



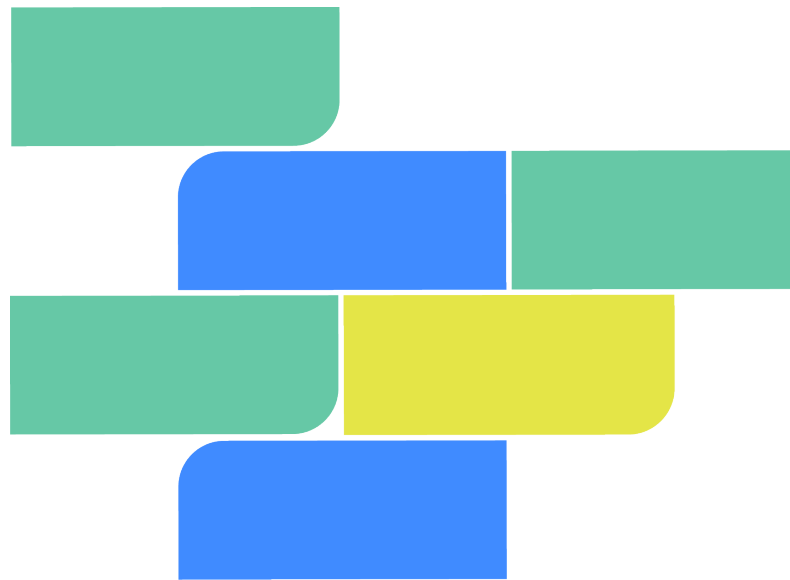
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Briefing:

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# The civic high street

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May 2026



# About this briefing

This briefing offers recommendations for how government can deliver a transformative High Street Strategy, using policy and investment to drive civic high street regeneration and create good places for communities to live, work and connect.

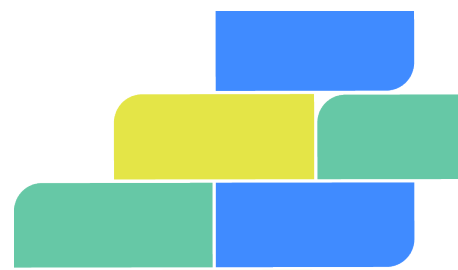
# About Power to Change

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them.

We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.

This work is part of Power to Change's community-powered places and spaces workstream. The spaces that help communities thrive are disappearing. Community businesses reconnect people, protect vital local assets and give neighbourhoods real agency. We are working with community businesses and partners to test new ideas, shift policy and mindsets, unlock finance, and collaborate across sectors, growing what works and reviving the places that matter.

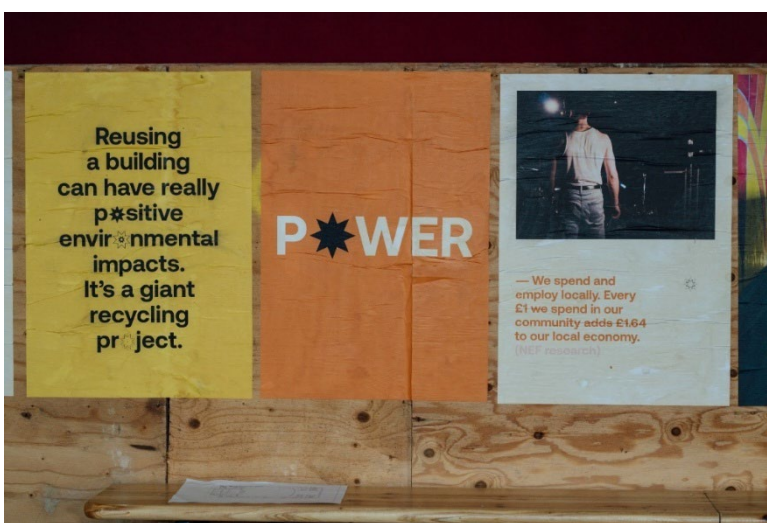


# The problem: A broken model for the British high street

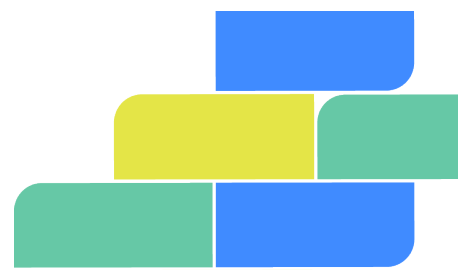
The state of the high street is a highly visible indicator of local prosperity or decline in every part of the country. High streets shape daily life, support local identity and signal whether national commitments to renewal are being met. Addressing their deterioration, including high vacancy rates, poor public realm and rising anti-social behaviour, is essential to local economic renewal and to creating tangible improvements that strengthen community connection, cohesion and pride in place. Fix our high streets and they become the shopfront of a growing economy.

Most people believe their high street is getting worse, and our research links this decline to increasing distrust in mainstream politics. Places with the greatest increase in persistent vacancy before the general election saw increased support for Reform UK than more prosperous high streets, to a statistically significant degree, even in areas receiving significant regeneration funding from the previous government.<sup>1</sup> This points to the need for a new approach. Yet for many years, national policy has continued to centre an outdated retail-led approach that no longer reflects how and where people shop.

The demise of department stores, the growth of online and out-of-town retail and wider economic pressures have created a surplus of retail space. A future-facing, creative reuse of these spaces – expanding what and who our high streets are for – will be essential to restoring pride and productivity on the high street.



*Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth*



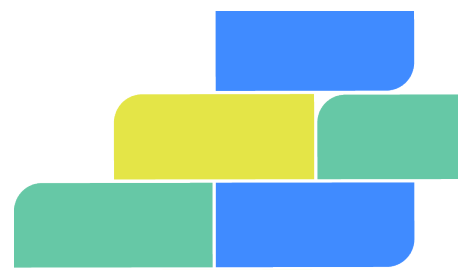
# The solution: Make the civic model the explicit vision for the high street

A mixed-use civic model is emerging as a resilient alternative for the high street, combining retail and hospitality with greater access to public services, community spaces and housing. This vision now needs clearer definition, drawing on innovative practice across the country and supported through the forthcoming High Street Strategy.

Furthermore, many existing and new powers, such as High Street Rental Auctions, Compulsory Purchase Orders and the Community Right to Buy, remain underused or poorly understood. Revitalising Britain's high streets requires better use of these tools, coordinated investment and stronger collaboration with local partners like communities and community businesses.

Across the country, communities are taking ownership of key assets and creating destination spaces that meet local needs, foster connection and boost footfall to nearby businesses.<sup>2</sup> They are motivated not by profit but by the desire to restore local pride. This approach builds strong, connected communities and keeps wealth local, with 56p in every £1 spent in community-owned assets staying in the local economy – compared to 40p in comparable private businesses.<sup>3</sup>

As stewards of high street buildings, community businesses give high streets enduring vitality, with community-owned spaces less likely to be vacant than those owned by pension funds or investment management schemes.<sup>4</sup> And they are resilient to economic challenges, with the majority of community businesses consistently confident in their future business prospects over the last year: in the last quarter of 2025 only a quarter of community businesses thought their prospects would worsen in the next quarter, compared to half of small businesses (when compared to research by the FSB).<sup>5</sup>

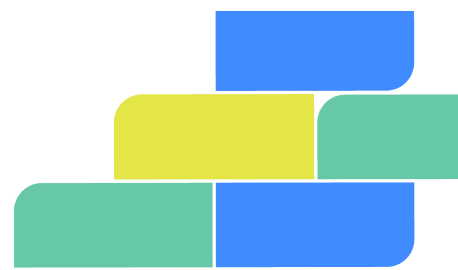


# Five steps to deliver a civic model for the high street

1. Tackle vacant buildings and signs of local decline through a Property Holding Vehicle - a government-backed pot to buy, restore and transfer high street properties to community ownership.
2. Roll out high street innovation squads to help councils utilise existing powers to shape the high street.
3. Reform access to and collection of high street ownership and vacancy data.
4. Establish a model meanwhile lease agreement that is fair for landlords and tenants, and support implementation.
5. Support communities to progress from temporary use to long term asset stewardship.



*Back on the Map, Hendon*



# Taking back the high street

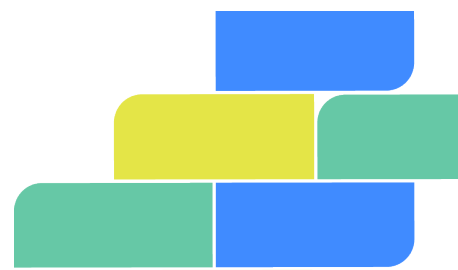
## Community-led regeneration as an alternative to local decline

Our high streets have suffered a long decline, with the demise of department stores and the rise of out-of-town and online retail changing how we shop. Each year, more shuttered buildings sit empty on our high streets. They are left this way by distant owners without a stake in the local community, and many stay vacant for years.

But across the country, a new model is emerging. More and more communities are taking ownership of key assets. Community businesses are helping create destination spaces that serve local needs, create space for connection and increase footfall to other local businesses. This model for local regeneration builds community power and keeps wealth in the local economy in ways that distant and extractive models of high street ownership do not.



*Haven Community Hub, Southend-on-Sea*



## Haven Community Hub: Health and care on the high street

Haven Community Hub is a multi-purpose community hub supporting older adults and their families, run by Age Concern Southend in a grade II listed former department store in Westcliff, Southend-on-Sea. It now welcomes 4,000 visitors a month and has helped save a closed grade-II listed department store but has also acted as a catalyst for wider regeneration of the high street.

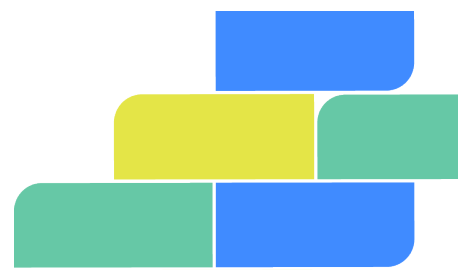
The hub has a focus on supporting older adults, their families and carers, and regularly hosts NHS clinics, health and wellbeing activities and social sessions in its café. It is also home to a five day a week specialist dementia day care service, helping adults with dementia and other neurological conditions to live well and maintain their independence for longer.

In 2025, the organisation raised £1.2 million to buy the building outright and keep it in long-term community ownership. The model here has the potential to be replicated in other department stores.

Community businesses often take a role in place-shaping beyond the assets they own. As locally rooted and locally accountable organisations, community businesses can act as a conduit for other high street stakeholders, such as local authorities and private developers, to engage deeply with local people and deliver the change they want to see. This makes them key players in a meaningful, community-driven Pride in Place agenda and the future of our high streets.

We want communities to have the power to create vibrant and resilient high streets that work for them. But to do so, high streets need inclusive governance that gives locals a say in decision-making. And they need the opportunities and resources to take ownership of the spaces and places that matter to them. Through evidence and advocacy, we're working to help communities take back the high street.

To secure a sustainable future for the high street, we must look beyond the current retail-dominated model. We believe a mixed-use civic model can create more vibrant high streets, stronger local economies and more connected, cohesive communities.



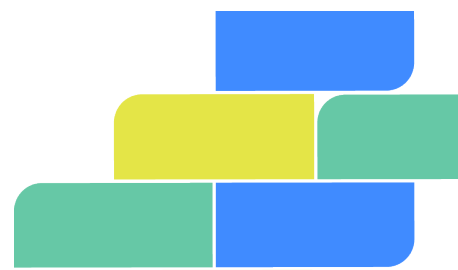
# Testing and learning from communities

Power to Change backs community business to test innovative approaches to high street and town centre renewal, sharing learning to shape more effective policy, practice and partnerships. In recent years, we've supported community-led initiatives to reshape the ownership and use of high street spaces, creating alternatives to retail-dominated high streets with more space for care, education and connection. We've also experimented with models for community-led governance and decision-making on the high street, helping to give communities more say in the future vision for the high street and how investment is spent.

## Community Improvement Districts

Our Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) pilot in 2021-2022 offered a model for community-led decision making on the high street, as a bottom-up alternative to BIDs. Working with seven places around England the pilot showed that CIDs, particularly where led by an established community anchor organisation, can help regenerate the high street by:

- **Convening** – CIDs adopted leadership roles within their localities, bringing together new groups of partners and initiating conversations and activities which otherwise are unlikely to have happened.
- **Amplifying resident and less-heard voices** – CIDs brought new voices to the table and offered new ways to achieve genuine community engagement and accountability in high street decision-making.
- **Galvanising local action** – one of the key successes of the CID pilots was their ability to create short-term, tangible signs of change, which became an important driver of local progress. Future Wolverton secured a vacant town-centre property to become a temporary community shop – which remains open today. In Hendon, Back on the Map created an identifiable local branding for the high street, created a street cleaning role and brought a Christmas tree back to the high street for the first time in decades.<sup>6</sup>



## Back on the Map: A vibrant neighbourhood high street

Emerging out of the New Deal for Communities in the early 2000s, Back on the Map is a changemaking community business based in Hendon, on the outskirts of Sunderland, which works to make Hendon a place of opportunity to live, work and thrive by creating a better place, a stronger community and a local voice.

In 2009 they set up as a social purpose landlord to tackle the poor quality of rental properties, often owned by absentee landlords, in their area. They now manage 130 homes and have £4.8 million of residential and commercial assets, the profits of which subsidise the organisation's community renewal work. Working with Power to Change, Back on the Map founded and led the Heart of Hendon Community Improvement District, catalysing local regeneration and partnership between the community and independent traders. This project led Back on the Map to purchase and regenerate a block of empty shops which are now fully occupied.

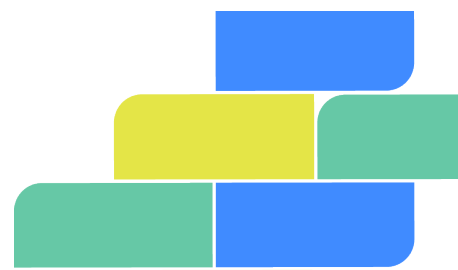
## Community-Led High Street Innovators

Since 2025, Power to Change has worked with community businesses in Birkenhead, Bristol, Dewsbury and Stockport to test innovative approaches to high street renewal: unlocking empty shops and green spaces for community enterprise and community-led housing delivery; giving communities a voice in local decisions; and using heritage- and culture-led approaches to regeneration.<sup>7</sup>

Their work exemplifies how community-led approaches unlock more locally rooted, trusted and durable renewal on the high street. However, they do this in spite of significant structural barriers: fragmented high street ownership, insecure tenure, thin local government capacity and misaligned or insufficient local funding.

### Reuse and ownership of high street space

Community businesses are taking on empty high street property to reactivate the high street, improve footfall and create space for connection and local activities and services. But a lack of readily accessible and transparent data about property ownership and vacancy makes it challenging to identify and engage with the owners of empty property. Temporary 'meanwhile' occupation of high street spaces can enable



communities to reanimate high streets and soft test their business models, but often lack security of tenure, disincentivising communities from investing in renewing these spaces and preventing longer-term growth.

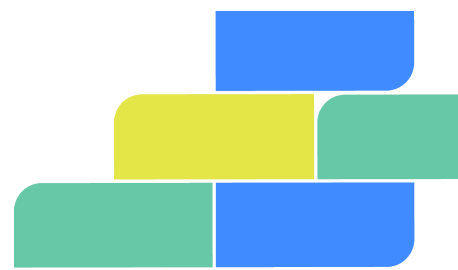
Communities are exploring routes to more long-term stewardship and ownership of the high street, and would like their local authorities to use existing powers like High Street Rental Auctions and Compulsory Purchase or asset transfer to make long-term vacant spaces available. But many local authorities' financial and legal risk appetite and practical expertise are too limited to make this practicable. Councils need more support and guidance to use existing powers to help local communities regenerate their high streets, and to support the implementation of forthcoming powers like the Community Right to Buy.

### **Governance and decision-making**

Communities are seeking real decision-making power on the future of their high streets. Community businesses can offer best practices for local regeneration: they foster trust and are accountable to local people, engage deeply to understand and respond to the community's needs and aspiration, and make imaginative use of high street space to serve these needs. In places like Dewsbury and Birkenhead, community organisations are helping to drive meaningful community engagement with Pride in Place plans.



*Southmead Development Trust, Bristol*



## Southmead Development Trust: Homes on the high street

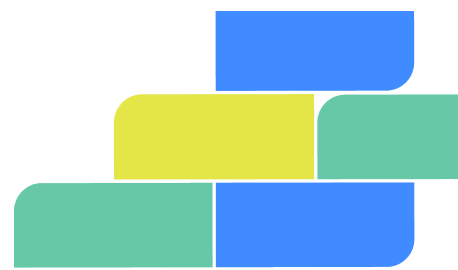
Southmead Development Trust is a resident-led community anchor organisation working in Southmead, Bristol. Founded in the early 1990s and based in a former secondary school now held on a long lease, the Trust delivers a wide range of services including health and wellbeing provision, youth work, enterprise support and community facilities. With a turnover of around £2 million and a staff team of approximately 60, it combines trading activity with grant-funded work to sustain long-term community benefit.

The Trust's current focus is the regeneration of Arnside, a small suburban high street and adjoining green space at Glencoyne Square. Once intended as the heart of the estate, Arnside has become run down and is affected by low footfall, vacancy and anti-social behaviour. SDT has set out to transform the area with an innovative community-owned extension to the high street to create 177 new homes above retail and mixed-use units. Alongside housing, the development will host a new library, gym, community enterprise units and improved public realm, designed to increase footfall, improve safety and support long-term viability for the area.

### Financing community-led regeneration

Securing funding for community-led regeneration remains a challenge. Local regeneration funding is often poorly aligned with what communities need – from small, flexible revenue funds to test business models in their early days to larger capital pots for asset purchase and regeneration – and they find themselves having to stitch together different small pots of funding to achieve their vision for the high street.

One of the critical issues impacting community-led regeneration is the lack of an agile facility providing capital at the scale and pace needed to compete with private developers to purchase assets for community ownership and use. With publicly-owned social infrastructure disappearing from our towns and high streets,<sup>8</sup> and with the introduction of the Community Right to Buy creating renewed opportunity for community ownership, bridging this gap is more urgent than ever.



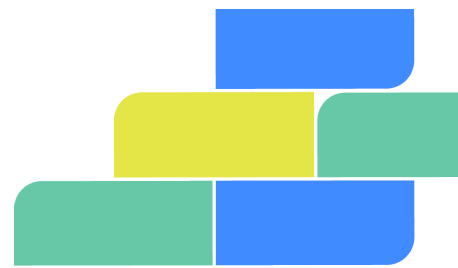
## Dewsbury Arcade: Using heritage-led renewal to overcome nostalgia

The Arcade Group was set up to transform and manage Dewsbury's Grade-II listed Victorian shopping arcade, which closed in 2016 after years of declining footfall and tenancy. The arcade was purchased by Kirklees Council in 2020 and secured a £4.5 million National Lottery Heritage Fund grant for refurbishment, to support a council-owned, community-run model for managing the asset. The Arcade Group is preparing to operate the building as the UK's first community-run shopping centre, blending retail, culture, workspace and events to reinvigorate town centre life.

The Arcade Group's work extends beyond the arcade, aiming to reinvigorate the town centre by developing a programme of events and a new town centre Business Network of 200+ members, supporting the town's Pride in Place programme. Last Summer The Arcade Group revived the 'Dewsbury on Sea' community event for the first time in 15 years. This transformed the town-centre shopping precinct into a beachside resort, bringing 3,000 visitors into a town centre that has long struggled with low footfall, creating connection in a town grappling with a diminished social cohesion and local pride.



*The Arcade Group, Dewsbury*



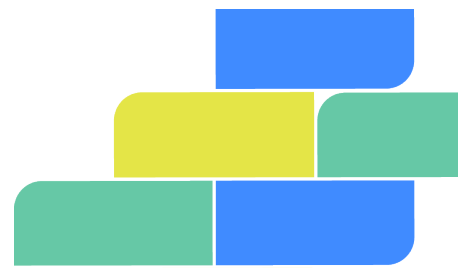
# Recommendations: Five steps to deliver a civic model for the high street

To secure a sustainable future for the high street, we must look beyond the current retail-dominated model and make the civic model the explicit vision of the High Street Strategy. We believe a mixed-use civic model can create more vibrant high streets, stronger local economies and more connected, cohesive communities.

We welcome the allocation of over £300 million for high street innovation partnerships. Now there is a real opportunity for national government to drive the reinvention of our high streets by **embedding an explicitly civic model, not just a retail-led recovery model**, as the core organising principle for a national strategy.



*The Arcade Group, Dewsbury*



We have identified five key steps that would start to lay the foundation for such a model, where high streets and town centres are treated as essential civic infrastructure, driven by use for community and connection, public service delivery, heritage and culture, housing and enterprise. Government should recognise the role of community ownership and community business as central delivery vehicles for this civic vision, and commit to aligning future high street funding and policy tools with achieving a mixed-use civic high street.

## 1. Tackle vacant buildings and signs of local decline through a Property Holding Vehicle – a government-backed pot to buy, restore and transfer high street properties to community ownership

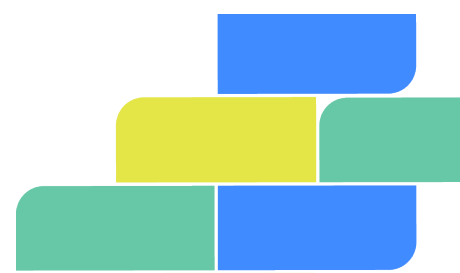
The government should tackle neglected and vacant properties – prominent symbols of decline that dent local pride – by establishing and part-capitalising a Property Holding Vehicle as a means to enable community and local ownership and renewal.

High rates of sustained vacancy are driving political disaffection as people feel they lack the control to change and improve their local areas. Without a mechanism to aggregate capital and hold assets for long-term community value, progress will remain piecemeal. This Property Holding Company would bring together ideas like Power to Change's long-standing call for a High Street Buyout Fund, emerging work on the Liverpool City Region Asset Holding Company initiated by Kindred and models like the National Trust's 'safe harbour' proposal for heritage assets, providing national scale and investment opportunities for trusts and foundations supporting the emergence of the civic high street, as well as property developers and the wider impact investing sector.<sup>9</sup> Driven by commercial property insight and community demand, it would act flexibly to purchase strategic assets for community ownership and transfer them into community ownership, over time and with support.

The government should commit to developing this vehicle as part of the High Street Strategy and could initiate this by part-capitalising the vehicle with funding from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government's £301 million funding for high streets. Community businesses already working at a neighbourhood scale – like Back on the Map in Hendon and Nudge Community Builders in Plymouth – could be engaged in a small-scale proof of concept for this approach.

## 2. Roll out high street innovation squads to help councils utilise their powers to shape the high street

Building on the Cabinet Office's 'Test, Learn and Grow' scheme, the government should implement an intensive support programme to enable local authorities to put their



existing high street powers (such as planning powers, High Street Rental Auctions and Compulsory Purchase) into practice to improve the state of the high street, facilitating a longer-term behavioural shift in how local authorities deliver high street renewal.

The government has already implemented a raft of local authority powers and is shaping new ones, such as licensing to restrict vape shops and betting shops on high streets, as well as introducing the Community Right to Buy. However, many local authorities struggle with a lack of expert knowledge, capacity, and legal and financial risk aversion, and do not fully utilise the powers at their disposal to unlock vacant space on high streets for civic reuse.

These innovation teams would draw on expertise from central government (including MHCLG and Treasury) as well as from innovative local authorities, practitioners and community leaders shaping creative reuse of high street spaces. This short-term intervention would not permanently add additional capacity to local authorities, but would help to trigger a behavioural shift towards more proactive use of these policies to free up high street assets for use by local community and civic regenerators.

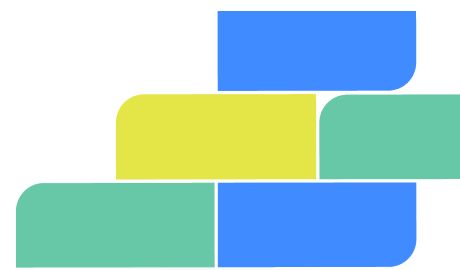
This intervention should also be supported by new or updated guidance for local authorities and local partners on using the existing policy toolkit, which could be made available in all places to help local authorities fill knowledge gaps and build confidence to utilise existing policy. This should also support readiness to implement the Community Right to Buy.

A practice network could translate these policies into applied models and surface examples which illustrate the benefits of engaging with existing powers for local authorities and for high street regeneration, to encourage take-up.

### 3. Reform access to and collection of high street ownership and vacancy data

The government and councils should improve and open access to information on high street vacancy and asset ownership, standardise datasets where possible, and ensure communities can access the data needed to target interventions and make the case for civic reuse.

Currently, data about who owns the high street remains fragmented and much of it is stuck behind a paywall. In many places, councils, communities and other regeneration practitioners lack a coherent overview of which spaces are stuck in long-term vacancy, or why. Building on the decision to reform Land Registry data access, Government should explore opportunities to create a comprehensive open access dataset that brings together existing centrally and locally collected data about land and property ownership, vacancy and value, and expand data collection to support local

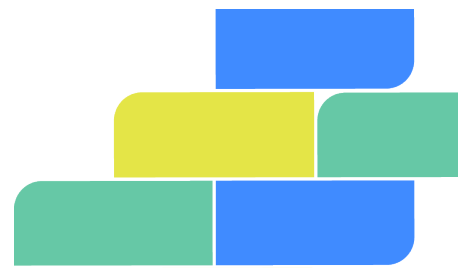


regeneration.<sup>10</sup> This could combine existing data such as that held in the Land Registry, Register of Overseas Interests, local business rate valuations and national vacancy data. To assist in monitoring the success of civic high street transformation over time, data on footfall, ownership composition (private, public and community) and local wealth retention could be added in time.

As part of the High Street Strategy, government should implement a high street data collection drive which requires councils to map and designate their local high streets, create a live vacancy register and strengthen local property ownership data. This work could be supported through funding community businesses to do targeted high street data collection – including running community engagement to map and designate high streets in their area, and identifying priority vacant properties for civic transformation, based on local need.



*Back on the Map, Hendon*



#### 4. Establish a model meanwhile lease agreement that is fair for landlords and tenants, and support implementation.

The government should develop a new model lease for meanwhile use and clear guidance for communities, landlords and councils as part of the High Street Strategy to help transform meanwhile space from pop-up activity to incubators for community enterprises.

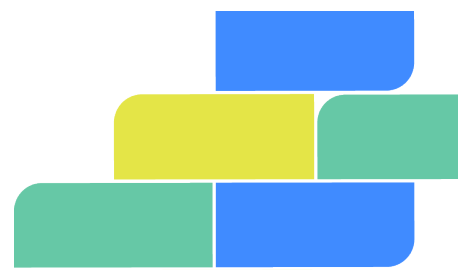
A model meanwhile lease is intended to provide a template and guidance to be used by landlords seeking to proactively provide access to space for communities in their surplus buildings. The current model meanwhile use lease and guidance supplied by MHCLG was introduced by the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2009 as part of the Meanwhile Project.<sup>11</sup>

A new model lease is needed and should be updated to reflect the changing economic realities and the government's aspirations for the high street, as well as the growing recognition of the role that communities play as developers and stewards. It should set fair parameters for short-term use of high street property by community businesses and community organisations, and recognise their role in creating value uplift, increasing footfall and stewarding assets (reducing guardianship or insurance costs to the asset owner) and accordingly ensuring affordable and secure access to space for communities in return.

This model meanwhile lease should:

- Establish a 'meanwhile condition' as standard for property at the beginning and end of a lease (rather than a full strip out) to prevent excessive fit out costs and reduce waste.
- Provide appropriate notification periods for lease termination and clear, mutually beneficial break clauses to help landlords and tenants plan for the future.
- Place restrictions on the duration of short-term, rolling leases by introducing new tenant rights after a period of initial occupation and asset stewardship, providing much-needed stability so communities can plan for the future.

Government should also explore preferential rights for community-led occupiers to secure assets they use on a meanwhile basis if the landlord decides to sell – like a right of first refusal to negotiate a sale with the landlord, or a priority right to asset transfer for publicly owned assets if a local authority chooses to divest of them.



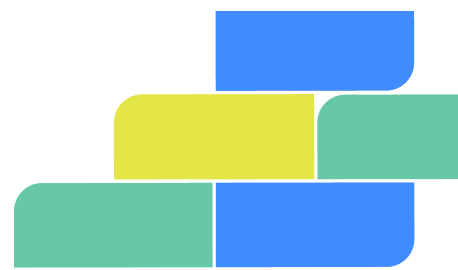
## 5. Support communities to progress from temporary use to long term asset stewardship.

National and local policy, support and funding should be designed to make it easier for community organisations to move from pop-up or meanwhile use to longer-term lease arrangements and ownership, enabling them to become long-term stewards of high street renewal.

Pop-up or meanwhile use works best as a means to soft-test the offer of community business and enable progress towards long-term occupation and stewardship of the high street. Government should require publicly funded high street regeneration programmes, funds and policy interventions to support community organisations to progress towards long-term use and permanence. The forthcoming High Street Strategy and associated funding should require local authorities and delivery partnerships to identify suitable assets for community-led use.

They should also: define the tenure options available at each stage; ensure that capital, revenue funding and support to progress projects are aligned to these different tenures and needs at different stages of the asset journey; and make sure that the powers will be used to help communities secure longer-term control where appropriate. This would shift policy away from treating community use as a temporary vacancy fix and towards building durable local stewardship of high street assets.

Community businesses should be viewed as key stakeholders and delivery partners for the government's £301 million High Street Innovation Partnerships and the funding should support their progress towards long-term use of high street assets. Where councils are approaching partnerships with the private sector to improve high streets, this funding and local government's convening role should be used to incentivise high street partners to create meaningful and affordable access to space for communities too.



# The infrastructure to drive change

We are at a critical juncture for our high streets, and it is essential that the government's forthcoming High Street Strategy reflect the opportunity of the civic high street. We want to ensure the government has the insight and infrastructure to make this possible.

## Work with us

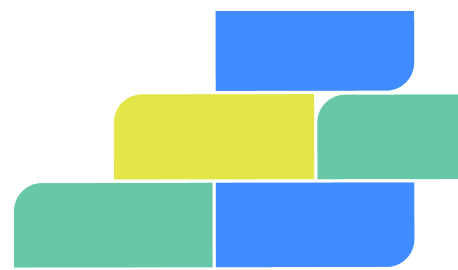
Power to Change brings partners together to do, test and learn what works to shape the conditions for community businesses to thrive. In 2026 and beyond, we're working with community businesses across England to test new community-led models for neighbourhood governance and to turn struggling high streets into vibrant civic spaces.

We share evidence and practical insight from our work on the ground with communities to help create an enabling policy environment, shift the mindsets and behaviours of public and private sector institutions, unlock funding and finance for community-led change, and transform how government, businesses and communities work together.

We are also partnering with This Day to create a Civic High Streets Collective. Bringing together a network of cross-sectoral civic regeneration practitioners, commercial developers and policy experts, the Collective aims to bridge policy, politics and practice to bring the concept of the civic high street to the mainstream. It will offer the knowledge, infrastructure and support to ensure the government's plans for high streets are deliverable and transformative for communities. It offers a space to test and develop new policy ideas for the future of high streets and to put them into practice.

If you'd like to find out more about our policy ideas or work with us to shape the future of Britain's high streets, please contact:

Jessica Craig, Policy Manager: [Jessica.Craig@powertochange.org.uk](mailto:Jessica.Craig@powertochange.org.uk).



# Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Jessica Craig et al., *Introducing the Shattered Front* (Power to Change, 2025), [https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/PtC\\_Introducing-the-Shattered-Front\\_Final\\_RGB.pdf](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/PtC_Introducing-the-Shattered-Front_Final_RGB.pdf).
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