

BRILLIANT BUILDINGS

REIMAGINING TOWN CENTRES



High street heroes

How local authorities are delivering more sustainable, inclusive and relevant urban centres for their communities to live, work and play in

DOES THE TOWN CENTRE HAVE A FUTURE?

Town centres were undergoing enormous change before Covid-19 accelerated the process. They now face a series of challenges. Changing retail habits, a decline in footfall as more people 'work from home', and poor-quality public realm mean that the very purpose of a town centre high street is being urgently redefined. This also presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to regenerate and reimagine town centres so they are more sustainable and relevant to the evolving needs of local people.

Strong leadership driving change

While some towns are focusing on leisure and culture to bring footfall back into their centres, others are looking to health or education. New homes remain vital for unlocking tomorrow's town centre – but with a more strategic mix of tenures and demographics to ensure communities and economies that meet local needs. 'Mixed use' has a more wide-ranging meaning too, with independent retailers and businesses gaining more importance.

Spurred on by government funds such as Future High Streets, Levelling Up and Towns, the places rising to the challenge of reinvention benefit from strong leadership and a clearly defined vision of what is needed to thrive.

Disruptive approaches

The Covid-19 pandemic has also served to refocus priorities. The future of town centre placemaking means addressing four important challenges: social parity, community spirit, healthy transport, and access to open spaces and greenery. Underpinning this is a need for new, disruptive local approaches.

Private sector funding is a must – but not at any cost. Many local authorities have already made great strides, leveraging local and central government funding to create investable masterplans, while retaining control. Here we look at examples of how some of our local authorities are doing this.

Reinventing town centres is complex and ever-evolving. It requires new forms of partnership and collaboration which are yet to emerge. What better time to start?



David Atkinson, national head of land and development, Willmott Dixon

REINVIGORATING POPULATION CENTRES

1 / Rochdale Riverside

Working with the council alongside a Genr8 and Kajima joint venture, Rochdale Riverside, we delivered one of the town's most important schemes in a generation, which provided 200,000 square foot of retail, leisure accommodation, a 520-space car park and a six-screen cinema.

2 / New homes in Rotherham

We worked directly with the council on three separate housing developments in the town centre, providing 171 new homes for sale, shared ownership and affordable rent; a key element of the council's housing growth programme and Town Centre Masterplan.

3 / Wool Market, Doncaster

Our renovation of Doncaster's popular Grade-II listed Wool Market transformed a run-down facility in the town centre into a thriving destination, breathing new life into a high street that badly needed investment to stimulate renewal and growth.

4 / Broadmarsh, Nottingham

Nottingham City Council used our skills to prepare the Broadmarsh area in the city centre for future development. We are now working with the council to deliver Nottingham's new 20-acre Green Heart regeneration scheme.

5 / Stockport Interchange, Stockport

Our team of town centre regeneration experts is transforming Stockport's bus station into the new Stockport Interchange mixed-use development. The state-of-the-art transport interchange includes a two-acre town centre park and 196 new, high-quality apartments.

6 / Station Quarter Skills Hub, Telford

Willmott Dixon has been working with Telford & Wrekin Council on its Station Quarter regeneration project. Planning on the new digital skills and enterprise hub in the town centre has now been granted and is underway.

7 / Smithfield development, Stoke-on-Trent

Working with Genr8, our team delivered the Clayworks build-to-rent apartments and Hilton Garden Inn Hotel at the transformational Smithfield development in Stoke-on-Trent, which is central to the council's regeneration plan. This underused part of the city will become a new district for people to live, work and connect in.

8 / Stockton Globe, Stockton-on-Tees

The plan to rejuvenate the high street in Stockton-on-Tees saw Willmott Dixon transform an iconic 1935-built theatre that was previously derelict. The newly restored Globe Theatre is now the biggest live entertainment venue of its kind between Newcastle and Leeds, giving a projected annual £18m boost to Stockton's economy.

9 / Ashton Rise homes, Bristol

In a first for Bristol City Council, our development solutions team helped the council unlock and build 133 homes to deliver much-needed new housing for local people, with 40% of homes available for social rent. It is a crucial part of the Bristol mayor's commitment to build 2,000 new homes in the city.

10 / Llys Cadwyn, Pontypridd

Pontypridd has been revitalised with a development providing a headquarters for Transport for Wales, alongside a library, council customer contact point, and a leisure and fitness centre. The work with Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council delivered a flagship development that replaced the 1960s-era Taff Vale Shopping Centre with bustling facilities that are stimulating further investment.

11 / Finzels Reach, Bristol

Over a period of five years, we have helped transform this part of Bristol, with a mix of build-to-rent homes and offices. This includes more than 400 homes for Grainger on two separate sites, plus two BREEAM outstanding commercial premises: Aurora, completed in 2018, and the Halo office situated nearby.

12 / Gascoigne Estate, Barking, London

Willmott Dixon's regeneration skills are being used by Be First, Barking and Dagenham Council's regeneration company, to transform the east side of the 1960s Gascoigne estate into a modern, environmentally friendly community with more than 400 new homes and public realm space.

13 / Queens Drive, Swindon

Swindon Borough Council is using our team to provide a gateway to the town centre with nearly 150 new homes that are carefully designed to pay homage to Swindon's heritage as a rail industry powerhouse by using the same grid formation of the site's former engine sheds.

14 / The Box, Plymouth

Willmott Dixon transformed a collection of Grade II-listed buildings into Plymouth's landmark cultural attraction, celebrating 400 years since the sailing of the Mayflower to America. A major attraction for visitors, featuring in *Condé Nast Traveller's* top 20 destinations, the Box is home to the UK's largest regional film and television archive, holding 250,000 individual films.



Pictured on the front page: Llys Cadwyn has transformed the very heart of Pontypridd, breathing new life into the high street (see no. 10).

1. ADAPTING TO DISRUPTION

In Rotherham, the council has ambitious plans, including the creation of two new zones – the Riverside Residential Quarter, and the Leisure and Cultural Quarter, which includes the regeneration of the Guest & Chrimes heritage site, a former brass and iron foundry. With awards of £12.6m from the Future High Street Fund and £31.6m from the Towns Fund, Rotherham now hopes for an £19.5m boost from the Levelling Up Fund.

In the meantime, it has decided to develop three crucial housing sites itself, supported by Willmott Dixon as construction partner (see Development models – the options, p8). “We don’t want to compete with the private sector. We should be looking at the more difficult sites, laying the foundations for future investment,” explains Jane Davies, head of strategic housing and development at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. The strategy is already bearing fruit, says Davies, with a private housing development underway near one of the three sites.

Conscious decoupling

When Portsmouth City Council ended its partnership with a developer to deliver the city’s northern quarter, the local newspaper reported it as a blow to Portsmouth’s regeneration plans. But for Tristan Samuels, director of regeneration at Portsmouth City Council, the move was quite the opposite: a “conscious decoupling” which gives the council far more control over its own destiny.

“When it came down to the commercial conversations about what risks we should take and what risks they should take, our views were very different,” explains Samuels. “What we thought we were buying into and what we would have got turned out to be different.”

Kick-starting private development

The council has also purchased an adjoining former Sainsbury’s site, with plans for a mixed-use development. The council has set up its own arm’s-length property development company, Ravelin, with five sites earmarked for new housing and a mission to kick-start the private housebuilding sector.

Portsmouth is one of several councils taking the lead in major regeneration

programmes rather than allowing the private sector to dictate terms, says David Atkinson, Willmott Dixon’s national head of land and development. “We are seeing more and more councils acting like developers and investors,” he says. “That means they aren’t letting the proceeds leak away from the council and they are retaining full control, working with partners that can facilitate, accelerate and enable their vision.”

Rotherham, Portsmouth and others are part of a new breed of more bullish councils, says Atkinson: “There is an acceptance that local authorities need to be more hands-on and interventionist. We will be seeing more and more disruptive models emerging.”



“WHEN IT CAME TO COMMERCIAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RISK, OUR VIEWS WERE VERY DIFFERENT.”

TRISTAN SAMUELS, DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION, PORTSMOUTH CITY COUNCIL



Rochdale Riverside Key facts

£39m
Project value

200,000
Square feet of mixed-use space

520
Car park spaces in the town centre

£20m
Predicted local spend during delivery

Right: Rochdale Riverside is a landmark regeneration project that will transform the town’s retail and leisure offering. **Opposite:** Supported by Willmott Dixon, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has developed three key housing sites itself. **Top:** We are also working with Gen8 and Kajima in Stoke-on-Trent on the transformational Smithfield development.

2. STIMULATING INVESTMENT

The investment momentum for town centre regeneration is growing. Aside from the central government funding to which local authorities have been applying, there is interest from institutional and private investors.

The challenge is how to best deploy central and local government funding to create the momentum that attracts private investors. “We start from the premise that town centre regeneration invariably is not financially viable,” says Mike Smith, founding partner at Gen8, a specialist developer which focuses on regeneration. “Because of the cost-value equation, projects often require some kind of financial public support.”

Funding cocktail

In addition to central government funding, councils can borrow money from the Public Works Loan Board or deploy income-strip arrangements, typically where an investor develops an asset which a council then leases back. “Quite often it is a cocktail of the three,” says Smith. “The trick is to come up with a cocktail that suits that particular council.”

Smith points to Rochdale as an example of how this approach can work. First the council worked to bring a new metro link into the town, built a new bus station and new office buildings for itself in the centre. This critical mass of investment paved the way for a partnership with Gen8, investor

Kajima and Willmott Dixon, that enabled the council to deliver the £80m Rochdale Riverside phase one, which combines retailers such as M&S, Next and H&M with a six-screen cinema, Hollywood Bowl and Puttstars. This momentum means they are now embarking on phase two: 240 apartments and a Hilton Hotel.

“It’s incredibly satisfying to hear what the public are saying about it now,” says Smith. “People are starting to fall in love with the town centre again and we are bringing young professionals in to live.”

Skills deficit

Securing funding requires a specific skills set which some local authorities may lack, a factor recognised by Homes England in May 2021 when it launched its Local Government Capacity Centre. This aims to support councils that don’t have the broad range of skills needed to get housing developments up and running, offering best practice tools, funding information and an online learning programme.

Another huge challenge is the pace of change, only quickened by the pandemic. “We see some councils that have worked with consultancies for 18 months or two years and by the time they come out to the market, everything has changed,” says Smith. “They need organisations who can help them shape their vision based on the realities of how things are delivered.”



3. THE RIGHT MIX - ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL



Town centres require a redevelopment strategy that attracts a demographically diverse crowd over different phases of the day. 'Mixed use' is taking on new dimensions with health and education facilities relocating into centres, local food outlets and retailers adding value and leisure activities transferring from the outer edges of towns to their centres.

"There's a real focus on tailoring solutions to meet local requirements," says David Atkinson. "It could be anything, including residential, some commercial, and retail, perhaps focusing on independents and public services."

Mixed residential

Residential elements must be equally mixed, explains Jane Davies, head of strategic housing and development at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, of its three key developments.

"With Willmott Dixon, we have designed a scheme that covers something for everybody: housing and apartments, homes for sale, shared ownership and council rented," she says. "Because we are developing the sites ourselves, we are able to focus on creating the

legacy of sustainable communities."

Achieving different mixes in town centres requires new collaborations. Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, for example, is working with local authorities to see how it can repurpose vacant council-owned retail premises as health facilities. This is a strongly recurring theme in central government (see box: Health on the High Street).

"Some councils invested in retail, which means they are quite heavily exposed," says Wayne Heal, head of property services at the Trust. "This is a way to find new uses for empty premises whilst driving footfall." The goal is that by locating health services in these empty retail properties, neighbouring ones will become more marketable.

Trusts and councils will need to work together, perhaps sharing costs based on broader economic and social impacts.

The pandemic has taught Trusts how flexible services can be, says Heal. Smaller retail units could be repurposed as clinics whereas larger ones, such as former department stores, could be transformed using offsite-manufactured pods.

Aligned goals

Education providers and councils can have beautifully aligned goals, explains Tim Hulme, executive director of resources and organisational development at East Sussex College: "If you look at local authorities in a post-Covid world, all their recovery themes are similar to our themes in further and higher education," he says.

"If you can prioritise investment that puts social and economic inclusion on a par with



Above: Tim Hulme, executive director of resources and organisational development, East Sussex College.



Health on the high street

The *Health on the High Street* report published in December 2020 by the NHS Confederation speaks on behalf of NHS service providers and Power to Change, which represents community businesses.

The report makes the case for reshaping health services and relocating some to empty retail premises in town centres. As well as driving footfall, this can make services more accessible to a wider range of people and increase the possibility of active travel. The report also talks about how NHS Trusts can help inform the design of town centres, to create healthier, happier places.

Among the report's recommendations are a better alignment of the funding available and the suggestion that the Levelling Up Fund should have a greater focus on healthy high streets and favour funding models which see local authorities, government, charities, community and private investors all working together. <https://www.nhsconfed.org/publications/health-high-street>

decarbonisation, that will have a much bigger impact on communities, whilst still meeting carbon reduction targets and generating strong returns."

Meeting diverse needs

For the college, which has campuses in Lewes, Newhaven, Hastings and Eastbourne, this means a far more strategic approach to meeting the diverse needs of the communities in which it operates. For example, developing live-work-study units aimed at vulnerable people or creating touchdown spaces and support for local businesses.

A big part of Hulme's role is working with local authorities on bids for government funding. In Hastings the college worked with Hastings Borough Council on its town fund bid, which will include a new Green Construction, Energy & Vehicle Training Centre to boost green economy skills locally.



Top: Refurbishment of Doncaster's Grade II-listed Wool Market breathed new life into a high street needing investment to stimulate renewal and growth. Above and left: The three developments for Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council contain a mix of apartments and houses for sale, shared ownership and council rent.

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TIM HULME, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, EAST SUSSEX COLLEGE

4. DEVELOPMENT MODELS - THE OPTIONS

Creating the right town centre development model is about redefining success through a very local lens. Value for the public sector is not the same as for the private sector, which is why local authorities are taking more control, shaping their development vision proactively from the earliest stages.

In Rotherham, the council took the decision to develop three challenging, yet pivotal, brownfield housing sites in the town centre at Wellgate, Sheffield Road and Westgate. "These are gateway locations into the town centre and therefore very important for placemaking," says Jane Davies, head of strategic housing and development at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. "But they are difficult sites;

the private sector wouldn't have been able to develop them in the short term."

Rotherham started working with Willmott Dixon early, not only on the technical solutions and designs, but also on a marketing strategy, which Willmott Dixon is delivering alongside the housing. "It's vital to have a really good sales, marketing and communication strategy from the outset," advises Davies, "particularly if you are creating a new market."

Rotherham was able to secure funding from Homes England and Sheffield City Region to complement the council's own significant investment. The town centre masterplan to introduce 2,000 new homes is a crucial part of the region's economic success, enabled by

a wide range of infrastructure improvements, including the tram-train connection to Sheffield.

The concurrent development of a leisure quarter, Forge Island, in parallel with the housing sites is also good news, says Davies, as one will fuel the other.

Delivery partners

In Rochdale, Willmott Dixon worked with the council to target and engage with Genr8 and Kajima for the first and second phases of Rochdale Riverside. Now a further development, Neighbourhood, again to be delivered by Willmott Dixon, sees the council teaming up with Capital & Centric

to develop 235 low-carbon homes, a park and community hub on derelict land near Rochdale train station, purchased by the council in 2018.

Likewise, Telford & Wrekin Council is redeveloping an area between the railway station and Telford town centre, named the Station Quarter. The council engaged early with Willmott Dixon as delivery partner, which has brought a consortium of partners together, to help make land, technical and delivery decisions before planning permission is submitted.

With £22.3m from the Towns Fund, the development will be home to a digital skills and enterprise hub.



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JANE DAVIES (PICTURED), HEAD OF STRATEGIC HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT, ROTHERHAM METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

Stockport Interchange Key facts

The transformation of Stockport's bus station into a modern transport interchange with public realm and green space

Creating a two-acre town centre park and 196 new, high-quality apartments

An innovative partnership that sets a new benchmark for town centre regeneration



The power of local: spotlight on Swindon

When people think of Swindon, they may think of the Honda factory or the thriving outlet centre, but they perhaps don't see it as a cultural hub. Yet the town is home to many creative businesses and groups, says Sam Rackham, project manager for Swindon town centre regeneration, it's just that they are scattered around the town.

At the heart of the plan for Swindon's renaissance is a cluster of new cultural buildings to greet visitors as they arrive at the train station: a new, larger home for Wyvern Theatre, a new Dance Centre, a Media and Arts Production Centre, three cinemas and a new pavilion for the town's little-known art collection.



Left and above: Sam Rackham; and at Queens Drive in Swindon, Willmott Dixon is supporting Swindon Borough Council through the delivery of more than 150 homes.

Regeneration vision

Swindon's vision is all about taking what it's got and amplifying it through the regeneration process. So, in the neighbouring Kimmerfields development area - which will be split roughly in thirds between office, residential and leisure use - the first piece of office space will be home to one of the town's most important employers, Zurich.

"It was really key that we showed commitment to Zurich," says Rackham. "It was a major coup to keep them in the town."

There is also Swindon's Heritage Action Zone around the model village, launched in 2019. Projects include the renovation and repurposing of the Grade II-listed Carriage Works, improving the beautiful Victorian

Health Hydro pool, refurbishing the Grade II Cricketers' pub and finding a new use for the former Railway Mechanics' Institute which is Grade II*-listed.

Building on local strengths is vital when creating a fundable vision, explains Rackham. "When it came to the Creative Quarter, we engaged with local people before we put pen to paper," he explains. "We had a group of 60 to 100 people, a young persons' engagement group and an advisory group made up of the leaders of local cultural organisations."

This link with local groups also creates a great network through which to communicate job opportunities once construction is underway, says Rackham.

Private investment

The next big hurdle is attracting private sector investment, with the Cultural Quarter alone costing at £80m.

In Kimmerfields, the strategy will be to get plots 'development-ready' with utilities and access sorted. "There has to be a recognition that there is currently marginal or even no viability," explains Rackham. "By doing this, we are reducing some of the uncertainty and risk."

Swindon's vision is long-term - with a bus station to relocate and infrastructure to get right, it will be nearly 10 years before people are watching shows in the new theatre. This gives the council time to sell its vision to would-be investors.

5. WHAT DOES GREEN MEAN?

Town centre regeneration is not about buildings, it's about people, says Willmott Dixon's group chief sustainability officer, Julia Barrett. Putting people first leads naturally to great environments inside and out.

"The fabric is just an enabler," she says. "We have to think about what attracts a diverse mix of people to places. It's all about supporting communities to be happy, connected and healthy."

Successful placemaking

Green spaces, active ways to move around and brilliant buildings are the ingredients for successful placemaking, says Barrett. Even before the pandemic underlined the benefits to health and wellbeing, many authorities were putting these things at the heart of their masterplans, linking green (parks and spaces)

and blue (rivers and ponds) assets and creating new ones (see box, below, on Exeter's plans to break the city into 'green' urban villages).

When it comes to the buildings themselves, a 'green' building is one that will have longevity in the face of climate change. "You have to build with the future in mind," says Barrett. "That means high thermal efficiency and the potential to become net generators of power, or to plug into future community energy schemes."

Bespoke homes

This is one of the driving forces behind Willmott Dixon's new Collida Living concept, which harnesses the latest digital processes to create bespoke homes that are climate change-resilient and meet the Passivhaus standard.

Accreditation schemes such as BREEAM or Fitwel can be useful, says Barrett. Councils should find a standard that aligns with their desired outcomes and perhaps consider a pragmatic approach that follows the principles, without necessarily needing the badge at the end of it. "Our go-to standard is Passivhaus, which is very much about thermal efficiency and wellbeing," she says. "Passivhaus buildings are just wonderful to be in."

High-quality refurbishment and repurposing of buildings also plays an important part in a 'green' regeneration agenda. Aside from the historic or aesthetic value of an existing building, and its importance to local communities, re-using parts of a structure means that all the carbon that has been expended in those materials does not have to be spent again.



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JULIA BARRETT (PICTURED),
CHIEF SUSTAINABILITY OFFICER,
WILLMOTT DIXON

Tips from the experts

We asked our local authority partners what tips they would give their peers about delivering town centre regeneration. Here's what they said.



Quality, quality, quality

If developments are to be transformational, there can be no compromise on quality.



Early engagement

Engage with the market early – or you may be missing the mark by the time you make your move.



Play to your strengths

Amplify the positive impacts of businesses, buildings and activities that already exist in your town.



Team up

Seek out opportunities to join forces with other organisations: Local Enterprise Partnerships, NHS Trusts, education providers, combined authorities.



Align the vision

Ensure there is a clear vision with a strongly articulated argument to take to funders.



New talent

Consider bringing in dedicated project managers, or even creating arm's-length developers which can pay competitive salaries. Willmott Dixon's development solutions team provides extra capacity to accelerate development plans.



Flexible masterplans

A masterplan's order of delivery should flex in order to make the most of the funding opportunities that arise.



Exeter: from city to villages

Exeter has plans to reimagine the city with nine new inclusive and sustainable communities incorporating strategic sites – some owned by Exeter City Council. Exeter City Living, the council's arm's-length housing development company, will be one of a number of developers leading the development of the 12,000 homes in the nine locations.

There are three drivers for ECL's involvement, explains Exeter City Living managing director, Emma Osmundsen: "We want to act as a catalyst to encourage developers to build to better and higher performance standards and provide choice in the marketplace for home buyers and renters; we want to create homes and communities that reflect our liveable city vision; and we want to create value and income for the city that can be reinvested for social value purposes."

Driving up standards

Exeter's drive to bring higher standards to new homes is reflected in its commitment to the Passivhaus standard over the last 14 years, says Osmundsen, alongside incorporating building biology principles, centred on healthy living environments and climate resilience, into its development designs.



Leading the charge with Passivhaus means the standard is now a viable option for private sector developers, claims Osmundsen: "We can build Passivhaus apartments 3% cheaper than Building Regulation-compliant apartments. We can design out 60% of the cost premium for Passivhaus just through good design."

The University of Exeter's plan to add 1,250 Passivhaus student apartments to its campus is evidence that the council's plan to act as a leader is working, she says.

One of the biggest challenges in Exeter



– and everywhere – will not be how we build our urban fabric, but how we encourage people to move between their green communities using green infrastructure as opposed to cars, and how this infrastructure will be funded.

"Current funding routes are lacking or the inclusion of green infrastructure is not viable through private development," says Osmundsen. "We need government interventions and assistance for green infrastructure to ensure we link quality new homes to the services and facilities of their neighbourhood."

Above: The new home for the Met Office's 'supercomputer' at Exeter Science Park has proved a major catalyst for further inward investment in Exeter.

Above left: The new Digital and Data Centre at Exeter College is the latest development in a city that is spearheading a skills revolution across the region. Key to this ambition is the supporting infrastructure provided by Exeter City Living. **Left:** Emma Osmundsen, managing director, Exeter City Living.



WILLMOTT DIXON

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Willmott Dixon is a privately-owned contracting and interior fit-out group. Founded in 1852, we are family-run and dedicated to leaving a positive legacy in our communities and environment. Being a large company means we can create a huge and lasting positive impact on our society. This is not only done through what we build and maintain; it's achieved through the fantastic efforts of our people who make a major contribution to enhancing their local communities.

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Our experts can accelerate your regeneration plans

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