



The Contribution of Spatial Planning to Town Revitalisation and Building Better Places

Introduction

The role and function of towns across the BIC administrations have evolved as a result of changes in behaviour, technology and an increased reliance on the private car.

An opportunity exists to revitalise our towns and make them places where people want to live, do business and spend their leisure time, while delivering on a range of wider outcomes including inclusive development, addressing climate change, supporting green recovery and promoting active and sustainable travel. Spatial Planning, by moving beyond traditional land use planning to deliver a holistic approach which acknowledges the nature and function of space, can make a significant contribution to the revitalisation of our towns and city centres, supporting positive place making and the decarbonisation agenda.

This paper highlights a number of the key challenges being faced across the BIC Administrations, explores how these have been addressed through spatial planning responses and includes a number of best practice case studies.

Context

Although the challenges faced across the BIC Administrations may vary in scale and degree, they are broadly similar in terms of the nature of the issues to be addressed.

Regardless of the current level of vibrancy in each of our towns, they all continue to face an array of challenges to their ongoing function and purpose.

There is a need to reverse the pattern of **stagnation** or decline in many towns, through the identification and establishment of new roles and functions, the enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities or a greater emphasis on services, hospitality and social interaction. The manner in which towns are managed and maintained is also key in ensuring that they continue to be attractive places to live, work and visit.

There is also a need to provide greater **opportunities for employment**; to address the effect of **vacant and derelict properties** on the vitality and attractiveness of towns; the impact of out-of-town and **online shopping** on town centre retail and the closure of facilities due to lack of service viability.

As our towns respond to a changing commercial and retail environment, and as our populations continue to grow and age, attention has been refocussed on the need for town centre living and the array of benefits this brings from an economic, social and environmental perspective. In many places however, there has been a general drift away from town centre living and town centre commercial activity, which has had a “hollowing out” effect and created a perception of town centres as less attractive places in which to live or operate particular retail or services.

Similarly, **edge of town development** has often overwhelmed existing communities; has failed to promote active travel and has locked in **car-dependency**. Such development has also often taken place at the expense of town centres and has been accompanied by a move of traditional retail and other services away from town centres to edge of town locations, designed primarily for access by private car.

Despite the fact that densification or intensification of uses in our town centres - including town centre living - can support **economic regeneration**, in many cases, there is a perception that there is a greater return on investment in green field sites on the edge of town, particularly when other factors such as the availability of existing services and environmental impacts are not factored into the economic investment decision. However, practical aspects such as achieving physical access for construction and other constraints within a historic environment are also recognised.

Environmental perspectives are at the centre of spatial planning considerations across the BIC administrations. Many of our urban centres have been built on the coast or at important river confluences. Consequently, the challenges of **climate change** and **rising sea levels** present a real threat to many places, and addressing these are of key importance if we are to build successful and resilient places.

Our towns can play a key role in supporting, facilitating and **driving a green recovery, economic investment and tourism**. The relative attractiveness and vibrancy of a town has also become an increasingly important element in achieving competitive advantage. A town's **built-heritage** can be key to a community's **sense of place** and to attracting both visitors and new residents.

The **COVID pandemic** has highlighted the importance of towns for local communities. Travel restrictions and home working have changed the pattern of movement and footfall to towns. Many people have rediscovered the value and convenience of **shopping locally** and the importance of local towns for social and cultural engagement. The widespread adoption of **remote working** has enabled workers across a wide range of industries and sectors to avail of a greater range of locations in which to live and work and has allowed many workers to spend less time commuting and more time in their own communities. This increased time spent in some communities for social, commercial and cultural purposes has demonstrated the need for towns to be seen as attractive environments for local people. On the flip side, it is important to recognise that reduced commuting and recreational visits to some towns and town centres, especially the larger ones, has negatively impacted upon many businesses and cultural, creative and entertainment venues and as a result, there is also a need to adapt to this change and provide support for that.

The Collaborative Spatial Planning work sector has responded to this evolving context through the sharing of best practice between BIC administrations, including the Living High Streets Craft Kit developed by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, and a presentation from Cork City Council on recent spatial planning initiatives such as the pedestrianisation of 17 streets in the city centre and improved green mobility across the city. The work sector intends to explore future collaboration with other BIC work sectors in this area, particularly the Transport work

sector where synergies exist with ongoing work on modal shift, active and sustainable travel and the decarbonisation of public transport.

Successful Places

From a spatial planning perspective, successful towns and places across the BIC Administrations share a number of key characteristics including:

- An **attractive public realm** (streets, spaces and parks, green and blue infrastructure) designed to promote safety, invite people to meet, mingle and dwell;
- A mix and **variety of services/shops** that provide employment opportunities; enable people to shop locally; meet the needs of the local community and encourage business to grow and develop;
- A range of **cultural, recreational and community spaces** (including scope for periodic events and festivals) that bring together community members and attract visitors/tourists;
- A well maintained **building stock** that creates visual interest and animates streets and spaces;
- Historic buildings and streetscapes that provide a unique identity;
- Promotion of opportunities for **decarbonisation** and **net zero** through connected, accessible and sustainable modes of transport and enable a high proportion of journeys to be made on foot, by bicycle or other self-propelled means;
- Traffic management within central areas so that streets prioritise vulnerable users (pedestrians and cyclists), enabling them to move about safely and in comfort;
- Provision of a mix of housing typologies and tenures to cater for diverse communities in terms of age, income and mobility;
- Utilisation of **digital technology** to enhance the experience of living and working in towns, enabling greater choices in terms of location and lifestyle;
- Provide opportunities for the amenity, health and well-being of residents, workers and visitors.

It is important to note that in addition to this set of common key characteristics which contribute to creating successful towns and places, other significant factors which can help to unlock a specific place are often unique to that place itself.

Role of Spatial Planning

The challenges facing our towns are significant. Spatial planning can, however, assist in addressing these challenges and can provide a range of opportunities which will **revitalise and support our towns** in becoming successful places.

The traditional model of land use planning is based primarily on regulating and ordering the use of land. Spatial planning moves beyond this to balance competing economic, social and environmental objectives, to achieve a more proactive, holistic and inclusive approach to addressing key issues and challenges and to acknowledge the nature and function of place. Spatial planning therefore has a fundamental contribution to make to the outcomes achieved in town centres and can provide a framework to guide future development and policy interventions.

Spatial planning also supports the promotion of **resilient locations** with **vibrant inclusive communities** and a strong cultural and social fabric. It is important that the knowledge of local people and communities is harnessed and trust built, to enable local people to have a stake in the towns and places around them. Spatial planning provides a mechanism to enable community engagement; it has a key role to play in enabling discussion about how the range of interconnected issues can begin to be addressed through collaboration and place-based approaches and how these might be translated into the development of place-specific objectives and policy frameworks to guide and effect implementation.

Spatial planning frameworks, at a range of scales, can be used to guide and encourage redevelopment and reuse of urban fabric in brownfield locations, promoting these, often underused areas as sustainable, vibrant places for people to live, work and enjoy. Spatial planning approaches can also be used to ensure that a diverse mix of uses are supported in town centres to encourage footfall. Design and place making also has a key part to play in ensuring that town centres are integrated

with their surrounding area and provide well designed buildings and spaces for communities.

The consideration of movement and transportation issues at the outset of the spatial planning process, with the aim of reducing dependency on the private car, also promotes an integrated approach to development from the earliest stages; encourages innovative approaches to movement and traffic management and can support the careful co-location of housing and employment thereby reducing the need to travel and building sustainable communities with people at their heart.

Design quality is key to achieving successful and thriving places, not just for the built environment but also the natural environment. A spatial planning approach which includes green and blue infrastructure and supports urban biodiversity, will promote a strong sense of place, identity and amenity; will enhance community development and provide opportunities for sustainable growth with associated benefits for health and well-being. Responding innovatively to the challenges of climate change, through spatial planning frameworks, can provide opportunities to green our urban centres, to make them more resilient to its effects; and to enhance and, in some cases, create new public realm opportunities where urban centres meet the coast or rivers.

Spatial planning also recognises the changing role of urban centres; adopts a more flexible approach to land use which doesn't rely solely on traditional retail activity but recognises the role of an attractive, culturally diverse environment in encouraging people to visit and spend leisure time.

The relationship between spatial planning and investment decisions to support this changing role of urban centres is crucial, which includes having a place based programme approach to co-ordinate delivery across sectors.

In these and a multitude of other ways, tailored to the specific needs and challenges of communities, spatial planning has a key role to play in shaping our towns and places and in helping to equip them with the means to respond successfully to the issues that they face now and in the future.

Conclusion

The BIC Administrations face a range of challenges in creating and sustaining healthy, vibrant and attractive places where people want to live, work and spend their leisure time. Across the Administrations there are examples of successful places which continue to evolve to address changes encountered at a wider societal level. These places demonstrate the role that spatial planning can play in helping to shape and deliver change in the built environment; in creating thriving and vibrant towns at all scales; in encouraging and facilitating people to live and work in town centre locations; in tackling the climate change challenge; in supporting a green recovery; in attracting investment and in creating resilient communities.

The sharing of best practice and experiential learning through the BIC structures continues to provide a means by which Administrations can support each other and collectively revitalise our towns and build better places.

Collaborative Spatial Planning work sector

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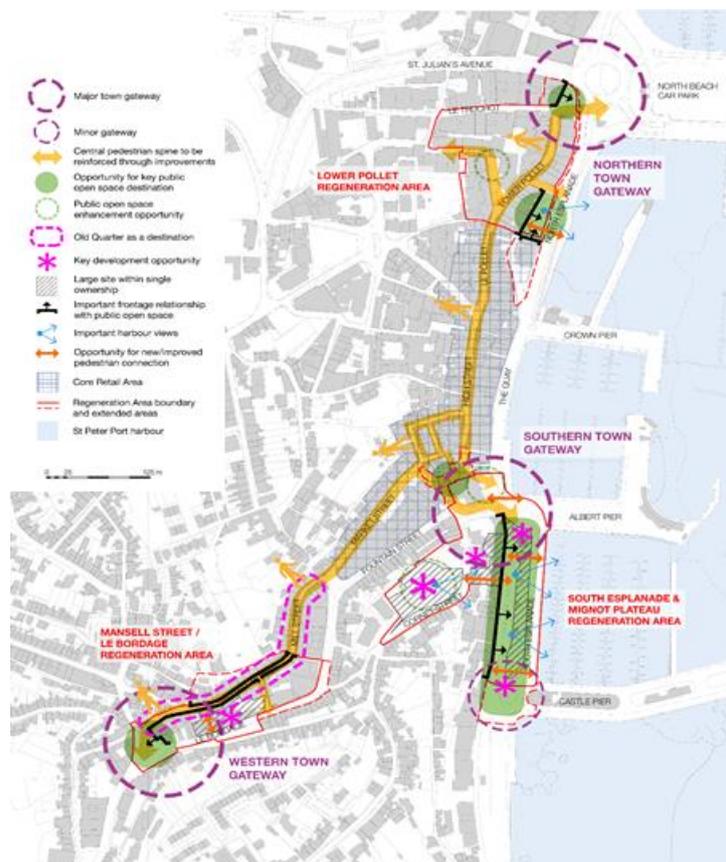
St. Peter Port Regeneration Areas, Guernsey

In December 2021, following extensive public and stakeholder consultations, the Development & Planning Authority (D&PA) approved and published the [Development framework](#) for the three St. Peter Port Regeneration areas of the Lower Pollet, South Esplanade and Mignot Plateau, and Mansell Street/Le Bordage. This framework has an overarching vision statement for the three areas:

'To enhance the St Peter Port Regeneration Areas to diversify and enrich the experience and long term attractiveness of Town as a place to work, live, spend time, meet people and explore, and to ensure that it continues to be a successful primary centre.'

Overall objectives include improved pedestrian experience into and through town and to support active and sustainable travel opportunities; a range of high quality public open space destinations which feel safe, are attractive, comfortable to spend time in, offer play and recreation opportunities, and can support community events; supporting investment in retail, business, workplace, community and health; extending above ground activities and uses, such as town centre living to increase footfall and the range of activities further into evenings and weekends and to maximise the potential for positive change.

Publication of the Development Framework document was a milestone for looking at how we regenerate these key parts of St. Peter Port. The intention is that the framework will be the springboard for revitalising St Peter Port as the jewel in the Bailiwick's crown, and through identifying opportunities for significant private sector development, will act as a catalyst for economic activity in St. Peter Port.



The Vision Concept Plan includes extending pedestrian-only (or pedestrian-priority) routes to reach each of the town gateways, the key new development opportunities, and the distribution of potential public open space destinations to help enrich the experience of Town's central area.

Clonakilty, Ireland

Prior to its recent regeneration, the traditional identity, overall function and built fabric of Clonakilty's main streets and squares had been eroded. People no longer wanted to inhabit the townscapes, town centre retail was under threat or



replaced by out of town retail and significant flooding had also occurred on several occasions impacting on business confidence in the heart of the town.

The **Clonakilty 400 Urban Design Masterplan** was developed as a multi-phased delivery of a long-term vision in collaboration with the citizens. This collaborative effort and open engagement process was established with the local communities at an early design stage with different construction phases identified to attract various funding sources. The plan included a strict policy for the protection of heritage architecture, which was important in retaining features like Emmet Square, a unique example of Georgian Architecture in an Irish rural context. The central parkland was redesigned based on new movement patterns and to coordinate with the attributes of the existing historic architecture and urbanism, while car parking spaces were removed along Main Street to provide pocket parks which create space for comfort and pauses.

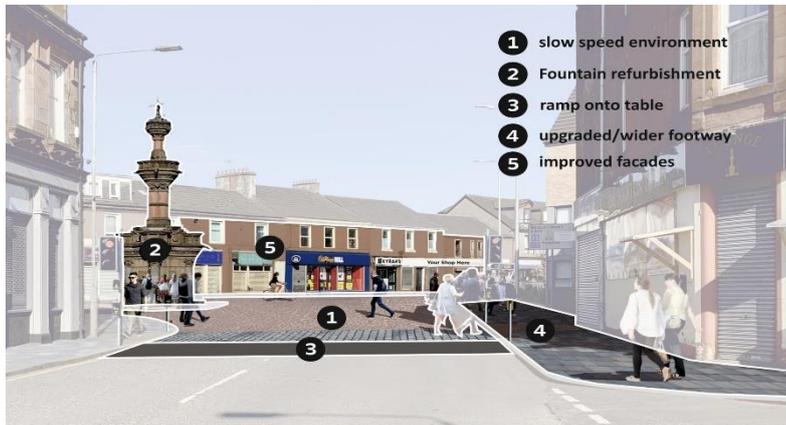


The project made the local community aware of the heritage value of its townscape including the preservation of traditional shop fronts and re-establishing social activities on the street. The town centre which was previously characterised by anti-social behaviour, dereliction and

focused on cars, became a hub that could facilitate increased socio-economic activity, socialising and wellbeing.

Alexandria, Scotland

Alexandria is a town in West Dunbartonshire, located in the west of Scotland, on the River Leven and in close proximity to Loch Lomond. The town centre has struggled to fulfil its potential over recent years, but with a community led Masterplan, change is now being realised through innovation and partnership working.



This Masterplan responds to community concerns and aspirations as well as meeting national and local policy objectives; sets a clear shared vision for the town centre which everyone buys into; provides a realistic framework to guide future development of the town centre; sets out a series of key

deliverable projects which will make a difference to the town and fully aligns with the community action plan (locality plan) covering the wider town and encompassing broader social and economic issues.

Key learnings from this regeneration project include: the need to be realistic and to accept that it won't be a single project that will change the town centre but a series of projects taken forward over a number of years that will make the difference; the importance of continued collaboration and engagement which recognises differences of opinion and allows for these to be talked through while keeping the shared vision in sight; accepting that all stakeholders have a role to play in the delivery of the projects and in seeking funding to take them forward; and the value of online engagement through a dedicated [project website](#), particularly during the pandemic, as a vehicle to capture the views of a wide section of the community and get them thinking about the future of their town centre.

