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# Creating Vibrant Places

2024



## Foreword

The foundations of a thriving society are vibrant places and Anthropy is delighted to have acted as the catalyst for this vibrant places report, a significant analysis into the elements behind how such vibrancy can be achieved. It provides analysis of what constitutes a vibrant place and the multifaceted, cross-sector roles necessary to cultivate them. I hope it will spark new thinking to emerge across communities.

A key observation concerns the various perceptions of responsibilities for building vibrant places, ranging from local and national governments to the roles of business and the social sector. At Anthropy, we see such responsibility as a collective one, inevitably requiring the concerted efforts of businesses, local government, and the voluntary sector to respectively drive economic growth, innovation and employment opportunities, facilitate planning and infrastructure development, and meet the needs of the more vulnerable people in communities. Cross-sector collaboration as a key Anthropy objective is never more relevant than in this part of the agenda.

I am delighted that Anthropy's national gathering 'home', the Eden Project in Cornwall, is highlighted as an example of the "art of the possible". The Eden Project is world renowned and was chosen to stage

Anthropy because it stands as a unique illustration of what can be achieved when vision, leadership, and collaboration converge. To the same extent and also highlighted within the report, The Building Bridges Hub – again, part of the Anthropy community – is an outstanding example of local leadership addressing local needs. It exemplifies how tailored solutions can be crafted to meet the unique challenges and opportunities of a community by harnessing local resources.

In summary, this report underscores the importance of creating vibrant places both for the national good and for local quality of life. By highlighting the critical roles of various stakeholders and showcasing exemplary initiatives like the Eden Project and The Building Bridges Hub, the report should provide the insights and inspiration for others to see how their own efforts can potentially transform both places and the prospects and quality of lives of the people in them. This commitment to collective wellbeing aligns perfectly with Anthropy's work to inspire a more positive, sustainable, equitable and successful future, and I look forward to seeing the impact of this important report.

**John O'Brien**  
MBE, founder and chairman, Anthropy

## Introduction

In an era marked by dynamic societal shifts, urbanisation and evolving community needs, the concept of a vibrant place can be a crucial element in shaping the fabric of our country – fostering a sense of identity, belonging and collective purpose beyond the tangible benefits of economic growth and improved living conditions.

As we grapple with the challenges of modernity, building places with thriving communities at their heart becomes not just a choice but imperative for the resilience and vitality of our society. Investing in them can enable us to build resilient communities and lay the groundwork for a sustainable and prosperous future.

To explore this concept, we brought together a panel of experts from across multiple sectors and, collectively, we have constructed a framework that simplifies the notion of a vibrant place and maps out the opportunities for and barriers against their creation.

Supplementing this is data from a survey of 1,241 people to gather evidence on the public's attitudes towards the areas in which they live and work and how they can be transformed.

We also held two interactive workshops at Anthropy 2023 – a national gathering at the Eden Project where leaders and organisations considered Britain's future and its place in the world – where more than 40 voices joined the discussion.

Utilising this expertise, knowledge and data, in this report, we define the essence of a vibrant place, explore the myriad of opportunities they present, and look at the barriers to and who is responsible for their realisation. We also outline our targeted asks of central and local government, businesses and individuals to enable their creation and shape the future of our communities.



## Executive summary

Despite acknowledging government and local authority investment as a barrier, the general public predominantly attributes the responsibility for creating vibrant places to these public bodies.

The trust placed in local authorities and councillors to make investment decisions for community improvement surpasses that in central government. However, concerning trends emerge as data reveals a significant number of English councils face bankruptcy, with a further 1 in 10 anticipating insolvency due to diminishing funding levels, according to the Local Government Information Unit.

Interestingly, while less than half of respondents consider their residential areas vibrant, even fewer perceive their workplaces as so. Greater London stands out as the sole region where respondents believe their workplaces are more vibrant than their residential areas. However, a pervasive sentiment of neglect by central government exists, especially in the North of England. Furthermore, the majority of people do not feel an attachment to or sense of community to where they live, with more than a third of people believing their hometown is depressing.

When it comes to creating vibrant places, transport services and green space top the list for both workplaces and residential areas, with leisure, hospitality and entertainment, and housing making up the respective top threes. Conversely, housing, health and social care, retail, and transport services are the factors most people consider as needing improvement.

These findings underscore the complexity of perceptions surrounding community vibrancy and highlight the urgent need for strategic action to address barriers and foster inclusive development across every region.

When it comes to ensuring every corner of Britain is vibrant, we can look to take inspiration from places across the globe that have already implemented solutions – from Coventry's Broadgate Square to The Netherlands' business rates overhaul – which we explore in the 'our asks' section of this report.

**Sarah Walker-Smith**  
CEO, Ampa



Our definition:

## What is a vibrant place?

A vibrant place is a thriving and safe environment that is accessible for all, driven by a connected community, and supported by integrated infrastructure that meets economic, environmental, educational and social needs.

A 'place' could be a local high street, a market town, a coastal village or city centre. It is not strictly determined by size, but by its community.

### The vibrant places framework:

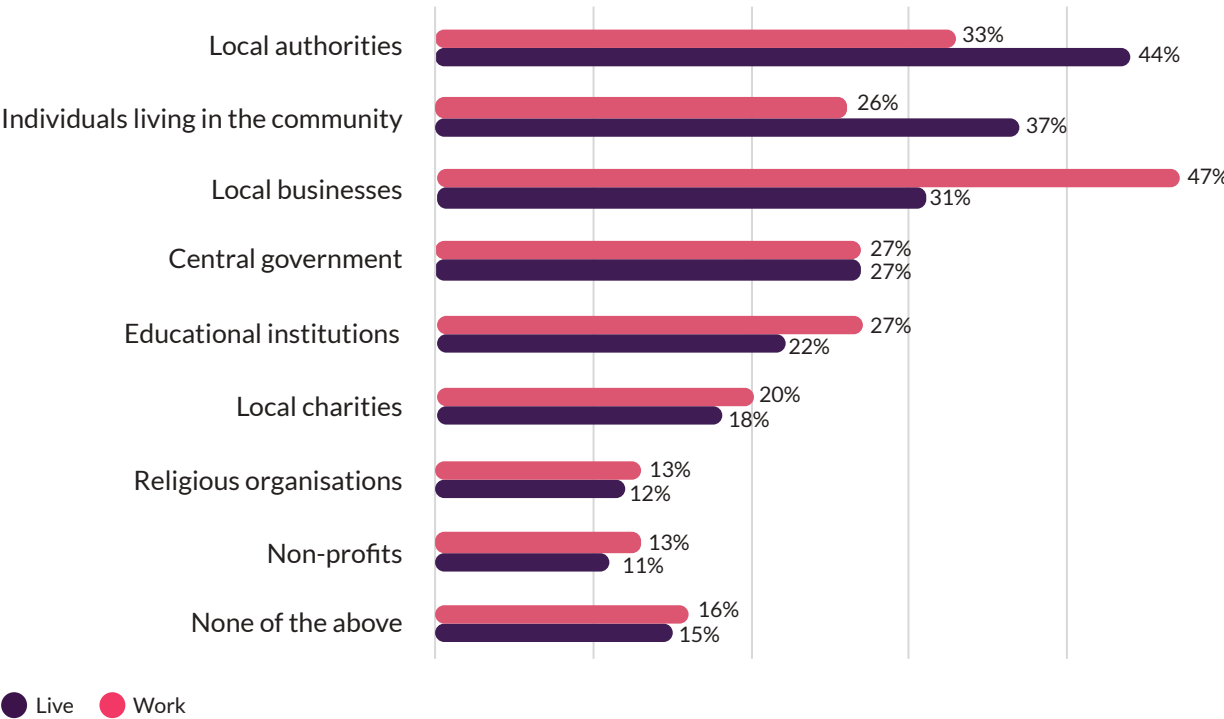
In order to generate solutions for how individuals, businesses, organisations and government can work together to deliver places that are built with thriving communities at their heart, we developed a framework that simplifies the concept of a vibrant place. This is broken down into four vital components (play, live, work and services), and includes the opportunities for and barriers against their creation.



Public survey results:

Who is responsible for creating vibrant places to live and work?

Which organisation(s) do you think is responsible for creating vibrant places to live and work?



When asked who is responsible for creating a vibrant place to live, the public placed the responsibility on local authorities and individuals living within the community.

On the other hand, when it came to creating vibrant places to work, the public see the lion’s share of responsibility sitting with local businesses themselves, followed by local authorities.

As well as placing greater responsibility on local authorities to create vibrant places, the public is also more likely to trust their local authority and local councillors to make good investment decisions about what is needed to improve their local community over central government.

When asked whether they would trust different governmental representatives to make good planning application decisions about what is needed to improve their local community, 38% and 39% agreed local authority and local councillors would make good decisions respectively, against just 33% agreeing central government would.

Furthermore, half of respondents felt their area had

been left behind by central government (50%); this feeling was strongest in the North of England (61%) compared to 50% in Scotland, 46% in the Midlands, 46% in the South of England.

Bucking this trend, however, is Greater London, where respondents are most likely to trust central government or the mayor to make good investment decisions about what is needed to improve their local community (43%).

We also see a difference in response based on age: Gen Z and Millennials have the most faith in central government to make good decisions, compared to Baby Boomers (43% and 41% versus 19%, respectively). Younger generations also have more trust in their local authority: Gen Z (49%) Millennials (44%) and Baby Boomers (31%).

However, amid these perceptions, recent data from the [Local Government Information Unit](#) has revealed a concerning trend: eight English councils have declared bankruptcy since 2018 and a further 1 in 10 local authorities anticipate insolvency by 2025 due to dwindling funding levels.

What creates a vibrant place?

The most important factors for creating a vibrant place to work are transport services, green space, and leisure, hospitality and entertainment. The top three priorities for places to live are green space, followed by housing and transport services. Both responses underscore the indispensable role of green spaces and transit in fostering vibrant environments to live and work.

When asked which factors need improvement or significant improvement in the place where people live, housing was at the top of the list, followed by health and social care, retail and transport services (see table below).

There is only a 4% difference in what the public considers to be the most important factors needing improvement:

Housing	47%
Health and social care (e.g. doctors’ surgeries)	47%
Retail	46%
Transport services	45%
Leisure, hospitality and entertainment	44%
Cultural centres	44%
Community centres	44%
Emergency services (police, ambulance etc)	43%
Accessibility for those with disabilities or additional needs	43%
Meeting sustainability goals (e.g. access to recycling facilities, green energy)	43%

Example:

The Eden Project, Cornwall, Morecambe and Dundee

In 2001, a disused clay pit in Cornwall opened to the public as the Eden Project, employing 350 people and giving a further 150 the opportunity to volunteer. Since then, the tourist attraction has attracted more than 22 million visitors and inspired an economic renaissance in Cornwall, contributing more than £1.7 billion to the county’s local economy.

Having grown into a living, breathing model of positive change, the team behind the original project is developing two more sites in the UK. Eden Project Morecambe has been awarded £50 million of Levelling Up investment and is in the process of securing the remaining £50 million from private and philanthropic sources. Eden Project Dundee is in the planning phase.

With ambitions of attracting 740,000 new visitors per year, Eden Project Morecambe will be a force for growth and regeneration, strengthening communities, engendering local pride and boosting confidence. It will create 1,300 high-quality, sustainable jobs, of which around 300 will be directly employed by the Eden Project and 1,000 supported in the regional supply chain - delivering a transformative boost to the economy.





## Do you live in a vibrant place?

Which of the following do you consider to be vibrant places?



On average, less than half (46%) of people consider where they live to be a vibrant place and just a third (33%) would agree that where they work is a vibrant place

London is the only region where people would agree that the place in which they work is more vibrant than where they live

### Example: New Lubbesthorpe, Leicestershire

Approved in 2014, the pioneering New Lubbesthorpe project is building a vibrant thousand-acre settlement of more than 4,200 homes in Leicestershire’s Blaby district.

Once an abandoned medieval village, the new community – which is the brainchild of the Drummond Estate – provides much-needed homes, jobs and facilities in a way that conserves the site’s archaeology, history and ecology. The development also includes an innovative on-demand bus service that can be called up within minutes via an app – offering a convenient way to travel while tackling urban congestion and improving air quality.

The first homeowners moved in during 2017 and the proposals will be built out over the next two decades. Once finished, the development will include 4,250 homes; a district centre with buildings for retail, commercial, employment and community use; two local centres; a secondary school and sixth form; two primary schools; a health centre; a business centre with office space; an employment site; more than 43 acres of playing fields; and over 475 acres of open space.



## What about a sense of community?

Almost half (49%) of people feel an attachment to and a sense of community in where they live. More than two fifths (44%) of people say the pandemic created a greater sense of community in the area they live – significantly higher than the cost-of-

living crisis (35%) and Brexit (27%).

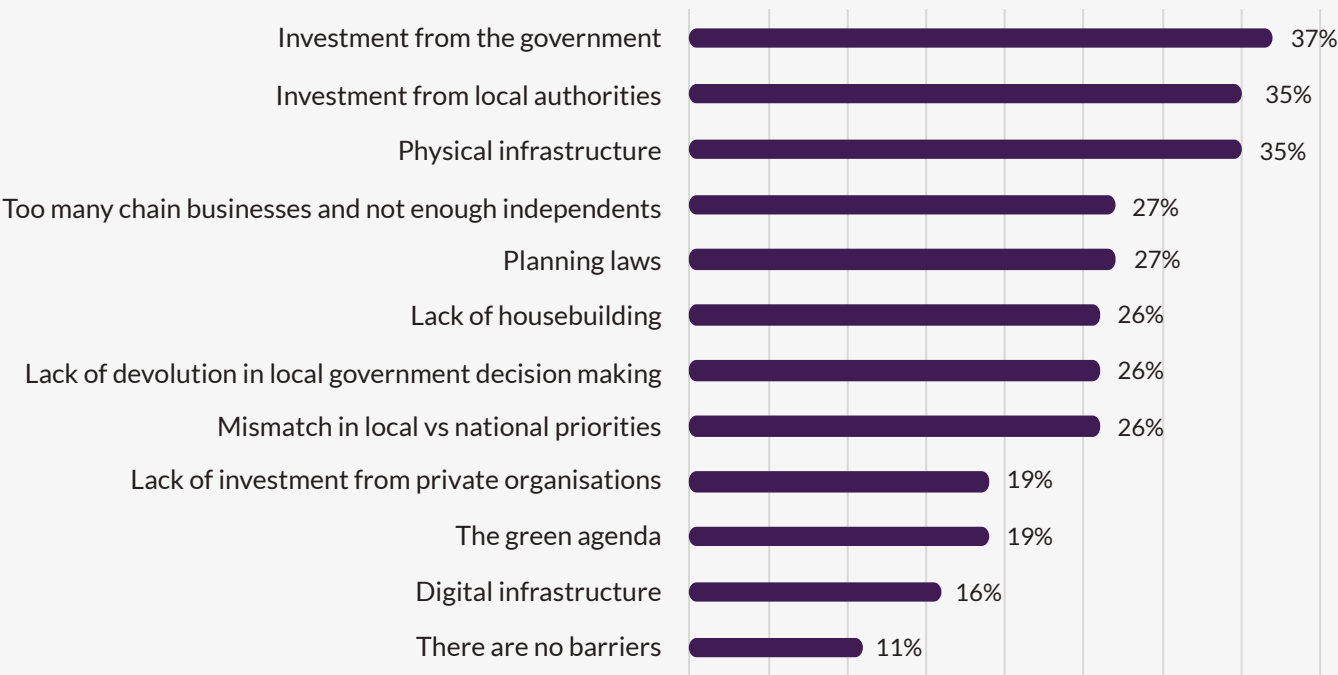
Sadly, more than a third of people (36%) believe the area they live in is depressing and 6 in 10 (60%) said their local high street is not as good as it used to be.

## What are the biggest barriers to creating vibrant places in the UK?

When it comes to barriers to creating vibrant places, investment from government bodies came top of the list, closely followed by physical

infrastructure – in keeping with transport services being a top area for improvement to create a vibrant place.

What are the biggest barriers to creating vibrant places in the UK?





# How do we improve communities?

With the public placing the greatest responsibility for the creation of vibrant places on central and local government, businesses and individuals, these key stakeholders can support by:

## Driving devolution

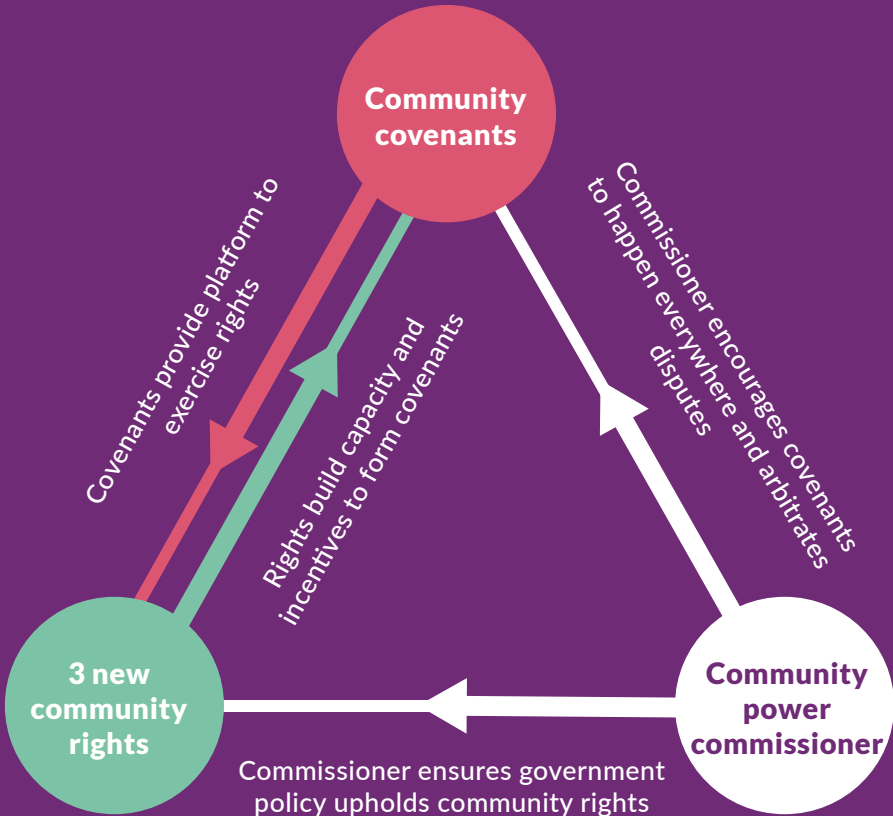
As well as transferring decision-making and funding from Westminster to local government, power should be devolved even further to communities at a neighbourhood level – enabling and inspiring people to shape the places where they live, while also tackling inequality, local decline, loneliness and mistrust.

This shift requires systemic changes in legislation to establish mechanisms where people are empowered to participate in decision-making processes so they are no longer just the recipients of change but active architects – fostering a sense of responsibility, stewardship and greater connection.

More than a quarter (27%) of people say a lack of devolution is a barrier to creating vibrant places

A proposal from We're Right Here, the Community Power Act is a major piece of legislation that would fundamentally change where power lies in England – removing some of the institutional and legal barriers in the way of people who are taking action in their community, by:

- 1. Creating three new community rights over spaces, local services and key spending decisions.
- 2. Introducing community covenants to bring local people, community organisations and local authorities together to share power and make decisions.
- 3. Establishing an independent community power commissioner to ensure action is taken across government to uphold the new rights.



### Example: Social prescribing, Fleetwood



With the life expectancy of Fleetwood’s 26,000 residents significantly lower than the national average, the Lancashire town took charge of its own social and health enrichment through the creation of the resident-led Healthier Fleetwood initiative.

The scheme – backed by healthcare providers and charities – “socially prescribes” events such as free sports sessions, harmony and health singing groups, and mental health support classes. Since its introduction, there has been a 20% reduction in A&E attendances.

### Example: The Crouch End Project, North London



After spending 15 years working in media marketing, in 2007, Clare Richmond set up a small grassroots initiative in Crouch End designed to breathe new life into the North London high street.

With no financial backing, prior experience or even local authority permission, the endeavour was instead born out of a scavenger mindset and focused on leveraging existing assets and fostering collaboration under a shared vision. The project rapidly gained momentum and within 18 months, it had engaged nearly 200 businesses and organisations.

Through innovative strategies such as the introduction of a loyalty scheme and the organisation of community events, the project successfully increased footfall and spending on the high street while nurturing a culture of cooperation. Its success garnered attention beyond the local sphere, inspiring similar initiatives in neighbouring town centres and demonstrating a scalable model for community-led regeneration.



Creating citizen centres

Bringing public services under one roof and uniting them with enterprising space for businesses and non-profits to create central citizen hubs can serve as focal points that enhance accessibility and improve service delivery to produce healthier and more engaged communities.

The vision for these integrated hubs extends beyond mere physical structures, evolving into dynamic spaces for local authorities, businesses and non-profits to collaborate and offer their assistance to residents, encompassing employment, council, police, voluntary, leisure, health and education services, for example, as well as co-working areas to build a sense of community.

**More than two thirds (68%) of people agree that having access to daily necessities and services within a 15-minute walk from their home is important to them**

Example:  
The Portal, Ellesmere Port



Cheshire West and Chester council rationalised and modernised its operational headquarters to support flexible working – saving £5.9 million across 10 years, reducing its carbon footprint, and acting as a catalyst for regeneration in the district.

As well as providing desk space for its workforce, the building acts as a base for local public and third sector

organisations, including the Job Centre Plus, Citizen’s Advice Bureau and the Work Zone, delivering a range of employment, skills and learning, welfare and benefits, community safety and prevention, health and wellbeing, and housing support and services to the public – ultimately, leading to better outcomes for residents.

Setting up souks

Local authorities can support businesses by implementing policies that discourage private commercial landlords from leaving retail units vacant for extended periods of time and, instead, encourage them to open their empty spaces for micro-retailers – nurturing entrepreneurship and economic resilience.

Co-retail souks (a marketplace, typically found in Northern Africa and West Asia) can enable independent businesses to showcase their hero products without the challenges of setting up traditional stalls in market squares or taking up costly and lengthy commercial leases – creating a pathway from home-based mini businesses to physical selling spaces to support young entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, opening up empty units at a lower cost can transform unused areas into vibrant hubs of activity with increased footfall, which, with evidence showing that thriving spaces are more likely to be sold or let, can attract interest and investment in the long run.

**60% of people say their local high street is not as good as it used to be**

**More than a quarter (27%) of people say too many chain businesses is a barrier to creating vibrant places**

Example:  
The Building Bridges Hub, Maidenhead



The Building Bridges Hub opened in March 2023 in Maidenhead. Founder Donna Stimson set up the hub with the aim of connecting charities and organisations within the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead to form a central and integrated part of the community.

Overcoming challenges like community awareness gaps and resource constraints by embracing innovative tools such as the OnePlanet platform, the hub has connected disparate groups and, as a result, Maidenhead has witnessed a surge in community engagement and collective action – paving the way for a more resilient and sustainable future.

**Almost 1 in 2 people (46%) feel there are too many empty retail units in their area**



Reforming business rates

Conducting a full root-and-branch review of the broken business rates system so it recognises differences in operating models and becomes fairer can provide surety and instil confidence around the taxation system for organisations.

As an upfront cost that property-dwelling businesses must pay before making a single penny, business rates can significantly impact the economic vitality of places.

Setting them too high may lead to business failures or deter startups, excessive complexity can result in numerous appeals, and imposing levies on new equipment or repurposed spaces may hinder investment and innovation.

The government should explore a revamped system that reflects local economic realities, fosters productivity and enhances prosperity.

Potential measures may involve delegating the valuation process to local authorities, streamlining the system, and removing the cap on total business rates revenue.

Example:  
Going Dutch



The Netherlands' business rates system underwent a significant overhaul in the mid-90s, which can provide valuable lessons to the UK government. Key reforms included a move to valuing properties annually rather than every four years and excluding plant and machinery from valuations, which acted as a deterrent for firms wanting to invest to make their



processes more productive and greener. These adjustments demonstrate that it is possible to successfully transform a centralised, slow and overly complex system, and turn it into a more agile and fair tax that considers actual local conditions and rewards local economic growth.

Introducing volunteer leave

Businesses that empower their employees to actively engage in their local community by providing time off for volunteering projects contribute significantly to creating vibrant and thriving places.

When employees are given the opportunity to volunteer, it not only allows them to make a positive impact on the community but also fosters a sense of purpose and fulfilment.

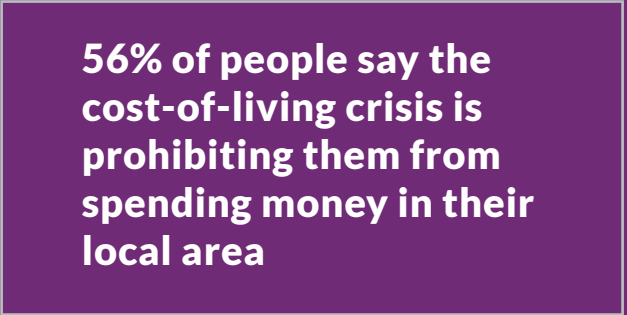
This active participation goes beyond the workplace, promoting a culture of social responsibility and civic engagement.

As individuals invest their time and skills in local projects, they become catalysts for positive change, building stronger bonds with their communities, which strengthens the social fabric of the area –

Example:  
Impactful giving

To support its corporate responsibility activities, IT consultancy Accenture offers its employees three paid days to volunteer each year.

In 2022, the collective efforts of its workforce resulted in 33,564 hours of volunteering support, with 76% of people saying they developed core



leading to increased collaboration and a sense of collective responsibility.

The ripple effect of these interactions extends beyond the immediate volunteer projects, creating a more interconnected and supportive environment that enhances the overall vibrancy of the community.

work skills as a result. This statistic underscores the dual benefit of the programme, not only in terms of the positive impact on communities but also in enhancing the professional growth and skill sets of its workforce.





## Constructing youth centres

In the face of the challenging environment young people navigate today, exacerbated by the pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis, it is imperative to recognise the critical role youth centres can play in aiding social development.

With an estimated 1.3 million young individuals missing out on crucial extracurricular activities and 30% ceasing participation due to financial constraints, youth centres can be an untapped solution.

Youth centres not only provide access to activities that boost confidence and ambition but also serve as inclusive hubs for community development.

By revisiting planning obligations like section 106 requirements and adapting licensing laws to accommodate extended and inclusive play hours for the younger age groups, we can ensure play becomes an integral part of community development rather than a mere obligation.

Investing in young people through these initiatives sends a clear message about their worth and



empowers the next generation to lead positive, fulfilling lives.

It is about creating safe, affordable and supportive spaces where young individuals, regardless of their background, can come together, explore their passions and develop the skills necessary for a brighter future.

### Example: OnSide Youth Zones



National youth charity OnSide opened its first Youth Zone in Carlisle in July 2011 and since then, it has built a network of purpose-built, state-of-the-art, multi-million-pound centres in 13 other locations, with a further seven in the pipeline.

Working in partnership with local authorities, communities, businesses and young people, and run by skilled youth workers, OnSide's Youth Zones enable young people to enjoy a wide range of activities and support seven days a week, 52 weeks a year.

On average, there are 650,000 visits to its Youth Zones each year and at least 20 activities to take part in every session. The Youth Zones also provide thousands of free meals during the summer break and 83% of those who completed its 'Get a Job' programme progressed into work or further study. According to its impact report, 77% of members feel more confident, 70% feel healthier and 82% have more friends.

## Our asks

After simplifying the notion of a vibrant place, mapping out the opportunities for and barriers against their creation, and gathering the public's attitudes towards how the places in which they live and work can be transformed, we held two interactive workshops at

Anthropy 2023. More than 40 experts explored the solutions that can be implemented to improve and shape the future of our communities. Here, we outline our asks of central and local government, businesses and individuals to enable the creation of vibrant places.

### Live

**Places of worship:** Grant Class F1 change of use planning permission to bring empty places back into use as places of worship.

**Green space:** Ensure nature is integrated throughout communities, not relegated to separate green space.

**Essentials** (for example food): Designate spaces for allotments where food can be grown by the community, inspired by Cambridge's Marmalade Lane.

**Housing:** Consider different models like co-living and take a more personalised, integrated approach to development.

### Work

**Digital infrastructure:** Invest in full-fibre broadband networks to increase digital connectivity, mirroring Stoke-on-Trent's ambitions.

**Physical logistics:** Identify potential sites for urban logistics hubs to promote clean and efficient freight activity and fulfil the last mile of the supply chain, similar to Ecofleet's cargo bikes in London.

**Commercial space:** Offer short-term and highly-flexible commercial licences in refurbished real estate, as evident at FarGo Village in Coventry.

**Industry:** Give young people defined roles and mechanisms for participation, such as governance roles and employment programmes.

### Support

**Public services:** Bring public services under one roof to create central citizen hubs to enhance accessibility and improve service delivery.

**Health and social care:** Decentralise authority to local communities to socially prescribe health and wellbeing initiatives.

**Education:** Take a holistic view to education and encourage life-long learning by providing pathways for skills development and recognition, like Navigatr's labour market-aligned digital badges.

**Charity:** Encourage employee volunteering to enhance community vibrancy and strengthen bonds.

### Play

**Culture:** Create highly-flexible and central public spaces that can host a variety of events, taking inspiration from Broadgate Square in Coventry.

**Recreation:** Invest in young people by revisiting planning obligations and adapting licensing laws to create youth centres.

**Retail:** Incentivise commercial landlords to fill vacant spaces with micro-retailers.

**Leisure and hospitality:** Undertake a comprehensive overhaul of the business rates system, tailored to diverse operating models.



# With thanks

We'd like to thank the survey participants for sharing their views and experiences, and the experts who took part in our working group sessions and Anthropy interactive workshops.



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# Join the Vibrant Places Alliance:

The Anthropy Alliances introduce a collaborative leadership opportunity to our national agenda. This new development is part of Anthropy's commitment to supporting its members and wider stakeholders to help inspire a better Britain.

Each Alliance convenes throughout the year to focus on specific themes aligned to Anthropy's key objectives, aiming to develop inspiring ideas, practices, research and initiatives to share with a broader audience.

The objectives of the Vibrant Places Alliance, chaired by Ampa, include exploring how economic, culture and the built environment interact in towns and cities, and how key sectors can work together to benefit communities.

To apply to join Anthropy and the Vibrant Places Alliance or find out more, please email [info@anthropy.uk](mailto:info@anthropy.uk)

# Further reading

[Shakespeare Martineau: More Than Stores](#) | [Marrons: Housing Need 2040](#) | [Royal College of Art: Our Future Towns](#)



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