

DECEMBER INSIGHTS by CHRIS TURNER

The last month of the year is a busy time in terms of policy and the new government's thinking on the future; there is a range of policy proposals and a white paper, which colleagues in BIDs will need to be aware of as legislation is firmed up for the Summer.

The government's [Devolution white paper](#) is a key document for many BIDs. Government is suggesting a “permanent shift of power away from Whitehall and into the hands of those who know their communities best.” They say they want efficient and accountable local and regional government, with local champions who understand their local places, their identities and strengths, and how to harness them. They believe that they will empower communities to take back control from Westminster and taking back control – if it means control for communities, not politicians in Westminster – is absolutely essential for growth. In the white paper there is a mention of BIDs [[§4.1 p84](#)] *And we will seek to support high streets by strengthening Business Improvement Districts which have helped to improve and city centres across the UK for 20 years, while ensuring they operate to high standards and are accountable to their communities.* One key element of the white paper is the suggested disappearance of district councils and a move toward single unitary authorities for England; this will of course be a major change for many BIDs, for whom a local district council is often both the financial and ballot officer. The initial announcement debate in parliament is available [here](#). The reference to BIDs operating to high standards and being accountable to their communities is already an important part of current British BIDs training and development – with our two Certificates in BID Management, and Marketing, the Diploma in BID Leadership and our Accreditation programme and we will continue to ensure that we take that agenda forward.

To some this appears to be **levelling up** by another name and the outcome of that policy is getting much [scrutiny](#). The last government apparently spent only a quarter of the money they allocated to levelling up. They allocated £10.6bn to the three main schemes, which provided funding for regeneration projects as diverse as leisure centres and local transport networks. But it managed to spend only £2.5bn of that money, which experts blame on a mixture of high inflation, bureaucracy and poor decision-making: “It is clear that short-term, competitive funding is not the most effective way of investing in communities...they spent too long requiring local authorities to bid for funding, didn't get it out on time and changed the rules of the game throughout – making it very difficult for

places to invest.” Many in BIDs involved in these programmes – some 60% - always felt this; it will be essential for the new devolution proposals not to be similarly enmeshed.

As we all know, one of the driving forces of business rates growth is the absurd historical immovability of **council taxes** from their post-Thatcher setting in 1991. British BIDs has spoken of this often – to the Treasury select committee inter alia. This is now getting some traction at last with some **MPs** starting to query the anomalies. The Labour backbencher Jonathan Brash is on a mission to draw attention to “the third rail of British politics” – because no mainstream party, including his own, wants to touch it for fear of electoral death. Brash has set up an all-party parliamentary group for council tax reform. And he is right to point to the madness of the current system. Labour has promised a much-needed overhaul of the council funding formula, aimed at tilting it back towards the most deprived areas.

Much has been written on **business crime**, and the analysis continues, with [The Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee](#) a short inquiry into shop theft. They list 15 key factors and specifically mention the use of the outdated term “shoplifting” which serves to trivialise the serious, organised nature of an increasing element of shop theft which is having a devastating effect on the retail sector. They recommend its use should be phased out, and British BIDs will henceforth do so. At the same time The **Home Secretary** also **announced** more than half a billion pounds of additional central government funding for policing next year to support the government’s Safer Streets Mission, including an increase in the core grant for police forces, and extra resources for neighbourhood policing, the NCA and counter-terrorism. This can only be good news for BIDs and their BCRPs.

An interesting development emerging from the House of Lords has been their report on [High streets: Life beyond retail](#), which is detailed, has had much response from the trade and professional bodies and is an interesting and very useful read. The report calls for a reimagining of UK high streets, emphasising the need to move beyond traditional retail to include more restaurants, leisure activities, and public services. [Holly Lewis](#), town architect for the London Borough of Hackney reckons that the report emphasises that local authorities, communities, and businesses must collaborate to create adaptable and resilient high streets that reflect local needs. A fixed, one-size-fits-all approach should be avoided in favour of flexible strategies that can evolve over time. Nevertheless, she feels that the report is honest about the scale of the problem. High streets are complicated places, and the ground is shifting underneath them. The challenges facing high streets

- and therefore BIDs - include the climate emergency, the impact of digital technology innovations on consumer behaviour and work patterns, and the need to accommodate housing by restructuring town centres – all of which are felt keenly by those trading on our high streets. Only holistic approaches will do. The government would do well to consider high streets as a powerhouse to multiply the benefits of its spending across multiple agendas. An intriguing piece By Andrew Holland is in Marketing Week [Ecommerce didn't kill the high street – retailers did](#). It's easy to blame the convenience of online shopping for the struggles of the high street, but recent success stories show there is still a demand for physical stores. However, investment is key.

Earlier this month, British BIDs were joined by **Philip Collins**, former chief speech writer to Tony Blair and founder of [The Draft](#), for a webinar on Placemaking and Language. Philip has advised that he would be very happy to provide further help or advice with editing or writing as they are now doing a lot of place-based writing. As he said, "*mostly because we love it, and it is such interesting work*"!

All the latest ballot data comes out in Ballot Watch (for members) and recent highlights were included in the British BIDs December Round Up - it is great to see some twelve BIDs successfully come through their ballots this month. The schedule for the British BIDs Certificates, Diploma and Academy courses are now available for 2025 and are all listed [here](#).

Do please all have a very happy Christmas & New Year!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Professor Christopher Turner, Head of Research, British BIDs