



# RECOVERY AND RENEWAL ON THE KENT HIGH STREET

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## ABOUT LOCALIS

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### Who we are

We are a leading, independent think tank that was established in 2001. Our work promotes neo-localist ideas through research, events and commentary, covering a range of local and national domestic policy issues.

In particular our work is focused on four areas:

- **Decentralising political economy.** Developing and differentiating regional economies and an accompanying devolution of democratic leadership.
- **Empowering local leadership.** Elevating the role and responsibilities of local leaders in shaping and directing their place.
- **Extending local civil capacity.** The mission of the strategic authority as a convener of civil society; from private to charity sector, household to community.
- **Reforming public services.** Ideas to help save the public services and institutions upon which many in society depend.

### What we do

We publish research throughout the year, from extensive reports to shorter pamphlets, on a diverse range of policy areas. We run a broad events programme, including roundtable discussions, panel events and an extensive party conference programme. We also run a membership network of local authorities and corporate fellows.

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## ABOUT LOCALIS POLICY TOOLKITS

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Localis Policy Toolkits are streamlined, modular reports designed to give local government practitioners clear and concise overviews of options, best practice and regulatory frameworks of individual issues within broad themes. Policy professionals can expect to find summaries of national and local approaches to major policy issues, with suggestions and recommendations for actions on different spatial scales and at multiple levels of local governance.



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## FOREWORD

ROGER GOUGH  
LEADER OF KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

There is perhaps no better barometer of local economic health than the local high street. Rightly or wrongly, nothing gives such an immediate impression of a place.

And the recent pandemic has highlighted the importance of having a good local high street or town centre as we have rediscovered the pleasure - and sometimes the necessity - of being able to shop locally.

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**“There is no one-size-fits all solution and nor should there be. Every high street and town centre should be distinctive and of its place.”**

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That is why I am delighted that economic development professionals from across Kent and Medway came together to shape the objectives of this Localis report which draws on both local and national best practice and innovation.

The changing high street is by no means a new phenomenon – and the report recognises this. Changes run deeper than Covid. At one end of the spectrum, on-line retail grows, while at the other, the leisure experience offered by multi-purpose retail centres creates new demands and expectations. Covid has in many ways just brought these changes into sharper focus.

In recent years, a succession of national studies have been published, the findings from which the Localis team has helpfully captured. This national learning is combined in the report with local experience from across Kent and Medway to develop a toolkit enabling places to draw from the successes, experiments and experiences of others. A panel of those leading high street regeneration nationally was convened to provide further insight.

For a national Government rightly intent on Levelling Up, the high street has taken on a new importance. With the Government’s Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill now published – and new powers to be introduced to tackle the scourge of empty shops – this report offers complementary local solutions and national policy ideas which could make levelling up on our high streets a reality.

There is no one-size-fits all solution and nor should there be. Every high street and town centre should be distinctive and of its place. But we can all benefit from understanding what has worked (and what hasn’t) elsewhere.

Through the pandemic, with the support of a range of Government grants and initiatives, local councils have been instrumental in keeping many businesses afloat as we sail towards better times. This report is prompted by the urgency of a sustained post-Covid local economic recovery and, within this, the need for high streets across the country to be able to thrive and grow.

A vibrant high street or town centre is central to local growth and a sense of place - this first Localis policy toolkit offers an array of ideas and options showing how by working together nationally and locally we may achieve this.



## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Before the COVID-19 pandemic descended, councils across England were already purposefully working with their town centre partners to protect and enhance their high street businesses and amenities. Through action planning, improvements to the public realm, and digitalising the town centre, councils were attempting to tackle the historical issues of shuttered stores, town centre decline and an over-reliance on retail.

While town centres have always been a place of public service, culture, and leisure, over the last 40 years there was a marked and rapid demand for their primary role to be as retail space. And recent trends exacerbated by the pandemic has meant this demand is no longer there – which is in effect reverting high streets back to their pre and immediate post-war characteristics as mixed and variable areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused immediate and dramatic alterations to the way in which residents and visitors used high streets and how they made purchases. The early months of 2021 saw a 68.3 percent year-on-year decline in high street footfall and a 4.9 percent decline in retail sales volume. In January 2021, the proportion of money spent

online was 35.2 percent, the highest on record. Consequently, by Q3 2021, there was a 14.5 percent high street vacancy rate with shopping centre vacancies at 19.4 percent<sup>1</sup>.

Amid these startling figures, it is important to remember that UK high streets were under considerable pressure long before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. A perfect storm has been created by an age of austerity, the continued preference for online shopping, paralysing rents and businesses rates; all factors which have driven the evolution of high streets. All high streets have been affected by far-reaching financial constraints, with both big chains and independent retailers affected. Thus, the pandemic merely accelerated what had already been happening for the last decade. Stores are being closed across the board with no forecast of a return to 'normality'.

The government has provided support measures throughout the pandemic which have been extended to many but not all businesses. For those who have benefitted, the support has been a lifeline. The March 2021 Budget revealed plans to inject cash into the high street through one-off

<sup>1</sup> <https://brc.org.uk/news/corporate-affairs/vacancy-rate-plateaus/>

grants and funds, including the £4.8bn Levelling Up Fund and the Restart Grant scheme. These positive measures are helpful but very short term. The challenge is how to bring about the scale of regeneration needed to halt the spiral of decline before it reaches an irrevocable tipping point. Of course, the high street cannot afford to rely too heavily on government funding, and the private sector needs to feel once again comfortable to invest in town centres. Resilience in the face of the pandemic, driven by the adaptability and opportunism of local councils, will instil both investor confidence and swift recovery.

Local government is the key institutional player in long-term management of high streets and town centres and has at its disposal several important tools and resources. However, a decade of financial retrenchment has hindered the ability of councils to act as place-makers, to manage the challenges facing the high street and to enact any plans they may have for its recovery. As such, it is even more important that local councils utilise all the policy levers at their disposal. Councils must act as local planning authorities, licensing authorities, and in their capacity to lead local strategic planning. Only by using these tools can local authorities take the role as a strong leader and collaborator, to own and drive forward the town centre regeneration agenda.

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**“The early months of 2021 saw a 68.3 percent year-on-year decline in high street footfall and a 4.9 percent decline in retail sales volume.”**

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The multiple policy areas that impact high streets and town centres need to be effectively leveraged. The most prominent of these are planning policy and business rates. The relationship of high streets and town centres with the planning system is a core aspect of effective placemaking and building communities. Local planning authorities are central in guiding the renewal of the high street by approving developments that will embed a strong sense of cultural identity and pride of place. Meanwhile, business rates play a significant role in the high street as most, if not all, traders will be liable

to pay the rate. Given the changing nature of retail purchases, from the physical high street to online, a rethink in business rates is paramount for the renewal of the high street. The government has begun making steps in this direction with legislation announced in the Queen’s Speech 2022 - including the shortening of valuation cycles and new rate relief measures - stopping short of a fundamental review of the form and function of the tax itself. The research presented in this toolkit highlights the urgent need for further investigation in this area.

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**“In this state of change for high streets, now is the time to adopt the right patterns of development, regeneration and recovery for long-term prosperity.”**

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Approaching present challenges to high streets and seizing upon opportunities must start with the question, ‘What does the future of the UK’s towns look like?’ During and following the pandemic, many local councils have been seeking to maintain a programme of place-based initiatives – including masterplans and investment plans – codesigned with communities and partners, to help urban areas and communities to adapt to Covid-19 and avoid decline. Understanding changing populations and working habits while improving town centre design, transport planning, and housing policies and practices will make the visions of sustainable and equitable cities easier to realise. Through these foci, Kent councils can renew and advance their strategic economic, social and environmental goals.

In this state of change for high streets, now is the time to adopt the right patterns of development, regeneration and recovery for long-term prosperity. Failing to do so will result in negative social, economic, and environmental trends being locked in for decades.

## 1.1

In the light of the challenges facing the high street, this policy toolkit gathers some perspectives on the issues facing sub-regional and local town centres in Kent, highlights innovative ideas that have been developed locally, presents a number of policy options, and outlines some themes for further investigation.

Town centres are a diverse category. In Kent and Medway, the network of sub-regional and local centres is highly distinctive, facing unique challenges based on typography and geography. This includes coastal towns such as Dover and towns sharing close proximity with London such as Dartford and Gravesend. The following toolkit abstracts these issues and considers what they might mean for other districts in the county and for Kent as a whole.

In this sense, our approach is one with a broad view, considering the multitude of differing issues that Kent's high streets and town centres are contending with. The research has been guided by and answers the following questions that have been informed by stakeholders from across Kent:

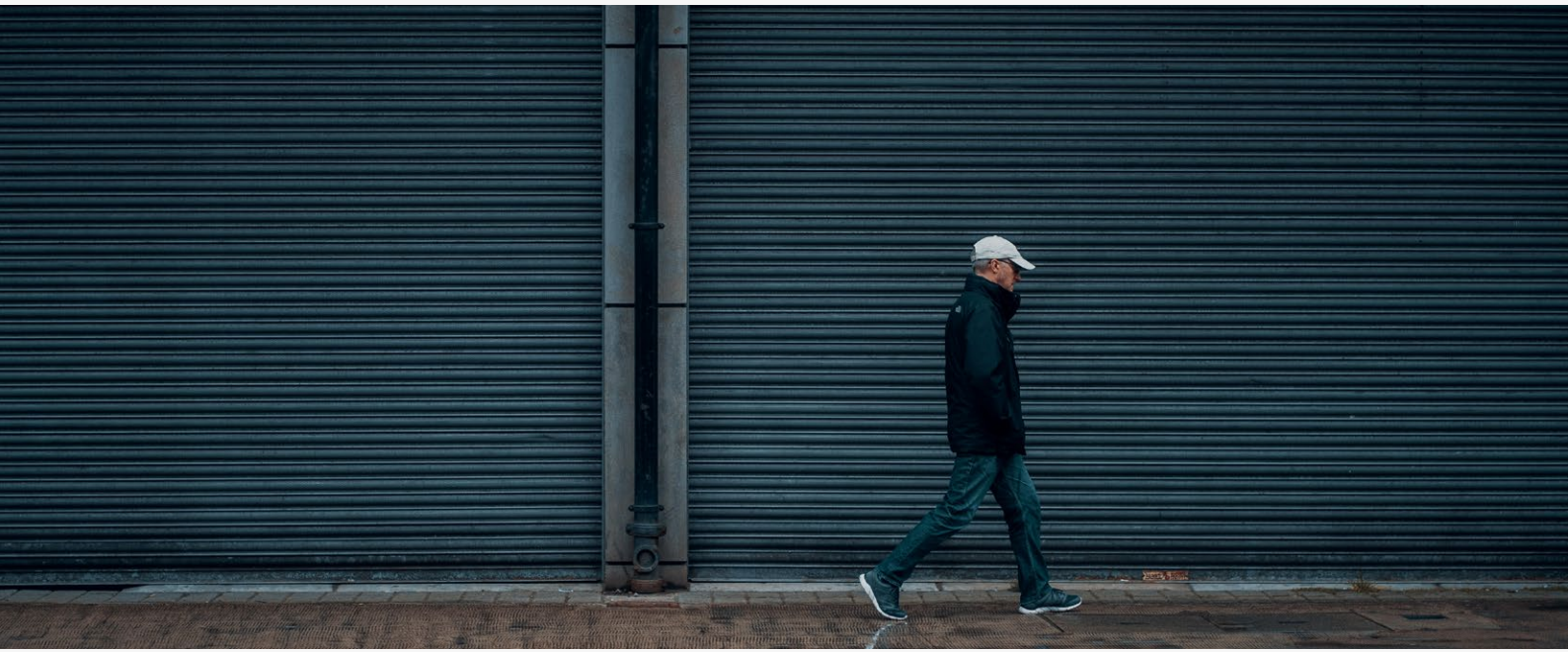
1. What will the future high street and town centre look like?
2. Where are current examples of success, nationally and internationally, and how have they been achieved? What was their evolution and how much would apply to Kent & Medway?
3. Are there common elements of best practice or will these vary according to place?
4. What can we learn from recent national and local reports on high streets/town centres?
5. What is the balance between the retail, leisure and/or other offers? What is the opportunity for diversification?
6. What is the role of local authorities and local agencies in growing the high street?
7. What is the risk from Permitted Development Rights and similar legislation and could local action be taken to minimise risk to the high street?

## PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

8. What are the wider costs of failing high streets and town centres?
9. What can we learn from the decline of high streets and the failure of key businesses to support new business-led development?
10. Can we define KPIs for high streets and town centres to monitor performance and measure community value?

Other research has been developed that looks at specific issues in Kent and nationally. A list of this can be found in the appendix.

Overall, while the challenges facing the high street are pressing, an examination of Kent's local centres provides excellent and concrete examples of places tackling these challenges with a sense of determination, optimism and positivity. The toolkit attempts to capture this sense of place pride and convey the outstanding actual proof examples of ingenuity and resilience found across Kent and Medway.



## 1.2 HIGH STREET DECLINE: LONG AND SHORT-TERM FACTORS

This section is designed to give an overview of the key issues facing the high street, the major policy responses that have been offered and the role of local government in devising and delivering high street policies.

### 1.2.1 LONG-TERM FACTORS

A perfect storm has been created by an age of austerity, the continued preference for online shopping, paralysing rents and businesses rates which have all taken their toll on high streets. The financial constraints have been far reaching, affecting both big chains and independent retailers, with more than 50,000 staff estimated to have lost their job in the retail sector in 2018.

Five primary reasons for high street decline are:

- Online shopping – online giants such as Amazon have had a huge impact on high streets as more consumers see online shopping as easier and cheaper than going to the shops.
- Rising business rates and inflation – in April 2018, rises in business rates and the National Living Wage saw retailers having to pay an extra £2bn over the following three years. This deterred investment in local communities causing shop closures and job-losses as retailers were prevented from meeting customer demand in an efficient and cost-effective way. Meanwhile, inflation remained low with the increasing costs of operation outweighing any inflation gains.
- Declining real wages and stagnant growth – the UK has had the weakest wage growth of all G7 countries since the 2008 financial crisis and throughout the 2010s, the disposable income of consumers decreased, with wages rising at a slower rate than inflation.
- Over expansion and out of town retail – many companies over-expanded during the pre-recession boom years, leaving them financially exposed during austerity. With shop numbers in a town centre limited, many expanded to out-of-town shopping malls. These hubs with multiple retail brands, eateries and leisure facilities made out-of-town shopping a destination event while high streets were increasingly deserted. Something that was bolstered by the ease of access and free parking available at out-of-town shopping centres.
- Over-indebtedness – because of rapid expansion, many retailers were shouldering high debt burdens around the time of the financial crisis. Just before its collapse, Toys R Us had a VAT debt payment deadline of £15m, which it would have been unable to pay without a cash injection from an outside investor.



In 2018 The High Street Report was published. Commissioned from an expert panel by central government, this outlined practical measures for government to help high streets. These suggestions included:

- High Streets Task Force – suggested to be a single voice for town centres, providing places with access to data to improve them. The intention was for the Task Force to facilitate cross-sector networking and skills building, providing access to expert help and support while sharing information and best practice stories. The task force was commissioned by the government in 2019 as part of its Plan for the High Street, in response to the 2018 report.
- Future High Streets Fund – a fund to interact with the Task Force and increase its impact. The report suggested co-funding with other sectors, providing capital for places to invest in high streets, with community involvement, where cross-sector leadership is demonstrated. The key purpose of the Fund is to encourage collaboration and partnership working. The Fund was launched in 2018, set up as a £675m fund and later increased to £1bn.
- Our Plan for the High Street – announced at the 2018 budget and presented a set of measures to bolster the high street. These included a two-year long cut in businesses rates by a third for up to 90% of retail properties and a consultation proposing reform to high street planning, as well as the aforementioned Task Force and the Fund.

### 1.2.2 SHORT-TERM FACTORS

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated pre-existing trends in the nature of the high street and its use by residents and visitors. Before the pandemic, footfall had dropped over 10 percent in the preceding seven years. Continuing this trend, data for November 2020 showed that footfall was about 45 percent compared to the same period last year.

The pandemic also continued to change the way people made their retail purchases. Internet sales had risen to 21 percent of all retail sales at the end of 2019, compared to seven percent

a decade earlier. But during the height of the national lockdown period in May 2020, internet sales had jumped to nearly 33 per cent of all retail sales.

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**“A perfect storm has been created by an age of austerity, the continued preference for online shopping, paralysing rents and businesses rates which have all taken their toll on high streets.”**

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Support measures from the government during the pandemic have extended to many but not all businesses. These have been wide-ranging, and many high street businesses have benefited. Support has included:

- The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme which paid a proportion of a furloughed employee’s salary and was open to any entity with a UK payroll.
- A range of loan schemes for businesses across the UK, including the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, the Bounce Back Loan Scheme and the Recovery Loan Scheme.
- A range of grants for local authorities in England, including the Local Restrictions Support Grant, Restart Grant, Additional Restrictions Grant, and Local Authority Discretionary Grant, and one-off cash grants of up to £25,000 to businesses in England in the retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors with a rateable value up to £51,000.
- 100 percent business rates holiday in England for retail, hospitality, and leisure businesses
- A moratorium on evictions of commercial tenants in England and Wales, extended until March 2022, and with legislation introduced to ringfence outstanding unpaid rent built up during the pandemic.
- The UK-wide ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ initiative.

Locally, authorities and councils have also been vital in supporting their high streets and town centres throughout the pandemic:

- Local authorities have directly administered government funds and implemented Covid restrictions and guidelines. Local authorities are paramount in communicating with the public, providing action planning to close and reopen services safely, and facilitating social distancing and active travel.
- Individual councils have developed innovative ways to support, reassure and revive their local areas. For example, Watford Borough Council created a confidence mark to assure residents that retailers were complying with Covid-19 secure procedures.
- Individual Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) also provided protective measures for their local high streets and town centres. For example, North Notts BID helped to develop a system where residents could see how busy their town centre was before deciding whether to visit or shop, while Stratford BID in Stratford-upon-Avon matched workers made redundant from the hospitality sector with vacancies at grocery retailers.

### COVID impact on Kent's high streets

In Kent, the pandemic has served as an accelerator of the decline already being faced. Every stakeholder engaged as part of this research had been working toward solutions in stemming the decline of the high street long before the pandemic took hold.

However, sometimes as a perverse result of considerable decline in previous years, some areas have proven to be more resilient than others in the face of pandemic pressures. For example, in Thanet, many of the major, national high-street brands left the area ten to fifteen years ago. Consequently, the council has been working with local businesses to promote local independent retail and boost economic growth for a long while. In the case of Deal, not having a large amount of large retail units has also meant that a lot of the businesses who occupy space are local and independent. Coupled with the work Produced in Kent have been doing on the 'Help Kent, Buy Local' campaign, this has meant that many areas have continued to show resilience and independence throughout the pandemic period.

Part of this resilience lies in the adaptability and ability of local councils to see and source the opportunities in finding alternative uses for larger retail units that may be vacant as a result of the pandemic. This brings the potential for different sectors to the fore including the arts, culture, and creative industries to utilise these spaces and to play a role in the renewal of Kent's high streets. Additionally, almost all districts engaged with as part of this research expressed intention to increase the levels of hybrid workspaces available in their area, demonstrating the opportunities that have emerged from the change in work patterns brought about by the pandemic.

### 1.2.3 GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO HIGH STREET DECLINE

There are several government funds that are entirely or predominantly focused on the renewal and revitalisation of the high street and town centre. These include:

- **Future High Street Fund:** There is £675m available for this fund. Its aim is to renew and reshape town centres and high streets in a manner that allows for good growth, improves people's experiences, and is sustainable<sup>2</sup>.
- **Towns Fund:** There is £3.6bn of funding available for this fund. The Town Fund has been providing Town Deals of up to £25m to towns across the country to create economic regeneration, deliver needed infrastructure, and attract inward investment. So far 101 Town Deals have been signed off<sup>3</sup>.
- **Levelling Up Fund:** This fund has £4.8bn available to it. Announced as part of the Spending Review 2021, it will look to support town centre and high street regeneration, local transportation projects, cultural heritage

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-high-streets-fund>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/town-deals-full-list-of-101-offers>

projects as well as wider levelling up projects that improve the daily lives of people across the country<sup>4</sup>. There are government decided priority areas for this funding, with proposals from higher priority places being more successful than others.

- **UK Shared Prosperity Fund:** The profile of the fund will gradually increase from £0.4bn in 2022/23 to £1.5bn in 2024/25 onwards. It has been set up to replace EU structural funding, and as such, its priorities can be defined by the government on its own terms. Previous manifesto pledges have stated these to reduce inequalities across the four nations of the UK and tackle inequality between communities through raising productivity. More recently, government has promised £500m to give disadvantaged people needed skills to succeed at life<sup>5</sup>.
- **Community Renewal Fund:** This fund will provide £220m additional funding to help places across the UK prepare for the introduction of the UKSPF<sup>6</sup>.
- **Community Ownership Fund:** This is a £150m fund. It has been set up for communities across the UK to help them take ownership of assets and amenities at risk of closure and will run for four years. Funding will support a range of community ownership proposals including pubs, cinemas, museums and galleries amongst others<sup>7</sup>.
- **Welcome Back Fund:** This is a £56m fund from the European Regional Development

Fund. Its aim is to support the safe return to high streets and help build back better from the pandemic.

The Levelling Up Fund, Future High Street Fund, Town Deals, UK Community Renewal Fund, and other national government funds will play a vital role in how Kent's high streets and town centres renew and regenerate in the recovery from COVID-19.

However, in the last fifteen years much of government and EU funding available to local authorities was not aimed directly at town centre regeneration. Rather it has been targeted toward business competitiveness. Furthermore, whatever has been focused in this area has been piecemeal and characterised by competitive bidding. This inhibits the realisation of the full potential of placemaking at the local level and was criticised in the 2021 report on high streets by the DLUHC Select Committee.

Similarly, while the Future High Street Fund and Town Deals are a firm step in the right direction, they still suffer from the same problem of being a competitive bidding process in nature. This means that many areas that require the funding will not be able to access it, since it rests on having to evidence deprivation based on nationally set metrics. Consequently, while government funding will be crucial, local authorities will have to continue to encourage private inward investment and set the correct conditions within their locality to make this happen.

## 1.3

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE HIGH STREET

Local government is the key institutional player in long-term management of high streets and town centres. As of 2021, councils face multiple capacity challenges that restrict their ability to act. However, there remain several important tools and resources at the disposal of local authorities. The extent to which these tools can be utilised,

and resources accessed depends to some degree on the governance arrangements of a local area and the associated level of devolution.

### 1.3.1 POSITION IN 2021

A decade of financial retrenchment has undoubtedly played a significant role in how local

4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-fund-prospectus>

5 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8527/CBP-8527.pdf>

6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus-2021-22#distribution-of-the-uk-community-renewal-fund>

7 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund-prospectus/community-ownership-fund-prospectus#overview>

authorities manage the challenges facing the high street and will be a factor in any plans they may have for its renewal and recovery.

This is most acutely felt in restrictions on councils' ability to act as makers and shapers of place, with efforts increasingly focused on budget savings to pay for statutory services. This has resulted in a diminished appetite for more innovative ideas about the renewal of the high street that may include an increased element of financial risk. At the same time, continuous budget reductions have also shifted attention to income generation, at the expense of proactive placemaking policies. Coupled with limited avenues available for revenue raising at the local level, this means an increased reliance on business rates.

Faced with existing pressures such as the increase of online shopping and COVID-19, business rates are proving an outdated method of revenue raising that can act as a deterrent for businesses looking to open on the high street. This is especially true for smaller independent retailers. This overreliance on business rates in paying for local services exposes local authorities to 'the vagaries of commercial real estate markets'<sup>8</sup>.

Recent austerity measures have also had an adverse impact on the capacity of local authorities to engage in bottom-up community engagement when it comes to large scale regeneration projects. Through the stakeholder interviews carried out to support this toolkit, the point was expressed that, because of financial limitations, engagement with the community tends to be decidedly top-down when an authority is given a sizable budget for a project. This kind of engagement is characterised as a Decide, Announce, Defend approach. This is driven, in part, from fear of not wanting to waste funds.

As has been pointed out by Localis previously, the issue of local authority under-resourcing also raises a constitutional question regarding the role of local government: are they considered at the forefront of decision making and delivery or simply an extended delivery arm of central government?

In the face of these well-rehearsed challenges facing local authorities, their courage, wisdom and creativeness in response to them - for the sake of improving the circumstances of their communities they serve - will continue to be our most prized asset in renewing the high street. Equally, as countless examples from across Kent demonstrate there is a strong willingness to overcome such challenges and work with the community.

### 1.3.2 RESOURCES AND TOOLS

Despite the adverse impact that austerity has had on local authorities in their capacity as placemakers, there are still several policy levers at their disposal to help meet the challenges of the high street. These are primarily based around their capacity as local planning authorities, licensing authorities, and their capacity to lead strategic planning and vision setting on the local state level.

#### The planning system

The planning system is and will continue to be a considerable factor in the health and success of the high street. At its core, the purpose of the planning system is to ensure that checks and balances are in place so that the right type of development occurs for the benefit of the surrounding community and local economy. It involves the management and regulation of development, while balancing interests of development with the need for the protection of local amenities, the environment, and the wider public interest.

The relationship between high streets and town centres with the planning system is a core aspect of effective placemaking and building communities. Local planning authorities are central in guiding the renewal of the high street through consenting to the right type of development that will bestow a locality with a strong sense of cultural identity and place pride.

In the context of the pandemic, the planning system has been utilised in several ways to help struggling businesses on the high street survive. Most significantly through Use Classes Order as well as wider Permitted Development Rights (PDR).

The Use Class Order groups properties and land into different classes according to their function. Changes from one Use Class to another are covered by Permitted Development Rights. In September 2020, changes were made to reform the Use Class Order. Most significantly, three new classes were added:

- Class E – commercial, business and service
- Class F.1 – learning and non-residential institutions
- Class F.2 – Local community.

With regards to the new Class E, this allows for premises to more easily be switched between retail, restaurant, gym, office, and restaurant amongst others. This has undoubtedly helped many retailers adapt their offer based on circumstances surrounding pandemic lockdowns. However, following a consultation, in May 2021 the government confirmed that a new Permitted Development Right will be introduced to that will allow for a change of use between the new Use Class E to Use Class C3 Residential.

It is important to note the far-reaching implications this will have for the direction of the recovery of the high street. The government maintains that this has been done to create “thriving town centres”. However, concerns have been raised over potential negative consequences. Particularly worrisome is the loss of democratic oversight as this new Permitted Development Right bypasses the local planning authority, as well as a potential increase of poor-quality housing.

Another way the planning system has been deployed to help high street businesses is through government-backed changes to the system. These have sought to safeguard community assets and cultural anchors on our high streets and town centres from adverse impacts of the pandemic. Under changes introduced in July 2020, councils are now required to heed the impact of COVID-19 when considering ‘the change of use, redevelopment or demolition of a theatre, concert hall or live music performance venue’.<sup>9</sup>

### **Kent Chief Planners – Reopening High Street**

The revival and regeneration of the high streets will rely on the development of clear and inclusive strategies for each of the centres. The starting point is to develop individual visions and objectives for centres which should involve all stakeholders from an early stage - to ensure strong foundations for the strategy which emerges - including business and investors along with the local community. How the Vision is made will vary between Districts. If the timing is right, these could be developed through Local Plans - which would afford them a statutory status. In many cases though it will be necessary for stand-alone corporate visions and objectives to be developed through consultation and engagement with the community and business.

These visions and objectives in town centre strategies will need to set out the framework for partnership working to deliver the visions and a carefully considered approach to intervention including public realm improvements and use of council controlled or owned land and buildings to lever in investment, both private sector and public sector.

Town centre strategies will incorporate and inform a range of both district and county led strategies, and coordinate these to maximise the benefits that they can bring. This will include the Local Plan - which will be central to this approach - as will others such as housing, transport, parking, cultural, heritage and public realm strategies.

Partnership working needs to be embedded within each strategy and the leadership role of councils must be strengthened and focussed to deliver sustainable change.

The establishment and delivery of coordinated Town Centre Strategies by the councils is necessary in response to the relaxation of planning powers within centres that were the historic means by which local authorities shaped the role and function of centres. Well-conceived Town

Centre Strategies also allow for efficient, targeted public sector interventions and private sector investment, together with maximising opportunities for successful grant funding.

A number of Councils have begun work to produce strategies and the early indications are that finding political, business and community consensus has been much easier than expected - which bodes well for the development and delivery of change to the town centres over time, better able to withstand political and organisation change.

### The role of business rates

Business rates hold a significant role for the high street given that most retailers will be liable to pay. They are an annual property tax that is paid on the rateable value of the property occupied by the business. This value is estimated by the Valuation Office Agency based on the open market rental value of the property and is therefore set at the national level, while being collected by the local authority every February or March. And because of this, it has been highlighted that the tax disproportionately affects bricks and mortar retailers. They are charged on most non-domestic properties including shops, offices, pubs, warehouses, and factories amongst others. Many of the high street retailers liable to pay are facing added challenges of high rents and declining footfall, and a key message coming out of this research has been the urgent need to address the feasibility of business rates going forward.

### Other key powers

Changes to the planning system brought in as a response to the pandemic have greatly bolstered the ability of local authorities to act in preserving assets of cultural and community value. Here, there is a strong opportunity to constructively engage with landowners along the high street and within the town centre, to understand how empty and vacant spaces could be better utilised in renewal. Understanding the possibilities of increased 'meanwhile use' as well as longer term use of larger retail units for purposes that could bring a new offer outside of traditional retail will be of principal importance. At the same time, through stakeholder interviews it has been noted that, when it comes to the limited revenue-raising capacity of local authorities, there is a reluctance

to use levers, such as empty property taxes on landlords sitting on vacant sites, for fear of driving away inward investment.

In their capacity as licensing authorities, alongside the formal role of licensing venues, local authorities have provided a critical business support function throughout the pandemic uncertainty. This has been especially true with regards to how local authority licensing teams suspended the pavement fees during the period of lockdowns.

### Leadership and convening power

As has been demonstrated by the authorities across Kent through initiatives such as the Folkestone Place Plan, Ramsgate Future Investment Plan, and many others, local authorities are still able to set out a rich vision for what they want the future of their locality to be, while drawing on the unique strengths of their place.

There is a slight tension here between the need for strong leadership to guide, sometimes pull, regeneration forward, and the need to establish local consensus and to bring residents along. There is a fine line between proper community engagement and becoming paralysed by a need to have everyone on board. Ultimately, a balance needs to be struck between leadership and consent. A single plan with a single leader is essential to a well-realised recovery. Leadership needs community backing, and leaders must be prepared to face down political challenge. This must be achieved within the difficult context of short political cycles and underpowered local government. Stakeholders have consistently, throughout this research, highlighted the need for strong leadership as the key to a successful locally-led regeneration.

## The Kent Context

The overall impression of stakeholders interviewed in Kent is that fundamentally, local authorities are in a good position to take the role as a strong leaders of place, to own and drive forward the

town centre regeneration agenda.

However, it has equally been pointed out that key to this is working with others and providing a strong platform for those who are trying to do good things. Whether this is a developer working to get a scheme off the ground, or a business looking to invest in the town.

Local authorities need to show their strength in using tools already at their disposal. Whether it be empty property taxes, planning strategy or business rates – these are all soft powers that can be used strategically when thinking about how to work with landlords on the high street. If used without consideration, effects of using these powers could bring additional challenges. For instance, when looking at North Kent, there are a few large-scale infrastructure projects such as the London Resort and Lower Thames Crossing. These projects present challenges for local authority resources by displacing the focus on place-shaping for local communities in areas such as Gravesend.

Fiscal under-resourcing will continue to provide greater challenges in the next few years. Funding cuts experienced by local authorities over the last decade have left them in a position of only being able to focus on what is in front of them when it comes to place-making. This risks a top-down approach to the issue.

### 1.3.3 DIFFERENCES ACROSS TYPES OF AUTHORITY

Local government in England, and its structure, is notoriously complex with different tiers of governance each vested with particular powers. Therefore, in areas governed under a two-tier county/district system the need for strategic spatial planning is ever important in the context of high street renewal.

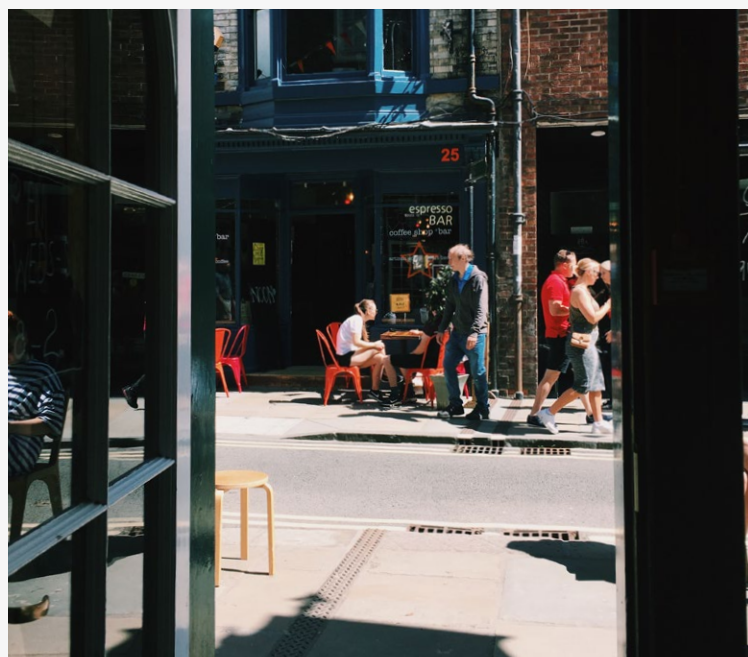
There are six main different types of local government units in the country. They include:

- County councils
- District councils
- Unitary authorities
- Metropolitan Boroughs
- London Boroughs
- Town and Parish councils

The differing landscape of local governance across England provides different paths forward for local authorities wanting to deliver on high street renewal.

For unitary authorities, which are responsible for the delivery of all public services, it is more straightforward to agree on a set of priorities and a plan of action bringing together various elements that may be required. However, this is more difficult in two-tier areas since certain powers needed for high street renewal are scattered across the county and district council. This requires a much closer level of partnership

working for the delivery of services and schemes, which might not always be possible owing to differing priorities of each council.



## CHAPTER 2

## HIGH STREET POLICY TOOLKIT

<b>2.1</b>	Placemaking	→
<b>2.2</b>	Post-pandemic changes	→
<b>2.3</b>	Sustainability/decarbonisation	→
<b>2.4</b>	Sector mix on the high street	→
<b>2.5</b>	Labour markets	→
<b>2.6</b>	Governance and evaluation	→
<b>2.7</b>	Barriers to recovery	→

During and following the pandemic, many local councils have been seeking to maintain a programme of place-based initiatives – including masterplans and investment plans – codesigned with communities and partners, to help urban areas and communities to adapt to Covid-19 and avoid decline. Looking across these strategies, taken from places with different economic circumstances in regions across the country, key overarching policy themes reveal a picture of the road to recovery as conceived in English local government. Through boosting sustainable travel, enabling renewed investment in the public realm, while honing in how and where people work and what they can enjoy in their localities, councils can renew and advance their strategic economic, social and environmental goals.

This section presents a ‘policy toolkit’, giving brief overviews and policy options for local government activity on key areas of high street recovery and renewal, illustrated with specific examples from Kent and further afield. The idea is to give a quick and accessible impression of how local government might act on each area alongside best practice examples, to help stimulate and guide thinking on local measures for high street renewal and recovery.

### Methodology

The policy toolkit was put together based on three strands of research:

- An analysis of high street strategies from different types of local authorities across the country.



- A series of interviews and group discussions with Kent council officers and other key local stakeholders.
- A roundtable discussion including national and local experts on high streets and recovery.

For the 'national overview' aspect, 25 strategies focused on recovery and renewal on the high street or in the town centre were analysed, from different types of authorities as broken down in the table:

Counties	2
Districts	14
Unitary authorities	4
Met Boroughs	3
London Boroughs	2

For the 'Kent context' aspect, 20 case study interviews were carried out with local stakeholders across Kent, particularly local council economic development officers. Kent district, borough and city council strategies were also analysed to gain an impression of how policy responses to the issue of high street decline in Kent fit within the key areas of focus.



## 2.1

## PLACEMAKING

<b>2.1.1</b>	High street decline and local identity	→
<b>2.1.2</b>	Public realm improvements	→
<b>2.1.3</b>	Diversification	→
<b>2.1.4</b>	Policy options	→

**P**lacemaking is at the heart of high street recovery and renewal, and an important responsibility of local government. Across the UK, councils are considering how to use the task of COVID-19 recovery to help stimulate local identity and reverse high-street decline, through improvements to the built environment and the diversification of the high street offer.

### 2.1.1 HIGH STREET DECLINE AND LOCAL IDENTITY

#### National overview

The pandemic damaged high streets and town centres, through rapid loss of businesses and radically altered flows of movement, that many were stripped of their sense of identity and place. As part of a recovery, many local authorities are seeking to create a local vision that captures the identity of their towns, giving locals pride and a sense of ownership over their town centres and high streets.

Councils have been doing this in two ways: enhancing and recovering identity; or creating a brand-new identity. Most councils believe they can recover their identity by bringing high streets out of disrepair, improving their look and feel to raise the profile and perception of their high streets. Councils looking to create a new identity for their local areas have been curating a fresh retelling of the local story.

The recovery of town and city centres must be locally tailored and led, using public consultation to provide direction and completing a town audit. The local story, whether recovered or new, can be used to reinvigorate the town centre and high street place marketing capacity to attract investment and jobs in key sectors and grow the visitor economy.

#### Kent approach

Bringing in new, creative, experiential offers to the high street and town centre will entail tapping

into the potential of each locality's heritage and culture. Looking across Kent, the county is strategically strong in terms of the cultural sector and creative industries.

The South East Creative Economy Network (SECEN) are in the process of identifying and understanding where the opportunities are at county-level<sup>10</sup>. A key document in helping identify where the opportunities are is the Creative High Streets report, which has been jointly produced by the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and Arts Council England. The report provides guidance on how to utilise local the creative offering to drive communities back on the high street.

The potential for such opportunities can operate across multiple policy strands such as work, employment, or innovation. This highlights how, if the aim of renewing town centres is to create great places where people live, work and visit, then a strong focus must be placed on cultural infrastructure. In these terms, the high street provides a strong opportunity through the potential in reusing vacant units for culture and heritage purposes including art studios and exhibition spaces.

Examples of places tapping into their culture and heritage potential already exist across Kent. A part of Ramsgate is within a Heritage Action Zone aimed at uplifting the facades of the historic parts of the town centre. In Canterbury, the 'Canterbury Tales of England' is an umbrella term for a number of initiatives that will help tell the story of Canterbury through the history of England. The council are keen on revamping the heritage offer and using heritage-based art and history to bring in new attractions to the city.

## 2.1.2 PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS

### National overview

Part of enhancing a sense of place involves comprehensive public realm improvements. This requires a solid financial commitment from councils, particularly in deprived areas, and a variety of responses have emerged.

Some councils are initiating a Local Shopping

Parades Regeneration Fund for such improvements and to help develop a sense of civic pride. Other existing approaches include:

- a Town Futures Team in each town – with members from local businesses, town council and communities – who will have a clear mandate to look to the long-term future and prosperity of the town, public realm, and sense of place; and
- a High Street Heritage Action Zone with associated Project Officer to restore local historic character and improve the public realm.

The key outcomes from focusing on place include the determination of local identity and sense of pride, directed by community engagement and public consultation, to create a town centre or high street that is more attractive to residents, workers, and visitors.

At the level of central government, the ninth levelling up mission set in the Levelling Up White Paper is for peoples pride in place and their satisfaction with their town centre to have risen across the UK by 2030. Here, driving forward public realm improvement will be a key focus.

To help do this, government will refocus Homes England to use its statutory powers to partner with local leaders in driving forward regeneration. This will be done by forming partnerships with local leaders to help deliver their regeneration objectives; using expertise to unblock private investment; work with partners to enable pooling of local and national funding; attract institutional investors; and establish a delivery vehicle that is responsive to local concerns and gives surety of decision making.

### Kent approach

The significance of public realm improvements as a way to revitalise the town centre has been recognised across Kent. Various initiatives are under way in all districts, either as part of wider town centre regeneration programmes or individually.

In Gravesend, Gravesham Borough Council is working on developing a creative hub within

the old Saint George's shopping centre. It is envisioned to serve the growing artistic community in the town through developing workspaces, but there is also a wider public realm improvement element involved. This is primarily focused on the area that connects with Saint George's Church and enhancing it with art.

In Folkestone, many of the action points in the council's place plan are focused on access. One of the schemes is looking to reclaim space from what is currently a bus station in the town centre. The council wants to move the buses from the area and create a new green town square that could be used as a public meeting space. The aim here is to provide more incentives for people to spend time in and enjoy the town centre.

In Tonbridge, the borough council have been investing in improving shop fronts. This initiative stemmed from work the council had been doing through the High Street Innovation Fund to enhance the high street, which involved getting businesses together and understanding their priorities regarding the public realm. Out of these discussions there was a lot of support for enhancing shop fronts. By using funding through the Business Rates Retention Pilot, the council funded and delivered 31 projects.

Thanet District Council has allocated £2.7m from the Future High Streets Fund for their Heritage Action Zone in Ramsgate. In addition to uplifting the façade of the historic town centre, the other two projects include a highway scheme to improve movement and access between the town centre and harbour.

Addressing challenges around physical infrastructure, through public realm regeneration, is something that requires close coordination between the districts of Kent and the county council. This is especially true when funding is involved. Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council were awarded funding through the Local Growth Fund by SELEP to undertake regeneration work along Tonbridge high street.

The three main projects involve upgrading the train station and bus station connected to it, broadening the high street to make it more pedestrian friendly, as well as making the river walk less car-dominated. The main goal here has been to create a more pleasant environment for

people coming to the town. While the work was undertaken before the pandemic, a key benefit it has brought in the context of renewal has been that the council already had the provision to accommodate lockdown policies such as social distancing.

### 2.1.3 DIVERSIFICATION

#### National overview

Urban realm diversification is frequently called for in town centre and high street strategies whereby new land uses are devised to help support the transition away from retail, bringing new life in to existing buildings and supporting the development of vacant sites in and around the town centre.

The pandemic accelerated a shift away from the monoculture of retail and councils now need to ensure that this shift does not result in vacant retail sites. They must work to create a flexible mixed use of spaces for residential, leisure and work activities to stimulate development and economic activity, both for the meanwhile and longer-term use. Residential uses would encourage new homes and residents into the heart of the high street, alongside necessary amenities for the community and public spaces. Meanwhile, leisure needs to be prioritised to attract both residents and visitors to high streets, stimulating the local economy.

#### Kent approach

In Kent, there is a clear understanding amongst local government stakeholders that while retail will still hold an important place on the high street, it must evolve to incorporate more experiential offers and other diversified range of uses. While retail will still be needed, there is a belief that it will need to offer something unique, and a socialising or recreational element will need to play a bigger role than it does at the moment.

In Tunbridge Wells, the background to The Amelia lay in the fact that the borough council wanted to develop the town's cultural offer and support the visitor economy on the high street by better utilising existing buildings. Therefore, the new centre includes a visitor information centre, redeveloped museum, art gallery, and library which will also provide adult education services.

The hope is that given its position in the heart of the high street, it will bring more footfall into the centre.

Tonbridge has seen an increase in its independent food and drink offer over the last ten years that all present something unique such as cat cafes. This is seen as the type of experience that gives something new, which cannot simply be ordered online.

In terms of diversification, in Folkestone there is the Folca centre. This is a former Debenhams department store that the council acquired. Now the council is working with two local GP practices and the East Kent CCG to put in a new medical centre. This will enhance the healthcare offer by adding in training and diagnostic services. Additionally, the council is looking to develop a mixed use scheme that will focus on delivered on what is not currently available in the town centre specifically in terms of good quality leisure offers.

In Medway, the council are in partnership with the Diocese of Rochester to repurpose St John's Church as a community space that will act as a gateway into the town from the train station. In addition to this, the council are working to convert the top floor of The Pentagon shopping centre into an innovation hub for startups that are linked to the university. These projects have both been facilitated through the Future High Street Fund.

Maidstone Borough Council purchased the Lock Meadow Leisure Centre complex in November 2019 at a cost of £19m, it was purchased with the aim of protecting an important leisure offer for the borough and town centre. Since the purchase the council has supported the upgrade of the Odeon to an Odeon luxe by lending them the funding for the renovation. The council has additionally invested in improvements to the external façade of the Odeon site and creating a large external event space.

### 2.1.4 POLICY OPTIONS

Some possible actions to help boost local identity and cultural offers include:

- Working with cultural anchors to develop tourism and visitor economy strategies.
- Working with the cultural and creative sectors and anchors to understand their role in high street renewal
- Repurposing empty properties for cultural and heritage use.

Some possible actions for driving public realm improvements include:

- Local development orders to bring forward development to regenerate town centres.
- Use of extensive compulsory purchase powers to help support identified development opportunities.
- Repurposing vacant or derelict buildings through Assets of Community Scheme or Community Asset Transfer giving community ownership.

Some possible actions to diversify town centres and high streets include:

- Planning provisions to include bringing vacant units back into use, for residential, leisure or work use.
- Collaboration between public and private sector landlords on how they best manage and repurpose empty shops through statutory powers or having a better understanding of local business and community needs.



## 2.2

## POST-PANDEMIC CHANGES

<b>2.2.1</b>	Population shifts	→
<b>2.2.2</b>	Flexible work patterns and co-workspaces	→
<b>2.2.3</b>	Policy options	→

Understanding and properly responding to the impact of the pandemic is crucial to formulating strategies for the recovery and renewal of high streets. In particular, understanding how pandemic-induced population shifts and working patterns are playing out at the local level can illuminate pathways to redefining the character of high streets and town centres.

The Levelling Up White Paper recognises the impact that COVID-19 has had in accelerating the pre-existing trends of online shopping and a move towards partial or full remote working.

These pandemic changes could mean long lasting changes for economic geography. This provides an opportunity for regional towns centres and high streets to boost local growth by focusing on how best to cater to these evolving circumstances.

Specifically in attracting the people and infrastructure investment for things like increased work space. There are numerous examples across Kent where this opportunity is being realised and the benefits of agglomeration are beginning to be

realised as more workers and firms relocate to the area.

### 2.2.1 POPULATION SHIFTS

#### National overview

The lockdowns brought on by the pandemic, and the requirement to work from home as a result, brought about an attitude shift with regards to the way we organise our lives around work. Specifically in London, individuals and families have started to move further out of the city where the cost of living is cheaper. Understanding that there will be a shift toward more flexible working, people have seen the benefit of moving out to areas with cheaper property prices.

In four of the five largest cities across England and Wales population growth has slowed down since the start of the pandemic. And it is the places in the immediate vicinity of these cities that are facing the largest consequences of this population shift. When looking at town centre recovery strategies, the changing demographics

of the area, and how to enhance the offer for existing and new communities that are coming in will be a core aspect of strong renewal.

### Kent approach

Both long-term trends and the impact of the pandemic on the movement and location of people have had significant and differing impact on high streets and town centres across Kent. These population shifts, along with the acceleration of remote working, have had an impact in how councils in Kent plan for recovery and renewal.

A changing population by way of positive migration and diversification can be helpful in revitalising high streets and town centres.

In East Kent, the 'down from London' phenomenon is prevalent, where people moving from the capital bring with them increased levels of money. The pandemic has given rise to an influx of Londoners, particularly in the coastal areas of the county, seeking cheaper and better-quality housing. Part of this is owing to changing work patterns, which has led people to seek homes with better access to nature and green space. This has led to certain adverse impacts in the coastal areas, such as highlighting shortages of accommodation. There are also knock-on consequences in the form of rising house prices that threaten to price out existing communities in the area. On the other hand, positives arising from people moving 'down from London' include increased interest in inward investment into the area, which will go on to support the recovery of places such as Dover, Folkestone, and Herne Bay. This highlights how the success of one coastal town may result in knock on success for other towns.

Changing demographics have also resulted in various ethnic communities flourishing in different parts of Kent, which can positively impact placemaking. Gravesend has seen an increase in South Asian and Eastern European communities across the town. This has resulted in several diverse retail spaces flourishing, offering a variety of products and services in the town centre and high street.

## 2.2.2 FLEXIBLE WORK PATTERNS AND CO-WORKSPACES

While the pandemic has brought about or accelerated several challenges for our high streets and town centres, it is causing a necessary shift in the way we organise ourselves. This is most evident in the shift to home working which, while a challenge, presents opportunities.

The 'Zoom Shock' effect of people in knowledge intensive industries and wider white-collar jobs working from home is something that will continue in one form or another. This presents a challenge for urban business district economies whose success relied so heavily on workers commuting from their house into the urban centre. On the other hand, an increase of people staying at home will have a positive impact on their local areas. This is an opportunity for the town centres of Kent.

### National overview

In the changing work world, where working from home has become the norm in certain sectors, authorities need to provide flexible working spaces to meet the needs of businesses and their workers. Key outcomes for the local labour market involve increases in quality employment and wages in high value sectors and the provision of local Grade A office space. Through this, a greater attraction and retention of talent can be achieved.

Working space provision can be fed into Local Plan evidence and can prioritise the types of space demanded by higher value sectors, such as ICT and professional services, and consequently can attract, retain, and accommodate talent in these sectors. By providing the facilities to attract higher value, knowledge intensive business sectors to the city, productivity gaps can be closed as the town centre or high street recovers.

An intensive package of employment, skills, training, and job readiness support, with a focus upon people, groups and localities that are underrepresented in the labour market, can increase economic success in all local communities and ensure businesses can access the skills they need for future success.

Building on this, working from home will become more commonplace than before. Therefore,

co-working spaces are also being prioritised in recovery schemes. These flexible working spaces can accommodate educational, skills and training use linked with existing and future growth sectors in the economy and contribute to raising prosperity.

### Kent approach

Kent is in a prime position to take advantage of the shift to flexible and more local working. This is true not only in the context of providing more workspaces on high streets and town centres, but also in attracting businesses to relocate to the area.

Dartford is now experiencing heightened commercial interest from companies looking to relocate from central London to where their workers spend more of their time living. This is something that has been spurred on by the pandemic and the search for places that have lower rents. The infrastructure context is important here. Dartford is seen as an attractive relocation destination especially because it is connected to the capital through HS1, the fact that a lot of new housing is being developed in the area, as well as the fact that it has the busiest business park on the M25.

Offering mixed use working arrangements will help attract and retain talent in the local area in ways that cannot be captured in central London. Seeing this potential, many councils across Kent have started developing flexible workspace environments that incorporate childcare facilities. This is true for both Folkestone and Gravesend. Other councils exploring the idea of developing co-working spaces include Tunbridge Wells, and Thanet amongst others.

For instance, part of Thanet District Council's focus through the Future High Street fund for Ramsgate is to open a creative workspace in the town centre as a result of understanding the latent demand for such space.

Relatedly, as part of the Margate Town Deal, the council was awarded £22m for their investment

plan which included the initiative 'Scaling Margate's Creativity and Production'. This will entail using a land trust to buy or take leases in properties in the town centre to create a supported network of workspaces.

In Tunbridge Well, the council is looking to appoint a partner to develop the town hall into a flexible co-working space. A part of this will entail adopting a hybrid working model to reduce the amount of council staff in order to provide more space.

Sevenoaks District Council has been working on a project to increase the number of business hubs across West Kent. And while they were not successful in receiving Community Renewal Fund money for it, there is still strong appetite for the idea. The idea tries to capture the hybrid working model that has become the norm post pandemic.

In Maidstone, the Borough Council launched the The Business Terrace in 2015, which is a managed workspace. This was in response to business failure rates outnumbering business births between 2008 and 2011 as a result of the tough economic climate following the financial crisis. This space has grown from eight incubator units to 23 units including grow on space utilising redundant council office space.

The Business Terrace provides a true one-stop shop, serving businesses in the Borough, bringing together like-minded individuals, promoting collaboration and networking opportunities. Free business advice is available to anyone who requires it, and the initiative is supported through partnerships with other local businesses promoting Corporate Social Responsibility. Since its opening, the workspace has supported 600 entrepreneurs, start-up companies and established businesses.

By developing working spaces that are flexible and close to stations with fast connections into London, the ambition is to have a new base for previous regular commuters, but also to attract emerging start-ups to set up base. One



such mixed use scheme is on Swanley high street, where the district council are building a new 'work hub' as well as homes at the former Meeting Point. The ground floor work hub will support new businesses and flexible ways of working.

Kent has traditionally been seen as providing dormitory towns for London, where people lived and commuted into the capital for work. However, the shift to flexible working provides

an opportunity to reverse this trend. Not only in the sense of providing the infrastructure to allow people to work locally, but in enticing industries and sectors that have been priced out of London. This is particularly pertinent for the creative sector, where the increase of creative work and studio space for cheaper prices in Kent places it in a leading position to support the UK remaining a global leader in the sector.

### 2.2.3 POLICY OPTIONS

Some potential actions to help boost the local economic impact of the turn to flexible work after the pandemic and associated population shifts include:

- Fast and reliable internet is crucial in promoting flexible, remote working in places like Kent, so it is essential to provide information on what is available locally. The government-sponsored Project Gigabit is currently delivering faster broadband across Kent, and residents in more rural areas may be able to access the associated Voucher Scheme.
- When considering the diversification of the urban realm through measures like use class changes, it is important to consider the offer to people working remotely and try to ensure that amenities are available to make the high street or town centre a viable and attractive place to work from.
- Local authorities can invest directly into new workspaces, or work in partnership with private sector workspace providers to repurpose parts of the public estate which may no longer be necessary for council use after the increase in flexible, distance working.



## 2.3

## SUSTAINABILITY/DECARBONISATION

<b>2.3.1</b>	Sustainability and connectivity	→
<b>2.3.2</b>	Pedestrianisation	→
<b>2.3.3</b>	Promoting active travel	→
<b>2.3.4</b>	Policy options	→

As the push to Net Zero becomes ever more urgent, and in the wake of the COP26 summit in late 2021, how plans for renewal and recovery integrate with the wider sustainability and decarbonisation agendas must be carefully considered. Where the high street and town centre is concerned, issues of transport are most pertinent.

### 2.3.1 SUSTAINABILITY AND CONNECTIVITY

#### National overview

Transport accounts for 27 percent of the UK's total carbon emissions, the majority of which (91 percent) are from road transport vehicles. The pandemic brought a halt to most travel and, with that, a noticeable and positive difference in air quality, noise pollution and carbon emissions.

Yet, as the country has reopened, and travel has resumed, communities have raised concerns surrounding congestion, air quality, poor public

transport, and lack of active travel opportunities.

As such, councils have prioritised a healthy, 'greening' approach to COVID-19 high street recovery strategies. The aim is to reduce carbon emissions by focusing on sustainable and low carbon travel that is aligned with connectivity improvements, green infrastructure, and clean growth objectives.

Improving connectivity through sustainable transport enables councils to link areas of housing growth with areas of employment expansion whilst keeping in line with decarbonisation targets. With COVID-19 having contributed to economic decline in many areas, connectivity can facilitate clean local growth and sustainable economic recovery.

To transform local transport systems and embed local sustainability commitments, councils are looking to develop ambitious programmes for sustainable transport schemes. To achieve this,

some councils are dedicating funds from their COVID Recovery Framework to the cause.

Success in this area will look different for each locality. Effective policies will reduce traffic congestion and lower carbon emissions in the town centre through a modal shift towards active and sustainable travel. Public transport would be more efficient with the provision of multi-modal transport options to, from and within the centre. Underpinning the ability for these strategies to succeed is active travel infrastructure and quality mixed-use development to reduce the need to travel in the first place.

Increasing local public transport connectivity across the country to be closer to the standards of London by 2030 has also been included as one of the 12 levelling up missions outlined in the Levelling Up White Paper.

The white paper acknowledges how effective local transport connectivity not only aids in boosting productivity, but also helps in the renewal of the high street and instilling place pride. It outlines how Local Transport Authorities will take on greater powers and responsibilities to help them plan systems more effectively. Additionally, forthcoming government guidance on developing Local Transport Plans is aimed at helping Local Transport Authorities deliver on projects and strategies aimed at reducing carbon emissions.

### Kent approach

Folkestone & Hythe District Council has a number of priority areas in their Place Plan that target transport and accessibility. This is owing to the fact that currently the road networks around the railway station, and in the town centre more broadly, do not effectively work for any type of road user, including cyclists and pedestrians. In order to set the foundation for further private investment into Folkestone as well as address wider issues around public realm regeneration, the council recognises that tackling challenges around accessibility will be a top concern.

In Canterbury, the city council is aware of congestion issues that cause traffic problems when arriving in or travelling across the city. Better use of technology for initiatives like intelligent traffic management systems is something that the

council looks favourably upon. At the same time, there is a recognition of the need to maximise the potential for Park and Ride services connecting the city to better manage traffic, worsening air pollution and reach wider goals around climate change.

Dover District Council has worked with county and town council partners, as well as wider local state stakeholders, in producing an audit of all the cycle and walking routes around Deal. The town's willingness to embrace change toward more sustainable transport has been noted as a leading factor in its economic and social success during and in the recovery from the pandemic.

Equally, there have been challenges noted with regards to implementing sustainable transportation in town centres. Particularly with regard to retrofitting cycling infrastructure. In Tunbridge Wells the borough council have been working hard, alongside Kent County Council, to deliver better active travel infrastructure and transport systems that would better connect the town and deliver on climate action targets. However, implementing this at scale and pace requires having active travel champions working together at both levels in the borough and county.

Overall, while there has been a recognition of the need for increased sustainable connectivity within Kent's town centres, solutions are not as straightforward as they may initially come across. Going forward, the bus industry will need to be heavily supported to recover and play its part in boosting sustainable connectivity. Throughout the pandemic, bus services have suffered from a loss of ridership, which still has not recovered to pre COVID-19 levels, and threats to funding. While government plans for 'Bus Back Better' aimed to provide £3bn to help the industry, this funding has now been cut to £1.2bn with many warning that this risks one in three services across England.

Kent County Council have been developing an ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plan, which is in response to the National Bus Strategy. However, owing to a variety of reasons, the funding to enact this is still uncertain. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind this context and the circumstances surrounding transport policy when considering how best to boost sustainable connectivity.

### 2.3.2 PEDESTRIANISATION

#### National overview

A desire for increased pedestrianisation in our urban centres has been gaining prominence for a number of years. Increasingly, pedestrianised places play a fundamental part in urban planning and contribute large benefits to the built environment in economic, cultural, social, and environmental ways. Additionally, in the face of increased traffic congestion within centres, pedestrianisation has come to be seen as a leading tool to address associated challenges including poor air quality and pollution. And more recently, pedestrianisation of the high street has been looked at favourably as playing a key aspect in its renewal and regeneration.

The walkability of a place plays a large aspect in its liveability. Through better connecting citizens together within their neighbourhood, pedestrianisation has been seen as an effective tool to increase a places liveability through improving mobility, safety and the local environment. When considering the possibilities around pedestrianisation, it is important to adequately consider important safety elements around the process. This could include factors such as measures for night time surveillance.

#### Kent approach

Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council received £2.6m from the Local Growth Fund through the South East Local Enterprise Partnership for projects relating to pedestrianisation and active travel along Tonbridge high street that were completed in 2016.

There were three interrelated projects as a part of this funding. The first looked at public realm improvement outside of the train station including upgrading the bus and train station. The second project looked at making improvements to the public realm on the high street, particularly through widening the pavement to make the high street more pedestrian friendly. The third project also looked at increasing pedestrianisation along the river walk, which had previously been dominated by car parking spaces.

### 2.3.3 PROMOTING ACTIVE TRAVEL

#### National overview

Promoting sustainable and active modes of travel,

such as cycling and walking, is the most common measure in town centre and high street recovery strategies to reduce congestion and carbon emissions.

Occasionally presented in the form of Active Travel Plans, councils are presenting coherent programmes of cycle and pedestrian networks across all major settlements, to ensure that residents can access town centres and high streets via sustainable means. Some councils have considered significant investment in mobility and active travel hubs in town centres to transform access for residents and visitors with connectivity improvements of cycle and walking routes. To enable this, Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans could prove useful, as councils increasingly seek to reallocate road space for green transport corridors and roll out widespread electric vehicle infrastructure. Additionally, following local consultation, many councils are seeking to pedestrianise high streets.

On the national level, the government have published a number of strategies to help localities move in the direction of active models of travel. In 2020, a plan for cycling and walking titled 'Gear Change' was published which set out the actions required at all levels of government to move forward with developing active travel. A key announcement was the formation of Active Travel England. Alongside this, the Cycle Infrastructure Design transport note sets out guidance for local authorities on delivering high quality cycling infrastructure.

#### Kent approach

A concern expressed by many stakeholders is the need to increase methods for active transport and accessibility on the high street and within the town centres.

Here the strategic partnership with Kent County Council as a highways authority is crucial, to enhance active travel routes, improve movement and access in and around town centres, and encourage green spaces. Developing strong working relations is imperative for such measures to succeed.

The need for strong working relationship is particularly important given the immediate infrastructure changes required to put in place

cycling and pedestrian friendly measures. These are changes that could cause short- and medium-term contention amongst different groups in the community. For example, if installing cycle infrastructure means the removal of car parking space this could cause frustration for certain businesses or car users who depend on them. Therefore, working together to navigate through these issues and taking collective decisions will help deliver schemes in an improved and nuanced manner.

Dover District Council has worked with Kent County Council to produce audits of walking and cycle routes across the district. Deal has embraced this to become more cycle friendly.

In Ramsgate, the district council submitted a bid to government for the Future High Streets Fund and has been awarded £2.7m for the town. This will entail two separate projects including a highways scheme to improve movement around visitor attractions as well as encourage people to actively access the town centre, which is currently

a car dominated space. Whereas the second element will include putting a creative workspace into the town centre.

As part of the Folkestone Place Plan, certain action areas will go on to inform the levelling up fund bid. One aspect includes the Harbour line Tram Road, which is a disused railway line that acts as a physical barrier for people accessing the town from East Folkestone. The council want to acquire this and transform it into a walking and cycle route as well as develop green spaces to encourage active travel into the town centre.

As part of the 'You Shop, We Drop' Damascus Mile proposal that Canterbury City Council and the BID are considering, a large component would have involved setting up collection and distribution hubs to deliver goods to residents across the city and district. Importantly, the delivery of goods would involve using electric vehicles and active forms of transportation, which would contribute to reducing the cities wider carbon impact.

### 2.3.4 POLICY OPTIONS

Some possible actions to boost sustainable connectivity and active travel in and around high streets and town centres include:

- Reallocation of road space for green transport corridors – for example prioritising electric buses or a dedicated Park & Ride lane.
- Bus improvement strategy to make buses more frequent, reliable, and cheaper.
- Installing electric charging points to promote the uptake of electric vehicles.
- Taking submissions for citizen-led plans to reclaim parts of the high street through organising road-closing activities like pop-up markets on pre-approved days.
- Public campaign to increase engagement and better understanding of the pedestrianisation process and how it can impact locally. This will allow for anxieties about the process and potential challenges to be addressed.
- Segregated and well-designed cycle lanes and cycle parking
- Linking in walking routes to public transport has been proven to boost physical activity levels
- Reducing speed limits in town centres can help promote walking, with evidence showing that 20mph speed limits encourage walking.
- Well-connected street layouts are important to boosting active travel.

# OPEN FOR BUSINESS



RESTURANTS  
CINEMAS  
BARS



SHOPS  
HOTELS  
HAIRDRESSERS

## 2.4

## SECTOR MIX ON THE HIGH STREET

<b>2.4.1</b>	Promoting local business	→
<b>2.4.2</b>	The experience economy	→
<b>2.4.3</b>	Creative industries	→
<b>2.4.4</b>	Experimentation and meanwhile usage	→
<b>2.4.5</b>	Policy options	→

Moving high streets and town centres forward into a 21st Century recovery requires consideration of how different sectors of the economy come into the high street and the impact that they can have. Particularly in the wake of COVID-related population shifts, how businesses are promoted and what type of economic activity might be viable on the high street and in town centres is a crucial part of planning for recovery and renewal.

### 2.4.1 PROMOTING LOCAL BUSINESS

#### National overview

Local independent businesses hold vast potential in the renewal of the high street, especially as larger brands might choose to leave the high street because of the short-term impact of the pandemic or the long-term proliferation of online shopping.

It is important for local authorities to understand how they can create the conditions for smaller independent businesses to flourish on the high street, while incentivising the community to support them. A part of this will involve high street campaigns that reward shopping more locally. This will be a core aspect of stimulating local economic growth and spend in the shorter term, particularly in light of the fact that for every £1 spent in independent stores, 63p of benefits are generated for the local economy.

With regards to levelling up, support for local business will play a major role in fulfilling the mission of instilling pride in place in town centres. This is something highlighted in the white paper, whether through aligning the need of local business with skill provision to create a responsive local labour market or guiding inward investment into the area to boost local business growth.

Government sees their role as supporting private sector clusters and enabling the private sector to increase investment, jobs and growth at a local level. One of the interventions they have identified to help achieve this includes ensuring a conducive business environment through a regulatory framework that supports private sector investment into local business over the longer term.

### Kent approach

Deal has shown resilience owing to the large number of local independent businesses. As a result, the 'shop local' message backed by stakeholders including Produced in Kent has resonated strongly in the area. This has greatly helped those businesses whose offer is unique and produce things not easily available online. Here, the district council's initiative of Town Centre Business Grants has provided additional help.

Gravesend also has a strong core of independent traders who have been growing around the high street in recent years with a particular focus on the health and wellbeing offer. This is something the council wants to encourage further.

Looking at Sevenoaks, the high street has a large number of smaller retail space. Surprisingly, during the pandemic this had the impact of a number of independent retailers opening to trade, which is a fortune not shared by a lot of high streets across the country. Equally, this has meant that large national brands have not been vacating retail space in large numbers as has happened across many other town centres.

Produced in Kent, following their successful 'Help Kent, Buy Local' campaign, have been granted funding by SELEP to expand the campaign to cover the entire South East region. Throughout the campaign, a strong message that has resonated with communities is buying local to support the local economy and farmers, preserve the countryside and help protect the environment. This helps give localities a sense of place and drives placemaking.

To boost local business, it is important to understand ways in which to maximise the potential of units, assets and spaces in the public realm to deliver a strong mixed-use offer. In Gravesend, through the Albion Waterside Project,

an idea being explored is to incorporate local artisan food and drink producers underneath the residential complex. It is thought that, in addition to serving the footfall of the complex, producers can be helped to deliver their produce locally within the town.

Medway Council is in the process of finalising its Local Plan, which will address challenges around retail and its town centres. In the preparation for it, a large focus is on the health and vibrancy of local centres across Medway. The council has stated that the uses within local centres have to be appropriate to the scale and character of centre. Given that in smaller areas, retailers also perform a community function, their viability must be protected.

Boosting local business can also involve showcasing the rich offer of independent businesses through partnering together, as is happening in Canterbury. The local Business Improvement District introduced the Canterbury Gift Card initiative in November 2020 in the lead up to Christmas. At a time when Kent was undergoing renewed lockdown, the initiative proved extremely successful with 22,000 being activated before the new year. With over 120 Canterbury based businesses signed up, it provided a much needed psychological and financial boost for them.

This example of Canterbury BID highlights the important role BIDs can play in promoting local businesses and local economic growth more generally. Tunbridge Wells BID has been active in promoting their members online, through a new website and on social media, as well as through a newly launched town centre magazine. This has given the strong impression that it is representative of local business interest and forward looking in its approach. Initiatives such as these demonstrate that with the right ambition BIDs can be a force for good and business improvement on the high street and town centre.

## 2.4.2 THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

### National approach

Repeated lockdowns throughout the pandemic resulted in the closure of many businesses, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors. But as the pandemic restrictions have lifted,

coupled with the idea that “millennials would rather spend their money on an experience or an event than buying things” and that this is thus “reflected in the shift towards leisure, arts, culture and dining on high streets”, recovery strategies need to include leisure in their high street diversification for economic revival.

Many high street strategies aim to increase footfall and spending and boost the evening economy through more and better food and beverage outlets, and a greater range of cultural and leisure activities. Impacting both residents and visitors to high streets and town centres, this aim would likely have a positive knock-on effect on the remaining struggling retail sector.

This strongly links to the visitor economy, whereby visitors are encouraged to return to high streets and businesses are encouraged to trade into the evening to enable more income generation. As part of Local Plan Requirements, some councils are developing an Evening Economy Strategy to increase the appeal of town centres beyond the working day.

Key outcomes begin in the short term, with increasing the town centre footfall through increased diversity of visitor offer. By increasing the number and value of tourism visits, local pride and perception can be enhanced along with growth in the cultural sector. The resulting long-term outcome of having developed a thriving town centre and circular economy supported by a modern tourist economy can thus be achieved.

### Kent approach

Long before COVID-19 hit, the nature of the high street and town centre was undergoing a fundamental shift, instigated by the increase of online shopping. When looking at the renewal and recovery of the high street, a vital component will be creating experiences in the town centre, giving people a reason to visit beyond the retail offer.

There are a plethora of opportunities to try to drive such activity, encouraged through funding pipelines and policies like Heritage Action Zones, Future High Street Fund, and Town

Deals. In Kent, this switch to an experience-based economy is exemplified in Margate with the Turner Contemporary, in Folkestone with the Folkestone Triennial, in Tonbridge with the Escape Art Centre, and in Tunbridge Wells with The Amelia. While not every locality might have such creative anchors, embedding the creative industry within the renewal of the high street and town centre in a more small-scale manner could aid in developing unique experiential offers. This will have to be done with a clear understanding of demographic and socio-economic conditions and therefore will require tapping into existing potential to understand how the creative industry can work for a specific place.

At the same time, it does not need to be driven by a changing demographic of people coming down from London. This offer can be developed by and for local communities in Kent. In the case of the Folkestone Place Plan, part of the rationale behind it was recognising that part of the town centre was prospering owing to the rich creative and cultural offer. The Place Plan aims to extend this offer to wider audiences across Folkestone allowing all communities to benefit equally.

In Sevenoaks, there is a growing cultural offer exemplified by the independent cinema The Stag, which also includes a theatre and spaces for things like craft markets. At the same time, it has been noted that whatever cultural offer does exist needs to be better connected together. One working idea that Sevenoaks District Council has is to develop a forum to work at a bigger scale and bring all stakeholders together. The council also has a place campaign that is promoting Sevenoaks and highlighting its potential as a cultural destination.

## 2.4.3 CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

### National approach

The creative industries have been recognised as a key growth sector that can be harnessed by local authorities across the country to aid in the recovery of high streets and town centres. Government statistics show that in 2018, the UK’s creative industries contributed more than £11bn



to the national economy<sup>11</sup>. At a time when the need for diversification on the high street is needed more than ever, understanding the role that the creative industries can play in the local recovery will be key.

The creative industries has also been highlighted by government as essential to their levelling up ambitions. An £18m expansion of the Creative Scale Up Programme has been announced, which provides financial and business support to firms in the industry. This new funding will go towards supporting high growth businesses in regions outside of London. Something that is a potential opportunity for Kent's high streets and their renewal ambition.

Embedding the local creative sector within high street renewal will involve drawing on existing assets and strengths found in the local area. Early engagement would enable a full picture to be developed detailing the presence and type of creative sector present in the local area.

Understanding how a locality can attract creative industries into their area would be beneficial for those places that might not have a strong pre-existing presence. Particularly in considering how fostering a new sector could complement and benefit the existing local community.

It is also important that when looking at the creative industry in the recovery of the high street, it is not seen as the silver bullet in itself, but as part of a wider whole. Embedding the sector into wider economic development and town centre strategies will be crucial.

### Kent approach

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is looking to set up a partnership called 'Creative Tunbridge Wells' to work with the creative sector to better embed the cultural offer into the local economy. This initiative is funded as part of Arts Council England's pilot for Cultural Compacts. And it is in addition to the work they are doing on The Amelia in the heart of Tunbridge Wells, which will open in April 2022 and will include a museum, library, art gallery as well as provide adult education services through the council.

While certain areas have benefitted from a large injection of public investment in their cultural infrastructure, such as Margate and Folkestone, there are other areas across Kent where the creative sectors are organically growing as a result of a few pioneer cultural anchors. An example of this is the Escape Art Centre in Tonbridge, which has provided a focus in terms of drawing in other stakeholders from the sector into the town centre.

Alongside this, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council has embarked on an initiative in Tonbridge town centre called Castle Lodge. The council works with Desk Renter Limited to provide flexible work space for individuals in the creative and artistic sectors.

Ultimately, the creative industry has a role to play in helping revitalise places post pandemic. However, it must be part of a balanced and mixed economy. Equally, fostering the creative industries in place can be a slow burner. It requires council investment to provide the space and offset rents to support early growth. But it might take a number of years until a cluster is created and a locality can reap the benefits of the regeneration work.

## 2.4.4 EXPERIMENTATION AND MEANWHILE USAGE

### National overview

As councils deal with the impact of COVID and long-term high-street decline factors, many are turning to 'meanwhile use' projects as a way of making productive use of empty buildings. Key outcomes of this repurposing concentrate on bringing activity back into vacant units for interim and longer term uses. Through collaboration between council commercial property, private landlords and developers, the development of high-quality flexible working spaces, leisure sites, and residential uses can be encouraged into the town centre to foster a mixed use residential and commercial environment. This is designed to encourage activity in the town centre beyond retail trading house and help open the market to evening economy and leisure opportunities.

11 [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/12.22\\_Supporting\\_the\\_creative\\_sector\\_07.1%20-%20creative%20places%20-%202022%20Sep.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/12.22_Supporting_the_creative_sector_07.1%20-%20creative%20places%20-%202022%20Sep.pdf)

Landlord engagement will be crucial in finding effective meanwhile uses for vacant units in local centres. In an effort to find new ways to make high streets and town centres thrive again, the government pledged in the Levelling Up White Paper to explore ways to incentivise landlords to fill vacant units. One idea put forward has been to require landlords to rent long term vacant properties to local start-up businesses or community groups. Measures like this will go a long way to increase opportunities for the local area.

### Kent approach

Kent is fortunate in that most, if not all, of its localities have a budding to thriving creative sector that can play a leading role in reusing empty units for meanwhile use. There are examples of this already taking place across the county.

In Ashford, there is The Coachworks, which is a former industrial building that is being purposed as a 'meanwhile' development that encompasses

a range of uses. These include co-working spaces, individual studio spaces in addition to a number of other creative spaces along with food stalls. The lifespan of the project is expected to be five years, and interestingly, Ashford Borough Council receive a share of The Coachworks profit on account of the fact that it helped fund its development.

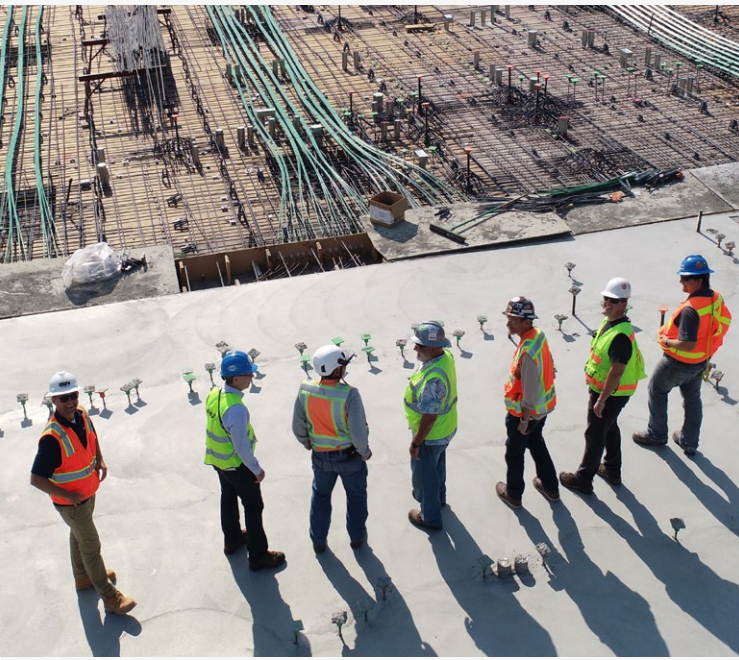
In the Development Strategy that informs Medway Councils Local Plan, set to be released in 2022, the council highlights the benefits of temporary and meanwhile use for vacant units in stimulating footfall on the high street. As a result, they have proposed a policy temporary use of units would be supported for a period of six months where the proposed use contributes to the vitality and viability of the particular town centre.

When considering options for meanwhile use in Kent, landlord engagement will be important. It is important to consider what local authorities can do to de-risk any venture for landlords, who might be slightly skeptical at first.

## 2.4.5 POLICY OPTIONS

Some possible options to increase the vibrancy of the sector-mix and local offer on high-streets and town centres include:

- Helping local businesses and social enterprise access government funding and other support through an advice service.
- Working with Chambers of Commerce and BIDs to develop support and advice programmes for young people in the locality to understand commercial opportunities and the business landscape within their town.
- Understand the viability of creating a BID within the town centre and whether this would work in the particular local context.
- Running marketing campaigns for the town centre or high street that emphasise local traders and the cultural offer.
- Promote the use of small-scale spatial development Neighbourhood Plans to boost differentiation at the hyperlocal level across towns and local authority areas.
- Provide small, below-rateable-value spaces to bring in a multiplicity of creative businesses, to help build distinctive character.
- Fill vacant buildings with Multi-Use Community Hubs as a one stop shop for accessing a range of services including healthcare, wellbeing, skills and employment support.
- Develop an approach to strategic acquisitions to enable vacant properties to be brought back into commercial or residential use.
- Another fund option is a Vacant Premises Fund to support a proactive approach to bringing vacant premises back into use, including grant schemes to incentivise landlords, rent subsidy for new businesses and support for meanwhile use.



## 2.5

## LABOUR MARKETS

<b>2.5.1</b>	Skills for regeneration	→
<b>2.5.2</b>	Skills for the high street	→
<b>2.5.3</b>	Policy options	→

Labour market factors – aligning skills supply and demand, ensuring high quality training options for residents – are an important consideration from the start to finish of high street regeneration. On the one hand is the fundamental skills base needed to drive the construction of regeneration, and on the other the skills needed to populate modern high streets with good jobs.

The need for aligning skills provision to local need is now recognised by government. One of the 12 levelling up missions outlined in the Levelling Up White Paper is for the number of people successfully completing high quality skills training to significantly increase across the UK by 2030. With the hope that this will lead to 200,000 more people annually completing high quality skills training.

A core focus in delivering this mission is through rolling out Local Skills Improvement Plans across England. These are employer led plans designed to shape the technical skills provision to be more in line with local labour market needs. Local

employer representative bodies, skills providers and other local state stakeholders are expected to work together in developing plans that are locally responsive. This provides a unique opportunity to understand how to address and cater for the skills needs required for the renewal and recovery of Kent's high streets.

### 2.5.1 SKILLS FOR REGENERATION

#### National overview

The UK economy is facing one of the biggest skills shortages in living memory. There are multiple factors contributing to this, chief among them Brexit and an ageing population in sectors including construction. Over the course of 2020, the performance of the construction sector was less affected by COVID-19. And after the initial lockdowns, demand for construction on housing developments and infrastructure projects quickly grew.

However, issues relating to a shortage of labour in construction and supply chain problems persist.

The skills shortage is currently costing companies £6.3bn. Traditionally relying heavily on EU labour, since the Brexit vote there has been a 42 per cent decline in EU workers. These issues pose a challenge for local recovery, especially through regeneration, unless steps are taken to tackle them head on.

### Kent approach

Addressing the growing skills shortage across key sectors of the economy will be a necessary element in the recovery and renewal of high streets in Kent as well as across the nation.

Local stakeholders are well aware of this, and a core pillar of the Kent & Medway Economic Partnership 'Economic Renewal and Resilience Plan' is on enabling people to access work and skills to reach their potential. Understanding the pivotal role that local partners will have in delivering national strategies on skills for the people of Kent and Medway, an Employment Task Force has been created to address the challenge of rising unemployment.

In its initial Employment Plan, the taskforce set out its initial priorities that included supporting young people into work, supporting the existing workforce, responding to redundancies, and driving future demand.

To inform the initiatives undertaken to work on these priorities, the Task Force has developed a Workforce Skills Evidence Base, which provides an overview of the current and future skills demand in Kent and Medway, as well as an assessment of the supply of skills amongst the local population.

The baseline looked at the skills needs and issues to be addressed in key sectors of the Kent economy. Sectors looked at with a particular relevance to high streets included retail and wholesale, development and construction, creative industries, and the visitor economy. Almost all highlighted the need for further joined up working and engagement between employers in their respective sector and the local education and skills system in order to develop a skills pipeline tailored to sector requirements.

Employer engagement is central to addressing skills shortage, providing training and employment opportunities to local people, and

helping the local economy recover. All together this will lead to sustainable renewal of the high street.

Engagement is something that Kent County Council focus heavily on in their strategies for 14 -24 Learning, Employment & Skills, and Adult Learning, Employment & Skills. To help facilitate this better, Kent County Council have developed Guilds in a number of priority areas. They act as forums to partner up local employers and education providers and promote a transition from education to employment through a focus on apprenticeships. So far eight have been created including in Creative and Media, Hospitality & Tourism, and Construction and the Built Environment. These are all key sectors for the renewal and recovery of the high street.

Their creation was a result of requests from employers for better links between employers, schools, colleges, and training providers. And the first Guild was developed in 2016 to help deliver strategic objectives in the adult and young people's skills strategies. Adding to this, the Guilds are also contributing to wider county council objectives to ensure that economic growth benefits local residents through bringing them into gainful employment.

Each Guild is chaired by a local employer and supported by an officer from the KCC Skills and Employability Service. They have been noted to be proactive in meeting quarterly and, through individual Action Plans, committing to deliver objectives to develop a local skilled workforce. Certain objectives include the development of apprenticeship and work experience opportunities, as well as supporting sector career events.

There is a clear opportunity for the Guilds and/or similar employer and sector groups to play an active role in coordinating between local employers and those at risk of becoming NEET, individuals looking for retraining, and school leavers to drive economic growth and the recovery of Kent's high streets.

Elsewhere, the West Kent Partnership worked to deliver a Kickstart scheme in 2021 that facilitated local businesses to offer 62 entry-level positions for young people through Kickstart West Kent.

## 2.5.2 SKILLS FOR THE HIGH STREET

### National overview

The skills shortage facing the UK economy will also have an impact on the workforce required for growing the high street. Specifically, those working in retail, the visitor economy as well as the creative and cultural industries. As seen in the construction sector, Brexit has had an immediate impact on the availability of skilled people ready to work in retail, hospitality and the visitor economy.

Recent statistics show that 94 percent of retailers are worried about talent shortages in the industry. Along with Brexit, the pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on the availability of staff. This is particularly true for the workforce in the visitor economy, where successive lockdowns have forced those traditionally working in the sector to search for employment elsewhere.

### Kent approach

The renewal of the high street will depend on a skilled labour workforce in a few focal sectors. Chief amongst these include retail, construction,

visitor economy, and the creative & culture industry. In regard to employment, figures from KMEP show that construction is the largest sector in terms of business enterprises. And the largest sector in terms of employment are education, health and retail, which together account for 34 percent of employment in the Kent and Medway region.

Adding to this, the sectors with the largest employment growth include construction as well as accommodation & food. However, both have faced significant contraction in demand as a result of the pandemic. Figures also indicate that employment in the retail and property sectors across the region declined by close to 2,000 jobs between 2015-2019.

Each of the sectors that will play a leading role in the recovery of Kent's high streets are facing unique, but sometimes shared, skills related challenges. These are discussed in KMEP's *Workforce Skills Evidence Baseline that are worth exploring in more detail*.

## 2.5.3 POLICY OPTIONS

### Retail and Wholesale

This sector accounts for 17 percent of all employment in Kent and Medway. With regards to the qualification profile of the workforce, most people are qualified at the intermediate and lower level. Majority of those employed in retail are female. Additionally, the high amount of young people employed are in entry level jobs.

The impact of the pandemic has been to accelerate the trends of decline for those retailers already struggling, affecting the employment of those reliant on work in the sector. As highlighted through the toolkit, recovery in terms of retail will be uneven, with those high streets offering a mixed economy which retail is one part of, being able to bounce back. At the same time, the move to online shopping increases the demand for digital skills amongst the retail workforce.

Taking these issues together, skills priorities for Kent and Medway's retail sector in the coming years include:

- Increasing soft skills, such as strong communication, in new entrants.
- Linking education curriculums closer to business practice in the sector.
- Better engagement between the retail sector, FE and HE bodies.

### Construction and Development

The construction sector accounts for eight percent of employment in Kent and Medway. Between 2015 and 2019 it grew by 7,000 and there are fewer people with degree level qualification than the wider regional economy.

Looking ahead to post pandemic recovery, the increased levels of planned housing development, major infrastructure projects along the Thames Estuary and elsewhere in the county, as well as requirements for repurposing existing developments in town centres, means that there will be a

significant demand for construction skills in the coming years. In addition to retail, innovations in technology and its role in construction will also be a key driver for digital skills within the sector.

Skills priorities for the regional construction sector in Kent and Medway in the coming years include:

- Skills supply chain planning. The industry needs to work with developers and stakeholders to understand the short, medium, and long term skills requirements needed.
- Closer collaboration across companies to better work on skills shortage in the sector, engagement with FE colleges, and understanding potential for local workforce.
- There needs to be increased efforts to build a good image of the sector in order to make it more appealing to young people.
- The construction sector needs to diversify its workforce and reach talent in underrepresented groups.
- Regarding skills shortages, there are specific challenges to do with Brexit and emerging technology led skills in Mixed Methods of Construction that need to be addressed.

### Visitor Economy

The visitor economy encompasses a range of areas including accommodation, food and drink, travel and leisure activities. These are also key parts of the experience economy. The sector accounts for ten percent of employment in Kent, with Canterbury and Medway having the largest amount of jobs in the sector.

It is expected that with the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, there will be a bounce back for the sector. The recovery of the visitor economy is expected to be driven by increased staycations until international travel is normalised again, as well as targeting activities towards local residents. Incorporating culture and activities related to food and drink will be key to growth in the sector.

Key issues to do with skills priorities in the sector include:

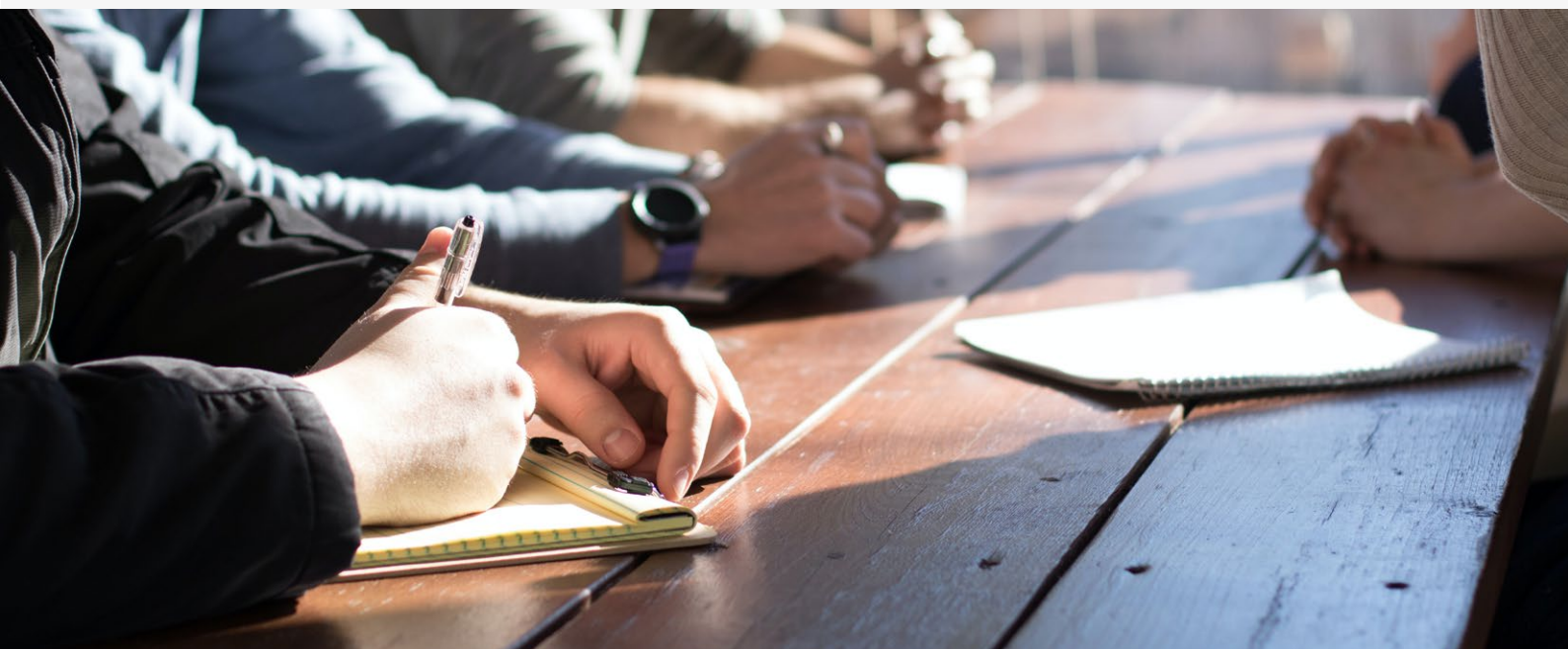
- Improving the image and perception of the sector. It is not seen as one with good career prospects. More needs to be done to communicate opportunities.
- Brexit and pandemic related skills shortages, particularly with waiters and chefs, will be an ongoing challenge. Efforts need to focus on retraining and retaining existing workforce.
- Finding a more streamlined way of engaging with Further and Higher Education.

### Creative and Cultural Industries

According to the KMEP definition, the creative and cultural sector accounts for two percent of employment in Kent and Medway. The sector is taken to include marketing, advertising, as well as artists to name a few. The highest employment rates are in Sevenoaks, Maidstone, and Tunbridge Wells.

The following issues and priorities for skills in the sector have been identified:

- Engage people in sector careers. Young people, adults and careers advisers need to be made aware of the wide range of work available in the sector.
- Partnerships with educations and skills providers including schools, FE, HE and other course providers need to be established or strengthened.
- Real world practice of the success experienced by people working in the sector needs to be better showcased. This can help establish professional networks that can spur growth in the sector.



## 2.6

## GOVERNANCE AND EVALUATION

<b>2.6.1</b>	Community engagement	→
<b>2.6.2</b>	Use of technology	→
<b>2.6.3</b>	Metrics	→
<b>2.6.4</b>	Multi-tier working	→
<b>2.6.5</b>	Policy options	→

As with all publicly-led planning, projects for recovery and renewal of high streets should build in robust measures for governance and evaluation. This involves meaningful community engagement, effective use of technology, establishing effective and lasting metrics and, for councils in places like Kent, multi-tier partnership working.

### 2.6.1 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

#### National overview

Community engagement will be an essential element of a robust high street recovery that reflects the strength, character, and future vision of a locality. Emerging from the pandemic and taking lessons learned regarding the evolving nature of the high street, working with the community in developing a shared vision and delivering this will also help embed a sense of place ownership and pride.

Citizens' assemblies are an innovative model of deliberative democracy, to engage residents in local decision-making and to generate trust between citizens and local authorities. They have become increasingly prevalent to tackle a whole range of issues across a variety of spatial scales – national, regional, county, and hyperlocal.

Citizens' assemblies can generate more transparency in decision-making and empower citizens as part of a radical overhaul of local democracy. They are different from traditional consultations and produce more interesting outcomes because participants aren't selected on the basis of who is most keen to share their views. They can provide a new way to understand the community perspective on the future of their high street.

Community engagement will also be central to levelling up, particularly in increasing pride

in place. To this end, the Levelling Up White Paper has announced pilots of new models for community partnerships aimed at empowering people to help shape and influence local services. These 'Community Covenants' will be agreements between local authorities, public bodies, and the community on how to holistically deliver public services in line with local requirement.

When considering effective community engagement, it is important to find the correct balance between understanding the community perspective and strong leadership where tough decisions need to be made that might not please all facets of the community.

### Kent approach

Effective community engagement has been highlighted by multiple stakeholders as key to successful placemaking and regeneration. The first point of call between residents and their local authority is the local ward councillor. They have a strong role in drawing together and representing the community view. In addition to this, there are a number of different models for engagement that are active across Kent.

Many councils have worked with external consultants to optimise engagement strategies. For example, Dover District Council are trying to work with and engage the local community in regeneration work within Dover, such as with the Market Square redevelopment. Work on the redevelopment has sought to consult and collaboratively work with the community and local state stakeholders on delivering the scheme. So far, the community has been receptive.

The success of community engagement will rest on the tools used to reach out to the community, especially those that are harder to reach or who might feel apathetic towards their place. A part of effective engagement will involve instilling a sense of place pride and ownership over projects that may be occurring. For example, despite the extensive work carried out by Thanet District Council on the Ramsgate Future Investment Plan as well as other initiatives geared towards high street regeneration, it has been expressed that certain pockets of the community do not see the town centre as theirs.

Using effective tools will be vital, including

how digital technology is adapted for robust engagement. In Tunbridge Wells, the council has a new digital community engagement platform, called 'Talking Point Tunbridge Wells', designed to allow for a more open and bottom-up approach. The first initiative will be 'Planning for the Future', which will ask for opinions on the borough as a place to live, work and visit.

Owing to certain budgetary constraints facing local authorities, effective community engagement is impacted. This leads to engagement that may be unstructured in nature. However, in the case of Folkestone and Hythe District Council, the process of community engagement in formulating the Place Plan was robust and deep. The missions and actions underpinning the place plan came as a result of the engagement process.

Importantly, owing to COVID-19, a lot of engagement has occurred digitally. This has come with the benefit of gaining a further reach, however, it also limited the human aspect of the engagement.

Engagement with the community also extends to the business community. The extent and success of this is very important, particularly in those areas with Business Improvement Districts. In Tunbridge Wells, while there was a majority for forming a BID there were some who were not initially convinced. However, it takes time to build up the reputation of a BID and consequently engaging with the levy payers is extremely important - especially in communicating how the main projects being undertaken are likely to affect them. However, as a result of awareness raising and the successful delivery of projects, there is a much greater support for the BID.

In Tonbridge, the businesses who were actively engaging with the council on public realm upgrade projects being delivered through Local Growth Fund money became points of contact for other businesses and individuals on the high street. Specifically, they would go out and speak to neighbouring businesses on the progress and updates of the council projects.

In Dartford, the twenty-year-old Town Centre Partnership has proven key in reaching the community when it comes to engagement. The council, through their partnership, have opened up community forums across the town



for residents to engage in. This has proven essential in making sure the process is not top-down. This is key, especially if the renewal and regenerative projects are to meet the needs of local communities.

## 2.6.2 USE OF TECHNOLOGY

### National overview

The pandemic brought in sharp focus the centrality of how we organise our lives through technology. For local authorities across the country, their ability to reach out and engage with the community was greatly enhanced through online Zoom sessions. And with regards to the renewal of the high street, digital technology will play a leading role in helping facilitate new experiential offers being made available.

While there was an understanding of the importance of it before the pandemic, now local authorities are acutely aware of the need for the provision of strong digital technology in the town centre such as free reliable broadband and use of AI technology to better serve the general public. If harnessed properly, the potential of these technologies can greatly aid in attracting and retaining footfall on the high street.

This awareness is also present in central government. One of the 12 levelling up missions announced in the white paper is to have nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage, with 5G coverage for the majority of the population by 2030. The white paper also highlights how robust digital technology can deepen local labour markets through remote working. Pointing to the importance of digital infrastructure in attracting new firms and developing high value sectoral clusters locally.

Elsewhere, online shopping has proved a key challenge for the resilience of the high street and retailers. However, when addressing this issue, it does not have to be a question of either or. Many small businesses operate through online platforms and their digital sales are just as important to their survival as footfall and having a bricks and mortar presence on the high street is.

### Kent approach

Harnessing digital technology to enhance the offer of the high street will become increasingly important as we look toward the recovery and

renewal of the high street from COVID-19.

Technology provided a lifeline for Kent's independent businesses during the initial period of the first lockdown. Produced in Kent developed their 'Help Kent, Buy Local' campaign in the first weeks of the lockdown to promote independent and local businesses in the food and drink sector across Kent. This was done by pinpointing on a virtual map where businesses were located, what services they were offering and what times they were open.

Gravesham Borough Council is seeking to employ digital technology, by exploring an 'innovation proposition' as part of their redevelopment of St George. The council are looking to engage SMEs to understand what mix of uses, mix of technology, data and built environment should embody the future of the high street in Gravesend. The goal is to work collaboratively with external stakeholders from the technology industry in an open way to find out how technology assets can add to the offer of Gravesend's high street.

## 2.6.3 METRICS

### National overview

Measuring the success and overall health of the high street will be vital in understanding the path toward recovery and renewal. However, a major obstacle is the lack of any agreed upon and consistent methodology. This is chiefly because each interested stakeholder, including local authorities, retailers, and investors, will be looking at different factors and variables when assessing.

Several studies have been carried out to develop a framework for measuring success on the high street. In 2011, BEIS released a report on 'Understanding High Street Performance'. It set forth a framework for analysis on high street performance. This covered:

- **Externalities** – usually situations out of user/occupier control such as macro-economic factors including recessions [and global pandemics].
- **Spatial and physical factors** – including the development of residential areas, as well as changes to the physical and natural environment.

- **Market forces and competition** – the emergence and presence of competitive alternatives to the high street, especially online shopping.
- **Demographics** – changing demographic trends including ageing population, presence of students and immigrant communities and levels of disposable income.
- **Regulation and legislation** – such as planning policy and licensing legislation
- **Management** – This is an important factor and has the potential to affect change.

More recently, the government's 'Build Back Better High Streets'<sup>12</sup> policy paper looks at revitalising the high street through focusing on five key priority areas including breathing life into empty buildings, supporting high street businesses, improving the public realm, creating safe and clean streets, and celebrating place pride in local communities.

While these initiatives sound promising, there seems to be little focus on the quantitative aspect of measuring the success of high streets by way of key data-driven performance indicators. There also seems to be a lack of understanding in what this might be for individual places.

There are a number of metrics that could be used in this regard, including measuring footfall on the high street, vacancy rates of retail units, the sense of safety and prevalence of crime, shopping patterns as well as job creation and availability amongst others. However, with regards to local authorities, a common concern raised has been the privatisation of such data and the high costs involved in accessing it through a subscription basis with local data companies. This is something that many authorities might not be able to afford when faced with tight budgets.

Relatedly, in 2020 the High Street Task Force identified 25 priorities<sup>13</sup> for attractive high streets that create long term success, which could be used by place leaders to prioritise action. These priority areas each included a number of component factors. These ranged from looking at the functionality of the high street and the degree

to which a centre fulfils a role (as an employment centre, tourist centre etc.) to the presence of anchors and the diversity of what is offered.

### Kent approach

The idea of monitoring the turnover rate of businesses was suggested as a metric to measure the performance of high streets in Kent and across the nation. This is because the survival rate of a business is key to the health of the high street. Therefore, alongside creating the conditions that attract independent start-ups, their survival rate will also be paramount.

Achieving this will require working with integrated digital means using public data. However, a challenge has been highlighted regarding adequate funding to support membership access to local data, since many local data firms ask for substantial fees to access the data. This idea might have more reach if undertaken at the county level to gain a fuller impression of business turnover rate and high street performance. Data used in this sense could lead to more targeted placemaking.

## 2.6.4 MULTI-TIER WORKING

### National overview

In local government areas that run under a two-tier system partnership working relies heavily on goodwill. And in many areas cooperation occurs on ad-hoc basis depending on the agenda item in question. This is particularly true for areas such as transport, strategic infrastructure, and planning. In the latter case, while planning reforms promise to make reforms to it, the duty to cooperate, which governs strategic partnership in planning, has proven to be weak.

The strength and success of enhanced two-tier working is often more dependent on relationship-building as opposed to any official government rules or mandates. Over the course of time, as administrations and officials change, this can have an impact on the dynamic of the enhanced working. This results in the different councils going through periods of closer and more distant alignment on strategic priorities, which can prove difficult in progressing with objectives in the long term.

12 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/build-back-better-high-streets/build-back-better-high-streets#executive-summary>

13 <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/frameworks/25-vital-and-viable-priorities/>

In relation to levelling up, government are clear that it cannot be achieved without local empowerment and devolution. And a significant aspect of the Levelling Up White Paper has been the devolution framework set out in it. It gives a flexible set of pathways to devolution for different areas across England depending on their place circumstance.

The three levels of the framework include:

- **Level 1:** Local authorities working together across a functional economic area or whole county area through a joint committee
- **Level 2:** A single institution or County Council without a Directly Elected Mayor, across a functional economic area or whole county area
- **Level 3:** A single institution or County Council with a directly elected mayor, across a functional economic area or whole county area

Each level comes with increasing levels of powers. While a strategic role in delivering public services will be given to all three levels, using LEP functions like hosting the strategic business voice in supporting local business is reserved for level 2 and 3. Control over local infrastructure decisions, financing local initiatives for businesses, adult skills for the local market, and investment spending is largely reserved for those areas opting for level 3.

### Kent approach

Kent operates in a two-tier system meaning there is Kent County Council (KCC), which is responsible for certain strategic services across most of the county and 12 borough, city and district councils responsible for different services in the areas they cover. The unitary authority of Medway is a single-tier authority, covering the part of the county not governed by KCC.

Kent County Council is responsible for education services, public safety, libraries, social services, streets, roads and footpaths, trading standards, transport and highways and waste management. Additionally, it is a significant property holder throughout the county. Meanwhile, district and borough councils have more localised powers including environmental health, leisure, and recreation facilities and in their role as Local

Planning Authorities. With varied powers, both levels of local government can be exceptionally influential players in high street and town centre recovery.

While both county and district councils have individual powers and strengths, they are stronger together, in alignment and collaboration. The enhanced two-tier working relationship between Kent County Council and the various districts is of vital importance in the successful renewal of the county's high streets and town centres. Collaboration for local government in Kent is nothing new. In the past, the county and districts in Kent have successfully joined forces on a wide range of issues from Brexit no-deal emergency planning to business rate retention and housing and infrastructure.

Perhaps the greatest challenge all councils have faced together in the past two years has been the strain the pandemic has placed on resources. At the start of the pandemic both the county and constituent district councils shared the objective of supporting as many residents and businesses as possible. KCC was keen to make sure that funding was used wisely and targeted residents most in need. Key to this has been finding immediate solutions whilst also securing sustainable ways to help in years to come.

Collaboration between the county and district councils on responding to the pandemic is vital, especially in responding to challenges it has brought to the high street. An unequivocal focus on people, places and communities will be a unifying factor despite challenges that may arise.

Collaborative working within two-tier local government has its challenges. In terms of governance, it has been noted that a function of not being a unitary authority is that at times certain incentives might not and cannot be aligned. Difficulty has been noted with regards to alignment on level of influence, political differences, and prioritisation for placemaking aspirations on the local level.

The separation of powers concerning services delivered and property assets owned reinforces the importance of having close alignment on local high street renewal. Kent County Council has a significant opportunity to use its assets across the county to feed into wider regeneration and

placemaking ambitions of the different district and borough councils.

While local authority funding cuts might cause challenges, effectively doing this would greatly enhance two-tier working and deliver for people, places and communities. A great example here is the redevelopment of The Amelia Centre in Tunbridge Wells high street – whose success required the county and borough working closely together.

Amongst a number of district stakeholders interviewed, a key priority for their high street regeneration efforts involved enhancing opportunities for active and sustainable modes of transport. Again, through their transport and active travel strategies, this is an opportunity for Kent County Council to work with the districts in understanding how best to drive this offer forward. An option that warrants further consideration is an 'Active Travel Manager' that acts as a cycling champion who can relate to aspirations for further sustainable transport.

From the perspective of business and the Business Improvement Districts on collaborative working, it has been noted that funding from the Welcome Back Fund had the added bonus of streamlining the working relationship between all actors of the local state - where everyone comes together to

coordinate and deliver on shared priorities. Once this funding comes to an end, the business side will have to build relationships individually with each stakeholder again.

Within Kent, there are two challenges involved in collaboration that provide opportunities to be built on. First, there is the need to strike a sensitive balance between the pursuit of a shared county-wide vision and objectives and the importance of not encroaching on the statutory responsibilities of individual districts. Second, the challenge of collaborating on housing and infrastructure in the context of the scale and diversity of Kent: from Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks in the West to Margate and Dover in the East, with a variety of different needs and opportunities .

Overall, the working relationship between the county council and districts has been described as good, given that at times there might be procedural hurdles to overcome. A strong understanding of the need for and benefits of alignment exists in Kent County Council and across the districts of the county. A firm focus on outcomes for people, places and communities in pursuit of the future of high streets will be a powerful mobilising force for greater local government collaboration.

### 2.6.5 POLICY OPTIONS

Some possible actions to enhance community engagement include:

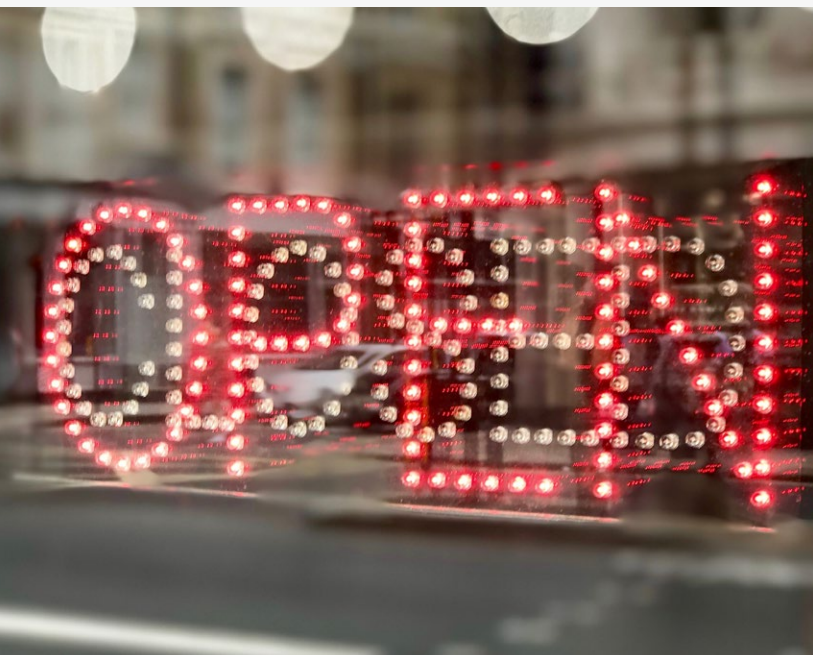
- Engaging through 'walkshops' and consultation in situ, particularly targeting hard to reach members of the community. This will help gain an understanding of how spaces can be repurposed in a real and practical sense for the benefit of residents.
- When thinking about how to repurpose public space, employing the use of 'customer avatars' to understand how different policies could affect different community perspectives.
- Employing the use of mixed methods of engagement including both innovative digital and physical outreach schemes to make the engagement an exciting proposition for the community.
- Exploring the options for setting up permanent citizens assemblies that engage a random selection of residents on a rotating basis on multiple different policy agendas including local high street recovery

Some considerations for use of technology and selection of metrics when planning for high street recovery and renewal include:

- Looking at options of aggregated purchase power of councils for accessing privately-held consumer data across the county.
- Ensuring that there is shared access to data held by the county as a highways authority on, for example, flows of traffic and people, is accessible by high street recovery teams.

Multi-tier working in Kent, and other similar areas, might be aided by options like:

- Where appropriate, developing county-level overarching masterplans on transport and high streets which incorporate the visions of districts into a single, broad plan of priorities and action.
- Appointing 'champions' at county level to take Kent-wide approaches to issues such as active travel, community engagement or creative industry promotion, acting as a single point of contact for districts.
- Work together to devise strategies for the usage and repurposing – for social or economic benefit locally – of the public estate.



## 2.7

## BARRIERS TO RECOVERY

<b>2.7.1</b>	Land use and ownership	→
<b>2.7.2</b>	Business rates	→
<b>2.7.3</b>	Infrastructure	→
<b>2.7.4</b>	Housing	→
<b>2.7.5</b>	Crime and safety	→
<b>2.7.6</b>	Policy options	→

Throughout this research, certain barriers to effective recovery and renewal of high streets and town centres were mentioned repeatedly by stakeholders and in associated literature. Understanding how these barriers can spring up and what can be done to avoid them is key to developing a long-term and holistic vision for regeneration.

### 2.7.1 LAND USE AND OWNERSHIP

#### National overview

Landlords who own property on the high street are a core stakeholder in its future renewal. Therefore, engaging and working with them to understand their concerns, priorities, and role in recovery is fundamental. However, given the

amount and variety of landlords in town centres, each with varying interests, it is difficult to gain consensus and shared responsibility from them.

Working with landlords in the context of understanding how empty units can be used for novel meanwhile and longer-term uses is particularly important in addressing high vacancy rates. In re-purposing empty units for new and unique uses along the high street, collaboration between local authorities, private landlords, and developers is necessary. In making this easier, landlords need to be incentivised in understanding their responsibility to the local area. Equally, there has to be a way for local authorities to find and engage with them more easily.

The Levelling Up White Paper revealed how government will bring forward measures to renew the high street through giving local authorities power to require landlords to rent out units that have been vacant for a long time to prospective tenants. These reforms have been brought forward in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which gives councils the power to serve first and final notices to landlords of empty properties before being able to hold a rental auction for the entry units.

The government have also promised a new white paper in spring looking at what support is needed in the Private Rented Sector. One proposal to be considered here will be the feasibility of a National Landlord Register. Such a register can prove extremely beneficial for local authorities trying to engage with landlords on the high street. As mentioned by a number of stakeholders across Kent.

### Kent approach

A key challenge to high street renewal is the issue of absentee landlords. In Dover, for example, a key reason for challenges is that landlords are not looking after their properties, which is making the high street and town centre less aesthetically pleasing. It also has an impact on people coming to the town and associated levels of expendable cash that can help drive economic growth. Similarly, while Margate was an original 'Portas Town', one of the challenges failed to be adequately addressed was the problem of absentee landlords. Specific issues included how firstly, they can be hard to reach, and secondly, that they are not willing to engage as their financial bottom line is not affected by whether their building is occupied or not.

In taking a proactive approach to overcoming the challenge, the Canterbury BID has recently reinstated its landlord forum that originally ran between 2014 and 2015. This came out of the understanding that it is important to engage with landlords and have a structured channel of communication open within which to take proactive steps forward. In addition to forums such as these, it has been suggested that a national registry should be made public in

order to engage hard to reach landlords. Such a registry should include information on who exactly the landlord is and how they can best be contacted. Something like this would be particularly beneficial when attempting to engage owners of large retail units on high streets.

## 2.7.2 BUSINESS RATES

### National overview

Business rates play a significant role in the high street given that most, if not all, traders will be liable to pay the rate. This is something that has been cited as a cause for contention and an added challenge to an already difficult context for the high street. This is because business rates represent 42 percent of all the taxes paid by larger retailers on the high street<sup>14</sup>. Added to this, because the rate is based on the rateable value of the property, critics have argued that this tax disproportionately affects bricks and mortar retailers. Business rates could therefore be seen as a factor in the increase of online commerce, and people choosing to forgo a physical presence on the high street to avoid the tax – particularly in the case of small independent retailers. For these reasons, the tax is increasingly seen as a high barrier of entry for many businesses in setting up a presence and investing in town centres.

The nature in which people do business is changing fundamentally with an increased presence online as opposed to physically. As such, it makes less and less sense to tax businesses based on the physical property that they occupy. Stakeholders engaged with for this research have drawn light to this, especially how certain businesses can be conducted virtually whilst operating with a high revenue yet still be exempt from any tax. Conversely, businesses such as hairdressers, who may be operating with much lower revenue, will have to pay increased rates.

The urgent need for changes to the business rates system, how this can help high street recovery and the best way to do this, is a factor that has emerged this research as one needing further in-depth research – and as such is one that goes beyond the scope of this toolkit.

Encouragingly, the Treasury published their

Business Rates Review<sup>15</sup> in October 2021, within which they recognised the need to reduce the burden of the tax to support the renewal of the high street.

### Kent approach

Business rates have been highlighted as a significant concern by all stakeholders interviewed. A particular challenge is local businesses being unhappy about the rates they must pay. Given that rates are set by central government, councils are unable to effectively mitigate or solve these concerns. Council officers expressed that while there has been rate relief during the pandemic, high business rates pose the risk of disincentivising independent retailers from coming to the high street in the longer term. This is especially true for those who may not be able to afford high rates.

In Medway, the council were part of the Business Rates Retention Pilot, which was quickly stopped. The central challenge is that without initiatives like this, there is very little ongoing revenue money for Medway's town centres. Having a delivery vehicle that can help generate such revenue, potentially through the creation of a BID, has been cited as holding great potential.

## 2.7.3 INFRASTRUCTURE

### National approach

Physical infrastructure plays an important role in the prospects around high street renewal and how it can manifest locally. Whether looking at how a local area might attract new businesses, opportunities around co-working spaces, or implementing better connectivity through active transport systems, those places that already have the correct physical, transport, and social infrastructure in place will be better positioned to take advantage of these opportunities.

The lack of adequate infrastructure can also be a large barrier to a places recovery. This is particularly true with regards to public transport infrastructure in rural communities and their high streets. In places that lack public transport, a reliance on cars is inevitable. However, for those who do not have access to a car, this severely

inhibits opportunities for social mobility and bettering life chances. It also makes high streets inaccessible to younger generations living in rural communities. It is for this reason that the high street of the 21st century needs to shift from serving and being designed around cars to being designed around people and technology.

The Levelling Up White Paper identifies transport infrastructure as a key driver of spatial disparity across the UK. And in the context of boosting productivity and regional economic growth, government are keen on unlocking institutional investment for local infrastructure priorities.

One such avenue has been identified as the Local Government Pension Scheme. To boost LGPS investment in local infrastructure projects across the country, the government have established an infrastructure platform jointly with LGPS asset pools. This comes along with an ask for LGPS funds to publish plans for increasing infrastructure investment to support local areas. Specifically, setting an ambition for 5 per cent of assets to be invested in local projects.

### Kent approach

Challenges associated with physical infrastructure go hand in hand with housing in impacting the viability of effective high street renewal.

For instance, the St James Retail Park has done well to draw people into Dover who might otherwise have passed the town on the way to the ferry terminal. However, a consequence of this is that it has moved traders and businesses from the high street on to the retail park itself. Yet, the work that is being started on the Market Square redevelopment is seen as the beginning of a process to connect everything together. Elsewhere, the fact that Gravesend has not had significant new development in recent years has led to it being 'off the radar' in terms of attracting people, businesses, and investment into the area.

The importance of identifying local opportunities for town centre renewal and growth as early as possible cannot be underestimated. Central to gaining this understanding is providing the infrastructure to facilitate the growth. Owing to earlier challenges brought on by Bluewater,

15 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1028478/BRR\\_final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1028478/BRR_final.pdf)



Dartford is one such area that had to reflect what these opportunities are and where they could best fit in. The result is Dartford emerging from the pandemic with all the right infrastructure in place to cater for emerging industries and sectors, including the arts and creative, that will be key for the future renewal of the high street.

Rainham is experiencing a lot of housing development. As a result, Medway Council have plans to use funding through s106 obligations to revise and refresh Rainham Shopping Precinct.

Challenges arising specifically from transport infrastructure have been cited as standing in the way of making progress on high street and town centre renewal. Dover, Sittingbourne and Canterbury have all struggled with the issue.

Dover District Council have a focus on taking lessons learnt from the success of Deal and applying them to Dover. However, the dual carriageway that runs in the middle of the town separating the beach from the town centre has been highlighted as a connectivity challenge that needs to be overcome to deliver quality housing and inward investment into Dover to make the place attractive for potential buyers and investors.

In the case of the Spirit of Sittingbourne, the multistorey car park that was constructed to allow for housing development on existing car parks has not been generating the revenue originally forecast. This has been caused by a decline in footfall and a drop in regular commuting which would have meant people using the multistorey car park to take the train into London.

While in Canterbury, it has been noted that the council does not have the infrastructure to guide visitors from the car parks and park and ride into the town centre itself. In particular, the ring road around Canterbury has been cited as a main problem. This leaves the impression that the city is not welcoming. It has been acknowledged that the council needs to do more to showcase the historical assets of the city.

On a separate but related note, attracting private inward investment into local infrastructure projects will be needed in the renewal of the high street. Here, local authorities have a role to play in nurturing investor confidence.

The Margate Town Deal was granted along with

£22.2m to help regenerate the area. While this is a substantial sum and will help kick start efforts, there is an understanding by the Board that this will not go far enough in the long term, and an action plan is needed for delivery that brings increased private investment.

This is an example of how renewal of the high street cannot solely be accomplished by local government. A key indicator of the economic health of an area is the level of investment flowing into it and its infrastructure assets.

In Medway, the council have a Service Level Agreement with Locate in Kent, who act as an inward investment agency for them. The success of this agreement rests on the strong working relationship and regular communication that exists between the two. The SLA has helped bring in investment not only to the town centres of Medway, but also to the brownfield land sites across the council area including in the Hoo Peninsula. Maidstone Borough Council are in the process of developing a Town Centre Area Action Plan. This will be focussed upon bringing forward new social, economic, and environmental infrastructure as part of a plan to promote investment in jobs and homes, together with a range of retail, leisure, arts and cultural facilities designed to reassert Maidstone's role as the County Town of Kent.

Giving a reason for why the private sector should invest in the local area will be the first point to address. It is important to provide a unifying vision for the future growth and prosperity of the area, and to delineate how investment will contribute to achieving this. A key part of this vision will centre on the specific infrastructure projects involved in regeneration.

Strong leadership, a unifying strategic vision, stability and capacity to deliver are all pull factors that will be favourable in attracting inward private investment for infrastructure projects that are a part of the renewal of the high street.

More broadly, the process of attracting private sector investment demonstrates the ability of the local public sector as coordinators. Setting out a unifying vision is the first key part, but how the local state uses its commercial expertise to manage assets will be important in guiding the whole process. Overall, the dynamism involved in

bringing together different funding streams from government funds as well as targeted private investment in delivering place vision and its component projects demands skill.

## 2.7.4 HOUSING

### National overview

Good quality housing in and around the town centre is a core way of revitalising the high street and increasing footfall. This has resulted in increased pressure for residential development in town centres to deliver on housing numbers but also to aid regeneration.

While housing has a role to play in the renewal of the high street, it is important to understand and define what that role is. There needs to be a clear balance between the amount and type of housing that is being developed as well as different types of unit use on the high street. This is an important point owing to the fact that the overuse and exploitation of Permitted Development Rights can undermine and damage the vibrancy of the high street, but also deliver poor quality accommodation.

While there is an appealing side of Permitted Development owing to the fact that it allows for things to occur at pace, concerns over its potential exploitation are valid. In addition to delivering poor accommodation, its exploitation could also result in a section of the community being neglected and isolated from the wider vision and hope for renewal.

On a wider level, reforms to the planning system have been cited by government as key to levelling up in the Levelling Up White Paper. To this end, it has stated that the government will enhance compulsory purchase powers in support of town centre regeneration.

### Kent approach

In Swale, original plans to develop residential private rented housing as part of the Spirit of Sittingbourne project have been scrapped. Instead, the new administration of the council is looking to create their own housing company with the focus being on council housing. While this is welcome, the change of focus in housing delivery alongside the Spirit of Sittingbourne development will have a different impact on local retail.

Whilst there might be the ambition to deliver residential development in and around the town centre, wider challenges may prove this to be difficult. For Canterbury City Council, two schemes have been put on hold that looked to re-develop former large retail units into mixed use developments, including residential. This is owing to wider ecological issues resulting in discharge from existing residential units finding its way into the Stour catchment area. Until this is resolved, the council cannot give the schemes its consent.

Folkestone and Hythe District Council have had more success. Their robust Place Plan has proven to be beneficial in terms of delivering better quality housing in the town centre in sites that were former retail and office units. Because the Place Plan clearly indicated the high ambition of the council for Folkestone, developers were keen to engage with them in driving up the quality of their offer.

In the case of Dartford, the borough council realised they needed to help the town adapt in the face of Bluewater shopping centre that opened over twenty years ago. Having gone through this process before has helped Dartford remain resilient in the face of current challenges including online shopping. A part of going through this process included looking at how the industrial estates on the edge of the town centre could be repurposed. This has resulted in a number of innovation centres and a large number of housing developments.

Consequently, a large amount of commercial interest in the area from companies looking to relocate outside of London following the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the main areas they look for is Dartford given its close proximity to the capital, yet affordable rental prices.

Dartford's investment in housing growth is an example of how housing can positively transform an area. Alongside commercial interest, the borough has seen more people move to the town, which has helped create a diverse and vibrant community. Dartford's strategic geographic location and strong transport connections via HS1 means that the positive impact of housing will play a strong role in Kent's wider economic growth potential as more skilled people move in to the area from the capital.

Looking at the role of housing in the renewal of the high street, the anxieties around PD rights and what this means for the quality of built environment is most relevant. This is a prime reason why many local authorities are working on developing robust Town Centre Strategies. Keeping town centres healthy will be greatly aided by coherent strategies with unifying visions. These will help grow footfall and occupancy rates both of which will act as less of a reason to convert businesses to other uses, particularly housing where the local planning authority will not have strong democratic oversight.

### 2.7.5 CRIME AND SAFETY

#### National overview

Crime is the product of many factors and is frequently part of a cyclical process of decline leading to disorder, leading to degradation, leading to further crime. In some high streets, the closure of stores, falling businesses and overall decline has resulted in rising levels of local crime or disorder. There are generally two different types of disorder. The first is physical disorder, typified by vacant buildings, broken windows, abandoned vehicles, and vacant lots filled with trash. The second type is social disorder, such as groups of youths congregating on street corners. There are some key indicators of elevated levels of crime in high streets and town centres: deprivation, local environment conditions, and community strength.

The ambition for high street recovery is to restore a sense of dynamism, become a testbed for innovation and rediscover a sense of purpose. For this, young people should be a priority group for policymakers, to reconnect with a demographic that no longer feels welcome in high streets or finds them inspiring. Policymakers should be looking at re-engaging young people; the high street has the potential to be a potent frontline for building citizenship and social capital.

Government also understands the importance of tackling high crime. For this reason, a central mission laid out in the Levelling Up White Paper is to ensure a decline in homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime by 2030. This comes from a recognition of how crime acts as a deterrent to inward investment, job growth, and

entrenches poverty in localities.

#### Kent approach

Ensuring public safety on the high street and town centre will greatly aid its overall renewal and recovery. This is something that Canterbury City Council are acutely aware of and are working on. There is strong ambition to work with local state stakeholders to ensure Canterbury is safe, particularly given that there is certain concern over anti-social behaviour in green spaces and other areas in city. For this reason, the council is working to improve public awareness, safety and security.

More specifically, in the areas that the council owns and controls, such as parks, concern is being addressed through improving lighting, making space more accessible, extended CCTV coverage, and locking gates at night.

In North Kent, Gravesham Borough Council set up their own Community Safety Partnership in October 2020 after previously being in a joint partnership with Dartford Borough Council. The new partnership consists of the borough council, Kent Police, Kent County Council, NHS Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley Clinical Commissioning Group, and a number of other local state stakeholders.

A new Gravesham Community Safety Strategy 2021-2024 has been launched which lays out the main priority areas for the partnership. These include tackling violent crime and domestic abuse, persistent anti-social behaviour, preventing offending and re-offending, protecting vulnerable people and strengthening communities, and communication and engagement.

The strategy outlines how tackling persistent anti-social behaviour has been identified as a key priority by local people due to the impact it has on quality of life in the neighbourhoods. And within town centres, anti-social behaviour has the ability to negatively impact local businesses and discourage investment.

Elsewhere, in Medway, a mixture of factors within the current system including high rents and business rates has been cited as crippling business in the town centres. This then contributes to things such as anti-social behaviour. When the

council engaged with the Chatham Town Forum with regards to public realm improvement using s106 funding, the top priorities of businesses

and residents included tackling crime and anti-social behaviour in the town centre, as well as improving the state of the environment.

### 2.7.6 POLICY OPTIONS

Possible actions to overcoming some of these barriers include:

- Encouraging diversity of offer on the high street through flexible short term leases for smaller independent businesses.
- In circumstances where efforts to engage with absentee landlords has failed, exploring the possibility of using Compulsory Purchase Orders.
- Those areas who have the business rates retention scheme should use this money to reinvest money on the high street through creating 'high street funds'
- Developing an index of physical infrastructure that can act as an asset to local recovery. Work with stakeholders to understand how this may happen. For example, using local business parks as selling points to attract companies to relocate to the area.
- Using Permitted Development Rights and regulations to develop de facto design codes and guides to help encourage development to be carried out in a way conducive to the local areas character. For example, South Tottenham guidance on house extensions through PDR.
- When planning around the built environment, consider the balance between 'anti-personnel' features including high walls and locks with the need for 'permeability' and openness in town centres.
- Look into improving natural surveillance in town centres through mix of uses between commercial and residential units alongside design features such as open and transparent shop fronts.

## CHAPTER 3

## POLICY OPTIONS SUMMARY

## PLACEMAKING

<b>Culture and Identity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Working with cultural anchors to develop tourism and visitor economy strategies.</li> <li>– Working with the cultural and creative sectors and anchors to understand their role in high street renewal</li> <li>– Repurposing empty properties for cultural and heritage use.</li> </ul>
<b>Public realm improvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Local development orders to bring forward development to regenerate town centres.</li> <li>– Use of extensive compulsory purchase powers to help support identified development opportunities.</li> <li>– Repurposing vacant or derelict buildings through Assets of Community Scheme or Community Asset Transfer giving community ownership.</li> </ul>
<b>Diversification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Planning provisions to include bringing vacant units back into use, for residential, leisure or work use.</li> <li>– Collaboration between public and private sector landlords on how they best manage and repurpose empty shops through statutory powers or having a better understanding of local business and community needs.</li> </ul>

## POST-PANDEMIC CHANGES

- Fast and reliable internet is crucial in promoting flexible, remote working in places like Kent, so it is essential to provide information on what is available locally. The government-sponsored Project Gigabit is currently delivering faster broadband across Kent, and residents in more rural areas may be able to access the associated Voucher Scheme.
- When considering the diversification of the urban realm through measures like use class changes, it is important to consider the offer to people working remotely and try to ensure that amenities are available to make the high street or town centre a viable and attractive place to work from.
- Local authorities can invest directly into new workspaces, or work in partnership with private sector workspace providers to repurpose parts of the public estate which may no longer be necessary for council use after the increase in flexible, distance working.

## SUSTAINABILITY/DECARBONISATION

### Sustainable transport

- Reallocation of road space for green transport corridors – for example prioritising electric buses or a dedicated Park & Ride lane.
  - Bus improvement strategy to make buses more frequent, reliable, and cheaper.
- Installing electric charging points to promote the uptake of electric vehicles.

### Active travel and pedestrianisation

- Taking submissions for citizen-led plans to reclaim parts of the high street through organising road-closing activities like pop-up markets on pre-approved days.
- Public campaign to increase engagement and better understanding of the pedestrianisation process and how it can impact locally. This will allow for anxieties about the process and potential challenges to be addressed.
- Cycle lanes and cycle parking
- Linking in walking routes to public transport has been proven to boost physical activity levels
- Reducing speed limits in town centres can help promote walking, with evidence showing that 20mph speed limits encourage walking.
- Well-connected street layouts are important to boosting active travel.

## SECTOR MIX ON THE HIGH STREET

- Help local businesses and social enterprise access government funding and other support through an advice service.
- Working with Chambers of Commerce and BIDs to develop support and advice programmes for young people in the locality to understand commercial opportunities and the business landscape within their town.
- Understand the viability of creating a BID within the town centre and whether this would work in the local context.
- Running marketing campaigns for the town centre or high street that emphasise local traders and the cultural offer.
- Promote the use of small-scale spatial development Neighbourhood Plans to boost differentiation at the hyper-local level across towns and local authority areas.
- Provide small, below-rateable-value spaces to bring in a multiplicity of creative businesses, to help build distinctive character.
- Fill vacant buildings with Multi-Use Community Hubs as a one stop shop for accessing a range of services including healthcare, wellbeing, skills and employment support.
- Develop an approach to strategic acquisitions to enable vacant properties to be brought back into commercial or residential use.
- Another fund option is a Vacant Premises Fund to support a proactive approach to bringing vacant premises back into use, including grant schemes to incentivise landlords, rent subsidy for new businesses and support for meanwhile use.

## GOVERNANCE AND EVALUATION

<p><b>Community engagement</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engaging through ‘walkshops’ and consultation in situ, particularly targeting hard to reach members of the community. This will help gain an understanding of how spaces can be repurposed in a real and practical sense for the benefit of residents.</li> <li>- When thinking about how to repurpose public space, employing the use of ‘customer avatars’ to understand how different policies could affect different community perspectives.</li> <li>- Employing the use of mixed methods of engagement including both innovative digital and physical outreach schemes to make the engagement an exciting proposition for the community.</li> <li>- Exploring the options for setting up permanent citizens assemblies that engage a random selection of residents on a rotating basis on multiple different policy agendas including local high street recovery</li> </ul>
<p><b>Use of technology and metrics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Looking at options of aggregated purchase power of councils for accessing privately-held consumer data across the county.</li> <li>- Ensuring that there is shared access to data held by the county as a highways authority on, for example, flows of traffic and people, is accessible by high street recovery teams.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Multi-tier working</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Where appropriate, developing county-level overarching masterplans on transport and high streets which incorporate the visions of districts into a single, broad plan of priorities and action.</li> <li>- Appointing ‘champions’ at county level to take Kent-wide approaches to issues such as active travel, community engagement or creative industry promotion, acting as a single point of contact for districts.</li> <li>- Work together to devise strategies for the usage and repurposing – for social or economic benefit locally – of the public estate.</li> </ul>

## LABOUR MARKETS

<b>Retail and wholesale</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increasing soft skills, such as strong communication, in new entrants.</li> <li>– Linking education curriculums closer to business practice in the sector.</li> <li>– Better engagement between the retail sector, FE and HE bodies.</li> </ul>
<b>Construction and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Skills supply chain planning. The industry needs to work with developers and stakeholders to understand the short, medium, and long term skills requirements needed.</li> <li>– Closer collaboration across companies to better work on skills shortage in the sector, engagement with FE colleges, and understanding potential for local workforce.</li> <li>– There needs to be increased efforts to build a good image of the sector in order to make it more appealing to young people.</li> <li>– The construction sector needs to diversify its workforce and reach talent in underrepresented groups.</li> <li>– Regarding skills shortages, there are specific challenges to do with Brexit and emerging technology led skills in Mixed Methods of Construction that need to be addressed.</li> </ul>
<b>Visitor economy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Improving the image and perception of the sector. It is not seen as one with good career prospects. More needs to be done to communicate opportunities.</li> <li>– Brexit and pandemic related skills shortages, particularly with waiters and chefs, will be an ongoing challenge. Efforts need to focus on retraining and retaining existing workforce.</li> <li>– Finding a more streamlined way of engaging with Further and Higher Education.</li> </ul>
<b>Creative and cultural industries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Engage people in sector careers. Young people, adults and careers advisers need to be made aware of the wide range of work available in the sector.</li> <li>– Partnerships with educations and skills providers including schools, FE, HE and other course providers need to be established or strengthened.</li> <li>– Real world practice of the success experienced by people working in the sector needs to be better showcased. This can help establish professional networks that can spur growth in the sector.</li> </ul>



**BARRIERS TO RECOVERY**

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