Who gets to own and shape our high streets?

Liam Kelly's evidence to the English Housing, Communities & Local Government Committee brings the experience of community businesses into the debate on England's high streets. His proposals to reduce VAT on retrofit and extend business rates relief to asset-locked enterprises deserve serious consideration. High rents, energy bills and the cost of making premises usable can put an otherwise viable enterprise out of reach. These pressures also shape what a high street can offer, from independent shops and cafés to childcare, repair services, training and affordable workspace.

Power to Change's post names community interest companies and community benefit societies in its account of the rates proposal. Co-operative societies deserve explicit consideration too. The linked project page already gives a practical example in October Books, a Southampton co-operative that combines bookselling with space for community events and services. The linked rental auctions article leaves the co-operative model unexplored. Bringing it into the policy discussion would make clear how the people who use, work in and depend on a high street can share in decisions about its future.

Asset locks and democratic governance serve different purposes. An asset lock protects assets for an agreed purpose. Democratic governance gives members a say in how the enterprise is run. A community benefit society can adopt a statutory asset lock, while a co-operative society can adopt a voluntary one through its rules. Any proposed rates relief should spell out which safeguards qualify and how applicants can demonstrate lasting local benefit. That would give eligible co-operatives a clear route to apply alongside other community enterprises.

Michelle Quinlan is right to draw attention to fit-out costs, planning delays, access and maintenance. A rental auction can open a route into a vacant property, but the incoming tenant still needs the money to make it usable and lease terms that justify the investment. Power to Change reports that the planned Birkenhead auction did not go ahead, citing funding design and stretched council capacity. Councils need the staff and resources to work with landlords and community organisations on practical questions about repairs, affordable rents and who pays for improvements.

Where buildings are strategically important, community ownership should also be on the table. Nudge Community Builders https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pliBwXV9Dco , a charitable community benefit society in Plymouth, used community shares to help acquire two buildings on Union Street . Its experience shows what becomes possible when local investment is backed by wider finance. In places where residents have little spare money to invest, grants and patient finance are especially important if community ownership is to be a realistic option.

The next phase of Power to Change's work should involve co-operatives and co-operative development bodies directly. Councils could test negotiated leases and community purchase alongside rental auctions, pairing each route with affordable finance, property advice and support for democratic governance. Success should be measured by how long useful services stay open, whether local enterprises can afford to remain, and how much influence residents and workers have over the places they rely on.