

Championing our high streets

Learning from a Study Tour to Roeselare



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Foreword



Cllr John Fuller OBE
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The high streets and market places of our towns and cities evolved and grew over centuries providing places to trade, places to meet and, yes, places to gossip and to enjoy some of the pleasures of life.

Things move on but the need for places to exchange goods and for people to come together will never fade away. But as society changes and technology allows us to pursue ever more personalised and bespoke interests, our high streets need to adapt to new realities.

But how? There isn't a single solution. In a country with 1,186 towns, with their populations varying between 5,000 and 225,000¹, covering over half the population in England and Wales – there are no silver bullets.

Each of these areas has different needs, challenges and opportunities. But if each is to remain relevant and vital, local leadership is needed to shape and to develop each space.

A delegation from the District Councils' Network, which represents many of those 1,186 towns and smaller cities, visited Roeselare, in Flanders, Belgium where an inspirational leader Mayor Kris Declercq and his team have made it their mission to reimagine how a town can be transformed to be fit for the twenty-first century whilst remaining true to the purpose of providing places to live, meet and trade.

Our Study Tour, led by Bill Grimsey, former Chief Executive of Iceland plc and a Senior Executive at Tesco plc, provided a blueprint of principles for change.

This pamphlet of short articles from the delegation members seeks to capture the essence of the progress made in Roeselare and to learn lessons that can be applied to our own places as they strive to remain relevant in a digital age.

As the lead authorities in areas granted Stronger Towns Funding and High Streets Funding, we know that districts must drive the change necessary to save our struggling towns. We have many of the tools for transformation, through our responsibilities covering housing, planning and growth, but we know that solutions lie not just in the bricks and mortar – but in the communities we serve and we must champion what makes our towns different to deliver real change.

This pamphlet and the articles within provide an important contribution to the debate about how our towns are reborn and repurposed. Not all the lessons will apply equally in all places. But the crux of what they are trying to achieve will have universal application and I commend this to you.

¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/understanding-townsineEnglandandWales/anintroduction>

A way forward



Bill Grimsey
Retail expert
Author of the
Grimsey Review
and
Grimsey 2

The decline in high streets has swept the country. With recent analysis showing **1 in 10 shops are sat empty and £1 in every £5 now spent online**, we are running out of time to save our high streets and keeping them relevant in the 21st century requires bold, brave changes.

Things will not, and cannot, remain the same. Maintaining high streets in a world where goods can be purchased in a matter of seconds by smartphone, and then be delivered the next day, means local leaders must look beyond retail to sustain our high streets.

Understanding place is at the heart of finding a solution to the future. Local areas must provide new and unique experiences to draw in business. It's no longer about anchor tenants or retail, high streets must become a focal point for communities. **Local leaders need to think about what is unique about their area, its' heritage and significance and use this vision to drive community centred changes.**

As well as looking to the past for inspiration, changes must recognise the future, the technology revolution is here and high streets need to be recalibrated to embrace this. My predictions are:

By 2025 there will be no high street banks.

By 2028, half of all superstore space will be gone and no longer needed.

By 2030, all cars will be self-driving, by 2050 there will be no cars in town centres.

Few saw the dramatic shifts of the last ten years coming, and there is a good chance there will be game changing developments on the way which we are not close to anticipating. However, by re-positioning high streets around experience and communities, we can help create more resilient places which appeal to the fundamentally social nature of people.

Managing this change requires determination, visionary leadership and long-term plans to ensure high streets can survive. I hope that the leaders and chiefs who witnessed the changes in Roeselare can draw on the experience to breathe life back into their own high streets for the generations to come.



Local government delivering change



Jackie Sadek
Chief Operating
Officer
UK Regeneration

Every town centre must develop a unique plan that is business-like and focused on transforming the place into a complete community hub incorporating: health, housing, arts, education, entertainment, leisure, business/office space, as well as some shops (if you've got 'em, hang on to 'em). During the last decade the conventional wisdom has been to advise local authorities not to purchase redundant retail stock, on the basis that there's a very good reason as to why it's up for sale.

However, with the advent of the Boris Johnson "levelling up" and significant funds available through the Future High Streets Fund, that conventional wisdom may be changing.

Every local authority is the democratically elected custodian of their place, and in that role, it may be that the most responsible thing to do is to invest in their town centre in order to protect their locality. With the depressed market, there may now be new opportunities to buy high street stock and convert to quality housing or mixed with community uses. A word of warning, any local authority looking to do this MUST get proper advice, the land and property market is still a jungle.

Advice aside, each town is different and the solution to saving high streets must be locally determined, driven by a single deliverable vision. Councils must use their place-shaping powers to act now, determine what is unique about their area and provide the leadership needed to bring all stakeholders, including the community, together to develop and deliver real transformation.

We can't keep doing the same thing and expect different results - but repurposing high streets to focus on social interactions rather than financial transactions is no easy task. When I shared the work of the Grimsey Review and Grimsey 2 with leaders at a DCN conference event, I urged them look to a town in Belgium for inspiration.

The second Grimsey review, "It's time to reshape our town centres" landed amid a bout of retail collapses, CVAs, pension scandals, and other assorted mayhem; it was clear that radical change was needed fast. Our main thesis, in both Grimsey Reviews, is that we need to turn things on their head. Our town centres are precious places: places of economic development, community service and social discourse. And their future should **not** be predicated solely on retail activity.



Why people matter



Katie Perrior
Chair
iNHouse
Communications

If high streets are to be completely reimagined around communities, local democratic leaders must be ready to take the helm and provide the vision for change. The Mayor of Roeselare, Kris Declercq certainly wasn't afraid to step up to the plate and take ownership of his town's transformation. His unconventional approach began with a vision first- costs later mantra. Declercq encouraged the delegation to think beyond the constraints of a budget to deliver something truly revolutionary.

Disrupting the status quo was not always popular and strategic communications were key to securing support for his vision. As part of this, the Mayor and his team held an extensive programme of events for business groups and citizens, knowing that it was not going to be universally welcomed. The business community had to face facts and acknowledge what was going wrong before being sold the plan of how to put it right. A talk from Bill Grimsey was a real 'wake up and smell the coffee' moment...

But, by having these challenging conversations early, offering support to those willing to embrace change and sharing honest truths to those reluctant to conform, allowed the Mayor to move quickly with his ambitious policy agenda.

Beyond business, reinstating civic pride and creating a more cohesive community was another cornerstone of the town's plans. The Mayor and his team recognised how fundamental community engagement was, particularly with implementing more controversial changes such as moving car parking to the outskirts of the town or fining residents for anti-social behaviour.

A notable example of this was repurposing a disused church to a market space. This would be a steep ask in many towns, but, by nostalgically framing the change as ensuring a much-loved building was able to return as a focal community point, allowed this to become a reality. Alongside the careful narrative of events and changes, was the creation of the brand "VANRSL". This represented "from Roeselare" encouraging local people and local products to celebrate what's unique about their vibrant town and to be proud to come from the area.

Delivering such widespread change requires a democratic mandate so that communities feel in control of changes to their town. The Mayor has deliberately kept the project under his personal portfolio throughout his tenure and his continued political leadership has given his team the ability to take a bolder, more radical approach to change. However, it also ensures that he, and his ambitious vision, are held to account at the ballot box. The last time he put that to the test, voters returned him to office with a higher majority than before.

Most importantly, Declercq has visually demonstrated the change he promised to make – he found solutions where everyone else just talked about problems. There is a lesson here for all politicians, local and national. Create the vision and get on with it. Be bold – nobody was ever remembered for a lick of paint and a quick tidy up. If fundamental change is needed in your neighbourhood, they are looking to you to make it happen.



Reflections from Cllr Humphreys



Cllr Dan Humphreys
Leader
Worthing Borough
Council

Grimsey in his review of high streets and embarked on a programme of action to revitalise the town and prepare it to prosper in the face of the challenges that the 21st century has brought.

From the moment of arrival in Roeselare the attention to detail on creating visual beauty is evident. The roads and pavements are looked after and the feeling that this area is looked after is immediate. That commitment from the local authority was reinforced throughout the tour and attendees were shown great consideration by the hosts.

This feeds through to the work done in the town. Each business that formed part of the talk spoke highly of the engagement with the local authority and it was clear that an incredibly productive working relationship had been formed. While the headline information is the investment in the public realm, the free Wi-Fi and the work to support events, what stands out is that attention to detail, particularly with regard to forging local relationships.

Next steps

My resounding message from the study tour is to get the big stuff in place. Without delivering our regeneration projects we won't have the extra cinema screens, homes, offices and other leisure or cultural stops to keep people happy and enthused in the town centre. We need to continue our ambitious public realm programme to make the town centre a genuinely beautiful place in which people can feel safe and relaxed. Completing our work to deliver a digital town centre, served by ultrafast broadband, free public Wi-Fi and critically, people who know how to exploit the technology, will be a big win. We need to grasp the opportunity that new technology provides. Roeselare and Bill Grimsey give us some great examples of where we can do this.

We'll be increasing our efforts to work with the local highways authority and Highways England to improve some of the gateways in to the town. Small-scale initiatives such as free pram hire to save families from having to transport such bulk items would be achievable and popular. A renewed effort to exert pressure on the owners of vacant properties to bring some life in them must also be a priority. It's not good enough for visitors and residents to be greeted by empty properties which could be housing shops, small leisure uses, offices or cultural attractions.

Worthing will soon be the first ultrafast town in the south of England. Others will follow but we'll be in the lead. When we fully exploit the opportunities that we're creating I suspect that we may well nudge ahead of Roeselare in terms of delivering a 21st century town centre.

About Worthing

The challenge for Roeselare, as with Worthing and every other town centre in Western Europe, is to adapt to a world in which regular trips to the high street are no longer a necessity. Online shopping and out of town supermarkets have put paid to that. For those local leaders who want to rise to the challenge of keeping the high street a vibrant and busy place where residents, visitors, local services and businesses come together to social and trade there are various solutions. None are easy but in Worthing we are, by and large, on the right track.

Our work with West Sussex County Council to rejuvenate brownfield sites, invest in significant upgrades to the public realm and deliver both ultrafast broadband and free public Wi-Fi are critical leaps in the right direction. Our investment in culture through events, our theatres and museum are already making a positive difference. Worthing town centre is a place where people come together - in one Saturday in July we saw hundreds of people complete the weekly Park Run along the prom, thousands attend the annual Pride event, huge numbers come to see and ride on our brand new Worthing Observation Wheel. All initiatives that could sit nicely in the Roeselare playbook!

The headwinds prevail in spite of all this. We have empty shops, too many people heading out of Worthing to spend their time and money in other Sussex towns and there is still not enough to hold people in the town for significant amounts of time. Some of this is changing and more needs to change. The Roeselare experience give plenty of inspiration to do more.

Reflections from Roeselare

The lessons learnt from the recent DCN study to trip to Roeselare have provided a call to action and inspiration for those of us who attended. The town in Flanders, led by Mayor Kris Declercq, took the suggestions laid out by Bill

Reflections from Bill Cullen



Bill Cullen
Chief Executive
Hinckley and
Bosworth Borough
Council
and Chair, DCN
Chief Executive
Group

"This is probably the most important delegation I've brought here". These are the words of Bill Grimsey left ringing in my ears on the first day of the study tour to Roeselare. This was a particularly memorable trip for me, as well as the learning experience, it was my first trip to Belgium and on the Eurostar.

When we arrived at the Town Hall in Roeselare for our welcome from the Mayor and his team we were hit by their sheer passion and commitment to their town centre. Their journey from a failing town to a thriving hub has been remarkable. The transformation has resulted from strong civic leadership, enthusiastic, corporate working within his council and a commitment to learning and valuing support from experts like Bill Grimsey and his team.

Bill advocated that "2013 was five to midnight in recognising issues for the high street" but we are "now at five minutes past midnight" so doing nothing to stem the tide of high street failure is not an option and we need to act now.

The 21st century impact of technology is moving at such pace, our high streets are in danger of extinction unless they reinvent themselves. Local authorities are best placed to be catalysts of change, with our understanding of place key to keeping our towns vital. The challenge is to shift from being a nation of "cloned towns" to valuing and celebrating our uniqueness using cultural and heritage links in our places as opportunities not burdens.

From intention to action

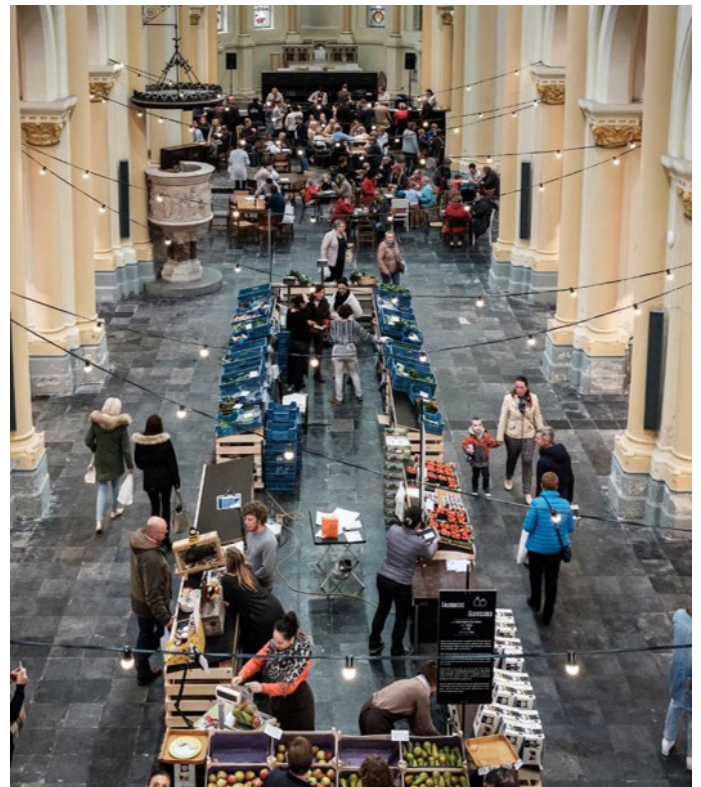
Celebrating difference was a key lesson from Roeselare. How to innovate a town the "Roeselare Way" was a key mantra of the Mayor and his senior team. He talked of having "transformers" to work together on a strategic plan and using shock tactics with businesses and shop owners to confront them with the bare truth of what was needed to happen to address the town's decline.

Through the bold leadership of the Mayor a town centre commission was established, and a 20-year plan drawn up. Very much at the heart of the plan, and key to its widespread acceptance, was drawing on heritage and nostalgia to inform change. The aim was to reinvent the centre as a "community hub" looking beyond retail to more a more holistic experienced based model. This plan also introduced effective ways to measure impact of initiatives and change which informed and emboldened decision making.

Reflections

What stood out around the success of Roeselare's approach was the "visible hand" of the Mayor leading the agenda developing a vision and strategy that businesses and stakeholders bought into; creating an effective town centre network and bringing together teams within the authority to drive delivery. A shared narrative was adopted, and the network was no longer referred to as a business improvement district but a community improvement district and likewise customers were now "citizens".

If there is one message that can be concluded from this trip is that it is not about the shopping but the experience you get from a town or city. This is a challenge and an opportunity for us all to consider; to make our towns places that provide magical and lasting experiences for all.



Reflections from Cllr Wood



Cllr Katrina Wood
Leader
Wycombe Borough
Council

"Every town has a market heritage and Local Authorities have a duty to celebrate their town's unique selling points and make them places for everyone to live, work and play. In other words - a Community Hub for all the community."

About Wycombe

As with all towns Wycombe has challenges, for example long term vacant buildings, tired public realm, loss of offices, technology deficit and poor perception of the town. However, the council is already intervening and we are purchasing vacant shops and bring them back into use by encouraging independent businesses into town. For example, one unit is now occupied by the "Mad Squirrel Tap and Bottle", a craft brewery providing beers and pizzas. Another houses "The Works" a family run restaurant which has just opened its second premises in town.

Reflections from Roeselare

"The Council in Roeselare can vary rates and property tax to benefit new businesses. They can refund the property tax, 75% first year, 50% second year and 25% third year to again enable businesses to get a sound footing. They can provide grants for businesses moving into the city or opening a second business. I wish we had this much ability to encourage businesses into our towns."

I think what stood out for me was how Roeselare has transformed their dying town to make it a vibrant place which encourages people to come into town to share experiences. From the old-fashioned thrift shop, similar to our charity shops but run as a business which started as a pop-up shop – to the maternity shop who had a small area out the back where mothers could feed and change their babies without feeling pressurised to buy anything. A maternity nurse visits twice a week and mothers can go and talk to her. She also takes a specially equipped van to

outside events where again mothers have a private space to feed their babies - good marketing for the shop. I loved the concept of the old church which has been deconsecrated and taken over by the Council. The parking area in front has been grassed over providing a large green grassy area. The church houses a farmers' market every Friday afternoon where people come to do their shopping and can meet friends at the café inside for a coffee and cake. After work, people can buy picnic baskets for dinner and sit and enjoy the evening on the grass outside. The church can also be hired as an event space such as for concerts.

Some of their ideas are very simple but they have a modern twist. At the market, all purchases are put into an electronic system and the buyers only need to make one payment to a cashier when they have finished shopping. Much simpler than paying at each stall. They have a "shop and go" scheme in some streets - 30 minutes free parking, monitored by a sensor, and as the 30 minutes is up the parking warden is notified by iPad if you haven't moved. These small ideas work well because people in Roeselare are obviously proud of their town. I believe one of the biggest challenges we face in Britain is instilling that same sense of civic pride back into all our towns. The council in Roeselare seems to be well respected but they also have a strong developed vision. Maybe as local councils we don't look far enough ahead. **Our funding basis from central government doesn't allow us certainty to plan for the long term. Business rates are controlled by government so we cannot vary them to encourage new businesses. As councils we need more freedom to do what we need to do to rejuvenate our towns.**

Every town is different and needs different interventions. We want to be able to be innovative and adaptive. We want and need to provide strong leadership, we need the ability and capacity to provide vision, and we need to be able to cut through financial and administrative barriers.

Next steps

As a result of visiting Roeselare, I was pleased to realise we are already doing some similar things in Wycombe but there is always more to do. I now understand more how retail is changing, along with our demographic, and that as councils we need to be aware of this and look to the future to shape the town centre of tomorrow. We need to be creating 'experiences' and 'events' and improve technology - especially around the use of the smartphone. I need to make sure that our regeneration strategy for our towns encompasses this to ensure our local towns survive the 21st century technological revolution.

Reflections from Lawrence Conway



Lawrence Conway
Chief Executive
South Lakeland
District Council

South Lakeland District is a rural area in the North West of England. It contains some of the most stunning natural landscapes in the UK, with two thirds of its area part of the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Parks. Its largest conurbations are Kendal and Ulverston, with the towns of Windermere/Bowness, Ambleside, Grange over Sands and Kirkby Lonsdale part of its overall make-up.

The towns in the Lake District have above average footfall, and low empty shop ratios mainly due to an influx of 16 million visitors to the South Lakes every year. Kirkby Lonsdale as well as being in the top places to live in the UK has no empty or vacant premises, and this is due to its keen local business forum and partnership with the District Council.

Kendal and Ulverston are small to medium sized market towns and whilst they have unique cultural and historical identities, they are affected by the general downturn in retail footfall and strategic plans have been produced using some of the learning from Roeselare.

Kendal will be hosting the MHCLG Towns task Force in February 2020 as a pilot and it is hoped that this experience will enable the town to not only learn from others elsewhere but to help inform Central Government on the future needs of our great towns and cities.

Reflections from Roeselare

Roeselare have reimagined their high street as an intersection of human life and activity where retail takes a back seat to experience. Through strong civic leadership and the creation of a clear, 50 point, measurable plan, Roeselare has become a vibrant social hub where families and local businesses can thrive.

By flexing their place-shaping powers, the authority have upped their cultural and arts offering, expanded their green spaces and incorporated wider social priorities within their transformation plans. Actions such as cracking down on landlords holding empty units through issuing fines, consolidating business, offering tax reliefs for start-ups and encouraging shared tenancies are all within the gift of the local authority.

Being more empowered, as the delegation witnessed, produced striking results. Visitors to Roeselare have risen by over 10,000 since 2014. Family-run businesses flourish, multi-purpose units prosper, and the team have succeeded in creating spaces and events that draw the community together.

Comparison to UK

In the UK, local councils are custodians of place, and districts, and their closeness to communities, housing, planning and growth powers are best placed to drive this agenda in non-metropolitan areas. However, councils here face their own set of challenges and often don't enjoy the same level of freedom as their Belgium counterparts. For example, land ownership is fragmented in the UK which creates a barrier to delivering a coordinated strategy. By contrast, in Roeselare, negotiations and interactions were limited to a smaller number of landowners, making widespread transformation a less complex process. Equally, permitted development provides a barrier to place-shaping efforts in the UK, affecting community trust in the planning system and it can depopulate our town centres during the day.

Differences aside, there is much learning from Roeselare that councils in the UK can, and should, embrace. Celebrating what makes your town different and creating a clear narrative which builds on heritage is absolutely key, people will no longer be drawn to clone high streets in an internet age. Equally, Roeselare had a highly co-ordinated and measurable strategy. This allowed them to clearly see where new initiatives were working and when they weren't, they had an evidential basis to stop activity and move on.

In order to ensure districts can make the transformational change needed to reinvigorate their high streets, Government must ensure they are properly empowered to do so and owing to the challenges varying between councils and their town centres, Government should consider a range of flexibilities; including strengthening compulsory purchase order powers, allowing local taxation and reconsidering the extension of permitted development rights so we can deliver the towns our existing and future communities deserve.

Observations from Cllr Ward



Cllr John Ward
Leader
Babergh District
Council

In Babergh, we have two small market towns: Sudbury, with a population of about 13,500 in the town itself and 23,000 including adjacent communities in the greater Sudbury urban area, and Hadleigh, with a population of about 8,500. Hadleigh is holding up well, with a small high street hosting some interesting businesses. Sudbury has seen a decline in retail variety and an increase in charity shops. Many familiar chains and local independents have gone. *The family-owned department store will soon close half of its business, with the rest likely to follow in the next two years.*

Reflections from Roeselare

The Roeselare visit has provided some useful ideas and guidance. The main things that stood out for me were:

1. They have encouraged new business models, e.g. stores which have more than one offering under the same roof. An example is a women's fashion store with a bar and a micro gym.
2. They haven't just concentrated on the main squares and streets: side streets and alleys have also been revitalised.
3. They have provided pop-up space and financial assistance for start-up ventures.
4. Town squares are now public spaces, with reduced or eliminated parking.
5. But: a sensible parking strategy has been implemented: cars are not seen as the enemy.
6. The very successful repurposing of the library into a knowledge centre, including pop-up space for micro businesses.
7. And last, but not least, the place was so clean!

Putting the guidance into action

We have been acquiring land in a run-down part of the town and have issued a prospectus for its redevelopment. The emphasis will be on entertainment and building a night-time economy centred around a cinema. We agreed to use some of our land in the town centre for a new medical centre and public service hub. We have also entered into an agreement with a major hotel chain to build a new hotel in the town centre because there is a severe lack of accommodation for business users and tourists. In partnership with the town council and Suffolk County Council, we have plans for redesigning the market square, removing car parking and making it a public space. This will complement a major regeneration project that is turning the adjacent redundant church into an events centre.

We will ensure that the changes to the market square will include the installation of full-fibre broadband to all premises and free public Wi-Fi. We will copy the pop-up model to encourage new businesses (and not just retail) and we will ensure we have clear plans in place as large premises become vacant – not just the department store, but also the inevitable bank closures that we must expect the next few years. Above all, we will communicate constantly with businesses, prospective business owners and residents to explain what we are doing and build up enthusiasm.

Roeselare has had to overcome a lack of pride in the town. Stakeholder engagement was essential to bring the community along because of the dislike of change. It needs people who believe in the project – supporters with courage – to counteract negative views and the conflicting requirements of special interest groups. But Roeselare has done it. People are proud of the place again.

Roeselare shows that towns can be repurposed and reinvented, and the things they have done are just as feasible here. After all, they were inspired by the thoughts and recommendations of an Englishman!

February 2020

