



# RECLAIM

## Reshaping our streets: working-class high streets in Greater Manchester



## What are high streets and what are they for?

People began using the term 'high street' in the 12th Century to describe a place with a greater status than everything surrounding it: the high street was the most important road in a town.

Today, high streets are often seen as places of money and finance: businesses sell their goods, and customers buy the things they need. However, high streets can and should provide us with so many more things:

- Meeting new people and building links within communities
- Socialising and relaxing
- Activities (such as sports and arts)
- Access to free civic resources e.g. libraries, job centres, green spaces and youth hubs

## What has been happening to British high streets?

Over the past few decades, high streets across the UK have been struggling. More than 420,000 shop jobs were lost between 2010 and 2023.

Many shops have closed down, and high streets have become increasingly empty. This has been caused by several factors, including the growth of supermarkets, online shopping, out-of-town shopping centres (like the Trafford Centre) and austerity.

One of the most significant reasons for the failure of high streets is that they are not designed to benefit the people who live there but for big businesses. Since the 1940s, high streets have followed a 'shopping-centred' model, which means that making a profit for big chains has been placed above the needs of communities.

Pay-day loan shops, betting shops and fast-food shops, in particular, are taking up more space on the high street. As a result, many high streets look similar and don't reflect the character or needs of local communities.

## What is happening on Leigh and Bolton's high streets now?

Leigh and Bolton were key towns during the Industrial Revolution when they created a lot of wealth from their mines and cotton mills. When these closed in the 1960s, they severely lacked money and resources.

In recent years, poverty in both towns has been worsened by Conservative government cuts. Between 2010 and 2023, Bolton lost £250 million in cuts to its council (councils use public money to support local services, such as schools, the care of the elderly, rubbish collection, roads and libraries).

The effect of these cuts is evident on the high streets in both towns, where the closure of shops and community spaces has led to reduced employment and cultural opportunities.

## The Coliseum nearly closes while retail parks rule

The Coliseum Theatre near Bolton - for example - almost closed in 2024 due to a lack of funding for refurbishment, before it was saved by a local, grassroots campaign (Save Oldham Coliseum).

Leigh opened the £50 million Loom Retail park in 2011, with a Nando's, a Tesco and a Cineworld. Although a lot of people, including Leigh's previous MP James Grundy, celebrated the opening of the Loom as bringing more jobs to the area, retail parks such as this speed up the closure of independent shops on the high street and take money out of Leigh itself, putting it in the pockets of big businesses.

Leigh, Brightmet, Farnworth and Harper Green (all in Bolton) are considered 'Left Behind' areas. In 2019, they were found to be in the bottom 4% of England's population in terms of places to meet (e.g. community centres, cafes and village halls), and their transport and digital connections to the wider economy.

Therefore, they have higher rates of unemployment, poor health and child poverty than the rest of the UK. This research shows how a young person's postcode plays a strong role in their future outcomes, which is deeply unjust.

## How are the high streets changing now, and what is changing them?

Many discussions are taking place at local and governmental levels about the problems facing the high street in places such as Bolton and Leigh. However, many current plans and proposals for 'improvement' are set to be deeply harmful to these areas, and the working-class people that live in them.

## The Levelling Up policy

The 'Levelling Up' policy was introduced in 2019 by the Conservative Government. It was a scheme to give money to some of the poorest areas in the UK, therefore trying to make them economically equal to the wealthier ones.

Leigh has received £32 million through Levelling Up. £12 million will be spent between April 2024 and March 2026 on three projects:

1. Improving Civic Square and Market Street/King Street
2. Improving shopfronts to make the town centre look better
3. Refurbishing Leigh Market

A further £20 million will be given to Leigh over the next 10 years to improve safety, transport and the high street.

It is worth noting that (as of July 2024), 99% of Leigh's Levelling Up money (which was awarded in November 2023) has not been spent, because it has been tied up in arguments between local politicians.

In November 2023, Bolton received £20 million of Levelling Up funding for town centre projects, including renovating the Town Hall and building a conference hotel on Le Mans Crescent.

## Regeneration or gentrification?

Regeneration is a word used to describe changes to working-class towns and housing in Manchester and beyond. It is most often - and misleadingly - used in a positive sense, to describe how areas can be made brighter, busier, newer.

However, the reality of 'regeneration' is making an area much more expensive to live in, by increasing property and rental prices. The result is that wealthier, middle-class people move into an area, and working-class people are pushed out of their communities, as they can no longer afford to live there.

Private property developers make huge amounts of money out of this, by building on plots of land which are cheap to buy and selling off their housing at high prices. This process is also called gentrification.

## Capital and Centric building Farnworth Green for the wealthy

One example of 'regeneration' is due to take place in Bolton, where Capital and Centric (a property developer) has begun to build 'Farnworth Green': a development of 97 rental properties and a shopping area.

Tim Heatley - the co-founder of Capital and Centric - has himself described his intention for the development to house wealthy people from outside of Bolton "“Yeah, we’ve got a list here for you, council. Do you want beanie hats? Corduroy roll-ups? You just tick which ones you want and we’ll ship them over in their droves!”"

In Leigh, the money provided by Levelling Up will be used to carry out the Leigh Strategic Regeneration Framework, which plans to bring in private property developers (like Capital and Centric) to 'regenerate' the town.

**What opportunities are there to create the change that young, working-class people want to see?**

## People

- Lisa Nandy - she is the MP for Wigan and was previously the Shadow Levelling Up Secretary.
- Jo Platt - current MP for Leigh. She has previously said, about Levelling Up spending, that "“We need to get to the root cause of social problems rather than just saying you can have some money to make your town look pretty.”"
- Andy Burnham - Mayor of Greater Manchester and former MP for Leigh (2001-2017)
- Angela Rayner - current Secretary for Housing, Communities and Local Government (the new name for 'Levelling up'). She is also an MP in Greater Manchester (for Ashton-Under-Lyne).

## Devolution

The Labour government have signalled that they want more devolution to take place, now that they are in power. Devolution is the process by which powers are taken away from central government (down in London) and given to local areas.

This will mean that local power holders (e.g. mayors and councillors) will have more say in what happens in the areas they work in. In theory, this should mean that local people - by communicating with their representatives - should have more influence on how their communities are shaped.

## Child-friendly city

In November 2022, Manchester (not Greater Manchester) joined Unicef UK's Child Friendly Cities programme.

This means that it is working towards being a place where 'all children [...] have a meaningful say in, and truly benefit from, the local decisions, services and spaces that shape their lives'.

What are working-class people doing to shape their towns and high streets?

## Manchester

### Block the block!

Locals in Hulme have been campaigning against plans for a new 11-storey tower block for student accommodation, which property developers are building to create massive profits for themselves, and which will block sunlight from the residents' shared garden spaces.

Campaigners want to build social housing on the site instead. Collectively, they have disrupted council planning meetings and picketed the site where the block is planned to be built. Since planning permission for the tower block has been granted, they plan to take Manchester City Council to the High Court for their decision.

### 0161 Community

A Manchester-based community organisation which aims to create a 'strong, unified working-class identity'. They use civic spaces (such as local libraries and clubs) to run sports and arts activities for young working-class people.

They believe that communities are strongest when built up and organised from within - as opposed to having the outside influence of e.g. property developers.

## The UK

### Focus E15 mothers

Focus 15 Mothers is a group of working-class mums who were evicted from their mother and baby accommodation by the council. They are demanding Social housing, not social cleansing!

In 2014, they occupied a block of empty flats in central London and used it as a social centre for two weeks. Here they held workshops, meetings, comedy and music events, as well as a creche.

### Save Ridley Road

Ridley Road Market in Dalston (London) - a market of local, independent traders, and an important community space - was going to be taken over by property developers and turned into luxury flats.

Local campaigners fought back against the plans, leading the council to buy the lease for the site. This means that the future of the market has been protected.

### Latin Village

This indoor market in Tottenham (London) is an important place for migrant communities, especially those with Latin American roots. The space is used for independent sellers to exchange goods and a place to get help looking for jobs.

It is also a community hub where people can support one another, socialise and dance. In 2004, Property Developers began a plan to knock down the market and turn it into expensive flats.

In response, market traders, residents and supportive groups worked together to push back against the developers. After 15 years, they won and the property developers withdrew. There is now a plan for traders themselves to manage the space, as well as having affordable rents and re-investing any profits created by the market back into its upkeep.

### Tenants' Unions

These are when a group of tenants (people who live in rented accommodation) come together to collectively fight for their right to safe and affordable housing. They help to prevent evictions, win money for much-needed repairs and push back against rent increases.

Tenants' Unions exist all over the UK. In Manchester, the Greater Manchester Tenants' Union (GMTU) have been involved in getting tenants together to push back against gentrification.

### Models for better towns and high streets

#### Transition Towns

In these towns, community-led groups work together to increase renewable energy and local food production, making them more environmentally sustainable places to live.

Transition towns also emphasise care, supporting one another (especially the most disadvantaged) and power sharing, so that everyone can participate in decision-making.

Some transition towns (such as Totnes in Devon, and Brixton in London) created currencies to encourage local spending (although a lot of these currencies were unsuccessful, and stopped circulating after a few years).

## Community wealth building

Linked to the idea of Transition Towns above, this approach seeks to keep local wealth for the benefit of local people, instead of - as usually happens - large companies taking money away from a place, for the benefit of people who have no relationship to it.

This might involve, for example, choosing a small, independent, locally-run cafe to take a place on the high street, rather than a big multinational corporation like Costa.

## Key definitions

- Civic - relating to a town. This is often used to describe resources shared by people within a town or city (instead of resources owned by a single person to make a profit).
- Austerity - a long period of significantly reduced government spending, introduced by the Conservative government in 2010, supposedly to reduce national debt. Austerity disproportionately affects working class people - who have severely limited access to resources they need as a result e.g. healthcare, housing support, Universal Credit and childcare support - while the wealthiest in society are unaffected.
- Grassroots - when ordinary people build or organise something, instead of people who already have lots of wealth and political power (e.g. CEOs and politicians).
- Gentrification - the process of changing a working-class area by moving in new businesses and building expensive houses. The effect is to bring wealthier, middle-class people into an area, and push working-class people out of it.
- MP - Member of Parliament. These are the people who represent your interests in government.
- Manifesto - a written statement of intentions. It is often used by politicians to outline the commitments they are promising to keep if they get elected.

Social housing - housing provided for people on low incomes by the local council.

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