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Place Making Programme – Darlington Final Report and Action Plan



Darlington, October 3rd 2022

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Foreword

Darlington and the High Streets Task Force (HSTF) began working together following an expert UYPP visit in February 2022. Based on discussions with the Council, the subsequent *Unlocking Your Place Potential Report* outlined how the Task Force could provide further support for Darlington. Although the existing vision for the town centre is to be commended, the desk research revealed the aspirations for involving and supporting business and the economy could be clearer, and there was a need to build further on Darlington's existing strengths and unique attributes.

Consequently, the High Streets Task Force expert identified the need to diversify the town's offer and experience – identifying Reinventing as the main barrier to transformation in Darlington. Reinventing entails developing a programme of activity to increase footfall and spend through interventions that attract either a wider range of residents or encourage other visitors, to visit and stay longer in the centre. This could include events, festivals, pop-up retail, reuse of vacant shops, and basic improvements to the appearance of the town centre. New activity could also be used to trial products or services that would both diversify the local offer and begin to adapt the centre to meet the needs of future users.

To help places tackle reinvention, the Taskforce offers the Placemaking Workshop, developed and delivered by the IPM, which is designed to bring together key stakeholders to identify the challenges and opportunities for their high street and to agree short term and long-term priorities which can be the focus of a placemaking action plan to ensure its future sustainability.

In Darlington, the workshop took place in October 2022 and included representatives from the Borough Council's town centre events and marketing teams, external event organisers, the local market manager, and owners of independent businesses: Leggs and House of Zana. The workshop was also attended by officers with responsibility for Darlington's Towns Fund, which has already led to investment in the town centre. The Task Force would like to thank all who attended the workshop for their active contributions and to thank Darlington 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, the HSTF has developed a series of quick wins and longer-term recommendations to inform an action plan to reinvent Darlington. The recommendations outlined in this report mark the end of the direct support offered through the High Streets Task Force, but online resources, training, and support remains available through the website¹.

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.

¹ <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/>

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

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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 a 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.

Joe Barratt

Joe Barratt is a Fellow at the Institute of Place Management and the Expert Co-Ordinator for the government's High Streets Task Force. He has been involved in place-management for over ten years, having co-founded The Teenage Market, an award-winning national initiative which gives young people a free platform to showcase their creative talents, in 2012.

His work has also involved the management of Foodie Friday, a monthly street food event in Stockport, Greater Manchester which recently won the "Best Pop-Up" award at the Manchester Food and Drink Festival for the second time, having previously won in 2016.

The Need for Reinvention

High street revitalisation is complex and challenging. Although places face common challenges, each one is unique and there are no easy prescriptive solutions for regenerating high streets and town centres. Whilst 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.

The Unlocking Your Place Potential Report (UYPP) written by Taskforce experts, draws on the IPM's 4 Rs Framework of Repositioning, Reinventing, Rebranding and Restructuring. The Four Rs are one of the centrepieces of the HSTF toolkit for communities, and the UYPP report will have indicated which of the Four Rs is the correct renewal strategy for the town.

Based on the results of a major research programme, the Framework is designed to help places make a town centre action plan. 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.



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.

Key recommendations

Priority #1: Collect, share, and analyse data

A key priority is to better understand your place through analysis of relevant data. We understand that Darlington has access to Springboard data but is not currently benefitting from a High Streets Task Force Advanced Dashboard. To access this dashboard, the council would need to agree to share access to the data with a business and community representative. We recommend you do this, to foster a spirit of collaboration.

We also recommend that you begin constructing a property ownership register to create a better understanding of who the key landlords, property owners, developers and commercial agents are. The long-term objective would be to create a property group comprised of private landlords and agents to take on basic improvements to buildings, and longer, term improve tenancy arrangements across the centre.

Priority #2: Sustain existing levels of activity, whilst providing new events and market improvements to encourage longer dwell time and wider engagement

As a second priority, we identified a need to both sustain the activity that is currently ongoing but also to consider how new events and improvements could make an impact on dwell time and engagement with a wider audience. We found a somewhat disjointed offer and experience at Darlington Market. Whilst we acknowledge that the Town Investment Plan refers to future and potentially exciting improvements to the market, our recommendations concern what can be done immediately to improve the offer. You should consider the potential gaps the market could fill, which are currently missing from the wider town centre offer.

Additionally, although Darlington is not over-run with vacant units, all towns should have a clear action plan and protocols in place to activate under-used and vacant sites on a temporary basis. Towns should be ready to respond immediately as units become vacant, even if interventions might be low key. Whilst it was good to see 'meanwhile' activity taking place in the centre, it was less clear what the plan was for many of the other empty units within the town centre, particularly the former Marks & Spencer building on the corner of Skinnergate.

Priority #3: Improve appearance, access routes and links to key anchors

The third priority we identified is across appearance, access routes and anchors. Whilst some really good work has been done already to improve the town centre in this area, there is scope to extend and develop these types of low-level interventions across the town centre, to create a more unified experience. Future projects might encompass more local narratives and celebrate diversity, such as creating a mural to celebrate the life of Cherry Valentine, a star of Ru Paul's drag race and a mental health nurse from Darlington, who sadly passed away in September 2022. From a spatial perspective, future interventions might extend to connect the town centre from adjacent sites through road softening and more visually appealing wayfinding.

Summary of the expert visit

The High Streets Task Force expert's evaluation of Darlington's plans for the town centre concluded there are sensible and clear activation plans already in place, but more could be done to promote and communicate their effectiveness to a wider audience. There is also a threat these activities are dependent on Alex Nicholson, in her role as Town Centre Partnerships and Events Manager at Darlington Council.

The demise of the Business Improvement District (BID) in 2017 has reduced the capacity to run and support events and promotional activity in Darlington and, although Alex and her team have provided sterling work in filling this capacity, there is now a need to build in greater resilience by extending the responsibility for delivering place-making improvements beyond the council and local authority resourcing. For this reason, we have identified there is a need to review the sustainability of the current model for delivering activity in the town centre and to identify mechanisms for delivering a wider scope of events.

Although vacancy is not a major issue for Darlington, nevertheless, we feel there is a need to develop more intelligence and a closer working relationship with private owners of the town centre's property assets. It is useful to have a clear action plan for activating vacant units, especially assets with long-term empty units, with a rapid response process in place to deal with any units which might become vacant in the future. With evidence the UK retail is currently 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. We were impressed with measures to improve alley-ways and backspaces, and we would suggest extending these efforts to encompass more of the town centre. This could be done in an iterative way, without the need for strategic regeneration funding, with responsibility shifting to businesses, property owners and community groups to create, manage, and maintain any micro-interventions.

An immediate concern is the future of the market. This is a great asset and provides Darlington with a unique landmark. However, from our observations and resultant discussion in the workshop, we would advise an urgent review of the market's design and development is required, involving the council, the market management company and traders. Markets are one of the IPM's top 25 Priority Interventions and have potential to significantly drive footfall. At the moment, however, this doesn't appear to be the case in Darlington, particularly during the day. Our concern is that the unique benefits markets can bring to centres will be lost in Darlington. Once gone, markets are very difficult to re-establish.

The development of the Railway Heritage Quarter provides a long-term opportunity to take advantage of synergies within Darlington town centre and to improve pedestrian access. In addition, the site of the new Treasury building will establish an additional footfall anchor in Darlington, but to take full advantage of the potential synergy between this employment base and the town centre will require substantive road softening schemes and improved walking routes. In this area of the town, the river frontage remains cruelly under-used, whereas in the long term this might be a strong green anchor for the town. These are all long term and strategic ambitions, but work could be done now to lay the groundwork for future development

through minor and iterative improvements to the basic appearance and wayfinding along key pedestrian routes connecting anchors to the town centre businesses. We would suggest this stretches to include measures that contribute to the greening of the centre and capitalise on Darlington's recent successes in this area. In addition, Darlington might review initiatives in Gateshead, which has recently extended trials to narrow lanes on the dual carriageway system around the town centre to establish a rationale for more permanent measures, and Sheffield, which has established the UK's first 'green street' by creating 1.3km of new active travel routes.

Whilst attendance at the workshop might have included greater representation from business and community representatives, it was welcoming to see a range of representation from the council itself. Useful contributions were made from both the teams responsible for marketing and the Towns Fund. Attendees underlined the importance of diversifying the town centre offer beyond retail, to encompass services, housing, health, and education to create a more multi-functional town centre economy. With an ambition to create more residential development in and around the town centre, it is also important to consider how the place making programme will adjust over time to meet the needs of future residents.

In summary, there are many strengths to Darlington's place offer and the town would benefit from developing a placemaking programme document which both captures these strengths, proposes a range of additional quick wins, and sets out a longer-term strategy to appeal to a wider catchment and prime the centre for future adaption. It is important the measures we suggest below, therefore, align with strategic plans and visions, although we would also advise long-term plans also need to accommodate a measure of flexibility and plan for future adaption.

Developing A Framework for Action

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. The 4 Rs Framework 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.

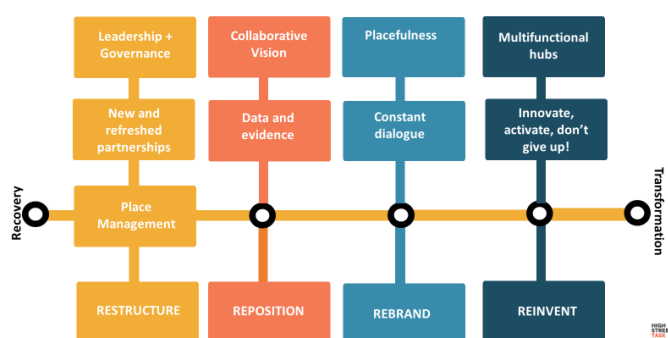


Fig 2: Transformation routemap

An editable version of the transformation routemap with instructions can be downloaded² 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 as 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.

² <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/transformation-routemap-webinars/create-a-transformation-routemap-for-your-town/>

Putting plans in Action: 25 Priorities

Whereas the 4Rs provide the council and other senior stakeholders with a strategic guide to renewal, the 25 Priorities provide a framework for activating a long-term vision. In trying to establish priority interventions, we recommend benchmarking your plans against the 25 Priorities (see appendices for detail).

From the workshop findings and from the other evidence we have collated, this report effectively represents the start of this process. The recommendations summarise the key priorities agreed by the workshop, together with suggested quick wins and longer-term actions.

It is important for local stakeholders to act quickly. The workshop provided by the Task Force 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 centre.

We would advise a leadership group is established involving stakeholders present at the workshop, to lead on delivery of quick wins. Over-time, however, this group will need to adapt and evolve. It needs to add capacity and take the pressure of the existing team responsible for the town centre. The group should also provide a co-ordinating role in the town centre and facilitate an ongoing placemaking programme, with clear communication of information between key stakeholders in the town centre being a high priority. It is important to involve senior council representatives in the group, to ensure alignment between strategic regeneration plans and the placemaking programme.

We would advise establishing the guidance sub-groups to take forward different work streams e.g., traders naturally should lead on developing the place. These groups should be tasked with the delivery of clearly defined actions. This could include:

- An independent trader's group to communicate and promote the centre
- University and college providers to facilitate strengthening the offer for younger people
- A property group of agents, landlords and developers to lead on vacant properties and façade improvements
- A markets group to take responsibility for managing the market offer in alignment with a wider vision of the centre.

The list above is not exhaustive, and neither should it be fixed. Membership should be fluid, allowing for new stakeholders to join over time. The table below may help you decide how to allocate specific activities.

The leadership group should engage in monitoring the effectiveness of interventions e.g., using footfall analysis, surveys of local traders, and other evidence to inform investment and resource decisions. Ultimately members of the group should in general act as ambassadors for Darlington and engage in promoting positive and upbeat messages about the town centre.

25 Priorities Framework for Action

Whereas the 4Rs 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 also important to note that behind 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:



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

The following recommendations are based on the top priorities for the town from workshop discussions as well as the UYPP Report, and a tour of the town centre. They are linked to the evidence based IPM's 25 Priority Factors for Vital and Viable Towns. References to supporting resource materials to help with your action planning are also included for each priority.

Priority #1: Collect, share, and analyse data

A key priority is to better understand your place through analysis of relevant data. Our research shows decisions based on inaccurate data and intelligence are usually ineffective. This also applies to the evaluation of impact of events, festivals, and other placemaking activity. It is important to use accurate data to establish a benchmark, against which to measure the effectiveness of short and long-term intervention. Key questions to consider in this regard are did the activity increase town centre footfall? Did it help attract a new demographic of user into the town centre? And did the activity improve perceptions of the town?

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.

We understand Darlington has access to Springboard data but is not currently benefitting from a High Streets Task Force Advanced Dashboard. Our advanced dashboards are designed to connect your Springboard footfall data together with social media sentiment data from Maybe© to provide a cohesive overview of your town. To access this dashboard, the council would need to agree to share access to the data with a business and community representative. This helps foster a spirit of collaboration and should lead to wider conversations about monitoring the impact of events and festivals when they are run throughout the town.

The importance of accessing this type of data was mentioned by attendees at the workshop from the Towns Fund team. Access to the dashboard could also be shared internally, so officers have full sight of town centre activity patterns to understand what's driving footfall at different times of the day, week, month, and year. When this data is overlaid and incorporated with different modal uses (car, bus, cycle, walking), it creates a powerful data set which can often help challenge existing preconceptions about how people move around and use the town. In addition, The High Streets Task Force runs regular online cohorts of the Developing Place Analysts training course, which are available on invitation.

A key information gap relates to property ownership. The construction of a property register would be helpful. We realise this might be a time-consuming and frustrating exercise, but engagement with landlords, property owners, developers and commercial agents is necessary. The revitalisation of places like Altrincham, for example, started with this, enabling the local authority to build better relations with the private property sector. The long-term objective would be to create a property group comprised of private landlords and agents to take on basic improvements to buildings, and longer, term improve tenancy arrangements across the centre.

Priority #1: Collecting, Analysing and Sharing Data

Quick Wins	Longer Term Actions	Indicative Good practice /supporting resource
<p>Analyse insights from your existing footfall data</p> <p>Establish a baseline against which to measure impact of events and to inform future investment plans.</p> <p>Identify key activity hours and days and compare to modal opening hours of town centre businesses.</p>	<p>Engage with the HSTF to create an Advanced Dashboard for Darlington.</p> <p>This enables places with access to Springboard footfall data the ability to identify their town type, and where it sits in the activity hierarchy, as well as several other functions, such as monitoring the daytime and night-time economies.</p>	<p>Developing Place Analysts</p> <p>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 online form.</p>
<p>Share these insights with at least key local stakeholders invested in the town centre.</p>	<p>Trial different opening times e.g., evening events, different days of the week, seasonal programming, working with local traders to maximise trading opportunities.</p>	<p>Approaches to Managing the Night-Time Economy</p> <p>Night-Time Enterprise Zone</p>
<p>Establish a property register identifying owners of all shops and buildings in the town centre.</p>	<p>Use this information to identify a potential landlords and property group comprising owners and commercial agents.</p>	<p>See: Altrincham revitalisation where this was key part of the process.</p>

Priority #2: Sustain existing levels of activity, whilst providing new events and market improvements to encourage longer dwell time and wider engagement

As a second priority, we identified a need to both sustain the activity that is currently ongoing but also to consider how new events and improvements could make an impact on dwell time and engagement with a wider audience.

We found a somewhat disjointed offer and experience at Darlington Market. On one side of the Market Hall, we encountered a handful of traditional traders struggling for customers, whilst the other side was packed with students eating food, but none of it was purchased from the market, as all the food vendors were shut. In addition, there were barriers separating these two sections, presumably to prevent people from moving across the hall, despite the fact you could exit and re-enter each side of the market through exterior doors. To us as outsiders, who have experience of running and studying markets, this made no sense.

Whilst we acknowledge that the Town Investment Plan refers to future and potentially exciting improvements to the market, our recommendations concern what can be done immediately to improve the offer, be it revised trading hours, opening at different times with new traders coming on site, and how the market might feature in plans for wider events and festivals, e.g., becoming a performance space. We acknowledge there have been attempts to vary activity, including a quiz night, 'vibes and vintage', 'misfit market' and artisan market, but this reprogramming of the space perhaps needs to be more sustained and linked more explicitly to events and activities taking place outside.

You should consider the potential gaps the market could fill, which are currently missing from the wider town centre offer. Could Darlington benefit from established schemes such as the Teenage Market? Could the market be the base for non-commercial promotions e.g. linking to health, education or sustainability? There is perhaps some untapped potential capacity to deliver a wider of activities to take pressure off the council and market management company.

Although Darlington is not over-run with vacant units, all towns should have a clear action plan and protocols in place to activate under-used and vacant sites on a temporary basis. Towns should be ready to respond immediately as units become vacant, even if interventions might be low key e.g., simply placing vinyls on to shop windows indicating potential future use. It was good to see 'meanwhile' activity taking place in a former optician's unit on the high street, with Ukrainian artist, Aleksandra Valchuck, running interactive exhibitions and workshops, however, it was less clear what the plan was for many of the other empty units within the town centre, particularly the former Marks & Spencer building on the corner of Skinnergate.

In addition, although Darlington is lucky to have so many bank branches, this is also a risk, as these companies continue to rationalise their property portfolios. In 2022, for example, the expert team visited several towns which lost all their bank branches this year, leaving behind several empty prominent and architecturally significant buildings. Working with landlords and property owners at an early stage can help bring about more rapid conversions which will contribute to the viability of the centre. We recognise in some cases building practical relations with private owners is going to be difficult. Long term plans, therefore, might require the deployment of statutory and regulatory powers to acquire new property, clear processes to enable asset transfers, and good relations to with local stakeholders who might be better positioned to manage these assets.

Priority #2: Sustaining existing levels of activity, whilst providing new events to encourage users to dwell for longer and appeal to wider audiences

Quick Wins	Longer Term Actions	Indicative Good practice /supporting resource
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.	See: Glaston-Bury – 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.
Evaluate the impact of the market on footfall and establish a working group to review the market offer.	Revisit the design of the market hall to consider how best integrate a traditional market trader offer with specialist street food and entertainment offer. Review how Radcliffe Market in Bury Trinity Market in Hull and Scarborough Market have created space featuring both traditional and contemporary market offers.	Markets Matter Report Market Toolkit for Parish and Town Councils Street Market: Quick Read Guide
Establish links with a wider range of stakeholders to run events for specific target groups e.g., host a Teenage Market. Work with the local college and university to establish events to show case creative talent and young entrepreneurs, and/or meet the needs of younger people.	Link activation projects to other strategic policy goals for Darlington working with a range of stakeholders e.g., to promote health and wellbeing, safety, business support, skills training/updating etc. Adapt placemaking plans in anticipation of a growing residential population in the town centre e.g., augmenting the retail, leisure, cultural and hospitality offer.	How can cities reimagine public space to support children and families? Saving the High Street – the community takeover
Create a vacant property action plan, working with specific property owners and community groups to encourage active usage and review the management of key architectural assets, and establish protocols to enable rapid response for units at risk of becoming vacant.	Deploy flexible, short-term lets, reduced or rent-free periods for start-ups, reduced rents for start-ups. Engage community groups to occupy units on a temporary basis for free where there is non-commercial use. Utilise community asset transfers where necessary.	A platform for places: Reviving town centres by changing how communities access property Pop-up Retailing Objectives and Activities Pop-up Shops Creative High Streets

Priority #3: Improve appearance, access routes and links to key anchors

The third priority we identified is across appearance, access routes and anchors. Some really good work has been done already to improve the town centre in this area. For example, in Buckton's Yard alleyway, where a colourful mural and greenery greets visitors outside the Sunflower Café. We were impressed by the impact of such a straight-forward, low-cost intervention to create green and more welcoming public realm, which encourage visitors to dwell and linger. We understand businesses such as Crafty Merlin's micro-pub do a good job of activating this space in the evenings too, which is to be welcomed.

These measures, which also includes the beautification of the Buckton's Yard hair salon with pink and cream vertical striped patterning, have been supported through the Towns Fund, titled 'Project Darling'. The prospect of adding a 'secret garden' in Mechanic's Yard, as part of an additional phase of works, is an exciting one and the TIP's aim to "draw on the spirit of European courtyards, the Shambles of York and the Lanes of Brighton" has been well actioned.

There is, however, scope to extend and develop these types of low-level interventions across the town centre, to create a more unified experience and really add distinction to Darlington. Future projects might encompass more local narratives, celebrate diversity, or simply replicate basic improvements as featured in the above. At the workshop we highlighted examples of murals that have been created to honour local heroes and cultural icons, including Mark E. Smith in Prestwich, Marcus Rashford in Withington and Frank the Barber in Adelaide.

We would recommend that you consider the potential to celebrate the life of Cherry Valentine, a star of Ru Paul's drag race and a mental health nurse from Darlington, who sadly passed away in September 2022, through a posthumous mural. This could be located on either the side of a building or on a large canvas that can be located in a public arena, such as the market. Such interventions need to be co-produced with the local community, such as the organisers of the Darlington Pride event, rather than the product of a top-down strategy.

From a spatial perspective, future interventions might extend to mark out potential routes and synergies into the town centre from adjacent sites. For example, start to create a sense of linkage between the Treasury site and the town centre, so when this development opens its doors, employees are primed to visit the centre. This might extend to include temporary road softening to reduce the impact of the A167 or creating a more visually appealing throughfare on Priestgate to aid way-finding into the town centre.

An example of best practice that we would direct you to consider in this regard is the Grey to Green initiative in Sheffield, an award-winning public realm project which has removed two lanes of traffic on an urban inner-city dual carriageway to create 1.3km of new footpaths and cycleways. The scheme utilises the UK's largest sustainable drainage system (SUDs) which captures and hold on to plastics from car tyres, road wear and other pollutants, including oil and microplastics, preventing them from reaching the watercourses. As a result, over 24,000 bathtubs' worth of water is saved from entering the city's sewage treatment works each year.

The River Skerne could be a real attribute in the future, and measures might happen now to activate adjacent sites and raise awareness of this natural asset. Other type of low level, low resource intervention might extend across the town to soften the landscape through more permanent planting and greening measures.

Priority #3: appearance and route making

Quick Wins	Longer Term Actions	Indicative Good practice /supporting resource
Undertake a comprehensive audit of poor-quality sites the public realm. For example, consider specific building facades or gable ends, community planting, pocket parks, street art/murals, litter-picking, graffiti removal etc.	Create a placemaking action plan which outlines a clear and viable programme of small-scale and iterative improvements, which can be supported with micro-funding (crowd funding, local authority small grants, contributions from key stakeholders)	Revealing Waterloo: A Placemaking Strategy
Approach the organisers of Darlington Pride to discuss ways to celebrate the life of Darlington born Cherry Valentine, star of Ru Paul's Drag Race, through place activation.	Consider commissioning a mural in memory of the life of Cherry Valentine, which could be displayed on the side of a building or in the market hall. The theme of this artwork could also draw upon Cherry's work as a nurse during the pandemic.	Street Art and Community in Oxford Frank's Lane, A Salute To The East End's Very Own Living Legend
Introduce basic signage and pathfinding e.g., use planters and basic creative installations to mark potential routes.	Trial and evaluate road softening schemes and improved walking routes between anchors, particularly the new site for the Treasury building.	Review the Grey to Green scheme in Sheffield to see how an inner-city dual carriageway has been turned into the largest 'green street' in the UK.
Create a specific greening programme to extend the softening of the town centre environment through additional planting throughout the town centre	Ensure alignment between major regeneration schemes and greening plans to open potential for reconnecting the river frontage with the town and creating green active travel routes into the town centre.	Review the Trees & Design Action Group website for guides and case studies to installing trees and greenery in hard urban spaces.
Undertake a property survey to evaluate the quality of facades across the town centre.	Establish a landlord and property subgroup with council representation, Deploy a carrot and stick approach to secure basic improvements to private property - combining small grants and existing enforcement powers to improve property.	A New Life for the High Street Store/Centre Design Pride of place: Examples of how to create better neighbourhoods

Appendix 1: Workshop Findings

Commented [SM1]: Joe; the findings below needs more interpretation, grouping in the themes, and these need to be clearly flagged body of the report above, with statements such from the workshop shops outlined we conclude

The future of Darlington 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. 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. The views expressed only represent those who attended but there was 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
3) VISION & STRATEGY 22) LIVEABILITY 16) ATTRACTIVENESS	More aspirational housing in the town centre
23) REDEVELOPMENT PLANS 22) LIVEABILITY	More people living in town centre
12) PLACE MARKETING 16) ATTRACTIVENESS	People visiting Darlington as a 1 st choice destination
23) REDEVELOPMENT PLANS 17) MARKETS 2) RETAIL OFFER 9) NON-RETAIL OFFER	Improved attractions and environment
15) DIVERSITY 10) MERCHANDISE 2) RETAIL OFFER	More independent shops
12) PLACE MARKETING 16) ATTRACTIVENESS 15) DIVERSITY	Encourage a younger, professional demographic
6) PLACE MANAGEMENT 4) EXPERIENCE	Improve management of town centre – example of nuisance busking was given
14) ACCESSIBILITY	Better transport solutions – taxi, bus, parking.

Activating Darlington town centre: stakeholder perspectives

The second workshop exercise asked participants to highlight what is currently being done well to activate the town centre, and what else could be organised quickly to extend this activation programme. The responses are detailed in the following table.

Activities Currently Done Well in Darlington	Activities to Quickly Improve the Town Centre
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seasonal town-wide events • Pop-up special events – dinosaurs! • Marketing through magazine and digital billboard • Dolphin Centre as a hub • Enjoy Darlington promotional activity • SG Petch Darlington 10k run • Improvements to alleyways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis • Reaching different demographics using different media (Tik Tok, Online newsletters, QR Codes etc) • Spread activities throughout the town • Working more collaboratively with businesses and landlords to co-produce events, ideas, strategy and change • Sook Spaces (pop-up retail) • Clearer targeted advertising • More planting and green spaces • Enterprise support for start-ups • Events that have more locations as venues • Modern street art installations • Involve more business owners • Creating a pristine town centre through cleaning • Having trendy co-working spaces + hot desks

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 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
Public perception / lack of pride in the town
Comms / marketing
Need for greater maintenance and cleaning of existing public real
Lack of openness and trust
Communications issues between internal teams, businesses, residents and wider community
No sharing of available data (footfall, vacancy etc.)
Elected representatives think they know the answer without consulting stakeholders
Ingrained mindset of traditionalism from people, lack of openness to change
Capacity for council to continue delivering place-making interventions at current rate
Physical barriers

References/further reading

Underpinning research

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

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