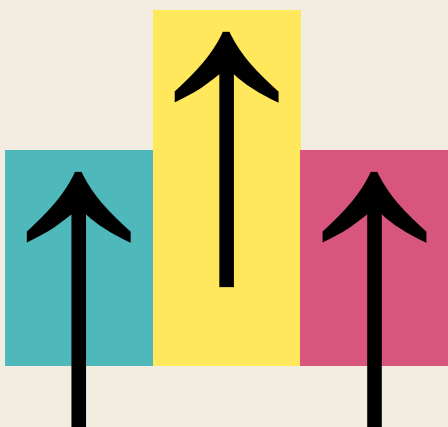


Town Centre Recovery Report



A report by the
National Retail
Planning Forum
& Public Practice

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Foreword by the National Retail Planning Forum

It might be tempting to think that the current problems suffered by town centres as a result of the pandemic are a new phenomenon. But think again! Many economic recessions in the past have resulted in hard times for town centres, with waves of closures of shops and other businesses. This has long been recognised by central government, local authorities and the private sector. As a result, much research has been undertaken over many years into what to do about it, key publications of which are included in the attached bibliography, spanning more than 20 years.

What is new is the *scale* of the problems in many town centres during the pandemic. Lockdowns, social distancing measures and ‘work from home’ guidelines have had a substantial impact on town centre footfall and spending. In addition, the trading context today is different from that of the past in two important respects:

- Town centres now face much stronger competition from out-of-centre retailing than during previous recessions; owing to four successive ‘waves’ of retail decentralisation to out-of-centre locations (food and non-food superstores, retail parks, designer outlet centres, and regional shopping malls).
- Online retailing is now highly ubiquitous and very widely used; so much so that it now forms the ‘fifth wave’ of retail decentralisation – decentralising sales right down to the level of every individual’s electronic device.

These trends, driven by the convenience and experience demands of consumers, have forced many retailers to downsize to fewer locations (or even abandon physical stores altogether) and invest in digital platforms.

Thus, many town centres have been harder hit by the pandemic than by previous recessions. Nevertheless past research can still provide useful and practical lessons in how to respond effectively to the twin threats of increased competition and reduced demand.

Clearly it would be pointless for anyone engaged in town centre revitalisation today to attempt to reinvent the wheel. The National Retail Planning Forum (NRPF) therefore commissioned the literature review, which (after the Introduction) forms Part 1 of this important research report. The bibliography and literature review together form a unique point of reference for such work, and the best starting point for building upon the achievements of the past and avoiding previous mistakes and pitfalls.

Structural change and challenges can bring new opportunities. The case studies set out in Part 2 of the report provide more up-to-date and useful practical insights into what is currently effective in town centre revitalisation and what is not.

The NRPF considers that the single most important finding of the report is that the active involvement of local authorities is critical to success in town centre revitalisation, as they:

- Can resist developments which would have significant adverse impacts on their town centres and high streets.
- Can promote the vitality and viability of town centres, through flexible planning policies which allow them to diversify and support a mix of retail and non-retail uses including housing.
- Are well placed to lead and foster collaboration amongst stakeholders to achieve cross-sector 'buy-in' and create a clear deliverable vision for their town centres.
- Often own income-producing property assets in the town centre, e.g. car parks and shopping centres, and are therefore able to shape transformation and regeneration initiatives.
- Have compulsory purchase powers, to assemble sites and ownerships for development and re-purposing.
- Have environmental management and social value responsibilities.
- May also be highway authorities, and have parking control powers.

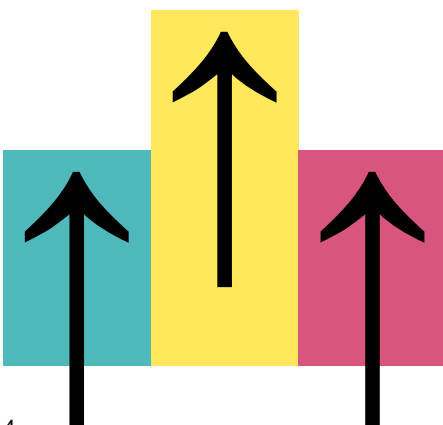
It is encouraging to see from the case studies that some local authorities are now using their property assets and powers to improve the attractiveness of their town centres. This idea is not new. A paper presented to the Retail Planning Seminar at the Town and Country Planning Summer School in 2000 put forward the proposal that local authorities should dedicate their income-producing assets in town centres to form a long-term financial endowment for the town centre to underwrite improvements to its attractiveness. The case studies show that some local authorities are now starting to do this effectively, but more need to follow if success is to be achieved.

Of course local authorities cannot turn things around on their own. They need the backing of central government, e.g. through national planning policies and planning appeal decisions, and financial support. The private sector too must commit as far as possible to maintaining investment in town centres, and continue to innovate in the provision of goods and services there. The literature review underlines the importance of partnership working, and the case studies provide some current examples of its success.

The NRPF and the Planning Officers Society (POS) thank Public Practice for this important and valuable report, and commend it as a substantial contribution to the theory and practice of town centre revitalisation.

Public Practice prepared the report, with financial support from the NRPF and POS; and the research was steered by NRPF Directors and Officers as follows:

Malcolm Sharp – NRPF Chair and POS representative
Linda Durnal – NRPF Company Secretary and Secretary to POS
Steve Norris – NRPF Director and Research Lead
Jonathan Baldock – NRPF Director
Edward Woodall – NRPF Director
Chris Watts – NRPF Director
Peter Keenan – NRPF Director
Christine Reeves – NRPF Research Secretary



Introduction

This report came together when the National Retail Planning Forum (NRPF) and the Planning Officers Society (POS) approached Public Practice, and asked us to explore models and approaches to town centre regeneration within the context of the Covid-19 recovery.

From the work Public Practice Associates and Alumni do on the ground in regeneration, planning, urban design and community participation roles in local authorities, we know of the scale of challenge officers are facing in the context of Covid-19. However we are also inspired by the resilience authorities have shown over the last few years, and how they are looking at new models and partnerships for town centre recovery.

We are acutely aware of the number of reports and guidance that have been commissioned over the last twenty years. But to look to the future, we must look to the past, and we decided to undertake a rigorous review of literature and distill learnings and lessons that are relevant today.

We believe strongly in learning from places, and therefore we have taken a case study approach by identifying five town centres, each addressing the particular challenges of their local high streets in different ways. Through interviews, we have considered how each local authority has approached strategic planning, leadership and governance, funding, community engagement and delivery in ways tailored to their town centres.

The findings from these five places, combined with the learnings from the literature review, have been synthesised into a series of eight recommendations, which we believe can help local authorities to ensure better high street recovery and more resilient places.

We hope this report can provide inspiration and practical guidance for officers over the next few years, as we navigate our way through a new wave of town centre recovery.

Recommendations

1

Recognise local authorities as the stewards of the high street.

- Local Authorities are well positioned to steward regeneration in town centres, taking either a leadership role or initiating and supporting the leadership of cross-sector partnerships.
- A strong asset based in a town centre can provide local authorities with the ability to shape a coherent place which meets the needs of its communities.
- Local authorities should explore ways to manage their assets including models of community ownership, social value leases, private sector partnerships and the use of income-producing assets to endow centres with a secure income.

2

Create strategic visions to bring ideas, people and funding together.

- A clear and consistent vision, unified around a strong brand, can focus stakeholders and maintain momentum – bringing them along the regeneration journey.
- Embedding design and heritage in strategic visions, ensures that individual developments and projects are cohesive and build the character of a place.
- The pedestrian experience of a town centre, and in turn the health and wellbeing outcomes of a place, can be enhanced by well-designed public realm and prioritisation of sustainable transport.
- Few local authorities are in receipt of full funding to deliver entire strategic visions, so careful management of small grants and opportunistic bids are required to ensure they build on each other – providing stepping stones for the next bid.

3

Look beyond retail.

- Successful high streets are diversifying beyond retail uses into sectors that reflect the particular needs of their communities, moving beyond leisure and entertainment to include office space, community facilities, education, workspace, and healthcare uses
- Community uses, run by and for communities, have great potential to build resilience, civic pride and social value, while reducing vacancy rates and bringing people to the high street.
- Local Authorities are well placed to act as a broker between communities and property owners, particularly of vacant units, to explore innovative models for communities to take over spaces on the high street.
- Focusing public sector investment on key strategic sectors with potential for growth, as well as social enterprises and cooperatives, can create greater impact.

4

Bring cross-sector partners together through governance.

- The public sector needs to leverage cross-sector partnerships to deliver more resilient places, and can bring together businesses, institutions and communities formally or informally to collaborate.
- Setting up governance structures, with independent accountability, can provide a rigour and strength to partnerships which ensures maximum buy-in from stakeholders.
- Understanding what each stakeholder brings to the partnership, and delegating roles and responsibilities accordingly, contributes to successful collaboration.

5

Provide the tools and opportunities for communities to lead.

- Community groups who are supported by local authorities to become key players in shaping their high streets driving improvements and developing resilience from the ground up.
- Enabling community groups to takeover, run or lease council assets can bring diverse new uses to a place, as well as keep important local amenities operating.

6

Use new digital tools to engage.

- Online engagement platforms can provide the means for early, regular and consistent participation, and when selected thoughtfully can enable local authorities to embed engagement practices in ways that meet their aspirations for community-led regeneration.
- Online platforms are also enabling local authorities to go beyond engagement, providing tools for co-design and community voting.

7

Re-define measurements of success.

- High streets and town centres are no longer solely considered commercial centres measured through economic metrics.
- Social value metrics capture community benefits, health and wellbeing, diversity and inclusion, and social integration.
- These principles further embed the idea of the high street beyond retail uses and the importance of communities playing a key role in shaping their local places.

8

Build skills and capacity in-house to drive change.

- It is not only 'regeneration and economic development' skills that are required for delivering town centre recovery. A range including in-house community engagement, digital, infrastructure coordination, urban design, planning, asset management and sustainability skills are needed.
- Local authorities need to work beyond siloed departments as recovery is a holistic approach.
- Local authorities need support to build capacity and skills in-house to truly become the stewards of the high street.

Literature Review



Town Centres & High Streets: A history of adaptation and resilience

1. Theodoridis, C., Ntounis, N., & Pal, J. (2017). How to reinvent the High Street: evidence from the HS2020. *Journal of Place Management and Development*.

The value of our high streets and town centres extends beyond purely economic measures, forming the beating heart of communities. These places are also often cited as barometers for the broader social and economic state of a place and indeed the national picture. High streets bring into sharp focus shifting trends, new innovations, and changing habits. As a result, the history of the high street is one characterised by adaptation and reinvention. This process can be described by the concept of adaptive resilience¹ – a framework that has emerged in the academic literature to describe the process of self-organisation and change that has enabled high streets to respond to shocks and disruptions in order to remain functional and productive places. The most successful places are those that can adapt and reinvent themselves quickly to meet the changing needs of their catchment.

The first part of this report explores previous moments of adaptation, when unexpected shocks or new drivers of change have forced high streets to reorganise and revitalise to become more viable – considering what lessons can be learned for our current moment of crisis. Taking a thematic approach, it reviews the forces that have shaped high streets and town centres in recent decades and the guidance and recommendations that emerged from each cycle of adaptation.

Topics addressed include:

- the changing nature of retail;
- the dominance of the car and the expansion of out-of-town shopping;
- economic recession;
- the rise of online shopping and other technological disruptions; and
- the shift towards social value.

Broader societal drivers of change have been impacting on consumer behaviour, market trends and the look and feel of the high street for decades. Since the post-war period the high street has been dramatically shaped by car and suburbanisation, and the four waves of retail decentralisation – with the fifth being on-line shopping.

2. Theodoridis, C., Ntounis, N., & Pal, J. (2017). How to reinvent the High Street: evidence from the HS2020. *Journal of Place Management and Development*.

In more recent history, the 2008 crash and the recession that followed had long-lasting effects on consumer behaviour, with studies indicating that post-recession lifestyles have some fundamental differences to pre-recessions habits for many². In a similar way, it may well be the case that the changes in shopping, socialising, and working caused by the restrictions of the pandemic will last far beyond the pandemic years and represent a fundamental shift in the way we use our local places.

Though the policy that frames town centres is not the subject of this report, it must be acknowledged that changes over the decades have and continue to fundamentally shape the high street and the powers that local authorities have to intervene. Some of the biggest policy changes that have impacted town centres and high streets include the town centres first policy which was introduced in PPG6, published in 1996, and began to stem the tide of out of town retail parks. The policy introduced the sequential approach, which was designed to rule out all other possible sites for development, including other district or neighbourhood centres, before allowing an out of town site even to be considered. More recently, Business Rates and their reform have been at the centre of debates around the vitality of the high street – with the current model accused by some as disincentivising investment in buildings and not reflecting changing market values and economic conditions accurately. The recent changes to Permitted Development Rights (PDR) which allows change of use to residential without planning permission has also been cited as having a potentially significant impact on the make-up of our town centres.

3. CLES (2021) Devolve, redirect, democratise: The future of economic development in the UK, p.10

4. DEMOS (2020) The Future of Towns, p.6

CLES³ have described the current moment as an ‘opportunity for a great reset’, and think-tank DEMOS⁴ declares it a ‘once-in-a-generation opportunity for towns’. Indeed, the literature recently published presents numerous opportunities for high streets that could be harnessed by the changes experienced in the last 18 months – many of which are outcomes which have been on the agenda for many years, but lacked the impetus to be put into action

Many reports suggest that the pandemic has not created new, lasting problems, but expedited existing trends and areas of weakness. We believe it is therefore worthwhile to review the substantial body of literature and guidance already in existence through the lens of our current situation – the lessons and learnings from which have a new relevance today.

Though the current moment is unprecedented, many of the challenges brought by the pandemic can be weathered by stronger and more resilient town centres, the fundamentals of which will underpin their capacity to absorb future challenges.

1. The Changing Retail Landscape

- 1.1 The central narrative around high street and town centre performance in recent decades has been the oversupply and dominance of retail space – the roots of which can be traced back to the post-war period, when the retail-centred model of urban form, function and financing emerged. A dramatic expansion of retail space in town centres characterised development in the three decades that followed the war, shifting the functional make-up of high streets away from a broad diversity of uses to centres dominated by commercial space.
- 1.2 The late 1980s and the 1990s saw the twin rise of the out-of-town shopping centre and the climate-controlled mall in the UK, which both had huge impacts on footfall in traditional centres. This followed increasing car ownership, and an element of deregulation which favoured a market-led approach to retail locations, leading to the birth of food/non-food superstores and retail parks in suburban areas. Headlines at the time described ‘Ghost Town Britain’, remarking on the hollowing-out of traditional retail centres.
- 1.3 It was not until 1993 that the Government issued clear guidance aimed at concentrating retail development in town centres (PPG13 and PPG6) – the beginning of the ‘town centres first’ policy that made some inroads into reversing the trend for decentralisation. Many at the time agreed that without these planning powers it is likely that out-of-town development would have completely devastated many towns and high streets. It is notable that the policy was first stated in PPG13 – dealing with transport: where it introduced the idea that town centres are locations which are accessible by a choice of means of transport other than the private car; and where one trip can serve more than one purpose, thus minimising the need to travel.
- 1.4 The 1994 report by URBED for the Department of the Environment reflected on the problem of dispersal, making recommendations that form the core principles of good town centre regeneration that have been echoed in the decades since⁵. These included methods for monitoring town centre performance and health through quantitative factors such as changes in yield and pedestrian flow, as well as changing uses and vacancy rates. The report put forward the idea of measuring the health of a place around four key themes, each with their own metrics, tenets that remain relevant today:
 - Attractions;
 - Accessibility;
 - Amenity; and
 - Action
- 1.5 The report also promoted town centre management and the Business Improvement District (BID) model from the United States as ways to leverage the private investment that places sorely needed during this recessionary period. Local authorities were encouraged to form multi-disciplinary town centre management functions from across service areas, and to draw the community and local businesses into these conversations through regular open meetings and forums.
- 1.6 Secondary retailing (town centre locations that are subsidiary to the main centre and typically provide a wider mix of retail and non-retail uses, including small towns and district centres) was the subject of a review by the NRPF in 2004⁶, identifying a number of trends in the 1990s that continued into the start of the new century. Overall they found that in a similar way to primary retail locations, these places had also seen a decline, with fewer retail units and an increase in service businesses, suffering from the vast majority of investment and development occurring in larger town centres.

5. Department of the Environment/URBED (1994) Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge.

6. NRPF (2004) The Role and Vitality of Secondary Shopping – A New Direction

- 1.7 The report found that the relationship between the catchment area and small towns and district centres was particularly key, with town centres that are able to respond to the needs of their communities and provide very specific, specialist businesses most able to thrive. The role of large out-of-town food retail units also had a significant impact on smaller centres' ability to draw shoppers for food related retail. Farmers markets were one strategy that secondary shopping areas were experimenting with at the beginning of the new century to bring back those shoppers.
- 1.8 The report also emphasised the inherent diversity in secondary shopping areas as a strength to be developed – with a wide range of attractions including health, leisure, community and council services leading to greater success, a finding echoed in many recent recommendations about high streets.
- 1.9 In cases where secondary shopping areas are not well connected to primary centres, the recommendation was to promote these areas as specific 'quarters' with a clear offer. Recommendations also outlined improvements to public realm and the pedestrian experience – extending the type of regeneration typically focused on prime retail areas to strengthen secondary shopping locations.
- 1.10 The first decade of the new century saw a huge boom in retailing across major town centres – many large retailers expanded, opening new stores on high streets around the country. As the Portas Review pointed out in 2011, this effectively pushed out many smaller and independent retailers who were unable to compete, particularly in the context of rising business rates⁷. It was during this period that the 'Clone Town Britain' narrative came to the fore – with many high streets losing unique and independent retailers to be replaced by larger chain brands – in contrast to the previous decade's 'Ghost Town Britain'.
- 1.11 This left town centres in an extremely vulnerable position when the 2008 crash hit, which caused many big names to either close their shops or go out of business entirely. A combination of squeezed spending power and a lack of a strong local offer which met the needs of communities, meant that these shops were often no longer viable.
- 1.12 In 2011, The Portas Review consolidated this shifting tide – declaring the retail-dominated model of high streets to be outdated and largely to blame for its inability to resist the onslaught of out-of-town and online shopping⁸. Key recommendations emerging from this study included:
- the idea of Town Teams;
 - measures to disincentivise vacancy;
 - the revitalisation of markets; and
 - schemes to bring community uses back onto the high street towards a greater diversification of uses.
- 1.13 In 2013 the Grimsey Review also called for town centres to go beyond retail to keep pace with the multi-channel retail environment, and proposed high streets as community hubs encompassing housing, education, arts, entertainment, office space, health, and leisure – with far less emphasis on shops⁹. The evolution of the multifunctional town centre is one anchored by community uses which allow people to both live and work in and around high streets, developing strong loyalties to independent businesses who meet not only essential needs but also social and community cohesion.

7. Mary Portas (2011) Portas Review: an independent review into the future of our high streets

8. Mary Portas (2011)

9. Bill Grimsey (2013) The Grimsey Review - An alternative future for the High Street

10. Distressed Town Centre Property Taskforce (2013) Beyond Retail: Redefining the shape and purpose of town centres

- 1.14 The Distressed Town Centre Property Taskforce also produced a report in 2013¹⁰ which echoed these findings, outlining key issues facing town centres that were preventing a shift away from retail towards multifunctionality:
- A lack of local leadership in the form of public/private partnerships, leading to a lack of proper strategy and visioning work,
 - A polarisation of large centres and small local centres, with those falling in the middle struggling to establish a clear identity or offer,
 - An oversupply of retail space and space that does not meet modern requirements.

Their recommendations built on Portas and Grimsey, emphasising the need for better coordination between local authorities and communities, with strong place leadership and longer term visions that can also be responsive. They referred to the integration of technology and town centres through social media and click-and-collect.

11. Centre for Cities (2018) Building Blocks

- 1.15 Centre for Cities 2018 report Building Blocks focused on the value of office space to the local economy¹¹. Their research examining 58 city centres demonstrate that many thriving places have a high proportion of good quality office space, providing retail and leisure businesses with the captive audience required to succeed.

- 1.16 Recommendations emerging from this report, which are echoed in What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth's 2021 briefing, centre around creating the right conditions for productive, high knowledge firms to locate in towns and city centres – including:

- Longer term measures to improve the skills required to attract such businesses,
- Reform of business rates to encourage office development,
- Developing more high-quality office space and refitting existing low-quality stock,
- Creating exemptions to PDR rights that have caused a loss of office space.

- 1.17 The issue of high street vacancy, also examined by Portas, is the subject of a more recent project run by the Meanwhile Foundation with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Meanwhile-use has offered a fertile model for putting empty high street units back into use – either through testing or incubating businesses, or through programmes which encourage community functions to develop.

12. Meanwhile Foundation (2020) Open Doors, Pilon Programme Report

- 1.18 The Open Doors scheme took as its starting point in 2018 the 11.3% vacancy rate of high street shops across the UK¹². The Open Doors scheme was designed to test whether a model of meanwhile use could enable landlords and communities to transform empty shops into community hubs. The results of this relatively small-scale intervention, which saw investment in five empty properties for community groups to deliver services over a one-year period, were increased footfall and spend, as well as an impressive 91 new volunteering opportunities established.

- 1.19 The pilot indicated that meanwhile use has the potential to allow communities to access space, develop partnerships, and reach their end users more easily than without such high street spaces. However, none of the pilot spaces were able to continue beyond the pilot period due to the costs involved, so any continuation of such community projects would need to be funded by local authorities or other mechanisms.

13. Centre for London (2021)
Town Centre Futures: Evidence
and ideas for recovery

1.20 High streets have also found new uses in the form of health testing, a community function that the Centre for London highlights in their recent report on the post-Covid recovery¹³. Their report suggests extending this further, with the potential for increased access to health services on the high street in the form of Community Diagnostic Hubs operating from empty commercial units to bring social value in the long term.

14. NHS Confederation / Power
to Change (2020) Health on the
high street

1.21 In 2020, the NHS Confederation brought together health leaders from the NHS, local government and the community in a roundtable to discuss embedding health in placemaking post-pandemic¹⁴. They proposed a number of measures which could offer more capacity for health service delivery, while attracting more people onto their local high street and encouraging healthier lifestyles. Recommendations aimed specifically at local authorities include:

- Putting health and social care at the heart of economic development planning, place-shaping and planning decisions, with local partnership boards including NHS membership or engagement,
- Embedding health services within the high street, using public-private or public-community partnerships, blended investment vehicles and social value approaches,
- Emphasising the social determinants of health through promoting community power through supporting community owned businesses, community asset transfers and meanwhile leases

15. Bill Grimsey (2020) The
Grimsey Review - Build Back
Better: Covid-19 Supplement for
town centres

1.22 The Grimsey Review's Covid-19 update confirms that the demise of the traditional retail-led town centre has been accelerated by the pandemic, with a truly multifunctional landscape emerging and increasingly empowered communities ready and willing to engage in setting priorities and shaping their area¹⁵.

Key Learnings

Establish a multifunctional high street that responds to the specific needs of its catchment, including community uses, housing, education, arts, entertainment, office space, health and leisure.

Develop a unique mix of functions and uses that provides a clear sense of character and USP for a place.

Promote town centre management bodies, cross-sector partnership and BIDs to establish clear local leadership, leverage private sector investment and engage communities and stakeholders.

Explore meanwhile leases/licenses to test new uses for vacant units, and bring renewed footfall and spend to an area.

Bring a health focus to the high street through engaging the NHS in planning decisions, relocating core health services and exploring new models of community healthcare.

Resist further expansion of town centre uses in out-of-centre locations, by rigorous application of the sequential approach of national planning policy.



2. Town Centre Management

16. Warnaby, G., Alexander, A and Medway, D. (1998). Town centre management in the UK: a review, synthesis and research agenda, *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, 8 (1): 15-31.

- 2.1 A key response to the decentralisation of retail in the 1980s and 1990s was the town centre management (TCM) concept – defined as the collaboration of public, private, and voluntary sectors to improve, maintain, and develop public and private areas and interests around high streets and town centres.¹⁶
- 2.2 TCM initiatives developed from initially taking on a caretaker mode to having a much longer-term and strategic focus on how to best develop town centres, catalysed by the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) in 1991.
- 2.3 The key issue which eventually led to the establishment of BIDs in their place, was that TCM schemes were voluntary both in terms of participation and funding, so many stakeholders benefited from them without contributing – raising issues of long-term sustainability in many instances.
- 2.4 Borrowing the BID model from the United States (but with the fundamental difference that US BIDs involved landlords and UK BIDs predominantly occupiers), the first BID in the UK was set up in 2005 in Kingston, Surrey. By 2019 there were 303 operational BIDS in the UK, with particularly rapid growth since 2012. Led and funded through businesses via a levy model and established through a ballot process, BIDs have provided more stable, longer-term improvements to town centres (the vast majority of BIDs are in town centres, but there are also industrial, leisure and other types of BID). Typical activities include place marketing, promotion of networks and partnerships, and improvements to the visual appearance of places.
- 2.5 In May 2020, the Government announced £6.1m of funding for BIDs to support local economies through the Covid-19 pandemic – a recognition that many BIDs were providing additional services including business advice and security for empty shops during this period. In Sheffield for example, the BID has rolled out an app – My Geo – which uses geo-fencing technology to send offers and communications to smartphones based on geographic locations, to support local business to attract customers, providing levy payers with free credit to incentivise its use.
- 2.6 BIDs have shown considerable resilience during pandemic, and have in many cases proven to be agile structures that can adapt to meet the needs of the area and the local businesses. Their evolution, moving away from simply providing value to levy payers and taking the opportunity to build better collaboration between businesses and the community, could see the model evolve as part of a stronger local recovery.
- 2.7 The importance of partnerships between public, private and social sectors runs through the majority of the recent literature on town centre regeneration, as well as management, vision and leadership. The second Grimsey Review, published in 2018, pointed to local authorities as the custodians of their town centres, best placed to provide stewardship and represent the needs of their communities.¹⁷ The report also outlined the need for a clearly identifiable town centre lead – whether an elected mayor, councillor, senior council officer or a figure from the business community – establishing clear responsibilities and accountabilities.
- 2.8 The Portas Review proposed Town Teams as a model for town centre management and regeneration, which could include key landlords, large and small shopkeepers, council representatives, the mayor or MP, other local businesses and service providers, and local residents – chiming with the then coalition government’s localism and Big Society agenda.

17. Bill Grimsey (2018) *The Grimsey Review 2*

18. CLES, APSE (2014) The role and value of local authority assets in town centres.

19. Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee (2019) High streets and town centres in 2030

20. LSE / Tony Travers (2011) Engaging London's Communities: the Big Society and Localism

21. Power to Change (2020) Community Improvement Districts - A discussion paper

- 2.9 The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) also focuses on Town Teams and strategic leadership in their 2015 report based on research conducted with the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) – proposing the local authority's role as one of facilitator and coordinator to manage relationships and priorities.¹⁸ Their recommendations focus on leveraging the private sector and social-commercial partnerships towards a much stronger connection between social and business activities, suggesting activities such as volunteering, mentoring, philanthropy, and the nurturing of social enterprises among the ways to foster these links. CLES also describe the importance of good governance, with clear and specific partnerships developed with focused aims, planning and evaluation processes, and realistic timescales.
- 2.10 The emphasis in the literature on the community involvement in town centre management was also picked up in the High Streets 2030 report produced by the Housing, Communities and Local Government select committee in 2019.¹⁹ This report suggested at a minimum that there should be community representation in BIDs, but further, it proposed the establishment of Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) as an alternative model where appropriate (an idea originally suggested by Tony Travers in 2011²⁰). The British Bid Foundation has acknowledged the potential for BIDs to become more community focused, though there is still no formal mechanism for CIDs in England (however they do exist in Scotland).
- 2.11 Power to Change's report on CIDs published during the pandemic explores the uptick in community activity and engagement in their local areas triggered by the public health crisis.²¹ There could therefore be an opportunity in the present moment to harness this activity towards more formalised structures of community governance. The CID model proposed by Power to Change would work in a similar mode to a BID, but be open to residents, businesses and other local stakeholders concerned with the economic, social, and environmental development of areas, acknowledging they might be best placed to work on a town centre. The report discusses a range of models for CIDs or versions of CIDs, including:
- Community involvement in BIDs,
 - Expansion of Neighbourhood Forum functions,
 - Formal funding for Town Teams.
- 2.12 The Town Team model promoted by the Portas Review suggests a way for communities to be involved in managing a place with the least legislative barriers, though examples of Town Teams are still relatively few and there is a need for better guidance for establishing well-functioning teams.

Key Learnings

Establish BIDs as formal structures to provide stable, long term management of town centres that can also respond to shocks and provide key support to help businesses adapt.

Identify the local authority as a key steward and representative body which can ensure the needs of the community are met by public private partnerships.

Explore Town Teams, CIDs or other community-led governance models, facilitated by the local authority, to build a stronger connection between social and commercial needs of a place.



3. Visioning

- 3.1 Throughout the literature there is a clear call for Town Centre Plans / Action Plans / Town Investment Plans, as well as supplements to Local Plans with dynamic strategies for high streets, and for the inclusion of the high street in Neighbourhood Plans. The ability for places to implement many of the fundamentals of good town centre development depends largely on the presence of strong visioning and strategic planning – a key tenet of place leadership.
- 3.2 Uniting cross-sector town centre stakeholders towards a clear long-term vision for a place is a fundamental recommendation that is found across the majority of the literature and guidance around town centres. In 2012, the British Retail Consortium, for example, set out strategic planning based around partnership and collaboration, underpinned by regular monitoring, as a core part of their recommendations.²² These principles have endured, with the main shift in the literature around the content of strategies (moving away from retail), and the stakeholder mix (a much stronger presence of community participants).
- 3.3 The GLA's Adaptive Strategies report describes the best town centre plans as being 'mission oriented' – clear actions to be taken by purposefully formed partnerships in response to specific place-based challenges.²³ They recommend live and dynamic planning characterised by an iterative and interactive process between stakeholders towards measurable, but adaptable goals based on desired outcomes rather than a predetermined solution. The report considers both participation and leadership as key to enabling this process.
- 3.4 The High Streets Task Force echoes these findings, singling out the importance of 'influence' in creating a town centre vision – since the need for visions to be meaningful and representative of all stakeholders is key to ensuring that the vision can be realised.²⁴ A process of continuous dialogue to update and revise a high street vision is also an important way to ensure stakeholders are brought along the journey.
- 3.5 The High Streets Task Force highlights the renewed importance of visioning post-pandemic, with a clear recovery strategy co-produced with key stakeholder groups essential to ensure town centres emerge in a strong position and are future-proofed.²⁵ For many places a return to the pre-pandemic state is either not possible or not desirable, and so new visions and strategies that can respond to future shocks are necessary. The High Streets Task Force has highlighted six principles such recovery plans should focus on: adaptability; co-design and collaboration; adoptability; governance; balance; value for money, data, monitoring and evaluation.
- 3.6 A key issue raised across much of the literature over the past ten years is the problem of fragmented high street ownership – meaning cohesive strategies can be difficult to implement. One response to this that has grown over this period are local authorities purchasing town centre assets. Revo's research with Lambert Smith Hampton in 2019 showed that local authorities have since 2016 emerged as key investors in the property market – motivated by both income generation and the greater regeneration controls that a more cohesive pattern of ownership can bring.²⁶

22. British Retail Consortium (2012) 21st Century high streets: A new vision for our town centres

23. GLA (2019) High Streets & Town Centres: Adaptive Strategies, p.9

24. High Streets Task Force (2021) Vision and Strategy - 25 'vital and viable' priorities

25. High Streets Task Force (2021) Guidance for local authorities: Excellence in developing COVID-19 recovery plans.

26. Revo / Lambert Smith Hampton (2019) Can we fix our 'broken' town centres?

- 3.7 Most notably local authorities have been purchasing shopping centres, taking ownership of 1 in 5 shopping centres since 2016. In some cases these are failing centres that require refurbishment or reorientation to bring back vitality to key areas in a town. In others they are in strategically important locations for new development and enable the council to consolidate sites for regeneration. Some councils have changed the use of shopping centres, concentrating retail units elsewhere in the town centre and bringing leisure uses into the shopping centre. Revo and Lambert Smith Hampton highlight the importance of developing costed long-term strategies to ensure such purchases lead to success. Local authorities' property assets in town centres should not be treated as 'cash cows' without being 'fed' new investment to maintain their social and monetary value and income generation. They have the potential to endow the town centre with a socially-owned asset base and income stream.
- 3.8 One initiative that a number of councils have experimented with using their own assets is to attract new uses or independent retailers through reduced rents and other incentive schemes. The GLA's Adaptive Strategies report proposes social value leases, through which councils could offer favourable terms to community organisations who can deliver on key social and public value outcomes – a refocusing away from financial returns (discussed further below).²⁷

Key Learnings

Establish a strong strategic vision for a place which is iterative and adaptable, interactive, and sets out clear, measurable goals and outcomes.

Secure strong cross-sector partnerships tailored to respond to the key challenges of a place.

Involve a broad range of stakeholders and the community in strategic planning work throughout the process.

Consider how the strategic purchase of assets by the local authority can help to deliver a coherent vision for a place.



4. Technological Disruption

28. DCMS (2020) Britain's Superfast Broadband Future

4.1 The revolution in residential broadband and the ensuing growth in online shopping has clearly been a powerful challenge to town centres in the last decade at least. A report in 2010 outlined the Government's aspiration to have the best superfast broadband network in Europe and to use digital infrastructure for economic growth.²⁸ A few years later in 2015, the Digital High Street 2020 report set out a vision for the transformation of town centres to make the most of the growth in digital.²⁹

29. Digital High Street Advisory Board (2015) Digital High Street 2020 Report

4.2 The report envisioned a seamless integration of digital and physical – with high street services supported through apps and tools to bring forward:

- New modes of advertising
- Ways to browse products and menus
- Modes of cross-channel entertainment and in-store experiences
- Personalisation through data
- Mobile wallets and loyalty schemes
- Streamlined street trading using mobile technology.

The report also proposed a High Street Digital Lab to support businesses and communities through a set of technical services and tools, as well as a Digital Health Index for measuring economic value creation.

30. Bill Grimsey (2018) The Grimsey Review 2, p.5

4.3 The second Grimsey Review, published in 2018, also brought the theme of experience and interaction through technology to the fore, citing the Apple Store's 'town square' concept as a new and highly successful model of retail which fused bricks and mortar with digital to create an interactive space for not only shopping but learning, events, and promotion.³⁰ The report also proposed libraries and public spaces at the heart of town centres – the new anchors – as well as digital and health hubs that embrace smart technology.

31. ONS (2020) Retail sales, Great Britain: May 2020

4.4 Some of these recommendations have been born out, particularly in recent years, while others which failed to catch-on initially have found a new relevance during the Covid-19 crisis. Though the pandemic forced people off the high street and online (with online sales rising to nearly 33% of all retail sales in May 2020, compared to 21% in 2019), we have also seen digital solutions to encourage people back to their town centres.³¹ For example:

- The need for less contact has seen a surge in the use of contactless payments, as well as technologies such as QR codes – which are now being used to view menus, make bookings or place orders, to access information and for loyalty schemes.
- Click and Collect schemes also gathered pace in 2020, allowing many shops and businesses to keep operating even when their doors were closed, and for customers to browse from the safety of their home while supporting their local outlets.
- Businesses and BIDs have been using apps and developing their own ones to fulfil particular customer or community needs, and there is considerable scope in this area to support the recovery.

- 4.5 More broadly, the Digital High Street 2020 report described the future of town centres as being engaged closely with their communities through technology and therefore able to adapt and respond to the diversity of needs and interests of those who use it. The convergence of community and digital has been a strong theme of the pandemic era, and represents a key area of potential development towards a community focused recovery.

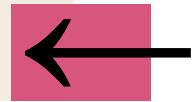
Key Learnings

Employ digital technology to improve the function of core high street services and businesses.

Harness the potential for digital technology to create more interactive and personalised experiences.

Use digital technology to support public health by providing contact-free retail and leisure experiences.

Explore ways to harness community involvement and action through digital technology.



5. Social Value

- 5.1 There has been a clear shift in the way value is measured in the last decade, with a concerted move towards measuring changes that affect wellbeing, diversity and inclusion, healthy streets, and social integration – described under the term social value. Much of the literature in the last decade has described a vision for town centres, which centres on the benefits to communities of locating health and social care services, leisure, arts and culture, natural amenities, and public spaces alongside retail.
- 5.2 Since the 2012 Social Value Act was passed, there has been a clear driver for public sector bodies to consider societal, economic and environmental benefits through procurement processes, and this has filtered down to a much stronger focus on community involvement and ownership in their local places. This has come to a fore during the pandemic, when the focus of local high streets shifted from being about retail and economic activity, towards supporting communities with a much broader range of services and activities, including health and social care.
- 5.3 The Portas Review placed a strong emphasis on allowing the community to take a more direct ownership of the high street. The report emphasised use of meanwhile-use tenancies and the community Right to Bid on local community assets, going further by suggesting a ‘community right to try’ model which would enable groups to take over assets when they do not have the means to purchase it.³² The report recommended that one of the roles for the local authority is to connect community organisations with landlords of vacant properties who are willing to engage in such schemes.
- 5.4 Power to Change have discussed the use of Community Asset Transfers (CATs) to provide community businesses with income streams and a secure base from which to deliver services.³³ Their report highlights the relative resilience of community owned businesses in contrast to the wider industry, with evidence showing that increased community, social sector, and public ownership on the high street could improve vacancy rates (shops owned by overseas investors are more than twice as likely to be vacant as publicly owned units). Extension of this idea to include income-producing assets such as car parks, could provide town centre management with a long-term secure income stream.
- 5.5 Community ownership also often draws on local supply chains and provides local employment, acting as economic multipliers. Power to Change described the potential for strategic CATs to alter the overall balance of high street ownership to make it much easier to develop a coherent strategy and vision for a place, since a fragmented pattern of ownership and absentee landlords are often one of the blockers towards joined-up planning.
- 5.6 In their work with ACTM, CLES have emphasised the importance of community functions within town centres, encouraging local authorities to take a more strategic view of their assets and ways to allow community groups to experiment with operating them before potential CATs.³⁴ They point out that the presence of such groups and services on the high street can contribute to civic pride – a key measure of social value.

32. Mary Portas (2011) pp.37-40.

33. Power to Change (2019) Take Back the High Street: Putting communities in charge of their own town centres.

34. CLES, APSE (2014) The role and value of local authority assets in town centres.

35. GLA (2019) High Streets & Town Centres: Adaptive Strategies, p.232

36. Bill Grimsey (2020) The Grimsey Review - Build Back Better: Covid-19 Supplement for town centres

37. CLES (2021) Devolve, redirect, democratise: The future of economic development in the UK

- 5.7 Their report also suggests the development of partnership and investment vehicles with the private sector to avoid selling off key buildings. CLES suggest further metrics that can provide the data local authorities need to make the case for retaining assets, such as the number of visits to council-owned assets by tourists, or the spend by local authority employees based in a high street civic centre.
- 5.8 Also putting social value first, the GLA's Adaptive Strategies report proposes social value leases, with clear strategic objectives around public value creation.³⁵
- 5.9 In the context of the pandemic, the Grimsey Review's Covid-19 update echoes many of these recommendations, suggesting their relevance to the current situation. The report proposes transferring power back to communities through more Citizens' Assemblies, Community Value Charters and strengthened Community Right to Buy/Bid laws.³⁶ It also outlines the potential benefits for councils investing in their own assets for community benefits such as wellbeing, instead of for commercial return.
- 5.10 CLES' most recent work also suggests how progressive local economic strategies can support a stronger recovery following the pandemic through targeting specific sectors which are strategically important to a local economic centre.³⁷ Their advice focuses on ensuring businesses are supported that enable greater wealth and resources to be kept within the confines of the local economy, with an emphasis on supporting cooperatives, employee-ownership, social enterprises, and community businesses.

Key Learnings

Expand metrics of success beyond financial to include measures which capture community benefit, health and wellbeing, diversity and inclusion, and social integration.

Broker between communities and property owners, particularly vacant units, to explore innovative models for communities to take over spaces on the high street.

Embed community uses on the high street as a means to develop resilience, civic pride and social value, and reduce vacancy rates.

Explore ways for local authorities to manage and maximise their assets, including models of community ownership and social value leases, partnerships with the private sector, and use of income-producing assets to endow town centres with a secure income stream.

Support local wealth creation through support to strategic sectors, social enterprises, cooperatives and other types of business that benefit local people.



6. Place-shaping

- 6.1 The importance of urban design and place-shaping in the success and resilience of town centres is a subject that has grown in the literature over the last decade and has even greater relevance today, as the importance of quality public space has heightened during the Covid-19 crisis.
- 6.2 Strong place-shaping and design underpins many of the recommendations found in town centre guidance, playing a key role in establishing a unique sense of place and high street brand. As the move towards seeing high streets as places for social interaction, gathering, and community uses which are accessible to all has gained momentum, so too has the importance of a high-quality public realm needed to support these uses.
- 6.3 The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment's (CABE) 2007 report *Paved with gold*, demonstrated the value of well designed streets to the success of town centres and high streets. The research used the Pedestrian Environment Review System (PERS) to assess the quality of each high street across a series of case studies, calculating an average score to assess the street design quality from a pedestrian's point of view. PERS is a multicriteria assessment tool designed to assess the quality of the pedestrian environment by placing scores on a number of characteristics, assessing the qualities of a particular street regarding its link or place function, which are weighted according to research which shows how users value each characteristic:

Link:

- effective width
- dropped kerbs/gradient
- obstructions
- permeability
- legibility
- lighting
- personal security
- surface quality
- user conflict
- maintenance

Place:

- moving in the space
- interpreting the space
- personal safety
- feeling comfortable
- sense of place
- opportunity for activity
- quality of environment

- 6.4 CABE's research (based on London) showed that well designed streets resulted in higher retail rents (adding an average of 4.9%) and higher residential prices (adding an average 5.2%). The report recommends that developers, local authorities, businesses and regional government agencies place a greater emphasis on the design of streets and public spaces – investing early on as a catalyst for longer-term investment.

38. Bill Grimsey (2018)
The Grimsey Review 2,
Recommendation 15

- 6.5 The Grimsey Review 2 also suggests that a design-led masterplan is an important part of a vision for a place, ensuring that proposed developments are unified and add to the character of a place.³⁸ A powerful Town Centre Plan will have a strong design element alongside clear strategic work on viability and delivery. This report also explains how a design-led approach to development can propose more intensive and flexible uses for units – with spaces designed so that occupiers can change day to night.

39. Public Health England (2018)
Healthy high streets: Good place-
making in an urban setting

- 6.6 As the importance of health and wellbeing has moved up the agenda, so has the need for parks and green spaces that are either accessed from high streets or even located on them. Public Health England's 2018 report explored how high streets can support better health outcomes, with a strong emphasis on inclusive placemaking.³⁹ The report includes the importance of an inclusive public realm with easy to navigate streets and crossing, places for shelter, shade and rest, low noise and air pollution, walking and cycling provision, green and blue infrastructure (street trees and planting, parks, ponds and water features), and a relaxing and safe atmosphere.

40. TfL (2020) New TfL data shows significant increase in walking and cycling since the pandemic started

6.7 The types of uses that communities need on their local high street have shifted during the pandemic in ways that have the potential to have a lasting impact on the shape and use of these places. Providing a safe and attractive environment in which to walk to your local high street is a recommendation that had traction before the pandemic, with evidence from Transport for London showing that people who walk to a high street spend 40% more than those who drive.⁴⁰

6.8 Schemes to improve accessibility for pedestrians and cyclists have been rolled out quickly in town centres across the country during the pandemic, including installing low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) at a pace not seen previously. Many of the regulatory or political barriers to such changes have been swiftly set aside due to the very real public health need for people to be outside as much as possible. This has also extended to widening pavements to allow for outdoor dining, with changes to the Business and Planning Act (2020) enabling fast track pavement licensing to create the sort of outdoor culture that has not typically been the mainstay of British high streets.

6.9 The tension between the provision of car parking demanded by many retail businesses, and the urgent need to reduce vehicular emissions for climate mitigation as well as to create better designed places which prioritise the pedestrian experience has been a key debate in town centres for the last decade. This is a political and contentious topic which is often very place specific, and therefore beyond the remit of this report. However, recent research by ACTM recommends parking be part of a holistic transport and accessibility strategy, avoiding generic responses and taking into account the complex needs of all stakeholders.⁴¹

41. ACTM (2020) Re-Think! Parking on the High Street: Guidance on Parking Provision in Town and City Centres

Key Learnings

Improve the pedestrian experience of a place through a well-designed public realm; which is maintained to a consistently high standard by pro-active planned maintenance.

Embed design in strategic visions, ensuring that individual developments and projects are cohesive and build the character of a place.

Support health and wellbeing outcomes through inclusive spaces, walking and cycling provision, and reduced noise and air pollution.



7. Data & Monitoring

- 7.1 An important thread running through much recent literature on high streets and town centres is on monitoring the performance of places, and the importance of robust and current data to help inform the effective planning, management and promotion of centres.
- 7.2 Both Grimsey's reports highlighted the need for common key performance indicators (KPIs) reported through a data dashboard that enables open data sharing. The 2018 Grimsey Review describes how all stakeholders in an economic centre can benefit from different forms of data – from retailers being able to adapt their businesses, to policymakers who can shape strategy and legislation to support a place, and transport planners who can improve access and air quality through data on local transport, cycling and parking.
- 7.3 The GLA's Adaptive Strategies report discussed new datasets and ways of accessing data that include wifi networks, cameras, crowdsourced data, data from apps and social media – providing opportunities for new types of cross-referencing with more standard data from credit card and mobile phone companies.⁴² The importance of this data is in being able to dig much deeper to understand how far people have travelled to reach a high street, their demographic profile and spending habits etc. – all of which can provide a more accurate picture of a place than observation or anecdotal evidence.
- 7.4 The GLA report also highlighted some of the difficulties around gathering and holding data, suggesting that places should involve their communities in collecting data, potentially developing data trusts to steward data.
- 7.5 Following the Adaptive Strategies report, the GLA launched the High Streets Data Service in 2021; part of their London Datastore.⁴³ This brings together both new and existing data sets, including:
- spend broken down into total spend;
 - number of transactions;
 - detailed footfall data based on types (resident, worker, visitor); and
 - metrics directly linked to the pandemic.

42. GLA (2019) High Streets & Town Centres: Adaptive Strategies

43. GLA: High Streets Data Service

The data is accessed on a subscription model, bringing together organisations concerned with the health and vitality of London's High Streets to collectively purchase, analyse and use data. This approach to data partnership shares the costs of accessing data from companies such as Mastercard and O2, and also enables councils to share knowledge, access training and collaborate on initiatives.

- 7.6 The data is enabling London Boroughs to accurately understand the pace and shape of recovery across their different town centres, exploring why some centres have shown better resilience than others and ensuring support is tailored to the varying needs and profile of each place.
- 7.7 Increasingly, public funding for town centres and high streets emphasises and often requires monitoring and evaluation processes to measure the performance of funded projects and the impact of funds. For example, the Government's Welcome Back Fund requires funded Authorities to set baseline measurements for key performance indicators that will be tracked by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

- 7.8 The Mayor of London's Good Growth Fund requires all funded boroughs to:
- Develop an Evaluation Strategy which sets out a baseline position and a clear approach to collecting evidence.
 - A self-evaluation report at project completion which provides final information on project impact and performance.
 - Participate in programme wide evaluation undertaken by the GLA Regeneration team.
- 7.9 In particular, the Good Growth Fund is interested in measuring social impact, aiming for at least one indicator specifically related to social impact within each project's KPIs. The complete 'basket' of indicators outline by the GLA should include:
- economic,
 - social
 - financial
 - strategic, and
 - environmental indicators
- 7.10 The GLA's Outputs and Outcomes Framework provides a list of more than 200 possible measures across three Good Growth Fund objectives: Growing Prosperity, Empowering People and Making Places Better – demonstrating that traditional metrics of town centre success involving footfall and economic indicators are now only a small part of the picture.

Key Learnings

Establish broad, robust datasets that capture the performance of a place across a range of areas of use to different stakeholders, including businesses, policy makers and communities.

Explore different ways to collect, track and share data that are open source and cross-referenced to gain new insights.

Develop regional data centres for collaborative data gathering and comparisons.

Employ metrics that capture the full range of impacts: economic, social, financial, strategic, environmental.



Case Studies



Introducing the Case Studies

This section discusses five town centres and high streets selected from across England, representing different approaches to regeneration in varying types and scale of place. Selection was made following an extensive desktop research process, which included examining local authority websites, local news articles, lists of places award funding related to high streets, as well as the insight of the Public Practice network and the NRPF board. Case study areas were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Geographic spread across England
- Range of town types – ex-industrial/rural/coastal/city etc.
- Projects implemented within the last 5 years
- Evidence of meaningful change
- Innovative / unique in at least one tangible way
- Public sector proactively involved

The places selected vary in their stage of delivery, but all have developed strategic visions for their town centres and are working towards delivery of those plans.

Shrewsbury, a market town in the West Midlands, was chosen for its strong cross-sector partnerships, stewarded by the local authority with a clear governance structure incorporating independent accountability. The case study demonstrates how the strength of these partnerships led by the local authority have developed strong buy-in and commitment to achieving a long term vision for the town.

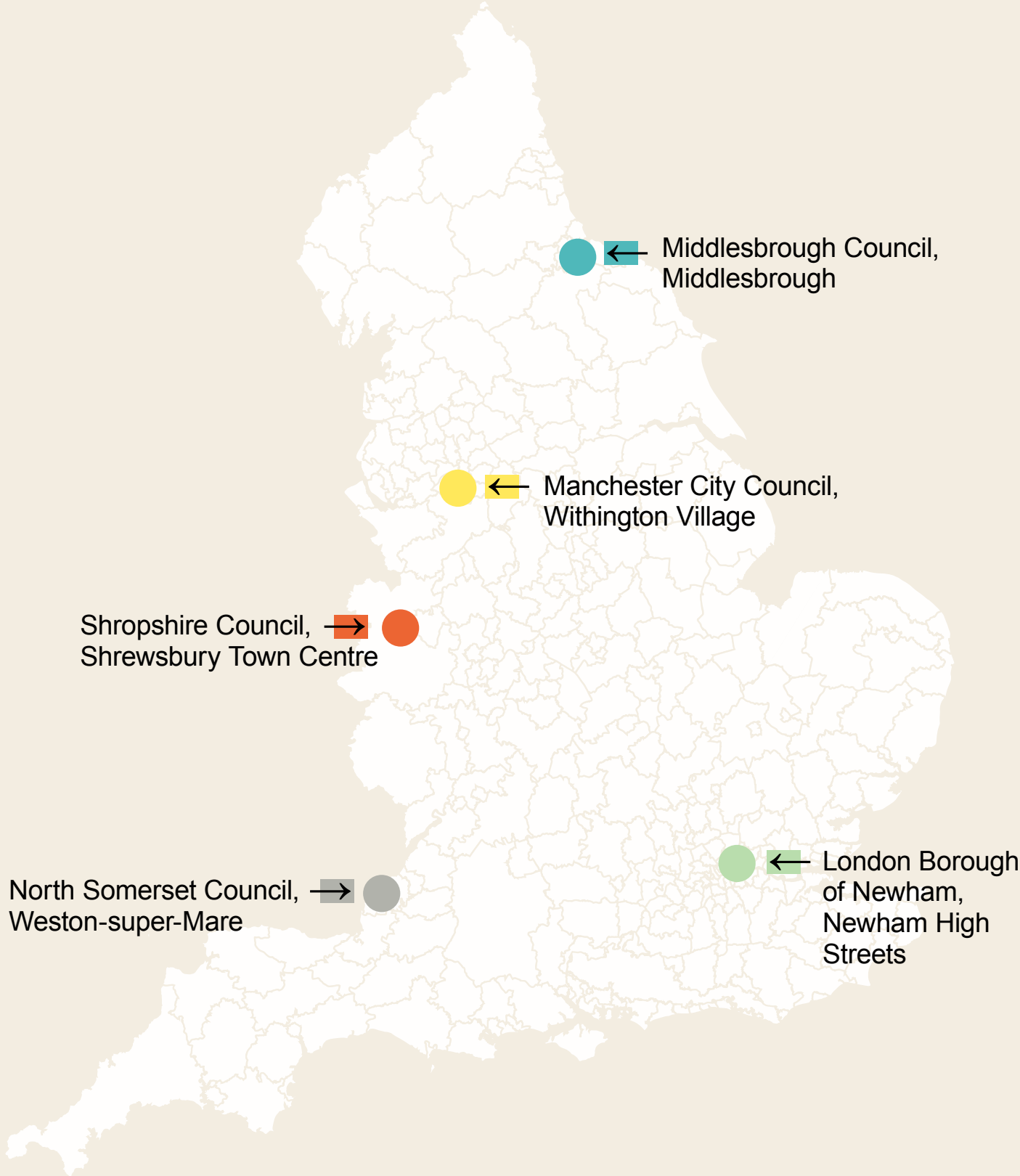
In Withington Village, a small district centre south of Manchester, the community have self organised to drive regeneration of their high street. The case study describes how a grassroots community-led approach to town centre improvements can be facilitated by the local authority and the range of activities that are possible with relatively little funding.

Middlesbrough, a former industrial town in Yorkshire, takes a business-focused approach to regeneration, with clear aims to diversify the town centre and attract investment. The case study shows how taking an evidence based approach can establish a strong case for major funding, and how investment in key sectors can drive long-term growth.

Newham, a London Borough in the east of the city, has a council-wide agenda focused on Community Wealth Building which has shaped their approach to town centre regeneration. Rather than focusing on one high street, this case study examines Newham's approach to regeneration across the borough to understand how co-design and Community Wealth Building are driving a strategy with social value at its core.

Finally, Weston-super-Mare, a coastal town in North Somerset, demonstrates how culture and heritage can be a strong hook to develop a place narrative. The case study explores how the town has attracted funding through their heritage assets, which have led to a robust strategic vision for the future of the town.

Map of the Case Studies



Shropshire Council, Shrewsbury Town Centre

Theme

Partnership Working



For the re-opening of Shrewsbury town centre, the Shrewsbury Recovery Taskforce (Shropshire Council, Shrewsbury BID and Shrewsbury Town Council) created the Shrewsbury's Open campaign. Image by Birgitta Zoutman Photography.

Introduction

Shrewsbury is a strong example of how excellent cross-sector partnerships stewarded by the local authority can produce a clear vision for a place and long-term buy-in for regeneration. The case study demonstrates the approach that Shropshire Council have taken to developing and formalising these relationships, as well as securing broad stakeholder and community support so that everyone in the is working towards the same outcome.

Shrewsbury published their draft Masterplan Vision for consultation at the beginning of 2021, following on from their Big Town Plan published in 2018. They are now entering the delivery phase of the plan, starting with a prioritisation of projects which the council are investing in. A number of large funding bids have also been made and will determine which larger scale projects are able to be delivered.

Place

Shrewsbury is a market town and sub-regional centre of 71,715 population. It is the primary growth point for the county of Shropshire in the West Midlands. The town has a historic medieval street plan and over 660 listed buildings. It is sited within a loop of the River Severn, giving it a distinct geographical character, but also causing substantial flooding in recent decades.

In 2008, the town was parished, with a new town council established in 2009 – chaired by an elected Town Mayor. It has a predominantly white population (98.5%), with mixed levels of deprivation, ranging from affluent areas in the south and west, to areas that fall into the bottom 15% of deprivation nationally. Shropshire as a whole has a higher than average ageing population, which is set to rise further.

Background

Strategic Aims: Shropshire Council's overall vision for the county is centred around innovation, economic growth, and a focus on preserving and enhancing the natural and historical environment. Partnership working is also a crucial theme, with the council building strong relationships with regional partners, the voluntary and community sector, as well as the private sector. Shropshire also seeks to embrace its rural position – citing digital connectivity for all areas as a key priority to facilitate economic growth throughout the county.

Town Centre Context: Shrewsbury town centre is a lively place with a high number of independent shops and cafes, an award-winning market and a strong historical character. It is a popular tourist destination, particularly in the summer when it hosts numerous events and festivals, and draws visitors from neighbouring towns due to its size and strength of retail mix. Shrewsbury has a lively BID, established in 2014 and renewed in 2019. The BID plays an active role in development and regeneration plans for the town centre.

There are three shopping centres within the town, which together account for around 15% of all units in Shrewsbury. The council saw an opportunity in 2018 to purchase these shopping centres under the powers of economic regeneration, to take back control and leadership of these strategic sites which were suffering from severe vacancy and required refurbishment. Through these purchases and active estate management, the council have been able to move retail businesses into a prime location the town centre to consolidate this offer, freeing up two major sites on the riverside for a new development.

Despite the successes of the town centre, it also faces a number of challenges. In particular Shrewsbury struggles to attract and retain young people to live and work in the town, with a low waged and low skilled economy, a lack of affordable housing and a lack of affordable and flexible workspace forcing people out to Birmingham in particular. The town also suffers from being disconnected from some surrounding neighbourhoods, with connectivity work required to link communities better to the town. There has also generally been a trend for office and commercial properties to move out to the edges of the town – creating a potential over-reliance on retail and lack of diversity in the core of Shrewsbury.

Though footfall in Shrewsbury has demonstrated good resilience, there are underused spaces in the centre and its vacancy rate is higher than the national average. Geographically, Shrewsbury has a very constrained street plan based on its medieval structure, which means development is physically very difficult. This has also limited movement and access through the town, with parts of the centre disconnected and a strong reliance on private vehicles.



Sessions engaging local residents during masterplanning week as part of the Big Town Plan, March 2018.

Vision: Shrewsbury began work on their town centre strategy – the Big Town Plan – in 2016, with a focus on co-creation, to reshape the town centre in a collaborative way. The first stage involved setting up a formal partnership between the council, the Town Council and the BID. Through a series of collaborative visioning workshops, a set of core themes and linked priorities were established which shape the vision:

- Rethinking movement and place
- Creating a place for enterprise
- Nurturing natural Shrewsbury
- Supporting vitality, life and mix

An element of the Big Town Plan is the ‘Shrewsbury Test’, an informal mechanism through which proposals and projects are quality checked to ensure they meet the precepts of the vision and are of a high level of design. Every development must answer these key questions:

- Does it support our vision?
- Does it strengthen the identity of Shrewsbury?
- Is it right for that part of town and most importantly, does it make life better for people?

Later in 2018, a masterplanning week was held with stakeholders, working with LDA Design, to build on the ideas gathered during the pop-up shop towards the first draft of the Big Town Plan. A second engagement event in 2018 played back to the public the initial responses and explored the emerging ideas for the plan, with feedback gathered. The final plan was agreed at the end of December 2018.

Following the Big Town Plan, the partnership appointed a multidisciplinary team in 2019 to develop the Big Town Plan Masterplan Vision. Over six months the team worked with the partnership board and the public through a co-design process – developing a detailed masterplan, business and delivery plan for six key character areas. This included a particular emphasis on commercial viability, heritage and conservation, and movement and access. Published in January 2021, the masterplan vision was then put out to public consultation, both online and through six-weeks of themed events under the umbrella of the Big Town Plan Festival.

Ensuring that everyone feels a sense of ownership over the plan, and buys into it at every level, has been key to developing a strong vision. This means that every move the council and the partnership make, small or large, can be related back to the vision. All the key businesses, organisations and groups involved in the town were asked to physically sign-up to the Big Town Plan on the wall of the pop-up retail unit, acting as a bold reminder of shared stewardship. Maintaining this momentum over the length of the vision is therefore one of the biggest challenges – with the partnership seeking ways to continually bring the Big Town Plan to the fore, planning events and promotions, and lively and engaging communications through the website and social media platforms.

Process

Team & Approach: The key players in the Shrewsbury Big Town Plan are the council's Shrewsbury Programme Manager, and the cross-sector Partnership Board. The council created the role of Programme Manager in 2018 to manage the Big Town Plan and to develop the masterplan vision. This key role is focused on managing relationships and working with stakeholders and the community. Crucially, the council were able to recruit an officer into this role who is from Shrewsbury – providing an advantage in terms of their insight and relationship to the community and the place. The council's Shrewsbury Programme Board cuts across service areas to oversee all aspects of the plan, feeding into the partnership through the Programme Manager.

The partnership board includes two members from each partner – the Executive Director of the BID and a BID board member, Head of Economic Growth at Shropshire Council and the Leader of the council, and the Leader of the Town Council and the Town Clerk. A broader team from all three organisations work with the board. Initially the board had a rotating Chair, but there was a desire to bring in an independent voice – somebody who can hold the partnership to account. A decision was made to recruit a voluntary Chair, which was advertised openly and a local business owner was appointed in 2019.

Any decisions that are made that involve significant funding or larger decision making, goes back through each partner's respective governance – the council reporting to Cabinet, the Town Council to their members and the BID to their board. Each partner has signed up to a partnership agreement, which involves putting in an agreed amount of money annually to support the partnership, which is spent in line with the partnership's constitution.

Given the scale of the Big Town Plan and the size of the in-house team, the council leans strongly on the partnership and the skills and resources that the partnership can offer – to carry out pieces of work or deliver certain aspects of the programme. Each partner plays to their strengths in terms of skills, knowledge and assets, for example the BID takes a strong lead on the engagement and communications elements.

Community Involvement: The community has been involved with the Big Town Plan throughout the process, beginning with sustained engagement through a dedicated pop-up shop which occupied a vacant retail unit in the town centre to gather ideas and feedback on the emerging plan. The shop attracted 2,500 visitors in 3 weeks, accumulating 5000+ post-its featuring ideas and comments. This was followed by six-weeks of themed online events under the umbrella of the Big Town Plan Festival in 2021, where the community were invited to comment on the masterplan vision.

Now that the masterplan is entering the delivery phase, the partnership are recruiting Shrewsbury Ambassadors to form 'Team Shrewsbury' – a group of residents, business owners and representatives from across the town. The team will be invited to regular meetings with the partnership, providing a stronger link to the broader Shrewsbury community.

The Shrewsbury Recovery Taskforce was initiated during the pandemic to respond specifically to the needs of the community and local businesses. Taken through the Big Town Plan partnership, a weekly virtual team meeting was established to monitor the situation, and an action focused programme of work was put together. This involved new branding to support the town, a series of webinars to support local businesses and provide information to residents, a photography and social media campaign to champion local independent businesses, managed outdoor spaces for social distancing and hospitality offerings, and temporary road closures and changes to support this. A Big Town Plan Map was created using Common Place for all town centre stakeholders to post ideas and notes onto a map. With over 2,500 responses, the partnership consolidated these suggestions into a recovery plan – feeding into the Big Town Plan.



Given the scale of the Big Town Plan and the size of the in-house team, the council leans strongly on the partnership and the skills and resources that the partnership can offer – to carry out pieces of work or deliver certain aspects of the programme.

Financing

The Big Town Plan has been co-funded so far by the partnership board, with each partner contributing an equal share annually to support the ongoing work. The council are the partner that have led on funding bids, making opportunistic bids for different parts of the Big Town Plan – such as the Getting Building fund and LEP funds. This has been able to fund the visioning work and some smaller-scale interventions, but the challenge now lies in structuring the financing of the delivery phase.

The council's approach is to invest up-front in the town centre, using their position and borrowing capacity to unlock early stages of development. Through development of their own assets, particularly the shopping centres they hope to leverage council-led delivery to improve the market in Shrewsbury in order to attract private sector investment. Once the market has been activated, they will look to either a capital release scheme or joint venture to recover the initial investment.

The partnership are also seeking larger grant funding through the Levelling Up Fund and other schemes, finding themselves in a strong position having already carried out the visioning and masterplanning work to clearly demonstrate their case.

Delivery

The council is now beginning the delivery phase of the Big Town Plan, beginning with a prioritisation of projects. The COVID-19 crisis has driven a desire to implement small but impactful projects quickly, to give the community a sense of improvement and change. Having a strong asset base in the town, further consolidated by the shopping centre purchases, means that the council has significant influence over development and is able to be proactive and lead delivery. The large riverside development is a key priority for both the council and the partnership board, as a large development project which will bring significant positive change to Shrewsbury.

The pandemic also enabled the partnership to take a disruptive planning approach – testing different road closures and direction changes, and accelerating plans around managed outdoor space. Following a clear positive net effect, it has been easy to build the case for long term change with the community and local businesses. Building confidence in the town, for private sector partners to want to invest, is a core part of the strategy.

The next step will be to assemble a range of data into a dashboard in order to monitor and evaluate the impact of the Big Town Plan. This will include economic, environmental and health impact assessments.

Key Takeaways

A cross-sector partnership brings a range of knowledge, skills and resources to the table.

Governance is key and an independent chair provides accountability and rigour to cross-sector partnerships.

A clear and consistent vision, unified around a strong brand, can focus stakeholders and maintain momentum.

Dynamic and sustained community engagement generates a strong community voice and buy-in.

Consolidating council-owned assets around key sites provides a strategic advantage.



Manchester City Council, Withington Village

Theme

Grassroots community-led regeneration



The Marcus Rashford mural, created by artist Akse as part of the Withington Walls project in November 2020.

Introduction

Withington Village represents a bottom-up approach to regeneration and was chosen because it demonstrates how a community can self-organise to lead on change in a place – with the support of the local authority. This case study also shows how funds secured through unconventional means (crowdfunding in this example) can build momentum, and the impact that small physical interventions can have on the success of a place.

Withington has been delivering community-led regeneration projects since 2017, with the council producing a strategic vision document in 2020 which formed the basis for a number of major funding applications – which if successful would fund more significant improvements and capital projects.

Place

Withington Village is a district centre 3 miles south of Manchester in a largely residential suburban area. It has a population of just over 15,000, a large proportion of which are aged 20-29, due to the village's proximity to both Manchester University and Manchester Metropolitan University. 77% of the population identifies themselves as white, and there are substantial Indian and Pakistani communities. Withington itself has relatively low levels of deprivation, however in the nearby ward of Old Moat, which is also served by Withington Village, there are areas that fall within the 10% most deprived areas in the country.

The internationally renowned cancer research and treatment centre at The Christie Hospital, founded in 1892, is located on the south side of Withington Village. The majority of the village falls within a Conservation Area, with notable Victorian architecture and a traditional street layout. The village has a strong cultural history, in particular relating to music – with the renowned music label Factory Records founded in the village in the late 1970s.

Background

Strategic Aims: The council's Our Manchester Strategy 2016-2025, which sets out a vision for the city region is based on five core themes:

- A thriving and sustainable city
- A highly skilled city
- A progressive and equitable city
- A liveable and low carbon city
- A connected city

Across these themes there is a strong emphasis on digital innovation and advanced industrial sectors such as life sciences and advanced materials. The council has a vision of Manchester as a 'digital city', using technology to tackle the climate emergency and change the way people live. The council declared a climate emergency in 2019, and has set a goal to achieve net zero in the city region by 2038 – with key pieces such as their Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy and the Greater Manchester Transport Strategy 2040 setting out measures to reduce vehicle dominance while improving quality of life and wellbeing.

The Our Manchester Industrial Strategy establishes a vision and delivery plan for developing a more inclusive economy. This strategy is centred around three pillars: people, place, and prosperity, with the place pillar describing a city of thriving centres. The strategy describes the development of district centres through improvements in transport and digital infrastructure, encouraging the re-purposing of buildings for business use, and improving the quality of work, pay and career progression. The community consultation undertaken for this piece of work also highlights the importance of high quality surroundings, with the built and natural environment major factors in attracting and retaining skilled staff and investment.

Town Centre Context: Withington Village is a small but lively village centre with a strong community of independent traders and residents. The village has a distinctive character due to its Victorian architecture, and a number of key local landmarks which anchor the village – including Withington Baths and Withington Library.

Despite having a good variety and service and comparison goods operators, only a very small proportion of Withington's catchment area population relies on the village for its comparison shopping needs (0.68%). The focus of the village has been commercial and leisure, however there has been a steady decline in the retail sector which mirrors national trends, resulting in vacant units and a reduction in the quality of retail occupiers. The number of takeaway food units has increased, making up 10% of all units in the centre.



The historic council-owned Withington Baths that have been leased to the Love Withington Baths organisation since 2015.

The public realm is typically of low quality, with few public spaces to dwell, and the centre is dominated by vehicle traffic due to its location on a key route into and out of Manchester. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, footfall fell 50% in Withington, compared to a national average of 84% – representing the hyperlocal nature of visitors to the village.

In 2013, a community group mobilised to save the historic council-owned Withington Baths from closure due to public sector funding cuts. Branding themselves Love Withington Baths, the group formed a charity and engaged with the council through campaigning and protest, eventually presenting a business plan to take over the running of the baths. In 2015 the council granted a 2-year lease to the organisation, who now run the baths and reinvest profits into their development. Under the community's stewardship, the baths have become a key part of the civic infrastructure in Withington – providing space for community groups and classes, and an essential leisure service. The council recently extended the lease to 30 years, securing the baths at the centre of the Withington community.

Following the campaign, Love Withington Baths turned their attention to the regeneration of Withington Village more broadly, forming the Withington Village Regeneration Partnership (WVRP) in 2017 in collaboration with Manchester City Council, Withington Civic Society, Withington Baths, The Christie Hospital, Southway Housing Association, local traders and local property owners. The partnership is now intended to be the key body delivering regeneration in the village.

In 2019, the WVRP established a separate traders association – We Are Withington, a collection of traders and service providers including Wilderness Records, A Curious Collection, The Lock Inn, Solomons, Burton Road Brewery, Withington Baths and The Christie Hospital. Both bodies play an active role in the village, with a strong programme of events, public art, and community activities.

Vision: To support the growing partnership work between the council and the WVRP, in 2020 Manchester City Council appointed a consultant team led by Nexus Planning to prepare the Withington Village Framework, updating the Withington Village Action Plan (2010-2020) and setting out a broad vision and key policy objectives. The strategic work aimed to establish a vision supported by the community that would provide a basis for future funding bids.

The work followed on from work done by the Institute of Place Management (IPM) at Manchester Metropolitan University for Manchester City Council in 2019-20 funded by the Interreg European Union Regional Development Fund. This project examined the city's district centres and made recommendations for creating more 'vital and viable' places, particularly through the promotion of collaborative partnerships.

The core themes of the vision are:

- A Cultural Community Centre – heritage, place, space, identity, celebration
- Environmentally Friendly – climate change, access, public transport, flood risk, reducing carbon emissions, air quality
- Health and Well-Being – 'moving the nation', health care, age friendly, community support
- Digital Economy – digital infrastructure, flexible co-work spaces, education, skills and learning

High priority projects which aim to have an immediate impact on the way the village centre is used include creating a new public space to act as a gateway to the village and improving the setting on the library; improvements to the pedestrian environment along the main high street and closing a key area to vehicular traffic. Other priorities include improving the walking and cycling routes into the village from adjacent areas, restoring heritage features including enhancing shop fronts, and reviewing the use of public car parks as new public spaces.

The vision also sets out early intervention short-term projects to facilitate investment and harness momentum – in particular building on the work that community groups and businesses have already done. A strong thread running through the vision work is to support and boost these groups, with a proposal to constitute the WVRP into a body that can lead on delivery of the vision.

Process

Team & Approach: The council has established a strong relationship with the WVRP, enabling their work as much as possible. This relationship has relied on a good synergy of personalities and a shared will to improve Withington. The WVRP in the first iteration as Love Withington Baths moved from a position of lobbying, to one of partnership and since proving themselves through the successful operation of the baths, have developed a close working relationship with the council.

Community Involvement: Since establishing the WVRP and We Are Withington, improvements and activities in the town have largely been led by these two community stakeholder groups. The WVRP meet formally every two months, with regular communications to develop projects in between and have had significant input into the visioning work done by the council. They continue to deliver their own projects and events alongside the framework. We Are Withington is a group of traders, not formally constituted as a BID, but informally united to improve the high street. They have a close relationship to and significant overlap of membership with the MVRP.



This grassroots approach to regeneration has united the community and given the village a strong character which forms a strong basis for a major funding grant.

Finances

Withington has not yet secured major funding to realise the aims of the visioning work, and is so far funding individual projects in a piecemeal approach. The council funded the vision work and has supported the WVRP to deliver small projects. The WVRP have had some success with small funding bids, for example from the national Pocket Parks Grant scheme. The partnership is aiming to secure major funding through national initiatives to deliver the key projects outlined in the vision.

There are numerous successful initiatives in the village which are all community-led, funded through crowdfunding (in the case of Withington Walls), or delivered solely through community efforts and resources. This grassroots approach to regeneration has united the community and given the village a strong character which forms a strong basis for a major funding grant.

Delivery

We Are Withington have spearheaded a number of successful initiatives, most notably Withington By Night – a regular event during which traders open late in an atmosphere of live music, food and drink. The most recent event saw a 30% increase in footfall in one evening, amounting to 1,000 additional visits to the high street.

Withington Walls, which is a spin-off project of WVRP and We Are Withington, is a community-led art initiative led by volunteers and funded primarily through crowdfunding. The project aims to reinvigorate the high street through artworks on the shop shutters and walls, produced by local artists. The initiative is closely linked to We Are Withington's aims to rejuvenate the nighttime economy in Withington, providing a more likely backdrop to the

town than blank shutters. The group has used the Crowdfunder platform to generate funding in four separate rounds – fundraising for specific areas and projects, as well as ongoing funds – securing over £55,000 so far. Most recently the group ran a fundraising show, where shoppers were able to purchase prints to raise money for the next set of public artworks.

A further community initiative, the Withington Public Hall Institute has recently formed as a Community Interest Company to take over the defunct members club in the town as a venue for community events, a place for socialising, eating and drinking, and with a particular emphasis on providing work opportunities for those most excluded from the job market – including young people and those with special educational needs a disabilities. The Lock Inn group, who have hosted pop-up pubs in disused venues across the town, were the catalyst for the institute, providing the first set of events in the venue. The group of friends initially occupied an empty Grade II listed building, featuring local brewers and food from a local restaurant.

Key Takeaways

The council can facilitate community-led regeneration by removing obstacles and participating in partnerships.

Providing support and trust to community organisations can help to ensure valuable community resources are kept functioning.

Council assets have a wide range of potential uses when put to the community to determine.

Mixing uses and combining community activities in one building creates vibrant and well-used places.

Events and unexpected activities can animate underused high streets and generate footfall.

The visual appearance of a place can be improved by small-scale interventions to create character and identity.



Middlesbrough Council, Middlesbrough

Theme

Diversification



The Dorman Museum in Linthorpe Road, one of two museums operated by Middlesbrough Council.

Introduction

Middlesbrough's approach to town centre regeneration is centred on the needs of business and a drive towards bringing investment into the town. It represents an example of an evidence-based approach, with clear metrics for monitoring the success of their work.

Middlesbrough was awarded money from the Future High Streets and the Towns Fund in 2021, as well as Heritage Action Zone funding in 2019. They are now focusing on the delivery of projects outlined in their 2019 strategic vision across these three funds.

Place

Middlesbrough is a large town in North Yorkshire with a population of 140,000, though the town centre's catchment extends to 600,000. It is part of Tees Valley Combined Authority and has had an elected Mayor since 2002.

It is the most ethnically diverse local authority area in the Tees Valley, with 7.78% Asian/Asian British, 1.71% Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups, 1.25 Black/Africa/Caribbean/Black British and 1.08% other Ethnic groups. It is the fifth most deprived local authority area in England overall, and has the highest proportion of neighbourhoods in the most deprived 10% nationally of any other authority.

Middlesbrough is a former industrial town, nicknamed during the 19th century 'Ironopolis' for its huge Pig Iron output, later transitioning to steel at the turn of the century. Due to its strategic industrial importance, it was heavily bombed during the second World War, with much of central Middlesbrough destroyed. The legacy of engineering remains in the form of a strong advanced manufacturing and emerging technology sector. It is also still an important port, handling over 27 millions tonnes of cargo a year.



An important part of the strategy is the creation of distinct quarters with defined characters.

Background

Strategic Aims: The Mayor's priorities for Middlesbrough set out in the Strategic Plan 2020-23 centre on three themes: People, Place, Business. Both Place and Business put the town centre at the core of this vision. Improving the physical fabric of the town centre and bringing more homes into the town are key priorities, as well as promoting investment and changing perceptions of the town. Within the People strand there is also a focus on reducing emissions and improving green space provision.

Town Centre Context: Two decades ago Middlesbrough was a well-performing retail-led centre which drew shoppers from across the region. However, the town centre has struggled in the last decade to respond to changing high street trends – with an over-reliance on retail in particular, making up 47% of its units, while only 11% is leisure. It also has four large shopping centres, a disproportionate amount given its size, which has driven a race to the bottom in terms of rents. Property values are typically low and vacant units are difficult to fill.

The local catchment has typically low disposable income due to the types of jobs offered in Middlesbrough and higher earning individuals choose to shop elsewhere, in particular the local retail park which has a strong mix of flagship stores and brands. The average spend in Middlesbrough is also low, particularly on entertainment and leisure – demonstrating the lack of provision in this area.

There has also been a lack of office space in the town centre, with numerous out of town office parks opening in the 1980s and 1990s. The result has been a higher than average vacancy rate (15.38% in 2018). During the pandemic a large number of anchor stores closed down, leaving behind large empty retail units. Combined with relatively high levels of crime and antisocial behaviour, run-down buildings and public spaces, the perception of Middlesbrough has suffered – with large numbers travelling to Newcastle, Leeds or York at the weekend.



Teesside University's Student Life building in summer 2021.

Vision: In 2018, the council commissioned an economic assessment of the town centre to provide a detailed evidence base for a strategic framework and action plan. Using this data, the council produced the Middlesbrough Town Centre Strategy 2019-23 alongside an Invest in Middlesbrough website, working with the Town Centre Partnership consisting of representatives from local businesses, the Police, Teesside University, and other key stakeholders. The strategy is focused on growth and employment, aiming to gain city status – becoming the key city centre of the Tees Valley.

The vision has five strategic priorities:

- A quality place: improving public realm and safety
- Attract and enhance: increasing footfall and spend
- Animate and inspire: encourage multiple interactions and attract visitors
- Opportunity and investment: secure private sector investment
- Connect: enhance transport and pedestrian links

Broadly, the strategy centres on diversification and rebalancing the economy to attract more commercial and leisure activity, new higher value employment opportunities and in turn to attract private sector investment. The strategy has a strong aim to build business confidence and alongside Investment in Middlesbrough present an economically-driven approach. It sets out a series of clear metrics with targets against which the work will be assessed including:

- Footfall
- Floor space vacancies
- Average spend
- Leisure/Food & Beverage floor space
- Major events held and visitor numbers
- Environmental satisfaction survey
- Investment
- New residential units
- High value employment

An important part of the strategy is the creation of distinct quarters with defined characters. Of particular strategic significance is the Boho quarter, or digital enterprise zone, which is building on the success of Teesside University's specialism in digital technology. The council has heavily invested in office space and business support for graduates in this sector over the past decade, starting with a small incubation centre. The sector has now matured in Middlesbrough, attracting and retaining skilled young people and producing higher paying jobs. The quarter now has over 60,000 square feet of office space and major global contracts.

This strategic work and the evidence base produced in 2018 put the council in a strong position to apply for both the Future High Streets Fund and the Towns Fund, securing over £36m of investment across the two schemes. The Towns Fund required a Town Investment Plan to be developed and delivered by a fully constituted independent panel.

Process

Team & Approach: The town centre officers are part of the Economic Growth and Infrastructure team, which sit within the Regeneration and Culture Directorate alongside Planning, Culture and Capital Projects. The team is strong on project management skills with a strong emphasis on business and inward investment, with heritage, culture, community engagement and events driven by the Culture team and delivery led by the Capital Projects team. The Tees Valley Combined Authority provides substantial business support functions, which are therefore not a key part of the town centre team's service.

There are no formal stakeholder groups or business forums (apart from the Town Deal Board connected specifically to the Towns Fund), due in part to the low ebb of the town centre. The council's approach is to get the basics in place and focus on one-to-one engagement with individual businesses, driving investment into the town centre, before stronger coalitions such as BIDs will be successful. They feed into community programmes and cultural activities, but do not lead on these initiatives.

Community Involvement: While the town centre team is focused on the business community, the Culture team has a strong programme of events and activities which aim to animate the town centre. These include establishing the Orange Pip Market of local and regional food, live music and creative workshops on a monthly basis. The market is centred on Baker and Bedford Street – two previously derelict residential streets which have been regenerated by the council into a neighbourhood of independent bars, cafes and restaurants.

Other initiatives include the Town Meal, which celebrates community groups who grow their own fruit and vegetables, cooked by a local school and free to everyone. The council have also been successful in attracting Arts Council funding for public art commissions and a public poetry series which involves large murals.

Financing

Middlesbrough secured grants from both the Future High Streets Fund (£14.1m from the Welcome Back Fund) and the Towns Fund (£21.9m) in 2021. The plans and projects funded by each award are strategically aligned and realise the earlier strategic vision.

The council also received funding from Historic England in 2019 for a Heritage Action Zone focused around the station, one of the few buildings of historic significance in the centre which is being refurbished and the public realm improved.

The council is also investing directly with a view to improving the property market. In particular they have directly delivered substantial office space in the centre, which has improved the rental market from £10-12sq/ft to £18-19sq/ft. At Albert North, the council has invested in bringing a key street back into commercial use, providing 50,000 square metres of office space alongside new residential units. They also purchased one of the four town centre shopping centres in 2020, with a plan (that will be funded by the Future High Streets Fund) to consolidate retail units elsewhere in the town and transform a quarter of a million square foot of retail space into leisure – with a focus on bowling, go-karting and other popular ‘competitive leisure’ uses.

Delivery

Middlesbrough is currently planning delivery of schemes under the Future High Street Fund, which will include:

- Development of residential property
- Adaptations to transport services and improving safety and security of town centre areas
- Cultural animation and experiences
- Grant funding for businesses to mitigate the impact of COVID-19
- Transformation of council-owned Captain Cook Square shopping centre for leisure use.

Similarly, detailed business cases are being submitted to the Middlesbrough Towns Fund Board which focus on:

- Development of residential quarters
- Developing town centre office space and manufacturing facilities
- Expanding Middlesbrough College and Teesside University campuses
- Improving rail links including a new platform and better public realm
- An improved cultural offer including a new visual arts venue.

Key Takeaways

A robust evidence base underpins a strong strategic vision.

Taking a business focused approach and speaking the language of the private sector is key to attracting investment.

Preparing strategic visioning work in advance places the council in a strong position when funding opportunities are presented.

Focusing on key growth sectors and investing heavily can generate high value clusters of activity and employment.

Council investment into failing street markets and market halls can improve them and build confidence for the private sector.



London Borough of Newham, Newham High Streets

Theme

Community Wealth Building



Young people from Beckton Youth Zone join Mayor Rokhsana Fiaz OBE to paint a mural at the entrance to Beckton Globe as part of the Shape Newham programme, May 2021.

Introduction

Newham's approach to town centre regeneration is rooted in their council-wide focus on Community Wealth Building, demonstrating a set of drivers which places social value before economic performance. The case study does not focus on a single high street but explores how the council's broad strategic vision is shaping their approach to community engagement, town centre planning and projects delivery across the borough.

Newham published the first phase of its Newham High Street Programme in June 2021, following a year of community engagement and co-production. This strategic delivery plan focuses on the first four neighbourhoods as a pilot, and is now beginning the delivery phase of this work.

Place

The London Borough of Newham, situated in the east of the city and with a population of 352,005, is the most diverse borough in the country – with over 100 languages spoken, and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities making up 72.5% of the borough's residents. The borough also has the highest rates of poverty and income inequality in London – with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities disproportionately affected.

A borough of contrasts, in 2012, Newham was one of six host boroughs for the London Games in the newly built Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in the west at Stratford. Alongside the Olympic developments, Newham is also the site of some of the largest regeneration schemes in the country, including the Royal Docks and the International Quarter in Stratford. However, Newham is also one of two London Authorities to be given tier 1 status in the Government's Levelling Up Fund, identifying it as a place in severe need.

Background

Strategic Aims: In 2018, Newham elected Rokhsana Fiaz as Mayor, with a Community Wealth Building agenda and a focus on addressing poverty and the racial and gendered wealth gap. In January 2020 the Mayor published her Community Wealth Building Strategy, which underpins everything the council does. The core principles of this strategy are to keep wealth within the local economy through the purchasing power of anchor institutions and progressive procurement, to provide support for young people and workers to get better access to training and employment, to encourage local employers to offer the living wage, and to nurture Newham businesses, in particular the local cooperative economy.

Co-production principles sit at the core of the Community Wealth Building approach, which means that residents, and those who work and study in the borough are involved in the design, commissioning, delivery, and monitoring and evaluation of all council services – working together on an equal basis. The council has a Co-Production team, and all council projects must demonstrate how they have integrated these principles into their processes.

Town Centre Context: Newham's high streets and town centres are at the heart of the council's commitment to Community Wealth Building. Development across the borough has been uneven in recent decades, with most focus in the West around Stratford and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, and Canning Town, leaving the smaller town centres requiring development.

Retail is a strong focus across the borough, though beyond the larger centres this is typically dominated by lower quality retail such as fast food takeaways and betting shops. Some centres, such as Green Street, have a strong visitor economy with a specialist ethnic offer across textiles, bridal and jewellery retailers, and there are also large markets such as the 5,600sqm Queens Market which caters to the diverse multi-ethnic nature of the local community. There is a strong need across the borough to diversify the high street offer beyond retail, with a focus on bringing in more leisure, community and cultural functions which support the Community Wealth Building agenda.

Many of Newham's smaller town centres are structured around busy A-roads, bringing high levels of noise and pollution, with typically poor quality public realm and priority given to vehicles. The need to improve air quality and provide better outdoors spaces on the high street for people to dwell has been emphasised by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the borough experienced high rates of mortality – emphasising existing inequalities particularly for Black and Ethnic minority residents. In the first five months of the pandemic, mobility in recreation and retail fell by 37%, comparable to other east London boroughs, however the mobility to and round parks increased by 457% – the greatest increase of any London borough, indicative of how few residents have access to private green space.

Vision: Since the start of 2020, the council has been developing the Newham High Street programme with a focus on producing place-specific, strategic delivery plans. The programme is divided into distinct phases, with Phase 1 focusing on four neighbourhood places, with follow-up phases subject to the success of the initial phase and identification of resources.

Working with an external consultant, who prepared appraisals and analysis of each town centre in the first phase of the programme, the council published Phase I for the first four town centres in June 2021. The document differs from other town centre visions in its strong community-led approach – with all aspects of each plan generated with the community and voted on democratically through an online engagement platform. This three-stage process of 1) evaluation 2) co-design 3) implementation is designed as a cyclical process which can respond to funding and opportunities as they become available.

After establishing the priorities for communities in each neighbourhood, projects across four types were generated in intensive co-design sessions:

- Public realm interventions - improving the look, feel and accessibility of the high street
- Transport and accessibility - around the principles of 15-minute neighbourhoods
- Active spaces - proposing new uses and activities onto the high street
- Non-spatial programmes - support around health, participation employment, training and young people

During the course of the strategic work, the council published its COVID-19 recovery strategy: Towards a Better Newham. This strategy put forward eight pillars of recovery centring on creating an inclusive economy, measuring success through the health, happiness and wellbeing of residents, rather than growth, productivity and land value – the only London Borough to make this shift. One of the key pillars of this strategy is focused on developing Newham's 15-minute neighbourhoods, ensuring residents can access all social, civic and economic essentials within a 15 minute walk or cycle.

Responding to the recovery strategy, and to the impact of the pandemic on local communities, the strategic work for the Newham High Street Programme shifted its focus. The key change was in moving away from producing a high-level vision document, towards a strategic delivery plan focused on short to medium term recovery and impacts. This enabled the council to respond to communities with clear, deliverable projects which can have an impact on people's day to day lives now.

Some further shifts were also noted during the process of co-design, most obviously a clear desire from the community for better access to green space and enhanced public realm. The idea of the high street as the main outdoor space accessed by many residents became a central focus of the work.



Architects' impression of a reimagined Alice Billings House and public realm, as a cultural hub of affordable artists' studios, craft and maker spaces

Process

Team & Approach: Newham was the first London borough to embed Community Wealth Building into its organisational structure, having a dedicated Community Wealth Building Directorate, under which Regeneration, Business and Enterprise, Estate Regeneration, and Adult Learning sit – consolidating functions that focus on generating social value and democratising the local economy.

Area regeneration teams take a neighbourhood approach to regeneration – considering the broader connection of places, amenities and communities and in turn how local town centres can strengthen and support this neighbourhood holistically – rather than starting with the high street itself. In focusing on what a thriving neighbourhood and community looks like, the council measures social indicators of success rather than conventional metrics that are more strongly tied to economic factors. This approach also means that strategic work, and therefore the needs of the community, is clearly linked to delivery and a continuous feedback loop can be established between strategy and delivery. There is strong cross-departmental working, with close relationships between area regeneration teams, highways, parks, economic development.

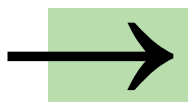
The regeneration teams work closely with Community Neighbourhood Managers across eight defined Community Neighbourhoods (which span ward boundaries), who are based in community hubs across the borough and act as intermediaries between the council and citizens, as eyes and ears on the ground – supporting the council to reach excluded groups and supporting the engagement process.

Community Involvement: Although some places in Newham have very active and vocal civic communities, who have the time, skill-set and ability to not only participate but to self organise, there are many communities who are unable to participate by traditional civic means. Due to these barriers, the council have steered away from setting up traditional governance structures for managing their town centres and bringing in stakeholders.

Instead, the council runs Community Assemblies in each Community Neighbourhood area which are open to all to attend, connected to cycles of council funding (for example, each area has been allocated £100k CIL funding for April 2021 - March 2022). The Assemblies meet regularly from the beginning of a funding cycle to establish local priorities and generate project ideas, vote on proposals, and feedback throughout the delivery process. A Working Group is also elected in each neighbourhood, made up of people who live, work or learn in the area, as well as council officers and councillors. The Working Group meets regularly to develop the proposals generated by the Community Assemblies and monitor project delivery – feeding back via Community Assemblies.

Prior to the pandemic, Community Assemblies and Working Groups met face to face, in town-hall style meetings. In Spring 2020, Newham were quick to pivot to an online platform, using Zoom for community meetings and selecting the Citizen Lab digital engagement platform as a tool for engagement and co-design. Launching as Newham Co-Create, the platform has a particular focus on co-design rather than consultation. This enables the council to use participatory budgeting for the S106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funds – allowing residents and businesses to propose projects and ideas (via Community Assemblies), and then for the community to vote on their favourites which in turn get funded.

Communities identified as digitally excluded have been supported through community hubs by their Community Neighbourhood Team to access Co-Create. In specific situations of extremely vulnerable communities, the council produce paper versions of engagement exercises and delivers them to residents to proactively gather their views. The council reports much higher engagement through Co-Create than with traditional face to face participation, and plans to keep using it across council functions in combination with in-person events even when restrictions end.



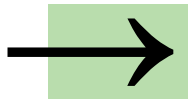
In focusing on what a thriving neighbourhood and community looks like, the council measures social indicators of success rather than conventional metrics that are more strongly tied to economic factors.

Financing

Newham takes a mixed economy approach to regeneration, with some large investments in major developments – around which the council aims to influence developers strongly towards bringing benefits for the community – while other small projects are council funded, or funded through small grants and support such as the GLA's Good Growth Programme.

The council is also one of the largest local authority landowners in the country and has one of London's largest house building arms (Populo) as well the Affordable Homes for Newham Programme, which is delivering 1,000 council-owned homes on disused garage sites. This level of council-led delivery and asset base affords the council leverage to shape development to bring benefits to town centres, for example the chance to move community and leisure functions into town centres as part of housing developments. Council-owned assets on high streets are also being redeveloped to meet the needs of the place and greater high street mix (see Active Spaces project below).

The communities themselves are also active participants in delivering projects, bringing skills and volunteer time (rather than funds) to build small interventions such as tree planting and public realm interventions. The council encourages such community involvement by reducing as many administrative and bureaucratic barriers as possible and enabling grassroots projects through Community Neighbourhood teams.



The communities themselves are also active participants in delivering projects, bringing skills and volunteer time (rather than funds) to build small interventions.

Delivery

The Newham High Street Programme is now entering the delivery stage, with a prioritisation of projects and funding allocations. An application to the Government's Levelling Up Fund includes a large proportion of the proposed plans, with small grants and opportunities also being sought. The council has a number of internal brands to deliver regeneration projects:

Shape Newham: Established to deliver public realm projects, working with an external design team and local artists. Specific Community Assemblies are hosted for detailed co-design of schemes and voting.

Active Spaces: A capital release programme to bring back disused council assets or empty privately owned spaces on the high street into creative new community uses. The first pilot project, Alice Billings House, is a grade II listed building originally designed as accommodation for firefighters and later used as a council office. It is situated in a strategic position for development and is a key part of the Stratford Town Centre Masterplan. Newham selected Community Land Trust (CLT) to operate the site on a 25 year lease from the council. The capital funds allocated will be used by CLT to refurbish the building into 30 flexible and affordable studio spaces.

The Active Spaces process involves:

- A call for spaces – publicly and privately owned
- Assemble list of spaces, shortlist and generate community feedback through Co-Create platform
- Assemble list of preferred operators and open a call for bids
- Assess bids through a Community Wealth Building matrix:
 - Youth employment
 - Spend in local supply
 - Number of Newham residents employed
 - Meaningful work placements
 - Co-production with residents
- Plus assessment of bidder viability through:
 - Six months of public accounts
 - Confirmation of status and board members to avoid conflicts
- Negotiate rents and business rates based on social value output – with measurable outputs capping rents.
- Confirm outcome of bids and invite comments and questions from the community.

Key Takeaways

A strong strategic mission in the form of Newham's Community Wealth Building agenda underpins all regeneration and development across town centres and high streets in the borough – providing coherence of vision, process and delivery.

A neighbourhood approach places the high street in the service of wider community needs and wealth building.

Early and regular community participation and co-design – including community assemblies, online engagement and community voting to allocate funding.

Selecting the right online engagement platform and rolling it out across council service areas can transform the ability for communities to engage and for the council to develop strong co-production credentials.

Strategic re-activation of disused council assets can provide new community facilities and diversify the high street offer.

Placing social value ahead of financial return through procurement matrices, rent and negotiated business rates can attract new uses to enhance community wealth.



North Somerset Council, Weston-super-Mare

Theme

Heritage and culture-led regeneration



The Whirligig Festival of outdoor arts in Weston-super-Mare. Photograph by Paul Blakemore, September 2021.

Introduction

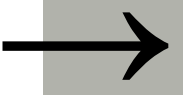
Weston-super-Mare demonstrates how culture and heritage can be a strong focus for transforming not only the physical fabric of a town centre but can also bring new uses and activity into an underused place. The case study also shows how funding streams can build on one another to maximise their impact, and how thinking about the legacy of funding can seed long-term relationships with stakeholders.

Weston-super-Mare received Heritage Action Zone funding from Historic England in 2017, followed by additional High Streets Heritage Action Zone funding in 2020, and have been implementing projects through these funding streams since. In 2020 they set out the SuperWeston Placemaking Strategy which builds on this work and joins individual schemes together in an overarching vision which the council is now beginning to deliver, dependent on funding.

Place

Weston-super-Mare (Weston) is a seaside town, the largest within the unitary authority of North Somerset. It has a population of 77,000 who are 96.5% white, with a significant ageing population – 20.1% are over 65, compared to the national average of 16.5%. At the start of the new millennium, Weston saw a growth in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres, which by 2009 accounted for 11% of all centres in the UK. One of Weston's wards is the 5th most deprived in the country, and life expectancy is 10 years less than the national average.

Traditionally a seaside town, Weston became a key tourist destination in the 19th century, due in part to its proximity to Bristol and Bath and the construction of a new Pier in the centre of the town. Like many British seaside towns, it experienced a decline in the 1970s when holidays abroad became more accessible. Today, tourism plays a significant role in the local economy, with pre-pandemic figures showing 5.1million day visits annually and £239.4 million in total visit related spend per year, supporting 4,600 jobs.



The purchase of Sovereign Centre was driven by a strategic need to diversify the town centre away from retail, with plans to bring in new uses such as flexible workspace and community uses.

Background

Strategic Aims: The council's corporate vision centres on being open, fair and green – with a significant emphasis on sustainability, since declaring a climate emergency in 2019. This includes a carbon literacy programme across the council workforce and a rewilding plan which focuses on the 2.5 million square metres of amenity grass managed by the council. North Somerset's vision also focuses on strengthening community leadership, reducing inequalities and providing opportunities for everyone, in particular improving outcomes for those in the most deprived areas.

Town Centre Context: Weston's town centre has a strong architectural identity, becoming a Conservation Area in 2018 consisting of four character areas, which each have their own appraisal and management plan. The town centre is focused on the spine of the High Street, flanked by Victorian three-storey buildings, most of which are retail at the ground and either vacant or used as storage on the upper levels. Many buildings are in a poor state of repair, with historic features, shopfronts and signage replaced with low quality materials and insensitive alterations which have degraded the character of the place. The property market is traditional low value, which has meant that owners are typically disinclined to invest in improvements.

The high street offer is generally poor, with few major anchors and little draw beyond low value retail. There is also a very weak nighttime economy, leading to the perception of a lack of safety at night. The lack of residential element to the town centre, particularly above retail units, has exacerbated the lack of vibrancy. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a number of larger chains leave the high street in Weston, while smaller traders did better than usual due to an increased local customer base, business rates relief and grants available.

Since 2017 there has been a concerted effort to use culture and heritage to regenerate the town – two drivers which were previously little used within the council. In 2017 the town centre was awarded Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) status by Historic England, winning £600k of funding until 2022. In 2020, the council applied to become a High Streets Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ), securing another £1.1million from Historic England until 2024. The projects across both these schemes focus on restoring shop fronts and key historic buildings, including bringing some vacant units back into use with a view to attracting new uses into the high street, as well as making improvements to the public realm. A programme of cultural engagement and community involvement also accompanies these physical interventions.

In 2018, the council purchased the main shopping centre in the town – the Sovereign Centre, which was suffering from major vacancy and required refurbishing. The purchase was driven by a strategic need to diversify the town centre away from retail, with plans to bring in new uses such as flexible workspace and community uses. The council was awarded £1.7m from the Getting Building Fund administered by the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) in 2020 for the first phase of the work.

Vision: The current strategic vision for Weston can be traced back to the 1997 Town Centre Plan, which was the first time that the heritage assets of the town were given significance. Following this, the town secured HAZ status in 2017 and became a Conservation Area. On the back of this funding and the new focus on heritage and culture, a much stronger placemaking agenda was established within the council. Following the appointment of a new director of Placemaking and Growth, the SuperWeston strategic vision work was initiated in early 2020 (prior to the pandemic) with a large consultation programme – producing a highly aspirational Placemaking Strategy.

The SuperWeston Placemaking Strategy (adopted in 2020) builds on the HAZ work, extending individual projects into more strategic placemaking initiatives and building on the strategic aims of the council in terms of rewilding and sustainability. Eight core objectives structure the vision, which together aim to generate a strong experience-based economy with more valuable tourism, a vital and consolidated town centre, and a thriving arts, culture and heritage sector:

- Weston Wellbeing
- Weston Experience
- Active Weston
- Learning Weston
- Green Weston
- Work Weston
- Carbon Neutral Weston
- Weston Living

Established as part of the strategic work, the Weston Place Agency is a cross-sector network which includes business, key institutions, community groups and the voluntary sector, and is the body that will develop and deliver the projects outlined in the strategic vision. They are also responsible for the brand, communications and online presence. A Steering Group was established in September 2020, which includes representatives from the council, the town council, Culture Weston, the local BID, the Chamber of Commerce, the shopping centre, the pier and the local college. The group reports to Placemaking and Growth within the council.

Culture Weston, a Cultural Development Company established as a collaborative enterprise between North Somerset Council and the local Theatre Orchard, is also a key part of the strategic work. The initiative was part of the council's HSHAZ bid, proposing to build on heritage work through arts and culture themed community engagement work. It was initially established as a pilot project, funded through the HSHAZ, and subsequently



The Memory Bank Culture Project held by Culture Weston, exploring residents' memories and visions of the high street, March 2021.

made a successful funding application to the Arts Council, with Weston identified as a 'priority town' for three years from 2021. Culture Weston is extremely active, producing events and community-led programmes focused on fostering creative talent, supporting placemaking and raising the profile of Weston. Culture Weston works closely with the council's heritage officers to ensure HAZ/HSHAZ projects and cultural projects are well aligned and mutually beneficial.

Process

Team & Approach: The SuperWeston work has been delivered by officers in the Placemaking and Growth teams, within the Place directorate. Following adoption of the SuperWeston Placemaking Strategy, the council is now developing a dedicated placemaking team of 10-12 officers who will lead on delivering the cultural activities, events, and various projects detailed in the vision. This new team is funded initially for two years through a combination of council funding and funds from WECA. The Placemaking Team will work alongside the existing Heritage and Design team, which focuses on delivering HAZ/HSHAZ work.

Partnership working with a broad set of stakeholders is central to the council's approach to cultural, heritage and placemaking work. Through Culture Weston, Weston Place Agency and the HAZ/HSHAZ initiatives, the council is working with the local BID, the Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses, Weston Civic Society, local colleges and schools, the voluntary sector and local residents. This work ranges from engagement work, to the formal partnerships of Weston Place Agency and Culture Weston, as well as co-delivery of projects such as through the heritage work.

Community Involvement: The community were engaged extensively during the initial phases of the SuperWeston work through a number of different projects. The Weston Wishes project was located in an urban room – a vacant unit in the Sovereign Centre mall – in which the community were invited to write or draw their hopes for the town on postcards which were exhibited in the space. 5,000 cards were completed, the ideas on which fed into the strategic vision and priorities.

Weston Wanders was a community mapping exercise which involved walks around parts of the town, co-writing poems with the community, and the creation of a physical map to capture thoughts and responses to specific places. Work Weston focused specifically on engaging businesses and investors, taking the form of a series of workshops on investment, identity and the town branding.

The community projects run by Culture Weston are extensive and numerous. Highlights include the 21st Century super Shrines project, in which communities and local artists have been designing their own bandstands in the town, building on the heritage of Weston's original bandstands. It is a three-year project funded by Historic England as a separate grant for cultural projects with the HSHAZ, and aims to bring shared values and a series of physical platforms of performance and events into the town.

The HAZ and HSHAZ have also developed a programme of initiatives which aim to extend the legacy of the Historic England funding. This involves working closely with Weston Museum to develop community volunteer programmes which are planned to be self-supporting in the future, including establishing Rusty Club for under 16s to get involved in learning about heritage. They have also funded training to community members to do guided walks of the town, and training for the Civic Society on planning issues and design – embedding key principles of the heritage work. Culture Weston are producing similar events and training programmes, hoping to leave a legacy of young people and volunteers who will develop and run events and programmes.

Financing

The council have leveraged the initial HAZ investment from Historic England in a way that has secured both longer-term funding and far-reaching impacts for the town. This initial HAZ work placed the council in a strong position to apply for HSHAZ funding, and to use learning gained through the HAZ work to get going very quickly on the HSHAZ projects – joining up initiatives to enhance their impact.

Culture Weston was effectively incubated through the HSHAZ funding, and has now extended into a much larger organisation with an extensive programme and significant funding from the Arts Council. In this respect, perceptions of Weston are shifting and momentum is building – which the council hopes in turn will generate more private sector investment, as well as other major grants such as Levelling Up Funds.

Delivery

The council is currently focusing on a set of quick and affordable activities to stimulate change across the town, while business cases and funding for longer, more strategic projects are secured. The 'microplan' includes public realm improvements, events and pop-up leisure activities such as an outdoor cinema, food trucks and street furniture.

The council is also continuing to deliver shop front improvements, refurbishment of key historic buildings (including the train station), and public realm projects under the HAZ/HSHAZ funding programmes. Culture Weston is also delivering arts based projects such as the 21st Century super Shrines project and Grow Feral, a series of workshops exploring the town's natural assets.

Key Takeaways

Building the identity of a place around heritage and culture provides a strong hook for funding and a narrative for place-shaping.

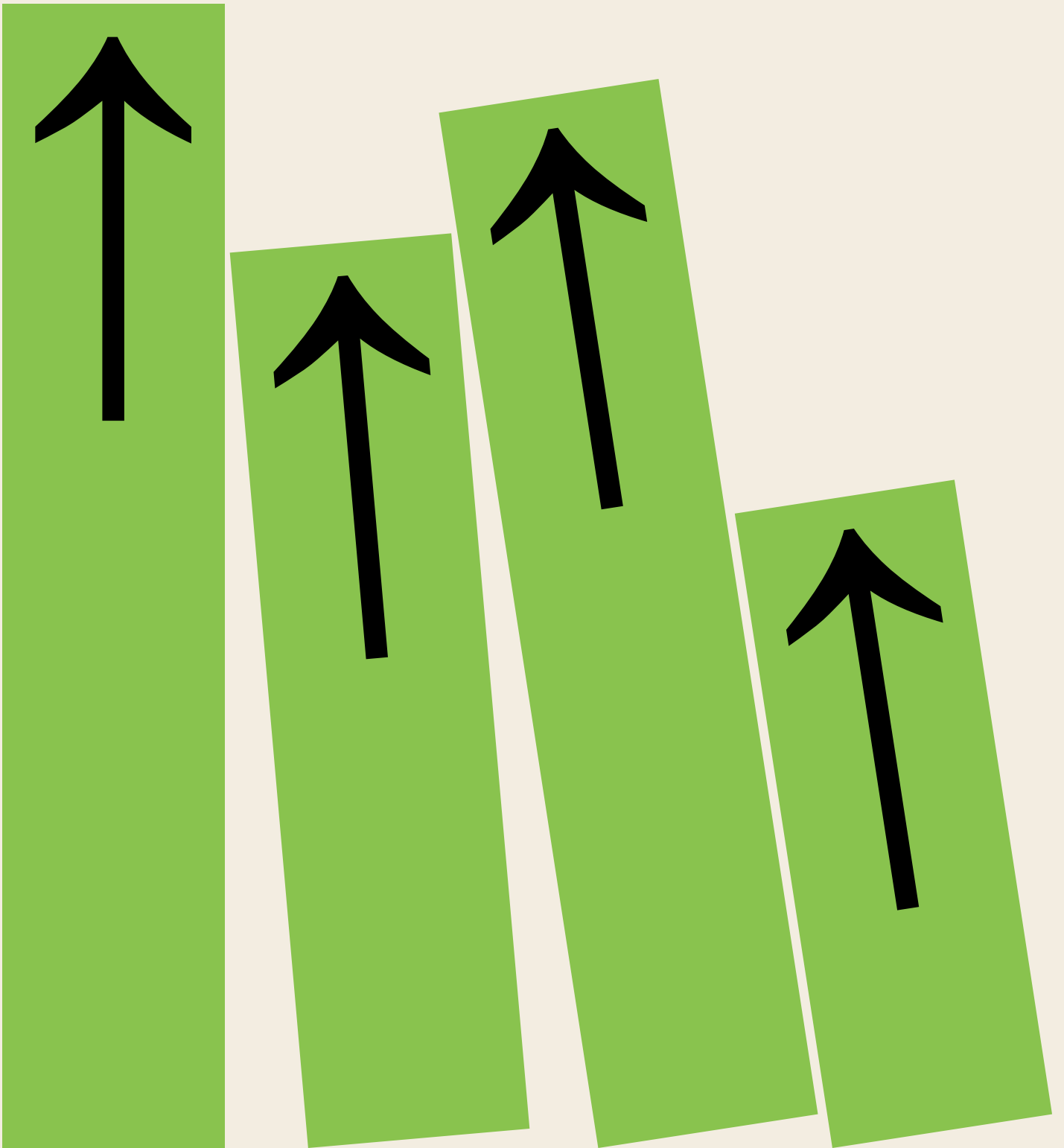
Heritage goes beyond conservation and when closely connected to culture provides a tangible way for communities to engage with their place.

Linking funding streams to build on each other magnifies their impact and generates a strong place-based narrative for further investment.

Training and development programmes for local organisations can ensure the legacy of heritage and placemaking work beyond grant schemes.



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