<u>Walsall Town Centre</u>

<u>Draft Public Realm Study</u>

Contents

1. <u>Introduction</u>

1.1 Aims and Structure

The public realm in Walsall town centre is of varied quality and lacks consistency. While recent developments such as Waterfront South and Tesco have led to some improvements in certain areas, on the whole the public realm across the town centre needs improving. Much of the environment is tired and there needs to be a single strategy for the public realm and legibility. In recent discussions with agents and developers, public realm improvements have been identified as critical investments which should not be overlooked.

This strategy aims to:
- Provide context to how the town centre has evolved, its heritage and how it is currently used
- Provide an overview of the current condition of the town centre public realm, street furniture, legibility, and signage
- Identify recent, current and upcoming developments and how these could alter routes and linkages across the town
- Identify priority areas for public realm improvements
- Set out a guide to colours and materials for future public realm improvements based on current planning consents
- Identify funding and delivery mechanisms.

1.2 Town centre context

Today it can be considered that the heart of Walsall town centre is Park Street. This is the main shopping street, and its pedestrianisation means it also acts as a link between other key areas, such as St Matthew's Church to the east, and the New Art Gallery to the west. Park Street also links the three transport hubs – St Paul's bus station, Bradford Place Interchange, and Walsall Rail Station. To the north of the town centre is the ring road, and this part of the town has been an area of focus for regeneration activity in recent years. To the west of the town centre is the canal basin, an important and unusual feature in the town centre.
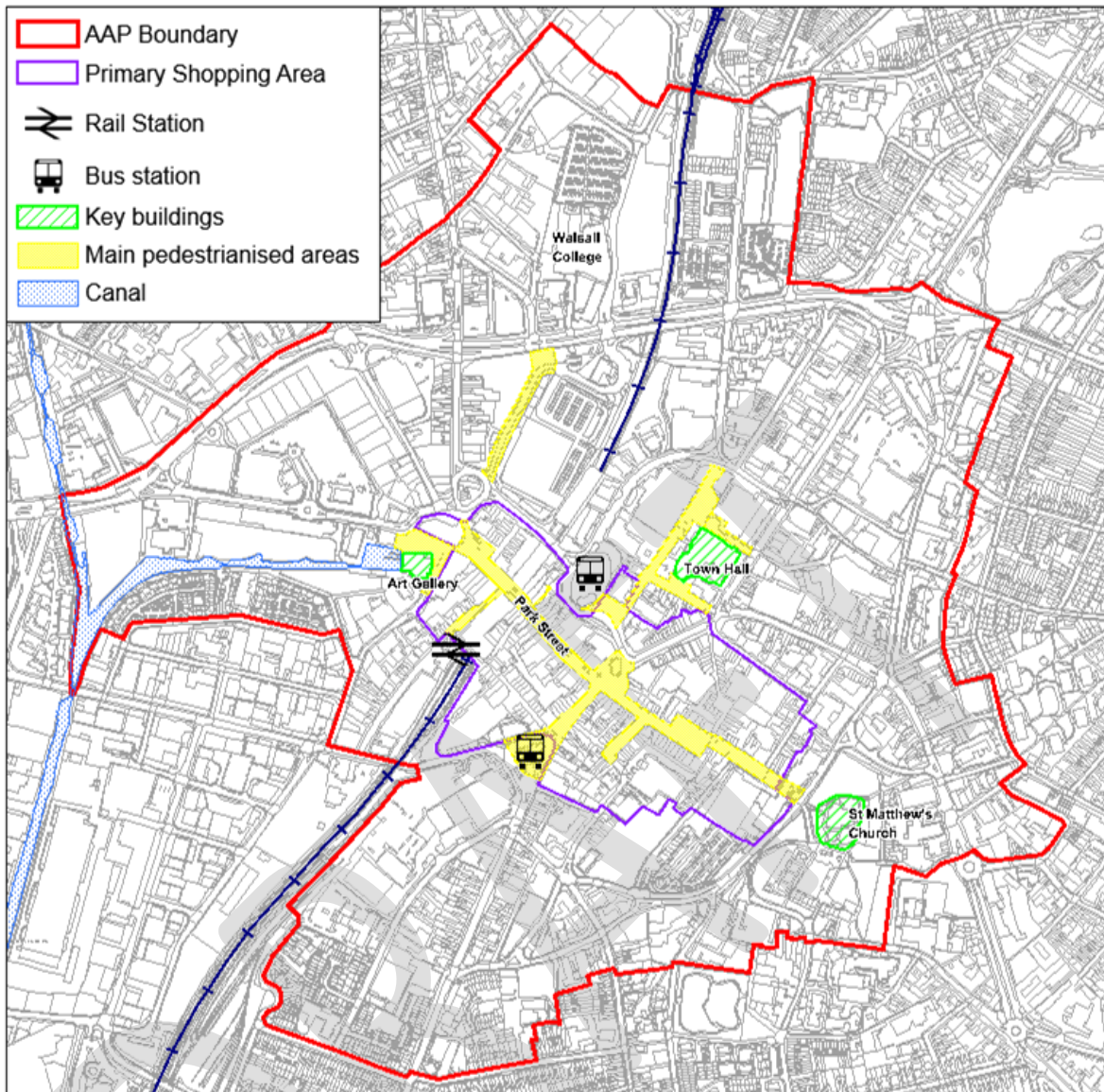
Figure 1: town centre plan showing landmarks and key boundaries.

1.3   Wider regional context

Walsall town centre is located centrally within the Metropolitan Borough of Walsall. This Borough, along with Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley make up the Black Country, which covers 356 km^2, forming the western part of the West Midlands Metropolitan Area and the largest conurbation outside London. The Black Country sits within the wider West Midlands region, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Walsall town centre within the wider West Midlands region.

Walsall town centre serves an extensive primary catchment area that includes most of the Borough, extending to Cannock in the north and to the edge of West Bromwich to the south. In June 2010 the primary catchment area was recorded as having a total population of 417,000, which is significantly above the major town average[1]. The centre provides over 650 comparison and convenience shops, as well as service outlets, occupying over 215,000 sq m (2.3 million sq ft) gross floorspace – it is almost seven times the size of the next largest centre in the Borough, Brownhills. Walsall plays a sub-regional role as the main centre for the Borough for comparison shopping and other town centre uses. It also serves a role in meeting the needs of adjacent communities for convenience shopping and local amenities and services.

1.4   Policy context.

1.4.1 National policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's position on the role of the planning system in both plan-making and decision-taking. It states that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, in economic, social and environmental terms. The Framework must be taken into account in the preparation of plans.

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[1] GVA Grimley (2010) St Matthew's Quarter, Walsall: Update of Evidence Base for Market Relocation. http://cms.walsall.gov.uk/wmbc_market_final_report_2010.pdf

The NPPF states that Local Authorities should recognise town centres as the heart of their communities and pursue policies to support their viability and vitality. The Government attaches great importance to the design of the built environment, and it is important to plan positively for the achievement of high quality and inclusive design for all developments, including individual buildings, public and private spaces and wider area development schemes.

The NPPF states that planning policies and decisions should aim to ensure that developments:

- establish a strong sense of place, using streetscapes and buildings to create attractive and comfortable places to live, work and visit;
- respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings and materials, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation;
- create safe and accessible environments where crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine quality of life or community cohesion; and
- are visually attractive as a result of good architecture and appropriate landscaping.

1.4.2 Local policy

The Black Country Joint Core Strategy (BCCS)[2] was adopted on 3rd February 2011. This sets out the vision, objectives and strategy for future development in the Black Country up to 2026 and beyond. As a strategic plan for the whole of the Black Country, the BCCS seeks to direct investment in retail, leisure and offices across the area. It emphasises that strategic centres such as Walsall should be the focus of large-scale investment in retail, offices and leisure.

Policy CSP4 Place Making states that *"The Black Country will operate on a permeable street network with pedestrian priority that gives maximum freedom of movement and a good choice of means of transport. Vibrant streets and spaces, defined by surrounding buildings and with their own distinct character, should provide the framework for a coherent interconnected network of places that supports social interaction and displays a clear hierarchy of private, commercial and civic functions... The Black Country will be a safe and secure place through organising the urban environment in ways that encourage people to act in a civil and responsible manner."*

Policy ENV3 Design Quality states that "*successful place-making will depend on understanding and responding to the identity of each place with high quality design proposals [through]: Implementation of the principles of "By Design" to ensure the provision of a high quality network of streets, buildings and spaces; [and] implementation of the principles of "Manual for Streets" to ensure urban streets and spaces are designed to provide a high quality public realm and an attractive, safe and permeable movement network.*"

The BCCS forms part of the Local Plan. This is the plan for the future development of the Council's area which is drawn up by the Council in consultation with the

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[2] Black Country Core Strategy www.walsall.gov.uk/ldf_core_strategy

community. The Local Plan replaces the UDP in stages. The Local Plan also covers the production of other site specific development plans, such as Area Action Plans.

An <u>Area Action Plan (AAP)</u>[3] is being developed for Walsall town centre. The AAP is a long term plan that allocates sites within the town centre for the development of new shops, leisure opportunities and offices, as well as setting out policies and proposals for other aspects of the town centre, including transportation and the environment. The AAP sets the planning framework for the town centre, and when adopted it will be the basis on which planning and investment decisions within the area are made. The next stage of developing the AAP is the Publication stage, where the final draft of the document will be subject to public consultation for 8 weeks between March and May 2016. Following consultation, any final changes or updates to the plan will be made and the AAP will be submitted to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for examination. The expectation is that the AAP will be adopted by the end of 2016.

The <u>Designing Walsall Supplementary Planning Document</u>[4] (SPD) was originally adopted in February 2008, and was revised in July 2013. The SPD forms part of the Local Plan.   The SPD sets out more detailed planning policy guidance on the principles of good design for all types of development, and explains how the BCCS and UDP policies will be applied in the context of the most recent Government guidance and requirements.

Relevant policies in the SPD include:
- DW5 Ease of Movement – All new development should contribute to creating places that are well connected, easy to get to and safe to move through.
- DW6 Legibility – New development should contribute to creating a place that has a clear image and identity and is easy to understand.
- DW7 Diversity – All new development should contribute to creating lively places and opportunities to sustain the widest range of possible users.
- DW9 High Quality Public Realm – New development must seek to ensure it creates places with attractive environmental quality that responds to the buildings and uses around it.

The SPD states that *"we recognise that through good design the street can become a useable space, a place for pedestrian activity and community interaction. Developers must embrace Walsall's aspiration to enliven our streets and provide an environment that people enjoy, which is appropriate for a variety of activities whilst remaining safe. Innovative schemes need not be expensive and can add value; creating an interplay between the use of a building and the public realm attracting custom, surveillance and further investment."*

The SPD divides the town centre into 7 key character areas: St Matthew's Quarter; Station Street; Waterfront; Gigaport; Lichfield St, Upper Bridge Street and Ablewell Street; Bradford Place, Bridge Street and Park Street; and Bradford Street.

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[3] Walsall Town Centre Area Action Plan www.walsall.gov.uk/walsall_town_centre_area_action_plan
[4] Designing Walsall SPD www.walsall.gov.uk/ldf_supplementary_planning_documents

2. Value of the Public Realm

2.1   What is meant by public realm?

The Designing Walsall SPD defines public realm as:
"Streets and spaces… – those parts of towns and villages that are available for use by everyone. The public realm is the public 'face' of Walsall where people walk, meet, rest and interact."

'By Design'[5] defines high quality public realm and what it contains, as:
"A place with attractive and successful outdoor areas [where] the success of the public realm depends on the arrangement of paving, planting, lighting, orientation, shelter, signage, street furniture and the way it is overlooked, as well as the routes which pass through it, and the uses in and next to it."

An attractive public realm enhances people's quality of life and the perception of a place. It is an integral part of the urban fabric and should make a positive contribution to reinforcing the local distinctiveness of the built environment of Walsall. Public space should be accessible to all members of the community.

2.2   Why is the public realm important?

The Designing Walsall SPD says that a quality public realm plays a key role in establishing the environmental quality experienced by people within the borough. It is achieved through well considered materials, planting, street furniture, signage, art, drainage and other highway infrastructure. Investment in these key elements can turn public spaces into memorable and enjoyable places. Public space, the way it is enclosed, the activity that takes place round its edges and within it, the choice of surface treatments, the maintenance of the space and its creative input all contribute to its image and quality.

A number of reports and studies from CABE, ODPM and DEFRA demonstrate anecdotal and qualitative evidence that points to the positive impacts that investment in the public realm can have on public performance; however it can be difficult to measure these impacts quantitatively. It should also be recognised that, rather than producing immediate impacts, public realm improvements will often generate positive impacts over the longer term.

The report 'Economic Impact of the Public Realm'[6] states that generally, public realm improvements can have economic improvements including:
- Stimulating the local economy and generating above average private sector returns.

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[5] CABE and DETR (2000) By Design. Urban design in the planning system: towards better practice.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7665/158490.pdf
[6] ECOTEC (2007) Economic Impact of the Public Realm: A Final Report to the East Midlands Development Agency.
http://www.vspsomerset.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/resources/EconomicImpactofThePublic Realm.pdf

- Having a positive impact on perceptions of the area, especially non-local ones, and therefore increasing tourism.
- Attracting more customers/ footfall and increasing consumer spending.
- Increasing investment in local business – it can create the impression of a prosperous area which businesses are keen to buy into
- Helping businesses build a good image and reputation which will provide a basis for growth
- Encouraging better retention of staff.
- Improving occupancy rates.
- Increasing house prices in lagging areas.

Good quality public realm can also help to deliver social and environmental benefits, including:
- Enhancing identity and civic pride, fostering a sense of identity and loyalty, celebrating distinctive characteristics, and strengthening civic pride and local 'ownership' of the town.
- Attracting more visitors and raising its profile as a destination. Public realm is often the first and lasting impression a town centre makes on a visitor.
- Increasing expenditure, improving the competitive performance of a town centre by providing an environment that encourages people to spend more time there.
- Helping independent retailers, which are often found in the high quality, distinctive parts of a town centre, where they relate to their surrounding character and help to create a unique atmosphere that encourages people to visit and to shop. This combination often represents an attraction in its own right.
- Creating safe places, reducing the fear of crime and adding to the sense of safety in public spaces during the day and at night. A successful public realm provides safe spaces for people to meet, encouraging people to visit more often and spend more time, and creating opportunities for social interaction.

English Heritage found that "*Analysis of successful communities increasingly points to a quantifiable relationship between economic success and the quality of the public realm. Carefully designed, well-managed streets are not merely a desirable outcome of successful economies; they are an important driver of such success*"[7]. CABE's report 'The Value of Public Space'[8] also describes how high quality public realm can have a positive impact on property prices, and argues that people are more likely to want to shop in a well designed and more aesthetic environment. They found that well-planned improvements to public spaces within town centres can boost commercial trading by up to 40% and generate significant private sector investment, and Berlin's land values demonstrated a rise of 17% following a tree planting programme in 2000. In recent discussions colleagues have undertaken with agents and developers, public realm improvements have been identified as critical investments which should not be overlooked.

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[7] English Heritage (2006) Streets For All: West Midlands. https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/streets-for-all-west-midlands
[8] CABE Space (2004) The Value of Public Space: How high quality parks and public spaces create economic, social and environmental value.
https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/the-value-of-public-space1.pdf

Therefore, while high quality public realm improvements can be very costly and the economic return may be delayed and difficult to quantify, the benefits have been assessed. It is considered that the positive social, economic and environmental impacts are clear and therefore justify the initial expenditure.

2.3   Overview of Walsall's public realm

The public realm in Walsall town centre is of varied quality and lacks consistency. Recent developments such as Waterfront South and Tesco have led to some improvements in certain areas, however as a whole, the public realm across the town centre needs improving. Much of the environment is tired and there needs to be a single strategy for the public realm and legibility. Some work has recently been undertaken to declutter the streetscene in Park Street and improve legibility, however further work is needed and the accompanying Wayfinding Strategy will take a longer period of time to deliver.

The public realm is considered in more detail through the town centre Characterisation Study, as set out in Section 3.1.1.

2.4   Vision

To transform the experience and perception of Walsall town centre for those who shop, work, visit, invest and live in Walsall through measures such as improved public realm, civic spaces, quality of place, pedestrian access and security alongside the active promotion of the centre and organisation of community events. The centre will bring all of these activities together in a vibrant, safe, attractive and accessible environment that combines local heritage with modern design.

2.5   Placemaking principles and case study examples

Public realm guidelines, which should be taken into account when designing any public realm scheme, include:
- Ground surfaces that help to unify the streets and spaces within the town centre, complementing the architecture and encouraging greater pedestrian activity.
- Street furniture that is well sited, offering clear benefits for all users, with a consistent style to ensure visual continuity.
- Planting that respects the historic character of the town, bringing texture and colour to special areas.
- Signage that is simple and well positioned to convey essential information only.
- Lighting that defines entrances to the town, celebrating focal points and key connections to help encourage greater activity after dark.
- Public art that engages the community, reinforces identity and creates opportunities for play and social interaction.
- Green infrastructure can be incorporated to improve connectivity for wildlife, mitigate against the impact of climate change, and improve amenity value.

The following two case studies have been considered as examples of successful public realm investment.

CASE STUDY – Sheffield city centre

Sheffield's public realm strategy focused on the 'Gold Route', which leads from the train station to the city centre, including the retail quarter and both university campuses. The public realm works included environmental improvements to paving and street furniture, innovative lighting, art works, water features, and the renovation and creation of 6 public squares, galleries and gardens. There was extensive pedestrianisation, and clearance of several substantial and unattractive post-war buildings, and the development of ambitious new buildings. The project was funded from a variety of sources including the Council, universities, ERDF, SRB, DfT, English Partnerships, and the RDA Yorkshire Forward. At the same time, Sheffield City Council produced and adopted the Sheffield Urban Design Compendium, which sought to provide confidence and a clear vision for private investors in the city, provide guidance for preparing and determining planning applications, provide the main guiding principles for design of development within the city centre, and set out a clear strategy for the repair and enhancement of the city's public realm, seeking improvements though redevelopment of adjacent sites.

CASE STUDY – Nottingham city centre

Since the early 2000s, Nottingham City Council has been investing heavily in improved public realm in its streets and spaces. They acknowledged that some of the earlier improvement schemes were not particularly successful, because the materials were not of sufficient quality and the designs were too fussy and inconsistent. The traffic routes also suffered because too much priority was given to vehicles resulting in a poor quality pedestrian environment. The Council therefore worked to refurbish and improve the streets and public spaces of the city centre. A consistent approach was been established which is set out in the City Centre Streetscape Design Manual.

The first major project was the refurbishment of the Old Market Square in the centre of the city. This was completed in 2007, and won 8 awards for its outstanding integration of functional design, including RIBA CABE Public Space award and 3 awards from the Civic Trust. Since then smaller streets and areas have been the focus for improvements, such as the Creative Quarter and shopping streets.

3. <u>Context to the Strategy</u>

3.1   Evolution of Walsall

In 1220 a charter was granted the town so that it could hold a market, which still thrives today and extends down the main central artery of the town from St Matthew's church to the area now known as 'The Bridge' where the street once crossed the brook. As with many mediaeval English towns the settlement form followed that of a principal street that organically grew and consequently has no particular alignment.

St Matthew's church dates to the early 13th century and crowns the hill at the southern end of the high street. The hill also houses a host of dwellings and other buildings and was the extent of the town for many centuries.

Radical expansion took place during Georgian and Victorian industrialisation of the Black Country and the town centre grew into a prosperous retail centre with railway tracks and canals connecting it from the west and merchant housing being developed along fine new streets such as Bradford Street and Lichfield Street.

The structure of the town very much radiates out from four points, three along the main retail artery (from Church Hill, the cross roads at The Bridge, and the hub around the art gallery) and finally the junction between Bridge Street and Lichfield Street, by the old court house. This network of transport corridors not only consists of streets, but also canals and railways that link the town centre to the surrounding inner suburbs and the various historic communities of the town.

Today, Walsall town centre is covered by 6 Conservation Areas, which illustrates that much of the town centre is considered to be of important historic significance to the evolution of the town's economy, transport and architecture. As the Conservation Areas are so varied, it is evident that it is not just the diverse range of buildings that are important, but the public realm, canals, wharfs and green spaces that are valuable to the town's character. The town is also home to 47 listed buildings, and 46 locally listed buildings. These are shown in Figure 3.

Walsall is a complex town centre in terms of its historical development, architecture, and the evolution of different and quite distinct quarters. As the civic, retail, cultural and commercial focus of the borough, building styles and materials are diverse and reflect the extensive transport network that has been long established, as well as the location of Walsall in the centre of the country. The use of a variety of stone, render, metal, brick, and other ceramics are evident and create a diverse pallet of materials.
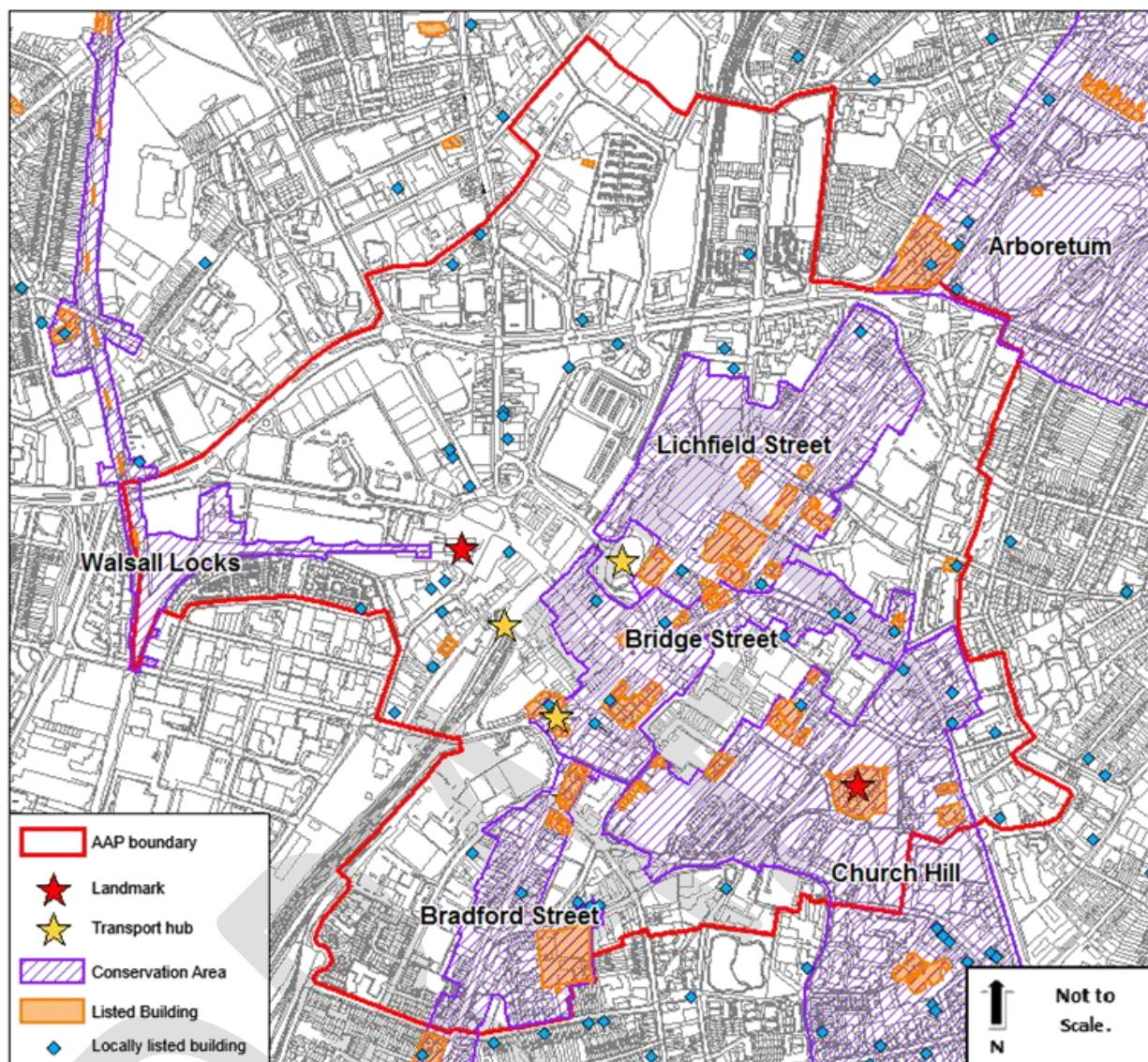
Figure 3: Walsall town centre, Conservation Areas, listed buildings and locally listed buildings.

3.1.1 Town Centre Characterisation Study

In early 2015 a Characterisation Study of the town centre was undertaken by the Council's Conservation Officer. The study was undertaken using guidance from English Heritage, and looks at the current character of the town along with identifying opportunities for improvement. The Characterisation Study can be found on the Council's website at: www.walsall.gov.uk/aap_evidence.

Characterisation is defined as the way in which 'places' are assessed, understood and recorded. As the historic perspective is largely responsible for the form of our towns and the primary building stock, the form of this assessment generally has an historic emphasis. That said, characterisation is a modern appraisal of the current townscape inherited and is therefore not exclusively concerned with the past. Undertaking characterisation allows us to establish values that inform the significance of our towns. From this we can formulate policy, undertake sound

management and monitor condition and the success of decision making. In this way, the characterisation study will be used to inform the AAP.

The Characterisation Study splits the town into 6 key character areas (see Figure 4), and each of these is divided into sub-character areas, of which there are around 90 in total.

In summary:

1   Much of the canal is covered by the Canal Locks Conservation Area, and the special interest in this area is that it preserves an important example of the transport infrastructure that was influential in the history of the development of Walsall. The canal now provides an important leisure facility.

2   This area characterises much of the building eras of Walsall, covering some of the Victorian industrial precincts, to the 20th Century clearance with a number of open areas of land, to the mid 20th Century developments such as the ring road and associated office buildings, to the more recent developments of large scale shopping complexes and educational institutions. Along with this there are pockets of housing development from the Victorian terraces and associated workshops along Station Street, to the more modern housing developments and cul-de-sacs present in Saw Mill Close. Building form and scale varies greatly throughout this area and is related to their era with haphazard building types and styles.

3   As the town expanded and transformed into an industrial community, the area to the north east expanded as a middle class neighbourhood with fine villa housing extending along principal boulevards such as Lichfield Street, leading to other similar speculative neighbourhoods in the Regency and early Victorian period, planned around a town arboretum.

4   The area of Bradford Place, Bridge Street and Park Street is the main area of commercial, retail and public transport activity in the town centre, and is a hub of activity for residents and visitors alike. The area comprises modest scale 2-3 storey built development including an eclectic mix of 19th century architectural styles, including attractive Victorian buildings such as the Victorian Arcade and Globe House. Today Walsall's Civic Quarter enjoys a good sense of place due to its fine Victorian/ Edwardian architecture and high quality 'shared space' public realm enhancements. Street clutter has been minimised and the surface treatment kept simple, which allows the fine architectural qualities of areas like Leicester Street to be better appreciated.

5   The Bradford Street area was far more industrial in nature due to its proximity to the rail line, and there is a mix of domestic and industrial workshop activity found in this area. Grander residential development that pre-dated the railway remains along Bradford Street. This forms an important gateway into the heart of the town centre from the south. While much of the town centre is dominated by low-rise buildings, typically 2-3 storeys, which is typical of the Victorian, Edwardian and 1920s architectures in some parts of the town, much of the infill development within the town centre was built within the 1960s and '70s and the architecture is typical of the style of that time.

6   Church Hill is where the town first developed on a defensible site next to a brook. Congestion on the hill led to the commercial centre relocating to the Bridge and Park Street. What remains around Church Hill is the footprint of a medieval street layout with the changes introduced in Victorian times. Significant areas of heritage townscape have been retained with individual buildings of historic note. The special interest of this area is that it preserves important examples of the history of the development of Walsall within an overall heritage townscape that benefits from the steep topography of its hill location.

The Characterisation Study also looked at the 'sensitivity to change' of each of the 90 sub-character areas. Each area was ranked on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is very sensitive (and therefore low capacity for change), and level 5 is not sensitive (and therefore has high capacity for change). This shows, from a townscape and character perspective, which areas should be protected, and which are opportunities for development and improvement. This is shown in Figure 5, which is also overlaid with heritage assets. This broadly demonstrates that the sensitive areas are those which include a high number of listed or locally listed buildings.

Town End

Chuckery

Canal Link

Civic Centre

Bradford Street

Church Hill
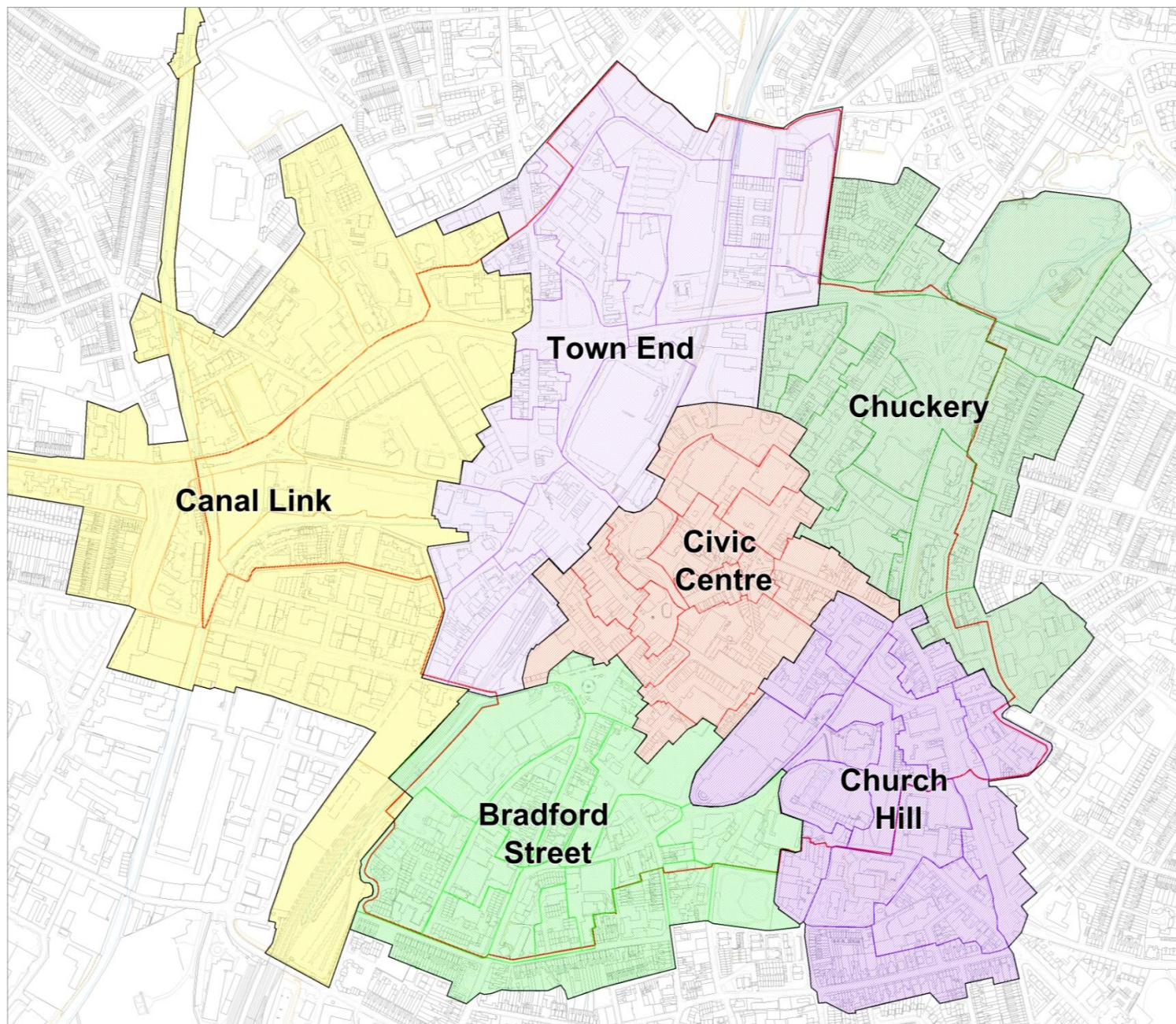
Figure 4: Character and sub-character areas as defined in the Characterisation Study.

Sensitivity

- Level 1 Very sensitive, low capactiy for change
- Level 2
- Level 3
- Level 4
- Level 5 Not sensitive, high capacity for change
- Conservation Area
- Listed building
- Locally listed building
- AAP boundary

Figure 5: Sensitivity of sub-character areas within the town centre, overlaid with heritage assets.

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3.2 Decline and Challenges

The challenge the town centre faces is the need to remain relevant to changing consumer habits, shifting socio-economic demographics and the constraints of the various modes of travel that serve it. Keeping the retail area viable and the market vibrant and well connected to other functions is key and connecting to community aspirations will shape how this will be realised in the long term.

Where improvements have been made to the public realm in recent years, the quality of the improvements has in cases declined due to a lack of quality maintenance and repair. This reduces the value for money of the original investment, as inco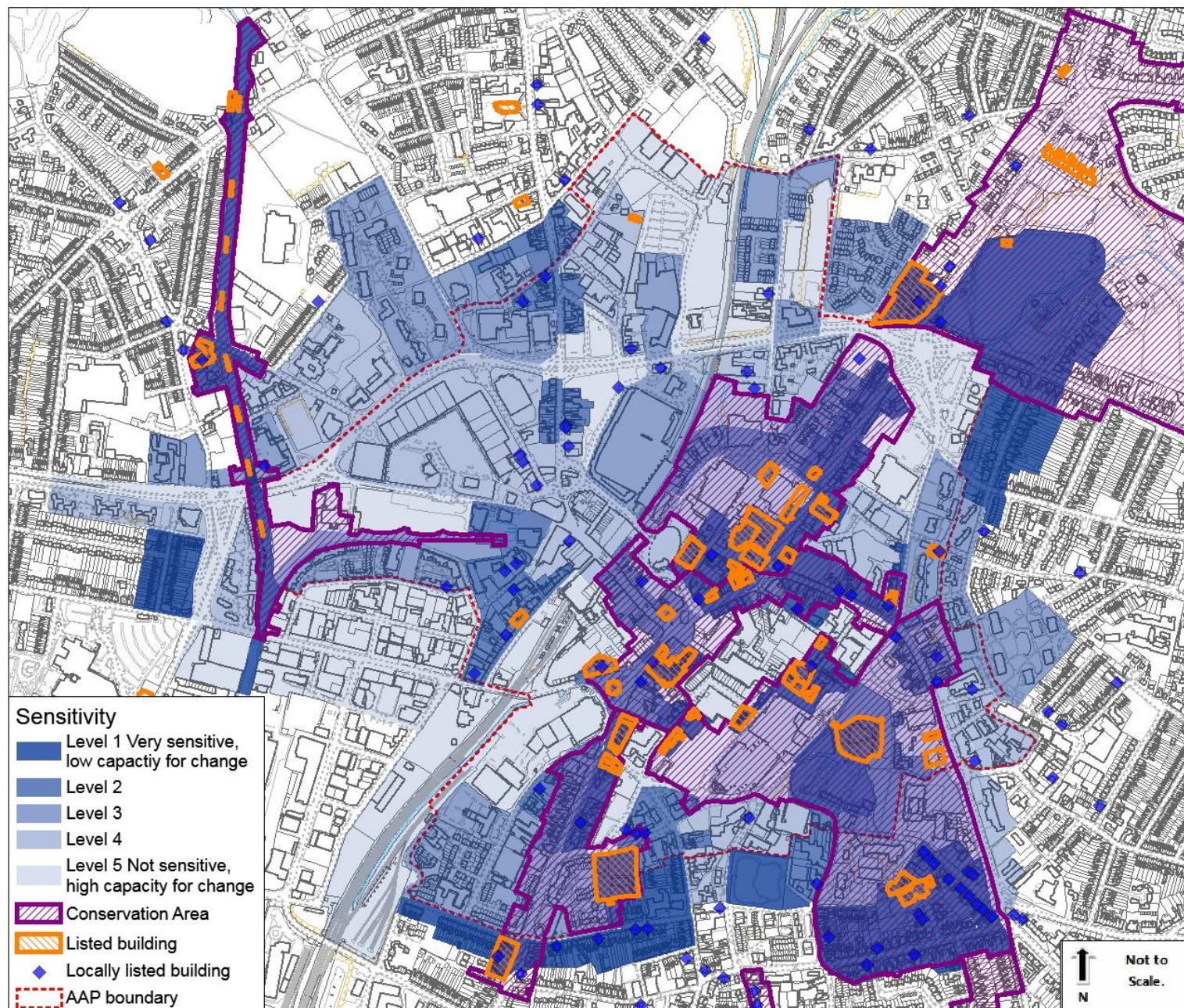nsistency in materials, and a lack of repairs or cleansing can quickly lead to a reduction in the quality of the environment. Maintenance of public realm works is of utmost importance, as regular inspections, cleansing, graffiti removal and repair work are essential to maintain the quality of any new works. This requires clear maintenance arrangements to be agreed in advance and enforced, and funding for cleaning and repairs to be identified.

3.3 Upcoming developments

As part of the ongoing regeneration of the town centre, there are a number of developments either recently completed, under construction or due to start on site within the next 12 months. The delivery of these developments may lead to possible improvements in public realm or to identifying areas where public realm improvements need to be focused within specific timescales. The larger developments will also impact on how the town centre is used, for example becoming new trip generators and influencing the routes people use to get around the town centre.

- Primark/ Co-op, Old Square/ Digbeth – Primark completed August 2015, Co-op completed January 2016.
- Park Street Arcade improvement works – largely completed January 2015, snagging issues completed late 2015.
- Business and Sports Hub – completed September 2015.
- Jhoots head office building on the former Noirit site – building completed January 2016, landscaping and infrastructure works due to completion March 2016.
- Waterfront North – Kier scheme for 9-screen cinema and 5 restaurant units – restaurants open from December 2015, cinema operating from March 2016.
- Waterfront South over-55s well-being apartments – due for completion early 2016.
- Norton and Proffitt site, High Street – planning application granted consent January 2014, started on site February 2016.
- Old Square Phase 2 – planning application granted consent March 2015.
- Electrification of the railway line – top end of Park Street during November 2015 and early 2016.
- Permanent market relocation – planning consent granted March 2015.

- Transport interchange – Centro are currently undertaking feasibility work around the development of a new town centre public transport interchange based around Bradford Place.
- Work is currently being undertaken on behalf of the Council and HCA focusing on the Station Street area in Walsall town centre, looking at both the potential for new development and for public realm improvements around the rail station.

There is a need to therefore be aware of developments taking place at the same time, for example proposals for the Old Square Shopping Centre and the Norton and Proffitt scheme could take place at the same time which would cause significant disruption to this area of the town centre. Once the developments are completed this part of the town is likely to see increased levels of footfall and therefore the public realm here will need to be improved accordingly. Consideration would therefore need to be given to how and when environmental improvements could be implemented whilst causing minimum disruption to the delivery of the sites and pedestrian access to this part of the town.

These works could also be happening at a similar time to the electrification of the railway line which requires parts of Park Street to be dug up; and works relating to Walsall Market; all of which will cause disruptions along the length of the retail core. It is important to understand timescales and extent of potential disruptions, and how public realm works can be worked into these timescales.

See also Section 7.3.

4. <u>Understanding Walsall town centre</u>

4.1 Arriving in Walsall

The retail core is seen as the key trip generator for the town centre, as it is considered that the majority of visitors to the town will be for shopping purposes. However other buildings which are likely to encourage visitors to the town are also shown on Figure 6, along with public transport hubs, car parks, and the road network.
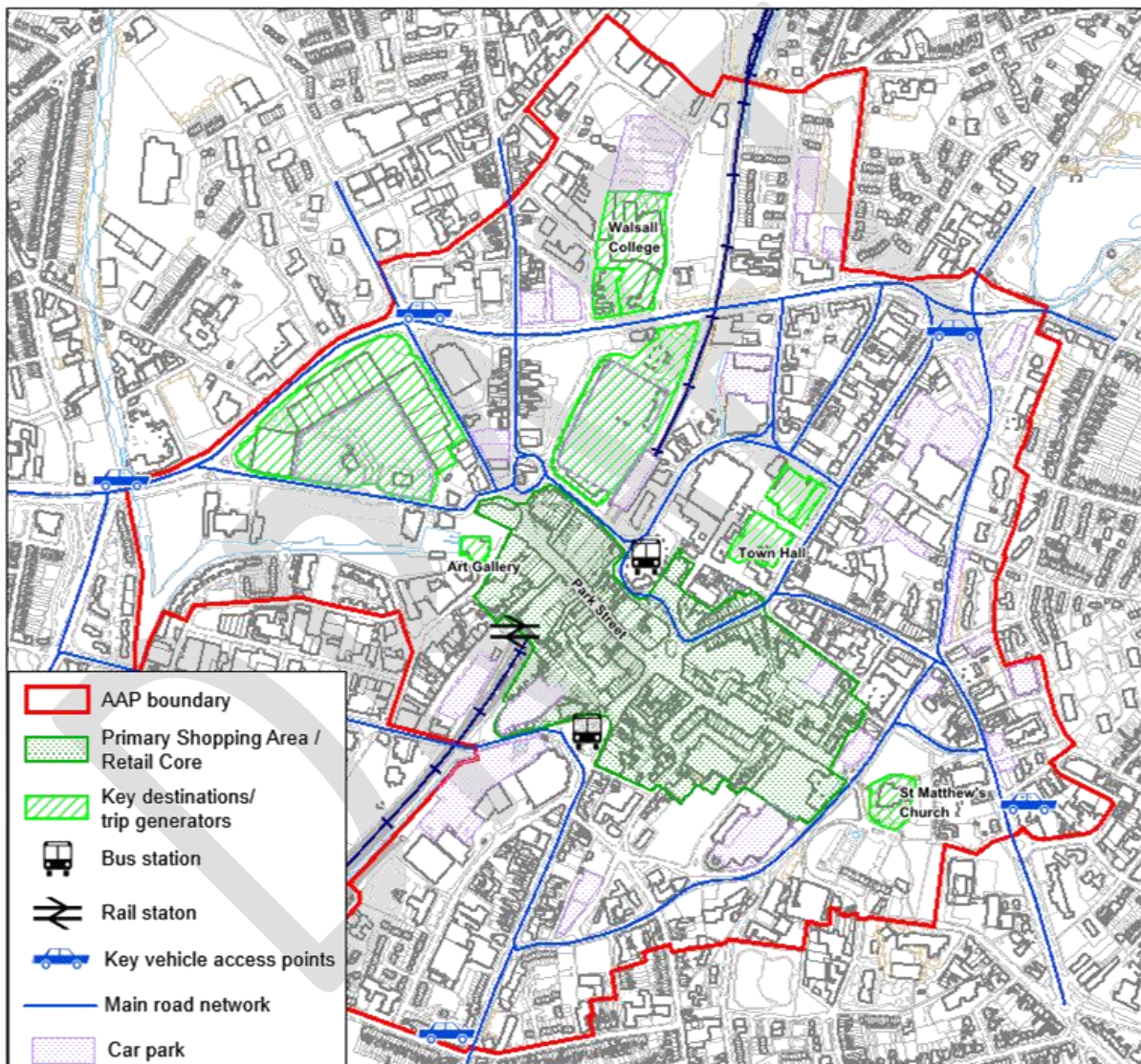

Figure 6: Key gateways for public and private transport, and trip generators/ destinations within the town centre.

4.1.1 <u>By car</u>

The ring road runs horizontally through the north of the town centre, and this is a key route for vehicles to, and through, the town. From here, routes towards the centre of

the town can be taken, or car parks can be accessed. Figure 6 shows public and private car parks, which are generally located around the periphery of the retail core and along key vehicle routes. However, consultation undertaken as part of the Wayfinding Strategy[9] found that a common complaint was the confusing central road layout, which sweeps traffic around the town centre efficiently but doesn't always make it easy to visit. Pedestrian links from the car parks are mixed in quality, and wayfinding information for visitors tends to be minimal. Certain developments, such as Tesco and Crown Wharf Retail Park, have their own parking and therefore can be accessed without visiting the rest of the town centre.

4.1.2 By public transport

The rail station is located centrally within the town centre and close to the retail core, however the rail station itself is dated and suffers from a lack of presence. The station appears hidden and its entrances through the Saddler's Centre or Station Street provide a poor quality welcome to people arriving in the town centre by train.

St Paul's bus station is also located centrally within the town and in close proximity to the retail core. However the bus station runs at full capacity, meaning that the location is congested and has an impact on the surrounding highway network. The station is also relatively hidden from Park Street, being accessed only via narrow arcades.
Bradford Place bus interchange is situated within the retail core, however it also operates at full capacity and has no space to expand. The area around the cenotaph has become congested, rather than being used as an attractive public space. This is the area where Centro are focusing their proposals for a new public transport interchange, which would utilise the front part of Jerome Retail Park.

Walsall is relatively fortunate in that it benefits from a large number of buses and trains running regularly into the centre of the town and providing connectivity to and from a range of nearby locations. Public transport is crucial for many residents, and must strive to offer an attractive alternative to the car, as well as continuing to provide socially necessary services for the community.

The Wayfinding Strategy states that Walsall is lucky to have its main rail and bus stations just a minute from its prime shopping street. Unfortunately the town lets this advantage slip by allowing the linkages to present such a poor impression to visitors – specifically Butler's Passage and Park Street Arcade.

4.1.3 On foot

The town centre can be accessed by pedestrians from any of the vehicle routes into the town centre, as well as along with canal. Once within the retail core, much of the centre is pedestrianised, giving priority to pedestrians in this key part of the town. However in other areas pedestrian links are severed by roads, for example the link between Park Street and Crown Wharf, or the barrier presented by the ring road.

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[9] Urbed (2012) Walsall Wayfinding Strategy Document.
http://cms.walsall.gov.uk/12-09-26_walsall_wayfinding_strategy_document_v7.pdf

As change in the town centre continues, the impact on pedestrian movement is evident. A number of new pedestrian flows are evolving, particularly surrounding access to the new Tesco store and Walsall College, and these will continue to evolve to reflect new developments, for example footfall along Digbeth has increased now the new Primark store is open, as will pedestrian links with the cinema at the Waterfront. There is a need to improve the quality of some of these evolving routes and to continue maintaining existing pedestrian areas across the town centre.

Walsall town centre benefits from being served by National Cycle Route 5, which runs from Oxford to Derby via Bridge Street, Walsall. There are currently 30 separate cycle parking locations around the town centre, situated at key trip generators, such as the rail station, library and supermarkets. These stands are well used, but many cycles are often locked up in other 'informal' locations.

4.2   Movement patterns

In March 2014 footfall surveys were undertaken in 12 locations around the town centre, along with questionnaire surveys in 10 locations. The aim of this survey work was to provide an indication of the current level of pedestrian movements in and around the town centre. The purpose of the questionnaire surveys was to provide an understanding of the make-up of visitors to the town centre including purpose of visit, destinations visited, and mode of transport. Understanding pedestrian movement patterns and how the town centre is used is vital in informing the programme of public realm improvements.

The footfall survey found that Bradford Street, The Bridge & Lower Park Street and Upper Park Street were clearly busier than the other surveyed zones. This is unsurprising as these zones represent the main shopping areas with direct connections to bus stops and stations. These zones also provide connections to two of the larger shopping centres within the town centre and two supermarkets. The footfall through each zone throughout the day is similar, with all of the zones busiest between approximately 10.30am-2.30pm. As the peak times are outside typical commuter time periods, this would indicate that the high footfall flows recorded within each of these zones relates to commercial activities ie. shopping trips.

The questionnaire survey found that the majority (44%) of people in the town centre had travelled from WS1 or WS2, indicating that Walsall town centre primarily serves the immediate surrounding areas. The most popular form of transport was the bus with 44%, with private car at 27% and walking/ cycling at 22%. 75% of respondents stated that their purpose for visiting the town centre was shopping, 11% had come for work and 6% for education. Tesco and Asda were the main shopping destinations, however 75% of the people using these foodstores also visited other shops in the town centre.

It should be noted that, whilst these surveys are extremely useful for understanding how, where and why visitors to the town centre use the town, they represent only a snapshot in time and that new developments since March 2014 will have impacted on movement patterns within the town centre.

4.3   Legibility

Good legibility is defined in the Designing Walsall SPD as "a place that has a clear image and identity and is easy to understand... If people can find their way around a place easily it helps them to feel safe and at ease in their surroundings".

Park Street is the main axis of the town, linking two of the main areas of change (St Matthew's Quarter and Waterfront) and at the centre of the pedestrian routes between the main public transport interchanges. The Wayfinding Strategy found that the main retail street is particularly strong in its fundamental form, enlivened by its market, with shopping malls, glazed arcades and public transport facilities immediately alongside. Main car parks and supermarkets are within a minute of this central spine. Unfortunately, the town centre offers very limited formal wayfinding assistance to visitors at present, and there is visual and physical clutter which blights the main spine route, reducing it to a quarter of its natural width in places and heavily disrupting sightlines. Other important streets also suffer from an excess of barriers which reduce easy movement.

Legibility across the centre, between the interchanges, the retail core, and other important elements of the town needs to be improved. New pedestrian flows will continue to evolve, reflecting the locations of new developments – in recent years this has included links to the new Tesco store and Walsall College, and is likely to see increased pedestrian activity to Primark and the cinema. There is a need to be aware of evolving and potential routes and their quality as well as continuing to maintain existing pedestrian areas across the town. The Wayfinding project commenced this process but the accompanying strategy will take further time and funding to deliver. Work is currently being undertaken to understand how Walsall can become dementia-friendly and disability-friendly; this work is currently at an early stage but needs to be considered in any new public realm works going forward.

Signage does exist within the town centre, positioned to improve legibility, but appears to be poorly used and ineffective. This could be due to the number of signs – a signage audit in 2014 found there were nearly 1,000 different signs within the town centre, and work is currently being undertaken to reduce unnecessary signage. However, legibility is based on more than just signage – the Designing Walsall SPD sets out simple urban design principles, such as building hierarchy, defined street enclosure and direct routes, which enable natural orientation to take place. The Wayfinding strategy suggests an imaginative approach through aesthetic and artistic interventions to assist sightlines, create memorable landmarks, link intuitive routes and help define character areas. The strategy developed 7 artistic ideas to improve wayfinding in key locations within the town centre – of these, two have been implemented (the mural at Townend House and the footpath along the canal). However it is difficult to quantify how effective these interventions have been in improving legibility in these areas of the town.

It is proposed that a legibility study is undertaken to objectively consider how signage, legibility, and wayfinding can be strengthened across the town centre.

CASE STUDY – Bristol Legible City

In 1996 the Bristol Legible City initiative was conceived by the City Council to deliver an information and wayfinding strategy that matched its ambitions to be a leading cultural and commercial destination. To implement Bristol Legible City, a core development team was formed that included Council officers, urban planning designers, product designers, information and identity designers, public art consultants, and traffic engineers. This team has delivered over 40 projects.

The aim is to ensure that the centre of Bristol is more welcoming, vibrant and easier to navigate for visitors, more successful for its businesses and more enjoyable for all. Bristol Legible City projects include direction signs, on street information panels with city and area maps, printed walking maps, visitor information identity and arts projects. They also developed frameworks and design guidance featuring easily understood symbols, a colour palette and legible text, and implemented a programme of de-cluttering. These projects communicate the city consistently and effectively to visitors and residents alike. This range of solutions requires coordination, to ensure that the projects and information make sense to the individual.

In particular, funding through a key partnership with Adshel, led to information panels and direction signs appearing on the streets in 2001. They are designed to be long lasting and low maintenance: a management contract with Adshel ensures that the system will be kept clean and updated over the long term. In total there are nearly 40 monolith panels and 60 direction signs, with over 700 fingers.

The project is managed and funded by the Bristol Legible City Partnership Group, and has won awards and praise from local and national groups.
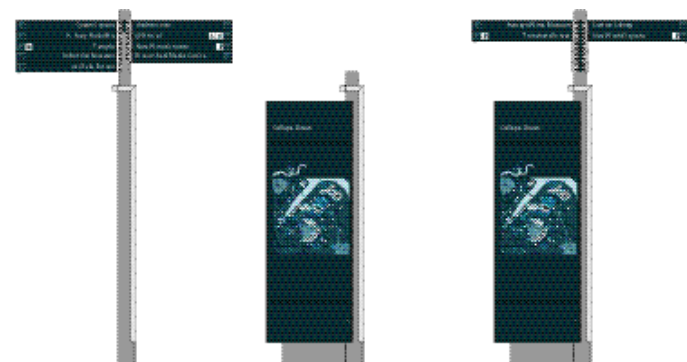
An option which could be further explored would be to 'zone' areas of the town into quarters based on their character or dominant uses. The Wayfinding Strategy found that "Walsall has a strong underlying spatial structure, with key streets and quarters arranged in the 'clover-leaf' shape potentially ideal to maximise footfall circuits and trading opportunities. By emphasising this clover-leaf shape of cross roads and four clear urban quarters we can make Walsall town centre more memorable and easy to navigate. This strong 'mind map' will encourage visitors to feel comfortable and confident to explore more of the town, uncovering its hidden gems" (see Figure 7). This could then be reinforced using specific colours, signage or branding within those areas and incorporated into town centre maps. It could also mean paying special attention to the reinforcement of sight lines and removal of barriers wherever needed around the clover leaf.
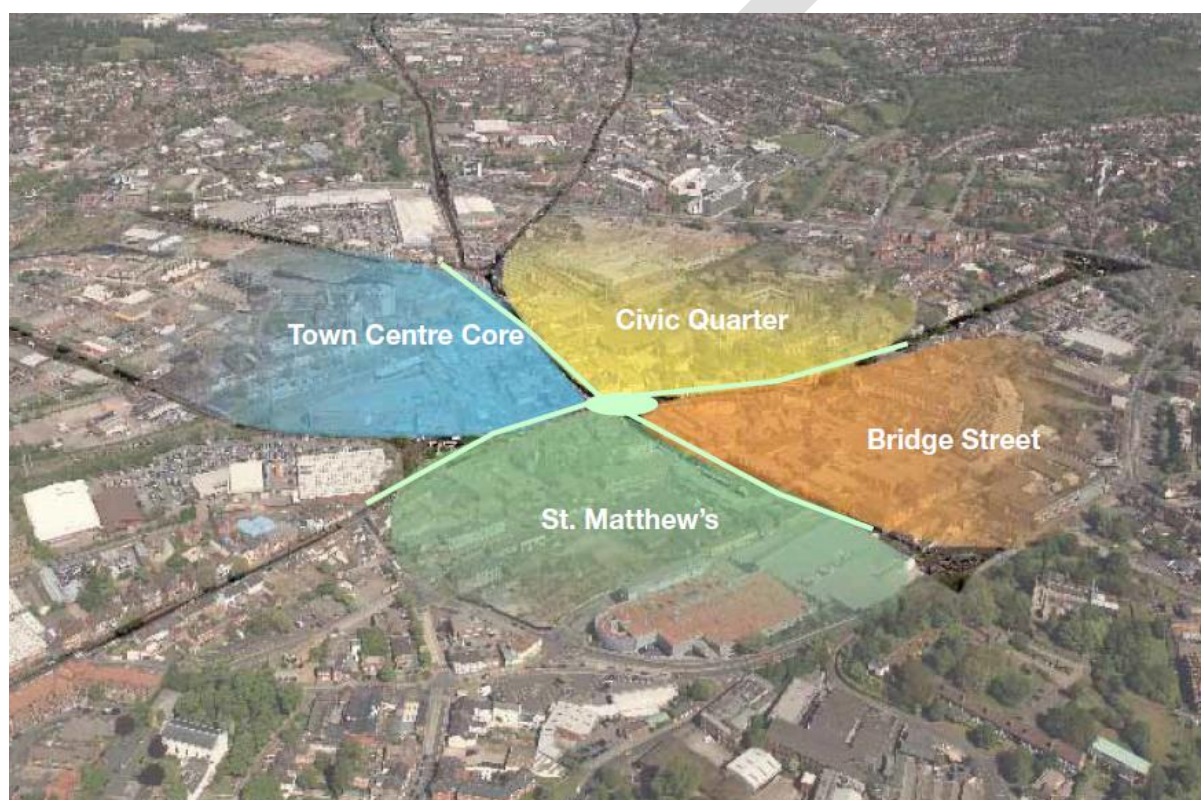
Figure 7: The 'clover-leaf quarters, as set out in the Wayfinding Strategy.

4.4 Public spaces

As shown in Figure 8, there are 2 green spaces within the town centre boundary. One is the green space surrounding St Matthew's church, while the other is a small landscaped area adjacent to the canal. This is a privately owned space but which is well used by visitors and residents, especially in the summer. The arboretum, which is 170 acres of lakes, trees and gardens, is located just outside of the AAP boundary.

There are a number of civic spaces around the town, particularly within or near to the retail core, which can be used for events. However some of these are not currently used to their full potential – for example the area around the Cenotaph houses

Bradford Place transport interchange, the area adjacent St Paul's bus station is rarely used, and the space in front of the Art Gallery is often too windy to be used. The largest space, at the Bridge, will be improved once the disused fountain and plinth have been removed. This is the proposed location for Walsall Market which will limit the number and type of events which could be held here, but the new stalls will be demountable and the planning consent granted in March 2015 covers the use of the Bridge for public events when not in use by the market.

A number of the streets around the town can be considered public spaces, in particular the pedestrianised streets within the retail core. These streets can also be used for events such as specialist markets, however a number are already cluttered or poorly maintained.

New spaces could be created as part of new large scale developments within the town centre, however it can be difficult to encourage this use of space to developers who are concerned with maximising built development on a site.
New public spaces could also be created through the demolition of existing buildings, and the demolition of the Poundland/Pure Gym building at the northern end of Park Street has been considered previously to create a large, attractive and useful space which would also improve linkages to the Waterfront and Crown Wharf. However acquiring a building which is currently well used, its demolition and the installation of a high quality public space, would be a very costly project.

Without demolition, it appears that the potential for creating new public spaces outside of new developments is limited, but much could be done to improve the existing spaces to make them more useable, both on a daily basis and for specific events.
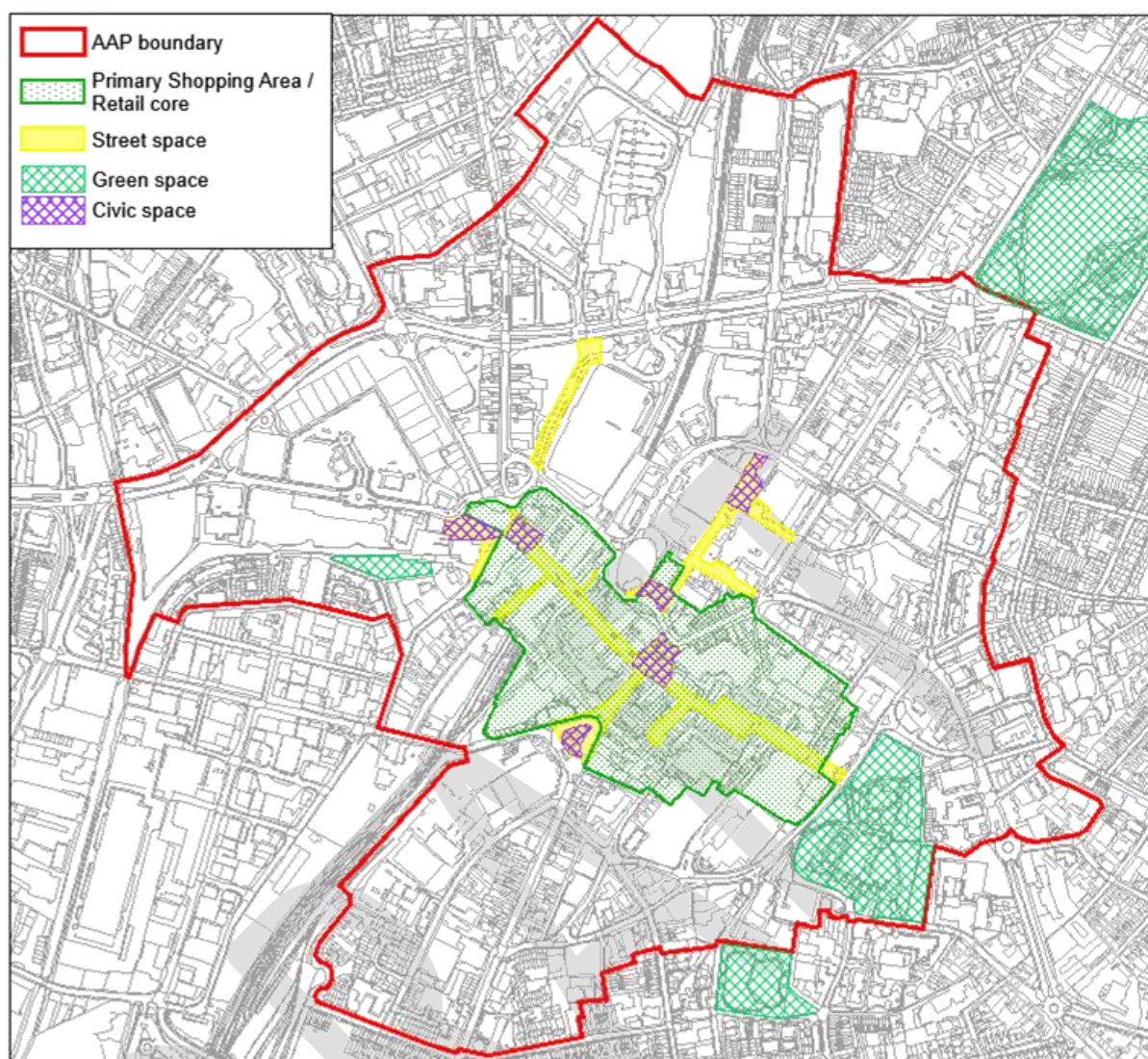
Figure 8: Green and civic spaces and streets within the town centre.

4.5   Existing Materials

The street surfaces across the town are very variable. A range of materials have been used, from red or blue coloured brick pavers, grey square pavers, to black or coloured tarmac. Where investment has been made in the public realm in recent years, for example at Wisemore, the pavers are high quality, however this does not extend across the whole town and a lack of consistency in materials is a major issue. Maintenance and repairs have also caused problems, where it is not possible to replace pavers like-for-like, and cheaper patch repairs of tarmac has produced a low quality environment. Recent tarmac repairs along Park Street have given this part of the town a very mismatched appearance. New materials need to consider health and safety implications such as trip and slip hazards, as well as maintenance considerations around cleaning and replacing surfaces, and this often overrules concerns about appearance and consistency.

There are a number of signs within the town centre, however far from improving legibility this can often lead to a cluttered street where signs are not easily seen.

Where signs are installed, they are often easily ignored or overlooked, due to a plain or poorly maintained appearance. Consistency across the different types of signage and directional signs is also poor.

There has recently been some investment in the street furniture along the main part of Park Street, where new benches, bins and street trees were installed in 2012. This has somewhat improved the consistency amongst street furniture in this part of the town, although it does not extend to other parts of the town, for example, different benches and bins were installed in the Civic Quarter as part of the improvements there in 2006. Ongoing maintenance is required to keep street furniture in good condition.

A number of large planters were removed from Park Street in 2012 in order to reduce clutter and widen the useable part of the street. Some planters remain, for example at the top of Park Street and outside the Saddler's Centre, however street trees are now the main form of soft landscaping throughout the town. Despite occasionally being subject to vandalism, the trees improve the look of the environment and should be further encouraged.

The town centre is generally satisfactorily served by standard street lighting columns; however the importance of adequate lighting in perceptions of safety and security within the town cannot be underestimated. Pedestrian routes are likely to be different in the evenings than in the day time – key routes will move away from retail and be more likely to include public transport hubs and taxi ranks, restaurants, leisure, and drinking venues. The lighting in the town centre is almost exclusively practical street lighting, and the opportunity to use innovative lighting to highlight particular buildings (similar to that used at the Art Gallery and St Matthew's Church) or routes needs to be considered in more detail.

5. <u>Strategy for the Public Realm</u>

5.1 Introduction

This section forms the overview of the strategy. First, an analysis of the existing public realm is undertaken, and compared with the Council and other stakeholders' vision for improved public realm in the future. This is then used to identify key themes and areas of improvement. These don't have to be solely based around physical improvements – they can be to investigate measures or review existing arrangements.

5.2 Analysis of Walsall's public realm

As part of the Characterisation Study (introduced in Section 3.1.1), an analysis of the townscape and environment of the current town centre was undertaken, identifying (amongst others) strong building frontages and those that could be improved, good public realm and areas for public realm improvement, nodes and potential nodes, and existing landmark buildings and sites for potential new landmark buildings (see Figure 9). This serves to demonstrate how the town centre is experienced and reinforce the identification of quality streets/ buildings/ public realm, and those which should be a focus for improvement.

The Study considers that much of the retail core (Park Street, St Paul's Street, Bradford Place, and Digbeth) has public realm which could be improved. The areas around the Art Gallery and the Civic Quarter are identified as good quality public realm, setting a standard which the rest of the town needs to achieve. These areas should also be identified as requiring high quality and consistent maintenance, in order to maintain, and even enhance, their 'good quality' status.

Existing nodes and landmark buildings are identified, and these will assist with legibility on the ground. Sites with potential for landmark buildings or features are identified, and these are largely situated along the ring road in order to improve this environment and to provide a distinctive gateway to visitors entering the town by road. Transport and pedestrian nodes which could be strengthened are also identified and improvements here would greatly improve legibility.

The building/ street frontages which are identified for improvements are likely to be resolved more through physical development, rather than public realm enhancements, however the yellow sites where character could be improved correspond well with the Council's regeneration aspirations.

Legend:

- Sites where character could be improved
- Good public realm / quality open space
- Poor quality public realm
- ★ Landmark buildings
- ★ Sites with landmark potential
- Existing node (signficant meeting point/ cross roads)
- Potential node (site in need of improved linkages)
- Significant water body (leisure/ transport/ visual amenity)
- Strong building frontage/ line
- Frontage in need of strengthening
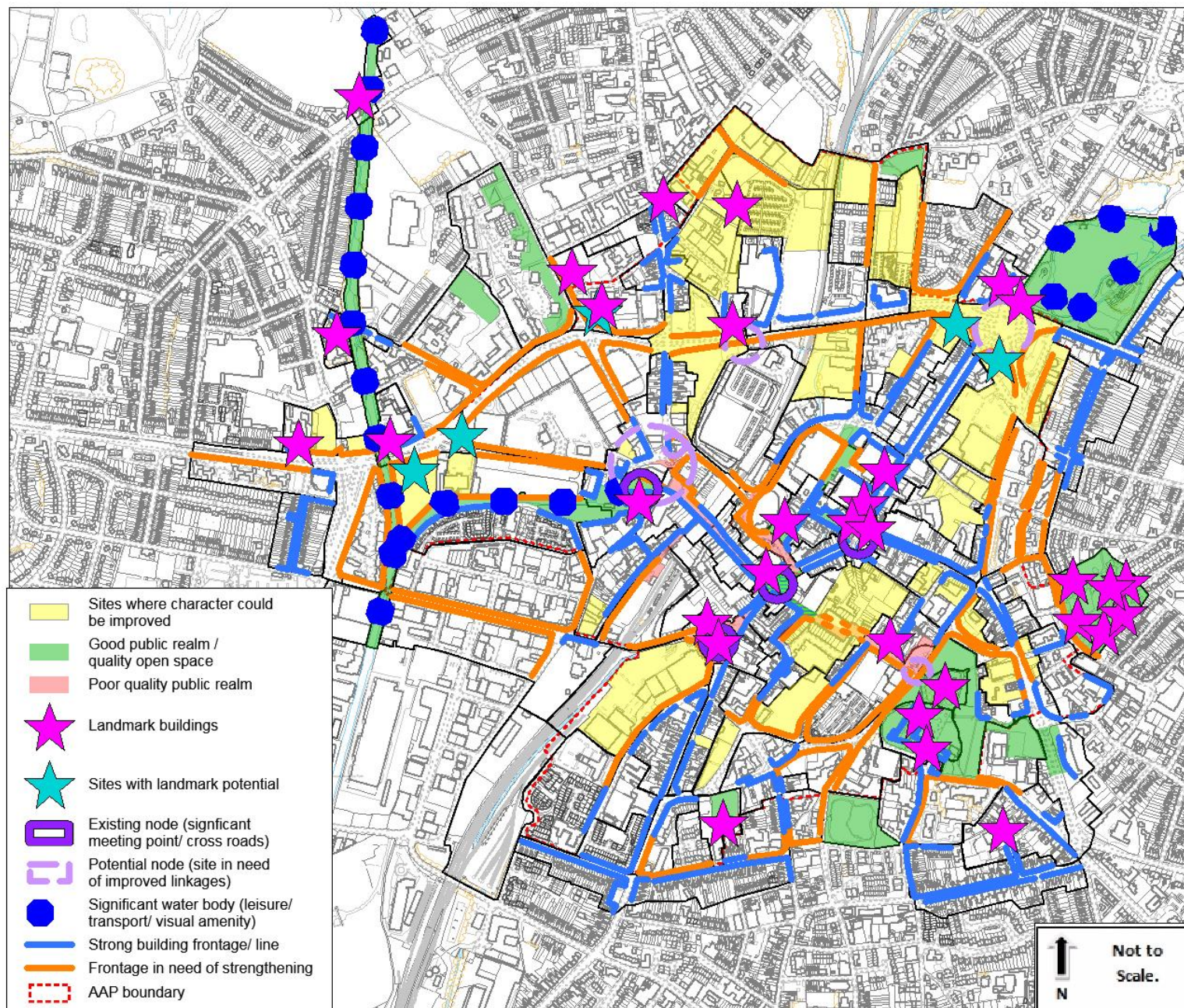- AAP boundary

Not to Scale.
N

Figure 9: Analysis of the character of the town centre and areas for improvement.

5.3 Strategy of improvements

The detailed analysis in Section 4 and the Town Centre Characterisation Study forms the basis for a strategy of public realm improvements. Five key areas and themes have been identified as the main focus for the strategy of public realm improvements:

- Key area 1: Park Street
  Park Street forms the retail core of the town centre as well as the key pedestrian route between public transport interchanges, and as such is often the busiest area of the town. While there are some vacancies in retail units, the layout of the shops and buildings, and their diverse ownership, means that comprehensive retail development is unlikely and cannot be relied upon to implement public realm improvements. Previous improvement projects replaced the benches and introduced street trees, however the environment here is somewhat mismatched, in particular the wide variety of surfacing treatments. The Council needs to implement a consistent, high quality scheme, focusing on attractive and robust paving, consistency in materials, providing adequate numbers of benches and bins whilst reducing unnecessary clutter, and how green infrastructure can be incorporated, particularly linking with the canal. Maintenance should be considered, in particular the replacement of damaged paving (rather than tarmac infill), collection of litter and prompt removal of graffiti. This scheme should include adjacent routes including Butler's Passage, Park Street Arcade, and Station Street, and should relate well to the environment at either end of Park Street, including the Bridge (see section 6.2.1 for improvements related to Walsall Market), and improving actual and perceived barriers with Crown Wharf. In particular, Gallery Square could be an opportunity to improve pedestrian linkages between Park Street and Crown Wharf, as well as with the new cinema development soon to open at Waterfront North. This should be a short term priority.

- Key area 2: High Street
  This area continues to be a focus for redevelopment and regeneration, building on the completion of the Primark and Co-op stores, and the anticipated retail schemes at Old Square Phase 2 and the Norton and Proffitt site. The Primark completion has increased footfall in this area, and this will increase significantly once these two further retail schemes have been completed. It will therefore be necessary to reinvigorate the environment in this area, following the removal of the market stalls and infrastructure and so that the quality is in keeping with these new developments. Public realm improvements in this area will also help to improve linkages with Asda and importantly, St Matthew's Church. Again this area will need to link in well with improvements to The Bridge as part of the permanent market relocation, and with adjacent streets including Lower Hall Lane, George Street, and Goodall Street and in particular the heritage assets in these areas. This should be a medium term priority, with the programme based around the timescales for the completion of the Old Square phase 2, Norton and Proffitt, and Walsall Market schemes.

  It is anticipated that other key areas of the town will become priorities for public realm improvements in the future, however new developments and subsequent

changes in the way the town centre is used may mean that the next stage of priority areas only becomes clear nearer the time. As such a certain amount of flexibility is necessary in order for the Council to react positively as the town centre changes and evolves.

- Theme 1: Improvements to key pedestrian routes and gateways, wayfinding, and legibility
  As discussed in section 4.3, legibility and wayfinding are important for visitors and users of town centre services and facilities to orientate themselves. A town centre that can be navigated in a way that is logical and intuitive will feel like a more pleasant and attractive place to spend time, and improving wayfinding between key destinations within the centre can encourage linked trips. Legibility will need to be considered as part of the improvements in key areas 1 and 2, but can also be regarded as a separate theme which should be incorporated across the town. Work is currently being undertaken to understand how Walsall can become dementia-friendly and disability-friendly; this work is currently at an early stage but needs to be considered in any new public realm works going forward. Improvements are likely to involve signage, materials, decluttering, lighting, and green infrastructure, amongst others.

- Theme 2: Safety (or the perception of)
  The town centre needs to feel safe and welcoming to all visitors, at all times of day and night, and in all areas. The perception of safety is as, if not more important, than the actual level of incidents. If visitors do not feel safe in certain parts of the town or at certain times of day, they will avoid these areas, thereby making those areas feel more deserted and as a result, even less safe. There are 2 key elements to improving the perception of safety in the town – firstly, providing adequate lighting and signage in particular between pedestrian routes that are likely to be used after dark; and animating all areas of the town centre. For example, due to the predominantly retail uses, Park Street can feel deserted as early at 6pm. Creating a more varied mix can help to animate all parts of the town centre.

- Theme 3: Maintenance, cleanliness, repair and consistency of materials
  This is an overarching theme which will need to apply to all public realm works, both those implemented within recent years and those going forward. Areas which are identified as good quality public realm need to be maintained as such, as well as taking future maintenance into account when implementing public realm improvements. A high level of maintenance is imperative in protecting the investment that the Council has made in improving the environment. This includes both regular cleansing (cleaning, litter picking, graffiti removal etc), repair (replacing items damaged through vandalism or wear and tear with similarly high quality materials), and ensuring consistency (consistent materials across the town centre even if works are undertaken at different times, or unless there is a conscious reason for using different materials ie. zoning, and selecting materials which can be easily repaired or replaced if damaged).

6. Guidelines for Change

6.1 Introduction

This section forms the detail of the strategy so far, setting out specific principles for improvements, palettes of materials and colours, based on existing work undertaken and planning consent for the Walsall Market relocation. To ensure consistency across the town it is envisaged that the materials used as part of the market relocation could be extended across the town, however further detailed feasibility work is required.

6.2 Guidelines

The Designing Walsall SPD says that "*Robust materials that are typical to the borough's pallet of building materials shall be used and these shall be applied to surfacing and street furniture in a way that discourages vandalism and antisocial behaviour. Urban spaces should be designed with the needs of all users in mind, such as children or the elderly.*"

Detailed feasibility work will need to be undertaken to understand and identify the most appropriate materials for each part of the town centre in order to achieve the strategy set out in Section 5.3. However, a good starting point is the public realm proposals for The Bridge, as part of the permanent relocation of Walsall Market.

The consultants for the market relocation project were tasked with developing a palette of colours and materials to be used to improve the public realm in this area. This was included within their planning application for the relocation of the market, which was granted consent in March 2015. Consultants have now been appointed to look at the delivery of the scheme. Once delivered, improvements could then be expanded across the town, using this palette as a basis.

6.2.1 Walsall Market relocation

The following information is taken from the planning application for the relocation of Walsall Market, which was granted consent in March 2015 (14/1871/FL).

The new public realm and market seeks to enhance the shopping experience, and the demountable stalls allow a flexible approach with the ability to provide a civic space that can be used by the community for events.

Paving materials, lighting and the selection of street furniture has been undertaken to bring together a series of elements that respond to the improvements and setting of the centre of Walsall Town. It is intended that an attractive open space is provided when the stalls are not present. It is intended that all elements will be robust enough to ensure limited regular maintenance and a long operational life that in turn provides the necessary uplift to the market and shopping district.

The Bridge market area will be clearly bound with different paving styles, lighting, bollards and other street furniture elements. The north eastern boundary of The Bridge market area is to be bound with bollards of approximately 900mm tall... The north-west and south-east boundaries are defined with flush kerbing to define the market area whilst allowing free flow pedestrian movements to the wider areas. Areas of vehicular access are to be distinguished with contrasting pavement types.

The Bridge has become inviting to shoppers with a less cluttered location with rationalised tree planting, muted paving, seating and art pieces which will begin to be implemented as part of Phase One.

5.5 Landscaping strategy

Initial thoughts for the permanent market as part of Phase Two are muted elements that are of the appropriate scale, texture and colour. It is intended that materials will define spatial activities when the market isn't in operation. The selection process must ensure materials can be repaired or sourced easily without the need to have significant items stored away from site as this has historically proven problematic for Walsall Council.

5.5.1 Street furniture and paving

Street furniture and paving will be propriety products chosen from mainstream supplier catalogues.

Benches must have backs and arms to provide support for the infirm or disabled, and all reduce their appeal to skateboarders and other anti-social behaviour. Wooden slats should be avoided due to their ease of breakage or disfigurement by vandalism. Paving will be laid onto existing construction with only the paving and immediate bedding layer being replaced as part of the scheme. Paving will be laid onto a high performance hydraulically bonding mortar, such as SteinTec tuffbed, to provide a shrinkage free stuff bedding for the paving units. It is proposed that a free flowing slurry grout such as SteinTec tufftop be used to penetrate the joints and cavities in the paving to finish the paving appearance.

Several paving types will be used as described below:

Surface Finish	Location for use	Image (Example only)
Existing Natural Stone reused from The Bridge area	Café style eating area	
Silver grey steel reinforced concrete flag units 600x600x63mm	General footways	
Mid grey clay brindle block pavers 200x100x50mm laid in herringbone pattern.	Vehicular areas	
Black fleck, rough-hewn textured blocks 300x200x60mm.	Building facades	
Silver grey flame textures kerbs laid flush in concrete haunch.	Paving delineation	

5.5.3 Lighting

Lighting provision in Phase Two will take two forms. Existing lighting columns which provide the necessary levels of illumination will remain, or be only slightly repositioned to suit the new layout. All columns and lanterns will be replaced with new columns and lanterns.

Additional feature lighting columns will be added to the scheme to provide more specific illumination of key architecture or public art, and to highlight routes within the market and public realm. All lighting produced will be by Philips or Thorn as approved by AMEY the PFI contractor.

5.5.4 Tree Planting

New trees are proposed within the application area, to replace the existing trees removed. The existing Tilia (common lime) trees are unsuitable for the location due to the sap and fruit produced, which damages street surfaces and market stalls. It is intended that new trees be fastigiate creating a narrow tree with a clear stem, to avoid disruption to pedestrians.

Planting containers are to be used in areas where trees can either not be directly ground installed due to below ground constraints, or they need to have the ability to be repositioned for access in special circumstances. The containers chosen must have enclosed tops to prevent collection of litter.

In ground trees will not use tree grills as these have maintenance and litter collection issues. A specific surface treatment such as compacted sand and gravel, or resin bonded gravel should be used at the base.

All in ground trees will have tree protection frames at their base, to prevent damage from passing dogs and vandals.

Root barriers will be used for all in ground tree pits, to minimise potential damage to adjacent utilities and paving.

The exact species will be determined at detailed design, but preferred options are:

Pyrus calleryana

Hardy and drought tolerant, with deep roots to avoid surface disturbance.

Tilia cordata

Ideal for natural planting, with low sap content.

Betula

New species with strong white bark.

Carpinus betulus

Very upright tree ideal for avenue settings.

6.1.3 Access

All street furniture will be positioned in a regular and consistent manner away from general lines of pedestrian movement ensuring routes remain unobstructed. Where possible, elements have been positioned to back of footways. Waste bins being considered will be round in form and interface directly with the surrounding paving ensuring partially sighted and blind can locate these items using a walking cane. Bollards will be minimum 900mm tall and spaced in a consistent manner to aid the partially sighted and blind.

Mobility impaired people require seating at reasonably frequent intervals. In pedestrian areas seats have been provided at intervals no more than 50 metres apart.

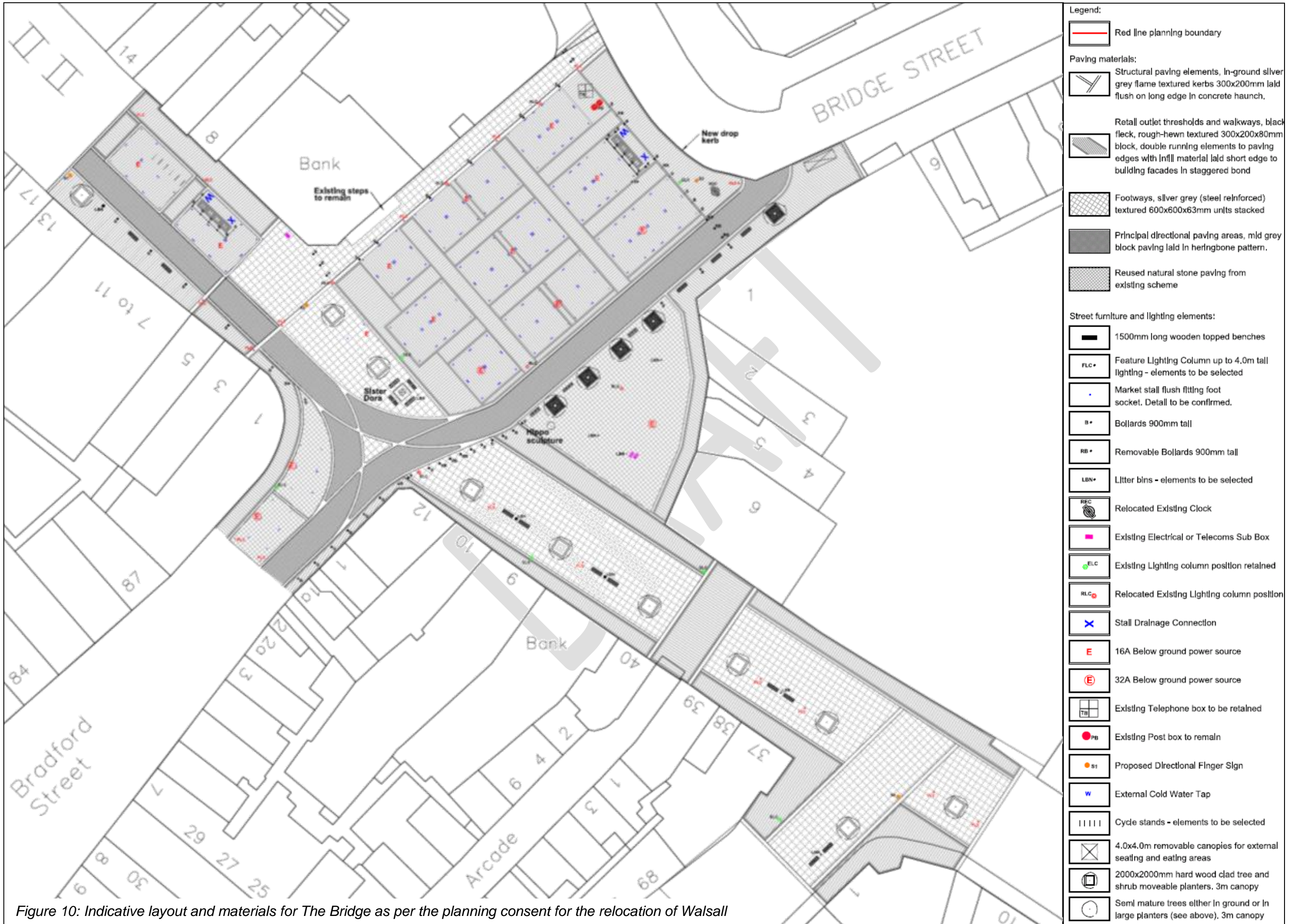Figure 10 shows the indicative layout and materials for the Bridge area, as per the planning consent.

Figure 10: Indicative layout and materials for The Bridge as per the planning consent for the relocation of Walsall

Legend:

Red line planning boundary

Paving materials:

Structural paving elements, in-ground silver grey flame textured kerbs 300x200mm laid flush on long edge in concrete haunch.

Retail outlet thresholds and walkways, black fleck, rough-hewn textured 300x200x80mm block, double running elements to paving edges with infill material laid short edge to building facades in staggered bond

Footways, silver grey (steel reinforced) textured 600x600x63mm units stacked

Principal directional paving areas, mid grey block paving laid in heringbone pattern.

Reused natural stone paving from existing scheme

Street furniture and lighting elements:

1500mm long wooden topped benches

FLC • Feature Lighting Column up to 4.0m tall lighting - elements to be selected

• Market stall flush fitting foot socket. Detail to be confirmed.

B • Bollards 900mm tall

RB • Removable Bollards 900mm tall

LBN • Litter bins - elements to be selected

REC Relocated Existing Clock

Existing Electrical or Telecoms Sub Box

• ELC Existing Lighting column position retained

RLC ⊙ Relocated Existing Lighting column position

✕ Stall Drainage Connection

E 16A Below ground power source

Ⓔ 32A Below ground power source

TB Existing Telephone box to be retained

● PB Existing Post box to remain

• S1 Proposed Directional Finger Sign

W External Cold Water Tap

||||| Cycle stands - elements to be selected

⊠ 4.0x4.0m removable canopies for external seating and eating areas

▣ 2000x2000mm hard wood clad tree and shrub moveable planters. 3m canopy

◯ Semi mature trees either in ground or in large planters (see above), 3m canopy

40

7. Delivery and Implementation

7.1   Introduction

It is important that this study is not just an analysis of the town centre's public realm, but that it contributes towards the delivery of public realm improvements across the town in an effective manner. Public realm improvements have traditionally been difficult to fund due to the costs associated with high quality materials and comprehensive improvements, and the difficulty of quantifying the economic returns on the investment. However as discussed previously, it is now becoming imperative that the Council is able to deliver the environment that is required to benefit the town centre.

7.2   Initial work areas

While Section 5.3 above sets out the key areas of focus for public realm improvements, there are some initial areas of work which will need to be undertaken in the first instance:

- Potential feasibility issues need to be further explored, understanding the issues involved in implementing improvement programmes such as closing key pedestrian (and vehicle) routes, utilities, timescales etc.
- A legibility study could be undertaken across the main parts of the town to understand how improvements could be made to linkages, wayfinding and legibility. This would need to be undertaken prior to the works being designed to understand how materials, lighting etc can be used to improve legibility.
- Starting engagement with key internal stakeholders. In particular, Clean and Green need to be engaged from an early point in order to understand their ability to maintain existing areas of quality public realm, and their capacity for maintenance as improvements are delivered. Furthermore, engaging with Clean and Green and Highways colleagues on proposed materials will be key to choosing materials which are robust and easy to clean/ repair/ replace.
- Detailed audits of existing signage, street furniture, lighting, and materials could be undertaken to understand the quantity and quality of elements of the existing environment, including what works well and what doesn't.
- Further detailed scoping work could be undertaken to understand more clearly the pros and cons of creating new public space through the acquisition and/or demolition of existing buildings, in order to reach an informed decision about the feasibility of this approach (see section 4.4).
- Consultation with the public, businesses, landowners and other stakeholders would be undertaken in order to better understand their views on the existing public realm and how this could be improved. This would help to understand key routes and journeys, which areas are liked and which require improvement, and what people consider important when implementing public realm improvements. This should support the priorities set out in section 5.3. Public consultation can also be undertaken following the detailed design of the works.

- Detailed scoping and feasibility work would be undertaken to recommend and provide costs for specific public realm improvements in key areas. This would provide the design of any new works, building on the work undertaken by consultants for the market planning consent and any further studies eg. a legibility study, the Station Street study. The proposed design and/or materials needs to work across the town centre but be able to be implemented using a phased approach.

7.3   Phasing

There is a need to be aware of the timescales for developments that are in the pipeline, as environmental improvement works will need to take into account any public realm works which may be undertaken as part of the development, and will need to take place as soon as possible after the development has been completed. It is therefore necessary to maintain a clear and up-to-date understanding of the timescales for forthcoming developments, as outlined in Section 3.3, and the phasing of any public realm works needs to be organised around such developments. A GANT chart will be produced which will set out timescales for upcoming developments and therefore a potential timetable for public realm improvements. This will also ensure the surrounding public realm is in keeping with high quality new developments.

For example, the permanent relocation of the market needs to be taken into account in terms of the timescales for disruption in this part of town centre, and the public realm works which will be undertaken as a result, including the removal of the fountain. Additionally, the western end of Park Street is currently experiencing a high level of disruption due to the electrification of the railway line, meaning that parts of the street are being closed off and dug up until Easter 2016. Furthermore it is unlikely that funding will be available which is sufficient to improve the whole of the town centre in one go, instead it is likely to be a piecemeal approach which can be implemented as new developments and funding allow.

However it may also be possible to implement a number of 'quick wins' – smaller projects which can be implemented initially while more comprehensive schemes are being drawn up. This could include litter picking, deep cleansing and graffiti removal, decluttering, temporary signage etc.

7.4   Funding and delivery mechanisms

Some potential funding sources include:

- Planning obligations (S106 or CIL) – planning obligations can be required for planning applications for major developments. Obligations for urban open space, highways improvements or public art could be used to improve the public realm of the town centre. However to fund comprehensive improvements rather than a piecemeal approach would need an explicit policy of seeking such contributions, and would require compiling funds from a number of developments, which could lead to time delays and uncertainty.

- Centro Transport Regeneration Fund – this can provide approximately £70-£100,000 per year (although there is no cap) to fund improvements to transport routes including pedestrian and cycling routes. Proposals should meet some Local Transport Plan (LTP) priorities, take a partnership approach to addressing transport barrier(s), and improve access to services.

- Heritage Lottery Fund – HLF can provide funding of up to £100,000, £2million or £5million, depending on the grant applied for, to fund projects with a focus on heritage. This is unlikely to cover the entire town but could be used around St Matthew's Quarter and/or the canal. A Townscape Heritage Initiative could also be used to fund environmental improvements as well as building works.

- ERDF – some programmes may be appropriate, however it is worth noting that ERDF funding cannot be used for works to retail properties.

- Growing Places Fund – applied for through the LEP, allows organisations to apply for funding to invest in capital projects, including land, property and infrastructure, which unlock economic growth and create jobs.

- Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) Economic Assets Programme – this applies to sites at Waterfront but could potentially be extended to Park Street. The programme aims to support local economic growth by responding to local needs and opportunities, linking up funding streams and promoting innovation.

- The HCA also has funding available to contribute towards feasibility and scoping work of development opportunity sites in the proximity of public transport facilities. Work is currently being undertaken on behalf of the Council and HCA focusing on the Station Street area in Walsall town centre, looking at both the potential for new development and for public realm improvements around the rail station.

- Development of a BID – businesses within a BID pay additional costs to fund projects within the BID's boundaries, such as environmental improvements, street cleansing and marketing. A BID can also draw on public and private funding streams. It can take up to 2 years to develop a BID and requires a ballot with majority yes votes. Improvements would focus on the BID area rather than the wider town centre. However a BID must be business-led rather than Council-led, and can only provide services which are additional to those provided by the Council.

- Other funding streams may be available based on culture and heritage, eg. improving links to the arboretum.

Some of these funding streams are not specifically targeted at public realm improvements, and in general it can be very hard to bid for funding for public realm projects as it is difficult to prove the economic benefits. As a result it may be necessary to apply for funding steams with specific outcomes which are not related to environmental improvements, but where part or all of the funding can be used for

this, where environmental improvements can be shown to achieve the specific outputs of the stream.

If the majority of public realm improvements were to be funded through external funding streams, it is very likely that a number of streams would need to be utilised. Some will only apply to specific parts of the town centre or to specific types of improvements, and therefore funding pots will need to be co-ordinated so that comprehensive improvements can be delivered.

While some funding and delivery mechanisms are available, the level of funding required for comprehensive improvements and the limitations and conditions placed on some of the funding streams, mean that it is likely that the Council will need to lead on funding from its capital programme.

A very initial consideration of improvements to the main parts of the town centre found that basic improvements would cost around £4million, while better quality improvements would cost at least £8million.

7.5   Governance and Resources

The programme would be managed by officers within Regeneration and Development, who have experience of implementing similar projects, with support from the Landscapes and Highways teams as required. It is considered at this time that consultants would be required to undertake the initial design and feasibility work, and a decision would then be taken whether consultants would manage the contractors delivering the works or whether this would be managed in-house.

Partnership working will be important during both the design and the implementation of the projects, and stakeholders/ partners who will need to be engaged include:

- Walsall Council Highways and Traffic Management teams
- Walsall Council Clean and Green services
- Centro
- Network Rail
- Canal and Rivers Trust
- Town centre businesses and landowners
- Police
- Historic England.