

Earning & *Belonging*

How to Fix Our Town Centres



About Us

Global Future is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders – from businesses to politics, arts and civil society – to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

To contact Global Future Foundation,
please email Akal Bains

akal@globalfuturepartners.com
www.globalfuturefoundation.com

The Foundation is supported by Global Future Partners, which is a consulting firm advising organisations on Purpose Driven Culture Change, Leadership and Talent.

If you would like to contact the Consultancy,
please email Gurnek Bains

Gurnek.Bains@globalfuturepartners.com
www.globalfuturepartners.com

The report was written by Rowenna Davis.

Rowenna Davis is a writer, teacher and community activist. She grew up in London where she got a lot of her politics from her multicultural state school in Cricklewood. She is now a councillor for her home ward of Waddon.

Foreword

Andy Burnham

Mayor of Greater Manchester



Every town, city and region has its own special character. But what this report makes clear, is that successful places have two things in common. First, they must be places where people can earn a decent living. Second, they must be places where people feel a sense of belonging.

A decent, well-paid job in the local area is essential, not just for residents, but to provide demand for local high streets that too often get boarded up. In my area, we're introducing the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate to give young people respected, credible vocational skills and links to major local employers. That way, they won't have to move out to move up in the world, as I felt I had to do. Instead, they'll add to the growth of their town.

Second, people must feel that sense of belonging and connection to their home. We created a Mayoral Development Corporation in Stockport to replace abandoned brown-field sites with a vision of great jobs in 21st Century living conditions. We created city-quality living at half the price of the centre. Now Stockport is thriving, alongside a quality music, cultural and arts scene that is bringing people together.

Building a politics centred around place, as outlined in this report, is rewarding because it works. I'd encourage all local leaders to read this and apply it. Because by working from the bottom up - not just the top down - we can truly build places where all of us can earn and belong.



The Loss

Boarded up doors, tatty shops and lightless windows. The decline of our town centres has become a tragically familiar story across the UK, with people describing the change with a grim sense of inevitability.

Certainly, we cannot reverse technology. In the past, the town centre was the only place to purchase consumer goods, whether you wanted a new hat or an iron, you needed to head into town. Similarly, functional jobs like getting foreign currency or renewing your licence, had to be done in person. Now the town centre enjoys no such monopoly; almost all goods and services can be acquired faster online. All too often this can leave our town centres unrecognisable and desolate, with precious little reason to go there.

Yet not all town centres have suffered this way. Rye in East Sussex continues to have a number of flourishing bakeries, butchers and local stores. Ascott, Sandbanks, Alderley Edge and Henley are all flourishing. And whilst it would be wrong to say that each of these places doesn't suffer

their own churn and challenges, they continue to function because they continue to have local populations - and visitors - with a sufficiently high level of disposable income to sustain demand.

Technological change might have swept over us universally, but if you have enough money being spent locally, your town centre can survive the storm.

So, it is not just technology, but the wider hollowing out of lower- and middle-income earners facing a cost-of-living crisis more generally, that has really hit our town centres. This has been well documented by Centre for Cities, which has shown how vacancy rates can range from 10% in Brighton to 33% in Newport¹.

Repeated studies have shown that if you want to sustain a town centre or a high street, you need sufficient demand². Town centres that don't have customers with disposable income start to dry up, triggering a cycle of decline. If people can't or won't spend locally, then shops have to shut, goods are no longer offered and jobs are cut, further eroding local spending power.

1. <https://www.centreforcities.org/high-streets/#:~:text=Their%20performance%20varies%20greatly%20from,centre%20economy%20as%20a%20whole>.
2. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9218/CBP-9218.pdf>

We know that the fall-out from this decline is more than financial. People closely associate themselves with the place they are from, which means town centres often play an important part of people's sense of identity and wellbeing. Many love their hometowns which means, when they're in decline, it's highly personal.

This is particularly the case for people who used to frequent their town centres in better days. We know that humans have a proportionately stronger reaction to losses rather than gains, so any sense of decline in a town centre is painfully felt, often with feelings of loss and humiliation.

There is even research to suggest that if an area is run down and resource-poor, inhabitants will start making more self-interested and short-term decisions, because they understandably feel the need to prioritise the threats and barriers of the present.³

So, whilst we know that regenerating our town centres would be a financial win, we should not forget that it is also a psychological opportunity to raise wellbeing, as well as a moral calling.

If we get this right, regenerating our town centres will help serve the levelling up agenda, promoting growth while leaving local people happier, healthier and with a restored sense of pride and community.

Territorial Stigmatisation

Tom Slater argues that we should think about the 'burdens carried by residents' of places that are widely shunned or feared. He describes how the 'disgrace of residing in a notorious place', frequently associated with crime, poverty or squalor, can impact personal identity. This can be experienced as a 'stigma' which influences residents' sense of self and also their encounters with outsiders.



3. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/business/consulting/assets/documents/how-poverty-affects-peoples-decision-making-processes.pdf>
4. https://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/~t Slater/assets/terstig_handbookurbanstudies.pdf

Earning

Town centres, and indeed cities, originated as centres of production and work. It was only in the 19th Century that the balance of economic activity began to tip in favour of consumption and leisure. In order to rediscover their purpose and flourish again, town centres are going to need to rediscover their role as sources of local skills and employment.⁵

An excellent report from *What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth* called for a more critical reflection on the supply-side solutions of the economy back in 2021.⁶ They argued that fashionable calls to regenerate old shop fronts, as well as one-off calls to remove graffiti and deep clean pavements would not be sufficient to deliver sustained regeneration.

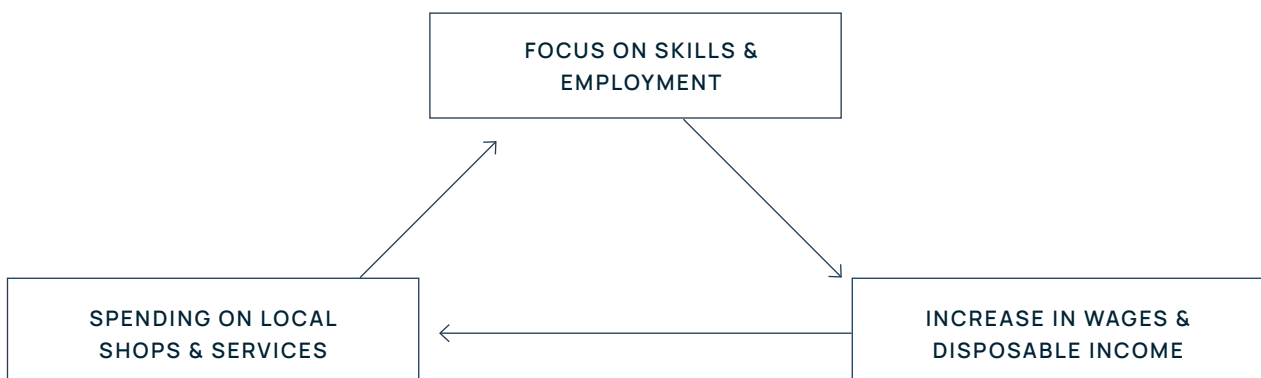
Instead, what was needed was a renewed focus on skills and employment. Higher skills, they argued, would drive up real wages, providing more disposable income to be spent on local

shops and services. This would produce a virtuous cycle, with business growth generating further increases in employment.

In short, if you want a town to serve its people with a growth in goods, services and employment, you have to make sure its people can afford to serve the town in terms of providing appropriate skills and economic demand.

‘If you want a town to serve its people with a growth in goods, services and employment, you have to make sure its people can afford to serve the town in terms of providing appropriate skills and economic demand.’

Diagram 01. The Virtuous Cycle



5. <http://www.eerpublishing.com/mckendrick-brewer-plumb-birth-of-a-consumer-society.html>

6. <https://whatworksgrowth.org/resource-library/evidence-briefing-improving-high-streets-and-town-centres/#:~:text=Sustained%20high%20street%20improvements%20need,policies%20designed%20to%20increase%20demand.>

“With more control over post-16 technical education, we could build a more responsive local skills system which would be a significant boost to investment and growth.”

ANDY BURNHAM

MAYOR FOR GREATER MANCHESTER

This focus on local jobs and skills is essential when regenerating a town to avoid fears of gentrification. The point of reviving a town centre should be to better serve local people, not to push them out with higher prices.

The way to do that is to make sure that the growth that comes to a place is built on increased skills and jobs for local people, and to work with the community throughout the regeneration process to make sure that it is not having an adverse impact on those that it is designed to serve.

The new Labour Government promised in its manifesto to devolve powers over skills and employment budgets, which could present a real opportunity for local decision makers. Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, is already talking about a Greater Manchester Baccalaureate MBacc to help local young people, providing a new vocational qualification that is valued by local employers and holds parity of esteem with more academic qualifications.

Young people aged 14 will be offered the MBacc⁷ in sectors that are growing in Greater Manchester, including digital technology, construction and health and social care. As Andy Burnham says, “With more control over post-16 technical education, we could build a more

responsive local skills system which would be a significant boost to investment and growth.”⁸

When considering a growth strategy for a town, it’s important to note that the focus can no longer solely be on retail. The technological shift to online shopping cannot be ignored, and many town centres – even in more affluent areas – have too much retail space to accommodate demand.

Nor should the focus be on an over-reliance on a single ‘anchor store’ such as Marks and Spencers or John Lewis, which can struggle to turn a profit in the modern era. Instead, **local decision makers should pursue a more diverse, mixed-use strategy to their town centres, with space for public sector buildings, leisure activities, office space, green space and residential units as well as traditional commercial and retail units.**

An excellent example of this is Stockport. For a long time, the town had an excess of retail space, including a huge empty Debenhams store that had closed down. Rather than try and fill it with more retail, Stockport is seeking to relocate its out-of-town hospital into this large vacant unit.⁹ A hospital in the town centre would have convenient transport links and increase footfall locally, whilst the old hospital site could be sold, providing investment for much-needed housing.

7. <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/andy-burnham-unveils-plan-to-turbocharge-growth-in-greater-manchester-with-new-technical-education-route-the-greater-manchester-baccalaureate/>

8. <https://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/mayor-calls-for-greater-powers-so-city-region-can-go-further-faster>

Rudlin, Payne and Montague have highlighted this example in their latest work *Highstreets: How our town centres can bounce back from the retail crisis*¹⁰, and argued that the same approach could be taken to schools, universities, council buildings, leisure and other services. All of these institutions, if shifted into the town centre, would provide more resilience in the face of economic shocks as they offer a more diversified portfolio of activity.

An economic strategy for any modern town centre needs to take account of the shift from businesses built on simply **buying** to those that encourage **wellbeing** and belonging.

Although technology has inevitably eroded some of the need for physical retail space, there will always be a need for a healthy amount of in-person services, particularly those that focus on

wellbeing and relationships. Doctors need to see patients in person, gym trainers frequently find it more productive to work with clients face to face, schools and universities require group working as part of their curriculums.

In the commercial space, we know that cafes, restaurants and bars frequently do better than traditional clothes stores for example, because they offer that unique ability to bring people together in person that is harder to replicate online. Indeed, many of these local businesses saw a strong revival after lockdown, as people missed the chance to come together in their communities.

Case Study: Barnsley¹¹

After Covid, Barnsley bounced back faster than most towns. At the centrepiece of their regeneration was a new market 'in the style of a Tuscan hill village' that built on the historic roots of the existing market that had been there since 1249. It included spaces for retail and leisure businesses, as well as global brands and hyper local pop-ups. The Council also worked

with the NHS to set up a diagnostics service in the town centre, bringing in more footfall. The regeneration made sure to include young people with a successful bid for '*Barnsley Futures*', aimed at improving cultural and wellbeing facilities for young people in the town centre, giving them a space both to make new friends and learn new skills.

9. <https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/stockport-council-finds-tenant-for-empty-debenhams/>

10. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003410423>

11. <https://www.publicfinance.co.uk/2023/05/regeneration-game-barnsleys-success-turning-around-its-town-centre>

Belonging

Town centres have never just been financial hubs, purely feeding production and consumption. They've also played an important role as civic centres, and important spaces for social interaction, friendship, celebration, connection and commemoration.

Evolutionary psychology has long recognised the human need for a public 'place to gather' outside of the private confines of the home, with our earliest ancestors congregating around a fire. We remain social animals with a need to find spaces together, a fact about our nature that the Covid lockdowns forced us to appreciate.

Rebuilding town centres presents a golden opportunity to respond to rising rates of loneliness, undoubtedly driven at least in part by the decline in neighbourliness people report. Indeed, given the reported polarities and isolation of modern times, the need for public congregation to break down stereotypes and find new friends is perhaps more important than ever.

As mentioned above, this need for social connection can complement certain types of economic growth. Some of the best examples of regenerated town centres are built on human wellbeing and the need for us to come together. Retail Week highlighted Stockton-on-Tees¹², which has reinvented itself, focusing particularly on pop up markets, festivals and family friendly public spaces.

Another more recent example, from Carlisle, involves regenerating an area of more than 64,000 sq ft, which is set to be a 'multi-functional space set to host a diverse array of activities and gatherings'¹³. Social interaction is placed at the heart of this design, featuring public benches that look like they are twisting out of the ground. What these towns are witnessing, in essence, is a shift from selling 'stuff' to focussing on 'self' and from 'buying' to 'belonging'.

Case Study: Sheffield

The city started as a centre for production, particularly for steel, and then evolved into a traditional shopping, financial and retail destination seen by many cities in the late 19th Century. Now that retail has migrated online - and to the out-of-town shopping centre at Meadowhall - the city is evolving to become more of an 'experiential destination'. It now has two universities, a number of theatres, and has also revamped the old large Co-op department store into 'Kommune', an independent food hall. This more diverse, cultural and social offer have led Rudlin, Payne and Montague to describe it as a 'prime example of a post-retail city.'¹⁴

12. <https://www.retail-week.com/analysis/retail-week-on-the-road-north-east-and-yorkshire/5038476.article>

13. <https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/council-plans-4m-reshape-of-carlises-market-square-and-greenmarket/>

14. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003410423>

Town centres that really want to capture a sense of belonging should lean into what makes them different. Too often, town centres became homogeneous replicas of each other, with the same brands and department stores on every high street. Local leaders are instead leaning into their neighbourhoods' unique selling points to motivate visitors into the town and prevent locals travelling elsewhere to shop.

Often this can involve utilising history, such as the 'heritagisation' taking place in Portsmouth.¹⁵ The city has drawn on its rich naval tradition to drive regeneration which has influenced everything from the new architecture at Gun Wharf to the anchors carved into the pedestrian trail that connects the old town to the seafront

and the new shopping centre. Using local culture as well as history can also help differentiate a town. Having suffered reputational challenges in the past, Slough has now regenerated itself¹⁶ in part by introducing a new cultural hub into the city, helping to make Queensmere Observatory Shopping Centre a fun, distinct and inclusive place to be.

'Using local culture as well as history can also help differentiate a town.'

Case Study: Kent Steps

Each of these unique steps was designed by local school children, giving them a sense of ownership and pride over the place as well as making it look fantastic.



15. <https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/heritage-strategy-aa-accessible-September-2024.pdf>

16. <https://democracy.slough.gov.uk/documents/s61048/Appendix%201%20-%20Slough%20Regeneration%20Framework%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>

17. <https://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/mayor-of-greater-manchester-andy-burnham-outlines-ambitious-proposals-for-further-devolution-of-skills-in-city-region>

18. <https://www.stockton.gov.uk/article/6256/Stockton-Waterfront#:~:text=Surplus%20retail%20space%20has%20been,and%20tunnelling%20of%20Riverside%20Road>

Andy Burnham: 'A politics based on the unifying force of place, rather than the divisions of party, is what this country needs now more than ever if we are to unlock positive energy in all places and spread a sense of new possibility throughout this land.'¹⁷

With less demand for retail space, **utilising green spaces, particularly, family-friendly parks, can be a great way to draw people into town centres and offer a sense of belonging that celebrates the unique geography and biodiversity of a locality.**

Stockton on Tees is a fantastic case in point. The locality received a huge amount of funding to create a 'waterfront vision of the highstreet'.¹⁸ At the centrepiece of this work, they demolished their huge shopping centre to create a park three times the size of Trafalgar Square. As well as space for lawns and wildflowers, there is a big emphasis on the social side of the park, with areas designated for picnics as well as play parks for local children.

Well planned improvements to the local environment have been shown to boost commercial trading¹⁹, and exceptional parks in particular can support local business by increasing footfall.²⁰

'A politics based on the unifying force of place, rather than the divisions of party, is what this country needs now more than ever if we are to unlock positive energy in all places and spread a sense of new possibility throughout this land.'

ANDY BURNHAM
MAYOR FOR GREATER MANCHESTER

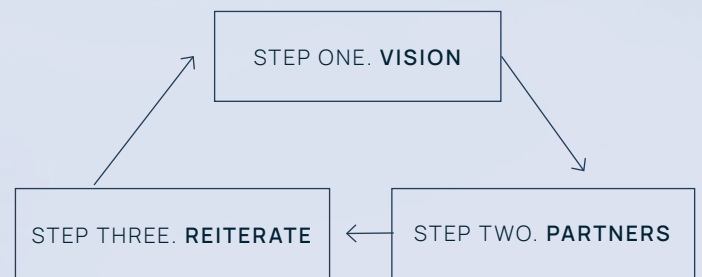
19. <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/fileadmin/uploads/dc/Documents/the-value-of-public-space1.pdf>

20. <https://www.the-napf.org/the-evidence-supports-the-hypothesis-that-exceptional-parks-spark-economic-growth-and-foster-thriving-communities>



The Hope

There is a huge amount that local leaders can do to make town centres flourishing sources of earning and belonging once again. Although more funding and devolution from central government is always needed, a great deal is possible right now if local leaders are prepared to follow these three steps: build a vision, form the partnerships and reiterate the work.



Step One. *Vision*

Local political leaders must create a vision for their town centre. This vision must address the twin needs of earning and belonging in the town in question. It must therefore be grounded in data and evidence, particularly in terms of the economic needs and skills of the locality, as well as the voices of local people.

To create a stronger sense of belonging and buy-in, the vision for any town centre should be grounded in the unique and distinctive character of the area in question. This should include meaningful contributions from investors, political leaders, local residents, third sector and local

business leaders. This vision will be stronger if diverse and lesser heard voices are also given a chance to contribute.

Note that this vision should be distinctive for the place, but should also be able to explain how the town complements the local geography and economy of the wider area, including neighbouring regional centres and individual highstreets and micro-centres that may exist within the town itself.

Step Two. *Partners*

Political leaders must act as conveners to major stakeholders to make this vision a reality. No political authority has the funding or legal powers necessary to implement true transformation on their own. In all of the examples of best practice listed in this report, the town centres that are able to create true transformation are those that can build strong relationships.

Elected politicians have an important leadership role in bringing partners together, either in a board or a steering group. Whilst the make up of these groups may differ, the important point is to have a balance of interests on this group so that each gets a say, but a minority can't hold up progress.

One way of doing this would be to operate the board on a 'Thirds Model', with one third of the board making up funders/investors, one third making up elected political representation from national/local government and one third constituting local resident/community/business groups. This way, one group can't dominate the board with their views, nor can it hold up progress if the other two thirds want to press ahead.

Step Three. *Reiterate*

A town centre is never finished. It is a constant work in progress, and good town planners will review what is happening and what needs to happen next, enabling a town centre to be flexible and resilient in the face of economic changes.

Perhaps the best way to ensure a town centre is adaptable is to make sure it contains a mix of uses. If retail sits alongside commercial, residential, public and third sector uses, then the town centre will be more resilient to economic shocks, which tend to hit one sector more than another. **A town overly dependent on retail will be more vulnerable, for example, to inflation, compared to one that has a mix of uses. There is strength in diversity.**

Similarly, Rudlin, Payne and Montague²¹ argue that the urban environments that are best at adapting to change contain a large number of small and medium-sized flexible units fronting onto naturally busy high streets leased to a number of different vendors, rather than relying on one large anchor department store.

Similarly, the opportunity of having smaller, cheaper, short-term units can also help entrepreneurs with start-ups and pop ups, enabling them to take a chance on economic growth at a lower risk than a larger, longer-term let would offer.

Finally, any reiteration process should constantly take into account feedback from those the

21. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003410423>

town centre is designed to serve – the people themselves. In particular, local leaders should pay attention to how well the town centre is serving local residents, and how accessible and inclusive it is to them.

Many town centres are facing ageing populations, and the older generation in particular can be put off from any changes that leave the town centre inaccessible, from a lack of transport access to poor public toilet provision. Similarly, young people need to have a specific offer to bring them in, and different cultural

groups need to feel the town centre is relevant to them, looking at everything from different opening hours to what festivals are celebrated when.

The only way to integrate these diverse interests is to constantly listen to local people and work with them to help their town centre evolve alongside them. This will also safeguard against understandable fears around gentrification. Any redevelopment must be reviewed to make sure it is serving local people, not pushing them out.

Concluding Remarks

Our towns can rise as well as fall. More affluent areas, and those with a vision for place based on earning and belonging, continue to provide town centres that serve, skill, delight and inspire their inhabitants. If local leaders roll up their sleeves and genuinely work in partnership and invest in the skills of their people, they can unlock this potential. Get this right, and town centres can regenerate the finances of a particular area and its people, whilst offering a true sense of wellbeing, pride and belonging to those who live there.



21. <https://www.centreforcities.org/high-streets/#declining>

22. <https://whatworksgrowth.org/resource-library/evidence-briefing-improving-high-streets-and-town-centres/>

Recommendations

- 1. Go for growth.** Make towns a source of jobs, training and upskilling. You need good wages to sustain demand for local shops and services. Local employment also reinforces our sense of belonging to a place. The new Manchester Baccalaureate is a fantastic example of upskilling local young people.
- 2. Shift from retail to social use.** Towns often have too much retail space given online shopping habits, so move towards social spaces e.g. cafes, gyms, playparks. Middlesborough is a good example, introducing an electric karting track, golf, VR gaming and karaoke pods into their regeneration plans.
- 3. Bring in the public sector.** Think about what public services can be relocated into central highstreets e.g. hospitals/GP surgeries, universities or council services. These services give people reasons to come to town, adding energy and footfall. Stockport is seeking to relocate its hospital in a former Debenhams store.
- 4. Make more homes.** Consider increased housing places in void or vacant retail units. Whilst we don't want town centres to become purely residential areas, more mixed use helps provide much needed homes and avoids the 'broken window' effect.
- 5. More green spaces and playparks.** The psychological evidence for green space is overwhelming. Stockton on Tees has demolished a huge old shopping centre and replaced it with a park three times the size of Trafalgar Square.
- 6. Keep things accessible.** Include a stronger focus on accessibility for disabled, elderly and families as well as better transport links. Make the green transition, but don't forget the car altogether!
- 7. Celebrate your history and culture.** Lean into shared heritage and culture as this sense of tradition binds us together and offers towns and highstreets unique selling points.
- 8. Work with technology, not against it.** At its best, town centre regeneration won't mean competing with the online world for social interaction, but complimenting it e.g. apps for towns that help you meet neighbours/promote local events.
- 9. Lean into events.** Markets, festivals, celebrations, pop up activities – all these things appeal to our nature as social beings and help increase trade. Sheffield has reinvented the old town centre by turning its old Coop store into 'Kommune', an independent food hall.
- 10. Experiment with pop ups.** Where there are vacant properties, consider short term low rent deals for entrepreneurs and pop ups, particularly in partnership with local universities. This can help growth, skills and local footfall in the town centre.
- 11. Use design to boost social interaction.** E.g. corner benches, pedestrian walkways that take you through the most pleasant routes, and keep retail exposed to the street without being hidden in a shopping centre to increase footfall.
- 12. Work with local people.** Regeneration should serve local people, not force them out via gentrification. Residents, businesses and community leaders should inform everything from vision and implementation to review. A small but powerful example of resident engagement is the Kent steps.

