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Retail NI launches plan to regenerate high streets

Retail NI launched a 47 point plan to revamp Northern Ireland's high streets at a conference at Queen's University Belfast.

The plan, contained in the Regeneration NI report, proposes establishing a Northern Ireland Town and Cities Partnership to manage and coordinate town centre policy and for councils to develop a retail development plan for each town centre.

Other NI proposals include: freezing on and off-street car parking charges for five years, devolving regeneration powers to local councils, establishing retail academies in each council area, parity with England on small business rate relief, and a tech strategy for independent retailers.

Retail NI also suggests the creation of a Rural Town Infrastructure Fund and a Future High Streets Fund.

Glyn Roberts, Retail NI chief executive, said: "Our Regeneration NI report is a radical plan to create 21st century town and city centres, updating our policy priorities and setting out new thinking for Northern Ireland's high streets.

"Radical thinking is required to be injected into the policy-making process. Too many of our villages, our towns and our cities are testament to a failure in regeneration policy to date. For the past 15 years, Northern Ireland has not only had the highest shop vacancy rate in the UK, but nearly double the UK national average."

Roberts added: "Reforming business rates is now a much higher priority than ever before for Retail NI members and needs to be addressed by an incoming Executive. The Rethinking Business Rates proposals presented by the last finance minister, which were based on ideas put forward by Retail NI and Hospitality Ulster, need to be a top priority.

"The recent UK Budget announced that English independent retailers would be receiving a rate reduction of one third, with our members in Northern Ireland receiving absolutely nothing. Retail NI members deserve the same as their English counterparts."