ICON
**Independent
Commission on
Neighbourhoods**

Pride in Parades Part 2:

Strategies for Renewing Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure

Dan Gregory, Oliver Holtaway and Dr Zoe Walshe
February 2026

POPULAR

Contents

Executive Summary

Genuine national renewal will require neighbourhood renewal. This is especially true in deprived areas where economic decline has hit hardest, and where the social fabric most needs restoring.

This report highlights five inspiring examples of how local people and organisations have made focused attempts to revitalise small-scale parades and arcades, and kickstart successful neighbourhood renewal in some of the UK's most deprived suburban areas. To address a gap in existing policy and public and private investment, it deliberately emphasises smaller clusters of retail assets at the neighbourhood level, as opposed to large-scale city centre regeneration projects.

We hope that this will inspire a range of actors, including local groups, civic bodies, asset-owning anchor institutions and local authorities, to initiate and collaborate on neighbourhood transformation projects. To this end, we identify common factors and enablers from across the five case studies, before making a set of recommendations for different actors.

Understanding parades as social infrastructure

A key plank of our approach has been to understand parades and arcades not simply as retail spaces, but as integral parts of a neighbourhood's wider social infrastructure: that is, the places, spaces and associations that allow people to meet, socialise and co-operate. Social infrastructure acts as a platform to generate connection, community and civic pride - in other words, the social capital on which wider prosperity rests.

This approach is also taken up by the organisations we encountered. From the Welsh Valleys to the Northeast coast, locally-rooted membership organisations and not-for-profit anchor institutions have successfully intervened in commercial spaces, rooting their efforts within a deep local understanding and wider sense of social mission. In doing so, they have built a further, associational layer of social infrastructure by creating local networks that enable co-operation and collaboration.

How did they do it?

While the local circumstances and organisations involved differed widely, we identify four strategic moves common across the case studies:

- **Seize the initiative:** an organisation steps up and makes a conscious decision to take responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. This can be an existing anchor institution, or a new organisation set up by local people.

- **Curate the retail mix:** the organisation uses available levers to attract, encourage and support certain types of tenants (and discourage others), rather than leaving it solely to market forces, to help avoid a 'monoculture' of amenities.

- **Bridge community organisations and traders:** the organisation creates and maintains networks of communication and co-operation that bridge local traders and civil society, enabling joint activities and campaigns, facilitating mutual support and sharing practical information.

- **Activate the area:** the organisation and its partners carry out marketing and promotional activities to bring people to the street and attract new tenants, including new branding or aesthetic interventions, or events and activities like food festivals and markets.

What enables this change?

Local groups face different enabling conditions and constraints to which strategies for neighbourhood renewal must adapt. We found that:

- **Geography and the built environment** can be defining features of a neighbourhood's destiny.

- **Business rates** have strongly influenced the economic viability of parades and arcades, including the use of charitable rate reliefs, temporary reliefs and discretionary rate reliefs.

- **Ownership and control** strongly influence the scope of possibility for locally-led neighbourhood renewal. Private landlords can be an obstacle to revitalisation, for instance, while community ownership and control provide a crucial platform. However, local control can be achieved without direct ownership, through partnerships, leases or meanwhile use.

- **Access to funding and support** are also critical. Each organisation received some form of catalytic support from outside their neighbourhood.

- **Relationships with local councils** can vary: where they are strong, supportive and trusting, transformation is easier.

What next?

How, then, can more neighbourhood renewal take place? We offer the following set of recommendations, with an emphasis on what actions local actors can take:

Encourage locally-led organisations to 'lean in'

Leaders of community anchor organisations, including housing associations, asset-owning charities, and development trusts, can reflect on their own potential to drive local renewal by convening conversations, partnering or leading initiatives, or taking on commercial property themselves.

- **Get more assets in community hands** using tools such as the new Community Right to Buy, Asset of Community Value designations, and the best models of social and democratic finance. In addition, both anchor organisations and councils should reconsider selling off existing properties.

- Where ownership is hard to achieve, hyperlocal **'Community Asset Stewards'** could take on medium to long-term leases on other organisations' assets, running them in a more strategic, locally responsive and community-led way. Community Asset Stewards can be created using existing non-profit models such as community land trusts, community benefit societies and community interest companies.

Empower neighbourhood co-design, tenant curation and support

New local powers promised by Pride in Place could give local residents and groups more strategic influence over the future of their local high street, parade or arcade.

- Community anchor organisations and other civic entrepreneurs should **convene and engage local people and traders in sustained, strategic, holistic high street planning**. This can be done informally, and without the level of detail or rigour required to create an official Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan. Crucially, regular conversations can become a useful source of local business intelligence, helping to attract the "right" tenants into the area.

- Local groups and councils should be empowered to create "**Super Community Improvement Districts**[1]": essentially, special economic zones with different planning rules, rate relief structures and other incentives. These could also serve as neighbourhood-level investment vehicles to attract funding and finance from elsewhere.

---

1 This builds on the [Community Improvement District](#) concept piloted by Power to Change in 2022-23. See footnote in the "Four Strategic Moves" section for more detail.

Incentivise private landlords

Private landlords can often be a barrier to coherent planning and action. Incentives could include greater use of existing tools such as **High Street Rental Auctions** and **compulsory purchase orders** by councils, as well as the nationwide creation of a **Vacant Shop Levy**. At the same time, landlords can be positively incentivised to award leases to Community Asset Stewards (see above), including through "meanwhile use".

Get the funding right

To support the above, it's vital to make best use of available funding streams.

- The new Pride in Place programme is a unique opportunity to develop long-term change in targeted neighbourhoods, rather than solely one-off improvements.

- Councils and local organisations can do more to release the estimated £8 billion of unspent funds from Section 106 agreements, the Community Infrastructure Levy and Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy, directing these towards locally-led neighbourhood renewal.

- We also recommend creating a "**UK Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum (REiiF) for Neighbourhoods**" to bring inward investment at a more local, neighbourhood level, rebalancing the playing field vis-a-vis city regions. This might help independent funders and social investors to focus on going where government funding and mainstream finance doesn't reach, to more effectively tackle disadvantage.

Two asks for national government

- The national government's **planned transformation of business rates** should lead to a regime that is redistributive and favours areas with in-built disadvantages, and allows councils (and local groups) more flexibility to offer targeted relief to serve neighbourhood renewal.

- In addition, the government should be **smart about the placement of new "hubs"**, such as the new Neighbourhood Health Centres, so that they support healthy neighbourhoods by linking to preventative social infrastructure (e.g. parks and gyms), rather than drawing people away to out-of-town, PFI-style developments.

The importance of parades and arcades

This report makes the case that parades and arcades are critical social infrastructure, as are the groups and networks who play an important role in renewing neighbourhoods. Social infrastructure does not simply connect us, but forms us: from the chippy to the laundrette, and from the efforts of social enterprises and community organisations working hand in hand with the local library or pub. In troubled times, they are critical institutions with deep political significance.

We hope what we have seen inspires and equips others, and that the lessons we have drawn inform the work and legacy of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, so that this report plays some small role in promoting neighbourhood and national renewal.

Introduction

This report tells the story of how local people and organisations have successfully renewed neighbourhood social infrastructure, including in some of the UK's most deprived suburban areas, in the hope of inspiring and equipping others to do the same.

It largely focuses on the revitalisation of local *retail* spaces, such as parades, arcades and small high streets, understanding such retail spaces as integral parts of a neighbourhood's *social infrastructure*: the places, spaces and associations that allow people to meet, socialise and co-operate[2]. This adds to previous research on high street renewal by focusing on the neighbourhood level, rather than on larger town or city centres, and builds on previous studies concerning the value of local social infrastructure by highlighting how commercial and retail spaces can foster connection in similar ways to more traditional examples such as community centres or social clubs[3].

By viewing parades as social infrastructure and not simply amenities, we can better appreciate how locally-led interventions to fill vacant units and attract more footfall are not just about stimulating economic growth, but also about cultivating civic pride, collective agency and community power.

Why parades matter to neighbourhoods

What is a neighbourhood? When asked, people's definitions vary considerably, but research suggests that local shops often serve as mental markers of where a neighbourhood begins or ends[4]. However, 53% of Britons feel their local high street has worsened over the last decade, rising to 59% in suburban areas and 63% in small towns (compared to 38% among city dwellers)[5]. This has long-term psychological effects: research has found that people who are constantly exposed to boarded-up shops and empty high streets experience a feeling of continual decline[6].

However, neighbourhoods can also be "motivational spaces" where community, belonging and emotional connection are cultivated, enabling and encouraging people to mobilise for the common good[7]. Some call this "social capital", which has been linked to higher growth and productivity[8]. But the bonds and bridges of social capital cannot be generated in a vacuum. Social infrastructure acts as topsoil for social capital to grow, by providing spaces and structures that bring people together to form connections.

If national renewal requires neighbourhood renewal, and prosperity is built upon the foundations of social capital, then we need healthy social infrastructure to exist - and persist - in every neighbourhood.

---

2 Other definitions are available. See Billingham et al (2024), "Sports Cages as Social Infrastructure: Sociality, Context, and Contest in Hackney's Cages" for an accessible introduction, and Joshi and Aldrich (2025), "Corralling a chimera: a critical review of the term social infrastructure" for a deeper dive.

3 See New Local (2025), "Where people meet: How We Celebrate, Sustain and Reimagine Community Centres", Centre for Democratic Business (2025), "Social Clubs, Community Power & Political Participation", Bennett School of Public Policy (2024), "Rethinking the role of supermarkets"

4 Public First (2025). Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods: Opinion Research Summary.

5 ibid.

6 ICON (2025). "Think Neighbourhoods: A new approach to fixing the country's biggest policy challenges"

7 ibid.

8 Demos (2025). "Social Capital 2025: the hidden wealth of nations"

About this report

This report aims to share learnings from successful stories of neighbourhood renewal by describing the key steps taken, identifying critical enabling conditions, and suggesting replicable models and approaches. By focusing on small-scale retail clusters in relatively deprived areas, we hope to find tools that will work in the absence of large-scale regeneration projects or gentrifying capital flows. As such, this research adds valuable practical insights to the Independent Commission on Neighbourhood's effort to build the case for neighbourhood-focused regeneration.

Part 1 sets the scene with a summary of the case studies, and describes what it means to "think social infrastructure" with regard to parades and arcades. In Part 2, we outline what the case studies tell us about the common ingredients of successful neighbourhood renewal. In Part 3, we consider wider factors that influence prospects for local action and renewal. Part 4 sets out recommendations for how local people, traders, community organisations and governments might take steps to revitalise parades in more neighbourhoods, while Part 5 offers further reflections about what emerging research and practice in social infrastructure could offer future efforts. Finally, detailed case studies are found at the end of the report.

Methods

Our fieldwork consisted of visits to five locations during the summer of 2025, in which we toured the areas and interviewed key organisations engaged in neighbourhood renewal.

We aimed to visit locations in the 20% most deprived areas of the UK, where there had been a deliberate, focused attempt to transform a cluster of assets, e.g. a parade of shops, rather than a single community asset. Taken together, the case studies covered a range of characteristics, including geographical features (e.g. regional spread and proximity to urban centres), as well as the longevity, core activities, ownership status and commercial model of the relevant organisations, etc.

Our fieldwork was followed by a workshop attended by around 30 academics, policy experts, community organisations and other practitioners, and supplemented by desk research and interviews.

Villette Road in Hendon, Sunderland

Back on the Map (charity/social enterprise)

Dewsbury Arcade in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire

The Arcade Group (community benefit society)

Wolverton in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

Future Wolverton (community benefit society)

Treorchy in Rhondda, Wales

Treorchy Business Improvement District

Aberfeldy Street in Poplar, London

Poplar HARCA (housing association), Meanwhile Space CIC (social enterprise), Jan Kattien Architects

Summary of case studies

Each of our five case studies involved a different type of organisation adopting various strategies and tactics to renew local neighbourhood social infrastructure, with an emphasis on retail spaces.

- **Treorchy**: Led by the local pub landlord, traders in a former mining town created a Business Improvement District (the UK's smallest) to co-ordinate events and pool resources to drive footfall and improve the trading environment. The town now boasts 95% occupancy rates and won High Street of the Year in 2020.

- **Hendon**: Back on the Map, a charitable social enterprise, expanded its strategic focus to include the local high street, adding commercial units to its existing portfolio of residential properties and community facilities. Through a Community Improvement District pilot, it worked with residents, traders and other stakeholders to rebrand Villette Road as the "Heart of Hendon", setting up a trader forum and holding events.

- **Poplar**: When Aberfeldy Street was scheduled for demolition and replacement as part of a long-term regeneration project, the parade started to empty out, depriving local people of a civic hub. In response, social landlord Poplar HARCA and development partner Ecoworld worked with Meanwhile Space and Jan Kattien Architects to transform the streetscape and animate empty units to attract new tenants, with a focus on supporting local start-ups and micro-enterprises.

- **Wolverton**: Catalysed by the demise of the Agora shopping centre and the drawing up of a Neighbourhood Plan, the social enterprise Future Wolverton, a community benefit society, launched events, took ownership of community assets, revitalised shops and more, alongside other social enterprises in the neighbourhood.

- **Dewsbury**: After Kirklees Council announced plans to purchase and refurbish the historic Dewsbury Arcade, a group of civic entrepreneurs set up The Arcade Group, a community benefit society, and persuaded the council to award it a lease to manage the arcade once it reopens in 2026. In advance of this, The Arcade Group has built a business and stakeholder network for the wider town centre, and put on events and activities.

The case studies demonstrate how locally-rooted membership organisations and not-for-profit anchor institutions can successfully intervene in commercial spaces, using their local presence and connections to galvanise community-wide revitalisation efforts. As we argue below, they also show how such organisations are well-positioned to tackle the problem of high street decline through approaches that understand retail spaces as part of an area's wider social infrastructure.

Thinking social infrastructure

"Social infrastructures matter. Social infrastructures are places that allow people to gather. Places that support community life. Places that allow friends to spend time together, and to care for each other. Places that allow people to crowd together, experience culture together. Places that encourage people to exercise, play sport, dance. Places that allow people to live comfortably alone and alongside one another." - Jack Layton and Alan Latham[9]

---

9 Layton and Latham (2022). ["Social infrastructure: why it matters and how urban geographers might study it"](#)

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods has argued that we should "think neighbourhoods": tackling the project of national renewal by empowering change at the hyperlocal level[10]. To get to grips with neighbourhood renewal, we believe it's also important to "think social infrastructure". This means seeing retail spaces as part of a wider local ecosystem that also includes community centres, cultural facilities and council-owned assets, as well as local groups, associations and institutions.

This approach is backed up by what we found during our research. In the locations we visited, we saw that:

- Successful local parades do not simply provide services and amenities to individuals, but also provide opportunities to build connection, community and pride;

- Successful organisational interventions often involve creating networks, structures and platforms that enable co-operation and collaboration, allowing for civic energy to flow from multiple sources, as opposed to rolling out top-down masterplans. In other words, they introduce and cultivate an associational layer of social infrastructure that knits together the physical layer into a coherent whole;

- Successful strategies for renewing high street retail spaces often involve and integrate non-retail community assets as well as other community groups and associations.

This convinced us of the value of taking a social infrastructure approach to understanding, planning and taking action for neighbourhood renewal. We argue that "thinking social infrastructure" offers a way to blend the best of past approaches to high street renewal, such as place-making, design and culture and heritage-led regeneration, with "place-based" strategies that urge a holistic, locally-specific approach to policy and investment. Most of all, it nudges us to look closer at what's already in place and pay more attention to people's actual experiences, habits and attachments.

10 ICON (2025). Think Neighbourhoods: A new approach to fixing the country's biggest policy challenges.

Four strategic moves

In this section, we describe four strategic "moves" that were common across the case studies, before setting out five key factors that enable and support those moves in the next section.

Our intention is not to provide a step-by-step guide or playbook: first, because local conditions vary too much, and second, because a wealth of excellent resources already exist for specific disciplines such as community engagement, place-making and network-building, and so on. Rather, this framework serves as a tool for reflection and strategising: which local actors are best placed to initiate each move? Which alliances and resources do they require? Where are the gaps, and how can they be filled?

#1 Seize the initiative

At risk of stating the obvious, change only occurred in our five neighbourhoods because an organisation stepped up and made a conscious decision to take responsibility for neighbourhood renewal. In Treorchy, Dewsbury and Wolverton, new membership organisations were set up to do this, while in Hendon and Poplar, existing community anchor organisations expanded beyond their primary activities to engage in high street revitalisation.

This proactivity cannot be taken for granted. Declining suburban parades are a classic collective action problem: there is no default body to step in, and getting involved often means taking on responsibilities that sit outside your core mission (e.g. running your own business, providing social housing or delivering charitable services). Breaking this deadlock requires the insight and vision to connect individual or organisational interests to a greater common cause, as well as the leadership appetite and resources to actually drive change.

For example, Back on the Map's strategy shifted after post-COVID consultations with local residents drove home just how important the local high street was to them, and how upset they were by its decline. This challenged the charitable social enterprise's longstanding model of owning and letting local homes and using the rental income to fund community facilities and services. In response, its leaders took the organisation out of its strategic comfort zone and into the high street, leading a Community Improvement District[11] pilot and taking on commercial properties as well as homes. The high street is now a core focus of Back on the Map's five-year strategy.

#2 Curate the retail mix

Our case study organisations tended to deploy what levers they had to proactively curate the local retail tenant mix, rather than leaving it solely to market forces. This helps avoid parades being dominated by the same, narrow selection of amenities, a problem that is more acute in deprived areas[12]. The Arcade Group in Dewsbury even developed a formal tenant curation policy which rules out vape shops and nail bars, foreshadowing the veto powers recently unveiled in the Pride in Place programme.

This is not unusual in retail: commercially owned shopping centres will also carefully curate their tenant mix. Here, however, curation is more likely to be informed by local aspirations for the neighbourhood and the cultivation of social infrastructure as a whole: for example, choosing

---

11 Both Back on the Map and Future Wolverton took part in the "Community Improvement District" pilot programme funded by Power to Change in 2022-23, which saw seven local organisations experiment with "a community leadership and development approach to regenerating high streets or town centres", working with local people to set visions, activate spaces, make short-term interventions and, where possible and appropriate, take ownership of property. See Power to Change (2023), "Community Improvement Districts pilot programme: Final Report"
12 ICON (2025). "Pride in Parades 1: The State of Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure"

to divide a retail space into multiple smaller units to maximise opportunity for local entrepreneurs, rather than the 'safer bet' of a single supermarket.

Of course, it's easier to curate when you own or manage all the units. This is the case in Aberfeldy Street and Dewsbury Arcade, where the relevant organisations can pick and choose tenants. However, controlling a handful of units can still nudge the retail mix in the desired direction: for example, Future Wolverton's "Shop on the Square" now hosts a grocer, florist and local producers. It is also possible to informally influence the tenant composition of other landlords' units. As well as buying properties, Back on the Map regularly consults residents and traders to identify gaps and speaks with entrepreneurs who are considering setting up shop on Villette Road.

In addition, several organisations offered business support to promising tenants to help them thrive, such as Aberfeldy Street's "Start Here" programme, as well as flexible leases and "pop-up" opportunities to create favourable conditions for fledgling businesses.

#3: Bridge community organisations and traders

Our case study organisations created and maintained networks of communication and co-operation with local traders and other civil society actors. These networks helped to co-ordinate joint activities and campaigns, as well as to provide mutual support and share practical information ("who knows a good accountant?"). In Dewsbury, for example, The Arcade Group is funded by Kirklees Council to run a trader network, managed by a second-generation local haberdasher, which has grown from an informal but vibrant WhatsApp group to the Dewsbury Business Network, formally launched by Baroness Warsi in September.

Crucially, local charities like Dewsbury Scouts have been included, allowing for more cross-sector collaboration on large-scale community events that drive footfall. The same is true in Treorchy BID, a trader-led initiative that has engaged with other neighbourhood social infrastructure. The BID's Angharad Walters describes "the lightbulb moment when, say, someone in the library realises it's in their interests to collaborate. Now we help the library reach new people and get new members and expand their reach too. You can't do this without the library and the theatre".

It's notable that social economy actors such as charities, community anchors, membership bodies and social enterprises are the network lynchpins in most case study locations, rather than state or private players[13]. Bridging these worlds can bring challenges, often requiring overcoming past mistrust or engaging in patient persuasion. Joint initiatives such as Community Improvement Districts or "high street charters" have proved useful in rooting co-operation in shared visions.

---

13 Business-led Treorchy BID is technically the exception, although it feels as much like a community group as a business network.

#4 Activate the area

This is where the established playbook of place-making, branding and design comes into play, alongside good old-fashioned food festivals, pop-up markets and elf trails. All locations introduced a blend of new branding or aesthetic interventions, alongside events and activities that bring people onto the street and attract new commercial tenants to vacant units.

For Back on the Map, the rebranding of Villette Road as the "Heart of Hendon" became the focal point for holding gatherings, offering voucher schemes[14] and sprucing up the area with planters and new bins. Aberfeldy Street, meanwhile, experienced a radical transformation of its streetscape as the result of a project led by Jan Kattien Architects, in which striking murals were developed with local residents to respond to the area's history and character. As Kattien explains, the project aimed at "actually getting under the skin of a place", to both celebrate and amplify its character while also challenging people's preconceptions.

Events and activities are also key. Treorchy BID organises food festivals, markets and events and deliberately holds them in the heart of the high street, rather than in a logistically easier nearby meadow. Future Wolverton, meanwhile, has developed a calendar of street markets and events that support new traders as well as driving more business to existing outlets.

Again, these are bread-and-butter activities for any high street or shopping centre trying to boost trade. In deprived suburban areas, however, our research suggests that this "move" is more effective (or indeed, more likely to happen at all) when it's built on the foundation of the other three moves. Here, high street activation is the visible tip of the iceberg, supported by deeper co-operation and community leadership around a shared vision.

***

We offer these four strategic moves as a tool to inspire thinking about what local action is possible, how the moves might be initiated and co-ordinated over time, and by which combinations of people, groups and institutions. In the next section, we consider how local organisations must navigate common constraints and make the most of the enabling factors available to them.

14 Specifically, Back on the Map lobbied the council to ensure that household support vouchers could be spent in local shops and worked with Sunderland BID to be included in their voucher schemes.

Five key enablers

What helps or hinders people and organisations to take the key steps towards neighbourhood renewal outlined in the previous section? Below, we describe five common factors that can serve as enablers or constraints to taking action. These help to frame and inform the recommendations made in the next section.

Geography and the built environment

Each of our case studies is influenced in some way by its geography, which can be a defining feature of a neighbourhood's destiny. Sometimes this may be a fundamental part of the characteristics of a place. On other occasions, man-made developments and external forces may shape the landscape for local people to respond, navigating the constraints and exploiting the conditions.

When it reopens next year, Dewsbury Arcade will have to compete with the White Rose Shopping Centre, 15 minutes' drive up the A653. By contrast, there is simply no space for out-of-town retail parks in the tight Welsh valleys that surround Treorchy, preserving the gravitational pull of the high street. Compactness also concentrates footfall: everyone lives within a 15-minute walk, and all the streets lead down into the main town. Treorchy is also far enough away from Cardiff that it avoids losing too many shoppers to the capital. This doesn't guarantee success, of course, but is an opportunity to seize.

In Wolverton, the demolition of the Agora shopping centre is clearing the path for an alternative future, effectively replacing a tired shopping precinct with revitalised Victorian parades of shops. Rather than seeking to attract or retain national chains, Wolverton seems to be moving beyond 'big box' retail and filling smaller units, with more flexible leases and multiple uses. This has brought vibrancy and character to the area and created the impression of a busy, successful place, with fewer vacant units.

Business rates

Recent history shows that changes to how business rates work can strongly influence the economic viability of parades and arcades that are made up of smaller retail units.

In 2017, for example, Chancellor George Osborne changed the business rates system so that many more traders either became exempt or subject to the (less costly) small business multiplier[15]. A later study of northern market towns found that this had extended relief to almost half of the independent retailers studied, most of whom received 100% relief[16]. Further changes were made to ease the burden on small retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in 2019, and short-term business rate relief schemes were introduced in England in the late 2010s and early 2020s[17].

These changes have helped to enable the renewal of neighbourhood-level retail spaces by making independent businesses in small shops more viable. While decisions in Whitehall may shape the nature of neighbourhoods more widely, local actors can also respond in turn - charitable rate reliefs, temporary reliefs and discretionary rate reliefs, for instance, can all be exploited to help enable neighbourhood transformation[18].

---

15 Previously, businesses in properties with a rateable value lower than £6,000 paid no business rates, and this was increased to £12,000. The threshold for which businesses were subject to the small business multiplier also rose from £18,000 (£25,500 in London) to £51,000. See Centre for Cities (2017), "What do the coming business rate changes mean for cities?"

16 Greenhalgh et al. (2019). "An investigation of the impact of 2017 business rates revaluation on independent high street retailers in the north of England".

17 House of Commons Library (2023). "Business rates: reliefs and grants"

18 However, we have seen in our wider work that civic entrepreneurs do not always make use of the available reliefs, and may even adopt legal forms or business models that actually make their work more difficult.

Ownership and control

The high streets, parades and arcades we visited each featured very different ownership patterns, with retail units owned by private landlords, local authorities, housing associations, charities, social enterprises and community businesses. Unsurprisingly, ownership distribution strongly influences the scope of possibility for locally-led neighbourhood renewal efforts.

In part, this is because disinterested private landlords can be an obstacle to revitalisation. In Hendon, for example, property owners are often content to generate revenue from upstairs flats and spare themselves the hassle of leasing the commercial space below - perhaps a rare case where landlords can be criticised for *not being greedy enough*. Elsewhere, distant owners engage in "landbanking", sitting on empty properties in hope of medium-term uplift in asset value, rather than short-term revenue potential.

By contrast, bringing local spaces into forms of community ownership and control provides a crucial platform to generate economic and social value. Asset ownership allows local groups and organisations with transformative ambition, strong local relationships and insight to implement projects and plans that prioritise community interests and operate at a neighbourhood scale. Control can also be achieved without ownership, as in Dewsbury Arcade's "council-owned, community-run" model. "Meanwhile use" is also a powerful tool for convincing private landlords to lift the shutters and let spaces be activated by community groups, although power ultimately resides with owners.

Access to funding and support

Each of our case studies received some form of catalytic support from outside their neighbourhood, whether financial or otherwise.

Power to Change's Community Improvement District pilot programme, for example, saw Back on the Map and Future Wolverton each receive £20,000 to support the development of a community-led approach. Back on the Map went on to access £168,000 from the Community Ownership Fund, as well as a social loan from Rank Foundation, to help it purchase and refurbish a derelict block of shops. In Aberfeldy Street, meanwhile, the Big Local group is investing £1 million of Lottery money in the estate[19]. By tapping national and regional funding sources, our case study organisations act as magnets and catalysts for inward investment into their neighbourhoods, in areas that are typically excluded from major investment flows.

Friendly support and expert advice has also often been critical. In Wolverton, for instance, Marie Osborne recalls how leading community shares expert Dave Boyle was an inspiration and galvanising force at a time when she doubted the way forward, persuading her that the change she pursued was possible. Future Wolverton and Back on the Map are both members of the Mycelial Network, a peer network for community-led organisations that are transforming neighbourhoods through community asset ownership.

Local authority relationships

Relationships between case study organisations and local councils varied considerably. Clearly, when relationships are strong, supportive and trusting, transformation is easier. But councils are sometimes suspicious of local activists, while communities can find council rules and regulations, financial constraints and inflexibility frustrating.

Back on the Map enjoys a trusted relationship with Sunderland City Council backed by over 15 years of solid delivery. Indeed, it acts as almost a mini-council for the neighbourhood, taking over the library after it closed, installing CCTV, and even sweeping the streets. In Dewsbury, The Arcade Group was able to persuade Kirklees Council that a hyperlocal community benefit society could manage Dewsbury Arcade in a more nimble, locally responsive and community-led way than the local authority. The council now funds the CBS to undertake wider business networking activities, and has been helpful in accommodating last-minute requests for road closures, etc.

In some cases, however, change has been achieved without, or even despite, the local authority. Frustrated by red tape, Future Wolverton themselves took the lead on an event programme to support the local community. While constructive relationships with councils can be powerful, they are not the only route to progress.

---

19 See Aberfeldy Big Local (2025), "About ABL"

Recommendations

How, then, can more neighbourhood renewal take place, and local people and organisations play a stronger role in the governance of their neighbourhoods?

Our five case studies, workshop and expert interviews have provided us with a rich and diverse range of ideas and recommendations. While national policy is important, we have sought to emphasise actions, tools, and resources for local actors.

Encourage locally-led organisations to 'lean in'

See asset-owning community organisations as convenors and pioneers

As a first step, we strongly recommend that the leaders of asset-owning community anchor organisations - such as housing associations, asset-owning charities, NHS bodies, development trusts, and universities and colleges - consider whether they could further their social missions by engaging in high street renewal. In addition, Pride in Place funding should be used by Neighbourhood Boards to create new community anchor organisations that own and manage local assets.

Depending on organisational appetite and resources, this could mean everything from convening conversations with local people and traders, partnering to lead and deliver initiatives that increase footfall, up to owning and/or managing commercial property.

Get more assets in community hands

One of the most powerful levers for high street renewal is the community ownership of retail spaces, which allows for greater 'curation powers' and more holistic planning. To encourage and facilitate more direct ownership of local social infrastructure by community anchor organisations, we make the following recommendations:

- **Hang on to what you've got**: Housing associations and other anchor institutions should reconsider any plans to sell off commercial properties already in their portfolios, taking into account the wider value and impact that enlightened management of these properties can have on the success of an area over the long-term[20]. By the same token, local authorities should consider long-term social value implications when disposing of commercial or high street assets, giving preference to locally-rooted, mission-driven organisations rather than selling to the highest bidder.

- **Use the new Community Right to Buy:** The Government is set to upgrade the existing "Community Right to Bid" to a "Community Right to Buy" as part of the English Devolution Bill, giving a range of locally-led organisations, including parish councils, neighbourhood forums, charities, community interest groups, co-operatives and community benefit societies, and social enterprises the power to prevent the private sale of 'assets of community value' (ACVs) and purchase them instead. Councils should proactively encourage the use of ACVs and ensure that their decisions to accept or reject nominations are clear and transparent. Small development grants should be made available to help groups explore and scope possible acquisitions.

- **Make use of social and democratic finance:** Of course, a "right to buy" is not much use without the ability to raise finance. The social investment industry has developed considerably in the UK over the last decade and more, although there remains significant frustration in many quarters

---

20 See Popular (2025), "How We Might Live - A Model for Future Neighbourhoods", on how social enterprise anchor institution Coin Street Community Builders has taken an mixed-asset approach for over 40 years on London's South Bank.

that the finance available is still too slow, expensive or risk-averse, or not reaching some areas. Some forms of finance, such as community shares, are more democratic, long-term, affordable and aligned to the missions of social enterprises and community organisations. New, socially-oriented versions of Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT) could also be created to attract investment into neighbourhood transformation, while balancing risk and reward more fairly between investors and investees.

Build better relationships between councils and community organisations

It's perhaps a cliché for a report to call on people to "work together more". However, relationships between local authorities and civic entrepreneurs can be fraught, and our findings clearly show the importance of strong multi-stakeholder partnerships. What practical steps should be taken to promote this?

The "Neighbourhood Boards" mandated by the Pride in Place programme provide a useful way forward. Appointed by MPs and senior council officers, these boards are intended to bring together elected officials with community leaders and local groups, including charities, social clubs and football clubs, to make plans for allocating Pride in Place funding. Done well, this structure has the potential to build effective and collaborative neighbourhood-level partnerships based on a clear, bounded set of goals and a transparent set of resources.

As such, we recommend that Neighbourhood Boards are also set up in areas that have not received Pride in Place funding, so that councils can use their convening power to stimulate and cultivate healthy forms of neighbourhood-level governance. These boards could potentially use the new powers promised by Pride in Place (e.g. the ability to block certain types of businesses from opening), designate High Street Rental Auction zones, create Community Asset Stewards (see box), or become vehicles for seeking funding and investment.

Crucially, they should be conceived, designed and run as seedbeds for locally-led action rather than feedback mechanisms on council performance: creating favourable conditions for local organisations to "lean in" by signalling a willingness to get behind their efforts and clear roadblocks where possible. This will reduce the risk of them simply becoming talking shops in the absence of Pride in Place funding - instead, we might hope to see new BIDs emerge, more collaborative marketing, and more locally-led strategic planning. Drawing on existing models, boards can be chaired on a rotating basis by council officers, charities and community organisations, mirroring the 'council-owned, community-run' ethos.

Such Neighbourhood Boards could be set up in any neighbourhood where there is the will and energy to co-operate[21], but would be particularly welcome and needed in relatively deprived areas that have narrowly missed out on Pride in Place funding.

Of course, this is primarily a governance and organisational strategy. In many places, part of the answer must also be the dreaded "culture change", coupled with a commitment to persist with the slow work of building relationships even when things get rocky. Councils should internally recognise the contributions that citizens working together can make[22], while civic activists should resist the temptation to slip into an oppositional mindset after hitting roadblocks ("the council just needs to get out of our way!").

---

21 This could even include more affluent areas where local people are seeking to mitigate the effects of gentrification. Could Pride in Place powers be used to block yet another GAIL's, just as they are used to block yet another vape shop?

22 See New Citizen Project's (2025) "Council Culture" project for a deeper exploration of methods for fostering more citizen-friendly local authority cultures.

'Community Asset Stewards': enabling control without ownership

While ownership is a powerful lever, lack of ownership needn't be a barrier. The "council-owned, community-run" partnership between The Arcade Group and Kirklees Council represents a possible future model for how hyperlocal, community-led organisations can take control of parades and arcades without necessarily buying them.

In Dewsbury, Kirklees Council awarded The Arcade Group, a community benefit society, a 10-year lease on Dewsbury Arcade in exchange for annual rent and a percentage of turnover (see case study for details). The Arcade Group will manage the arcade's units based on a democratically determined tenant recruitment policy developed through local consultations.

By adopting this approach, other local community enterprises - let's call them 'Community Asset Stewards' - could take on medium to long-term leases on other organisations' and landlords' owned assets[23], where they are better placed to build local trust, tap civic energy and respond to local priorities.

We recommend that local authorities consider entrusting the management of council-owned commercial properties to such local groups. This model could also work for anchor organisations, such as housing associations or local charities, who are willing to buy retail spaces but reluctant to manage them. Even private landlords could be incentivised to lease to such groups, allowing for a more cohesive approach to local development even where the underlying ownership is fragmented. This is inspired by the example of Creative Land Trusts (a type of community land trust), where developers have granted leases[24] enabled by Section 106 obligations, which then open up affordable spaces to artists and creatives.

'Community Asset Stewards' can be created through tried and tested legal models such community benefit societies, community land trusts or community interest companies. Different structures will suit different situations, but we generally recommend the adoption of more democratic models, e.g. community benefit societies, community land trusts, that give efforts greater accountability and legitimacy.

Empower neighbourhood co-design and curation

Tenant curation and support is a key ingredient of successful renewal. New local powers trailed in the Pride in Place announcement will give local residents the power to block certain over-saturated businesses such as vape shops and nail salons. At the moment, these powers are framed somewhat negatively - through the power of veto - but they may open the door to giving local residents and groups more strategic influence over the shape of their local parade.

Engage residents in high street planning

- **Start conversations:** Community anchor organisations and other civic entrepreneurs should convene and engage local people in strategic, holistic high street planning. This can be done informally, and without the level of detail or rigour required to create an official Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan. Participatory planning processes such as design charettes[25] or simple mapping exercises can be used to create a bottom-up "high street vision" or "parade plan", which might include broad themes such as health and wellbeing or places to socialise, or list specific types of desired amenities[26].

---

23 Citing examples in Japan, Power to Change refers to these as "community development companies". Power to Change, (2023), "Community-powered high streets: how community businesses will build town centres fit for the future"
24 Creative Land Trust (2025). "Portfolio"
25 Involve (2025). "Design charettes"
26 Here, the experience of Power to Change's Community Improvement District pilot programme offers invaluable learning. Power to Change has published several reports, guides and toolkits to help other localities take a community-led approach to high street design. See Power to Change (2023), "Getting started with Community Improvement Districts", and Power to Change (2023), "Community Improvement Districts pilot programme: Final Report"

- **Get into the weeds:** Of course, if planning and engagement is done in a one-off, disconnected way, it will be little more than a wish list. We recommend that convenors go deeper, working with local residents on who owns what, and which tools might be at their disposal. Done well, regular canvassing and conversations can become a useful source of local business intelligence, allowing for open and honest conversations with entrepreneurs who want to open businesses locally. There is also no reason why community organisations shouldn't propose their own ideas of what might work on the high street, based on evidence and best practice from elsewhere, as part of genuine two-way conversations with residents.

- **Think social infrastructure:** Within this, we recommend that tenant curation is informed by "social infrastructure thinking": that is, considering how different types of businesses and community facilities create opportunities for social bonds to develop, and advocating for places that allow people to linger and chat. An inspiring example is Kitty's Launderette in Liverpool, a community-owned launderette that doubles as a social space with free tea and Wi-Fi, as well as events and activities. Taking a social infrastructure lens might even mean looking at nail salons and even betting shops in a fresh light. This also means recognising the existing and potential contributions of the more unheralded micro-anchors in communities - social clubs, sports clubs, the Women's Institute, pubs, leisure centres or libraries. In a city context, community anchors are large institutions, such as universities or hospitals. Yet at the neighbourhood level, a chemist or a GP surgery may be the anchor institution for the economic life of a community when other businesses die or move away. In Wolverton, for example, Jardine's chemist is 'the 'biggest draw on the square'.

Create "Super Community Improvement Districts"

Community-led organisations should be able to propose to local authorities that their neighbourhood be designated as "Super CIDs": a "beefed-up" version of the Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) proposed and piloted by Power to Change[27]. These "Super CIDs" would essentially serve as special economic zones in which different planning rules, rate relief structures and other incentives apply. "Super CIDs" could feature:

- Business rate and levy relief for local businesses, to retain and attract more shops, including greater use of discretionary reliefs

- Local suspension of permitted use rights, so landlords can't change commercial properties into houses without planning consent

- A Community Right to Buy extension whereby the decision to list a property as an Asset of Community Value is more transparent, public and democratic than one only taken by council officers

- An exemption that allows growing local businesses to retain Small Business Rate Relief when opening their fourth branch within a "Super CID"[28]

Depending on local circumstances, these rules could be tweaked to promote a community wealth building approach, favouring small and independent businesses, democratic businesses like co-operatives, and not-for-profit traders such as social enterprises, over national chains and big brands. It could also be used to incentivise particular types of business, such as greengrocers. Indeed, many of the other ideas contained within these recommendations, such as greater use of High Street Rental Auctions or a new Vacant Shop Levy, could be applied via "Super CIDs". Ideally, local people (via a democratic community organisation, Neighbourhood Board or Community Asset Steward) could co-design the incentive structure of their "Super CID" with their local authority from a list of pre-approved powers, rather than using a one-size-fits-all framework.

---

27 ibid

28 This has been an issue on Villette Road when Back on the Map has tried to attract trusted local businesses to open up shops in the neighbourhood.

Going further, "Super CIDs" could serve as neighbourhood-level investment vehicles, akin to both BIDs and Development Corporations, which could attract financial contributions and investment from both local and socially-motivated funders and investors.

The concept of Super CIDs follows the established examples of the UK's 61 Enterprise Zones and 12 Freeports, both of which offer tax incentives to attract business investment, albeit on a much larger scale. For inspiration at a more neighbourhood level, we recommend learning from the best aspects of France's "Zones franches urbaines-territoires entrepreneurs" (ZFU-TE)[29], Italy's "Zone Franche Urbane" (ZFU)[30] and the Canadian Province of Ontario's Community Improvement Project Areas (CIPA)[31], which variously incentivise new business creation and local employment through a mix of tax reliefs, planning measures and grants.

For example, French ZFU-TEs can not only waive business rates on eligible traders but also up to €50,000 of annual profits tax for the first five years. Italian ZFUs can exempt businesses from making National Insurance-type contributions on wages from employment. Ontario's CIPAs, meanwhile, can offer zero-interest loans to business owners to pay for improvements to façades and building interiors, among other grants and loans. Crucially, each CIPA creates its own bundle of incentives according to local circumstances, as captured and agreed in a Community Improvement Plan.

Cultivate networks for sharing expertise

Simply sharing the best and most imaginative practices can lead to significant transformation. For instance, how to make best use of temporary use and charitable models which can effectively and legitimately be deployed to minimise business rates liabilities - whilst enabling productive activity and new initiatives - are not always widely understood. Or engaging communities in high street co-design and activation in effective, creative and resourceful ways, such as imaginative public realm alterations that harness community creativity, history and culture - thinking beyond the hanging basket.

The Pride in Place programme has committed to establish a "Network for Neighbourhoods" across the UK to "build connection and learning between community leaders, convene the partners that support and strengthen community organisations, groups and social clubs, and embed participatory approaches in how local decisions are made". It will be important to ensure that appropriate bodies and experts are invited to become part of this network - specifically, those with deep experience in community-led working, democratic governance and social entrepreneurship, rather than generic business and management consultants[32].

Beyond this, infrastructure bodies such as Locality, Power to Change, Stir to Action, the Mycelial Network and Platform Places should be resourced to facilitate platforms for anchor organisations who have taken the leap into neighbourhood transformation to share their stories, build an evidence base, and inspire others.

---

29 Service Public Entreprendre (2025). "Exemptions on profits in the urban free zone-entrepreneurial territory (ZFU-TE)"
30 Ministero delle Imprese e del Made in Italy (2025). "Zone Franche"
31 City of London, Ontario (2025). "Community Improvement and Incentives"
32 The design of this network should also take on board lessons from the Coalition government's Community Organisers programme. See Community Organisers (2025), "History of our organisation", and Cabinet Office (2015), "Community Organisers programme: evaluation"

Incentivise private landlords

The regulation of property owners[33] and property conditions is a common challenge for declining suburban parades, as well as an obstacle to those wishing to take action for them. Below, we identify a range of existing and proposed "sticks and carrots" that councils and community groups can use to incentivise private landlords to participate in neighbourhood renewal strategies.

Sticks

- HSRAs: Launched last December, High Street Rental Auctions (HSRAs) are a new, promising but so far underutilised tool. Sometimes dubbed the "right to rent", HSRAs allow councils to temporarily take control of persistently vacant shops and auction short-term leases to new tenants, without express permission of the landlord. Several early adopters are now setting up vacancy registers and 'HSRA zones' where the powers apply, which could be incorporated into wider community-led high street planning (including Super CIDs). We recommend that more councils adopt the scheme, and that community organisations push for their use.

- CPOs: Councils should also make greater use of compulsory purchase orders and enforced sales in areas that communities have identified as in need of improvement, and where there is a community-led vision to achieve it. Cash-strapped local authorities with limited short-term planning capacity could benefit from more support from wider resources to enhance the use of CPOs across the country, with initiatives such as Public Practice[34] leading the way.

- Vacant Shop Levy: We recommend that the national government introduces a Vacant Shop Levy, modelled on the existing 200% empty homes council tax premium, to give councils further leverage over landlords with empty properties[35]. (See further recommendations on wider business rate reform below).

Carrots

There are also several steps that could be taken to give landlords positive incentives to fill vacant units and co-operate with community-led high street strategies and visions.

Private landlords and developers could be persuaded of the benefits that come from investing in community-led social infrastructure, in terms of how it can increase property prices and make neighbourhoods more desirable (we recommend further research into the UK-specific evidence base for this). As above, this might include incentivising private landlords to sign leases with Community Asset Stewards.

In addition, the well-established playbook of tools and techniques from the "meanwhile use" movement could provide easier ways for recalcitrant landlords to reactivate vacant properties while reducing perceived risk.

Getting the funding right

Pride in Place

The Pride in Place programme will see 244 neighbourhoods receive up to £20m in long-term funding, with a further 95 places accessing £1.5m in one-off capital injections. This is a unique opportunity to fund community-led strategies for renewing neighbourhood social infrastructure in the UK's most deprived areas.

To make the most of Pride in Place, we recommend that Neighbourhood Boards (who are responsible for allocating investment) work with community organisations to develop projects,

---

33 The Green Party have recently adopted a policy to 'abolish landlords'. Perhaps first they should be offered the chance to improve their behaviour.
34 Public Practice (2025). "About us"
35 Power to Change has also recommended this, using the US term "commercial vacancy tax". Power to Change (2023), "Community-powered high streets"

assets and structures that can promote sustainable, long-term neighbourhood change, rather than focusing solely on one-off improvements. In particular, they should use the funds to promote community asset ownership in and around local parades: a use that is explicitly encouraged by government guidance which pre-emptively greenlights "providing funding to a community group to take ownership of a disused asset" and "providing funding to refurbish or improve an asset already in community ownership" as possibilities for Pride in Place funding[36]. Community assets that can generate revenue beyond the 10-year scope of the programme offer more 'bang for the buck'.

In Pride in Place areas, Neighbourhood Boards can also facilitate many of the recommendations made above: for example, convening local conversations and collective strategic planning, funding the purchase of community assets, developing new Community Asset Stewards and helping to design and implement Super Community Improvement Districts in collaboration with local authorities.

To support this, community organisations and civic entrepreneurs should be proactively encouraged by MPs and council leaders to become members of Neighbourhood Boards. This will prevent the composition of Neighbourhood Boards from simply mirroring existing structures such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, chambers of commerce and so on. In many cases, community organisations with deep neighbourhood roots will be best placed to offer hyperlocal insights as well as ambitious, creative and realistic ideas. They also offer a crucial platform for understanding local needs, which is vital given Pride in Place's emphasis on being "community-led". For example, rather than relying on one-off, council-administered surveys, Neighbourhood Boards can fund community organisations to hold richer conversations and more meaningful co-creation events with local residents and traders, building on existing trust, relationships and knowledge.

Finally, it's worth noting that the Pride in Place programme includes "circa 37% revenue to support managing and delivering investment projects"[37], which is an important recognition that capital funding is not everything: community organisations must be able to access expertise, capacity building and support, including support to enable tenant curation and tenant training. However, this does not apply to the Pride in Place Impact Fund, a £1.5 million grant to 95 places, which must be 100% capital funding[38]. For the overall programme to reach its full promise, the revenue element should be rebalanced across both streams of the programme.

Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funds

Research from the Home Builders Federation estimates that local authorities in England and Wales are "sitting on over £8 billion of infrastructure payments by developers, including over £6 billion from Section 106 agreements and almost £2 billion raised through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)"[39]. This compares to £5 billion of Pride in Place funding. It also includes an estimated £873 million of unspent funds earmarked for investment in social infrastructure.

Councils should provide greater transparency and openness around unspent funds. This will help ideas to come forward, help them get money out the door quicker and improve conditions in their localities. This is especially true of the unspent Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL) funds, which are designed to ensure that between 15–25% of CIL contributions are spent in the neighbourhood directly affected by the development in question.

As such, NCIL is a potentially powerful tool for supporting hyperlocal regeneration projects. NCIL funds are currently allocated to town or parish councils, where they exist. Where they do not, we propose that Community Asset Stewards or the boards of Super Community Improvement Districts should fulfil this role.

36 MHCLG (2025). "Pride in Place Impact Fund: Prospectus"
37 MCHLG (2025). "Pride in Place Programme: FAQ"
38 MHCLG (2025). "Pride in Place Impact Fund: Prospectus"
39 Home Builders Federation (2025). "Unspent developer contributions"

We also recommend that councils explore community-led priority-setting and participatory budgeting models for how developer funds are allocated, learning from examples like Newham's People Powered Places platform, which used participatory budgeting to allocate a significant chunk of the borough's NCIL funds.

Councils should also clarify the conditions under which developer contributions can be spent on ongoing revenue costs and to support social infrastructure rather than just roundabouts. One example of innovative Section 106 approaches is the London Eye agreement put in place by Lambeth Council back in 2003. Since 2004 this has seen 1% of revenue invested in the area around the attraction. Over the years, this has exceeded £14 million[40].

Create a "UKREiiF for Neighbourhoods"

The concept of 'community wealth building' has captured imaginations in recent years. Part of the model is about finding ways to keep wealth circulating in a (usually deprived) area: for example, through community ownership and public procurement. This has many merits, but stopping money from leaking out is only half the picture. Based on our research, we recommend that community wealth building should also focus on bringing money in - something that wealthier cities and regions call "inward investment", and which holds much more sway in economic development more widely. The UK's Real Estate Investment & Infrastructure Forum ("UKREiiF")[41], for instance, is a three-day conference which has become an ever more important date on the circuit for Combined Authorities seeking to attract investment into their regions.

We propose a MIPIM[42] or UKREiiF for Neighbourhoods. This would be a "forum for unlocking investment and driving regeneration and development across the UK" and for "people, places and businesses to drive sustainable, inclusive and transformative investment and regeneration" but at a more local, neighbourhood level, rebalancing the playing field vis-a-vis city regions. This would be a showcase for locally-led organisations and civic entrepreneurs to attract funding, investment and partners. By harnessing national or regional funding streams, they are already literally bringing economic wealth to their areas. A "UKREiiF for Neighbourhoods" should also be a

---

40 Love Lambeth (2025). "Lambeth partners celebrate London Eye's local investment"
41 UKREiiF (2025). "The UK's Real Estate Investment & Infrastructure Forum"
42 MIPIM (2025). "The Global Urban Festival"

place to convene and share knowledge among enabling organisations and supporters, such as the Mycelial Network, Stir to Action, Platform Places and others.

Linked to this, we recommend that independent funders and social investors focus on going where government funding and mainstream finance doesn't reach. It's unlikely that Pride in Place will get everything right, such as the balance between capital and revenue funding. Independent funders and investors can help by addressing these gaps, supporting places that narrowly missed out on Pride in Place funding, or providing ongoing subsidy and more appropriate finance in areas facing inherent geographic disadvantages.

Two Asks for National Government

Smart placement of health hubs, youth hubs and family hubs

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Wes Streeting MP and his team are designing a new 'neighbourhood health service' with the ambition to "establish a Neighbourhood Health Centre (NHC) in every community". The Government says that "NHCs will co-locate NHS, local authority and voluntary sector services" starting with some of the most disadvantaged areas in the country[43].

But if the proposed new Neighbourhood Health Service is truly to "lead on prevention", then these new NHCs need to be developed in a holistic way that truly best helps these neighbourhoods to thrive. Will NHCs be a valuable piece of local social infrastructure? Will new PFI-style Public Private Partnership (PPP) funded NHCs appear as new build, out-of-town 'retail park' style developments? Or could they be closer to peoples' doorsteps, in the heart of neighbourhoods? How do they fit with DWP's ambitions for Youth Hubs[44]? With DfE's £500m for Best Start Family Hubs[45]? Where do Young Futures Hubs sit[46]?

Flexible and redistributive business rate reform

The Government is currently in the process of transforming the business rates regime[47]. As we have noted, changes to business rates in 2017 supported neighbourhood renewal in deprived areas by exempting large swathes of smaller retail units and reducing rates for small businesses[48]. We strongly recommend that the next round of reforms builds on this redistributive approach, actively favouring areas with in-built disadvantages and a history of neglect, while also offering a more flexible suite of tools to local authorities so that rate relief mechanisms can better enable neighbourhood transformation in more places. A Vacant Shop Levy, for example, would give councils further leverage.

The importance of these levers should not be understated: they can both maintain and transform the landscape of our country. Small adjustments may make the difference to whether our seaside towns can once more become vibrant and desirable destinations for day trippers and holidaymakers. The tax code influences whether traditional rural neighbourhoods maintain their village shop and village pub, cherished by so many as central to the character of our country. Whitehall rules may bring small-scale makers, craftsmen and artisans back to the heart of our northern towns, reshaping them as new, modern industrial heartlands.

---

43 DHSC (2025). "Government takes action to deliver neighbourhood health services"
44 DWP (2025). "Football clubs partner with Government to help young people into work"
45 Department of Education (2025). "Best Start Family Hubs: what parents need to know"
46 Prime Minister's Office (2025). "Young Futures Hubs to launch offering vulnerable young people lifeline"
47 See HM Treasury (2025), "Transforming Business Rates: Interim Report", which outlines priority reforms to improve the operation of the business rates system, as well as HM Treasury (2025), "Business rates: forward look", which sets out a timeline for reform of the business rates system, including plans for new multipliers, revaluations and further potential changes.
48 Of course, these exemptions did not guarantee renewal. See recent research from the Centre for Cities (2025), "No, business rates aren't killing struggling high streets", which argues that low incomes, rather than business rates, are the main driver of empty high streets.

Conclusion: exploring new frontiers for "thinking social infrastructure"

Throughout this report, we've attempted to demonstrate the importance of "thinking social infrastructure": highlighting how successful strategies for neighbourhood renewal understand retail spaces as one component of a wider ecosystem of places and spaces that build connection, community and pride.

However, to truly "think social infrastructure" means more than simply recognising that parades and arcades are social infrastructure, or that various forms of social infrastructure can play an important role in renewing neighbourhoods. Rather, it means drawing on recent research and practice to expand our thinking about what social infrastructure does, and what questions it forces us to confront.

Social infrastructure does not simply connect us - it forms us. Whether by guiding us through the well-worn grooves of familiar places and rituals, or by exposing us to novelty, surprise and difference, our interactions with social infrastructure shape and influence the depth, register and colour of our relationships with people and places, as well as our social and civic capacities. This means that the library, the chippy, the playground and the gurdwara are, in a way, social actors in their own right - formatting our social relations, and opening and closing down possibilities for how we might live together[49].

This insight is supported by the growing body of qualitative research. Emma Jackson describes how competitors in a North London bowling league experience not only a sense of "belonging", but also a sense of "becoming": growing selfhood through an embodied practice that builds both friendships and biceps[50]. Negotiating shared spaces also requires us to develop the basic civic skill of learning and negotiating social "rules of engagement", as shown in Kate Fox's anthropological study of pub-going habits[51] and Louise Laverty's account of the unwritten rules of a youth club's pool table[52]. Our shared spaces can also be contested, as brought to life in Jack Layton and Alan Latham's account of tensions over fenced-off festivals in urban parks[53], and Luke Billingham, Fraser Curry and Stephen Crossley's study of how young people in Hackney carve out space in a hostile city through their use of sports cages[54].

---

49 Here, we are surfing the wave of thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, who have explored the ways in which social relations between humans are shaped and influenced by non-humans. For a deeper dive, see Latour's (2005) Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network Theory, and Bennett's (2009) Vibrant Matter.
50 Jackson (2020). "Bowling Together? Practices of Belonging and Becoming in a London Ten-Pin Bowling League"
51 Fox (1993). Pubwatching with Desmond Morris.
52 Laverty (2024). "Social cues: The unwritten rules of a youth centre's pool table"
53 Layton & Latham (2022), "Social infrastructure and public life – notes on Finsbury Park, London"
54 Billingham et al (2024), "Sports Cages as Social Infrastructure: Sociality, Context, and Contest in Hackney's Cages"

Two principles for "thinking social infrastructure"

Based on this, we propose two core principles that have informed our approach to this research, and that we believe would benefit future neighbourhood renewal efforts:

#1 Different spaces do different things

"Thinking social infrastructure" means asking: which sorts of places invite people to linger, chat and make connections? Which places, events and community rituals make people feel connected to local history and identity? Where do people catch up on local gossip, or hear about job opportunities and so on? [See box below]

The aim is not to pit different forms of social infrastructure against each other. Rather, these questions can help local people and decision-makers to make sense of the local ecosystem: do residents have access to a healthy, diverse and viable blend of social infrastructure? Could small interventions make a particular asset or set of assets more likely to generate social connection?

#2 Social infrastructure is inherently political

As soon as we begin to imagine how local social infrastructure might be improved, we are confronted by questions of power. Who owns and controls the assets we value? Which actors have the capacity and credibility to develop visions for change and fund interventions? This is especially pertinent in the context of "community-led" regeneration, which always depends on some actors being able to convene, consult, and ultimately speak for the "community". How democratic and accountable are those actors, and how open, inclusive and equitable are their engagement processes?

Bubbling underneath this, meanwhile, are the everyday micropolitics among residents over what constitutes healthy social infrastructure and how it should be used. Are chicken shops ticking timebombs of the obesity crisis, or much-valued places of "routine, recognition and a quiet sense of community"[55]? Is it right that the local football club gets exclusive use of a council-owned field? These contests, which are often informed by class-based, gendered or racialised assumptions, complicate the notion that social infrastructure is a straightforward "public good", something which should be reflected in how strategies for renewal are developed and implemented.

---

55 Banharally (2025), "Chicken Shop Talk". See also forthcoming research from London Development Trust on how young people reflect on these trade-offs.

How social infrastructure shapes us

Synthesising existing research[56] and practice, Popular has developed a 12-part framework for grasping what different types of social infrastructure actually do: specifically, how different spaces can format social relations in multiple, overlapping ways. This can serve as a diagnostic and planning tool for anyone looking to cultivate healthier social infrastructure, either at the single-asset or ecosystem level.

Social infrastructure includes spaces of...

- **Appearance:** being visible and encountering others; basic human contact

- **Recognition:** being recognised and recognising others ("where everybody knows your name")

- **Conversation:** speaking to others on a personal level, hearing others' stories and perspectives, getting to know people, making friends

- **Information exchange:** accessing local gossip, advice and networking ("anyone know a good plumber?"), signposting, acculturation to broader societal norms of the area ("figuring a place out")

- **Dissemination:** where changes in social attitudes are disseminated, contested and negotiated "on the ground" (i.e. café conversations about wider social issues)

- **Affirmation:** being around others who share my values or are like me culturally or politically (i.e. beyond simply being welcomed or recognised) e.g. cultural or "alternative" venues, festivals and carnivals

- **Historical or intergenerational connection:** feeling connection across time as well as in the present; can be identity-forming (e.g. heritage spaces, traditional events)

- **Disappearance:** losing yourself in a collective experience (e.g. worship, spectator sports, dancing)

- **Reciprocity:** turn-taking, trading small favours ("could you watch my laptop for a minute?")

- **Civic skill-building:** learning site-specific "rules", contributing to shared practices and atmospheres

- **Agency:** shaping a space by setting and enforcing site-specific "rules", activating a space by holding events (e.g. starting a monthly 'green drinks' in a co-working space), contributing to upkeep and maintenance

- **Association:** participating in durable, member-like behaviour, from a pub darts team to democratic community ownership

---

56 See, for example, the concept of "registers of sociality" proposed by Layton & Latham (2022), "Social infrastructure and public life – notes on Finsbury Park, London"

Case Study:
Back on the Map

Opening new doors

The suburb of Hendon is about 25 minutes' walk south from the ornate redbrick facades and clean regenerated squares of Sunderland's city centre. A stone's throw from the beach, rows of single-storey "Sunderland Cottages" once housed generations of shipbuilders who, alongside coalminers, formed the backbone of the city's prosperity. But deindustrialisation arrived in sharp shocks in the late 1980s and early 1990s, leaving Hendon underinvested and blighted by multi-generational joblessness and a transient population. Efforts to arrest this decline included a £54m injection from the New Deal for Communities between 2001 and 2011, which led to the creation of local community anchor organisation Back on the Map, but the area remains one of the 10% most deprived areas nationally.

Strolling down Hendon's Villette Road on a bright summer morning, however, reveals a hopeful if mixed picture. The community cafe is bustling, a Greggs discount store is open for business and a queue of sorts is already forming outside the barbers. There is a butcher and a baker (namely, Müller Swiss Bakers, trading since 1959, famous for its frog cakes as well as the city's ubiquitous pink slice), while candlesticks are probably best sourced from Decades Antiques, Sunderland's only remaining antique store. That said, at least a dozen shopfronts will remain shuttered all day: empty, abandoned, or full of white goods stored behind boarded-up windows. However, vacancy rates have improved in recent years, the street is looking smarter and derelict buildings are being restored. This resurgence would be impossible without the hard work, ingenuity and co-operation of local traders, but much credit is also due to Back on the Map's bold decision to make Villette Road its problem.

A strategic shift

For over a decade, Back on the Map had a simple model: its social enterprise arm bought, refurbished, and let residential properties to local people and families (it now owns over 130 homes), while the main charity used the rental income to provide services and operate community facilities, including Hendon's former library, a community cafe and a workshop. In 2022, however, Back on the Map changed tack. While the charity retains its core residential property portfolio, it has made cleaning up the high street the focal point of its 2023–2028 strategy: buying and letting commercial properties, setting up trader forums, rebranding Villette Road as the "Heart of Hendon" and pulling in funds to spruce up the high street and nearby green spaces – and in some cases, literally sweeping the streets.

The shift was inspired by a series of local consultations carried out as the neighbourhood emerged from lockdown. Local people repeatedly lamented the sorry state of Villette Road, which felt increasingly scruffy, unsafe and underused. In response, the charity's senior leadership, most of whom have deep local connections to Hendon, took the strategic decision to expand their mission beyond housing and services. If the charity's goal was to make Hendon "a place of opportunity to live, work and thrive", they realised, the charity would have to use its leverage as a community anchor organisation to directly tackle the decline of Villette Road and restore a sense of pride and vitality to the neighbourhood.

A Community Improvement District

The strategic shift was galvanised by Back on the Map's yearlong participation in Power to Change's Community Improvement District (CID) pilot programme, which provided both £20K of funding and a focal point for convening local residents, traders and other stakeholders around a common goal.

Running from May 2022 to June 2023, the programme led to the rebranding of Villette Road as the "Heart of Hendon", complete with smart new signage and a visual identity. The local authority contributed by installing planters and new bins, and the green spaces that bookend the high street were restored. Back on the Map also led events and gatherings to raise the street's profile and build local belief that Villette Road's fortunes could change. In a moment of special emotional resonance, it installed the street's first Christmas tree in decades. Online sceptics grumbled that it would soon be vandalised, but the tree stood tall, delighting locals and visitors. The following year, residents knitted their own decorations for it.

"People do have a pride of place here," says Joanne Cooper, Back on the Map's Chief Executive. "We are just trying to build on that."

A newfound sense of trust with the street's traders was key. Back on the Map's previous high street acquisitions had rattled traders who didn't want to see retail spaces lost from Villette Road, and communication had generally been less than ideal. This time around, the charity made a sustained effort to engage traders, sharing consultation results and setting up a forum with a core of 16 traders. It also convinced Sunderland City Council to make sure that its Household Support Fund vouchers could be spent at local shops as well as supermarkets, and worked with Sunderland BID to include Villette Road in various promotional schemes – even buying card machines for local traders to ensure that they could participate.

Turning point: a landmark purchase

While this burst of activity boosted footfall and changed perceptions, Villette Road continued to face a deeper structural problem: derelict properties and uninterested landlords. These issues acutely affected local traders, who struggled to convince landlords to carry out basic repairs and worried that shoppers were being put off by eyesore buildings. Buoyed by the success of the CID pilot, Back on the Map made a landmark intervention: purchasing, refurbishing and letting out a block of four derelict shops which had lain empty for around 15 years.

Most properties on Villette Road have retail units on the ground floor and flats on the upper floors. Often, landlords are content to rent out the flats upstairs – which can realise yields of

up to 15%, double the national average - while saving themselves the bother of dealing with commercial tenants downstairs. Even when retail units are let, shopowners often complain that landlords don't invest in the properties, which has led to a number of successful businesses decamping to nearby neighbourhoods.

Using its own reserves and capital investment fund, alongside a £168,000 Community Ownership Fund grant and a social loan from the Rank Foundation, Back on the Map purchased the block of shops for approximately £230,000 and carried out extensive renovations, drawing on pro bono support from local architect firm Building Design Northern. The decision to buy the block was taken alongside local traders, who identified the prominently-located building as in most need of intervention.

"We're acquiring the worst properties and bringing them back into use because it's not commercially viable for anyone else to do it," explains Craig Richardson, Head of Business at Back on the Map. "It's viable for us as a charity and a social enterprise because we benefit from good yield on the residential income. That allows us to reinvest in the asset and bring quality retail space to the area."

Back on the Map has now welcomed its first tenants to the block and hopes to secure funding to acquire further commercial properties along Villette Road.

The power of community asset ownership

Back on the Map's story is particularly relevant to asset-owning community anchor organisations, including housing associations, development trusts or universities. Such organisations should seriously explore whether they can incorporate the renewal of neighbourhood social infrastructure into their overall social mission.

That's not to downplay the gravity of the task. Unsurprisingly, Back on the Map's decision to expand its strategic remit involved a lot of internal headscratching and soul-searching, culminating in an organisational transformation that saw its headcount increase from seven to 25, and more commercial property expertise drafted onto the board of trustees. The senior leadership team has also had to focus heavily on building new relationships with funders and financiers to support its "high street revolution", having previously been a largely self-supporting, self-contained social enterprise.

It's also worth noting that Back on the Map already enjoyed a long-term, trusted relationship with the local authority, having built up a track record of delivery and taken over management of the old library building (now the Carnegie Community Corner) and parts of the parks. Indeed, the charity seems to act almost as a "mini-council" for Hendon: sweeping the streets ("if we don't do it, who else will?"), and providing low-level security through CCTV and "eyes on the street". If a dog goes missing in Hendon, it's Back on the Map that gets a call. This is underpinned by the deep personal connections that many of the team, from the chief executive down, have with the neighbourhood: the polar opposite of the "parachuted-in" social reformer.

Case Study: Treorchy BID

Rising from the valleys

Treorchy is a former mining town deep in the Welsh valleys. A one street town, with a high street spine between a few rows of solid, very decent, sometimes handsome Victorian terraced housing. The coal tips or slag heaps which built up around the town have since grown grass over the decades and evolved into green, rolling hills.

The high street is busy. In 2020, it was crowned the UK's best high street in a competition that hasn't since been repeated, leaving it still officially the UK's best. Vacancy rates are low compared to neighbouring towns. There is a real sense locally that the town is on the way up. There's something happening here.

But while bustling, it's far from flash. Indeed, some shops feel like they could belong to the 1980s or even the 1950s, alongside others more from this century. Indeed, this is a town that many national chains never reached. Big box retailers demand car parking, white boxes and high footfall. But there isn't much room for new developments and large car parks in a tight valley. There may be no Shoezone or Carpetright, but there is an old-fashioned shoe shop and a classic carpet shop opposite newer businesses selling vapes or craft ale.

Indeed, from some angles, Treorchy looks like a high street from another era - just a pretty successful one. But this is not a museum, it's alive. This is a high street that works because it has persisted in being itself. It's not glamorous but it is practical. These are mainly small shops. Most units are run by owner-occupiers or long-term tenants with skin in the game. There are independent, family businesses, cafés, and small retailers. The absence of big chains has become not a weakness but a proposition.

Adrian Emett, the landlord of the Lion pub says that in the past, "we have been beaten up" and "we were always a left behind place". Treorchy ranks 40th out of 573 places with the most

deprived areas in Wales[57]. Even when jobs were easier to find, it was a poor area. Factories were built to provide jobs when the mines closed but the major employer, Burberry, closed in 2007. Today the population is around 7,000 and the wider Rhonda area is home to around 50,000. Yet in 1911, it was over 150,000. So the area has lost over 100,000 people in a century.

Other valley towns are really struggling. Other neighbouring areas used to be seen as 'better towns' as they had a Woolworths and bigger shops. But most have closed. Twelve or 15 banks have shut their doors in the Rhondda over the last decade or so, with the last Barclays in South Wales outside Cardiff and Swansea closing in Treorchy in 2024.

A spirit of mutualism

Yet somehow Treorchy seems to work. Perhaps there is a spirit tucked into the valleys that Treorchy has managed to harness. Adrian describes this as "we do things together because nobody else will" and "what we have here is that there is nobody else".

Others might call this a spirit of mutual aid and self-help. The nearby Aberdare valley was a crucible of co-operativism in the 19th century and just eight miles north of Treorchy is Tower Colliery where mine workers bought out their pit and reopened it as a worker owned co-op (today it's Zip World, an outdoor adventure park.) Tredegar, whose mutual healthcare model inspired the creation of the NHS, is just half an hour away. Welsh speakers often referred to their local retail co-operative society not as 'the co-op' but as 'siop ni' (our shop). This muscle memory of co-operativism, institutes and friendly societies, self-sufficiency and looking after each other runs deep through the valleys.

The BID

In 2011, Adrian Emmett came home to Treorchy and took over the Lion pub. In 2018, he took over as chair of the local chamber of trade. The next step was the creation of a locally-led Business Improvement District (BID), launched in 2020. BIDs are led and funded by local businesses through a levy, pooling resources to provide additional services and make high street improvements, above and beyond what local councils offer[58]. Once a BID is established, businesses vote every five years on whether to continue it.

Treorchy would normally be considered too small an area for a BID, and indeed Treorchy BID is the UK's smallest - raising around £25,000 per year compared to Cardiff BID's £1 million. Treorchy's BID is also less dominated by the business community than others, because the business owners are also residents, and the people are closer. Indeed, sometimes it feels like more of a community group than a business group.

As Adrian says, "just make sure your first meeting is in the pub." If you put some food on and make sure there's a free pint in it for people, they will show up. As an experienced pub landlord, Adrian certainly has the right CV for managing conflict, and the credibility and authority to navigate through tricky situations.

The BID aims to create a sense of place and a 'sticky' street. The team has worked to create a brand around the town but with a 'bottom-up approach" driven by local people. Inherent to the BID model is that, to survive, it has to deliver. To win the ballot next time, the team has to keep

57 StatsWales (2025). "Built Up Area Analysis"
58 MCHLG (2025). "Business Improvement Districts"

the customer satisfied, and retain that "sense of us doing things together as a town". So the BID team has focused particularly on one driving mission, which you could call *change you can feel*. In everything they do, they ask themselves "does it drive footfall to the high street?". The food festival, for example, might be logistically easier in a nearby field but that wouldn't benefit the high street so much. Always asking this simple question has helped the BID refine a model that is more likely to see tangible results that locals can touch.

Activities that the BID has enabled include:

- **Understanding the community's ambitions:** the BID carried out an independent survey to gather data on what people wanted.

- **Running events:** such as the food festival and market. This has required considerable determination, like not calling off events due to weather conditions, when council run markets have been cancelled. The BID team is proud they still deliver events 'when the chips are down'.

- **Attracting funding:** Adrian describes how the BID company structure has allowed the team to matchfund and bring more resources into the valley, such as Transforming Towns[59] money from the Welsh Government.

- **Creating a local lottery:** an idea borrowed from nearby Tonyrefail. The lottery is £1 a ticket with 50p going to the community and 50p to winnings, and prizes up to £2,500. But winnings are not just cash but vouchers that need to be spent in Treorchy, with 40 or 50 shops involved. This is a model designed to create incentives that bring people together and into the high street.

- **Santa Claus voucher scheme:** Love Treorchy pays for a Santa grotto in the local library. Visitors pay £5 to meet Santa (Adrian provides reassurance this is actually the 'real Santa'), receive presents, and get a £5 voucher to spend on the high street. Again, the model is designed so that punters have to spend vouchers in Treorchy. £12,000 has gone back into the community so far, rewarding local shops by creating the incentive to spend money locally, while also being 'habit forming'.

- **Shop window competitions** help improve the visual quality of the area.

59 Welsh Government (2025). "Transforming Towns: support to improve town centres"

On the up

Treorchy seems to be on the up. The area now has the highest house prices in the Rhondda valley. Statistics reported in the Welsh Parliament suggest that retail occupation rates in Treorchy are around 95% occupancy with 80% owned locally, and 80% run by women, although Adrian can no longer find the envelope these were drawn upon the back of. Of course, it isn't all sunshine and rainbows. Traffic can be a nightmare. Some shops close when people retire. But if shops are vacant, they don't stay that way for very long.

The team in Treorchy emphasises the importance of sharing and borrowing lessons from elsewhere. BID Manager Angharad also works in nearby Aberdare where she has taken on some of the lessons from Treorchy. Conversely, Treorchy will benefit from what she learns in the next valley, and sometimes costs can be shared, like gazebos and other equipment. The lottery idea was pinched from Tonyrefail. This cross-pollination should bring mutual benefit for all. Tonypandy has just set up a BID, partly because Treorchy did. Angharad says "we've shown what's possible".

Traders voted to renew the BID for another five-year term in February 2025, and the team are confident about the future. They also want to purchase some land and develop assets, perhaps through accessing financial support from the local wind farm Pen y Cymoedd Community Fund[60]. In addition, the BID team is working with Transport for Wales, trying to timetable later trains in the evening back down the valley on weekends, to strengthen the nighttime economy.

---

60 Pen Y Cymoedd Community Fund (2025). "Pen Y Cymoedd Community Fund"

Case study: Future Wolverton

Old town, new town

Absorbed by the administrative boundaries of the new town of Milton Keynes in 1976, Wolverton's streets wouldn't look out of place in some suburbs of London or indeed, the neighbourhoods of northern England. If you squint, this could be Albert Square or, around the corner, Coronation Street. These are solid, reliable, red brick terraces, and family houses. Some are quite modest, some a little more handsome, and none too grand. There are two-up-two-downs, flats above shops, backstreets and ginnels. This is a very recognisable, perhaps even a typical type of English place.

Wolverton was originally a Victorian railway settlement, and built with a sense of responsibility towards the welfare, health and education of the railway workers and their families. Here was one of the first Mechanic's Institutes in the country, which housed classrooms, a library, an auditorium and lecture theatre, evening classes, and a reading room [61]. The founders also made sure to build a few pubs, but not too many.

Today, there is not a single empty shop on the main square. But there does seem to be one of everything. There's one chemist, one new African mini market, one Polish shop, one old snooker club, one charity shop, one Vape shop, one Vietnamese restaurant and one shop run by the social enterprise Future Wolverton, offering fresh fruit and veg, plants and flowers. This looks like a successful place, a thriving neighbourhood. But how and why?

---

61 Living Archive Milton Keynes (2025). "The Science and Art Institute"

The Agora

The development and demolition of the Agora shopping centre is central to the story of Wolverton. Built in the 1970s, it was intended as a civic and commercial centre, and a gift from the MKDC to Wolverton. Yet it literally divided the neighbourhood. Wolverton's spine used to be the Radcliffe Street but the Agora landed in the middle of Wolverton in the late 1970s and soon became both a physical and psychological barrier in the community, cutting the main artery through the neighbourhood.

Less than a decade after opening, by 1988, the Agora was already in poor physical condition and Wolverton's civic heart was already failing. It was sold to private landlords, effectively privatizing the town centre. Conditions worsened. After hours, it was closed and locals were unable to get from one side of Wolverton to the other without going the long way round. By the early 2000s, it was failing. In 2009, the Agora went into administration and for a while was owned by an absent landlord.

Neighbourhood planning

Meanwhile, in 2011, the Conservative-led administration announced the new neighbourhood planning regime as part of the Localism Act. Wolverton was chosen as one of the frontrunners to develop a new neighbourhood plan. Locals received backing from central government and engaged in significant grassroots consultation.

Then in 2013, the private owners put the Agora up for sale. One developer submitted a planning application for large retail boxes, which was at odds with the neighbourhood plan for a mix of dwellings and smaller retail units. Then, following the EU referendum and other economic shocks, the future of large floor retail looked less rosy and in 2017, the commercial developer pulled out.

A new developer then bought the site in 2019 and introduced proposals more aligned with the local plan - more walkable blocks, small commercial units at street level, community spaces and mixed housing tenure, including co-housing[62] and community housing[63]. This was a plan for a shift from a single-purpose shopping centre to a more dispersed mixed-use neighbourhood, and less parking. Permission was granted in 2021.

But tensions have surfaced and progress has been slow. A Swedish housing developer was involved but no longer. Wilmot Dixon were engaged but dispensed with. While some locals love the new plans, others just want more parking. Finally, in 2021, the Agora was demolished. For now, the divide at the heart of the community has been torn down, and a vacuum occupies the neighbourhood.

The latest from the council[64] states that there have been "continued delays... Nonetheless, the project remains a strategic priority for the Council and we appreciate the continued patience of the Wolverton community. We now anticipate that a further Council decision to approve the construction will be taken late this year and that construction would start in early 2026".

---

62 Town. (2025) "Still Green Co-housing"
63 Housing Design Awards (2025). "Love Wolverton"
64 Love Wolverton (2025). "Update on the Agora Regeneration Scheme"

Stitching the neighbourhood

While the Agora has sucked life out of the area, energy has found other places to get busy. The neighbourhood planning process was built around a magnetic galvanizing force - everyone hated the Agora. This bred resolve and ambition for the wider neighbourhood.

Focus shifted beyond the Agora site, with local social enterprise Future Wolverton working to lift the mood, engage the community, provide services and put life back into the town centre. Future Wolverton has supported the development of a thriving community, and the diverse community has helped to ensure consistently occupied retail units. They have been "stitching the neighbourhood back together" through a range of practical actions:

- **Leading the development of a calendar of community activity, street markets and events.** Locals expressed interest in a market featuring local independent businesses, selling a range of products from fresh food and baked goods to gifts and street food. Future Wolverton have established the monthly street market which is now in its second year. Some local community groups have free stalls, and there are activities for kids, street games, giant Jenga, and music. Marie Osborne from Future Wolverton describes it as "the connecting tissue of the community". When the street market is on, other businesses, including the coffee shop and charity shop, are open, so local independents benefit. When the festive lights are switched on, and during the Lantern festival, Future Wolverton hosts local micro businesses in their shop.

- **Buying the Old School building:** a community hall and coffee shop and home to an employability programme, made possible with support, grants and loans from the Social Investment Business, Power to Change, the Architectural Heritage Fund, together with a community share issue, supported by Ethex and Social Investment Tax Relief.

- **Transforming shops in the square:** Until recently, Age UK ran the only charity shop in Wolverton. For a while it was due to close. So Future Wolverton worked with the charity and galvanised the local community to refurbish the shop, which has now taken on a new five-year lease.

- **Activating empty shops:** Future Wolverton agreed with the owner of a vacant unit an initial period of two months, rent free. The shop provides pop-up opportunities to local small businesses, giving them a real "bricks-and-mortar" retail experience, and the chance to connect with their audiences face-to-face. Theresa from Branch Out CIC is the permanent

anchor tenant at the shop, selling locally grown flowers and botanical gifts. Wolverton Gin and Chouxly Scrumptious, two Wolverton businesses, have used the shop as a springboard and Future Wolverton occupy a table in the shop every Wednesday as a point of contact for sharing the work they do, as well as selling locally made produce, such as Urban Beelievers Honey, preserves, bread and Old School baked goods.

Participating in Power to Change's Community Improvement District pilot programme in 2022-23 unlocked further funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, via Milton Keynes City Council. This funding was used to further animate the area, with a major music and street sports event, arts exhibitions, the street market becoming a permanent monthly fixture, and diversification of the pop-up traders in the shop.

A social enterprise place

Wolverton seems to be a particularly social enterprise dense neighbourhood. Local social and civic entrepreneurs and civil society groups include:

- **Future Wolverton:** a Community Benefit Society formed in 2013 that aims to help Wolverton thrive, and transform local buildings for community use. There is a core team of 12 with 25 people on the payroll.

- **MK Christian Foundation[65]:** an innovative local charity growing people and community through social enterprise. The group is made up of eight enterprises, which each work to 'co-produce' solutions to locally identified issues.

- **Branch Out MK CIC[66]:** a not-for-profit organisation that supports adults with learning differences and autism through social and therapeutic horticulture in a supportive environment. Branch Out has three staff and used to be based upstairs in a community centre, but has now taken on space in the shop to involve others in the business, gaining visibility, volunteers, service users and connections with schools.

- **Community Action MK:** the local infrastructure body, or CVS, is based in Wolverton and exists to support, promote, involve and coordinate the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector in Milton Keynes.

Wolverton is now seen by many as the most interesting part of the city of Milton Keynes. What was once a Victorian railway town is now a more artistic, creative community with all the ingredients to be a successful place, and with a distinct character.

---

65 Milton Keynes Christian Foundation (2025). "About"
66 Branch-out MK CIC (2025). "Shop on the Square"

Case study: The Arcade Group

From rot to renewal

Standing outside the scaffolded Dewsbury Arcade on a grey Friday morning, over the sound of power drills and Makita radios, Chris Hill of The Arcade Group apologises for not being able to offer a tour. The workers have been bothered by enough visitors already – and given that the restoration is now three years behind schedule, we'd hardly want to get in anyone's way. Once the works are complete, however, The Arcade Group – a community benefit society with over 200 members – will play a vital role in bringing this 19th century Victorian arcade into a modern, 21st century retail future.

A market town since 1318, Dewsbury flourished as a wool hub during the 19th century, making heavyweight cloth and pioneering textile recycling. This economic boom paid for beautiful Victorian civic buildings such as the old library, swimming baths, post office and bank. Dewsbury Arcade opened in 1899 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (which took place in 1897 – construction delays are a perennial issue).

Sadly, many of these buildings are now boarded up and left empty, victims of "land banking" by absentee landlords. Footfall in the town centre has decreased. The closure of Marks & Spencer, some ten years ago, is still talked about as a turning point in the town's decline. Post-war progress has also left the town centre tightly surrounded by A-roads and dual carriageways, making it feel cut off. Something had to change.

A radical proposal

Kirklees Council's response is the Dewsbury Blueprint, a 10-year masterplan launched in 2020. As part of the plan, the council purchased Dewsbury Arcade, closed since 2016, and began to restore and refurbish it. It also planned to run the arcade – until it received an unexpected and radical proposal.

Chris Hill and Peter Mason, two experienced property developers and civic entrepreneurs, wangled a meeting with council officers and pitched an alternative vision: Dewsbury Arcade as a focal point for community events and engagement, run by a locally-based community enterprise. Some officers took more convincing than others, but the Regeneration Team saw the logic. Kirklees Council awarded The Arcade Group, a new community benefit society, on a 10-year lease at a price of £11,000 per year and 15% of turnover.

No arcade is an island

Unfortunately, the team soon hit a bump in the road. Each stage of the restoration seemed to uncover more rot, decay and structural problems, and the scheduled completion was pushed back from end-2022 to end-2025 (and more recently to early 2026). But The Arcade Group did not sit on its hands.

"One or two years in, we realised that Dewsbury was going down the pan," says Chris. "It was just vape shops and takeaways everywhere. People didn't feel safe. If the arcade was going to survive, we needed to regenerate the whole town centre."

The Arcade Group found itself without an arcade, but it still had a group. Drawing on its members' expertise, it expanded into a community-led regeneration body, bagging grants and winning council contracts to set up a business network, landlord network, and events programme to bring together civic-minded Dewsburians to animate the town's streets, parades and markets. As Jenny Holden-Stokes, the group's business and events manager, says: "The arcade is not an island - we need to bring everyone else up with us."

Connecting business and civil society

The business network started out as a WhatsApp group of around 45 traders recommending accountants, borrowing coat hangers and – crucially – organising joint events. Unlike trader associations that focus on influencing council policy, this group focuses on the practical task of harnessing the community's energy.

"I said in the first meeting that I can't fix the parking, I can't change the rates - I can only give you tools that mean we can put things on and bring people in," says Jenny. The growing group has now formalised into Dewsbury Business Network, led by a well-connected local business leader and launched in September by Baroness Warsi.

As the second-generation owner of a haberdashers' shop that has been trading in Dewsbury for over 30 years, Jenny was perhaps the ideal person to build the network. The universal appeal of good fabric meant that her family shop was one of few patronised by equal numbers of Muslim and non-Muslim customers, allowing Jenny to bridge divides in a sometimes-segregated town. The keen involvement of Dewsbury Scouts, almost entirely Muslim-led, offered a sounding board to ensure events are inclusive. As well as taking part in a market event for Eid, which featured a girls-vs-boys "Apprentice"-style challenge, the Scouts descended en masse to a Christmas event: "we had Santa and samosas, it was brilliant", Jenny recalls.

Driving footfall through events is a core strategy. Jenny's group has partnered to stage a food festival that attracted 5000 people, organised Halloween pumpkin and "hunt the elf" trails, and even revived "Dewsbury On Sea" after a 15-year gap, transforming the town centre into an urban beach with deckchairs and sandcastles. Crucially, the Arcade Group has set up a temporary space in the nearby Princess of Wales Shopping Centre, which has so far attracted over 12,000 visits through a range of heritage events, darts competitions, monthly clothes swaps, craft workshops and other activities.

Recruiting tenants

The Arcade Group is now busy recruiting tenants. Interest has been steady, especially after a "win a shop" raffle attracted over 30 businesses in 48 hours. The group is also putting together a support package for future arcade tenants, such as pro bono help from solicitors and accountants.

Notably, the group has a recruitment policy that excludes "gambling, vaping, nail bars, mobile phone repair or fast-food take-away shops". This was based on local conversations, not snobbery - people generally became more engaged "once they realise we're not going to fill it with "cheap and cheerful". That said, Chris admits there are "healthy tensions" among the group's board: the more commercially minded simply want to fill the arcade, while others are keen to make Dewsbury Arcade a shopping destination.

The group is also trying to attract tenants who will be a good match for the physical quirks of the Victorian arcade's units (compact, with little room to store stock) and align with general high street trends towards experience-led retail. Some things customers still want to touch, feel, see and smell before they buy, such as fabrics, perfume and scents, high-quality clothes, printed magazines and graphic novels.

"It's all about experiences now on the high street", says Jenny. "You need to offer a workshop, or give people something to taste or feel".

The team is also trying to attract entrepreneurs who run businesses at home and online who may want to add a physical presence. This hybrid model is increasingly common: Jenny herself now spends a few hours each week doing QVC-style broadcasts on Facebook.

Making neighbourhood funding go further

The Arcade Group's activities have been largely funded from grants and short-term council contracts: around £50,000 each from the Architectural Heritage Fund and Power to Change, £60,000 from National Lottery Heritage Fund contract to run events and a £20,000 contract to set up and run Dewsbury Business Network, awarded through the local Neighbourhood Board. A community share offer also raised £127,000 from around 210 of The Arcade Group's members.

This is a drop in the ocean compared to the £10 million-plus committed to the restoration of the actual building – but this just shows how locally-rooted, democratic groups can create outsized impact on neighbourhood regeneration. As Chris argues, "given that we have only 1.2 FTE employees, the amount of stuff that's been shifted is incredible."

Hyperlocal groups can be more efficient and nimble than larger organisations, especially when co-operation flows from trusted, face-to-face relationships: partnership over paperwork. "We're much more personal," says Jenny. "If you email me, I'll answer you. We can be more proactive and responsive - we know the area, and what works and what doesn't."

More importantly, many people will give their time and energy more freely to community-led, democratic projects than they would for a council or larger organisation. The Arcade Group has been able to draw upon a wealth of professional experience and local connections from its member base, as well as a wider army of volunteers that support events and marketing.

In this light, Chris believes that "council-owned, community-run" can be a viable model for other neighbourhoods. He also insists that community efforts to regenerate a neighbourhood are much more powerful if they are based around an asset: "there's a passion in asset ownership, a mentality of building something". A community organisation that proves it can run an asset independently has a gravitas that's harder to achieve just by fulfilling contracts: "if you're running it and making profits, you're treated as a proper business, not just a service provider". This can help build trusted and equitable relationships between community groups and councils - as Jenny is quick to point out, Kirklees Council has been very helpful in supporting local events, now that it can see what The Arcade Group is capable of achieving.

Case study: The Aberfeldy Estate

Restoring the fabric

The Aberfeldy Estate is tucked between a triangle of busy roads in Poplar, East London, in the shadow of Ernö Goldfinger's iconic brutalist Balfron tower. One of the poorest parts of the borough of Tower Hamlets, the area was heavily bombed in World War II, and unsurprisingly, is now part of a wider, and ambitious regeneration project.

Yet unexpected and confusing things seem to happen from time to time in this sometimes-forgotten corner of the capital's dockside district. Half the streets have Scottish names. There's a church that became a printing house which then hosted Iron Maiden's first ever gig to an audience of nuns. Just around the corner is the UK's earliest purpose-built pedestrian shopping arcade. There's a flower shop that has become a pub, named after a man who sounds like a gangster but designed the world's first programmable computer at Bletchley Park[67]. The Tommy Flowers pub is now run by the local community.

Now, also surprisingly, the area has had a new lease of life, just as it is set to be demolished. The housing association Poplar HARCA took over ownership of the estate in late 1990s. Around 2010, plans accelerated for mass redevelopment and regeneration. But in the meantime, the shops in Aberfeldy Street, in the heart of the area, started to empty. The shops were programmed for demolition and while the prospect of development promised change, the shopping parade seemed to be dying. What was once the civic hub of the estate, and gathering place for the neighbourhood, felt run down and unsafe. Footfall was down. The shutters were down. While the locals waited for long-term development, the day-to-day experience of the street deteriorated.

---

67 Smith (2025). "Move over, Alan Turing: meet the working-class hero of Bletchley Park you didn't see in the movies"

Stepping up

In 2019, Poplar HARCA and their development partner Eco World commissioned High Street Works to step in. High Street Works is a joint venture between Meanwhile Space CIC and Jan Kattein Architects.

Jan Kattein explains: 'The perception of the street was that it was not safe. Even to the people living here, it did not feel like home. Our work was about shifting that perception. We did this by re-inhabiting empty shops so that there are eyes on the street and to increase footfall, but also by transforming it visually. Radical visual transformation encourages people to re-evaluate their environment.

The objectives of the programme were to drive footfall, incubate local independent businesses, bring new and existing communities together, and change the perception of the area. The work combined temporary business incubation, visual placemaking, and community engagement. If local businesses could occupy previously vacant units, vibrant facade artworks could reflect local heritage, and a programme of events could connect residents to the street, this could be a model for inclusive regeneration in East London.

The model has several complementary elements:

1. 'Meanwhile use' and retail incubation

The challenge was to bring back some of the traders. So local businesses and organisations were invited to apply to occupy vacant units on a rent-free basis, 'laddered' to gradually increase over time, with flexible lease terms. The programme also opened up access to funding from the Aberfeldy Big Local programme[68]. This provided low-risk opportunities for start-ups and micro-enterprises to establish themselves in the community.

Ellie Sillett from Meanwhile Space describes how "essentially, we put a call out to say, what is your idea? What might you do with this space?" The spaces became an opportunity to test, grow and evolve ideas, so that people could try new things in a supported environment. An allocations policy was developed to prioritise local entrepreneurs. New tenants would be given the chance to test their business idea, with the prospect of finding a long-term home in the new shops after the development was complete. Recruitment for the scheme took place in the summer of 2020.

The programme also provided business support for traders shaped on the basis of survey feedback. This included a business support 'bootcamp' to inspire and build capacity to adapt and improve their offer - mentoring sessions, advice, competitor analysis field trips (i.e. tours to grocery stores and grilled chicken restaurants and takeaways), visual merchandising action plans and interventions, and support with their online offer.

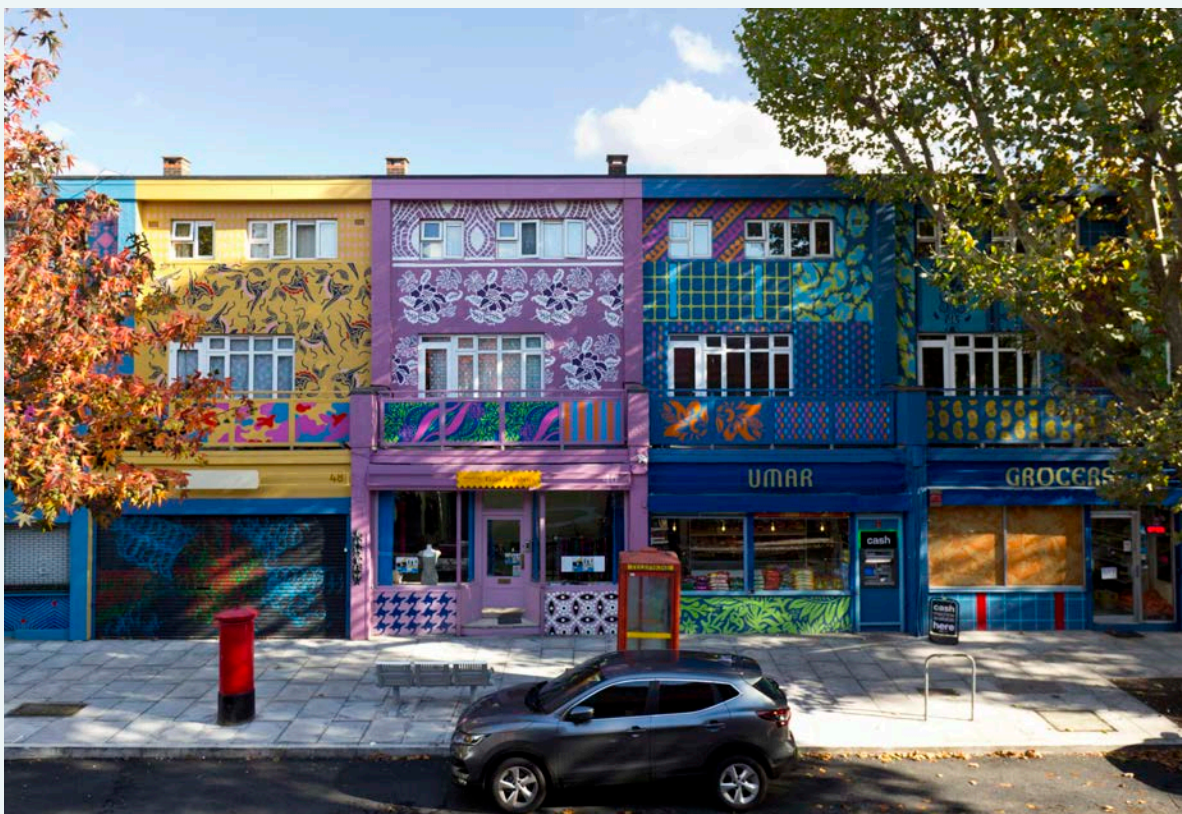68 See Aberfeldy Big Local (2025), "About ABL"

2. The public realm

While the parade was dying, the surrounding area was still full of life. Poplar has developed a particular flavour based on Indian and Bangladeshi immigration, which is present everywhere: in the shops, in the cultural institutions and embedded in the communities. While of course East London more widely has a vibrant garment manufacturing history that stretches back centuries – Spitalfield's silk, the rag trade, and Jewish traditions for instance – there is a more recent heritage of patterns, fabrics and garments in the East End that has been introduced by diverse South Asian communities. Here was the inspiration for transforming the public realm.

Buildings along Aberfeldy Street have now been transformed through a major public artwork inspired by the Bengali and Indian Kantha patchwork tradition, a crafting technique for repurposing old textiles through patchwork and embroidery crafts – taking something old and reinventing it. Local people from all backgrounds contributed fabric swatches, which were digitised. Then a team from Cuttle Construction, The London Mural Company and Accent London brought them to life using over 200 different colours to apply murals to cover Aberfeldy Street's ground floor shop facades and upper residential frontages. Jan Kattien Architects worked closely with local shops to create bold new frontages, and business identities were revived, and new window displays developed. As the cult London blogger Diamond Geezer observes[69], "it might seem strange to paint a high street pretty colours shortly before you knock it down, but there is method to the madness."

The programme also included redesign and fit out of empty shops. On the street itself, new colourful treelights now illuminate a safer environment at night. Shutter artwork has also drawn inspiration from local people and stories, and the gable walls have been painted with large scale artworks.

69 Diamond Geezer (2020). "Open House: Aberfeldy Street"

3. With the community

Co-design processes, events and workshops brought residents into the project. Fabric donations, mural painting and local participation in street activation events have strengthened community ties and pride. Businesses on the street were surveyed to understand their performance, key concerns and ambitions. A community day to activate the street and engage residents old and new took place in September 2019. This work with the local community and stakeholders has encouraged their participation in the events as well as appealing to the newer residents. Events included a Community Party, Shutter Artwork Workshops, the Aberfeldy Fun Day, a Festival of Light and more. The street has also played host to the London Mural Festival, which saw large scale artworks painted on the gable walls, which is now included in annual architectural festival tours. A double-sided printable street directory helps visitors and locals navigate the local shops.

A new chapter

The South Asian inspiration has created a radical improvement in the visual character of the streetscape through combining a bold and modern colour palette with patterns from donations of materials that held meaning for local residents and business owners. This reflects local heritage and connects the buildings more closely to the people. Aberfeldy Street has become extremely Instagrammable and is now 'the most colourful street in the country'. It attracts visitors from outside the area, as well as awards, national and social media. But has it transformed the area? Has it really brought whole old and new communities together?

What is certain is that a number of businesses and lives have indeed been transformed through this work. The area has seen increased activation and occupancy of vacant units. Incubation and growth of local businesses has had a significant wider social impact. The likes of Aberfeldy Boxing Club, Roots Barbers, E14 Bikes and More Life Home have all reported increased profits and created jobs. The programme has reduced barriers for local entrepreneurs, while having a significant impact on marginalised and vulnerable local people.

Roots Barbers at No. 37 Aberfeldy Street was one of three empty shops that were fitted out as part of the scheme. Local residents, Leon and Josh had developed a booking system app called Digi Barber, and invested in training for some of the fledgling barbers. The refreshed parade and attractive rental terms now attract more high-profile barbers, who in turn attract visitors from outside the area, as well as appealing to a diverse local audience. Two barbers have gone on to open their own businesses independently. There is also a social infrastructure story here, as Blossom Young from Poplar HARCA explains: "the barber shop model has actually become a mental health kind of space for men to speak openly."

Long-time resident Kirk Whitelock had a history of working in youth sports and saw the opportunity for a boxing club on the street. Initially intending to support marginalised youth, through the initiative 'Stop the stabbing, stick to jabbing', the business has proven to have widespread appeal with a customer base from the existing community and new residents in the area. Aberfeldy Boxing Club took on the premises at No. 29 and has since grown and expanded into a second shop on the street. The club is now affiliated with Boxing England and has well

exceeded its original goal of 200 members. They have gained wider recognition in the industry and even appeared in Idris Elba's 'Fight Club'. The club was also nominated for the London Sports Awards 2023 in the category of 'Uniting London'.

Jan Kattein describes "this amazing moment when the boxing club moved in, and I remember being down on the street taking photographs, and they were training on the pavement, and it's like, God, this has changed, right? There were these big young men training on the pavement, and it was a completely different vibe, because they were engaged in boxing. Nobody's going to mess with them, or with the street, or with anybody who cared about the street. And that was the moment when I thought, God, we've succeeded here. It's really happened."

More businesses have since been added to the scheme. A bike repair shop, E14 Bikes, opened in 2021. More Life Home started in 2020, a reuse, recycle and repair shop creating employment and volunteering opportunities through upcycling of pre-loved furniture.

It seems that Aberfeldy Street has begun to function as a more inclusive, socially vibrant high street, even while the development looms. The work has strengthened community engagement and connection to the high street, and even pride in place. This seems to be about creating belonging through the combination of transforming the public realm, offering business support and deep community engagement.

New plans for the second phase for the Aberfeldy Street meanwhile scheme will see the transformation of residential block Jura House into a retail and office space. The project so far is now feeding into the next phase of development. There is a kind of participatory design consultation happening here. Poplar HARCA recognise that there is a significant Muslim community in the area and a mosque was operating out of two shop units, albeit with a long-held desire to have their own premises. The housing association has now been able to facilitate that for them, acquiring a building to be released to the mosque. This is about celebrating the existing story, and then finding that new chapter together.