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Post-Programme: Findings

September 2024

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The Institute of Place Management (the IPM) consists of an internationally acclaimed research group based at Manchester Metropolitan University and a professional network of place practitioners, policymakers, and other academics who work collaboratively to make better places.

ABOUT THE REVIEW PROCESS

This report was reviewed by members of the High Streets Task Force Board and Executive as well as representatives from the Sector Leaders Group and the Professional, Research and Data Group.

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Executive summary

The High Streets Task Force (HSTF) was commissioned as an innovative response to the growing challenges facing the England's high streets and town centres. Commissioned in 2019 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, the HSTF was a consortium of thirteen partners, led by the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University. It was designed to bring together world-class research, expert knowledge, and targeted support to revitalise high streets across England.

High streets have long been at the heart of local communities, yet they have faced significant disruption due to changing consumer behaviour, the rise of online shopping, and, more recently, the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, the HSTF was created to tackle these complex challenges by empowering local authorities and communities with the tools, strategies, and expertise they need to drive sustainable high street regeneration.

Process evaluation

Tender compliance - HSTF successfully developed 91% of the products and services promised in the original tender. The adjustments due to COVID-19 introduced additional flexibility, such as shifting to online delivery and running more regular meetings with project partners and government, to provide evidence and insight for pandemic-focussed policy.

Project timeframes - The project faced delays due to COVID-19, and other factors, which doubled delivery time. The average time to complete the program was 16-18 months, excluding the 6-month COVID-19 pause. To mitigate this, a 3-month extension was agreed upon in January 2024, resulting in a new project end date of September 30th, 2024. This extension allowed 135 local authorities to complete their support journeys, with 99% of products delivered by the end of September 2024.

Satisfaction and product delivery - Most products scored between 4.25 and 4.45 on a 5-point scale, indicating that participants were satisfied or very satisfied.

Outcome evaluation

Success of expert recommendations - 79% of the recommendations made by HSTF experts were acted on by places, with restructuring of governance (39%) and reinventing activities (26%) being the most common.

The Place Making Programme was the highest-rated initiative of the HSTF. Across England, 40 multi-sectoral workshops were conducted, with 532 participants giving the programme an impressive rating of 4.45 out of 5. For many attendees, it marked the first occasion where passionate place makers from diverse backgrounds came together. While the initial stages involved some challenges, including navigating differing viewpoints, these were effectively addressed. Thanks to expert facilitation, the workshops concluded with a shared understanding of the issues at hand and a clear action plan. This plan included a set of quick wins and was collectively owned by the group, ensuring commitment to its implementation.

Impact evaluation

Impact on Local Authorities - From a sample of 80 local authorities that have completed the HSTF journey, 79% demonstrated increased capacity, but most of this capacity came from improvements in internal (67%) and external collaboration (59%), rather than partnership development, or the creation of new place management roles (6%) or place-based partnerships (14%).

Statistical analysis revealed a significant relationship between the amount of HSTF support a local authority received and the level of capacity-building achieved, indicating that more intensive support (in the form of more HSTF products and interventions) was associated with higher capacity outcomes in local authorities.

Legacy evaluation

Despite the challenges of the pandemic the HSTF had a significant impact on policy, practice, and public perceptions and has uncovered some key challenges for future policy.

- **Partnerships and governance:** HSTF demonstrated the benefits of effective place partnerships that leverage capacity and capability from the business and community sectors outside the local authority.
- **Place leadership and management capacity:** The HSTF programme took an average of 453 days to complete, compared to the expected 270 days, with more deprived areas experiencing longer delays. These delays were primarily due to a lack of staff resources to engage with the programme.
- **Youth engagement:** Young people were significantly underrepresented in high street transformation efforts, pointing to a need for far more inclusive engagement strategies to involve young people in place decision making. Only 1% of stakeholders invited to attend the Unlocking Your Place Potential meetings were under the age of 25.
- **High street experience and identity:** Across England, the HSTF found high streets that had lost their purpose. Unattractive and unappealing, the HSTF initiative focused on implementing quick wins, enhancing the public realm, fostering local events and activities, and improving branding, marketing, and communications. Through implementing visible changes, and fostering a stronger sense of identity, the HSTF programme has showed high streets can become vibrant hubs for both community life and business activity.

Conclusion and recommendations

The High Street Task Force has had a demonstrable and positive impact on the revitalisation of England's high streets. It has shown how a collaborative and structured approach to high street regeneration, underpinned by high quality research and independent assessment and advice, can lead to improvements in capacity, capability as well as high street performance. Four key areas—investing in place management and leadership, building inclusive partnerships, improving the high street experience, and fostering place leadership and hyperlocal governance structures—represent the inputs and activities that can lead to transformative outcomes for high streets, and which future policies should encourage.

Professor Cathy Parker
Principal Investigator and Research Lead

Mark Robinson
Chair of the HSTF Board

High Streets Task Force | 6

1. Introduction and background

This report provides an overview of the High Streets Task Force (HSTF), covering its background, approach, strengths, weaknesses, impact, performance, and legacy. Launched in July 2019 and concluded in September 2024, this innovative government programme supported local authorities and their communities to transform their high streets. The report informs stakeholders—government officials, partners, and the public—about the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned, while offering recommendations to sustain successful elements of the programme for future high street support. It also highlights remaining challenges facing England’s high streets and strategies for overcoming them. An accompanying technical report details the operational set-up, research, methodology, and statistical results. This section summarises the HSTF’s background, purpose, and set-up.

1.1 Background

In 2018, then High Streets Minister Rt Hon Jake Berry established an Expert Panel chaired by Sir John Timpson to identify the key challenges facing high streets. The panel included experts from various sectors such as retail, property, community, and local government.

In response to the Timpson Review, the government created the High Streets Task Force and the Institute of Place Management (IPM) at Manchester Metropolitan University, supported by a consortium of 12 partners was selected to lead the initiative. The partners in the consortium were PwC, Royal Town Planning Institute, Design Council, The BID Foundation, Landscape Institute, Association of Town and City Management, Civic Voice, MRI OnLocation, Maybe*, The Teenage Market, Cardiff University, and MyKnowledgeMap Ltd. This collaboration pooled expertise in place management and marketing, urban planning, urban design, civic and community engagement, landscaping and sustainability, data analysis, business and place partnership engagement, project management, digital product development, and more to meet the task force’s objectives. Further information on consortium partners can be found in the accompanying technical report.

There were 152 local authorities selected by government to work with HSTF - at the time of selection there were 333 local authorities, but subsequent local government reorganisation in 2023 has reduced the number to 317, meaning nearly half (48%) of local authorities were selected to work with the HSTF. Of the 152 Local Authorities only 2 chose not to take-up the HSTF offer of any support meaning 99% of selected Local Authorities engaged with HSTF support. Figure 1. below shows where the local authorities selected to work with the HSTF are located and illustrates the national coverage of the High Streets Task Force programme.

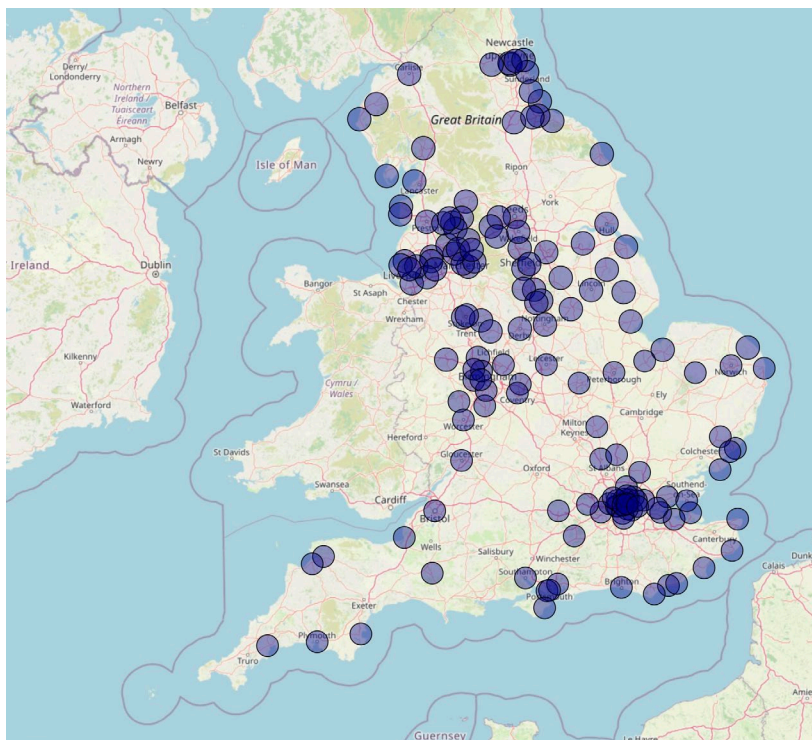


Figure 1 Map of HSTF locations

1.2. Aims/objectives of HSTF

The ethos of the High Streets Task Force, as envisioned by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, was to help build the foundations of sustainable, successful, diverse, and resilient high streets and town centres. To focus its work and to align with other government strategies and funds, four key objectives were defined in the High Streets Task Force tender.

1. *Boost local authority capacity for managing high street*

The Task Force provided expert knowledge and support to Local Authorities to address the problems that were holding places back, this support was provided through online resources, as well as through on-the-ground expert support.

2. *Improve place making skills*

The Task Force built the skills of organisations and groups to deliver effective initiatives and strategies that made a difference to their local area, through the provision of guidance, support, information, and data.

3. *Increase coordination of groups and messages about the high street*

The Task Force promoted positive messages about what was happening in town centres, to highlight the changes occurring, to develop confidence for investors, and help communities feel proud of their high street.

4. *Share intelligence and data about high streets*

The Task Force supported local leaders to develop the right plans for their town centres and high streets. This required access to reliable data, information, and evidence.

1.3 Delivery phases

The HSTF's work was divided into four key phases:

1. **Phase 1 (July–September 2019):** Set-up and Launch
2. **Phase 2 (October 2019–June 2020):** Scaling Up and Piloting
3. **Phase 3 (October 2020–November 2022):** Full Rollout
4. **Phase 4 (December 2022–September 2024):** Legacy and Evaluation

1.4 Governance and management:

Strong governance was a key factor in the success of the HSTF. The governance structure included several groups:

- **HSTF Board:** Provided strategic direction and acted as the senior governance body.
- **Executive Group:** Focused on delivery and operational matters, met quarterly to track progress.
- **Professional Research and Data Group (PRDG):** Pooled research and data to support evidence-based decision-making.
- **Sector Leaders Group:** Coordinated sectoral organisations to understand high street issues and disseminate best practices and innovations.

A Project Management Office (PMO) supported the delivery of the programme, with weekly project meetings and work loading, planning, risk management, and consortium partner coordination.

1.5 Research

The High Streets Task Force was led by the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University. Their research has provided the theoretical underpinning for the project, from concept all the way through to delivery and evaluation. More details on the knowledge frameworks are included in the technical report, but the key concepts utilised by the HSTF, are included below.

1.5.1 The 4Rs Framework of Regeneration

Derived from the High Street UK 2020 project (Parker et al., 2018) and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the 4Rs (Repositioning, Reinventing, Rebranding, and Restructuring) framework was central to the diagnostic and strategic work undertaken by the HSTF. This framework provides a structured approach to assessing and addressing the barriers to high street transformation.

- **Repositioning** (Millington and Ntounis, 2017): Focused on collecting and analysing data to understand wider trends affecting the high street, including consumer behaviours, economic shifts, and local demographic changes. The goal was to create long-term visions that are rooted in the reality of local needs.
- **Reinventing** (Theodoridis et al., 2017): This involves taking actions that adapt the high street's offer to changing consumer demands. It includes introducing new activities, diversifying uses, and increasing footfall through events, leisure, and other non-retail uses.

- **Rebranding** (Ntounis and Kavaratzis, 2017): Rebranding aimed at improving the internal and external perceptions of a place. This was often achieved through marketing, improving communication strategies, and cultivating a positive image to attract visitors, investors, and businesses.
- **Restructuring** (Peel and Parker, 2017): Refers to changes in governance, physical layout, and partnerships that can enhance local capacity and coordination. It includes restructuring partnerships, planning frameworks, and large-scale public realm improvements.

The 4Rs were used as a diagnostic tool during the Unlocking Your Place Potential (UYPP) visits and served as a roadmap for places to identify and address the key barriers to their high street's success. This framework was also applied in mentoring and expert support activities to align strategies with evidence-based approaches.

1.5.2 COVID resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges for high streets, requiring original approaches to fostering resilience. The HSTF conducted surveys and research to assess the impact of the pandemic on high street businesses, particularly in sectors like hospitality and retail (Ntounis et al., 2022). These findings informed the development of the COVID Resilience Composite Score (CRCS), which measured the resilience of several types of businesses based on factors such as financial support uptake, operational changes, and future confidence.

The CRCS revealed significant disparities in resilience across sectors, with tourism-dependent businesses being the most vulnerable. The HSTF used these insights to tailor support for high streets facing the greatest challenges, providing targeted interventions such as expert workshops and guidance on navigating government financial assistance schemes.

1.5.3 Annual footfall reviews

Footfall has been a central indicator used to monitor the health of high streets throughout the HSTF programme. The task force emphasised the importance of regular footfall monitoring as a simple yet powerful metric for understanding high street activity (Mumford et al., 2021)

- **Footfall data:** Footfall was used to assess the impact of interventions and diagnose potential issues with the vitality of places. By tracking footfall trends over time, some places were able to correlate specific interventions (e.g., events, public realm improvements) with changes in visitor behaviour.
- **Viability Assessments:** Footfall data was incorporated into broader viability assessments, helping places to benchmark themselves against national trends and understand how their high street was performing in terms of longer-term success.

The HSTF also developed dashboards for local authorities to easily monitor footfall data and use it to inform their decision-making processes.

1.6 HSTF Products

The HSTF developed several new products and services to meet the needs of high street stakeholders. A full list of these is included in the accompanying Technical Report but a summary of the expert products is included in Table i.

<i>Product</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Number Delivered</i>
UYPP Visit	A one-day diagnostic visit identifying strategic potential and further expertise required for local high street improvements.	151
Expert Support	Technical experts providing specialised advice in areas like planning, urban design, and place management to enhance local authority strategies.	120
Mentor Support	Mentors working with local authorities to improve leadership, partnership-building, and long-term planning for high street projects.	21
Developing a Shared Vision	Workshops facilitated by the Design Council to create a collaborative and transformative vision for local high streets.	40
Teenage Market	A programme from Market Innovations Ltd encouraging youth engagement in high streets by providing support and licenses for local authorities to run youth-led markets.	20

Table i HSTF Expert Products

2. Strengths and weaknesses of the model

The HSTF had a significant impact on revitalising high streets across England. Through its expert-led interventions, capacity-building efforts, and collaborative approach, it supported local authorities (LAs) and their communities in their efforts to address the challenges facing high streets. In this section we analyse what worked well and what worked less well.

2.1 Strengths of the model

There were three main strengths of the HSTF approach. The design and mix of products; an independent consortium approach, and its ability to convene stakeholders at both national and local level.

2.1.1 Design and mix of products

The HSTF was led by Manchester Metropolitan University and products were based on peer-reviewed research. In other words, there was scientific underpinning to the High Streets Task Force programme and interventions. The HSTF product development team at Manchester Met had in-depth understanding of the challenges facing England's high streets as well as extensive experience of implementing solutions. This resulted in a mix of products and services that were popular with local authorities (LAs) and other beneficiaries, with its support welcomed and deemed successful. 92% of HSTF beneficiaries were either satisfied or very satisfied, except for Developing a Shared Vision, which had a lower satisfaction score (Table ii).

Product/Service	Mean	Std Deviation	Respondents
PMP	4.45	0.70	532
EFUS	4.42	0.58	48
DPL	4.37	0.83	94
MFUS	4.33	0.50	9
UYPP	4.25	0.81	279
DaSV	3.60	1.05	20

Table ii Satisfaction (mean) of HSTF Expert-led products/services: Place Making Programme (PMP); Experts Follow-up Support (EFUS); Developing Place Leaders (DPL); Mentor Follow-up Support (MFUS); Unlocking Your Place Potential (UYPP); Developing a Shared Vision (DaSV).

By grounding its interventions in research-backed frameworks such as the 25 Priorities for Vital and Viable High Streets and the 4Rs of Regeneration, the HSTF ensured that its delivery was not only valued but also addressed the root causes of high street decline.

Where the HSTF was able to apply these frameworks in the way the research recommended, then that led to HSTF making an impact in a location. This was assessed through finding evidence, mostly in the public domain, and occasionally through exit interviews or surveys with the LA, that HSTF had made a tangible difference.

For example, the process of diagnosing the main barrier to transformation, through a UYPP, resulted in evidence that the HSTF made a difference to the location. Places which did not want a UYPP, usually when the local authority wanted to 'self-diagnose' the main issue, did not result in the HSTF achieving any impact. In other words, at the end of the programme, there was no evidence in the public domain (nor from the LA) that HSTF had made a difference in those locations which did not have a UYPP product to diagnose the main issue, that subsequent support then focussed on. The independent, 'critical friend' approach of the HSTF, using a structured methodology, although possibly different to what many LAs would have been used to, identified actionable recommendations that they thought they should implement, *and which made a tangible difference*. More details about the type of impact the HSTF made is covered in Section 3.

Similarly, when the focus of the expert support remained aligned with the original UYPP diagnostic, the recommendations from the expert work were more likely to be implemented, and there was a greater likelihood of finding evidence that the HSTF had made a positive impact on the location.

As well as an expert offer to a significant group of local authorities, the High Streets Task Force developed an online offer for all stakeholders interested in improving their high street. The High Streets Task Force resource repository offered several key resources, that were valued by a wide range of users. It provided a comprehensive range of open-access resources, including case studies, evidence, best practices, and research to support high street transformation. The repository included useful data and insights, such as the Annual Footfall Review, which helped local leaders, and policy makers, assess, diagnose, and evaluate high street performance.

The resources were easily accessible online, making it convenient for anyone working to support their local high street. Additionally, each item (over 1,000) was reviewed by experienced researchers and included abstracts with key takeaways, making the resources easily searchable, digestible, and prompting further investigation into related materials. These strengths made the repository a valuable and trusted tool for enhancing the effectiveness of high street revitalisation efforts.

Whilst the online offer was not formally evaluated in the same way as the expert offer, a recent report (Brandes et al, 2024) on international practices in place management, by Georgetown University in partnership with UN-Habitat, commended the work of the HSTF, recognising it as "one of the few global experiments in national-level policymaking which targets the capacity development of local place management organizations". The resource repository has been recognised as the most comprehensive currently available by important international placemaking movements, such as PlaceMakingX (USA) and the Town Team Movement (Australia).

2.1.2 Independent consortium approach

The consortium approach to running the High Streets Task Force (HSTF) brought together a diverse range of partners and the consortium's collaborative model enhanced the adaptability of the programme, enabling rapid adjustments to changing circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the involvement of experts from a range of professional bodies enabled a more holistic and multifaceted approach to high street regeneration and this contributed to high satisfaction levels.

The consortium's independence from Government was also seen a strength. Whilst having the backing of government, as a commissioned programme, was important, the input and expertise provided by the consortium and through the Expert Network was perceived to be independent.

Because the HSTF was led by a university and involved other universities and researchers through the consortium model, it was able to undertake original research and provide additional support to policy makers, for example, in the design and support of the High Streets Accelerators.

Finally, as the team leading the programme were used to encouraging learning and engagement, the consortium adopted a rigorous approach to innovation with a clear, staged approach that allowed for constant feedback and iteration. By moving through concept, prototype, pilot, release, and monitoring stages, each product was refined through practical insights and testing before being fully rolled out. Satisfaction with the programme increased over time, demonstrating the efficacy of the new product development process in making incremental improvements to products and delivery.

2.1.3 Convening stakeholders

As part of the onboarding for the HSTF programme detailed guidance was sent to local authorities to ensure that there was community and business representation at the UYPP. Other organisations were also recommended, including those from the culture sector, public sector, anchor organisations, employers, and transport providers. Building on the support provided for Sir John Timpson's review, it was explicitly suggested that the UYPP include representation from young people (under 25). Guidance was also provided to suggest useful contacts, such as schools, colleges, and youth clubs, to help identify a suitable delegate. The various stakeholders convened through UYPP is shown in Table iii.

		%
Local Authority Officers	684	41
Councillors	196	12
Businesses	360	22
Community	156	9
BIDs	57	3
Other place partnerships	61	3
Public organisations/other	97	6
Other	62	4
TOTAL	1673	100

Table iii Proportion of stakeholders present at UYPP meetings

There was a wide variation in the number of stakeholders that were invited to UYPP meetings. The average number of attendees were 11 but one UYPP took place with 4 attendees (Blackburn and Darwen) another with 35 (Tameside). Having too many (over 11) attendees at the UYPP meetings was associated with a lower level of satisfaction. If there was a Business Improvement District (BID) in the area, then a representative from it was likely to have been invited. Nevertheless, there were still 14 UYPPs that took place without representation from their local BID.

In over half (53%) the UYPP's the leader, CEO or their deputy was present. Again, HSTF guidance made it clear that senior sponsorship would help get the most out of the programme. Nevertheless, even when the leadership was not present, other senior representatives were present. 397 (or 24%) of the delegates had 'Head', 'Director' or some other senior job title. Having a leader present did not increase satisfaction. However, if businesses were represented respondents were more satisfied with the UYPP. Conversely, community representation was associated with lower levels of satisfaction with the UYPP product. However, as our research into place viability, place leadership and place partnerships reinforced, *successful place transformation is a product of taking a wide group of people on a 'journey,'* reinforcing the importance of the HSTF's inclusive and collaborative approach to convening local stakeholders.

At a national level HSTF successfully coordinated the various sectoral interests to the benefit of the high street, through the Sector Leaders Group, to give Government a rapid synthesis of high street issues. This was especially important during COVID 19, when the Sector Leaders Group met monthly to provide evidence and insight to government, that fed into the development of emergency legislation to support high street businesses during the pandemic.

2.2 Weaknesses of the model

2.2.1 Challenges in Local Authority engagement and culture

Despite the overall success of the HSTF, 17 (11.1%) of local authorities either withdrew or were signed off from the programme. Engagement was hindered by competing priorities, including managing COVID-19 recovery efforts and submitting funding bids for initiatives like the Levelling Up Fund and Shared Prosperity Fund. This extended the average HSTF delivery window to 453 days. Interestingly, locations where expert support aligned with UYPP completed the programme faster (179 days) than those where it did not (254 days).

More deprived areas took longer to complete the programme. This may be attributable to entrenched challenges that place greater demands on local authorities, consequently impacting staff time and capacity. If this is the case, additional funding or resources may be necessary to effectively support high street regeneration initiatives in these areas. However, it should be noted that no direct evidence has been identified to substantiate this observation.

Many factors can change, the longer it is between a diagnosis and the start of support. HSTF Experts identified change of political party, change of elected members, and/or change of officers as key reasons why the focus of support may change. While changes within local authorities are inevitable, maintaining a consistent, agreed-upon plan is critical to ensuring that high street regeneration efforts remain focused and effective, regardless of leadership or staffing changes.

Where HSTF was most effective was when there was continuity of engagement with key individuals and when their LA had a culture of collaboration. The HSTF experts highlighted varying levels of commitment from local authorities and identified some cultures that were more controlling which posed a challenge, undermining the effectiveness of HSTF support efforts. The Experts wondered, in future, whether programmes like the HSTF should only work closely with councils that welcome their assistance, and were comfortable working in a collaborative way, to prevent unnecessary delays in providing support to locations.

2.2.2 Limited engagement of some stakeholder groups

While the HSTF made considerable progress in coordinating stakeholders, there were notable gaps in the representation of certain groups, particularly young people. Despite clear guidance on the importance of youth involvement in high street decision-making, only 1% of UYPP attendees were under the age of 25. In the research undertaken in preparation for the High Streets Task Force young people were especially credited for their enthusiasm, energy, and ideas to transform their high streets. The underrepresentation of younger voices means that regeneration strategies are unlikely to align with the long-term needs and preferences of younger generations.

2.2.3 'Wide and shallow' nature of programme

Although HSTF was a 5-year programme, the number of days each location received was very short (maximum 5 days). Insufficient delivery time was a weakness of the model – with some LAs receiving a minimum of just 1-2 days of support if they decided not to engage with the programme after their UYPP visit. This was a major issue from our experts who expressed the need for more extensive periods in each town to address the diverse array of challenges identified. The challenges facing the HSTF high streets was greater than the 'average' high street. HSTF high streets faced deprivation across all domains, income, employment, education, skills and training, health and disability, crime, housing, and services, as well as the living environment. We investigated the impact of deprivation on footfall, specifically the change in footfall between 2023 and 2019 (a measure of recovery from our last Annual Footfall Report). There was a (weak) relationship with deprivation and footfall recovery after COVID. In other words, the underlying vitality of the HSTF locations post-COVID was less than non HSTF locations, suggesting HSTF locations may well have benefitted from more intensive or longer-term support.

More delivery time (through delivering more products) would have improved the results as there was a relationship between the number of products received and the amount of capacity developed (e.g. place partnerships created, place management roles recruited, further expert consultancy procured).

Finally, Experts felt it important to be realistic about what could be achieved within the given resources and timeframes that were set aside for the delivery of support. High Street transformation takes time, and so there may not be evidence of results from the interventions – especially in those places that received support at the end of the project. Experts recognised that maintaining a long connection with each place over time was essential, as relationships between Experts, the council and the community are vital, and trust takes time to develop. Cohorts that started after 2022 were less likely to have implemented HSTF recommendations than those that started before 2022.

2.2.4 Missed opportunity to implement HSTF recommendations using regeneration funding

A perceived weakness of the HSTF model was that there was no requirement for local authorities to make the connection between expert support and the regeneration funding they received. This was a point made by both HSTF Experts and HSTF Board Members as being an area of improvement to ensure more effective strategic alignment across public investments in the future.

Despite receiving approximately £3bn of regeneration funding the HSTF locations that received funding were no more likely to implement the HSTF expert recommendations. In other words, whilst one government-funded programme (HSTF) was making recommendations as to what would make a positive difference to the high street, these recommendations were no more likely to be adopted, even though funding may have been available to do this. Similarly, there was no evidence that the

HSTF program made a difference in locations that received funding. This weakness was a missed opportunity to implement HSTF recommendations with regeneration funds. This may have been because the HSTF recommendations were not compatible with the regeneration funds LAs were in receipt of. For example, we found ample evidence that Local Authorities face significant capacity and capability issues in regeneration or place management. However, the allocation of regeneration funding was not associated with an increase in capacity. This is because most of those funds could only be spent on funding capital projects, rather than addressing the skills, knowledge, and capacity gaps needed to resolve the entrenched and complex problems faced by many high streets and town centres.

3. Impact of the model

3.1 Impact against the original objectives

3.1.1 Boost local authority capacity and capability

The HSTF was an ambitious programme and 99% of the 152 local authorities selected to receive support engaged. This validated both the need to boost local authority capacity and capability and the willingness of local authorities to engage with a national programme of support.

Of the 135 supported 92 or 69% increased their capacity to support high street transformation. Six different methods for increasing capacity among local authorities were identified: Improving cross-departmental working, improving collaborative working with external partners, developing new partnerships, improving existing partnerships, recruiting a place management post, or boosting capacity/capability by using consultants. Aldershot, Gateshead, Grimsby, Hyde and Liscard made the most progress by increasing capacity in four of the areas identified.

The following quotes illustrate how the High Streets Task Force has helped increase capacity in local authorities. First in Ellesmere Port the HSTF has helped form a partnership.

“The resources provided by the Task Force proved extremely helpful. Looking to the long-term future, we’ve benefited from practical advice on bringing together a partnership that can deliver for the area. The Partnership will now push forward with our plans to bring public services, housing, and an enhanced cultural offer into the town to support town centre businesses and make <place> an even better place to live, work, learn and visit.”

Local Authority Cabinet Member

And in London, a town centre manager has helped develop relationships with many businesses and been able to support several practical projects.

“We were in the latter years of the Council’s high street strategy and, because of that, the (High Streets Task Force’s advice) landed well at the time. The recommendations were followed, and it was a useful shot in the arm for the team to rethink about <place>. The Council has now got a visible presence in the High Street and businesses have that direct line which is valuable. As well as the Town Centre Manager’s salary being funded by the Council, we’ve got a small budget to deliver improvements for the businesses up and down <place> on a case-by-case project basis. One example is a shortwave radio scheme to encourage businesses to get in contact with CCTV and the police, to help tackle ASB and security.

Regeneration Manager, London.

Additionally, efforts have been made to ensure that high streets and town centres continue to be a key priority for national policymakers. Over £11bn of funding has been allocated to 280 high streets/town centres in England with over £3bn of that going to HSTF locations. Whilst the development of these policies/funds has been outside of the HSTF's remit, our focus on place-based interventions, partnerships, and place making has provided compelling evidence for policy development.

3.1.2 Improve placemaking skills

944 local place makers improved their placemaking skills. That is 90% of a total of 1,049 respondents who agreed that their place making skills were improved, because of a HSTF intervention. The HSTF has also run a Developing Place Leaders programme across 38 regions and subregions involving place leaders from local authorities, BIDs, business, voluntary and community organisations as well as place professionals.

"The placemaking workshop demystified the whole thing about improving our town centre, changing it from a theoretical conundrum to something practical that actually doesn't feel that hard now."

Service Director, Local Authority, Luton

As well as improving the skills of local place makers, our work with the Professional Bodies has Improved understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of placemaking.

The Landscape Institute was pleased to propose a cohort of experts who were keen to work on HSTF projects. All built environment developments are based in the landscape, involving practitioners in projects from the outset has led to more effective placemaking and inclusive designs of the public realm. To name a few successful outcomes, landscape specialists were able to design more open and hospitable environments that prioritised space for public transport and pedestrians; they also proposed effective greening solutions and pocket parks, that would support events and family entertainment activities. It was encouraging that several local authorities have implemented proposed designs, creating attractive places and cultural regeneration for local communities. Such landscape developments boost health and well-being, they enhance sustainability and lead to economic gain. These initiatives provide a positive legacy for future projects to provide environmentally conscious developments that attract businesses and people back into town centres.

CEO Landscape Institute.

3.1.3 Increase coordination and representation

The HSTF has coordinated a range of groups, to the benefit of the high street. At a local level, the HSTF has engaged with 57 BIDs, 360 local businesses, 156 community representatives through the Unlocking Your Place Potential Product. A total of 1,673 people took part in these initial diagnostics – meaning their experience and expertise was reflected in the initial problem definition and recommendations. A further 1,000+ have taken part in the Place Making Programme, identifying actionable solutions and ‘quick wins’ to implement.

“The Unlocking your Place Potential work was really helpful. It gave us a grounded framework of where we actually are - a strong vision, good stakeholders around the table, but that the governance and collaboration piece was missing. We have since invested in projects which really show the town is changing. A strong level of community buy-in is what we’re looking to achieve, to underpin transformation of place through large scale investment into the Masterplan delivery.”

Planning Regeneration Team Leader + West Midlands Young Planner of the Year 2023, Sandwell Council

“The support we have received has been vital in bringing together closer collaboration between public and private sector partners in Kendal.”

Senior Specialist - Economy & Culture, South Lakeland Council.

At a national level HST successfully coordinated the various sectoral interests to the benefit of the high street. A diverse range of organisations that have a ‘stake’ on the high street and in town centres have come together, through the Sector Leaders Group, to give Government a rapid synthesis of high street issues. This was especially important during COVID 19, when the Sector Leaders Group met monthly to provide evidence and insight to government, that fed into the development of emergency legislation to support high street businesses during the pandemic.

HSTF has challenged the negative media coverage of the high street. Through television and radio, printed and online media, journals, conferences and events, the HSTF board, executive, experts, and partners have consistently shown that the high street is not ‘dead,’ that many places are working hard to reinvigorate themselves. Crucially the Task Force has not only highlighted the change happening across the country but has shown the routes taken to bring it about.

3.1.4 Share data and knowledge

A respected and authoritative collection of data and knowledge has been developed. The HSTF website received over 250,000 views from 45,000 unique visitors. Regular communication was maintained with a group of 3,600 registered subscribers. Additionally, over 1,000 useful resources were abstracted and catalogued.

“They (HSTF) provide great resources and guidance to people like us about how to help high streets improve and they’ve got great ideas and they’ve been fantastic”

Representative from Chiswick Flower Market speaking on Radio 4 You and Yours.

3.2 PwC evaluation of success and impact of Task Force local interventions

A PwC-authored report identified four main points in its analysis of the project.

- There is strong evidence that the programme was contributing to short-term impacts

Case studies showed that there are short term activities occurring because of the programme, but there was limited primary evidence across all locations to suggest this is true for each location.

- It is likely that the programme will contribute to long-term High Street improvements.

Evidence analysed as part of the Contribution Analysis suggests that it is plausible the programme will contribute to long-term social and economic impacts.

- To see long-term impacts, programme interventions will need to go further.

At the time, programmes only reached the surface level. Evidence showed that operational support is crucial and will lead to greater and more seismic changes.

- Future iterations of the programme would benefit from evaluability being built into the design.

Collecting and analysing the necessary data at a suitable spatial level could strengthen the impact narrative to a point where concrete policy recommendation can be made.

The report showed that the programme did achieve a lot and made great leaps in impacting high streets. However, it highlighted that evaluation was a challenge due to lack of primary and quantitative data. The report argued that in future iterations, these challenges need to be tackled to ensure that the programme can have the biggest impact. The report showed that there are lessons to learn from, but that legacy analysis is indeed difficult and needs to be factored in in future iterations. The main recommendation of the evaluation was that any future programme should develop a Theory of Change so that the impact of the intervention can be evaluated more effectively.

3.3 Impact on Local Authorities

Impact was operationalised through the development of a standard framework that researchers used to review written records (such as expert reports, committee minutes, internet news stories, emails, conversation notes, etc.) to answer the research questions “were recommendations acted on”, “has capacity been increased”, and “are there evidence that HSTF has made a difference?”

3.3.1 Were recommendations acted on?

106 completed HSTF 'journeys' have currently been reviewed to assess whether HSTF recommendations have been acted on.

	Numbers	%
Yes	34	32%
Partly	29	27%
No	17	16%
Don't know	26	25%
TOTAL	106	100%

Table iv Were recommendations acted on?

Based on an analysis of 80 locations that have fully completed their HSTF journey, and for which there were evidence to know whether recommendations have been acted upon, 63 locations (79%) have acted on the expert recommendations provided, either fully or in part, demonstrating the effectiveness of the HSTF program of expert support.

There were still 26 locations that have completed their HSTF journey, but it was not determined whether they have acted on the recommendations, by the end of the report. This was due to a lack of evidence and information needed for an accurate assessment, which was being collected from local authority officers and wider stakeholders.

	Acted on recommendations	%
Restructuring	24	38%
Reinventing	19	30%
Rebranding	10	16%
Repositioning	5	8%
UYPP Lite	5	8%
TOTAL	63	100%

Table v Type of recommendation

Of the 63 locations that have acted on the HSTF's recommendations, 24 (38%) had been prescribed the process of Restructuring to address their main barrier to transformation. Of these 24 locations, 16 had a *governance restructuring* diagnosis - and were advised to address partnership working (67%), whilst 8 had issues relating to *physical restructuring* – and were recommended improvements in the public realm (33%). This is an important distinction to make as the two forms of restructuring (governance and physical) are quite different – although the larger scale physical restructuring is also likely to rely on governance and statutory functions (i.e. planning) to facilitate change (Peel and Parker, 2018).

Nevertheless, as 1/3rd of the restructuring prescriptions would have utilised landscape and/or planning experts, this may explain why there was no significant relationship between the original diagnosis and the professional body that provided the follow-up expert support, even though 46% of UYPP's resulted in a restructuring diagnosis.

The next highest strategic approach prescribed that had resulted in action being taken was Reinventing, with 19 locations (30%) focusing on activation and delivery, followed by 10 for Rebranding (16%) with a focus on communication and messaging, and 5 for Repositioning (8%) with a focus on data-collection and high-level vision development. In addition to the above, 5 locations were considered UYPP Lite (8%) which involved a lighter-touch approach to determining the form of expert support (often strongly influenced by the Local Authority) than the traditional UYPP full diagnostic, which was much more rigorous and objective.

There were several factors that appear to impact whether recommendations were implemented.

Having a UYPP (rather than a UYPP Lite) meant that recommendations were more likely to be implemented. From these results, HSTF concluded that including representatives in the initial stages of discussion is preferable to decision making without their input. Even if those discussions may be a bit awkward which is likely to be reflected in a lower level of satisfaction with the meeting itself.

If the expert work had been aligned to the original UYPP diagnosis, then recommendations were more likely to be implemented. This also shows the value of having a systematic, robust methodology underpinning the process of place transformation. Having senior council leadership attend the UYPP also meant that recommendations were more likely to be implemented.

3.3.2 Was capacity/capability increased?

In addition to understanding the prescriptions given and whether the recommendations were acted upon, the aim was also to assess whether working with the HSTF led to improvements in capacity and capability. From reviewing our annual research studies in viability, leadership and partnership working, as well as empirical evidence from expert reports, case-studies, testimonials and through the regular contact the Expert Coordinator has with experts and locations HSTF developed six measures of capacity.

	Numbers	%
Improved internal working	73	69%
Improved external working	63	59%
External consultants appointed	22	21%
New partnership developed	15	14%
Existing partnership improved	6	6%
New place management post recruited	6	6%
TOTAL	106*	
*The total used is the number of locations assessed, rather than the sum of the number of times each factor was identified		

Table vi How capacity increased

Of the 106 locations that have fully completed their HSTF journey, and where we have evidence of impact, **improved internal working**—specifically enhanced cross-departmental and place-focused

collaboration among local authority officers—was the most frequently observed improvement (69%). This was closely followed by **improved external working**, which involved enhanced collaborative efforts between the local authority and external organizations (59%). There was then a significant drop in improvements being evidenced before **external consultants being appointed** i.e. third-party contractors commissioned to produce, for example, a Place Action Plan or address an issue with the public realm, emerges as the next most frequent improvement (21%), followed by **new partnerships being developed** (14%) and **new place management posts being recruited** (6%). The lack of additionality (i.e. new resource) also reinforces findings from our place leadership research which identified the lack of capacity, resource, and expertise in place management as being a common barrier to place leadership and the process of transformation.

3.4 Impact on Places – did HSTF make a difference?

Of the 63 locations that have acted on the expert recommendations provided, over three quarters (76%) required support from the HSTF to help address the main barrier to transformation that was identified at the UYPP stage. Only a small number (6%) were able to address the problem without the support of the HSTF. This determination was made by reviewing the evidence collected to show how a location has acted upon the recommendations. The assessment considered whether further HSTF support contributed to achieving these outcomes, typically requiring explicit reference to the HSTF's role. Information available in the public domain was utilized for this determination.

	Numbers	%
Yes	25	40%
Partly	23	37%
No	4	6%
Don't Know	11	17%
TOTAL	63	100%

Table vii Was HSTF support needed?

To provide a clearer picture of the impact that HSTF experts had on 63 locations, a summary of the journey taken by four locations during the HSTF process is presented below. Each location corresponds to one of the four components of the 4R's framework.

3.4.1 Restructuring in Accrington

Accrington received a UYPP visit in March 2020 which identified that the main obstacle to improving the town for businesses and residents was the lack of collaboration and decision-making structures to encourage discussion and joined-up working.

This initial UYPP visit was followed up with further support from experts who worked with Hyndburn Council to bring together local stakeholders at a workshop to examine how a cohesive town centre partnership could be developed, bringing together existing teams, groups, and organisations that were working on specific aspects of the town's development, into a more collaborative overarching partnership that could unite behind a compelling vision.

The recommendations that emerged out of this process were to formalise the arrangements for the partnership framework, develop the vision for Accrington and establish a 12-month plan of action for the town. The experts also recommended that Hyndburn Council seek professional strategic support and guidance to ensure enough capacity was allocated to deliver on their proposals.

As a result of this work, a new Town Centre Stakeholder Group, consisting of 24 members from a diverse range of sectors, backgrounds, and perspectives, was created to meet quarterly to discuss the town's future. Furthermore, in June 2021, Hyndburn Borough Council appointed Bradshaw Advisory as consultants to assist in further diagnostic work, data gathering and stakeholder engagement as part of the creation of the Accrington Town Centre Investment Plan 2022 – 2032.

In addition to the wider Stakeholder Group, a new Town Centre Partnership Board, consisting of 13 members, including Accrington & Rossendale College, Hyndburn Chamber of Trade and Hyndburn Shop Local Group, was established to constructively critique the strategic direction of this plan, its structure, background data and analysis, modelling, and intervention proposals as they arose.

By working in a collaborative manner, the new Town Centre Partnership Board has helped create and decide on the new vision for Accrington, agreed on the guiding principles which were used to select schemes for inclusion as part of the plan and continue to meet, along with the wider Town Centre Stakeholder Group, to oversee the implementation of the plan and the application process used for various grants and funding packages. Without the initial support from the HSTF, Accrington would not currently be benefitting from this level of collaborative working.

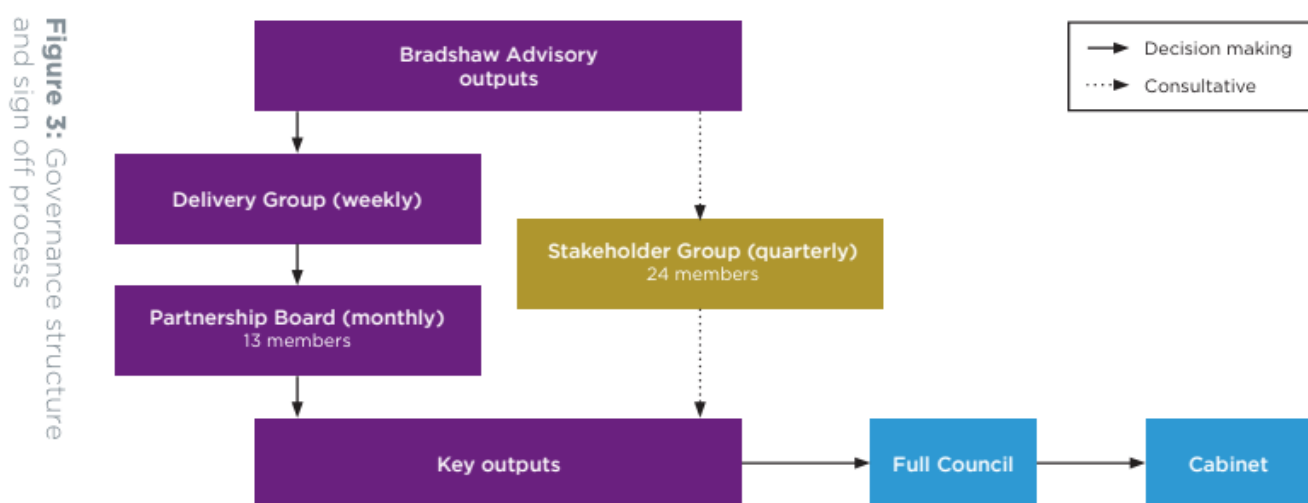


Figure 2 New governance structure in Accrington

3.4.2 Reinventing in Scarborough

Scarborough received a UYPP visit in February 2022, which highlighted the need to “activate the town centre for local people” as a key challenge. Further expert support was then provided which focused on revitalising a vacant high street unit to support the creative community and stimulate local regeneration. This initiative involved collaboration with council officers, local landlords, and creative practitioners.

The engagement process revealed significant interest from creative groups to transform a high street unit into a multi-functional space, incorporating gallery displays, pop-up theatre, and hands-

on workshops. Discussions led to the development of a business plan template that could be applied to vacant units, led by Scarborough Studios, the creative organisation behind The Old Parcels Office.

Despite an initial setback after it became clear that the identified site was selected for demolition, the project has been able progress after the vacant block was acquired by the council as part of its plans to regenerate the area. Whilst the site is still planned for demolition, the property has been leased to Scarborough Studios to create a gallery, exhibition, and performance space on the ground floor, with creative studios upstairs. Additionally, the three former public toilets opposite Scarborough Market were also to be repurposed as art installation spaces.



Figure 3 Meanwhile art space in Scarborough

These leases, which took over a year to secure, aim to provide affordable spaces for grassroots, emerging, and established artists in Scarborough. The initiative seeks to establish an Artistic Quarter around the Market Hall area, with artists encouraged to submit works for the newly leased spaces, each with a £150 commission fee. Whilst this artistic initiative is only a ‘meanwhile’ project, prior to the site being demolished to create a new Market Square and performance space, the hope is that this collaboration between the creative community and Scarborough Council can be strengthened and alternative space for these artists and creatives can be identified when it is required.

The support from the High Streets Task Force has been crucial in Scarborough’s revitalisation efforts, demonstrating the effectiveness of collaborative approaches in transforming vacant properties into vibrant community art hubs.

3.4.3 Rebranding in Streatham

Streatham received a UYPP visit in March 2022 which identified that “communicating local identity” was the main barrier to transformation. Further expert support was provided to develop a vision and identity for the district which has the buy-in and support of the local community.

As part of this process, an in-person workshop in Streatham was organised and attended by BID board members, local authority officers and local businesses. The main reflections from this session were that, whilst Streatham has distinct sub-areas, a clear and cohesive identity is lacking. As such, a stronger vision and visual identity was needed to improve the perception of the centre and attract investment. Following this meeting, the HSTF Experts provided a list of examples to demonstrate how other locations have successfully enlivened their neighbourhoods across the UK.

Following this engagement, a new place identity was created for the area with the aim of making Streatham the destination of choice for consumers and businesses. Led by local business owner, Sally Bell, owner of creative consultancy B1 Creative, the process involved engaging with and listening to a diverse range of voice, to ensure that all viewpoints were represented.

As various unique stories and perspectives emerged, an analogy of “jewels along a necklace” took shape which highlighted how, individually each business was a jewel but, brought together, they formed something more valuable. Working off this principle, each of the zones along Streatham High Road was styled with its own colour and icon to provide a unique personality and sense of pride, with the new logo being made up of all these individual pieces.



Figure 4 New brand for Streatham

In addition to the creation of a new visual brand, a tone of voice also took shape to help InStreatham articulate their impact through association with other words that begin with “in,” such as “Inspiring Action” and “Inclusive Economies.” As such, the outcome has not only been to create a new logo for the area but to create a stronger sense of identity for the whole of Streatham High Road which can better serve the diverse range of businesses that it represents.

In summary, the outcome of this process has brought a renewed sense of pride to the whole community, resulting in additional benefits being secured for the area, such as local businesses deciding to renovate their storefronts, volunteers painting outdoor planters to freshen up the street, and the BID investing in improved benches and seating. This work would not have been possible without the HSTF acting as a catalyst to address the lack of a strong place identity.

3.4.4 Repositioning in Neasden, Brent

Neasden received a UYPP visit in February 2022, which identified the “the need for research and an overarching vision”. Further support was delivered to help the local authority develop an overarching vision for the town centre and understand the views and perspectives of residents and businesses in greater detail. Following engagement with council officers and a representative from the local Business Association, two surveys were produced, one for residents and one for businesses, alongside a plan to maximise responses from local stakeholders. The aim of these surveys was to generate an evidence base which could be used to support decision making in Neasden, whilst also helping to secure funding for activities to improve town centre footfall and engagement. The survey was to be distributed by the newly appointed Neasden Town Centre manager from Brent Council.

The results of the surveys, which generated responses from 212 businesses and 300 residents, revealed common concerns about the town centre relating to crime, the physical environment, the

evening economy, and employment opportunities. Positive responses focused on feeling well informed about events and initiatives, confident about business in the area and valuing the transport links and affordability of the area. In addition, the increased interaction with council representatives in the delivery of the survey provided a positive response with typical comments including, *“I am very pleased that somebody is concerned about my business situation”* and *“It is nice the council cares, but we need action.”* Following the delivery of the support, Brent Council have commissioned a Town Centre Placemaking & Sustainability Action Plan (Figure 6) which sets out a suite of projects to be co-authored, co-designed and co-delivered throughout 2024-27 to support the overarching vision to achieve a fairer, safer, greener, healthier, connected and more diverse Neasden.



Figure 5 Excerpt from Neasden Town Centre Action and Sustainability Plan

In summary, because of the HSTF support, Neasden have received additional help and guidance to collect data on the views and priorities of local stakeholders which, in turn, has helped inform the creation of a Town Centre Action Plan to address the place's main barriers to transformation.

3.4 Impact on Place makers

The HSTF had a direct impact on many distinct types of place makers as developing placemaking skills was a key objective of the programme. There were a variety of skills mentioned, including expertise and knowledge from the HSTF Resource Library, enhanced place marketing initiatives, people feeling encouraged to take ownership for issues and actions, and feeling their thinking had been inspired or stimulated which would help them “take the place forward.” The positive comments also mentioned that following the HSTF support resulted in an informed action plan and a unified vision.

3.4.1 Evidence from KPIs

The selection of the KPIs that were relevant to place makers, and their skills is shown in the table below. These focus on the ability of the HSTF to have improved the quality of a person's place making skills as well as the quantity of additional support made available and provided to place makers.

KPIs	Evidence	
KPI 2.1	Provide evidence on the quality of Task Force services (e.g. training and expert advice), including number of feedback forms received from participants after attending classes and demonstrating positive impact of learning in their placemaking skills.	With an aggregate performance of 90% positive feedback across the programme (93% in year 5) place makers have indicated that the learning undertaken through the HSTF has positively impacted their place making skills.
KPI 2.2	A year-on-year increase in the number of participants who feel their Place Making skills have improved due to training (from the UYPP + PMP product).	There has been a notable improvement in the number of participants who feel their Place Making skills have enhanced due to both attendance and training through the UYPP and PMP products. In Year 1, 81% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their skills improved, which increased to 89% in Year 4. The total number of feedback surveys also showed a significant increase over the years, from 50 in Year 1 to 263 in Year 4. This upward trend suggests that the training provided by the Task Force is effectively enhancing participants' Place Making skills.
KPI 2.3	Year on year increase in the number of previously unengaged local high streets accessing and completing training courses.	This KPI shows that there has been a considerable number of previously unengaged local high streets accessing and completing training courses over the programme. In Year 1, there were no places accessing the training courses. However, by Year 4, 14 places accessed the Place Making Programme, and 20 places accessed the Developing Place Leaders course. Moreover, there has been substantial progress in the participation of Developing Place Analysts, with 57 students accessing the course in Year 2 and 75 in Year 3.
KPI 4.2	Year on Year increase in number of high streets and town centres to have accessed learning materials and/or training.	Figures show that for the first four years of the programme, 2,773 organisations accessed bespoke training sessions run online. The profile shows numbers peaking in year 3 at 1083 having started with zero in year one, 898 in year two and 792 by year four. As a result, there has not been a year-on-year increase in organizations attending or accessing materials and learning, as was originally envisioned by this KPI.

		This is potentially driven by two key factors, COVID which resulted in the popular HSTF recovery programmes being run during this time and driving attendance and secondly, as a five-year programme covering a limited number of places, it is inevitable that there would be a slight fall off in the latter years.
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Table viii KPIs relevant to place makers and their skills

3.4.2 Evidence from Developing Place Leaders' surveys

92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge about leadership, governance, and place making has increased, and 96% of them agreed or strongly agreed that the HSTF encouraged them to continue collaborating with others to improve their high street

The Developing Place Leaders workshop was delivered online to 38 locations, engaging with over 350 representatives from local authorities, local businesses, and local community groups, as well as organisations such as Business Improvement Districts and Civic Societies.

The sessions introduced the concept of place leadership, which included a consideration of what qualities make for a good place leader, highlighting a variety of examples of best practice in relation to place improvement initiatives across the country.

Where possible, relevant case studies of successful place improvement initiatives were included by highlighting examples from locations either within the region being presented to or from places with similar characteristics. For instance, examples of coastal town improvements were highlighted when delivering to areas with several coastal towns, and examples of market town improvements were emphasized when presenting to more rural areas.

Feedback from the Developing Place Leaders product was consistently high, with 92% of respondents agreeing that “my knowledge about leadership, governance, and place making has increased” and 97% agreeing that the course “encouraged me to continue collaborating with others to improve my high street” (see Table xiv). The sessions grounded these examples by framing them through the 4Rs of Renewal - the HSTF's strategic framework for determining what each town's primary focus should be to tackle its main barrier to transformation. By doing this, the attendees were not only exposed to successful examples of place improvement but were also provided with a better understanding of the strategic framework which should underpin and guide their decision-making process when it comes to determining which priority area to focus on to tackle their own place's issue.

	"My knowledge about leadership, governance, and place making has increased"	"It encouraged me to continue collaborating with others to improve my high street"
Strongly agree	31.25%	63.54%
Agree	60.41%	33.33%
Neither agree nor disagree	7.29%	0%
Disagree	0%	1.04%
Strongly Disagree	1.04%	2.08%

Table ix Feedback from the Developing Place Leaders programme

The sessions ended with a reflection on the different organisational cultures that can be found within places. These range from an Apathetic culture, in which there is little or no capacity to make change happen, to a Grassroots culture, where change is being led by the community, a Paternalistic Culture, where change is being led by the local authority, and a Pluralistic Culture, in which all partners are effectively collaborating to make change happen. While these sessions have been useful in highlighting examples of place improvement, educating attendees on the HSTF's strategic framework, and identifying blockers and enablers, it has been observed that attendees were already well-engaged in efforts to improve their high streets and town centres. They tend to embody a culture of openness and collaboration. As a result, it has often felt that the sessions were more about "preaching to the choir" rather than reaching those who most need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of place leadership.

3.5 Impact on policy

This section reviews the impact HSTF has had on high streets and town centre policy in England. One of the original problems that the HSTF was set up to solve related to the competing strategic priorities of local authorities. Many years of policy focus on set themes and outcomes (e.g. economic development) rather than the priorities of locations meant that high streets and town centres (i.e. places) were not seen as a priority at national or local level. The HSTF has been able to help support a funding paradigm shift – away from themes and outcomes - and towards places and partnerships.

3.5.1 High Street Accelerators

As members of the MHCLG Policy Development Steering Group, the Chair of the HSTF board, and the research lead for the HSTF were able to bring the data and evidence collected from HSTF deep dives to inform thinking on how to ensure the impact of the pilots was optimised. This resulted in the following key factors being baked into the pilot:

- Establish an effective place partnership, chaired independently from the local authority, and comprised of key stakeholders from across the place, to drive change directly and collaboratively.
- To ensure each place has a bespoke and compelling vision that resonates with and is owned by the people of that place.
- Ensure that high street accelerators access HSTF professional capacity and expertise in an area of need.
- To consider how post-pilot places can continue their work in a sustainable manner.

In December, the HSTF, on behalf of MHCLG, hosted a one-day HSA induction which was attended by all ten HAS locations. Speakers from HSTF and MHCLG provided information on the programme, including the packages of support available and attendees benefited from master class sessions by experts from the Institute of Place Management and Platform Places. An evaluation of attendees was carried out, with the event recording a satisfaction rating of 95%.

The HSTF experts have supported the pilots through the formation of strong visions which inform work plans to be driven by robust action orientated partnerships. For example, in Stepney, Hull, where their vision alluded to elements of safety, attractiveness and vibrancy the partnership's action orientated approach resulted in a clean-up day where 47 tonnes of waste was collected, as well as the development of plans for a World Food Festival. In Grimsby, safety was an element of their vision too. HSTF support has helped use the HSA programme to install 8 new safety cameras, facilitate better working with the police, appoint female place ambassadors, and carry out 'deep cleans'. Likewise in other areas such as Stoke, Oldham and Hyde, HSTF Experts supported the creation and execution of key improvement actions, through the HSA programme.

3.5.2 Wider policy impact

The analysis, conducted by exporting data from Overton (a searchable index of policy documents and think tank publications), reveals that the HSTF was mentioned in 125 policy documents between January 2018 and July 2024. A significant majority of these documents focus on the national UK level. Specifically, 73% were produced at the national level (e.g., UK Parliament Select Committee Publications, Hansard UK, the UK Government), 20% at the local level (e.g., Belfast City Council, West of England Combined Authority), 6% at the regional level (e.g., Northern Ireland Executive), and 1% at the international level (i.e., the Technical Meeting on Digitalization in the Retail Sector as an Engine for Economic Recovery and Decent Work in Geneva, 25–29 September 2023).

Furthermore, 80% of these documents were issued by government entities. This indicates a strong governmental interest and involvement in the initiatives and activities of the HSTF, highlighting its 'importance in shaping national policies related to UK high streets'. However, interest in the HSTF's impact on communities and places also emerges from non-governmental stakeholders at the international level, such as think tanks (19%), including the Design Council and Centre for Cities, and intergovernmental organisations (1%), such as the International Labour Organisation.

4. Key Findings

At the end of the HSTF we reflected on what we have learnt and identify the activities that transform high streets. Any future policy or programme should focus on these. In this section we use a range of HSTF locations to give context and illustrate key findings.

4.1 Place management - getting the basics right

The lack of basic capacity to perform essential activities, such as maintaining clean and tidy high streets, engaging with stakeholders, coordinating projects, and communicating effectively, was observed in various locations. The examples below illustrate how these locations addressed this issue by employing place management professionals to enhance capacity and community engagement. These places have experienced positive improvements by simply ‘getting the basics right.’

4.1.1 Tower Hamlets

“The High Street Task Force’s advice was timely and impactful. The recommendations were followed, providing a much-needed boost for the team to rethink Whitechapel.”

Tower Hamlets Local Authority Regeneration Project Manager

When the HSTF first engaged with Tower Hamlets in 2021, it was evident that the primary issue was limited local engagement and practical action. It was recommended that an effective Town Centre Manager be appointed, possessing the necessary skill set, including the ability to listen and the authority to act, to improve the day-to-day experience for market traders, businesses, and residents. Since this engagement, Tower Hamlets has focused on getting the basics right. Notably, the decision to employ a Town Centre Manager for the Whitechapel area has provided a main point of contact for the community and facilitated stakeholder collaboration. This has resulted in a significantly increased programme of events and activities for residents and businesses, including transforming shopfronts and vacant spaces with the help of local artists. Business engagement has also improved, alongside collaborative efforts between Camden, Brent, and Westminster councils, who are now actively working together to address the challenges facing Kilburn.

4.1.2 Luton

In July 2021, it was identified that Luton needed a “short to medium-term activation plan”. With support from the High Street Task Force, it was decided that a town centre-focused brand and website were also necessary to improve communication with the local community. Additionally, the activation of the Stage site through temporary performances was recommended to start to build identity and test concepts. The creation of a “High Street Hub” to communicate ongoing changes and the establishment of a citizen’s panel to ensure local input on Luton’s future complemented the work of the Town Centre Strategic Board.

Following discussions with the Task Force, the council in Luton appointed a Town Centre Director and Activation Manager and developed a successful programme of events. They also committed to developing a new place brand and High Street Hub to enhance the town's image and feel. This brand, adopted by the Step Forward Luton partnership, includes Luton's civic, voluntary, and business organisations, aiming to promote Luton as a great place to live, work, invest, visit, and study. As stated, the brand of Luton: "will be owned and driven by external ambassadors from across Luton's communities, initially focusing on civic pride and inward investment." The local council's capacity has increased as more individuals are now involved in boosting the town's image, identity, and message. This additional capacity has been mobilised due to the local authority's place management capability to facilitate it.

4.1.3 Armley

In November 2021, High Street Task Force support identified the need for better partnerships and communication with business leaders and the wider community. Through several in-person meetings with key high street stakeholders, challenges and opportunities for Leeds City Council were identified, informing their future high street strategy. The main recommendation was for Leeds City Council to invest in human and financial resources to establish and support a dedicated town centre group or partnership in Armley.

The Armley Action Team was established as a Community Interest Company in November 2022. This group oversees various community-based activities, including regular litter picks, and is currently recruiting a Volunteer Coordinator to work 3-4 days per week (including 2 Saturdays a month) on a salary of £23,088 until March 2027, funded by a successful National Lottery Community Fund application. Additionally, Armley has received £75,000 in funding from the Local Centres Programme (LCP) established by Leeds City Council in 2017 to support the vitality, viability, and resilience of Town and Local Centres through eligible interventions identified by members, frontline services, and partners. The Armley Town Street Active Travel project team was tasked with proposing ideas on how to use the LCP funds, which would then be discussed by ward members. While a local partnership is ideal, the Armley Forum public meeting, chaired by local councillors, provides residents and workers with updates on local plans.

Their plans for 2022-2023 resulted in various place-making projects, such as the launch of Pocket Park, which included a community-decided mural on the wall facing the Gelder Road shops. This led to the creation of two different markets throughout the year on Armley Town Street and the Moor. Additionally, the partnership created the Armley Winter Wonderland (including the Christmas Light Switch-On) and helped maintain local festivals and 'in-bloom' projects. The work in Armley demonstrates that effective place management can be delegated to the community but highlights that there is still a need to coordinate this by the council. Armley exemplifies the strength of a 'team approach,' creating various events and place-making strategies that help improve the area.

4.2 Building inclusive partnerships and networks that mobilise and empower people

The locations in the examples below have successfully built inclusive partnerships and networks that extend local authorities' capacity and capability by empowering place stakeholders and involving them in creating change.

4.2.1 Accrington

When the High Streets Task Force engaged with Hyndburn Borough Council in Accrington, it identified the primary challenge in enhancing the town centre as the lack of collaboration and mechanisms for joint decision-making and dialogue among local stakeholders. In response, a Town Centre Stakeholder Group was established to create and oversee a roadmap for change. This group, which meets quarterly, comprises 24 members from various sectors, backgrounds, and perspectives, including volunteers, local authorities, and business representatives.

In June 2021, Hyndburn Borough Council appointed Bradshaw Advisory as external consultants through an open competition. Their role was to support diagnostic efforts, gather data, engage stakeholders, and provide guidance on decision-making processes for developing the plan. Following this, it was recommended to form a smaller board, a subset of the larger Stakeholder Group, to expedite decision-making. Additionally, a core team, known as the Delivery Group, was created to meet weekly. The Town Centre Partnership Board, comprising 13 members, was tasked with discussing the strategic direction of the plan, including its structure, data analysis, modelling, and proposed interventions. Through collaborative efforts, these groups developed a new vision for Accrington, accepted the findings from Bradshaw Advisory's diagnostic work, and established guiding principles for prioritising and selecting projects for the Town Centre Investment Plan. These groups continue to meet regularly to oversee the plan's implementation and manage the application process for grants and funding opportunities.

4.2.2 Paignton

Recognising the activation of Paignton town centre as a key issue and strategic priority, Torbay Council engaged High Streets Task Force experts and local stakeholders in a 2023 Place Making Workshop. This workshop aimed at setting priorities, including improving the town centre's appearance, enhancing promotional efforts, increasing events and activities to diversify offerings, creating new business development spaces, and formulating an action plan to support the broader vision and strategic goals of the town.

Additional expert support in 2023 focused on addressing the gap between the closure of shops and the start of the evening economy. Proposed initiatives included markets and entertainment to fill this period, as well as efforts to develop a forward-looking brand to reshape perceptions and establish a distinct identity for Paignton, differentiating it from other locations associated with the English Riviera brand.

The Minutes of the Paignton Town and Preston Community Partnerships Meeting from September 2023 reveal that progress is being made through a collaborative effort involving local stakeholders beyond the Council. Steps are underway to form a 'Paignton Team' and develop a 'Paignton Town Centre Action Plan.' Supported by the Council, the Paignton Town Team, which includes local groups, organisations, and business leaders, is responsible for driving the action plan, developed with input from the High Streets Task Force. Public awareness has been raised through social media about the team's role. Reviewing the progress on the action plan over the past year would be valuable for assessing further developments.

4.2.3 Grimsby

“It’s not about one organisation doing all the work – it’s about all of us working together to improve how the town centre looks, feels and operates.”

Lead of the Grimsby 2025 Group (Nelincs.gov.uk, 2023).

Like Torbay Council and Paignton, the High Streets Task Force’s recommendations for Grimsby focused on revitalising the town centre. Evidence indicates that the Grimsby 2025 Group was established as a Community Interest Company (CIC) with the aim of becoming a Business Improvement District (BID), a solution supported by local Grimsby stakeholders and the Northeast Lincolnshire Council.

The group is actively working towards the original recommendation to reinvigorate the town by increasing footfall and creating a more vibrant town centre. They are mobilising local stakeholders under the campaign slogan ‘Be Part of the Positive,’ which promotes a unique partnership identity. This is clearly communicated on the partnership’s website, designed to raise public awareness and engagement through a membership programme.

The partnership’s influence in extending the council’s capacity, mobilising people, and empowering the community to transform the town centre is evident through the implementation of their activation plan strategy. As of 2023, the Grimsby 2025 Group reported that work is ongoing to complete the Riverhead Square project, which connects the Garth Lane area to Victoria Street. Additional key projects include the Freshney Place Market and Leisure scheme, town centre living initiatives, and improvements to the town’s waterfront (Nelincs.gov.uk, 2023).

Efforts are also underway to encourage property owners to maintain their buildings and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour with the help of new funding. Furthermore, initiatives are in place to attract new businesses, with New Look returning to Freshney Place and smaller independent shops opening. On the creative front, public murals have been commissioned, and the Grimsby Creates programme has encouraged public events and nurtured local creative talent in the town centre (Nelincs.gov.uk, 2023).

4.3 Improving the High Street experience and identity

The following case study highlight how activation and successful branding initiatives can enhance a place’s feel, identity, and positivity. These examples demonstrate improved perceptions, increased footfall, and more appealing public spaces, emphasising that quick wins can significantly enhance places.

4.3.1 Barnsley Town Centre, Barnsley

Barnsley has attracted investment and economic activity by improving the perception of its town centre. This was achieved through the development of a relevant and significant brand identity that residents, stakeholders, and community groups could understand and promote.

In 2023, the council produced a document that began to define the town’s brand as a place that “celebrates the people and places that make our town centre so vibrant.” By doing so, the town council provided town centre stakeholders with the “opportunity to collectively promote Barnsley

town centre as a destination of choice for visitors, telling stories to increase visitor footfall, dwell time, and change perceptions about our town.”

This brand identity has led to significant growth for the area. The town centre has seen increased activation and growing awareness of what it offers to residents and the surrounding area. This has been achieved through a marketing approach managed by a Marketing Group. Barnsley has also seen recent increases in footfall, demonstrating that a strong local identity and brand can improve public perception. Footfall in the first quarter of 2023 was up by nearly 40%, with the second quarter not far behind with an increase of 25%.

4.3.2 Streatham Town Centre, Lambeth

Streatham Town Centre has been working towards constructing and promoting a strong local identity. This was achieved through the development of a vision and identity for the district, which included the local community.

Led by local business owner, resident, and active community volunteer, a new place identity was created for the area with the aim of making Streatham the destination of choice for consumers and businesses. The process involved engaging with and listening to the voices of the local community to ensure that all viewpoints were represented. This was achieved through a series of workshops for the community to discuss ideas and contribute to the creative process.

As their unique stories developed, an analogy of “jewels along a necklace” took shape, highlighting how each business was a jewel, but together they formed something more valuable.

Given the length of the High Road, neighbourhoods became divided by pockets, so the approach to place brand development was to maintain that immediate local identity. Each of these zones was styled with its own colour and icon to provide a unique personality and sense of pride, with the new Streatham High Road logo comprising all these individual pieces.

In addition to the visual brand, a tone of voice was developed to help InStreatham articulate their impact through association with other words that begin with “in,” such as “Inspiring Action” and “Inclusive Economies.” The aim was to build an affinity for the area without rigid guidelines that work in other BID areas.

The objective was not merely to create a logo or name but to create an identity that would serve the businesses it represented. The renewed sense of pride created by the identity has filtered through to the community, leading to shop storefronts being renovated by their owners, outdoor planters being painted by the community, and benches and seating being refreshed.

4.3.3 Earlestown Town Centre, St. Helens

In Earlestown, there was a need to “identify a shared vision produced through a collaborative working process and plan.” This led to the establishment of a new partnership group to give local stakeholders a vehicle to create the animation they need and want within the town.

The inaugural meeting of this new group, named Earlestown Thrives, was chaired by an HSTF expert and attracted 30 local stakeholders, alongside a selection of Council officers and Members. The meeting made excellent progress, with plans discussed to organise events, trails, and activities to attract more visitors.

This group quickly organised a Family Fun Day, which attracted large crowds to the town centre and received positive coverage in the local press.

4.3.4 Scarborough

In Scarborough, placemaking efforts have activated the town centre. Several stakeholders across the town engaged in discussions to collaborate on curating a high street space that could provide window space for a gallery, space for 'pop-up' theatre, and hands-on workshops. Despite setbacks, including a landlord's decision to demolish one of their proposed sites, continued collaboration and inclusive discussions resulted in a template business plan to progress to concept in other vacant units.

Scarborough Studios secured leases on vacant units in Scarborough's Old Town to convert existing eyesores, including the former Shakespeare pub, the neighbouring newsagents, and three former coin-operated toilets, into vibrant galleries and art studios for the creative community. These units will provide exhibition space and studios for 12 artists in the flats above the former shops.

Activation efforts also referenced the town's seaside postcard traditions. For example, Scarborough Studios turned a block of public toilets into "Scarborough Bogs," offering a "unique viewing experience" for artists' work as part of efforts to christen this part of the town as Scarborough's new Arts Quarter.

4.4 Long-Term viability through place leadership and hyperlocal governance

As the High Streets Task Force was only a relatively short programme, there has not been time to study the long-term effects of the recommendations that have been implemented in locations. Nevertheless, some places have demonstrated the positive trajectory that has been seeded with HSTF support. This has been catalysed by strong place leadership and governance, and this case study demonstrates that high street regeneration is not a one-time effort but an ongoing process requiring robust structures, long-term visions, comprehensive plans, and sustainable funding streams. Effective place leadership and hyperlocal governance provide communities with the tools and authority needed to shape the future of their high streets, ensuring their resilience and adaptability for years to come.

4.4.1 Ashton-in-Makerfield

Ashton-in-Makerfield faced numerous challenges that hindered its potential for growth and vibrancy. Traffic congestion caused by heavy goods vehicles navigating the narrow high street, the dominance of chain stores over independent businesses, and the absence of a central market square all contributed to the town's decline. The marketplace, primarily used as a car park, further reduced footfall, and added to the town's lack of identity. Additionally, there were no strong links between the town and the nearby Haydock Park Racecourse, representing a missed opportunity for boosting local tourism and business engagement. Despite these issues, there was a keen sense of pride in the community, though frustration grew as residents felt the town was not living up to its potential and getting the support it needed.

In response, Wigan Council, with support from the High Streets Task Force, acted by convening local leaders from the voluntary sector, business community, and the council. Recognising the community's commitment, the HSTF Expert reflected, "When I first went to Ashton-in-Makerfield, there was no money on the table, but about 30-35 people in the room with a really powerful sense of pride and place. There was no blame culture; it was very refreshing." This strong engagement led to the formation of the Ashton Innovation Board, designed to bring together stakeholders to create a shared vision for the town's future. The board, which held its first meeting at St. Thomas' Church,

included representatives from various local sectors, ensuring that decisions were made collaboratively and reflected the needs of the entire community.

The participatory approach in Ashton-in-Makerfield was strengthened by a bottom-up leadership model that emphasised transparency, accountability, and maintaining motivation despite challenges. The HSTF Expert noted, “There was no blame culture, it was very refreshing,” highlighting a form of governance that encouraged open dialogue and trust among stakeholders. He further explained, “The whole process was different from the normal ‘we’ve brought in consultants who’ve borrowed your watch to tell you the time.’ This needed to be meaningful engagement, which it was.” He emphasised that the Innovation Board was not merely a consulting body but an active partner with the council in leading the decision-making process. While the local authority remained the accountable body, the Innovation Board participated in every step, allowing business representatives to suggest practical improvements to council proposals. As the HSTF Expert stated, “People who live and work in the town have a better understanding of the area than the local authority officers, based in another town.” The collaboration between the board and the council has been highly effective, with the chair of the Innovation Board even having the power to propose amendments to unrealistic timescales, ensuring that the town progresses at an appropriate pace.

The £6.6 million funding secured from the Capital Regeneration Programme further boosted morale, demonstrating the long-term sustainability of the place-based partnership emerging from Ashton-in-Makerfield, with the HSTF Expert describing the funding as “manna from heaven.” This success was attributed to the convincing evidence of stakeholder engagement, a factor that had been absent in earlier funding applications. “When they applied for levelling up the first time, there was no evidence of stakeholder engagement, so they were unsuccessful. However, this time they could clearly demonstrate diverse elements of the town centre involved, and that was cited as one of the reasons why they got the funding.”

In other words, the creation of the Ashton Innovation Board, which brought together representatives from local businesses, the voluntary sector, and community leaders, demonstrates the value of collective place leadership. The Expert stressed the importance of embedding the Innovation Board within the council’s broader strategy, stating, “You cannot have an innovation board acting as a satellite. It has got to be integrated into everything else that’s happening.” This highlights the crucial role of community-driven governance and expertise in shaping effective place-based strategies. For instance, involving key property/estate owners helped bring about crucial progress, such as addressing traffic congestion. Gibbons recalled, “The three big property developers in Ashton-in-Makerfield said they had never been asked for their opinion or support before, and they could overcome traffic issues because they owned most of the land.”

In conclusion, the example of Ashton-in-Makerfield underscores the importance of long-term strategic planning, financial support, and a collaborative leadership model for successful place development. Through community engagement and expert input, the town is gradually overcoming its challenges and building a more vibrant future based on a form of hyperlocal governance that places local stakeholders as drivers of change and innovation, with the council as a facilitator. This partnership has laid the groundwork for long-term improvements, highlighting the transformative power of community-driven governance, putting Ashton-in-Makerfield – in the HSTF Expert’s words – “in good stead for seeking additional funding. They’re already looking years down the line.”

5. Recommendations

This section builds on the strengths and weaknesses of the original HSTF model to make recommendation for future policy or programmes designed to increase capacity and capability across stakeholders who will continue to evolve the nation's high streets.

5.1.1 Build in more flexibility and reach into a future offer

A future programme could continue to provide a basic expert offer for all local authority areas and an online offer for all high streets. The level of expert support available in the original High Streets Task Force programme was successful in many cases. By working in a 'wide and shallow' way the High Streets Task Force has shown that high streets can be revitalised through partnerships, rebranding, activation, involving young people, tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, in fact a whole host of approaches and interventions that were not previously labelled as 'regeneration'.

We recommend that any future programme that continues to provide a "basic expert offer" should not be confined to make this available only to/through the local authority. Whilst a local authority should continue to identify the high street for support, they do not then need to be the main 'beneficiary' of expert support. BIDs and community groups often have more 'buy in' and capacity to work alongside Experts to make improvements. While the Task Force engaged widely with local authorities, more direct interaction with Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and community groups would build more capacity and capability, generate more comprehensive and locally grounded solutions, and increase the impact of interventions. Any future programme should ensure the inclusion of these groups in the delivery of products and foundational meetings like Unlocking Your Place Potential (UYPP). If the Local Authority is not able to readily identify high street stakeholders (or prioritise a high street to support) then more intensive support is needed to develop the capacity/capability needed to engage and work collaboratively with external partners.

Whilst the original HSTF support was successful in many cases, the report identifies a major limitation of the "wide and shallow" model in some instances. While the Task Force engaged with a broad array of local authorities, the relatively limited support provided (typically 1–5 days of expert guidance) was insufficient for tackling deeply rooted issues in many places. High streets facing high levels of deprivation often require long-term, intensive interventions, which were not feasible under the short support model. The analysis of interventions in various towns demonstrated that more intensive support correlates with better outcomes, as seen in locations that received extended mentoring or multiple touchpoints. For instance, deprived areas took significantly longer to benefit from the Task Force due to complex, entrenched challenges that could not be addressed in a few short visits.

In a future model, the Task Force could identify a smaller cohort of high streets to receive more intensive support—perhaps working with those with the lowest footfall recovery post-COVID, or areas demonstrating high levels of deprivation in indices such as income, employment, and education, or those with weak relationships with high street stakeholders. Intensive support could involve multiple components:

Extended Expert Support: Rather than a one-off diagnostic visit, the Task Force could provide each targeted area with a suite of ongoing services, such as periodic workshops, tailored mentorship, and a dedicated local expert who works closely with the community over an extended period to deliver a high-impact place project. In Scarborough, a creative project using vacant high street space as an art hub gained traction after sustained support and engagement with local creative groups. A focused

approach would enable similar projects to flourish, with dedicated support to navigate logistical challenges, develop business plans, and establish continuity beyond initial idea.

Capacity-Building for Local Authorities: As seen in places like Accrington, where governance restructuring improved decision-making and collaboration, longer-term support can empower local stakeholders to drive change sustainably. Extended engagement could focus on identifying important stakeholders to involve, strengthening local authority capacity, building long-term partnerships, and creating community-led governance structures. This could be done more effectively by working more closely with organisations that network stakeholders that may be excluded from existing governance structures. For example, Civic Voice, Association of Town and City Management, and The BID Foundation were all HSTF consortium partners, and have members in many of the locations where the local authorities seem to have struggled to engage and partner with business and/or community groups. Likewise, local authorities may need additional support to partner with local organisations that network young people and develop skills/attitude to collaborate with young people, who bring fresh ideas and a vested interest in long-term high street viability. A future programme could address LAs capabilities to ensure young people are represented in all project and place governance groups to advise and oversee activity.

Capacity-building for places The Place Making Programme – this 3 hour, *in-situ*, multi-stakeholder workshop, delivered in 40 locations, was the highest rated HSTF product. This is some achievement given the variety of people that attended and that often the programme was the first-time passionate place makers from a variety of backgrounds had come together. The meetings *build capacity in place*. Any future programme could mobilise and empower a broader set of thousands (or hundreds of thousands!) of high street stakeholders through a nationwide placemaking programme.

5.1.2 Involve more young people

Any future initiative must address the identified underrepresentation of young people in high street transformation efforts and align regeneration with the interests of younger generations. Although the original Task Force encouraged youth involvement through initiatives like the Teenage Market, youth representation in the ‘expert’ delivery remained low, at only 1% of attendees in UYPP meetings. The inclusion of young people needs to be considered in all activity. By creating specific roles or projects for younger participants, high streets can build an inclusive vision that addresses both current and future generations as well as ensure all regeneration activity (repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring) harnesses their ideas, creativity, effort, and buy-in. Local young people can be engaged by partnering with educational institutions and youth organisations at the local level. Additionally, high street initiatives must incorporate digital platforms popular with young people (e.g. TikTok or Instagram), enabling them to contribute ideas virtually and stay informed on regeneration progress.

5.1.3 Convene national high street stakeholders around high street (not sectoral) issues

The original HSTF was successful at regularly convening national-level stakeholders, including government, cultural, and business sector representatives, to discuss high street issues, through the Sector Leaders Group meetings. This forum provides a direct channel for evidence-based insights to shape policy and respond to emerging challenges. The Task Force’s ability to convene stakeholders at both local and national levels proved valuable, particularly during crises like COVID-19. The Sector Leaders Group, which met monthly during the pandemic, provided invaluable insights that shaped emergency legislation to support high streets.

We recommend the SLG (or similar) continues with a refreshed focus on what sectors can do to support the successful evolution of English High Streets. A quarterly meeting to discuss high street trends, evaluate new research, coordinate responses to emerging issues, and share best practices, and build consensus on 'blockers' to progress that government may be able to influence, would ensure important stakeholders are aligned and can have a considerable impact on issues such as growth and productivity, or the sustainable development goals.

5.1.4 Align capacity/capability building programmes to government missions

To maximise its influence, any future Task Force should establish formal links with national and local funding bodies/schemes to ensure high street recommendations align with regeneration funding, or funds that support other government missions (e.g. growth). This would help address a key weakness identified in the report: Task Force recommendations often went unimplemented, even when aligned with regeneration funds. Developing protocols that make Task Force recommendations eligible for specific types of funding, such as the Shared Prosperity Fund, could close this gap. For example, if the Task Force identifies a need for improved public spaces in a deprived area, it should work with funders to ensure such improvements are prioritised and eligible.

Even at a basic level, future capacity/capability programmes like the HSTF that build people and organisations skills and knowledge, could help support funds and missions by providing workshops, literature, training etc to ensure high street improvements are aligned with other schemes/and funds. The original Task Force supported the Future High Street Fund, through running a training day for bidders, to help them identify the type of interventions that would have the required impact both in terms of the funds criteria as well as address challenges and opportunities of specific high streets.

In places like Kendal, the involvement of private sector partners and community representatives strengthened local buy-in and enhanced project outcomes. Any future programmes could formalise this partnership approach establishing co-funding models or incentivising joint projects between BIDs, community groups, and local authorities that can foster greater financial and operational collaboration, ensuring that high street improvements align with local business and community needs as well as national missions/funding priorities.

5.1.5 Improve evaluation

Finally, the report notes that the online resource repository developed by the Task Force was well-received and internationally recognised for its comprehensiveness. The resource collection, which included over 1,000 items, provided support for local leaders and community groups in high street regeneration. Any future provision of this nature needs to be formally evaluated. Accessibility and GDPR concerns prohibited formal evaluation of the High Streets Task Force online resources. This could have been overcome, but as the website contract was separate from the HSTF consortium, budgetary/contract constraints meant that it was never resolved. Had more formal evaluation undertaken it may have provided the necessary evidence to decide if the online resource repository should be offered in the future.

Another weakness inherent in the design of the project was the need for more regular assessment of impact. Given the challenges encountered, such as the turnover of Local Authority (LA) personnel, decreasing LA resources, and the lack of capacity for placemaking and place management, measuring the impact of the HSTF is difficult.

There is often little institutional memory in local authorities when it comes to projects. Stakeholders remember that a workshop took place, or a plan was written, or recommendations made – but if this work was undertaken under a previous administration – or by another officer then it can be overlooked. More regular contact with a range of project beneficiaries would have enabled us to capture the impact of the project on *high streets* more effectively. It would also encourage more of an incremental approach to establishing place viability, where regeneration initiatives build on each other, rather than occur in a piecemeal fashion.

A Theory of Change framework at the program's outset would help facilitate evaluability and demonstrate impact. But the same framework should outline long-term outcomes for high streets and provide clear steps to evaluate how interventions lead to intended outcomes, improving accountability and the ability to iterate on strategies. The report highlights that a research-backed approach was one of the Task Force's core strengths, enabling it to provide reliable and impactful advice. This allowed Experts to assess high street conditions methodically and target root issues with products/interventions that had been based on 'science' and tested and evaluated. Any future programme could go further and integrate real-time data sources like footfall, visitor demographics, spending patterns, and resident feedback into the process of diagnosis, recommendations, action to not only drive locally appropriate solutions but also measure the impact of interventions and show how they are building on each other through a theory of change.

5.1.6 Maintain a consortium approach to support place-based programmes

Programmes that are place-based need a wide range of partners to ensure the necessary expertise and objectivity can be deployed to meet the needs of individual places. The HSTF consortium was independent, multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral. In addition, it had several governance mechanisms and groups that increased its diversity and understanding and, therefore, ensured it was representative (or at least cognisant of) of the wide range of high street stakeholders it was set up to support. The independence from government enhances credibility, while a collaborative consortium model allows adaptability to evolving challenges, as demonstrated by HSTF's COVID-19 adjustments. We recommend retaining an independent consortium model to support the continued revitalisation of England's high streets.

6. Legacy

This section presents suggestions for the of the longer-term impact the HSTF can have beyond the end of the programme, by presenting, a theory of change for high street regeneration and suggestions for its governance and achievement, through the evolution of the HSTF consortium and continued use of the HSTF brand.

6.1 Theory of Change for high street regeneration

Establishing a Theory of Change at the program’s outset would guide both intervention design and impact assessment, ensuring a structured path from short-term activities to long-term goals. This approach was recommended in the PwC evaluation, which found that clear intervention logic would have strengthened the Task Force’s impact narrative. The Theory of Change could outline desired outcomes like economic vitality, community engagement, and improved environmental quality, specifying how interventions (such as skill-building workshops and place-making initiatives) are expected to produce these outcomes.

Based on the key findings from the High Streets Task Force, we propose a ‘legacy’ theory of change, that is not only relevant for future policy or programmes designed to support the long-term viability of England’s high streets, at a national level, but can also be implemented locally, to identify where interventions are needed.



This theory of change outlines how a structured approach to high street regeneration, grounded in the knowledge frameworks utilised and insight developed through the HSTF programme, can lead to long-term success.

The four key areas—investing in place management, building inclusive partnerships, improving the high street experience/identity, and fostering place leadership and hyperlocal governance — represent the activities and outputs that lead to transformative outcomes for high streets.

6.1.1 Getting the basics right: Investing in place management capacity and capability

Activities: Developing place management skills across officers in ‘place’ roles (e.g. economic development, planning etc.), creating dedicated place management roles, providing (and expecting) continuous professional development.

Outputs: Increased capacity to facilitate high street regeneration effectively across all high streets, improved collaboration across departments, and better coordination of initiatives.

6.1.2 Building inclusive partnerships and networks

Activities: Engaging local businesses, community groups, and civic organisations; creating cross-sector partnerships; fostering collaboration between local authorities and stakeholders and improving communication between council and external stakeholders.

Outputs: Diverse stakeholder involvement in decision-making, increased community ownership of regeneration efforts, and stronger partnerships between local businesses, local people, and local government.

6.1.3 Improving the High Street experience and identity

Activities: Implementing quick wins, enhancing the public realm, fostering local events and activities, and improving branding and marketing for the high street, improving communications across all stakeholders, increasing pride and attachment. Providing funding to improve experience and identity.

Outputs: Improved perceptions of the high street, increased footfall, higher business engagement, and more appealing public spaces.

6.1.4 Place leadership and hyperlocal governance

Activities: Establishing local leadership structures, developing hyperlocal governance models and devolve funding to building strong, long-term visions for the high street, and aligning national and regional policies with local efforts. Providing funding for long-term regeneration (capital and revenue).

Outputs: Strong leadership, trust, long-term strategic vision for high streets, and resilient governance structures that ensure sustainability.

6.1.5 Outcomes: Positive changes resulting from actions

Short-term outcomes:

- Enhanced capacity within local authorities to manage high street projects.
- Stronger, more inclusive partnerships driving collaboration and shared ownership of the regeneration process.
- Quick, visible improvements in high street appearance, increased footfall, and perceptions, fostering community confidence in high street initiatives.

Medium-term outcomes:

- Increased community engagement in high street planning and decision-making.
- Higher levels of footfall, lower vacancy rates, and improved business success on high streets.
- Strong local identity, with high streets that reflect the needs and values of their communities.

Long-term outcomes:

- Sustainable governance and leadership structures embedded in local areas, ensuring ongoing high street transformation.
- Long-term viability of high streets through adaptive and resilient place leadership and management
- High streets that meet the evolving needs of communities and are central to local life

Impact: Achieving long-term regeneration and sustainability

- High Streets that thrive: Through structured investment in place management, better communication, inclusive partnerships, enhanced public experience, and strong local leadership, high streets become vibrant, resilient, and sustainable places that meet the needs of their communities.
- Empowered communities: Communities are empowered to take ownership of their high streets, driving continued improvements, and ensuring long-term success.

6.2 Governing and implementing the theory of change: Legacy proposition for the High Streets Task Force

The theory of change outlined in the last section illustrates how a clear, strategic approach can transform high streets into thriving, sustainable spaces that reflect the needs and aspirations of their communities.

This section explains how the theory of change can be governed and implemented, through evolving the HSTF consortium and using the HSTF brand.

The key legacy recommendation is to reflect the key findings of the HSTF model at a national level to evolve a partnership that mobilises the significant capacity and capability of several important stakeholders who have a long-term interest in the regeneration of England's high streets. This should be a permanent, national, and strategic partnership that is focused on place to provide insight and expertise to policy makers, as above, but also provides a forum/conduit linking all those who deliver and support change together. Just like place-partnerships it should be able to evolve.

The challenges facing the high street are complex – and are beyond the control of government, just like at a local level the challenges are beyond the control of local authorities. To effect the change proposed a variety of organisations, many of whom were represented in the HSTF consortium, can work in a long-term partnership with government, using the theory of change as a strategic framework, with the vision of high streets becoming vibrant, resilient, and sustainable places that meet the needs of their communities. This partnership will effect change by mainstreaming many of the successful interventions outlined in this report, with partners responsible for implementing the recommendations, but working with policy makers to reduce barriers to adoption. This strategic partnership will have many of the strengths of the HSTF model. Independence from government but a 'team' approach. A respected consortium representing diverse players but all united under the same vision.

The theory of change outlined in this section should become the standard framework for high street regeneration at the local level, meaning local stakeholders, partnerships, and national stakeholders and the HSTF partnership are working at different spatial levels but in a compatible theory of change.

The HSTF brand could be retained, to represent the long-term partnership and theory of change. The HSTF would then take responsibility for the commercial and other models of delivery, much of which would be achieved through the activities of individual partners or sub-groups – again just like an effective place partnership. The individual partners all have a long-term interest in high street regeneration, they have the necessary expertise, and do not have to be ‘contracted’ to deliver – in the case of the professional bodies, for example, they exist to ensure society trusts the activities of their members.

This novel approach to supporting the long-term regeneration of high streets, mirroring the same approach taken at a local level, is a suitable legacy for the High Streets Task Force. In addition, any future partnership needs to embody the sustainability agenda more closely and include social value and well-being as key indicators of success.

An exploratory meeting with MHCLG is recommended to discuss the feasibility of adopting this approach.

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