



West Midlands
Combined Authority

WMCA Housing and Land Delivery Board

Date	25 October 2018
Report title	Town Centres Programme
Portfolio Lead	Councillor Mike Bird – Housing and Land
Accountable Chief Executive	Deborah Cadman – Chief Executive, WMCA
Accountable Employee	Gareth Bradford – Director Housing and Regeneration
Report has been considered by	

Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The WMCA Housing and Land Delivery Board is recommended to:

1. **Agree** that the first wave of the town centre programme should consist of five centres; supplementary analysis will be provided at the Board meeting to inform the selection of the five centres;
2. **Delegate** authority to the Director of Housing and Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Lead for Housing and Land to agree the membership of the Regional Town Centre Task Force. The types of expertise and sectors proposed to be represented on the Task Force and its role are set out at paragraph 2.12.

1. Purpose

1.1 This report:

- Updates the Board on the emerging regional town centre programme;
- Seeks Board agreement that five town centres should be selected to act as a vanguard and test bed for the programme in a first wave - with future waves following on from that experience and learning. Supplementary analysis will be provided at the Board meeting to inform the selection of the five centres; and
- Seeks Board agreement that authority be delegated to the Director of Housing and Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Lead for Housing and Land to agree the membership of the Regional Town Centre Task Force whose role will be to champion and support the town centre programme.

2. Background

2.1 There is no shortage of studies, assessments and reports identifying the deep seated structural and cyclical problems affecting the UK's town centres and high streets: from the Portas Review to Town Centre Investment Management to two Grimsey Reviews and high profile announcements of closures or re-structuring at BHS, House of Fraser, and M&S.

2.2 Existing centres are often based around their retail offer making them vulnerable to changes such as the increase in online shopping, out of town retail and changing consumer habits. This in turn manifests itself as vacant units, low end retail occupiers and areas of decline making town centres less attractive as an investable proposition.

2.3 The effects are particularly significant in small and medium sized centres, and secondary areas of larger strategic centres, that are less resilient to change.

2.4 A number of key themes apply to most centres:

- Too many centres rely too heavily on retail. Changing consumer habits and the internet are changing shopping habits along with out of town retail and leisure sites. Centres need to diversify their role to become community hubs incorporating residential, cultural, educational, leisure, business and health uses, as well as retail.
- Many centres suffer from a poor quality built environment, often dominated by cars and HGVs, too focussed on allowing people to travel through efficiently. Centres need to create people focussed environments, safe, walkable, spaces to exchange ideas and places to dwell, whilst enhancing accessibility by a range of transport modes.
- Consumers increasingly expect data and technology to be integrated into their day to day experience and make life easier, including, broadband, Wi-Fi, Artificial

Reality, Smart technology and future innovations. Centres need to embrace changing technology.

- Many centres have land ownership issues, either with multiple ownership of land, making interventions and land assembly difficult or with investment priorities not always in the interests of local communities. Strong local governance is required, with full engagement with people and business

2.5 Town centres will need to re-invent themselves as modern centres that function to meet these challenges head on and provide a centre that meets the needs of residents if they are to remain viable as centres and improve the wellbeing of residents that would otherwise suffer in failing town centres.

The Town Centre Programme

2.6 The town centre programme will support local councils to accelerate their plans to regenerate and renew their town and district centres, bringing Combined Authority resource, support and expertise as required to help turn those plans into reality and accelerate them. This is an opportunity to approach town centres in a new and exciting way in a limited number of pilot centres, developing the programme collaboratively with local authorities, residents and other stakeholders and testing a range of available tools and approaches such as evidence gathering, stakeholder mapping and engagement, asset management and planning tools/powers etc. First wave centres will benefit from combined authority resources in terms of funding and staff resource and act as a test bed for interventions but all centres will benefit from transferable interventions and lessons learned whether they form part of the programme or not.

2.7 The programme is not seeking to duplicate the work already being undertaken by local authorities and other stakeholders in the region; rather the programme will compliment and build on existing plans, strategies and frameworks already prepared or under preparation and be developed in collaboration with the LEPs and local authorities.

Actions to date

2.8 Following strong interest expressed at the Housing and Land Delivery Board in July, the WMCA wrote to the seven constituent authorities seeking expressions of interest for identified centres to form part of the first wave of the town centre programme. Since then a discussion has taken place at the Housing and Land Delivery Steering Group on the programme, key criteria and approach and there has been collaborative working with a dedicated sub group of officers from each of the seven constituent authorities. Their focus has been to consider the identification of, and rationale behind, the centres which would form the first wave.

2.9 A desk top analysis of potential sites has been undertaken by the sub group. The analysis provided an initial qualitative assessment of each town centre, based on information provided by local authorities in response to a series of questions posed on defined characteristics, qualities, etc. Supplementary analysis will be provided to the Board to inform the selection of five centres for the first wave of the programme

- 2.10 It is proposed to assess the programme over the coming months with a second wave commencing in approximately six months' time. This would be open to all constituent and non-constituent members where they would like support.

The Regional Town Centres Task Force

- 2.11 Strong, vibrant, healthy and inclusive town centres are an essential part of the West Midlands' economy and social fabric. WMCA is proposing to establish a Regional Town Centres Task Force to champion our town and city centres locally and nationally, explore and influence the national agenda and help support local partners in deploying targeted interventions in our centres.

- 2.12 Given this remit, membership of the Task Force will need to include a variety of public and private sector organisations whose representatives can deliver theory, best practice and practical support. Governance arrangements will need to be put in place to ensure that the knowledge and innovation can be shared with commercial organisations, local communities and others so that they can be quickly turned into action. The types of organisations who could make a difference are listed below; their knowledge and expertise, translated into local action, could make the West Midlands an exemplar of good practice on a matter of national interest.

- Academia
- Advisory
- Commercial property
- Finance
- Government
- Housing
- Local Government
- Public Services
- Retail, leisure and other town centre uses

Next Steps

- 2.13 Once a decision has been made by the Housing and Land Delivery Board on the town centres to form the first wave of the programme, each will be the subject of further, more detailed analysis with local partners under a number of headings. This needs to be proportionate but needs to provide the evidence to demonstrate that interventions are deployed to tackle problems, not symptoms, maximise opportunities and address challenges. This will help ensure that each town centre can deliver effective and meaningful change in the timescale required. Arrangements for monitoring progress on delivery will also be put in place.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 There are no direct financial implications as a result of approving the recommendations within this report. Any investment into the chosen sites by WMCA will require appropriate funding to be identified and the budget approved in line with WMCA governance processes.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 Section 113A(1)(a) of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 gives the CA a power of competence appropriate for the purposes of carrying-out any of its functions. Part 4 of The West Midlands Combined Authority Order 2016 (2016 No 653) confers that the functions relating to any Economic development and regeneration in the constituent councils are exercisable by the CA. Part 3 of The West Midlands Combined Authority (Functions and Amendment) Order 2017 confers the functions corresponding to the functions of the Housing Community Agency has in relation to the combined area.
- 4.2 Part 7 of the Mayoral of The West Midlands Combined Authority (Functions and Amendment) Order 2017 confers the power to pay Grant (pursuant to s31 of the Local Government Act 2003) to the Mayor with assistance of members and officers of the Combined Authority.
- 4.3 There are no direct legal implications arising as a result of this report. However, the proposals set out in this report may have legal implications in the future which will be considered at the appropriate time through future reports as necessary

5. Equalities Implications

- 5.1 An Equality Impact Assessment will be conducted to identify key equality implications and engagement needs for the overall programme.

6. Inclusive Growth Implications

- 6.1 An important success factor for the programme will be the extent to which it promotes inclusive growth. Individual interventions have the opportunity to address this through the programme.

7. Geographical Area of Report's Implications

- 7.1 First wave centres will demonstrate a reasonable spread of activity across the conurbation. Future waves of the programme will be open to all constituent and non-constituent members so the spread of activity could be widened, cascading benefits to other areas. In addition, sharing learning from the pilot centres is a crucial part of the programme and lessons learned will apply across the region.

8. Other Implications

None

9. Schedule of Background Papers

None