

TURNING A LOCAL VISION INTO ACTION FOR A VIBRANT CITY CENTRE

Key information

- Location: **Hengelo (Netherlands)**
- Population: **80 650**
- Involved in URBACT network: **RetailLink**
- More information: <http://urbact.eu/retailink>



Struggling to keep up with neighbouring cities and shifting shopping habits, Hengelo's post-World War Two centre was not pulling in the crowds. The URBACT RetailLink network helped locals cooperate better to build a clear, integrated plan for attracting quality retail — and shoppers — back to Hengelo's city centre.

"Great functionality — good accessibility for example — but a low experience value," is how Hengelo's RetailLink Project Coordinator Susan Meijer describes the centre of her city in the east of the Netherlands. After Hengelo was bombed in World War Two, much of the former old town was redeveloped. In the 1960s, a Dutch market square was added, but it did not provide a convivial environment for modern retail, which relies heavily on cultural and social provisions to encourage shoppers to stay on and enjoy a longer visit.

In 2015, before Hengelo joined RetailLink, a group of local stakeholders, including the Foundation Centre Management Hengelo (FCMH), the Foundation Real Estate Hengelo (FREH), the finance sector, housing corporations and local government, had drafted a report called Future-Proof Town, identifying a wish-list of areas in the city that needed improving. The report wanted increased inner-city visitor numbers, and staying times; higher business turnover and real estate values and improved business climate; and a more compact city centre with mutually reinforcing and recognisable districts.

Vote early, vote often

The local government reached out to URBACT to help their citizens carry out an extended problem analysis and put

forth a vision with a set of measures to accomplish it. An URBACT Local Group was formed, including local shop owners and business people already working in cooperation before URBACT. Over the course of two years, from 2016 to 2018, this group enabled the municipality to work with local stakeholders to identify distinctive historical sites downtown and build a new plan for enhancing the area around them, promoting diverse shops in a safe atmosphere to attract people from Hengelo and beyond. They entirely remodeled how car parking and bicycle parking worked in the town, plans that are currently being delivered. Through working with the RetailLink network, the URBACT Local Group created a series of proposals to reduce retail vacancy by a vital 10% but — importantly — in a manner that suited the town.

In November 2017, for example, the group organised a vote among all residents from the age of 8 up in the town to choose the best redesign of Market Square. A scheme by the pioneering Dutch landscape architects West 8 was chosen and, buoyed by the positive experience that the popular vote engendered, the local group laid out plans to renovate a prominent 1960s-built office building and transform it into an apartment block. Other proposals included converting the area around a key church — the Lambertus Basilica — into a green and quiet place. Further

plans are being drawn up to redesign a main thoroughfare and core shopping areas.

A local shop for local people

But the plan is not simply directed to the physical landscape of the town: the URBACT Local Group is also supporting and coaching start-ups, with the help of an organisation called ROZ (Regional Organization Self-Employed) which offers advice and training to entrepreneurs. The scheme has drawn in a subsidy from the provincial government and hopes to achieve an increase of 10% of new businesses in the city centre. The ambition is that the vacancy rate for retail will be reduced not simply by providing cheap rents to any outlet, but by also providing a platform for local businesses.

Other cities in the RetailLink network helped Hengelo out on topics such as the customer journey, city identity marketing and retail trends. From towns like Fermo (IT) and Romans (FR), Hengelo's local team gained an appreciation of a sense of place and a sense of history as a means of drawing in and retaining customers. "Among other things, the atmospheric public space in the historic city centres; a pedestrian zone in the city centre with attention for art, water and greenery," says Ms Meijer. This prompted those leading the renovation of Hengelo to restore or reassert what makes it unique rather than copy other towns. Ms Meijer adds, "You get fresh ideas, but you are realistic about what does and does not work in your own municipality."

Hengelo was able to set out a realistic plan to implement this local vision for a lively city centre. Underway at the moment are plans to improve the provision of public art in the town



The RetailLink partners in Hengelo

through working with local artists and arts organisations as well as working on the branding of the city and how it is best disseminated through social media and conventional media outlets such as newspapers and TV. A lasting effect of URBACT has been to improve the conversations that are needed to achieve all these policies.

"Local cooperation with the most important partners has improved and resulted in a joint course and action plan as a result of URBACT."

Susan Meijer



A vision of Hengelo's down town for the near future