

Making The Most of High Street Investment

A Review by the Institute of Place Management - January 2024



**We are
OPEN**



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The High Streets Task Force is a England-wide, government-funded, programme of support commissioned in response to Sir John Timpson's 2018 review of the High Street.¹ The High Streets Task Force is led by the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-high-street-report>





1 Introduction

A lot has changed since the High Streets Task Force started their work back in 2019. Back then, Debenhams and other department stores were the visible anchors for many towns, LTNs were a largely unknown acronym, working from home was an occasional employee benefit and the British Retail Consortium were bemoaning “the worst year on record” for retail sales, unaware of the global pandemic just around the corner.

But even then, change was very much in the air. While a high street transformation was gathering pace, it would soon hit jet speed as Covid-19 ushered in 10 years’ of change within a year or two.

Today, you can see these changes everywhere. In the explosion of exciting new leisure businesses bringing immersive experiences to the high street. In the success of artisan food entrepreneurs shaping a new wave of market halls. And in the bold repurposing of empty Debenhams buildings into multipurpose creative spaces, the expansion of public realm to make towns more people friendly, the resurgence of independent retail, and the increase in community businesses, providing much needed services like repair cafes.

But while these new openings reflect resilience, innovation and creativity in our towns and cities, our high streets are not without their challenges and there is another altogether more troubling story we are all familiar with.

It’s one of high streets, collectively, struggling to keep up with the pace of change and failing the communities they are there to serve. Many of these places have been the subject of visits from the High Streets Task Force over the last few years and our work with local authorities, businesses, Business Improvement Districts and community organisations has given us rich insights into the challenges they face.

Most are not hard to see. Empty shops, crime, a limited and unappealing offer, low civic pride, and a lack of identity. But while high street challenges are easily recognisable, they are far more difficult to solve.

High streets are complex ecosystems which our research shows are subject to over 200 forces that shape their fortune.² Much like whack-a-mole, new ones are forever springing up. Some of these forces, like inflation or rising energy costs, are well outside of the control of the local high street. Instead, these macro issues often become the responsibility of Government. But many factors are far more local in nature. Like the ownership of high street properties or the opening hours of particular businesses - and here the Whitehall machine has little influence. Nor do Town Halls. If our visits to over 140 towns across England tell us anything, it’s that we need solutions that draw on the wider resources and powers of businesses and communities as well as local and national government.

Where we’ve seen high streets managing to reverse decline and plot a route to reinvention, it’s largely been down to passionate, committed individuals from different organisations working together around a common vision for their location. Growing *place leadership* capacity by helping these people work in more effective partnership structures has been key to getting things done.

This has often been inspiring to witness, and at a time of rising polarisation and social divisions, there is a very British and unassuming story of place leaders rolling up their sleeves and working together to reinvigorate their high street.

2. See High Street Task Force, ‘25 Vital and Viable priorities’, <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/frameworks/25-vital-and-viable-priorities>; and Parker et al, 2017, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JPMD-03-2017-0032/full/html>

Introduction

Of course, the power of partnerships is not new. In virtually every other industry, from construction to healthcare and technology to financial services, joint ventures and alliances are becoming essential to success.

But where the regeneration of high streets is concerned, these partnerships are still a rare beast. Bringing together police, businesses, community groups, BIDs, health providers, housing associations and other actors is not easy. Places that rise to this challenge and build collaborative partnerships are far more likely to succeed than those that have no partnerships in place.

Over the following pages, you will see how place partnerships can truly unlock place potential and deliver better outcomes for all.

Worryingly, the Task Force found that over 40 per cent of towns we visited had no such cross sector place partnership. As a result, these places can mount no response against decline with limited leadership capacity and stretched Council resources.

Arguably this remains the biggest challenge to high street revival. If the promise of levelling up is to be delivered and communities everywhere are able to have high streets they can be proud of, this must change. High streets are not the sole responsibility of local authorities. Yes they have an important role to play – but so do local traders, owners/landlords, the wider community, and other public services.

Reversing years of high street decline is already hard enough – and will certainly take time. But our report shows there is an emerging routemap to follow that can transform our town centres.

“Where we’ve seen high streets managing to reverse decline and plot a route to reinvention, it’s largely been down to leaders from different organisations working together around a common vision for their location.”

This is not to say that adequate government funding and smarter national policies are not needed. Because they certainly are. But at their heart, high streets are a local institution and those high streets that are being reborn are those that have strong, collaborative leadership.

They need support to make this happen, but the prize is well within reach and worthwhile - distinctive high streets that are the beating hearts of their communities



SHOP TO LET

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Executive summary

After thousands of hours of analysis, over 130 high streets visited, and many leadership classes and workshops on vision and placemaking delivered with hundreds of local stakeholders, we've learned a lot about how our towns are changing.

And when we come to assess the current state of England's high streets, there are differing viewpoints. But, for us, two stories stand out. The first is familiar to anyone who follows the news and will have seen endless 'death of the high street' headlines. This tells a tale of decline, boarded up shops, and major chains disappearing from our high streets. It speaks of a lost battle and the vibrancy of our towns slipping away for good.

The second story is not so familiar, but should not be ignored. It speaks of a silent revolution taking place in high streets across the country and is a tale of renewal and community spirit led by place leaders, a growing army of people passionate about making their place better.

This is a narrative that's yet to gain proper traction with the commentariat, wider public, and policy makers. But it is a phenomenon that's building momentum and was witnessed on High Street Task Force visits to towns across the country.

We saw this manifesting itself in the establishment of new partnerships and different models of leadership to bring fresh thinking and new resources to deep rooted high street challenges.

These partnerships are largely being driven by a keen sense of ambition for local high streets. Nurturing this enthusiasm and shared community aspirations is key to building the necessary momentum and confidence to support wider regeneration plans.

Unfortunately, though, this silent revolution is still in its infancy and has yet to gain wider traction. In too

many places a tired status quo prevails and there was a failure to develop social capital and harvest the expertise and energy of local leaders.

In every town, there will be leaders, perhaps from business or the community or health, who have skills, resources and enthusiasm to invest in their high street. They have good ideas but too often these fall on deaf ears. Where there should be a shared local vision representing the collective aspiration of the community, there is all too often no vision - and this is why regeneration bosses continue to seek off-the-shelf solutions from developers instead.

Moving away from this default approach of thinking that every town needs the same type of buildings and occupiers to be successful will take time. And it will only happen when towns find the courage to develop their own identities and be brave enough to do things differently.

In parts of the country, this is already happening, and it's this creative approach that we celebrate.

Because while there are important discussions to be had about business rates, planning and taxation, this report argues the real debate around high streets needs to fundamentally change. Instead of trying to solve challenges with increasingly bigger demands, and more expensive development, we need a mindset change to allow high streets to unlock their potential.

There is crucial foundational work that needs to happen now. We need a culture of collaboration and to invest in effective place partnerships. Without these, as a nation, we can continue to invest billions in towns across England and call for Royal Commissions. But it won't make half as much impact.

“Instead of trying to standardise and solve challenges with increasingly bigger demands, we need a mindset change to allow high streets to unlock their potential.”

High Streets Task Force

130

Over 130 places visited

210

Days expert support

50

Workshops on vision & placemaking

225K

Website views

30

Leadership masterclasses

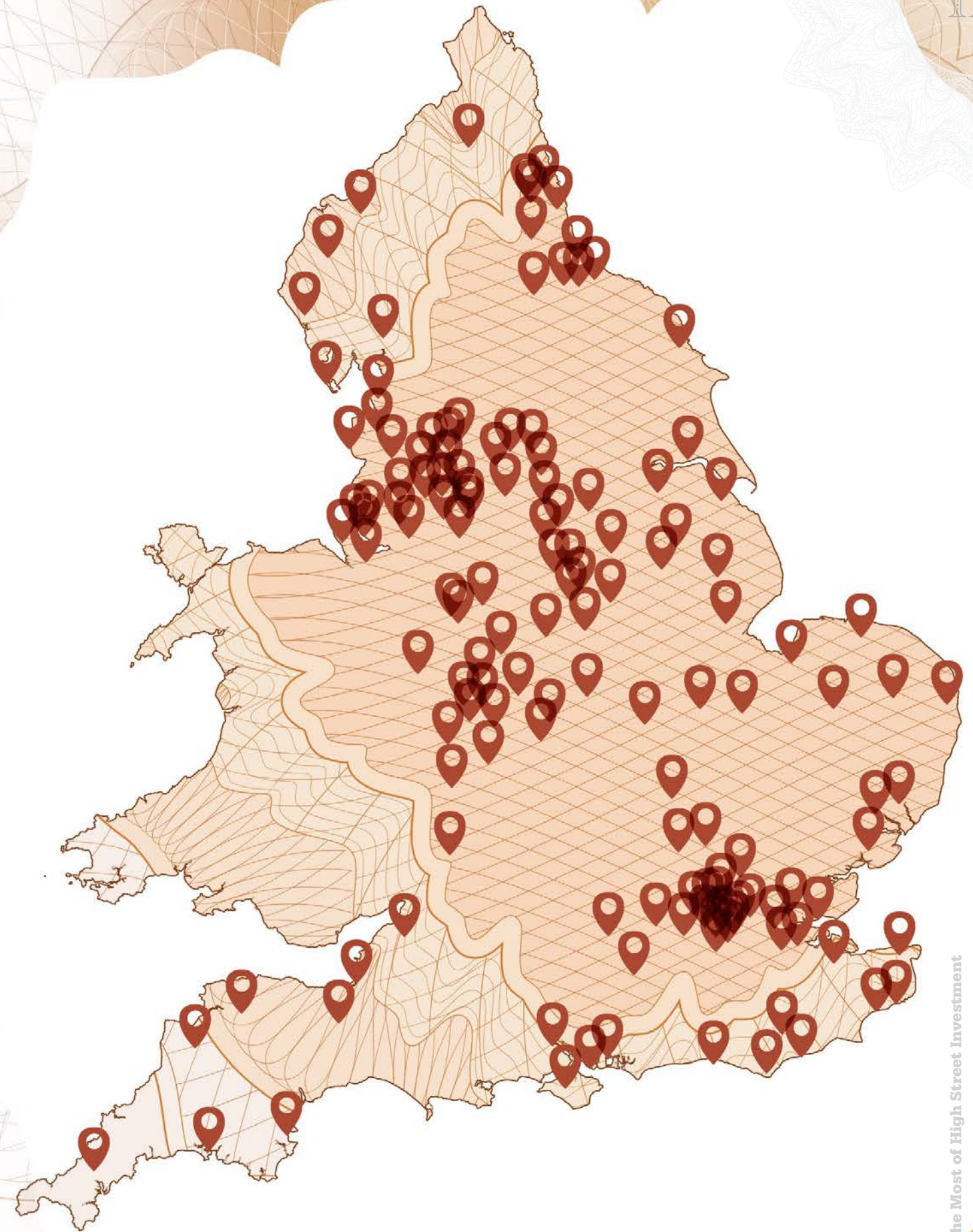
850+

Online resources

>2,600

Hours of local analysis

Delivery 2019 to 2023





Each location followed the same engagement process, which included initial work to diagnose the main local barriers to transformation, followed by several support services – such as advisory or training – to start addressing these barriers. The support process is outlined briefly below.

The quantitative and qualitative data subsequently generated through the support process has been used to gain a better understanding of the local and national picture of high streets.

Key barriers to transformation

Based on the initial place analysis, high street visit, and meeting with local groups, a primary barrier to transformation was identified for each location (figure 1, overleaf).

Lack of partnerships and shared vision

We found that 37% of all locations lack the local partnerships and place governance required to deliver change at the high street level. This shows there are a critical lack of reliable structures that can own and take forward both strategic projects, such as the creation of a compelling place vision, and tactical interventions, such as programming events or improving the appearance of local shop fronts.

Task Force experts observed a lack of engagement between local authority and other stakeholder groups including residents and businesses, with these groups often being excluded from the formation of local plans and other decision-making processes. Across all place visits made by the Task Force, less than 40% of local stakeholder meetings included representatives from the community (Figure 2),

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Key Data Findings

From 2019 to 2023, the High Streets Task Force has worked with 151 local authorities in England. Each authority was selected based on local deprivation (as measured by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation) and asked to choose a specific high street, district, town, or city centre to work with the programme. This approach enabled support to go to locations where it was most needed, typically to address difficult and often entrenched local challenges and/or to complement the delivery of other significant funding or place strategy efforts.

Stage 1	Place visit and analysis – ‘Unlocking your Place Potential’	A range of desk research to help understand the location and how it is perceived, followed by a town tour and workshop with broad stakeholder group to examine local plans.
Stage 2	Follow up Expert consultancy or Mentoring	Consultation with a nominated Task Force Expert with specific background and skills in tackling the barriers identified in stage 1. Each Expert filed a pre- and post-delivery report.
Stage 3	Workshop – Developing a Shared Vision OR Placemaking Programme	A focused workshop to help the development of either a vision for the location or a set of activity to generate momentum and bring existing visions and plans to reality.
Stage 4	Follow up and exit interview	Operations team stay in contact with the location throughout support delivery and finish with an exit interview.

Key Data Findings

Identified barrier/area of focus for further support for 142 HSTF supported places (%)

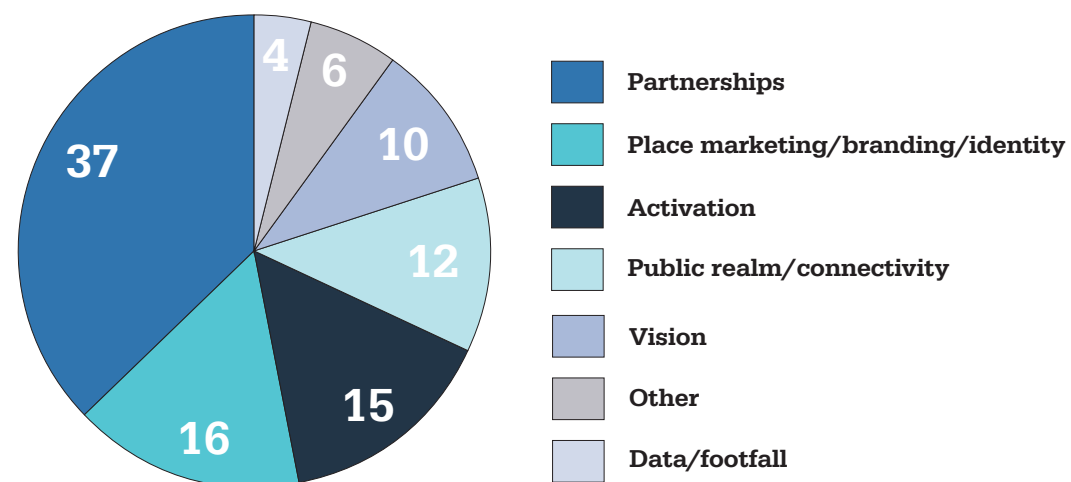


Figure 1: main barriers to transformation of high streets in England

despite instruction that their inclusion was important. In other locations, where this engagement had taken place, it often failed to deliver impact on the high street because there was no delivery structure or partnership to action recommendations or decisions made. Time and time again, a great deal of local enthusiasm is let down by lack of partnership working between the council, businesses and the wider community.

It was also notable from Task Force findings that towns with lower deprivation levels are more likely to have both a Business Improvement District and a local Civic Society. This suggests it may be harder to form these place partnership structures in more deprived areas and certainly points to a lack of social infrastructure from which to form larger place partnerships that deliver change.

We also found that 65% of locations are held back by a lack of a compelling vision that is shared by local people and businesses. A lack of vision was found to be the primary barrier for 17 locations, however many others required development in this area but were advised to first address their lack of local partnerships. As high streets and consumer

behaviours change, having this distinct vision is vital to differentiate towns and cities competing for footfall and investment, and to galvanise all local stakeholders in coordinated action. In many cases these visionless locations are home to a range of unique high street assets but do not connect them in a meaningful way or explore the gaps in their local offer that a vision may help identify.

“Some years ago we worked to develop plans for the smaller centres in the region but we have not got round to this (the largest town), probably because it had more projects being delivered and some recognised strengths” – Comment from ‘Developing a Shared Vision’ workshop delegate

“Coming together collectively with local businesses and communities at this pivotal point in your progress to collectively agree the vision and plans for the next stage in the town’s regeneration will, in turn, resolve many of the other barriers identified. (There needs to be) a big conversation as to how to take (the town) further forward. It was very clear from the town tour and the workshop in particular that there is a vast amount of work ongoing (and) it is also clear that there is a real opportunity to further harness

the ambition of your town centre in developing and delivering future plans.” – Excerpt from report recommending vision development

Local authorities visited by the Task Force have an average of 10 district centres to manage across their defined areas and – outside of large metropolitan councils – put the onus of responsibility for their transformation on very small teams of regeneration and planning officers.

This capacity deficit impacted on the ability of local authorities to take up support offered to them from the High Streets Task Force. The average duration of support, comprising two to three engagements with the Task Force, was 16-18 months per local authority, more than double the time projected. Over 30% of local authorities requested a delay to specific Task Force support services such as Expert advisory. These findings are further evidence of why high street transformation cannot be just the responsibility of the local authority.

These findings demonstrate the importance of broader social infrastructure to deliver change on high streets. Local authorities are key partners in this change, but they cannot deliver it alone. Those local authorities with over 20 district centres within their boundary predominantly selected highly deprived locations for support (80% of those selected were in the top 35% of deprivation). Without local partnerships and a broader place management capability, these locations are at particular risk of neglect.

Non-retail offers and activating high streets

Another prevalent challenge for locations engaged with the High Streets Task Force was the activation of their high streets, with events and offers to attract footfall, and a lack of a non-retail offer (Figure 3). These were most commonly cited by Task Force Experts (in 25% of locations) after the local partnership and vision challenges previously discussed here.

Proportion of UYPP meetings with representation from stakeholder groups

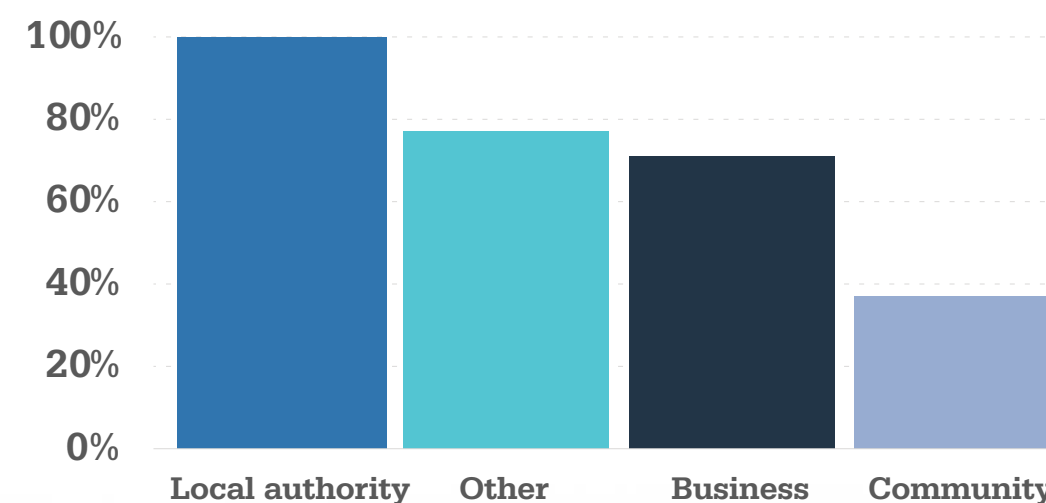


Figure 2: representation at Task Force stage 1 diagnostic visits (workshop element)

Key Data Findings

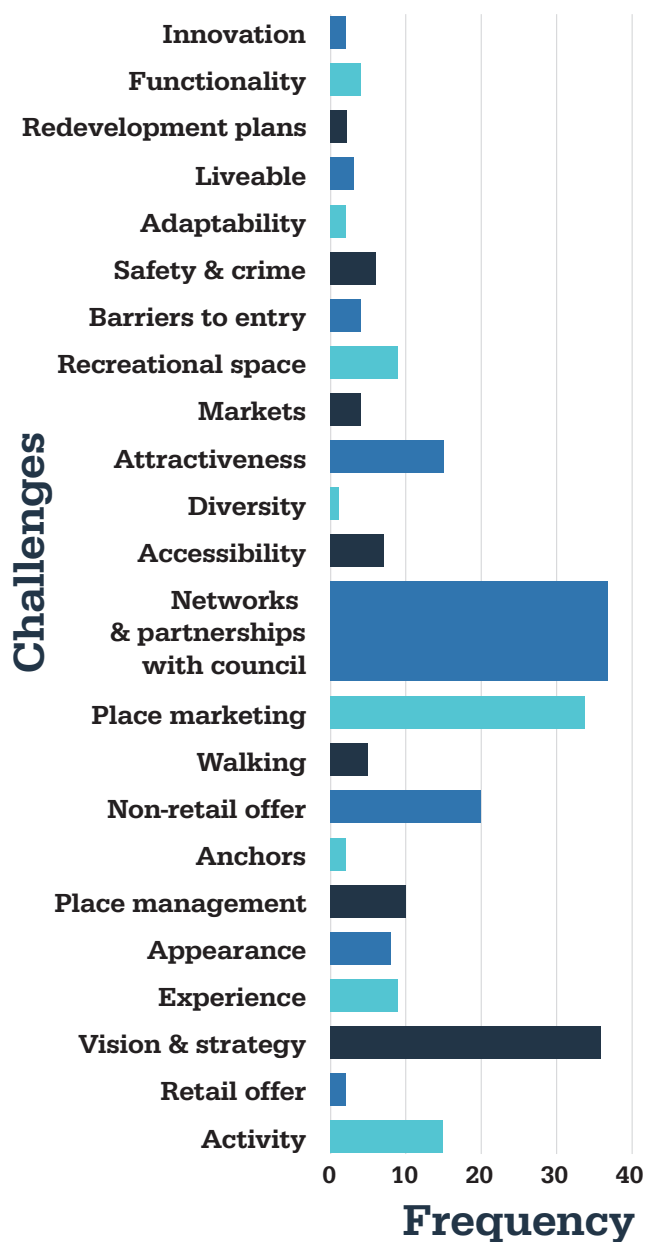


Figure 3: Challenges identified by Task Force Experts

In over 60% of locations we could find no evidence of high street activation from either our desk research or our visits in-person. There was a distinct lack of a consistent and organised events programmes that would give more of an incentive for people to visit their local high streets. A place is twice as likely to have a plan for high street activation if it does not have a Town Board (Figure 4). Whilst activation plans are not the norm, we found this rather counter-intuitive finding can, in part, be explained by an increased focus from local authorities to deliver funding applications for longer term capital projects. However, this effort can be at the expense of the day-to-day task of activating high streets with events, markets, festivals etc, which are required to generate footfall for the new public realm and capital developments that Town Boards seek to deliver.

Place priorities (4Rs of regeneration)

When we come to group the key barriers to high street transformation and recommended strategies to tackle them, there is a clear national picture around the need to 'restructure' high streets. This mean addressing local governance and partnerships in 40% of locations.

Secondly, the need to *reinvent* – prioritise delivery of placemaking activity and place activation – is the priority for 27% of high streets visited. The final two strategies highlighted in figure 5 – *rebranding* and *repositioning* – are more nuanced approaches based on place marketing and understanding the underlying patterns of high street use, respectively, in places where there was already sufficient local partnership structures and resource available.³

Relationship between Town Boards and activation plans

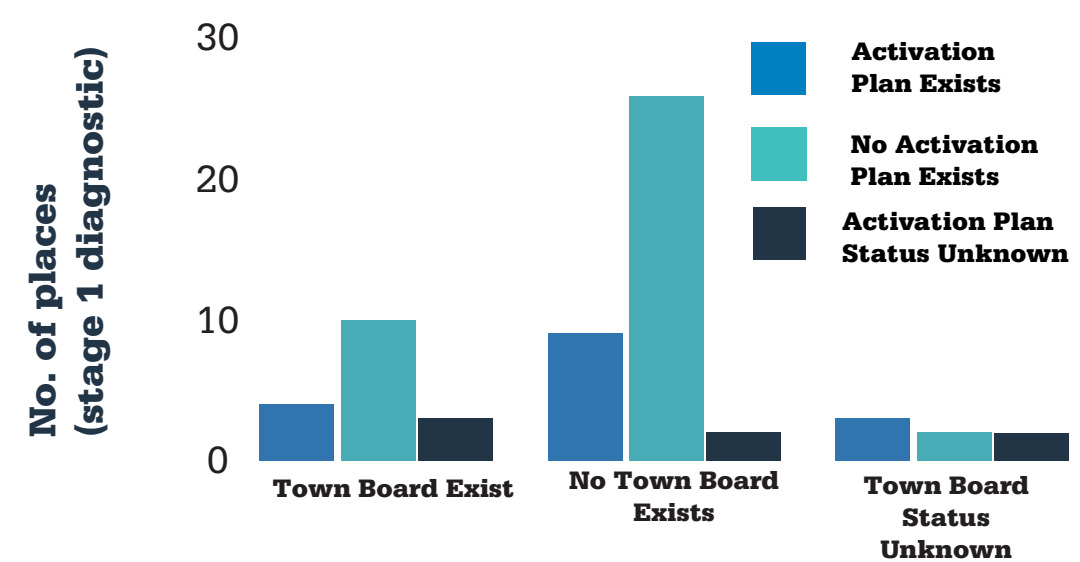


Figure 4: Prevalence of town teams, boards and partnerships vs. high street activation

Identifying the many causes of a problem and a way to prioritise solutions

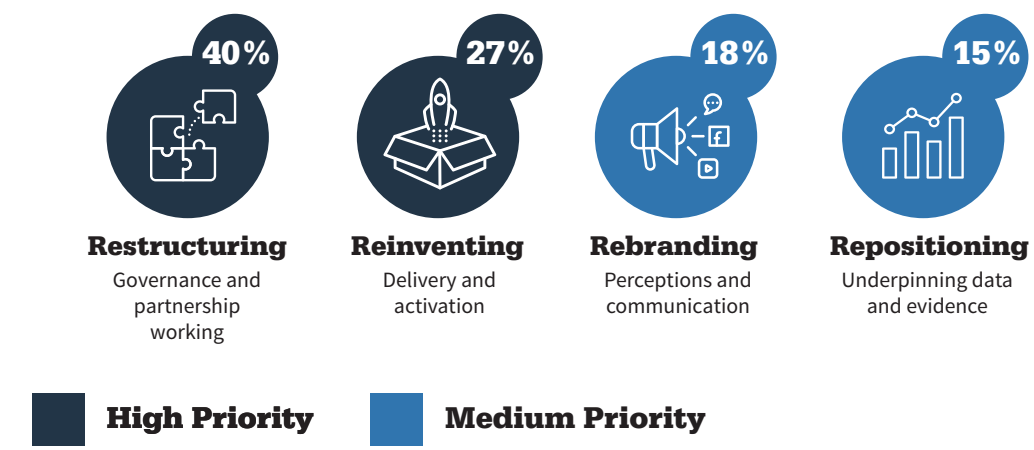


Figure 5: Identifying place priorities (4Rs framework)

³See High Street Task Force, '4rs-regeneration', <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/frameworks/4rs-regeneration-framework/> and Parker et al, 2017, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JPM-03-2017-0032/full/html>



4 State of the Nation

For hundreds of years our towns have been home to every aspect of contemporary life in one socio-economic ecosystem; the traditional market, the pub, the 'butcher, baker and candlestick maker', a place for artisans and, in larger towns, of industry; entertainment, a place of culture, justice and education. In modern parlance they were multifunctional centres.

However, since the 1950s our towns evolved into places where retail was the primary function. Even today, this sector is still the largest private employer in the country. But a significant contributor to the struggles many high streets face today is how retail has changed over this period. In 1971 70% of retail sales were generated by 29,000 retailers, yet changes in pricing legislation allowing stores, not manufacturers, to set prices fueled the rise of chain stores. In less than 30 years this transformed the sector, and by the year 2000 70% of retail sales were generated by just 100 retailers.

The proliferation of chain stores dramatically altered the fabric and character of many high streets.⁴ Smaller buildings and varied streets and public spaces gave way to large stores, shopping centres and precincts, driving out independent retailers as well as a myriad of other uses. Although we are fundamentally a consumer economy, how we consume and from where has changed radically. Out-of-town retailing and the internet have resulted in the closure of many big high street names, causing places to lose their purpose.

This loss has far reaching social ramifications. Once a town's raison d'être is removed, the community connection falls away, resulting in a loss of civic pride, of jobs and entrepreneurship, of social spaces to commune. It ceases to be a place of service to people as banks, travel agents and public facilities close, which gives rise to isolation, crime and increased pessimism. The damage caused by this loss goes much further than the town centre itself.

Turning this cycle of decline around is a major challenge for local and national policy makers and one that was consigned to the 'too difficult to do' box for a long time. It's also a challenge that can't be solved

by energetic lever pulling in Whitehall or by issuing blanket, one-size-fits-all edicts.

In the widest sense places are complex, a nexus of competing interests and needs, expertise and knowledge, wrapped up in social, political and historical factors unique to that place. They are made up of different organisations and individuals. Each of these, be they from the public, private or community sectors have a unique perspective, contribution and role that they can play to drive change in their locations, if enabled to do so.

This clearly suggests that places would benefit from an approach that brings these interests together in an aligned and formalised structure, to enable individuals to work together. In essence, an integrated and strategic partnership with a membership that's truly representative of a given place, with a clearly defined and compelling vision backed up by the delivery of short, medium and long term actions.

Yet despite this, analysis of HSTF data suggests that just over 40% of the places drawn from their sample did not have a true partnership. Indeed, where partnerships did exist many were simply a token consultative body run by the local authority.

The lack of effective partnerships across our regions is at odds with other sectors, such as health, who hold partnership working at the centre of dealing with the myriad issues they face. In the form of Integrated Care Systems, primary, secondary and tertiary providers, across a given geography, work together with local and public health authorities as well as private and community organisations to deal with the issues in a holistic, joined up way. This is a clear policy choice, accepted and enacted by all levels of the constituent organisations and guided and by clear governance operational arrangements that all partners understand.

4. Rudlin et al, 'Tale of the High Street', <https://www.msa.ac.uk/research/project/140/>

Within Integrated Care Systems it's accepted that it is not simply the role of the hospital trust or GPs to maintain the health of people in a place, just as it isn't solely the role of the local council, or a BID, to maintain the health of the place. Yet unlike health, there is not a wide recognition of the need for integrated partnership working at a place level – a fundamental omission that now needs to change.

This is challenging because, currently, alongside reduced local authority budgets, many councils do not have the resources or capacity orientated to establish an integrated place partnership and in many cases the skills and professional knowledge to do this may not exist either. Rectifying this goes beyond simply bringing in a town manager to coordinate a place based approach, as valued (and rare) as this can be. Senior leaders and officers within local authorities as well as national policy makers and decision takers must recognise their duty to the social and economic vitality of place and seek to ensure they are equipped with the resources, capacity as well as capability to support robust place based partnerships. Until this gap is closed, many places will fail to make the changes that they require for growth and vitality. Bridging this resource gap would cost a fraction of the capital funds made available under the Levelling Up agenda and would have a significant return in investment through increased spending, job creation, returns to the exchequer and, ultimately, public confidence and wellbeing.

A further consequence of the scarcity of partnerships is the lack of immediate activity in our towns, at a time when stimulating our high streets is critical. As high streets move away from being simply shopping places to destinations where people come to gather, socialise and enjoy experiences, a programme of events is essential.

However, many places remain focused on longer term plans, particularly those places who have been successful in their capital funding applications. Some 62% of places of the sample that the HSTF worked with had no activation measures at all.

Place activation is a legitimate form of regeneration and typically include events, festivals and markets or creating meanwhile uses in empty shops or buildings. This is a fundamental role of a true town centre partnership. It is noted that Levelling Up Funding requires Town Boards of key figures from the town to be established. However these are not to be mistaken for town partnerships. The majority of Town Boards are simply focused on the delivery of the LUF bid and indeed figures show that where Town Boards exist places are less likely to be activated than where they don't exist. Conversely, we saw evidence that where cross sector stakeholders come together organically (rather than because they have to as a requirement of government funding) places are more likely to be activated.

Place activation is not only key to driving footfall and bringing a broad section of the community into town, but also to generating confidence and building civic pride. The success of food markets combined with entertainment programmes, such as Foodie Friday in Stockport, for example, which regularly attracts thousands of visitors, has helped support the growth of bars and restaurants in the area and shows how events are needed to bring places to life.

Similarly, at a time when places are breaking free of a clone town 20th century, retail-dominated model and need to develop compelling visions to rediscover their identity, many were failing to make this change. Analysis of place 'visions' in towns visited by the HSTF shows that two thirds were neither transformational nor compelling and a third were not clear nor did they link to the specific challenges of their area. Counterintuitively, places that had a masterplan and/or investment

plan were more likely not to have a strong vision perhaps because the masterplans in many cases are only focused on one particular capital scheme within a place, rather than a vision for the wider town as a whole.

This may, in part, be due to a traditional view of place regeneration based on large capital projects as the only driver for change. Certainly there has been a slew of Government funded capital schemes being made available to local authorities for large, targeted interventions in recent years – usually for new or renovated building or public spaces. This is to be welcomed and will no doubt benefit many towns.

However, in isolation, capital funding is not the panacea that it is imagined to be. Rather, it is one piece of the revitalisation jigsaw that needs to sit alongside a suite of other measures. Take the Northeast town of Stockton-on-Tees, for example. They are delivering a long term capital project which will demolish a major shopping centre and repurpose the space with a town park combined with new peripheral public sector and community buildings. In doing so it will reconnect the valuable frontage of the River Tees on one side with the town centre on the other. It's a bold and no doubt significant move that will have considerable benefit.

Crucially though, Stockton recognised that to become a successful town, other more immediate measures were needed including a range of smaller initiatives covering public realm improvements, the provision of the arts, culture and sculptures into the town centre, new quirky independent retail provision, incentives to encourage the growth and retention of professional businesses and the repurposing of empty units – working closely with the community and businesses throughout.

In doing so the local council is not just waiting years for the benefits of the big scheme to trickle through, they have sought to activate the town immediately and in doing so generated confidence and opened up new

opportunities. Indeed, places that haven't got access to capital funds should look at what they can do in the here and now. In the Wirral town of Liscard, the council have established a cross sector town team focused on stimulating trade, activating the town by holding events and markets, as well as tidying, greening and physically improving the town, all alongside wider longer term aspirational plans for the town's centre. And in Hull a range of short term measures to complement their long-term regeneration plans have been introduced, including hosting a highly successful three day city centre festival in the early spring, which has drawn in over 100,000 people who reconnected with, and crucially spent their money, in the city centre.

Such examples recognise the urgency of building momentum and energising town centres – and they also reflect a public mood that's tired of 'jam tomorrow, but never 'jam today' promises. They want to see immediate changes to their high streets and don't have the patience to wait years for capital projects to be delivered.

These examples also point towards a changing of the guard in terms of high street regeneration. Our towns are fast evolving and ever more complex. So too are consumer needs. No longer are towns merely temples of commerce; their offer is expanding to cover much more than shopping. Experiences, services, leisure, food and drink, community, culture and wellbeing are now at the heart of future high streets – and a sophisticated model of leadership is required to adapt to this emerging reality.

No longer can this be controlled by Whitehall and local authority regeneration departments. We need a much bigger conversation to determine our high streets' future – and many more stakeholders, working together in effective partnerships, need to be leading this.

Ashton in Makerfield

Ashton in Makerfield is a market town in Greater Manchester located four miles south of Wigan. Its town centre suffers from traffic congestion and this is exacerbated by HGVs coming off the nearby M6 and thundering through a narrow high street. The makeup of the town centre is largely chain stores with few independents and it lacks character and a sense of identity. This is further compounded by the lack of a market square or 'heart' to the town. The market place is currently used as a car park. All these issues have resulted in falling footfall figures.

After a visit by the Task Force in 2022, the Council recognised the need to harness the energy and commitment of the local community and build extra capacity to ensure plans to improve the town were led in a bottom up way.

After putting out a call for people to join, Ashton Innovation Board was subsequently founded and a meeting was held at St Thomas' Church, just off the high street.

Around 25 people attended and the group was made up of people from the local business community,

night time economy and voluntary sector. A chair has subsequently been appointed and further members are being recruited from faith groups, schools, emergency services etc. to ensure the board is fully representative of the community.

Working in partnership with the Council, this group is shaping plans to improve the town and has benefitted from the Council being awarded £6.6million from the Capital Regeneration Programme in the Spring Budget.

Having engaged the community and developed a new model of leadership, the partnership between the Council and Ashton Innovation Board is focussed on delivering bottom up change through the following:

- Traffic calming and re-routing the HGVs
- Some part pedestrianisation
- A new market square
- Walking and cycling routes
- Improved shop frontages
- An events programme including food markets, live music events and flower markets

5 Case studies

Earlestown

Earlestown is a town in the Metropolitan Borough of St Helens in Merseyside. It has considerable history and heritage, with a market dating back 700 years and a town hall where The Beatles once played. But it has struggled for some time with empty shops and a limited offer. Business owners have spoken about dwindling footfall and a steady decline and, while there are major regeneration plans in the pipeline, there is a need for immediate action to start breathing confidence back into the town.

Following a visit from the Task Force, a new partnership group was created with a mission to create events to stimulate footfall in the town. The inaugural meeting of this new group, named Earlestown Thrives, was held in July 2022 and attracted 30 local stakeholders, alongside a selection of Council officers and Members.

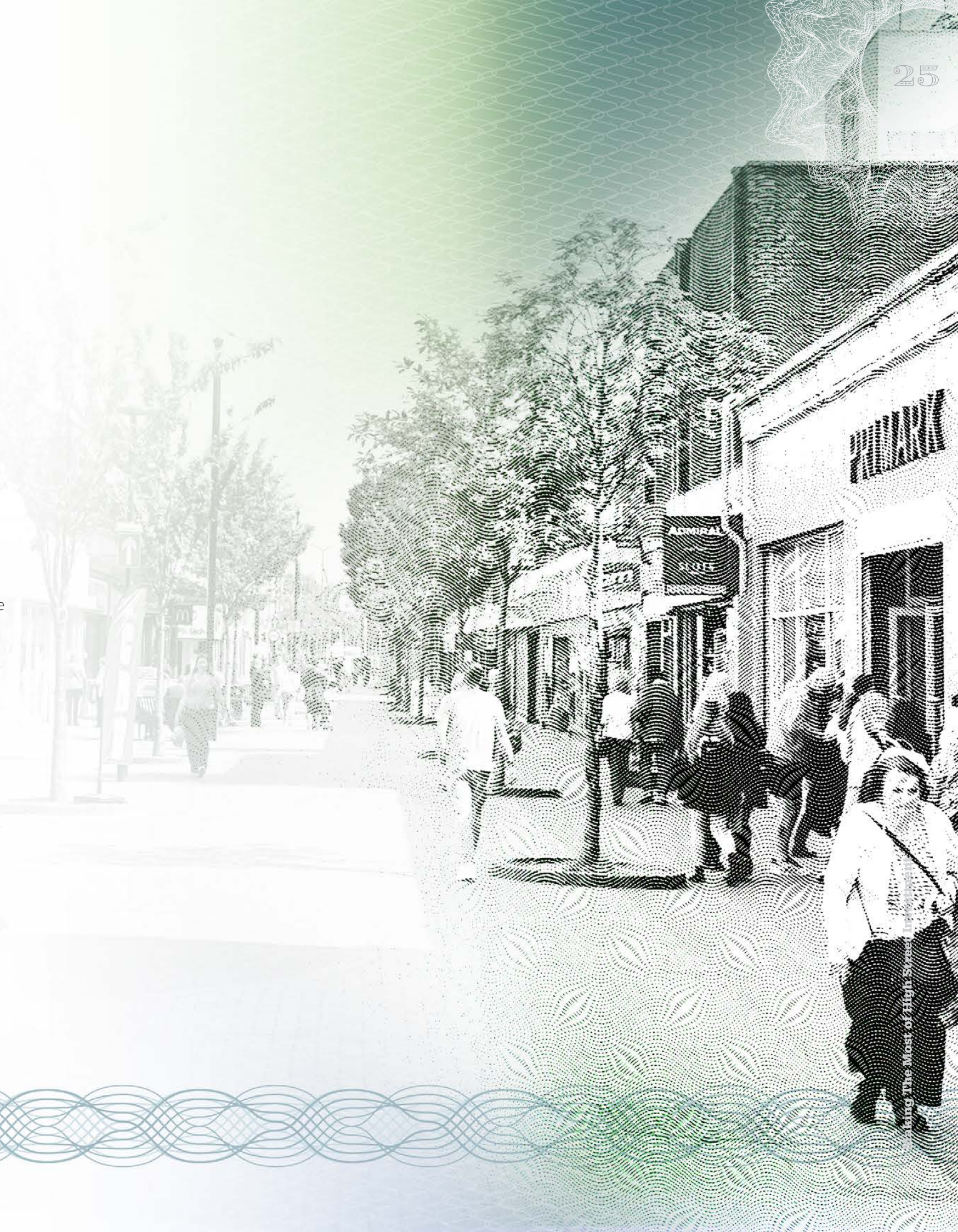
Initially chaired by one of the Task Force experts, the group has subsequently grown and organised Family Fun days and other events to attract people into the town centre and support local businesses.

Liscard

Liscard town centre is the main retail and service centre for Wallasey and North Wirral in Merseyside. The town centre core was significantly redeveloped in the 1960s and has seen limited investment since the 1990s. It is struggling with empty shops, an under-developed night time economy and a lack of footfall. Many people who live there choose to shop elsewhere and there is a challenge to bring the town centre back to life and give it a fresh purpose.

At the instigation of the Taskforce, businesses, community groups, residents, police, housing providers and other key stakeholders have come together to set up Liscard Together. Officers have admitted that they do not have the capacity in-house to offer the level of support the high street needs, but some funding has been provided to maintain momentum.

An economy group has since been established with local business leaders and an action plan drawn up. This has helped create some immediate improvements in the form of tree planting, street furniture changes, business awards, Christmas events and closer work with the police to tackle anti-social behaviour. A formal launch is planned in the New Year and more and more businesses and other stakeholders are joining the partnership.



Bringing The Most of High Street In

Whitechapel Road

Whitechapel Road is a major arterial road in Whitechapel, Tower Hamlets, in the East End of London. Its offer is predominantly retail, but the insularity of the market, crime, a weak evening economy and a lack of brand vision for the area were identified as some of the problems holding this area back.

Following a visit from HSTF experts in 2021, a number of recommendations were made, including building stronger partnerships and introducing a town centre manager. The Council have subsequently taken forward the recommendations and achieved a number of early success including building greater trust with the local community, increasing business-led marketing, co-ordination with police, process improvements in engaging new business entrants and improvements in crime reporting.

West Bromwich

West Bromwich is a market town in the borough of Sandwell in the West Midlands and is situated seven miles northwest of Birmingham. Its high street was once said to be the longest in the country but its heyday has long gone and the town is battling against a sense of decline. The Council are leading major plans to regenerate the town centre and claim it will be “unrecognisable” in 20 years. But, like many other towns there is a need to achieve some quick wins and build positive momentum.

The HSTF advised the Council to focus on building local partnerships and effective communication around the Masterplan and how it will transform the area. Staff at the Council took on this engagement and worked with stakeholders including the local college, Business Improvement District and public sector organisations. These stakeholders were directly involved in shaping the Masterplan and the subsequent rollout of high street initiatives such as new seating, fountain restoration, lighting, urban greening and increased artwork.

A culture of partnership and stakeholder involvement has continued to develop and a wide range of stakeholders now feel like they have a stake in delivering for the town and are seeing progress with the opening of new developments.

Local input has been baked into future regeneration work through the formation of working groups for individual projects and the Council’s regeneration team has been proactive in delivering social value through each intervention.

Having secured a range of long-term capital investment and committed to a community-based process of co-developing opportunities to deliver a multi-functional, modern town centre, they are well positioned to make every pound of investment go far.



6 Partnerships and Capacity Building

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are increasingly being acknowledged by organisations as an essential mechanism to tackle complex challenges such as healthcare, poverty and education. By bringing together different strengths, insights and resource, partnerships can develop innovative solutions to deliver change.

But if the starting point for these partnerships in other sectors is a recognition that the scale of the problems they face is too difficult to be tackled solely by one organisation, this epiphany has yet to properly occur to the custodians of our high streets.

Although there is now a greater sense of urgency across the local government landscape for the need to help local high streets and town centres adapt to changing needs, this is not largely being mirrored in new ways of working – and an overly simplistic approach is holding many places back.

Many local authorities still believe that one or two major capital projects hold the key to transforming their high streets. This ‘silver bullet thinking’ fails to recognise the structural changes that are needed to help high streets adapt to changing needs, and the less glamorous work of animating streets with events, improving public realm and working to diversify the town centre offer fails to get done.

“If I am to talk about some of these things with highways, licencing or economic development departments, we are always told it’s not a priority,” one Council officer told us. “That’s why we had to start building wider partnerships to build leadership capacity and get extra resources. Modern high streets now need constant attention and councils can’t do it on their own.”

Even before the huge technological changes we have seen driving a major shift in consumer behaviour in recent years, it has long been recognised that partnerships are essential to inject creativity and fresh thinking into community renewal.

In their 2002 book, *Managing Partnerships*, by Andrew and Melanie Kelly, the authors argued that a cultural shift is needed to put partnership thinking at the heart of urban development.

“The relationship with business and organisations needs to go beyond counting logos on a funding application,” they argue.

Over 20-years later, that relationship still needs further development as the success of high streets can often be determined by the maturity of partnerships involved in day-to-day operations. For example, over the same 20 year span, more than 330 Business Improvement Districts across the UK have provided significant strategic and operational capacity in their areas. Learning from the BID model, more strategic and operational capacity can be developed through other forms of partnership.

In Liscard, an area in the town of Wallasey on the Wirral Peninsula in Merseyside, for example, a lot of work has gone into building partnerships with businesses and the wider community. Modelled around a 1960s shopping centre, this is the retail centre of Wallasey and, like many towns, it feels like it’s seen better days. Once home to all the big high street names such as Woolworths and BHS, empty units are now becoming more frequent and the centre needs to find a fresh purpose.

Nevertheless, despite its challenges, civic pride remains high and the community has rallied to try and reverse Liscard’s fortunes. At the instigation of the Taskforce, businesses, community groups, residents, police, housing providers and other key stakeholders came together to set up Liscard Together.

This partnership has subsequently established three task and finish groups. These focus on stimulating the local economy and supporting business; improving place by making the town safer, improving public realm, removing redundant street furniture and introducing planters and parklets. There is also a group dedicated to, people and creating events, better facilities for young people, and art and culture.

Combined, it's a partnership that is genuinely of the place for the place, and which brings an enormous amount of local skill, passion and experience to support the town's transformation. The board and groups are not local authority dominated and they bring fresh thinking and energy to problems that simply can't be tackled on their own by councils.

To see the local manager of a major chain store knocking on doors, working with landlords to get better deals for start-ups and trying to help the business community is incredibly refreshing, and it suggests there is enormous untapped leadership potential in every town that can be harnessed.

The fact that Liscard has recently received over £10 million in Levelling Up funding is timely, as they are now in a better position than many other towns that have received government funding to make this money go further and achieve more.

Liscard is certainly not on its own, though, and other local authorities are beginning to establish better partnerships with a wide range of key stakeholders to ensure a laser like focus on delivering better outcomes for their high streets. In our experience, these partnerships work well when they are:

- Representative – it's critical that they identify and involve people and organisations with a broad range of skills and resources to drive the partnership across a range of short through to long term actions.
- Driven by a vision – partnerships need a compelling vision that address a specific need of the place or conveys an ambition bespoke to that place, created by those from that place
- Have suitable governance – brand new partnerships shouldn't get hung up on heavy governance arrangements, rather they should:
 - o Maintain a degree of flexibility to develop a governance and operating model that suits that place and what it seeks to achieve. However be mindful that it may need to receive and spend funding so this will dictate its form.
 - o Ensure partnerships are transparent and open – around membership, its aims and action plans, any Terms of Reference, and how people can get involved.
 - o Be outcome orientated – alongside longer term strategic interventions every place needs things to happen now to stimulate activation, drive footfall

and spend plus change perceptions. This is vital to create confidence. Consequently, a partnership should:

- o Not be afraid of risk – it needs to be open to trialing and experimenting, ensuring it allows creativity to flourish
- o Be independent – avoid the domination of any one partner or organisation, or at least be arms-length if it is run by a LA or similar.
- o Be sustainable – it will need to have some ongoing arrangements to resource the core. But also funding will required to provide support from professional place management capacity and capability - to manage/run/support the partnership and its aims. Whilst leadership will come from volunteers, professional place managers are needed to ensure plans are delivered.

The place partnership model is one that we are starting to see slowly develop in a number of towns and it is not only helping achieve outcomes such as reduced vacancy and increased footfall. Place partnerships are also helping local authorities and the private sector identify opportunities to better prioritise and target investment both in the short and long-term.

With constrained public finances, it's vital that this model is more widely adopted because, as we have witnessed, partnerships that bring dynamism, impetus and continual small-scale interventions are effectively launching tireless attacks on urban blight. Cumulatively, they chip away at decay one act at a time and begin to breathe confidence back into previously moribund high streets, ultimately allowing green shoots of recovery to once again take hold.

“Many local authorities still believe that one or two major capital projects hold the key to transforming their high streets.”



Conclusion

At the time of writing, latest figures from the Office of National Statistics show a high street recession in the run-up to Christmas and a 2.7% year on year fall in retail sales. This drop is significant in that it is not only lower than economists forecast, but also **because** retail sales are now lower than before the pandemic. There are many reasons for this trend, but one thing which cannot be disputed is that high streets are moving away from an over-reliance on retail.

While statistics bluntly illustrate this emerging new reality, the work of the High Streets Task Force tells a fuller, richer story. This unique national programme has seen from close quarters the struggles that are faced when responding to changing consumer demands that require high streets to urgently diversify and modernise.

The programme has provided places wrestling with these changes bespoke professional advice, capacity, and a suite of resources to support those who are seeking to renew and repurpose their towns and cities. It has also uncovered examples of good practice where the efforts of individuals and organisations results in real change, providing a route for others to follow.

But it has also discovered something else; valuable insight on the specific, but collective issues that those seeking the renewal of their places face.

Firstly, what has been brought into stark focus is the pervading view that place transformation occurs singularly through the significant capital funding of major projects. Although undoubtedly necessary and needed, by itself many places see physical development as the only route to renewal. In doing so this prevents a number of other vital short and medium term place changing measures being delivered. It can also stifle the creativity and innovation that is so important in stimulating ideas that can result in desperately needed economic, cultural and social enhancements.

In short, this prevailing orthodoxy should be challenged as capital funding should not be seen 'as the only show in town'. Places which have been successful in securing funds should also focus efforts on both an immediate and intermediate set of targeted actions to tackle the issues they face and, in doing so, are much more likely to ensure the success of their larger projects. For those who are not beneficiaries of funding then the need for this approach is absolute.

This current regeneration as development orthodoxy presents a second significant issue, that of place management capacity, resources and skills. Local authorities traditionally work towards a spatial 'masterplan' approach, the execution of which is mistaken for place vision, leadership and management. It isn't as it excludes the lived experience of the community, the detailed understanding of the dynamics of the centre from local organisations, and the wider curation of place. Many of the current Town Boards, responsible for delivering projects through the various High Streets funds, highlight this in that their focus is the delivery of a capital project. Few look at the wider place activation measures needed beyond their own schemes.

Therefore, there is a national deficit of place leadership and management because regeneration is enacted through the prism of physical development. Professional skills and funding are orientated towards this function with many authorities not recognising the essential need for wider placemaking skills. This results in a major lack of dedicated professionally trained people whose role is to actively support and stimulate place, working across individuals, departments and organisations who collectively can support renewal. To tackle this it is vital that a dedicated and professional workforce is built up, and this will require job descriptions to more accurately reflect the wider set of place skills required. Alongside this, dedicated training and development needs to be made available to ensure this function is accorded the importance that it is due and enacted to high standards. The success of our high streets will depend on it.

These skills gaps have been further highlighted by a recent recruitment and skills survey by Public Practice, which shows that 66 per cent of local government placemaking professionals felt their team did not have the "necessary bandwidth and skills" to tackle their authority's strategic objectives. The survey also revealed that more than three quarters of the placemaking professionals

Conclusion

interviewed (78%) said their local authority had difficulty attracting appropriately qualified or skilled candidates to fill the capacity gaps in their teams.

Thirdly, and largely due to the earlier two factors, the most significant omission across many of our towns and cities is the lack of place wide, collaborative, integrated and strategic partnerships. These must be recognised for what they have to be; engines to drive a set of short, medium and long term actions that individually and collectively work to repurpose places.

Places face a myriad of issues requiring multiple interventions, yet the prevailing wisdom suggests it is the role of one organization, often a local authority, to solely be responsible for change. This is no longer sustainable and it is becoming critical to develop the place based infrastructure that is representative of a specific place. Local authorities need to be able to tap into the inherent resources that exist within that place, drawing from those people and organisations from across the public, private and community sectors, whether that be from businesses of all sizes and sectors, creatives and artists, from education, leisure, health and housing, the young, the old and everyone in between.

Not only will this help to unleash wider creative forces, but it will help to develop plans and actions that range from immediate confidence building initiatives such as shop front improvements, digital signage, festivals and events right through to long term plans for new public spaces, repurposed building, and new transport infrastructure.

Similarly, richer multi-stakeholder partnerships can also act as a bulwark against cynicism, maintaining a vital pipeline of public goodwill and community support.

We have seen this work successfully, whether it's through local people in Ashton in Makerfield forming an Innovation Board to shape plans to improve their town, partnerships such as Earlestown Thrive organising family fun days and live music events in St Helens or the creation of Love Liscard in the Wirral, which encourages community groups to hold events to promote the town as a place to visit.

Such groups can often lay the foundations for bigger, structural changes to make the most impact by irrigating high streets with fledgling confidence at a time when they are facing competing pressures and their role is evolving.

“It can also stifle the creativity and innovation that is so important in stimulating ideas that can result in desperately needed economic, cultural and social enhancements.”

We are beginning to see the function of high streets change, notably through the growth of leisure, culture and new food and drink experiences, but often these changes require strong community buy-in for them to be successful.

As part of this process, the hard work of winning hearts and minds, along with building confidence and pride, is just as important as the physical changes that are needed to repurpose our high streets.

What we are seeing across UK town centres is that many places have simply not evolved fast enough – and, for those towns locked in a spiral of decline, effective integrated place partnerships of place leaders must be the driving agent for change.

They need to be supported by skilled place managers who understand the complexities of place making and are professionally equipped to deal with them. And this must signal a shift in culture that recognises place change isn't just about large scale capital spends and that the larger strategic plans have to sit with a raft of more immediate tactical interventions.

Continuing to invest in structural changes will be key to reshaping high streets so that they meet modern needs. But we also need to understand that ribbon cutting on capital projects isn't the only way to drive change, and that the hard work of cultivating place confidence should have far greater recognition.

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