

Warwickshire Towns Routemap: Final Report

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About the Institute of Place Management

The Institute of Place Management is the professional body for people involved in making, maintaining, and marketing places. As part of Manchester Metropolitan University, the Institute of Place Management is dedicated to supporting people who serve places, providing them with unbiased research, continuing professional development, qualifications, conferences, events, and networking opportunities.

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DRAFT

Summary: Warwickshire Future Places Routemap

High street revitalisation is a complex and challenging endeavour. Although they face common challenges, places are unique. Consequently, there are no easy prescriptive solutions for regenerating high streets and town centres. Whereas the IPM can bring expert guidance and frameworks to help places, it is incumbent on local stakeholders to use their insights and capacity to create and deliver bespoke programmes of change that will ensure the vitality and viability of their centres. The purpose of the Warwickshire Future Places Routemap, therefore, was to bring together agencies responsible for the management, development, and marketing of towns into a county-wide programme, to identify the challenges and opportunities for Warwickshire's towns and high streets, and to assess what stakeholders and partnerships need to focus on to survive and thrive over the next 15 years. Working in partnership with the Sustainable Communities team at Warwickshire County Council (WCC), the IPM proposed a 10-month programme to explore the challenges, complexities, and opportunities for Warwickshire towns, outlined in the table below:

Project timeline and outcomes ¹	
May 2021	#1 Workshop: Project Launch
May 2021	#2 Workshop: Changing Ambitions
June 2021	#3 Workshop: Changing Economies
July 2021	#4 Workshop: Changing Places
Sept 2021	Publication of mid-project report
Sept 2021	#5 Workshop: Taking Action
Nov 2021	#6 Workshop: 4Rs High Street Regeneration Framework
Dec 2021	#7 Workshop: Vital and Viable Atherstone
Mar 2022	Publication of Vital and Viable Atherstone Report
April 2022	Publication of Final Report
April 2022	#8 Workshop: Next steps

The first part of the programme focused on the structural challenges facing UK high streets, with specific reference to aspects affected by the pandemic. In these sessions expert guest speakers discussed trends and nation-wide developments such as retail restructuring, climate change, technological advances, and tourism. The second part focused on generating recommendations to be taken forward at a county level to support high streets, collating evidence from workshops with key stakeholders. This report, therefore, summarises these responses, using the IPM's 4Rs Regeneration Framework: Repositioning, Reinventing, Rebranding and Restructuring, to identify potential quick wins and longer-term priorities.

¹ All the project deliverables and resources are available to view on a dedicated webpage created by the IPM specifically for stakeholders across Warwickshire <https://www.placemanagement.org/2570>





Applying the 4Rs Framework across Warwickshire

On 25th November 2021, the IPM team hosted an online county-wide workshop focused on the 4Rs framework. The workshop focused on the higher-level strategic priorities for Warwickshire's towns. There were 17 participants, mainly government officers from WCC. The workshop began with a refresher about the 4Rs Framework, introducing a real-world example of how the framework was applied, together with an outline of how it is being utilised through the High Streets Task Force for England.

The group was split into three facilitated break-out rooms, and tasked with identifying priorities for specific towns, using the 4Rs framework as guidance. The three breakout rooms were loosely grouped by geographical location to represent towns from North, Central and South Warwickshire. Group 1 included six participants, broadly representing towns in the north of the county: Bedworth, Nuneaton, Rugby and the three market towns of Atherstone, Coleshill, and Polesworth. Two of the participants from the county council were not representing a specific town, but contributed broad points in relation to community engagement, and environment and transport. Group 2 included four participants representing Southam and Stratford. One representative worked for the county council and was able to provide insights on both centres discussed in the breakout session. There were three participants from the public sector and one representative from the private sector, who was also a local town councillor. Group 3 included five participants representing Leamington, Kenilworth, and Stratford. A representative from WCC was able to provide insights on all three centres. This group included two representatives from the private sector, included the cultural sector.

Figure 1: 4Rs Framework slide used in the workshop

What should you prioritise?

Reposition	Reinvent	Rebrand	Restructure
			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We don't know who uses our town centre• We don't know how our town centre functions• We have data but don't do anything with it• We don't have a clear idea about how future trends will affect the high street• We don't have a clear and shared vision for the future of the town centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We have plans but nothing is going on in our town centre• We rely on the existing offer to drive footfall• We rely mainly on shopping to attract people• We find that local people go elsewhere for the products and services they need or want• We don't know how to change the offer in our centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We have lots of things happening but the town still has a poor reputation• We need to change perceptions• We don't communicate well with other local stakeholders• We don't do enough to celebrate local distinction and creativity• We don't have a clear sense of place	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We can't make decisions• We have done things in past but they haven't worked• We don't speak to other local stakeholders• We don't know how to engage with a wider group of stakeholders• We need large-scale physical change

To help focus the discussion, participants were first asked to consider which of the scenarios presented on Figure 1 (above) best matched the current situation of specific towns in Warwickshire.

Participants were then invited to explain and justify their decision. This led to a follow up discussion, where participants were tasked to put the 4Rs into priority order. The outcome of this exercise is presented in Table 2 (below).

Table 1: 4Rs Framework Priorities for each town

	#1	#2	#3	#4
Atherstone	Reposition	Reinvent	Restructure	Rebrand
Bedworth	Reposition	Reinvent	Restructure	Rebrand
Coleshill	Reposition	Reinvent	Restructure	Rebrand
Kenilworth	Restructure	Reposition	Reinvent	Rebrand
Leamington	Restructure	Reposition	Reinvent	Rebrand
Nuneaton	Reposition	Reinvent	Restructure	Rebrand
Polesworth	Reposition	Reinvent	Restructure	Rebrand
Rugby	Reposition	Reinvent	Restructure	Rebrand
Southam	Reinvent	Restructure	Rebrand	Reposition
Stratford	Reposition	Restructure	Rebrand	Reinvent

Whereas the results above represent only a snapshot of local views from a limited number of representatives, there is a remarkable level of consensus across each town, where Reposition is most frequently cited followed by Reintervention, Restructure and then Rebranding. It is important to recognise these processes are not mutually exclusive, but form part of the same routemap. The method really involves encouraging places to work out where best to start, especially where communities might feel over-whelmed by the complexity of the challenge that is high street revitalisation. The next section of the report, therefore, fleshes out each these positions by summarising the group discussions that took place during the workshop, and provides a summary of key recommendations.

#1 Repositioning

Repositioning involves knowing your town and using relevant data and information to develop a collaborative, inspiring vision that achieves change. This is recommended for places where there is a poor understanding of the catchment, of the challenges and trends impacting on the place, or where there is a lack of basic data on which to base decisions. In these instances, a strategy of repositioning is sensible. This entails taking time to collect and analyse data and information, and then using that evidence to develop appropriate visions and strategies that encourage widespread buy-in.

IPM research shows that development decisions which are not based on accurate data and intelligence are usually ineffective. Strong EOIs, or more generally plans for transformation, should be consistent in what they identify as a challenge, their vision, and what their plans are going to address. A common issue is that a particular problem (e.g., health deprivation in the catchment) is not presented as a challenge or included in the vision, but it is mentioned as the main outcome of one of the plans for transformation. Often, air pollution is discussed as a challenge, but no air pollution levels are presented. How is the effectiveness of an intervention in this regard going to be measured if there is no benchmark data? It is important that decisions about future interventions are based on evidence. Just because somewhere else has done something successful, does not mean this intervention is transferable across different contexts. Many wrong decisions have been made by places in the past because of an absence of evidence, and a poor understanding of local needs, leading to poor investment decisions, which fail to address the problems they sought to solve.

Repositioning was identified as the main priority in 7 of the 10 towns discussed in the breakout groups. For those representing towns in **North Warwickshire** (Atherstone, Bedworth, Coleshill, Nuneaton, and Polesworth) there was a strong consensus regarding the need to consider future trends and to develop local understanding of how broader structural change will affect high streets and town centres. The exception in this group was **Rugby**, where the case was made for large scale physical change, although even here it was recognised there is still a case for more careful consideration of data and trends.

For **Stratford**, the discussion, perhaps unsurprisingly, concerned tensions between tourism and residents. There is a suggestion the value of tourism to Stratford is not well-communicated, although such assertions require an evidence-base to underpin them. This might extend to include an assessment of the viability of calls to improve the night-time economy, which reflects concerns that the existing offer is insufficient to encourage post-theatre crowds to dwell or entice tourists to spend more than the day in the town. It would be useful first to analyse footfall data because Stratford's annual footfall signature suggests it is multifunctional, and perhaps less dependent on tourism than it first seems. With the town much quieter over the winter months there is a suggestion it is residents who are under-served rather than visitors. Consequently, there is perhaps the need for a piece of work to be done in Stratford evaluating the impact of tourism, especially in relation to what this means for local traders and surrounding towns. But more importantly, it would be beneficial to engage residents and other regular visitors to assess whether their needs are being met by the town centre. Ultimately, the vision for Stratford might be one that begins to resolve perceived tensions between occasional tourist visitors, and residents who live and work in Stratford all year-round.

The representative speaking for **Leamington** was unsure whether the centre collected footfall or had any additional place-based data that could be useful in decision making. If data is collected, they did not know who had access to it. The town, however, has four footfall counters and has been collating data since 2009. The issue, here, therefore, appears to relate to sharing existing data. This compares to the situation in **Kenilworth**, where it was understood footfall data was collected, but there was need to generate insights and analysis to understand the relationship between the town and the castle, a key destination, but one located a mile from the centre. This is a common issue we find locally, where the concern is not the absence of data, but where existing data is not shared widely. If footfall data is available, for example, efforts should be made to share this in a meaningful way with local stakeholders. One solution might be to establish a single hub which collates and shares key performance indicators e.g., footfall, vacancy, business diversity, together with basic catchment information (population profile, size, and deprivation).

The IPM and the High Streets Task Force share a lot of data and intelligence about how town centres are changing nationally, to draw attention to structural changes that affect all town centres in some way e.g., the growth of online shopping. But the impact of such change may affect places in different ways, depending on how centres function or are used. In addition, local partnerships also need to be aware of specific local factors that might affect local centres. For example, if a major employer closes or a new investment comes along, this may lead to a substantial increase or decrease in town centre footfall. Therefore, it is essential to gather data and information from national and local sources, from businesses and investors and all community perspectives when embarking on change.

A general concern raised across the group discussions concerns the need to foster greater collaboration amongst local stakeholders and to develop shared visions for each centre. Consequently, the development of a shared understanding of the challenges might foster closer working amongst local stakeholders, to 'get partners sat round a table' and agree a strategy for improvement. Weighing the effectiveness of how information is communicated between town centre partners should be a key priority. In each case, the first steps might be to collate what data is currently available for each town. It is important this is done first, to avoid the often-grandiloquent statements presented when describing a town's vision. Such statements do not offer much insight into what the vision aims to target and achieve. 'A town centre with opportunities for all' is not specific enough, is this about employment, housing, etc.? This links back to being consistent and to being able to evidence correctly. Once an evidence base is established, it would be appropriate for each town to undertake a visioning exercise, and ultimately create their own visions. Going forward, it might be appropriate for each town to embark on their own visioning process, to create viable visions where they do not exist, or to refresh existing ones. During these sessions towns should consider questions such as:

- What changes are happening in the town, to the community, and in wider society and the economy?
- What are the big challenges and how are these going to impact on the town's offer?
- What are the aspirations of the community?
- What data and evidence do we have to underpin decision making?

In summary, visioning workshops will help to develop a common understanding of challenges to high streets, and to support the construction of a shared vision for future change and adaption, which acknowledge the need to diversify beyond retail.

Repositioning: key recommendations

QUICK WINS

Ensure footfall data is widely available and can be accessed by local traders, event organisers and other place-based stakeholders to demonstrate success of delivery.

Review what other data is available for each town and devise a simple and cost-effective mechanism for sharing this information with local stakeholders e.g., create an online Warwickshire High Street and Town Centre monitoring hub.

Review High Streets Task Force Webinar: Repositioning Developing Collaborative Inspiring Visions that Achieve Change.

Conduct a review of existing town centres visions and score them by benchmarking against the IPM's 25 Priorities.

LONGER TERM

Continue to track effectiveness of interventions in the town centre through monitoring and interpreting footfall data (volume and pattern of activity), providing impact assessment of events etc.

Establish a clear and consistent method for collating footfall data in each town e.g., ideally installation of automated footfall counters.

Data collection, analysis and data communication training for local government officers and other local stakeholders.

Undertake visioning workshops or exercises in each town and establish clear and collaborative visions for each centre, benchmarked against the IPM's 25 Priorities.

Repositioning supporting resources:

25 Priority Interventions: e-learning <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/frameworks/25-vital-and-viable-priorities/>

Repositioning: Developing Collaborative Inspiring Visions that Achieve Change <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/transformation-routemap-webinars/repositioning-developing-collaborative-inspiring-visions-that-achieve-change-3-5/>

Understanding Place Data Video Resources <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/courses/understanding-place-data/>

#2 Reinventing

After repositioning, participants saw **reinventing** as the second most important priority, except for **Southam**, where it was the top one. Reinventing involves activating and animating the town centre in the short term, but with the long-term goal to become more multifunctional by diversifying attractions. Reinventing is recommended as a starting point on a place's transformation in a situation where there are clear and evidence-based plans for how the town needs to change to better serve its catchment communities, but where little is happening in the town to deliver the vision. Sometimes, even if major physical development schemes are complete, nothing changes in the town, because the development has not been *activated*. For example, a new shopping centre has been built but it has attracted few tenants. In these scenarios, a process of reinvention is needed. A programme of activities might draw in a wider range of residents from the local catchment or encourage existing users of the high street to visit more frequently. In summary, reinvention involves offering interventions that serve the community and draw in footfall and spend, through trials and experiments of new products and services in the high street.

Examples of events and activities which quickly animate the centre, include interventions to create lively and inviting shopfronts, basic improvements to cleanliness and maintenance of stores and public realm, installation of new decorative lights, and the delivery of markets, festivals, and pop-ups. Walking tours, over recent years, have proven to be another effective place-making intervention, a low-cost way of animating the town whilst extending the visitor offer. Short-term measures like these, however, may serve a more strategic purpose. Experimental place-making, and other trialling of activities might be used to test out the impact of road closures on traffic congestion, or pedestrian dwell-time, to build the case for permanent public realm schemes. Markets can be a lower cost/risk mechanism for introducing new products and services into a place. Consequently, reinventing can help places begin to adjust to structural changes in consumer behaviour, demographic change, or new technology. It might be focused on targeting specific social groups to make the high street a more inclusive place e.g., age friendly.

Workshop participants drew attention to plans for **Southam**, which identify many deliverables, including the collection of information and data to inform a strategy for improvement. The plan here appears to involve less focus on tourists in favour of developing a compelling offer for residents which, from the outside, appears to be a sensible approach to take given the wider disruption to visitor markets. However, it appears there is concern about taking the plans forward to delivery. Obviously, it is difficult to offer any firm recommendations without understanding more about the local situation, however, we feel it would be useful for local stakeholders in Southam to review their deliverables, ensure they are clearly linked to specific evidence, and benchmarked against the IPM's 25 Priorities. This might help to focus on activities that could be viably delivered in the short-term, to encourage activation and demonstrate things are going on. An effective approach might be to form sub-groups and assign specific tasks to each one.

In North Warwickshire, towns recognised the need to diversify the local offer beyond retail. One participant suggested **Bedworth**, for instance, might be reinvented as a community hub. On the issue of diversity, another participant made an important point about broadening the understanding of high street viability to acknowledge the value of health, well-being, green and open space. This would require additional data to be tracked in addition to more common measures, such as vacancy

rates and footfall. The representative for **Leamington** was keen to understand more about how changes to working patterns and social activity brought about the pandemic, might impact on future development. However, reinventing was seen as a lesser priority for both Kenilworth and Leamington compared to restructuring. Indeed, Leamington is celebrated for its place-making activities, which have received national attention.

Reinventing: key recommendations

QUICK WINS

Review a range of place-based anchors (retail, employment, transport, green space, markets, heritage, culture), everyday activity that significantly attracts footfall in each town centre.

Review and share place-making best-practices at a county level.

Establish a forum (either online/hybrid) for local stakeholders to share ideas, challenges, and best practice.

Encourage local stakeholders to Review High Streets Taskforce Webinar: Reinventing – Making Vital and Viable Multifunctional Hubs

LONGER TERM

Ensure key place-based attractors are embedded in local plans and visions for the town centre and included in wider messaging.

Undertake place-making workshops with local towns where this is a priority. The purpose of these workshops would be to engage local stakeholders in the generation of ideas for place-making activities, and to delegate delivery to specific organisations and individuals.

Each town to generate a programme of potential place-making interventions, tailored for each centre, drawing on mainly low-cost / short-term activities. Activities should be clearly linked to named organisations/individuals responsible for their delivery. Use footfall and other KPIs to measure impact on new activity.

Reinventing: supporting resources

High Streets Taskforce Online Learning: Understanding Futures Users of the High Street:
<https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/frameworks/understanding-future-users-of-the-high-street/>

High Streets Taskforce Webinar: Reinventing – Making Vital and Viable Multifunctional Hubs:
<https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/transformation-routemap-webinars/reinventing-making-vital-and-viable-multifunctional-hubs-5-5/>

Market User Survey Template (University of Leeds):
<https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=fb737708-6be9-4b82-95c8-47db1b60c5e8>

#3 Restructuring

The third most common priority identified by workshop participants was **restructuring**. The exceptions were **Kenilworth** and **Leamington** where restructuring was seen as the top priority. As discussed above, there is also a case for restructuring to be the top priority in **Rugby**. To deliver effective high street revitalisation requires putting in place the capacity, leadership, and partnerships to deliver change. Restructuring is required when towns and high streets become stuck in a state of inertia around decision making or, when decisions are made, they do not have the impact that was expected. The previous section on reinvention, for example, implies the need to refresh local networks to create the capacity to devise and deliver a programme of place-making activities, especially if established networks are not doing so.

Either the governance and management mechanisms in the town need changing or large-scale spatial planning is needed to address some structural problem – for example the town's main anchors are too fragmented, or the centre of gravity has shifted to somewhere that is no longer in the town's current designated core. Store closures are also impacting on property values and presenting new opportunities in many towns and cities for physical restructuring. Local governance arrangements, therefore, might also need to change where big regeneration projects are needed to transform the centre.

The representative for **Kenilworth** discussed the advantages for the town arising from Kenilworth Castle, a key visitor destination which, according to English Heritage, has a strong positive impact on the local economy. Similarly, the town's proximity to the University of Warwick, whose students appear to use the town centre, was also seen as an advantage. With footfall in Kenilworth in 2021 matching its pre-pandemic level, the town appears to be functioning well. However, it was noted there was a need to improve communication between different stakeholder groups, and perhaps a need for a more constructive alignment between local and county level visions and plans to generate stronger synergies between the town centre and other place-based attractors.

The situation appears to be similar in **Leamington**. Although footfall recovery is more muted here than in Kenilworth, the representative for the town drew attention to the range of activity taking place in the centre. However, they also pointed to the need for better alignment between the work of different stakeholders, and alignment of specific projects with a wider strategy and vision. The representative for **Stratford** also referred to the need to review how effective current governance models were in terms of bringing about positive change in the town centre, and the need to improve communications between all partners before the development of new projects, plans and strategies to improve the town centre offer. Here it was suggested that this process might begin through an assessment of what data is currently available for the town, with particular emphasis on the tourism economy (which is essentially repositioning), before conducting a review of how effective the current governance models are to bring out about positive town centre change. Once this has been achieved, it was recognised there was a need to improve communications between all partners before, finally, working collaboratively on projects, plans and strategies to improve the town centre offer. Indeed, the other representative for Stratford opined they were somewhat relieved to hear other towns recounting challenges regarding communication and data sharing.

Although the representative for **Southam** referred to the need physically restructure the town centre to improve accessibility and walkability, they highlighted a concern that, since plans had been put in place to improve the town, there had been little action. The need to activate a centre normally aligns with the process of reinventing, however, attention was drawn to the need to review the various partners that are involved in the delivery of this activity, before identifying any gaps where additional stakeholders, such as local businesses or members of the local community, could be better involved.

Although restructuring can mean large scale physical regeneration and planning, none of the towns (apart from **Rugby** and **Southam**), identified this as a priority. Rather, the situation reported in several Warwickshire towns reflected the other dimension to restructuring, which involves the need to create effective governance structures to ensure different partners are working together, in a co-ordinated fashion, and are both making decisions and getting things done. Effective place management involves working across the different siloes of government, and co-ordinating multiple stakeholders from a range of different sectors, to ensure clear and efficient communication between all these different partners.

Strong partnerships are key for being able to develop plans for transformation and achieve change. Local authorities, however, need to be warned that a partnership does not simply involve acquiring a letter of support from local organisations. A genuine partnership has a clear purpose, a reason for being, and is productive of joint outcomes. Collaborative capacity stemming from real partnerships emerges when many people are involved in identifying the challenges, developing the vision, and linking the plans to other strategies. In thinking about their local governance arrangements, local stakeholders might consider:

- What are the governance structures to manage the transformation and the everyday activity?
- How do these groups relate to each other?
- Who is managing and coordinating?
- Is spatial change needed? What is the governance process for this?

Restructuring: key recommendations

QUICK WINS

Each town should review its existing networks and partnerships, by conducting stakeholder mapping, and reach out to new or previously excluded groups who can contribute collaborative capacity.

Where appropriate, each town might consider refreshing local networks to widen their diversity and add additional capacity to effect change locally

Refresh networks at a county-wide level to support closer alignment between regional policies and strategies involving high street revitalisation and place leadership

Review internal structures within Warwickshire County Council and to assess how different directors might better work together in support of place-based outcomes

LONGER TERM

Each town to form a strategic leadership group (town team), but then also delegate specific responsibilities to sub-groups, with local authorities supporting the facilitation and co-ordination of this network

Establish county-wide High Streets Taskforce bringing together key strategic leads e.g., transport, tourism, business growth and development etc.

Establish internal town-centre strategic team with representatives from different directorates.

Restructuring: supporting resources

Diagnostic: capacity and structures for managing change (IPM):

<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=ef1f3e38-3cd4-4241-82ac-9785e146b334>

Principles of Town Planning in relation to High Streets and Town Centres (RTPI) Video Resource:

<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=2521f580-ea25-4b98-9ca3-2dfd152f51f4>

Town Centre Partnerships (URBED)

<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=813e53a5-9810-4ee1-a02c-f1b6c25fcd82>

#4 Rebranding

In general, it was somewhat refreshing that rebranding was seen as a low priority in all the towns featuring in the workshop. Too often, local stakeholders see the decline of their local high street simply as an image or reputational problem, that somehow might be tackled through publicity. Research, however, suggests most place branding exercises fail, partly because the intervention does not tackle core problems, and often because place branding is not done in a collaborative and participatory way. Often the result of this is that the intended audience do not recognise the authority or authenticity of the exercise. Whereas it is relatively easy for local stakeholders to create a strong digital presence and engage with social media to communicate with their catchment, it is important first to engage with place product development. There is little point in communicating an existing offer, if that offer is weak, dated or simply unattractive. Consequently, place branding can be a costly and ineffective strategy unless other more pressing issues are dealt with first. This seems to be widely understood by the participants across Warwickshire. Rebranding, however, is recommended when a town might have an excellent vision, based on good evidence, and these plans are being brought to life through a programme of place-making events to activate the high street, but nevertheless the image or reputation of town centre remains dogmatically negative. In short, the town is both repositioning and reinventing, but catchment perceptions have not changed. People are still negative about the town and that is when a process of rebranding may be needed.

It must also be said, several towns in Warwickshire have a strong existing place image, and in the case of **Stratford**, one that is recognised internationally. Not everywhere, however, can be, or needs to be the next Stratford. Indeed, it might be useful to consider how other towns might piggyback on Stratford's appeal, to strengthen synergies between Warwickshire towns. Attention was drawn to the good practice initiated by the **Leamington** BID in raising the profile of the town as a visitor destination. Towns need organisations working together to improve the image of the town through a combination of marketing and place-making interventions, not just to widen appeal to outside visitors, but also to make the town centre more appealing for residents. The case in North Warwickshire illustrates this latter point where it was acknowledged there needs to be greater effort to change perceptions within the various local catchments, but it was also pointed out there is perhaps a wider issue in relation to community engagement, which would not necessarily be resolved by branding. The overall feeling is that public consultation is often understood as a tick-box exercise. Either it is briefly mentioned but no information provided, or it is not dealt with at all. Places need to communicate clearly about the vision. This is a communication exercise, getting people to align on the problems and the solutions. This also involves creating partnerships, which is back to restructuring on the IPM routemap.

The other challenge is in relation to place branding and reputation. Too often, negative stories about the decline of the high street make excellent clickbait for local newspapers trying to drive traffic to their online advertisers. However, the IPM team often encounters situations where local stakeholders will talk about poor place image from their own perspective, but this sentiment is not shared widely within the local catchment. The local estate agent can quickly tell you how attractive a town is by the number of enquiries they receive from people wanting to move into the area. Additionally, what visitors might say about a place on platforms such as TripAdvisor, might be very different to what local stakeholders tell us during a workshop.

In the IPM's framework, rebranding is a three-way process. Firstly, place branding involves the communication of consistent, clear, and positive image of the high street. The nature of this image, however, is not something that can be devised at a high level and imposed on a place. Rather, it should involve establishing an identity and sense of place that can engender pride, commitment, and attachment, and communicating this across the whole community. Following this, it is important that rebranding creates a sense of 'placefulness' – building on an existing identity or developing something new that people believe. To do this, local decision makers need to use communication channels to listen to what residents and visitors are saying about their town, an exercise which can be done relatively easily through social media analysis or town centre surveys. The branded place image must be one that is co-produced. Finally, the third process includes better stakeholder communications, not just marketing and PR activities. This appears to be the case in several Warwickshire towns, where a lot of great work is happening on the ground, but the potential impact of this activity is confined, because other stakeholders who might add capacity or other support simply do not know what is happening in their own town.

Rebranding: key recommendations

QUICK WINS	LONGER TERM
Assess the digital footprint of each town centre	Undertake place sentiment analysis to inform and establish an evidence base for any wider reputational issues
<p>Review stakeholder communication and devise a process for sharing news, events, and knowledge amongst local stakeholders. During this review, each town should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the unique aspects of the town been uncovered and are they being promoted? • Do you have a nice town, but everyone talks it down? • Is everyone updated on what the plans are? <p>Is there lots of informal communication and networking?</p>	On the back of visioning exercises, each town should construct a clear and positive message about their high street/town centre, that is shared consistently by local stakeholders.
Each town should develop low-cost and coordinated social media activity to communicate the centre-offer and increase its visibility to existing catchment and users.	Engage with wider stakeholders responsible for promoting Warwickshire at a county level, e.g., review alignment between local place promotion and DMO material.

Rebranding: supporting resources

Understanding Place Sentiment

<https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/courses/understanding-place-sentiment/>

Conclusions: next steps

Many of the suggestions outlined in this report address some of the short-term priorities. However, the long-term challenge will involve turning local conversations into real action, building trust with and between local stakeholders, and maintaining momentum in each town once plans start to be delivered. We appreciate this is a particular challenge in a climate where public resource is limited. Our engagement with local stakeholders across Warwickshire, however, reveals there are gaps in capacity across the county. Some towns, such as Leamington, are recognised nationally in terms of good practice, an exemplar which others might learn from in terms of place management and leadership. Yet it is important that local towns understand they are not necessarily in competition with each other, and there are potentially great synergies and mutual benefits to be had from closer networking and alignment of local strategies. However, this may ultimately involve a frank evaluation of the effectiveness of local networks and partnerships, which may in some places require a refresh, with new voices brought to the table.

It might be sensible, as we are beginning to see elsewhere, to establish a network of town centre managers, to support individual or clusters of towns, to address issues in relation to **restructuring** which were identified by workshop participants. This role might extend to including nurturing and coordinating local voluntary networks to support events and the delivery of other activities, together with efforts to engage and support local traders. Ultimately, this calls for specific skills in place leadership, which includes brokering relationships, co-ordinating existing resource, and maintaining collaboration to steer local stakeholders to act in the interests of place. What is becoming clear from the IPM's wider work is that local and county level government might play a vital role by supporting, nurturing, and facilitating local action. The IPM, for example, completed research for Stockport MBC in 2019, which led to the appointment of two District Centres by the local authority in 2021 to manage clusters of centres in the West and East of the borough. These appointments have proved greatly helpful in the IPM's subsequent engagement with local stakeholders in March 2022, signalling to communities that resource was being put in place to help support their local high street. The IPM, subsequently was able to leave each centre in the hands of a dedicated individual to carry forward these plans. These roles, however, are perhaps less about place leadership, but more focused on co-ordinating local groups and reducing barriers to community action where the local authority is implicated.

Upon reflection, if we were going to do this programme again, we might do more Vital and Viable workshops. The workshop for Atherstone, and subsequent stakeholder engagement at the local level helped to identify to some fine grain detail about the place to inform potential interventions. This multi-centre approach has been adopted by North Devon Council, East Lindsey District Council, and Manchester City Council. The IPM is currently working with Salford City Council, and Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, to complete a programme of workshops for 13 suburban centres. In each of these locations the IPM has facilitated and led local workshops with stakeholders representing specific high streets and town centres, which informed a report for place, which as was achieved in Atherstone, sets out a recommendations and priorities using the IPM frameworks. In Manchester, Salford, and Stockport, however, the research also involves more in-depth projects, which also includes the installation of automated footfall counters in each centre (in partnership with Springboard), and the completion of independent Place Quality Audits in each location by the IPM research team, drawing on both site observations and desk-based research.

A more straightforward measure, however, might be to encourage and support local stakeholder groups to construct their own Transformation Route Map, using the toolkit developed by the High Streets Task Force:

<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/transformation-routemap-webinars/create-a-transformation-routemap-for-your-town/>

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