



## **Labour Towns: 'A Fair Deal For Our Towns' September 2019**

1. Why we need a manifesto for towns – Yvette Cooper MP
2. Young people in our towns deserve the same chances as in London. Here's how we help them – Gloria De Piero
3. Driving investment in our towns: A case study of Stockton on Tees – Alex Cunningham
4. Delivering a digital revolution for our towns – David Hanson MP
5. 'From the bottom up': Growing a grassroots economy for our towns – Jim McMahon MP
6. Community focused spaces: Regenerating our town centres – Justin Madders MP
7. Rethinking transport for towns – Ian Lucas MP
8. A town to call home. Rebalancing the cultural dial – Tracy Brabin MP
9. Retail jobs are real jobs: A new industrial strategy for our Towns – Paddy Lillis, General Secretary, Usdaw
10. 10. Ensuring a fair deal: Why we need a public service guarantee for our towns – Melanie Onn MP
11. Revitalising our towns through the night time economy – Liz McInnes MP



### **Why we need a manifesto for towns**

*Yvette Cooper, MP for Normanton, Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley*

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Every town has a story. Millions of us across Britain live in communities with unique local histories, deep traditions and proud industrial and cultural heritage. These towns are the backbone of our country.

But Britain's towns aren't getting a fair deal. The Labour Towns Group has been warning for years that towns are being harder hit by austerity, just as at the same time economic changes are concentrating new jobs and retail opportunities in cities, while jobs and high street services are being lost from towns.

Our towns have lost buses, shops, sports centres, libraries, police stations, neighbourhood police, NHS services, magistrates courts and Sure Starts as Tory austerity has hit. Budgets have been heavily cut and public services have become more centralised in cities and larger towns. Yet we still have strong communities, often championed by local councils who are doing their best in difficult circumstances, and great potential that is just being ignored.

The Tories have only just woken up to the issues faced by towns as a general election looms. But their promised Towns Fund doesn't go nearly far enough, doesn't reverse austerity, doesn't help most towns, and doesn't give us a fair deal. Instead of having a proper plan to renew and empower our towns, the Tories are offering only a top-down fund targeted mainly at marginal seats in the run up to an election. And they offer

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nothing to tackle the deeper causes of the growing divide between cities and towns. What we need is a proper long term plan with a fair deal for our towns – that is what the Labour Towns Group is calling for, and that is why we believe Labour’s manifesto should rightly include a strong plan for towns.

Austerity has hit towns heavily because budget cuts mean public services have often been centralised in cities and the biggest towns so smaller communities lose out.

Recent OCSI (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion) research for Local Trust identified 206 local authority wards that had been most heavily affected by economic and social changes and recent cuts to public services and family support. Labour Towns analysis of their work has found that more than half of them are in Northern and Midlands towns.

We’ve had a double whammy. First the Tories have cut public service budgets so heavily that local managers have been forced to close some services altogether. Second, service decisions are too often based on unreasonable cost comparisons as well as wrong and unfair assumptions about how easy it is for people to get into the cities for services.

For example, in Pontefract, health bosses have been trying to close our midwife-led maternity unit and make everyone travel to Wakefield instead. Senior clinicians who haven’t been to Pontefract or talked to local mothers argue that its cheaper to provide larger services and that it won’t make any difference to families’ choice because there’s an alternative unit half an hour away. But for lots of parents it takes a lot longer than that and is even worse if you don’t have a car, the buses don’t run and the taxis are expensive. And anyway, why should our towns keep losing local services because they don’t have the same economies of scale as big city services?

At the same time as vital services have been cut, the job gap between cities and towns is growing. In the slowest economic recovery for generations, towns have been held back. Research by the House of Commons library shows that job growth in town constituencies is half the rate of job growth in cities.

Changes in the economy are concentrating opportunities in bigger conurbations - cities and university towns - while online shopping is challenging local high streets. So manufacturing and retail jobs are under pressure in towns. But service sector jobs and tech jobs are growing in the cities. As Paddy Lillis and Justin Madders explain, that is creating real challenges for local high streets too.

Yet instead of an industrial policy to support towns, Conservative Government policies on infrastructure are making things worse. Ministers are concentrating infrastructure investment in cities and forgetting about towns. Big transport investment is focused on London and on HS2. Yet our northern towns still have to put up with the old, rattling Pacer trains. Meanwhile local bus services have been cut by £1.3bn, so we've lost 3,000 bus routes that people depend on to get them to work, to the shops, to hospital or to school.

Towns often lack training and skills infrastructure too. Teenagers from towns across Britain are getting fewer opportunities including less chance to go to university than Londoners, especially those from families on low incomes. Lottery funding is skewed away from towns, and especially from the coalfields, whilst arts and culture investments are still concentrated in the cities too.

Frustratingly, local people rarely have the power to challenge this because too many decisions are still taken in Whitehall and Government devolution policies are concentrated on city regions and metro-mayors.

The consequence, as the Centre for Towns has documented, is that towns are getting older and cities are getting younger, as people move away from towns for opportunities.

We need a proper, strong and radical plan to tackle the growing gap between cities and towns. Capital funding that just goes to some towns isn't enough and certainly doesn't go far enough to outweigh the billions of pounds cut from services in towns since 2010.

Labour plans to end austerity are at the heart of a new approach that should bring investment, jobs, services and opportunities back into thriving towns. Already the party rightly has a plan to rejuvenate our town centres, including banning ATM charges and protecting banks and post offices from closure. Our Shadow Ministers have announced plans to reverse the Tory cuts to bus routes and provide free bus travel for under-25s. An overhaul of business rates to help town centre shops is crucial, and there are great measures like free public wi-fi in town centres and powers for councils to hand over long vacant shops to cooperatives start-ups and and community projects.

But the Labour Towns Group is putting forward new ideas so we can go further.

There has to be much more radical devolution of power out of London and Whitehall. But it isn't enough to focus on city regions. We need greater devolution to towns so

local people have more power to make decisions about the services that they rely on every day.

There also needs to be a proper industrial strategy for towns backed by substantial new investment, taking the lead from plans developed by councils and mayors. But instead of having to bid and beg for central government pots, we need billions for towns regeneration and renewal to be devolved for councils and local people to decide. And the Government should lead a proper audit of the investment currently going into cities and towns.

As David Hanson argues, towns should be at the heart of the digital revolution creating the jobs of the future. That means Government should prioritise smaller places for the next wave of digital infrastructure, making sure places with slower connections are the first to benefit from the roll out of full-fibre broadband. It also means focusing on skills and training, focusing on the jobs that will help towns thrive in the future.

Labour councils and MPs across the country are already pioneering change. In Stockton-on-Tees, the leadership by a Labour-run council and Alex Cunningham has led to a revitalising of its market towns and given vital support to local businesses filling the gap left by large retailers. In the Coalfields, Gloria de Piero is calling for a Coalfields Challenge to draw in innovation and investment to schools in former mining areas and give their pupils the resources to realise their ambitions. Holywell Town Council is tackling the digital divide between cities and towns, making the case for 'smart towns' that embrace digital technology and data to make communities work better for local people.

If people living in towns are to make the most of new opportunities, there needs to be a much fairer allocation of transport investment too. Transport for the North have earmarked £39bn for Northern Powerhouse Rail over the next twenty years. There are great plans for connecting northern cities. But where do the towns fit in? We need more trains and more carriages each and every year. Transport for the North should draw up a specific Towns Plan and other regions should show they are doing the same. As Ian Lucas argues, connecting towns to villages to cities and to rural communities is a crucial first step to safeguarding their future.

We also have to stop public services always shrinking back into cities as a result of cuts or because senior managers have calculated that it is cheaper not to run services in towns. As Mel Onn argues, it's time for a public service guarantee, ensuring a statutory

minimum of services that everyone can access regardless of whether they live in cities and towns.

But we've also got to celebrate our towns. That's why one of our first campaigns has been for the Government to set up a Town of Culture award as a badge of pride for towns rich with cultural history and heritage, but also to increase footfall and national recognition for the towns involved, and to empower communities to be creative and ambitious. As Tracy Brabin argues, culture should not be an add-on, an afterthought or a 'nice to have' – it has real potential to be an engine for regeneration in towns.

Right now the divides across our country are growing. Yet we need strong cities and strong towns for us all to thrive. Only a Labour approach can bring our towns and cities back together and make our country fairer and stronger, true to the values that have always been at the heart of our movement. It's time to stand up for our towns.



**Young People In Our Towns Deserve The Same Chances As In London. Here's How We Help Them**

*Gloria De Piero, MP for Ashfield*

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Hearing the news that 93% of constituencies in line to receive additional education funding under the new Prime Minister are Tory-held shows yet again that this is a Government with misplaced priorities.

It's former coalfield communities that need the cash.

It's time for a 'Coalfields Challenge' to give young people in former mining areas a fairer chance at social mobility, like the all-too-rare examples of the people who inspire me.

My teenage constituents Bryony Toon and Molly Carswell have had none of the advantages of privilege, but both may be destined for Oxbridge.

Bryony has spent several years in care and suffered with mental health problems, but will soon begin studying law at Oxford. What a testament to her intelligence and tenacity.

Molly will be the first in her family to go to university and recently attended a summer school at Cambridge University to try it for size. She told me: "The people were completely different to what I expected, and I realised I do not need to come from a rich family to access it."

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These young women are exceptional in every sense: Ashfield has always had low university attendance, with no more than a fifth of 18-year-olds starting university in recent years, but that figure has now slipped even further, to just 16.5% – the fourth lowest out of 650 parliamentary constituencies.

For comparison, just over 43% of 18-year-olds from Rushcliffe, Nottinghamshire’s most prosperous constituency, started university in the same year.

The difference in opportunity for pupils who go to school just a few miles apart is nothing short of staggering.

Last year 80% of Rushcliffe GCSE students who did not qualify for free school meals achieved five or more good GCSE grades. That figure was just 62% in Ashfield.

Of those young people in Ashfield who did receive free dinners, just 26.1% got the five good GCSEs needed to go on to study for A levels. Yet, 51% of kids on free school meals down the road in Rushcliffe achieved this benchmark.

It’s bad enough that poorer pupils in England are, on average, a year and a half behind their peers by the time they finish their GCSEs. But in my constituency, they are an astonishing 21.6 months of learning behind their non-disadvantaged peers by the end of secondary school.

It’s indisputably harder to get on in life if you come from my constituency than other parts of the country – particularly London.

But the capital’s far better performance on narrowing the education gap isn’t just a coincidence. A major factor according to experts was the London Challenge, a deliberate and holistic programme of positive innovation and investment in schools in the city during the last Labour Government.

That’s why we need a Coalfields Challenge, to emulate that transformation in former mining areas.

The London Challenge offered schools bespoke advice from experienced educationalists, innovative ways to work with other schools, and support to develop community hubs for parents and children.

The solutions for the Coalfields Challenge will be different, both in terms of tailoring solutions for the very different local context, and given the advances in research and technology that can be applied to the education sector today.

We would need to attract the best teachers, who are often more inclined to work in big cities, with the promise of more affordable housing or student loan forgiveness for working in coalfields areas. And we could use advances in technology to bring top business speakers to classrooms miles from Canary Wharf, to address the huge inequality in careers advice. And that's just for starters.

Unfortunately, the government has not prioritised finding creative solutions, instead bringing schools to crisis point with constant cuts.

I visited headteachers in my constituency to discuss social mobility. I received the same message from them all – schools are doing everything they can, but having to do more with ever-decreasing budgets is tough.

At Abbey Hill Primary School, on one of the most deprived estates in Ashfield, nearly two-thirds of pupils qualify for free school meals and there are a significant number of vulnerable families who access support from Social Care, Family Service and the Early Help Team.

The inspiring headteacher Helen Chambers employs a support worker to help families with problems such as debt, health issues and foodbank referrals. She endeavours to provide trips and guest speakers to broaden children's horizons.

But, as Jacquie Sainsbury, headteacher of nearby Brookhill Leys Primary School told me, having to provide so much more than just education puts a strain on budgets: "This takes resources and means that you are spread more thinly. We have to provide some children with breakfast, with uniform, with PE kits, because their parents don't or can't."

It's not that coalfields areas are lacking in aspiration – a stereotype I hear far too often.

Stephanie Dyce, headteacher of Hall Park Academy, told me about a recent encounter with a single mum whose kids have free school meals. She approached Stephanie saying, "My kids will be coming to your school and I need a school and headteacher who will help them achieve their potential." She was ambitious for her children and did not want them written off just because of they live in a deprived area.

A local secondary teacher told me about the time he asked students, "Who wants a nice house, a nice car, a good job, a family, and enough money?" Every pupil raised their hand.

He then asked if they thought they were going to achieve that vision – and not a single hand went up.

People in coalfields areas have the same ambitions as anyone else. But without a major intervention like my Coalfields Challenge, even very straightforward dreams will be very difficult to realise.

Sajid Javid is famously the son of a bus driver, but benefitted from his education to become one of the most powerful men in the country. Will he use that power to announce a Coalfields Challenge fund? Or will the grandchildren of miners have to keep waiting for a Labour government?



## **Driving Investment in our Towns: a case study of Stockton on Tees**

*Alex Cunningham MP, MP for Stockton North*

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Towns across the country have been hit hard not just by austerity, but by the Conservative Government's lack of interest in their long-term future. While the Future High Street Fund is a welcome – if a much late in the day – initiative, towns continue to lag behind cities in terms of business and job growth.

But where the Government has long ignored our towns, we see some towns succeeding thanks to the hard work and vision of Labour-run councils who are leading the way in driving forward local initiatives and championing them to outside investors.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is a prime example of a forward-thinking local authority, leading in its vision of a thriving borough, futureproofing the towns of Stockton-on-Tees while creating an environment for businesses and developers to have confidence to invest in the area.

### *Supporting market towns*

An historic market town since 1310, it is no doubt that the markets of Stockton and Billingham continue to be important in the drawing in of footfall into the towns of Stockton on Tees whilst Yarm has developed a niche shopping experience.

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Markets such as Stockton Town Market are the lifeblood of many towns. With more than 100 independent stalls, Stockton Market is a regular feature in the calendar and attracts shoppers from all across the Tees Valley. But this market, like many others across the country needs support to compete with the growing changes in shopping habits.

Recognising this, Stockton on Tees Borough Council invested £35 million into an ambitious project to regenerate Stockton's high street. This saw changes to the layout of the roads, a new water feature and public art works, and a refreshed public realm. The Council hasn't stopped at physical regeneration but has launched "themed markets" such as a craft market and one designed specifically at promoting young entrepreneurs.

### *Encouraging local business growth*

With larger businesses moving away from our high streets and towns, it has become imperative for our councils to support local, smaller businesses and thus fill the gap left by the likes of Marks and Spencer, Debenhams and Thorntons – all of which have left or will leave the town soon. The Council has played a leading role in promoting and supporting these smaller businesses and start-ups, acquiring a long term vacant unit on Stockton High Street – the Enterprise Arcade – and transforming the ground floor to create a number of smaller units which can be let to start-up retail businesses to test their idea in a safe way without the burden of a long-term lease or a high business rates bill. Arcade businesses also receive expert advice on all aspects of developing their business, which enables them to gain enough experience to move on and begin to trade in a unit of their own. Since opening, the Enterprise Arcade has seen over 60 businesses establish themselves with eight now fully independent in their own premises in Stockton and over half continuing to trade either at markets, online or in other town centres.

### *Investing and Intervening*

Most recently, the Council has bought one of the two shopping centres in Stockton – Wellington Square. This purchase gives the Council control over the direction of the retail sector in the Stockton and gives a signal that the Council is taking an active role in supporting and growing the high street as a retail hub. This is not the first time the Council has taken an active leadership role in the future development of the town of Stockton on Tees, having recently funded the building of a 128 room Hampton by Hilton Hotel, the redevelopment of the 3000 capacity Globe Theatre, and has invested £25 million into public realm works in Billingham. This leadership has inspired confidence from others, such as the Heritage Lottery and private developers, and helped attract

Government funding such as the £150,000 investment from the Future High Street Fund. Without these efforts, our towns would be left to struggle against austerity and changing shopping patterns. By taking the lead our Council has not just provided our towns a safety net but has given them a platform on which to grow and succeed.

### *Role of the night time of economy*

The towns of Stockton on Tees are famous for their cultural scene. This year saw the holding of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Stockton International Riverside Festival (SIRF) in Stockton High Street, and the 54<sup>th</sup> year of the Billingham International Folklore Festival. Both events attract thousands of people each year and are much-loved fixtures in the North-East cultural programme.

They are, however, much more than culture for culture's sake but a toll in which to drive up footfall and support the economy of our towns. These events are free, open and accessible to all, and are in the heart of the towns that host them, ensuring visitors are close to the shops. The high street of Stockton itself has been re-developed as a performance space to accommodate a flexible all year-round events programme – including in 2019, the City Games in the shape of international athletics. From the success of these Stockton, Billingham and Norton have seen the growth of a vibrant night-time economy through micro-pubs, new eateries and a revamped Georgian Theatre – thanks to a joint partnership led by Stockton on Tees Borough Council.

### *Conclusion*

The case study of Stockton on Tees gives us hope to what our towns can achieve if they have the right leadership and a vision. The austerity agenda pushed by the Conservative Government and the decline in high street sales pose a significant and existential challenge for towns such as Stockton and Billingham, but they also pose an opportunity to be grasped. Stockton on Tees Borough Council has done just that, providing leadership and financial support, promoting our towns as the heart of local economy, and showing how towns can adapt successfully to an ever-changing economic climate.



## **Delivering a Digital Revolution for Our Towns**

*David Hanson, MP for Delyn*

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The digital revolution is fully underway.

In cities across the UK 4G has helped grow local economies. The digital challenge will continue to define the future and 5G will soon do so much more to create new opportunities for growth.

It's now time for our towns to share in this revolution and it's the clear role of government to work with local councils and businesses to make that happen.

Some of the UK's cities have seen the opportunities in front of them and grasped them with both hands. However, many of our towns and villages haven't had the resources or the support needed to use emerging and now established technologies.

All too often the phrase 'digital' is appended to a word in the hope that it makes a policy sound new and engaging.

That's not enough.

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Towns need to grow organically in each community so that they can address the opportunities in front of them. The role of central government is to provide the tools for local businesses and councils to utilise. Only then can they construct a digital infrastructure that works for their citizens.

There are two areas of policy that would be greatly beneficial for our towns. First to address the digital divide occurring between cities and towns, and SME business and multinational businesses.

Second is to deliver smart towns. Let's look at each in turn.

The digital divide has arisen due to under-investment in towns' technological infrastructure, which is commonplace in our cities. This can range from fibre optic broadband, 4G reception and even in some parts of the country 3G reception.

Connectivity to the wider world is vital for growth. With online sales accounting for 18% of all retail activity in the UK – and growing at an exponential rate – we can see how high street retailers are locked out of sales. They may have limited connectivity and lack the means to access e-commerce, which holds them back.

Another result of the digital divide is the inability of residents to access goods and services online. Many people looking to rent or buy a new home will take into account the broadband speeds and 4G coverage. As our rural areas and small towns have been left behind it has meant that populations have declined and aged. The lack of young people in towns means that their longevity becomes greatly diminished. That's why our cities continue to expand as millennials want better connectivity so leave their home towns for more choice.

The digital divide will only get worse if these factors aren't addressed. The UK economy is moving radically towards fintech, software development and digital services. If our towns do not have the digital infrastructure in place these new industries will gravitate towards our cities. Driving the divide even more.

However, these problems have solutions. With the advent of new industries that are not determined by place – unlike the industries of old – we could see fintech solutions based in Flint, or game development in Gedling and software development in Sedgefield. The possibilities are endless and the potential for jobs great.

There are already examples of how we can jumpstart the digital economy in our towns. Holywell, in North East Wales, was struggling following the loss of most of its banks which placed untold pressures on high street retailers. This came at the same time as the world of retail was in flux as online shopping took hold. Instead of standing back and watching as the high street slowly vanished the local town council, retail association and community groups banded together to secure a partnership with Square, a contactless card reader company, that could ensure that many of the shops could take card payments for the first time. A small but important change. Many small retailers cannot compete with the behemoths of Amazon on price, but they can on expertise and customer experience. However, that expertise can sometimes be missed by potential shoppers as we move towards a cashless society. When you combine the loss of ATMs from our high streets the pressures upon independent retailers are only exacerbated. That is why supporting businesses with the costs associated through payment diversification is one small, but important, policy that must be implemented.

A digital town needs a first-class online presence, a digital footprint to market itself, integrated web presence and to highlight the history, shopping, cultural and artistic activities of the town. But we now need to prepare for the next generation and in doing so we need to drive smart towns forward.

Smart towns are a harder concept for people to flesh out because we are still learning so much about how we can utilise data to make our communities better places to live. Some of our most scientifically engaged cities are only just starting to lay the foundations on which we can create smarter places. However, we shouldn't just rely upon these cities, we should be encouraging our towns to engage as well.

The explosion in data means that we have untold opportunities before us to make our towns work better for their people. Many people ask, 'what is a smart town?' To put it simply, it is a town that uses digital technology to form the foundation of how a town works. This covers all matters of life from how we get to work, how we travel to and from places and how we access health and leisure facilities.

In an era of greater concern for our natural environment, smart towns will help us utilise our natural resources much more effectively if we use data. It will help us monitor our air quality and implement policies to keep it clean, it will help us better manage our waste collections. We should be pushing for smart towns for this reason alone. We must utilise smart data to protect our towns' local environment and public health. A healthier environment makes a town a much more attractive place to invest and develop.

Helping our councils and community groups to utilise data to create a smart town means that we can tackle the scourge of congestion and unlock new public transport routes. A smart town will enable us to monitor how people travel in real-time. It will ensure that we can put bus services in place that people need and even tailor traffic signalling for a smoother flow of cars. By monitoring traffic through data town planners will be able to reduce congestion and learn where people are traveling from and to. Therefore, new public transport routes could be established that will be used.

Our population is ageing, and we need to implement smart towns so that we can provide healthcare, especially social care, in the places where people need it. Being more effective and efficient in social care provision will bring down costs for local government which can be reinvested into more carers and support. For example, if a local town council established an after school football club for local children they could allow parents to sign up for the club through an online portal. This information could be used to see what services constituents want and provide more of them. It could also be used, in the example of sports clubs, to target areas with underlying health problems like obesity as the council will know the children that are not engaging.

Supporting our towns so that they can all become smart towns will not be an overnight transformation. We should encourage our towns to start small and for central government to help them think big. The small step of enabling people to purchase goods and services through a variety of payment options from their council and local businesses will help us towards a smart town evolution. The UK Government can then share data to help with the bigger issues of healthcare, transport and environment.

There are other measures that can be taken to support towns to harness the opportunities arising. A fully integrated transport ticketing service would be a massive boon for towns. Not only would it help inform our councils to provide better transport through data, but it would ensure that communities had a more affordable ticketing system to get around. Another policy that should be rolled out is electric vehicle charging points across the country. Low carbon transport is vital and will attract people back into town centres if they can charge their vehicle.

Whether we are trying to secure the future of our high streets or enhance the services provided by local government in our towns we should look towards the digital infrastructure we can deliver. Smart towns and digital high streets can help us face the future with optimism and prosperity.



**'From the bottom up': Growing a Grass Roots Economy for Our  
Towns**

*Jim McMahon, MP for Oldham West and Royton*

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For our towns to thrive our economies require rebuilding from the ground up.

There's no doubt that Britain's towns have had a hard time. Many like my own town of Oldham were part of the original (and actual) industrial powerhouse that created the wealth of modern Britain. They have had to respond to the long process of de-industrialisation, but there is no doubt that the last ten years of government-imposed austerity have hit towns hard.

The New Economics Foundation has estimated that government policies have cost the economy over £100 billion in lost production and taxes. To put that in context that means over £3,600 per year for the average family and we know the poorest communities, often living in towns, have borne the brunt of austerity.

What is clear is that the scale of public expenditure has ripped the civic heart out of our towns. It's not savage cuts to local council services, but also the reduction in the level of police services and cultural facilities that have left many town centres hollowed out.

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We have also had an ill-advised policy of centralisation of many public services that has seen county courts, magistrates courts and tax offices closed in many towns and relocated to distant city centres.

To rebuild our towns the foundations of a strong local economy, together with strong local public services, are critical. For while we welcome the focus on our cities, much needed and long overdue, it cannot be that towns are ignored, or even activity disadvantaged in that pursuit. For Britain to thrive every part of our nation must have a role to play and receive the investment needed to make it a reality.

When we look at the impact it has been profound. Any place is a reflection of its underlying economic condition. Less money in the local economy naturally is on full display, not least of all on the high streets where too often boards and pulled down roller-shutters have replaced once thriving shops, banks and post offices.

That impacts not just the feel of a place, but also on how people feel about it, as it quickly becomes a reference point for decline, a future less bright, a sense of loss and with it anger.

A recent survey of public opinion on our towns from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the think-tank UK in a Changing Europe, showed that local people have a very realistic view of what needs to change. They wanted to see a future for the many young people in their communities who don't go on to university, helping those in low paid work to get additional skills, and nurturing local businesses and high street shops.

These realistic attitudes are at the heart of Labour policies and are already being put into action by many local councils. When I was Leader of the Council in Oldham I set up the 'Get Oldham Working initiative' to help local people into work. In the last eight years it has helped secure jobs for over 6,500 local residents, including 4,500 permanent jobs, 800 apprenticeships, 280 trainees and 1,100 work placements. Preston has rightly been acknowledged as a leading council in ensuring that the principal 'Anchor Organisations' in the town work together to keep 'money local' to the benefit of local shops and businesses.

It shows one approach to embed businesses in the local community and now is the time for this action. As many multinationals trade in our local communities, but extract wealth offshore, it hasn't just impacted on the Treasury's books but also on the ability to retain value, recycle it within the local community and ensure that it grows.

The Co-operative Movement is a prime example of how to renew our towns. Together there are more than 7,000 independent co-operatives across the UK which contribute over £36 billion to the UK economy. There are hundreds of local examples of co-operative action. Oldham Community Power is a local initiative to encourage schools and community buildings to generate some or all of their electricity using renewable energy technologies. And it's not just in the public and co-operative sectors where good practice can revitalise the fortunes of our towns. Ultimate Products, a self-made business with a turnover of over £100 million, has joined up with Oldham College to create a training academy for school leavers to teach higher level skills in digital and design.

We need to encourage local businesses and co-operative enterprises who are willing to create well paid jobs and pay their taxes and shame those such as Amazon who succeed on a business model of zero-hours contracts and tax avoidance.

In the 1940s that remarkable Labour Government created a New Towns Commission to provide work and better housing for those who lived in the slums of our major cities. Times have changed. The next Labour Government will commit to renewing our urban towns with better transport, properly funded public services and access to the skills and training needed to succeed in the modern world.



## **Community Focused Spaces: Regenerating Our Town Centres**

*Justin Madders, MP for Ellesmere Port and Neston*

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There are some areas of policy that frustrate. Everyone sees that change is needed, inquiries happen, proposals are made, pilots are run, and then nothing, or very little, happens. This has been the experience of our town centres over the last decade.

In recent years our high streets have been hit by changes in shopping habits, developing technology and the rising costs of business. I have seen this in the two towns within my own constituency both of which have a retail offer that is dramatically less than it was ten years ago, and nationally figures for the first half of 2019 show that sixteen stores closed every day - the highest recorded decline since monitoring began in 2010. With 60 bank branches closing every month, many towns have now lost all of their banks which undoubtedly has an effect on the high street not just for customers, but for other businesses that use local banks. High streets have also been seriously impacted by transport issues, with real cuts to public bus services making it difficult for customers and retail workers alike to access the town. Many of those shops, once closed, stay empty and are not replaced, with current estimates showing that 29,000 ex-stores have been empty for at least 12 months. This can add to the feeling of continuing decline and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as new ventures don't feel encouraged to invest. As the range of retailers reduces so do the reasons for people to visit the high street, and it continues.

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These issues are sadly repeated up and down the country. If we do not take the regeneration of our town centres much more seriously now, the inequalities and imbalance between towns and cities that we have seen in recent years will continue to accelerate, and the feeling shared by many people in our towns that they are not viewed as important in comparison to other parts of the country will worsen. Last year, nearly 85,000 retail jobs were lost in the UK, and the latest research predicts that online shopping will account for more than 50% of retail sales within the next ten years due to changing demographics, faster and cheaper home deliveries as well as there being fewer physical stores to shop in. The trends are there for all of us to see.

Our councils are doing what they can, but the multifaceted challenges we have heard about in the era of austerity cannot fall entirely on their shoulders. The evidence is clear that the capacity to meet such challenges has been hollowed out after a decade of cuts. It will take sustained, focused and locally driven but nationally supported investment to change this.

The Government's plan to address this crisis is to pit towns against one another in a competitive bidding processes, with only a lucky few getting a slice of the pie. By its nature, the approach is limited.

Labour has a five-point plan to support and rejuvenate our High Streets. The plan includes: banning ATM charges and stop bank and post office branch closures; improving local bus services and providing free bus travel for under 25s; delivering free public wi-fi in town centres; establishing a register of landlords of empty shops in each local authority and new powers for councils to reopen abandoned shops; and introducing annual revaluations of business rates, ensuring a fair appeals system and reviewing the business rates system.

These ideas are common-sense, straightforward and deliverable, and put together they can deliver meaningful changes that could provide a launch pad to secure the future prosperity of our town centres.

Retailers need to be given a fighting chance but we should not place all our eggs in the retail basket, instead we must revitalise our town centres by offering something different and new to encourage people into it, not just to buy things but to experience things and to get back that sense of community for which most people yearn.

It will take imagination and will require a change from the old way of doing things. The successful high streets of the future need to be community focused spaces which combine retail with leisure and services. Reinvigorated places where people spend time as well as money. In order to achieve it, we will need to give local authorities the capacity, resources and power to plan and deliver what is needed. They are best placed to identify what will work in their areas; be it housing, leisure, or investment in infrastructure, but to do this they need the necessary powers and must be backed by proper funding. It may be too much to expect central Government to provide much of the cash needed directly, but Councils are well placed to borrow at reasonable rates to invest over the long term. That investment will also have to step in where the private sector can't or won't; the electric vehicle charging infrastructure this country will need is one obvious way where a critical and inevitable investment could be done in a way that encourages people into town centres. The entire focus of the public sector from procurement to location of offices can be done with the needs of towns in mind rather than defaulting to big cities on every occasion.

Civic pride, community identity, jobs and opportunities all suffer when our high streets and town centres are in decline. We owe it to the people in our communities to do much better than to simply reverse that decline. We must have the ambition to deliver town centres that are equipped for tomorrow's world. When we see all the clamour for change, all the disaffection with the way the world is now, we know there are multiple issues with the way the economy works for many people and the decline of their own high street is perhaps an almost daily reminder for them of this. Government has the power to change it is if it thinks big enough.



**Fractured Transport Systems, Driven by Market Interests Alone: Rethinking  
Transport for Towns**  
*Ian Lucas, MP for Wrexham*

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The pressure on our towns – and particularly our town centres – has become a significant political issue.

In recent years, the shift towards shopping online has presented real problems for town centre economies. It has meant we have begun to focus on ways to revive places which were once thriving areas for the communities we represent, establishing new reasons for people to go there.

For this, towns need effective transport networks – and these are important not just within town centres, but for the whole of our towns and for the villages and other rural communities that surround them.

Along with the rise of online shopping, a crucial factor in the decline of our town centres has been a failure to provide valuable transport systems. This is a major cause for concern, as our town centres are not just important areas for commercial businesses, they are also vital to the provision of public services. They are essential community hubs which we cannot neglect.

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I represent Wrexham, the largest town in North Wales.

One of the largest local complaints I have is that there is inadequate transport provision to the town. There is no doubt in my mind that the root of this is privatisation – firstly, of the bus industry in the 1980s and, subsequently, of the railway industry in the 1990s. This has created a fractured transport system, driven by market interests alone, and services are too often delivered in an unplanned way. In recent years, the subsidy which mitigated some of the impact of this already-fractured system has disappeared, laying bare a wholly private system, short of investment and failing to address the social needs of our communities.

It is, quite simply, imperative that we deliver a transformed public transport system for our towns.

In Wrexham, advances with regards to improving transport have not been easily won – but we are seeing progress.

Sixteen years ago, Louise Ellman, MP for Liverpool Riverside, then Vice-Chair of the Transport Select Committee, arranged for me, a new Committee member, to meet the then Chief Executive of Merseytravel to talk about direct train links between Wrexham and her city. In May of this year, it was wonderful to meet Louise at the platform at Lime Street, after getting off a train direct from Wrexham. It was the first direct service from Wrexham to Liverpool since the mid-1970s, made possible by the reopening of the Halton Curve.

A lot of resilience was required in securing this now-regular service but we got there – thanks also to the commitment of Welsh Government Rail Minister, Ken Skates, the advent of Transport for Wales and help from Steve Rotherham, Liverpool City Region Mayor.

It is hugely significant. By opening up services to Wrexham from Liverpool, we boost our employment opportunities and enhance our industrial strength. It is good for tourism too.

There can be no doubt that transport, in and to our towns, has been seriously neglected by the UK Tory Government.

In Wales, transport is devolved to a Labour government in the Welsh Assembly and the creation of the Transport for Wales public body, modelled on Transport for London, has been a positive move. It creates a structure within which we can begin to design transport systems which serve people and are not purely driven by the profit motive.

Progress has been achieved but there is a lot more work to be done.

We have established a local initiative to have festivals in Wrexham town centre, to give novel reasons to encourage people to go there. People want to come to our festivals in Wrexham but cannot do so because of the inadequate public transport system that exists. We need to have much more integrated transport in our communities, applying new technologies and ways to travel, with interchangeable tickets for bus, rail and any other form of travel. We also need a plan for the development of sustainable transport systems, including cycling and more healthy methods of moving around. There is a massive contrast between the levels of investment in cycle lanes in places like London, compared to that which is being made in towns up and down the country. Again, the blame here lies with the Tories.

There is an increasing perception that our towns are simply not receiving the levels of investment that they need to have, and this problem should be an urgent priority for any incoming government.

It is imperative that the first step taken is to create regional structures to allow people to travel within the region in which they live. Connecting towns to villages to cities and to rural communities is a crucial first step to safeguarding their future. When these structures are in place, proper cooperation can begin, leaving development of transport to individual local authorities.

Let us make sure the efforts that are going into making sure town centres are worthwhile places to visit are not frustrated by the lack of ability to travel.



## **'Retail Jobs Are Real Jobs' a New Industrial Strategy for our Towns**

*Paddy Lillis, General Secretary, Usdaw*

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There is a great deal of focus on the high street in the discussion around the future of retail and towns. The boarded up shops we see when we walk down our local high street are a very visible symbol of the retail sector's troubles. When we stand in a high street that was once the centre of people's lives and is now threadbare, it speaks to a frightening vision of the future; a future where people no longer interact face to face, and where the ties that bind communities together fray and break.

However, the pressures in retail go beyond the high street. The supermarkets and retail parks are now facing their own crisis. Vast retail spaces come at a hefty price, and customers are changing their shopping habits at a pace we have never seen before, switching to online giants whose low overheads allow them to undercut the traditional model. Even the stores that have managed to maintain a widespread physical presence are constantly restructuring, often cutting their staffing levels back to an absolute minimum in an effort to remain competitive.

In hundreds of towns across the country, the rapid growth of supermarkets during the 1990s and early 2000s was essential in filling the jobs gap left by loss of industry. Retail jobs may be stereotyped as a stop gap, or a way to pick up some extra cash, but the reality is very different. Just as whole families once worked in the same factories and mills, there are now generations who work in the same shop together. Most of the Usdaw members I talk to are family breadwinners, with many years of experience and an extraordinary sense of loyalty to their employer. So when a big shop closes down in

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a town where retail is the major employer, it isn't just a tragedy for the individual workers, but for the entire community.

For too long, the focus on retail jobs, where it existed at all, has been on how to get people out of them and into 'real' jobs. This perspective is entirely misguided. With the right approach from government and employers, retail jobs can and should provide stable incomes, access to skills and training, and job satisfaction. However, I believe that a prevailing disdain for retail work is a key factor in the failure of this Government to respond appropriately to the retail crisis. If any other sector had haemorrhaged 74,000 jobs in the space of a year, there would be emergency measures taken to stem this loss. For retail, we have seen little but warm words, some half-hearted task groups and tinkering around the edges.

The Government's Industrial Strategy focuses almost entirely on science, technology and manufacturing. Retail, the country's largest private sector employer, is mentioned only five times in their 253 page white paper. This fact was pointed out by John McDonnell at the launch in June 2019 of Usdaw's Industrial Strategy for Retail. We developed the Industrial Strategy as our response to the retail sector crisis and the Government's inaction. The strategy is summarised below, but the full document can be downloaded at [www.usdaw.org.uk/industrialstrategy](http://www.usdaw.org.uk/industrialstrategy)

## **1. Economy and Community**

We need measures to create a more level playing field between in-store and online retailing. The existing economic framework is no longer fit for purpose, and we are calling for:-

- Reform of tax laws to level the playing field between online and 'bricks-and-mortar' retailers, including a fundamental review of business rates.
- A review of town centre parking charges and other transport issues.
- An increase in community focus to drive up footfall.
- A review of the role and function of the Competition and Markets Authority, including a voice for workers in decision-making.

## **2. People and Productivity**

Retail workers are working under a cloud of uncertainty and job insecurity. Staff morale in the sector is at an all-time low. Decent pay and job security for retail workers would help drive productivity in the sector, improving employee retention and engagement. This will require:-

- Minimum pay of £10 per hour – a real living wage - for all workers.
- Legislation to tackle underemployment and insecure work by providing a minimum contract of 16 hours (for those who want them).
- A contract that reflects the normal hours people actually work.
- Investment from Government in skills within the retail sector, with a particular focus on workers affected by automation.

## **3. Changing Perceptions – Retail Jobs are Real Jobs**

We need to recognise the critical contribution retail jobs make to household incomes and the wider economy, particularly in our towns. We are calling for:-

- An increased focus on retail across Government policy and decision-making mechanisms.
- Greater focus by retailers on good customer service which is a valued element of the in-store retail experience. While in the short-term reduced headcount and automation may reduce costs, the long-term damage to the sector needs to be considered in its entirety.
- Measures to tackle retail crime, particularly in light of automation and the lack of investment in stores which has, in some cases, resulted in severe understaffing
- A designated inclusive body for the retail sector that brings together existing panels and inquiries, to ensure a co-ordinated and coherent approach that involves all key stakeholders, especially retail workers,

who should have a voice and input into policy making and key decisions.

This strategy is focused on retail, but its application could extend across the foundational economy to the other 'invisible jobs' in leisure and hospitality. Our high streets and towns are in serious trouble, but their decline is far from inevitable. With the political will to implement a comprehensive industrial strategy to support them, and with workers front and centre in those efforts, it is possible to see our high streets and local communities prosper again. Only Labour has demonstrated that political will, and only Labour can deliver for our towns and the workers who keep them alive.



### **A Town to Call Home, Rebalancing the Cultural Dial**

Tracy Brabin, MP for Batley and Spen

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I have worked in the creative industries for the majority of my career, predominately as an actor and a writer and since making the switch to politics, my resolve to make sure everyone can access culture, wherever they live or whatever they earn, has only strengthened.

Culture and creativity run through our country like Brighton through a stick of rock. We are rightly proud of our creative industries and our great institutions.

Films made here immediately recognisable from a single still, books sold in all languages across the world, children go to be dreaming of appearing in a West End show and our music is handed down from generation to generation like a gift.

So, given all that we have, why is it that millions of people need to get on a bus or a train to get access it?

We know that Arts Council funding is four times higher in city constituencies than in towns. Some of that discrepancy has been mitigated for some by the Creative People and Places scheme and in recent times my constituency of Batley and Spen has been treated to some incredible displays of culture.

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One of which I'm especially proud was when a group of West End professionals, inspired by the late Jo Cox MP, brought their expertise and passion to put on an incredible performance of Les Misérables at a custom-made location in Oxfam Wastesaver in my constituency. The cast was entirely made up of local school children and the standard was impeccable and what really struck me was how many people thought this was a treat, or not something that does, or should happen in areas like my constituency.

We're not a big city, we don't have a university or a theatre, all the things that are usually associated with 'cultural places' aren't in place – but so what? Every town and every resident in a town should have access to culture.

And let's be clear, I'm talking about a cinema, or a theatre or a gallery. I understand that not everywhere can have a media city like in Salford or the V&A like Dundee or the countless opportunities of London. However, we in towns should expect a fair slice of the pie.

And things are slowly changing. The Arts Council contributes around £53million for Creative People and Places, a programme designed to bring cultural events to areas with low levels of arts engagement, with a further £17.5m announced this month.

And it was a happy shock to discover that their most recent research 'The Value of Arts and Culture in Placemaking' showed arts and culture is up there with good schools where people choose to live. This desire to live where there is a cultural offer, if taken seriously by policy makers, councils, the third sector and the public could be the defining driver to regenerate our towns.

That 68% of the people surveyed said arts and cultural events are very important for fostering community feeling, building confidence and a sense of identity must be a powerful reason to act, especially as schemes and projects so far have failed to deliver substantial transformative change.

And, be in no doubt, this is about investment, regeneration and job opportunities. The Creative Industries is the fastest growing sector of the UK economy with the number of creative jobs increasing by 30% since 2011 contributing £101.5 bn to the economy, so

we cannot afford to allow the divide between communities widen because it's primarily towns that will miss out.

That's why my Labour Towns colleagues and I are working with creatives, Councils and funders to see what's possible and what could work to enrich our towns. We want to explore how we can sustainably embed culture and creativity into every town, no matter how small.

So where should our priorities be?

Well firstly, every town should have a venue, whether that's a town hall, a library, a community or even a leisure centre. Places where the doors are open to the community, either for meeting or spaces where culture can be displayed, whether it's a gallery, a play or a gig.

My colleagues and I have also taken inspiration from the great success of Hull's time as City of Culture and believe we need one for towns.

The award would bring investment, tourism, regeneration and an explosion of ideas into our towns. It would be an opportunity for communities to decide what sort of culture they want to promote and celebrate.

This could act as the boiler room for ideas to bring about the regeneration that is so vital to this project.

Supporting towns to support a night-time economy with places on the high street for buskers and exhibitions, empty shops being opened up for community performance spaces and locals taking control of their own cultural offer, demanding high-quality and innovation for their community.

And we should always remember that culture doesn't stand still, so whereas I might think 'actor', an 18 year old might think 'YouTuber'.

Youth clubs have been devastated and while rebuilding them we should utilise technology and include recording spaces for music and online.

Our young people are some of the unhappiest in the world, and our policies should be aimed at turning that around.

As we work on these plans, we'll work with Tom Watson, Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Digital, Media and Sport, members and our policy teams to discover which of these ideas can become Labour policy.

However, one thing is clear, culture is not an add-on, an afterthought or something 'nice to have'. Rather it has the real potential to be an engine for regeneration in towns, transforming places into places where people want to live and be happy, brilliant places to live, work, create and enjoy experiences of coming together as audiences and practitioners.

The Art's Council's survey proves that is now what people are looking for when deciding where to live.

We need to deliver at speed and with commitment and a Labour government will do just that.

- Every town should have a venue – a library, a community centre, a village hall where people can meet, create, share views and enjoy culture.
- The Government should support a Town of Culture award.
- There should be a fifth pillar of the EBacc so creative subjects are given the same status as STEM subjects.
- City based arts institutions receiving arts council funding should have to prove their reach goes well beyond the city walls and into local towns and villages.
- Every town should have a space for youngsters to come together to create, like a youth theatre, a recording studio or a music venue.



**Ensuring a Fair Deal, Why We Need a Public Service Guarantee For  
Our Towns**

*Melanie Onn, MP for Great Grimsby*

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Universalism is a key pillar of our public services in the UK. When we walk into a hospital, go into a school or enter a library we do not expect to be treated differently because of how much we earn or where we are from.

But far too often this universality breaks down when we go to a different hospital, school or library. Going to a hospital in Grimsby, where all four targets for timely care are missed, will not get you the same standard or expedience of care as in Kingston. For example, nearly twenty percent more patients with an urgent GP referral for cancer are seen within 62 days in Kingston than in Grimsby, and a similar story is told for A&E admittance, the time between referral and treatment and the commencement of mental health therapy.

This shouldn't be the case. We should expect that, wherever we are in the country, we receive the same standard of care whichever of our public services we use and that standards remain high.

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But too often our towns bear the brunt of this inequality. In local authorities like Doncaster and North East Lincolnshire, there are half as many 'outstanding' and twice as many 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate' schools as in Hackney and only 6% of providers in the most deprived areas are rated as Outstanding in North East Lincolnshire compared to 33% in Hackney.

This has a significant impact on the relative prosperity and outcomes of those growing up in our towns compared to in our cities, North East Lincolnshire has more than double the number of 16 to 17-year olds outside of education, employment and training than London.

For our towns to do well and develop we need to focus on improving the standards of our public services, ensuring that our children are not left behind and that those suffering from health problems can be treated swiftly to avoid a loss of working time, longer term complications developing from illnesses and avoidable deaths.

This will also make our towns attractive to new workers who can bring prosperity through the new industries that are coming to our town. It is hard to convince people up sticks and move their family if they think that the schools they will send their children to and the hospitals they may rely on are significantly worse than in other parts of the country that they may be looking at.

Ensuring that service standards become consistent throughout the UK would not only be fair but would also help increase the prosperity of our towns and communities. So how can we do this?

We need to ensure that the public can expect a minimum standard from our public services, ensuring that no area is left behind and that everyone can feel they will receive a similar standard of service from all our public services and not expect variation or a postcode lottery.

This already exists in part through NHS waiting targets, but budget constraints imposed by the Conservative Government means that targets are missed regularly, and the Government are unwilling to reduce the targets and accept the harm they've done to our NHS or invest the necessary funding to ensure targets can be hit by an acceptable number of hospitals.

This has meant that the narrative around these targets have become around a national failure rather than one of variation within the system. Labour should change that not just by providing the funding to ensure the targets are met far more frequently but also by putting a focus on addressing any inequalities that sneak in at the heart of public service policy.

This could be applied to our schools, ending the postcode lottery, our libraries where we can make sure that a minimum level of provision is provided per a certain number of residents or our buses to end the wide disparity between service quality and frequency between towns and cities.

Public services is not the only place where this type of guarantee could be useful; in towns like Grimsby we've seen a loss of services from our high street, with free cash machines and banks in particular being a difficult loss for many elderly residents who still heavily rely on these services to manage their money, with those on lower incomes disproportionately affected by a loss of free cash machines.

A service guarantee, working through public-private partnerships and support from councils and the Government, could cover these areas, ensuring a minimum level of provision of banking services in our town centers and providing solid protection against the erosion of these services that has happened over the past few years. This could be applied other services like pubs and post offices to help reverse the loss of facilities on our high street across the country.

By providing a minimum standard of services and facilities regardless of location we can put the life back into our towns and assure that they are attractive to everyone in the country.



## **Revitalising Our Towns through the Night Time Economy**

*Liz McInnes, MP for Heywood and Middleton*

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The role played by the night time economy in the regeneration of our towns can easily be overlooked. Yet the recent example set by Greater Manchester offers an innovative and hopeful approach to regeneration for other towns across the UK.

The night time economy covers all activity between 6pm and 6am. This includes cultural and leisure activities as well as industries that work at night, such as transport, social care and the emergency services. In Greater Manchester, the night time economy employs around 414,000 people, which represents 33% of the area's total workforce. What's more, it has seen a faster growth rate than the rest of the area's economy since 2001.

In their *Night Time Economy Blueprint*, Labour Metro Mayor, Andy Burnham, and his Night Time Economy Adviser, Sacha Lord, have made a number of proposals to be implemented by April 2020. These are designed to ensure that our towns, as well as our

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cities, can offer thriving nightlife to residents, attracting income, jobs and increased footfall that will directly benefit our towns.

The plans cover all 10 local authorities that make up the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). This includes my local authority, Rochdale, as well as Oldham, Trafford, Stockport, Wigan, Tameside, Salford, Bury, Bolton and Manchester.

The proposals cover safety for staff and visitors, improved public transport and cultural diversity.

The Blueprint was compiled after consultation with customers, workers, operators, local authorities and other stakeholders.

The Blueprint embraces the “Agent for Change” principle, which refers to measures aimed at facilitating engagement in the night time economy. For example, encouraging later opening hours across cultural organisations, cafes, shops and restaurants to provide greater accessibility and opportunities for non-drinkers.

There is also, importantly, a pledge to improve mental health provision and wellbeing support for businesses and their employees operating during night time hours, plus the introduction of enhanced safety measures for customers, artists and employees. In order to ensure that leisure and hospitality staff have a safe and supportive working environment, a voluntary “Operators Standard” is proposed, which includes best practice guidelines for wages and tipping.

In addition, there are measures aimed at protecting residents, such as ensuring that new build developments located near to venues like pubs are properly sound-insulated to reduce noise disturbance and complaints.

The plans will be implemented with the help of the Night Time Economy Panel, which comprises of expert organisations from across the GMCA, including Greater Manchester Police, Transport for Greater Manchester and the LGBT Foundation.

#### Altrincham’s Inspiring Example

I met with Sacha Lord in his home town of Altrincham, where we visited the bustling streets and thriving local market. We talked about what has been done to make

Altrincham such an attractive destination for both daytime and night time culture and experiences.

Sacha spoke about how the opening of the large out-of-town retail experience, the Trafford Centre, had such a detrimental effect on local businesses. Shoppers had deserted the town centre for the convenience of major high street stores under one roof. Yet with buy-in from local businesses, Altrincham is once more thriving, with niche shops and restaurants, microbreweries and the market hall transformed into an eating and drinking experience – a great place to chat and meet friends and family.

Sacha explained the important role the night time economy had played in this revitalisation. He said that Altrincham had now become a night time destination, which had certainly not been the case a few years ago. In 2018, it was honoured as the 'Best High Street in the UK'.

As Sacha observed: "As the traditional model of a retail-driven high street is failing, the night time economy is a powerful tool for the revitalisation of our region."

He is conscious of his role as "Night Time Tsar" across the whole of Greater Manchester, saying: "We want to ensure there is a thriving night time offer across all of our communities, towns, city centres and high streets in Greater Manchester."

Elizabeth Faulkner, who is the Business Improvement District (BID) Manager for Altrincham, spoke with me about the importance of local businesses working together with each making a small financial contribution towards community events and marketing of the town.

Elizabeth also stressed the important role that social media has played in getting out a positive message identifying Altrincham as a place to go for both daytime and night time activities. Whilst so much of social media seems preoccupied with talking places down it is encouraging to see it being harnessed as a force for good and it clearly can be a very valuable tool to any town seeking to improve its image and attract more people.

Optimism for the Future of Our Towns

The Blueprint has been enthusiastically welcomed by various bodies involved in the UK's hospitality sector, including Brigid Simmonds, the Chief Executive of the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA). She says: "It is fantastic to see Greater Manchester creating a best in class night time economy...and creating that sense of place so important to local communities."

Kate Nicholls, the Chief Executive of UK Hospitality, says: "The GMCA understands the importance of the late-night hospitality sector. We need more local authorities who "get" what we do". She wants to see the widespread adoption of similar policies by mayoral authorities around the UK.

All our towns are unique. Each needs to play to its strengths in improving its night time offer and not simply try to imitate what neighbouring areas are offering. It is so encouraging to see Labour-controlled Greater Manchester leading the way and putting its recommendations into action.

Altrincham, and Greater Manchester's Night Time Economy Blueprint, serve as important examples. They teach us that when considering our declining high streets and falling visitor numbers, we should not only concentrate on new ways to attract footfall during traditional daytime shopping hours. We must also focus on the contribution of the night time economy.