



Northern Ireland
Executive

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High Street Task Force

Delivering a 21st Century High Street



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A Report and
Recommendations by the
High Street Task Force –
March 2022



Shipquay Street,
Derry~Londonderry

1. Introduction

The High Street Task Force Report

1.1. This report summarises the findings, advice and recommendations of a High Street Task Force (HSTF), appointed by Ministers in August 2020, to deliver the following agreed vision:

“Sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services as well as being great places to live.”

1.2. The report represents a genuine collaboration across sectors, including expertise from central and local government, academia and the third sector, as well as businesses that are based on the high street. It is accompanied by and reflects the views contained within the [“Call for Evidence Report 2022”](#) on the extensive consultation and engagement which got us to this point. This report has been developed by the independent HSTF¹ to prioritise those actions that can drive delivery and build momentum. It cannot capture all of the views expressed, but those views will be taken on board as we move ahead.

1.3. That collaborative approach must continue over the coming years to deliver high streets, village, town and city centres that are fit for the 21st Century. The HSTF proposes that, in the first instance, there is a five-year programme of work to reinvent our high streets led by the Executive and the Assembly.

The Challenges

1.4. Our high streets have experienced constant and increasing change, particularly in recent years. Technology has changed how we shop and communicate for ever. This fundamental change, together with a global financial crisis, and, most recently, COVID-19, has created a huge set of challenges for the high streets that we value so much.

¹ The HSTF also comprised officials from a number of government Departments who brought information and insights to the process. The HSTF report is not an expression of government policy.



Commercial Court – Belfast

The Opportunities

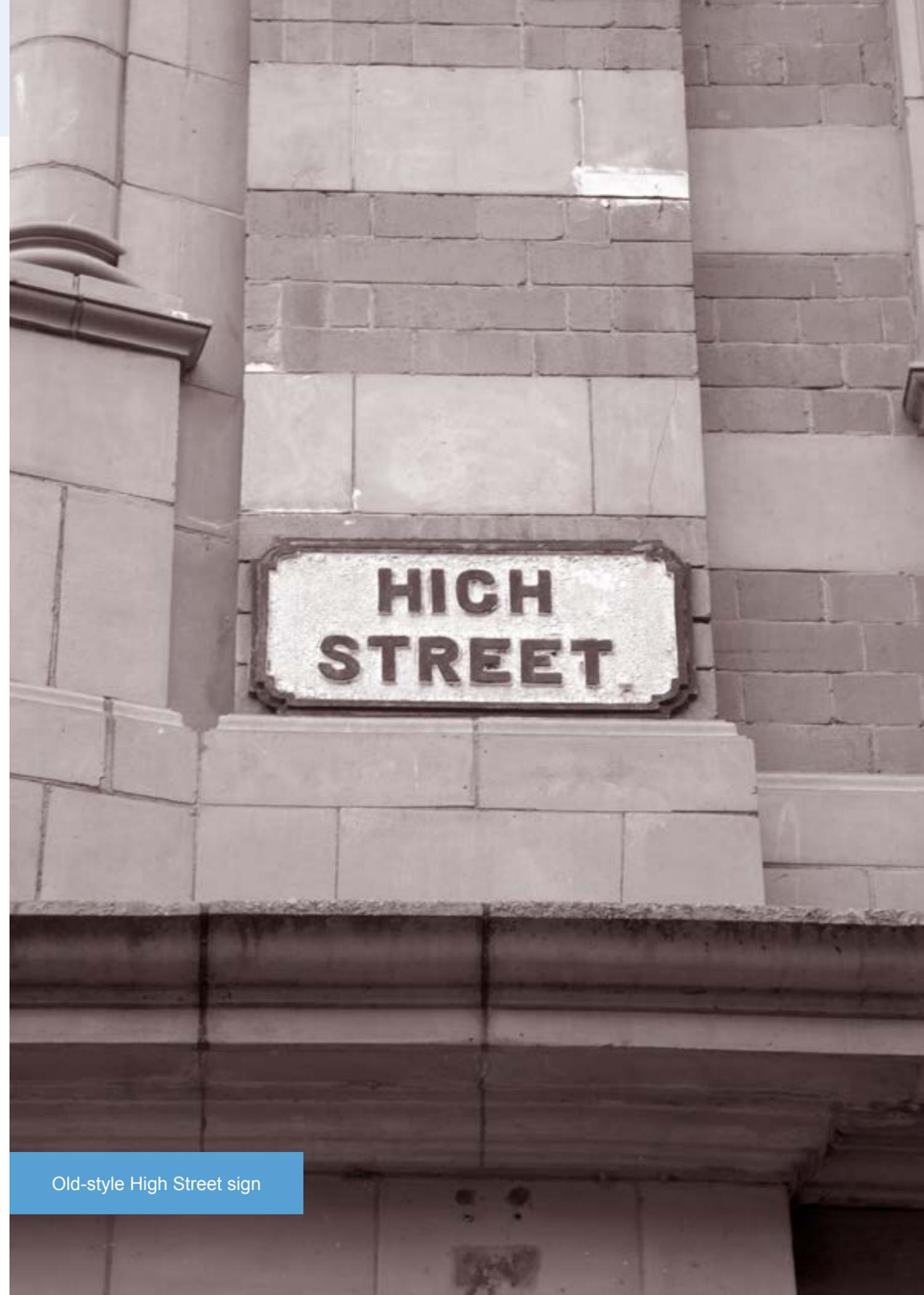
- 1.5. There are also new opportunities: specifically, to create a more diverse high street; to address social needs as well as economic sustainability; and to deliver green growth. More than ever before, it is clear that our actions must focus on people and communities. Rather than viewing the empty premises in our town centres as derelict buildings or eyesores, let us be ambitious and see them as homes for new enterprises of the future.

The Approach

- 1.6. We need our high streets to be clean, green, fun, family-friendly destinations that are welcoming for everyone, including residents, visitors, entrepreneurs and workers.
- 1.7. Meeting the challenges which have been identified will include significant changes in planning, business rates, regeneration, and infrastructure investment. That, in turn, means involving and working closely with everyone who has a key interest in and ability to transform our high streets in line with the vision.
- 1.8. The approach that we set out here is not about top-down or one-size-fits-all solutions; it is about empowering people and communities to reshape and repurpose their local villages, towns and cities. The role of central and local government should be to support local leadership and encourage and resource the local action, working across sectors, to realise our vision.

2. Building on Existing Work

- 2.1. While recognising that urgent changes are needed, the HSTF acknowledges that important actions have already been undertaken by the Executive to support the high street as part of other regeneration strategies and in response to the pandemic. These are set out in our [“Call for Evidence Report 2022”](#), and they range from rates holidays that have been so crucial for high street businesses throughout the pandemic, to targeted interventions such as the Spend Local voucher scheme and a range of other interventions supported by Executive Departments for village, town and city centres, as well as the development of city and growth deals.
- 2.2. Local government has worked closely with central government Departments on place-based regeneration for many years, and the HSTF welcomes the transformation that has happened as a result in places such as Ebrington in Derry~Londonderry, Belfast City Centre and seaside towns such as Newcastle and Portrush. These efforts should continue, but should be informed by our proposals on the importance of local leadership and our strong recommendation that such places become much more diverse in their role as places to live and socialise as well as to work and do business.



Old-style High Street sign

3. OUR PROPOSALS

- 3.1. The HSTF completed an extensive Call for Evidence to capture the views of a wide range of stakeholders. The submissions received, together with the views of HSTF members, have informed our proposals. These are presented to the incoming Executive for Ministers to consider. Some solutions need to be developed and implemented over the longer term, but others can be delivered more quickly.
- 3.2. The HSTF members were encouraged by Ministers to be challenging and innovative, and we recognise that government will have more work to do to develop our ideas further.
- 3.3. The HSTF acknowledges the important role played by our cities and city regions. They play an important role as centres for commerce, employment, foreign direct investment, culture and tourism, entertainment and learning. They are critical in terms of opportunities for economic growth that benefit the whole of the region, and they can be home to shared services so that duplication is avoided and that development can take place in a sustainable way. It is important that our city centres become places for living. With more homes come more people, and this will help sustain the vibrant mix of living, working and doing business, as well as community and leisure services that we want to see on our high streets. Consideration needs to be given by the Executive as to the required investment that is required to drive this forward.



Enniskillen Castle, Fermanagh

Recommendation 1: Executive Support for Our Cities and City Regions

- 3.4. The HSTF therefore recommends that the Executive continues to support our cities and city regions as key drivers of economic growth and prosperity, and considers the support needed to strengthen their role in positioning the region for investment and innovation and to address the objectives of increasing city centre living.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS – YEAR 1

- 3.5. The HSTF's view is that every high street, village, town and city centre has its own unique set of specific issues, strengths and assets, as well as facing many common challenges. Early work should therefore focus on understanding each place and developing bespoke plans; learning from others.
- 3.6. For example, Los Angeles launched a programme in 2013, recognising that streets are the city's largest public asset. This involved substantial investments, partnerships with communities and grants to transform an underutilised asset into vibrant spaces that reflect the unique character of their communities.
- 3.7. We propose a Living High Streets approach, working in partnership with local communities to design the vibrant spaces that they need. The Ministerial Advisory Group on Architecture and the Built Environment²(MAG) has developed a way to lead local co-production on the future of high streets and town centres. The Living High Streets Craft Kit sets out why the high street is important, who should be involved in shaping it and how to go about doing so. The "how-to" focuses on a series of questions that should be asked about a place. This will provide a better understanding and combine social, environmental and economic insights to determine what should be done.



St George's Market, Belfast

² An arm's-length body of the Department for Communities.

Recommendation 2: Living High Streets Programme

- 3.8. The HSTF has endorsed the Living High Streets Craft Kit and now recommends that it is rolled out with the necessary support for implementation in each high street, village, town and city centre that is prioritised for action by the relevant district council.
- 3.9. In each place, the Craft Kit approach will lead to local actions that can be implemented quickly. At the moment, many creative proposals fall because there is no clear route to secure resources.

Recommendation 3: Living High Streets Fund

- 3.10. The HSTF therefore recommends that a fund is created to support such initiatives. We describe this as an agile or pop-up fund, and we suggest that it is made available for projects that are sponsored by district councils and delivered by a competitive process in which the HSTF has an advisory role.

Recommendation 4: Immediate Rates Relief

- 3.11. The Executive should reinstate the Back in Business Rate Relief Scheme to encourage vacant properties to be brought back into use and should ensure that there is ongoing protection for small and start-up businesses by extending the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme. The Executive should also bring forward proposals to improve the Rates Hardship Fund and look at ways of establishing a Capital Allowance Rate scheme to support business growth.

MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS – YEARS 2 TO 3

- 3.12. The HSTF is convinced that, over the next three years, real progress is possible by utilising the Rural Business and Community Investment Programme, the city and growth deals and the Investment Strategy. High-street-related projects will complement the major projects that these initiatives will deliver. For example, at present, these programmes involve restoring and renovating some key properties that can act as centres of rejuvenation for high streets. We need to maximise the impact of those investments and ensure that the benefits are realised by local communities. That can only happen by way of partnerships between central government, local government and local communities and businesses.



Hill of the O'Neill, Dungannon

Recommendation 5: High Street Investment Programme

- 3.13. The HSTF urges the Executive to prioritise the delivery of place-making by developing and implementing an investment programme for blue-green infrastructure, cleaner and greener public realm and sustainable transport. Through the programme, the Executive must ensure that investment is balanced across the region. Rural communities should see their village centres become home to community hubs that make use of heritage buildings where possible.



Donaghadee

Recommendation 6: High Street Council Plans

- 3.14. The HSTF strongly recommends that district councils each develop dereliction strategies and action plans and that they use their existing powers to transform streets and village centres. By investing in such proposals, they will attract new levels of footfall, retain spending power in their districts and benefit from a growing rates base. This will complement the programme under Recommendation 5.
- 3.15. While technology has created problems for our high streets — particularly for our retailers — it can also bring opportunities. With many employers offering hybrid working in which their staff can work in an office, at home or a third place, there is a need to ensure that our regional towns and villages are able to provide an attractive place for workers.

Recommendation 7: Smart High Streets

- 3.16. Alongside investment in the quality of place, the HSTF therefore recommends that the Executive identify a lead Minister to champion Smart High Streets. This will optimise the role of high streets through universal WiFi access, the Internet of Things, augmented reality and a range of other initiatives which can secure the benefits offered by digital technologies.

Recommendation 8: Fair Work on Our High Streets

- 3.17. Our high streets are also workplaces. The HSTF supports the promotion of good work and fair work policies for workers in our high streets. To that end, the HSTF recommends that the Executive implements the commitments made in the New Decade New Approach agreement³ to promote this policy and ensure best work practices and high standards in our high streets.

³ See [New Decade New Approach](#), Appendix 2, paragraph 1(x)

Recommendation 9: High Street Challenge Fund

3.18. In line with the HSTF’s strong conviction that locally-derived solutions have the greatest part to play in the development of our high streets, we recommend that the Executive establishes a Challenge Fund at significant scale. We suggest that a competitive fund, open to bids from the private, voluntary and community sector, as well as public bodies, has the potential to harness the creativity of those who value our village, town and city centres. The Executive should be prepared to take risks where the potential benefits merit it. The Challenge Fund approach would be ideal to support reimagined models for the high street and encourage collaborative and competitive working between appropriately experienced organisations. The primary objective would be to create an environment in which innovative solutions are developed. The HSTF is willing to play its part in the assessment of bids to such a fund.

LONGER-TERM PROPOSALS – TOWARDS 2050

3.19. The draft Investment Strategy Infrastructure 2050, agreed recently by the Executive and currently out for consultation, sets out what we need in which to enhance our communities and places:

“Our towns and villages need to regain and then retain their vibrancy, purpose and sense of place. High streets of the future should be safe and attractive gathering points for whole communities, where people can live, work, shop, learn, do business, use public services and enjoy their leisure time...”

Significant intervention will be required to help our towns and villages. In cases of market failure, the public sector may need to rethink the location of service delivery and administration investment or pump-prime regeneration, at least in the short term, to encourage private and community investment. This can support the long-term evolution of our high streets from retail centres, helping them to redefine their purpose, to embrace a broader role servicing local social, environmental, housing and economic needs.”

3.20. The HSTF strongly supports proposals to put important public services and amenities right in the middle of the high street which are accessible by sustainable forms of transport. Whether these are libraries, healthcare facilities, places for education and community use, or simply more and better housing, these investment choices will help to create vibrant, people-focused places in line with our vision.



Belfast Bikes

3.21. This requires innovation in projects and investment programmes, but it will only be possible if it is supported by the right policy and legislation. Our policy should support and protect the distinctiveness of our high streets, including their cultural and built heritage; these are the things that people value. Our planning and fiscal policies and systems, therefore, need to be up to the task, and our delivery arrangements need to be agile.

3.22. In line with Infrastructure 2050, the HSTF supports investment that enables sustainable development of our villages, towns and city centres. This means ensuring that there is enough capacity in our water, power and telecommunications systems to support new homes, business and other facilities and that places are designed and laid out thoughtfully in layperson terms.

Recommendation 10: High Street Investment Programme – Long Term

3.23. We recommend that the High Street Investment Programme is developed within the overarching Investment Strategy. This should include strategic investment decisions required to progress the vision set out above.



Planning Drawing

Recommendation 11: Review of Planning Processes

3.24. We suggest that, together with the right long-term spending decisions, it is important that our planning system works efficiently and effectively. We therefore recommend that the Executive works to implement the recent review of the Planning Act 2011 to ensure that it acts as an enabler of sustainable development in city, town and village centres. We also recommend that, in Year 1, the Executive review the operation and implementation of the existing Town Centre First Retail Planning policy to ensure that it is working, and, where it is not working, identify appropriate measures to fix it. This will apply to councils and central government.

3.25. Where possible, opportunities should be taken to streamline processes so that the changes identified as necessary for town centres through local initiatives — such as the Living High Streets Craft Kit — can be implemented without delay or undue cost. This includes reducing the need to submit planning applications for minor developments in town centres by reviewing permitted development rights and the Use Classes Order.

Recommendation 12: Local Government Powers

- 3.26.** The HSTF heard views during the Call for Evidence that the Executive should devolve further powers to local government, including those needed for regeneration. We recommend that, during the next mandate, Ministers engage with elected representatives from local government and the Assembly to explore the benefits of extending powers in this way.
- 3.27.** We have seen how, over many years, the rates burden has fallen on non-domestic ratepayers to such an extent that the relationship between rent and rates for our local businesses has become unbalanced. The rates burden is a major obstacle to investment.

Recommendation 13: Review of Fiscal Policies

- 3.28.** It is recommended that there is a fundamental review of non-domestic rates. We recognise the need to raise revenue for public services and suggest that the Executive review its fiscal policies as a top priority; this should look holistically at the impact of taxing businesses and households here. We look to the new Fiscal Council to engage with stakeholders in our village, town and city centres as it develops its advice for Ministers.



The Diamond, Coleraine

4. Making it Happen

- 4.1. With the commitment of Ministers and the involvement of people and organisations across many sectors, the HSTF is confident that real change is possible. We strongly recommend that a focus on implementation is seen as a priority now and in the longer term. We see the lifetime of our proposals for at least five years and they should be regarded as the Executive's programme for our high streets for the entirety of the next Assembly mandate.



Generic High Street Sign

- 4.2. This means that substantial resources will have to be made available as part of the core functions of several Departments and by local government to deliver meaningful change. The resources needed to continue the engagement that has now started are comparatively modest. The allocation of roles and responsibilities will be for the agreement of the Executive, but a coordinated programme-based approach will be required with senior responsible owners appointed by Ministers.

Recommendation 14: A Five-Year Programme

- 4.3. We recognise that our high streets exist in an ever-changing environment and we will see changes in transportation, homes, workplaces and much more besides. The programme that we have set out here must be equally dynamic. We therefore recommend that the HSTF is kept in place for the next five years — refreshing its membership as necessary — with support from central government for monitoring, evaluation, research and outreach. Such support should extend to resourcing the creation and maintenance of a web-based resource or micro-site to provide helpful advice, case studies and other material that can be used to support local action.



Carlough

5. Conclusion

- 5.1. The HSTF members have welcomed the opportunity to engage with government over the last 18 months on the future of our high streets. We are hugely grateful to all those who took the time to share their views with us, and we believe that we have reflected those views in a set of realistic proposals for consideration by Ministers.

Membership of the High Street Task Force

Business Alliance
Department for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs
Department for Communities
Department for Infrastructure
Department for the Economy
Department of Finance
Federation of Small Businesses
Hospitality Ulster
Mr Chris Sutor (Business Owner)
NI Council for Voluntary Action
NI Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions
NI Local Government Association
NI Retail Consortium
Queen's University Belfast
Retail NI
Social Enterprise NI
SOLACE – The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives
Ulster University
USDAW – The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers

Annex A - Image Index

Page	Location/Image Description
Cover	Drawing
Page 4	Shipquay Street, Derry~Londonderry
Page 6	Commercial Court, Belfast
Page 9	Generic High Street Sign, Stock Image
Page 10	Enniskillen Castle, Fermanagh
Page 11	St George's Market, Belfast
Page 12	Hill of the O'Neill, Dungannon
Page 13	Donaghadee
Page 14	Belfast Bikes
Page 15	Planning Drawing, Stock Image
Page 17	The Diamond, Coleraine
Page 18	Generic High Street sign, Stock Image
Page 19	Carnlough



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