

# West Midlands Combined Authority Town Centre Toolkit

## Building the Future of Town Centres

Draft document for discussion

(3 September 2019)

## Introduction

This document sets out a wide range of potential interventions (a toolkit of tools) that the WMCA is keen to explore under its ambitious and ground-breaking town centre regeneration programme.

Town centres are facing seismic challenges – both economically and socially. A diverse package of interventions will therefore be needed across public, private and the voluntary sectors. Hence WMCA launched a comprehensive programme with significant investment attached in 2018 to help turnaround these centres and build on the great work the region already had in train.

Interventions in town centres come in all shapes and sizes – from high level endorsement of a particular approach by a mayor, to light touch support for community events through to funding technical appraisal work for key projects and master planning of development sites to investing in hard infrastructure and land acquisition & assembly. There is no one size fits all approach that is going to work in every town centre so choosing the right tools that respond to the challenges and opportunities of each town centre will be critical. Examples from around the country (especially towns which have won or been shortlisted for the Great British High Street Competition) show that community events and activities can be just as impactful as the repurposing of a derelict site to housing.

The toolkit has begun being applied already to the five pilot centres (Bilston, Bordesley Green, Dudley St Thomas, Walsall St Matthews and West Bromwich Eastern Quarter). Central to this work has been understanding the evidence in each centre and developing an ambitious vision for each centre and then turning that quickly into a series of soft and hard, short term and long term interventions for that centre in a Delivery & Investment Plan.

For too long town centre plans across the country have not been delivered for all sorts of reasons and have focused too much on a particular prescribed set of top-down interventions. Our approach is very different – to build from a strong evidence base and locally led vision for each centre which can deploy a comprehensive programme of possible interventions in a regional toolkit (set out here).

Delivery & Investment Plans can be used to bid for WMCA or national funding and/or attract private investment. Where WMCA funding or investment is sought there is now a simple, well laid out funding assessment route for all project sponsors we call the ‘Single Gateway’ process (see Annex A). Projects should apply to the following email address [[landanddevelopment@wmca.org.uk](mailto:landanddevelopment@wmca.org.uk)] to begin that process and will be allocated a project sponsor in WMCA.

This toolkit provides examples of tools and interventions that could be used in a wide range of centres and which have been used elsewhere. What town centres that have repurposed and reimaged themselves show is that community champions and engagement will be central to

success. We therefore welcome an active dialogue with residents, charities, public bodies, private businesses and investors. Tools should never be 'imposed' on centres or communities, they are there to support, enable, unlock and accelerate local vision and ambition for the centres identified.

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# Context

## Town centres

For the purposes of this document 'town centres' has been used as a general term for centres across the region, regardless of size or function. It includes city, strategic, district, town, local and linear centres.

## The Challenge.....

We live in changing times and nowhere is that truer than in our town centres – the lifeblood of any community. Our town centres are often based around their retail offer but that has made them vulnerable to changes in the retail sector such as the increase in online shopping, out of town retail and changing consumer habits.

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 visible announcements of closures at BHS, House of Fraser and Marks & Spencer.

Simply put there is too much retail space in most town centres for current business needs. But it is more fundamental than that - the way consumers are choosing to shop, work, live, travel and spend their leisure time has shifted in profound ways and the rise of the internet has accelerated changes that were already emerging. The built environment, national policy and taxation systems have not kept pace with those cyclical

and structural changes. So we need to embrace more radical and long lasting solutions. Doing the same things and expecting a different result is just not going to work.

Retail vacancies, poor quality public realm, crime and anti-social behaviour, an outdated physical environment, lack of housing and footfall in town centres all contribute to a poor perception of the town centre. A loss of pride in a town has wider impacts on quality of life, health and wellbeing and aspiration, skills and productivity.

## .....and the Opportunity

Many 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 changing needs of all residents if they are to remain viable as centres. Whilst retail and commercial uses will still have a role in centres, changes will often mean a reduced reliance on traditional retail in favour of residential, leisure, community, health, cultural and other such uses. A whole place approach will be required to generate the footfall, pride and opportunity.

This is a great opportunity for us to approach the repurposing of town centres in a new and exciting way. We want to develop any town centre plans or 'toolkit' 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, compulsory purchase orders, local development orders etc but also softer interventions such as pop-up shops, incubator units for local businesses, health and

social care hubs, local markets, business improvement districts, neighbourhood plans and much much more. Many of our town centres now require a range of 'hard' and 'soft' interventions to make them resilient to current and future changes in retail and to diversify their role. We need to be repurposing our town centres for the next 100 years and thus building in resilience and adaptability will be critical.

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## Successful Town Centres

There is a wide range of research, case studies, strategies, plans and tool kits looking at what makes a successful town centre. The LGA toolkit and Scottish Town Centres Partnership offer helpful guidance for the ingredients required to make a successful centre. Within the West Midlands the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership launched a Towns and Local Centres Framework providing details of what makes a successful centre as well as information on LEP funding.

The main points from these guides, toolkits and frameworks are summarised within this toolkit.

The key ingredients can generally be categorised into the following key aspects for outcomes that reflect a successful town centre or intervention:

**Environment:** Based on the local character and history. Creating high quality buildings (including cost effectiveness of ownership and occupation) and public spaces with a sense of place with people as the focus including creating safe environments

**Town Centre Uses:** Facilitating the conditions for a broad mix of uses, away from the traditional retail offer. Will include creative industries, public sector services, health, office, leisure, residential and some retail. Also need to consider the format and flexibility of spaces and accommodating temporary uses.

**Technology:** Including lighting, broadband, Wi-Fi, Augmented Reality, Smart technology and future innovations

**Accessibility:** Putting people at the heart of town centres whilst enhancing accessibility by a range of transport modes is key to any successful town centre.

**Governance:** No strategy or plan will be successful without a clear commitment from all stakeholders to delivery. Whilst strong leadership from the top of organisations equally meaningful engagement with local people and business is critical to re-purpose centres. Clear delivery outcomes and action plans are essential

## Role of WMCA – An Offer to All..

In October 2018 WMCA launched a brand new regional town centre programme – more comprehensive than any undertaken previously. Crucially it sought to tackle some of the fundamental cyclical and structural causes impacting on these centres through an evidence-based approach. Five pilot centres are developing comprehensive and exciting town centre Delivery & Investment Plans

The WMCA is also committed to supporting the regeneration and repurposing of all town centres across the West Midlands – creating a movement of change – so hence this toolkit has been developed as an offer to all communities and town centres of the region of the sorts of interventions that WMCA can help support and enable.

When it comes to town centres WMCA has 4 critical roles:

- As an investor through its £multi-million investment pots that allows us to invest in many different ways in our town centres and to deliver town centre plans – from landscaping to land acquisition
- As a landowner through the land we already own in town centres and are acquiring to facilitate regeneration and leadership of the public land programme in the region (called ‘One Public Estate’)
- As a broker and influencer – to attract new investors and developers in partnerships with local councils, bring people together around key interventions and delivery plans

- As a champion of the town centre agenda with HMG and the private sector – bringing new expertise and support for town centres across the region by bringing all potential public and private investment behind town centre plans and co-designing schemes that maximise opportunity for additional private investment

The interventions in this toolkit includes a wide variety of interventions we have seen trialled in the UK and around the world which we are keen to support and deploy with local partners in our town centres. These have been categorised in three ways, ‘Policy’ Interventions, ‘Hard’ Interventions and ‘Soft’ Interventions. It is important to remember that not all of these approaches will be applicable to every centre and the best tools and interventions are those grounded in a solid, evidenced understanding of local needs and aspirations.

### **‘Policy’ Interventions**

These are policy tools available to help create the right environment for town centres to prosper, whether by relaxing planning control through a Local Development Order or tightening control to achieve a desired outcome through an Article 4 direction, they offer a chance to re-frame the way we think about town centre policies.

### **‘Hard’ Interventions**

These are land and hard infrastructure based projects such as site acquisition & assembly or site clearance to deliver sites ready for investment and development.

### **‘Soft’ Interventions**

These are other interventions without a direct land implication that can generally be delivered quicker and help drive footfall in centres either directly (such through the running of events or indirectly such as through improving the environment)

### **Tools and interventions to support delivery**

There are a wide range of tools and interventions available to support delivery of regeneration priorities in town centres. The following tables provide a starting point for the types of tools available. Whether these are required will depend on the type of centre, the challenges, the aspirations for the centre and crucially will be informed by the evidence.

The tables in this toolkit should not be treated as a checklist or be taken as the ‘answer’ to town centre regeneration. It is critical that solutions are developed locally and where one intervention may work in one centre, in another it may not be appropriate.



## Policy Interventions

These are policy based 'interventions' and can be used to lay the foundations for building a successful town centre.

<b>Research and Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The commissioning of evidence to support town centre interventions such as audits, market analysis, viability, ground conditions etc</li> </ul>	<b>Article 4 Direction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An article 4 direction can be used to limit permitted development rights.</li> </ul>
<b>Local Development Orders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A local development order can be used to grant planning permission for new buildings or changes of use that support a flexible approach to town centre uses.</li> </ul>	<b>Compulsory Purchase Orders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of CPO where fragmented ownership and change unlikely to occur if left to landlords or landlord not invested in future vision for centre.</li> </ul>
<b>Asset Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying land ownership. Bringing together opportunities to locate public buildings in town centres.</li> <li>The One Public Estate programme provides an opportunity to identify land in public ownership that could help unlock the potential of town centre.</li> </ul>	<b>Advertisement Control</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Powers to restrict advertisements where they are currently harmful to local amenity (or highway safety) (Directions Restricting deemed Consent/Areas of Special Advertisement Control)</li> </ul>
<b>Town Centre Audit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish clear baseline against which to assess the current health of a centre and to measure the success of any interventions. Centre audits need to move away from simplistic vacancy rates approach. Need to encompass the multi-functional role of centres and take a more proactive approach.</li> </ul>	<b>Design Charter</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistent messaging, place making principles, promoting the best of the west midlands.</li> </ul>

## Hard Interventions

The WMCA has funding available to support the provision of hard infrastructure projects.

### Land Acquisition & Site Assembly

The acquisition and assembly of sites is often a complicated process requiring specialist skills and knowledge, as well as funding to deliver. Through the WMCA's single commissioning framework the WMCA can consider applications for funding and support for site delivery. We will work with local authority partners and the private sector to bring forward schemes that can provide to transformation required in many centres. Building on the excellent work already being undertaken across the region.

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## Soft Interventions

<b>Public Realm Enhancements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public realm is the public spaces between buildings accessible to everyone. Enhancements to the public realm does not have to mean pedestrianisation. It is about creating spaces people can meet, interact, feel safe and strengthen local character to create an attractive environment.</li> </ul>
<b>Pedestrianisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Removing cars and other vehicular traffic from a centre or specific routes in a centre to create a more pedestrian friendly environment.</li> </ul>
<b>Urban Gardens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating space in urban areas for the growing of food.</li> </ul>
<b>Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased police presence through locating of police in vacant units</li> </ul>
<b>Temporary Uses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Temporary uses can be an effective way of utilising otherwise vacant spaces or premises. They can provide opportunities for local businesses/community groups/schools/charities etc to promote their work or products, attracting footfall and social interaction.</li> </ul>
<b>Events</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A well-defined events programme can give people a reason to visit a centre, create opportunities to meet and interact and create a vibrancy in the centre.</li> </ul>

<b>Incubator Units</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incubator units can be used for new start-up businesses along with mentoring support to assist them in establishing as a business, with a view to moving to a vacant town centre shop on a permanent basis. Often subsidised premises and running costs during a six month.</li> </ul>
<b>Digital Rewards Scheme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Combine online voucher offers with the local high street experience, offering discount for shopping locally.</li> </ul>
<b>Online Retail Presence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting high street stores to develop an online presence to help promote the business and boost sales. Using online to complement the business rather than as competition.</li> </ul>
<b>Contactless Payments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With the rise of mobile phones, banking on the go, many people are moving towards contactless payments. Companies now offer products for receiving payments with contactless readers.</li> </ul>
<b>Place Marketing Town Centre Website</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating a clearly defined brand for the town centre.</li> </ul>
<b>Cycling Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Well planned routes for cyclists, provision of secure bicycle storage and changing areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Business Improvement Districts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creation of BIDs to help drive change in town centres</li> </ul>

<b>Pop-ups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>shops, cafes, bars, food stalls</li> </ul>
<b>Festivals and events (local connections/celebrate heritage/local distinctiveness)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing festivals and events can be a successful way of generating interest in a town centre and drive footfall. Festivals and events should ideally be based on local connections and distinctiveness and fit with the long term vision for the centre.</li> <li>food, beer, arts ,music</li> <li>street theatre</li> <li>performance arts</li> <li>carnival</li> <li>sports day</li> </ul>
<b>Temporary uses</b>	<p>Temporary uses provide a great way to maintain footfall and interest in a centre during longer periods of regeneration by making effective use of cleared sites. The uses can help maintain a vibrant centre.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>art gallery</li> <li>parks and play areas</li> <li>public squares</li> <li>beaches</li> </ul>

<b>Public Realm/Street Furniture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>benches, hanging baskets, recycling bins</li> <li>lighting (lighting to enhance streets and buildings)</li> <li>signage (single brand/cleaning/updating)</li> <li>de-cluttering streets (removal of unnecessary street furniture)</li> <li>alfresco dining (branded uniform approach)</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental</b>	<p>The environment in a centre is fundamental to how people experience that centre and can influence perceptions. There are ways to make an immediate impact pending longer term regeneration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>trees and floral planting</li> <li>community litter pick, graffiti removal (and create dedicated graffiti zone/wall)</li> <li>urban gardens/allotments</li> </ul>
<b>Shop Front Enhancements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>frontage improvements</li> <li>vinyls</li> <li>temporary displays</li> </ul>
<b>Art/Heritage trail</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Gromit unleashed', 'Birmingham Bears', 'Wolverhampton Wolves', etc. (themed art installations subsequently sold for charity)</li> </ul>

<b>Marketing:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing materials based on the centres unique selling point. This should be based on the overall vision for the centre.</li> <li>• Flyers</li> <li>• goodie bags</li> <li>• promotional material</li> <li>• tv/radio advert</li> <li>• town centre website/social media presence</li> <li>• banners</li> </ul>
<b>Technology</b>	<p>Technology can be used in a variety of ways, from linking bricks and mortar to the online environment to changing the way people experience the high street. In an ever evolving digital world town centres need to consider seamlessly integrating with changing consumer habits and expectations around technology. Access to a reliable fast internet connection is becoming an expected norm and free WiFi within town centres can attract visitors and provide an opportunity to market the town directly. Opportunities exist around the rollout of 5G.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• online presence for retailers (Shopappy, Wolverhampton eBay trial),</li> <li>• contactless payments</li> <li>• free WiFi</li> <li>• augmented reality trail (similar to Pokemon Go)</li> </ul>

<b>Retail Reward Scheme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• digital vouchers/incentive schemes</li> <li>• loyalty card schemes</li> </ul>
<b>Car Parking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relaxed restrictions, replace pay and display with 'check in/check' out systems</li> </ul>
<b>Electric vehicle charging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• installation of charging infrastructure</li> </ul>
<b>Enhanced Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCTV</li> <li>• police presence in vacant units</li> </ul>
<b>Family activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• family events, soft play, crèche provision</li> </ul>

All interventions need to be set out in an ambitious, locally led town centre Delivery and Investment Plan. Major projects (eg hard infrastructure) will be subject to approval via WMCA Single Commissioning Framework and expressions of interest should be submitted to [landanddevelopment@wmca.org.uk](mailto:landanddevelopment@wmca.org.uk).

## Creation of Delivery & Investment Plans

Through the WMCA town centre programme three key steps were identified in preparing centres for Delivery & Investment Plans; having a strong clearly articulated **vision**, clear **evidence** to inform decision making supportive **policy framework** and well developed **projects** to deliver the vision and address the challenges identified by the evidence. Each stage should be underpinned by meaningful community engagement.

**Vision:** A clear and ambitious vision supported by residents and businesses is essential for delivering town centres for the future. The vision should reflect an understanding of the evidence and the USP for the centre to set out how the centre will change to remain a focal point for the area. There should be a clear reason for people to want to live, work and relax in the centre. Confidence can be provided to investors through a credible, widely owned vision, defining the role of the centre, the ambition and its unique selling point. The vision should leave no doubt to what is to be achieved in the centre.

**Evidence:** A key stage in developing strategy and identifying interventions for regenerating a town centre is to identify and measure key indicators of a successful centre and gauge local opinion. Local councils and Local Enterprise Partnerships are particularly good resources for local data. Sample indicators for assessing the health of a town centre

can include footfall, foot-flow, vacancy rates, parking occupancy, rental levels, public services, customer catchments, public transport and journey times, well-being etc. A robust baseline focussed on wider town centre health (not just retail vacancy rates) in order to identify key interventions and to evaluate those interventions. Much of this data will be pre-existing and will need to be collated into a single town centre health check.

Qualitative surveys can be used to tell more about what type of place a centre is including. This qualitative data can help identify perceptions of the town centre and understand what attracts people and equally why people stay away.

**Policy Framework:** The planning policy context needs to provide certainty to investors. Where necessary planning policies should be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose and supportive of town centre re-purposing and alternative uses. However, out of date planning policies should not be a reason to delay action and investment.

**Projects:** Clear articulation of projects to deliver change in town centres. **Not limited just to land and infrastructure, but social, environmental and capacity building.** The projects should be to create the right conditions for investment and economic and social vitality into the centre. Careful consideration should be given to how best to maximise economic and social impact through prioritising and joining up development opportunities.

The Delivery & Investment Plan is the key document for unlocking funding and attracting investment for town centres.

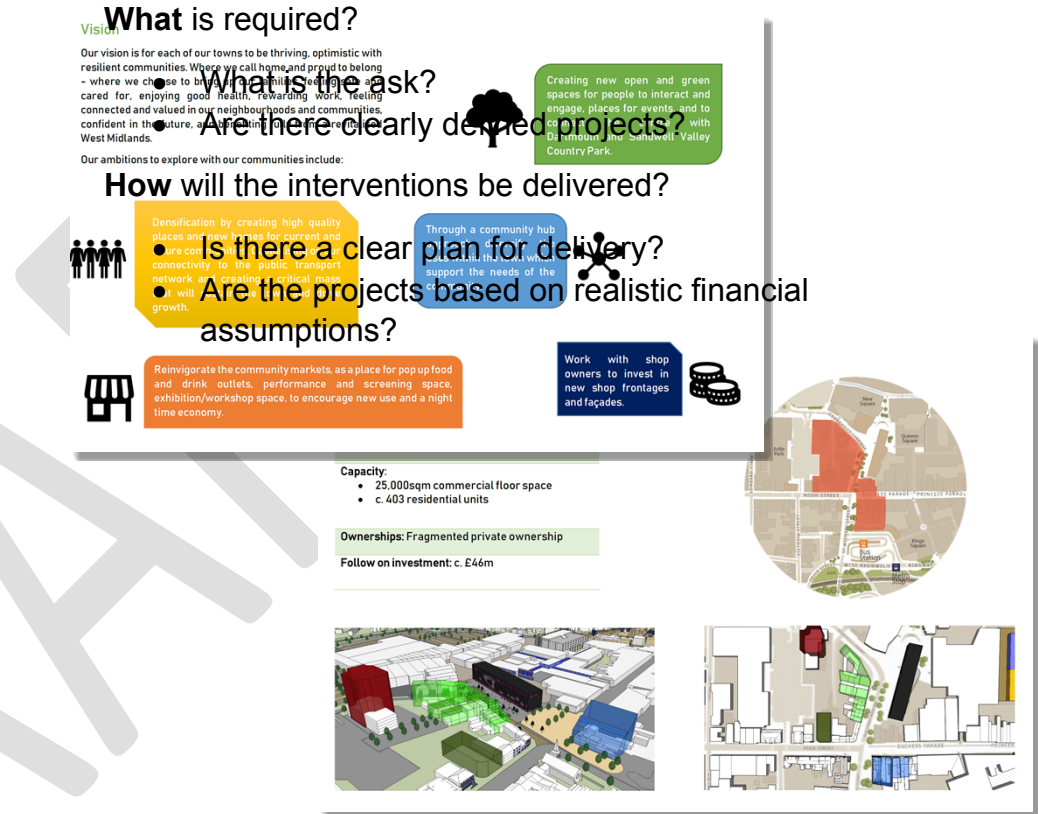
A standard template has been developed through the town centre programme pilot centres to capture the key stages above and the required level of detail to justify investment.

These Delivery & Investment Plans must answer the 'why' 'where' and 'how'.

**Why** should someone invest in the town centre?

- Why this centre rather than another?
- Why is this centre ready for investment?

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## **Case Studies**

**Case studies to be added**

**National**

**Regional**

**Pilot Centres**

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**WMCA Funding - Single Commissioning Framework**

SCF Summary to be added.

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