

Towns Vitality Roadmap

A new policy framework for the UK's towns

Aveek Bhattacharya
Sam Robinson

SMF

**Social Market
Foundation**

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VISA

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Aveek studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at undergraduate level, and has Master's degrees in Politics (from the University of Oxford) and Social Policy Research (from the London School of Economics). He holds a PhD in Social Policy from the London School of Economics, where his thesis compared secondary school choice in England and Scotland.

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FOREWORD FROM THE SPONSOR

By Mandy Lamb, Managing Director, UK&I, Visa

At Visa, I have the privilege of working with a team that is deeply committed to empowering individuals, businesses, and economies. Our purpose is clear and unwavering: to uplift everyone everywhere by being the best way to pay and be paid, through the most innovative, reliable and secure payment network. We seek to enable individuals, businesses, and economies to thrive, and always put customers first.

It is with this purpose in mind that I am delighted to introduce our Towns Vitality Roadmap in partnership with the Social Market Foundation and British Retail Consortium. This roadmap is the next step in Visa's Talk of the Town initiative, a testament to our commitment to fostering growth, digitisation, and inclusion across the UK.

For decades Visa has been at the forefront of the payments industry, helping to drive economic growth and financial inclusion. Very few people spend time thinking about payments, but they are essential to our daily lives. Payments are more than mere transactions; they power economic growth, to the benefit of everyone. At Visa we believe in the power of partnerships, whether that is by empowering small businesses through digital enablement toolkits, engaging and mentoring young talent, promoting inclusivity in women's football, or reducing our own environmental footprint, we are committed to playing our part.

I don't need to explain how important towns are for all of us. The majority of us in the UK live in towns, myself included. I speak for Visa when I say I am passionate about towns and the businesses that reside in them. They are the backbone of our economy, the heart of our communities, and the engine of job creation. Yet, they often face significant challenges, including funding allocation, skills challenges, infrastructure issues and digital adoption. In a time of economic uncertainty, rising living costs, and productivity challenges, it is crucial to create the right conditions for towns, helping them to thrive and grow.

We began in 2022 with '*Let's Talk about Towns*'. A first-of-its-kind report which began the conversation by augmenting existing data with Visa spending data, providing unique insights into the economic vitality of towns as distinct places, previously overshadowed by cities in the policy debate.

In 2023, we continued with an exploration into the ways towns are helping their communities and businesses to thrive, through *Let's Celebrate Towns*, a nationwide showcase gathering examples directly from local authorities and councils of how they have delivered positive outcomes for their towns, culminating in an awards ceremony in Westminster.

We heard amazing stories from across the UK, including collaboration and creativity of high street businesses in Bromsgrove; business diversification in Pontypridd; building historical tourism in Banbridge; and driving sustainable practices in Kilmarnock. I was personally so inspired by the success stories from all the nominees, and felt honoured to hear first-hand from people how important their towns are to them, and the benefits that the initiatives have brought to their communities.

Now, together, *Let's Unleash the Potential of Towns*. Across the UK, our towns hold such potential that, if unleashed, could lead to stronger communities, thriving businesses and a healthier economy. The actions and recommendations in this report are not Visa's alone. This Roadmap outlines how we can work together - businesses, government, and communities, to make this vision a reality, drive inclusive growth, and build a better future for all.

I am excited about the journey ahead. As we move into the next phase of Visa's Talk of the Town initiative, we are thrilled to be growing our collaborative team alongside the Social Market Foundation and British Retail Consortium partnership.

Now, we turn insight into action as we look to unleash the potential of our towns together.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Up and down the UK, there is enormous potential available for and from our towns.

Potential that, if unleashed, would help communities to prosper, businesses to thrive, and the economy to grow.

Against the backdrop of a cost of living crisis, inflationary pressures and uncertainty across the economy, never has there been a more important time to help create the right conditions for towns to thrive, and people and businesses that reside in them to flourish.

Government initiatives like the Levelling Up Fund and the Future High Streets Fund – both aimed at revitalising communities – have made some difference, but there is much more that could be done to support towns in a more strategic way to reach their full potential.

The need to enable economically productive towns is paramount if the UK is to economically recover and thrive. Equally, ahead of a general election, the 46% of the population residing in UK towns will go some way to determining the success of a future government.

Talk of the Town is a Visa-led collaboration of industry, politicians, local leaders and policymakers developed to address this need through a better understanding of the economic underpinning of towns, as well as highlighting the many ways they are helping businesses and communities.

Having developed a new data-led infrastructure in 2022 for understanding town vitality in our report ‘Let’s Talk about Towns’¹, and convened a coalition of influential voices to inform its findings, this stage of the initiative moves the project from the insight into action.

The following report, supported by Visa, details the actions and policy solutions available to decision makers to drive real change by setting out a roadmap for towns that, if implemented, could help to unleash their economic potential across the UK.

This phase of work: From insight to action

By leveraging proprietary Visa data, and a range of other sources, we identified six thematic town ‘types’, based on performance relative to five indicators: people and skills, economic prosperity, business environment, infrastructure, and sustainability. More details of our analysis can be found in the appendix.

Through the prism of these town ‘types’, we have now focused on consulting a range of experts to gather insight into the challenges and opportunities for towns, as well as identifying specific policies to build into a policy roadmap for growth.

An ‘Accelerator Panel’ of senior business leaders, politicians, trade associations, and retail experts, was established to set the strategic framework and to inform policy themes and recommendations.

The strategic principles shaped by the Accelerator Panel to inform our work were:

- **Empower decision making at a local level.** Decisions on town regeneration should be taken at the lowest political level possible, using local data. Many successful case studies of town revitalisation have involved local authorities and towns themselves communicating, partnering with and involving local institutions with a deep understanding of the area.
- **Uplift communities everywhere.** Successful towns, as well as those with dormant potential, can be found across all parts of the country, not just in particular regions. The relationship between towns and cities is also positive sum; success in nearby cities can provide spillover benefits to surrounding towns.
- **Unleash economic growth to boost quality of life.** Policies to revitalise a town need to be based on a clear understanding of what its main limiting factors are and targeted at overcoming them. However, economic growth should not come at the expense of wellbeing, liveability and life satisfaction.

To gather detailed insight into specific towns, we ran a series of workshops with local leaders, academics, and industry bodies, each covering one of the town ‘types’ identified in ‘Let’s Talk about Towns’. Through these workshops, we were able to delve deeper into the specifics of how our policy principles apply to each town type, hear about best practice, and identify case studies of town revitalisation – some of which are included within this report. Further case studies in this report of best practice in towns have come from the ‘Let’s Celebrate Towns’ competition, which showcased the actions towns across the UK have taken to create a supportive environment for businesses and communities.

The blend of quantitative and qualitative analysis contained within this report lead us to a series of recommendations that could play an important role in shaping the future economic outcomes for towns.

Recommendations: A new policy roadmap for towns

The insights and expertise gathered from the Accelerator Panel and town type workshops assessed against the backdrop of our previous research have informed the development of a series of recommendations for policymakers to drive lasting change for UK towns.

Further details on specific policies decisionmakers can consider to help unleash the economic potential of towns can be found in the final chapter of this report.

Business environment

Among the key challenges for towns is lack of diversity in industries and a reliance on traditional sectors. The scarcity of innovation hubs and research centres further inhibits the development of cutting-edge businesses, and their ability to compete on the national stage. In addition, businesses, particularly small and medium sized which makeup the majority of those located across towns, require more support to help capitalise on the digital transition to boost their productivity, competitiveness and growth.

Policy recommendations:

- Enhance the role of public private partnerships in support of business incubators, co-working spaces or innovation centres to support startups and entrepreneurship in towns.
- Focus on digital enablement of small businesses across the UK by embedding digital skills in local business peer networks.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure challenges in UK towns can vary based on a range of factors, including population density, location, economic activities and historical development. These can include transportation and connectivity, like roads and public transit, where there is a need to ensure better integration of different networks. Also, reflected in challenges across digital, including access to high-speed broadband which can limit business development, remote working, and access to online services. A failure to address infrastructure challenges can limit the expansion of business, deter potential investment into towns, and impede the flow of goods and services.

Policy recommendations:

- Accelerate the roll-out of 5G technology and broadband connectivity.
- Promote the development of open-loop transport infrastructure, to help boost connectivity within, and across towns.
- Use local ‘digital champions’ to facilitate broadband rollout, and increase awareness of the Governments Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme.

People & Skills

UK towns face a range of challenges related to skills that require focus, attention and strategic intervention. First and foremost, among these is the outflow of young skilled talent to cities. This not only deprives towns of valuable human capital but also perpetuates a cycle of economic stagnation. Furthermore, towns often contend with a scarcity of diverse skills, resulting in a mismatch between the demands of emerging industries and the available workforce, e.g. in the digital skills transition.

Policy recommendations:

- Develop apprenticeships, internships and mentoring programmes that focus on digital skills training.
- In doing so, build an ambitious approach to developing and retaining local talent through place-based scholarship bursary schemes.
- Target reduction of Apprenticeship Levy underspends through local Levy Deals.

Sustainability

Sustainability challenges for towns centre on creating environmentally, socially and economically responsible communities that can thrive, whilst helping to tackle a range of issues, from air quality, transportation, housing, and renewable energy production/consumption.

Policy recommendations:

- Leverage local-level data and insight to help unlock the rollout of new electric vehicle charging infrastructure.
- Develop incentives for jobs in clean sectors via the Apprenticeship Levy transfer allowance.
- Strengthen the role of the High Streets Taskforce in supporting towns to decarbonise.

National coordination

Despite a renewed focus on towns, there remains a lack of coordination at a national level, limiting the potential positive outcomes for towns. This is compounded through a lack of institutional means to share data and insight, best practice, and through the constraints on local authorities and councils.

Policy recommendations:

- Encourage the formation of ‘Town Groups’ to strategically bid for funding available by Government.
- Consider setting up a ‘Town Ambassador’ programme to help share information and open-source data, to inform best-practice decision making across towns.

Linking policy proposals to towns

Each of the policy recommendations we have outlined could benefit any of the town types we identified in our Let’s Talk About Towns report. However, some town types face specific challenges, based on particular metrics. This means that different policy themes will have higher or lower priority for a town depending on their context. For example, Heartland Towns have prosperous economies, however, face significant infrastructure challenges. Therefore, Heartland Towns should prioritise policies in the Infrastructure theme first and foremost.

A summary of the key themes that each town type should focus on, reflecting their most significant relative weakness, is below.

Table 1: Key characteristics and policy priorities of each town type

Town Type	Key Characteristics	Top policy priority
Opportunity Towns	Often nice places to live (for example, as measured by resident wellbeing) and sometimes relatively affluent, but scoring below-average on skill levels, infrastructure and business environment Retaining young, skilled workers is a central challenge	People & Skills
Backbone Towns	Spread out across the UK, but often clustered around cities or along the coast. Places scoring above average on infrastructure or business environment (but not both), suggesting strengths to build on. These places are below average on skill levels	Infrastructure / Business Environment
Foundation Towns	Typically 'New Towns' Towns that perform well on infrastructure and business environment but fall short on skills levels.	People & Skills
Heartland Towns	Typically rural towns with a relatively affluent economy. Towns with above-average skills levels but below-average infrastructure quality.	Infrastructure
Gateway Towns	Role as 'dormitory towns', typically surrounding major cities. Often lack a strong business environment, but otherwise affluent economically, with high wages and excellent infrastructure.	Business Environment

Source: SMF analysis

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Let's talk about towns

In 2022, we set out to find out more about towns. Why? Because towns have a huge amount of untapped potential. Towns, where hard-working people and businesses are supporting their communities, and where local cultures and traditions thrive.

In a first-of-its-kind report, 'Let's Talk about Towns', leveraged Visa data and a range of other sources, to analyse ~900 towns across the UK.² Our belief was that by better understanding the unique strengths and challenges of towns across the country, we can unlock opportunities for growth, innovation, and community development.

We identified five economic indicators — economic prosperity, people and skills, infrastructure, business environment, and sustainability — and found unifying characteristics which could be used to inform our analysis.

The study then led us to identifying five town types – Foundation, Backbone, Gateway, Heartland, and Opportunity towns – each with a different combination of challenges and opportunities. While each of the town types were by no means homogenous, by grouping them in this way we were able to better understand key policy priorities facing different areas.

The report and its findings gave local and national decisionmakers deep insight into their local areas, as well as a better understanding of the drivers of economic success that could help inform and shape policy in the future.

Let's celebrate towns

We then wanted to continue our exploration into the different ways towns are helping their communities and businesses to thrive. This led us to 'Let's Celebrate Towns', a nationwide showcase designed to hear directly from local authorities and councils, about how they have delivered positive outcomes for their town.

We received more than 50 applications from different towns across the UK, each with a unique story to tell about how they are working to improve their local area, ranging from community-led initiatives to partnerships with local businesses, charities, and other organisations.

To spread best practice examples from across the nation, town representatives and their local MPs were invited to an event in Westminster. More than 150 people shared their stories and showcased how innovative projects are making real impact locally – stimulating growth and enabling local communities to thrive.

Let's unleash the potential of towns

This year we have focused on turning our insight into action. Together with Visa and the British Retail Consortium we have worked with experts from across the UK to identify specific policy solutions to build a roadmap for growth for UK towns.

Bringing together what we learned from the analysis of ~900 towns, the specific case studies, we have worked alongside a range of policy makers to design the practical policy themes and recommendations that could help to enable growth across UK towns.

To support this work, we convened an 'Accelerator Panel' of senior business leaders, politicians, trade association leads, and retail experts, to set the strategic framework for policy design and recommendations. We also ran a series of workshops with local leaders, academics, and industry bodies to identify viable policy solutions, best practice, and find case studies of town revitalisation.

The blend of quantitative and qualitative analysis, as well as expert insight, contained within this report led us to a series of recommendations that have the potential to shape the future economic outcomes across UK towns.

What comes next?

Our ambition, over the coming months, will be to share the lessons learned through our data analysis of towns, as well as the policy recommendations for success outlined in this report with policymakers, industry, and local leaders across the country.

Revitalising towns can stimulate greater economic activity, create jobs, and promote local entrepreneurship - helping businesses and communities to flourish. The coalition of supporters convened throughout this engagement process will work hard to continue to represent towns, and propel the country towards a more vibrant, inclusive, and resilient economic future.

CHAPTER TWO – THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING TOWNS

The UK is home to a diverse range of towns, each with their own history, identity, and economy. These differences should be recognised and celebrated, and towns policy should tailor support to individual towns in a way that meets their specific needs and aligns with their local environment.

This has been hindered recently, presenting towns with a new set of challenges to navigate. When convening local and national town experts through the Accelerator Panel and the town-type workshops, the discussions reinforced the lasting impact the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, high, and persistent inflation have had on consumer behaviour and town centre footfall.

COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis have also exacerbated other trends. Participants in our panel and workshops also made clear that towns reliant on traditional brick-and-mortar retail suffered challenges, while those with a solid digital infrastructure and e-commerce presence fared better. These trends have been discussed in many high-profile interventions such as the Grimsey Review.³

These developments underscore the need to bolster support for towns to help them negotiate economic headwinds. On the flip side, our workshops also uncovered longer-term economic trends that harbour significant opportunities. The rise of new technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), has the potential to transform the way businesses operate and capture the imagination of business owners on the upside of technology and digital skills.

Looking ahead, the future economic outcomes for towns are likely to be shaped by their ability to innovate, diversify, and embrace digital transformation. Mitigating challenges for towns will require a combination of strategic policy decisions, collaboration across all different levels of government, and efficient use of funding, to help maximise their future economic potential.

This report will therefore outline such opportunities and how policymakers can support towns to flourish and build sustainable growth in an evolving economic landscape.

The current policy landscape

There have been a range of efforts in recent years to revitalise towns, at both the national and local level. These have gone some way to helping towns to regenerate their centres, reinvent their high streets and engage businesses and communities. But, as our Let's Talk About Towns report (2022) and the discussions in the Accelerator Panel and town workshops show, there is more still to be done.

It is essential to understand the current policy landscape in place for towns, including the key shortcomings and areas of success, can be used as the basis for understanding our own roadmap for towns.

National funding frameworks for towns

There have been several national funding frameworks put in place for town revitalisation since 2010. Overall, broad funding schemes specifically targeted at town revitalisation have become more generous over this period, from the £1.2 million set aside for 'Portas pilots' to the £3.6 billion for the Towns Fund.

Despite this, policy interventions aimed at revitalising towns have faced challenges in achieving their objectives at a national level because of several interconnected factors.

Lack of long-term, coordinated strategy for towns

National initiatives for towns to date, including the Future High Streets Fund and Towns Fund (see case study below), have lacked a unified, cohesive and long-term strategy for town revitalisation.

As reflected in our town workshops, there is a sense that the short-term nature of funding cycles – exhibited by both the Towns Fund and Future High Streets Fund, which have been introduced within only a few years of each other – is not well aligned to the long-term strategic needs of towns.

The core of this challenge is that while central funding allocations offer a significant injection of money for capital projects, they tend not to focus on day-to-day spending that is needed to truly sustain, and build on, the success of new projects.

Funding disbursement and resource allocation

Recent policy aimed at towns revitalisation has typically revolved around centrally administered funding pots with the aim of supporting a variety of projects in towns that bid for funding successfully.

A key criticism of the Towns Fund and similar schemes that emerged in our consultation process was the competitive nature of the funding allocations, which was felt to be pitting towns and local authorities against each other. In part, this criticism was conceptual: participants felt that fostering a more collaborative relationship between towns and cities sharing geographic areas and characteristics would be a more conducive approach to revitalising towns than placing them in opposition to each other to secure extra funding.

A second element of this criticism was more practical. In almost all the workshops, the capacity constraints facing local authorities came up as a limiting factor on the ability of towns to implement projects envisioned in the Towns Fund bids. Our workshops revealed that this central funding model is also occasionally vulnerable to unexpected developments, such as additional costs on designated sites for development.

Case Study: The Towns Fund – the limitations of competitive funding bids

In July 2019, the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a £3.6 billion Towns Fund, which included an additional £325 million for the Future High Streets Fund, bringing the resourcing for the Future High Streets Fund up to £1 billion. The core element of the Towns Fund has involved 101 towns in England being selected to develop ‘Town Deals’, for which they can bid for up to £25 million in funding through developing ‘Town Investment Plans’.⁴

Our workshops revealed a sense that the short-term nature of the funding cycles exhibited by the Towns Fund and Future High Street Fund is not well aligned with the long-term strategic needs of towns. As many people in the workshops pointed out, towns are often grappling with deep-seated socio-economic challenges, like the transition away from traditional industry, and require sustained action to break out of ‘vicious circles’ caused by factors such as demographics, outward migration of young people or low provision of skilled opportunities in the area.

The core of this challenge is that while Towns Fund allocations offer a significant injection of money for capital projects, there are still issues that need to be addressed, which can centre on:

- An uneven distribution of resources: Larger towns with greater access to resources might have an advantage in preparing and submitting comprehensive and well-researched proposals, leaving smaller towns with a disadvantage.
- A focus on competition, rather than collaboration: The competitive nature of funding bids could lead to towns trying to outdo each other rather than collaborating on regional or local challenges (like infrastructure) that could deliver cross-cutting benefits.
- Short-term focus: Competitive funding often requires a clear demonstration of short-term benefits and outcomes. This could discourage towns from proposing projects that might have more significant long-term benefits but might take longer to materialise.

Overall, the impression given of the Towns Fund in our workshops was that although on paper the initiative is aimed at the long-term challenges that towns face, several features of the funding process make the effect of the scheme less than the sum of its parts.

Limited local engagement and ownership

Insufficient involvement of local communities, businesses, and stakeholders in the policy design and implementation can result in initiatives that do not reflect local needs.

There is a risk that, due to lack of resources and other factors, policies can sometimes adopt a standardised approach that fails to consider the unique characteristics and challenges of individual towns leading to ineffectiveness. We have seen this in the case of towns like Leamington Spa, where we heard that an overly standardised approach to planning policy, particularly the recent restructuring of ‘use classes’ for buildings, has limited the ability of the town to curate its high street and adapt it to local needs.

To overcome these challenges and build the effectiveness of revitalisation efforts, there is a need for a more holistic, adaptable, and locally tailored approach. Policymakers should prioritise clear objectives, streamlined governance, active community engagement, and mechanisms for ongoing evaluations. By doing so, and fostering collaborative partnerships, national policies can better align with the diverse needs and aspirations of towns, leading to better and sustained economic outcomes.

Local institutions and best practice

National policy is far from the only source of support for towns. Efforts to revitalise towns are implemented by a wide range of regional, local, and town-level initiatives that are not solely government-led, and instead are often driven forward by business or local communities.

Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Skills Improvement Plans, and Business Improvement Districts, have all been deployed across towns with varying levels of success and challenge.

Similar to the national picture, there are unifying challenges and opportunities for regional and local policymaking for towns, which should be considered when developing a framework for future growth and prosperity.

Fragmented coordination and governance

It was recognised in our workshops that despite regional and local initiatives often having a positive impact, the proliferation of different actors working to revitalise towns has meant duplication of effort and a loss of strategic vision.

This patchwork of actors has been recognised by government which, in view of avoiding duplication between the remits of local actors, committed to end public support for Local Enterprise Partnerships from April 2024, announcing an alternative strategy to support local business representation and economic planning.

Local Skills Improvement Plans are one way the government is aiming to address this challenge, as they are primarily designed to address the skills and training needs of the local workforce. In contrast to Local Enterprise Partnerships, they focus more on addressing skills gaps, with responsibilities including setting out the key priorities in a local area to align educational provision more closely with the area’s economic needs, setting out actionable targets to better meet skills needs, and represent employers’ views on the skills most needed to boost the local economy.

Varying regional needs

Another key theme from our workshops was the need to cater to the distinct needs of different regions. Participants often made the point that many towns have different needs even if they appear similar in terms of raw data and objective measures. For example, our *Let's Talk About Towns* report found that coastal towns and (post) industrial towns often exhibit similar patterns in terms of their labour markets, business environments and skills provision. While this is true, and these towns do face similar problems, the causes of these problems are distinct. Over time, analysing trends in data and changes relative to policy decisions will help to drive at solutions tailored to the needs of specific town types.

A data-driven approach to understanding the problems facing towns can aid the development of more nuanced policy to revitalise towns. But this observation is an important reminder that a failure to dig beneath the data and account for the unique regional characteristics and histories of towns, could result in ineffective solutions.

Fostering local collaboration

Another important consideration arising from our workshops was making full use of local knowledge and relationships when making efforts to revitalise towns. Participants with a background in Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Skills Improvement Partnerships and other local government structures reflected that, while these institutional structures are important, fostering deep local relationships and facilitating collaboration between different sectors and backgrounds in a town is highly valuable to maximise the impact of strategies for revitalisation.

Business Improvement Districts were mentioned as playing a significant role in the economic outcomes of towns across the UK by fostering collaboration between businesses, regional and local government, and wider stakeholders.

From facilitating business support services, to coordinating community engagement – Business Improvement Districts have proven to be effective mechanisms for enhancing the economic vitality and overall quality of life across towns, through collaboration and implementing targeted initiatives.

Let's Celebrate Towns Case Study: Altrincham Business Improvement District – showcasing the benefits of local business partnerships

Altrincham's Business Improvement District (BID) has taken multiple steps to improve the town centre's offering and support local businesses to thrive, and was recognised in the 'Let's Celebrate Towns competition' for its proactive efforts to provide opportunities for businesses in and around Altrincham.



It offers a range of services to local businesses, including:

- The 'Visit Altrincham' website, which acts as a dedicated information platform to the town and spotlights local businesses. In 2022 the site was particularly successful, gaining high levels of web-traffic through Google during the Altrincham Jubilee celebration.
- The BID has invested in Place Informatics - software which gives a better understanding of how a town centre is used in order to maximise its trading potential. Data collected from Place Informatics has revealed that during June 2022, Altrincham attracted more unique visitors from postcodes outside the normal range. On the first day of the Jubilee bank holiday footfall was up by 5,500 people.
- The BID is working with night-time economy businesses to help secure 'Purple Flag' accreditation. The Purple Flag status operates in a similar manner to 'Blue Flag' accreditation for beaches, reflecting excellent standards of managing the evening and night-time economy.
- Business training, including support for businesses on employment and skills, apprenticeships, leadership, funding, business strategy and organisational development. This includes both support for new businesses and support for existing businesses to expand their operations. For example, Project You, a local business, was able to achieve a record day in terms of engagement on Instagram after engaging with the BID.
- A 'Business Cost Saving Scheme' in which the BID offers advice to local businesses on strategies for minimising business expenditure. This has enabled some local businesses, such as The Green Room, to save as much as £10,000 on their outgoings.

- Support with social media outreach – businesses can tag the BID’s social media accounts to extend the reach of their posts, while the BID itself has an average reach across social media platforms of over 50,000 a week.

Altrincham BID provides an example of how local relationships and partnerships can increase the reach, and effectiveness of, initiatives to strengthen towns economically and socially, ultimately through boosting small, local businesses.

CHAPTER THREE – IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES FOR POLICYMAKERS

Principles for revitalising towns

The diverse strategies we have analysed for unlocking the potential of towns, as part of our policy review, necessitates a tailored framework to guide our recommendations for how they could be further enhanced or evolved.

We therefore distilled the key thematic priorities for towns identified above to develop three fundamental principles that should guide efforts to revitalise towns and set the strategic framework for further policies.

Our principles for revitalising towns are:

- 1. Empower decision making at a local level.** Decisions on town regeneration should be taken at the lowest political level possible, using local data. Many successful case studies of town revitalisation have involved local authorities and towns themselves communicating, partnering with, and involving local institutions with a deep understanding of the area.
- 2. Uplift communities everywhere.** Successful towns, as well as those with dormant potential, can be found across all parts of the country, not just in particular regions. The relationship between towns and cities is also positive sum; success in nearby cities can also provide spillover benefits to surrounding towns.
- 3. Unleash economic growth to boost quality of life.** Policies to revitalise a town need to be based on a clear understanding of what its main limiting factors are and targeted at overcoming them. However, economic growth should not come at the expense of wellbeing, liveability and life satisfaction.

These principles were shaped by the Accelerator Panel, who met at the start of the project, to help set the strategic direction for our policy areas of focus. The output of which will be discussed in the sections below.

How current policy interventions are impacting towns

The subsequent consultation process conducted with local leaders, businesses and high street experts on the current policy landscape were guided by the principles outlined above. During these conversations there were several recurring themes that emerged regarding the current policy priorities for towns.

Many of the policy priorities related to ongoing and challenging issues for towns require a proactive partnership-based approach. Several of the entries into our 'Let's Celebrate Towns competition', set up to showcase areas of across the UK where towns are helping businesses and communities to thrive, showed that such action could make a difference despite the challenges.

Equipping every town: bridging the skills challenge to enhance inclusive growth

Participants in our workshops repeatedly stressed the need for towns to focus on improving skills and attracting and retaining talent over the long term and emphasised that despite recent policy attention on skills – as noted in the previous chapter – there are still further approaches and opportunities to improve skills provision that need to be taken.

There was a focus on the need to upskill workers in areas where local labour markets lack the necessary skills to develop a dynamic economy. Making improvements to the apprenticeship system to help young people growing up in towns acquire skills was identified as a key priority in this regard. This would help local economies obtain the mid-level skills needed to make local green investment projects viable and to thrive in a digital future.

Improvements to transport infrastructure and interconnectivity between towns were also seen as connected to the skills agenda, to provide access to upskilling opportunities to young people in towns that lack universities or large employers willing to offer apprenticeships.

However, there was a recognition that upskilling on its own would not be sufficient to solve the problem of skills provision. A key consideration was the retention of skilled individuals, to ensure that young people with newly acquired skills used them to benefit their local communities rather than simply moving to large cities where these skills were in high demand.

One way of achieving this that came up in our workshops is through place-based bursary schemes for university courses, such as the Peter Coates Foundation's Fast Forward Programme, which seeks to retain talented workers in the Stoke-on-Trent area and catalyse the development of new local businesses. It was considered equally important, however, to ensure that local economies can offer skilled workers adequate job opportunities, such as through collaboration between businesses and further or higher education institutions.

One observation that came through in our town workshops was the shortcomings of the Apprenticeship Levy. The underspend on the Apprenticeship Levy is a well-known problem, while in our workshops it was observed that local small businesses often struggle with capacity to host apprentices, meaning there are barriers to increasing apprenticeships.

Targeting Apprenticeship Levy underspends should be a priority in creating skills, and could be done by allowing local authorities to make deals with local businesses and educational institutions to pool Apprenticeship Levy accounts. This would enable such institutions to make more efficient use of their Apprenticeship Levy funds and encourage collaboration between a range of key local actors on how to support apprenticeships in their area.

Case Study: The Peter Coates Foundation – Providing locally-rooted business opportunities

The Peter Coates Foundation runs the ‘Fast Forward Programme’, which is a place-based bursary scheme that aims to retain talented workers in the Stoke-on-Trent area and help to catalyse the development of new local businesses. The scheme offers to cover the full cost of the (newly created) Master of Science (MSc) in Entrepreneurship at Staffordshire University. At the completion of the course, up to 30 graduates from the MSc have the opportunity to pitch for venture capital investment worth up to £200,000, as well as ongoing mentoring, to support their business ideas.

The key element that makes this programme relevant to revitalising towns is its explicitly place-based focus. The eligibility criteria gives priority to:

- Applicants whose primary address is within 20 miles of either the Stoke-on-Trent or Stafford campus of Staffordshire University.
- Graduates of Staffordshire University.
- Applicants from lower income households.

The scheme also makes explicit that candidates should apply in good will, with the intention of setting up a business in the Stoke area. While the Fast Forward Programme does look to provide support for disadvantaged individuals, it also has the long-term trajectory of Stoke in mind.

Although the Fast Forward Programme is still in its infancy, having only recently taken its first cohort of students, the programme has potential to not only reverse some of the outflow of skilled graduates from the area but also to inject dynamism into the local business environment through the creation, and funding of, new startups.

In this way, the Fast Forward Programme aims specifically to kickstart a virtuous circle by encouraging skilled people originally from the area to return and make an impactful contribution to the economy, in turn making the area more attractive for further investment and workers. The need to not only fund new capital projects, but also to address the root causes of town decline including outward migration, was a consistent message in our workshops.

Fostering local prosperity: Enhancing the business environment across towns

Many of the participants in the Accelerator Panel highlighted recent changes to the economic landscape that present both challenges to the current framework for revitalising towns and opportunities that can harness these economic trends.

Initiatives such as the Towns Fund, and other welcome injections of capital for standalone projects, have given towns some tools to start to respond to these trends. However, our workshops emphasised that the combination of a long-term strategic vision with input from local government, businesses and communities, and a sustained effort to drive change, are needed to fully respond to these changes.

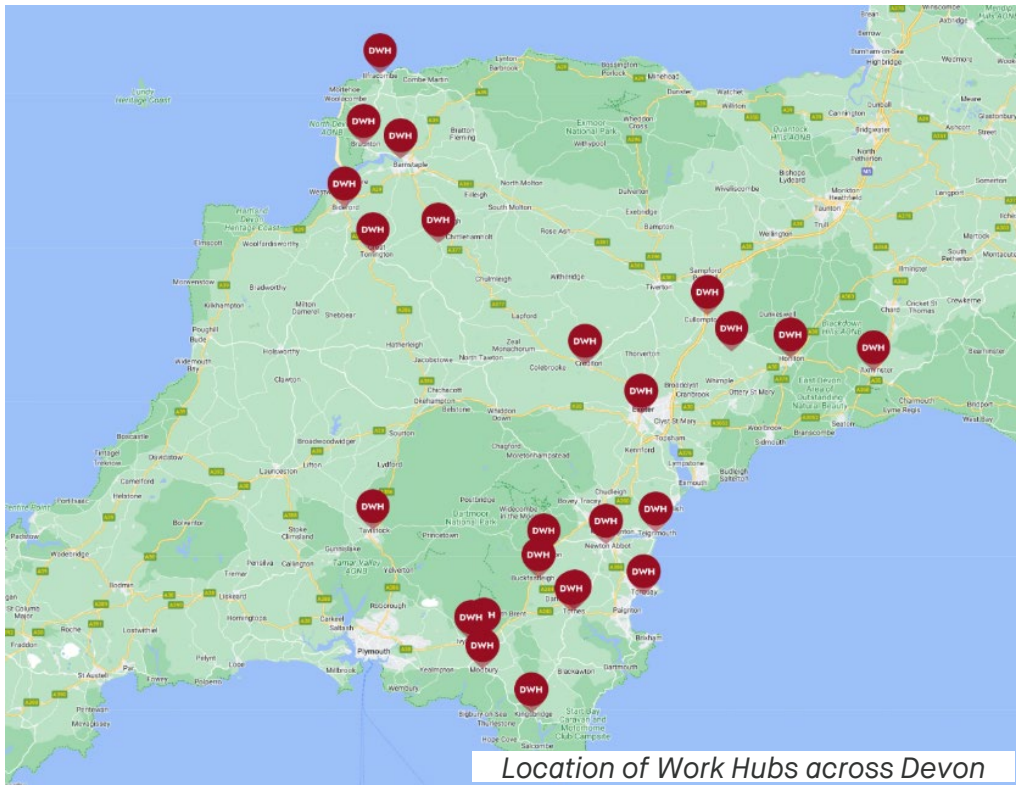
Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing trend of home and hybrid working, which has become a permanent feature of the working week for many across the UK. The shift to more home working entailed large-scale economic disruption initially, but it has also offered towns opportunities to boost footfall and economic activity in their local area, as more workers spend a greater amount of time in and around the town centre during the working week. These dynamics are particularly relevant for towns which are challenged by a less dynamic local business environment and weaker infrastructure connections.

Discussion around how to respond to home working in our consultation process centred on reimagining the high street and town centre areas, for example through creating attractive co-working spaces where residents from different professional backgrounds can work remotely.

In order for towns, and the businesses that operate in them, to fully capitalise on this trend, there must be a continued focus on digital enablement, ensuring employees have the necessary skills, and firms are setup to maximise business resilience in response to the new flexible landscape.

Case Study: Devon Work Hubs - Overcoming digital barriers

The Devon Work Hubs initiative is a network of co-working spaces supported by Devon County Council. The network started in 2012 with two hubs and has since expanded to include 24 hubs spread across the county. To bolster and expand the network, the Council has worked with the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership to secure funding and enable new co-working hubs to open.



Devon has some of the slowest average broadband speeds across the UK.⁵ Average download speeds in West, North and Central Devon are typically around 60Mbps, compared to the UK average of 111.6Mbps. The co-working spaces around Devon offer reliable broadband connections. Selected Devon Work Hubs also feature media rooms with specialist video conferencing equipment including audio-visual equipment, conference phones and large screens.

In addition to connectivity, the Work Hubs also provide businesses with flexibility by giving them access to spaces on a month-by-month basis without the commitment of a regular lease. This has enabled some businesses to expand as a result: for example, REDS Group started out in the Tavistock Enterprise Hub to reduce overheads, and the company has since expanded to own five offices nationwide.⁶

Scotland Rising Star, Annan: Leveraging the town's history to attract tourism and boost the business environment

As a result of its collaborative, proactive approach to regeneration, Annan has made good progress in positioning the town as a tourist destination, through a series of events and by generating new sources of funding.



Annan's History Town Group has worked hard over the past few years to help boost prosperity. This was seen in the face of particular challenges such as the closure of a local large employer, which led to the loss of over 500 jobs and had a wider impact on local businesses and the high street.

To achieve this, Annan has focused on:

Partnership

- By working in tandem with business and community organisations, a long-term strategic project was established to attract more visitors due to the historical significance of the town.
- After consulting with local people and businesses, an events programme was developed to help launch the initiative, working closely with a range of different organisations.
- Following the pandemic, Annan launched its inaugural History Summer Festival, which attracted over 3,000 visitors to the town, and involved over 20 organisations locally.
- Due to the success of the first event, in 2022, Annan delivered its second year of the festival, which saw participation grow to 40 organisations and over 4,000 visitors.

Besides the immediate economic opportunity that strategies such as co-working spaces can provide like increased footfall in town centres, discussions in our town workshops also highlighted some indirect economic benefits in the form of networking and knowledge spillovers that can occur. This is particularly the case if co-working spaces in towns are able to attract a wide range of workers in different fields.

Another area of focus was the many opportunities presented by digital technology, which was also somewhat catalysed by the pandemic. However, there is further to go on digital adoption and connectivity. For example, there are ongoing challenges around the progress of Project Gigabit, the Government's flagship programme for high-speed internet rollout. The scheme aims to reach 85% of UK premises by 2025 and a full nationwide rollout by 2030, however, recent data suggests the rollout stands at 76%.⁷ Besides affecting residents of towns with poor broadband provision, these challenges are particularly holding back the potential of local businesses in towns. 32% of rural firms have reported having internet reliability issues, compared to 17% of urban businesses. More worryingly, around one in seven of rural businesses say slow internet speeds are affecting their ability to contact customers.⁸

Adoption rates of various technologies give a sense of how much further digital adoption among UK SMEs has to go. Although over four in five SMEs have a website, just over half (55%) use payroll software and only around a third make use of customer service technologies and customer relationship management (CRM). Roughly a quarter make use of technology to make data-driven decisions.⁹

The UK's recent Help to Grow: Digital scheme provided SMEs with free and impartial information to help them choose, buy, and integrate new digital technologies as well as vouchers worth up to £5,000 to help with the cost of software. But following low levels of uptake - less than 1,000 vouchers were redeemed by SMEs - the Government took the decision to end the initiative at the end of 2022.¹⁰

The ongoing need to drive digital enablement of small businesses is apparent. National government, local government and businesses can work together to address this by ensuring that digital adoption is a key priority in Local Skills Improvement Plans, and support Business Improvement Districts to provide peer-to-peer training and mentoring on digital adoption.

Tackling these challenges has the potential to unlock huge transformation for SMEs. On a national level, some estimates suggest that greater digital adoption among SMEs could unlock an additional £232 billion per year.¹¹ Looking further ahead, the Towns Accelerator Panel in particular has stressed the emerging role of AI - both in terms of the enormous gains it could bring to businesses, and the importance of companies understanding how this new technology could affect their operating models.

The role of businesses and local partnerships

There was extensive discussion of the crucial role of business in revitalising towns throughout our consultation. Given the lack of local authority capacity discussed in our workshops, there was widespread agreement on the need for, and potential of, strong public-private partnerships in delivering change for towns. Not only can businesses help to alleviate the capacity issues facing local government, but their networks and existing partnerships within the community can leverage efforts to revitalise towns. These networks will be crucial in supporting town revitalisation strategies, removing the risk - as highlighted in our workshops - of new policies imposing solutions on a community.

Some public-private partnerships in recent years have emerged as a response to the effect of COVID-19 on the high street. Councils have partnered with private companies to develop a data-driven response to changing shopping habits and make use of digital technology to revitalise their local high streets.

Let's Celebrate Towns Case Study: The ShopMEA App: Connecting businesses and customers in the wake of COVID-19

In response to the significant challenges to the high street posed by COVID-19, local authorities in Antrim used a public-private partnership to facilitate footfall in local towns through the 'ShopMEA' app. The app was developed by bubltown, a technology company, in partnership with the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council's Town Centre Recovery Group.



The app mainly functions as a tailored local marketplace platform that helps Antrim-based businesses gain visibility and, ultimately, sell more to local residents. More specifically, the ShopMEA app integrates promotional offers in its interface, allowing users to see exclusive deals, reward schemes, and events from local retailers all in the app.

Since October 2021 when the app was launched, 374 businesses have registered, with 245 offers available, 4,429 customer downloads and a social media reach of over 103,000 people. The app has already begun to have an impact in local towns in the area such as Carrickfergus, while the Council there continues to encourage new businesses to sign up to ShopMEA to increase its reach.

Related to the use of shopping apps, many towns have partnered with businesses to introduce local gift card, loyalty and discount schemes aimed at encouraging people to visit the high street and engage with local businesses. There are several examples of this among entrants to Visa's 'Let's Celebrate Towns' competition, from Penarth in Wales – whose Shop Penarth scheme was introduced in 2010 – to Broughty Ferry near Dundee, which has its 'Dundee Loves Local' programme that since 2021 has included 212 businesses and generated sales worth more than £10,800.

Let's Celebrate Towns Case Study: Partnerships in Pontypridd: Successfully leveraging local relationships

Pontypridd provides a good example of how local authorities can work with a wide range of businesses and educational institutions to drive positive change in a town.



The local Council has worked extensively with Your Pontypridd, the local BID, on a number of projects. The Council secured funding and worked collaboratively with Your Pontypridd to develop and implement a Street Café Furniture Permit Scheme. This enabled hospitality businesses to create an improved café culture in the town and increase the offering on the high street in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The partnership between the Council and Your Pontypridd has also enabled the town to make best use of digital technologies. The Council installed free public Wi-Fi throughout the town and worked collaboratively with Your Pontypridd to develop a “Digital Plan”, which encourages a more collaborative approach in how data is captured and used going forward. The Council has also secured funding to trial new footfall technology in Pontypridd with a vision of improving data analytics.

Finally, the Council facilitated a renewed partnership between Your Pontypridd and the University of South Wales, to provide social media student placements in addition to art students utilising areas of the town to create and display pieces of art relevant to the area, as part of their final year assessments. This project is now in its fourth year and continues to foster a positive culture that brings students, businesses, and the wider community together.

These examples demonstrate how public-private partnerships encompassing local authorities, businesses and educational institutions can make towns more flexible and better equipped to capitalise on opportunities from economic trends or digital developments.

Building foundations: revitalising town infrastructure for progress and connectivity

The challenge on infrastructure provision for towns is twofold. Some towns, in particular Heartland Towns such as Buckingham, have a low level of public transport infrastructure. Building infrastructure capacity in these towns will be a crucial part of helping them to move to a more sustainable economy.

Some contributors noted the scope to ensure more integrated and better synchronised travel networks, with different modes such as rail and bus working together more effectively in a manner similar to the Transport for London (TfL) network in London. There is also a need to ensure that transport networks are improved with purposeful journeys in mind; that is, that improved transport networks are connecting people to new employment opportunities, work training or health activities.

Businesses can play an important role in making transport networks across towns more efficient, by working with local authorities and Local Skills Improvement Plans to ensure contactless payment is widely available and improve timetables across different modes of transport (for example by synchronising between rail and bus). Importantly, businesses and local authorities can collaborate to help provide active travel options in areas in the town where there is acutely low public transport provision to reduce modal reliance on cars.

Another facet of infrastructure provision is broadband quality, a theme which came up several times in our workshop discussions. Poor broadband speeds and a lack of 5G infrastructure present logistical challenges for workers and businesses, and poor provision in this area is holding back the economy of such towns.

With Project Gigabit, the Government's flagship scheme for upgrading broadband in the UK, falling behind in its target to achieve 85% coverage across the UK by 2025, there is more to do to roll out superfast broadband. Businesses and local authorities in towns with low broadband coverage can work together to accelerate the rollout of broadband, for example by improving awareness of the Gigabit Broadband Voucher scheme, which provides vouchers worth up to £4,500 for homes and businesses to help to cover the costs of installing gigabit broadband¹².

To meet its target of covering all populated areas in the UK with 5G by 2030, national government could also do more to engage with locally to identify how 5G rollout can be integrated into town revitalisation strategies, for example using street furniture and ensuring that the process for 5G operators to install infrastructure is as simple and streamlined as possible.

Wales Rising Star, Mountain Ash: Enabling local businesses, and supporting diversification boost the local economy

Mountain Ash has benefitted from significant investment over the past 5 years supported by the Mountain Ash Town Centre Regeneration Framework. This has delivered transformational change for the town and the wider communities it serves and sets a solid platform from which the town can thrive and prosper. It also reaffirms the Council's commitment to its town centres as set out within the 2020-2024 Corporate Plan - Making a Difference.



The town is primarily made up of independent businesses who are passionate about the community they serve, with many being locally born and still residing in the local area. Businesses take pride in their environment with many having taken opportunities to access grant support to improve their businesses and the wider town, working collaboratively with the Council to realise a vision of creating a place where people are proud to live, work, visit and invest.

Using local-level data

- In supporting Mountain Ash to become a “Smarter town,” the Council implemented free to use public Wi-Fi throughout the town in 2019, enabling businesses to increase their digital presence and connectivity with consumers, working to becoming a more digitally focused high street.
- The Council also collect footfall data for the town centre and this is shared with the business community as well as local partners and stakeholders. The Council continue to explore new technologies with a view to improving data analytics for the town, using these to inform future investment.

Building sustainable communities: transforming towns for a greener future

Besides making infrastructure more comprehensive and inclusive, as the section above discussed, towns also need support to make their infrastructure and economies more environmentally sustainable.

On the infrastructure side, many towns grapple with low public transport provision, which makes the challenge of lowering emissions and decarbonising particularly challenging as these areas have a high reliance on cars as a result. Investments in rail and bus infrastructure are of course important to improving the infrastructure provision in such towns, but this is something that local areas and towns have little influence over.

However, there are opportunities for towns to build toward greener infrastructure. First, encouraging modal shift by providing more active travel options to residents in towns, and second, enabling the transition to electric vehicles (EVs). Many towns across the country are already pursuing expansion of active travel; this has been seen in Penzance where the town has begun to use Towns Fund awards to alleviate some of their infrastructure challenges through increasing the availability of cycle routes and developing a transport infrastructure scheme called the 'Sustainable Travel Network' to better integrate the town centre with its outskirts.

Towns will need more intensive policy support in addressing the need for EV infrastructure. Businesses can play a key role in supporting EV rollout in towns by working with local authorities as well as town residents and sharing data to identify EV 'cold spots' where there is a lack of charging infrastructure. This will help to ensure that investments in EV charging infrastructure represent good value for money and are effectively matched with demand for charging infrastructure.

Northern Ireland, Town Champion, Banbridge – focus on sustainability for people and business

Banbridge is a thriving town centre with low vacancy rates and a host of independent businesses. It is the location of the new Game of Thrones Visitor Centre which attracts visitors from all over the world. It is in line to receive major investment with an agreed town centre public realm improvement scheme which will result in a major transformation of the streetscape. It is a town ‘woven by tradition sculpted with ambition’ .



Among its other initiatives to help boost the prosperity of the town for people and businesses, Banbridge has demonstrated a wide range of initiatives to help drive sustainable practice. This includes:

- As part of the Urban ABC project, a number of different initiatives have been introduced to address sustainability across the town, which has included:
 - Infrastructure review to ensure that energy efficiency is being adhered to where possible across public spaces.
 - Further introduction of EV charging points across the town. Alongside the development of more cycle stands as part of the Active Travel project.
 - Park and ride facility has been extended to help reduce pollution in the down centre and reduce emissions.
 - A programme of plastic waste reduction, and helping to tackle single use plastic across shops and businesses.
- In addition, the 'Green Economy' business support programme is an opportunity for all local businesses to hear directly from experts in the field of clean energy and how to contribute to the growth of a greener economy. As well as direct consultation and support services available, information is continually shared on social media and other forums to encourage businesses and households to dispose of waste properly, and encourage them to reduce and reuse.

The second central challenge to make towns greener is in making town economies less environmentally harmful over the longer term. As the UK transitions to net zero, ensuring a pipeline of green skills will be vital to delivering the infrastructure necessary to achieve this goal. This presents challenges, but also economic opportunities for towns that can provide opportunities to develop, or use, green skills.

Green apprenticeships – apprenticeships identified as supporting green career pathways – are one way in which towns can provide locally available, skilled opportunities in the industries of the future. The UK government should consider increasing the Apprenticeship Levy transfer allowance to 50%, up from the current 25%, with the conditions that the receiving organisation is an SME, and training and apprenticeship opportunities are designated as necessary for ‘green work’ – work that supports the UKs transition to net zero.

Towns do currently receive valuable support and resource signposting from the High Streets Taskforce (HSTF) on sustainable placemaking. But with the mandate of the HSTF set to end in 2024, there is an ongoing need to provide towns with the advice and resources they need to make their economies more sustainable. One solution could be to prolong the mandate of the HSTF to beyond 2024.

Harmonising Growth: The need for greater coordination and planning

One of the most salient themes to emerge, both from our Accelerator Panel meetings and from the town-type workshops, was the significant challenges the fragmentation of local government in England and Wales poses to the coordination of efforts to revitalise towns and the implementation of policy. There is not only a risk that efforts are duplicated between multiple layers of government and different local actors – as the recent decision by the Government to discontinue Local Enterprise Partnerships illustrates – but participants in our panels also stressed that the complex web of local government makes it difficult to pinpoint ownership of, and responsibility for, a town vision. This diffusion of responsibilities and powers between various actors at different geographic scales presents a potential hurdle to the emergence of a clear and strongly directed strategy to revitalise a town.

Interestingly, in our towns workshop, planning came up as a specific local authority capacity bottleneck. In part, this can be because major commercial or industrial proposals arise infrequently, and it is often the case that there is a lack of experience in a local authority team in dealing with large projects on this scale. Allied to this was the observation that local authorities can sometimes be risk-averse on matters relating to major developments.

A recurring observation that arose in town workshops about the current policy framework for revitalising towns is that policy can sometimes fall into the trap of viewing towns in isolation, away from their geographic and economic contexts. For example, Margate’s economy is influenced extensively by the town’s proximity and connections to London.

For many of those in our discussions, recognising the context of towns also means viewing the relationships between towns and cities, and towns with other towns, as positive-sum. It may be tempting, for instance, to think of cities as pulling local skills out of nearby satellite towns. However, many of the participants in our workshops were keen to stress that success in nearby cities can, and often does, provide benefits to towns in the area.

This observation also tied into criticisms around the prevailing funding model for towns including schemes such as the Towns Fund – that of central pots of money being administered to successful bids from individual towns. In particular, there was a perception among workshop participants that current funding models for towns “put places in competition with each other” and often had a short-term, reactive focus which is not conducive to developing a sustainable long-term vision for a town.

England Town Champion, Bromsgrove: Celebrating collaboration, creativity and high street revival

Bromsgrove was recognised for its efforts to improve the business environment and infrastructure of the area post-pandemic.



Visit Worcestershire in collaboration with Worcester City Council and the Worcester BID have been working to improve the business environment within the City of Worcester. The historic City centre was struggling pre pandemic with falling footfall and large chain stores shutting their doors. Like many Cities, COVID added to the pressure and left the City Centre empty.

The key steps to achieve this were:

Business support

- The City Council recently launched a new Retail Enhancement Grant to support occupancy of empty units and improvements to existing premises.
- The BID became a peer-to-peer network provider, which gave them the opportunity to support and train businesses during a difficult period. Investigating in adaption of businesses, consumer trends, looking at ways to build up consumer confidence. The training was so well received that the BID continued to develop a programme of their own to support the businesses in bouncing back.
- Visit Worcestershire also offered free consultancy support to all tourism and hospitality businesses across the County but specifically in Worcester, ensuring its key assets such as the Cathedral, Worcester Porcelain Museum and the Commandry are all offering relevant experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR – A POLICY FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT TOWNS

The previous chapters reflected on the extensive opportunities to build on current policy frameworks for towns, and highlighted town priorities, before setting out the strategic principles to guide the development of new policies. This chapter therefore sets out how, with the key principles in mind, town revitalisation policy can unleash potential in areas that will support growth in line with the diverse priorities of different town types.

The themes emerging from our Accelerator Panel and the town workshops have informed the development of our policy recommendations, grouped below according to the key metrics we identified in Let's Talk about Towns: people and skills, business environment, infrastructure and sustainability.

Throughout our town workshops, a common theme that underpinned the success of the above-mentioned policy areas arose – the need for greater co-ordination on towns policy.

Revitalising towns is a multifaceted challenge in which different actors are involved. But there is plenty of scope, demonstrated in the wide range of case studies and examples in this report, for both local and national government, businesses and other organisations such as educational institutions to work collaboratively in strengthening our towns' positive outcomes.

People and Skills

The key issues around people and skills we uncovered centred around the need to attract and retain talent to develop a dynamic economy. Currently, many towns face an outflow of young people, many of whom are high-skilled, to cities or other towns as they search for work. On the other hand, a lack of high skilled workers coming into the town can exacerbate this problem, even if the town may otherwise have good infrastructure and work opportunities.

The main focus for policy efforts should be on creating opportunities for skills development and generating high-skilled apprenticeships and plentiful work opportunities. As well as this, there is scope for towns policy to do more to retain talent.

One way to address this would be to **appoint a Digital Skills Lead as part of each Local Authority who specify local skills needs and enable the ability to recommend the repurposing of Apprenticeship Levy Fund underspends for dedicated programmes in towns.**

The underspend on the Apprenticeship Levy is a well-known problem. Targeting Apprenticeship Levy underspends should be a priority in creating skills, and could be done by allowing local authorities to make arrangements with local businesses and educational institutions to pool Apprenticeship Levy accounts. This would enable such institutions to make more efficient use of their Apprenticeship Levy funds and encourage collaboration between a range of key local actors on how to deliver apprenticeships in their area.

Building digital capacity is another key economic opportunity for both people and businesses in towns. Towns should therefore **enhance their work with local communities to expand their practical digital skills**. Working alongside universities, FE colleges and other education institutions, local government and local businesses have a positive role to play in helping to align digital skills training programmes with local priorities.

Enhancing digital skills in underserved communities can help bridge the digital divide. It ensures that all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have more equal access to opportunities in the digital age.

Aside from these recommendations, place-based scholarships such as the Peter Coates Foundation have been a powerful way of not only attracting skilled workers to a town, but also retaining local talent. Delivered by universities, local government can help by raising awareness of such programmes, while businesses can help by providing mentoring opportunities to students undergoing a place-based scholarship, to support their transition into work or starting their own business.

Business environment

As the previous chapter noted, there is more to do to maximise the opportunities for businesses and towns arising from recent economic developments, in particular the growing trend of home and hybrid working and the longer-term opportunities presented by digital technology. Making the most of these by embedding digital skills in town economies should be viewed as a key policy priority.

To grasp these opportunities, public-private partnerships can be used to reimagine high street spaces, incubate local businesses, and bring together people from different professional backgrounds to help knowledge spillovers and generate business ideas.

Taking this further, towns could **allow local councils to set up Digital Growth Zones for digital businesses with exemptions from planning requirements, with a designated council official as a contact point. All such zones should count as ‘Gigahubs’ for the purpose of Project Gigabit.**

While there are many co-working spaces already across the UK, which tend to be privately run, there is scope for deeper public-private partnerships between different local actors to maximise their effect for towns. Local government can provide access to physical spaces and regulatory assistance, while involvement from businesses and educational institutions can come in the form of mentoring and networking events.

In making this a reality, towns should consider **working with local authorities to implement streamlined regulatory processes and approvals for public-private partnerships that relate to the development of innovation hubs or co-working spaces.**

The UK’s recent Help to Grow Digital scheme highlighted the Government’s willingness to support wider digital rollout for SMEs but more could be done, alongside local authorities and businesses, to ensure that they are given the support required to tackle challenges in the current operating landscape.

With a focus on expanding digital skills, towns could **promote regional engagement with the National Cyber Security Centre to help tackle SME-facing fraud.**

Infrastructure

The key policy priorities around infrastructure, identified in the previous chapter, revolve around streamlining and accelerating the rollout of broadband infrastructure to lower barriers hindering the growth of businesses and workers, and expanding mobility in towns by empowering towns and businesses to create more synchronised and effective transportation systems.

To help ensure existing government initiatives are utilised, towns should work in partnership to **accelerate Project Gigabit by considering additional resourcing and improving efficiency**, possibly through the use of dedicated 'Digital Champions', to help inclusion.

These champions would act as a single point of contact for telecommunications companies in local areas and create efficiencies in processes such as granting permission for street works. The Digital Champion should also seek to coordinate broadband infrastructure work with other street work such as those related to the water and gas networks.

Businesses can also play an important role in streamlining transport networks across towns. **Working with local authorities and LSIPs to develop and promote the use of contactless payment and improve timetables across different modes of transport** (for example by synchronising between rail and bus) **will help towns to achieve greater efficiency while ensuring local needs are met.**

This could also help to enhance accessibility, as a well-designed and integrated transit system ensures residents have access to jobs, education, healthcare and leisure activities, which can improve overall quality of life.

A robust transportation infrastructure can also stimulate economic growth by connecting businesses to a larger labour pool and customer base. It can attract new businesses and encourage existing ones to expand, leading to job creation.

Sustainability

As the previous chapter highlights, our consultation noted the importance not just of providing infrastructure, but making sure it is environmentally sustainable and in line with the UK's goal of achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

Linked to the above point, there is a job for policymakers regionally to ensure they are supporting the transition to electric vehicles, particularly in areas with a high reliance on car use, e.g. rural areas, via efficient deployment of infrastructure.

Businesses can play a key role in supporting EV rollout in towns by working with local authorities and town residents, sharing data to identify potential 'cold spots' where there is a current lack of charging infrastructure. This **local-level data and insight should be used to facilitate the deployment of EV charging infrastructure.**

The other side of the coin on sustainability is ensuring businesses, particularly SMEs, are well supported to improve resource efficiency and work to offer circularity to their customers. More sustainable practices can lead to cost savings for businesses and communities. By reusing materials, reducing waste and optimising resource use, organisations can lower operational expenses, and boost profitability.

To help promote this across towns, consider **removing any requirements for change of use planning for repair or re-use businesses**. Instead, **incentives should be offered where businesses can show they have reduced waste that would have otherwise gone to landfill**.

National co-ordination

Throughout our town workshops, a common theme that underpinned the success of the above-mentioned policy areas arose – the need for greater co-ordination on towns policy.

The complex nature of the local government system, particularly in England and Wales, was repeatedly noted as something that can make it difficult to develop, and delineate, a ‘big vision’ for a town with clear ownership.

Meanwhile, the need to avoid the trap of viewing towns in isolation, in competition with each other and with nearby cities, was repeatedly stressed. From this, we conclude there is a clear need to create a **framework that encourages a positive-sum, collaborative relationship between towns and strengthens the sharing of information and open-source data, to inform best-practice decision making across towns**. Consideration should be given to facilitate the sharing of information and resources, through a digital platform available to local leaders,

Equally, consideration should also be given to the **coordination of future national funding models for towns, with a greater focus on ensuring funding deals not only facilitate new capital projects, but also deliver ongoing resources to existing initiatives**. Boosting capacity for these existing initiatives would aid support given to local networks, attract talented individuals to work in priority areas such as local authority planning teams, and maintain the provision and quality of short-term initiatives.

Policymakers could build on this through considering methods of **streamlining and enhancing regional development efforts, for example by allocating funding directly to Regional Town Groups** with a broader mandate to invest in projects that have cross-cutting benefits to towns.

A summary of our key policy recommendations for revitalising towns is detailed below:

Policy category	Policy theme	Policy recommendation
People & Skills	Foster local digital skills development and collaboration.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Appoint a Digital Skills Lead as part of each Local Authority who specify local skills needs and can recommend the repurposing of Apprenticeship Levy Fund underspends for dedicated programmes in towns. 2. Enhance the role of practical digital skills development and deployment across towns – with a focus on communities with the largest shortfalls, for example ‘Foundation Towns’.
Business environment	<p>Promote digital enablement for local small businesses, and expand practical knowledge on related challenges, like fraud.</p> <p>Enable startup ecosystems in towns through public-private partnerships.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Allow town councils to setup Digital Growth Zones for digital businesses that have exemptions from planning requirements, with a designated council official as a contact point. All such zones should count as ‘Gigahubs’ for the purpose of Project Gigabit. 4. Work with local authorities to implement streamlined regulatory processes and approvals for public-private partnerships that relate to the development of innovation hubs or co-working spaces. 5. Promote regional engagement with the National Cyber Security Centre to help tackle SME-facing fraud.
Infrastructure	<p>Enhance integrated transportation and connectivity across towns</p> <p>Promote connectivity enhancement and digital inclusion.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Working with local authorities and businesses, develop and promote the use of contactless payment across all transport routes, to ensure local needs are met. 7. Accelerate Project Gigabit by considering additional resourcing and improving efficiency, possibly through the use of ‘Digital Champions’.
Sustainability	Promote sustainable businesses and communities through circularity and resource efficiency.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Remove any requirement for change of use planning permission for repair or re-use businesses. offer incentives where such businesses can show they have reduced waste that would otherwise have gone to landfill. 9. Leverage local-level data and insight to help the deployment of new electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure. 10. Encourage a focus on embracing the circular economy in ‘Opportunity Towns’ – leveraging best practice, particularly on how circular economy practice can be integrated into UK planning and policy delivery.
National coordination	Collaborative town empowerment and alignment of a long-term strategic vision for towns.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Facilitate collaborative relationships between towns to strengthen information sharing and open-source data to inform best-practice led decision making. 12. Streamline and enhance regional development efforts by allocating funding, both to local capacity building efforts, and to Regional Town Groups with a broader mandate to invest in projects that have cross-cutting benefits to towns.

APPENDIX

Linking policy proposals to towns

Each of the policy recommendations outlined in this report could benefit any of the town types we identified. However, some town types face specific challenges, based on particular metrics. This means that different policy themes will have higher or lower priority for a town depending on their context. For example, Heartland Towns have prosperous economies, however, face significant infrastructure challenges. Therefore, Heartland Towns should prioritise policies in the Infrastructure theme first and foremost.

A summary of the key themes that each town type should focus on, can be found below.

Town Type	Key Characteristics	Top policy priority
Opportunity Towns	Often nice places to live (for example, as measured by resident wellbeing) and sometimes relatively affluent, but scoring below-average on skill levels, infrastructure and business environment. Retaining young, skilled workers is a central challenge.	People & Skills
Backbone Towns	Spread out across the UK, but often clustered around cities or along the coast. Places scoring above average on infrastructure or business environment (but not both), suggesting strengths to build on. These places are below average on skill levels.	Infrastructure / Business Environment
Foundation Towns	Typically 'New Towns'. Towns that perform well on infrastructure and business environment but fall short on skills levels.	People & Skills
Heartland Towns	Typically rural towns with a relatively affluent economy. Towns with above-average skills levels but below-average infrastructure quality.	Infrastructure
Gateway Towns	Role as 'dormitory towns', typically surrounding major cities. Often lack a strong business environment, but otherwise affluent economically, with high wages and excellent infrastructure.	Business Environment

Methodology

Identifying town types

In 2022, the SMF, in partnership with Visa, developed a typology of towns in the UK. This substantiated the ‘Let’s Talk about Towns report’ – that aimed to understand towns better by grouping those facing similar challenges and opportunities into clusters. While each of the town types identified are by no means homogenous, by grouping towns in this way the report builds a deeper understanding of the key policy priorities facing different kinds of towns.

The report was the first of its kind to measure the vitality of towns as distinct statistical units, rather than relying on data based on broader local authorities or regions. This comprised looking at almost 900 towns across the UK based on five key pillars, which are economic prosperity, people & skills, infrastructure, business environment, and sustainability (see appendix for full methodology).

Through this analysis, we identified six different types of towns, each with a different combination of challenges and opportunities. A key finding of the report was that 86% of towns have untapped potential, which reflects the need to better understand and support towns to enable them to thrive. The five types of towns we identified as having untapped potential are:

- **Foundation towns (11%)**, which possess a strong business environment and strong infrastructure, but tend to have below-average skill levels. Taking steps to upskill the local population and attract talent from elsewhere are key priorities for these towns. This should include efforts to improve the liveability of Foundation towns, as they tend to have the lowest resident happiness of all town types.
- **Backbone towns (20%)**, which have below-average skill levels paired with **either** a relatively strong business environment **or** relatively strong infrastructure (but not both). The priority for Backbone towns is to take advantage of their relative strengths to address their relative weaknesses, such as by marketing their strong infrastructure to attract skilled workers.
- **Gateway towns (13%)**, which tend to have strong infrastructure and skill levels, as well as the highest average median earnings of any town type, but below-average business environments. These towns typically surround major cities such as London or Manchester, and a key priority is strengthening local economies to generate well-paying jobs.
- **Heartland towns (21%)**, which tend to have high skill levels but below-average infrastructure, making it difficult for residents and businesses to access jobs and customers from elsewhere. A lack of public transport infrastructure in (typically rural) Heartland towns also fosters car dependency, creating challenges as the UK heads towards net zero. Priorities for these towns are shifting away from private to public transport, providing electric vehicle charging infrastructure and taking advantage of the rise of remote working.

- **Opportunity towns (21%)**, which score below average on all metrics, particularly skill levels, infrastructure and business environments. These towns are spread across the country and face correspondingly multifaceted challenges. However, they have the second highest mean resident happiness score of any town type, and any policy solution for their challenges should avoid damaging the liveability of these towns.

The key pillars for measuring town vitality were as follows:

- **Economic prosperity** was underpinned by four indicators: employment, wages, productivity and economic activity. The first three were drawn from metrics used in the Government's Levelling Up Index of Priority: the 16-64 employment rate from the ONS's Annual Population Survey; annual median pay, from the ONS's Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings; and gross value added, from the ONS's Subregional Productivity data. Economic activity was measured using unique local-level transaction data made available to the SMF by Visa.
- **People and skills** was designed to reflect human capital, incorporating indicators measuring the size, skills and health of the labour force. The proxies for the size and skills of the labour force were the proportion of adults aged under 65 and the proportion of adults with NVQ4+ qualifications, both from the ONS Annual Population Survey. Two proxies were used to measure health: the proportion of 16–64-year-olds inactive through sickness and the proportion of the same age group working with a disability, again from the ONS Annual Population Survey.
- **Infrastructure** incorporated both transport and internet infrastructure. For internet infrastructure, the proxy used was the average download speed from Ofcom's Connected Nations report; while for transport, the proxies used were the number of jobs within an hour's drive or use of public transport, from the ONS's Business Register and Employment Survey and Travelttime.com.
- **Business environment** was underpinned by indicators measuring entrepreneurship, SME support and the strength of the town centre. The proxies used were as follows: for entrepreneurship, new business formation from the ONS's Business demography quarterly experimental statistics; for SME support, perceived support for SMEs from BVA BDRC's SME Finance Monitor; and for the strength of the town centre, local-level transaction data on leisure and retail spending made available to the SMF by Visa.
- **Sustainability** assessed towns' resilience and capacity to respond to the shift to net zero, using carbon emissions, net zero opportunities and carbon intensity as indicators. The proxies used were CO2 emissions from BEIS data on UK local authority and regional greenhouse gas emissions; proximity to net zero clusters from BEIS's industrial strategy; and the proportion of businesses in carbon-intensive sectors, from the ONS's data on greenhouse gas emissions intensity in the UK.

From insight to action: Consultations with towns policy experts

In this next stage of the project, we have built on our earlier analysis from the 'Let's Talk About Towns' report by consulting a wide range of experts in towns policy to develop an actionable roadmap for policies to support town revitalisation. This consultation exercise consisted of three major parts:

- **The Accelerator Panel.** We convened a high-profile, cross-sector panel senior business leaders, politicians, trade associations, and retail experts oversee the project and shape our strategic framework for revitalising towns. The Accelerator Panel met online twice in the project: once on 27th June 2023 to discuss our principles for town revitalisation and review the landscape that new efforts to revitalise towns will be operating in, and a second time on 6th September 2023 to provide feedback on this report and identify key opportunities for further collaboration to highlight the importance of revitalising towns. Each of these discussions were an hour and a half long and held under Chatham House rules.
- **Town Types Workshops.** Over the course of June and July 2023 we held five hour-long online workshops on towns policy, each one covering one of the town types we identified in the Let's Talk About Towns report detailed above. These discussions included local leaders, high street experts, academics as well as representatives from businesses, universities and FE colleges. The workshops focused on the key priorities facing each of the town types, examples of best practice already occurring in the town type, and potential policy solutions to overcoming the key challenges facing each town type. The workshops were also a chance for participants to provide critical feedback on the analysis in our Let's Talk About Towns report, and share their reflections on how different types of towns can be identified and effectively supported. All of the discussions were held on Zoom under the Chatham House rule. The five workshops were as follows:
 - Foundation Towns workshop - 29th June 2023
 - Backbone Towns workshop – 5th July 2023
 - Gateway Towns workshop – 10th July 2023
 - Heartland Towns workshop – 13th July 2023
 - Lev Towns workshop – 19th July 2023
- **Data analysis and synthesis.** Leveraging all available resources, which includes quantitative analysis of ~900 towns across the UK, and qualitative insight gathered through an extensive period of consultation, we synthesised all information into the recommendations within this report.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Talk-of-the-Town-Sept-2022.pdf>

² <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Talk-of-the-Town-Sept-2022.pdf>

³ <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=a394edb5-34c8-4811-81f3-fb8e0bee71b5>

⁴ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2020-0176/>.

A full list of the towns currently involved in the Towns Fund, and each town's corresponding Town Investment Plan, can be found on the fund's dedicated website, here: <https://townsfund.org.uk/towns>

⁵ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/constituency-data-broadband-coverage-and-speeds/#postcode>

⁶ <https://devonworkhubs.co.uk/case-studies/reds-group/>

⁷ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/07/29/paul-norris-exits-building-digital-uk-broadband-falters/>

⁸ <https://www.fsb.org.uk/resources-page/fsb-report-reveals-struggles-of-rural-small-businesses.html>

⁹ <https://www.sage.com/investors/-/media/files/investors/documents/pdf/public%20affairs/sage-digital-britain-report-june-2022.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/final-opportunity-for-businesses-to-access-help-to-grow-digital-scheme>

¹¹ <https://www.sage.com/investors/-/media/files/investors/documents/pdf/public%20affairs/sage-digital-britain-report-june-2022.pdf>

¹² <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/>