

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 7 December 2023

REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director Environment & Regeneration

PORTFOLIO: Deputy Leader – (Major Projects)

SUBJECT: Widnes Town Centre Vision

WARDS All

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of the report is to update the Executive Board on the development of a vision and delivery strategy for Widnes Town Centre and outline the next steps in progressing this work.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That Executive Board

- 1) supports the Vision and objectives outlined in the report;**
- 2) agrees the next steps outlined in section 4.1 of the report; and**
- 3) agrees to the establishment of a Town Centre Panel.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The Council commissioned Aecom and the BE Group to develop a 'high-level' Vision and Delivery Strategy for Widnes Town Centre. The aim of the Widnes Town Centre Vision is to guide the regeneration of the town centre and to identify opportunities and priorities for development.

3.2 This work precedes a Masterplan for the Town Centre and seeks to highlight investment and intervention opportunities and provides a high-level delivery strategy and action plan to deliver these priorities.

3.3 A market analysis was undertaken which was used as a basis for identifying opportunities and market gaps that could be addressed. Equally, a SWOT analysis was undertaken to inform future interventions.

3.4 Guidance has been provided which outlines some practical short-, medium- and long-term actions and advises on where further studies

and planning is required.

- 3.5 The work to date included consultation with commercial agents, public sector agencies and key landholders. Councillors were also consulted through two Members' Seminars. Members will be aware of the challenges facing Halton's town centres as well as the potential opportunities, but the two seminars served to create consensus and get agreement and 'buy in' as to where future limited resources need to be prioritised.
- 3.6 Due regard has been given to the broader context in which Widnes Town Centre would be operating over the next few years, for example, but not exclusively, Climate Change, social deprivation, skills, technological changes, and the way people use town centres.
- 3.7 The consultants concluded that Widnes town centre performs 'solidly' but is primarily retail rather than a broader town centre, and therefore, needs to provide a more diverse offer. Some parts of the town centre are failing. Some parts are hidden. Sustainable transport connections and connectivity within the town centre could be improved. Some other retail, leisure, cultural and civic functions are outside the town centre leading to a lack of critical mass and overreliance on car usage. However, the consultants refer to opportunities in respect of development sites that require further consideration.

To start to address these issues and to proactively progress opportunities in the town, a vision and set of accompanying three objectives has been identified.

Vision:

Widnes town centre is a modern, attractive and vibrant centre servicing a range of needs of the town. The centre is well connected to its community and key assets within Widnes.

The town centre is diverse, celebrating and reflecting the Widnes community. It provides a broad range of employment and business opportunities. It is the focus of Widnes' community, social and civic functions, including a thriving evening economy.

Objective	Comments
A more cohesive town centre	This objective is in recognition of Widnes' sprawling nature and disconnected layout. The centre can be difficult to navigate for those unfamiliar with it and key elements are poorly connected, despite being physically close (e.g., Widnes Shopping Park and the high street or the Market Hall and the

	high street).
A more diverse town centre	The town centre is heavily reliant on the retail sector, meaning it is vulnerable to downturns in this sector. An economically more diverse offer within the town centre would make the town centre more resilient, but also more attractive as a destination. A thriving town centre should be a location for a broad range of uses, including retail, commercial, civic, community, leisure, food and drink, entertainment, social and residential.
A more sustainable town centre	The town centre is very car-dependent, which has a higher impact on the environment in terms of climate change emissions and pollutants. Reducing the reliance on car trips by increasing public transport use and active travel would improve the sustainability of the town centre. Increasing the quantity of residential dwellings within and near to the town centre means that more users of the town centre would not require car trips.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 A Widnes Town Centre SWOT analysis was undertaken and from these future interventions to meet the proposed objectives have been developed.

The proposed interventions include Development Sites; Public Realm options; a focus on Placemaking as well as the need to progress other strategies. It should be emphasised that evidence has also been provided to demonstrate the need for each intervention.

Next Steps

The development of a Town Centre Vision for Widnes Town Centre builds on a tried and tested approach applied in the regeneration of Runcorn Old Town. The Council's strategy to date has been

- a) to develop a vision; obtain consensus and agreement as to the key ingredients needed to develop a successful town centre.
- b) develop a Masterplan specific to developable and deliverable schemes.
- c) identify potential delivery mechanisms and funding routes.

This approach has enabled the Council to articulate a clear and coherent set of priorities to developers and key stakeholders when

seeking external funding and inward investment for the town.

Therefore, the following as 'next steps' are proposed:

1. The consultants have identified potential mechanisms for delivery ranging from purely private sector schemes to public sector involvement. It is proposed that an assessment of each delivery mechanism is provided to focus on the role the Council needs to play in ensuring that schemes can be brought forward to the market in a timely manner.
2. Prepare a brief to commission consultants to undertake master planning work in line with the agreed priority development sites.

Factors to consider would be an audit of existing facilities, stakeholder and public engagement, opportunities and analysis, optioning and design, viability assessment, preferred design, delivery and funding options.

3. Undertake an assessment and cost benefit analysis of the short-, medium- and longer-term interventions that have been identified.
4. Establishment of Town Centre Panel. It is proposed that a Town Centre Panel is established to guide the work outlined above and make recommendations arising from the review to the Executive Board would provide options for the future implementation of this work. The Group would comprise:
Deputy Leader (Major Projects)
Portfolio Holder Environment & Renewal
1 representative from each Widnes Ward.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 At this point, the financial implications relating to possible town centre interventions are not known.
- 5.2 A Cost Benefit Analysis will be undertaken which evaluate for example, whether capital investment in the town centre environment/public realm will lead to increase in footfall, or whether revenue interventions aimed at supporting local businesses, attracting 'non-users' of the town centre and improving town centre coordination will produce similar results.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

Town centres historically provide the major economic focus of a local area, and therefore, this work will have implications for all the Council's priorities. The way we use our town centres has evolved over many decades and continues to change. The primacy of retail in town centres

is reducing, with successful town centres being diverse, experiential places that encourage visits for a wide range of reasons, including cultural, leisure, socialising, education, health, employment and services, as well as retail.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 A risk analysis and options appraisal will be completed as part of the next steps outlined in paragraph 4.1.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 Higher unemployment levels and lower health outcomes are close to the town centre. The regeneration of Widnes town centre should look to support and improve social outcomes in these areas. This would include better access to a broad range of employment opportunities, and access to a wide range of health, community, public transport, and support services.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Consideration of the impacts of climate change, including reducing the carbon footprint, mitigation and adaptation will be required. At the town centre level, this would include such considerations such as reduced private transport use, provision of local renewable energy sources, alternative heating sources, Electric Vehicle charging points, appropriate building design, innovative construction methods, shading, planting. The Widnes Town Centre Vision can have a role to reduce the town centre's impact on the climate as well as promoting good practices for residents and businesses.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.