

UNLOCK THE
HIGH STREET

how to
**UNLOCK
YOUR
HIGH
STREET**



co-operative
party

How to unlock community power on high streets

Union Street in Plymouth hasn't always been in need of saving. In its heyday, it was the destination for letting your hair down. But by the early 2000s that felt like the distant past – a quarter of the land along Union Street was standing empty and it was getting a reputation for antisocial behaviour.

The community decided it was time to change that – and after a street party on Union Street, they formed a community benefit society, crowdfunded to buy up the empty shop on the corner, and started renovating. Shortly after they bought the Clipper, a former 24-hour pub that was standing empty. Today, the team at Nudge Community Builders runs three buildings along Union Street, home now to a radio station, café, music hub, food court, community space, garden, and indoor market.

In the centre of Dumfries, a similar story is unfolding with the Midsteeple Quarter. The community is buying up and redeveloping empty high street properties, not to save their town centre but to reimagine it – creating a thriving new heart for Dumfries built on principles of local prosperity and well-being.



In 2018, they took on ownership of their first building – The Oven – and been buying up properties in the town centre ever since. They show that the determination and collaboration in their community has the power to transform their neighbourhood.

How to...

Mobilise your community

Consider a street party like in Plymouth, or in Dumfries the team behind the Midsteeple Quarter organised events on the high street to get people interested in imagining how their town centre could be different.

They called their team of volunteers their Doon Toon Army, and as well as engaging them and the wider public on a vision for the high street, they organised regular clean up and action days – cleaning, scrubbing, painting and improving key areas around the high street. This builds a movement and develops local capacity, as well as allowing people the chance to meet their neighbours, make new friends, share skills and have a practical role in reshaping their town centre.

Shape a vision for your high street

There are lots of ways to get people's views on their neighbourhood – try organising street stalls, hosting meetings online or in person, creating fun opportunities to have a say, and offering a range of ways to be involved to make sure diverse voices are heard. You could organise a rhyme time event for parents at the library, and ask the parents for their views while the kids are entertained, or an armchair disco with local older peoples' organisations to make sure your elderly and less able residents can have their say.

Try asking people what they love about their high street, their memories of it in the past and their hopes for the future. What do they travel to buy or do which they'd like to have locally – perhaps they go to the out-of-town shopping centre because they can't buy clothes anymore in the town centre, or they travel to the next town for the cinema or to get out cash. What makes their heart drop when they see it in town – perhaps a particular run down property, or broken street furniture that does the town centre a disservice.

Try talking to businesses too – find out what challenges they face and what they think might help them thrive. Do they wish to expand but can't access bigger premises? Or maybe they find certain events get punters through the door. Why did they open their doors in your high street, and what will make them stay there and stay viable? What are their ideas for improving the neighbourhood, and what are the barriers – perhaps council officers are unavailable or the advice and professional services they rely on have moved out of town.



**Resources for
campaigning online at:**

www.party.coop

Start a community benefit society and start raising funds

A Community Benefit Society is similar to any other co-operative except that, when the co-operative turns a profit, instead of that cash being redistributed between its members as dividends, it is put back into the business or the community.

Now you're ready to raise funds. You can do a community share offer to let people help you to buy up buildings. This is great because everyone who buys a share can have a stake and a say in the future of the project. You can also approach the council, funders like Power to Change, the Hive or third sector grant giving organisations, local anchor institutions with a stake in the success of the town centre, and many other sources.

Make best use of your local council

The council has a critical role to play in enabling community power. Good local councillors are in touch with their community and work hard to listen to their aspirations and help make them a reality. Many of the projects listed in this publication had individual councillors who rolled up their sleeves and got stuck in – and are the more successful for it.

There are tangible and soft powers at the council, including but by no means limited to:

- **Funding** – either council grants or access to other funding programmes that community groups are ineligible for. Some of the projects like Nudge Community Builders also borrowed from the council, as local authorities have access to more affordable sources of finance than banks. Councils could even buy community shares and have a stake and say in the project.
- **Information** – the council may be able to pin down who a landlord is and help to facilitate meanwhile uses or negotiations to purchase. The council can give advice on planning and licencing, share details of other redevelopments, identify useful partners and give support throughout.
- **Networks** – the council can help community groups consult and engage residents, including some of the communities that activists might otherwise struggle to talk to. For example, sheltered accommodation residents, disability rights organisations, youth clubs, or council tenants. The council has a wide reach for its communications, and it can help to big up exciting projects.
- **Formal powers** – from planning powers to compulsory purchase, the council has a number of relevant powers which it may choose to use to help community ownership on the high street.

Talk up your town at every opportunity

Work to build a reputation for the high street as an interesting, thriving place and help spread the word about the power of communities. In Radcliffe, the success of Radcliffe Market Hall Community Benefit Society in turning the market hall into a destination place has had a significant impact on people's views of what can be achieved in the town centre. The redevelopment of The Oven, the first building bought by the Midsteeple Quarter, showed Dumfries residents the potential of community ownership and enthused many more people to get involved in future crowdfunding.

At the Co-operative Party – we can help! Share your projects and successes with the team at the Party, write us blogs and send us videos of your work. We love to champion the actions of co-operative councillors and activists. ●

How to create a community improvement district

Community Improvement Districts exist in various forms in Scotland, Canada, the US and South Africa, but lack a definition or model in England and Wales. The term is borrowed from the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) that already exist in many high streets, in which non-domestic rate payers in a defined area contribute a compulsory levy which helps deliver a set of services aimed at improving the local economy.

BIDs can be a great tool for building a business community, and working together to achieve shared aspirations for a local area. They offer a model for funding locally-led bottom up regeneration and their democratic structure allows all businesses an equal say.

Many BIDs already work closely with their local communities – indeed, the response to Covid-19 showed how well connected many business communities are with their local residents and customers as they adapted to ensure everyone had access to food, support and medicines. However, in England and Wales, no formal mechanisms exist to incorporate community anchors or wider community voices.

Scottish BIDs on the other hand are explicitly incorporating community anchors and local residents into the process of delivering the local vision and lobbying for change.

In Scotland, these bodies are called CIDs, and they are aided by the Community Empowerment Act and the Landlord Reform Act which embed community rights in town centres. CIDs have developed in Lanark, Stornoway, and Carluth as well as Possilpark, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the UK, which create an equal partnership of businesses and community organisations within the existing legislation. Community Improvement Districts provide opportunities for community stakeholders to participate in operational and strategic decision-making for their neighbourhoods.

While wholesale replacement of BIDs with CIDs may require some legislative changes to catch up with the statutory powers awarded in Scotland, there are interim measures local areas can take to bridge that gap between communities and the businesses that serve them. And the effort it takes to put these measures in place is well worth the effort. Better collaboration and recognising the economic interdependencies between local residents and local businesses will help to increase residents' sense of ownership, strengthen the



relationship locally between supply and demand, increase opportunities for community ownership on high streets, and create new markets for goods and services.

How to...

Increase community involvement in existing BIDs

Many BIDs already involve residents, ward councillors and other community stakeholders at a board level or on sub-groups – but often in a non-voting capacity.

A basic change to the BID's articles of association would enable resident and community participation, where it does not already exist. To further formalise this, and to put communities on a greater parity with businesses, a voluntary levy arrangement could be set.

Voluntary payment of the levy is usually for small businesses below the threshold to pay in return for BID services but it would be possible to widen this to include residents. However, many BIDs do not permit voluntary levy payers to participate in the board, and again a change to the Articles of Association would be needed to permit this.

There would be a need to ensure that the desires of the business community and the resident community were fairly represented and balanced via sensitive mechanisms of mediation or consensus building. Often, businesses' and residents' interests are aligned – from crime reduction, events, jobs and environmental improvements.

Create CIDs in places where you don't have a BID yet

Establishing a BID requires a ballot of all the properties which come under the defined geographic footprint of the proposed BID. If the property occupiers vote for the ballot, they pay a defined proportion of the rateable value of their properties (typically around 1.5 per cent): this provides a guaranteed source of income for the next five years until the ballot is repeated. The income then allows the BID to invest in the area, with improvements targeted at enhancing the operating environment for business occupiers.

Lots of **useful resources exist with detailed information on how to set up a Business Improvement District.**



Strengthen existing community links

Stroud District is made up of 52 town and parish councils: each more than just a transactional place for shopping, but a thriving hub with community at its heart. The pride of place in each of these spaces shows that no one size fits all – and means partnership working is at the heart of everything the council does. To capture the enthusiasm for local shops and shopping parades, and build on the strong community spirit, top-down solutions cannot work.

Community Improvement Districts cannot ignore the existing communities and community organisations – they should not seek to duplicate or replace but to amplify and strengthen. A good first step is to map the community in each town centre, identifying the existing community groups and stakeholders but also finding the gaps – those underrepresented communities that lack any stake or say in their neighbourhoods. ●



How to support the foundations of the high street

Pontypool, like many other post-industrial towns, suffers from empty shops, a run-down high street and higher than average unemployment. While these problems stem from the decline of traditional industry, they have been exacerbated by many other, more recent factors – including landlords with no connection to the area buying up commercial property as investments. As the high street declines, it has less and less to offer compared with nearby Cwmbran – those with cars drive elsewhere to shop and spend time, and those without are left with a dwindling offer.

Any local residents have small businesses or wish to start them up, but can't access the premises or support. Many shops that do manage to open just can't stay open. Out of town landlords had little motivation to lower rents or split units into smaller, more affordable spaces. Meanwhile, national programmes were too disconnected from Pontypool and its community to be impactful for local people.

In February 2020, the Council successfully applied for the Welsh Government's Foundational Economy Challenge Fund in order to run a pilot programme providing hyper-local place-based support for small businesses. This ranged from test-trading opportunities, mentoring, meanwhile use of spaces, training, small start-up grants and support with marketing.

A new "work-hub", Foundational Economy Torfaen, set up shop in Pontypool Indoor Market. From here, a range of tailored measures based on really listening to local businesses and residents have been developed. These include the development of a local procurement system, negotiating with landlords, offering very low-cost (or during Covid-19, no-cost) spaces in the indoor market, one-to-one mentoring, support accessing finance, and working with local anchor institutions to develop local supply chains.

As a result, hundreds of businesses have been supported to stay open, despite the difficulties of Covid-19, and others to start up shop. For example, thanks to the access to low-cost space in the indoor market, Woolfall's 3D Printing was able to start up and get off the ground. And with start-up mentoring and support brokering a space recently vacated by New Look, High Street Fitness was able to open its doors. A community interest company set up by a group of qualified trainers and a doctor, it provides a low-cost gym to the community as well as mental health support and a programme of training and qualifications. Working with local housing association Bron Afon, a local skills gap has been identified and work is underway with the University of South Wales to explore how those skills can be developed to enable local manufacture of solar panels and heat pumps.



How to...

Support the foundational economy

The price tag for hyper-local support doesn't need to be a huge one. In Torfaen, a huge impact was made with one member of staff and a premises in the indoor market. The project officer was a sounding board, a source of support and advice, and a signposter to services offered elsewhere such as from Social Business Wales. She built networks and relationships to unlock opportunities – **a human approach which she says is the root of the success of the project.**



Unlock the potential of local assets

Torfaen, like many other towns and high streets around the country, has an indoor market which has been repurposed to breathe new life into the town. By using this as a base for Foundational Economy Torfaen and offering low-cost stalls, the council was able to achieve two major goals – opening up the market, breathing new life into it and increasing footfall, and providing opportunities for local start-ups to embark on something new at a lower cost and lower risk than commercial property landlords would.

Radcliffe Market Hall has offered a similar opportunity in Bury. Following a tender process in 2018, the market was contracted out to a co-operative owned and run by the local community. They support independent market traders and put on regular food events and community activities, breathing new life into the space. Anyone can become a member to have a say in what they do and how they do it, and 25% of all membership fees are put into a social fund to support social projects which tackle inequality and continue to improve the town centre.

Scale up community co-operation

In 2014, West Norwood was home to a pilot project – Open Works – that in partnership with Lambeth Council brought together local residents to create 20 new community-led initiatives.

The theory behind Open Works applies in every neighbourhood: that small, fragmented, low frequency community engagement will not transform neighbourhoods, that competition fragments communities, and that there are fundamental activities that bring people together like cooking, eating, growing, learning and making. The team had a pop-up shopfront on the high street where residents could drop in with their ideas to network and access advice and support. This helped create a network of 20 practical projects involving 1000 local residents.

Seven years later, many are still running and have expanded into new neighbourhoods and projects. The Library of Things started life as a pilot project under the Open Works banner, and then moved into a shipping container off the high street. They now operate in libraries and town centres in Crystal Palace, Finsbury Park, Hackney, Dalston, Kentish Town and Morden.

The team behind Open Works have partnered with Barking and Dagenham Council to start Every One Every Day which has five high street shops around the borough and a large public Makerspace. People can pop in to have a cup of tea and share their project or business idea, and access support to make them come to life. Over the past 24 months, the project has grown a large and enthusiastic network of over 5,000 local people, and more than 150 neighbourhood projects. ●

Resources:

- Participatory City participatorycity.org
- Every One Every Thing weareeveryone.org
- Library of Things libraryofthings.co.uk



How to harness the power of communities to breathe new life into neglected spaces

In its heyday, Leigh was at the heart of Britain's textiles industry – beginning as a cottage industry, by the early Twentieth Century cotton and silk mills employed many thousands of people in vast multi-story mills.

Over the years, de-industrialisation, cuts to public services and underinvestment led to shops closing, a loss of public services and a rise in antisocial behaviour. The huge mill buildings that once defined the town were falling into dangerous disrepair and required extensive works.

But communities are fighting back. Leigh Spinners Mill, one of the finest mill buildings in the country, is being brought back to life by the Leigh Spinners Mill Building Preservation Trust – community-owned, co-operatively run and committed to the long term sustainable future of the mill. They aim to renovate the heritage, in order to create space and opportunity for businesses wanting to get a foot on the ladder. The space they offer is affordable, with business rates low or non-existent.

For example, one tenant was a private members gym occupied by a group of friends who were serving police, fire and other public service officers. Their workplace gyms had long gone with the cuts. What became apparent was the need for them to extend their gym, not just to a group of friends, but to their wider colleagues in order to tackle the growing mental health issues that consume those in demanding frontline roles.

In Leigh, another mill is being regenerated too – private developers are turning Mather Lane Mill into luxury loft-style apartments in a gated development. The contrast could not be more obvious: through community ownership Leigh Spinners Mill is creating jobs, opportunities for start ups and space for the community to share in their town's heritage.

Leigh Spinners Mill is far from alone. Communities are the key to bringing heritage buildings back to life across the country – ensuring people's pride of place is restored alongside the buildings in their town centres and repurposing spaces for the greater good. In Sheffield, for example, Portland Works has reopened the country's first stainless steel cutlery factory as a social enterprise, comprising more than 500 community shareholders who are renovating the space. The Grade 2* listed building has been reborn as a centre for small manufacturing, independent artists and craftspeople, with over 30 small businesses located there.

These spaces could even be home to co-operative development and community businesses themselves. In Rochdale, the Greater Manchester Co-operative Commission proposed the use of textile mills and heritage buildings as a home for co-operative development. As a result, Rochdale's town hall is currently undergoing restoration and Historic England have praised the work to open the new Co-operative Enterprise Hub and the South Parade and Drake Street regeneration. The heritage of the town is being harnessed to regenerate the town centre, and a prominent previously vacant building at its heart has reopened as a hub for new co-operative businesses.

How to...

Harness the power of your community

Many of the steps for rescuing a heritage building or special place that's fallen into disrepair are the same as the first chapter of this publication – but an additional tool at your disposal is 'Assets of Community Value' legislation. The Co-operative Party's "Love It? List It!" campaign includes **many tools to help you motivate people and list the assets you value.**

As well as working with the council, you'll also be likely to need to build up relationships with organisations like Historic England to work on restoration plans, and there will be heritage funds you can apply to in addition to other sources of funding.

**4 steps to listing the
places that make your
community special**

www.party.coop

Include your heritage in your plans for co-operative development

To help to understand the challenges and opportunities to developing the co-operative sector in Greater Manchester, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) agreed to set up the Greater Manchester Co-operative Commission in 2018. Its role was to ensure that the city-region stays at the forefront of co-operative development.

The Commission sat as an independent panel, making policy recommendations to support the continued development of the co-operative sector in Greater Manchester – among which were the development of a co-operative enterprise zone and the use of the heritage of Greater Manchester's towns to promote co-operative development.

Rochdale have followed through on this proposal, delivering co-operative development space in a prominent building in the town centre as part of the town's Heritage Action Zone. ●

Unit 13, 83 Crampton Street,
London SE17 3BU

020 7367 4150

mail@party.coop

 @CoopParty

www.party.coop

Co-operative Party Limited is a registered
Society under the Co-operative and
Community Benefit Societies Act 2014.
Registered no. 30027R.

Promoted by Joe Fortune on behalf of the Co-
operative Party, both at Unit 13, 83 Crampton
Street, London SE17 3BQ.



**co-operative
party**

