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# Re-imagining Bradford for a post-Coronavirus world

## Background

Bradford Civic Society's Place Panel is a collective of design-led thinkers who have come together with the aim of improving urban design and thereby making Bradford a more **socially just, inclusive** and **sustainable** city. We seek to work with and for Bradford's bubbling undercurrent of bottom-up, inspired creative citizens and together to participate in shaping the future of our city.

The Coronavirus pandemic continues to cause widespread disruption to everyday life at the time of writing this report, and there will be significant implications upon the way city centres around the world are used. The pandemic has, in some ways, focussed the aims of the Place Panel, and initial soundings on social media and in the Telegraph and Argus suggest that there is an appetite among Bradfordians to make the city centre a healthier place for a post-Coronavirus world. This report was written by the Bradford Civic Society Place Panel after a series of online discussions and some social media canvassing.

## Introduction

**We will set out six approaches to improving the look and feel of Bradford's city centre.**

We hope to stimulate a discussion with other like-minded groups in the city in order to bring about practical but also radical change in the city centre, believing that what happens there has a ripple effect on the district as a whole.

In order to do this, it is essential that we have a constructive relationship with the Council, which we strongly believe should consult widely and in a timely fashion on initiatives that impact on the future of our city. In this spirit, we see ourselves as critical friends to the Council, and are regularly

approached by the media for our views on plans for the refurbishment of individual buildings as well as for the occasional broader regeneration scheme. We are, however, concerned that currently too much is decided before consultation occurs, and that consultation itself tends to be rather limited.

We are writing this report at a very specific historic juncture, both in general terms – the pandemic – and in Bradford-specific terms – the Transforming Cities Fund and other strategic projects planned for the next few years. Further on, we list some of the specific improvements that we believe could be made now, in the following months as we slowly issue from pandemic lockdown measures.

We believe in the first place that it is important to recognise the city's incredible heritage of fine buildings that make Bradford a highly distinctive city, and a city of great opportunity. We believe the following approaches afford the best possibilities for exploiting the opportunity that Bradford offers

## **Six suggested approaches**

### **1. Use empty retail spaces and first and second floors to encourage independent shops and businesses and to incubate a recycle, repair and regenerate artisanal industry. This should help create a healthy mix of well-designed work/live spaces.**

A major issue in the centre of Bradford is presented by the number of empty properties, especially on upper floors, and the extent of vacant land. Recent examples in Darley Street and on Ivegate show that possibilities exist for creating both pop-up and more permanent spaces for artists, designers, makers of every stripe. We believe that Bradford should follow a policy of promoting independent outlets in the city centre, not least through an enlightened approach to rates. In this way the city can carve out a distinctive ethos, one that ties in with its cloth-making history. Bradford's various city centre districts – Goitside and Little Germany, for example – lend themselves to some of these activities.

### **2. Use available micro spaces to set up pocket parks, following well-known examples in cities such as Tokyo, Barcelona and San Francisco.**

Pocket parks are flexible spaces – street corners and small spaces of many types that are converted into little islands of green. They conveniently sidestep issues of land ownership. But pocket parks are only one of several strategies for introducing spaces of greenery, rest and contemplation in the city. For example, we support the longstanding Friends of Bradford's Becks campaign to restore life to the city's waterways.

### **3. Convert more streets to pedestrian use only, widen pavements on shared streets, and create better links to public transport.**

We are very fortunate in Bradford to have Centenary Square and City Park, such an attractive open space in the middle of the city, with the Mirror Pool as its much appreciated primary feature. Taking this as an inspiration, we believe there is much more that could be done to extend pedestrian areas in the city centre. In this context we welcome the Council's stated intention,

linked in with the Transforming Cities fund, to create new cycling routes and to widen pavements. As we indicate in the more detailed text that accompanies this blog, we believe there are further, more radical measures that the Council should take. We urge the Council to consult the plans put forward by the governments of cities like Paris and Milan in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic to create more space for cyclists and pedestrians. We believe that the current juncture provides an invaluable opportunity to stake out ambitious plans, including improved links to and between our rail termini.

#### **4. Strengthen alliances with other like-minded groups in Bradford to engage with the Council to ensure that a generous level of consultation occurs well before important planning decisions are made.**

As an arm of Bradford Civic Society, it is part of our remit to offer advice to the Council on plans and visions that will shape the city's future (this is a central purpose of the civic society movement). To this end, we liaise with other groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Bradford Property Forum, Bradford BID and Integreat Plus (along with the RIBA). We will too engage with the Council; we are concerned that at present the Council reaches out rather late to a wider public – lay and expert – when it comes to consultation over projects and plans that impact on the city centre. Examples of this would be the 'top of the town' re-development of the Oastler Centre area and the re-design of Forster Square station and its surroundings. We will press the Council to create open and transparent consulting mechanisms and forums.

#### **5. Work with community groups in Bradford to create activity spaces that can be enjoyed by all the city's communities.**

We intend to work with other groups in a range of fields – the arts, healthcare, faith, food and drink – to foster and celebrate the city's diversity and bring more people (back) to the city centre. We look too to Bradford's City of Culture bid, and hope to be able to contribute in a meaningful and authentic way.

#### **6. Join with other groups, especially groups active in the North of England, to exchange ideas and learn from experiences.**

The towns and cities of the North of England are abuzz with new community groups, with original ideas for community activism and with innovative ways of building grassroots urban interventions. We in Bradford need to know what is happening in nearby towns and cities to learn from best practice and to share ideas.

Each of these approaches is based on the three principals set out above: **social justice**, **inclusivity** and **sustainability**. We will be campaigning over the next few months and more to promote these ideals among Council leaders and opinion-formers in Bradford. We intend to follow up on each of these aims and provide specific examples, and, in doing so, to work proactively with the Council.

## 2020/21 Proposals

Bradford Civic Society's Place Panel has a number of specific ideas about things that could be done in the short-term to improve the feel and shape of the city centre. The proposals below are all simple and feasible, and relevant to our current situation as we enter what looks to be long months of slow relaxation of lockdown measures.

### **Forster Square + Little Germany**

- Encourage Bradford Council to work with British Land to repurpose the mothballed former Royal Mail sorting office site at Forster Square. We propose that the site be landscaped and turned into a large green space to increase biodiversity within the city, with the opportunity for temporary events or play space. A key design consideration would be to ensure that our proposal be utilised on other vacant sites around the city once the time comes to develop this site. Well designed transient installations can benefit the city in the short and long term, both economically and socially.
- Ask West Yorkshire Combined Authority/Northern Rail to assess the current flow through the station. One option would be to remove the ticket barriers at Forster Square station and declutter the concourse with a view to removing the current 'people bottleneck' and preparing the site for redevelopment.
- Introduce a strategic closure of streets to vehicles in Little Germany to avoid rat-running and promote more pedestrian walking routes.

### **Midtown**

- Close Kirkgate / Piccadilly to through traffic to allow ease of pedestrian flow from Forster Square into the city centre, and to stop the bottlenecks caused by pick-ups/drop offs. This would also create a safer, more pedestrian-friendly route from the Broadway to the top of town – and it could be enhanced by a public art trail along the route.
- Install traffic-calming measures on Cheapside / Lower Kirkgate to enforce the 20MPH speed limit. Consider creating colourful art or wayfinding graphics on the highway to slow vehicles and help pedestrians navigate across a busy road.
- Redesign Market Street to remove the bus shelters that block the pavements. Possibly begin the partial reopening of Well Street to buses to allow a more phased transfer of vehicles.
- Remove the bin corral behind the Ivegate arch; this currently creates a public health hazard and is unwelcoming and unsightly.

- Gate off the alley between Ivegate and Queensgate to combat persistent drug dealing, which is currently having a detrimental impact on the pedestrian usage of Ivegate.

### **Oastler Market + Top of Town**

- Partially close North Parade on certain evenings to facilitate more outdoor hospitality space for the summer months. This could turn out to be a valuable means of helping businesses while retaining social distancing.
- Turn the top floor of the Oastler Centre car park into a massive outdoor cinema space to allow the crowd-controlled screening of films / entertainment.
- Remove redundant or hard-to-lease market units to create extra space on the market floor. The space could be used for additional dining space, or to support a new layout that better promotes social distancing. The reconfiguration would be used to show the market is 'open for business' in spite of the challenges faced by coronavirus and the forthcoming relocation.

### **In general**

- Add a new section to Bradford Council's 'report it' app whereby citizens can suggest a street that they think would benefit from changes to facilitate social distancing.
- Create a platform or app that enables people to volunteer on small projects to improve the city centre – in the belief that collectively Bradford's citizens can help the city to flourish. Likewise this would be used to crowdsource suggestions for improvements.

This list of proposals is far from exhaustive. It reflects our observations and thoughts at a specific moment in time.

We would very much like to hear other ideas – your ideas. We welcome them on our Twitter @BradfordCivic, and we will look to include them in future blogs and other material we place online.

