The Issues and Options for Walsall Town Centre

The following four chapters focus on key themes for the town centre, using the straplines Shopping, Business, Living, and Leisure. Each chapter looks at the main issues facing the town centre under that theme, poses questions and asks you to consider the options.

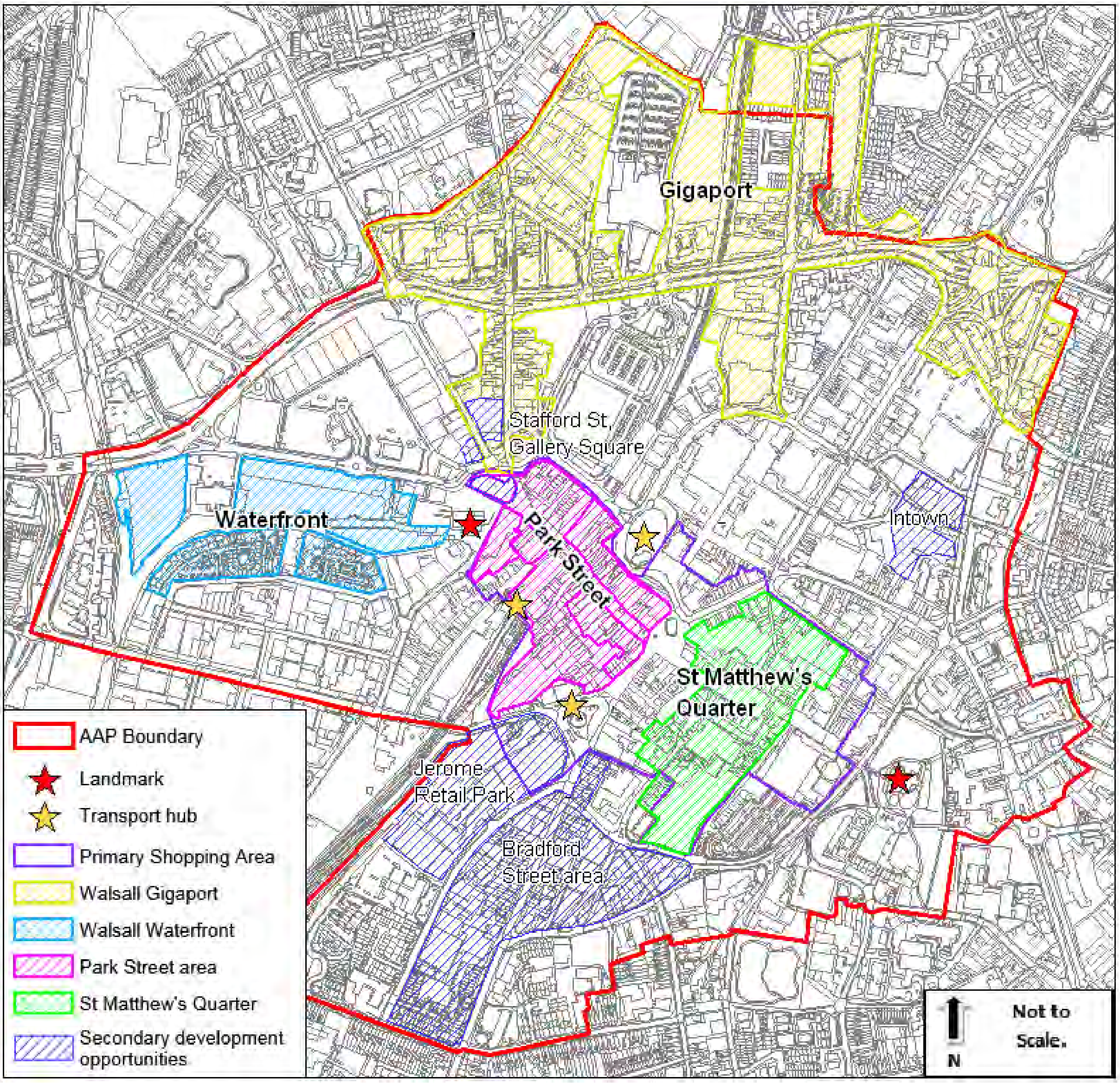

Figure 4.1: Key town centre areas.

4. Walsall Town Centre – A Place for Shopping

4.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the current shopping experience in Walsall and the type of existing retail development in the town centre, in order to fully understand the current retail conditions, before going on to consider locations for potential new retail development.

Jargon Buster

- **Convenience Shopping**: the provision of everyday essential items, including food, drinks, newspapers and confectionary.
- **Expenditure**: The act of spending money for goods or services
- **Factory Outlet Centres**: Groups of shops specialising in selling second and end-of-line goods at discounted process.
- **The Primary Shopping Area (PSA)**: the area where retail development is concentrated.
- **Sequential Test**: A planning principle that seeks to identify, allocate or develop the most central locations in the first instance.

4.2 The Shopping Experience

Shopping is one of the key functions of a town centre, and a healthy economy requires a diverse range of shops and associated facilities that meet the needs of the community. It is recognised that to compete with internet shopping and other surrounding centres the shopping experience of visitors to and residents of Walsall needs to be improved. This includes making it easier to combine shopping and leisure activities, giving visitors the opportunity to connect shopping trips to other attractions such as restaurants, cafés or the cinema.

S:Q1 What do you think of the current shopping experience in the town centre? What can be done to improve the experience?

4.3 The Current Shopping Offer

Walsall town centre is accessible, well located and has a wide catchment area. The shopping offer includes large department stores, independent shops and a very large market. The town centre has a number of shopping centres, including the Old Square, Saddler's Centre, Park Place, Victorian Arcade and Crown Wharf. There are also large supermarkets in the town centre, including Tesco, Asda and Morrisons. At present there are a high proportion of 'value retailers' such as £1 stores, which reflects the lower income demographics of the catchment area.

At the end of 2010 Walsall Town Centre had a vacancy rate of 29.6% (LDC 2012). There are a number of key issues that could be identified as contributing to this, including:

- Leakage of expenditure, as customers from Walsall's shopping catchment go to competing nearby centres such as Birmingham and Wolverhampton
- Competition with the internet and with supermarkets that sell an increasingly wide variety of goods
- Loss of investment and trade from the cumulative build-up of out-of-centre developments over the years
- Unit sizes are too small for modern retailer demands
- High number of vacant buildings
- Varied quality of public realm
- Parking in some cases is too expensive, of poor quality and in the wrong location, for both customers and staff
- The perception of small businesses that business rates are high
- Some potential visitors and customers have a negative perception of the town centre.

There is a high level of competition from a number of nearby centres including Birmingham, Wolverhampton, West Bromwich, Brierley Hill, Lichfield, Cannock, and Sutton Coldfield. In addition Walsall is outperformed in the Black Country by Wolverhampton and Brierley Hill in terms of retail floorspace, rents and yields. There is also a wide range of out-of-centre shopping, and pressure for more out-of-centre development, selling a wider range of goods, with free parking. As a result Walsall Town Centre faces above average levels of competition, ranking 167th out of 200 comparable centres (GVA Grimley, 2010).

Within the town centre pedestrian flows have declined and there appear to be fewer people coming to the centre as a whole (GVA Grimley, 2010). This reflects not only Walsall's retail performance, but also its office market and leisure provision.

In this context retail rents in Walsall have not kept up with those in competing stronger or more affluent centres. Multiple retailers have been lost as well as gained, whilst retailer interest has tended to decline. The town centre is not in good health as a shopping centre. This is partly a reflection of general trends for retail, leisure and service activity to seek to locate in larger or more affluent centres and in out-of-centre locations.

S:Q2 How much impact does the variety of shops available in Walsall have on the attractiveness on the town centre as a place for shopping?
S:Q3 Should the AAP explore issues around the number of some uses in the town centre such as hot food take-away outlets or betting shops?

4.4 Walsall's Primary Shopping Area

Walsall Primary Shopping Area (PSA) is defined within the saved Policies of the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) and in the Black Country Core Strategy (BCCS). The PSA is the focus for retail development and is designed to protect the heart of centres. Retail schemes outside this area will only be permitted when it can be demonstrated that there are no suitable development sites or vacant premises within or immediately adjacent to the PSA through the sequential test (UDP Policy WA1). We need to make a decision about whether the PSA is fit for purpose or if any changes need to be made.

The Primary Shopping Area boundary (PSA)	
PSA Option 1: Retain the current PSA boundary	Implications: Shopping investment remains focussed and the heart of the centre (Park Street) is maintained.
PSA Option 2: Expand the current PSA boundary	Implications: Shopping investment would not be concentrated within the heart of the centre (Park Street) without demonstrating that there are no suitable more central locations through the sequential test. This may deliver larger retail units at a faster rate then through focussing on the current PSA but could result in a shift of investment away from Park Street and St Matthew's Quarter. This in turn could lead to an increase in empty units within these locations, and poor pedestrian links as the retail offer is diluted.
PSA Option 3: Reduce the current PSA boundary	Implications: Reducing the PSA may result in fewer vacant units and a more compact retail offer. This may however mean it is difficult to deliver the BCCS targets for retail within the PSA and deliver the larger units required to meet modern retailers' demands.
PSA Option 4: Expand the PSA once all development opportunities within the current Primary Shopping Area have been maximised	Implications: A staged approach would help to protect the retail core while ensuring space for further retail investment. However an expanded PSA overall could be difficult to sustain and protect, which may lead to increased vacancies if demand decreases after the expansion.

S:Q4 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

S:Q5 Do you think the primary shopping area needs to be changed? If so how?

S:Q6 What approach can the AAP use to allow development outside of the PSA boundary once all development opportunities have been maximised? (see Figure 5 for development opportunities)

S:Q7 The current PSA policy places no restriction on other town centre uses within the defined area. Do you agree with this approach or should the AAP look to control the uses within the PSA further?

4.5 The Location of Major New Retail Development

The BCCS states that Walsall Town Centre should accommodate 85,000 sqm gross of additional comparison retail floorspace by 2026. The AAP will need to allocate the key locations for future retail development. The Council has promoted St Matthew's Quarter as the focus for retail investment in the town centre, and some of this is expected to be delivered in the next 2 years through the first phase redevelopment of the Old Square Shopping Centre. Furthermore the Council has recently received a planning application for the northern half of the former Shannon's Mill site. However, even with later phases of redevelopment of the Old Square Shopping Centre and further retail investment in the rest of the Shannon's Mill site, the majority of the additional 85,000 sqm would have to be delivered in other locations in the town centre.

As explained in **Section 10.2.3**, an approach to calculating the level of potential additional floorspace which could be achieved in the town centre was adopted and calculations undertaken. This showed that, should all potential retail areas be developed to their full extent, it would be possible to achieve an additional 85,120 sqm of A1 floorspace within the town centre. Focusing on sites within the PSA alone, it would be possible to achieve 67,520 sqm of additional A1 floorspace.

There may be an opportunity to reconfigure the Saddler's Shopping Centre as part of proposed works to the rail station. The station currently suffers from a lack of presence in the town centre due to its location under the shopping centre, and with increased rail services extra capacity in the form of a fourth platform may be required. A reconfiguration of the Saddler's Shopping Centre could aid this by creating more space adjacent to the tracks and allowing the frontage of the station to be on or nearer to the high street. As discussed in **Chapter 8**, improved rail services can boost the attractiveness of the town centre to retail providers and businesses.

Figure 5 below and **Table 1 in Appendix 1** show the various sites which could be allocated through the AAP as a retail development opportunity. Some of these may fall outside of the current PSA and it's important to consider how any development outside the PSA can be managed so that the heart of Walsall is not negatively impacted on (see **Section 4.4** for the options around the PSA boundary).

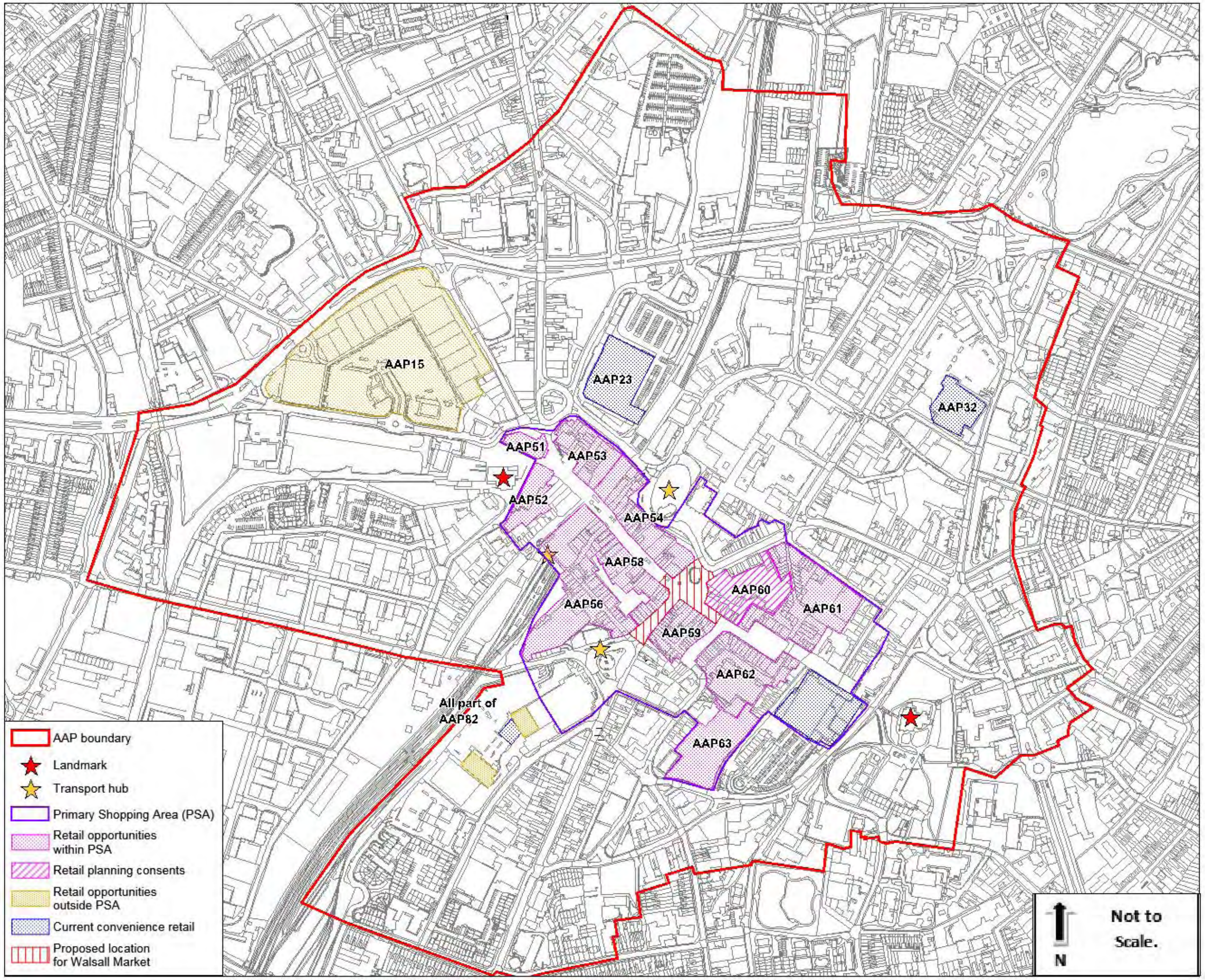

Figure 4.2: Shopping

The Location of Major New Retail Development	
Location of New Retail Option 1: Park Street (as defined in the Figure 4.2) and St Matthew's Quarter are allocated for retail development opportunities	**Implications: Shopping investment remains focussed and the heart of the centre is maintained.**
Location of New Retail Option 2: Once opportunities have been maximised for Park Street and St Matthew's Quarter, development opportunities elsewhere in the town centre will be allocated for retail development	**Implications: A phased approach to the location of major new retail investment would ensure the heart of the centre is protected whilst providing opportunities to meet the comparison retail targets. Investment may take longer to deliver as Park Street and St Matthew's Quarter are in need of redevelopment and reconfiguration in order to meet modern retailers' requirements but this approach would ensure a sustainable approach to retail development.**
Location of New Retail Option 3: The location of major retail development is uncontrolled through the AAP and the location of key retail is left to the market.	**Implications: The Council would have little control over the location of new retail development and the heart of centre would be at risk of further decline as investment is attracted to easier to develop edge-of-centre locations. A lack of control over the location of retail development would have implications for the delivery of other targets such as office floorspace or leisure.**

S:Q8 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

S:Q9 Where should we deliver the 85,000sqm of new comparison retail floorspace set as a target in the BCCS? Do you agree with the sites we have identified in Table 1 (Appendix 1) as potential retail development opportunities? What sites have we missed?

4.6 Walsall Market

The market is an important tradition of the town centre and has been in existence since 1219. Although popular and part of the town's heritage, there is a perception that the quality of the stalls provides a negative image of the town centre, and its attractiveness and usage has declined since its peak. To revive its fortunes, the market relocated to its existing position in Park Street, The Bridge, Bradford Street, Digbeth and Lower Hall Lane in October 2009 and the temporary planning consent will last until April 2013.

Figure 4.3: Sketch of the future Market

To enhance the place value of the town centre and encourage stallholders and customers to stay, a permanent home is required for the market where it can act as an anchor attraction for the retail offer in the town centre, with good pedestrian movement and visibility for retailers. The Council has commissioned independent work to assess the potential locations for the long term home for the market, which has included an analysis of both indoor and outdoor options. This has concluded that the market should be located permanently on The Bridge and in Bradford Street, and this should be accompanied by significant investment in the public realm, the quality of the stalls and supporting infrastructure, the range and quality of produce, and the way in which the market is managed. Further feasibility work, including key stakeholder involvement, will be undertaken to consider the full resource and logistical implications of implementing this proposal.

Walsall Market	
Walsall Market Option 1: Pursue the proposed permanent location for the market on The Bridge and in Bradford Street	**Implications: This will deliver an improvement in the quality of the market. However the spatial constraints may lead to a reduction in the overall number of market stalls.**
Walsall Market Option 2: The Council reconsiders other potential indoor and outdoor locations for the market.	**Implications: It is considered that this may lead to further delays and uncertainty about the future of the market.**

S:Q10 Which of the above option do you agree with?

S:Q11 Do you support the conclusions of the independent analysis for the long term location of the market? If not, do you have any evidence to support this position?

S:Q12 What improvements or changes are needed to ensure the long term success of Walsall market? What evidence do you have to support these suggestions?

S:Q13 If the market is permanently located around the Bridge, should the public space here which will be used be replaced elsewhere in the town centre?

4.7 Factory Outlet Centres

There has been some market interest in the provision of a factory outlet centre on the northern side of the West Midlands conurbation. Factory outlet centres provide a concentration of smaller retail units for luxury retailers to sell high end goods at discounted prices. It is considered that the most sustainable location for a factory outlet centre would be within or on the edge of the town centre. If such a centre were pursued elsewhere in the Borough, there would be a negative impact on the town centre through the loss of investment, spend and footfall, and no opportunity for linked visits to other town centre shops and services.

S:Q14 Do you think that the AAP should make provision for a site to accommodate a factory outlet centre? If yes, where?