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Principles for Sustainable Town Centres

Merseyside Civic Society (MCS) supported Steve Rotheram, Metro Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, when he launched an independent Town Centres Commission for the City Region at the start of this year. MCS is also aware that the government has recently (November 2019) announced a 'Town Deal' for 100 places in England, as part of the £3.6 billion Towns Fund. The Society is concerned that these initiatives should have an inclusive mandate to improve life for as many people as possible and that the solutions that are being considered by the Commission should go far beyond the scope set out for the government's Town Fund. The emphasis on urban regeneration and planning, skills and enterprise infrastructure and connectivity are important and should be part of an overall strategy. However, MCS would like those tasked with improving our town centres to be aware that people lie at the heart of communities and that investment in social value is as important as economic property and environmental enhancement.

For this reason, MCS will be developing a manifesto for Town Centres to assist the City Region in its work. The first part of this project is to establish a set of Principles that should be used to test whether any new strategy for the City-Region's Town Centres is sustainable.

These Principles are:

- Create inclusive partnerships (business, arts, third sector and residents for example) and maintain them with dedicated co-ordinators
- Be caring yet bold and decisive about bringing under-invested or under-used property back into full use. Be inventive about re-assigning property that has been an obstacle to change into new or temporary forms of ownership so that transformation does not stall.
- Be imaginative about the future uses of high street units and buildings as the assumptions around the dominance of retail and commercial space recedes and becomes less viable. Create a community enterprise/representative space for every City-Region Town Centre as a defining feature of the area
- Curate the public realm, through the facilitation of Town Centres as places for people to meet. Remove all unnecessary obstacles that stand in the way of this.
- Re-discover the features that once made each Centre unique and remarkable and build on those that lie in conservation areas. Where Centres have lost their distinctiveness, involve local people to create new features to be proud of.

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- Be scrupulous in the re-design of streetscapes that are uncluttered, pollution free and safe. Extend frontages into the streets inviting people to slow pedestrian traffic. Link nearby green space to the Centre through green corridors and infrastructure. Exclude car traffic and encourage cycling in sections of the centre creating oasis of calm and spaces to dwell.
- Provide an open digital forum for those using the Town Centre and use this to generate conversations about what happens in that space. Make engagement and participation meaningful by responding to stakeholder contributions in a timely manner
- Connect those visiting Town Centres with those producing the experience and encourage discussion within those groups through a range of media and ideas
- Increase the frequency of events and new experiences in Town Centre spaces
- Never assume the formula is right by investing in engagement and participation on a regular basis. Constantly invent new way for people to feel they have a stake in the way their place evolves