

# Best Practice Guide Place Visioning

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## Executive Summary

Once your partnership has been created (**see Best Practice Guide for Partnership Development**) it is important to create a vision. This is incredibly important for partnerships in helping them guide activity and delivery. This guide, therefore, outlines the development, application, assessment and adaption processes partnerships need to consider to ensure their vision meets the needs of a place.

In summary, a strong vision statement:

- is positive, aspirational, galvanising, and clear. (**See Developing Your Place Vision**).
- Is housed within a **clearly structured vision document** – that does not use jargon – so that everyone can understand the language and approach. (**See Developing Your Place Vision**).
- Is **evidence based and measurable**. This will help substantiate approaches for future funding bids by showcasing how change has been managed. (**See Developing Your Place Vision**).
- Is **inclusive and participatory** through being co-designed by the community and key stakeholders. (**See Who to work with section**).
- **Draws in relevant expertise**, including placemaking, engagement and other experts to ensure that the approach taken is considered, **effective and actionable**. (**See Who to work with section**).
- Considers **branding, marketing, viability, and outreach** as mechanisms for engaging with everyone in the local area. (**See Using a place vision**).
- Is **sustainable and flexible** to adapt to change. (**See Assessing and Adapting a Place Vision**).
- Considers **environmental, economic, and social** factors. (**See Assessing and Adapting a Place Vision**).
- Is **adaptable** and **flexible** as a place changes. (**See Assessing and Adapting a Place Vision**).

Support will be provided to your place from the Design Council.

## Background

This report is written by the Design Council, a partner of the High Streets Task Force. The Design Council is the UK's national strategic advisor for design. We are an independent charity committed to working with the public, business, and the public sector to improve the understanding of design.

In response to the climate crisis, in 2021 our mission became Design for Planet. This means supporting design that is regenerative and meets the needs of the environment as well as communities. We work with government, local councils and communities using design methods to create more citizen-centred services to address the climate crisis. We also have partnerships with national bodies who want to work more inclusively with communities.

We support local authorities across the country in developing shared place visions through our work with the High Streets Task Force and High Street Accelerator programmes. These programmes are designed to support local authorities in catalysing a transformative vision for their town centres and enable them to build consensus around the direction of travel for their high street and community.

## How to Read this Guide

This best practice guide provides an outline approach to develop, apply, assess, and adapt a place vision to guide strategic activity and delivery. This is not an exhaustive guide on how to create a specific place vision, but it can help councils build their understanding of the process and develop an initial approach. Concretely, the guide can be used as a prompt for discussions within the council or as a mechanism for engaging communities in additional rounds of co-creation and consultation.

## Introduction to Place Visioning

A place vision is a galvanising resource that describes the future aspirations for a specific location. It captures the place's values, represents local people's aspirations, and outlines what the place may look like in the longer term. As such, it is a guide for decision-making and can help direct resource allocation towards reaching specific outcomes and help bring people and ideas together. In the process, it creates accountability and establishes shared understandings of what success looks like for the place, encouraging collaborative working.

## The Importance of a Place Vision

Place visions can have many positive outcomes for the places they help steward. If successfully completed these primarily include:

- **Providing direction and focus** through effectively engaging in long-term thinking about the future. They therefore provide an opportunity to delve into difficult and deep-rooted issues that affect the place and help create a plan for improving these challenges. A place vision can also be helpful to communicate aspirations for future changes and allow local people to buy into the ideas. Place visions can also help to align goals and ensure communities, businesses and developers are on the same page when understanding development and changes in local places, establishing a shared roadmap for long term change.
- **Promoting community cohesion and identity** through providing the opportunity to undertake community engagement and establish feedback loops which effectively allows co-creation of the vision and beyond into other work. It can also help to preserve and enhance local heritage, natural assets, culture, and other aspects which make a place unique.
- **Guiding sustainable development.** When a vision considers environmental, social, and economic factors, it can help support sustainable development. Additionally, when taking a step

back to view placemaking over many years, it can help support a longer-term view and reduce reactive decision making which can better support the transition towards a greener future. Concretely, this can be achieved through retaining important heritage features, developing buildings and spaces that last and can adapt to changing needs over time, improving links to nature, and incorporating green landscape approaches such as Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) and biodiversity.

- **Adaptability and resilience.** A considered place vision allows for monitoring and evaluation over time, thereby ensuring that adaptation to changing circumstances and new challenges is possible. In this sense, the adaptability of the vision supports the resilience of its advocated approach.
- **Attracting resource and investment.** Well researched and presented visions can help develop positive engagement with local communities, as well as attract business and investment into the local area. It showcases the place potential and demonstrates how ambitions can be translated effectively into action.
- **Improving quality of life.** When all of the above elements are considered, it makes the place in question a better place to live, work and visit. It can also encourage more businesses to move to the area, in turn providing more employment opportunities.

## Developing your Place Vision

To begin developing your place vision, start by thinking about physical assets that can be mobilised through the vision – such as parks, existing buildings, and transport links – as well as less tangible assets – such as funding, community engagement and place history. It is important to consider both the physical and intangible when creating a cohesive place vision

We suggest the following structure to develop your place vision:

1. **Understanding the place-specific context is vital.** We recommend beginning with asset mapping. Consider the challenges and opportunities of your town centre, alongside existing assets. Explore all factors affecting the town including environmental, social, economic, and cultural factors. Do not be afraid of focusing on the biggest challenges as these can help catalyse the largest positive changes for a place. It may be helpful to do this work as a group in a workshop setting, inviting colleagues with relevant expertise and knowledge of the place. Consider undertaking additional research where data is lacking to clearly define these challenges and opportunities.
2. **Consider the scope the vision needs to cover;** is it just the high street, or should it encompass the wider town or city? Does a connected approach such as a masterplan need to be undertaken, or would more specific and individualised approaches be better suited to reach the desired outcome?
3. **Conduct community engagement to shape a shared vision.** For a vision to be embedded within a place, it is vital to involve the community from the beginning, listening and learning from them as the vision emerges. Opportunities must be made for the community to feed into visioning conversations. This may be done through public meetings and workshops, going out into the place to have conversations, as well as through online forums. Diversity of outreach methods is critical and ensures as many people as possible can input and feel that the vision takes their aspirations into consideration. Through this engagement, explore possibilities, identify shared values, and prioritise actions to build consensus. Make intentional efforts to foster an inclusive environment where all feel comfortable and confident to speak and be heard. This may take time in areas where there is a lack of trust between the council and community. Although it takes work, it is important to undertake this with an open mind to truly evaluate all

concerns and options. Ensure that feedback loops are developed to allow feedback to be properly fed into the process. More information on who to work with to create a shared vision can be found in the section below.

4. **Begin to shape your vision.** Once evidence is captured, the council can then begin to distil learnings into a vision and outline actionable steps forward.
  - Ensure a **vision statement** is captured and shared. This should be a clear and concise expression of aspirations or a summary the collective ambitions for a place, and should begin the vision document. The statement should be inspirational, galvanizing, place-specific and actionable; providing clarity and direction for everyone to get behind. Many organisations and places have strong visions. It may be helpful to explore vision statements that are inspirational and think about how one can be shaped that is specific to the place in question (**See Case Studies below**).
  - The remainder of the vision document can be split into sub-headings formed around **place pillars, values and goals, short-term tactics, and long-term strategies**. This will help break the high-level vision into specific and actionable steps. It is important to develop plans alongside the vision, assigning roles and responsibilities to ensure that work is carried out and movement is made in the right direction. Prioritising outputs and outlining timelines is another helpful way to build clarity and accountability. Ensure decisions are made based on research conducted and engagement completed before being carried out. It is important to secure wider buy-in, visions address real challenges, supported by evidence and data, with a clear and measurable outcomes attached.

At a high level, some examples of approaches taken by other local authorities include:

- Reviewing processes and governance structures.
- Identifying data and data analysis needs and insights
- Creation of a Towns Team/local taskforce
- Engagement with or creation of a BID (Business Improvement District)/ traders associations/retail partnerships to drive local improvements.
- Testing ideas through prototyping (meanwhile-use can be a helpful method for this).
- Exploring connectivity, e.g. within the town centre, between modes of transport, or between green and blue infrastructure, walkability of public realm, active travel into centres and high streets from adjacent neighbourhoods
- Updating or creating new markets such as craft markets, teenage markets and so on.
- Mapping existing community events and festivals and to consider their impact on footfall and spend in the centre, together with their scheduling and promotion across a calendar year
- Understanding the evening economy offer and other gaps in provision at different times of the days
- Developing engaging, place-specific branding and marketing to frame perceptions about the place and attract investment.
- Opportunities to establish additional functionality in the centre e.g. health, leisure, housing, employment, education and so on.
- Opportunities for creative interventions and greening
- Consideration of the arts, cultural and visitor offer

- Identification of key place-based anchors (employment, transport, education, health, tourism etc) and how they drive footfall in the centres

We encourage expansive and creative thinking about strategies and interventions. This includes exploring what others in the UK and worldwide have done to enhance their places. We also encourage knowledge-sharing between local authorities in the United Kingdom to support each other in making better places for people and planet.

## Who to Work With to Create a Shared Vision

Working with the right people is key to developing a successful vision. It is important to identify the groups and individuals that need to be involved early on in the visioning process, and to bring them along on the journey to ensure they feel that the vision reflects their aspirations for the local place.

Sometimes councils find they lack key community, business and stakeholder voices in their place visioning work, and the amount of commitment, and effort that is required to properly build and maintain relationships with such groups is often underrated. However, the pay-off from the work is considerable and helps ensure the resilience and public appeal of the emerging place vision.

Involving stakeholders presents some key benefits including:

- **Improved decision making** that considers a range of perspectives from a variety of stakeholders, leading to more informed decision making.
- **Reduced risk**, and **resources are better able to be mobilised to meet needs** as potentially ineffective ideas are identified and discontinued early on in the process.
- **Increased buy-in** from key stakeholders as they feel invested in the process. This helps build the resilience of the emerging vision and represents an asset for future funding applications.
- **Improved trust, communication and collaboration** which can be beneficial in many facets, including for future projects, and increases a community spirit and pride in place.
- **Improved sustainability, longevity, and resilience** due to a long-term mindset that is developed when people actively and positively engage on a project they see as being meaningful.

The people engaged will differ depending on the conditions of the individual place. Some groups to consider engaging with when creating a place vision may include (but are not limited to):

- Elected Members
- Locally elected bodies, e.g. Parish or Town Councils
- Planning or Regeneration Officers
- Other council officers, such as transport, community, economic development, markets, business support, environmental services etc
- Business Improvement District CEOs or Chairs
- Town Centre Managers
- Town Teams or Place Partnership reps
- Trade association / Chamber of commerce / Business leader / Culture or heritage reps
- Market manager
- Developers
- Arts and cultural groups

- Civic/volunteer groups, e.g., Civic Societies, faith groups, Rotary etc.
- Police officers
- Young people
- Resident Bodies
- Town centre services (e.g. library, health, education, transport).

Effective cross-departmental internal working at the local authority is also key to ensure the place vision can properly permeate into the area and ensure a cohesive approach.

## Using a Place Vision

Here are some steps to ensure a place vision is utilised in the best way possible:

- We recommend breaking down the vision into **actionable steps** and **assigning roles** to best guarantee success. Drawing on **local expertise** and **maintaining good communication** can support this approach.
- Consider the **branding and marketing** of the vision and communicate consistently through diverse channels (taking into consideration physical, digital and language barriers) to ensure the message gets out to everyone. Also, **be transparent** and make sure outreach feels engaging.
- Work with the right experts to **make plans a reality**. Marrying technical expertise with open community engagement will help develop the resilience of the vision.
- Continue **collaboration and action**. Map who needs to be involved in the place visioning – whether at development or delivery stage – and consider how to involve them.
- Ensure that **promises made in the vision are carried out** where possible to reinforce trust built with local communities and businesses, and that any **changes are communicated** properly to all stakeholders.
- **Monitor and adapt** as necessary, for more about this, see the section below.

## Assessing and Adapting a Place Vision

Over time it is important a place vision is reviewed to assess the implementation of plans, measure success and reflect changing needs. Be openminded to adapting the vision as new information becomes available and circumstances change. It is important that communication, engagement, and feedback loops are maintained in order to do this effectively.

Whilst changes may be necessary over time, it is also important to keep the community informed about progress made and celebrate successes to boost morale and maintain trust.

## Case Studies

### WeAreWaterloo

WeAreWaterloo Business Improvement District began a placemaking strategy at the start of January 2022. These priorities focused on several aspects:

1. Identify public realm opportunities
2. Bring existing public realm projects to the front line



3. Define Waterloo as a place
4. Realise avenues for destination marketing
5. Embed ambitions into the development agenda
6. Address retail pressures
7. Provide a set of placemaking principles

The vision was based around how the place's past informed the Waterloo's future. It focused around what was working and what was not working and then examined how these aspects could be improved upon.

This led to a vision based around three points

- Waterloo Is... - A celebration of Waterloo's history, people, and assets. Here, insights from the consultants' survey and research data are extrapolated to articulate how Waterloo continues to be a community minded hub of creativity, culture, activity, and learning.
- Waterloo Could... - Recommendations on the ways in which Waterloo could improve by addressing the challenges that it faces.
- Make it Happen... - Over 150 public realm and placemaking activation project recommendations, all designed with the intention of delivering positive change within Waterloo.

These visions focused around short- and long-term points. For example, short term vision included the implementation of quick wins for the public realm such as pocket parks or small changes to unsightly streets that make these places more welcoming. Long-term included, ideas around working with partners to establish Waterloo as a leader in climate-minded actions and initiatives.

## Union Street Aberdeen

The vision of union street focused around five very simple aims. They wanted to

1. Brighten the street
2. Fill the units
3. Use the space
4. Tell the story
5. Engage the city

This vision was formed due to communication with local stakeholders in the place. This was launched in March 2023 to improve the Main Street. They listened to the concerns that people had and what changes they wanted to see. This led to over 10,000 ideas which they then focused down to 17, overarching themes. This was further discussed in a later meeting in the Music Hall where questions were welcomed from four hundred attendees. These attendees were then asked to consider if they could volunteer as leaders for individual themes. This led to around eighty people offering to lead and another one hundred and thirty offering to assist.

These themes were then separated into groups and individuals were tasked to lead to delve into the topic and report back at another, later meeting. These seventeen themes were then narrowed down to five action points which help provide a structure and formality to the vision of Aberdeen.

## Shrewsbury

The importance of a town/place vision is evident in Shrewsbury. Their Big Town Plan ensures that any idea, plan, and development that is proposed is always tested against their vision. Everything has to past

what they class as the “the Shrewsbury Test.” They ask key questions; does it support the vision and does it cement local identity and improve local lives.

The vision is narrowed town into four key themes:

- Creating a Place for Enterprise
- Improving movement and place
- Nurturing Natural Shrewsbury
- Supporting Vitality and Life and Mix

The projects that they run then connect and link into the vision for the place. The vision defines what projects happen and are supported and which ones are not.

We hope you found this guide helpful to better understanding the importance of, and approach to, creating a place vision for your local area. You may wish to consult the High Streets Task Force’s [25 factors for town centre viability & vitality](#) for inspiration on potential routes to pursue.

Please reach out if you have any questions.

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