



GROUNDWORK

CHANGING PLACES
CHANGING LIVES

REGENERATION AND A GREEN RECOVERY

Bringing people and nature back to town
and city centres

A changing context

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed many things, some of them temporarily, some of them for good. How our town and city centres function and are financed is one of them. It will be some time before we fully understand the long-term impact on retail and office accommodation, but some of the trends that were evident before the pandemic have been accelerated and look like becoming part of 'the new normal'.

In the short term town centres are going to have to accommodate social distancing, queueing and more outdoor activities. In the longer term, the switch to online shopping for some goods and services is likely to be permanent and partial home working will be the norm in many office-based professions, leaving premises under-occupied and land undeveloped. For some people this will be accompanied by a change of routine or lifestyle, making greater use of shops and eating places closer to home and walking or cycling more than before.

And yet town centres remain a focal point in our lives. Even during lockdown many of us have been drawn to places where we feel a sense of connection with others, where we may see familiar faces and where there are activities or sights that can interest or entertain us.

For local authorities dependent on business rates to subsidise core public services the challenge will be to steer the recovery and development of town centres in a way that creates a distinctive retail offer and identity and maximises footfall while responding to these changing patterns of use.

Promoting town-centre living is seen by many as part of the response, a process which is already well underway in many places. Most attention to date has focused on attracting young professionals with sufficient disposable income to sustain a 'café culture', but in some areas this is being complemented by strategies to support independent town centre living among older people, who benefit from being closer to essential shops and services.

A new vision

If town centres are no longer the default places we travel to in order to work or shop, but become places where more of us live and many of us socialise, then we need to think differently about how to keep them vibrant, safe and attractive.

Groundwork has a 40-year history of working in towns and cities whose communities have been impacted by economic and social change. Many of those places have had to recover from post-industrial restructuring and have now seen their local economies and local communities hardest hit by the pandemic. Ensuring these places remain vibrant and prosperous will take action on a number of fronts.

Connecting with people and with nature

Town centres have always been meeting places, with milk bars and tea rooms on the high street supplanted by coffee concessions in shopping centres. Whereas previously a refreshment stop was a welcome break from a tiring shopping expedition or a day spent staring at a screen in the office, meeting friends is increasingly the purpose of visiting the town centre. This has always been true of young people who prefer to hang out in shopping centres or skateboard on the town hall steps because being visible helps them feel safe and connected. In order to maximise the use of town centres as social spaces, while managing the tensions that may arise between people with different needs and uses, we need to focus on design. Bringing more nature into urban centres softens hard edges and makes people more likely to linger while family-friendly spaces, play areas and other facilities such as benches and toilets will make it easier for people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds to spend time in each other's company. Enhancing natural focal points such as riversides, greens and parks can create additional visitor attractions and adapting urban areas to climate impacts through sustainable drainage, tree cover and 'green screens' to reduce air pollution supports both visitors and residents and creates jobs that will be in increasing demand in future years.

Community hubs

A focus of many town centre regeneration strategies is the desire to put more vacant land and buildings at the disposal of local communities. The fact that people of all ages and backgrounds gravitate towards town centres means they could play a much bigger role in connecting people and encouraging voluntary action. In many places there is a dearth of well-maintained, accessible places to host community events and many charities would benefit greatly from a high-street presence to bring their services and support to a wider range of people. It is often a criticism of town centres that they are dominated by charity shops, and there is a need for a more imaginative approach to values-driven retail. Providing workshop space that could be used by social enterprises and community businesses to deliver training and sell products would complement specialist retail offerings while providing venues for projects such as 'men's sheds' or drop-in centres for support groups would increase their accessibility.

Cultural spaces

Building on a sense of local identity – and celebrating the traditions and cultures of a town and its inhabitants – is one of the best ways of making town centres vibrant destinations and places that promote community cohesion. With more land and buildings potentially available for temporary use comes more opportunity for activating programmes of events, exhibitions and activities that explore and explain our diverse connections to a place. Using these programmes to initiate consultation around the repair and refurbishment of natural and built heritage assets – and involving more local communities in the long-term stewardship of these assets – enhances local pride while also building the capacity and skills needed for wider civic engagement.

Sustainability centres

One consequence of the lockdown has been an increased recognition of the environmental impact of our pre-pandemic lifestyles. Whilst it is inevitable that some patterns of behaviour will 'snap back' into place, for many people the last 12 months has initiated a more fundamental reappraisal that, with the right reinforcement, is likely to last. At the same time, the principles of 'community wealth building' are gaining ground in many areas – the idea that economic activity

should be localised and people-centred with wealth 'locked in' to local areas through more democratic ownership, shorter supply chains and socially useful management of land and property. Town centres should support and incentivise these behaviours and models, managed to maximise carbon reduction and promote a more circular local economy. This means for example designing in sustainable transport, hosting markets selling locally-grown produce and providing high street facilities to re-use, repurpose or recycle materials.

High street communities

Bringing about these changes will require a new, localised and partnership-driven approach to town centre management – one that treats businesses, residents and visitors as stakeholders in a place-based approach to regeneration and long-term stewardship of the public realm and trading environment. In a growing number of towns Business Improvement Districts are being used as a vehicle for engaging with this diverse range of interests and developing shared visions and action plans for the development of town centres. Engaging expert, locally-trusted organisations to manage these consultation and engagement processes helps to reconcile the varying interests and needs of these diverse audiences and can provide a channel for ensuring the voices of traders and residents are heard as part of wider decision-making processes.



Groundwork in action



Roof East

Roof East is a pioneering high-rise urban park, located on top of a five-storey car park overlooking Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in the heart of Stratford, East London. It incorporates a bar and kitchen with seating and tables, an open air cinema zone, an aquaponics greenhouse and games that are integrated into the roof's design. Groundwork was commissioned to design the park to withstand the many challenges presented by its rooftop location, including strong winds, dry conditions and delivery limitations due to the vehicle height and weight restrictions of the car park building. Roof East has quickly developed into a much-loved public open space - a high rise oasis above the bustling streets and shops below, with spectacular views across London and a host of events and activities taking place over the warmer months.

Kirkgate

Since 2012 Groundwork has been working closely with Wakefield Council on the regeneration of the Kirkgate area of the city. Central to this was completing a £5.6m refurbishment of Kirkgate Station, once described as "a station that brought shame to British Railways". The station's facade has been restored and new facilities created including a station café, office accommodation and community meeting space.

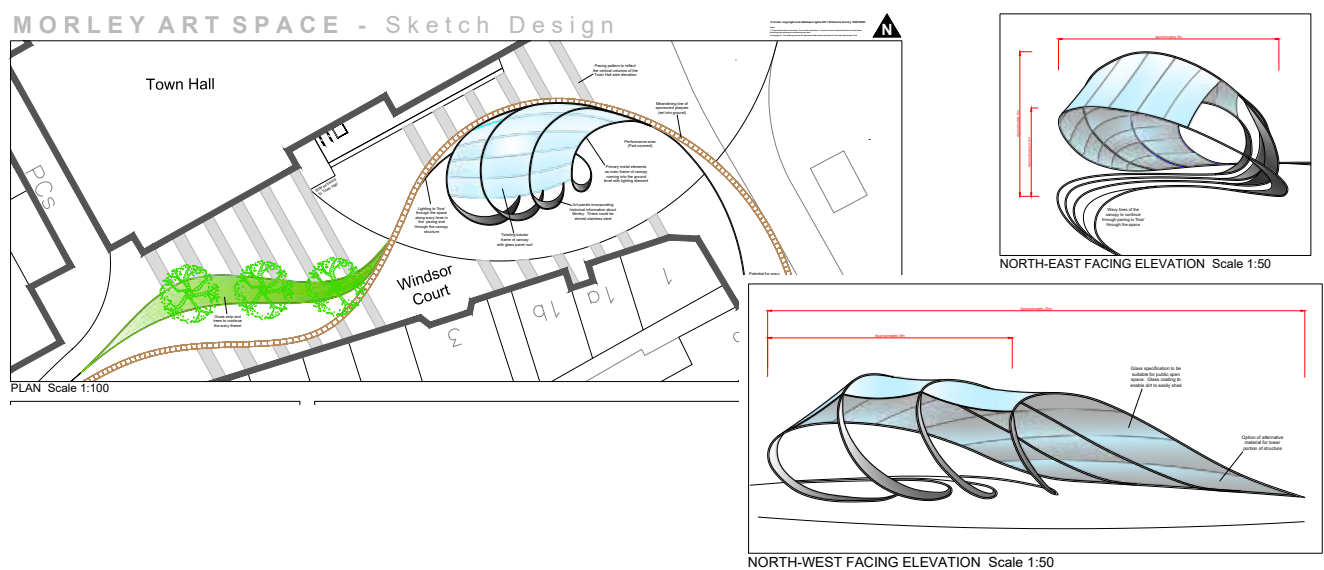
At the same time, 'Kirkgate Calling' ensured that the regeneration project involved and engaged the local community. Groundwork has also designed a number of additional projects in the area including the creation of new temporary green spaces on the route from the city centre and design interventions to link the station to the Hepworth Art Gallery and adjacent mill redevelopments which are creating a waterfront commercial, residential and entertainment hub.



Morley Artspace

Like many successful towns incorporated into larger local authority structures Morley has been working hard to re-establish its own unique identity beyond its role as a dormitory town for nearby Leeds. A key aim has been to give the town centre a modern, functional focus and Morley Town Council asked Groundwork, who have an office base just off the high street, to

design an arts and events space to bring the area to life. The proposed design is contemporary while complementing the Grade I listed Victorian Town Hall and includes a roof and dry seating area to maximise use in all weathers. The design is now likely to form part of a masterplan to upgrade a wider area of Morley town centre.



Regenerating the Roch

The River Roch helped to fuel the growth of Rochdale, but by the early 1900s had been covered over and hidden from view. In recent years this important part of the town's heritage has been revealed as part of a major regeneration project, creating an attractive setting and re-introducing wildlife into the town centre with brown trout, kingfishers and pied wagtails all spotted. Through its experience of hosting 'catchment partnerships' in other parts of the North West, Groundwork has been commissioned by the Environment Agency to develop a river restoration strategy for the Roch, with the aim of maximising the benefits of this important blue infrastructure for people and wildlife.



Made with Many

Groundwork is the accountable body for Made with Many, a programme of community arts and cultural events in Corby and Wellingborough supported through the Arts Council's Creative People and Places initiative. The programme aims to create new audiences for the arts and give local people a greater say in the events that take place in their town. This includes a series of flagship events and festivals overseen by a community panel alongside smaller scale workshops and commissions. A focal point for 2022 is the Corby Pole Fair, a major celebration held in the town every 20 years to commemorate the original granting of the Royal Charter to Corby by Queen Elizabeth I in 1568.

The Loops

The Loops are Groundwork's award-winning community reuse hubs which help communities in disadvantaged areas of London by recycling and reusing household goods, and help the environment by reducing fly-tipping and the amount of waste sent to landfill.

The Loops offer a door-to-door collection service for unwanted furniture which is then repaired, restored or upcycled so that it can be sold on at affordable prices. All proceeds are reinvested in providing training, employment and volunteering opportunities for local residents through free courses in upholstery, home improvement, power tools, paints and wood finishing products, decoupage, stencilling and more. Unwanted electrical goods are passed on to Groundwork's Rework project, where they are repaired and distributed through charitable retailers. The Loops are currently estate-based social enterprises but plans are in place to bring the activities onto the high street by opening a number of 're-use superstores'.



Backing Buckley

In North Wales Groundwork is breathing new life into the high street by developing a former bank branch in the town of Buckley into a Repair and Reuse centre. Developed in conjunction with Flintshire Council and with funding from the Welsh Government's circular economy fund, the centre will be used to provide repairs to household items, and offer lessons in upcycling. This will include demonstrations of basic repair techniques which can be replicated at home and information on how to donate unwanted household items. Products made from recycled materials will be sold and the centre will also house a community café and a community garden to provide indoor and outdoor meeting spaces. The long-term aim is to promote education and behavioural change on waste and recycling initiatives, as well as providing volunteering opportunities and employment for local people.



Before



After



Burnley BID

Groundwork managed the development and consultation process that resulted in a positive vote for the establishment of a Business Improvement District in Burnley town centre. Using a small levy on business rates, business owners in the town have been able to draw up a £1m shopping list of additional activities, projects and services that will make the town centre safer, cleaner, greener and more economically vibrant.

This includes a year-round programme of marketing campaigns and events to attract more shoppers and visitors, support to grow independent businesses and specific initiatives in partnership with the Police to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour in the town centre.



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