



High Streets Task Force Case Study: Bigg Market: Giving an Historic Heart back to Newcastle

June 2021

Bigg Market: Giving an historic heart back to Newcastle

Basic Facts about the high street and local area

Bigg Market (including Cloth and Groat Markets)

The **Bigg Market** is a site of historical significance dating back to the middle ages in the centre of Newcastle's Conservation Area. Located within close proximity to both castle and cathedral, the area represents a key pillar of Newcastle's development as a city. Named after a type of coarse barley (**Bigg**) the site was once a bustling market place. Comprising over 30 buildings, many of them listed, the area has a rich history that until recently was in danger of being permanently eroded. In 2016, Newcastle NE1 Ltd, in partnership with the local authority and with support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, launched a project that aimed to give a historic heart back to Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Key opportunities/challenges

Despite its central location and historical significance, The Bigg Market had become entrenched in a race to the bottom over the past few decades, with many businesses sacrificing quality in pursuit of profit and allowing property to fall in to disrepair. Contributing little to the City's economy (save for at nighttime), the area around the market had become downtrodden, undervalued and in danger of becoming at risk. The once popular markets were a distant memory with only sporadic attendance by a few local stall holders. The public realm had not received any care or attention since 1998 and had become a confused space, with pedestrian movement and vehicular access regularly in conflict. The architectural splendour was slowly being eroded through a lack of maintenance and planning class uses which belied their historic value. The number of vacancies was increasing at an alarming rate. Indeed, according to a 2016 business intelligence survey, of the 69 registered businesses within the area, 20 were described as non-operational and over 40 were occupying buildings with multiple floors vacant; and in many cases these were ground floor businesses with nothing above them. The picture today is somewhat different and, although there is still a significant amount of vacant upper floor space, the overall vacancy rates have diminished considerably. In addition to this, public perceptions were at an all-time low, business confidence had waned, and portrayals in the media reflected an unflattering truth that was actively undermining the historical significance of the area. The same business intelligence survey also concluded that the Bigg Market was described in "highly critical terms" with a criticism to compliment ratio of 78:22 and the most frequently used descriptors were: dirty, neglected, and rundown.

Goals/objectives

The project aimed to revitalise the Bigg Market, protecting and maximising its heritage and cultural value, through a combination of investment in capital works, alongside a long-term legacy of activities to engage and attract new audiences.

More specifically, the project aimed to:

- Refurbish, repair and protect the buildings and fabrics of high-priority buildings in conjunction (through match funding) with landlords and occupants**
- Repurpose (for future occupation) an iconic former underground public toilet**
- Redevelop the public realm to a high quality, visually pleasing space for public use, including markets, events and outdoor cafes**
- Drive footfall and return business and public confidence in the area**
- Alter perceptions and reinforce the rich history of the area**
- Engage new and diverse audiences through a curated activity plan.**

Description of the project/initiative

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In 2016, the project was awarded a £1.8 million grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. This, together with partnership funding from the BID, the local authority and match funding from the private sector building owners, gave a project pot of £3.2 million.

Since 2018, the project has delivered:

- An award winning Public Realm redevelopment, incorporating high-quality street furniture, reclaimed materials and new trees
- The restoration and repair of 6 buildings of significant heritage value
- The refurbishment and re-purposing of a former public toilet (now a high-end wine bar)
- 5 new, curated food markets using local traders (Bigg Foodie Fridays)
- 2 new, family friendly events aimed at bringing new audiences into the area to enjoy daytime activity and experience the rich history and heritage
- A short-form documentary entitled: A People's History of the Bigg Market
- Numerous collaborations, including a student-led design exhibition (Bigg Ideas) with local educational institutions, including two world-class Universities
- Continued support and collaboration with existing and new businesses
- 6 new pavement cafes, including the city's first purpose-built parklet.

Additionally, the project has supported and encouraged further inward investment from both existing and new businesses.

The team involved in the project/initiative

Project/initiative team

The entirety of this project was made possible thanks to the support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Led initially by Gareth Neill (former Bigg Market Project Manager, NE1 Ltd) and succeeded by Alex Slack (Head of Special Projects, NE1 Ltd) with oversight from Adrian Waddell (CEO, NE1 Ltd) and contributions from the wider NE1 team, the project team is, at its core, small and nimble.

Expertise and specialisms have been provided by Artis Consulting (Quantity Surveyors), Mawson Kerr (Architects), Southern Green (Landscape Architects) and Historic Property Restoration (Main Contractor).

The project has relied heavily on successful partnership working, especially with the local authority who have trusted NE1 Ltd to lead from the front in delivery.

The local business community has been integral to the success of the project, and has invested (both figuratively and financially) in the vision which is vital in creating a sustainable future for the place.

Activity partners including Newcastle Castle and Newcastle Cathedral have been a constant source of support and guidance, as well as being active participants in the project.

Local historians, volunteer city guides and influential figures have championed the project from the outset.

Impact or outcomes

Short-term outputs/achievements

In the short term, the project has:

- Brought the area back into focus, with an increased number of visitors to the area and an upsurge in positive engagement through social media. The local art community is a good example of this, with many artists and photographers taking inspiration from the area for their respective commissions
- Restored civic pride and emotional investment
- Demonstrated the viability of heritage-led regeneration
- Engaged stakeholders and engendered a spirit of public/private collaboration. The success of the project has enabled greater collaboration with the local authority, and has encouraged businesses to get involved in decision-making processes and the future direction of the area
- Sought feedback and consultation from the business community
- Welcomed (through new markets and events) missing audiences; at their peak, the Big Foodie Friday events, for example, attracted an additional 5000 visitors to the area in the daytime.
- Facilitated inward investment
- Increased occupancy and footfall. Since the project commenced in 2018, eight new businesses have been welcomed into the area and, prior to the pandemic, footfall data indicated visitor numbers by day were beginning to match (the previously dominant) visitor numbers by night.
- Helped to reduce anti-social behaviour; indeed, Northumbria police have specifically referenced the improved lighting in the area as successful in deterring anti-social behaviour.
- Enabled and facilitated 6 new pavement cafe licenses (previously there was only 1 permitted).

Long-term outputs/achievements

By bringing the area back into focus and restoring civic pride, the project has engendered a spirit of community ownership. Resident businesses have come together and created a forum in which they can share ideas, collaborate on activities, and lobby for continued support and investment from City Centre organisations.

Historians and local guides bring visitors to the Bigg Market to teach them about the rich heritage of the area, thus preserving its significance as a place of historical value. Local schools and colleges also hold field trips within the area.

Restoration to buildings have safeguarded them from imminent deterioration and in many cases have transformed them into viable investments. Local property agents are receiving an unprecedented volume of enquiries from potential occupants.

The curated events and markets programme has illustrated the potential that good quality public realm brings. The Bigg Market has - and always will be - a market space, and the redesign of the area has paved the way for the market to continue. The 2019 Bigg Market Bash and Bigg Foodie Fridays, demonstrated that the area can welcome visitors of all ages. In the future, it is hoped that the resident business community take a lead on organising and managing their own events.

Engagement with the local planning authority has transitioned from being reactive to proactive, with a number of building owners seeking advice and guidance prior to commencing development in the area.

The NE1 Street Team have become champions for the area and proudly ensure the area is kept clean, tidy and safe.

The relationship between the BID and the Local Authority has been strengthened through the course of this project, enabling better consultation with the business community and providing a platform for continued improvement.

Advice for High Streets Task Force users

Advice/key Learning

Like any regeneration project, the highs and lows have been plentiful.

Having a wide and varied network of support has been vital to the success of this initiative. It has been imperative to develop and nurture relationships with a broad range of stakeholders and more crucially to listen and learn. Gaining the trust and support of the local authority has been crucial in the successful delivery of the project.

Time is also key; it takes years to make transformational change and thus it is vital to implement milestones and to constantly reflect and review as each step is reached. Where projects are time limited it is important to look past the funding or project deadline, try to think several steps ahead.

Always remember that there is no such thing as a silly question, if you are thinking it, it's highly likely that someone else is.

Over the course of this project, the lessons learned have been plentiful: it is necessary to be flexible and fleet of foot as projects change and evolve by their very nature. It is important to be creative, especially where problems emerge, and it is vital to have a reliable, solution focused team around you for when such issues arise. It is also useful to remember that things rarely go as planned, so plan for it.

Throughout this project, the whole delivery team have adopted the mantra:

"If it wasn't difficult, it wouldn't be worth doing"

Though this may seem flippant, it has ensured focus when challenges have been met.

For anybody considering a similar project, I would offer the following three key takeaway messages:

- 1. Establish and nurture key strategic relationships - such projects rely on effective partnership working.**
- 2. Encourage collaboration with a range of stakeholders who will derive value from participation - this should extend well beyond just the immediate residents.**
- 3. Plan a varied and diverse programme of activities and events, with broad appeal in order to attract a wide variety of audiences.**

