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Dewsbury Arcade: A Community-Led Model for High Street Renewal

Dewsbury Arcade is fast becoming a reference for how councils and communities can transform a declining high street through shared ownership, creativity and determination. By combining bold Council leadership with genuine community enterprise, the project is bringing a long-empty Grade II listed building back to life. It is the UK's first community-run shopping centre—drawing investment, building local pride and putting the future of the town centre firmly in the hands of local people.

Dewsbury, the second-largest town in Kirklees, has faced declining high-street footfall, the loss of national retailers, and competition from nearby Leeds and multiple out-of-town shopping destinations. As in many towns, this culminated in the closure of well-known retailers like Marks & Spencer in 2008. The Grade II listed Dewsbury Arcade, first opened in 1899, and housed 20 diverse businesses, including coffee houses, florists, tobacconists and record shops, was one affected asset. The last tenant closed in 2016.

In 2020, Kirklees Council purchased the Arcade as part of its strategic action to deliver the Dewsbury Blueprint, its long-term town centre regeneration plan. The Arcade's refurbishment became a flagship project within an £80m regeneration programme that includes investment in Dewsbury Market, public realm improvements, a Building Revival scheme, and cultural activity.

Cooperative Partnership and New Civic Models

Shortly after the Council's acquisition, a group of local residents and business people—including an experienced cooperative development consultant—approached the Council with a proposal: rather than the Council managing the Arcade after refurbishment, a community-owned organisation could take on responsibility for its long-term stewardship.



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The Council supported the proposal and commissioned the cooperative consultant part-time to help establish what would become The Arcade Group, ensuring the organisation had the necessary capacity, governance, and business planning.

The Arcade Group is formally constituted as a Community Benefit Society (CBS), a type of cooperative in which individuals become members to deliver wider community benefits. Grants from the Architectural Heritage Fund supported the group’s development and secured preferred bidder status for the lease. The CBS then enabled a community share offer, giving local people the chance to become co-owners and provide vital early-stage working capital. The share offer raised £125,000, including match funding from Co-op’s Community Shares Booster Programme and a contribution from the Council itself.

The partnership between the Council and the Arcade Group also strengthened the bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, resulting in a £4.5m grant for refurbishment works. Additional funding was secured from the Towns Fund and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority’s Getting Building Fund—collectively forming a significant capital package underpinning restoration.



Artist's impression of the refurbished Dewsbury Arcade

Historic Restoration and Local Economic Opportunity

Refurbishment work began in April 2024 under William Birch & Sons, a Yorkshire-based heritage construction firm. Their involvement has created nationally rare opportunities for local people to undertake specialist work placements with heritage stonemasons. Restoration of the Arcade’s distinctive glazed roof has been a highlight of the project. Uniquely, this work was carried out by Dewsbury-based Standard Patent Glazing that installed the original glazing in the 1890s, continuing to build local history through craftsmanship.

The renewed Arcade will offer 16 small shop units, four larger end units, and eight studios on the upper floor, creating space for independent retailers, makers, and small enterprises.

Community Ownership in Action

The Arcade Group regards its role not just as a landlord but as a curator of a unique, people-focused town centre experience. Through community engagement, the Group co-created a set of principles to guide tenant selection, signalling a commitment to avoiding homogenised or low-value high street uses (“no takeaways, vape shops or nail bars”) in favour of more distinctive, independent propositions that attract footfall and strengthen local identity.

To build early momentum, the Group initiated creative outreach activities while the building remained closed for refurbishment. Events and pop-ups have included a clothes swap, weekly wall-art sessions, active coffee mornings, and a Valentine’s Wellness Day. These activities highlight the future potential of the Arcade as a community venue, support wellbeing and social bonds, and help foster a pipeline of future tenants. They have also backed events hosted by other local venues, promoting them to their followers.

The Arcade Group has adopted a similarly inventive approach to attracting future tenants. In 2025, it launched a “Win a Shop” competition, offering a year’s free occupancy to an outstanding independent business. This initiative attracted regional attention and emphasised that the Arcade will prioritise creativity, diversity and community value over purely commercial concerns.

A Model for Cooperative Placemaking

The Dewsbury Arcade project demonstrates how councils can reshape local economies by sharing power and responsibility with community organisations. Kirklees Council’s leadership—in acquiring the asset, facilitating the formation of a CBS, contributing match funding, and acting as co-bidder for a major capital investment—has provided a foundation on which genuine community ownership can flourish.

Meanwhile, the Arcade Group has shown how local residents and businesses can step into a stewardship role, raise investment, generate new energy around a struggling town centre, and develop a credible long-term operating model for a heritage asset of this scale.

For towns seeking fresh approaches to regeneration, Dewsbury Arcade offers a powerful example of how cooperative principles—shared ownership, mutual investment, and community-led enterprise—can help rebuild local economies from the ground up.

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