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hands

Community Improvement Districts Pilot Programme

**Emerging learning from the first phase of the CID
programme**

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About Power to Change

Power to Change is the independent trust that strengthens communities through community business. We use our experience to bring partners together to fund, grow and back community business to make places thrive. We are curious and rigorous; we do, test and learn. And we are here to support community business, whatever the challenge.

We know community business works to create thriving places when local people take ownership of spaces that matter and deliver services that communities need. Our 2021-26 strategy sets out how, using strategic funding, trusted partnerships, rigorous research, policy insight, and a strong network of remarkable community businesses we will back the sector, creating the ideas, evidence, and exemplars that make the case for others to back them too. Ultimately, we will amplify the efforts of community businesses and put them at the heart of a fair economy.

About CRESR

CRESR (the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research) is one of the largest multi-disciplinary policy research centres in the UK and a flagship research centre within Sheffield Hallam University. Our aim is to understand the impact of social and economic disadvantage on places and people, and assess critically the policies and interventions targeted at these issues.

About Shared Assets

Launched in 2012, Shared Assets is a Community Interest Company and a 'think and do tank', working to create a socially just future through practical projects that build new relationships between people and the land.

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Background

The pilot programme for Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) has emerged from a continuing need to revitalise traditional high streets and town centres. High streets and town centres have faced arduous challenges in recent years, with the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21 accentuating existing trends such as the increasing shift to online retail, and accelerating the demise of traditional department stores.

These trends have exacerbated widening inequalities within communities. But they have also offered opportunities for new ways of creating thriving places, where benefits are shared more equitably. While Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have been a successful model for involving business communities in local economic development, there is no parallel system enabling residents and community led organisations to participate.

Community led approaches can bring much positive change in terms of town centre regeneration^{1,2,3}. With this in mind, the first step towards promoting this approach has to be to involve community stakeholders in strategic conversations about the future of town centres. This is what CIDs aim to do: they provide a forum where groups of stakeholders that are wider than usual can discuss and plan the future of their town centre together.

A Power to Change paper by Ben Stephenson published in 2020⁴ defined Community Improvement Districts as *'bodies which provide opportunities for community stakeholders to participate in operational and strategic decision-making for their neighbourhoods'* (p3). Such organisations would be:

- Non-political, democratic and inclusive
- Concerned with the economic, social and environmental development of neighbourhoods
- Open to residents, businesses and other stakeholders
- Designed to complement other local mechanisms where they exist
- Non-profit distributing bodies

With the support of Power to Change, the idea of CIDs is now being tested in seven locations in England. The aim of this pilot work is to explore exactly what a CID might be when the theory is translated into practice, how CIDs develop and operate, how they overcome barriers and challenges, and how the idea of CIDs fits within the national policy context.

This report summarises emerging learning from the first phase of the CID programme, and outlines key questions for the next phase of research.

¹ Dobson, J. (2022), [Community businesses and high street: 'taking back' and leading forward](#), CRESR

² Lee, N. and Swann P. (2020), [Saving the high street: the community takeover](#)

³ Wills, J. and Harding, C. (2021), [Community Town Centres, Centre for London](#)

⁴ Stephenson, B. (2020), [Community Improvement Districts: A discussion paper](#)

About the seven pilots

The seven pilot CIDs cover a wide range of local situations, partnerships, and activities. They are located in Hendon (Sunderland), Ipswich (Suffolk), Skelmersdale (Lancs), Stretford (Greater Manchester), Wolverton (Milton Keynes), Kilburn (NW London) and Wood Green (North London). They range from those led by a community anchor organisation such as Back on the Map in Sunderland, to BID led examples such as Wood Green and Ipswich, to local authority-led initiatives such as Kilburn. Some of the pilots aim to set up a CID as a new entity while others are hosted by established organisations. Three of the pilots are working alongside large shopping centre redevelopments.



Billboard poster promoting a community engagement event in Wolverton

Emerging characteristics of CIDs

The pilots are in the midst of a **prototyping and experimentation process for CIDs**, rather than testing a fixed CID model. The programme has not developed enough to be able to identify 'best practice' at this stage.

However so far we have observed the following characteristics, functions and themes:

- **CIDs are a process rather than an entity**
- **They take a governance, communicative and convening role**
- **CIDs act as nodes in networks of town centre stakeholders**

Emerging functions of CIDs

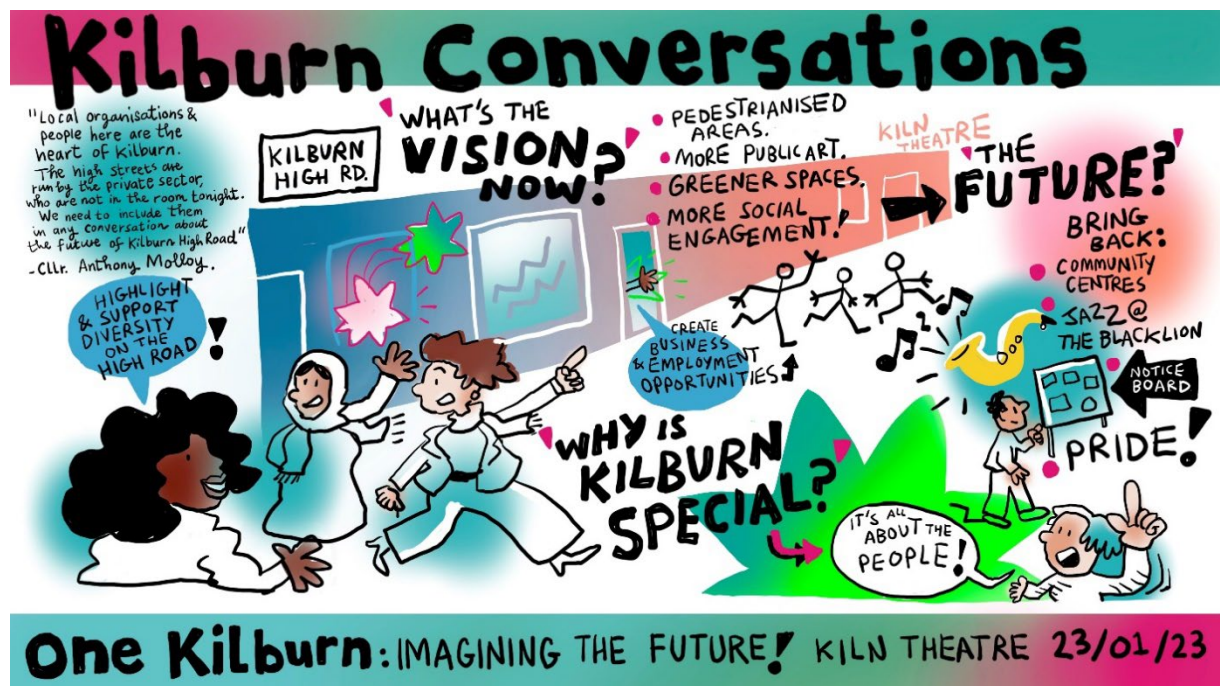
- **Convening.** Most of the pilot CIDs are adopting leadership roles within their localities, bringing together new groups of partners and initiating conversations and activities which otherwise are unlikely to have happened.
- **Amplifying resident and less-heard voices.** CIDs are bringing new voices to the table and extending ways to achieve involvement and accountability. Early examples include the pop-up shops in Stretford and Wolverton, the engagement of young people in Ipswich, and events and activities in Hendon and Kilburn.
- **Galvanising local action.** Although still at an early stage, pilot CIDs have begun to achieve practical changes, such as the temporary shops in Wolverton and Stretford and the high street Christmas tree and striking local branding in Hendon. Identifying quick wins seems to be an important driver of progress, and **visible activities and engagement led by CIDs gain more traction and buy-in** from communities and stakeholder organisations than the idea alone.

Connecting with the wider community in Ipswich

[Ipswich CID](#) is led by an existing Business Improvement District (Ipswich Central) which has been going for 15 years. The CID sprung out of an awareness that a wider vision for town centre regeneration was required with the involvement of a broad range of local people, including those whose voices are not usually heard in decision making such as young people. There is existing momentum for town centre renewal, including a successful bid by the local authority for £2.3m of Towns Fund money for digital infrastructure, and a planned celebration of the heritage of Cardinal Wolsey to mark his 550th anniversary in 2023. A Connected Town task force has been established under the auspices of the BID. The focus of work so far has been on consultation and engagement, with a series of events planned for spring 2023. These will seek to gather views of what the town centre needs to thrive in future as well as how best to tackle immediate issues around cleanliness and safety. There have already been positive moves to include young people in the work of the task force: for example, Suffolk New College is hoping to work with Ipswich Central to involve further education students in the development of the Connected Town plans, while discussions are continuing with local arts organisations to develop a youth-focused place strategy board for the cultural sector.

Wide public engagement in Kilburn

Kilburn High Road is also the boundary between the London Boroughs of Camden and Brent (and includes the northernmost point of Westminster). It's a well-connected and vibrant place, but with many challenges. Camden and Brent councils are leading the CID pilot through the [One Kilburn](#) project. One Kilburn aims to take advantage of a number of planned projects - investment in railway arches, the refurbishment of the library, some funding to improve shopfronts - to build an effective community partnership to help tackle Kilburn's challenges. A lot of engagement work has been carried out led by the LB Camden participation team, particularly through organised walks around the area. A public 'town hall' event with over 100 attendees was held in late January to share more about the potential for projects and collaboration. A planning group has been set up, and conversations about governance and decision-making will be held with that group over the next few months. Part of the pilot funding will pay for the appointment and training of local people to be paid 'community activators' who will lead wider outreach and engagement in the area.



Emerging forms of CID

Three approaches to CIDs seem most likely to emerge from the current pilot programme. There is no sense so far that a specific 'CID model' is emerging or required.

1. Existing organisations convene and lead initiatives to revitalise town centres, using the CID label to signal a particular focus and set of stakeholders
2. An extended BID with community participation, perhaps drawing on models pioneered in Scotland
3. A standalone community-led partnership in which local businesses and users of high street premises are key members of the partnership

Themes observed so far

- **All of the CID pilots are rooted in flux and change**, since every high street is a complex system of changing stakeholders, interests, ownerships and priorities. CIDs may experience conflicts as well as cooperation, and they must respond to difficult and changing external circumstances. **CIDs will probably never be 'finished'. Rather they will always be adapting and changing in response to their environments.**
- **Some pilot CIDs are hosted by established organisations.** This enables the CID to be fleet of foot and not get bogged down in structural arrangements, keeping a clear focus on engagement with local stakeholders and public-facing activities. However, there is then a risk that the CID becomes indistinguishable from its host organisation, operating as little more than a sub-group. The pilot projects are currently working out how best to give their CIDs a distinct identity and purpose.
- **Establishing a new structure takes time, and can take focus away from 'doing' visible activities and engagement.** Our observation so far is that focusing on this too early carries a risk of slowing progress as pilots may become bogged down in models, structures, roles and responsibilities. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis where businesses and communities may be struggling, there is a strong drive for pilots to be seen to be taking action.

The risks and benefits of the above approaches may become clearer as the pilots proceed.

Barriers and challenges

- Funding constraints for local government and the community and voluntary sectors, and reduced capacity of local government staff to support projects emerging from outside the public sector.
- Increased pressures on the cost of living are likely to impact high streets, potentially countering the positive impacts of CIDs' work.
- Challenges with defining and communicating their structure and function: What is a CID?
- How to generate buy-in across the networks of interests involved in local town centres and building effective partnerships.
- Town centre contexts where the different stakeholders are not equal e.g. property developers and community organisations.
- How to involve residents with limited capacity and multiple demands on their time. How can residents be rewarded for their contributions and are there specific skills that need to be supported to enable their participation?

Implications for policy

- **So far we have found no evidence to suggest that there are legislative barriers** that could only be overcome by enacting new legislation or amending existing laws. Changing the regulations on BIDs to encourage or enforce community representation may have some limited impact, but the effects may not be proportionate to the effort involved.
- **A national investment programme for CIDs may be beneficial** to promote an equitable model for town centre regeneration. Such funds should support people rather than capital projects. The work required is around capacity building and connecting, bringing different stakeholders together in town centre contexts beyond the confines of local authority structures or the rules of existing BIDs (although it is possible for BIDs to work beyond a narrow interpretation of their remit).

Funds would be needed to support a programme of engagement, events and local activities that have high visibility and potential impacts within a short timescale while the longer-term work of partnership building takes place.

The scale of the resource required isn't known. However in the pilots scheme, the greatest impact has been made where organisations have **supplemented the grant from Power to Change with their own resources**.

Questions for the next phase of research

Our discussions have highlighted the importance of identifying the **additionality** that the pilot CID programme has enabled: what is happening because of CIDs that would not otherwise happen? We have also asked the pilots themselves what questions they would like us to explore, and four of the pilots (plus Locality) responded to our survey. From this we have identified five overarching questions we need to explore over the next two months within the resources available. Each question is framed in terms of a headline question and a series of sub-questions.

1. What **changes have happened** that can be attributed directly to the CID programme?
 - What activities have taken place that would not otherwise have happened?
 - What new partnerships or forums have formed that would not have happened otherwise?
 - If the CID funding had not been in place, how would the pilots have addressed the issues of their town centres?
2. What has the **process of becoming a CID** (including structure and governance) brought to each place?
 - How has the process of establishment created new partnerships or conversations?
 - What benefits or challenges have arisen through creating new or amended structures or governance arrangements? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen structure and form of leadership?
 - What forms of negotiation have taken place with local partners? Who was involved?
 - How has the approach to funding offered by Power to Change and the requirements associated with it influenced what pilots have done?
 - What support from Power to Change and facilitators have CIDs most valued and why?
3. How has **participation in the CID** generated additional value?
 - Who is at the table who was not there previously, and how were they recruited?
 - How have CIDs brought less-heard voices into discussion and decision-making about town centres?
 - Are some groups still not at the table and what is being done about that? What else needs to be done to support equality and diversity in town centre regeneration?
 - What processes of engagement, consultation or coproduction were enabled by the CID? Would they have happened anyway?
 - Is a bespoke process needed to facilitate genuinely inclusive high street regeneration?
4. How has **local action** been generated through the CID?
 - What factors brought this about – the focus on high streets, the people, the governance structure?

- Did the CID accelerate existing ideas or generate completely new ones?
 - What plans for the future have been made or are in progress?
 - Have the CIDs been able to access regeneration funding from government or other sources and do they expect to be able to in future? Would they need to be set up as separate legal entities to do this?
 - What challenges have CIDs faced and how have they responded?
5. What resources have been leveraged through the CID programme?
- What additional funds have been allocated or promised and from what sources?
 - What additional non-financial resources have been allocated or promised (e.g. staff time) and from what sources?
 - What longer-term funding streams will be used to continue the CID's activities?
 - What additional resources would pilots need in order to bring the CID's work to a state of self-sustainability? How long would they expect this to take?



Local people discuss plans for Wolverton Town Centre