

# Research impact: making a difference

## Reviving British town centres and high streets

UK Business Improvement Districts, introduced as a direct result of LSE research, have been instrumental in reviving town centres and high streets

### What was the problem?

Traditional high street shops were finding it increasingly difficult to compete with out-of-town malls and other privatised spaces where shoppers could park free of charge and enjoy better facilities. Many town centres were blighted by empty, boarded-up shops as independent traders went out of business. A strategy was needed to breathe life back into the high street.

### What did we do?

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) were already enjoying success in New York. They are geographically defined areas in which businesses pay an additional tax to fund services such as street cleaning, security and marketing and improvements such as urban landscape enhancements.

LSE researchers, led by Professor Tony Travers, examined the operation and impact of BIDs in New York and published a 1996 report funded by the City of London. Their research included fieldwork in New York undertaken by Travers (and Jeroen Weimar, of global consultancy KPMG), which involved interviews with BID presidents, board members, academics and critics. Analysis of academic literature on BIDS in other US and Canadian cities also informed the report, as well as research undertaken by Travers in the UK on local government and public finance.

### What happened?

The report was endorsed by the Association of London Government, which represented London borough councils. Its president, Lord Jenkin of

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Roding, introduced a Bill in the House of Lords to legislate for introduction of BIDs into the UK. The LSE research was cited by Lord Jenkin in his second reading speech. When the Bill was unsuccessful, the Conservative Government commissioned further research into the issue.

BIDs were finally introduced by Tony Blair in the Local Government Act of 2003, along very similar lines to those recommended in the LSE report.

Travers was involved in seminars and presentations to organisations such as the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, London First (a business representative group) and Central London Partnership (a business/local government forum).

BIDs have subsequently been created, following referendums, in most parts of the UK. In 2012 the Northern Ireland Assembly introduced legislation to extend them into Northern Ireland.

It was suggested that BIDs would, if introduced in London, allow traditional high streets to compete on even terms with malls and other privatised spaces. This has occurred in places as diverse as the West End, Camden Town and Ealing Broadway. Manchester introduced a BID for its city centre in 2013.

Travers has maintained his involvement with several of the BIDs in London, notably the New West End Company and the BID in Central London local to LSE.

The success of BIDS has been quoted both by the government in relation to its 'localism' and Big Society projects, and also by Mary Portas, the retail consultant and broadcaster, in her review of high streets.

A subsequent LSE report on Community Improvement Districts commissioned by the City of London and London Councils was published in 2012. The idea of using the BID model to develop local community-led governance was supported by Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude, who explicitly cited this research.

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Travers has spoken at hearings in Parliament and at business conferences about the development of BID's in Britain and their impact on the private sector. He has also continued to take part in academic and public events, and has been cited in mainstream media about the advantages and disadvantages of BID's, particularly in London.

BID's are now seen as delivering a number of public services in town and city centres. The Portas Review suggested that BID's will have a key role in reviving traditional town centres. More directly, in dozens of localities across the country, BID's are delivering valued services such as street cleaning, marketing, security and urban improvements.

The original LSE research, enabling knowledge exchange from the US to the UK, can thus be seen to have had a direct impact on the potential for city centres to compete with out-of-town malls and privatised space and for the British high street to be revived.

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He is currently an advisor to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee and the Communities and Local Government Select Committee. He has published a number of books on cities and government, including *Failure in British Government*, *The Politics of the Poll Tax* (with David Butler and Andrew Adonis), *Paying for Health, Education and Housing: How does the Centre Pull the Purse Strings* (with Howard Glennerster and John Hills) and *The Politics of London: Governing the Ungovernable City*.

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*LSE gratefully acknowledges the following for support of this research:*

The City of London

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/researchImpact>

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