

REKINDLING LOST CONNECTIONS

THE COVENTRY AND WARWICKSHIRE BUSINESS
SUMMIT, HOSTED BY GRAPEVINE, 29 APRIL 2021



Zoom Meeting

100%

Recording



48
Participants

Chat

Share Screen

Polling

Pause/Stop Recording

Live Transcript

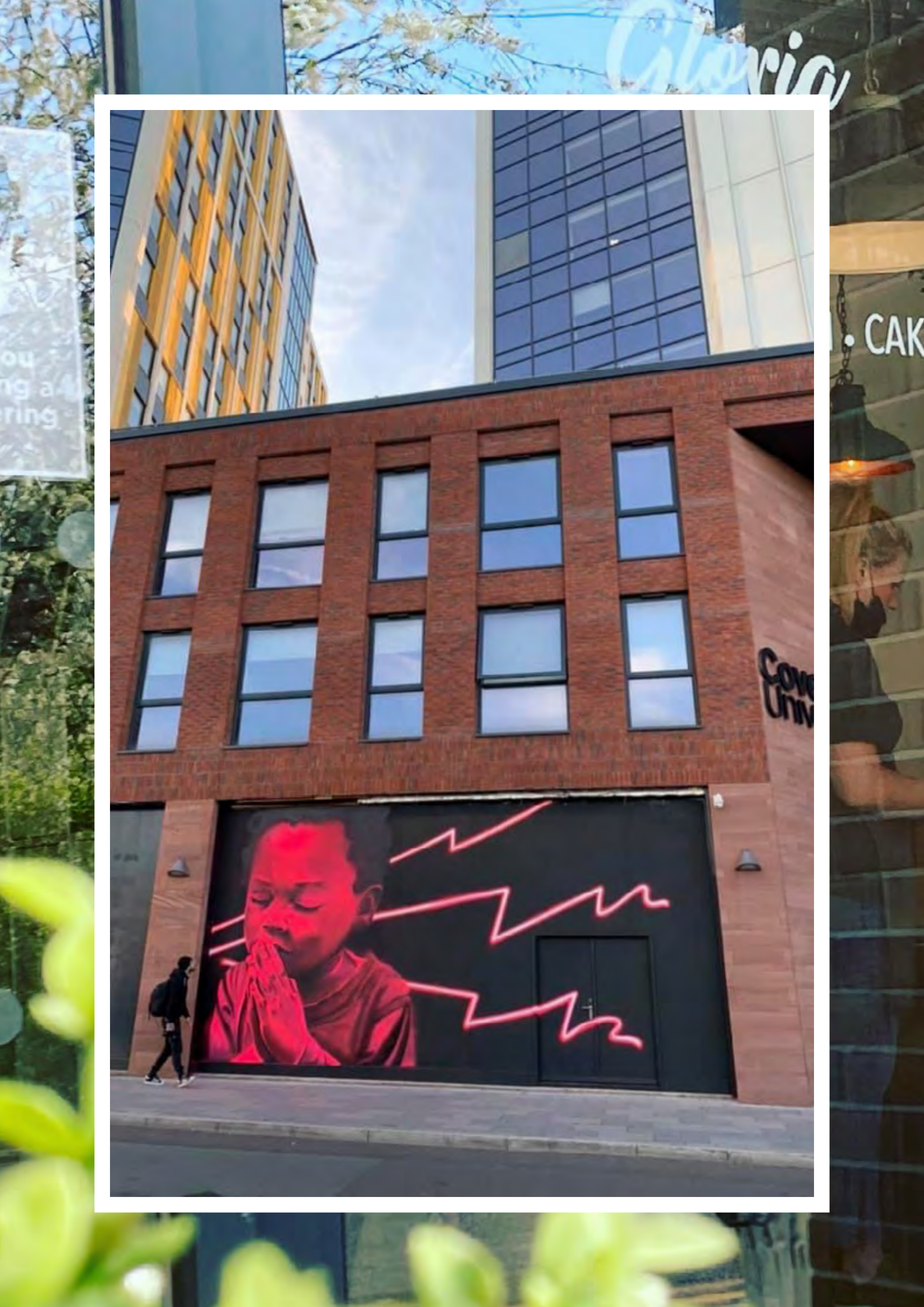
Reactions

More

REKINDLING LOST CONNECTIONS

THE COVENTRY AND WARWICKSHIRE BUSINESS
SUMMIT, HOSTED BY GRAPEVINE, 29 APRIL 2021





CONTENTS

What did we set out to do, and why?	7
What's on people's minds after the last year?	10
What are the ideas for action?	16
What power do we need? And who needs it?	23

Thanks go to: Iona Lawrence (The Relationships Project) Claire Spencer (WMCA), Immy Robinson (The Relationships Project), Martin Reeves (Coventry City Council), businesses, BID leaders and other business sector workers who helped plan, design and deliver the summit. An extra helping of thanks to all those who shared photographs, especially Alan Van Wijgerden and Street Art Strategy and to those who spoke at the event Ann Osborn, Trish Willets, Steph Kerr and Emma Ward and Eilis Newman.

-  [grapevinecovandwarks](#)
-  [@grapevinecandw](#)
-  www.grapevinecovandwarks.org
-  [grapevinecovandwarks](#)



Welcome to the

Herbert

Art Gallery
Museum
History Centre
Shop
Café

Admission
FREE

What did we set out to do, and why?

“

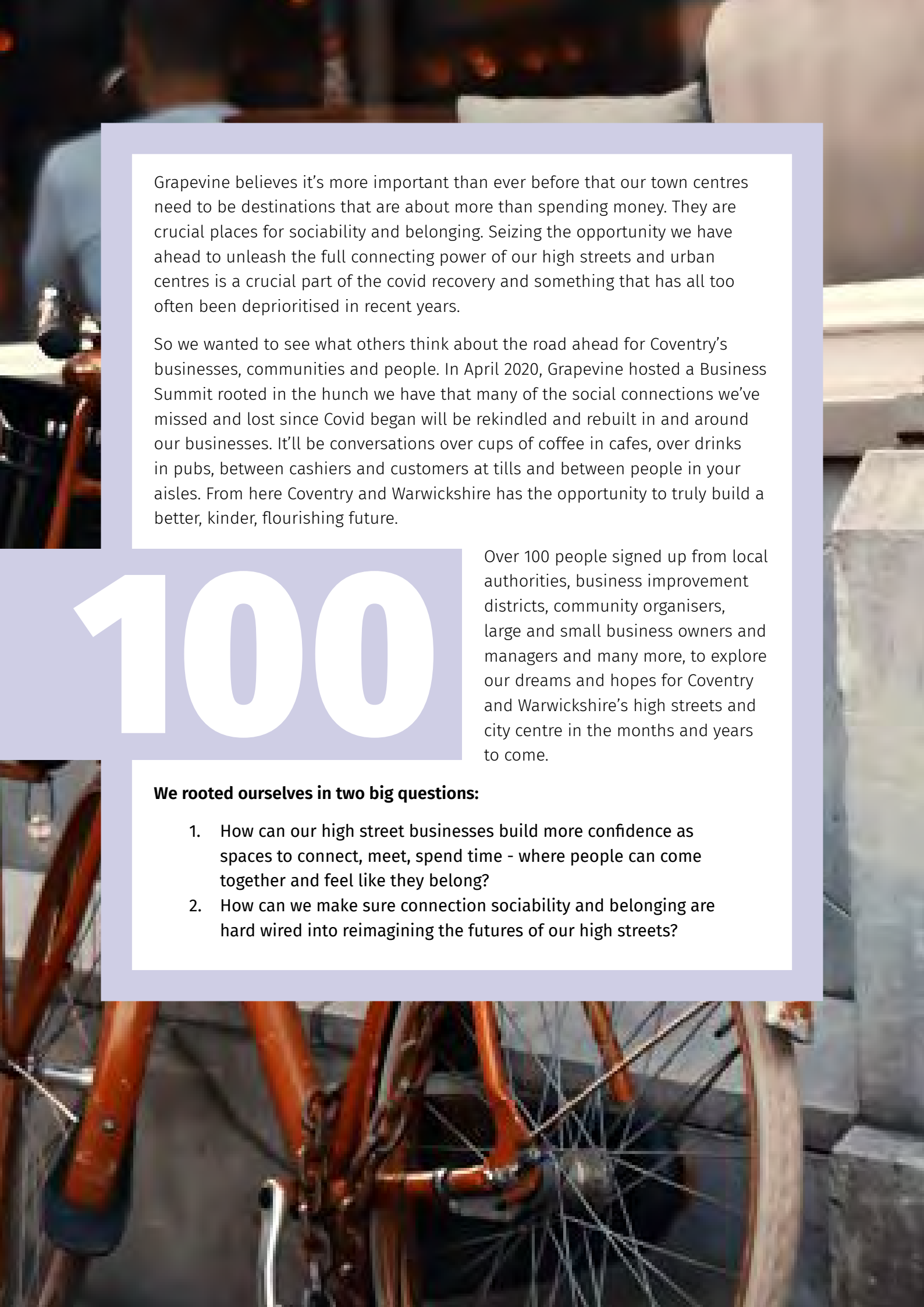
“Now so many of us are talking to our neighbors again, we should take that energy to connect to the high street.”

To say that the last year has been tough for people, communities, high streets and workplaces is an understatement.

It has been a year of two halves - on the one hand a year of deep disconnection and loneliness with **1 in 4 British adults saying they felt so lonely at points they thought something might happen to them and no one would notice**. And yet on the other hand it's been a year of connection and neighbourliness with record breaking numbers of volunteers delivering food, collecting prescriptions and millions of neighbours simply reaching out hands of friendship and support across hallways and streets.

Despite the huge financial and emotional pressures businesses large and small have been under, millions have stepped up and played their part in growing connections and helping out during the upheaval. From the efforts of businesses to support children in poverty inspired by Marcus Rashford through to the millions of meals made by hard-pressed hospitality businesses for key workers. It's been a year where the lines between business and the community and the relationship between 'doing the right thing' and 'doing the financially viable thing' have been more blurred than ever before.

From the ever-changing pedestrianised precinct to the post-war development of areas including Radford, Coundon, Canley, Cheylesmore and Stoke Heath, to the rebuilding of the cathedral to the recent development of Fargo Village, our high streets and city centre have changed and evolved over the years and created opportunities and challenges for all people who have travelled there for work, socialising, exercising, shopping and relaxing.



Grapevine believes it's more important than ever before that our town centres need to be destinations that are about more than spending money. They are crucial places for sociability and belonging. Seizing the opportunity we have ahead to unleash the full connecting power of our high streets and urban centres is a crucial part of the covid recovery and something that has all too often been deprioritised in recent years.

So we wanted to see what others think about the road ahead for Coventry's businesses, communities and people. In April 2020, Grapevine hosted a Business Summit rooted in the hunch we have that many of the social connections we've missed and lost since Covid began will be rekindled and rebuilt in and around our businesses. It'll be conversations over cups of coffee in cafes, over drinks in pubs, between cashiers and customers at tills and between people in your aisles. From here Coventry and Warwickshire has the opportunity to truly build a better, kinder, flourishing future.

100

Over 100 people signed up from local authorities, business improvement districts, community organisers, large and small business owners and managers and many more, to explore our dreams and hopes for Coventry and Warwickshire's high streets and city centre in the months and years to come.

We rooted ourselves in two big questions:

1. How can our high street businesses build more confidence as spaces to connect, meet, spend time - where people can come together and feel like they belong?
2. How can we make sure connection sociability and belonging are hard wired into reimagining the futures of our high streets?

What's on people's minds after the last year?

What are the challenges and opportunities we face as we look to the future of our high streets, city centre and their role in strengthening communities and social connection?

Coventry and Warwickshire has had a long history of creating spaces and places for people to gather and belong

“ The City of Culture offers the chance for us to secure a long term legacy for our high streets as places and spaces for belonging. Crucially belonging for everyone. And this is maybe especially true to our independent businesses

“ Coventry's city centre has always had a life of its own, it is constantly changing and renewing.

“ We are on the cusp of a new transition - one that places the consuming and retail functions alongside their truly socially connecting potential.

“ The arts and business sectors have a good track record of making things happen together in Coventry. In 2018 footfall in the city went up 5.4% (above the national average) and this was partly because businesses and artists were working together to create destination places from performances in cafes to livening up windows. We ended up inundated with support from businesses and we couldn't make the most of it for the festival.

The last decade has been tough for high streets. The last year has been even tougher

“ It's been an incredibly tough year for businesses large and small. From furloughing staff to seeing shutters come down permanently on some long-loved places, the economic and emotional impact has been massive. But hopefully, there's a bit of light at the end of the tunnel

“ Independent businesses have had a hard time on high streets. I remember as a kid there being so many more than there are now. But if the pandemic has shown us anything it's that staying local and shopping independently is easy and doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg.

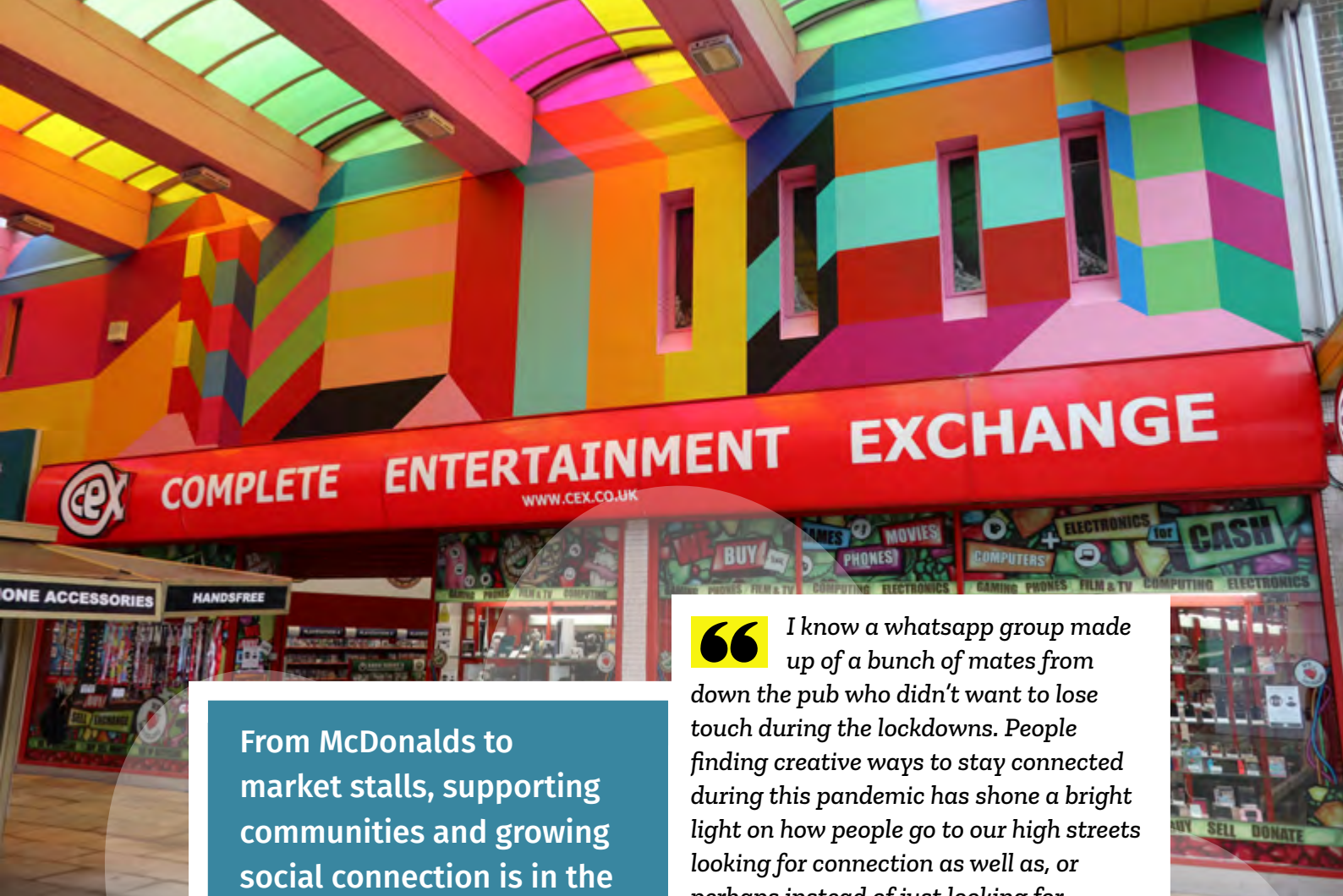
“ Retailers big and small are struggling more than ever to compete with online businesses. However, what people will always make the effort to come to town for is experiences. It's in all our interests to seize this opportunity to make our towns and city centres a destination for connection.

“ Our transactions and our footfall were falling before Covid. Covid has accelerated our soul searching questions around our purpose. We know people don't just come to us because we're a building society that looks after their money. It's the social interaction or social engagement that they really enjoy as they come in the door. And it's the thing that will bring them back time and again.

There is a tension between the need for 'anchor tenants' who can pay the high rents/rates, and the need to create city and town centres that are about more than simply shopping

“ We know we need to find alternative tenants for the Debenhams site and we know we need to make sure that they offer people and their communities what they want: a more than retail experience. But finding a way to do that whilst also covering costs can feel like an impossible task.





From McDonalds to market stalls, supporting communities and growing social connection is in the DNA of many businesses large and small

“ From restaurants to businesses to hotels to pubs to local shops - businesses who found themselves in very difficult positions, still found ways to step up, offer support to their communities and offered a friendly face, a reassuring conversation and the connective tissue we know and love about our centres.

“ 80% of small businesses up and down the UK have done something to contribute to their community during the tough last year.


“ From offering special shopping arrangements for particular customers who need a little more time and care through to volunteering staff time and donating stuff to those who need it. The vast majority have stepped up.

“ I know a whatsapp group made up of a bunch of mates from down the pub who didn't want to lose touch during the lockdowns. People finding creative ways to stay connected during this pandemic has shone a bright light on how people go to our high streets looking for connection as well as, or perhaps instead of just looking for something they can buy.

“ Covid has knocked business' confidence. We've all thought 'do I really need to go to that shop, perhaps I should just go online'. And I think that wariness will be around for a while.

“ It's not big or small businesses, it's big AND small. We need both to thrive and the best way to do that is together.

“ When my sister and I go into town we need welcoming spaces because she's got a disability. We've found that it's independent businesses that offer us something unique. They are often smaller and more welcoming. More understanding of our particular need for time out.



There is both excitement and trepidation about coming back together again

“ *There is huge pent up energy for people to gather again, to regain social contact and interaction after over a year of enforced separation. For some more than others this is accompanied by anxiety about the risks.*

“ *How can we grow people's confidence and win their trust in gathering and public places again? The welcome that people get when they come through the door for the first time, will make a huge difference.*

There are green shoots of a connected recovery

“ *I run a market stall. I've teamed up with the guys at the pub to open a new culture space where people come in and explore the beautiful warehouse building. We're inviting artists and practitioners to come and do interesting things in those spaces. But the key thing is to make it all informal and welcoming, so people want to come in and explore at their own pace. That creates those little conversations and moments of connection.*

“ *Creating connecting spaces for people and running a thriving healthy business with a solid bottom line are two sides of the same coin.*

“ *We've all got an opportunity, haven't we? Every step someone takes on to our high streets and city centres is a chance to make that person feel welcome and experience belonging. And that is up to all of us that are trading in the city centre. Whether that be a museum, or a theatre, or a clothes shop, or a gaming shop.*

Focusing on more than just our city centre and town centres

“ *We need to talk about more than just the city centre. It's too easy to forget about the fantastic areas of the city that lie beyond the centre. After a year of lockdown people have refound their place in lots of their smaller, more local areas. And this creates an opportunity for us to harness this energy and reinvigorate all our high streets.*

Keeping things authentic and not losing Coventry

“ It's important we don't just carbon copy the sorts of bars, restaurants and shops you get in every town centre. How do we make things feel fresh and modern and welcoming without losing a feel for the place this is: Coventry with its rich history, diverse communities and amazing people.

Creating inclusive places, together

“ We need to start with a big conversation with everyone who is interested in our centres. If we truly want people to feel like they belong in the Coventry of the future, we need to ask them how it might feel and look in the future.

“ One of the things we need to ask ourselves as we imagine the future of our high streets is: 'If I had no money would I be welcome here? What would I do to spend time here? Could I spend time here and not spend money?' And I think that's always a really good test to apply. Because actually, you know, one day someone who's not got much money might have some money, and then might spend it with your business, but only if you make a space where you can also have no money.

“ We need to do some listening and some mapping of who's doing what, and where some of those spaces and places are that are naturally connecting. Places like Coventry Building Society and the theatre. But also the benches and outdoor parks that people particularly enjoy. From here we can understand where our strengths are and where we need to work together to focus on catalysing connection.

“ The risk is that the people with the loudest or more confident voices, those who have the most power, define what happens next and in doing so define who our centres are designed for. We must work to create a future where no one is left behind. Not least because the pandemic has hit those who were already called by some 'the most vulnerable'. How do we make sure they're not even further behind and are part of our connected future?

What are the ideas for action?

Immediate action

Build up networks and boost communication between all those who are growing social connections by working with and through businesses

“ There is the green business network that's run by the Council. They do look more at what can be done with their business to make it more carbon friendly, they offer grants too and rewards for those who are achieving gold-standard sustainability status. We should do the same thing for social connection! Point out and celebrate businesses who are putting social connections at the heart of their business, customers and staff.

“ We have the Coventry champions network and there are other business networks as well. But I think all of those networks can do even more to promote community and sharing across businesses.

“ We can do so much more to help businesses to share skills, share resources and save time and effort. How about a time and energy bank: businesses could come together and buy things that everybody needs, then that reduces the costs. Similarly they could lend their spaces out when they're not using them. I am interested in knowing what facilities there are in Coventry, to establish this type of cohesive network and collaborative approach.

“ We (the FSB) have surveyed our members and we have heard loud and clear that small business owners want to feel like they form part of the local leadership within the high streets. They want to be involved and engaged and have their say. That's the one thing that's really come out of this situation for us: and the keenness for small businesses to be part of the solution going forward.

Unlock wasted human capacity and wasted physical spaces

“ We probably just have to accept that there will be vacant spaces on the high street. So the question we should be asking is how can we help to repurpose those? Can we find local groups and ideas to help fill them up when they're needed?

“ By using empty shops for social activities and community stuff we can shift the norm towards one where it's normal for town centre spaces and buildings to have multiple uses. A building society during the day is used as a social club in the evening.

Create a monthly calendar to share all the ways people can join social activities and connect with one another in the city centre and high streets

“ Over the past year there's definitely been more energy to be local to spend locally. It's important we don't lose that as we move forward. How do we harness that energy and celebrate it so it continues. Perhaps a calendar of activities across the city

“ Perhaps we could be inspired by Meet Up Mondays and set up a weekly calendar of free drop in social spaces in hospitality venues?

Identify the most creative ways in which people are already building bridges between businesses and communities to catalyse social connection and celebrate these

“ There is a very good project in Warwickshire called Air Desker where people can be a member of air desk, and go to places displaying the symbol. All venues are also members and for a very small amount, you can sit there all day and get coffee and cake and lunch. It's a nice way wrapping up services and having people in venues actually makes it a lot easier and more welcoming for other people to come in and join them. So rather than being an obstacle, you can indeed become part of the furniture and part of the attraction.

“ In Westfield in London, they introduced pianos to public spaces. And it's a bizarre idea, really. And you might think that they would get damaged or vandalized in some way, but they haven't. They are used by people who can really play the piano. And it's really lovely to see people gather around and listen to them play and what what a simple idea that was. It helps create an environment where people talk to one another, and adds a little injection of surprise. It's that sort of thing that can have an effect on people striking up conversations and making connections.

“IT'S EVERYONES RESPONSIBILITY”

Identify additional, new things that could be tested and tried to catalyse new ways for people to connect

“ I'm a McDonald's franchisee. And I think the high street will change. We've had delivery going from 10% to 50% of our business and I think people will get used to that. It'll change the relationship they have with our spaces and high streets whether you're a big or a small business. So I think there is a real opportunity for independents and brands to come together as a community in high streets to create spaces to gather, connect and talk.

“ I know loads of mums and dads with babies and the pandemic has been hard. They have missed out on the chance to meet other parents at antenatal classes, nurseries or playgroups. So I want to offer a 'slow shop' for mums to bring their babies and prams and pushchairs. They could have a cup of tea and a chat and meet other parents. So that there's no rush, there's no hassle and time to connect and build relationships. But finding a space is nigh on impossible so perhaps I need to team up with a business.

“ We should do more 'slow shopping'. So many shops have had slow shopping hours for older people during which time staff are encouraged to speak to people rather than to rush them through as quickly as they possibly can. It's just a different approach or a different period of time. And I wonder if you know, trialing that for Monday afternoons and Thursday afternoons or something might be an interesting thing to do for anyone who wants a different, more connected experience.

“ There's little touches all businesses can do that make a huge difference. Like by just having a board for people to put posters and like putting a few leaflets on the counter or things like that, for things that are going on locally.

Work with everyone to design the future

“ Accessibility must be at the core of our thinking. We need city centers that are truly accessible for people to get to. And that means we must listen to the experiences of those who feel excluded or marginalised. So we need a space or the forum for people to contribute, based on their lived experience, anything that might be preventing or hindering or stopping them from coming into the centres, and return time and again.

Borrow and explore ideas that work elsewhere as the catalyst for thinking about what could work in Coventry

“ I love what Marks and Spencers do with Ruby Wax's Frazzled Cafes. It can be so easy to disrupt the way things happen in shops and create moments of fleeting or deeper connection between people.



A festival of social connection

“ Maybe we could host a festival of connections during which time there are hundreds of ways to get involved in events in and around high streets and town centres that give people the chance to connect. It would give us the chance to have a concentrated effort over a short period of time, which could then spill forward into the future and create a lasting legacy of connection. Perhaps this could be connected to the City of Culture?

Explore ways to influence and shape physical spaces that nudge people towards connection

“ Just as an older person who needed to sit down quite frequently isn't always welcome in some environments. I think some very, very simple and basic physical infrastructure tweaks, you know, like the availability of seats, can make things feel a great deal more welcome

Fix the transport problems

“ Car parking charges are a barrier to people coming into the town centres and city centre. We should look at some kind of discount being offered to encourage people to come in and connect. And perhaps shopping in independent shops too.

“ I think that's really important to get people out of their cars as much as possible. So it's been terrific seeing people out on bikes during the past year. This isn't just good for the environment. It slows us all down and once we slow down stop rushing around so much we connect with each other more.

Design spaces and the built environment in ways that encourage hybrid usage

“ Some of the more successful spaces around Coventry and Warwickshire, tend to be spaces that bring together services, support and socialising. So they'll bring in things that might relate to their local authority, or their local GP practice might be something around health. We must look to design spaces that offer a little something for everyone and are at the heart of it warm and friendly.



What power do we need? And who needs it?

We need...

TO ENSURE DECISIONS AREN'T TAKEN IN ROOMS and through processes far away from the people who are affected by them and whose right to use and belong in our city and town centres is at stake.

TO FIND THE RIGHT APPROACH to incentivise decisions on the priorities and resources that underpin our spaces to be rooted in more than just financial measures but in the possibility and delivery of meaningful connection and belonging.

TO BROKER POWER THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS and collaboration, not in silos. What can big and small businesses do together? What can different sectors achieve to build and boost belonging?

PEOPLE WHO MAKE THE BIG DECISIONS about our city centres and high streets to harness the power of their imagination and the imagination of communities to make possible the seemingly impossible.



ORGANISING OUR NEXT RESPONSE

Grapevine is already doing this work with communities. Pre-pandemic we were moving the city's communities towards a position of increased strength and resilience. The solidarity of communities' response has aided this. But maintaining and growing this momentum has now become essential both to tackling existing problems and to the city's recovery and future prosperity.

Here's what we will do

Our people-led **Connecting For Good Movement** is already pulling together action post-summit. But we want to bring more people, including the business and public sectors, deeper into the work. With them onboard we want to accelerate our activity, strengthening the city and its readiness.

Join us

Sign up for a conversation with Clare or Mel.



Come to Collaboration Station

Every third Wednesday of the month, 5.30-7pm.

Links at www.facebook.com/ConnectingForGoodCov

Email us at admin@grapevinecovandwarks.org

WHO ARE Grapevine?

We are a multi-award winning social action charity that's best at reinventing itself in response to people's needs. We help services, funders and systems find new ways to create deep social change. We're willing to be bold, remove the box and bring edge-based solutions into the middle. Check us out at:

Web: www.grapevinecovandwarks.org

Twitter: www.twitter.com/grapevinecandw

facebook: www.facebook.com/grapevinecovandwarks

Insta: www.instagram.com/grapevinecovandwarks



Cold
Drinks &
milkshakes