

# Town Centre Best Practice

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**new  
economy**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document sets out examples of best practice both within Greater Manchester (GM) and across the country in relation to delivering a sustainable future for town centres. The work was based on desktop research primarily looking at council policies and practice. The research is, therefore limited to what is available publicly through published research and on-line, and there proved to be very little hard evaluation work on best practice in town centres that give any definitive and clear case studies. A number of council policies which could be deemed best practice are cited that could be rolled out across other towns, taking individuality into account where relevant. These “best in class” examples are highlighted under the following themes.

## **Business Engagement and Leadership**

Trafford, through its Altrincham Forward initiative demonstrates strong leadership thorough well engaged partners, including the Chamber of Commerce, retailers, developers and letting agents to engage stakeholders and potential investors. Within this theme there are clear links to Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) such as in Skipton whose higher business rate contribution, as voted on by the businesses themselves through its BID goes towards marketing and events in the town.

## **Managing Town Centre Services**

Wigan provides an excellent example of town centre management particularly in acting as the interface between the public and private sector. This is built around a number of capital projects under a strong management strategy with 6 clear priorities. Dartford, through their Portas Pilot bid have diversified services in the town centre to actively encourage community based services.

## **High Street Business Support**

Rochdale’s High Street Foundation offers a range of funding support in the shape of mentoring, training and some funding and grants under an agreed set of principals as to the direction of the town centre. In Brighton, support is shown through the Business Rates Empty Property Discount Scheme.

## **Place Marketing**

Bolton has led the way in marketing, branding itself as a “proper town centre”, emphasising its strong assets and traditional town centre appeal. Retailers are engaged with the campaign and contribute financially. The benefits of marketing through councils working together is demonstrated in South Wales where eight towns with limited marketing resources have worked together to promote particular aspects of their town centres.

## **Public Sector investment and risk bearing**

The Knowledge Quarter in Bolton has been highlighted for some time as an exemplar regeneration project to demonstrate the viability of the location for private sector investment. This strength is being built on via the Bolton Innovation Zone. Oldham council has looked at innovative ways of de-risking investment for potential investors in the area particularly under its clear town centre vision, this is particularly evident in the support given to the development of the leisure offer in the old town hall. Stockport council has a pro-active strategy, purchasing both land and individual buildings for strategic interventions such as with the Grand Centre office scheme.

Brixton have developed a Brixton Green Community Land Trust where a Community Land Trust buys land at a reduced rate from the local council to provide useful collateral against which to borrow.

## **Public Realm**

Investment in new and high quality public realm is a key part of the place shaping role of all local authorities across the country. In Greater Manchester it will particularly be important in the development of Metrolink service and footfall to the key town centre locations. Altrincham have used public realm to facilitate business growth. Leicester's Street and Spaces initiative provides some evidence that investment in public realm has improved and attracted new businesses.

## **Traditional Markets**

Bury is a prime example of a successful traditional market which is regionally significant and has a strong brand. Similarly, Ashton-under-Lyne's indoor and outdoor markets are trading strongly and provide a real focus for town centre activity. Bradford's market celebrates and reflects the cultural and social diversity of the area and the Boqueria market in Barcelona is an international example of traders having greater responsibility for, and hence a greater stake in, the upkeep and promotion of the market.

## **Meanwhile Use**

The practice of meanwhile use has strong political will as one option that is currently being explored in a number of towns and cities in order to fill vacant spaces with the aim of helping to rejuvenate public spaces. The concept can cover a number of the themes outlined above. Examples of best practice in meanwhile use are plentiful locally and nationally as well as even internationally, and some not specifically in a town centre location are still relevant. If GM co-ordinates, particularly its meanwhile use activity, it could potentially leverage economic benefits as well as social, cultural and environmental improvements

The first stage of this desktop research has been developed further by adding in depth case studies of those best practice examples that are of most interest to the local authorities. The following schemes outside of GM have been explored further to add most value to our evidence:

- Business Improvement Districts – such as in Skipton
- Darford's community based Portas pilot scheme
- Brighton: The Business Rate Empty Property Occupation Discount Scheme
- Brixton: Green Community Land Trust
- Bradford: International Markets
- A more detailed look at public realm and in particular Leicester: Streets and Spaces
- A more detailed look at meanwhile use and in particular Glasgow: Stalled Spaces

# 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Our town centres lie at the heart of communities but are facing a series of fundamental challenges. The growth of e-commerce and large out-of-town retailers means the retail sector is going through a revolution, and town centres are struggling to adapt. This trend is set to continue and accelerate with the amount of retail space required within town centres set to contract by nearly a third by 2020. It is essential that we redesign the offer that our town centres make, based on an evidenced understanding of their unique characteristics and the changing market to both consolidate existing strengths and develop an offer that meets emerging demand.
- 1.2 A comprehensive review of Greater Manchester's (GM) eight principal town centres was undertaken over autumn 2012. Using an independent team of private sector experts, the reviews tested the thinking and approach behind local town centre strategies and made a number of specific recommendations for enhancing them. Outcomes were agreed by the GMCA<sup>1</sup>, which tasked New Economy with implementing the research recommendations.
- 1.3 Individual Councils are now updating their town centre strategies in light of the reviews, developing a sequenced programme of interventions to enable the centres to respond to changing markets and consumer demand. The reviews also pointed to the need for further collaborative work to better understand the role of town centre marketing, car parking and business rates in revitalizing our town centres as well as the need to support more independent business and build much closer relationships with large multiple retailers and leisure organisations.
- 1.4 As part of this shared plan of action, a broader piece of research has also been prepared to bring together examples of best practice from across GM and the country in general. This has been a desktop data gathering exercise, but seeks to identify innovative practice, new solutions to common challenges and critical success factors so that these can be applied more widely and rapidly within GM. The desk top assessment was carried out during Autumn 2013. Individual town centre strategies will each have their own focus, shaped by local priorities and the different assets in each centre. However, a strategic approach to all town centres will include a number of common elements and the examples of best practice are structured around these common elements:
  - **Business Engagement and Leadership:** meaningful private sector engagement at all levels, setting a clear vision and strategy as well as coordinating decisions or activities to maintain progress towards the vision
  - **Managing Town Centre Services:** ensuring that basic public services meet the needs of local businesses and their customers

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<sup>1</sup> The full GM Town Centre Report can be accessed at

[http://www.agma.gov.uk/cms\\_media/files/12\\_gm\\_town\\_centres\\_project.pdf](http://www.agma.gov.uk/cms_media/files/12_gm_town_centres_project.pdf)

- **High Street Business Support:** practical support to make it as easy as possible for business to locate and grow in a town centre context
- **Place Marketing:** a clear brand that is strongly promoted to target markets
- **Public Sector Investment and Risk Bearing:** direct investment to attract or de-risk private sector development, utilising measures like local authority covenants to provide confidence for further investment in town centre schemes.
- **Improving the Public Realm:** investing in the public realm of a town centre to develop the sense of place and create vitality by raising footfall and lengthening dwell time
- **Traditional Markets:** managing a successful and distinctive market

## 2 BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES

The concluding report of the GM Town Centre Study identified a number of policy themes to engage town centre management teams to focus on a way forward in the light of declining retail potential in town centres not just in GM but across the country. The following highlights these themes with examples of best practice from within GM and nationally.

### 2.1 Business Engagement and leadership

Success is far more likely when local authorities, private sector businesses, landowners, investors, and the wider community share a vision for their area and, through strong local leadership, work together to deliver that vision.

**Trafford** council has high levels of engagement with local businesses and takes the lead on where the town centre should go in the future through their Altrincham Forward initiative<sup>2</sup>. The council has a policy of actively finding businesses to move into vacant properties in the town centre with the aim of reducing vacancy periods. The council has also helped to promote business-led initiatives such as *drive2thrive* (a competition among the local community to come up with town centre policy ideas). Strong leadership through Altrincham Forward and well engaged partners, including the Chamber of Commerce, retailers, developers, letting agents, and the civic society has engaged stakeholders and potential investors, promoting regeneration from the bottom up.

**Wigan** have engaged with business directly through the development of their Wigan Plus Card<sup>3</sup>, similar schemes have been implemented across the country such as Kensington and Chelsea Wedgecard<sup>4</sup> and smaller schemes, such as in Haselmere in Surrey have also had similar success in terms of number of businesses engaged. These are often linked to local currency schemes, such as the Totnes Pound in Devon and the Lewes Pound in Sussex and have a similar beneficial effect for local shops in terms of keeping more money circulating locally

**Skipton** is one example of businesses being engaged through the development of a Business Improvement District (BID)<sup>5</sup> where businesses voted to add one percent to their business rates to go towards town centre marketing, festival funding, public realm improvement and training for all members. Having this single organisation has helped Skipton to negotiate with national firms and make sure they compete with other independent shops on a fair basis.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.altrinchamforward.com/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://wiganplus.com/files/6213/0639/8133/partner\\_info\\_pack.pdf](http://wiganplus.com/files/6213/0639/8133/partner_info_pack.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> NEF (2012) Reimagining the high Street: Escape from Clone town Britain

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ukbids.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://welcometoskipton.com/bid/introduction>

### **Case Study – Skipton’s Business Improvement District**

The Skipton Business Improvement District (BID) was established in 2009 to support the changes from an old market town to a contemporary tourist destination and gateway to the Yorkshire Dales. There is a high proportion of independent retailers in Skipton which is why the BID is seen to bear an important role. The vote determining the future of the BID is due in January 2014 and the ATCM predicts the loss of the BID might mean the loss of independent shops with a further effect on the retail balance in the town (ATCM Successful Town Centres – Developing Effective Strategies, Annex B: Case Studies). The cost of the BID based on the 1% of rateable value charge, is less than £100 for more than half of the businesses involved. During its first term, the BID has invested in excess £485,000 to the town’s benefit with a further £391,496 invested via third party or partner funding stimulating the economic activity in Skipton. During its second term the BID is aiming to ensure a thriving business community remains in Skipton which is not only an attractive place to visit but a pleasant area to carry out business. The BID has funded a range of initiatives during its first term, ranging from festivals to training and business support. (Skipton Business Improvement District Detailed Proposal Document and Business Plan.)

## **2.2 Managing Town Centre Services**

Town Centres have a leading role as a focus of public and private sector services as well a community role and local authorities have a key role in managing this diverse range of services. **Wigan** Council provides an excellent example of Town Centre management. This management acts as the interface between the public and private sector and aims to encourage retail businesses to participate in and contribute, financially or otherwise, to a range of services and development of the town centre. There is a strong planning framework for the town centre built on a number of capital projects, especially in terms of major gateways and transport improvements. Key elements are the relocation of council employees through the Town Hall refurbishment and the Life Centre and the Northern Crescent Learning Quarter (new college and University Technical College, with a Youth Zone and public realm improvements) The broader management strategy has six clear priorities - rebalancing the town centre, the quality of the environment, accessibility, broadening the leisure offer, learning facilities and change within the Town Centre.

**Dartford's** Portas Pilot bid was based on trying to diversify town centre services by giving the high street a community centre type role rather than just a functional retail location. Dartford Council have provided suitable venues in the town centre and the shopping centre hosts regular 'fun days'/arts and crafts days in empty units aiming to get people into the town centre through actively encouraging community based services and groups .<sup>7</sup>

#### **Case Study – Dartford My Street**

A Portas Pilot scheme was carried out in Dartford over 18 months to revitalise the town centre. The bid brought in total £159,000 of funding with half matched by Dartford Borough Council to deliver the Dartford My Street programme. The scheme included twenty £1,000 bursaries for entrepreneurs to start up new market stalls, six new pop-up market stalls, seed funding for a six-month Sunday Market pilot and free Sunday parking, events to boost the evening economy, equipment for community activities, a loyalty card scheme and Dartford My Street App in addition to specialist training and business support. £15,000 was invested in community activity equipment with a further £30,000 earmarked for purchasing an event space in a High Street location. The bid aimed to create social capital and added value to existing regeneration projects in the town centre. Announced in May 2012, further evaluation of the scheme is yet to be published. However, the number of empty shopping outlets has been reported to increase in 10 out of the 12 towns, Dartford included. The success of the programme should be evaluated in full including reviewing details of footfall levels and other than retail based town centre activity, as the majority of the support provided by the programme was invested in market, pop-up and event based activities.

## **2.2 High Street Business Support**

The Portas Review and the Grimsey response to Portas believe there needs to a more joined up approach to planning for the town centre to engage and support business and towns as a whole. **Rochdale** Council has set up the High Street Foundation which aims to enable local businesses to work together with Rochdale Council to create a vibrant and sustainable high street both now and in the future. A range of business support is offered in the shape of mentoring, training and some funding and grants. The foundation has an agreed plan and eight principles which mean that all the members are in broad agreement with the council on where they want the town centre to go.

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<sup>7</sup> Republica (June 2012) 'Clubbing together: The Hidden Wealth of Communities'

**Brighton** has engaged with and assisted businesses with The Business Rates Empty Property Occupation Discount scheme<sup>8</sup> which started operation on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013 and is scheduled to operate until the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015. It provides a six month discount to business rate payers who occupy long term empty (over 6 months) non domestic properties. The amount of discount will vary according to the Rateable Value (RV) of the property, so that smaller and medium-sized businesses would benefit proportionately more than larger ones. Opinion was sought from various interested parties, including City Regeneration, Planning and the Property Estates team as well as commercial agents Cluttons. All felt that there was merit in the scheme and that it would only serve to support local business. There was positive support for the focus on more support for smaller and medium sized businesses via a tapering effect of aiming the discount at lower Rateable Values. Further feedback was gleaned from informal discussions with the Chamber of Commerce and the Brighton and Hove Economic Partnership. As the overall feedback was positive and the initiative was supported. The scheme had originally been designed with three months of support in mind but as a result of these discussions and some further analysis of the caseload, the scheme now covers six months of discount, albeit for a lower range of Rateable Values. A review of the actual costs and the effectiveness of the scheme will be reported back to the Council after the end of the financial year 2013/14. Similar schemes have been trialled in Northern Ireland<sup>9</sup> and in Scotland offering 50% reduction in business rates for 12 months for occupiers of business premises which have been vacant for more than 1 year. Towards the end of 2012 52 businesses had benefitted from a 50% reduction on their rates totalling £143,000 since the introduction of this rate relief in April 2012.

#### **Case Study – Brighton’s Empty Property Occupation Discount Scheme**

Brighton City Council has set aside £100,000 of its 2013/2014 budget for a new business rate relief to assist businesses in Brighton & Hove. The Empty Property Occupation Discount is part of the council’s broader economic development objectives with prospects of revenue increases from business rates in the longer term. The scheme is set to run from 1 October to 31 March 2015 offering a six month discount for businesses occupying non-domestic properties that have been empty for at least six months. The discount varies according to the Rateable Value (RV) of a property with smaller and medium-sized businesses benefitting proportionally more than larger businesses. Businesses with RV £24,999 or under, receive a 100% discount and businesses with RV of £25,000-£34,999 receive a 50% discount. There were 506 empty properties in Brighton & Hove in August, which could qualify for the discount, with 86% of the properties having RV lower than £35,000 (<http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/press-release/council-proposes-new-discount-help-local-businesses>). The scheme applies to a range of properties from shop units and office blocks to medium-sized businesses and as such it is a contribution to the council’s commitment of creating 6,000 jobs in the city. (Brighton & Hove City Council Policy & Resources Committee Agenda Item 47.)

Both Grimsey and Portas recognise the importance of the planning system in the management of town centres. Grimsey<sup>10</sup> recommends that the business plan for the town centre should come first with planning applications fitting around it and Portas<sup>11</sup> urges the Government to cut planning red tape. They believe that the change of the planning use class system could be used effectively to prevent empty units on the high street and recognise that engagement with landlords plays a key part in minimising the number of empty shops. For example, Grimsey suggests in particular that the change of use process could be used to convert entire sub-high streets to residential or other uses within the agreed high street plan and relocate the successful independent retailers into the main commercial centre.

### 2.3 Place Marketing

The promotion of town centres which highlights a particular strength and/or exploits how a particular town centre is different is particularly important within such a competitive environment. In Greater Manchester **Bolton** has led the way in place marketing. It has branded itself as a “proper town centre”, emphasising its strong retail assets, public and leisure amenity and traditional town centre appeal. A key strength of the campaign is that retailers are fully on board, to the extent that they are contributing 50% of the cost of the campaign. This “bottom up” approach to understanding branding and marketing was specifically recognised in the town centre reviews and the AGMA report recommended that other local authorities liaise with Bolton in order to learn from and adapt their experiences.

The advantages of town centres working together has been highlighted in the marketing of the **Rhonda Cynon Taff** area in South Wales. The eight towns in the area, with limited individual marketing and promotional resources worked together to promote particular aspects of their town centres and tourist attractions.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/the-grimsey-review/>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.maryportas.com/wp-content/uploads/The\\_Portas\\_Review.pdf](http://www.maryportas.com/wp-content/uploads/The_Portas_Review.pdf)

## 2.4 Public Sector Investment

Initiating public sector investment can demonstrate confidence in the town centre, and to develop a pro-active strategy as well as de-risk private sector investment. **Bolton** Council were highlighted in the 2010 GM Town Centres' study as using public sector investment to develop a strong business case for their emerging Knowledge Quarter. They have built on this strength with the Bolton Innovation Zone (BIZ), a project aiming to regenerate the area around the University to demonstrate its viability as a location for private sector investment. It includes a new Health Centre (Bolton ONE), expansion of the university and the relocation of two of the town's FE colleges and as well as a refurbishment of Bolton market. There is the potential to further increase the impact of the Knowledge Quarter by utilising a number of sites within the town centre for incubator space to support entrepreneurs and small businesses linked to the university and colleges.

**Oldham** council has looked at innovative ways of de-risking investment for potential investors in the area. The Council has a clear vision for the Borough outlined in the Invest in Oldham prospectus. The town centre is a critical element of Invest in Oldham, with over 50% of the investment (circa £56m) of public funds being allocated to developing the town centre. The Council's approach of direct financial intervention is innovative and bold but driven by necessity given the market position. The review of the town centre strongly support proposals for The Old Town Hall, redeveloping this listed building into a landmark multiplex cinema with the Council putting significant funds into the scheme.

**Stockport** council has a similarly pro-active strategy, purchasing both land and individual buildings for strategic interventions. Key investment priorities are the Grand Central office scheme, relocation of cinema and restaurants/retail at Bridgefield and regeneration around Underbanks and Market Place for independent business.

Another approach is the use of council support is working with Community land trusts, one example is being tested in **Brixton**<sup>12</sup>. This Community Land Trust has bought land at a reduced rate from the local council and another landowner, local

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<sup>12</sup> [http://s.bsd.net/refoundation/default/page/-/publications/Reimagining\\_the\\_high\\_street\\_2.pdf](http://s.bsd.net/refoundation/default/page/-/publications/Reimagining_the_high_street_2.pdf) p.28

people then buy shares in the Trust. This provides useful collateral against which to borrow and is a clear example of the community getting a genuine stake in the future development of Brixton by purchasing land for themselves. The Trusts work enables occupiers to pay for the use of buildings and services at prices they can afford, while the value of land, subsidies, planning gain and other equity benefits are permanently locked in, on behalf of them and future occupiers, by the Trust, helping small independent businesses and new kinds of green businesses such as recycling and repair workshops get a foothold in the town centre. The challenge of the Trust has always been raising the capital to purchase land in urban areas but the **Brixton Green Trust** do this through a community share issue which has proven to be an attractive alternative way of locals investing their savings rather through banks.

#### **Case Study – Brixton’s Green Community Land Trust**

The Brixton Green Community Land Trust (GCLT) is working in partnership with Lambeth Council ensuring a strong level of community involvement in the plans to redevelop part of Somerleyton Road in the heart of Brixton. The site is situated 400 yards from the Brixton Underground station but has seen significantly less activity than the area on the other side of the tracks, which means it has had reduced economic activity and has been seen as a community safety issue. The project is set to run from December 2013 to April 2017 including a studies and team selection, community stakeholder meetings and workshops scheduled to take place throughout the project. The first stage of the project includes detailed planning and funding proposal production with a review before entering the second stage, which includes the actual planning application process in 2015 with construction running from July 2015 to April 2017. The project has been identified as a major opportunity to boost local community engagement as the Council is committed to work with the community to lead the regeneration project and offer longer term management once the site is built.

## **2.5 Public Realm**

Investment in new and high quality public realm is a key part of the place-shaping role of all local authorities. High quality and attractive environments can play a fundamental role in increasing the time people spent in an area and in raising and directing footfall. This can directly help to grow turnover for neighbouring businesses and can lead to new business investment. The importance of this will be paramount in **Ashton under Lyne, Oldham and Rochdale**, where investment in public realm will help to connect passengers using the new Metrolink service to the main town centre services. There are a number of public realm strategies

across GM with a particular focus on the town centres. One example is that put forward by **Altrincham**<sup>13</sup> and one recommendation of the town centre reviews across the centres was further investment in public realm in particular to facilitate business growth. In light of this more specific and detailed case studies will be sought from the districts.

There are various examples of public realm being used throughout the country and various good practice guides. Living Streets commissioned research company Just Economics to bring together the evidence of the commercial and consumer benefits of good walking environments.<sup>14</sup> Research shows that making places better for walking can boost footfall and trading by up to 40% and that good urban design can raise retail rents by up to 20%. The report found that Leicester, previously described as having a traditional city centre, lacking public open spaces and suffering from dereliction and underinvestment in many areas had made significant efforts to improve and enhance its public realm. In 2005, a public realm strategy was initiated in response to the redevelopment and expansion of the Shires Shopping Centre (re-launched as the Highcross) in the centre of Leicester. This three year programme of investment – the Streets and Spaces initiative – led to £19 million of improvements across the centre, to regenerate and transform its appearance to help it to benefit from and attract new visitors. Measures included pedestrianisation, de-cluttering, new street paving and street furniture, tree planting and changes to street lighting. A survey of business carried out during the project's implementation found that 91 per cent felt that the space surrounding their business location had recently improved, and 64 per cent agreed that these improvements have been good for business. Furthermore, 73 per cent stated that the improvements had helped to attract visitors. It was also noted that the flagship John Lewis store, the retail anchor of the new Highcross development, would not have been secured without the Streets and Spaces initiative.

#### **Case Study – Leicester's Streets and Spaces Project**

A three year public realm improvement programme was carried out in Leicester City Centre to develop the physical fabric of the city centre and attract more visitors. The project launched in 2005 coinciding with the regeneration of the Highcross Shopping Centre. Character areas and streets, distinct city spaces, meeting places, gateways and thresholds were identified for enhancement using city design. The qualities of each of the identified eight areas were strengthened by using different elements of urban grain, material, scale, street pattern and colours to match each area. Character streets with no major transport routes were pedestrianised while changes to lighting, purposeful planting of trees and installing innovative street furniture were all used as tools to revitalise the City Centre. A business survey was carried out during the project by ESOTEC showed 91% of Leicester city centre businesses reported an improvement in the surrounding space and 73% stating that the improvements had helped attract more visitors to the area. The project brief can be accessed on the Leicester City Council website

## 2.6 Traditional Markets

Traditional markets provide an opportunity in many town centres for existing market trading to be used and extended in terms of both location and diversity of offer so that the market brings benefits across more areas of the town centre. **Bury** is a prime example of a successful traditional market which is regionally significant and has a strong brand. It provides a distinct role and contributes to the town being a visitor destination. In a report by the CLG<sup>15</sup> looking at traditional markets Bury was sourced as an exemplar of good practice in using the market to link with other parts of the town centre. Also within GM, **Ashton-under-Lyne's** market area including the indoor and outdoor markets are trading strongly and provide a strong focus as a functioning core of the town centre.

The Retail Markets Association in the CLG report also noted that one reason for the success of **Bradford** International Market was that it celebrated "the cultural and social diversity of the area with "signature market events" held over a number of bank holiday weekends. The report also noted that England could learn from the relationship between trader and authority organisations in Europe. In the Boqueria market in **Barcelona** for example traders have greater responsibility for, and hence a greater stake in, the upkeep and promotion of the market than do their counterparts in English markets. All traders as part of their licence are required to join the trader organisation. The traders in turn employ staff to promote the market and liaise with the city authority, who in turn employ specific staff to look after the interests of the market.

### Case Study – Bradford's International Market

Bradford started hosting the large outdoor market event offering continental products in 2004. The event attracted over 650,000 visitors and returned to Bradford in 2006 after a year in Trieste, Italy. The event has grown to be much more than a bank holiday weekend market as it combines a fun fair and an art market in addition to the professional entertainers and street artists from across Europe. The International Market has been part of Bradford's Big Summer campaign offering events almost every week from June to September. Due to its success, the continental markets have become a regular event reflecting the multicultural population in the area – especially Oastler Market and Kirkgate Market offer an abundance of international and continental products. The Bradford District Council has recognised offering a high quality shopping and leisure experience as a way to reflect the city's cultural mix. The markets form one key part of the city centre and exploiting the city's cultural assets is seen as a key issue in the Bradford City Centre Area Action Plan 2013-2028.

## 2.7 Meanwhile Use

One overarching example of best practice which is emerging within the realm of the work around town centres is that known as “**meanwhile uses**”, Meanwhile use is best defined as “*the temporary use of vacant buildings or land for a socially [and ultimately economically] beneficial purpose until such time when they can be brought back into commercial use again.*”<sup>16</sup> Some examples have already been touched upon previously but it is worth looking at this concept in more detail. The concept covers a number of the themes derived from the GM Town Centre Review in particular business engagement and leadership, managing town centre services, high street business support, strategic public sector investment as well as leveraging council assets to support town centre investment

The practice of meanwhile use has had national attention as one option that is currently being explored in a number of towns and cities in order to fill vacant spaces with the aim of helping to rejuvenate public spaces. The previous government used pilot initiatives to enable community uses of an increasing number of vacant property and sites. This work was led by Meanwhile Space, a community interest company, who support diverse initiatives such as pop-up shops for young entrepreneurs to revitalising derelict land through community gardens. These pilots were highlighted as good practice in the Portas Review. The Coalition government has brought forward a number of acts and policy interventions which are increasingly starting to make the use of ‘meanwhile space’ a more viable and necessary proposition to all stakeholders. These include the Empty Property Rates Relief introduced in 2010, bringing a huge financial incentive for landlords to make space available in the meanwhile period; the Localism Act 2011 enabling local authorities to retain a significant proportion of the business rates generated in their area and new powers to reduce the business rates as they see fit and in 2011, the rateable value threshold for empty property rates dropped from £18,000 to £2,600, which increased the number of landlords affected from 30% to 95%. In 2012, DCLG announced changes to the planning system use class to facilitate temporary uses for up to 2 years.

A website has been developed to enable potential landlords to be matched with potential occupiers as well as a toolkit to get meanwhile use off the ground [www.meanwhitespace.com](http://www.meanwhitespace.com). However, this facility appears to be somewhat underused but is a resource that could be utilised in the future.

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<sup>16</sup> [www.meanwhile.org.uk](http://www.meanwhile.org.uk)

Whilst stakeholders seem keen on the idea of meanwhile use in principal, there a number of conditions that will need to be in place in order to encourage take up of this scheme. There are a number of key themes that emerge from the evidence around meanwhile use that need to be taken into consideration. These include the central role of business rates as well as the restrictive nature of “use class” regulations. Business rates in particular could prove vital to the success of meanwhile uses, as financial benefits to the key stakeholders are vital to encourage involvement. There are clear benefits of the scheme to property owners or leaseholders such as the security of active occupation, lower costs during vacant periods and increased prospect of future commercial occupancy. The potential future use of the space could be of interest to community groups and occupiers who would take advantage of some prime locations perhaps giving a low risk space for innovation and growth and preventing knock on blight.

Examples of best practice in meanwhile use are plentiful locally and nationally as well as even internationally, and some not specifically in a town centre location are still relevant. For example, locally, Stagecoach Manchester ended its century-long association with its Princess Road site in August 2011, when it moved to new purpose-built premises on the Sharston industrial estate in Wythenshawe. The land was acquired by **Manchester** City Council, who invited the community to make suggestions for a ‘meanwhile’ use of the land, while its long-term future was discussed. One of these suggestions was an urban orchard<sup>17</sup> which was implemented with very limited funding and revitalized the area through involvement of the local community. In **Oldham**, a small community led cinema was developed in an empty shop unit in Oldham Town Centre<sup>18</sup> where there was a leisure opportunity identified which was not being met by the town. This was developed with an initial Arts Council grant and continued support of Oldham Council’s Arts Development team the project is going from strength to strength.

In the rest of the UK **Glasgow** Stalled Spaces<sup>19</sup> is a good award winning model of meanwhile use with an impressive number of community based projects that they have funded in 2011/12. Projects that are part of the scheme include public realm, local food production and play areas run on a volunteer basis. **Sheffield** have developed a community scheme that aims to use temporary 'meanwhile use'

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.manchester.gov.uk/news/article/6577/time\\_is\\_ripe\\_for\\_urban\\_orchard\\_on\\_former\\_stagecoach\\_depot\\_site](http://www.manchester.gov.uk/news/article/6577/time_is_ripe_for_urban_orchard_on_former_stagecoach_depot_site)

<sup>18</sup> <http://thesmallcinema.com/about-us/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=13600&p=0>

leases to get creative entrepreneurs and independent businesses into empty shops<sup>20</sup> In Sheffield there are also opportunities within meanwhile use<sup>21</sup> for the arts and cultural uses. The Island, in **Bristol**<sup>22</sup> is a temporary use of an old police station in Bristol city centre which is awaiting development in a partnership between Urban Splash (owners) and Artspace Lifespace<sup>23</sup> Similarly the college project, also in Bristol is a 2 year temporary use of an ex-vocational college in Bristol agreed between also with Artspace Lifespace and the HCA. Both these spaces operate with discretionary business rates relief as multi-use arts and community resources incorporating studios, training spaces, events, urban agriculture, galleries and performance.

**Belfast's** strategic approach to high street decline has led them to conclude that 'meanwhile uses' can be more than a 'pop-up' craze and that they can be meaningful and generate a long term and sustainable future for many of its vacant historic buildings<sup>24</sup> A more indirect approach to historic empty buildings has been developed by Liverpool<sup>25</sup>. A project from **Liverpool** based social enterprise PLACED that explores some of the city's empty buildings by inviting residents and visitors to share memories, stories and images of buildings that they worked in, visited and used but can no longer access. These memories will form the starting point for considering what the future of these buildings could be; developing ideas about how the potential for these buildings can be unlocked.

In **Greater London** there are various examples of a 'pop up' approach to revitalising and making town centres more interesting and attractive. These include a pop up mall in Shoreditch (BoxPark)<sup>26</sup> and a pop-up theatre (Arcola Tent) in Hackney<sup>27</sup> The concept continues to restaurants/cafes in Greenwich<sup>28</sup>, Peckham<sup>29</sup> and Kings Cross<sup>30</sup>, to the reuse of an old underground train for business in Shoreditch<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/the-northerner/2013/may/17/sheffield-high-street-common-people>

<sup>21</sup> <http://artspacelifespace.com/index.php?/current/the-college>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.theislandbristol.com/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://artspacelifespace.com/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.uahs.org.uk/cmsfiles/Meanwhile-to-Meaningful--Meanwhile-Uses-for-vacant-historic-buildings-UAHS-April-2013.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.hiddenliverpool.org.uk>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.boxpark.co.uk/about/#>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.hackney.gov.uk/art-in-empty-sapces-arcola-tent.htm>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.themovementgreenwich.com>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.londonpopups.com/2013/06/franks-cafe-rooftop-pop-up-in-peckham.html>

There are linkages between meanwhile use and Business Improvements Districts<sup>32</sup> with examples being in Gabriels Wharf on the South Bank<sup>33</sup> where old garages, now with shop-fronts added, now make excellent retail design studios and in Camden Town where businesses have set up Camden Town Unlimited<sup>34</sup> which incorporates various business led initiatives including a pop-up shop programme

Internationally, the USA and in particular Australia have taken ambitious strides to counter the threat of empty or vacant properties and sites to their economy. In New York, 596 Acres<sup>35</sup> is a scheme with the aim of providing new community spaces in neighbourhoods where green and recreational areas are scarce. Through its interactive mapping it is also a good example of how to integrate and hybridize physical fieldwork with digital and programming work. In Australia, funded by the New South Wales government and the University of Technology in Sydney, a toolkit has been developed to promote short-term reuses of empty shops and spaces for creative and community development<sup>36</sup>. The site publishes tools for empty space coordinators to start a 'pop-up' initiative, success stories, information for landlords and local government about creative space reuse for local development and an online community to share knowledge.

From a brief review of literature and case studies in relation to meanwhile uses and general best practice above there is clearly a wide range of creative and innovative practice acting in relative isolation. This raises the question as to whether, if GM co-ordinates, particularly its meanwhile use activity, it could leverage in significant economic benefits as well as social, cultural and environmental improvements and is clearly one thing that could be explored further strategically.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.kingscross.co.uk/press-release-2012-05-17>

<sup>31</sup> <http://villageunderground.co.uk/about>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.ukbids.org/>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.coinstreet.org/developments/gabrielswharf.html>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.camdentownunlimited.com>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.ciudadesaescalahumana.org/2012/09/crowdsourcing-underused-urban-assets.html>

<sup>36</sup> <http://emptyspaces.culturemap.org.au/page/toolkit>

### **Case Study – Glasgow Stalled Spaces**

Glasgow Stalled Spaces is a meanwhile project started by Glasgow City Council and Glasgow Housing Association in 2010 to address the high level of vacant sites in Glasgow, which is more than in the rest of Scotland put together. The project has successfully brought 13 hectares of land into temporary use – out of which 8ha are located within the worst 15% of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation dataset according to the Central Scotland Green Network. The range of purposes is broad with a focus on green spaces within the city. Examples of use include green gym/outdoor exercise, exhibition space and arts projects, outdoor education, pop up park and other innovative ideas. The project brings new temporary purposes for vacant land, open space and earmarked development sites that remain under utilised. Stalled Spaces has been awarded the City to City Barcelona Fostering Art and Design (FAD) Award marking the project's success. The project does not only put vacant space into good use but develops projects with community groups improving people's social, economic and environmental wellbeing. Stalled Spaces has received nearly £500,000 match funding (up until 2012) as a result of Community Support in addition to smaller investments from Glasgow City Council and Glasgow Housing Association. The value of in-kind support for the project has been estimated to £56,000. The Stalled Spaces website is linked to the Glasgow City Council website (<http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=10691>).

## 3 CONCLUSION

- 3.1 It is clear from the examples highlighted in this brief just how diverse the range of projects and schemes are in relation to the strengthening of town centres not only within GM but nationally. Common threads do emerge including the need to diversify the offer away from retail, working in partnership with business as well as other town centres in the area, embracing new technology and encourage new ways of working to engage local people
- 3.2 It is also clear that the examples of best practice have got to be finely tuned to an individual area. What works in Bradford, for example, focusing on the cultural and social diversity of the area and other areas encouraging visitors to certain aspects of a town's heritage, exploits the individual aspects of a local area and its population. Finding areas of individuality is just as important as finding areas of common interest and working together is possible in both respects.
- 3.3 Only some of the case studies discussed in this brief have been subject to thorough evaluations with continuation depending on the success of the project. While Brighton's empty property occupation discount scheme is deemed to be worthwhile based on previous business rate relief schemes, for example Dartford's community based Portas pilot scheme awaits further evaluation despite the significant funding the scheme has received.
- 3.4 One thing that has clearly emerged from this broad look at best practice is that there does not appear to be any strong and consistent evaluation of the schemes that are out there on the ground both within and beyond GM. Evaluation is key not only to assess if money is being spent wisely and to its maximum effect but in also being able to learn from what things have, and perhaps more importantly, have not worked too well.