


**Please cite the Published Version**

Millington, Steven  and Gao, Chao (2023) Placemaking Programme Report - Luton. Project Report. High Streets Task Force.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.23634/MMU.00631124>

**Publisher:** High Streets Task Force

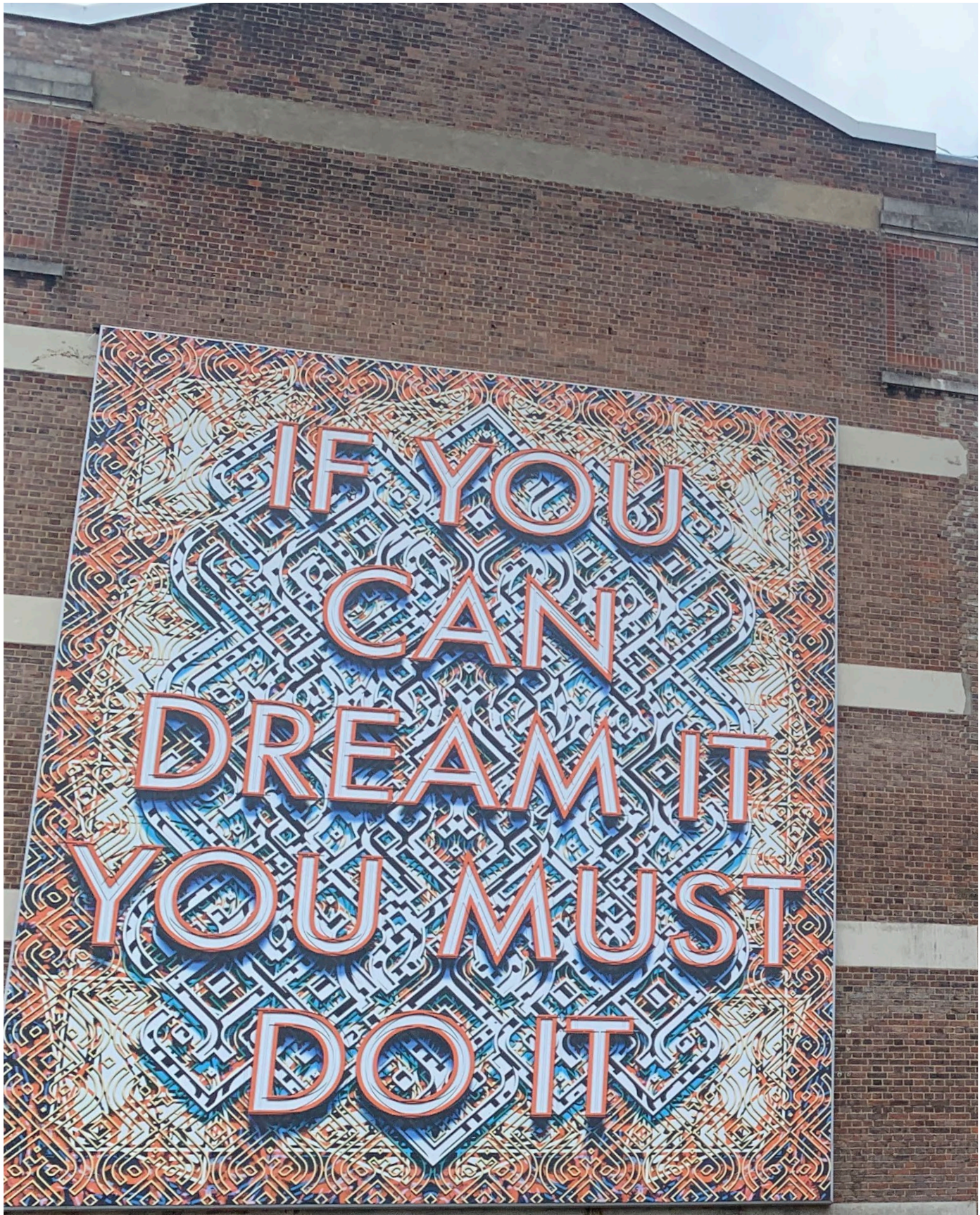
**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/631124/>

**Usage rights:**  In Copyright

**Enquiries:**

If you have questions about this document, contact [openresearch@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@mmu.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)



# Place Making Programme – Report and Action Plan

## Luton

Luton, November, 2022

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>3</b>
About the High Streets Task Force and Report Authors.....	4
Summary of the expert visit.....	5
<b>Developing A Framework for Action</b> .....	<b>6</b>
The Need for Reinvention.....	7
Putting plans in action: The IPM’s 25 priorities .....	8
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Improving the look and feel of the town centre.....	9
Improve the functionality of the town centre .....	13
Improving the town centre offer .....	16
Creating opportunities to change.....	18
Improving place management.....	20
<b>Appendix 1: Workshop Findings</b> .....	<b>23</b>
The future of Luton town centre: stakeholder perspectives.....	23
Activating Luton town centre: stakeholder perspectives .....	24
Barriers to activation: stakeholder perspectives .....	25
<b>Further reading</b> .....	<b>27</b>

# Foreword

Luton and the High Streets Task Force (HSTF) began working together following an expert visit in October 2021. Based on discussions with the Council, the subsequent *Unlocking Your Place Potential Report* (UYPP) outlined how the Task Force could provide further support for Luton.

It was agreed there were solid development plans and funding applications in process to regenerate Luton. The Expert Support which followed the UYPP Report recommended strengthening partnerships and developing a narrative on plans for the future.

In 2022 Luton secured funding to deliver its regeneration plans, however, these projects may take several years to complete. The pressing challenge is the need to activate the town centre now. Consequently, the Task Force recommended Luton begin a process of reinvention. This entails developing a programme of placemaking activities intended to increase footfall and spend, through interventions to attract a wider range of residents or encourage existing town centre users to stay longer. This could include events, festivals, pop-up retail, reuse of vacant shops, and basic improvements to the appearance of the town centre. New activity might also trial new products or services which begin to diversify the local offer and adapt the centre to meet the needs of future users.

To help places tackle reinvention, HSTF provides a Placemaking Workshop developed and delivered by the Institute of Place Management (IPM). This is designed to bring together key stakeholders to identify the challenges and opportunities for Luton and to agree short and longer-term priorities which can be the focus of an action plan to ensure its future sustainability.

In Luton, this workshop took place in October 2022 and included representatives from the arts, major employers, night time venues, local businesses and the BID. Council representatives from the Community and Voluntary Sector Development, Major Projects and the office of the local MP were also present. The Task Force would like to thank all who attended the workshop for their active contributions and to thank Luton Borough Council for organising the session.

This report summarises ideas provided by local stakeholders, but also reveals barriers they identified which they think currently stops activity from happening. Based on the workshop discussion and findings, HSTF has developed a series of short and long-term recommendations to inform a strategy of reinvention for Luton.

The recommendations outlined in this report form part of the direct support offered through the High Streets Task Force which includes continuing expert support alongside online resources and training available through the [website](#).

**Thank you for participating in the High Streets Task Force Programme. With your permission, the High Streets Task Force would like to check in with you after 12 months to evaluate how delivery of your transformation plan is progressing. Please indicate whether this is possible in your response to this report.**

## About the High Streets Task Force and Report Authors

### **The High Streets Task Force**

The High Streets Task Force is an alliance of placemaking experts working to redefine the high street. We provide guidance, tools, and skills to help communities, partnerships and local government transform their high streets. The programme, funded by HM Government will run in England until 2024.

### **The report authors**

Dr Steve Millington is the Director of the Business Transformations Research Centre, based at Manchester Metropolitan University. His academic career spans over 20 years, he is Senior Fellow, and a director of the Institute of Place Management, where he leads on several projects including the IPM's Vital and Viable programme and designing the placemaking programme for the High Streets Task Force for England.

Chao Gao is a Chartered member of the Landscape Institute and a High Street Task Force Facilitator. She is also the founder of Ciaociao Design and a Landscape Architect at Gensler, a design company that focus on resilient cities and landscapes. Her projects include meanwhile space, streetscape design, civil space at national significant institutes and masterplanning.

## Summary of the expert visit

The High Street Task Force experts' evaluation of Luton's plans for the town centre concluded there is a sensible and clear vision in place. This should deliver transformative change, but it may take several years to fully realise.

The HSTF's earlier work (in 2021) with Luton identified place activation as the main barrier to transformation i.e., there needs to be more activities taking place in the town center empty sites such as the pedestrianised George Street and brownfield sites awaiting redevelopment. Now Luton has been successful in its funding bids, the town's ambitions can become real. Rather than revisiting previous recommendations and the longer-term plans for the town, the experts instead concluded Luton should focus on addressing activity in the town centre by developing a placemaking programme which delivers quick wins, but also helps to diversify the offer, increasing the appeal of the town centre to a wider audience, and priming the centre for future adaption.

In preparation for the workshop, the HSTF Experts reviewed previous recommendations and desk-based research, participated in a walking tour of the town centre facilitated by the local council (where we engaged local traders), and gathered evidence from the workshop (summarised in the appendices). The workshop was well attended with representation from Luton stakeholders including local business owners, police, Luton Town Disabled Supporters Association? CultureTrustUK Useful contributions were made from all participants, and it is clear stakeholders want to create a thriving town centre, one which fulfils its potential, a place to be proud of. Most importantly, stakeholders want to be part of the changes.

In summary, there are many opportunities for Luton but there needs to be short to medium interventions to stop the decline whilst new developments are underway and to start diversifying the town's offer now, not when the new projects are complete.

It is important for local stakeholders to act quickly. The workshop aimed to galvanise local stakeholders into action and equip them with low resource ideas which could be taken forward in the short-term to activate the town centre.

# Developing A Framework for Action

High street revitalisation is complex and challenging. Although they face common challenges, places are unique and there are no easy prescriptive solutions for regenerating high streets and town centres. Whereas the Taskforce can provide expert guidance and frameworks to help, it is incumbent on local stakeholders to use their insights and capacity to create and deliver bespoke programmes of change to ensure their high street or town centre is both attractive and prepared for the future. It is vital stakeholders have a well communicated plan that recognises the tasks which need to occur to manage recovery and longer-term transformation. This is effective place management and is what gets places from a collection of investments and actions onto a path of transformation.

Based on the results of a major research programme, the 4 Rs Framework is designed to help places develop a town centre action plan. The figure below distinguishes between the processes of analysis and decision making (*repositioning*), effecting change (*reinventing*), communication (*rebranding*) and governance/spatial planning and development (*restructuring*). The High Streets Task Force encourages town centres to use this framework in their recovery and long-term planning.

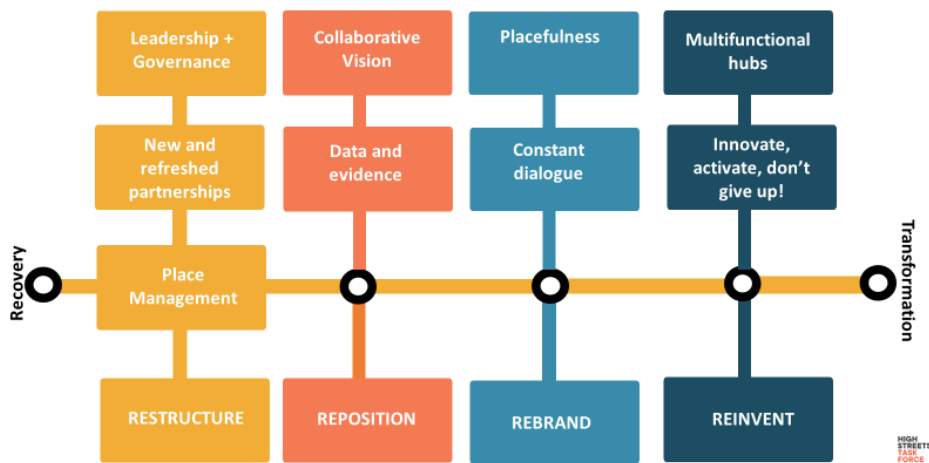


Fig 2: Transformation routemap

It is important to acknowledge the 4Rs are not mutually exclusive but are connected to one another; each is a potential start point on a journey to transformation; and different places will be at different stages on the journey. The Four Rs are one of the centrepieces of the HSTF toolkit for communities.

An editable version of the transformation routemap with instructions can be [downloaded here](#) to help you plan the Action Plan. Depending on where you start, this Route Map will take time to deliver but is a useful tool for planning both short and long-term priorities. Actions under each R may happen simultaneously, consecutively, or repeatedly.



If delivered correctly through effective leadership and collaboration with all key stakeholders, placemaking has the potential to improve the local economy, environment, and society, as well provide cultural benefits. The underlying aim of any placemaking intervention should be to create and promote places that are sustainable, attractive, sociable, accessible, active, secure, welcoming, healthy, and friendly. Temporary activation of underutilised or neglected sites can showcase these to potential investors. Reinventing, however, is just one element of the routemap. It is important, therefore, to work through the implications of the recommendations above in terms of the other Rs on the routemap.

## The Need for Reinvention

The *Unlocking Your Place Potential Report (UYPP)* written by Taskforce experts, draws on the IPM's 4 Rs Framework and indicates which of the Four Rs is the correct renewal strategy for the town:



Fig 1: 4 Rs Framework Outline Summary

Reinventing is prescribed when there is a lack of activity in a place, or there is too much reliance on the existing offer to drive footfall. It may be the case local people are having to travel elsewhere to access the products and services they need or want, rather than use their local centre. Although the focus is on developing a programme of short-term priorities, places also need to consider how they can introduce new activities which will begin to adapt the town centre to meet the needs of future users. It is important, therefore, that local stakeholders share a common understanding of broader structural change affecting the high street.

## Putting plans in action: The IPM's 25 priorities

Whereas the 4Rs provide local stakeholders with a strategic guide to renewal, the 25 Priorities are a framework for activating a long-term vision (see appendices). Each priority is supported by online learning and resources available through the High Streets Task Force website. It is also important to note that behind each priority there is a subgroup of factors to consider.

Based on background research, pre-existing expertise, visit to the town centre, and of course information provided by stakeholders during the workshop, we have established what we feel the top priorities are, using the 25 Priorities framework. To help make sense of the recommendations, we have grouped them within five thematic areas:



### **What affects the look and feel of the high street or centre?**

4) Experience 5) Appearance 12) Place marketing 20) Crime and Safety 22) Liveability



### **How does the town centre function?**

1) Activity Hours 7) Necessities 14) Accessibility 11) Walkability 24) Functionality



### **What does the town centre have to offer?**

2) Retail Offer 8) Anchors 9) Non-Retail Offer 10) Merchandise 16) Attractiveness 17) Markets 18) Recreational Space



### **How does the town centre need to change?**

15) Diversity 19) Barriers to entry 21) Adaptability 25) Innovation 23) Redevelopment Plans



### **How is the town centre managed?**

3) Vision and strategy 6) Place management Networks and partnership

The recommendations below are organised into quick wins and longer-term actions by the HSTF experts. Each one is linked to supporting resources, good practice case studies, or additional guidance. Ultimately we recommend also benchmarking your long-term strategic plans against the 25 Priorities.

# Recommendations

## Improving the look and feel of the town centre

Appearance is ranked #5 in the 25 Priorities. It refers to the quality of public realm and aesthetics. This can be negatively affected by cleanliness, quality of lighting, landscaping, design consistency, and the management of under-used spaces. When not addressed, poor building quality and public realm can generate poor place perceptions and undermine civic pride. Occasional visitors are less likely to make repeat visitors. The atmospheric and visual qualities of the high street will also impact on place experience and can contribute to fear of crime, even though such concerns remain largely unsubstantiated. Ideally, high streets should be welcoming places, where people feel safe, and are likely to dwell and linger.

General litter and cleanliness are not major problems in Luton, and new landscaping and outdoor seating along Dalton Road is a positive development. There are, however, several unkempt spaces, both in the centre and located at key entry points into town, including side streets and backspaces, together with a numerous building facades in need of improvement.

We recognise Luton's long-term regeneration plans will address some of these issues, but in the meantime basic improvements to appearance are required. Indicative interventions include greening empty spaces, shopfront improvements, and basic public art or creative works. During the workshop, participants focused particularly on the potential of artwork to be displayed on vacant premises and numerous small sites that could be animated through simple artwork and/or greening.

It is important first to establish a comprehensive list of potential interventions in terms of public and private property, to underpin the development of a costed placemaking action plan. Individual projects should be low cost, low risk and deliverable within less than 12 months. Once established we would advise trialling and experimenting with a few but visible schemes, and then encouraging specific businesses and community groups to lead on delivery and take ownership of others. Private businesses and property owners clearly need to take greater responsibility for their assets within the town centre, facilitated by council support and regulatory powers to encourage/enforce improvements. A specific focus of this work might be on rekindling the association of Luton with historic events and well-known people born or associated with the town, measures that might celebrate local heroes.

#1 Improving the look and feel of the town centre		
Quick wins	Longer Term Actions	Indicative good practice / supporting resources
<p><b>Streetscape and wayfinding improvement</b></p> <p>Identify empty sites at the town center and along the key routes to University of Bedfordshire under the council's ownership. Insert a number of pocket parks, seating, pop-up kiosks and playful streetscape to provide functions to those sites.</p> <p>Consider painting the bland building facades, temporary hoardings, bollards and install signage to improve the wayfinding experience.</p>	<p>Complete a comprehensive audit of street furniture and cluster under the council's ownership. Street furniture should support movement desire lines and enhance the public realm experience. Cohesive material and design language also help to build the identity and character of a space. Establishing a streetscape design manual would help Luton to establish its identity.</p> <p>Create a placemaking action plan which outlines a clear and viable programme of small-scale and iterative improvements, supported with micro-funding (crowd funding, local authority small grants, contributions from key stakeholders).</p>	<p><a href="#">Revealing Waterloo: A Placemaking Strategy</a></p>

<p><b>Match season activations</b></p> <p>Create a number of activity events such as mini football at key public spaces such as market hall plaza prior to the match season.</p> <p>Encourage food pop-ups at match season around the town center.</p> <p><b>Luton lates</b></p> <p>Identify the gap between the town center shop opening time and football match start and end time. Spilling inside out.</p> <p>Build on existing first Thursday of every month with more activities like project mapping on buildings, lasers, co-labs, events, animation and food/drinks.</p>	<p>Establish a clear funding programme for physical improvements to shop fronts and commission a Shop Front Design Guide.</p>	<p>Jenny’s Stiches and Burrow’s – already offer good examples of window activation and smart shop fronts.</p>
<p><b>Activate the existing civic spaces</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promote small local businesses to utilise the empty shop unit (Debenhams) for community events, workshops and pop-ups on weekends and festival period. Consider dividing the floors and rent out desk spaces for workspace.</li> <li>2. Activate the adjacent Market Hall Square accordingly to attract people.</li> <li>3. Healthy streets</li> </ol> <p>Potential site: Bunting on Bute Street” Install catenary lighting / add planting including climbers to make the street more friendly to pedestrian and create a village feel from station to Mall.</p>	<p>Transform the small business cluster to a business/ art/ craft quarter and curate festival across Luton annually to promote local business.</p>	<p>Example of transform empty shop units to community led art workshop: FAT Studio at Old Kent Road <a href="https://www.fatstudio.co.uk">https://www.fatstudio.co.uk</a></p> <p>Peckham levels another successful case of transforming empty building into workspace and maker space. The Peckham Festival takes place every year at Levels attract great footfall and promote local art. <a href="https://www.peckhamfestival.org">https://www.peckhamfestival.org</a></p>

<p><b>Made in Luton - Artwork Initiative</b></p> <p>CultureTrustUK has initiative to run a hat pin competition to animate any previous hat factory buildings. The hat pin competition should be a start of many art projects eventually create an fun art trail in Luton.</p>	<p>Run a number of workshops with CultureTrustUK, Luton school and college students, the disable group and local residents, etc to create drawings, artwork, sculpture and install them around the empty site of Luton. The aim is to change the outlook of Luton from 'Blend, monochrome' to creative and diverse. The artwork will also improve the wayfinding and strengthen the connection of community.</p>	<p>Community (local artists and makers) led gateway art project example: Seven Bridges at Lambeth</p> <p><a href="https://www.7-bridges.org">https://www.7-bridges.org</a></p>
<p><b>A network of pocket gardens</b></p> <p>Identify unkempt sites amenable to simple planting schemes and facilitate both formal and informal community-led gardening initiatives.</p>	<p>Evaluate the impact of these activities and build a business case for more ambitious greening measures e.g., larger scale temporary gardens, pocket parks " with greater involvement of community organisations and volunteers to support maintenance. Establish connections from the pocket gardens to the Openup River Lea project. Keep the gardens at where they are and transform them into permanent gardens.</p>	<p>Example of community led gardens: Cody Dock at Canning Town</p> <p><a href="https://codydock.org.uk">https://codydock.org.uk</a></p>
<p><b>Gateway projects</b></p> <p>Create a number of gateway projects throughout the town and at key transport stations (especially places with good visibilities like rooftops). A good example in Luton is Youthscape sign. Consider illuminated letters and graphics that represent Luton's heritage, diversity and culture. Installation and dissembling methods to be thought through before installing to allow flexibility of sculptures ( for meanwhile space and long term locations.)</p>	<p>Establish an extensive murals programme, commissioning local arts organisations to brighten the town centre. Important for this to be a collaborative rather than top-down exercise.</p>	<p>Examples from the workshop included:<a href="#">Withington Walls</a>Victoria Quarter (New Brighton, Wirral) led by <a href="#">Rockpoint</a> (images on <a href="#">Instagram</a>)</p>

<p><b>Streetscape maintenance</b></p> <p>Identify centre wide concerning cleanliness e.g., litter-picking, graffiti removal, broken windows etc.</p>	<p>Establish a programme of public works to remove small but unsightly issues, and facilitate community voluntary litter picking sessions</p>	<p><a href="#">Pride in Place: Tackling Environmental Incivilities</a></p>
--	---	--

## Improve the functionality of the town centre

It is useful to think about functionality in terms of both spatial layout of the centre, how activity patterns vary of the day/week/months. Understanding and intervening to address mismatches between footfall, anchors, and opening hours remains the number one priority intervention.

Many businesses in Luton operate traditional 9-5pm opening hours. Evidence from other towns and the HSTF’s national review of footfall, suggests towns review local data and adjust opening hours to suit the needs of their contemporary catchment. Clearly, people who work until 5pm will have limited opportunity to shop locally as most shops are closed by then. Workshop participants suggested Luton’s early evening economy suffers as a consequence, with little to do once shops have closed, especially during the week. This is not an uncommon situation, and unquestionably people who work in or close to the town centre will travel elsewhere to access the goods and services they need after 5pm, such as the extensive edge of town Hollywood Retail Park which also accommodates hospitality and leisure, or they will travel to other nearby towns. With a major employment anchor at BAE Systems, there is a potential catchment which might justify the trialling of extended shopping hours and provision of a differentiated leisure and hospitality offer. A review of opening hours and footfall data might initially inform an event programme which can be developed to fills quiet times or draw visitors to quieter parts of the town centre.

This challenge links to how workshop participants were also concerned about connectivity between other key anchors and the town centre e.g., the immediate local catchment of residential streets, nearby natural landscape, and other visitor attractions Luton has to offer. This included anticipating future anchors such as the planned university campus. Unfortunately, many of these potential drivers of footfall are not well connected to the centre, limiting potential synergies, whereas as well-connected centre will encourage flows and linked trips between retail and non-retail anchors, between key entry points such as car-parks and public transport hubs, nearby attraction, and residential neighbourhoods. Some of these challenges can only be addressed through major long-term infrastructural reconfiguration. However, participants commented many people’s commuting distances are short – sometimes only a mile. With a lack of signage there is no prompt to consider why you should go into the centre or how you would get there.

Short term measures, however, might include the trialling of traffic calming or temporary road closures to encourage active travel. Improved signage, way-faring, and lighting into and through the centre might also help. Longer term, we would advise reviewing strategic regeneration plans to review what changes could be progressed through larger schemes, focusing on public transport hubs and car parking, and more permanent measures to provide active travel options. For example, lack of parking was not seen by participants as a major obstacle, rather the location, costs, and limits on parking duration were seen as unhelpful to retailers.



Improve the functionality of the town centre: recommendations		
Quick wins	Longer Term Actions	Indicative good practice / supporting resources
#1 Analyse insights from your existing footfall data and establish a baseline against which to measure impact of events and to inform future investment plans.	Engage with the HSTF to create an Advanced Dashboard for Luton.  This enables places with access to Springboard footfall data the ability to identify their town type, where it sits in an activity hierarchy, plus several other functions, such as monitoring the daytime and night-time economies.	Developing Place Analysts  The training is free, designed to support the best use of data within place management strategies for cities, towns, districts, and high streets. To put yourself forward for this training, please complete our <a href="#">online form</a> .  See also: <a href="#">London High Streets Data Service</a>
#2 Identify key activity hours and days and compare to modal opening hours of town centre businesses	Use the results of the audit to shape an events programme and develop an approach to the early evening economy e.g. trialling revised opening times.	See: <a href="#">Withington Case Study</a>
#3 Conduct a carparking audit and compare access with is in the right location and access aligns to activity hours (and to include business owner and market trader parking).	Review charging to consider a parking rebate scheme with spend, for example, at The Forum or Market Hall reducing parking costs (if they are found to be a deterrent).	<a href="#">Linking People, Place &amp; Parking in Sleaford Town Centre</a>  <a href="#">People, places and parking process</a>
#4 Improve town signage and wayfinding. Complete an audit of existing signage (quality, location, and relevance), and trial new pathfinding routes e.g., using simple planters and basic creative installations to mark potential routes.	Evaluate your trial and construct a longer term a wayfinding action plan, which aligns with wider town centre regeneration plans. Consider community sourced wayfinding suggestions and taken on board design considerations from a heritage point of view.	<a href="#">Walking – 25 Vital and Viable Priorities</a>  <a href="#">Great Public Spaces: Guide and Evaluation Tool</a>

## Improving the town centre offer

Luton possesses strong architectural heritage and has a growing independent offer. The town centre benefits from The Forum, a theatre housing a café and function rooms, which shares a building with the market, subject soon to new investment and redevelopment. The Forum is a key asset, capable of drawing audiences from a wide catchment. However, what visitors might do before and after performances is open to question. Luton also benefits as a location tourists use to explore the Lake District, but again there is concern about what is on offer in the town centre to retain tourist spend. Another advantage is the nearby location of BAE Systems, a major employment hub. But, again, workshop participants raised concern that many employees drive into Luton but bypass the town centre. In summary, there is a need to develop a much stronger, diverse offer and communicate that to existing catchment groups. However, the loss of major retailers and the lack of activity after 5pm, raises questions about the wider town centre offer and its ability to appeal to a wider range of needs, beyond everyday shopping.

The long-term view is places can no longer rely on national multiple retailers to drive footfall. New forms of retail experiences are required, new merchandise, store formats, and a much stronger non-retail. During the workshop participants discussed how a new offer might be introduced through temporary events and activation of vacant units, which might lead to more permanent change, particularly activity that might appeal younger people in anticipation University of Cumbria campus opening in 2024. The Market Hall and The Forum are existing venues which could be used more and host events as both have space which could be used in the short-term. We discussed how there might be a fuller year-round event programme to add reasons to visit and return to the town centre, complimenting the existing offer with temporary use, pop-up and outdoor events. This might arise simply through the co-ordination and enhanced promotion of existing events, perhaps best led by the BID.

The indoor market has a strong connection with the town, but it does not operate to its potential. Markets are one of the [IPM's top 25 Priority Interventions](#) and can significantly drive footfall, but with limited opening hours and range of merchandise this is not the case in Luton. It is important to consider the market redevelopment as an opportunity to create better synergy between the cultural and market offer. In the meantime, however, more could be done to create a variegated market offer. We suggest a trial using the Teenage Market, reviewing when and where outdoor markets happen. Markets reduce barriers to entry, enable low risk trials and experiments with new offers, and can be scheduled at different times. In Stockport, for example, Foodie Friday has been transformational in terms of filling gaps in the evening offer and improving place reputation.

One business owner in the town centre, explained to the expert how their shop is an office/service hub to manage enquiries and ship orders from, rather than relying on walk-in customers, recognising retailers need offer a hybrid of both in-store and online experiences. The HSTF's view is more retailers (including market traders) need to acknowledge the need to engage with online tools to drive both online sales, footfall, married with various delivery options, including click n collect.

Improving the town centre offer: recommendations		
Quick wins	Longer Term Actions	Indicative good practice / supporting resources
#1 Create a vacant property action plan, working with property owners and community groups to encourage active usage	<p>Deploy flexible, short-term lets, reduced or rent-free periods for start-ups,</p> <p>Engage community groups to occupy units on a temporary basis for free where there is non-commercial use.</p> <p>Utilise community asset transfers where necessary.</p> <p>Review management of key architectural assets through the BID and commercial agents, establish protocols to enable rapid response for units at risk of becoming vacant.</p>	<p><a href="#">A platform for places: Reviving town centres by changing how communities access property</a></p> <p><a href="#">Pop-up Retailing Objectives and Activities</a> and <a href="#">Pop-up Shops</a></p> <p><a href="#">Case study: Non-retail offer</a></p> <p><a href="#">High Streets Taskforce Online Learning: Understanding Futures Users of the High Street</a></p> <p><a href="#">Foodie Friday</a> (Stockport)</p> <p><a href="#">Art Battle</a> (Stockport)</p>
#2 Review how existing events can be maintained and supported.	Evaluate the potential to add additional activities at different times of the year, and/or extend existing events and festivals e.g., to encompass key gateway sites and activate and improve underutilised public realm.	<a href="#">Glaston-Bury</a> – a music festival taking place over one day in Bury town centre with 200 performing artists across 13 indoor venues and six temp outdoor stages.
#3 Review the Market Hall redevelopment schedule to identify times when pop-up traders and activities could be in the space (over seven days and into the evening)	Evaluate the impact and integrate ideas into plans for the redeveloped market hall currently underway	Review how <a href="#">Radcliffe Market</a> in Bury and <a href="#">Trinity Market in Hull</a> have created space featuring both traditional and contemporary market offers.
#4 Working with existing business development support and SME champions, especially in relation to online sales and market, create a targeted action plan to support traditional SMEs and market traders in the town centre.	Establish a programme of training and support to upskill traditional SMEs in contemporary business practice e.g., digital skills, collaborative marketing etc.	<a href="#">Help to Grow Retail Innovation</a>

## Creating opportunities to change

Luton is one of many places where the retail offer has been undermined by the collapse of large retailers such as Debenhams. With high numbers of vacant premises, it is widely accepted big name retailers are unlikely to return to many town centres, leaving behind large stores that are difficult to adapt or repurpose. However, vacancies also provide an opportunity to change, through trialling of new merchandise, services, and experiences.

Determining what new activity fills vacant units, ideally would be subject to care market analysis and respond to community needs. However, landlords or letting agents often follow a line of least resistance. More careful creation of new business development can only arise through the gathering of intelligence and a closer working relationship with private owners of property assets, to ensure new tenants contribute strongly to vitality and viability.

It is useful to have a clear action plan for activating vacant units, especially assets with long term empty units, and to have a rapid response process in place to deal with units which might become vacant soon. The BID is probably best placed to lead on this.

With evidence the UK retail is 40% over-spaced, reactivation of former shops will almost certainly require non-retail uses. Long term plans, therefore, might consider more creative models e.g., community asset transfer, or moving public services back to high street locations. Local councils are reminded they have regulatory and statutory powers to enforce private landlords to act, and CPO always remains an option where resource allow. In the meantime, efforts could be made to open existing vacant units to pop-up or meanwhile use, until investment plans are finalised. Our final advice here, is to follow the example of Altrincham, and to engage in what might provide to be long and difficult exercise to establish a landlords register, to ascertain ownership of all land and property in the town centre. We might advise then to reach out to landlords and to ultimately establish a sub-group focused on commercial property. A commercial agent already working with the council may be well placed to be part of this group and facilitate wider membership.

Another consideration is the abundance of space under Council control which could be repurposed. The empty sites provide Luton with great potential for reinventing the town centre through place activation, basic improvements to appearance and a simplified Council process to enable stakeholder projects to happen quickly should be key priorities in the short-term.

Creating opportunities to change: recommendations		
Quick wins	Longer Team Actions	Indicative good practice / supporting resources
#1 Identify buildings with vacant units suitable for conversion to alternative use, including residential	<p>Assess residential demand for town centre living</p> <p>Match demand and buildings against Landlord Database to prioritise which buildings are feasible in terms of condition and location.</p>	<p><a href="#">A New Life for the High Street</a></p> <p><a href="#">Levelling up and Regeneration Bill: Recommendations for housing, retail and the high street</a></p> <p><a href="#">Homes on Our High Streets</a></p> <p><a href="#">Dealing with Empty Shops: A guide for councils</a></p>
#2 Reduce barriers to entry for young entrepreneurs and creatives in the town centre e.g., by hosting a Teenage Market.	Evaluate potential to attract new creative businesses and young entrepreneurs through free/reduced rents/flexible leases, linked to the activation of vacant units.	<p><a href="#">Creative High Streets</a></p> <p><a href="#">Teenage Market</a></p> <p><a href="#">National Youth Market</a></p> <p><a href="#">Young Enterprise</a></p>
#3 Establish a property register identifying owners of all plots/buildings in the town centre.	Use this information to identify a potential landlords and property group comprising owners and commercial agents which will support gaining permission for artwork on shutters and later activating empty buildings	See: <a href="#">Altrincham revitalisation</a>
#3 Review council processes and identify obstacles to community access to council owned property and land.	Remove barriers such as red-tap, unnecessarily long application processes, and licensing fees and deposits, where they might deter community led non-commercial activity.	<p><a href="#">Barriers to New Entrants</a></p> <p><a href="#">Principles for public space design, planning to do better</a></p>

## Improving place management

As capital projects progress, now is the time to galvanise the local community to bring life into the town centre. However, there was acknowledgment the local authority has a small regeneration team compared to other similar sized towns. The view of the HSTF is the council cannot lead on all projects and others need to deliver certain projects. We also noted the Council needs to create a better working relationship with local stakeholders who are already willing to lead on place activation. Encouraging collaborative working will help to overcome general apathy and negativity about a lack of involvement in Council regeneration plans.

An agreed priority is to establish a placemaking partnership, to provide further capacity alongside the BID and Council, creating an additional vehicle for community groups to activate the town centre and widen its appeal. Although the council created an online group, participants at the workshop are perhaps better positioned, meeting face-to-face and outside work hours, to lead on quick wins. This should not necessarily be a formal arrangement, because over time this group will need to adapt and evolve, allowing fresh partners to join and deliver specific outcomes. Ultimately members of the group should act as ambassadors for Luton and engage in promoting positive messages about the town centre. The council, and other local stakeholders should support the delivery of small projects with micro-funding or help in-kind. This new group should replace the existing town centre stakeholder group created by the council and we have offered Expert Support to boost your capacity to establish this. We would advise establishing sub-groups to take forward different work streams and tasked to deliver clearly defined actions.

It is important the work of the BID, Council and newly formed placemaking partnership is clearly communicated to each other, and activity is co-ordinated. We would advise a smaller leadership team is established to provide this function, involving senior council representatives to ensure alignment between vision and strategy and the placemaking programme. The leadership group should engage in monitoring the effectiveness of interventions e.g., using footfall analysis, surveys of local traders, and measures of visitor satisfaction. This group should also begin linking activation projects to other strategic policy goals for Luton working with even wider range of stakeholders e.g., to promote health and wellbeing, safety, business support, skills training/updating etc. to ensure that activation reduces deprivation levels. This group should also provide strategic steer and advise on the adaptation of placemaking plans in anticipation of a growing residential population in the town centre e.g., augmenting the retail, leisure, cultural and hospitality offer.

Improving place management: recommendations		
Quick wins	Longer Term Actions	Indicative good practice / supporting resources
Establish first placemaking partnership group meeting, and agree terms of reference, and appoint a leadership team and begin to establish sub-group to lead on specific activities	Create a dynamic placemaking action plan on annual basis	<a href="#">Saving the High Street – the community takeover</a>
<b>Independent traders</b> to communicate and promote the centre	Advise on additional goods, services or activities might attract people in the future.	<a href="#">We are Withington</a>
<b>Engaging younger people</b> , involving University of Cumbria, colleges, and youth-orientated providers such as the Rock School	Facilitate strengthening the offer for younger people.	<a href="#">How can cities reimagine public space to support children and families?</a>
<b>Property and landlords</b> , comprising agents, landlords and developers	Leads on vacant properties and shop front improvements, now and in the future.	<a href="#">Landlords</a>
<b>Arts</b> , comprising formed art-teaching providers/groups and artists	Leads on shutter art, rotating town centre art murals and so forth.	<a href="#">Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda (written IPM evidence)</a>
<b>Markets</b> , to generate and deliver short-term changes and activities ahead of the market hall being redeveloped.	This should work closely with independent traders to ensure the markets remain continue as a core part of the town centre offer during and after the redevelopment of the indoor market	<a href="#">Markets Matter</a>





# Appendix 1: Workshop Findings

## The future of Luton town centre: stakeholder perspectives

In the first interactive session, workshop participants were asked to individually identify one broad change that should happen to attract people to the town centre and to ensure the centre's future sustainability. Each group was then asked to agree what the most important change should be.

The table below details the views of the stakeholders, aligned with the most appropriate of the IPM's 25 Priority Factors for Vital and Viable Towns, with suggested indicative interventions to address each one. The views expressed obviously only represent those who attended but there was quite a diverse range of stakeholders with different perspectives on the town.

### The top priority interventions needed to attract people and ensure future sustainability

IPM Priority	Stakeholder comments
SATETY / CRIME PLACE MARKETING PLACE MANAGEMENT	To address ASB issue To shake off the negative perception (especially safety perception) about Luton Cleaner streets.
APPEARANCE ANCHORS	More arts ( includeing gateway art), celebrate heritage, more entertainment,
EXPERIENCE ATTRACTIVENESS INNOVATION RETAIL OFFER	More independents, more aspirational, innovative and creative
ACCESSIBILITY	More inclusive to all people – young, old etc – who want to access and use the town centre. Local focus

The exercise reveals how the views of local stakeholders align with the Task Force’s recommendation that Luton pursues a strategy of reinvention. This involves activating and animating the town centre in the short term, but with the long-term goal to become more multifunctional by diversifying the offer.

## Activating Luton town centre: stakeholder perspectives

The second workshop exercise asked participants to highlight what can be done quickly to animate the town center. The responses are detailed in the table below.

Activities to quickly improve the town centre	Examples
Urban greening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Green corridors</li> <li>Pocket gardens / community gardens</li> <li>Planters (more on George Street)</li> <li>Invite local people to plant</li> </ul>
Street activations / spill out / public realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allowing performance, art and services like micro stores or bike repairs happening on the street.</li> <li>Summer chess benches / tables</li> <li>Free stage for locals</li> <li>Noisy activities that attract families (e.g. craft stores and funfairs)</li> <li>Better use of St George Square like a themed market</li> <li>Utilise amphitheatre area more</li> <li>Outdoor gigs</li>   <li>Record breaking events like big sing exercise and dance</li> <li>Race ducks down the Lea</li> </ul>
Retail / food / drink offer Pop-ups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friday foody</li> <li>Night market</li> <li>Craft market</li> <li>Teenage market and live music for them</li> <li>More cafes</li> <li>More late opening</li> <li>Sport</li> </ul>

Use vacant space for: Community hubs	Equipment support (for selling and receiving donations) Well being day for arts, craft, fitness and yoga. Advice centre to provide support Partnership day to see your community
Health support	Health checks Screening Advice Connect to VCSE
Cut red tape	Reduce bureaucracy and adopt a bottom-up approach. Engage with youth, Luton fans and market traders to regain trust in authority.
Street art Heritage trail (work in progress)	More art next to the football stadium

Some of these ideas are more viable than others, but the recommendations try and reflect as many as possible. The key challenge going forward, however, is which organisations and individuals are going to take responsibility for delivery.

## Barriers to activation: stakeholder perspectives

For the final exercise workshop participants were asked to consider what barriers need to be removed to enable change to happen. Their views are detailed in the table below.

Main Barriers
Lack of sharing information and communications across stakeholders
Lack of ownership
People's perception - hard to convince people to be ambitious and make changes.
Inflexibility and 'red tape'

Lack of empowerment / risk taking / trust.

Funding and capacity

## Further reading

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

From temporary arrangements to permanent change: Assessing the transitional capacity of city street experiments <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=d381d241-4dfd-4aa0-9937-9da06be8459a>

Community planning – Civic Voice presentation slides  
<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=4547887e-b2b6-4097-8f57-1f8b332cd1ee>

Placemaking: Building on the ‘Soul’ of a Place  
<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=902ef4c6-8010-40a8-932c-796165cbd204>

Community Shops: A Better Form of Business  
<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=a4369b30-d3ef-4236-9a27-8f21fe8b5961>

Reputation - 237 'Vital and Viable' Factors  
<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=1dcb78c8-deae-4443-911e-b63690657d8e>

Parliament, 2019. *High streets and town centres in 2030*. House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Westminster. Available at:  
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1010/1010.pdf>

Timpson J. et al. 2018. *The High Street Report*. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Available at:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/766844/The\\_High\\_Street\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766844/The_High_Street_Report.pdf)

Grimsey Review COVID-19 Supplement Report: Build Back Better. Available at:  
<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=48a97424-00b3-4ad9-a7c2-9a544c474082#:~:text=June%2D2020.pdf-.Building%20on%20the%20Grimsey%201%20and%20Grimsey%202%20reviews%2C%20the,in%20a%20post%2DCovid19%20environment.>

The Grimsey Review 2. Available at:  
<https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=2a3d7ab0-fc51-43aa-9192-488fc34ffded>