

Downtown Vibrancy:

**Building Energy,
Activity, and Appeal
in the Heart of the City**

March 2026

Executive Summary

Downtown Vibrancy as an Economic Strategy

Downtown London is the city's calling card and economic heartbeat. It is where London's identity is most visible, where culture and commerce intersect, and where confidence in the city's future is most clearly signalled. When downtown is vibrant, it attracts investment, talent, and activity that benefit the entire city. When vibrancy weakens, the impacts ripple well beyond the core.

This working paper positions downtown vibrancy as a measurable economic outcome, not simply a quality-of-life aspiration. Vibrancy emerges when the right conditions are in place: a strong and diverse business mix, active cultural and entertainment offerings, inviting public spaces, a steady flow of visitors, a growing residential population, and critically, a healthy and engaged office sector that brings daily life and purchasing power into the core.

Both storefront and office vacancy represents one of the most pressing challenges to downtown vibrancy, but also one of its greatest opportunities. Prolonged vacancy carries measurable financial, cultural, and community costs, signalling market weakness and dampening confidence. At the same time, strategic activation and adaptive reuse can transform underused spaces into drivers of energy, perception change, and long-term economic resilience.

While vacant office space presents clear challenges, it also offers opportunities to increase downtown vibrancy. Through adaptive reuse, including residential conversion and temporary activation, and through shifts in workplace policy that prompt employers to re-evaluate office location and space needs, underutilized space can be repositioned to support a more active and resilient downtown. Office workers remain a critical audience as employees, customers, residents, and daily users of downtown spaces. Their presence is central to sustaining activity throughout the day and into the evening.

This paper introduces a Downtown Vibrancy Model built on five interconnected pillars:

- **Retail, Hospitality & Services,**
- **Arts, Culture & Entertainment,**
- **Public Realm & Placemaking,**
- **Tourism & the Visitor Economy, and**
- **Residential & Mixed-Use Living.**

Together, these pillars form an integrated framework for strengthening downtown's energy, appeal, and economic performance across corridors, seasons, and audiences.

Underpinning these pillars are cross-cutting strategies focused on adaptive reuse, activation of existing assets, partnerships, policy alignment, and sustainable funding mechanisms. London's designation as a UNESCO City of Music presents a unique opportunity to leverage culture as a tool for vacancy reduction, place activation, and economic differentiation, while collaboration with business, tourism, and institutional partners ensures vibrancy is shared, supported, and scaled.

Downtown London is building momentum, but vibrancy remains uneven across time, place, and experience. The next phase requires connecting existing successes into a cohesive strategy that supports business confidence, strengthens the office ecosystem, enhances public life, and tells a clearer story about progress. With coordinated investment, creative activation, and shared ownership, downtown can continue to evolve as a place that is lived in, worked in, visited, and celebrated every day, by everyone.

Downtown Vibrancy

Building Energy, Activity, and Appeal in the Heart of the City

Introduction

Downtown London is the City's calling card. It's the place where London introduces itself to the world. It's the first impression visitors feel, the daily backdrop residents experience, and the stage where culture, commerce, and community converge. When downtown thrives, it signals confidence, creativity, and opportunity citywide. When it struggles, the whole city feels the impact. We represent the city's heartbeat, the place where people connect, create, and celebrate. Vibrancy is more than a feeling; it's an economic outcome that emerges when the right conditions come together. It's anchored by a strong mix of retail and services, a thriving cultural scene, well-designed and accessible public spaces, a steady flow of visitors, a robust office population and a growing residential and customer base that sustains energy beyond the 9-5 work day.

A recent LinkedIn post from Thom Mahler, City of Calgary's Director of Downtown Strategy, sums up the value proposition for investing in our downtowns:

“ Investing in downtowns is a virtuous circle, the more attractive they become to residents and businesses, the more investors take note. As new investment delivers property tax generating revenue, the better off become all taxpayers. Not to mention, they create a destination for some of the most rewarding urban experiences they can get in their city, improving their overall quality of life.”

This working paper explores the **principles and pillars of downtown vibrancy**, offering a framework for how London can strengthen its downtown and inspire confidence, creativity, and investment. Vibrancy is essential as an economic indicator, not just an amenity for a healthy community.

According to [Zero Empty Spaces](#), vacant property activation specialists, vacancy is the biggest untapped asset for property owners and municipalities. This is a unique way of looking at vacant spaces as not only a problem, but also as an opportunity.

“Vacant storefronts are often treated as a passive waiting period for property owners and a cosmetic issue for municipalities. In reality, prolonged vacancy imposes significant financial, cultural, and community costs. Empty spaces reduce net operating income, depress property valuations, increase carrying and insurance costs, and signal market weakness to lenders, tenants, and investors. These impacts compound over time, creating a hidden “vacancy tax” that extends beyond lost rent.

Strategic activation reframes vacancy as an opportunity rather than a liability. Temporarily activating empty spaces mitigates financial erosion by improving perception, foot traffic, and long-term leasing potential. Active storefronts enhance a property’s visibility and desirability, shifting market narratives from decline to momentum.



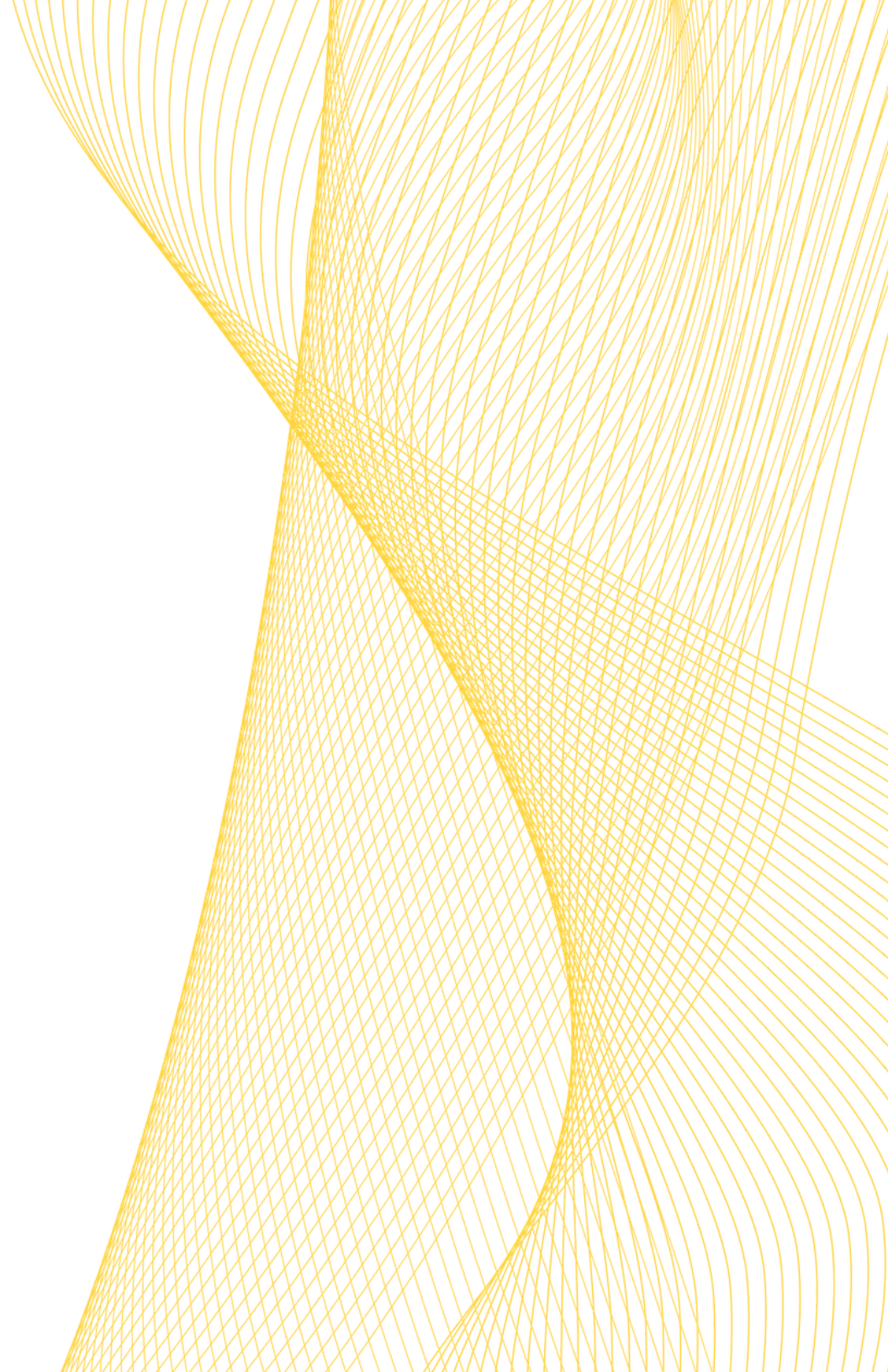


Beyond economics, vacancy drains cultural energy from commercial districts. Dark storefronts discourage engagement and reduce perceived safety, while activated spaces—such as artist studios, co-retail hubs, and pop-up food concepts—restore vibrancy and public interest. Cultural activity attracts visitors, supports surrounding businesses, and lowers perceived risk for future long-term tenants.

At the community level, activation rebuilds trust and confidence. Visible reinvestment signals care and future potential, increasing civic pride and encouraging local participation. Flexible, low-barrier spaces support emerging entrepreneurs and create a pipeline of viable small businesses. For municipalities, activation strengthens downtown vitality, stimulates economic ecosystems, and reinforces a shared sense of place.

In aggregate, vacancy-to-activity strategies demonstrate that doing nothing carries measurable costs, while intentional activation delivers financial resilience, cultural renewal, and community momentum.”

Beyond vacant storefronts, we recognize the importance of addressing office vacancy as well. While vacant office space presents clear challenges, it also offers opportunities to increase downtown vibrancy. Through adaptive reuse, including residential conversion and temporary activation, and through shifts in workplace policy that prompt employers to re-evaluate office location and space needs, underutilized space can be repositioned to support a more active and resilient downtown. Office workers represent an important demographic for downtown as customers, as residents, and as active users of downtown spaces. Having addressed the economic and vibrancy impacts of vacant offices, more support may be needed to signal that a return to the office is good for the office workers too.



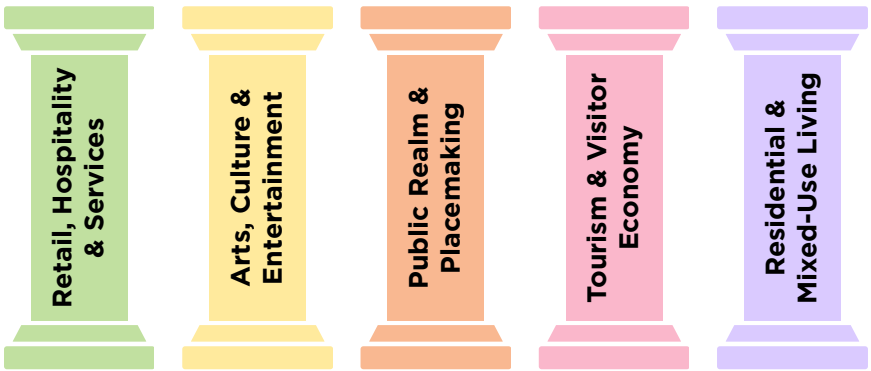
The Vibrancy Model:

Five Pillars, One Purpose



DOWNTOWN VIBRANCY

ENERGY • ACTIVITY • APPEAL



ADAPTIVE REUSE & ACTIVATION OF EXISTING ASSETS

Partnerships, Policy, and Funding Mechanisms

Downtown Vibrancy is supported by five interconnected pillars:

1. Retail, Hospitality & Services

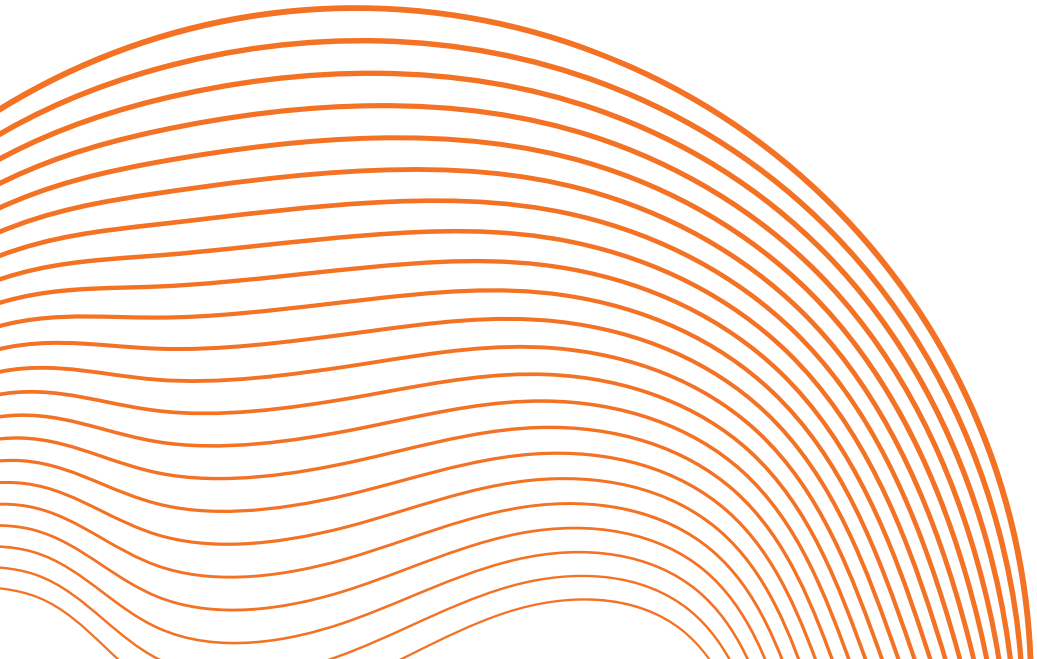
We are building a diverse and dynamic commercial ecosystem that meets daily needs, supports social life, and creates destinations. To do this, we need to curate a balanced business mix, support small business resilience, encourage adaptive reuse of vacant spaces, and attract experience-oriented retail. We recognize the important role that service-oriented uses (grocery, pharmacy, personal services, wellness, childcare to name a few) contribute to long-term vibrancy as well, particularly with office tenants and downtown residents. Our measures of success include office and retail vacancy rates, business retention and attraction, and a business diversity index.

2. Arts, Culture & Entertainment

Our downtown is a district that celebrates creativity, culture, and local identity every day. To do this, we need to focus on leveraging London's UNESCO City of Music designation, expand live performance opportunities, and integrate art and creative endeavours into everyday spaces and throughout the year. Daytime activations (e.g. lunch-hour programming, exhibits) animate the core for residents and office workers alike, recognizing the relationship between cultural activation and the needs of surrounding businesses and neighbours. Cultural vibrancy adds significant value to office employers, giving employees another reason to enjoy working at the office which supports both attraction and retention of employees. We can measure progress in a variety of ways, including the number of cultural events, attendance, artist participation, distribution throughout the year and throughout the day/evening, and local economic impact of cultural activity.

3. Public Realm & Placemaking

Our public spaces need to be designed for people in a way that is welcoming, beautiful, and full of life. Our investments in streetscape and placemaking should support employer confidence in bringing staff back to work downtown as well as attracting the broader consumer demographic. We can do this by focusing on ongoing streetscape enhancements, ongoing maintenance and consistency in block-by-block conditions, seasonal installations, lighting and landscaping, and reimagining underused spaces for temporary or pop-up uses. We can design and maintain the public realm with key target audiences in mind (e.g. daytime office workers 7-9 AM, lunch time, 4-6 PM, evening visits for dinner, entertainment, etc.). We recognize that we need to support a 24-hour economy, and our public realm is a sustaining factor in these endeavours. We will know we are making progress by paying attention to indicators like foot traffic, dwell time, satisfaction with cleanliness/safety/ambience, and the number of activated public spaces. Further, we must ensure that funding is available for ongoing maintenance of installations, as appropriate.



4. Tourism & Visitor Economy

Downtown offers the city's signature visitor experience and gateway to London's identity. In support of this goal, we will continue to collaborate with partners at Tourism London and Ontario's Southwest Tourism Corporation to create packaged experiences, cross-promote festivals, create welcoming communications and align downtown events with regional marketing campaigns for tourism. Beyond festivals and events, we need to pay attention to off-peak periods and shoulder seasons, helping smooth activity throughout the year. As well, we need to continue to collaborate with and support conference planners, RBC Place and downtown hotels and other venues who bring business travelers to London and host them, as part of both the office and tourism ecosystems. We can measure progress as it relates to hotel occupancy, visitor spending downtown, event attendance, and our share of citywide tourism activity occurring downtown throughout the year. We recognize that downtown represents a base for exploring the broader city and region, and we can collaborate with hotels, venues and regional partners to strengthen our role with visitors.

5. Residential & Mixed-Use Living

We are building a downtown that's lived in, worked in, and visited, to foster community, safety, and vitality. To do this, as residential growth continues, we recognize the importance of daily life amenities that support long-term livability to ensure residents can enjoy everyday living (groceries, services, schools, and creative spaces). We encourage thoughtful integration of a variety of ground floor uses in new residential projects, well designed to help maintain street-level energy and continuity within our city blocks. We also support mixed-use growth that complements and strengthens office uses without significantly displacing them with residential conversions. Measures of success include population growth, residential occupancy, housing diversity, business mix and after-hours foot traffic.

Underpinning the five pillars of vibrancy is the combined power of:

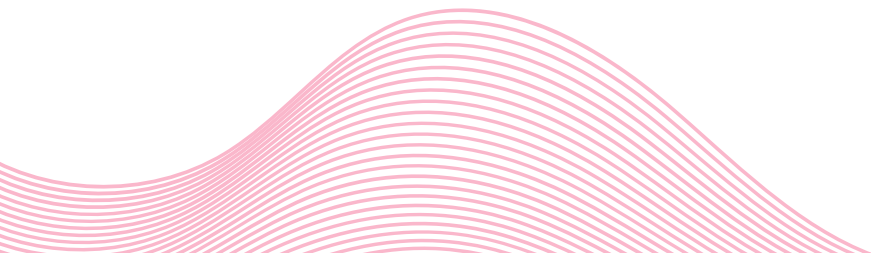
1. Adaptive Reuse

We want to breathe new life into old buildings by turning vacant spaces into lively, creative destinations like music venues, art galleries, creative business incubators, studios, or immersive attractions. It's about keeping the history, adding creativity, and filling our downtown with experiences that bring people together, create community and support local businesses.

As a UNESCO City of Music, London has a unique opportunity to address vacancy through ***culture-driven adaptive reuse***, transforming dormant spaces into active hubs for music, arts, and creative enterprise. Drawing on best practices from local, North American and international case studies, we can create a pathway to reduce vacancies, stimulate economic growth, and strengthen London's cultural brand. We echo the message of the working papers from the London Chamber of Commerce regarding the importance of culture in both defining the unique value proposition of our downtown and creating prosperity.

2. Activation of Existing Assets

Early wins include more intentional activation of existing assets. Great work is already happening with festivals and events on Dundas Place, at Covent Garden Market, Victoria Park and Canada Life Place, in addition to performance venues like The Grand Theatre and London Music Hall.



3. Partnerships, Policy and Funding Mechanisms

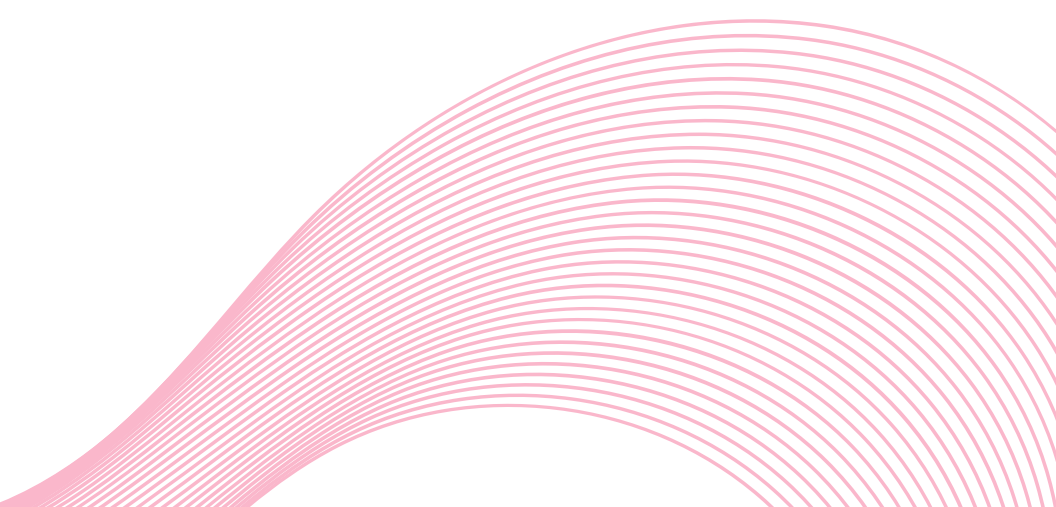
- **Collaboration with the London Chamber of Commerce**

The Chamber's Downtown Reimagined white papers stress that downtown vibrancy requires active participation from the business community. Joint opportunities include:

- Co-develop business-led improvement projects (e.g., storefront enhancement funds).
- Pilot Business Improvement Bonds or pooled micro-grants for downtown beautification.
- Host a joint "Business for Downtown" summit on how employers can invest in vibrancy as a workforce attraction strategy.

- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and Funding Tools**

- City-BIA-Developer partnerships for plaza upgrades, parklets, or laneway activations.
- Corporate sponsorships for festivals, lighting, and cultural programming.
- Tax Increment Equivalent Grants (TIEGs) to support adaptive reuse and residential infill.
- Philanthropic investment from foundations and organizations like London Arts Council supporting arts, housing, or community development.
- Community benefit contributions from new developments dedicated to public realm improvements (similar to current Public Art contributions).



Vibrancy Scorecard

(2025 Baseline)



An illustrative diagnostic using available data and stakeholder input.

Pillar	Score (1-5)	Current Status	Key Needs / Opportunities
Retail, Hospitality & Services	3	Moderate variety; retail vacancies improving but uneven across corridors.	Support independent retail; incentivize ground-floor activation.
Arts, Culture & Entertainment	4	Strong identity as a City of Music; growing events calendar.	Better coordination, long-term funding, and cultural infrastructure.
Public Realm & Placemaking	3	Improved through Dundas Place and activations; some underused areas remain.	More lighting, greenery, and flexible spaces for programming.
Tourism & Visitor Economy	3	Robust summer festivals; limited year-round tourism draw.	Build off-event visitation and integrate business partnerships.
Residential & Mixed-Use Living	4	Rapid growth through conversions and new developments.	Support complementary services and ensure affordability.

Overall Downtown Vibrancy Index: 3.4 / 5

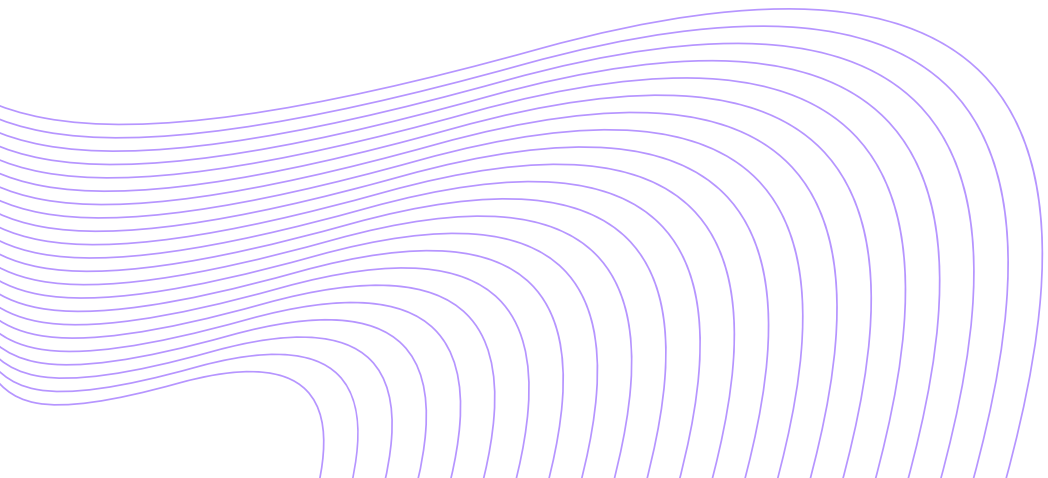
“Building Momentum”

Downtown London shows strong growth in cultural energy and residential life but needs continued investment in retail curation, visitor experiences, and public realm design to achieve full vibrancy.

Key Opportu- nities

Strengthen Downtown London's Vibrancy

Downtown London's vibrancy is building, but it remains uneven across corridors, hours, and audiences. The opportunity now lies in **connecting the energy already present** through coordinated investment and creative activation, including residents, visitors, businesses, and culture. These opportunities focus on unlocking activity, enhancing experience, and sustaining momentum.



Opportunities to Drive Vibrancy



1. Activate Vacant and Underused Spaces



2. Strengthen Cultural Programming and Identity



3. Build a 24-Hour, 4-Season Economy



4. Curate a Balanced Business Mix



5. Strengthen Residential & Mixed-Use Density



6. Create a More Inviting Public Realm



7. Build More Cross-Sector Partnerships



8. Tell the Downtown Story Better

1. Activate Vacant and Underused Spaces

Turn physical gaps into places of discovery and creativity.

If we don't do this, vacancies and empty lots signal disinvestment, even when broader momentum exists.

Action Plan:

- Incentivize short-term and adaptive reuse of vacant storefronts for pop-ups, artists' studios, and temporary exhibitions. Partner with landlords to pilot "Vacant to Vibrant" programs that reduce rent barriers for first-time entrepreneurs. Along with this, continue to support the city's Vacant Commercial Space Fit-Out Grant Program. New tenants moving into the downtown describe this program as a **"game changer"** for them.
- Develop an inventory of available spaces and collaborative landlords who are willing to modify terms to accommodate short-term, "meanwhile" creative uses that can grow to larger enterprises. Identify and remove real and perceived barriers to these tenancies.
- Use creative window installations and art activations to maintain street-level energy while spaces transition. Partner with local arts collectives (for example, TAP Centre for Creativity, Embassy Culture House and others) to create pop-up galleries in vacant spaces. Honour our history as a cultural generator. Address landlords' requirements to cover at a minimum their utility costs and insurance coverage for temporary installations. Work with local realtors to communicate the value of these temporary uses in marketing vacant spaces with these "meanwhile" uses.
- Collaborate with landlords to test interim uses that draw people downtown.
- Support employers in their return to work actions by providing a toolkit they can use to explain benefits to working downtown, for both existing employees and new hires.
- Support leasing agents and landlords with leasing brochures highlighting the benefits of downtown office spaces.

Outcome:

- Continuous street front energy, lower perceived vacancy, and a more dynamic pedestrian experience.

2. Strengthen Cultural Programming and Identity

Make creativity and culture visible every day, not just during major festivals. London's designation as a **UNESCO City of Music** positions culture as both an economic and identity driver.

Action Plan:

- Create programming like London Arts Live to layer small-scale cultural activations (buskers, art pop-ups, performances) between major festivals.
- Promote a unified "Downtown Is Alive" cultural brand across partners: Downtown London BIA, Tourism London, London Music Office, London Arts Council and City of London.
- Reinvest in infrastructure that supports culture year-round (lighting, micro-stages, sound systems, and artist residencies).
- Develop programs and funding to match businesses with performers, along with infrastructure noted above. Integrate music-related retail goods into local retail and other businesses.
- Consider creating a **Music District** concept linking venues, murals, and cafes.
- Invest in music-integrated public realm design (e.g., sound benches, street pianos) where feasible.
- Expand Downtown London experiential trails and activations into Culinary, Wellness and Music themes, co-marketed with Tourism London and Ontario's Southwest.
- Signature annual "Music City" festival co-led by Tourism London, London Chamber of Commerce, London Music Office, LEDC, other community organizations and the BIA. Expanding collaboration with **London Music Hall, Fanshawe's MIA program, and Western University's Don Wright Faculty of Music.**

Outcome:

- A downtown that feels creative and expressive daily, deepening its emotional connection with locals and visitors.

3. Build a 24-Hour, 4-Season Economy

Extend vibrancy beyond 9-5 and beyond summer. Evening and winter periods remain downtown's quietest times, despite high daytime and event-based traffic. Focusing on the night time economy will have positive impacts on perceptions of safety as well as vibrancy.

Action Plan:

- Incentivize later business hours with joint promotions and themed night markets.
- Further develop the night time economy by prioritizing and supporting experiences that bundle multiple destinations together in promotions (trails, pop-up experiences, districts, etc.) with particular focus on evenings.
- Partner with post-secondary student groups to advocate for later transit operation hours to get night life patrons back home safely at the end of their extended evenings.
- Encourage winter-friendly design: heat lamps, lighting, and sheltered seating that extend outdoor use. Support this via funding mechanisms as well.
- Support events that embrace seasonality (e.g., winter light installations, warm-up patios, DJ and Skate events, "Night in the Core", or a holiday pop-up bar series). We are inspired by the business community collaborations we see in other cities, like [Chicago's Holiday Pop-Up Bars](#).

Outcome:

- Predictable, year-round foot traffic that supports local business, creates new experiences that differentiate the district due to our unique business mix, and changes public perception of safety and activity.

4. Curate a Balanced Business Mix

Partner with MainStreet London and other organizations to recruit and retain the right mix of businesses to create a holistic downtown experience. An over-concentration of one type of use weakens retail variety and visitor appeal.

Action Plan:

- Revisit our **Downtown Business Recruitment Strategy** and update it to identify target gaps (e.g., family dining, boutique retail, grocery).
- Offer recruitment incentives tied to diversity of offer or underrepresented sectors.
- Leverage data from our **downtown database and dashboard** to track sector health and recruitment success.

Outcome:

- A complete ecosystem where residents can live, shop, dine, and play without leaving downtown.

5. Strengthen Residential & Mixed-Use Density

Keep the conversion momentum going and support daily life downtown. More residents represent more activity, stability, and natural surveillance, impacting perceptions of safety.

Action Plan:

- Advocate for continued **office-to-residential incentives** through the City's CIP programs.
- Encourage inclusion of ground-floor retail in new developments.
- Support grocery, childcare, and other resident-serving businesses to round out livability for both residents and office workers.

Outcome:

- A 24-hour neighbourhood that sustains restaurants, retail, services and culture for both residents and commuters.

6. Create a More Inviting Public Realm

Ensure every downtown block feels safe, comfortable, and human-scaled. Perceived safety and comfort strongly influence how long people stay and whether they return.

Action Plan:

- Invest in lighting, greenery, and micro-plazas to enhance comfort. A micro-plaza is a small, human-scaled public space created by transforming leftover or underused areas (wide sidewalks, street corners, parking lot setbacks, laneways, or former loading zones) into places where people can sit, gather, rest, or experience programming.
- Expand “adopt-a-corner” partnerships for corporate-sponsored beautification.
- Continue visible Clean Team work and communicate its impact through data storytelling.

Outcome:

- A cohesive, high-quality streetscape experience that reflects civic pride and reinforces the city’s calling card image.

7. Build More Cross-Sector Partnerships

Align business, cultural, and public interests under shared goals for vibrancy. Downtown vibrancy depends on coordinated effort; no single organization can do it alone.

Action Plan:

- Deepen collaboration with organizations like **Tourism London, Chamber of Commerce, and post-secondary institutions** to co-fund and co-program activations.
- Establish a **Downtown Vibrancy Roundtable** to align data, resources, and advocacy.
- Pursue public-private partnerships for placemaking, event infrastructure, and creative reuse projects.

Outcome:

- Shared ownership of downtown’s success and sustainable funding for creative, high-impact projects.

8. Tell the Downtown Story Better

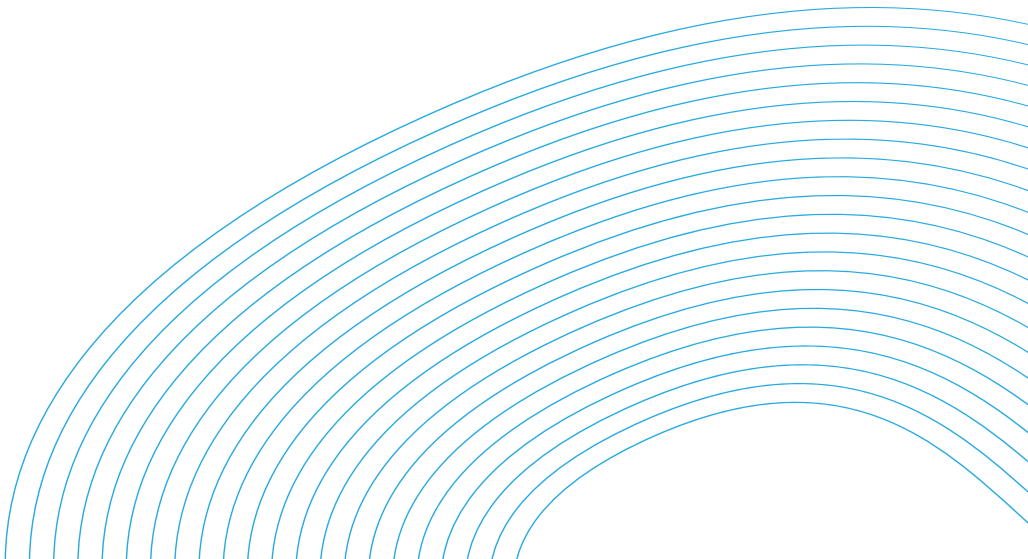
Change the narrative by showcasing real progress and people. Perception often lags behind reality. A clear, consistent story helps shift public sentiment and attract investors.

Action Plan:

- Launch a “Downtown Momentum” communications campaign highlighting success metrics (e.g., Clean Team stats, new residential units, events, business openings).
- Empower BIA Board and members with key talking points to amplify positivity.
- Share impact infographics and dashboards through newsletters, socials, and City updates.

Outcome:

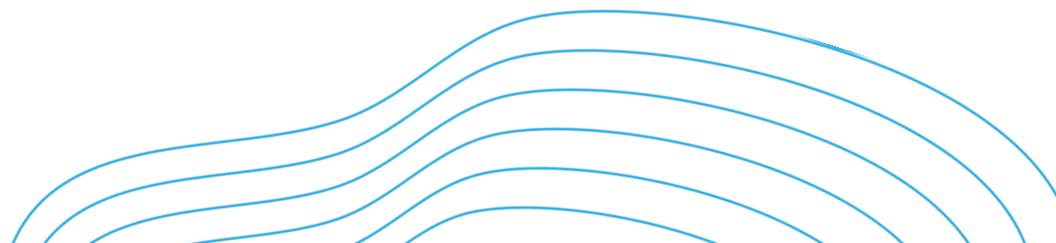
A community that sees, believes in, and contributes to continuing the downtown momentum.



Summary: The Next Phase of Vibrancy

Downtown vibrancy isn't something we build once; it's something we keep alive.

It's a continuous process of curation, creativity, and collaboration. London's next big opportunity lies not only in starting new projects, but first in connecting the ones already underway into one cohesive, citywide movement which includes adaptive reuse, resident growth, cultural programming, business curation, and storytelling.



Measuring Progress

- 1. Develop a Downtown Vibrancy Dashboard** using available data (foot traffic, retail occupancy, event counts) linked to Downtown London's digital dashboard and momentum reports.
- 2. Convene an Annual Vibrancy Roundtable** with the City, Chamber, Tourism London, and cultural organizations.
- 3. Update the scorecard annually** to monitor improvements and align with Downtown London's strategic goals.

By aligning efforts across public, private, and community sectors, London can fully realize a downtown that is alive with energy, activity, and appeal, every day, for everyone.

What's Next?

Our working paper on downtown vibrancy makes the case for nurturing and carefully curating the experiences and energies that impact perceptions of progress and momentum. We have been listening to our members and community partners, looking for natural collaborations and innovative thinking to create opportunities for real impact and real connections.


Call for Collaboration

We invite businesses, institutions, agencies, cultural organizations and residents to help us shape the downtown of the future into an even more vibrant, competitive and inspiring place to live, work, play and stay. In our individual organizations, and in our collective work together, we all have the potential to impact this truly unique place with transformative ideas and actions. Let's keep growing together and make the downtown a vibrant and prosperous heart of the city.



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