

Town Centre Development Team – Scrutiny Review

The Town Centres Development Team (TCDT) are part of the Regeneration and Inclusive Growth Directorate and have responsibility for the development and delivery of a wide range of interventions across the Borough's six town centres.

The team is made up of a broad range of roles with the focus on overseeing and coordinating the development, design and delivery of capital projects. Predominantly under the funding umbrellas of Levelling Up Fund, Towns Fund, National Lottery Heritage Fund and Future High Streets Fund, as well as town centre business engagement and market management.

Until a few years ago, town centres were built almost exclusively around retail with traditional shopping habits which have dominated the nation's high streets for 200 years.

Increasing use of online shopping and growth of out-of-town retail parks has meant that the retail-dominated function of the High Street has changed and town centres need to evolve and react to changing consumer habits if they want to remain vibrant and popular places for people to visit.

Ultimately the role of the TCDT is to ensure our town centres continue to thrive as a critical part of the Borough's economic growth through the creation and development of high quality, welcoming and safe spaces that encourage visitors and support economic growth

The Council is building on this investment and continuing to drive change forward in the six towns across the Borough, to adapt to the changing face of retail and town centres in the coming years.

A key and intrinsic part of our vision is to create places that are both safe and welcoming.

Design of our Regeneration schemes

When approaching the design of plans and regeneration schemes, we aim to deliver an outcome that meets the needs and requirements of end users. They need to reflect the ambitions of residents, elected members, businesses and a variety of wider stakeholders

From this point on, a wide range of inputs are sought from across the authority and through a variety of external partners and agencies to ensure that emerging concepts and designs are compliant with relevant policy, guidelines and laws whilst continuing to meet the needs of the initial brief and end users. Ensuring that all significant components of its design, planning and layout are considered together at an early stage,

Individual workstreams for each element of the project include discussion with key stakeholders (both internal and external), to ensure understanding across all parties. This helps identify who is responsible for areas of delivery and reach collective agreement on mitigation strategies moving forward, when faced with issues.

When developing our spaces and places, there are many factors that need to be considered to ensure that we are in line with legislation as well as other functions within the authority. Examples include:

- Planning
- Legal
- Highways
- Community Services
- Care for You Area
- Licencing
- Security & Surveillance

Linking in with the various teams listed as part of project teams or through specific workshop sessions, ensures that all relevant departments are involved in the development of the schemes and are able to feed into the delivery of the projects and feel a sense of involvement and responsibility.

A fundamental aspect to the development of the schemes is the level of public consultation and engagement. The aim when consulting the public is to take them on a journey and inform and update during the design and development of the project.

With regards to the major regeneration schemes we are delivering across the borough, in 2019 the TCDT undertook a consultation about a shared vision for the 6 town centres across the borough.

The main objectives of the consultation were to seek people's views on the future of town centres in their town, to identify what is important to the users of the town centre and to inform future priorities for intervention.

An online survey was created for responses, as well as face-to-face sessions held within central locations (libraries and customer service points). The consultations were promoted widely on social media, via a postcard drop to central homes and to all town centre businesses.

The findings of this helped scope the initial designs for each of the schemes. Obviously when dealing with such regeneration projects, there are other factors and other considerations that must be considered too.

As the project starts to evolve, it is usual for initial concepts and scheme designs to be presented back to the public through engagements sessions or viewing online. After any further amendments are made, the public are then presented with the final scheme.

Once the project is operational, communication about the scheme is ongoing and regular social media posts, briefings with councillors and press releases are common throughout, until the scheme is complete.

The process of how we do this does differ between projects, but by way of example, here is a flavour of how we approach this:

- **Romano Park** – initially based on community consultation and discussion with elected members, the project was designed with some key safety aspects incorporated to ensure the scheme was as appealing and welcoming as possible. This included new safety surfacing and play equipment. Both of which are subject to ROSPA inspections to ensure they are compliant with European and British standards. In addition, further CCTV was installed, in response to public requesting more, due to ASB incidents.

One unique element seen on this project was the incorporation of the design ideas from school children into the final design of the feature Dragon playground feature.

- **Norton Public Realm** – the driver was to make the environment more welcoming for visitors, particularly pedestrians. The public realm and quality of the materials will create a welcome environment, which will help provide a better place for businesses to trade. It will also offer a space to potentially host small scale events and markets.
- **Billingham** – a masterplan has been drawn up for Billingham Town Centre following the “Lets Talk about our Towns” consultation in 2020. It will create a more welcoming and modern environment which will include improvements to the public realm, housing and retail elements. Further public engagement will be held in 2024, when the plans are presented in more detail.
- **Stockton Waterfront** – our flagship town centre regeneration scheme which will change the face of the high street for generations to come. Creating a safe, attractive and welcoming place for all has been fundamental to the design, with conversations with internal and external stakeholders crucial to this. CCTV, Civic Enforcement, Police are all part of this process.

Seeking views from the “Parent Carer Forum” was beneficial to understand what young people and families would like to see within the park. This considered all aspects, including the play area, green spaces, event space, as well as safety and security aspects.

An additional safety item incorporated within the design is a fence around the playground area, so that young children are contained in a safe, well designed and protected area, that also offers peace of mind for parents too.

The installation of “Pleached Trees”, will provide a look of a “green wall” in certain locations. This also allows better sight lines and another pointer to the creation of a secure environment.

Lighting throughout the park is a key element to ensure a sense of safety, particularly in winter months, encouraging use of the park throughout the evening. It has also been designed to allow the lighting to be adjustable, thus creating different types of atmospheric environments, be it for events, shows, markets etc.

What makes our towns welcoming?

It is not necessarily easy to define “what makes a town centre welcoming”, quite often, the focus is on large scale regeneration initiatives, however the following examples highlight where, smaller scale interventions go a long way towards a sense of welcoming in our town centres.

An instant and obvious barometer for the look and feel of our town centres is the condition of the public realm and buildings. Across the town centres we have an extensive programme of street cleaning and cleansing which is done on cyclical and programmed basis.

This includes jet washing and street cleaning vehicles, working hard to create clean, well presented town centres. These are operated and work undertaken by experienced and knowledgeable staff who deliver an excellent service.

First impressions really do count and ensuring street cleansing, litter collection and other aspects such as horticultural services, are critical to providing a strong foundation when presenting the towns in their most welcoming light.

We are pro-active in our approach to ensuring vacant properties are kept in a presentable condition, via a regular audit of buildings. This allows us to monitor them and where necessary identify issues with building owners and encourage them to make necessary improvements when required.

In addition to the above we also undertake a regular audit inspection of town centre locations, specifically at areas which attract dumps of waste (both residential and commercial) and fly tipping.

Across the borough there are numerous examples of improvements and initiatives that make our town centres a welcoming place to live, work and stay.

- In Wellington Square, new planters to create a greener environment and offer a tranquil offer within a vibrant shopping centre.
- Dog “hydration stations” are located throughout the scheme.
- Art features throughout the shopping centre at numerous locations, designed by local artists. Hugely improve the appearance of the area and make it feel much more welcoming.
- In partnership with a local primary school and in conjunction with “Mind”, a “Buddy Bench” has been installed within Wellington Square to help combat loneliness. The bench helps to encourage people to sit and down and talk to one another.
- 2024 saw the launch of “Wellington Wellness”, regular sessions which bring groups and organisations to support mental and physical wellbeing.
- Local primary schools were invited to draw what Christmas decorations they would like to see displayed in the centre. These were then manufactured, as drawn by the children and displayed during the festive period. This creates a real sense of community spirit
- The Council via the Town Centre Development team provided a small budget to both Norton and Yarm Business Forums to deliver small-scale interventions. In both towns these have made a significant contribution, with the delivery of Christmas events in both towns. These included Christmas Trees on buildings and “Carols on the Cobbles” in Yarm, as well as the “Meet the Reindeer” event and “Advent Window Trail” in Norton
- A grant scheme is provided to support new and existing businesses across the six towns. This helps reduce the number of vacant units and creates a better environment and a more vibrant town centre.
- Implementation of a new, dedicated Town Centre Management function, providing further evidence of our commitment to ensure the town centres are safe and welcoming places.
- Electronic video screens have been installed in three key locations of Stockton Town Centre. They display a raft of information from upcoming events, public health, community safety and a range of other information.
- We work closely alongside Stockton BID to help support a range of projects they deliver. They are independent from the council but are constantly looking at ways to

improve the town. The BID with support from SBC led on the high street becoming accredited as “Dementia Friendly”, with many businesses undertaking training. This has also been rolled out to businesses across the borough.

- Warm Spaces – across the borough we are involved with the initiative to open buildings and offer a space for people to stay warm, chat and play games etc. Thornaby Pavilion has been a huge success and Fountain Shopping Mall will shortly host the first in Stockton Town Centre.
- The “Enjoy Stockton” shop provides a central point of contact in a dedicated unit in Stockton High Street. This is a valuable service for members of the public to get information about transport, events and other council matters.
- Across the borough we host events such as SIRF, Stockton Sparkles, Festival of Thrift and many more, which attract visitors into our towns, to enjoy an experience and provide fun for all the family.
- The Walking and Cycling Hub is Stockton-on-Tees’s active travel centre. It provides a service to make it easy for people to walk and cycle around the Borough, whether that’s to school, work, the shops, or just for fun.
- Silver Street – completed a number of years ago, a pedestrianisation scheme was implemented as well as a number of public realm features, improved lighting and surfacing. This was done to enable more flexibility for the businesses, a location for events, as well as creating a safer and welcoming environment.

Conclusions

There are several factors we consider when we look at determining if our interventions are making a difference and are successful. We continually monitor footfall and dwell time in our town centres, where people are visiting, what people are doing and where they are coming from.

We have invested in system which helps us track this information and are always looking at how we can best use this to support what we are doing. It also helps us identify areas which require more focussed attention.

In the past 4 years the TCDT have undertaken over 10 individual public sessions to consult or engage with people on the plans and designs of the regeneration schemes. This will continue and we will strive to ensure all residents, visitors and businesses are proud of the town centres and see them as secure, safe and welcoming places.

*SBC Town Centres Development
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