

the paul hogarth company

mcgarryconsult.com

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**Ards and
North Down**
Borough Council

Comber
Masterplan Review Analysis Report
Draft - August 2023

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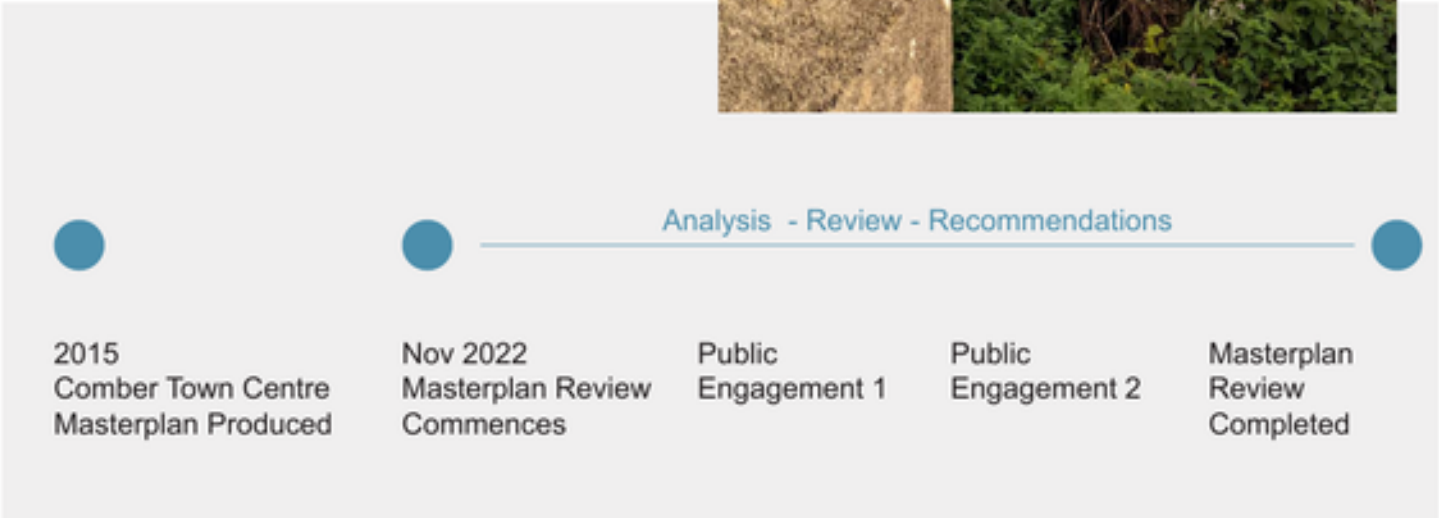
Introduction

This report has been prepared to summarise the findings of a review of the Comber Town Centre Masterplan (2015). It has been researched and prepared by The Paul Hogarth Company, with McGarry Consulting and informed by a public engagement exercise undertaken by Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Places change over time and therefore this review provides the opportunity reflect today's social, economic, environmental and policy context of the town.

The following section sets out an understanding of current projects, initiatives, an overview of conversations with stakeholders as well as a fresh analysis of Comber.

It is followed by revised priorities and actions for Comber Town Centre to be delivered over the next 8 years.





What has happened since the masterplan was written?

Since the Comber Town Centre Masterplan was produced in 2015 much has changed. The role of the town centre is changing, there has been a post pandemic shift in patterns of work, commuting and domestic tourism. National and global circumstances have also changed, including the Covid 19 pandemic and the emerging severity of the Climate Crisis.

Comber is successfully adapting and navigating these challenges through its growing reputation for coffee, cycling, craft, and cuisine, but there is an opportunity to build on this success through the identification of projects that will benefit both the community and town centre.

A summary of projects delivered since 2015 is provided in the following section.

i. Masterplan Delivery

Comber Masterplan Projects		Progress			Notes / Comments
	Uncompleted	On-going	Completed		
Townscape Improvements					
Townscape heritage improvements and building frontage revitalisation schemes			✓	THI completed terraced row of buildings on High Street	
Public realm enhancements			✓	Public realm enhancements completed in core of town (Bridge St/The Square/High St)	
Redevelopment of key opportunity sites/encouragement of business/start-up units		✓		Dereliction Improvement Scheme 2 sites in Castle Street. 1 now being redeveloped	
Heritage trail and gateway strategy		✓		Comber Town Trail	
Extending and improving the heritage trails to exploit the abundance of built and natural heritage		✓		Work ongoing in relation to developing Titanic Trail	
Restoration of walled garden			✓	In association with restaurant development	
Restoration of Laurelbanks and review of the requirement for a feasibility study of the dams		✓		Biodiversity strategy	
Accessibility and Movement					
Town centre traffic assessment			✓	Comber Town Centre Traffic Assessment completed	
Town centre car parking strategy			✓	2019	
Improved cycling and pedestrian links in and around town exploiting the benefits of the new linear greenway through the town		✓		Work ongoing on the greenway linkages through Comber	
Implementation of the Comber by-pass Phase 3	✓				
The Enler River Park (Country)					
Comber greenway extension to town centre		✓		Greenway connection Comber to Newtownards planned	
Promotion of community woodland planting, allotments, polytunnels, rustic play areas and fishing stands to help create the riverside park environment (conceptual masterplan and feasibility study would help guide the future development of this area)	✓				
New park and ride facility to include parking, bicycle rental and services		✓			

Comber Masterplan Projects	Progress			
	Uncompleted	On-going	Completed	Notes / Comments
The Enler River Park (Urban)				
Creation of an urban park to include a range of facilities and attractions for visitors and local communities – to include BMX track, new outdoor fitness facilities and walking/cycle trails to help create the riverside park environment (conceptual masterplan and feasibility study would help guide the future development of this area)	✓			
Provision of new community centre and garden – site selection/options appraisal and feasibility study	✓			
The Enler River Park (Lough)				
Extension of the linear park towards Strangford Lough to include facilities such as small harbour, look-out points, interpretation boards, boardwalks and trim trails – feasibility study and site masterplan	✓			
Park and Ride				
New park and ride facility		✓		Plans underway for new park and ride facility
Links to Comber greenway		✓		Links to greenway in planning
Toilets and cycling facilities	✓			

ii. Other Delivery/Success





How is Comber today?

Overview

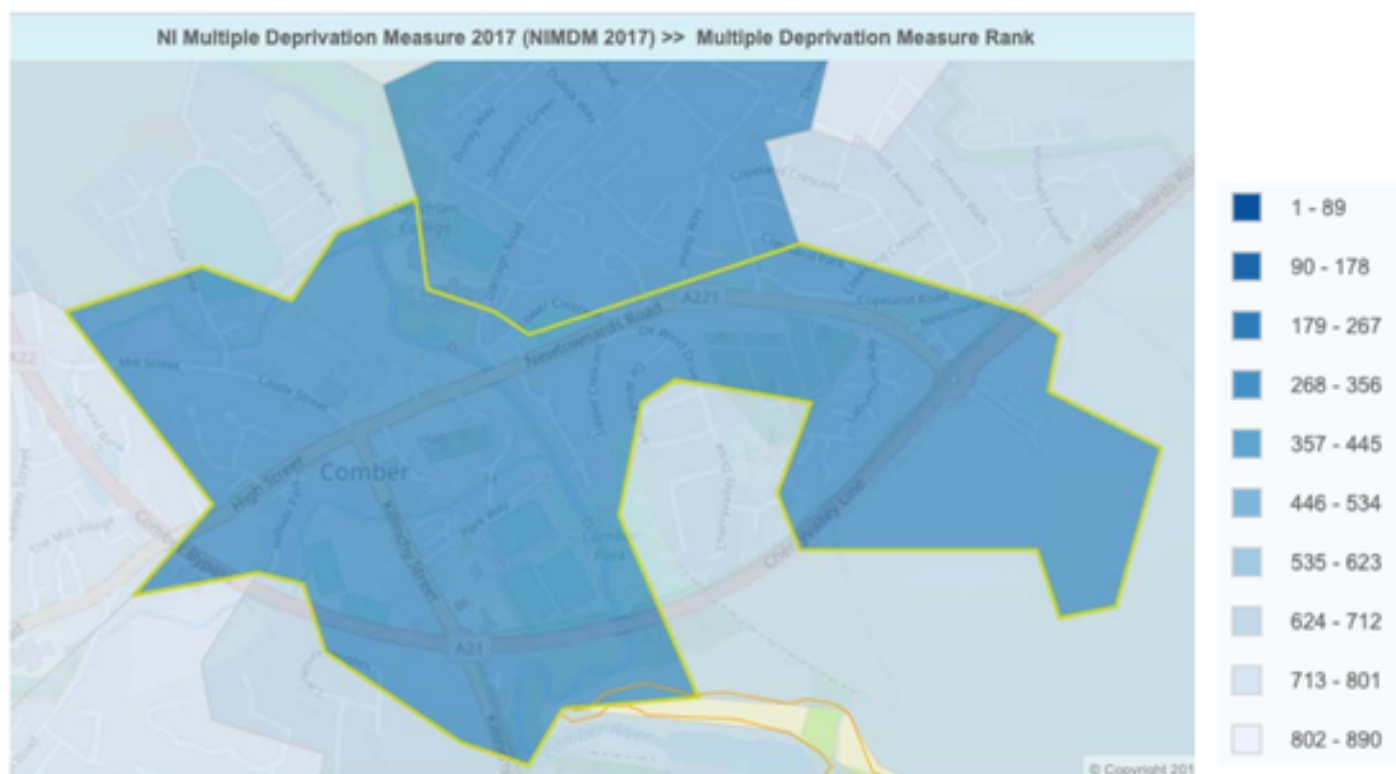
Comber, dates from the 1600's before growing as a market town in the 19th and 20th Centuries. It has a population of 9,529 (2021 Census) and lies near the top of Strangford Lough. Initially centred around the town square, the town's footprint has grown with its proximity to Belfast, 10 miles to the North West, attracting many commuters. NI's main airports and ports are within 45mins drive, and almost 1 million people live within an hour's drive.



a. Socio-Economic Profile

Town & Town Centre Profile (Comber B Super Data Zone)

The town centre has a population of 1,658 and grew by 9.1% between 2010 and 2020, significantly above the NI (5.0%) and borough (2.7%) averages. Donaghadee town centre has a slightly older population (53% over 40, v NI average 49%) leading to smaller households (72% 1-2 person households v NI 61%). Flats comprise 20% of all accommodation (v ANDBC average 11%) and approximately 1 in 3 have no access to a car or van (v ANDBC 15%). Two-thirds have good or very good health (v NI 79%). Town centre residents have lower levels of qualifications (19% at Level 4 or above, v NI 34%) and low unemployment (4%) with half economically inactive. 70% travel to work by car, with 10% walking or cycling (v ANDBC 6%) and 5% use the bus or train (v ANDBC 3%). Most (53%) commute beyond 5km for work (v ANDBC 45%). Active travel for those travelling to study is 42% Walking or Cycling (v ANDBC 20%) and 21% getting the bus or train (v ANDBC 23%). Only 12% work from home (v NI 19%, ANDBC 23%), with 21% travelling less than 5km to work (v ANDBC 21%). 'Comber East' is considered among the 40% most deprived areas (super output areas) in NI, and amongst the 14% most deprived areas in NI in terms of 'Crime and Disorder'. However, it ranks among the 25% least deprived for 'Access to Services'.



b. Sectoral Profile

Property Profile

Comber has 134 properties within the town centre, of which 18 are vacant (13.4%). This has fallen from 2016, when 29 (22.7%) of 128 properties were vacant and is now well below the NI average of 23.7%. There is 2,567m² of office space in the town centre across 33 properties. However, 'Shops, Supermarkets and Showrooms' dominate accounting for three-quarters (75.4%, 10,433m²) of the town-centre floorspace.

Business Profile

In 2021, there were 75 businesses (20 'Wholesale & Retail', 15 Food & Accommodation) in the town centre, largely in line with 8-year trend. Employee numbers fluctuate annually between 450-506, with 160 jobs in 'Wholesale & Retail', 83 jobs in 'Food & Accommodation' and 32 jobs (new in 2019) for 'Professional, Scientific & Technical' being the top 3 sectors. Total business turnover for the town centre fell 38.3% between 2015 (£48.60m) and 2018 (£29.99m), with no breakdown or more recent figures available.

Tourism

As of June 2023, there is 1 Self-catering property offering 4 bedspaces/1 unit within the town centre boundary. However, within a 3 mile radius of this boundary, there are 2 guesthouses offering 4 bedspaces/2 rooms and a further 3 self-catering properties offering a total of 12 bedspaces/3 units.



c. Policy Context

National and Regional

The Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS)

The RDS puts in place spatial planning, transport and housing priorities that will support and enable the aspirations of the Region to be met.

Strategic Planning Policy Statement 2015 (SPPS)

The SPPS supports positive place making as a people centred approach with the key to successful place-making set out through identifying the assets of a particular place as well as developing a vision for its future potential. Successful place making promotes accessibility and inclusivity for all, acknowledges the importance of creating hospitable and safe places, and emphasises the contribution of vibrancy, adaptability, and diversity of use and how it plays a role in contributing to vitality of place and how it will endure into the future.

Living Places - An Urban Stewardship and Design Guide for Northern Ireland 2014

The Urban Stewardship Design Guide establishes the key principles behind good place-making and recognises the wider economic, cultural and community benefits of achieving excellence in the stewardship and design in these places, be they existing or proposed.

Local Context

Local Development Plan

The Council is now preparing the Local Development Plan. Until the LDP is adopted, planning decisions are made in the context of the following existing plans:

- **Ards and Down Area Plan 2015**
- **North Down and Ards Area Plan 1984-1995**
Due to the adoption of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) being deemed unlawful and subsequently quashed the North Down and Ards Area Plan 1984-1995 is the statutory development plan for the legacy North Down area.

The Big Plan for Ards and North Down 2017 - 2032

The Big Plan sets out the vision for the next 15 years for Ards and North Down to be a vibrant, connected, healthy, safe and prosperous place to be. The Plan sets out 5 outcomes to achieve the vision:

Outcome 1:

All people in Ards and North Down fulfil their lifelong potential.

Outcome 2:

All people in Ards and North Down enjoy good health and wellbeing.

Outcome 3:

All people in Ards and North Down live in communities where they are respected, area safe and feel secure.

Outcome 4:

All people in Ards and North Down benefit from a prosperous economy.

Outcome 5:

All people in Ards and North Down feel pride from having access to a well-managed sustainable environment.

Integrated Strategy for Tourism, Regeneration and Economic Development 2018 - 2030

The Strategy presents a coherent vision for the pursuit of prosperity for Ards and North Down. It responds to the vision and outcomes of the Big Plan and is used as a common point of reference for the growth of the economy, the welcoming of visitors and the improvement of both urban and rural places.

d. Comber Today - Conversations & Perceptions

A series of conversations have taken place through the public engagement exercise the Council carried out as well as targeted workshops with the Town Advisory Group, council officers and elected members.

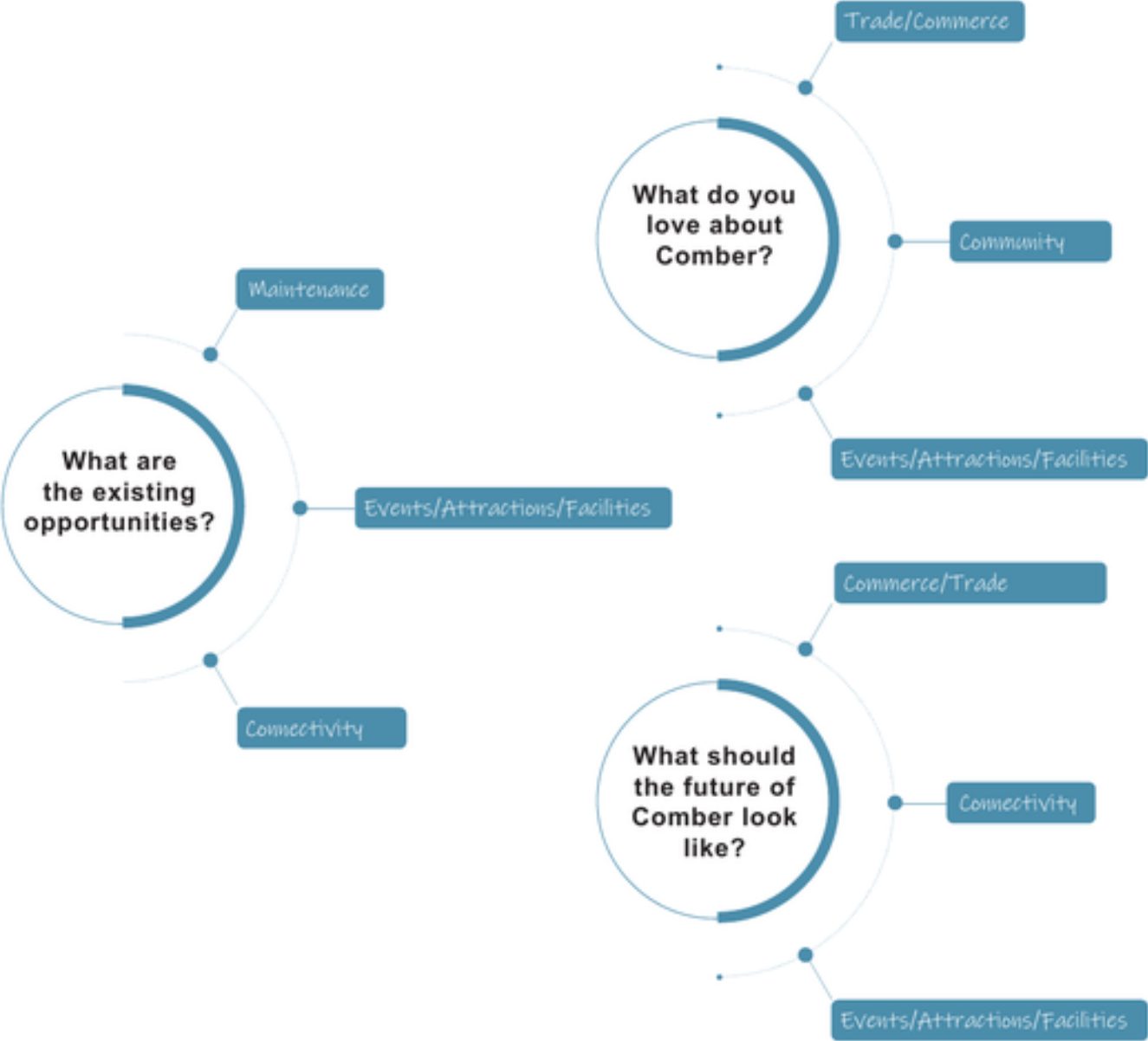
The Council organised a drop-in event and on-line survey providing the opportunity for the community to engage with council officers and representatives from the Comber Town Advisory Group and provide their views and aspirations for the future of the town.

Drop-In Event:

130+ comments

On-line Survey:

51 responses



Why live in Comber?

- Community
- Connectivity
- Events/Attractions/Facilities
- Green Spaces

What are the undesirables about Comber?

- Connectivity
- Housing/Development
- Anti-social Behaviour

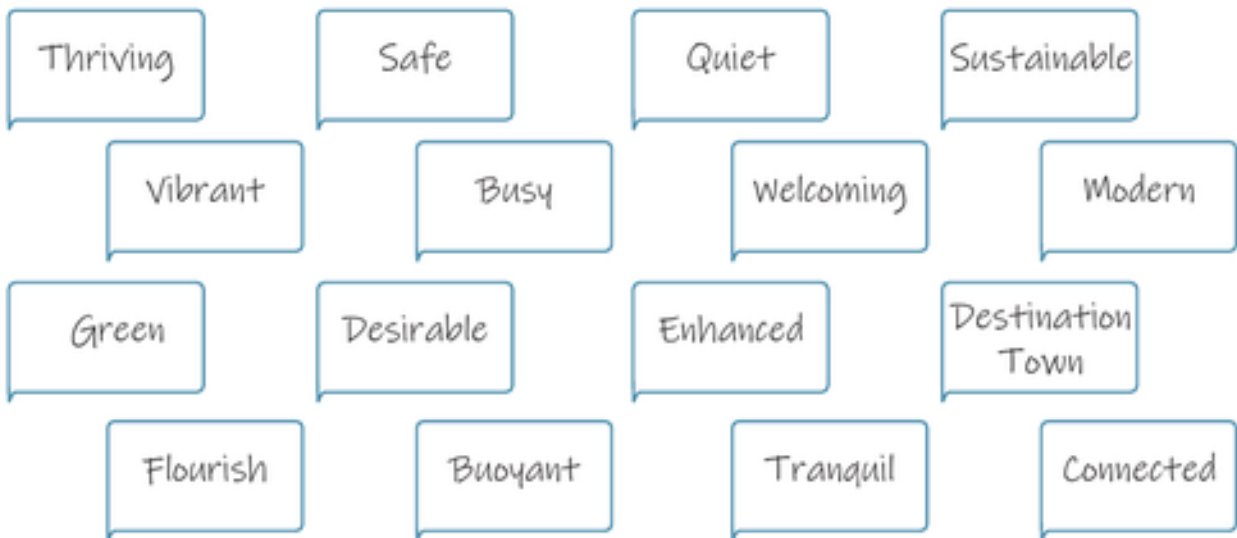
What is a disadvantage for businesses in Comber?

- Connectivity Issues
- Maintenance

Areas for Improvement



The Future of Comber?



d. Comber Today - Conversations & Perceptions

Through targeted workshops with the Town Advisory Group, council officers and elected members further conversations have taken place.

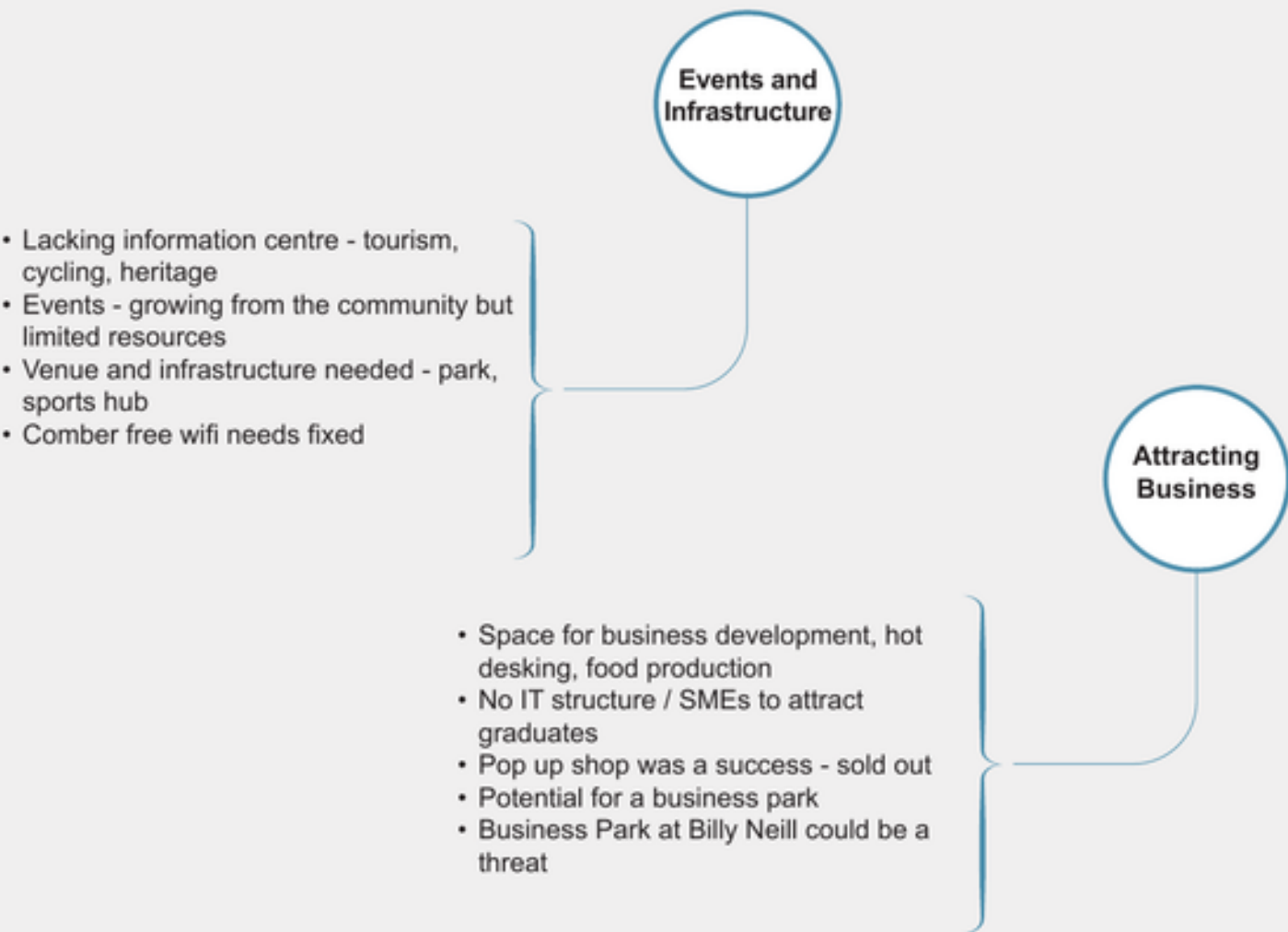
It was highlighted that residential development along the primary routes contributes to congestion within the town centre with lack of sufficient infrastructure to support the significant growth.

It was discussed that the town lacks a commercial heart. There are a growing number of people who want to live and work in the town but there is a lack of commercial units and serviced offices to enable that. Could there be scope for affordable start up business space?

The prominence of key vacant buildings was highlighted, with attention brought to the town centre.

It was felt that extending the greenway link through the town centre was extremely important in providing a car free route. The Comber Greenway has been hugely successful so the benefits of completing the proposed route are acknowledged.

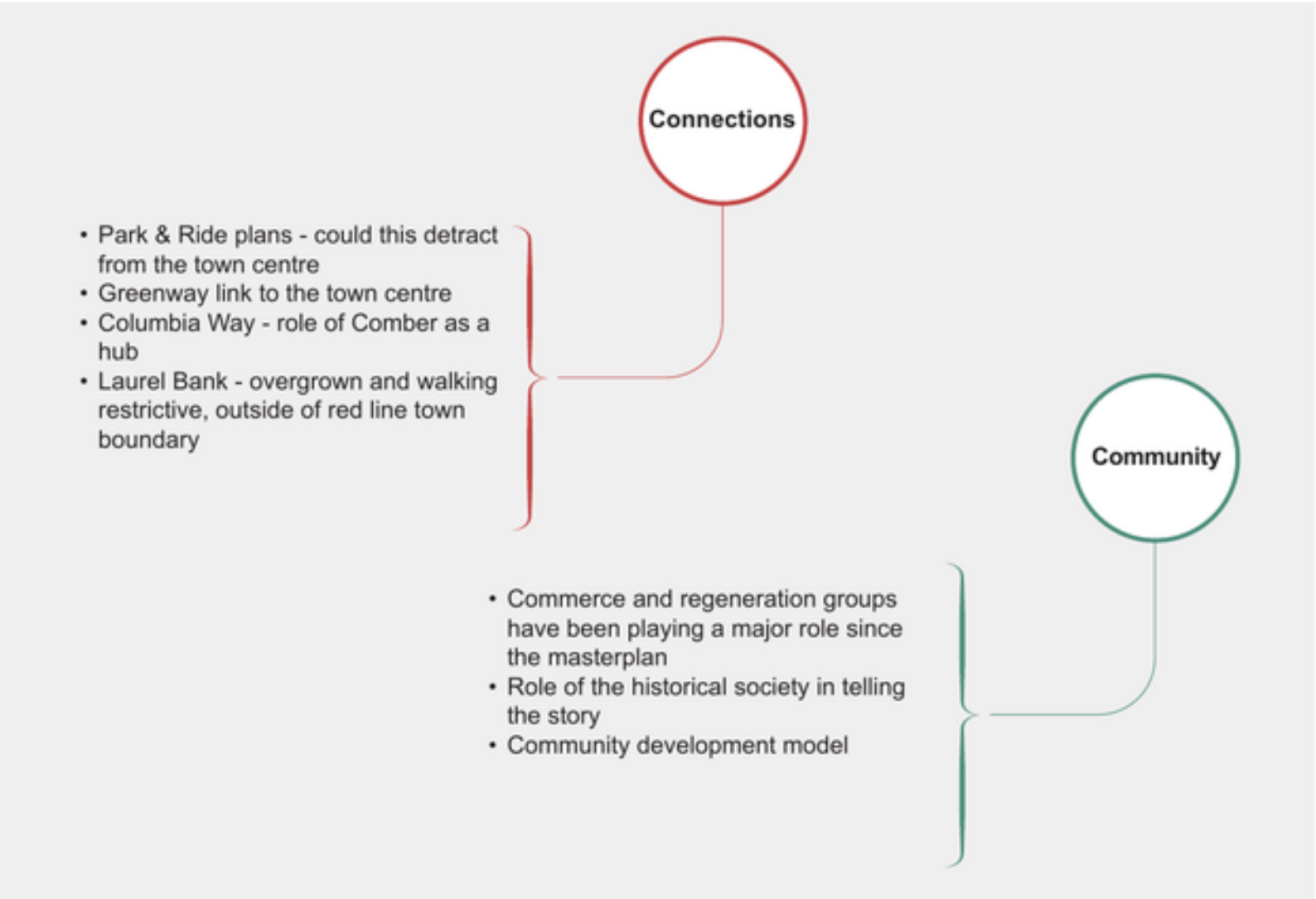
It was recognised that community and regeneration groups have played a major role in the towns success since the masterplan was produced.



Events have steadily been growing from community involvement but there is limited resources and financial support is needed.

There was discussion regarding infrastructure within the town and the need for facilities such as a sports hub and park.

The success of the town centre was also highlighted with low vacancy rates and the success of the pop-up shop by makers and artists.



e. Comber - Urban Design Analysis

Comber is the third largest town in Ards and North Down, located to the west of Strangford Lough. The town established at the intersection of High Street, Bridge Street, Castle Street and Killinchy Street with the Square positioned at the heart of the traditional core.

Historically the distilleries, flour and linen industries provided important employment opportunities. Today Comber has developed into a commuter town, owing to its proximity and location to Belfast and the introduction of the bypass along the former route of the railway line.

Although within close proximity to Strangford Lough, the bypass acts as a barrier physically disconnecting the town from the natural asset that sits on its doorstep.



Comber - Urban Growth





OS County Series 2nd Edition c.1860

OSNI 1957-1986



Town Wide Context

Street Pattern & Grain

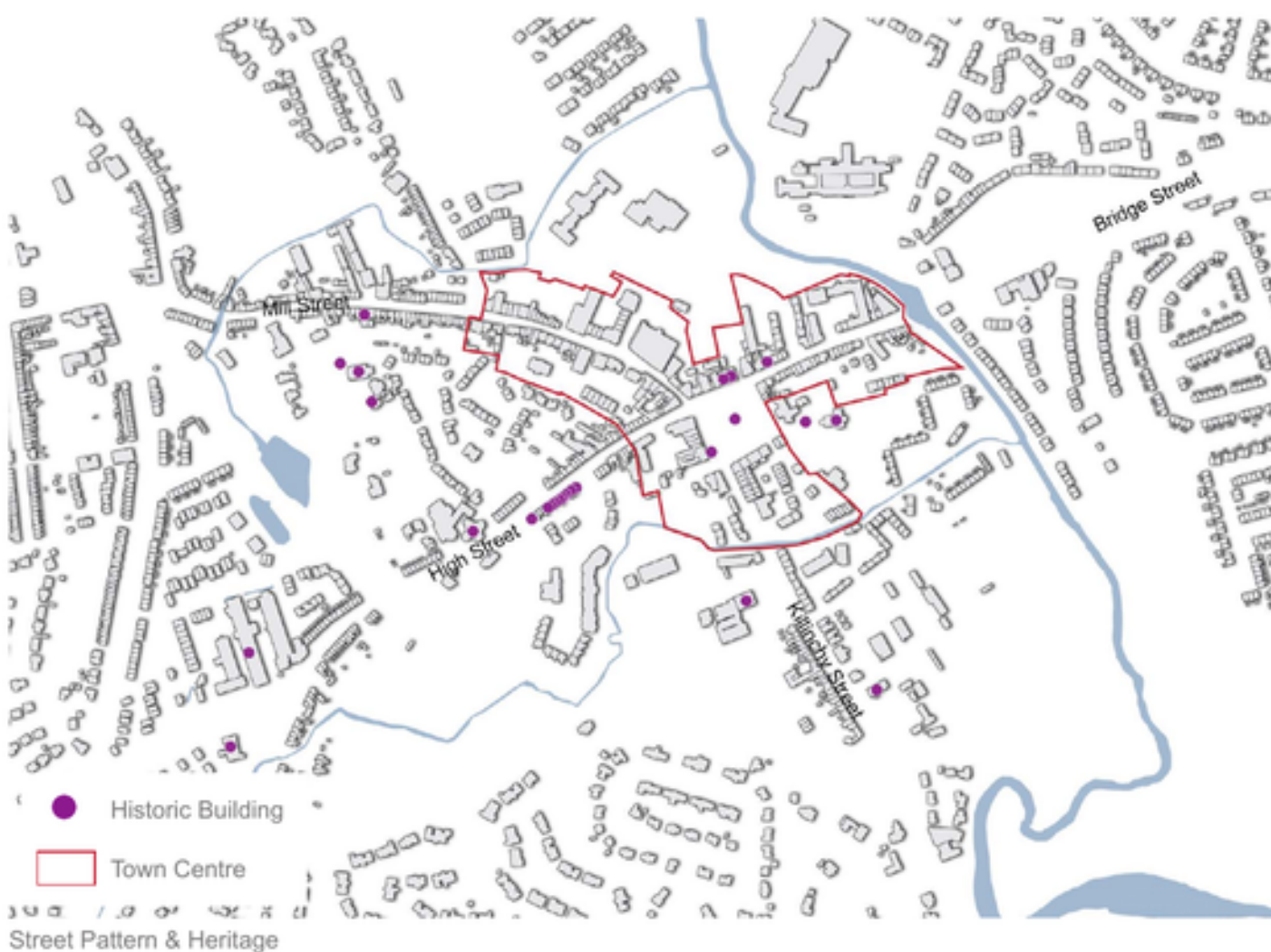
Comber's historic core and tight knit urban grain is still visible today. The network of streets extending from the Square are largely lined with terraced properties providing continuous frontage and adding character to the centre of the town that should not be forgotten.

The larger footprint of the former Andrew's Spinning Mill provides a contrast in scale and link to the town's former industrial past.

The Square creates a clear focal point and heart, positioned at the intersection of the routes within the town centre core.



The Square





The Square & view towards St Mary's Parish Church



Frontage extending along High Street

The gable ends fronting onto High Street and Bridge Street marks the arrival into the Square from both the east and west, creating a clear demarcated central point.

The town has grown, extending out from the core along the arterial routes connecting Comber to Belfast and Newtownards.



Cobbled footpath



The Gillespie Monument



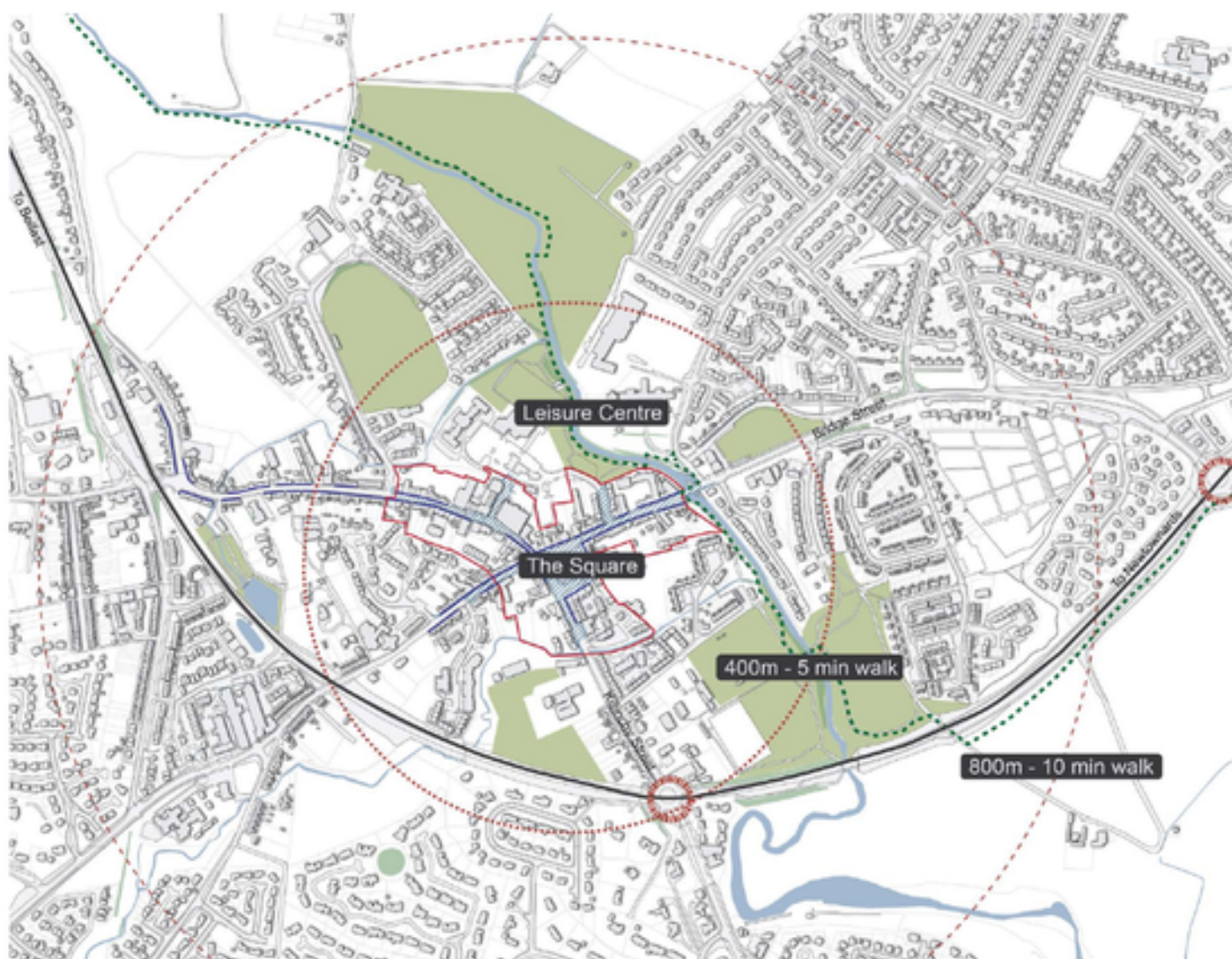
Terrace, High Street

Movement

Much of Comber is within a 10 minute walking distance from the Square. Like many commuter towns, Comber must contend with the challenges of traffic.

Today traffic is an issue with main routes, such as High Street and Bridge Street, dominated by traffic and easily congested at peak times. The town centre performs a significant role in terms of vehicle movement with the main flow of traffic travelling through the town centre to access other areas of the town from the bypass.

-  Primary route
-  Proposed greenway
-  Continuous frontage
-  Gateway
-  Public Realm Improvements
-  Town Centre
-  Green space



Movement



Main routes dominated by traffic



Improved public realm areas

Although public realm streetscape improvements have been completed within the centre, the heavily trafficked streets and parked cars encroaching on the pavements have dictated the quality of the town centre resulting in an uncomfortable and difficult environment for pedestrian users.

Success & On-going projects

The Comber Greenway has been hugely successful providing a traffic free route from Belfast to Comber along the former railway line for walking and cycling.

There are now further plans to extend the greenway, providing a north to south route through the town centre along the river, connecting onwards to Newtownards.

The town has seen notable improved commercial offer, with independent retail and cafe culture. As a result there are relatively few vacant units.

As previously mentioned the Square has continued to provide an important setting and heart for town centre life.



Plans for extended greenway route along river



Townscape heritage improvements



The Square



The Way Forward

Analysis Summary:

Historic urban form to town centre centred around the square	✓
Car based town centre with traffic issues at peak times	✗
Compact and walkable town centre	✓
Town square provides an important civic space and role	✓
Lack of visitor and tourism facilities	✗
Greenway plans will provide important pedestrian and cycle connections through the town centre	✓
Key vacant buildings/sites within town centre	!
Little draw or facilities for new businesses	!
Disconnected from natural assets, such as Strangford Lough	✗



Masterplan Vision (2015):

"In 2030 – Comber is a thriving market town supported by its local community. The town centre is accessible and enticing, attracting people from far and wide for its superior quality and niche retail offer. The extended greenway through the town, linking to Newtownards and on to the coast has made Comber the focus for recreation and has established the town as the 'Gateway to Strangford'.

Comber has also built upon its rich cultural heritage with The Square providing the focal point for activity."

Masterplan Objectives:

- 1. Provide an attractive, accessible, and viable town centre
- 2. Protect and enhance Comber's cultural, built and natural heritage
- 3. Improve community, leisure and recreation services and facilities
- 4. Promote and enhance the production and sale of quality foods, arts and crafts

In light of conversations the masterplan vision and objectives are still relevant but perhaps lacking in focus to provide the social and experiential uses that are now needed from successful town centres.

The fact that much of the vision and objectives reflect the current "state of play" reflects the success of efforts in Comber to date. Never-the-less there remains work to be done and the vision provides the opportunity for a new level of ambition and focus to create a truly resilient town centre going forward.



New Priorities for Comber Town Centre

Four new priorities are proposed for Comber Town Centre, drawing upon the findings of the research and engagement process.



A. Walkable Comber

The Comber Greenway has been a major success. Every effort is now needed to continue the greenway through the town centre and to connect routes within the town.

B. Making the most of valuable space

Comber Town Centre is abuzz making its few vacant spaces and buildings more valuable than ever.

C. Activating the Square

The Square is Comber's heart. This important space should be sensitively developed as a venue for events and activities.

D. Connect to the Lough

Strangford Lough is one of Comber's greatest assets, but it remains relatively disconnected from the town.



Engagement

A second round of conversations have taken place through a public engagement exercise. By listening to the people of Comber during the first round of conversations, a set of proposed priorities were proposed. The public were invited to view information both online and at a drop-in event before providing their feedback through a short online survey. Community engagement was facilitated by members of the team, council officers and representatives from the Comber Town Advisory Group.

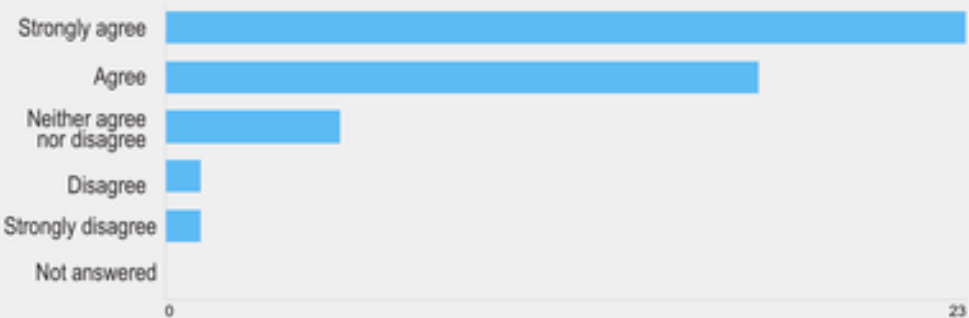
At this stage there was a total of **47 responses** to the survey with the results set out in the following section. In response to engagement feedback, the draft priorities for Comber were revised.



Engagement Results

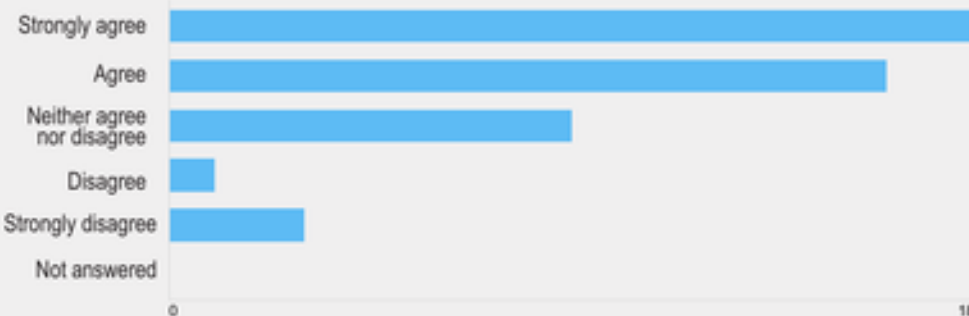
A. Greenway all the way

To what extent do you agree with the priority: Greenway all the way?



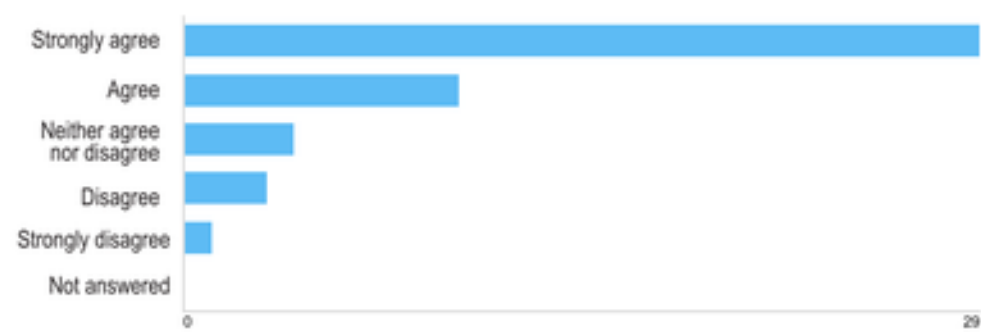
B. 15-minute Comber

To what extent do you agree with the priority: 15-minute Comber?



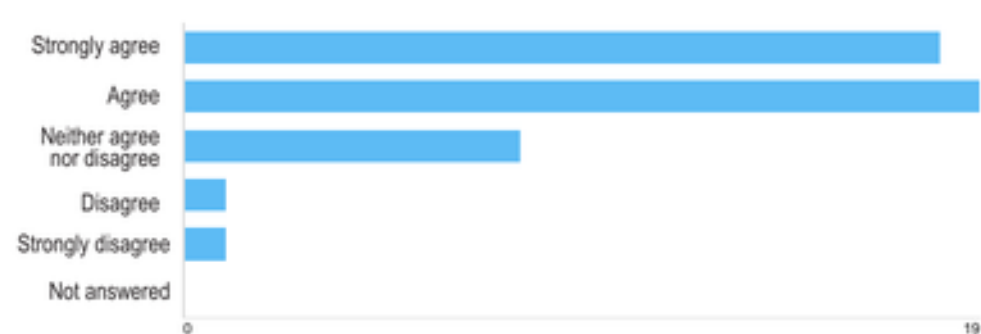
C. Making the most of valuable space

To what extent do you agree with the priority: Making the most of valuable space?



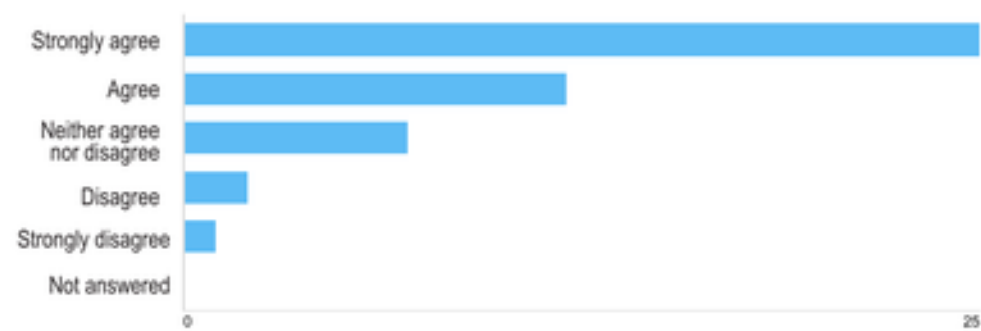
D. Community enterprise hub

To what extent do you agree with the priority: Community enterprise hub?

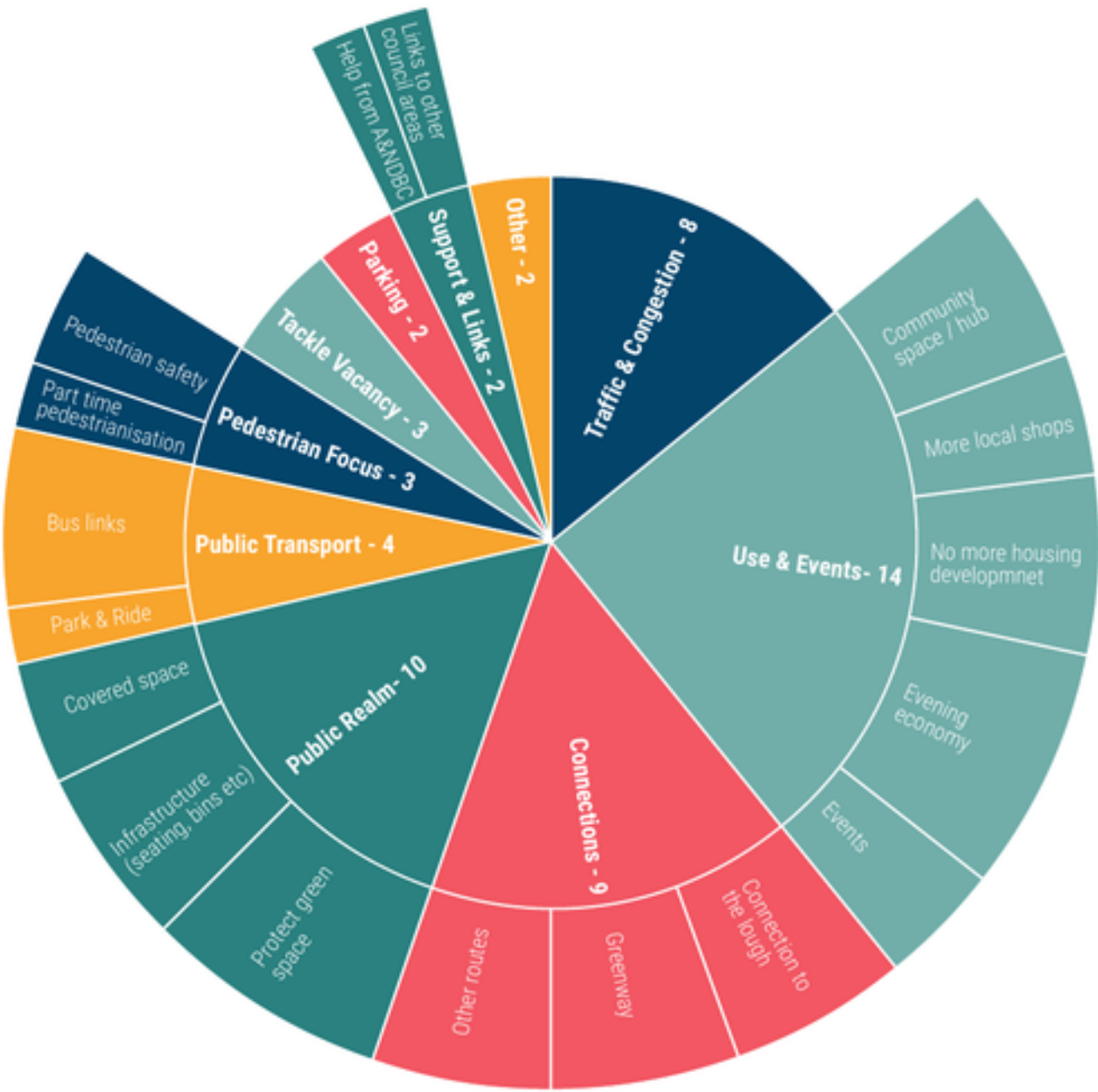


E. Connect to the Lough

To what extent do you agree with the priority: Connect to the Lough?



Other ideas for priorities for the Town Centre
33 Responses



PRIORITIES

A. Walkable Comber

Capitalise on the success of the greenway by delivering the connection through the town centre, adjoined with feeder routes serving the town centre and neighbourhoods. Develop and build on Comber's walkability to support a town centre where people can live, work, play, thrive all within convenient proximity, building a resilient and sustainable local economy that places people at the heart.

The existing greenway linking Comber to the edge of Belfast has been a huge success that needs to be capitalised through the delivery of the onwards connection to and through the town centre, working in partnership with key statutory agencies.

Creating a series of offshoots, connecting to town centre destinations, will provide options for how people move around and within the town centre.

The town centre has a compact and walkable core and a simple solution for the traffic congested centre is to get more people walking and cycling.

By providing a series of links that connect between the centre, residential areas and the planned greenway, every opportunity will be provided to encourage more sustainable modes of travel.

A wayfinding and signage system without clutter that shows you how long it takes to walk and cycle from place to place, will help users navigate along the routes. It makes moving through spaces simple, understandable and provides cues and information needed to aid movement.



Connswater community greenway



Building on Comber's walkability will play a role in supporting local living, connecting town centre amenities with residential areas and encouraging local spend and dwell time through improved active travel routes.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- A.i Deliver planned greenway through the town centre, led by DfI
- A.ii Identify a series of links and routes connecting through the town centre to the greenway, working with DfI and key statutory agencies
- A.iii Provide wayfinding and signage



Comber greenway



PRIORITIES

B. Making the Most of Valuable Space

Building and growing on the success of current initiatives there is an opportunity for further pop-up activities to test ideas and pilot initiatives within properties and open space that are not fulfilling their potential.

Vacant or under-utilised land and buildings can be the result of complex reasons but provide a valuable opportunity to temporarily activate the space through a range of initiatives such as pop-ups and pilots to test ideas.

Comber has already had success through a pop-up shop, creating the opportunity to grow this initiative further throughout the town centre.

Temporary initiatives can be designed in a way that creates real value for communities and ensures that benefits are long-lasting.

Projects can be short-term in practice but support long-term ambition for the town, instilling a legacy that lives beyond their temporary nature. They can serve as an opportunity to drive, test and implement potential solutions, that will contribute towards a resilient town centre for Comber.

Pop-up activities can occupy harder to let and vacant units, facilitating day and evening activities, creating social and economic value from previously underutilised sites.



Pop-up shop

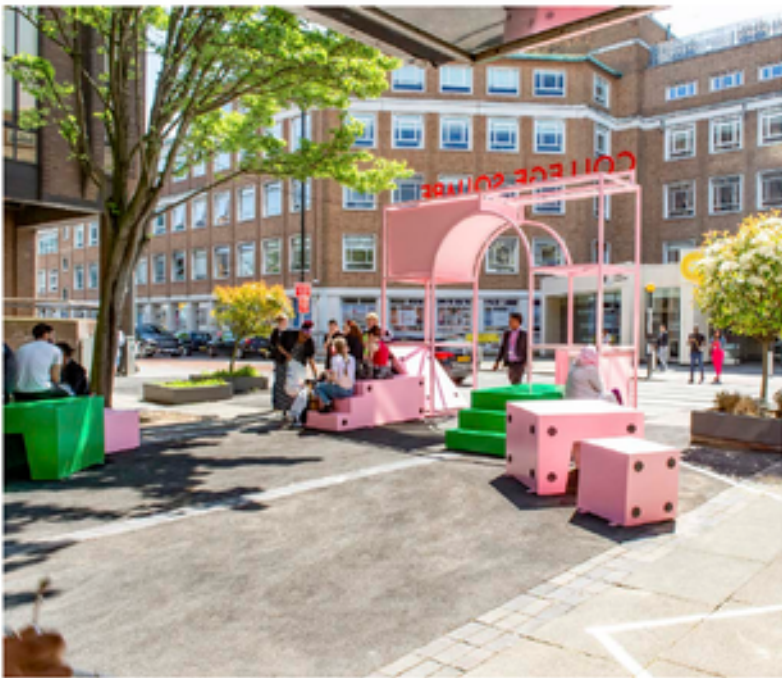


Pop-up workspace

This will require a coordinated effort and engagement with interested parties, including identifying key properties and space, establishing the demand and maintaining a continued dialogue with potential occupiers.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- B.i Identify key properties within the Town Centre
- B.ii Engage with TAG and wider community to establish appetite and key groups looking for space
- B.iii Undertake feasibility study to establish demand for Community Enterprise Hub
- B.iv Dialogue with potential occupiers
- B.v Promotion of space
- B.vi Assessment of similar case studies / funding streams and delivery models



Pop-up square



Peckham Levels

PRIORITIES

C. Activating the Square

The Square is a special focal point in Comber, representing its heart and soul. Yet great potential exists to further develop the space so that it accommodates events and activities of benefit to the town and its centre as a whole.

The Square is well used in Comber but more could be done to ensure the space fulfils its potential as the heart and focal point of the town. Putting it simply, the Square should be where Comber lives, and it needs to work hard to sustain the town.

Town squares are traditionally for congregation, meeting and trading and have long held a vital role in bringing people and communities together. Today, town squares are often designed with multi-use in mind, creating space to hold functions and community events.

Opportunities should be explored to improve the appearance and functionality of the space. One important use of the Square in Comber is to commemorate local lives lost through conflict and the tragedy of the Titanic. As well as being a place of memorial and reflection, the Square should also be place of life and vitality in which all can celebrate the peaceful and prosperous times we are fortunate to now enjoy.



Comber, 1929 (Britain from above)



Trinity Square, Hull

Engagement and co-design with the community and stakeholders is needed to identify what the space can and should do for the people that live in Comber, ensuring a sense of ownership in how the Square can be improved.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- C.i Identify opportunities to improve the appearance and functionality of the Square, and examine the possibility of a shared surface that can be utilised for events
- C.ii Engage with the community and stakeholders



Bonn Square, Oxford



Brentford

PRIORITIES

D. Connect to the Lough

Strengthen connections between Comber and Strangford Lough. This may include visual and physical links where landownership permits and increased awareness through storytelling and interpretation. (eg the harbour, food, wildlife via Castle Espie.)

Strangford Lough sits on the town's doorstep, providing a spectacular natural asset for both residents and visitors. Further down the shore is Castle Espie Wetland Centre, providing an excellent resource for education, awareness and connection with wildlife and biodiversity.

Currently, the town is disconnected from the Lough with the bypass creating a barrier between the two. There is a need to strengthen connections between the town and these assets.

Connectivity between the town and the lough should be improved through three types of intervention.

The first is improving visual connectivity. This can be achieved by the sensitive removal of visual barriers and the management of vegetation in locations such as the Killinchy Road.

Secondly, as per the town centre masterplan, physical connectivity between the town and the Lough should be improved. This requires continued and concerted efforts to identify the most appropriate points of public access without impinging upon the environmental or agricultural uses in this area.



Comber with Strangford Lough in the distance

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Thirdly, raising awareness through storytelling and interpretation will further strengthen connectivity, reminding of the historic and cultural bonds between Comber and the Lough.

- D.i Strengthen visual and physical connections to Strangford Lough and utilise existing routes
- D.ii Engage with landowners and stakeholders
- D.iii Develop interpretation and storytelling initiatives



Education and interpretation opportunities

Making it happen

PRIORITIES	PROPOSED ACTIONS	COMMENTS
A. Walkable Comber (combining Greenway all the way and 15-minute Comber)	i. Deliver planned greenway through the town centre ii. Identify a series of links and routes connecting through the town centre to the greenway iii. Provide wayfinding and signage	Opportunity to build on the greenway concept by providing a series of offshoots that connect throughout the town centre.
B. Making the Most of Valuable Space (combining with Community Enterprise Hub)	i. Identify key properties within the Town Centre ii. Engage with TAG and wider community to establish appetite and key groups looking for space iii. Undertake feasibility study to establish demand for Community Enterprise Hub iv. Dialogue with potential occupiers v. Promotion of space vi. Assessment of similar case studies / funding streams and delivery models	Building and growing on success of current initiatives within properties and space that are not fulfilling their potential.

PRIORITIES	PROPOSED ACTIONS	COMMENTS
D. Activating the Square	<ul style="list-style-type: none">i. Identify opportunities to improve the appearance and functionality of the Square, and examine the possibility of a shared surface that can be utilised for eventsii. Engage with the community and stakeholders and examine possibility of a shared surface that can be utilised for events	Maximising the potential of the Square as the heart and focal point of the town.
E. Connect to the Lough	<ul style="list-style-type: none">i. Strengthen visual and physical connections to Strangford Lough, utilising existing routesii. Engage with landowners and stakeholdersiii. Develop interpretation and storytelling initiatives	Potential for creative interpretation to contribute to strong identity.



Delivery

Introduction

Central to the success of any masterplan is its ability to affect positive change on the ground. As documented in this review of the original town centre masterplans, the rate of project delivery has been varied to date when compared against the intentions set out in the published Action Plans. Reasons for this include the availability of funding, the buy-in of key stakeholders and changes in political context. It is therefore imperative that a clearer understanding is established on how the new regeneration priorities for each town can be taken forward in a manner which fulfils their potential, builds on public support, and actively contribute to the improvement of the settlement in question.



Action Plan Lifespan

Through this review process it has been agreed that the remaining lifespan of the updated town and city centre masterplans is 8 years. This will correlate with two terms of elected Ards and North Down Borough Councillors. Yet unlike the original town centre masterplans, it is not advised to produce a single action plan that will remain unchanged over that period. Rather, the Actions Plans must be considered 'live' documents that are subjected to regular reviews and updates, with a major review and update taking at the halfway stage in 4 years' time. This will allow for delivery progress to be accurately recorded and for reprioritisation of actions to happen in response to inevitable changed circumstances. After the 8 years period in 2030 it is recommended that new 'place plans' are commissioned for each town centre, based on multidisciplinary research and extensive public engagement.

Monitoring of Progress

Every project takes time to deliver, and an effort has been made here to identify initiatives that can be brought forward relatively quickly, while other more complex actions will inevitably take longer. In recognition of this, all actions are broken down into 14 stages as shown here. This will enable a more accurate and transparent plotting of project progress to take place. A regularly updated masterplan 'dashboard' will show the current state of all projects, helping to inform decision making accordingly.

		Delivery Stages													
		A Project Definition				B Project Development				C Project Funding				D Project Delivery	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Comber	A Walkable Comber														
	B Making the most of valuable space														
	C Activating the Square														
	D Connect to the Lough														

(A) Project Definition

1. Identify Online Project idea & Scale (and ideally case study to help visualise)
2. Identify Project Lead
3. Identify Initial Community/Statutory Support
4. Identify Potential Funding (both to develop and deliver project)

(B) Project Development

5. Determine Land Issue (land ownership, options, access, ability to acquire, likelihood of planning)
6. Identify Potential Project Partners (who, why, how)
7. Outline Key Issues: Need/Demand, Objectives/Aims, Project Management, Financing, 'Net Zero' Impact and Sustainability
8. Detailed Investigation - Proportional Economic & Technical Feasibility Study

(C) Project Funding

9. Detailed Funding Case - Proportional Business Case, Designs, Costing
10. Land ownership/access confirmed, planning permission secured and working capital/project financing in place,
11. Funding Application(s) Submitted

(D) Project Delivery

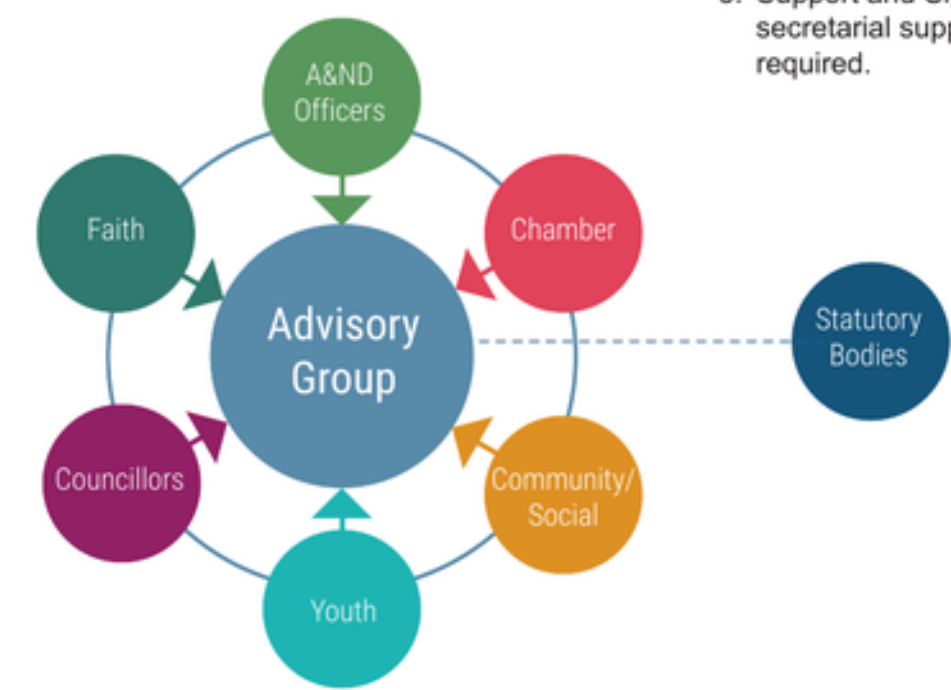
12. Managing Funding - Letters of Offer, Procurement, Construction, Delivery
13. Post Funding Delivery - Adaptation, Delivery, Launch and Official Sign-Off
14. Project Evaluation Complete

Town and City Advisory Groups

The town centre masterplans identify the regeneration needs of each town centre and consequently do not neatly fall to the responsibilities of one organisation (public or private), council or government department. Furthermore, the process of developing viable projects requires the continued input of town centre stakeholders and the public. To reflect this complexity, Ards and North Down Borough Council constituted Town and City Advisory Groups in 2019. These groups, originally known as Town Steering Groups, comprise local representatives of business, community, youth and faith organisations, as well as councillors and officers of Ards and North Down Borough Council. The groups meet regularly through the year, convened by Council officers and led by an appointed chair.

The existence of such groups is to be commended and reflects current best practice being emulated elsewhere in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Yet the effectiveness of the groups requires review to ensure they play a fuller part of the delivery of masterplan priorities. A key area for review is examining how the groups can be given greater levels of responsibility in a manner that is compatible with the functions of both council and government departments. It is recommended that an independent review is undertaken by an external consultant to work with all the advisory groups to review governance and processes with the view to recommend changes and reference best practice models.

- 1. Strengthen – Make more representative by inviting more members and volunteers and ensure more regular representation from different council sections and relevant NI Executive departments (eg DfI).
- 2. Simplify – assign specific tasks to sub-groups, comprising members and invited parties.
- 3. Support and Signpost – provide training, secretarial support and professional advice when required.



Locally Based Organisations

There is a need to support strong and capable locally based organisations both existing and new, such as Donaghadee Community Development Association and Comber Regeneration Community Partnership. The success comes from dynamic, driven people coming together and making projects happen for their community. Often one project leads to another, and locally based organisations become crucial partners for the public and private sector, promoting a shared understanding of place and the need for a more integrated approach to delivery.

Potential Funding Streams

A range of funding sources are likely to be available for delivery of action plans. These include committed council budgets, and DfC regeneration funding, although noting the challenging fiscal environment at present.

A key issue is the current use of NISRA Town Centre boundaries for the allocation of regeneration funding as those areas do not align accurately with the generally recognised town centre areas. It is advocated that this means of funding allocation is reviewed and ideally changed.

A range of other funding sources not restrained by these boundaries should be proactively explored as follows:

- Community Ownership Fund
- Levelling Up (future rounds)
- Shared Prosperity
- Peace Plus
- Shared Island Funding
- National Lottery (Heritage Fund)
- Ulster Garden Villages
- Groundworks
- Social Finance (e.g. Community Finance Ireland, NESTA)

Outcomes / Indicators

It is proposed that arrangements are made to measure the success of masterplan delivery through the measures of outcomes or key performance indicators. This will require the commissioning of baseline surveys where existing data is not available.

Potential indicators are:

- Town centre footfall
- Town centre cycle journeys
- Biodiversity of key sites
- Animation
- Purple Flag Accreditation
- Residential Accommodation/Housing units within Town Centre
- Population numbers
- House prices (and/or rate income)
- Jobs
- Civic Pride/Perception, Business Perception

