5. Walsall Town Centre – A Place for Business

5.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the town centre's current economy and the existing office market, before considering new opportunities for office development.

Jargon Buster

- **Business Improvement District (BID):** a partnership between a local authority and the local business community to develop projects and services that will benefit the trading environment within the boundary of a clearly defined commercial area.
- **Live-Work Space**: property that is specifically designed for dual use, combining both residential and employment space
- **Social Enterprise:** generally a not-for-profit organisation which recycles any surplus into the social and/or environmental purpose of the business.

5.2 A Diverse Economic Base for Walsall

There is a need to plan for a modern and diverse economic base that meets the needs of a 21st century town centre. We need to provide for more jobs and bring new businesses into the Borough in order to ensure the economy is more resilient to changes in the wider economic environment. A diverse economic base is also key to ensuring income levels are maintained and increased for local residents, which in turn raises the level of spending power in the Borough, supporting expenditure in the town centre.

Walsall's town centre is unusual in that there is some industry in and around the centre. These are mostly fragmented based on small works with poor access to key transport routes. Industry is gradually leaving these areas and consolidating in larger industrial areas that have better access to the motorway. This process provides opportunities for the reuse of these sites, helping to diversify the economy of the centre.

The service industry accounts for 76.3% of employee jobs (NOMIS, 2008), and although service industries may have suffered with the job losses over the past few years it is still the largest employment sector. Walsall needs to prioritise putting in place the conditions to significantly grow private sector knowledge-based employment in the Borough (Ekosgen, 2010). The service sector will be one of the key drivers of economic growth in the coming years and the ability to accommodate such employment will prove crucial to the future success of the Walsall economy. Walsall's service sector is largely dependent on local consumer demand. As such the growth of services will only happen if development brings large scale inward investment which can sell services to a wider than local population catchment (Lambert Smith Hampton Research 2007).

Walsall Town Centre should be at the forefront of achieving a diverse economy as it provides the focus for new jobs in the service sector including finance, IT and other business activities brought to the centre through the delivery of new office space.

5.3 The Scale of New Office Development

The demand for offices, and the quality and quantity of available office accommodation, is currently poor. The office market in Walsall Borough only had 130,000 sqm of office stock in 2007 (Lambert Smith Hampton Research 2007). Take-up of office space is limited by a lack of suitable supply and lack of demand. There is very little if any space currently available to satisfy the needs of the modern occupier with much of the in-centre market being predominantly outdated 1960s/70s construction, badly configured and with inadequate parking provision (GVA Grimley 2009b and Lambert Smith Hampton Research 2007).

The BCCS requires 220,000 sqm of additional office floorspace to be accommodated in Walsall town centre by 2026. Whilst new offices have been delivered as part of the new Tesco store, which will improve the centre's offer, it is the proposals within the Gigaport project that will substantially alter the office market. The development of a strong office market is crucial to improve the centre. It will provide more employment, increase footfall and enhance consumer spending power. It can also act as a catalyst for other developments in the leisure and retail sectors. It also serves a wider role in the economy of the whole Borough.

Walsall needs to prioritise the development of office and other commercial space for private sector occupiers in the town centre, in order to attract new investment and jobs and retain skilled employees. Alongside this, it needs to improve the broader town centre offer to create an attractive environment for employment in finance, professional and business services. There are office vacancies in the town centre at present and pressure to convert or redevelop offices to residential use. However it is important to take a long-term perspective when considering what office provision should be made in the town centre.

B:Q1 What type of offices should be delivered?

B:Q2 What can we do to create demand for offices and a strong business environment?

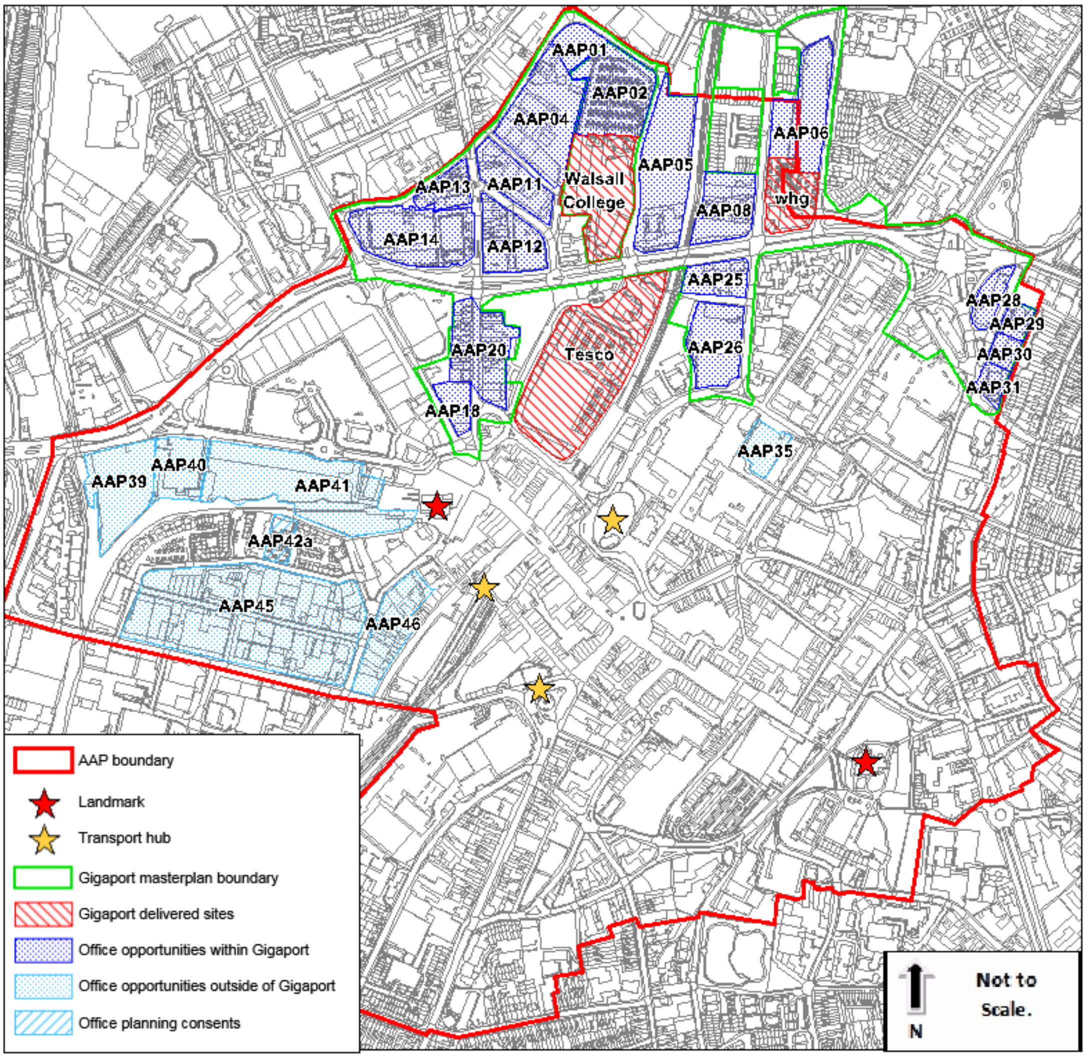

Figure 5.1: Potential areas for office development

5.4 The Location of Major New Office Development

Gigaport was initially identified as the focus for office development due to the availability of a number of sites in public ownership alongside other under-utilised sites, providing a quantum of space to create a new office quarter all within walking distance of the core of the town centre and providing good transport links. The Gigaport masterplan was granted outline planning consent in December 2008, placing an emphasis on office development, supported by limited hotel, sports and leisure and live-work elements in particular locations to ensure vibrancy out of office hours. It was originally envisaged that the masterplan would be delivered by a single development partner, supported by public sector intervention from the Regional Development Agency. However, the economic downturn and changes to central government policy have necessitated a reconsideration of how the Gigaport project can be delivered. Discussions between the Council and the private sector have concluded that the masterplan is not deliverable as a single entity, and that a more incremental delivery approach should be made to take advantage of the Council's land ownership along the Littleton Street corridor.

Other sites within the town centre have planning consents for office development. For example at Waterfront there are planning consents for a further 29,400 sqm of office space, which when added to the Gigaport proposals go further towards the BCCS target of 220,000 sqm by 2026. However, there is still a shortfall that must be addressed through this document. **Figure 5.1** above and **Table 2 in Appendix 1** set out the possible locations for the allocation of office development.

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 were undertaken. This showed that, should all potential office areas be developed to their full extent, it would be possible to achieve an additional 442,875 sqm of B1 floorspace within the town centre. Focusing on sites within the Gigaport boundary alone, it would be possible to achieve 183,375 sqm of additional B1 floorspace.

The Location of Major New Office Development	
Location of New Offices Option 1: The Gigaport remains the prime location for office development in Walsall town centre	**Implications: Office accommodation is concentrated in an accessible and attractive location, creating a business environment that connects well to the town centre.**
Location of New Offices Option 2: Offices are dispersed around the centre	**Implications: Office accommodation is spread across the town centre, missing out on the opportunity to create a business district and therefore making the offer less attractive to investors and businesses.**

B:Q3 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

B:Q4 How can we ensure Gigaport links well with the rest of the town centre?

B:Q5 Are there any other locations where we should encourage major new office development within the town centre? Do you agree with the sites we have identified in Table 2 (Appendix 1) as potential office development opportunities? What sites have we missed?

5.5 Industrial Uses

There are currently some industrial uses within the boundary of the town centre and consideration needs to be given to what, if any, possible changes should be brought forward through the AAP to such uses and areas. **Figure 7** below and **Table 2 in Appendix 1** show sites which we think currently have some industrial uses in operation. The Council's Employment Land Review (ELR) suggests that most of this land could be considered for release from employment land and that other uses would be suitable. Any change of this land from employment would be subject to BCCS policies EMP 1-5 and DEL2, which act to protect the employment base. A key issue is whether the businesses can be suitability relocated. If sites become vacant, these previous industrial sites would provide land for the shortfall in office floorspace or may be suitable for housing.

Although much of the employment land in the town centre is of poor quality Albert Jagger in Green Lane is of high quality and there is a question over if this site should be protected and retained through the AAP as an exception to the other industrial sites.

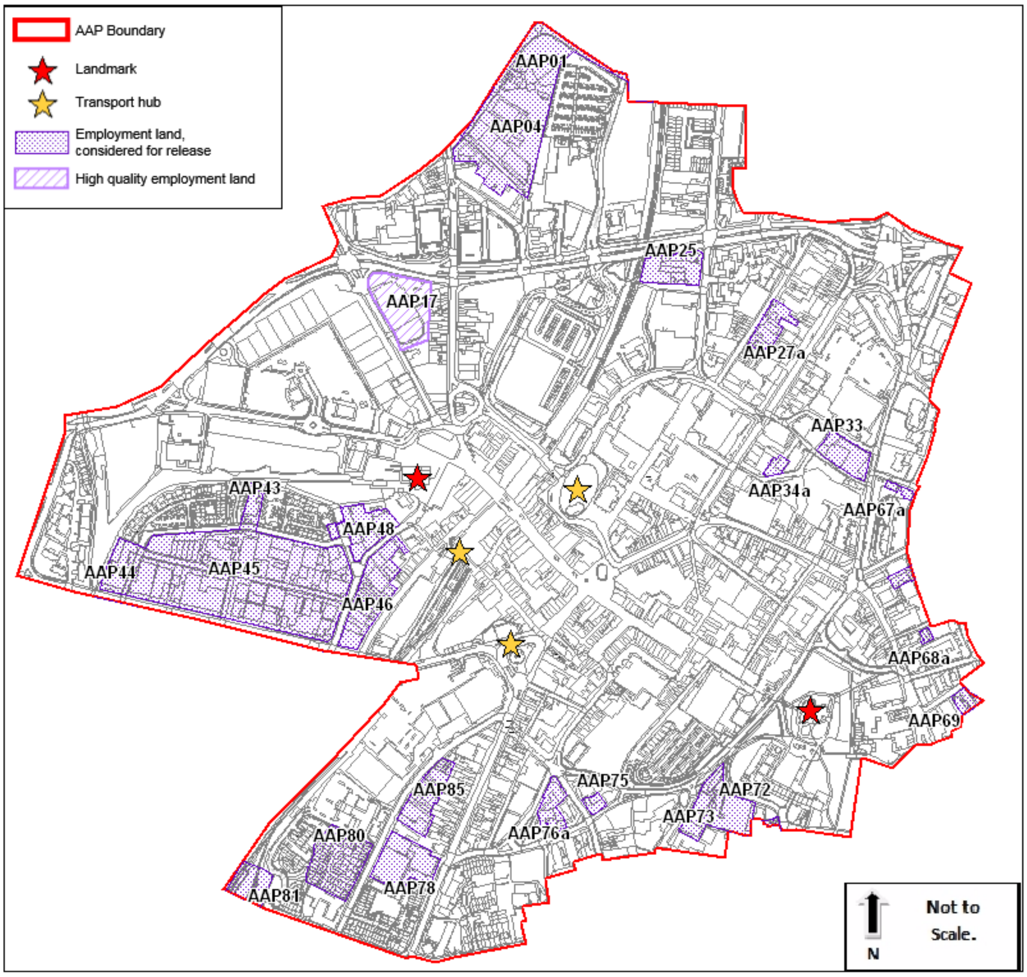

Figure 5.2: Map showing the location of industrial areas

Industrial Uses	
Industrial Uses Option 1: The AAP protects and enhances the current industrial uses within the town centre its boundary	**Implications: Employment uses are protected but not necessarily in the right location. This may constrain the businesses, conflict with surrounding uses and stop areas being used for development of town centre uses especially offices.**
Industrial Uses Option 2: Alternative uses for the current industrial sites and the relocation of industry are considered once all other development opportunities have been maximised (as in accordance with BCCS Policies)	**Implications: This is the current situation and would allow for flexibility. It allows industry to be protected without constraining the growth of the centre and development of centre uses. This may however put pressure on business owners to relocate and would depend on a mechanism for relocating industry being found.**
Industrial Uses Option 3: The AAP aims to attract particular	**Implications: This could help with the diversification of the economy within the**

industrial sectors, for example those that would utilise the close location to the hospital could be allocated sites for the promotion of Research and Development or other related uses	**centre, attract new businesses and bring more expenditure into the centre. A balance would need to be found in promoting industrial sectors and freeing land for other development.**

B:Q6 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

B:Q7 Do you think the sites shown above and in Table 2 (Appendix 1) should be allocated for alternative uses than industry? Have you any suggestions for what the sites should be allocated for?

B:Q8 Do you have any suggestions for how we can ensure businesses in the town centre are relocated to more suitable locations?

B:Q9 Are there any employment sites that should be allocated for protection? If yes, which and why?

5.6 Other employment issues

It is recognised that there are many different types of employment that make up a diverse economic base and add vibrancy to the town centre. The AAP needs to consider what these should be and how to locate them in the town centre.

Other uses may include, for example trade counters, research and development, car showrooms, live-work space, social-enterprises, conference facilities, training centres, financial and professional services (e.g. banks, building societies, estate agents, betting offices), day nurseries and crèches, creative industry studios and data centres.

B:Q10 What other employment uses should be considered in the town centre?

B:Q11 Where should these employment uses be located?

B:Q12 Should the AAP promote social enterprises in the town centre, if so how? Is there any evidence to suggest a need to allocate specific locations or building requirements for such uses?

B:Q13 Should the AAP be promoting live-work provision? If so, how?