

Looking after our town centres



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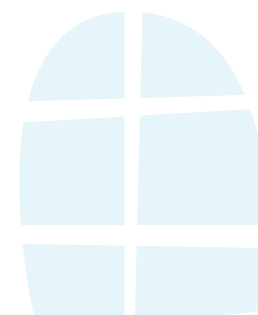
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Foreword

Town centres should be places where everyone, regardless of their age or background, can come together as equal citizens. The high street, the market square, the shopping centre – these are the places that should define a town, give it its sense of identity and vibrancy, and give local people a sense of pride in the place they live or work.

We need to look after our town centres during turbulent economic times every bit as well, if not better, than we did before. Keeping our town centres dynamic and interesting places helps to protect the future of local businesses while continuing to attract local people and visitors onto their streets.

It is clear that the downturn is giving rise to challenges: the sight of boarded-up shops can be depressing. But turbulent economic times can also herald a period of remarkable innovation, energy and creativity. For example, we are already seeing how some town centre managers are taking swift and positive actions to, for example, fill empty shops and other spaces with art galleries, create opportunities for communities to engage in learning, and provide access to local information and services, farmers' markets and community centres. Special events have been organised using targeted marketing, loyalty card schemes and powers that already exist to make sure that town centres thrive during the day and night.

This short guide is for town centre managers and their local partners. It offers practical help in setting out how we can work together to make sure that our town centres reach their full potential, even in tough times, so that we can all enjoy, and be proud of, the centres of our great towns.

But it also looks further ahead. It is vital that those involved in town centres – planners, service managers, businesses, local groups and communities – develop a clear vision, and actively plan to take advantage of new opportunities when the recovery begins.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hazel Blears".

Secretary of State
for Communities and
Local Government



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Burnham".

Secretary of State
for Culture, Media
and Sport

Section 1: Realising the potential of town centres

Introduction

This guide aims to provide practical help for people who care about their town centre. It may be a large and diverse urban area, a country town or village, a local high street, even a local parade. Each of these in their different ways provides important services – either to the district and wider region or to the local neighbourhood.

Town centres that are attractive, well-designed, and well-managed, with a range of shops, arts and cultural uses, entertainment, good amenities, and good transport connections, are engines for economic growth, providing a focal point for business and social interactions. Vibrant town centres are good for business: they create jobs, attract investment and generate income. At their best, they create a local buzz and define the wider area, attracting people from near and far.

Dursley, Gloucestershire

Several businesses in Dursley have closed with the decline of the local manufacturing industry, leaving many empty, shabby shop fronts.

Working with the local council and in close consultation with local landlords, the town centre manager set up a project to convert a parade of shop windows into a series of galleries. In return for the displaying their works, local artists repainted and renovated the shop fronts.

Landlords saw that enhancing these vacant buildings helped reduce the likelihood of vandalism. The galleries were temporary, so the premises could quickly revert back to their original use. The area is now more appealing to potential tenants and attractive to local people.



People do not want to visit town centres that are run-down, difficult to get to or move around, and that don't offer them what they want. The economic downturn is starting to have a visible impact on some of our town centres. A recent survey estimated that the number of empty shops in Britain rose from 63,500 in December 2008 to 90,000 in February 2009 and forecast further increases. Boarded-up shops have knock-on effects: they can attract fly-posting and litter, they can suffer vandalism and fall into disrepair, and they can create a sense of neglect that has serious consequences for the wider area.

That is why it is important to manage town centres well, building on a strong partnership between local people, local businesses, and local service providers such as the local council. Town centres need a clear sense of their identity, a vision for their future, and strategies for achieving that vision.

This makes sense whatever the economic climate. Strong, well-managed towns are better placed to exploit opportunities during times of growth, and are more resilient and better able to adapt when times get tougher. Getting the basics of town centre management right is now more important than ever.

So this guide seeks to:

- make the clearest possible case for our town centres, showing how strong partnerships and positive management can help to keep them attractive and vibrant places
- draw attention to the range of powers, guidance and tools that can help town centres, and highlight some of the creative approaches that local partnerships are already taking in response to the downturn
- set out the steps that the Government is taking to help local authorities and their partners take positive action in their town centres, particularly in enabling temporary use of boarded-up shops.

The guide is aimed primarily at town centre managers and people in similar roles, as they are well placed to galvanise concerted action that responds to the particular issues faced in different areas. But it will also be of interest to local business and community groups, as well as local people, indeed all who are committed to ensuring that their town centre is a lively and vibrant place that people want to visit.



Section 2: The building blocks of successful town centres

Introduction

This section summarises the range of powers, tools, and approaches available to local councils and their partners that can help to provide solid foundations on which to build strong and attractive town centres. Town centres that get the basics right will be better able to respond to the consequences of the downturn, and better placed to ensure that they are ready to take advantage when the recovery begins.

The importance of town centre partnerships and town centre management

“Sustainable management of town and city centres depends on creating successful partnerships – both strategic and operational – to approach local issues with a shared vision.”

How to manage town centres (2005 & 2007)

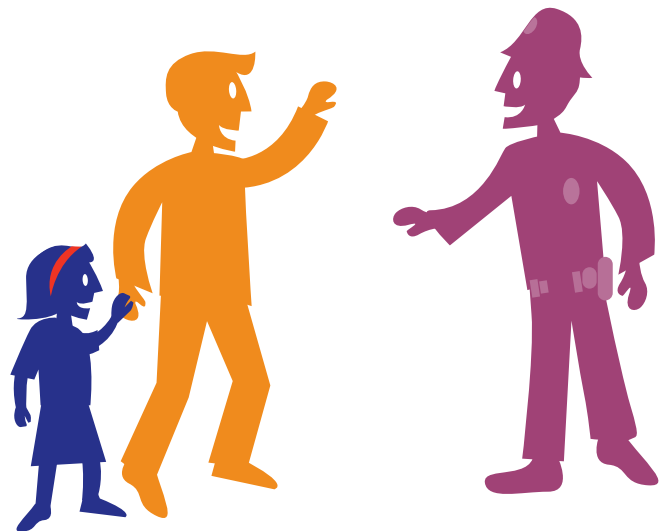
Partnerships often develop in response to complex and multifaceted problems that cannot be tackled effectively by any single person or organisation. In town centres they can deliver real benefits, and provide a vital platform on which to develop strategies, secure coordinated action, and respond to particular local issues.



A town centre partnership typically brings together the broad range of interests in a town centre, public and private, i.e. local businesses, the local council, often the local police and occasionally local residents. Many are associated with a town centre manager, who may have a small team, whose job it is to support the partnership and ensure that its aims are implemented. Partnerships range from the informal (sharing information on an ad hoc basis) to the formal (legally established organisations with formal governance structures).

There are several powerful incentives for organisations to work together for the benefit of a town centre. Town centre partnerships can:

- create a forum to engage local stakeholders in discussion and collaboration
- shape and influence organisational agendas to develop a shared strategic approach to town centre development
- deliver core services and/or provide a channel for additional services and enhanced service delivery
- facilitate access to funding and resource opportunities to enhance town centres
- provide flexibility, innovation, and extra financial and human resources to help solve problems.



Managing town centre partnerships – a guide for practitioners **(CLG, October 2008)**

This guide is the product of a two-year action-learning project involving 21 town centres, from across England, that were at various stages in developing town centre partnerships. It captures the learning outcomes from the project and sets out comprehensive, step-by-step guidance on how to set up and manage a town centre partnership. Contents include:

- Stakeholder engagement – how to identify, engage and manage different stakeholders
- Strategy and action planning – how to develop a strategy and develop objectives
- Performance management – how to link strategy to performance
- Governance and delivery capacity – how to build accountability structures and processes, including managing change
- Funding and financial management – looking at robust systems, and a step-by-step approach to developing a funding strategy.

The guide includes toolkits and case studies drawn from the project partners. The guide can be downloaded from:

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/towncentrepartnerships

“This comprehensive ... guide is set to become the definitive guide for anyone interested in or involved in establishing, developing or reviewing a town centre partnership.”
(ATCM, Chief Executive’s Blog, October 2008).

Town centre management schemes therefore offer a coordinated and proactive approach to ensuring that towns and cities are attractive places. The Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) estimates that there are more than 500 towns and cities in the UK that have some form of management initiative. These vary in terms of their remit and activities, but they all focus on promoting the vitality and viability of their centre, and maintaining its key role as the heart of its community.



Top tips from the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM)

Town centre managers and their local partners can help their centres respond to the downturn by:

- **increasing commitment** to maintaining the attractiveness of the centre and ensuring that visits to the centre are positive experiences through enhanced cleaning, security initiatives, planting, art installations and working with property owners
- **bringing together stakeholders with marketing budgets** to ensure consistent messaging. More careful targeting of these messages will also help to increase awareness of what a town centre has to offer
- **targeting visitors from countries that use the euro** or other currencies, who may be attracted to our towns at the current time
- **thinking more about the town centre** as a destination for UK visitors
- **managing vacant retail premises** – innovative examples show how town centre partnerships are facilitating new cultural or educational uses into vacant retail premises. Elsewhere, vacant units are being used for promotional posters or maps; while other centres are developing initiatives to enable local businesses or start-ups to be supported in these types of premises. Larger centres are looking at recruiting international retailers who now find the UK more affordable
- **increasing activities** by encouraging the use of the streets and venues by community or performance groups and local businesses
- **bringing businesses together** to ensure they are fully aware of what is happening in the town centre and to pool their ideas on what can be done to support the centre and their businesses
- **working closely with local media** – such as running awards with local papers so readers can nominate shops, restaurants and bars that offer excellent customer service
- **understanding** what is going on elsewhere.

The ATCM is dedicated to helping town and city centres realise their natural roles as prosperous locations for business and investment, and as focal points for vibrant, inclusive communities: www.atcm.org

The importance of town centre strategies and performance management

“Town centres are constantly changing. To manage these changes successfully it is vital to understand how centres are used, by whom and when.”

How to manage town centres (2005 & 2007)

Strategies set out a long-term plan of action designed to achieve a particular goal: they confirm what will be achieved, how it will be delivered, and when.

This may seem obvious for town centre managers, but it bears repeating: strategies are important for town centres because they help partners to define their overall vision and aims, plan out the steps that need to be taken towards the overall vision for the town centre, take coordinated action, and manage risks along the way. Performance management is a vital element because it links strategy to real results, enabling the partnership to assess whether it is achieving its strategic objectives and, therefore, on track to realise its vision.

For more guidance on developing town centre strategies see:

How to manage town centres (CLG, 2007)

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/howtotowncentres

Managing town centre partnerships – a guide for practitioners (CLG, October 2008)

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/towncentrepartnerships



A town centre strategy and performance framework therefore:

- helps partnerships to focus their efforts, enhance their results and develop stakeholder commitment
- provides a guide, prompt and control for the progression of the town and the partnership, showing the priority of activities, and allocating resources for their delivery
- clarifies the role and contribution of each partner
- represents a vision for change and a source of stories for the media
- provides residents and the business community with information showing what is being planned and delivered within their town centre.

The key is to know your town centre. Town centres are dynamic places, and no single person will have a complete understanding of all that is going on.

The importance of the local community

Town centres are where local people and local businesses meet. They are places not just where people work, but where they go with friends and families to shop and spend their leisure time. So it is important that town centres are managed in ways that respond to what local people want – if not, people will choose to go elsewhere.

The more that local people have a say in decisions that affect their town centre – whether that be on future planning proposals or options for using vacant shops – the more likely it is that they will feel connected to it, and will want to support it. They can help local authorities think creatively, and often have innovative ideas for improving the delivery of local services.

The Government's white paper *Communities in control: real people, real power* (CLG, 2007) set out how we are transferring more power to local people and communities. This is even more important in difficult economic times, and local authorities and town centre partners both stand to benefit from engaging with local people – in terms of better value public services, increased trust in local institutions, and stronger relationships between people of different backgrounds.



Communitybuilders Fund

The £70 million Communitybuilders Fund will enable local community organisations to develop their work and services. Community organisations often form the bedrock of local support and energy. They empower neighbourhoods by offering a place for community activities including running a wide range of different courses and services, stimulating involvement and enterprise and generating independent sources of income. For example, community-led organisations might want to develop a vacant shop for a variety of activities, services and social enterprises to benefit local people.

The importance of business

The Government is also helping businesses to get more involved in shaping and managing their local areas.

For example, we introduced legislation in 2004 enabling Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to be set up. A BID is a partnership between a local council and local businesses that develops projects and services which improve the business environment, often in a town centre. They are funded by an additional levy on the non-domestic rates bill, which is collected by the local billing authority and can only be used by and for the BID. Businesses decide via a ballot whether the BID should be established and the amount of the levy.

BIDs have proved a popular way for businesses to work together and generate resources for investment in their area. Seventy-one BID ballots have been successful over the last five years.

The National BIDs Advisory Service website offers guidance, good practice guides and a “fast facts” section: www.ukbids.org.

The Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI) has also helped to stimulate enterprise in deprived communities. It is a £100m a year fund paid by CLG to 20 local areas, and uses high streets as focal points to provide business support and help revive town centres. For example, in Hastings LEGI funded a town centre media centre, providing affordable serviced incubator space for multimedia start-up companies and self-employed people. In Great Yarmouth, LEGI refurbished a town centre building to provide walk-in business advice to residents and businesses, while in County Durham LEGI provided specialist advice to independent retailers to help retain diversity in its town centres. For more information on LEGI: www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/page.asp?id=1612



The importance of attractive and safe town centres

Well-designed and well-maintained buildings and public spaces, including parks, streets and squares, play a vital role in creating attractive and welcoming town centre environments for people of all ages.

Public spaces, including green spaces, can help to attract investment into town centres, enhance community spirit and cohesiveness, promote community health and wellbeing, and manage the effects of climate change.

Equally, it is important that town centres and high streets are places that look and feel safe for people and businesses alike.

Attracting visitors and tourists

Many UK cities and towns are already tourist destinations, and there is the potential for short-stay holidays to increase as people choose more cost-effective holiday options nearer to home. Tourists choose their destinations carefully, drawing on their previous impressions, talking to friends and family and looking up feedback on the internet. Businesses operate to turn a profit, and customer “footfall” is the lifeblood of the retail and leisure industries. The extent to which a town or city has made a strong and positive impression is vital in securing repeat visits. So the quality of the public space, the ease with which people can move around, the design and branding of street furniture and signage, and access to local amenities like public toilets all make an important difference.

Delivering quality design

Various forms of advice and help are available for planners, architects, and town centre managers.

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) plays an important role in the creation of high quality places that are more attractive to live in. Its programmes of expert advice, training and quality assurance, promote better informed attention to design. CABE leads the way in providing expert and practical assistance to



organisations involved in the design, planning and development of building and public places including:

- *delivering design quality in new homes and neighbourhoods*, notably through its Design Review service, which provides expert advice to local authorities across England. CLG actively encourages all local planning authorities to make use of this service for significant schemes at the earliest possible stage
- *promoting cohesive communities in housing growth and market renewal areas*, notably through its Enabling programme, which focuses on supporting the clients of masterplanning and public space projects through the provision of strategic advice and practical support
- *championing improvements to parks and the wider public realm* through CABE Space, which assists local authorities in writing green space strategies and supporting skills development in improving public space.

Fakenham town centre's market square

High-quality natural materials and fine detailing encourage people to linger in Fakenham town centre's market square, designed by North Norfolk District Council.

This scheme highlights the best of the town's character, in particular the fine buildings surrounding the market place and square. Street clutter has been eliminated and surfaces have been installed which, despite their variety and block size, are smooth underfoot and do not present problems for walkers, children in buggies, disabled or elderly people or cyclists.

Extensive seating positioned to catch the sun, alongside trees, artwork, numerous well-signed pedestrian routes through the area, and lack of litter all contribute to an attractive, convenient and comfortable environment for shoppers and residents of all ages. It is a place where they can linger safely, have informal meetings and conversations, relax, and where young people can also meet.

More good practice examples can be found on CABE's website at www.cabe.org.uk/case-studies/listing?page=1&tag=Public+space&tagId=25&type=case-studies



As the Government's expert adviser on the historic environment, English Heritage offers advice and, occasionally, grant assistance to help local authorities manage their historic town centres in a positive and sustainable way. English Heritage works with local authorities to identify historic areas that are particularly run-down with a view to setting up partnership grant schemes that help kick-start regeneration through investment in the repair and enhancement of historic buildings and spaces.

Publications relevant to the regeneration of historic town centres include:

Retail Development in Historic Areas

English Heritage, Planning Advisory Service and English Historic Towns Forum 2005

Guidance on the management of conservation

English Heritage and Planning Advisory Service 2006

Streets for All

(Guidance on streetscape issues) English Heritage 2004 and 2008

All are available at www.helm.org.uk

Focus on Retail English Historic Towns Forum supported by English Heritage 2008

Manual for Historic Streets English Historic Towns Forum supported by CABE and English Heritage 2008



Princesshay in Exeter

The redevelopment of the post-war shopping area Princesshay in Exeter has successfully demonstrated how a high quality, mixed use, contemporary development can be sensitively integrated into the existing historic urban fabric. By using three architectural practices, the development is enhanced by a range of different design approaches that respond to the city walls and cathedral nearby. The scheme improved pedestrian movement from the city centre towards the cathedral and created new, attractive public spaces which reinforced Exeter's unique identity.

Councillors' guide to creating quality public places

The Government has also published guidance for local authority councillors on action they can take to create quality public places. The guide reflects the new powers and responsibilities councillors have, and supports them in taking effective action on cleaner, safer, greener and quality of life issues. It includes case studies highlighting actions that local authorities have taken, working with local businesses and private landlords, to create a better, cleaner trading environment in town centres. Small-scale actions such as these can help to keep places looking attractive.

Councillors' guide to creating quality public places (CLG, Aug 2008):

www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/915722.pdf

Keeping town centres accessible

Town centres rely on their ability to attract people and encourage them to return. They need to be accessible, on foot, by public transport, and by car; and people need to feel assured that they will be able to use good quality amenities. Knowing that someone will be able to access a well-maintained and properly equipped public toilet, for example, can make the difference between them choosing to visit one town over another. For some people – families with young children for instance – this is fundamental to their health and comfort.



Improving public access to better quality toilets (CLG, Mar 2008)

This strategic guide sets out ways in which local authorities and their partners can improve public access to toilets. It:

- makes the case for public toilets, and highlights their importance across a range of public policy themes – social inclusion and equality, healthy communities, cleaner and greener communities, sustainable transport, creating attractive town centres, attracting tourism etc
- examines the causes of declining public access to toilets
- sets out how local authorities and their partners can take positive action to promote better public access to toilets.

www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/713772.pdf

Ease and cost of parking, too, is an important consideration when people choose their destinations.

Parking in Billericay

In February, Basildon Council introduced free parking at all council-owned car parks in Basildon, Wickford and Billericay from 6pm on Fridays to 8am on Mondays. Short stay car parking fees have also been reduced by 20 per cent on weekdays in Basildon and Wickford to encourage short-term shopper parking. In Billericay, the local Chamber of Commerce estimates that there has been a 10 per cent increase in the number of shoppers in the high street compared to last year.

Keeping town centres safe

Various factors combine to help town centres create a sense of safety and security for business and visitors at all times of the day and night: the layout and design of streets, buildings, and open spaces, the attractiveness of public spaces, the visibility of a uniformed presence on the street. The *How to manage town centres* guide contains information on Government initiatives to tackling crime and other options available to help keep town centres safe.

Crime against business – what businesses need to know

In March 2009 the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and the Home Office published guidance for businesses on reducing crime. It aims to ensure that businesses get heard and know what support is available to help tackle crime.

<http://berr.ecgroup.net/Publications/EnterpriseBusinessSupport/CrimesAgainstBusiness.aspx>

Making best use of statutory guidance and powers

The importance of planning

The planning system is a positive mechanism for shaping cities and town centres, ensuring that they are attractive, diverse, and accessible. Effective planning helps to improve economic performance and ensure that development happens in the right locations.

The main aim of national planning policy for towns and other centres is to promote their vitality and viability as important places for communities, and to ensure that they are economically successful.

We announced in our response to Matthew Taylor's *Review of rural economy and affordable housing* that we are bringing our planning policies for sustainable economic growth, including policies for town centres, into a single comprehensive policy statement. This draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) will create a coherent and modern set of policies designed to meet the challenges town centres face both now and over the longer term.



Building on the current approach in *Planning Policy Statement 6 on Town Centres*, the PPS will maintain the crucial town centre first approach, directing new retail, leisure and office development into centres, where possible. It will reiterate that councils should be proactive in managing their town centres, large and small.

The PPS will also protect village shops and services, such as pubs and post offices, by being clear that councils should consider the importance of the service to the local community, protect existing facilities and respond positively to proposals to convert shops where this will improve their viability. We aim to publish the draft PPS for consultation shortly.

Positive use of planning and licensing powers

Local councils have a range of planning powers that they can use to promote a balanced and varied range of uses in their town centres.

At the strategic level, Sustainable Development Strategies and Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) are the main documents that local authorities should use to set out their overall aims and long-term vision for the economic, social, and environmental well-being of their area. LDFs can also be used to control the number and type of premises used for particular purposes in an area.

Local councils also have positive powers to allow changes of use in town centres and elsewhere: Local Development Orders (LDOs) give councils the flexibility to extend permitted development and speed up changes of use, which can help to bring empty properties back into use. LDOs are considered further in Section 3 of this guide.

Where relevant, planning conditions can be used to control changes of use, for example, where there may be concerns about particular uses proliferating.

At a practical level, vacant shop fronts can be used for posters giving information on local attractions and amenities, or to display community artwork. This would not require planning permission, but may need advertisement consent – there are various exemptions, and town centre managers can play a valuable role in helping people find out about relevant rules and policies from their local planning and licensing authorities.

Part 4 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (the GPDO) grants automatic planning permission for the temporary use of land for up to 28 days in any calendar year (14 days for local markets), subject to various restrictions and conditions. These powers could be used to allow vacant or under-used land to be used for a range of short-term purposes.

It is important that local councils make the best possible use of the planning tools available to them to promote retail diversity and consumer choice in town centres. To help with this, we have commissioned research that will be completed in July this year, and we will incorporate its recommendations into practice guidance for local planning authorities.



Licensing public space

Local councils also have a range of licensing powers that can help them regulate particular uses, for example:

- pubs are licensed under the Licensing Act 2003, which aims to prevent crime and disorder, public nuisance, and ensure public safety and the protection of children
- betting shops are licensed by local authorities under the Gambling Act 2005, which aims to prevent gambling from being a source of crime or disorder, ensuring gambling is conducted in a fair and open way, protecting children and other vulnerable people from being harmed or exploited by gambling
- lap dancing clubs are currently licensed under the Licensing Act 2003 in so far as they provide performance of dance and/or serve alcohol. However, the Government has brought forward legislation in the Policing and Crime Bill, which is currently undergoing Parliamentary scrutiny, to give local authorities additional powers to regulate lap dancing clubs as “sex establishments” under the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982. These new powers will give local communities a greater say over the number and location of lap dancing clubs.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport currently provides a central register of licensed public spaces in England and Wales, which lists places that have been licensed by local councils for regulated entertainment, including performances by musicians, dancers, circuses and plays. In this way, some local authorities enable performers and event organisers to identify where they can stage an event without applying for a new premises licence or giving a temporary event notice themselves.

This removes much of the red tape which acts as a disincentive to live performers, whether professional or amateur. Instead of going through the full licensing process, performers need only to get the permission of the relevant local council.



Around 150 local authorities have entries on the register, which is operated in association with Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS). Many of these authorities license parks or similar venues, but some have licensed the whole of the town centre or individual streets. Beaches, high streets, market squares, village greens, or community centres, and with a bit of imagination, any space, whether indoors or outdoors, can be transformed into live music or performance venues. If local authorities wish to do so, licences can also cover the retail of alcohol and facilitate farmers' markets where locally made cider, beer and wine can be sold.

Many performers, particularly amateur performers, and event organisers are unaware that certain public spaces are already licensed in this way, so it is important that local authorities advertise the facility they have made available.

Blackburn

In Blackburn, the town centre and market place are licensed as well as many streets in the surrounding areas. This facilitates continental markets, community events, parades, Christmas fairs etc. People are encouraged to use licensed spaces to put on events. An indoor retail space ("The Mall") shares boundaries with public land. Working in partnership with the local authority, the owners of the retail space have also licensed The Mall. This enables events to take place with ease both indoors and outside, allowing local retailers to maximise retail opportunities when an event is being held.



The importance of variety and diversity in town centres

“A diversity of uses in centres makes an important contribution to their vitality and viability. Different but complementary uses, during the day and in the evening, can reinforce each other, making town centres more attractive to local residents, shoppers and visitors. Local planning authorities should encourage diversification of uses in the town centre as a whole, and ensure that tourism, leisure and cultural activities, which appeal to a wide range of age and social groups, are dispersed throughout the centre.”

Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning for Town Centres (CLG, 2005)

Many people have commented on the growth of homogenous high streets – the replacement of independent traders with national chain shops. In some areas people say that they wish their high street could be “like it used to be”, in others, people are worried that their high street is being taken over by fast food outlets or mobile phone shops. Whether or not these views fairly reflect reality on the ground, town centres that offer a range of uses – retail, leisure, cultural, and tourism – during the day, into the evening and beyond, are more likely to attract a diverse mix of people. These are the sort of town centres that keep a sense of buzz and energy after 5.30pm in the afternoon, and are not regarded as “no-go areas” because only pubs, bars and nightclubs are open in the evening.

Managing the 24-hour economy

The night-time economy has grown over many years. When well-managed, it becomes part of a town centre’s self-image and atmosphere, as well as creating jobs, increasing footfall, and providing opportunities to showcase a wide range of ever-changing arts and cultural events.

People’s lifestyles are changing. They go out more often after work and at weekends, and want a greater range of things to do in the evening. Some people would like to visit museums, the theatre, or galleries, others would like to get involved in community activities. Town centres that broaden their evening and night-time offering stand to build stronger connections with local people and attract more people from further afield.

A range of support is available for those involved in managing the evening and night-time economy in town centres.



2009 sees the 10th Round of Beacon awards. This scheme was set up to reward and share best practice in service delivery across local government across a range of themes. The “After Dark” theme this year recognises best practice in local authorities that are taking an integrated approach to planning and managing the evening and night time economy of our towns and cities. Four councils secured Beacon awards under this category:

- Brighton and Hove City Council
- Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council
- London Borough of Havering
- Nottingham City Council

The Civic Trust has developed a new accreditation scheme for town centres at night, called Purple Flag. The aim is to raise the quality and broaden the appeal of going out at night. The first round of Purple Flag will be launched on 23 April in Manchester. Participating local authorities and partnerships will have two months to submit their entries.

Specially appointed teams of assessors and expert panellists will decide whether town centres reach the required standard, in accordance with a Core Agenda of key issues:

- **Wellbeing:** welcoming, clean and safe
- **Movement:** a secure pattern of arrival, circulation and departure
- **Appeal:** a vibrant choice and a rich mix of entertainment and activity
- **Place:** a stimulating destination and a vital place
- **Policy envelope:** a clear aim and a common purpose

Those centres that reach the standard will gain the right to fly the Purple Flag for two years. The Accreditation Ceremony will be held in mid-November, so that centres can capitalise on the promotional value in the important run up to Christmas. For further information go to www.purpleflag.org.uk



The role of arts and culture in town centres

It is more important than ever that national and local partners deliver the quality and range of cultural and sporting activities envisaged before the onset of the global economic downturn. Cultural facilities and services are going to be vital during this period and as we come out of the recession. Many of them are made available in town centres because that is where it is easiest for most people to gather and to meet.

Margate

Thanet District Council and the South East England Development Agency have used art to revitalise Margate town centre. A former Marks and Spencer site has been rechristened the Turner Contemporary Project Space, and houses a number of exhibitions and events that have increased footfall in the vicinity. The council's Creative Squat initiative ran a "Windows of Opportunity" scheme, in which local artists were commissioned to create temporary "fake shops" in the windows of vacated retail spaces. Not only did this visually lift the area, it also made the premises more attractive to potential tenants. There were no change-of-use issues, as the scheme ran for just three weeks, and the spaces were intended to return to retail use after that period.

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) provide an important framework for measuring take up and involvement of cultural services at a local level. LAAs are about improving the quality of life in local communities and providing better public services.

Chorley

In recent years, Chorley arts department has utilised empty retail spaces for craft exhibitions and workshops. By working with the centre managers it has put on events that have been mutually beneficial, bringing shoppers to the area, making the retail spaces more attractive to future tenants and providing venues for informal learning (including a summer-long music workshop). Agreements have been reached between the centre and the council, who have dealt with licensing issues and temporary events permissions. The schemes have been such a success, that a semi-permanent exhibition space in an empty unit has now been proposed.

We recognise that culture and sport are crucial parts of building sustainable communities, and we are working with cultural agencies to ensure that culture plays its part in plans for regeneration and housing growth. One of the ways this is being achieved is through Living Places, a partnership programme to ensure growing communities have access to high quality, well-planned, cultural and sporting facilities.

Opportunities for learning in town centres

The Government published its white paper, *The Learning Revolution*, in March 2009. It sets out proposals for widening access to a broad range of exciting informal adult learning opportunities – learning for its own intrinsic value, for pleasure, and to support social inclusion and community development.

In the current economic conditions, empty shops and premises offer fantastic opportunities to host all kinds of learning events on the high street, igniting sparks of interest, and engaging people in new experiences. As well as bringing proven benefits for individuals, families and communities, these informal learning experiences can offer a stepping stone to skills training, qualifications and more rewarding work for people who are low-skilled or who have negative previous experiences of formal education.

Opening up empty high street premises for learning on a temporary basis will help to maintain vibrant communities and lively physical spaces as well as supporting the vision of informal learning set out in *The Learning Revolution*. A wide variety of learning can take place in these settings, including:

- information and outreach activity for all kinds of local learning providers
- learning activities for families and older people
- financial capability sessions close to high street financial services
- health awareness days and healthy living campaign activity
- taster sessions to support progression towards skills, qualifications and employment
- self-organised training, such as reading groups and University of the Third Age meetings
- computer training
- performance, rehearsal and meeting space for community arts activities.



Bringing in the countryside – farmers’ markets

Farmers’ markets bring food from their locality directly to consumers. There is no middle-man, and no stallholder sells food that they have not grown or reared themselves on a farm that is near to the market place (30 miles as a rule of thumb).

Farmers’ markets are often set up in high street locations, generally outdoors on car parks, pedestrianised precincts and pavements. At their best, they are colourful, lively, and have a good atmosphere as people enjoy talking to the stallholders.

Farmers’ market at Brigg

North Lincolnshire District Council saw a farmers’ market as a way to revitalise Brigg for weekend shopping. This takes place on the fourth Saturday of the month and has grown to around 40 stalls. Where once just 500 people came to Brigg to shop, even on non-market weekends many times that number now come into town to buy in the high street shops.

Local authorities and town centre managers may wish to explore these opportunities in more detail. The following contacts can provide guidance and advice:

Farmers’ markets:

Simon Johnson
DEFRA Food Policy Unit
Tel: 020 7238 6623
simon.johnson@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Retail and wholesale food markets:

Katie Dick
DEFRA Food Policy Unit
Tel: 020 7238 1551
Email: katie.dick@defra.gsi.gov.uk

National Farmers’ Retail & Markets Association (FARMA)

FARMA is a cooperative of farmers, producers selling on a local scale, and farmers’ markets organisers.

Gareth Jones/Rita Exner
FARMA
12 Southgate Street
Winchester, SO23 9EF
Tel: 0845 45 88 420



Section 3: Real help now for town centres

Introduction

This section of the guide focuses on issues that town centres are facing with the downturn, and offers practical help on ways to manage these challenges.

People are increasingly worried about boarded-up shops and vacant land in their towns and cities. It is vital that we do all we can to enable vacant properties to be used for temporary purposes until demand for retail premises starts to improve. Not only will this help to ensure that our towns and high streets are attractive places where people want to go, it can also stimulate a wide range of other uses such as community hubs, arts and cultural venues, and informal learning centres, which can unlock people's talent and creativity.

This will benefit:

- local community groups looking for space to meet, training providers wanting to promote informal learning activities, and arts organisations looking for studio or rehearsal space
- landlords paying empty property business rates, as premises that are occupied and used for activities such as a temporary art gallery are no longer liable for these rates
- local businesses, who want to keep their area vibrant and busy with visitors
- local people who rely on their town centres and high streets for employment, shopping, leisure, entertainment, and a wide range of other services.



Enabling temporary uses of vacant premises

Many towns and cities are already taking positive action to use vacant shop windows to post information about the local area, and there are opportunities to go further – for example posting information on healthy living choices, local fitness classes, and so on.



Chelmsford town centre

The Town Centre Management team at Chelmsford Borough Council has used the frontage of the former Woolworth's store to showcase the other shopping facilities and attractions in the area. One window features a bright, vibrant poster inviting visitors to "Explore Chelmsford" and "shop local and shop Chelmsford". Another shows a large map of the town centre showing all the shops and open spaces, plus places of interest, and amenities such as taxi ranks, park-and-ride stops, and public toilets. The posters are vinyl stickers pasted to the outside of the glass, and can be removed easily.

Some town centre managers have brokered arrangements to enable a vacant shop to be used as an art gallery, a museum, or a community services centre.

Dewsbury

An empty shop in Dewsbury was turned into a new base for police and community services for a short period. Local people could get advice on crime prevention from police officers, and could also access information on Sure Start services, the local fire service, community rangers, and neighbourhood housing. The Indian Muslim Welfare Society and the Pakistan and Kashmir Welfare Association also had a base in the shop.

These initiatives are often down to the energy and imagination of the local town centre manager. We know that there are barriers that hinder similar activities happening on a larger scale – there may be uncertainty about whether planning permission is needed to change use, landlords may be difficult to contact or may be reluctant to consider a temporary lease, or some modest funding might be needed to redecorate and adapt a shop for a temporary use.

But there is the potential to make a real difference on some of these issues by focusing on:

- helping local authorities respond more quickly and flexibly to change of use proposals
- working with landlords to make interim leasing arrangement easier, quicker, and less costly
- enabling councils to help landlords who do not wish to enter directly into short-term leasing arrangements with temporary occupiers for community purposes
- providing funding to accelerate temporary uses of vacant premises.

Making it easier to change use

Temporary uses of vacant premises may require planning or other consents, for example, listed building or conservation area consent. Councils, of course, need to weigh up the benefits of proposed changes, but it is important that they are able to respond flexibly to changing circumstances in their town centres, where appropriate.

Local planning authorities can use Local Development Orders (LDOs) to allow for changes of use that would otherwise require planning permission. There is a wide range of potential uses for LDOs – in a town centre, they could allow changes from shops to banks, building societies, clinics, day centres, art galleries, or museums.

We know, however, that councils have shown limited interest in LDOs, possibly because there are a number of restrictions and approvals that apply to them. We want to ensure that LDOs are easier to use, and will therefore bring forward, by June 2009, provisions in the Planning Act 2008 that will remove the requirement that LDOs be linked with policies in local development plans – this should allow local planning authorities to implement LDOs with greater speed and flexibility, without requiring changes to their local development plans.

We are also keen to hear more from local councils about how they might make better use of LDOs. Working through the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), we are looking at ways in which LDOs might be used more effectively – this is well advanced and should be available in April. Also working through PAS, we intend to provide around £15,000 to each of four local authorities to help them to develop LDOs.



Supporting landlords

Commercial landlords have a strong interest in maintaining the vitality of town centres, as thriving towns provide the best security for their investment. Landlords are obviously keen to let empty shops on a normal commercial footing at the earliest opportunity, but the current economic conditions can make that difficult in some places. Offering temporary occupation on a non-commercial basis may benefit landlords, and others, until there is an upturn in the market.

To enable this to happen more often, landlords need to be assured that there is a proper legal basis for any temporary uses, that their property will be kept in good condition, and that they will be able to take the empty premises back as soon as there is a prospect of a commercial letting.

To help minimise the cost of setting up such arrangements, we will provide specimen legal documents that landlords can use for temporary occupiers.

And we will continue to work with commercial property organisations to understand the difficulties preventing more temporary uses, and to promote vibrant town centres.



Boosting community uses

Not all landlords may wish to enter directly into short-term leasing arrangements with temporary occupiers, so there may be a role for local councils to step in as an intermediary between a landlord and, say, a local community group looking for temporary space. It may be possible for the council to agree a temporary, or “meanwhile”, lease with a landlord, that enables the council to make use of the otherwise empty property by granting an interim licence to a local group for community uses. The lease would include a short notice period so that if any organisation wished to take on the lease on a long-term basis at the market rate, the council would pass the property back to the landlord by the end of that notice period.

This can offer real advantages to landlords, for example:

- having expenses such as security costs and utilities covered
- no longer having to pay empty property business rates when their properties have been leased to the council
- insurance cover provided by the council

Properties that might otherwise have been boarded up could be used by a variety of local groups. For example, artists could turn eyesores into potential local attractions; young people could run their own safe space for learning and leisure purposes; job clubs could be set up where people who are not working at the moment could come together and find out about job opportunities, volunteering, business start-up, and what's on offer in terms of support; or small retail enterprises could be established where individuals and small groups use the outlets to sell their wares (for example locally grown food).

The Asset Transfer Unit (ATU) will develop, test and promote “meanwhile” leases to facilitate community use of otherwise empty properties. ATU is an independent service, funded by CLG and led by the Development Trusts Association, which provides expertise, advice and support to anyone involved in the transfer of assets to local communities. In addition to its main demonstration programme for long-term community asset transfer, the Government will support the ATU to work with five town centres to pilot this kind of interim or “meanwhile” community asset transfer.

Funding to help make it happen

Being able to access a small amount of funding can sometimes tip the balance in bringing a vacant shop back into temporary use, or getting an idea off the ground that can benefit a town centre. We are therefore planning to establish a fund to provide access to small-scale grants to help with cleaning and decorating vacant premises, basic refit for temporary uses, publicity posters, and other activities that can help town centres attract and retain visitors. We are considering how this fund might best be set up and managed.



Real help for small businesses

We are also doing all we can to help small businesses and independent retailers, as they contribute so much to the uniqueness and diversity of our town centres and high streets, for example:

- Our *Real Help for Businesses Now* package offers free support on how to find finance, raise productivity, or save money by reducing waste and saving energy – www.realhelpnow.gov.uk/pdf/national.pdf
- Deferring business rates: the Chancellor announced on 31 March 2009 that the Government will bring forward legislation to enable businesses to spread payment of the planned increase in business rates over the three years to 2011-12. This will help businesses smooth out rates payments over the next few years. For an average rates bill, a business will be able to defer payment of around £360 of the £600 increase to the two following years www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/businessrates
- Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) helps small businesses reduce their business rate bill: it applies to businesses that occupy one property and offers relief on a sliding scale depending on rateable value.
- Local authorities have discretion to grant rate relief of up to 100 per cent to a wide range of non-profit making bodies, such as charities, and local clubs or societies.
- Raising the threshold for empty property business rates: the Government has announced a temporary increase from 1 April 2009 to the threshold at which an empty property becomes liable for business rates, from £2,200 to £15,000. This covers 70 per cent of all properties and, if empty in 2009/10, a property will pay no empty rates in 2009-10.
- Charity shops are entitled to mandatory rate relief. Information on all rates relief is available at www.businesslink.gov.uk

Conclusion – looking to the future

This document sets out steps that the Government, national and local partners are taking to address some of the most pressing issues affecting our town centres. For the first time, it sets out in one place the range of policies, powers, advice, support, and approaches that can help keep our town centres attractive during these tough times. Building on the solid foundations that town centre partnerships provide in many areas, on the positive actions that local partners are already taking, and on the additional support set out above that Government is taking, there are real opportunities for town centres of all sizes to respond positively to the challenges now facing them.

But we are already thinking about the long term. For central and local government alike, it is important that we plan for the future so that we exploit existing and emerging opportunities to create vibrant and economically sustainable communities where people are proud to live and work.

Each area is different, and the nature and scale of the challenges and the opportunities vary. The approaches and measures set out in this guide should help, but it is local initiative tailored to local circumstances that will matter.

Looking ahead, those involved in planning and managing the future of town centres will be thinking about the types of activities and sectors that might offer the best opportunities for growth in their locality when the recovery comes, be that arts and culture, the green economy, community enterprises, informal learning, or other areas.

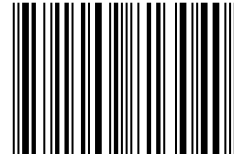
For example, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport recently announced the establishment of a working group to look at feasibility for a UK City of Culture programme. This is because we want to help ensure that more places experience the benefits seen by Liverpool 2008, European Capital of Culture, and its ongoing legacy. The winning cities will be the ones that are best able to articulate the vision of how they will use culture to transform places and the lives of their citizens.

At its best, regeneration is an empowering experience that engenders civic pride in a way that cannot be quantified but is nevertheless palpable. And by working together, we can make a real difference in creating and sustaining dynamic town centres at the heart of our communities.





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