

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 17 April 2025

REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director Environment and Regeneration

PORTFOLIO: Deputy Leader and Climate Change

SUBJECT: Widnes Town Centre Regeneration Framework Key Decision

WARD(S) Appleton and Central & West Bank

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present to Members for approval, the Regeneration Framework for Widnes Town Centre.
- 1.2 The Regeneration Framework sets out a set of spatial strategies and deliverables to drive the future of Widnes Town Centre. It creates an ambitious picture of the future which, with the support from partners and stakeholders, can become a deliverable and implementable programme to benefit all who live, work and visit Widnes Town Centre. However, it is for the Council to determine whether it chooses to accept some, or all of the recommendations made in the document.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- 1) the Widnes Town Centre Regeneration Framework, the spatial strategies and projects outlined within it be supported and approved by the Executive Board;**
- 2) the Board approves next steps to delivery as outlined in section 7 of the Framework;**
- 3) delegated authority be given to the Executive Director for Environment and Regeneration (in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Major Projects and Climate Change) to pursue further investigations into identified project areas as opportunities come forward;**
- 4) to move towards establishing a Widnes Town Centre Strategic Board comprising relevant public and private sector partners, to have direct oversight of the delivery of projects; and**

5) the Widnes Town Centre Regeneration Framework and its two supporting documents be published on the Halton Borough Council website.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 In December 2023, the Executive Board was presented with the Widnes Town Centre Vision. The aim of the Vision was to guide the regeneration of the Town Centre and to identify opportunities and priorities for development. The Vision presented had earlier been considered at a Members Seminar which to gauge the feelings of the wider membership of the Council and this influenced the final report then presented to Executive Board in December 2023.
- 3.2 The Regeneration Framework was also presented to a selection of Halton Borough Council staff through two dedicated workshops, as well as to the Widnes Town Centre Panel, which was established following the recommendation of the previously approved Vision document. The Panel was established to comprise one member per ward from each of the electoral wards in Widnes, so are to receive a board range of views during the early stages of work as the Council develops a Vision and moves towards formally adopting a Development Framework. These sessions provided an opportunity for review and feedback.
- 3.3 The Executive board endorsed the Vision and the recommended next steps. The Framework before the board today is the result of the approval of the 'next steps.'
- 3.4 The Framework itself is supported by two evidence-based documents which have been composed by industry specialists to inform the special strategies and projects. These are:
- Widnes Town Centre Parking, Active Travel and Movement Study (produced by WSP); and
 - Widnes Town Centre Engagement Feedback Report (produced by Placed).
- 3.5 **The Framework** contains a comprehensive review of the context within which the town centre sits. It summarises the evolution of the town centre over the years, and some of the challenges which will need to be overcome, before setting out the where the development opportunities will likely lie.
- 3.6 The Framework sets out the Vision and Objectives that were previously agreed at the Council's Executive Board (December 2023) and builds on these to develop nine spatial strategies.

- 3.7 The objectives and spatial strategies seek to make Widnes Town Centre:
1. More sustainable through providing a more holistic approach to the town centre, providing an attractive high street and a greener town centre.
 2. More cohesive through rebalancing movement across the town centre, simplifying the vehicle network and repairing connections to and from the town centre.
 3. More diverse through providing diverse uses for diverse users, promoting town centre living and celebrating and enhancing Widnes' heritage and identity.
- 3.8 The above three aims were first presented at a Members Seminar in August 2023 and have formed the basis of the Vision that was subsequently developed.
- 3.9 The projects that have been identified in the Regeneration Framework to achieve this are detailed in section 6 of the Framework.
- 3.10 **The Widnes Town Centre Parking, Active Travel and Movement Study** has been composed to inform the identification of the projects included in the Framework, specifically relating to movement and connectivity. The Study highlights challenges and opportunities that are crucial for the successful development of a thriving town centre.
- 3.11 The Study makes the following recommendations that flow through to The Framework strategies and projects:
- Increase Visitor Traffic: By maximising the town centre's strategic location, more footfall boosting local businesses and the economy.
 - Sustainable Transport Promotion: Encouraging the use of buses, trains, walking, and cycling can reduce traffic congestion and reduce the environmental impact of transport.
 - Space Reallocation: Reallocating vehicle-dominated spaces can free up land for new developments, such as parks, community centres, or commercial spaces.
 - Community Benefits: Development of freed-up land can lead to enhanced community amenities and services, improving the quality of life for residents.
 - Transport Hierarchy: Establishing a transport hierarchy can prioritise sustainable modes of transport, ensuring a balanced and safer transport system and improving the choice of travel for all.
- 3.12 **The Widnes Town Centre Engagement Feedback Report** has also been compiled to summarise the public engagement programme that engagement specialists PLACED delivered during

October and November 2024 and feed into the strategies and projects in The Framework.

- 3.13 The Feedback Report provides an overview of the different engagement activities delivered and how they were promoted, details on who participated, and a comprehensive outline of the engagement findings.
- 3.14 Those who participated in PLACED's engagement programme highlighted a range of issues from the need for a more diverse retail offer, to the importance of making the town centre a safer, better connected, and more attractive area.
- 3.15 Throughout all workstreams, a dominant theme was the desire for an attractive and bustling high street. Residents expressed concerns about the current state of the high street, with its appearance issues, low footfall, poor quality retail, and lack of variety.
- 3.16 Safety and Security was another prominent theme with participants flagging anti-social behaviour, dangerous cycling, vandalism, and youth crime.
- 3.17 The findings also indicate that the town centre is currently car-centric with various barriers to active travel such as unreliable public transport, poorly maintained routes and complex crossings. There were calls for improved public transport links and connectivity.
- 3.18 Response to the engagement delivered was, on the whole, positive with residents and stakeholders keen to see projects delivered that transform Widnes Town Centre into a safe, attractive and well-connected area with a busy high street and diverse retail offer. These aspirations for transformation, however, coincide with hopes for future funding to enhance and preserve existing assets such as the market area and parking facilities.
- 3.19 The Regeneration Framework was also presented to a selection of Halton Borough Council staff through two dedicated workshops, as well as to the Widnes Town Centre Panel, which was established following the recommendation of the previously approved Vision document. The Panel was established to comprise one member per ward from each of the electoral wards in Widnes, so are to receive a board range of views during the early stages of work as the Council develops a Vision and moves towards formally adopting a Development Framework. These sessions provided an opportunity for review and feedback.
- 3.20 Overall, the response was positive, with attendees generally expressing support for the proposed approach. Members were

encouraged to share their views at the meeting or follow up directly with officers. Some members provided additional feedback via emails and further discussions.

- 3.21 At the most recent Panel meeting, there were differing opinions regarding the availability of car parking spaces in the Town Centre. Some members felt that developing surplus spaces would be a more effective use of land, while others believed there was no surplus at all.
- 3.22 There was strong support for enhancing the transport hierarchy, particularly in ensuring that cycling infrastructure is safe for both cyclists and pedestrians.
- 3.23 Members also highlighted the need for the town to cater to both younger and older demographics, noting that younger people's interests have shifted away from a traditional drinking culture.
- 3.24 Other suggestions included improving the general cleanliness and maintenance of the public realm, making Council services and financial advice resources more visible and accessible, and promoting the concept of a 'smart town.' Additionally, there was discussion around ensuring the Framework includes clear references to climate change and sustainability.
- 3.25 Comments and suggestions provided by Members were carefully considered and have been incorporated into the Framework where relevant, ensuring it reflects local priorities and aligns with community needs. Suggestions not directly included in the Framework are being explored as 'meanwhile projects' to be pursued alongside the Framework's proposed initiatives.
- 3.26 Members will be aware that progress has been made to bring forward the former Leisure Centre, Magistrate's Court and Police Station site and it will be important that any future development reflects the key priorities outlined in the town centre framework being presented.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Framework aligns with existing local and national policy objectives, supporting economic growth, sustainability, and community well-being. Its implementation may require updates to planning policies, investment strategies, and partnership agreements to ensure effective delivery.
- 4.2 Consideration will also need to be given to how the Framework interacts with emerging policies, including those related to housing, transport and environmental sustainability.

- 4.3 Ensuring alignment with the Local Plan and broader strategic priorities will be essential to securing funding and stakeholder support.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 At this point, the financial implications relating to possible Town Centre interventions are not known.
- 5.2 However, it is clear that the projects contained within the Framework will need to be prioritised, as it will not be feasible to develop them all simultaneously.
- 5.3 Further site acquisitions may be required to facilitate key developments, and any future bids for funding will need to be supported by a Green Book appraisal to ensure robust economic justification.
- 5.4 A phased approach to delivery will be essential, aligning investment with available resources and funding opportunities.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

Possible positive implications depending on what developments and programmes are implemented.

6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy

Potential for job creation and inward investment.

6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families

Possible positive implications depending on what developments and programmes are implemented.

6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need

Possible positive implications depending on what developments and programmes are implemented.

6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future

Any development that comes forward through the Framework will be built to environmentally friendly building regulation standards and biodiversity net gain.

6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community

The future projects can help create assets and public realm for local people to enjoy.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 Each project within the Framework will be subject to individual risk assessments to identify and mitigate potential challenges.
- 7.2 A key risk is maintaining public confidence. Extensive consultation has taken place, and there is a risk that stakeholders and residents may lose faith in the process if tangible progress is not made.
- 7.3 Additionally, the success of the Framework is dependent on external factors such as the state of the property market and the ability to attract private sector investment.
- 7.4 Economic fluctuations and shifts in investor confidence could impact the viability and timing of projects, making it essential to adopt a flexible and responsive approach to delivery.

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 and planting. The Framework can have a role to reduce the Town Centre's impact on the climate as well as promoting good practices for residents and businesses. Furthermore in regards to the Kingsway Quarter site referenced above there is an opportunity to explore the use of the energy supply to be provided from the propose Solar Farm extension, as previously reported to Executive Board in July 2024.

KEY DECISIONS ON THE FORWARD PLAN

The definition of a key decision is as follows:

A decision which is likely to

- a) result in the local authority incurring expenditure or make savings which are significant; and/or*
- b) be significant in terms of its effects on communities.*

10.0 REASON(S) FOR DECISION

The Framework has the potential to impact the wider Halton community.

11.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

N/A

12.0 IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Subject to obtaining the necessary permissions and securing funding, the period from 2025 to 2035.

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

- Widnes Town Centre Vision 2023 (Previously approved)
[Widnes Town Centre Vision.pdf](#)
- Widnes Town Centre Regeneration Framework 2025
[3591-ID-004-01-Town-Centre-Regeneration-Framework-WEB.pdf](#)
- The Widnes Town Centre Parking, Active Travel and Movement Study 2025
[Widnes Town Centre Parking, Active Travel and Movement Study v02 \(1\).pdf](#)
- The Widnes Town Centre Engagement Feedback Report 2025
[240601_PLACED Widnes Town Centre Engagement Feedback Report \(1\).pdf](#)
[PLACED WidnesTC Engagement Summary.pdf](#)