

Newtownards Vacancy & Dereliction Study



May 2025

Contents

Recommendations Summary	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Strategic Context	11
3. Site Assessment	14
4. Town Centre Evolution	26
5. Positive Stories	30
6. Regeneration and Case Studies	35
7. Proposed Interventions	47

Recommendations Summary

Small-Scale Interventions

- *Town Centre Business Led Organisation:* Create one or more business groups (e.g. by street), supported with admin and capital funding, to lead area-based improvements and collaborate with Council to reduce vacancy.
- *Creative Character & Urban Trail Pilot:* Build on Paddington and mural successes to launch a playful, low-cost urban trail linking character installations and interactive features, boosting footfall and engagement.
- *Empty to Energised Pilot:* Deliver a two-year pilot to activate ground floor units with financial contribution, targeting high-impact, low-cost transformations in areas with clusters of vacancy, to attract tenants to Newtownards town centre.

Medium-Scale Interventions

- *Animation and Visitor Plan:* Develop a year-round events strategy, using successes like the Guitar Festival and Paddington, to create a signature festival and regular activity calendar that increases town centre vibrancy.
- *Growth Units:* Survey local businesses to assess demand for expansion, and pilot a mapping exercise to match them with larger or reconfigurable premises within the town.
- *Shop Front Revitalisation Scheme:* Launch a scheme to provide financial contribution to upgrade shop façades individually or as part of area-wide projects, enhancing the town's visual identity.
- *Meanwhile Use:* Explore temporary use of spaces pending development, drawing on examples like Vault Studios, to support creative, community-based or studio uses in underutilised premises.

Large-Scale Interventions

- *Upper Floors Project:* Initiate a dedicated programme to reuse upper floors (85.7% vacant above empty ground floors), targeting small households or creative studio conversions to address housing need and vacancy.
- *Heritage Buildings:* Use AHF (Architectural Heritage Fund) or NLHF (National Lottery Heritage Fund) funding support to restore historic properties that lie outside typical commercial viability, reconnecting the town with its built heritage.
- *Rates Consideration:* Investigate a long-term punitive rates mechanism similar to Bexley's sliding scale, to incentivise property occupation and penalise long-term vacancies.
- *Co-ordinating & Complementing Investment:* Align interventions with the Citizen's Hub launch, ensuring new assets are activated with accompanying events and promotion to maximise their regeneration impact.



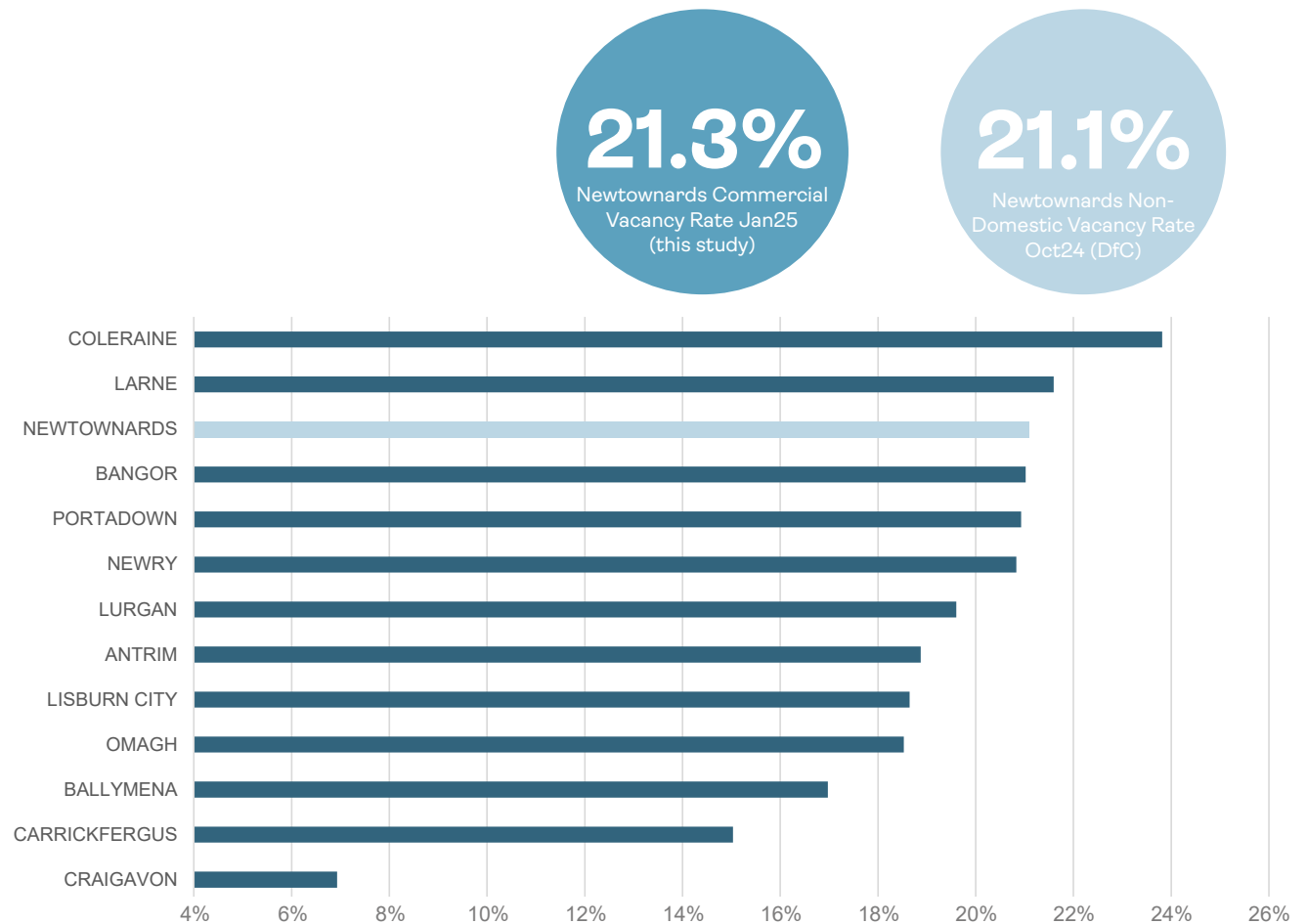
Introduction

Background

The 2023 Review of the Newtownards Masterplan highlighted the need to tackle vacancy within the town centre. In pursuit of this, Ards and North Down Borough Council (Council) commissioned McGarry Consulting, in partnership with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) to undertake a study into Dereliction & Vacancy within the town centre and how it could be addressed.

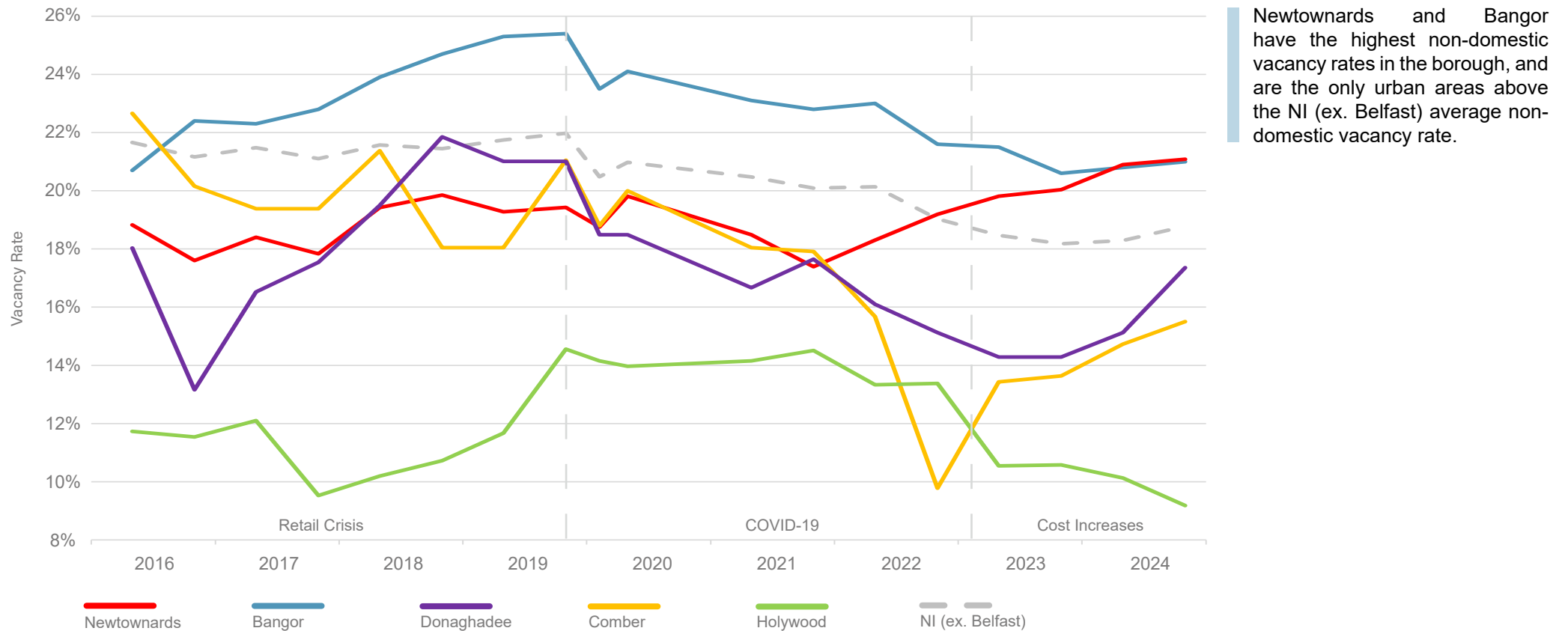
To combat vacancy and dereliction within Newtownards, the first step involved mapping where the vacant and derelict commercial properties were within the Department for Communities (DfC) defined town centre boundary. This involved walking the streets and looking at each building within the boundary line. After conducting supporting research, the study looks at how the dereliction and vacancy could be reduced based on feedback, examples from elsewhere, and site-specific analysis.

This study was commissioned to research **commercial dereliction and vacancy**, which differs from **non-domestic dereliction and vacancy**. Non-domestic units include schools, charity shops, religious buildings, among others, which are not designated as commercial.



▲ Fig 1A: Non-Domestic Vacancy Rate of all Band C Towns and Cities, NI. 31Oct 24. Source DfC Town Centre Database

A&NDBC Town/City Centre Non-Domestic Vacancy Rates



▲ Fig 1B: Non-domestic vacancy Rate of all city/towns in A&ND between 2016 and 2024, compared to the NI (excluding Belfast) average. Source: DfC Town Centre

Introduction

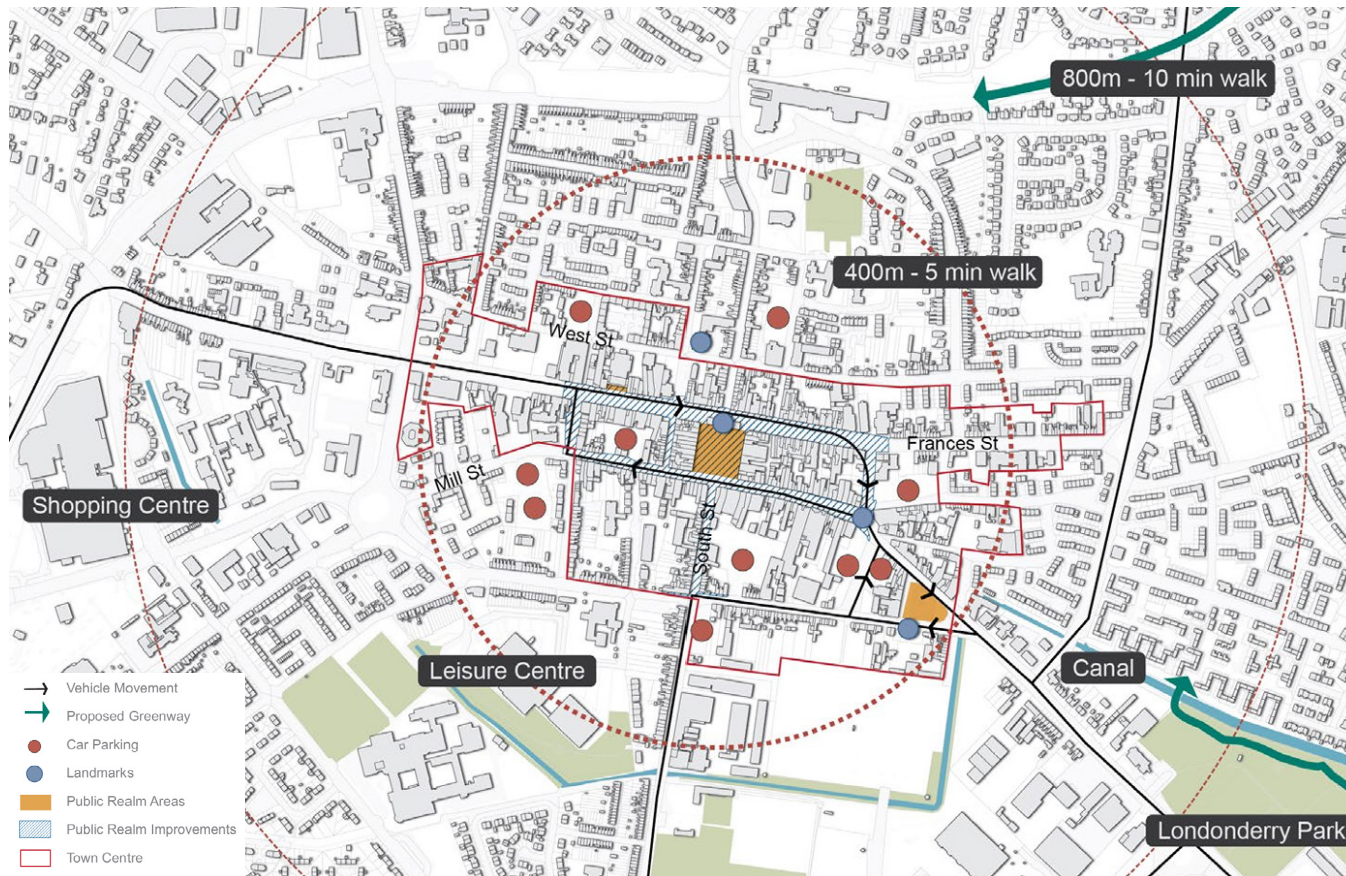


With monastic origins dating from the 6th Century, with potential pagan significance before then, Newtownards, as a settlement has been around for a long time. It has served and survived Vikings, Normans, and more, before emerging as a key market town in the 19th century. During this time, Scrabo Tower, a symbol of the area, was built overlooking the town.

Located at the top of Strangford Lough, it wasn't viable as a port but grew through commerce, and its ties with Belfast. Today, Newtownards has a population of 29,677 (2021 Census) and serves a wide hinterland. It has an historic town square and town hall, a modern leisure centre, hospital and large shopping centre all within walking distance of each other.

The town's history and heritage have led to a commercial centre comprising largely of independent businesses, retailers and service providers. Recent efforts by business to run events, such as Christmas light shows, have increased connections between local businesses and neighbouring communities.

Newtownards Masterplan and Review



The Newtownards Masterplan was originally produced in 2010. In the interim period, Newtownards experienced significant changes including large retail departing the High Street, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and working from home, amongst others.

Therefore, in 2022 the Council sought to review the town centre Masterplan and ensure they were up to date and reflected public feedback. The new plans were produced by The Paul Hogarth Company in partnership with McGarry Consulting in September 2023. The new plan reaffirmed the original vision, and set out key themes and targets, which form the background to this report. This is set out on the next page.

Fig 1C: Key Landmarks, Public Realm and Movement.

Newtownards Masterplan and Review

VISION

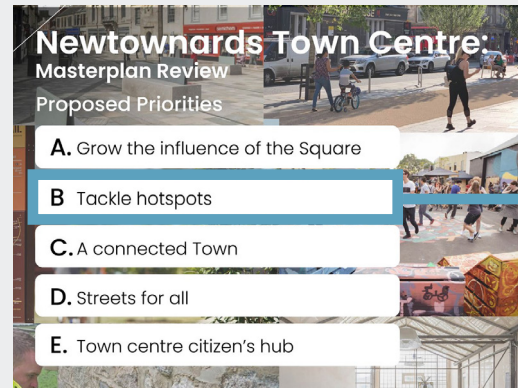
(Newtownards Masterplan 2010)

Masterplan Vision (2010):

“A vibrant and distinctive market town, Newtownards is a destination of choice complementing the wider tourism offer in the Borough. The local people are proud of their town and regularly visit the centre to enjoy the wide range of shops, services, cafés, restaurants and leisure facilities provided in a high quality, attractive and user-friendly environment. In particular, the Town Centre is well known for its selection of local and independent retailers, many of which are found only in Newtownards. It has a reputation for being a welcoming and friendly town, providing customers with a retail leisure experience that is second to none.”

PRIORITIES

(Newtownards Masterplan Review 2023)



PROPOSED ACTIONS

(Newtownards Masterplan Review 2023)

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- B.i** Identify key properties within the Town Centre
- B.ii** Dialogue with property owners to identify appropriate interventions
- B.iii** Explore option for viable short and long-term buildings uses with owners, statutory bodies and the community
- B.iv** The Council will continue to support the creation of additional jobs through bringing buildings back into use for economic development purposes in the town.

▲ Fig 1D: Diagram to explain Masterplan and Masterplan Review background to this study.
Sources: Newtownards Masterplan 2010; Newtownards Masterplan Review 2023.

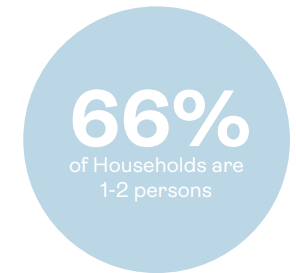
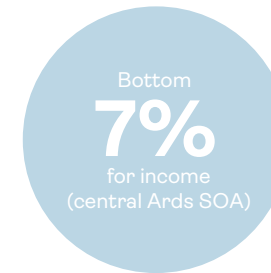


“Much concern has been aired regarding hotspots of dereliction in Newtownards. This requires a concerted and multifaceted effort to address this issue.”

- Newtownards Masterplan Review 2023

Town Profile

Newtownards has an older age profile than the NI average with more 1-2 person households especially in the town centre. Town centre residents have lower levels of qualifications and higher rates of economic inactivity (not in work or seeking work). The town centre is considered one of the 20% most deprived areas (Super Output Areas, SOAs) in NI, with low scores for Employment (bottom 17%); Health & Disability (18%); Education, Skills and Training (12%); and Crime & Disorder (7%). It has a notable high of top 14% for Access to Services.



Central Ards SOA, Newtownards Town Centre		
Domain	Rank (890)	as a %
Multiple Deprivation Measure	99	11.1%
Income	62	7.0%
Employment	148	16.6%
Health and Disability	159	17.9%
Education, Skills and Training	107	12.0%
Access to Services	770	86.5%
Living Environment	387	43.5%
Crime & Disorder	55	6.2%
Income Affecting Children	22	2.5%
Income Affecting Older people	136	15.3%

▲ Fig 1E: Multiple Deprivation Measure Domain Table for Central Ards SOA, Newtownards Town Centre

Town Profile	Newtownards	A&ND	NI
Under 14 Years Old	17%	17%	19%
15-39 Years Old	29%	27%	31%
Over 40 Years Old	54%	56%	49%
1-2 Person Household	66%	66%	61%
Qualification Level 4+	28%	34%	32%
No Qualifications	23%	19%	24%
Economically Inactive	43%	43%	41%
Travel to Work by Car	63%	62%	63%
Travel to Work by Public Transport	4%	3%	4%
Travelling less than 5km to Work	26%	21%	28%
Work from Home	18%	23%	19%

▲ Fig 1F: Town Profile Table. * 'Newtownards' refers to Newtownards DEA



Strategic Context

NI Strategies



▲ Fig 2A: NI Strategies

The new Programme for Government (PfG), sets out nine priorities including growing a sustainable and competitive economy; providing more affordable and accessible housing and safer communities. Town centres can help meet these goals through supporting businesses (who can sell locally and globally); transforming unused space into housing and giving people more reasons to come into town and feel safe while they are there.

The Regional Development Strategy (RDS), although preceding the PfG, it stressed NI's economic ambitions and how place making, transport connections and housing can contribute to these ambitions. Future town centres will be mixed use, more accessible, more navigable, more experiential and more connected with outlying areas.

NI's new Economic Plan, seeks to provide better jobs, more investment outside of Belfast and give local partners more power in this area. Allied with DfC's Communities Strategy which seeks the common purpose of supporting people, building communities and shaping places, the policies chime with town centres being places that more people live, work and visit; with closer community ties.

Council Strategies

Ards and North Down Borough Council's strategies are centred around the **Corporate Plan 2024–2028**, which aims to foster a sustainable borough; balancing economic, environmental, and social wellbeing. The plan highlights three priorities: economic growth, environmental resilience through carbon reduction, and social inclusion to enhance community wellbeing.

The Council's **Integrated Strategy for Tourism, Regeneration and Economic Development 2018–2030** promotes local economic growth, attracting visitors, and improving urban and rural areas.

The **Big Plan for Ards and North Down 2017–2032** complements these efforts with five key outcomes, including fostering lifelong potential, improving health and wellbeing, and enhancing economic prosperity. These initiatives underline the Council's commitment to revitalising its city, towns and villages.



▲ Fig 2B: Council Strategies



Site Assessment

Methodology

Overview

The land uses of all ground floor units within the town centre boundary of Newtownards were surveyed as part of this exercise in early 2025. This survey adopted a visual field survey approach, which involved Masters' students in planning from QUB visiting and identifying all ground floor commercial units that were in use and all ground floor units that appeared vacant as well. Those buildings with ground floors identified as non-commercial, such as those used for residential or community purposes were excluded from the survey detail.

Process

All vacant commercial buildings were noted and their photographs taken. Where, on inspection, a clear previous commercial use of the ground floor was discernable, this use was added to the vacant buildings glossary. If the previous use was clearly residential or another non-commercial use, these were not recorded for the purposes of the study. In those cases when the last previous use was not readily identifiable, the historic photographic record from Google Streetview was utilised to determine if the building was previously in commercial usage. In those instances when a building was not open during the fieldwork and the building appeared in good condition, checks on the

business were made online by searching websites and social media pages help determine if the business was still operational.

When vacant units were identified, the presence of 'For Sale' and 'To Let' signs was noted to complete additional desk-based research. Similarly, planning histories were investigated for all identified vacant units to understand current or historic proposals for the buildings. The analysis of the vacant units also included a reference to whether they were listed buildings as well.

Examples

Two examples from the vacant buildings glossary are shown on the pages following the methodology.

Difference from DfC Town Centre Database

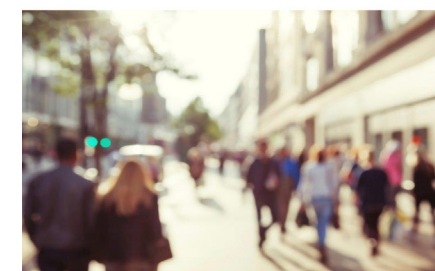
DfC adopts a different method based on mapping rate payers with ArcGIS software. This generates many more properties, which are believed to be mostly upper floor units rated separately to their ground floor unit.

Peer Review

The field survey work completed by the Masters' students was peer reviewed by Dr Neil Galway of QUB who checked the details of the survey work in the centre of Newtownards.

The Northern Ireland Town Centre Database

Non Domestic Property NAV, Planning Applications and Vacancy Rates Data



▲ Fig 3A: NI Town Centre Database

Methodology

Building condition

The condition of all vacant buildings identified, were measured on a three-point scale:

- **Good condition** - properties where all elements, including paintwork, signage, and window frames appear well-maintained.
- **Minor Façade Improvements** - properties showing noticeable wear, needing repairs like repainting window frames, updating signage, or fixing cracked tiles and windows. Moderate intervention is needed.
- **Major Works Required** - properties in considerable disrepair, potentially boarded up or with extensive visible damage including structural damage. Major repairs or renovation are expected.

These ratings were then peer-reviewed for consistency of interpretation purposes when the premises were noted in the vacant buildings glossary.

Upper Floors

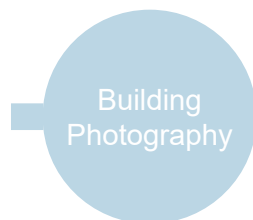
When vacant ground floors were noted during the field work, the surveyors noted the number of storeys of the building and sought to identify if the upper floors were in use. In some instances, evidence of upper floor occupation was clear through signage associated with different businesses and signs of residential accommodation such as buzzers for flats, curtains, plants in the windows and other signs of occupation. The use of the upper floors was noted in the vacant buildings glossary.

Vacancy terms

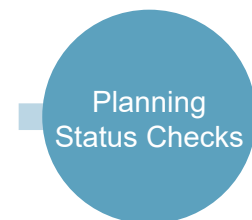
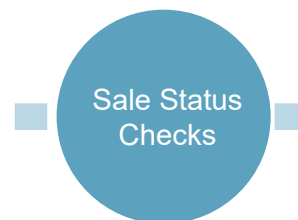
Once vacant ground floor commercial units were identified and added to the vacant buildings glossary, desk-based research was completed to determine the last usage of the building. This research relied upon the use of Google Streetview to determine when the building was last in use. The photographic records for Newtownards were detailed with eleven dates photographed from October 2008 to June 2023.

Additional online and social media searches of the business were then used to help estimate when the building became vacant. Based on the findings of this research, the vacant premises were classified as either vacant for more than 10 years or less than 10 years.

Site Analysis



Further Checks



Peer Review



▲ Fig 3B: Research Methodology Process

Vacant Buildings Glossary

▼ Address: 11 Regent Street



Summary Table	
Building Reference Number	01
Last former use	Unclear
Building Condition	Good
For Sale / To Let	No
Number of storeys	2
Upper storeys in use	Yes - Tanning Parlour
Planning History	None
Changes in Use (Google Streetview)	Farm shop 2015-2022
Listed	No

#01
Building Reference
Number

◀ Fig 3C: Building #01

Vacant Buildings Glossary

▼ Address: 2 Castle Place



Summary Table	
Building Reference Number	30
Last former use	Retail- “Dales Carpets”
Building Condition	Major Works Required
For Sale / To Let	Recently Sold
Number of storeys	2
Upper storeys in use	No
Planning History	None
Changes in Use (Google Streetview)	Same shop since 2008
Listed	No

#30

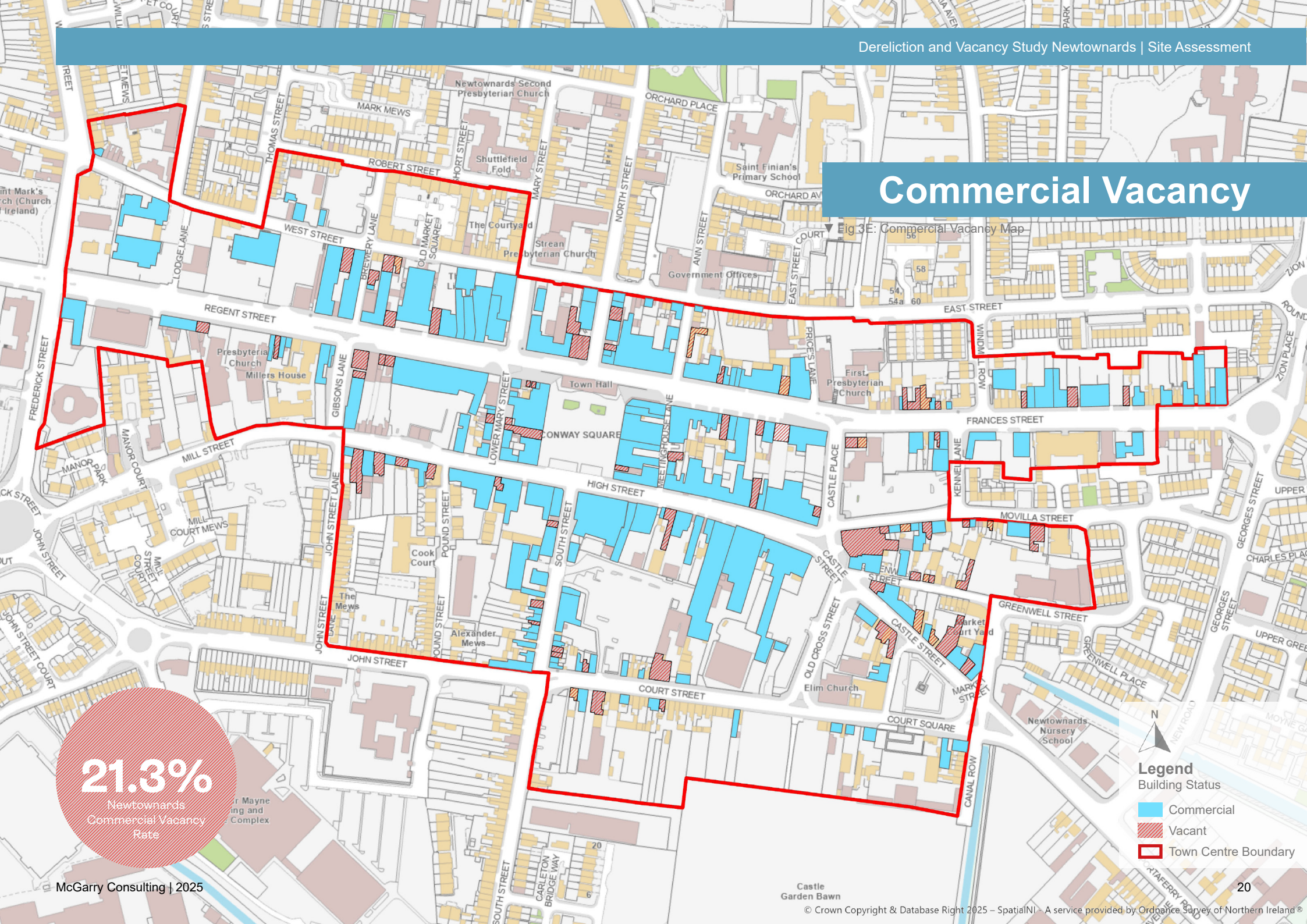
Building Reference
Number

◀ Fig 3D: Building #30

> Maps

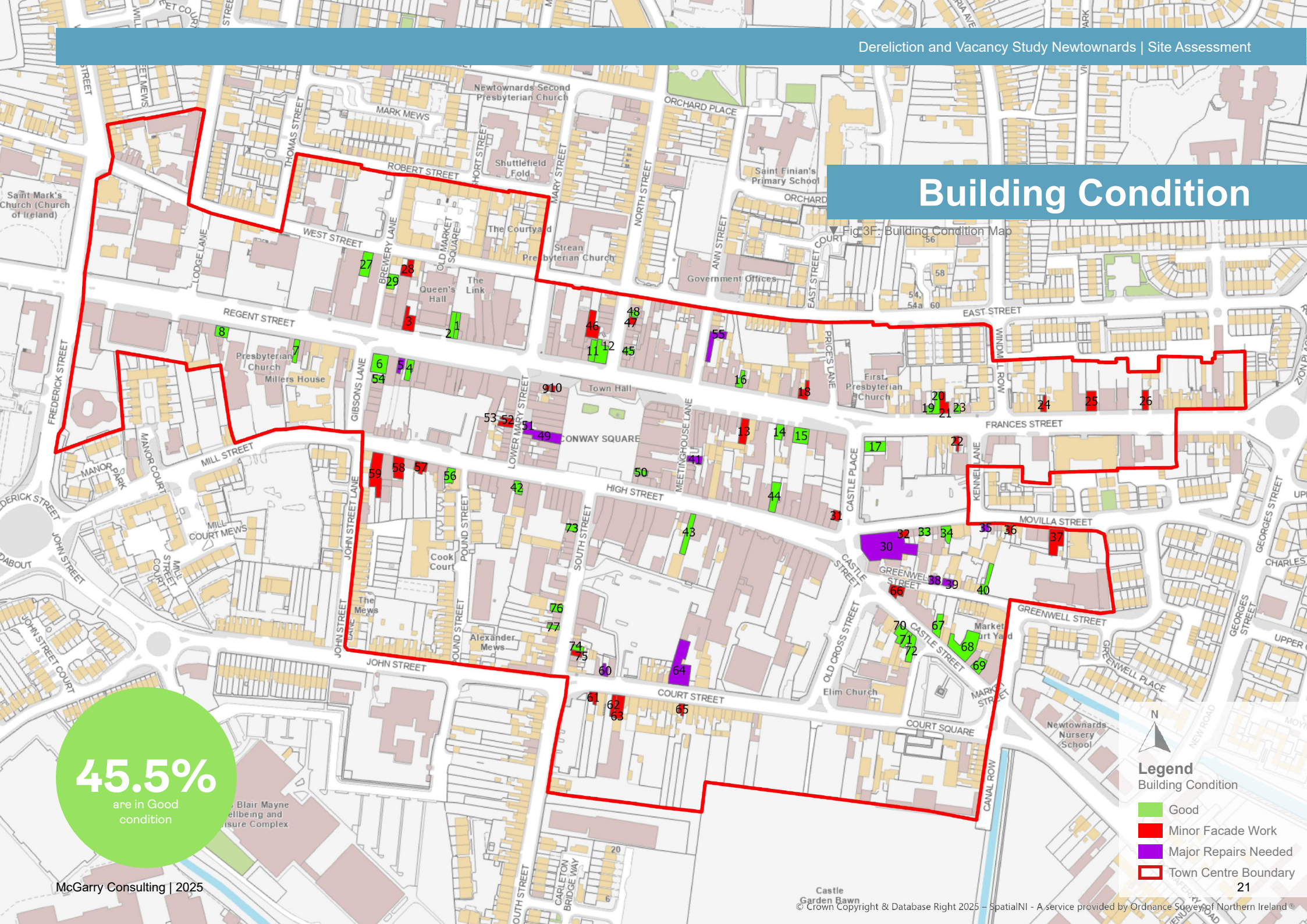
Commercial Vacancy

Fig 3E: Commercial Vacancy Map



Building Condition

Fig 3F: Building Condition Map



45.5%

are in Good condition

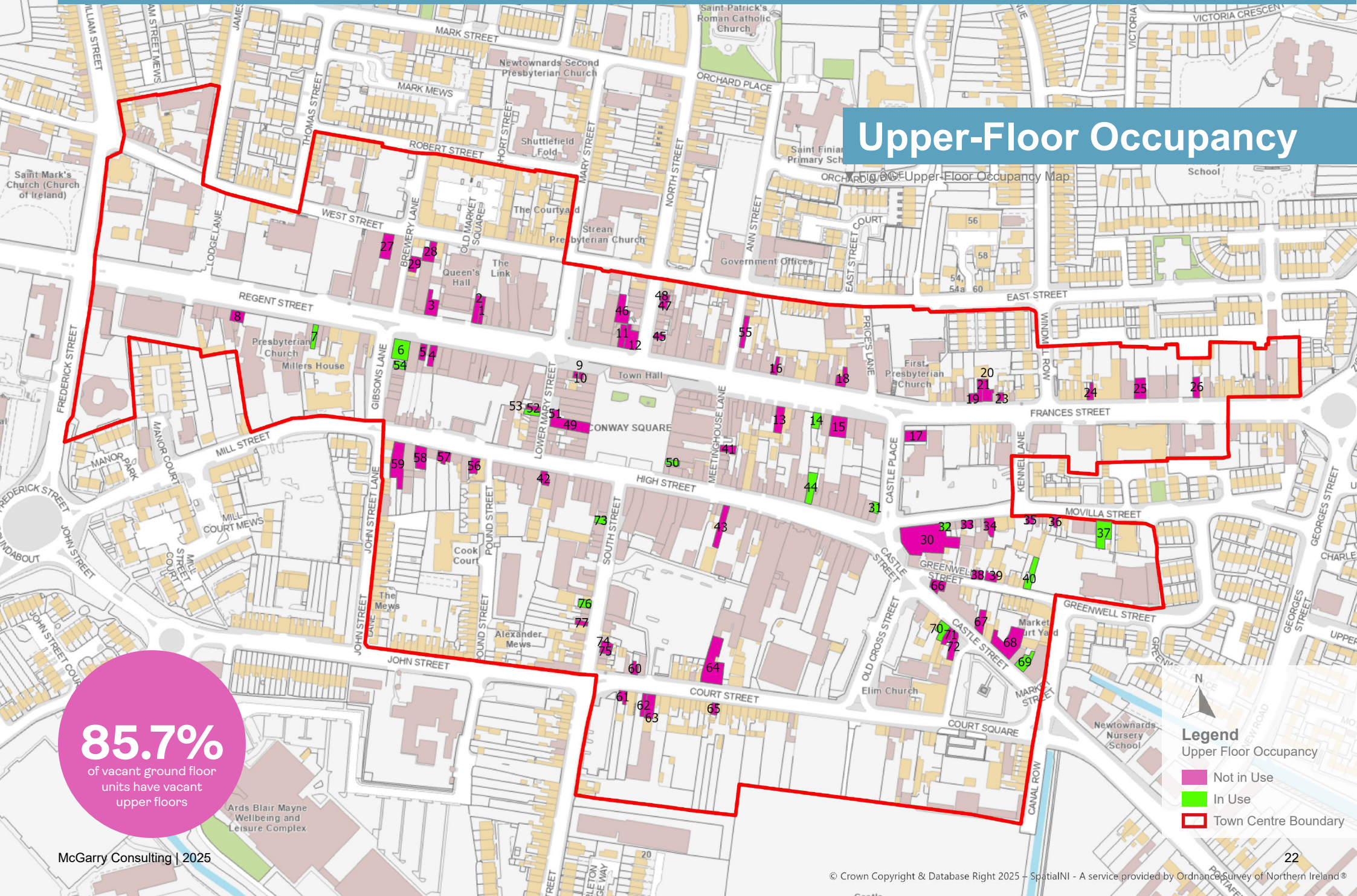
Legend

Building Condition

- Good
- Minor Facade Work
- Major Repairs Needed
- Town Centre Boundary

Upper-Floor Occupancy

Fig 60 Upper-Floor Occupancy Map

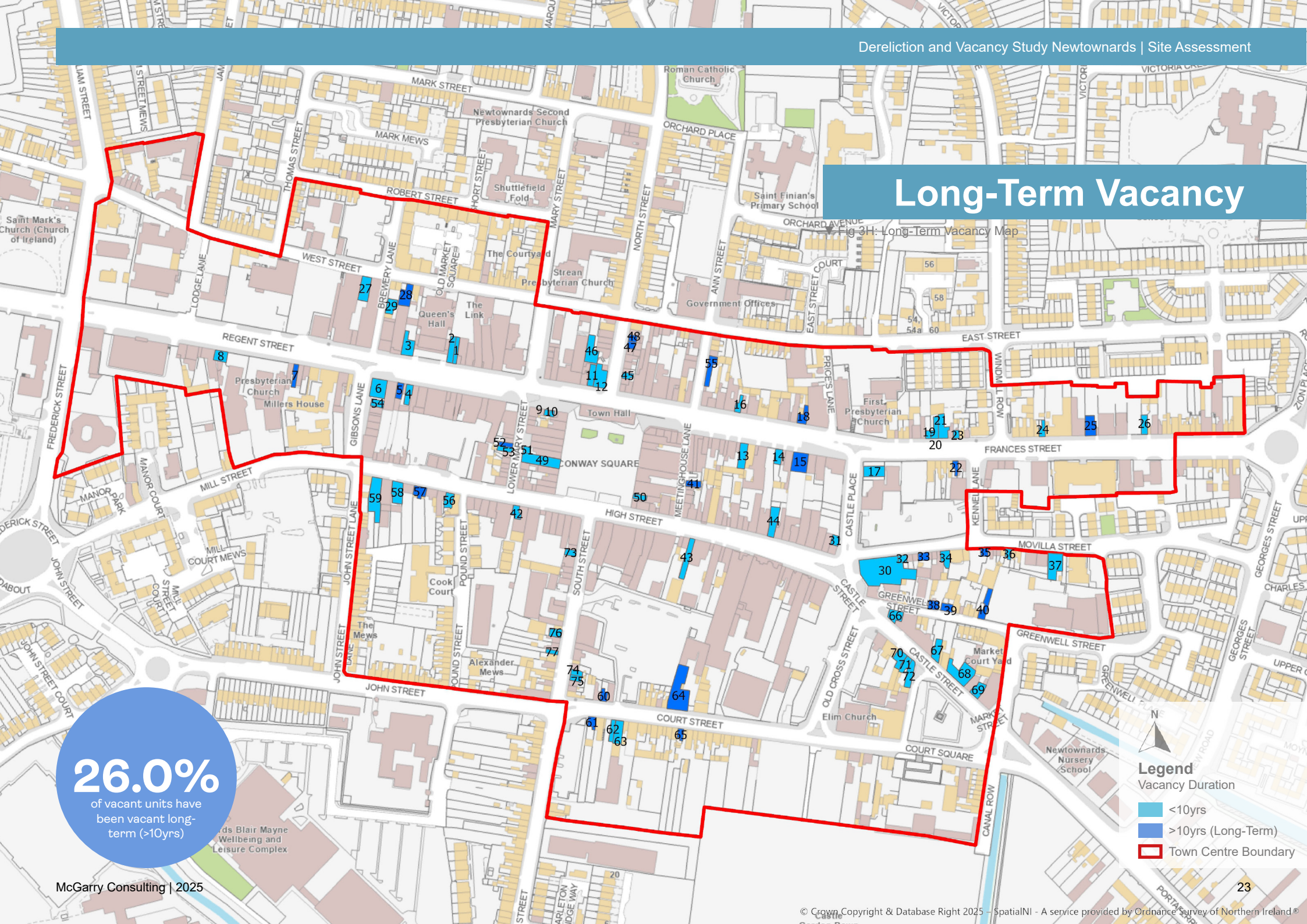


85.7%

of vacant ground floor units have vacant upper floors

Long-Term Vacancy

Fig 3H: Long-Term Vacancy Map

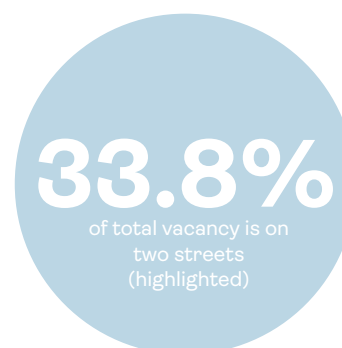


26.0%

of vacant units have been vacant long-term (>10yrs)

Dereliction and Vacancy Analysis

Street	Total Units	Vacant Units	Vacancy Rate
Castle Place	2	2	100.0%
Brewery Lane	2	1	50.0%
Movilla Street	14	6	42.9%
Greenwell Street	7	3	42.9%
Castle Street	15	6	40.0%
West Street	6	2	33.3%
Ann Street	3	1	33.3%
Court Street	18	6	33.3%
Mill Street	13	4	30.8%
North Street	14	4	28.6%
Lower Mary Street	11	3	27.3%
Meetinghouse Lane	4	1	25.0%
Frances Street	82	18	22.0%
Regent Street	38	8	21.1%
Gibsons Lane	6	1	16.7%
South Street	32	5	15.6%
Conway Square	17	2	11.8%
Court Square	10	1	10.0%
High Street	58	3	5.2%
Other Streets*	10	0	0.0%
Total	362	77	21.3%



362 commercial properties identified within town centre boundary (denoted by red line on maps).



77 of those were considered vacant, equating to a **21.3% vacancy rate**.



Vacancy was concentrated in certain Streets, with Regent Street and Frances Street accounting for one third (33.8%) of vacant properties in Newtownards.



High Street had only three vacant properties, equating to a very low vacancy rate of **5.2%**.

▲ Fig 31: Table showing street by street analysis of vacancy, of commercial units. *Other Streets* refers to Lodge Lane, Mary Street, East Street, William Street, Old Cross Street.

Dereliction and Vacancy Analysis

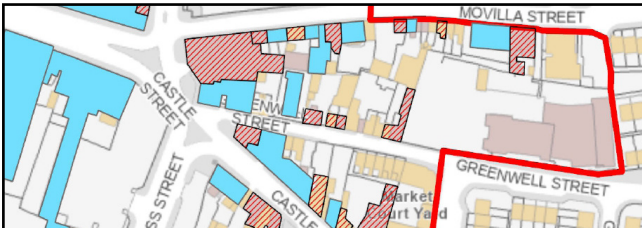


▲ Fig 3J: Clipped Map of High Street, using Fig 3E

5.2%

High Street
Vacancy Rate

High Street has the second highest number of units (58) but the lowest vacancy rate (5.2%) with only 3 units. This is unusual, and points to the strength of high street and core shopping area. It should be noted that there are some empty units, just off High St (on Mill St). Additionally, there are many social enterprises, which occupy units on the High Street.



▲ Fig 3K: Clipped Map of Movilla, Castle and Greenwell streets, using Fig 3E

42.9%

Movilla Street
Vacancy Rate

The largest hotspot for vacancy in Newtownards is on Movilla Street, Greenwell Street and Castle Street, with vacancy rates of 42.9%, 42.9%, and 40.0% respectively. This hotspot is at the confluence of the commercial town centre and the central residential areas beyond. It is emphasised by the derelict carpet shop, a large building which sits prominently at the end of High Street.



▲ Fig 3L: Clipped Map of Regent Street using Fig 3E

21.1%

Regent Street
Vacancy Rate

Most of the ground floor vacant units are spread out with the biggest clusters comprising 3-6 properties (e.g. Regent Street, Frances Street). The majority of the properties are in good condition – with some needing minor works – and vacant for under 10 years. It is important to target these smaller clusters to reduce vacancy.



Town Centre Evolution

Newtownards Non-Domestic Vacancy Rate

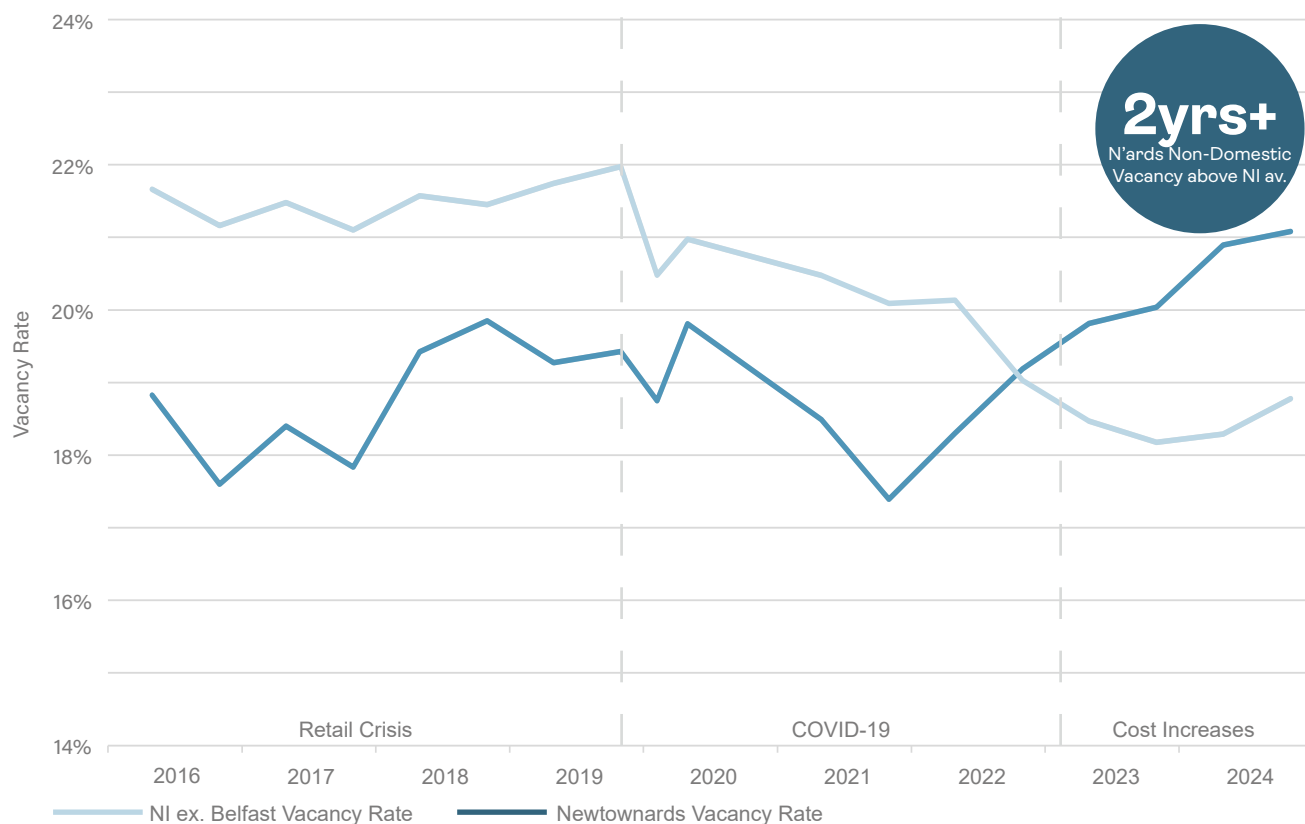
Across the 41 towns and cities in NI, the average non-domestic vacancy rate was 22.8% in October 2024. This is skewed by Belfast, an outlier, at 34.3%. Therefore, the average vacancy rate excluding Belfast (the light blue line) has been used as a more comparable baseline for Newtownards (dark blue line), as shown in fig. 4A opposite.

Fig 4A shows Newtownards has a high non-domestic vacancy rate of 21.3%, which is above the NI (ex. Belfast) vacancy rate of 18.8%. This vacancy rate has been above the NI figure since 2022.

The chart shows Newtownards starts out in 2016 with around a 3% gap below the NI average (ex. Belfast) vacancy rate. This gap reduced between 2018 and 2020. In 2021 Newtownards' vacancy rate hit a trough of 17.4% from which it has risen steadily to 21.1% (October 2024).

Although the underlying figures and methodologies differ, the DfC vacancy rate of 21.1% (October 2024) is very close to the 21.3% (February 2025) vacancy rate recorded in this study.

Fig 4A: Comparison Between Newtownards and NI (ex. Belfast) Non-Domestic Vacancy Rates 2016-2024 ▼



National High Street Trends

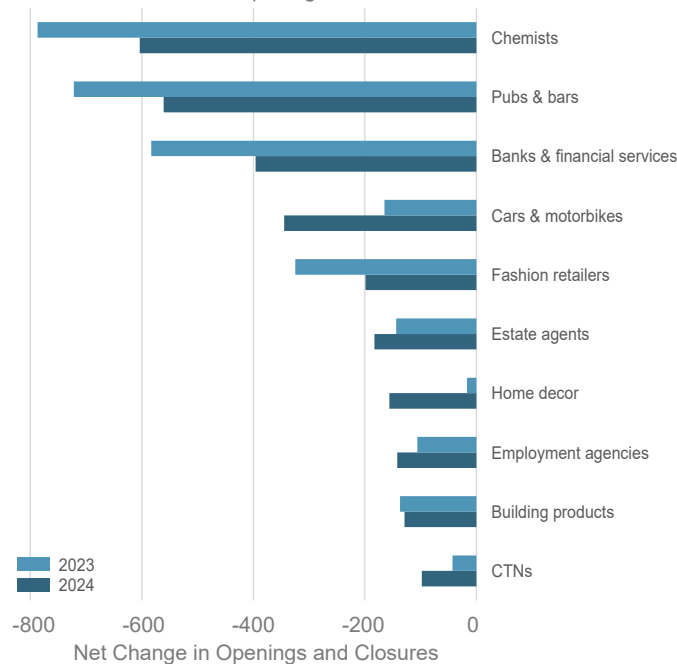
Struggles of Town Centre Retail

On average, each day in 2024, 25 shops opened and 35 shops closed across the UK. Compared to a decade earlier there are 50% less banks, 30% fewer shops on high streets and 25% fewer outlets in shopping centres. Although the net declines in 2024 are smaller than previous years. Overall footfall is 15-20% lower than pre-pandemic. However, some sectors are growing, in particular supermarket chain convenience stores (net 3 new shops per week), coffee shops (net 2 new per week), and takeaways (net 1 new shop per week).

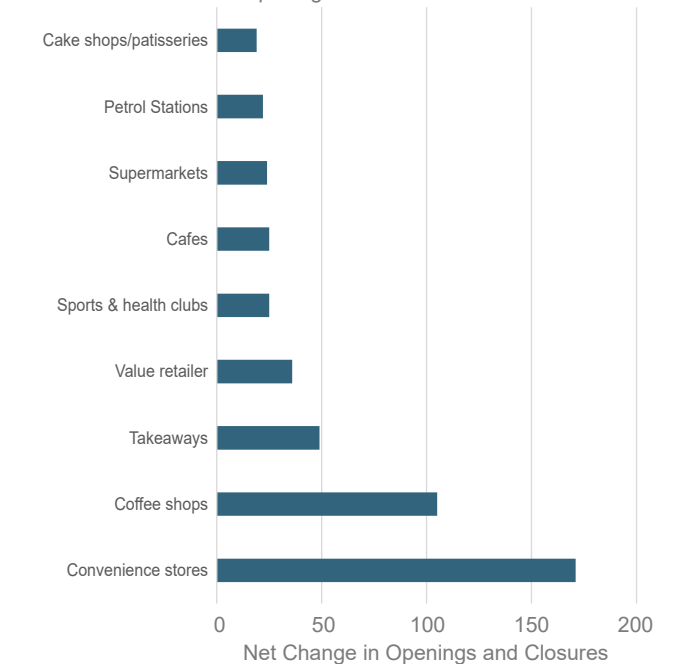
Retailers face many challenges (e.g. rising costs, staff shortages, online competition, new legislation etc) and opportunities. In February 2025, the British Retail Consortium estimated the recent UK Budget would add £7bn worth of costs to the sector.

In April 2025, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) stated that business confidence amongst small businesses was low, with three main concerns being utility costs, labour costs and the tax burden. In addition, the new Employment Bill was to bring 28 new regulations affecting small businesses. With its high number of independent shops, these challenges will impact Newtownards.

▼ Fig 4B: Fastest Declining Outlet Types by Net Change 2023-2024
Source: PWC Store Openings and Closures 2024.



▼ Fig 4C: Fastest Growing Outlet Types by Net Change 2024.
Source: PWC Store Openings and Closures 2024.



National High Street Trends



Struggles of Town Centre Retail

The UK retail sector has faced ongoing disruption since the 2008 financial crisis, described by the Centre for Retail Research as a “permacrisis.” This prolonged instability has been driven by shifts in consumer behaviour, the rise of internet shopping, and wider economic challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have further accelerated these pressures, leading to more shop closures and a stronger move towards online retail.

This House of Commons Library Research Briefing paper outlines the current state of the retail sector. In 2023, the sector contributed £111.8 billion to the UK economy, representing 4.5% of total output. There were 2.7 million retail jobs in 2022 and nearly 325,000 retail businesses in early 2024.

Spending Changes

In 2024, retail sales in Great Britain reached £517 billion, a 1.4% rise from 2023. Of each pound spent: 39p went on food (up 1%), 11p on clothing (down 0.1%), 9p on fuel (down 0.2%), and 7p on household goods (down 4.7%). These figures show changing consumer priorities and growing pressure on certain sectors.

1.4%

retail sales growth
2023-2024

26%

of UK retail revenue
is online shopping

5.8%

decline in NI annual
footfall 2023-2024

4.5%

of UK economy is
retail sector

▲ Fig 4D: House of Commons Library Research Briefing paper: Retail Sector in the UK



Postive Stories

Paddington and Derek the Squirrel

Animation-led Regeneration



▲ Fig 5A: Paddington

Paddington

The Paddington statue was unveiled in October 2024 in Newtownards. It formed part of the 'Paddington Visits' trail, celebrating the character's cinematic return.

Located in Conway Square, it is a focal point, attracting visitors and increasing footfall. Additionally, the initiative stimulated local businesses, enabling themed promotions and events that strengthened community engagement. A celebration on 9 November featured family activities, reinforcing its role in town centre revitalisation.

The project supported tourism, encouraging visitors to explore shops, cafés, and local attractions, by using cultural assets to enhance place identity. The initiative contributed to economic growth, community participation, and the long-term appeal of Newtownards as a visitor destination.



▲ Fig 5B: Derek the Squirrel

Derek the Squirrel

In October 2021, the squirrel mural, Derek, was painted on Meeting House Lane in Newtownards by the artist Annatomix, as one of many artworks completed there at that time.

This artwork, of which people have quickly become proud, became a local attraction and focal point, attracting residents and visitors alike. Local businesses may benefit from increased footfall, that this mural or similar murals have brought to the town.

Derek's scale, colour and modern style create an automatic landmark. The mural transforms an everyday gable wall and reduces the prospect of graffiti. Murals alone cannot regenerate a town centre but they can invoke pride, a sense of place and fun, while contributing to changed perceptions.

Citizens Hub

Public Investment

Project Overview

The Newtownards Citizens Hub is a **£14.5 million** flagship regeneration initiative undertaken by the Council and Libraries NI.

The project entails constructing a new building on the site of the existing Queen's Hall to house an expanded library—five times the size of the current facility. The new structure will also feature a 400-seat bookable performance space and modern facilities for the Council's Arts Service.



▲ Fig 5C: Newtownards Town Hall

Meanwhile, Newtownards Town Hall will be repurposed to accommodate civic functions such as licence renewals. The Ards Visitor Information Centre (VIC) will also be relocated to provide visitor services from the more central location of the Town Hall. Additionally, the current VIC space at Brewery Court will be transformed into a new, accessible home for Ards Billiards Club.

Objectives

The primary objectives of the Citizens Hub project are:

- **Sustainable Infrastructure:** Develop a flexible, modern building at Queen's Hall to meet the evolving needs of the community.
- **Enhanced Library Services:** Support the delivery of a contemporary library service with significantly increased capacity.
- **Civic Revitalisation:** By serving traditional civic functions and hosting events such as meetings and weddings, the Town Hall can fulfil its function as a hub for the town, increasing town centre footfall.
- **Centralised Services:** Establish a Citizens Hub that provides residents and visitors with convenient access to various Council services.

Current Status

In June 2024, the Council had planned to advertise a tender opportunity for an Integrated Consultancy Team to design the Newtownards Citizens Hub. This would facilitate the submission of a planning application for the redevelopment.

The project was identified as priority E in the Newtownards Masterplan review in 2023.



▲ Fig 5D: Headline projected figures

Northern Card Gaming, 142 Frances Street

Private Investment

Store Overview

Northern Card Gaming (NCG) are Northern Ireland's leading Hobby & Gaming Store. They specialise in trading card games (TCGs), such as Pokemon, and host events such as a NI open tournament.

Store History

After founding a community of in 2016, they began retail in 2019, and moved to Newtownards in 2021. Currently, they are looking to expand, but are struggling with the cost of finding somewhere large enough, yet affordable to renovate.



▲ Fig 5H: NCG Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/notherncardgaming/?locale=en_GB



Link to Retail Trends

NCG are dependant on having an in-person store and an online store, which say is essential for their business. This **omni-channel retailing** is increasingly popular among independents and large-retailers alike, as independents can use social media, shopify etc. to retail their products.

Additionally, NCG maximise the opportunity of **experience products**, in which people first experience the product before buying. In this example the activity of playing TCGs is inseparably linked to the purchasing of cards and other games. NCG is evidence that people still want to meet together, and this can benefit business.

Wider Benefits

NCG host around 20 events per week, in both the evenings and during the day. This boosts footfall in the town, and diversifies the offer of what people can do in the town. Other businesses in the town may benefit from the people who are attracted to NCG, especially in the evening, when people may also buy food or drinks.

▼ Fig 5I: NCG Timeline Overview



Private Investment Outside Town Centre Examples



▲ Fig 5E: Nightcap directors Dean McFarland and Declan Holmes at Foxes Den. <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/business/northern-ireland-hospitality-firm-reopens-the-foxes-den-restaurant-with-ps50000-investment-4803007#>

The Foxes Den

Nightcap Event Group bought the Foxes Den restaurant in Newtownards in September 2023 and subsequently invested a further £50,000 in rebranding and refitting to meet increased demand. With a new look and feel, the restaurant can accommodate 50% more people, a total of 106 people, across 1,800ft². It attracts both locals and those travelling from further afield.

This not only reflects belief in the local economy but also illustrates how existing units can be reimaged to cater for larger audiences. The Nightcap Group state the business has continued to grow and attract a wider client base.

When many NI hospitality businesses face considerable challenges, it is positive to know that there are still hospitality businesses willing to invest, and expand, in Newtownards.



▲ Fig 5F: Formation Works



▲ Fig 5G: Formation Works

Formation Works

Formation Works is a serviced office provider that has expanded quickly with 12 offices across NI alone. Including one on the Jubilee Road in Newtownards and a larger unit outside Comber.

Demand for serviced offices and co-working spaces, where people can hire desks or offices for one all-inclusive monthly fee, has increased significantly over the last decade. Especially since Covid, where businesses have reprofiled their facility needs, and many more people now work remotely and/or on a hybrid basis.

Quality flexible and affordable office space makes it easier for businesses to start, grow and network; and can attract creatives, higher salaried professionals & remote workers. It is increasingly important for town centres to have this as part of their offer.



Regeneration and Case Studies

Latest Public/Commercial Research

The **Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)** 'The future of the High Street' (2024) report describes how UK high streets are entering a period of major change, as online and physical retailing converge.

The report notes the potential of small and independent businesses to drive vibrant local economies, as they adapt to digital markets and changing consumer habits.

High streets should be seen as unique destinations that attract diverse visitors and their survival depends on distinct identities and varied offerings. Vacant units should be repurposed for pop-ups and new business models. Strategic investment can help high streets evolve and remain central to local economic life.

47%

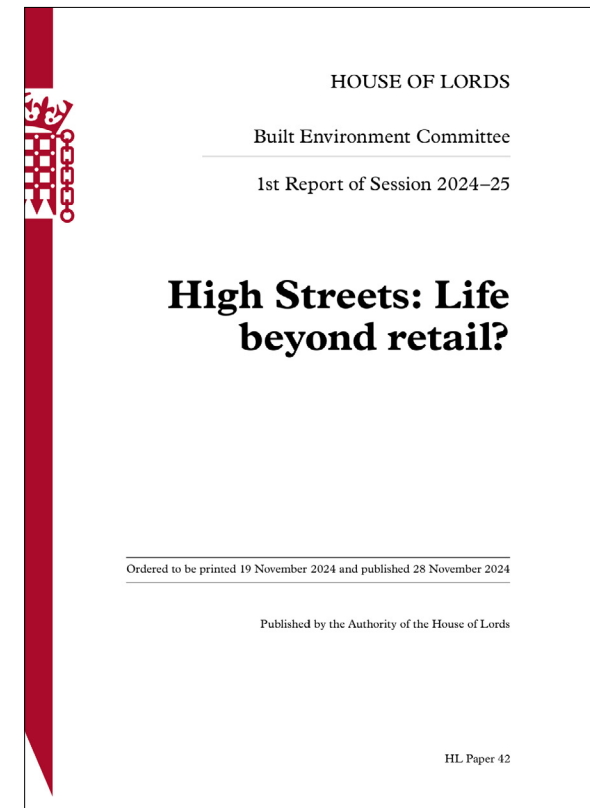
of high street businesses say an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour is the biggest risk to their high street.

57%

of high street small businesses say a diverse range of independent businesses is important for the future of the high street.



▲ Fig 6A: FSB - The future of the High Street, report August 2024



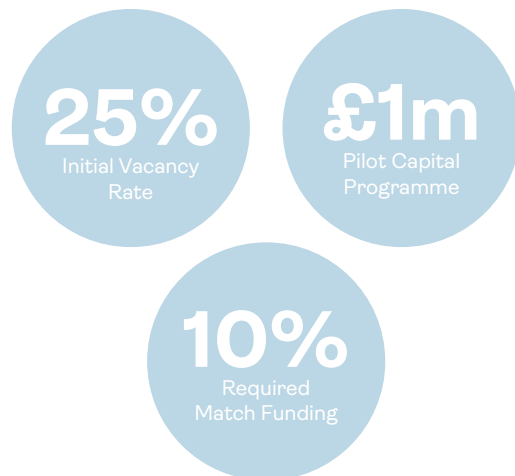
▲ Fig 6B: 'High Streets: Life beyond Retail?' House of Lords report, 2024-2025

Vacant to Vibrant, Belfast

Regeneration Scheme Case Study

Project Overview

The 'Vacant to Vibrant' scheme was launched in July 2022 to reduce the high vacancy rate in city centre, made worse by the Primark fire. The scheme set about transforming unused properties into active spaces. The £1 million pilot capital grant programme offers financial incentives to property owners and potential occupiers, including start-ups, independent retailers, and social enterprises to repurpose vacant properties.



▲ Fig 6C: Project Headline Statistics

Grants

The scheme provides capital grants at three levels and shown in fig 6D, depending on floor area and the lease length. Funding can be used for external enhancements like shop front improvements, signage, and lighting, as well as internal modifications to make spaces fit for occupation, including access improvements, furniture, and necessary equipment. Successful applicants are required to contribute a minimum of 10% match funding.

Impact

As at January 2025, there were 40 projects underway or completed. These projects included diverse businesses such as bakeries, gyms, art galleries, and hairdressing salons. Due to its success, the scheme is being extended citywide with an additional £500,000 in funding from the DfC and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, aiming to revitalize vacant properties along main arterial routes and across local neighbourhoods.

▼ Fig 6D: Grant Summary Table

	Max. Funding Available	Unit Size	Split
Grant 1	£15,000	<150m ²	35-40%
Grant 2	£25,000	>150m ²	55-60%
Grant 3	£2,500	N/A (Meanwhile Use)	5%



▲ Fig 6E: Vacant to Vibrant

Vacant to Vibrant, Belfast

Regeneration Scheme Case Study



▲ Fig 6F: Vacant Buildings in Belfast. BBC, 2025:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce9nvvk447do>



▲ Fig 6G: Sloan's Gym, Vacant to Vibrant BBC, 2025:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce9nvvk447do>

Application Process

Applicants were encouraged to discuss their proposal with a member of council staff at an early stage. This was to help filter out passing interest and support those with a more substantive plan. This saved time for all parties. This resulting application was then scored against a matrix to ensure maximum value for money and regeneration. Scoring was weighted towards ground floor transformations, dereliction clusters in the city centre, and job promotion, among other factors. Higher value grants required a business plan, financial forecast and prove deliverability. Most businesses had identified their preferred unit in advance.



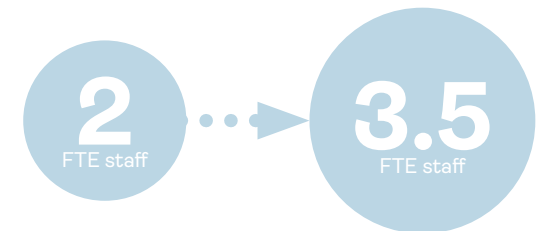
The application process involved:

- Basic Eligibility
- Definition and Deliverability
- Property proposal
- Project/Property Owner
- Affordability (Business plan and financial forecast)
- Cost Breakdown
- Declaration

▲ Fig 6H: Application Process

Management of the Scheme

Initially the city centre Vacant to Vibrant scheme was slow to take off, with Council staff undertaking extensive preparation and promotion (in person and online). As projects began to take place and people could see physical changes, interest greatly increased. Having property agents helped to identify properties and match them with businesses. There were 2 FTE staff on the city centre project, which expanded to 3.5 FTE staff when the city wide scheme launched.



▲ Fig 6I: Full-time equivalent Staff

Return on Investment

Investing in Reducing Vacancy

Increased vacancy rates along with a higher proportion of rate exemptions (e.g. charity shops selling only donated goods) reduce business rates income for Councils. Therefore, Council's need to invest in reducing vacancy, and increasing ratable premises for their long-term sustainability.

Belfast City Council's Vacant to Vibrant Scheme was projected to generate £4 in rates for every £1 invested by the Council. This highlights the return on investment purely in terms of rates. In addition, 40 properties have been transformed and 110 employment opportunities created. New businesses have started, existing businesses have grown, and the city centre's offer has been broadened.

Example

As an example of the possible impact. In Newtownards, a 700 ft² (65m²) ground floor empty retail unit on Frances Street would have annual rates of £3,8101 (2024/25 base). Under Belfast City Council's Vacant to Vibrant tier, this could attain up to £15,000 in a grant.

Therefore, in four years post opening, the Council would have received a net return on their investment ($4 \times £4,300 = £17,200$, less £15,000 initial investment is £2,200). This is a simplified equation for demonstration purposes only but shows the potential return solely to the Council over the longer-term. As above, there would likely also be extra jobs, and a more diverse business offer within the city centre.

▼ Fig 6J: Project Return on Investment



‘£4 in rates for every £1 invested’

Empty to Occupied & Fit for Future

Regeneration Scheme Case Study

Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABCBC) have initiated two key regeneration programmes—'Empty to Occupied' and 'Fit for Future'—aimed at revitalising vacant properties and stimulating economic growth within the borough.

Empty to Occupied (ETO) Scheme

Launch and Objectives

Initiated in 2021, the ETO scheme aims to address the long-term dereliction of key buildings that were otherwise financially non-viable to redevelop and occupy. The programme provides financial assistance to property owners for major structural works, transforming these vacant properties into attractive, fit-for-purpose commercial spaces.

Implementation and Impact

By Q1 2025, 14 projects had received Letters of Offer under the ETO scheme, with four successfully completed and occupied. These completed projects involved substantial investments, with two costing approximately £200,000 each and the other two around £370,000 each. The programme supports the delivery of renovation projects across various towns, including Armagh, Tandragee, Banbridge, Lurgan, and Portadown, aiming to reduce commercial vacancy and stimulate economic growth.

	Empty to Occupied	Fit for Future
Max. Grant	£90,000	£20,000
Scope	Major Structural Works	Minor touch-ups
LoOs awarded	14	23
Projects completed	4	0
Total Project costs	£200,000 - £370,000	£21,000+
Match Funding	20%	20%
Year Launched	2021	2023/24
Budget	£1,150,000	£600,000

▲ Fig 6K: Empty to Occupied (ETO) and Fit for Future (FFF) side by side comparison



▲ Fig 6L: ABC Council

Fit for Future (FFF) Scheme

Launch and Objectives

The FFF scheme was introduced to tackle long-term vacancy of buildings requiring more minor touch-ups and repurposing. It offers grants of up to £20,000 to property owners and prospective tenants to support internal and external frontage renovation projects. The scheme aims to contribute to modernise properties, enhance streetscapes, increase occupancy, and support job creation within the borough.

Implementation and Impact

By Q1 2025, 23 projects had received Letters of Offer through the FFF scheme, with the third call for applications opening on 13 January 2025. ABCBC anticipates supporting 30 projects under this initiative. The phased grant payment structure ensures accountability and encourages timely project completion, with 45% disbursed once 50% of the works are completed, another 45% upon full completion, and the remaining 10% after the property is occupied.

Fit for Future & Empty to Occupied

Regeneration Scheme Case Study

Key Takeaways	
Communication Protocols	Incorporating a return information protocol in the Letter of Offer, with stipulated response times (e.g., five days for standard communications and ten days for more complex matters), helps maintain project momentum.
Professional Advisory Support	Engaging a professional advisory team, including architects and quantity surveyors, has proven instrumental in navigating the complexities of property renovations, and providing expert advice.
Focus Areas	Prioritising ground-floor refurbishments and key activation areas enhances the visibility and impact of the projects. Implementing a scoring system in the application process for these aspects ensures strategic focus.
Application Volume & Timing	Anticipating less applications due to challenges securing architectural plans or planning permissions, sets realistic expectations. Additionally, building projects, especially larger ones, often take longer than expected, impacting timeframes and spending profiles.
Project Readiness	Prioritising 'shovel-ready' projects, especially those with existing planning permissions, maximises the immediate impact. Many applicants do not realise they need planning or permissions at the outset. This leads to projects being delayed or derailed. Projects need to be made aware of planning needs and timeframes as early as possible.
Funding Exclusions	Establishing a clear list of ineligible projects—such as those related to gambling, religious purposes, or political activities—ensures alignment with the council's strategic objectives.
Grant Allocation	Limiting grants to one per applicant promotes equitable distribution of resources and broader community benefit.
Planning Liaison	Maintaining close collaboration with planning authorities streamlines the approval process and mitigates potential delays.
Procurement & Delivery	Procurement requirements need to be proportionate to the proposed project. Too rigid, and small contractors are effectively excluded and formal tender prices become prohibitive leading to some businesses proceeding without the grant.
Flexibility	Funds need to be flexible to support projects, whilst retaining objective and paper trail. Where two schemes are launched, there needs to be scope to allow movement between them to match demand.

▲ Fig 6M: Key Takeaways from ABCBC schemes



▲ Fig 6N: ETO work underway.
<https://www.northernirelandchamber.com/member-news/work-officially-underway-for-councils-empty-to-occupied-programme/>

Bexley Empty Property Premium Council Tax

Premium Overview

The London Borough of Bexley imposes a Council Tax Empty Property Premium to encourage the reoccupation of long-term unoccupied and unfurnished residential properties. This premium is an additional charge on top of the standard Council Tax and is structured as shown in fig 6P.

Objectives

The Empty Property Premium operates on a sliding scale to penalise long-term vacancy, and lack of redress. For the first two years there is no additional penalty, but this increases in stages to 300% premium. This is used to incentivize investment and improve the local area to meet local needs.

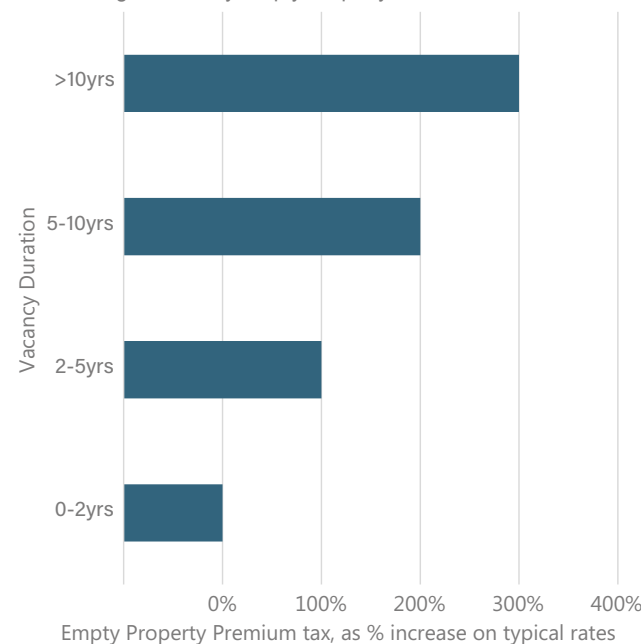


▲ Fig 6O: Map of London Boroughs with Bexley highlighted (red)



▲ Fig 6Q: Bexley Council

▼ Fig 6P: Bexley Empty Property Premium Tax Rate



Outcomes

Specific data on the outcomes of this premium in Bexley is not readily available, similar policies implemented elsewhere have demonstrated effectiveness. For example, a UK Parliament briefing paper noted that since the introduction of the empty homes premium in 2013, 239 councils in England adopted the measure, **resulting in a reduction of 38,009 long-term empty homes between October 2012 and October 2013.** House of Commons Library: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN02857/SN02857.pdf>.

Relevancy

This short case-study suggests that imposing additional Council Tax charges on long-term empty properties can be an effective strategy in encouraging owners to address vacant properties. This punitive sliding scale is a proactive and proportionate response that deliver more commercial and residential space whilst reducing vacancy and raising funds.

Vacant and Derelict Land Fund

Project Overview

The Vacant and Derelict Land Fund (VDLF) provides targeted funding to remediate long-term vacant and derelict sites in Glasgow. Managed by Glasgow City Council, the VDLF 2025/26 funding cycle has allocated £1.91 million to support projects that align with Scotland's regeneration priorities.



Uses of Funding

The funding can be used for number of aspects of the development:



▲ Fig 6R: Glasgow City Council

Objectives

The VDLF has several key objectives, which align with the Scottish Government's broader regeneration goals:

- Stimulate economic growth
- Create jobs
- Promote environmental justice and improved quality of life
- To support communities to flourish and tackle inequalities

Eligibility

To be eligible for funding, proposals must:

- **Target Long-Term Vacant Sites:** The site must have been listed on the Scottish Vacant and Derelict Land Register for at least 15 years.
- **Align with Regeneration Objectives:** Projects should meet one or more of the Scottish Government's regeneration objectives
- **Reflect Community Needs:** Proposals must be shaped by local community needs and aspirations, fitting into a broader place plan.

Vibrant Business Destinations, Belfast

Project Overview

The Vibrant Business Destinations (VBD) pilot project was delivered by BCC between March 2022 and April 2024. The £475,000 initiative was funded by the DfC to support businesses along Belfast's arterial routes post-COVID. The project sought business led improvements through a mix of capital & revenue funding and targeted consultancy support. Ten trader associations participated in the scheme, receiving funding as shown in fig 6T.



▲ Fig 6S: Vibrant Business Destinations

Objectives

The VBD project had several strategic objectives, including:

- Increasing footfall through targeted marketing and promotional activities.
- Enhancing the appearance of local business areas via greening initiatives, improved street furniture, and public art.
- Strengthening local trader associations, particularly where formal structures were underdeveloped.
- Supporting area-based action plans to address specific local challenges and opportunities.
- Encouraging business diversification, ensuring shopping areas served as multifunctional social hubs.

Category	Max. Funding
Env. Enhancements	£30,000
Marketing and Footfall Promotion	£6,000
Events	£4,000
Total	£40,000

▲ Fig 6T: Funding Breakdown



▲ Fig 6U: BCC

Outcomes

- The pilot's mix of capital & revenue funding led to a variety of approaches (e.g. new murals, planters, markets, lights, marketing etc)
- It helped establish and re-establish traders associations and help them take the lead in their area
- Many of the markets brought large numbers and will be sustained.
- Community pride has increased through new murals, seating, local events & connections
- The programme helped establish or strengthen local trader associations, with some areas formalising governance structures for the first time.

Kilkenny

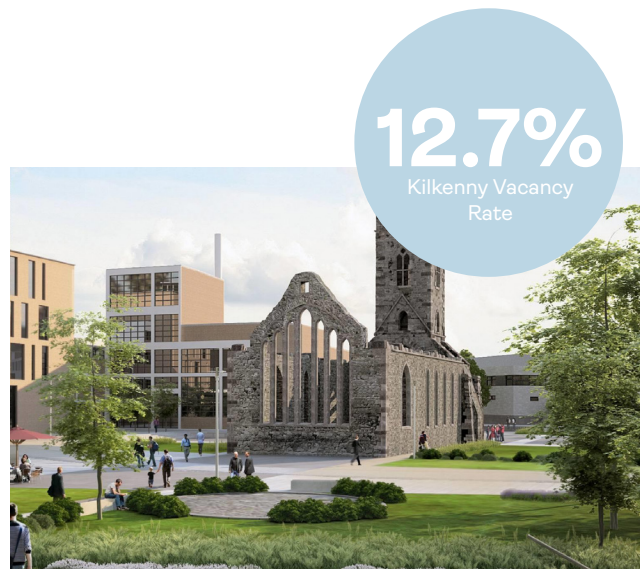
City Overview

Kilkenny, an historic castle city in the southeast of Ireland, one hour from Dublin, has a population of approximately 27,000. It has a similar population, a recently reviewed masterplan, proposed new 24km greenway and focus on urban regeneration.

Some possible learning lessons for Newtownards are:

- Kilkenny focuses on improving people's every day quality of life. It's Abbey Quarter (the town centre) masterplan seeks to blend its medieval heritage with modern urban living needs (e.g. gardens, skate park). Other plans seek to increase the retail, and parks offer at a local level to improve community life and reduce the need to get in the car. Quality of life is used to attract people to live and work in the city, and to make everyday lives of local people better.
- Kilkenny is working with partners to develop a Greenway, to gain from the success of other Greenways (e.g. Waterford) in the area through tourism and appealing active travel. This dovetails with its Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP) that seeks to reduce congestion through improved active travel, public transport and connectivity.

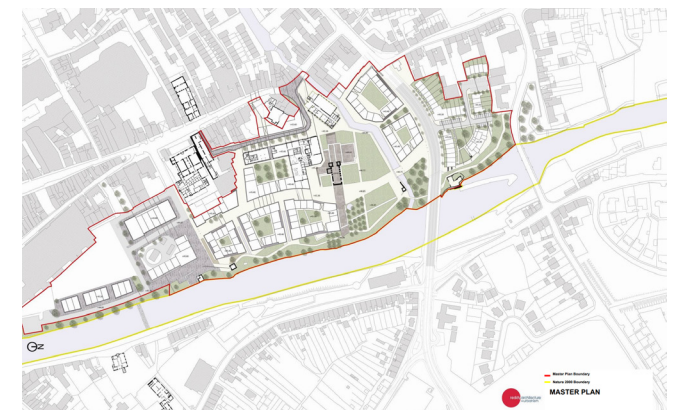
- Kilkenny has a major annual comedy festival, 'Cat Laughs', fig 6W which attracts visitors and raises the profile of the city. This provides bed nights, venue hires, and has led to off-shoot festivals. Newtownards will have increasing indoor and outdoor venue space (including squares, car-parks) in the town centre that could help form the basis, in time, of a larger more celebrated festival.



▲ Fig 6V: Masterplan 3D view



▲ Fig 6W: Cat Laughs Festival



▲ Fig 6X: Abbey Quarter Masterplan

Regeneration Trends

1



Growth of Independent Retailers

The absence of large chains has led to more independent businesses and retailers opening up. By creating more unique shops and experiences, independents can create a more distinctive town centre offer. Supporting these independents through incentives like flexible leases, smaller retail units, and restricting out-of-town developments, ensures their success.

Encouraging more independent businesses helps bring energy, local knowledge, and identities to town centres. They are often resilient, flexible and better able to connect with local communities.

2



Town Centre First Policy

Current High Street challenges are primarily driven by the crisis affecting large retail chains rather than town centre decline itself. A town centre first policy prioritises the vitality and function of the town centre. It seeks to provide multiple reasons for people to come and stay there. This may include more housing provision, more events, more public services and more family friendly opportunities.

Effective implementation requires collaboration among local authorities, businesses, and communities to repurpose vacant spaces. By embracing multifunctionality and avoiding reliance solely on major retailers, town centres become vibrant, sustainable places, reflecting reflecting and responding more to local community and consumer needs

3



Community-led Regeneration

In the absence of commercial-led regeneration, communities are becoming more willing and able to take on and transform under-used space. Often to deliver more community and creative activities unavailable otherwise. They usually engage more with local communities and attract visitors because of their authentic offer.

Community initiatives, including local stewardship of green spaces, community hubs, and cooperative management of cultural facilities, enhance pride and commitment. Supporting grassroots activities through funding, expertise, and policy flexibility ensures regeneration reflects genuine community aspirations, strengthening urban vitality.



Proposed Interventions

Interventions Overview

▼ Fig 7A: Interventions Overview

Small

Town Centre Business Led Organisation
Creative Character & Urban Trail Pilot
Empty to Energised Pilot

Medium

Animation and Visitor Plan
Growth Units
Shop Front Revitalisation Scheme
Meanwhile Use

Large

Upper Floors
Heritage Scheme
Rates consideration
Co-ordinating & Complementing Investment

Proposed Small-scale Interventions

Town Centre Business Led Organisation

Existing businesses, community and creative organisations within the town centre provide a wealth of knowledge, ideas and awareness of what is happening on the ground. They are the investors, experiential providers and the drivers of footfall. Collectively, they should be formally construed and supported under one umbrella, such as a BID (Business Improvement District). This may include admin/consultancy support, and provision of small capital and revenue budgets (similar to Vibrant Business Destination pilot in Belfast).

Consider one or more some smaller business associations (e.g. by Street) to start with and provide them with support and/or funding to become established and gradually take ownership of initiatives in their areas. Focusing on a more local level, may also make it easier to link in with, and potentially partner with, local communities in the future. Together with Council and Departments they can work together to reduce vacancy and dereliction thereby improving the town centre offering, footfall and appeal.

Creative Character & Urban Trail Pilot

The success of Paddington and the murals should be built on. Urban trails could be used to guide people around the town centre to visit these landmarks.

Playful features like hopscotch could be marked on the ground in chalk to engender a family friendly and fun atmosphere. These could be spread out through the town and possibly combined with seating, to create photo opportunities. Additionally, they could be adopted or sponsored by local businesses, or play a role in community and creative programmes. A pilot should be considered that tests out low cost approaches, identifies key locations, and tests out traditional and new ways to connect landmarks.

Empty to Energised Pilot

An Empty to Energised scheme should be piloted in Newtownards over at least a two year period. This is to allow for set-up the project and processes, marketing, identification of properties, bringing landlords on board, pre-application and application rounds, selection and support, project delivery, administration and verification.

The project should focus initially on empty small ground floor units – in targeted areas - that can be inexpensively brought back to life. This will help ensure that a modest fund can create maximum value, transformation and leverage, to attract tenants to Newtownards town centre. The pilot should be targeted on projects that can be enabled with a financial contribution. Research shows that the largest cluster of vacant buildings to



▲ Fig 7B: Paddington at Conway Square
<https://newtownardschronicle.co.uk/paddington-takes-a-pew-in-conway-square/>

the east (bordered by Movilla Street and Castle Street) and/or smaller clusters (close to Regent Street and Frances Street) could be prioritised.

The pilot, if successful, should pave the way for a more expansive scheme.

Proposed Medium-scale Interventions (1/2)

Animation and Visitor Plan

Open House (Bangor), Portaferry Gala and various food festivals highlight how quality cultural programmes, events and activities can attract large crowds and transform people's perception of, and use of, place. They also show that people will travel if you give them a reason to come.

The International Guitar Festival, as shown fig. 7C which takes place each April in Newtownards within Town Centre venues (e.g. Ards Arts Centre, Queen's Hall) is a good example of how a festival can work. The new Citizen's Hub will add significant performance space, which along with potential outdoor venues in (e.g. Conway Square) and outside (e.g. Londonderry Park) the town centre offer potential for a broader festival in the medium to longer term.

Efforts should be started to develop an animation and events programme to build on the success of Paddington, Derek (Mural), Guitar Festival, Puppet Festival and various venues within the Town Centre. A programme that could build on the unique assets of Newtownards and define a year round programme of events with one large regular festival that could become a signature event for the town, and showcase its streets, venues, businesses and people.

Growth Units

A survey should take place of town centre businesses (via the new business group(s)) to assess how many may be looking larger premises over the next five years. Based on the results a pilot programme should be set up to map out existing larger units or those units (individually or collectively) that could be reprofiled to meet the business need.

The pilot would not involve capital works but would, in tandem with extended Vacant to Vibrant scheme, provide businesses looking to expand with viable options. The aim of the programme is to demonstrate that successful businesses could grow within the town centre, without having to leave.



▲ Fig 7C: Ards International Guitar Festival
<https://andculture.org.uk/news/ards-international-guitar-festival-unveils-2024-programme>

Proposed Medium-scale Interventions (2/2)



▲ Fig 7D: Trademarket, Belfast.
<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/food-drink/trademarket-food-outlets-future-uncertain-as-owner-confirms-plans-for-dublin-road-site/a933031057.html>

Shop-Front Revitalisation Scheme

A revitalisation could complement a potential vacant to vibrant type scheme. This would provide match funding for shop owners to improve their shop fronts, façades and immediate streetscape in order to improve the visual appeal of the city centre. This could be done on an individual or collective basis (e.g. in co-ordination with the Animation and Visitor Plan and/or Town Centre Business Led organisation) and create more distinctive streets or quarters within the town.

Meanwhile Use

Some spaces are underused, and some places are stuck in inertia awaiting permissions, funding, development or market fundamentals. These open themselves to temporary or meanwhile usage. Belfast's Vacant to Vibrant scheme first tier of funding was aimed at exploring meanwhile use and could be replicated as part of an extended Empty to Energise scheme. Vault Studios in Belfast, have a track record in taking over time-limited empty buildings and illustrate the potential for short-term community centred affordable artistic studios.

These ideas should be explored more between Council, BID/Business Groups and Local Creatives & Communities after the first round of Empty to Energised which should help clarify interest in meanwhile use and identify potential locations.

Proposed Large-scale Interventions

Upper Floors

The site inspection revealed that 85.7% of the upper floors above vacant units were also vacant. There are many vacant upper floors above occupied units in Newtownards also. Two in three households in Newtownards are 1-2 person households. Therefore, upper floors could potentially be used for residential accommodation. Additionally, given the experience of Boom Studios in Bangor and Vault Studios in Belfast, some empty ground and/or upper floor space could become creative studios. The extent of upper-floor underuse should be a dedicate larger scale project, one that may not be unique to Newtownards.

Heritage Buildings

Heritage Buildings can offer links to the city's past, but their renewal costs are often outside the scope of a vacant to vibrant style scheme.

The Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF) is currently seeking to extend their village catalyst scheme to larger market towns in NI. Along with National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) schemes, the AHF fund appear the most appropriate first call for heritage regeneration projects.

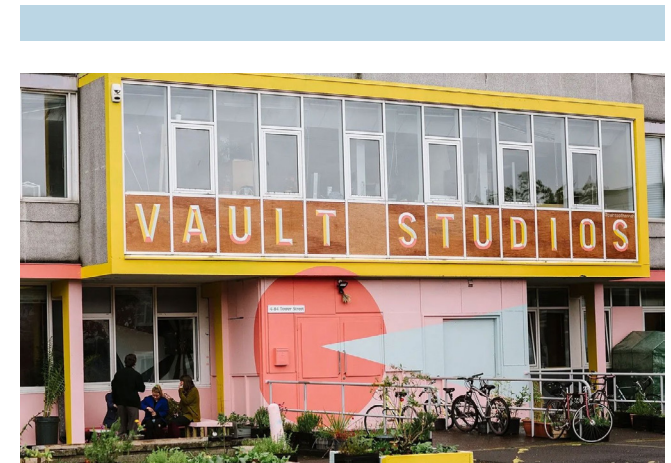
Rates Consideration

In the longer-term, a new approach (either Council or NI specific) to rates is recommended for consideration. Shops and service that create jobs and improving the livelihood of the town should not have to pay more rates than owners of neighbouring vacant units, who may benefit without contributing.

The example of Bexley council, and others demonstrate that a sliding scale of punitive rates (either linked to vacancy and/or energy efficiency) can work effectively to open up and invest in unused land. This creates a carrot and stick approach, that encourages open units, while actively discouraging vacant units.

Co-ordinating & Complementing Investment

The proposed Citizen's Hub and reprofiled Town Hall service offering, when complete, will help bring more people into the town centre and create more reasons to visit. It is important that there are planned programmes and promotions in place over the first 2-3 years to ensure they are firmly established and become well used.



▲ Fig 7E: Vault Studios, Belfast.
<https://www.vaultartiststudios.com/locations>

End of Report