

How to Bring the High Street Back to Life

cyclehoop

CREATE streets

Foreword



Everyone has a high street they care about and recall. For me, I distinctly remember as a kid wandering round my home town centre of Nelson in Lancashire with my mum and sister. For you, it might be a market square, a parade of shops, or the street where you had your first Saturday job. Whatever it is, you notice when it starts to slide. The bank shuts. Then the pharmacy. Then the pub. And, if we're not careful, what replaces them often takes far more from the community than it ever gives back.

It's easy to shrug and say that's just how things are now, but this report shows it doesn't have to be.

How did we get here? Trade moved out of town and online. The streets left behind were designed for driving through, not stopping. Recent action against illicit shops helps, but clearing out a unit doesn't fill it.

Then there's how we pay for the fix. Councils still compete for pots of money, and a single bid can cost up to £30,000 in staff time. For a small council, that's a big ask, often for nothing. Our Committee called for this system to change back in 2024, and I'll keep making that case. Councils should be spending their time getting things done, not filling in forms.

The good news is that a lot of what works isn't expensive. In Salford, Bloom Street was rebuilt in 2017 for £40,000: some seating, some trees, room outside the Kings Arms. It's now a street people actually want to spend time on. Small, well-made and built to last.

At the bigger end, Stockport took the traffic out of its old Underbanks streets, independent stores set up shop, and now new homes are arriving to keep them busy. Stretford has opened its mall back up to the street, with hundreds of homes to come. More people living in the centre means more customers for local shops. It's a point we frequently made whilst our Committee looked into new towns. Homes can't just be homes for homes' sake. People need shops, green space and a reason for people to want to stay and enjoy an area. The catch is that capital funding is built for big schemes, so smaller high streets struggle to get a look-in. That needs fixing.

It also matters who feels welcome. Older people can benefit from places to stop and sit. Families need space to come together. Young people need places to hang out that don't cost money. Students told our Committee exactly that when we looked at high streets. And women and girls need to feel safe on their high street after dark.

Then there's getting there. People will arrive by bus, by bike, on foot and by car, and a good high street works for all of them. Where councils have been brave with road space, making more room for seating, play and simply being outside, local businesses tend to do better. Parking doesn't disappear; it moves round the corner. And where communities want to take on a building or a space themselves, we should make that easier.

None of this is one-size-fits-all, and the people who know a high street best should have the biggest say in it. So much of it is doable, and some of it is already happening.

We can all give examples of what works (and what doesn't). And this booklet highlights many points worthy of serious consideration for all of us. I don't necessarily agree with them all myself but you don't need to. I do think we need to have more of a debate and more of awareness about what can be done. This isn't about politics. It matters to all of us.

Lord Gascoigne Writing in a personal capacity (Chair, Built Environment Committee, House of Lords)

Summary of Recommendations

Family-friendly High Streets

1. Make family-friendliness an explicit design test for publicly funded high-street schemes, using Living Streets' nine-to-ninety principle.

2. MHCLG to commission UK research linking the presence of families to footfall, dwell time and occupancy on high streets.

Centring Place In Policy

3. DfT to reinstate previously withdrawn network management guidance supporting active travel, or issue equivalent guidance under s.18 of the Traffic Management Act.

4. Rebalance the s.16 network management duty in the Traffic Management Act 2004 with an equivalent objective for the quality and safety of streets as places.

5. MHCLG to publish a model Place directorate structure that puts highways alongside growth, property and regeneration.

6. MHCLG and combined authorities to fund shared public realm design and delivery capacity at sub-regional level.

Clutter and Street Furniture

7. Require highway authorities to carry out a rolling audit of street furniture on principal high streets against the Inclusive Mobility and Manual for Streets standards, with a presumption of removal for items that can't be justified.

8. MHCLG, through the Planning Advisory Service, to confirm that removing public seating is not a recognised crime prevention measure.

9. Review the pavement licence fee caps under the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 to cover the full cost of processing, inspection and enforcement.

10. Where Hostile Vehicle Mitigation is used, require it to double as street furniture as a condition of public funding, subject to the same disabled-access clearance standards.

11. DfT and MHCLG to publish a model street furniture specification as an annex to the National Model Design Code.

Funding Small-scale, High Quality Schemes

12. Explore a route for Biodiversity Net Gain obligations to be met through high-street greening.

13. Combined authorities and Pride in Place boards to set up a small-schemes funding route for schemes under about £250,000.

14. DfT to review the traffic order and highway consent process for small public realm schemes and create a proportionate consent route.

15. DfT and MHCLG to publish a national unit-cost benchmark for public realm and crossing works, based on outturn costs.

16. Designate a small number of one-year market-town demonstrator schemes and publish their outturn costs, delivery times and footfall after completion.



Greening the High Street

17. Make in-ground, on-carriageway planting the default in publicly funded schemes.

18. Publish a National Underground Design Code with best-practice guidance for utilities, street design and greening.

19. Put utilities in shared ducts in all new streets.

20. Require bids to state whole-life cost and score schemes that cut maintenance liability favourably.

Kerbside Space

21. DfT to publish technical design guidance for continuous footways.

22. Amend the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 so that cycle hangars, cycle hire parking, shared micromobility bays and e-scooter parking count as highway infrastructure and don't need a traffic regulation order.

23. DfT to use the update to the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions committed to in Better Connected to introduce standard signs and markings for micromobility parking.

24. DfT to set up a simplified process for moving kerbside space from general parking to sustainable transport uses, and to publish national guidance on micromobility parking.

Shop Fronts

25. The Planning Advisory Service's forthcoming shopfront guidance should set standards by parameters rather than prescribing styles, excluding designated conservation frontages.

What Has Gone Wrong



Political Context

In August 2026, the Prime Minister made high streets a national priority. Andy Burnham's package — scrapping the Gambling Act's "aim to permit" rule, doubling closure orders for crime-linked premises from six to twelve months, a £30 million enforcement crackdown, and new shopfront guidance to be developed with the Planning Advisory Service, is the most significant national intervention in England's high streets since the Future High Streets Fund [1].

While the government has initiated the necessary crackdown on the forces of decline, this report addresses the subsequent vacuum. We define the characteristics of what makes a thriving local centre and provide a blueprint for quality, simplicity, and permanence. Our focus remains on retrofit and the pragmatic transformation of existing streets, rather than the misplaced cost of building from scratch.

The way people interact with their high street is changing. In cities, towns and villages, high streets need to have a wider purpose than just commerce; they are the natural meeting points for communities. Modern high streets need to be commercially sustainable and environmentally sustainable too, so this report has a specific focus on measures to increase footfall through increasing walking and cycling.

This alignment extends to the regional level too. In Greater Manchester, the launch of a £20 million Good Growth High Streets Fund - overseen by a dedicated Taskforce - demonstrates a commitment to community-led regeneration. The fund, which opens to applications from businesses and community groups later this year, is intended to route capital directly to local operators and businesses to anchor growth within the heart of smaller towns like Middleton, where the policy was announced on 10 August 2026. [2]

The politics and the public appetite are aligned. The funding is the harder question, and this report's answer is that most of what works costs far less than assumed. This report provides the evidence for what works, the costs of doing it well, and the small number of national rule changes that would let councils do it everywhere.

1 "Prime Minister's Office and MHCLG, "PM vows to save 'hollowed out high streets' with crackdown on vape and betting shops", GOV.UK, 11 August 2026

2 Primary source: Greater Manchester Combined Authority, "Mayor unveils plans to revitalise Greater Manchester high streets with new £20m fund", 10 August 2026.



The Works - Newport

The Reasons for Decline

The decline of a failing high street is instantly recognisable: empty units, ubiquitous vape shops, gambling premises, and a public realm of neglected tarmac. However, these visible failures are the results of decline, not necessarily the origins of it. Rogue businesses colonise the high street because their model out competes legitimate retail. While the Prime Minister's recent licensing changes aim to check this spread, the challenge of revitalising the resulting gaps remains.

To reclaim these spaces, we must first understand the forces that hollowed them out. This failure happened in four distinct stages.

First, we moved the people away and put barriers between them and the high street. A precinct in the 1960s, a retail park in the 1990s, a mall in the 2010s: each siphoned commerce away from historical town centres. As residential sprawl expanded around these outlying developments, newly constructed road networks cut off the traditional core from its surrounding local community.

Second, the demand moved online. In 2008 around one pound in every twenty spent in British retail was spent online; it is now more than one in four. [3] The high street lost its captive market.

3 Office for National Statistics, Retail Sales Index, series J4MC, internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales (Great Britain): around 5 per cent (2008 annual average); 27–28 per cent in 2026 (release of 21 August 2026).



Closed shops and cluttered pavement

Third, what remained was given over to traffic infrastructure. The default high street is engineered for traffic and furnished from a catalogue: a tarmac pavement, guardrails penning people at the kerb, litter bins ordered from a procurement catalogue, a row of plastic planters - public investment that is joyless. Streets designed to be driven through, not for time to be spent in.

Fourth, the money followed the failure. Councils spent over £770 million buying shopping centres between 2016 and 2019 - one in five of all those sold. [4] Shropshire Council paid £51 million for Shrewsbury's three centres in 2018; by 2021 its own accounts valued them at £12.35 million. [5] The fix, meanwhile, was designed for flagships. The three main levelling-up funds (The Towns Fund, the Levelling Up Fund and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund) promised £10.5 billion, awarded much of it competitively, and rewarded the large capital scheme over the small permanent one; three years on, little more than a tenth (£1.24 billion) had been spent. [6] Councils already struggling to deliver basic services

4 Revo and Lambert Smith Hampton, Fixing Our "Broken" Town Centres, September 2019: local authorities invested over £770m in shopping centres from 2016, almost one in five transactions.

5 Shropshire Council, "Valuation statement: Shrewsbury shopping centres", 29 July 2021 (newsroom.shropshire.gov.uk): £12.35m at 31 March 2021, against £51m paid in January 2018.

6 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, Levelling up funding to local government, HC 424, 15 March 2024: £1.24bn of £10.47bn spent by September 2023; £3.7bn transferred by December 2023



spent valuable resources (around £30,000 per bid) to compete. [7]

Into the space this left, organised crime moved. The National Crime Agency estimates that £12 billion of criminal cash is generated in the UK each year, and that around £1 billion of it is laundered through cash-intensive high-street businesses - vape shops, barbershops, sweet shops and nail bars.[8] Vacant units and falling rents made the high street the cheapest place in Britain to put a cash business, and criminal money took the space that legitimate trade could no longer compete for. In a single month of 2025, Operation Machinize visited nearly 3,000 such premises and made over 900 arrests.[9] The Prime Minister's licensing reforms and enforcement crackdown confront this directly - but enforcement clears the space rather than filling it.

7 Local Government Association estimate, cited in HC 424

8 National Crime Agency, "Operation Machinize: hundreds of barbershops targeted in NCA-coordinated crackdown", 10 April 2025 (£12bn); Home Office, "New high street unit set up in nationwide blitz on dodgy shops", GOV.UK, 19 May 2026 (£1bn laundered through high-street businesses).

9 National Crime Agency, "Operation Machinize 2: thousands of businesses targeted in coordinated crackdown on high street crime", November 2025: 2,734 premises visited and 924 arrests during October 2025.

High Streets for People

The High Street as a Destination

Winning high streets have diversified away from their traditional role as retail hubs towards destinations for civic life. Places that have embraced this evolution are consistently surpassing those tethered to a traditional retail-centric model. While digital shopping has eclipsed the necessity of local shopping, it cannot replicate the human impulse for social connection. Residents still gravitate towards the high street to linger, decompress, and share experiences with their social circles. A retail-dependent street is in direct competition with Amazon; a street that fosters community engagement offers something entirely unique.

Environments designed for walkability and aesthetic appeal transform routine errands into leisure. This shift encourages visitors to wander and dwell, a behaviour that correlates precisely with increased retail expenditure, sustained business viability, and robust rental values. [10] Furthermore, pedestrians contribute more to the local economy than those arriving by vehicle, not through higher transaction values per visit, but through higher frequency of visits. [11] Families serve as the ultimate barometer for a street's vitality: where children can move freely and parents feel at ease, commercial success usually follows.

10 Pedestrian Pound (3rd ed., 2024)

11 Pedestrian Pound (3rd ed., 2024)

Winning high streets have diversified away from their traditional role as retail hubs towards destinations for civic life.

The core principles underpinning every successful intervention in this report are universal: quality, simplicity, and permanence. Our evidence base spans from £37 million strategic regenerations to £20,000 community-led improvements. While financial scales vary, the fundamental logic remains constant; every local centre can implement a version of these changes within its means.

The common thread among these case studies is a fundamental reimagining of the street's purpose. The high street is no longer treated as a corridor for transport or vehicle storage, but as a place to stay. Parking is not eliminated but relocated to less valuable land around the corner. By repurposing the high-value space adjacent to shopfronts, we can replace inefficient car storage with infrastructure that supports active travel and encourages the prolonged dwell time that sustains our local economies.

CASE STUDY
Sleaford — from car park to market square

The historic Market Place in Sleaford had gradually surrendered to vehicle dominance, with moving traffic, parking, and market stalls all vying for space against the backdrop of the war memorial and St Denys' Church. Reclaiming this civic heart, North Kesteven District Council eliminated on street car parking and resurfaced the area in pale sandstone setts. The intervention introduced ten hardwood benches, two raised planters, enhanced lighting, and integrated cycle parking, alongside new power infrastructure for community events. The project completed in just five months, reopening for the WinterLight festival that December.

The transformation has delivered a high-quality pedestrian square. This set out a place to linger, navigate with ease, and appreciate the town's heritage without the obstruction of parked vehicles. This refreshed layout provides greater functional flexibility than the car-centric model it superseded; the square now serves as a versatile stage for ceremonies, markets, and social life, fulfilling civic roles that were previously precluded by its use as a car park.



Market Square after



Market Square before.

CASE STUDY
Altrincham — the market-town flagship

In 2010, Altrincham suffered from the nation's highest retail vacancy rate, with nearly one in three units lying empty - more than double the UK average.[12] [13] Today, it stands as the preeminent example of market-town regeneration. By 2018 vacancy had fallen to 7.3 per cent and annual footfall had risen by over a million visitors, and the district has successfully integrated over 25 new hospitality venues alongside a flourishing ecosystem of independent operators. [14]

While the 2014 restoration of the derelict Altrincham Market is frequently cited as the catalyst, the building itself was merely the anchor. The town's broader success stems from a strategic partnership between the council and local businesses to deliver a walkable, car-free core. This vision combined high-quality street greening with dedicated infrastructure for active travel, ensuring the benefits of regeneration radiated across the entire town centre.

The vitality of the evening economy has followed this shift towards a more human-centric design. In January 2026, Altrincham secured its third consecutive Purple Flag accreditation, the industry benchmark for safety and management after dark. This recognition reflects a successful collaborative model where Trafford Council, the BID, and regional transport authorities have treated the town centre as a single, coherent destination.



Market - Before



Market - After



Market - After

12 Executive Member Workshop, "A market town revived: The story of Altrincham," Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) — apse.org.uk/sites/apse/assets/File/Richard%20Roe.pdf

13 "From ghost town to go-to town," LocalGov, 2018 — localgov.co.uk/From-ghost-town-to-go-to-town/45320

14 Reshaping Trafford Council: Revitalising Altrincham Town Centre," CIPFA — cipfa.org (PDF: 47DBA080B2D9488587A60FD99A448DA9.pdf)

CASE STUDY
Stockton-on-Tees — right-sizing the high street

In 2019, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council acquired the decaying Castlegate Shopping Centre, a relic of 1970s planning, and initiated its demolition to create a five-acre riverside park. An intervention three times the scale of Trafalgar Square, reconnects the historic centre with the River Tees by realigning and narrowing the A1305 Riverside Road and bridging over it with a 55-metre land bridge. By hollowing out failing retail capacity and consolidating trade within Wellington Square and the northern high street, the council addressed a vacancy rate that had surged to triple the national average. The £37 million Stockton Waterfront programme, within which the urban park itself cost around £23 million and opened in June 2026, supported by the Future High Streets Fund and the Tees Valley Combined Authority, replaced a stagnant precinct with a major civic anchor designed to sustain the surviving Victorian core. [15]

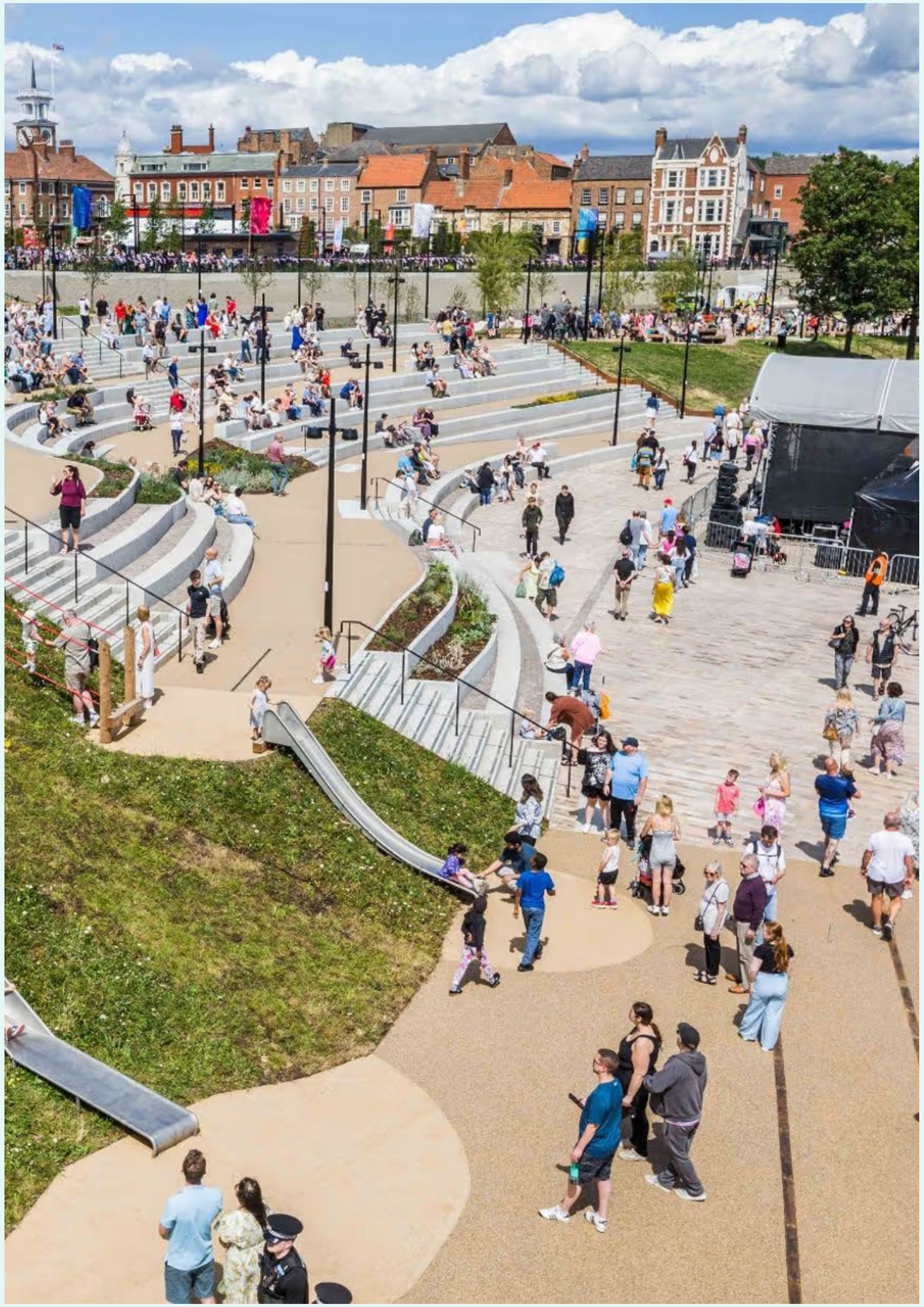


Castlegate Shopping Centre before demolition· Photo: Tees Vision Media



Stockton riverside park, June 2026 · Photo: Stuart Boulton

15 Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, "Castlegate Shopping Centre and Swallow Hotel demolition begins", September 2022 — stockton.gov.uk/article/8994; "Stockton: high street to be demolished to make way for riverside park", ArchDaily — archdaily.com/957528. Scheme by Ryder Architecture; £16.5m Future High Streets Fund, £20m Tees Valley Combined Authority.



CASE STUDY
Stockport Underbanks and Market Place

Stockport's trajectory mirrors a recurring national trend. Its historic heart endured successive expansions: first through a 1960s precinct and later via a car-dependent mall in the 2010s. This outward sprawl fractured the centre's gravity, hollowing out the historic Underbanks and Market Place. These areas were relegated to mere transport corridors, dominated by bus movements through narrow, ancient thoroughfares.

By pedestrianising the Market Place and diverting an established bus route, the council reclaimed the street for civic life. A strategic investment of £7 million, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, enabled the restoration of traditional facades and the repurposing of derelict structures. This commitment to quality and permanence anchored a new ecosystem of independent operators, contributing to a doubling of local footfall over a five-year period. [16]

Peter O'Hare, who worked on the original masterplan for Market Place and the Underbanks while at Urban Vision and is now a regeneration officer at Salford City Council, identifies the Underbanks as a triumph of destination-making, yet notes it remains limited by low residential density within its immediate catchment. In this environment, commercial survival depends on high-dwell hospitality; while bakeries and cafés have flourished, specialised retail remains vulnerable without a captive local population to sustain it.

This final structural barrier is now being dismantled. The delivery of new apartments at St Mary's Gate and the ambitious Stockport 8 masterplan will introduce up to 1,200 homes to the town centre. Where retail expansion failed, the removal of through-traffic and the return of a resident population will provide the permanent demand required to support a thriving, independent high street.



Underbanks before - a road for movement



Underbanks after - a destination to dwell and spend money



Underbanks - outdoor dining



Pedestrianisation spreads to Market Place

16 Stockport Council and Marketing Stockport, Underbanks investment programme. Footfall figure is reported by businesses in the area and is not a measured count. Sources: Stockport Council, "Six years that brought the Underbanks back to life", 30 March 2026; Marketing Stockport, "Six years of investment bring new businesses, new homes and new visitors to Underbanks", 2026 ("feedback from businesses is that footfall has doubled over the last 5 years").



The wrist test — Oldham

Family-Friendly High Streets

Families are the indicator species of a healthy high street. Where environments encourage parents to linger with their children, the result is sustained footfall, robust dwell times, and a powerful signal to visitors and investors alike that the district is secure, well-maintained, and desirable.

"Public spaces and parts of cities where families with young children choose to visit signal better than any marketing material that an area is clean and fun. Retail, leisure and business occupiers increasingly recognise that this is good for business." — Roger Madelin CBE, former CEO, Argent (King's Cross) [17]

A family-friendly environment extends beyond the mere provision of playgrounds. Tim Gill's framework identifies three core pillars: Public space (areas to rest and shelter without commercial obligation), Pedestrian priority (where traffic is either eliminated or tamed), and Programming (curated markets and events that foster repeat visits).

The fundamental metric for success within these civic spaces is what Tim Gill calls the wrist test: can a parent safely release their child's wrist? On a street where the answer is yes, it's more likely to see the broader objectives of urban revitalisation met.[18]

Applying Living Streets' "9 to 90" principle makes this standard universal: an environment navigable by a nine-year-old unaccompanied is inherently accessible to a ninety-year-old unaided.

Play infrastructure should be recognised as an anchor opportunity. Children at play provide the most compelling evidence of a safe public realm, attracting the high-dwell family demographic that sustains local economies. The Southbank fountain in London demonstrates this dynamic as active play serves as the catalyst for a surrounding ring of parents dwelling at the perimeter.

17 Roger Madelin CBE, quoted in Tim Gill, Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities, RIBA Publishing, 2021. [Check exact wording against the published text before print.]

18 Tim Gill Stakeholder Interview



Play as anchor infrastructure — children engaging with the environment as parents dwell nearby - Southbank, London

The metric for a successful family-friendly high street is simple: can a parent safely release their child's wrist?

Bradford's Mirror Pool confirms that this approach is effective beyond the capital. By creating a unique family attraction, the city centre has established a magnetic pull that consistently returns residents and visitors to the high street.



Bradford City Park — the Mirror Pool, in full use · Photo: Gillespies

CASE STUDY
Stretford — unwinding the mall

The 1960s indoor mall in Stretford has undergone partial demolition and retrofit to emerge as a traffic-free, open-air destination. Mirroring the strategic shift in Stockton and Stockport, this intervention reduces surplus twentieth-century retail capacity to concentrate demand within a consolidated, high-quality core.

With the initial phase of retail consolidation reaching completion, the masterplan has progressed to its second stage: establishing a resident population through the construction of a new town-centre neighbourhood. This return of people provides the permanent demand required to sustain the high street.

The result is a lived-in environment where families engage with the public realm: children play football while parents dwell at nearby hospitality venues, or explore the trim trail as part of the daily school run. By removing the dominance of the car, we create a secure space for play that allows parents to relax, linger, and contribute to the local economy.

Since completion, footfall at King Street, Stretford has increased by around 200%, cycling by 725%, and more than 10 new businesses and community destinations have opened. [19]

We recommend that family-friendliness be adopted as an explicit design test for publicly funded high-street schemes, applying Living Streets' nine-to-ninety principle.

We recommend that MHCLG commission the UK research that does not currently exist, linking the presence of families to footfall, dwell time and occupancy on high streets.



Kingsway, Stretford — before: an arterial road acting as a severance between the community and its high street.



Kingsway, Stretford — families playing on trimtrail



Children playing football

19 https://www.instagram.com/p/DdTlYXnCLnX/?img_index=1 https://fcbstudios.com/projects/stretford-king-street?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio



Stretford High Street

From Highway to Place

Most streets are ugly not because councils lack desire for change, but because of a system that is adverse to ongoing maintenance liabilities. A typical highways department is measured by vehicle throughput, insurance claims, and maintenance backlogs, rather than the creation of places where people actually want to be. Within this narrow framework, trees are viewed as a utility risk, benches as a magnet for antisocial behaviour, and planting as a persistent maintenance burden. The inevitable result is the national default: a joyless landscape of neglected asphalt, restrictive guardrails, and mass-produced catalogue bins.

This institutional preference for vehicle movement over destination-making is rooted in statutory guidance. Section 16 of the Traffic Management Act 2004 mandates that local authorities ensure the "expeditious movement of traffic" [20] - yet no parallel duty exists to ensure those streets are worth visiting. While Manual for Streets provides a movement-and-place framework (recognising that even a busy road can function as a high-quality environment) pedestrians are frequently sacrificed to the throughput metric. [21] Rebalancing this duty requires primary legislation, but its day-to-day application can be transformed through updated statutory guidance issued under section 18 of the same Act.

To dismantle these structural barriers, Lincolnshire, Lancashire, and Surrey have moved to a model Place directorate structure. Since 2018, Lancashire has integrated its highways service with economic development, planning, public transport and waste. This ensures a single executive director is accountable for both the delivery of major infrastructure and the long-term quality of the streets that serve it. [22]

Most streets are ugly not because councils lack desire for change, but because of a system that is adverse to ongoing maintenance liabilities.

20 Traffic Management Act 2004, s.16 (network management duty).

21 Department for Transport / CIHT, Manual for Streets, 2007 (movement and place framework).

22 Lancashire County Council: Executive Director of Growth, Environment, Transport and Community Services established with responsibility for highways, economic development, planning, public transport and waste (appointment of Stephen Young, April 2018; succeeded by Phil Green, 2022 — news.lancashire.gov.uk



Circle Square, Manchester — a pedestrian-priority access road: planting, seating, cycle parking, wayfinding, and a delivery van sharing the space



(Fig 1) High quality place based high street - Preston, Lancashire



(Fig 2) Pedestrianised high street - Preston, Lancashire



Pedestrianised high street - Preston, Lancashire

When highways and regeneration share the same leadership, the authority responsible for the cost of a better street is also responsible for its benefit. This alignment prevents a disconnect where one team bears the capital expenditure while another claims the social and economic credit.

Preston exemplifies the success of this unified approach. The initial 2014 transformation of the main high street [23] (Fig 1) set the template for Preston to develop a place based approach. The subsequent pedestrianisation of Friargate (Fig 2) under a new directorate shows that these are products of an embedded culture where high-quality permanence is the default, ensuring that the revitalisation of the town centre no longer depends on the advocacy of individual officers.

At a national level, the steer remains inconsistent. In 2022, the Department for Transport provided a clear mandate via "Network Management to Support Active Travel," instructing councils to use their statutory duties to favour walking and cycling. [24] This guidance was withdrawn on 2 October 2023, leaving a vacuum where there should be leadership. Reinstating this guidance is essential to provide councils with the confidence to prioritise active travel and reclaim the high street for people.

23 Lancashire County Council, Fishergate Central Gateway, completed 2014–15; £2m LCC, £1.38m ERDF; landscape architect Planit-IE.

24 Department for Transport, Network Management to Support Active Travel — statutory guidance issued under s.18 of the Traffic Management Act 2004, 2022; withdrawn October 2023. Withdrawal challenged in R (Vince) v Secretary of State for Transport [2025] EWCA Civ 763 (Court of Appeal, Holgate LJ, 13 June 2025: appeal against refusal of Department for Transport, Network Management to Support Active Travel — statutory guidance issued under s.18 of the Traffic Management Act 2004, 2022; withdrawn October 2023. Withdrawal challenged in R (Vince) v Secretary of State for Transport [2025] EWCA Civ 763 (Court of Appeal, Holgate LJ, 13 June 2025: appeal against refusal of permission for judicial review – confirm outcome before print); see also R (Transport Action Network) v Secretary of State for Transport [2024] EWHC 1405 (Admin) (Kerr J, 11 June 2024), on the March 2023 active travel funding cuts – confirm the outcome and any appeal citation; a [2025] EWCA Civ 702 could not be found.

We recommend that the Department for Transport reinstate network management guidance supporting active travel withdrawn in October 2023. Alternatively, that equivalent guidance be issued under section 18 of the same Act, framed around high streets and town centres.

We recommend that the Traffic Management Act 2004 s.16 network management duty be rebalanced with an equivalent objective for the quality and safety of streets as places, reflecting the movement-and-place framework in Manual for Streets.

We recommend that MHCLG publish a model Place directorate structure, locating highways alongside growth, property and regeneration functions, drawing on the approach taken by Lincolnshire, Surrey and Lancashire, so that the authority accountable for the cost of a better street is also accountable for its benefit.

We recommend that MHCLG and combined authorities fund shared public realm design and delivery capacity at sub-regional level, on the basis that the binding constraint on small permanent schemes is officer time and design skill rather than capital.

Building High Streets That Last

Michael Beckwith | Games News Reporter
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We almost expect Mario to jump out of one (Picture: **SWNS**)

Degraded trees in planters diminish the high street [25]



Natural stone and in-ground planting — quality permanence in Manchester

When revitalising a high street, the primary goal should always be **high-quality permanence.** This means integrating improvements directly into the environment rather than layering objects on top of existing failures. For instance, a pavement build-out constructed in paving rather than tarmac, trees planted directly in the ground rather than placed in planters, and street furniture rather than mass-produced catalogue items.

A persistent institutional assumption suggests that high-quality streets are expensive to deliver and maintain. Within this framework, permanence is viewed as an unattainable luxury reserved for major capital schemes with long-term revenue settlements. However, the evidence compiled in this report demonstrates that this assumption is flawed.

The Government's commitment, in the Department for Transport's Better Connected strategy, to amend the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions to permit simpler zebra crossings without beacons provides a compelling case for affordable permanence. While a standard signalised crossing requires an investment of £360,000 and a traditional zebra with beacons was reported in a recent Freedom of Information response to cost £48,551, a side-road zebra which relies on the same fundamental design without the statutory equipment, can be installed for as little as £1,000.

25 https://metro.co.uk/2021/05/17/walsall-residents-blast-plant-pots-for-looking-like-super-mario-pipes-14596544/

This section sets out why our high streets are so cluttered. It covers what gets bought and why, the cost of planting permanently rather than temporarily, the routes available for funding small schemes, the value of kerb space, and shopfronts.

Nobody Chose Ugly

The current landscape of the British high street is rarely the product of bespoke design. Instead, it is a hodgepodge collection of catalogue-ordered infrastructure, where procurement frameworks prioritise risk mitigation and maintenance liabilities over the creation of destination value.

Successful high streets are defined as much by what is removed as by what is added. By prioritising **subtraction over accumulation**, the most effective interventions clear the way for high-quality materials and planting to drive value. Crucially, a clear public realm is a matter of equity: removing the obstacles of the default street ensures that those with physical or visual impairments can navigate their local centres with safety and independence.

The public experience of this decline is quantifiable. Evidence shows that residents consistently penalise high-clutter environments; streets that fail the test of walkability and aesthetic appeal record significantly lower levels of active travel, suppressed dwell times,



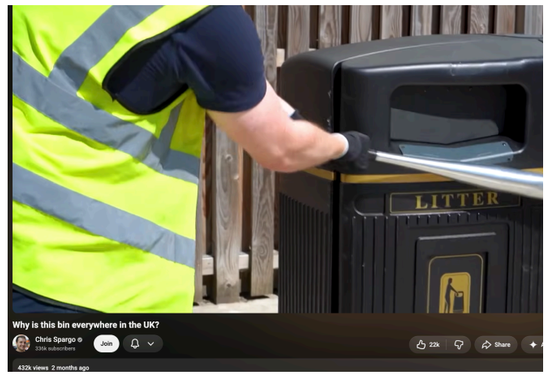
Clever street arrangement overrun by excessive clutter



An upturned plastic planter



Plastic kerbs and trees in planters clutter the pavement



Youtube critique of ubiquitous high street bin

and diminished commercial expenditure. [26]

This institutionalised mediocrity is exemplified by the ubiquity of the standard litter bin. Dominated by a handful of manufacturers, the market offers near-identical solutions, such as the Glasdon Jubilee. Launched in 2009, this 110-litre polymer unit was marketed to councils on the basis that it would improve their NI195 scores (a metric for street cleanliness.) Its design features ribbed surfaces to deter graffiti and a material choice focused on cleaning efficiency rather than aesthetic contribution. Although the NI195 indicator was rescinded in 2010, [27] the restrictive specifications it birthed remain the national default for public realm procurement.

Embracing the principle of subtraction over accumulation, stripping away pedestrian guardrails

26 The Pedestrian Pound, 3rd ed., Living Streets, 2024.

27 National Indicator 195, part of the National Indicator Set for English local authorities introduced 2008 and abolished 2010.

represents the most cost-effective upgrade for the majority of high streets. Metal barriers eventually rust, trap wind-blown litter, and become a persistent maintenance burden when struck.

In 2010, a report publicised by Road Safety GB claimed that "ongoing removal of 60 km of guardrailing in London was likely to injure or kill more than 1000 pedestrians per year." However, following a comprehensive site-by-site assessment, Transport for London successfully removed vast stretches of guardrail without compromising safety standards.[28] TfL's approach on road safety focused on eliminating the threat of vehicle speed from the source, rather than mitigating its effects. Sixteen years on, there is no evidence of the predicted additional thousand pedestrian casualties a year. Separately, TfL's 2025 analysis of more than 150 20mph schemes introduced between 1989 and 2013 found a 34 per cent reduction

28 Transport for London guardrail review programme, from 2010



Guardrail as clutter



Catalogue planters substituting for benches



A catalogue bench facing a vacant unit, beside a plastic-kerbed island



Outdoor seating and clutter blocking the pavement

in people killed or seriously injured on the borough roads concerned.

Beyond the capital, however, guardrail often remains by default, as local highways officers are reluctant to assume the perceived liability of its removal. Every metre cleared restores pavement width, reduces the council's asset maintenance and removes the visual noise from the public realm, and gives a clear message that the high street is for people first.

We recommend that local highway authorities be required to carry out a rolling audit of existing street furniture on their principal high streets, assessed against the clearance and placement standards already set out in Inclusive Mobility and Manual for Streets, with a presumption of removal where an item cannot be justified against those standards.

The absurdity of modern public realm management is best illustrated by the application of Secured by Design. It is now common for neighbourhood officers to advocate the removal of benches that provide vital rest for older and disabled residents, in order to prevent younger people from gathering. [29] In April 2022, Kent Police removed five benches and shrubs from the Stanhope estate in Ashford as a three-month trial in response to anti-social behaviour complaints. Camden Council's own Secure by Design review of Whitfield Gardens, published in 2019, set a design brief requiring that seating must not allow rubbish to build up behind it or create places where people could conceal themselves.

The Department for Transport's own guidance points the other way. Inclusive Mobility, updated in December 2021, advises that in commonly used pedestrian areas seats should be provided at intervals of no more than fifty metres, and that seating should be provided at bus stops wherever possible. Active Travel England applies the same threshold to resting points on active travel routes. One arm of government therefore recommends a bench every fifty metres on a busy high street, while another part of the system advises their removal.

Where seating has been retained, it is often placed to satisfy an audit rather than a person. Benches are sited facing brick walls, bus shelters and car park perimeters, or with their backs to moving traffic.

We recommend that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government confirm through the Planning Advisory Service that the removal of public seating is not a recognised crime prevention measure

Clutter can also be caused by al fresco dining. Enforcement of the rules is inconsistent. The Government's 2024 pavement licence guidance directs councils to the footway widths in Inclusive Mobility, which recommends a clear width of 2.0 metres under normal conditions and treats 1.5 metres as the minimum acceptable.[30] Furthermore, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 codified this licensing framework into law and increased the maximum fee to £500, providing authorities with the financial resources to pursue enforcement. [31]

However, as it stands, the fee structure fails to achieve full cost recovery. Local authorities that have conducted assessments routinely set charges at the statutory ceiling, yet these maximum rates often fall short of the resources required for rigorous processing, inspection, and enforcement. This gap is compounded by the fact that most dedicated licensing teams were significantly hollowed out by austerity years ago.[32]

We recommend that the Government review the pavement licence fee regime to allow councils to recover the reasonable costs of administering and enforcing it, while reducing unnecessary burdens on responsible businesses. Compliant operators with an unchanged layout should benefit from a simplified, lower-cost renewal process and longer licences of up to two years. This would give councils the resources to tackle obstruction and poor practice while making the system simpler and more predictable for well-run cafés, pubs and restaurants.

29 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/02/police-public-spaces-secured-by-design-uk-cities

30 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024). Pavement licences: guidance. London: GOV.UK.

31 UK Parliament (2023). Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, Schedule 22: Pavement Licences. London: The Stationery Office.

32 Local Government Association (2022). Regulatory services – a vital but overlooked service. London: LGA.

Hostile Vehicle Mitigation (HVM) represents one of the most rapidly expanding form of street clutter. For some, it might appear a fact of modern life and while it is probably out of scope for this report to discuss the merits of such a strategy, this report does argue that Hostile Vehicle Mitigation does not need to be ugly.

HVM installations are authorised via Anti-Terrorism Traffic Regulation Orders, issued solely upon police recommendation.[33]

The effects on public realm and accessibility are frequently negative. Concrete blocks and barrier arrays frequently narrow or entirely obstruct cycle lanes and tactile paving, creating physical barriers that undermine the independence of disabled residents and those with visual impairments. The narrow gap between objects (usually 1.2m, 19cm less than the width of a Bedford Rascal narrow van, last produced in 1992) can make an area feel cramped.

Manchester, while doing many great things, also has clear examples of the disbenefits. Whether HVM appears on a given street depends on whether a police recommendation is made and acted on. Two comparable squares can end up with entirely different treatments.

It doesn't have to be this way. According to The Times[34], over the past five years, MI5 has been working with architects and designers to come up with a new set of design rules, dubbed "the public realm design guide for hostile vehicle mitigation". The guidance is designed to ensure that Hostile Vehicle Mitigation functions as intended, but adds to the public realm, rather than devaluing it.

HVM can also be useful and additive to local people. Cycle hire docks and cycle parking can also be used to prevent motor vehicle access while providing amenity.

33 National Protective Security Authority, Hostile Vehicle Mitigation guidance. Under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, an ATTRO authorising permanent HVM may only be made on the recommendation of a Chief Officer of Police. Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, ss.22C and 22D(1) (inserted by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004); s.22D(1A) (Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019) allows the usual publication requirements to be disapplied where the chief officer considers publication would undermine the order's purpose.

34 https://www.thetimes.com/uk/london/article/anti-terror-bollards-sculptures-bwpvqzk72

Temporary Hostile Vehicle Infrastructure can be even more damaging to the public realm. As this report has highlighted, local areas can lack permanence, with temporary infrastructure remaining for many years. A recent example of this is brightly-coloured barriers outside the iconic Trafalgar Square. If a solution is deemed to be required in this area, local authorities should move as quickly as possible to ensure it is in keeping with the local surroundings.

In short, good Hostile Vehicle Mitigation infrastructure shouldn't *feel like* Hostile Vehicle Mitigation infrastructure.

We recommend that where HVM is retained, it be specified as dual-use street furniture - seating, planting, cycle parking - as a condition of public funding, and subject to the same disabled-access clearance standards as any other street furniture.

The result of years of bad design is a fractured landscape: disparate catalogue-ordered objects layered onto stagnant highways infrastructure, failing to address the fundamental geometry of the street.

In sharp contrast, quality furniture arranged to foster social interaction and extended dwell time is heavily utilised. Quality public seating and greening act as vital economic engines; by fostering an environment where people linger, they drive the extended dwell times that are fundamentally linked to increased retail expenditure and the commercial vitality of the local area. [35]

We recommend that the Department for Transport and MHCLG publish a model specification for street furniture as an annex to the National Model Design Code, covering placement, clearance and material quality, so that councils procuring benches, bins and barriers have a national reference to specify against.

35 The Pedestrian Pound, Living Streets, 2024



Stevenson Square — painted concrete blocks



Piccadilly Station — concrete HVM blocks clutter the gateway to Manchester



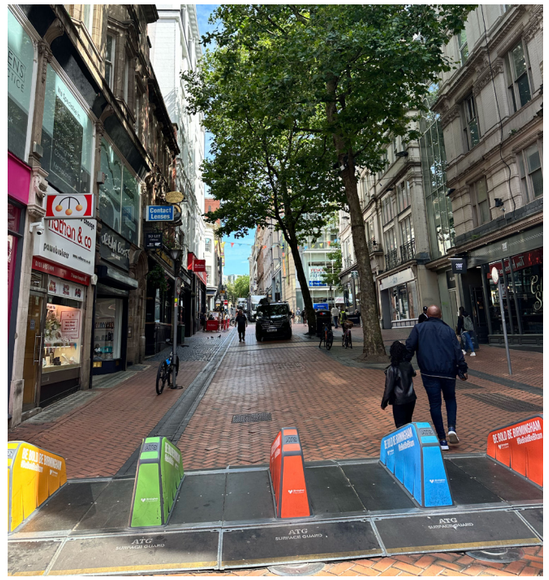
The Arsenal sign outside the Emirates Stadium acts as Hostile Vehicle Mitigation but also provides a local focal point for visitors



An ornate wall protects a Government building in Whitehall (Google Streetview)



Temporary HVM infrastructure in Trafalgar Square, London. Credit: ShinewithShanu (Facebook)



Temporary HVM on Birmingham's New Street which remained in place for several years

Funding the Small Stuff

While funding remains available, the mechanisms for delivering small-scale, high-quality permanence are absent, obstructed by the very administrative processes designed to manage them.

The thresholds are well documented. Every mayoral combined authority publishes an assurance framework setting out how devolved capital is approved, because the Government's English Devolution Accountability Framework requires it. Each applies HM Treasury's five-case business model, with sign-off tiered by value. Greater Manchester's framework has set a minimum capital threshold for major scheme funding; Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's tiers approval at £1 million and £5 million. Frameworks of this kind follow the assurance expectations the Government sets for devolved funds, and they are proportionate for the schemes they were designed around. The effect, however, is that a £5 million junction has a pipeline into devolved capital and a £50,000 street corner has none: the business case a small scheme has to clear is the same document a large one clears, and the cost of producing it is not proportionate to what is being built.

The report earlier recorded what competing for national pots costs: around £30,000 per bid, and roughly £2.25 million per authority per year across



Social seating



A small change to the street; a large improvement

the funding landscape. [36] This means a council can spend more pursuing money for a pocket park than the pocket park costs to build. The Government has itself conceded this is an issue that needs resolving: therefore, the integrated settlements granted to Greater Manchester and the West Midlands replace pot-by-pot rules. The last piece of the puzzle is a proportionate route for capital to reach schemes costing tens of thousands rather than millions.

Several authorities have found routes anyway. In each case the route was assembled locally rather than provided nationally. With the potential for local areas to retain some tax income locally, we could see more local schemes come to fruition without the need for competitive funding.

36 Local Government Association, Fragmented Funding: the complex local authority funding landscape, September 2020 (around £30,000 per competitive bid; roughly £2.25m per authority per year), repeated in LGA briefings 2024–25; the £30,000 figure is also cited in House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, Levelling up funding to local government, HC 424, March 2024.

CASE STUDY
Church Corner, Grimsby — a park for £19,350

East Marsh has one of the lowest tree canopy figures in the country. East Marsh United, a community organisation in the ward, set out to change that by adding greenery, trees and street trees across the area, with the transformation of a single derelict street corner one of their latest achievements

The site was an unused patch on the edge of a church car park. In 2025, local residents and teenagers designed a 150 square metre park for it in a single session. It is now complete, with new trees, benches, footpaths and planting, making an attractive entrance to Rutland Street.

Planning, design, construction and planting came to £19,350. That is roughly one eighteenth of the £360,000 cost of a single signalised crossing. Two things account for a figure well below the normal cost of a scheme this size. There was no highways process to navigate, because the land was owned by the church. The church granted permission quickly, and East Marsh United then designed and delivered the work rather than procuring it, residents and teenagers set the brief in one session, and local labour built it. Design support was provided as and when needed from

Create Streets. Neither saving is peculiar to this site. Most high-street schemes sit on land a council already owns, and the conventional route to a scheme of this size often begins with a consultant-led vision study costing many times the build.

The lesson here is not that communities should bear the weight of public works instead of councils, although there is often the willingness for community action. It is that the cost of a small permanent scheme is largely the cost of the process wrapped around it. East Marsh United is a local, energetic organisation, but this scheme did not depend on them alone. It depended on

residents being allowed to decide what they wanted and then to get on and build it.



Church Corner, East Marsh — before and after · Google Street View



The concept · Visualisation: Create Streets



Delivery — community tree planting, May 2026



The finished corner, June 2026

CASE STUDY
Bloom Street, Salford — the £40,000 street

Completed in 2017 for £40,000, (roughly £60,000 to £80,000 today) the reconstruction of Bloom Street overturned a legacy layout prioritising vehicle throughput and parking.

The redesign has transitioned the thoroughfare into a multi-functional civic asset. Integrated seating and planting serve the Kings Arms pub, accommodating high-dwell social activity and the natural ebb and flow of patrons. Dedicated e-scooter and cycle infrastructure provide the active travel connections that allow residents to bypass car dependency, while sustainable drainage systems and trees bring greenery to the space. The result is a highly attractive destination street.

Salford delivered this transformation through borrowing against capital programmes, bypassing the friction of national competitive bidding. While this local route provided immediate autonomy, it remains a finite resource. As pressures mount, the capacity for councils to sustain such independent borrowing is diminishing, making a different route for capital essential.



Bloom Street before - parking and movement



Bloom Street today — e-scooters and cycles lined along the kerb under a full tree canopy



Cranleigh — the catalogue shelter, before · Google Street View



The oak shelter that replaced it · Create Streets

The intervention at Cranleigh illustrates the impact of high-quality permanence at the most granular level. When the local bus shelter required replacement, the authority shunned the standard glass boxes found in every catalogue-ordered procurement framework. Instead, it was commissioned as a bespoke oak and clay-tile structure that reflects the authentic architectural vernacular of the Surrey landscape. The result was a tangible expression of civic pride embedded into the daily streetscape.

We recommend that the Government explore a route for Biodiversity Net Gain obligations to be discharged onto high-street greening.

We recommend that combined authorities and Pride in Place boards establish a small-schemes funding route, with an approval process proportionate to value, for schemes below a stated threshold of around £250,000, so that capital held above the major-scheme threshold can reach schemes costing tens of thousands rather than millions.

We recommend that the Department for Transport review the traffic order and highway consent process as it applies to small public realm interventions below a stated value, with a view to establishing a proportionate consent route, on the evidence that process cost rather than construction cost is what makes small permanent schemes expensive.

We recommend that the Department for Transport and MHCLG publish a national unit-cost benchmark for public realm and crossing works, compiled from the outturn costs of publicly funded schemes, so that councils and bidders can price small permanent works against a published figure rather than a local estimate.

We recommend that the Government designate a small number of market-town demonstrator schemes, each delivered within a single financial year, and publish their outturn costs, delivery times and post-completion footfall

Greening the High Street



A street tree in the ground, Poundbury



A tree build-out into the road, Bloomsbury

Trees Belong in the Ground

A tree confined to a planter will probably die leading to more costs down the line. Denied the space to develop a resilient root structure, the tree cannot access enough rainwater. This constraint creates a liability, ultimately resulting in its premature removal. Containers also serve as magnets for litter while permanently hollowing out valuable pavement width. Conversely, **high-quality permanence** through in-ground planting delivers a resilient civic asset that cools the urban environment and manages stormwater with minimal long-term maintenance liabilities if planted correctly once established.

This transition is, unfortunately for the way funding is often made available, not a major capital scheme; it is a straightforward retrofit involving lifting paving and cutting beds directly into the existing streetscape without requiring extensive carriageway works. The primary friction is the perceived risk to subterranean utilities. While the National Underground Asset Register is a welcome ambition, its rollout remains patchy, and improved data alone cannot dismantle the institutional assumption that planting must be segregated from apparatus. Reclaiming the street requires both technical clarity and a fundamental shift in how utility companies and highways departments manage the presence of street trees.

We recommend that in-ground, on carriageway planting be the default in publicly funded public realm schemes, with container planting permitted only where in-ground planting is not physically possible, or as a time-limited trial with a stated end date.

We recommend that the Government publish a National Underground Design Code, alongside best-practice guidance for utilities, street design and greening, so that what lies underground is clear before a scheme is designed rather than discovered during it.

We recommend that utilities be placed in shared ducts in all new streets, as is common practice in other countries.

A Low-Maintenance Horticultural Approach

The economic logic of **high-quality permanence** applies equally to the planting selection. By adopting a resilient, perennial-led approach, grounded in the "right plant, right place" methodology, authorities can utilise dense ground cover and deep mulching to almost eliminate the long-term revenue burden of weeding and irrigation. Sheffield's Grey to Green scheme transformed former traffic lanes into a vibrant landscape, while Cardiff has successfully repurposed kerb space into rain gardens that mitigate flood risk. In Withington, this is delivered as a coherent, small-scale package: kerb build-outs featuring birch trees and wildflowers protected by chestnut paling, proving that even modest interventions can provide a **consolidated, high-quality core** for the community.

We recommend that bids for publicly funded high-street schemes state whole-life cost - capital plus twenty years of maintenance - and that schemes reducing ongoing maintenance liability, such as in-ground planting, resilient perennial planting and guardrail removal, be scored favourably against those which increase it.



Grey to Green, Sheffield — the bench crescent · Photo: Mr Ignavy



Grey to Green Sheffield. Photo: Nigel Dunnett



Cardiff — parking bays converted to rain gardens



Withington — build-outs, wildflowers and a cycle lane in one package

The Power of the Kerb



A former side street transitioned into public space — Chapel Street, Salford



The same principle of pedestrian priority applied in Withington





Before and After: Tunsgate, a historic small street off Guildford High Street, was given a new lease of life with pedestrianisation and more active frontage delivered in 2019 (right), transforming it from a road (left) into a vibrant, walkable street.

While pedestrianisation represents the gold standard for the high-street, it is not always feasible where geographic constraints or network requirements mandate vehicle movement. However, the absence of full traffic removal should not preclude significant improvements. Even on streets that must carry traffic, small-scale interventions can rebalance the environment in favour of people.



Side road crossing in London

The Potential of Side Roads

Virtually every high street is intersected by side roads that serve non-essential traffic. By implementing point closures or significant kerb build-outs, authorities can capture the benefits of quality permanence at a fraction of the capital cost. These measures reclaim valuable public realm for residents to linger and decompress, mitigating the negative impacts of motor traffic and restoring the street as a destination for civic life.

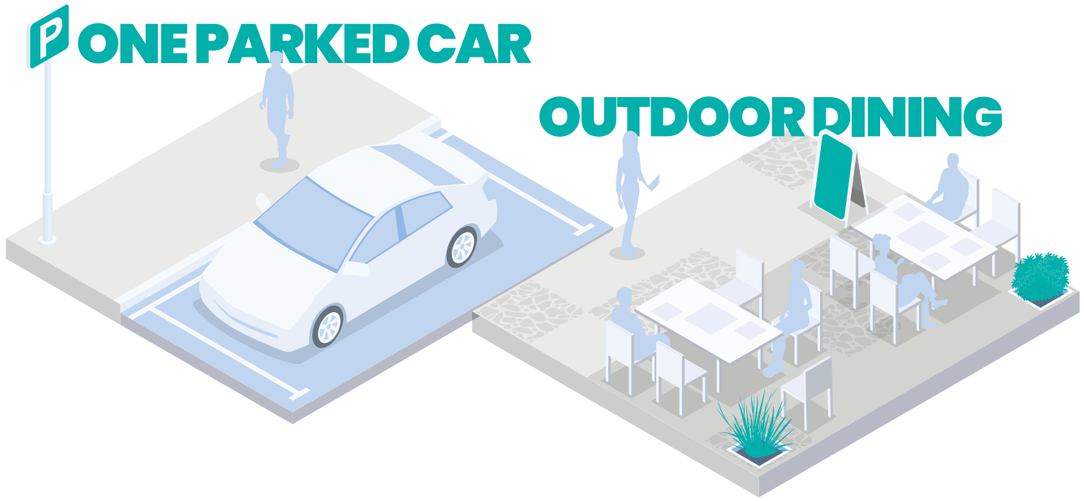
Where vehicle access remains necessary, the traditional bell-mouth geometry is no longer the required standard. A growing number of authorities are adopting continuous footway crossings that maintain the priority and material consistency of the pavement over the carriageway. At present, these interventions remain isolated exceptions rather than the national default. While pioneers like Manchester City Council have commissioned a pedestrian-friendly design framework for side-road junctions, and Active Travel England provides technical guidance, [37] the lack of unified procedural standards prevents councils from deploying these small, effective schemes at scale.

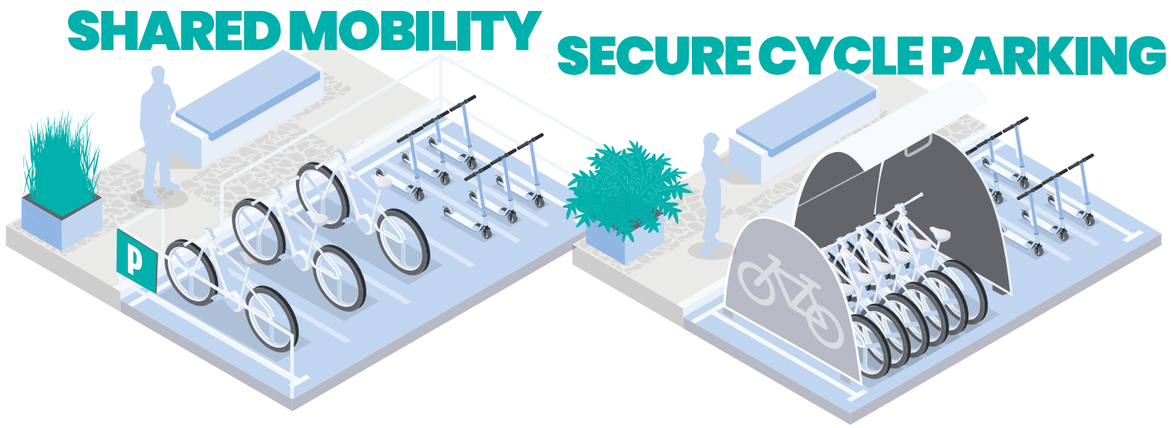
We recommend that the Department for Transport publish continuous-footway technical design guidance

37 https://www.activetravelengland.gov.uk/planning-active-places/side-road-crossings

On Street Parking

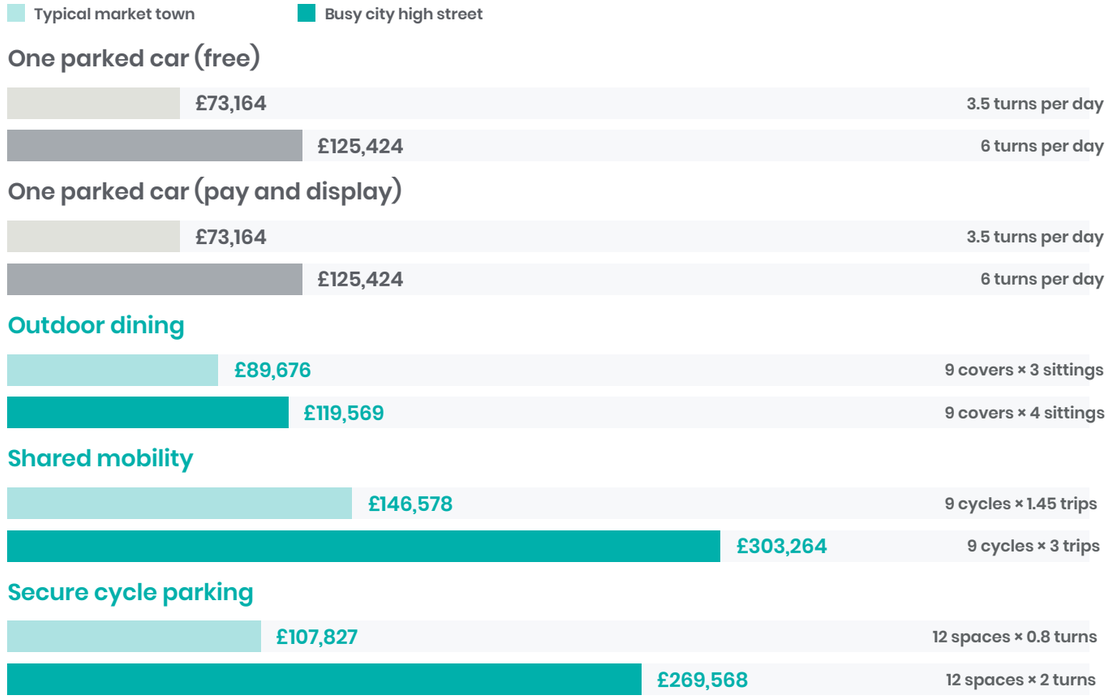
The kerbside represents the most significant yet least scrutinised asset within a local authority's estate. While a single parking bay accommodates just one vehicle, that identical footprint can be repurposed for nine cycles or nine outdoor covers, generating commercial value for neighbouring businesses throughout the trading day. Conversely, a standard parking space remains a persistent fiscal burden. The following comparative analysis evaluates the efficiency of these three distinct kerbside applications.





Wider economic value per bay, per year

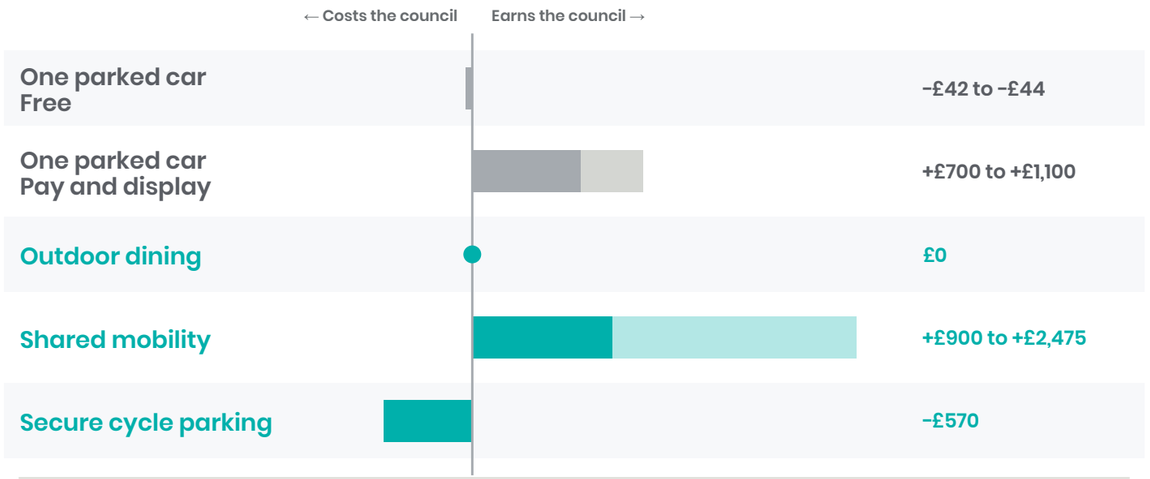
Retail and hospitality spend generated by one kerbside bay under five different uses



Derived figures. See notes a–i to the accompanying table.

Net position to the council, per bay, per year

What one kerbside bay costs or earns the council each year, by use



Derived figures. See notes a–i to the accompanying table.



CASE STUDY
Lambeth — managing the kerb as an estate

In January 2023, the London Borough of Lambeth formalised its Kerbside Strategy, establishing a series of strategic objectives to be achieved by 2030. The document is one of the first instances of a UK local authority publicly defining the purpose of its kerbside asset, replacing the traditional model of street-by-street negotiation with a coherent, borough-wide vision.

The initial audit revealed a misalignment, as 94 per cent of the kerbside was given over to parking and its management, yet around 60 per cent of Lambeth households do not own a car. To address this imbalance, the strategy seeks to manage this public land more equitably, prioritising active travel, air

quality, and climate resilience as core civic priorities.

The strategy codifies a versatile menu of alternative uses for former parking bays, including in-ground street trees, rain gardens for flood management, cycle hangars, and social seating. By repurposing this high-value space, the council is transitioning the kerb from vehicle storage to a productive civic anchor. Implementation is now being delivered through a rolling programme of neighbourhood-level projects. Lambeth's first progress report, published in July 2025, recorded the share of kerbside in sustainable use rising from 6 per cent to 10.2 per cent in two years, against a target of 25 per cent by 2030.

The transformation is fundamentally procedural; converting a parking bay is now treated as a standard delivery within a consolidated, high-quality core rather than an administrative exception. While Lambeth's demographic profile is distinct, this framework provides a scalable model for market towns to rebalance their own streets, allowing authorities to determine the appropriate ratio of conversion based on local demand.



Lambeth Kerbside Strategy — where are we now?


Lambeth — kerbside parking becoming rain garden


Kerbside Rain Gardens for Flood Management



Bikehanger on the high street



Mobility Corral parklet

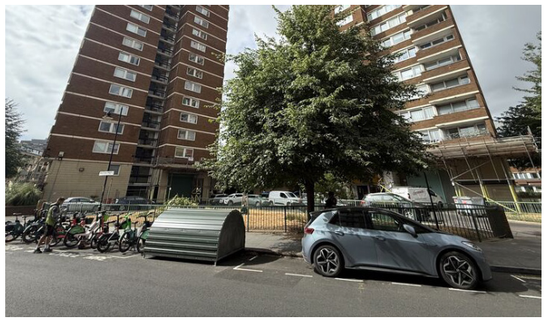
Micro-Mobility Infrastructure

Infrastructure for micromobility is currently among the most rapidly expanding kerbside assets in the UK. Town centres increasingly serve people who arrive at co-working spaces, libraries and community venues or retail destinations and those visitors need somewhere secure to park a bike for part of a day.

Private parking solutions range from the ubiquitous Sheffield Stand to the high-security hangar. Sheffield stands represent the most cost-effective form of catalogue-ordered furniture, requiring only a level surface for installation. While Bikehangars and bespoke shelters and parklets necessitate a higher cost, they provide the security required to anchor the high-dwell demographics that sustain independent retail, and dwell space for people to enjoy the high street.

By introducing a flexible, pay-as-you-go Bikehangar model, authorities can enable visitors to access the town centre with the same transactional ease as a pay-and-display car bay, with 12 times the users. Similarly, a Mobility Corral parklet serves as a flexible, dual-use space by repurposing car parking bays to accommodate both outdoor hospitality seating and secure cycle parking for patrons.

Shared bicycles and electric scooters are equally vital components of a modern high street. With approximately one-third of Lime journeys connecting



Shared cycle corral and bike hanger, London

directly to the public transport network, [38] these services are essential for the viability of town centres. The challenge for authorities is managing their parked footprint to avoid the visual noise of a cluttered high street.

The arrangement of these assets are critical to successful implementation. Individual stands bolted into arbitrary gaps materialise as pavement clutter, obstructing movement and degrading the public realm. Conversely, stands aligned in a coherent, continuous row, integrated into a greenery such as a parklet made from lasting materials serve as a visible signal of quality permanence. On street cycle corrals, cycle shelters and public realm can combine to create a uniform kerbside destination for all types of micromobility users being attracted to the high street.

38 Lime Stakeholder Interview



Designated shared mobility bays in Bloomsbury



Mobility Corral in Hackney



Overflowing shared mobility bay at capacity - London

Kerbside Standards

Prioritise the carriageway over the pavement. The footway is the scarcest asset on the high street and must be kept clear of obstructions. Cycles abandoned on the pavement create the same physical barriers that badly parked cars impose on disabled residents. A dedicated carriageway bay is a cost-effective, reversible intervention that repurposes space from its least productive use.

Utilise marked bays rather than unregulated parking. In the absence of designated space, users default to the pavement outside the shop they are visiting. A clearly designated bay is the most effective tool for encouraging responsible parking behaviour.

Where the demand is. Operators running flexible parking concentrate bays around high streets, because that is where users need certainty. Density is the response to demand, not evidence of oversupply.

The most common council complaint on this issue is that there are too many bikes on the high street. It is argued by bike share operators that a street with high demand and high footfall - the condition every high street in this report is trying to reach. The per-bay analysis gives the evidence needed to back this claim. One car space stores one vehicle, the same footprint holds around nine cycles, and generates several times the retail spend per square metre.

Councils can perversely read a full cycle bay as a problem and a full car bay as a success. They are the same signal, and the cycle bay produced it by delivering nine people to the high street in the space that delivered one. Where car parking cannot be often be seen as politically challenging, removing the cycle bay is easier but is ultimately a decision to reduce the number of people arriving and spending money on the high street.

CASE STUDY
Castlebar and Westport, Co. Shared Mobility in a market town.

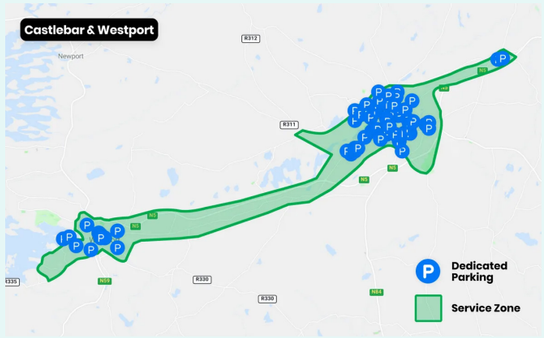
Castlebar and Westport are single-high-street Irish towns where a shared-bike scheme reaches roughly a third of the town's population as users.

Lime has operated in Castlebar, Ireland since 2022 and has had over 30,000 trips. The scheme recently expanded bikes to Westport in 2023.

We recommend that the Government amend the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to recognise cycle hangars, cycle hire parking, shared micromobility bays and e-scooter parking as highway infrastructure, and to make clear that installing them within the highway does not require a traffic regulation order.

We recommend that the Department for Transport use the update to the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions already committed to in Better Connected to introduce standard signs and road markings for micromobility parking places.

We recommend that the Department for Transport establish a simplified process for reallocating kerbside space from general parking to sustainable transport uses, and publish national guidance on the design, siting and management of micromobility parking.



Service zone between Castlebar and Westport



Castlebar — micromobility on the high street



Loading bay graded at pavement level — the footway stays continuous

Loading Bays

Integrating loading bays at footway level offers a further lesson in how to enhance high-street functionality through **quality and simplicity.** When graded to the pavement, the loading bay maintains a continuous surface, signalling a space that vehicles "borrow" rather than dominate. Conversely, a bay graded to the road severs the footway, resulting in lost public realm that pedestrians cannot utilise.

Last-Mile Delivery

The logistics of the high street are undergoing a shift towards efficiency. Agile electric quad-cycles are increasingly displacing traditional vans for final-stage distribution, requiring significantly less kerb space and shorter stationary periods. To support a flourishing local economy, our public realm must evolve to accommodate these emerging patterns of urban access.



Loading bay graded to the road — the pavement gives way



Amazon quadcycle kerbside

Shopfronts

The face of the high street matters. Few things signal decline or vitality as immediately as the condition of its shopfronts, yet across the UK they have been steadily degraded for decades. Poorly proportioned fascias, oversized signage, cheap materials, blanked-out windows and visual clutter can diminish an entire street. It is little wonder that restoring traditional, attractive shopfronts commands considerable public appeal and unusually broad political support. [39]

The government is now taking the issue seriously, with the Prime Minister asking the Planning Advisory Service to produce shopfront guidance for councils. That ambition is welcome. But guidance will only make a difference if it focuses on the things that genuinely shape how people experience a street, rather than becoming another box-ticking exercise concerned with matters of little consequence. It should be rooted in evidence about what people actually find attractive, welcoming and worth spending time around.

That evidence points towards a shopfront 'sweet spot': neither blandness nor clutter. Facades that are visually rich but coherent, with clear proportions and hierarchy, natural materials, depth, craftsmanship and legible entrances and windows are those that tend to be experienced as more attractive, interesting and engaging. By contrast, facades that are flat, repetitive, visually confused or materially artificial tend to leave people indifferent, or actively diminish their experience of a place.

The implication is important: good shopfront design is not cosmetic decoration. Collectively, shopfronts form the public face of a high street. Improving them can strengthen the character of individual buildings, restore coherence to whole streets and help turn places people merely pass through into places they enjoy being in.

39 Shopfront guidance to be developed with the Planning Advisory Service — part of the August 2026 high streets package



Character as a business asset — timber shopfront, Northern Quarter, Manchester



The Thirsty Korean, Chorlton — shutter art commissioned by the business. Identity after closing time



After: the same shopfront with warmer colour, a bay window, new tiling and an awning — upgraded under a Create Streets code, funded through the High Streets Heritage Action Zone programme.

67 high streets between 2020 and 2024 at a cost of £95 million, with an independent evaluation by AMION Consulting finding economic and civic value. [40]

While the costs of these upgrades vary with the shopfront and the scale of the work, a new timber shopfront can be built by local joiners for as little as £15,000 to £20,000.

We recommend that the Planning Advisory Service's forthcoming shopfront guidance adopt parameter-based standards - proportion of frontage covered, legibility, alignment - rather than prescribed styles, with heritage prescription reserved for designated conservation frontages.



Before: a shopfront in Ryde, Isle of Wight.

40 Historic England, High Streets Heritage Action Zone programme, 2020–24: £95m programme (£40m DCMS, £52m Future High Streets Fund, £3m National Lottery Heritage Fund) across 67 high streets; 723 historic buildings repaired and 462 shopfronts restored — historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-action-zones/regenerating-historic-high-streets; independent evaluation by AMION Consulting (2025), valuing total benefits at over £245m — historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/news/heritage-regeneration-value-revealed.



Fix2Fit Tailors, Nails Icon and Phone Repairs — a coordinated frontage

CASE STUDY
Deansgate, Manchester — a landlord-led unified frontage

A parade of shopfronts on Deansgate, Manchester shows what coordination can achieve. The landlord approached the tenants along the parade and proposed bringing several frontages up to a shared standard at the same time (matching dark fascias, a consistent signage height, minimal gold lettering) with the cost split equally between landlord and tenant. The result reads as a single, confident piece of streetscape rather than a row of competing signs, and it cost each party half of what it would have cost either alone. Historic England's High Streets Heritage Action Zone programme has proved one of the most visible and effective tools for boosting high-street vitality and civic pride. So far it has restored 462 shopfronts across



Fix2Fit Tailors, Nails Icon and Phone Repairs — a coordinated frontage

Conclusion

The decline of the British high street is not inevitable, nor is it irreversible. Our report demonstrates that the path to renewal lies not solely in the pursuit of large capital schemes but in a return to three fundamental principles: quality, simplicity, and permanence. By stripping away the clutter of car-centric infrastructure and re-centering the street as a place for people, we can clear the failure that currently defines too many of our local centres and replace it with a thriving and independent community.

We have shown that a successful high street is a destination for a population rather than a corridor. Whether in Altrincham or Stockton, the shift toward pedestrian-first design consistently drives increased footfall, higher dwell times, and improved economic resilience. When we reclaim space for families to play, for communities to gather, and for local businesses to flourish, we create a place that changes the purpose of the high street, rather than one that unsuccessfully competes with online retail.

Yet this evolution requires a fundamental realignment of our institutions. As long as highways departments remain siloed from regeneration and landscape teams, and continue to measure success by vehicle throughput rather than civic vitality, our streets will remain designed for traffic rather than people.

The approach to fixing the high street has been demonstrated in this report, but these towns which have succeeded are few and far between. For these outliers to become the norm, political will, delivery structure and design clarity need to align. It is time to abandon managed decline and put the British high street back at the centre of community life.





Appendix

ALL FIGURES ARE ANNUAL, PER BAY (£ PER YEAR)					
Per bay, per year	Cost to council	Direct income to council	Net to council	Wider economic value, market town	Wider economic value, city
On-street car parking bay (free)	£42–£44 [a]	£0	-£42–£44	£73,200 [b c]	£125,400 [b c]
On-street car parking bay (pay and display)	£42–£44 [a] plus £350–£750 [d]	£1,500 [d]	£700–£1,100	£73,200 [b c]	£125,400 [b c]
Outdoor seating / dining	£350–£500+ [e]	£500 new, £350 renewal [e]	£0	£89,700 [f]	£119,600 [f]
Shared mobility bay (cycle / e-scooter)	£0 [g]	£900–£2,475 [g]	£900–£2,475	£146,600 [c g]	£303,300 [c g]

Notes

a. Carriageway maintenance

- Bay 2.4m × 4.8m = 12m².
- Resurfacing 12m² × £63/m² = £756 ÷ 20 yrs = £38/yr.
- Preventative treatment 12m² × £7–£10/m² = £84–£120 ÷ 20 yrs = £4–£6/yr.
- Total £42–£44/yr. Unit costs: Derbyshire County Council resurfacing programme.
- Excludes drainage, remarking, kerb repair, sweeping.

b. Car parking turnover

- Perth & Kinross / Systra 2024, 5,976 spaces, manual and
- ANPR: 69-min average stay, 56% peak occupancy = 2.9–4.9 turns/bay/day.
- Earls Colne ANPR 2020: 202 vehicles ÷ 44 spaces over 24 hrs = 4.6 turns.
- North Hertfordshire 2016, Knebworth: 50–100 visits ÷ 30 spaces = 1.7–3.3 turns.
- Assumed 3.5 market town; 6 city (69-min stay at 85% sustained occupancy).
- Market town 3.5 × £67 × 312 = £73,200. City 6 × £67 × 312 = £125,400.

c. Spend per visit by mode

- TfL/Accent Town Centres Survey 2014–15, 7,760 interviews, 14 London town centres: car £47, cycle £25.
- Uprated ONS CPI D7BT (2015 = 100; 2026 ≈ 142.6), ×1.43 = car £67, cycle £36. London data.

d. Pay-and-display

- Income: Thanet DC parking account 2024/25, £1,341,707 ÷ 883 bays = £1,519/bay/yr. Assumed £1,500. Excludes PCN income.
- Running cost: Henley-in-Arden 2021 business case, off-street items removed = £385/bay/yr. RAC Foundation England 2024-25, expenditure at 49% of income = £740 on £1,500. Assumed £350–£750.

e. Pavement licence

- Fee caps £500 new, £350 renewal: Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023; MHCLG Pavement licences: guidance (2024).
- Council cost £350–£500+: Tandridge 2024, North Yorkshire 2025, Westminster.
- Carriageway terraces also require planning permission and a monitoring fee. Both additional income, not counted.

f. Outdoor dining

- Covers 12m² ÷ 1.2–1.5m² per cover = 9.
- Sittings assumed 3/day market town, 4/day city.
- OpenTable UK average 3 turns at 50–80 min per cover.
- Spend £18.35/visit: Lumina Intelligence, Eating and
- Drinking Out Panel Q1 2026.
- Season 181 days = British Summer Time, late March to late October, six-day week. RBKC licenses carriageway terraces for BST only.
- Market town 9 × 3 × £18.35 × 181 = £89,700. City 9 × 4 × £18.35 × 181 = £119,600.

g. Shared-mobility bay

- 9 cycles per bay; 8–10 reported (Lime stakeholder interview, 14 August 2026).
- Utilisation: CoMoUK operator data 2023, 67,565 hires/day ÷ 46,488 vehicles = 1.45 trips/vehicle/day. City 3 from TfL, 150,000 daily dockless e-bike journeys ÷ fleet of 50,000.
- Installation £1,500, operator-funded. Income £100–£275 per bike/yr × 9 = £900–£2,475. Fees charged against agreed fleet size; per-bay figure is an attribution. Fee will vary between contracts.
- Market town 9 × 1.45 × £36 × 312 = £146,600. City 9 × 3 × £36 × 312 = £303,300.

h. Bikehangar × 2

- 12 spaces: two six-cycle hangars per bay. Pay-as-you-go destination parking, not residential storage.
- Turnover assumed and demand-limited: 0.8/space/day market town, 2/space/day city. Neither observed. Bounded above by note b. Barcelona: 23% of on-street cycle parking sites reach 1.0 turns (Honey-Rosés et al., 2023).
- Market town 12 × 0.8 × £36 × 312 = £107,800. City 12 × 2 × £36 × 312 = £269,600.

i. Trading days

- 312 days a year, six-day week, all rows except outdoor dining at 181 days a year

cyclehoop

CREATE streets