have had a situation where the indigenous traders on that road were cut off from their local customer base. Therefore, we are working on solutions with the Department to ensure that that does not happen and that this great investment can move forward.

In conclusion, that example underlines the need, as the Minister has said, for an infrastructure commission that brings some of the key players together and charts a longer-term future. We see things like the high street task force not as a silver bullet but as a means to an end. We now need to focus on the recovery. The Department for Infrastructure and this Committee have a key role to play in that future debate.

Chair, thank you very much. Apologies that I cannot stay longer. I have a Minister on another line.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you.