Active Design

CREATING ACTIVE ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH PLANNING AND DESIGN

CASE STUDY
Stevenage town centre urban regeneration

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Stevenage, located 45km north of London in Hertfordshire, is the UK’s first designated original post-war New Town and was designed to create a new, healthy place for populations affected by bomb damage and overcrowding. It is currently undergoing an ambitious town centre regeneration programme to provide new homes, transport infrastructure, jobs and facilities, within a rejuvenated public realm that prioritises walking and cycling.

At the heart of the regeneration plans are new homes in the town centre within walkable distance of all its facilities. This is supported by new spaces for physical activity, including streets with play equipment, a new events space laid out for sports and recreation, and changes to the street network to make them better for active travel.

Who?

- Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) leads on planning policy and initiated the push for regeneration.
- The Stevenage Development Board brings together voluntary key stakeholders from public sector organisations, private businesses, not-for-profit organisations and heritage organisations. The Stevenage Development Board was set up in March 2020 to formulate a bid for the national Government’s Town Fund initiative, of which Stevenage was awarded £37.5m. It is chaired by independent businessperson Adrian Hawkins OBE, and provides strategic oversight for the Towns Fund projects.
- Partnership working with private sector partners Mace, Reef Group and the Guinness Partnership.
How it happened

- The Local Plan, supported by the Stevenage Central Framework (see below) allocated significant planned growth to the town centre, underpinning the regeneration approach.
- The Stevenage Central Framework (prepared by David Lock Associates) was commissioned to provide a spatial framework for development, identifying key connections, public realm and sites within the town centre. It was backed up by an Implementation Plan.
- The first set of sites for delivery, known as SG1, was assembled through a joint venture between SBC and Mace.
- The successful award of £37.5m from the national Towns Fund will enable a wide range of new projects, including many related to physical activity such as a new sports and leisure hub, upgraded active travel infrastructure, improvements at the railway station and an arts & heritage trail.
- SBC is the owner of much of the town centre public realm and has been actively undertaking visible change ahead of new building development.

Why is it successful?

- The investment programme covers all aspects of placemaking and regeneration, and has generated wider investment interest in the town centre as a mixed-use destination and centre.
- It demonstrates how many of the UK’s New Towns can successfully regenerate and improve, while supporting the active and healthy behaviours that were the original attraction of these places for new residents post-World War Two.
- It retains broad political support despite being a significant change to the town.

Lessons Learned

- A guiding masterplan provides certainty and a framework within which many partners can work.
- A multi-partner delivery board is able to take forward proposals and de-politicises the process.
- The importance of high quality public realm and physical activity opportunities in transforming streets and spaces.
- The temporary use of space to test ideas can be successfully based around physical activity opportunities.
Applying the principles

**Principle 1: Activity for all**
The regeneration of the town centre is led by an inclusive approach that prioritises equitable access for all (via active travel or public transport), and the provision of accessible, walkable public realm which offers something for everyone.

The vision is to ensure that the town centre is a point of investment, and that this brings wider benefits for all in the town and its surrounding areas.

A significant component of the regeneration is the provision of new homes in the town centre, most of which are apartments of various sizes. One of the sites will be coming forward shortly, delivering its first phase, comprised of affordable homes.

**Principle 3: Providing connected active travel routes**
Stevenage is equipped with a comprehensive network of segregated cycleways that run parallel to major roads. This network has been underused for many years due to the ease of driving, and perceptions of safety issues on routes that may lack natural surveillance. This network is a great asset for the town and connects most areas to the town centre quickly and easily. The town has been designated as one of Hertfordshire’s Sustainable Travel Towns, prioritising investment and ongoing work on an active travel Implementation Plan.

Where the cycleways and pedestrian routes meet the town centre ring road, improvements are being made or planned to the quality of underpasses, wayfinding, and provision of controlled surface-level crossings across this wide dual carriageway.

The town centre masterplan ultimately envisages the downgrading of Lytton Way in the west from a dual carriageway to more of an ‘urban boulevard’ environment. A new surface crossing connecting the Bus Interchange to the railway station and bus priority measures have already been installed, and consultation is underway about the future of the route.
Principle 4: Mixing uses and co-locating facilities

Before the regeneration plans, the town centre had only around 250 homes in its entirety. A major component of the plans is residential-led development in the town centre, to create a population that can support local facilities and an night-time economy. This new town centre population is much more likely to get about by active and sustainable means than residents in car-based suburbs.

This approach moves away from previous regeneration approaches of the 1990s and 2000s, which were primarily retail-focused. Instead, this approach aims to build a wide mix of self-supporting uses, based around a walkable catchment population, and to create an urban neighbourhood within the town centre, that also provides higher-order facilities for the whole town.

A visible example of this is a new primary school, planned for the south-east of the town centre, to cater for local residents in the new residential development.

Stevenage is experiencing significant commercial interest and investment in highly-skilled employment, particularly in life sciences. This builds on the town's existing high-tech industries in aerospace and pharmaceuticals.

This is being encouraged as part of a holistic growth of town centre employment along with residential growth, with workers embedded in the town centre and able to walk to facilities, cycle to work or use public transport.

A new bus interchange and bus priority measures have taken the place of a former surface car park and has released land near the Town Square in the heart of the town centre for improved public realm and active uses.

Principle 5: Network of multifunctional open space

At the centre of the town, the town square has been rejuvenated with new seating, lighting and renovation of frontages, and is now integrated with the former adjacent bus station, which will in time become a ‘garden square’, to provide a complementary green space to the more urban Town Square.

These form the centre of a walkable network of streets and spaces, connected to the Town Centre Gardens to the east. A new sports and leisure facility, which will face and activate the gardens, has been funded through a successful recent Towns Fund bid.
**Principle 6: High quality streets and spaces**
The importance of high quality and active public realm is best exemplified by Market Place, a row of shops connecting the town centre to neighbourhoods to the east. It previously suffered from neglect, empty units and a poor public realm that meant people either avoided it or hurried through.

It has been transformed by the provision of seating, informal play equipment and planting within the street, turning it into a place people now enjoy and feel safe in.

This investment has revitalised the street, and it is now full with no vacancies, and is busy and active throughout the day.

**Principle 7: Providing Activity Infrastructure**
A new secure cycle hub is being constructed at the railway station, adjacent to the main entrance, and connected to the segregated strategic cycling network.

This will provide much improved cycle storage, and is intended to encourage commuters to cycle to the station instead of driving, and also to enable ‘reverse commuters’ to Stevenage’s high-tech industries to store bicycles securely for the last-mile connection from the station to work.

Pedestrian wayfinding around the town centre is consistent and clear, and is designed to reflect Stevenage’s heritage and architecture.
**Principle 10: Activating Spaces**

Event Island Stevenage is a large new piece of temporary public realm that has been recently created on the former bus station (now relocated close to the railway station). This community space has increased greenery, informal play provision and provided a stage for performances and events. It will eventually become the site of the planned ‘garden square’, but in the meantime it is being used as an ‘urban lab’ that tests out different uses of the space to see what is successful.

Sport and physical activity uses have proved popular, with play equipment such as trampolines in landscaped areas, and enough space set aside for local sports clubs to convert the space temporarily for events. Recently, a covered ice rink was installed for people to enjoy. Other uses include concerts and community events.

A Heritage Trail is being established, celebrating the town’s New Town status, and some of the unique parts of its built environment. At the moment this consists of a series of ground plaques, utilising hoarding to show the history of the town and in the future will form part of the planned wayfinding provision.

Stevenage has a proud history of arts and culture, and the history and heritage of the town is respected through the regeneration. There are several pieces of listed artwork within the town square, and the vibrant atmosphere of Event Island Stevenage is designed to showcase local talent. With a stage for performances from local schools and community groups, it acts as a platform to celebrate arts and culture.