

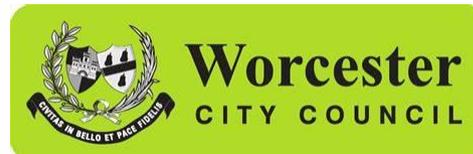


During the pandemic trees and planters with seating have appeared in Regent Street, London – designed by BDP for the Crown Estate and Westminster City Council

High streets and city centres post- pandemic

Future Cities Forum Report (July 2021)

With thanks to our contributors





Historic England



BDP.



Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The high street
- 3 Funding and direction
- 4 The future of shopping centres
- 6 The role of heritage
- 7 Case studies
- 8 Investment in city centres
- 9 Conclusions

Introduction

Welcome to Future Cities Forum's annual high streets and city centres report – based on a series of forum panels and interviews in 2021 - where we examine the nation's appetite to support our shopping and market areas and the initiatives being taken to boost the economic fortunes of retail, entertainment, work life and tourism.

This year, we have been featuring the role of heritage in supporting the ailing British high street, the opening-up of new office buildings as part of the future development of city centres and talking to local authorities as well as investors, architects, for their views on what needs to happen to prevent our high streets from dying after the pressures that Covid-19 has brought.

We have spoken to Westminster City Council's Programme Leader and member of the GLA's infrastructure group, Elad Eisenstein, about the regeneration of one of the most famous shopping streets in the world, Oxford Street, London. New plans have just been announced to transform Oxford Circus into two pedestrian-friendly piazzas, creating significant improvements to public realm and tackling issues with safety, poor air quality and noise.

In the current debate about the levelling up in the UK, we have also shone the spotlight on cities such as Coventry, Leeds, Sunderland, Worcester, and Portsmouth as well as the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham and the City of Westminster, to look at their programmes for recovery.

Questions have been asked around the funding of heritage and decisions to adapt historic buildings for modern use, as well as which innovations can draw visitors back to our high streets. The role of biodiversity, and how bringing business back into centres can prevent the death of retail, culture and the night-time economy has also been examined.

An important story has emerged while writing this report – that of the retail department store owner, John Lewis, voicing its ambitions to move into residential development. Originally reported by The Sunday Times and announced on the BBC news feed today (4/7/21), it claims to be keen to build 10,000 homes for rent, some on new sites, but others (7,000) within its existing property portfolio, ranging from studio flats to houses, providing the business with stable long-term income, while addressing the housing shortage. As the BBC states:

'The announcement comes as the department store retail business has come under increasing pressure from the decline of UK High Streets and the rise of an increasingly competitive online market.'

This has been an interesting announcement, but most people will still want to know what the UK government has been doing to support the high street and city/town centre recovery?

On 17 May, the BBC reported that the latest easing of Covid restrictions in the UK had not encouraged more people back into the shops. The number of people visiting shops – quoting figures compiled by specialist data firm Springboard which tracks how customers are visiting stores – was down by 3% compared with the same time a week earlier.

Compared with the equivalent Monday in pre-pandemic May 2019, footfall overall was 28.4% lower. Visits to high streets were down by 38.4%, shopping centres by 32% and retail parks by 3%.

Two days later, on the 19 May, it was announced that more high streets were to be given money to improve transport links, build homes and transform underused spaces in what was described as a key milestone for the UK government's levelling up agenda. In total, 72 English high streets from Penzance to South Shields will share over £830 million.

The government says this is part of its plan to protect, support and create thousands of jobs in a range of industries, delivering opportunities and prosperity to communities across England.

The plans include £17.28 million for Grimsby to create a new multiplex cinema and market food hall, which it hopes will boost visitor numbers to the town centre plus a new public square and events space to create more vitality and buzz to the high street. In Taunton, £13.96 million investment is being given to build new homes, business spaces and hospitality venues, as well as an outdoor performance venue for events to boost visitor numbers.

Communities Secretary, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

'This funding is part of wider support we are providing to communities and businesses, to protect jobs, support the most vulnerable and ensure no one is left behind as we recover from the pandemic. The investment will make a huge difference to towns and cities across England and transform themselves in desired places to shop, visit, live and work.'

Back in March 2021, the government launched the Welcome Back Fund to help councils boost tourism, improve green spaces, and provide more outdoor seating areas, markets and food stall pop-ups – giving people more safer options to re-unite with friends and relatives throughout the summer.

Read on to find out what Westminster City Council has decided is the strategy for the future of Oxford Street, once the go-to area for retail from the early 1900s and now being re-invented for a greener, and more robust future.



Oxford Street, by the London College of Fashion, looking east to Oxford Circus (pre-pandemic)

The most famous shopping street in the world?

Future Cities Forum has given a focus to Oxford Street, London, in this report as an example of how the pandemic has threatened a famous retail and business area but has also shone a spotlight on issues of sustainability that are now being tackled in a positive new programme.

How far is Oxford Street representative of other high streets in the country, where a mix of office, living, retail and entertainment post Covid-19, needs to be carefully curated in order that our city centres continue to thrive?

We spoke to Elad Eisenstein, Programme Director for Oxford Street at Westminster City Council about how to create a sustainable influx of shoppers and visitors, day to night, and whether it is business and the office market that underpins this?



[Oxford Circus: Crown Estate and Westminster City Council announce pedestrian piazza plans \(Image: Publica\)](#)

Elad Eisenstein described the established but diverse local community in the West End and that the challenges - which were there before the pandemic and which remain - around keeping work, retail, residential in balance. Oxford Street he said 'is not just about retail, there are many offices, and it is a global meeting place for lots of people, but if you remember to make people your focus everything will be alright.'

Elad was asked about the Covid-led change at John Lewis in converting its higher floors at its Oxford Street flagship department store to offices - and whether this would be a growing trend with the area becoming more corporate in feel and less for 'the people'?

'Change in business has been driven by market trends over the last decade and this business focus brings mutual benefits, but well-connected transport is a major driver to retain a healthy balance and mix of uses around Oxford Street with culture and the arts playing their part too.'

'We need to build the night-time economy and support it with the right infrastructure and transport. It is very different for example, in Japan where the shopping centre is full of people at 2am. We need to build a (night-time) experience in London that is as diverse as during the day. But safety remains an issue. You can't just light up the city and fill it with a few clubs to go to. We have to make the West End a place that people choose. Leisure is a big deal and we have learned to appreciate the outdoors through Covid-19. But we need the right transport and infrastructure to fuel interest in coming to these places at night.'

'Art and culture are main drivers to get people to come back into the city, to build our recovery. We need communities in the West End to thrive and businesses to come back

otherwise all that art and creativity which is supported by those communities will suffer. We need to stabilise the arts and artistic community drain from the West End. Music used to be the centre of it. The 100 Club in times past was thriving on Oxford Street but not anymore.'

This summer dozens of temporary shops and art installations will pop up across the West End as part of a campaign to fill vacant space. The 'Pop-Up Exhibitions' is a partnership between Westminster City Council, Heart of London Business Alliance and The Crown Estate and sees artists receiving their own space in the West End, as well as a £5,000 grant.

Westminster City Council has also just announced that Oxford Circus will be transformed into two, pedestrian-friendly piazzas as part of plans with The Crown Estate. The new piazzas will become London's 'front door' and will be the subject of an international design competition through RIBA. Works on the transformed Circus will begin later in the year with the scheme also set to include significant improvements to the public spaces in and around Oxford Circus, creating more pleasant places to eat, drink, shop and enjoy the centre of the city. Additional planting and seating will improve the overall look and feel of the area and encourage dwell time.

Chris Stanton from architects BDP who has worked on improving public realm around another famous shopping street - Regent Street in London - for Westminster City Council and the Crown Estate, commented:

'Streets are evolving into multi-functional scenarios, not just about one thing. We are interested in streets that can adapt not just from day to night but between the seasons and not just for visitors. If we want people to work in city centres, we need to create places that attract top talent, places that they enjoy being in and where they can come down into the street and meet colleagues and socialise.'

'We have to ask ourselves, what do people value and how do they get pride out of where they work? A street is not just a corridor. We have to work at them so that employees feel proud about going back to work and where they can enjoy asking their colleagues to meet them after work.'



Planters and seating on Regent Street London (part of public realm investment in 2020 by the Crown Estate and Westminster City Council – by architects BDP)

'It is not always about making streets feel better through pedestrianisation but getting the balance right through transport - it's about getting people there in the first place. Then the greening and air quality issues should be dealt with for people's mental health. We now have birds and bees on Regent Street and when people see them they feel happy. People start wanting to be there again. I think public realm is almost a reflection of how we see ourselves in society. There has to be a holistic and inclusive approach to providing the right street furniture and seating areas. One of the things we have learned from Covid is that sitting down next to someone is one of the great joys of life.'

'We should also create cities for the old as well as the young. Cities will thrive if we also work on the idea that we can encourage different groups of people to come in and use the city at different times and in different ways.'

'Streets also have to be smarter in terms of deliveries and how we allow for deliveries for example at night that are quiet and do not disturb residents who are asleep. Trials can be very effective at working out these solutions and allow people to experience change that does not frighten them.'



Morley House, Regent Street London (owned by The Crown Estate) and rebuilt by Kier Group, with interiors by MSMR Architects – pre-pandemic

How is the current focus on sustainability influencing the design of our city centres? Should heritage buildings on our shopping streets be preserved and can we bring back residential into our cities for a balanced life?

On Regent Street in London, the Crown Estate has been investing to improve the sustainability and useability of buildings. Morley House was built in 1924. It is a well-known building and façade adding to the character of the shopping street.

Kier Group tackled the need for the re-development of the building and has reached 'BREEAM' standards for improving energy efficiency in its redevelopment.

The plan included retaining the Grade II listed facades, whilst delivering a new core to the building, improving energy efficiency and achieving a BREEAM 'Excellent' rating. The new development provides 1,021 square metres of high-quality retail space on ground and basement levels, as well as 44 new homes for market rent which will go on sale later this year. The project has consisted of demolition behind a complex facade retention system, removing and storing the existing stonework facade and shopfronts for reuse.

Both The Crown Estate and Kier's commitment to sustainability and local community engagement led to Morley House achieving the equal highest Considerate Constructors Scheme score ever recorded in London and a high level of energy efficiency.

'Breathe' panels were installed throughout the redevelopment along Little Portland Street to absorb Nitrogen Dioxide, Sulphur Dioxide and benzene molecules from particles in the air. This enabled the team to measure emissions and through this, they were able to offset over 25 tonnes of CO2 through tree planting.

David McKenzie, managing director at Kier Regional Building London and South East, said:

'We are delighted to have handed over another successful residential project, which demonstrates our capability in safely delivering a high-quality product with bespoke solutions for retained and heritage elements, to our client The Crown Estate.

'This project is testament to the team who have shown unrivalled levels of expertise and innovation throughout a particularly complex redevelopment project on a tight central London footprint. It also showcases our commitment to achieving our sustainability goals and helping our clients to achieve their own sustainability aspirations through the projects we deliver.'

High Streets and shopping centres: who is in charge?

'On high streets and residential density, it is important to say that people come to high streets because they are public places, and we don't want to turn them into private realm. We are concerned about permitted development rights and the spaces above shops that can be turned into flats. Long term we want city centres to engage with people in more positive ways.'

So stated the Chief Executive of Historic England, Duncan Wilson, during a recent Future Cities Forum discussion, continuing the debate about the balance of living space, shopping, offices and high standards of public realm in our cities.

Historic England has done much to save ailing high streets with its Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) programme, but in many towns and cities there is still much to be restored to create attractive places for people to shop and visit.

Bill Addy, Chair of the BID Association (Business Improvement Districts) and Chief Executive of the Liverpool BID Company described to Future Cities Forum how Liverpool has lost some

of its rich architectural heritage since medieval times and is facing a new challenge about its (historic docks) UNESCO world heritage status:

'Liverpool has grown since the 13th century and it has grown because of its river and transport. We have lost a lot of historic buildings through the second world war, and we had a clean slate in the 1960s, but some of that hasn't worked. Fortunately, we had £1 billion pounds of investment put in to build Liverpool One and it was an investment for the long term, enabling the new shopping centre to connect to the waterfront. It is an open shopping centre that uses original streets to connect, and it looks organic.

'The on-going questions are how do you curate place, who owns the city and the big chunk of retail there, pension funds or sovereign wealth funds? Stakeholders who work and live there should come together to have their say. '

Future Cities Forum asked Simon Moscow, Head of Asset Management, Aberdeen Standard Investments about ownership and how investment is being used to secure the prosperity – and re-purpose- city centres and shopping malls:

'Pre-pandemic we were overweight to retail. We held some very good retail investments and we have moved some on but there have been headwinds. It has been a perfect storm of business rates, planning, Covid-19 and the growth of the internet. The pandemic has blown the doors off.

'When we spoke to Sainsburys, Next and others they have said what they expected in five years has happened in six months. The growth of online has been extra-ordinary. One good thing from the pandemic from an institutional landlord perspective is that we have never been so close to our tenants and partners.

'We have been talking intensely to them about operating models and issues of cashflow. We are still running our town centre schemes so those conversations have been very helpful in understanding the models – how much they rely on 'click and collect' and where the deliveries come from, and this has focused our attention on investment strategy.

'We have sold a couple of town centre schemes – Edgware and Wimbledon (Centre Court), both well located on transport hubs – and these will see re-purposing. Everything is re-purposed in retail now. We have huge scale projects in city centres looking at residential, dark kitchens, leisure, conversion to offices. We are a joint owner of Brent Cross shopping centre, we own Churchill Square in Brighton, and other retail parks.

'We are working closely with a council in outer London, where they want more from us – as they have retail and parking, so they need people coming in. Where you own a large part of a city centre, it is much easier to pick up the phone to chief executive or head of planning at the council. The challenge on other high streets is fragmented ownership. The councils though are much more engaged as are the planners. They want us to be more radical. I have never known so much engagement. We are looking now at how to improve local district centres, which have DIY and discount stores – this is their time.

'We don't want to end with zoning, with residential over there, retail there and so on. Consultants are saying mix it up. Leisure is important for the evening economy. Edinburgh – which has the St James development opening soon, is a fantastic city with a wonderful mix of tourism, residential and business. We did the Apple store in Prince's Street some ten years' ago. Debenhams will now be a restaurant with bar on the roof looking over to castle. There is also the Johnny Walker Whiskey Experience to draw in visitors.

'In Gloucester, the university is taking over Debenhams, which is a new use for a department store. However, (in the UK) we have too much space devoted to retail. Repurposing is expensive and takes time especially when it is a covered shopping centre. There will be lots of challenges going forward.

'Sustainability is huge and it's important for the occupiers – office occupiers want to charge their cars. There is a need for solar panels on sheds, and also for retail distribution centres, and (the question of) what we do with waste recycling. Sustainability is a key factor from fund strategy to our asset management plans for buildings and shopping centres.

'Europe perhaps has not been impacted so much by internet sales – we share across our teams in Paris and Frankfurt and Asia Pacific. The wackier idea the better for re-purposing – and certainly just converting to residential is not the only option. It will be a year of lots of change. How quickly will our cities return?'

Our next section of this report looks at the future of the 'shopping centre' within cities, and how new ideas are being deployed to upgrade them for a more engaging experience.



Re-modelling outside space at King's Mall, Hammersmith (BDP)

The future for shopping centres and markets

As part of this report on the future shape of high streets and shopping centres, we asked architect director at BDP, Garry Wilding, for his vision post pandemic. Garry has worked internationally and across major developments such as Meadowhall in Sheffield and the Lexicon in Bracknell, Berkshire – the latter for investors L&G Capital and Schroder UK Real Estate Fund.

He spoke on the following themes: the need for an inter-generational focus, the creation of public performance and entertainment spaces, the requirement for curation during the day and in the evening, and investment in public realm.

Garry described the effect - as he sees it - of the pandemic on retail:

‘It has certainly changed it. Some of the smaller shopping centres will close. The recent headline on store closures from the John Lewis department store chain was stark. They have closed Vanguard Way in York, for instance which was a relatively recent addition. However, there will be a shift and those shopping centres with the right catchment and the right owners won’t die. There will be less reliance on retail and on food. There will be more focus on outdoor spaces and entertainment. What motivates people to do things? If you can add pieces of people’s passions into shopping centres, then you can create a piece of life. I think flexibility is important.

‘The Lex is a really good example. Opened in Bracknell in 2017, the project was a transformation of a 1950s new town where we created an amphitheatre set of steps, as the main event space – and that is the right thing to do today. Having green space is important, as at Westfield in Stratford, East London with the Olympic Park nearby so that families and visitors have a mix of activities.

Garry went on to explain how BDP is currently re-thinking shopping centres:

‘What’s interesting to me is the inter-generational focus. How do we get more people from different age groups living in town centres? It’s not just about the 25 – 40 age group living there. Some centres have too much retail and too much focus on food and restaurants, and because of online shopping growth that is not sustainable. There is a lot of space that can be unlocked for leisure and residential. If you designate a district as a conservation area, you protect but you also need to feed it. The same is true for city centres. These need lifeblood and activity at different times of day.’

‘We are working on King’s Mall near the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, west London. This shopping centre sits within a Richard Seifert designed complex from the 1970s. Ingka (IKEA) bought it one year ago with the need to put a store in. It sits at the heart of Hammersmith, which in fact has quite a lot of office development. There was a refurbishment done three years ago, but not a very sensitive one. Our brief is to make it a place to spend time. IKEA

has a philosophy of the 'meeting place' which is designed to cater for the needs of community. What we are proposing is an amphitheatre of steps, a public space surrounded by residents. The spaces have been unloved. but we can make much more of the site with a flexible events space to give it a heart and focus. We have an ambition to create a community hub. It will be flexible with five kiosks and a 'maker' space run by IKEA to 'hack IKEA furniture', and space for Pilates, boxercise and other activities. The plan is to curate it in a similar way to the successful Boxparks. It will provide different things throughout the day, and it needs to be curated.

'How does King's Mall compete with for instance the behemoth of Westfield White City which is just up the road at Shepherd's Bush or even with Regent Street? The answer lies partly in the need for localism and community amenities that have come out of the Covid-19 pandemic.'

'It's a subversion of what IKEA has done in the past. The company is, in part, moving away from the car. In developed markets in Europe IKEA is developing urban sites, while in regions across India and Russia, BDP is working on the big out-of-town blue and yellow blocks that mark out the traditional IKEA approach.

Ingka Centres (part of Ingka Group), which has 45 shopping centres in 15 countries, acquired King's Mall in January 2020 from Schroder UK Real Estate Fund, with a plan to transform the shopping centre into a new IKEA-anchored urban, mixed-use destination, helping to regenerate Hammersmith. Urban projects like King's Mall, the company writes, are designed to complement IKEA's retail strategy of opening smaller format stores in inner city locations in response to global urbanisation trends and the digitisation of retail. King's Mall comprises 27,133 square metres and 604 car parking spaces.

Garry continued:

'I think the way people approach projects has really changed. I am amazed at how busy we as a practice, more so than a couple of years ago. Public realm improvements have been accelerated because of Covid-19. Regent Street has had little landscaping since it was first created by Nash in the 1800's. In late 2020 BDP's Chris Stanton and Nick Edwards increased the width of pavement and added 80 to 100 planters, putting trees on Regent Street for the first time in history. It has happened partly as a response to Covid-19 impact in order to make it feel cleaner and greener. It is a temporary intervention and trial looking at what difference this can make over one year.

'It's a really interesting time to see if centres can be stronger with more culture and with less focus on single use such as shopping. We think localism will benefit areas like Hammersmith and these will evolve as people will live and work more locally. You will escape your local office for a coffee or to meet someone so you will be more connected with where you live. That will mean people taking more pride in their local area. Secondary centres may thrive, while there are more questions to resolve about the traditional city centres, where corporate offices and big retail have dominated in the past.'



Shepherd's Bush Market stalls today www.myshepherdsbushmarket.com

Historic markets are another important feature of thriving city districts, so we asked Yoo Capital how they can be preserved and adapted to remain relevant? Yoo Capital has started work to renovate the 19th century Shepherd's Bush market in Hammersmith and has also been consulting with the community. Managing Partner Lloyd Lee gave a picture of how his investment firm goes about the process:

'The way we approach every project is about tapping into the individual story of the place. If you don't do that you find that every high street looks the same - it has all been copied and pasted too many times. People fear losing the original story and in Shepherd's Bush market that means the story of its late 19th century origins and the 1950s developments, so we work with that and don't paste over it.

'All collective voices make the original story special. Among the market traders there will be those who remember that their great grandfather was there and want it to be restored to how it was, and the problem is that it has become cluttered, so they asked us to look at this, to bring back the original character.

'Start-up businesses want to be part of a community, so in Shepherd's Bush Market they want spaces where they can chat to the next business across the hall and they want to convey the image of what they are about, shared thinking, shared ideas. They love being part of the 'Victorian fathers' who invented in those spaces, so as innovators they feel at home. The community can represent your corporate ideas better than a glass building on a block can.'

Shepherd's Bush Market is located less than a mile away from the evolving life sciences and tech company hub at White City Place and at Imperial West (the new research and residential campus for Imperial College London).

Future Cities Forum – Case studies

How are individual towns and cities in the UK reacting to the new world they find themselves in after Covid and how do their heritage stories and economic prospects guide them to a strong future? How are they re-developing retail, city centre living and the tourism market?

We chose Coventry, Worcester, Portsmouth, and Sunderland as our case studies to shine a light what has been happening to survive the pandemic.



CGI of Coventry City South regeneration scheme for by Chapman Taylor for Shearer Property Regen Ltd

Case study - Coventry

Preserving the heritage of Coventry has been an essential ingredient in Chapman Taylor's new mixed-use retail master plan for City Centre South, Coventry. The scheme, which has planning permission, will upgrade several areas such as Bull Yard, Shelton Square, city Arcade and Hertford Street, which will make the city a significant shopping and leisure destination in the West Midlands.

The whole scheme will connect the city's much-loved circular market with the rest of the centre, with the aim to have the development open for business by 2026. Chapman Taylor's

urban regeneration master plan for City Centre South in Coventry was submitted for planning application last December 2020, and this has been warmly welcomed by people living there. The plan aims to upgrade several areas of the historic heart of Coventry, including Bull Yard, Shelton Square, City Arcade, and Hertford Street, and will make the city a significant residential, shopping and leisure destination in the West Midlands.

Among its provisions, the greatly improved urban environment will include new residential apartments at the upper levels, new public spaces, new retail units, F&B and leisure and community uses to activate the street level. A curated pavilion building will stand in the heart of a new plaza, which will be fronted by the city's listed and much-loved indoor market. A new hotel, medical centre and cinema will complete the plan.

The proposals have been based on some key principles, namely, to create a strong sense of place, a new but authentic quarter, drawing on the traditional city streetscape, to enhance the setting of listed buildings and to create a development that will stand the test of time. The architectural firm states that the design will remedy ' the mistakes of the past while respecting the best elements of the area's heritage and reinstating a permeable street pattern. The plans are inspired by a wish to restore the authentic spirit of Coventry, including the best pre- and post-war architecture, without resorting to pastiche.

Project Architect, Daniel Morgans commented on how people may be attracted back to the city centre or high street if master plans help to unclutter some of the over-built environments from bad decisions taken in the 1970s:

'We can't predict the future, but it is about reconnecting to the historical past and recognising why Coventry is special and why some of the buildings are listed. The form they create is worth preserving. It is almost going back to Gibson's master plans as well as the medieval plans of the city. The trouble is the way the building of the 1970s has got in the way. The construction blocks the city and prevents good public realm. We need to open up the spaces to allow experimental brands to come in and provide community meeting places. In City Centre South, Coventry, the public realm picks up the structure of the medieval walls and we have opened up the structure for businesses too, so that we will be creating a city centre resurgence with a mixed environment. There will always be activity and things going on and you don't necessarily need a car, you can walk.'



Turkish barber shop in Hales Street, Coventry before restoration (Historic England)

Louise Brennan, Director of Historic England's Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) Programme joined the debate with Chapman Taylor:

'The vast majority of the historic environment is adaptable, and the high street needs to learn to wash its face.

'The High Street (across the UK) needs new uses, and it needs to diversify with more than just shopping. We need use our historic buildings and not be precious. The historic environment of the high street is egalitarian, you don't have to pay an entrance fee to enjoy it, it is for everyone.

'A lot of our high street houses are in truly diverse places. When you think of a place like the Burges in Coventry, there are so many different communities represented there, for instance, guys from Afghanistan running the tailors. Leicester - again, diverse and all those people are really engaged with who was using their shops 100 years ago, so they value the heritage.



Turkish barber shop, Hales Street, Coventry
(after restoration by Historic Coventry Trust)



CGI of The Burges, Coventry: restoration of historic streetscape for Historic Coventry Trust and Coventry City Council funded by Historic England's Heritage Action Zone programme (Corstorphine + Wright architects)

'It is really interesting how the smaller independents have been able to adapt in times of Covid-19. When we put two million pounds into the Burges in Coventry, all the

independents were interested in investing in their buildings, and I am sure that with the big names that just wouldn't have happened.'

'The idea of meanwhile uses - like the brilliant 'natural history' example in Portsmouth - is very helpful but they cannot be the only activity on the high street. What is interesting is how independents have flourished in the pandemic. Little retail operators have been able to adapt in a way the big chains haven't. The Burges renovation project has continued though lock-down. All the local owners are independent and it has gone forward. I don't think this would have happened if the big groups has been involved,'



Coventry City Centre South development - CGI aerial view (Chapman Taylor for Shearer Property Regen Ltd)

Duncan Wilson, Chief Executive of Historic England was asked by Future Cities Forum about funding the restoration of important heritage sites for the survival of cities and their high streets and whether - at the moment- with the effect on the economy from Covid, it was still possible:

' The Burges in Coventry has shown that there is a big role for public sector and the Lottery here. If we start others follow. In fact, we have put several million pounds into Coventry's street regeneration in various parts of the city. Originally shopkeepers saw it as disruptive but have now entered into match funding and engaged with the scheme. Peoples' image of

Coventry is probably ring roads but there is a lot of medieval Coventry still left, often behind cement render. We can give it a new lease of life. There will be sceptics and we may not be able to do everything because of cost, but the evidence of our investment has started to create momentum. There is a realisation that historic buildings are not just a liability but make places where people want to be.'



The Commandery, Worcester (from Visit Worcestershire)

Case Study - Worcester

At Worcester City Council, Chief Executive, David Blake admitted that regeneration of the town centre has been really hard work. The city has the historic Scala Theatre to restore and other heritage buildings dating back to the English Civil War that the council wants to develop to provide renewed interest for tourism. The High Streets Fund is providing a large donation for development, but like all cities, Covid-19 has created problems.

The masterplan will create a successful and growing Cathedral and University city, with more homes, businesses and jobs, a city with high quality tourist, education and retail attractions, and a place that maintains its 'city in the country' feel, its valued heritage assets and environmental quality.

It defines key development schemes and public realm improvement projects that can have a transformational impact upon Worcester city centre. The proposals within this masterplan have the potential to produce the following:

- £385 million additional GVA per year, once fully developed
- Eight historic buildings brought back into economic use
- 3,243 new homes proposed
- 8,610 new jobs created
- £0,7 million of savings for the NHS per year through healthier lifestyles
- Nine new parks, squares, and public spaces and
- 14 kilometres of new cycle infrastructure

Last year, Worcester was one of 101 towns across the UK to be given the opportunity to create a Town Investment Plan (TIP), making a compelling pitch for the funding.

The Worcester Towns Fund Board which comprises fourteen local organisations, has proactively engaged with residents and businesses over the past year to get a broad range of local views to support the development of vision for Worcester and agree on potential projects that the funding could support.

An important focus for the town has been to increase heritage tourist numbers through promoting the national profile of The Commandery, a historic site whose story is central to the ending of the English Civil War, modernising the story of the Worcester Soldier at the City Museum and Art Gallery, using it as a catalyst for learning about democracy and conflict resolution. The aim is to raise the quality of the interpretation at the Guildhall, one of the most beautiful civic buildings in England while providing a new arts exhibition space in the city centre.

Worcester was also awarded £17.9 million from the government's Future High Streets Fund in December 2020 for the northern end of the city, which will enable the re-opening of the restored Scala Theatre and Corn Exchange, as well as providing new homes. David said:

'I am dealing with empty buildings where the occupier has long gone but is still paying the rent, so the owner has no interest in re-letting because they are getting paid anyway. In overall design, I have an aversion to plate glass as I ask myself where's the rhythm, where's the beauty? I spend a lot of my time apologising for what we did in the 1970s, but we have been successful with our Future High Streets funding applications giving us £28 million and we are waiting to hear about our Towns Funding bid too which if we are also successful, will be used over the next four to five years'.

'We are lucky that you don't need to get in a car here because it is easy to walk from one end of the city to the other but the original medieval street pattern has been built over and way finding is really difficult due to the haphazard nature of regeneration over the last years.

'We are acquiring properties, sometimes to knock down and an example of that is the building opposite Worcester Foregate Station in order to reveal a walkway down to the River Severn, which no one seems to be aware of.

'Gradually, as we publish our plans, confidence from the private sector is emerging and we are getting businesses to move into the area. It is important that we are seen to be delivering our City Plan, but we don't want to be a single-use economy. We want to be accessible to a wide range of people. We want to bring people to live back in the city centre but how do we also create a night-time economy with noise and disruption? I am also slightly fearful of the government idea of different zones in cities that separate living and business.'



Natural history pop-up exhibition (by Portsmouth Museums) in empty store in the Cascades Shopping Centre, Portsmouth

Case study - Portsmouth

The UK government 'High streets fund' has been vital in enabling local authorities to rejuvenate struggling areas.

Cllr Steve Pitt, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Economic Development at Portsmouth City Council, told the forum that funding was given for two centres, one in Fratton Road and the other in Commercial Road. Steve stated:

'The Bridge Street shopping centre is unloved and with the funding we want to secure housing on the upper floors with pop up shops and a library on the ground floor. The same for the anchor site in Commercial Road - which hosts a street market dating back centuries - where there should be room for community and culture on the ground floor and homes upstairs.

'This is all based on research from local people who tell us what they want. Part of this is creating good public realm space with nice places to eat and drink with hang out spaces for families.'

'So much of Portsmouth was bombed in the second world war and this includes Commercial and Fratton roads, so we don't have to worry too much about preserving historic shop fronts but where we do have them in Castle Road, we leave them and they are fine....where we have put thought is in attracting people back into centres and we spent only £7,000 on putting a natural history exhibit back into the centre and that drew 60,000 people. It was money well spent.'

'We had an experience recently when we lost both of our anchor department stores in the Southsea area of Portsmouth which is the main tourist area. However, the Knight & Lee store (previously part of John Lewis) is being converted with a food market, gym and co-working spaces with a hotel on the upper floor. The Debenhams store across the road now has planning permission for upper floor conversion to residential which we need and the ground floor is 50% let to a health hub which will bring back thousands of people to the Southsea centre. We are seeing a lot more pop-ups and setting up a giant indoor market during the pandemic has helped market traders. This has done really well. Retail in the High Street is not finished but the identikit approach to high streets is dead.'



CGI of the 'Culture House' in Keel Square, Sunderland - which will contain a new library and meeting spaces (Riverside Sunderland)

Case study - Sunderland

The Chief Executive of Sunderland City Council, Patrick Melia, spoke to Future Cities Forum about getting the balance right in reflecting the past of a city while positioning for its future:

'The city of Sunderland sometimes reflects too much about the past - our coal mining and ship building - and we are currently developing the old Vaux Brewery site and that's great, but we want to tell the story of the future. We have the largest car plant in the UK and we haven't celebrated car building enough. Our heritage is about innovation and engineering and that's also relevant to the future.'

'The High Streets fund is being poured into our Culture House which is a derelict site and contains a library but it will also be a meeting space where people can interact with businesses, different ethnic groups and ages, and where the future can take them, where they will see a positive future for themselves.'

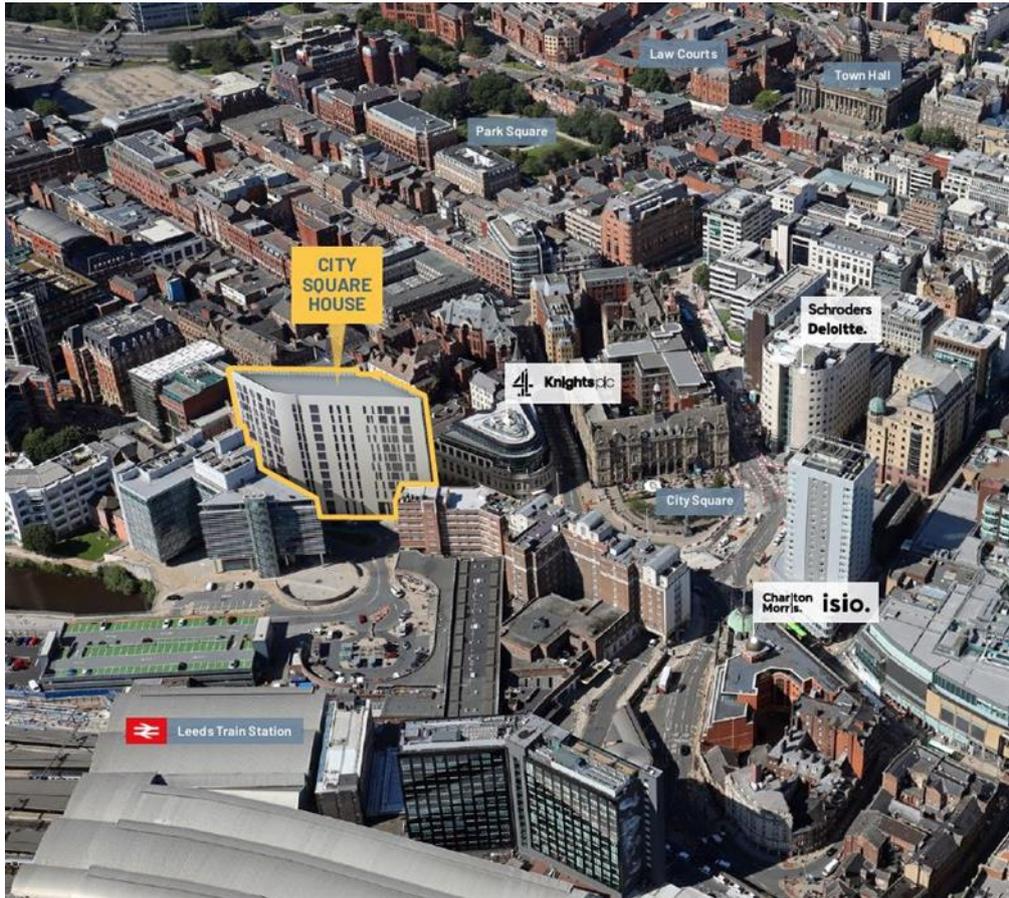
'Sunderland is also an 'intelligent city'. We have lost our ship building and coal mining, but have replaced all those jobs. Unfortunately, in the process we have hollowed out the city

centre, so for the future we have to look at what is right for our residents, how we can re-connect the city internally and connect our communities. We must be a smart city, because that will have a huge impact on health and education'.

'We are re-purposing several historic buildings in the city centre with new tenants. These include a micro-brewery and a hair salon and independent retailers and this is creating a community. We also have a Debenhams store that has closed but we are in conversations with IMAX about a new cinema and entertainment venue. on that site. The growth of independents really heartens me in Sunderland. I think there will be much more communal mix with people being entertained in the library or cinema and then visiting independent shops. Eight thousand new jobs in the city centre will help bring vibrancy back with 1,000 new homes. We have seen student accommodation growth but people living there all the year will bring back the evening economy. You can walk from the middle of the city to the beach in 15 minutes and that is a unique thing if we can connect the two.

'The council has really helped to forge the vision for the future of the city of Sunderland', stated Peter Connolly, CEO of igloo Regeneration which is master-minding a plan to bring orchards and allotments back into the centre as well as housing and a green heating system as part of the Riverside Sunderland development.

'The city is incredibly green and we are working on opening areas and the connection routes. Two new bridges will be put in place and this will help with cycling and pedestrian links and we are also determined to keep car traffic out. We are aiming to create places where communities can talk, where they want to meet and have a reason for going, a sense of place. Applications are in for planning housing involving smart living with the city's aim of being carbon zero by 2030 and this is complemented by improving biodiversity with orchards where people can pick fruit and grow produce in allotments in accessible areas.'



Aerial view of central Leeds, showing relation of City Square House (developed by MRP for occupiers DLA Piper) to the railway station and Channel 4 HQ.

The return to work

As our report stated in the opening section, through the words of Westminster City Council's Director of the Oxford Street Programme, Elad Eisenstein, if city centres and shopping streets are to survive post pandemic, they need a workforce to return to them to support the financial future of retail and evening entertainment.

Investment is needed in office space for this reason both in the South and North of the country and is part of the government's important levelling up plans.

But will the workforce return to the city or insist on working from home at least part-time and what effect will this have on the retail economy?

Law firm DLA Piper, which has a long history in Leeds, has signed a deal with developer MRP to take more than 80,000 square feet of prime office space in the new 12-storey City Square House, next to the Majestic in the centre of the city.

The partner leading the project for DLA Piper, Andrew Clarke, stated that from September DLA Piper would be asking employees to come back to their existing office two to three days a week. Based in Leeds, Andrew Clarke advises a portfolio of local, national and international clients. He specialises in advising corporate occupiers including central government departments, health companies, motor dealerships, charities and property developers.

The construction of the new office has begun, facing City Square and positioned next to the Majestic where Channel 4 is now based. Andrew is optimistic that the new office building - being close to the station and benefitting from expanding new public realm, will be convenient for employees and clients and an attractive place to work:

'I think a lot of our staff do want to come back, but they want to come back to a different type of office, more of a home from home, the design of which is still in progress but will be more flexible and agile.

'Pre-Covid we were carrying out surveys among staff for what they wanted for a better working environment and mental health. So, there will be more communal space, for example, with a very large terrace on one of the floors just for staff, a wellness suite, a prayer room, car parking based on those who need them rather than just partners. There are EV charging points too in the building.

'One thing that is an issue is the lack of a mass transit system in the city. We do look at Manchester and want what that city has. As roads are pedestrianised and the M1 - which comes right into the centre - is shut off, we need alternative means of travel around the city and the plans are only drafts, at the moment. Perhaps the solution could involve the super trams of old, but there does need to be thought to connect north of the city where most of the workers live and also as the city expands east to grow it in a more inclusive way.'



View from Leeds train station to Majestic (Channel 4) left, and Leeds City Square (courtesy Rushbond)

The occupiers and developers looking at investing in Leeds have become very important in recent years stated Adam Brannen, Head of Regeneration at Leeds City Council, and particularly as the city grows as a 'work capital' and the balance shifts from London:

'City Square was one of the original civic spaces in Leeds. It is an 'arrival space' with the station handling as many people as Gatwick Airport. But beyond the station, it is not very well served for transport and those transportation changes that have taken place are not entirely good, damaging the way people experience the space.

'Leeds relies on buses and it isn't great, as we need to improve reliability and make it a better experience. There is difficulty outside the city in getting around. It is really challenging, and we often say it is easier to get to London than to Huddersfield. We don't have smart ticketing and the need for car parking in the city is because there is often no alternative but to drive in. We also need to work on last mile deliveries using e-bikes.

'However, our current plans align around our climate emergency objectives and City Square will become a multi-functional place and a formal backdrop for important investments. The existing architecture, some of it Victorian, some modern will provide for a place of collaboration and coming together. Post Covid, it is much more about the people themselves.'

Future Cities Forum will be keeping a watching brief on the role of office development in city centres through its on-going series of interviews and forums.



Lower Regent Street, London showing new planters, trees, and seating (created by BDP)

Conclusions

When considering our famous retail destinations such as Regent Street, but also smaller high streets, it is important to remember that a street is not just a corridor, but a place to spend time in, shaped for different seasons and somewhere people, both young and old, are proud to spend time in.

Attention to biodiversity and good street furniture is vital. The pandemic has taught us that spending time with one another is vital for well-being and mental health. Trials around night-time deliveries that do not disturb sleep can be helpful for future planning.

There needs to be a balance of 'voices' from the community in determining the shape of city centres and retail provision, where it is not just driven by financial institutions.

In Portsmouth, a £7,000 natural history exhibit in the city centre shopping area attracted 60,000 people, suggesting that there are innovative ways to build the retail experience and get people back to centres.

Good master plans are the result of strong community consultation and an attempt to embrace the form and flow of historic buildings, and marketplaces. They help to unclutter city centres, reversing some of the poor decisions taken in the 1970's, allowing start-ups and new innovative retail to move in, along with creating attractive places to meet.

It is important to tap into the individual story of a place otherwise all high streets look the same. Market places have a history that survives in the memories of the community and must be preserved while being developed. Young start-ups often want to identify with this when they take space particularly if there has been a Victorian history of innovation. High streets should be public places, where the community can meet, rather than turned into private realm.

On financing the restoration of historic buildings in town and city centres, we should get away from them just being seen as a liability. Where organisations such as Historic England invest, often community interest is created and a momentum for match-funding.

Sunderland wants to tell its heritage story as a story for the future. Having lost its coal mining and shipbuilding, it wants to position itself as a city of innovation and engineering. Its hollowed-out city centre will now be filled with orchards and community facilities such as the 'Culture House' where people can interact with business to see where the future will take them.

Well-connected transport is vital to maintain a mix of business, residential, retail and culture/entertainment for young and old around shopping streets. Businesses must come back to city centres to support the arts and night-time culture, otherwise it will die. The night-time economy must be as diverse as that offered during the daytime. Safety and good transport infrastructure are important issues. Leeds, for example, needs a new mass transit system, perhaps along the lines of the historic trams, connecting the North and expanding East of the city.

Within the UK government plans to regenerate high streets and city/town centres, there is some current concern over permitted development rights and zoning.

The return to work is currently being debated with some large firms wanting staff back at their offices. Some employers such as law firm, DLA Piper, are re-designing offices as more of a 'home from home', providing a better working environment for mental health, with wellness suites and prayer rooms along with EV charging.

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