

## 6. Walsall Town Centre – A Place for Leisure



### 6.1 Introduction

For town centres to be truly attractive as places to live and work they need to offer a full range of housing, retail, work and leisure opportunities. Centres increasingly need to offer a combined shopping and leisure experience, offering restaurants, cafés, bars and multiplexes, which attract shoppers and encourage longer stays. Such leisure uses require relatively large physical venues and are likely to play an increasingly important role in town centre land uses. This chapter looks at the current municipal and commercial leisure facilities in the town centre, cultural and community facilities, the evening economy, and the overnight accommodation offer.

#### Jargon Buster

- **Community facilities:** any facility that provides meeting places or focal points for community activities.

### 6.2 Sport, Leisure, and Active Recreation

The Council is committed to providing opportunities to encourage people to be more physically active to achieve the health and wellbeing benefits of an active lifestyle. Few people in Walsall (less than 20%) currently achieve recommended levels of physical activity and more than half of adults (56%) don't participate in physical activity. Both national and local research has indicated that the activities most likely to encourage Walsall residents to be more active are swimming and fitness – activities that are wholly dependent on physical facilities (swimming pools and

gyms). **Figure 6.1** and **Table 8 in Appendix 1** show the current sport and leisure provision in the town centre.

Sport and Leisure provision is increasingly moving towards large multi-purpose sites. Large sites are able to provide the range and scale of facilities people want and present a cost-effective way of delivering the service. Research has also articulated a clear need to improve the quality of leisure facilities – quality is cited as the principal factor why people are inactive by 29% of respondents to the ‘Your Place, Your Wellbeing’ Survey 2012.

On this basis the emerging strategy for Borough-wide Sport and Leisure provision focuses on developing a small number of relatively large cost-effective leisure centres. This in no way detracts from other active recreation opportunities such as those in parks and greenspaces, however if meaningful improvements are to be made in activity levels, a core offer of quality swimming and fitness provision is essential.

Locating the sort of leisure centre provision described above in a town centre is challenging. A mid-sized leisure centre would ideally comprise a pool, sports hall, fitness facilities and ideally outdoor artificial grass pitch – plus associated changing and support provision. Such a centre would require a building of at least 5,000m<sup>2</sup>, with a ground-floor footprint of 3,750m<sup>2</sup> (swimming and sports hall provision is prohibitively expensive when developed above ground-floor). An artificial grass pitch would need a further 7,500m<sup>2</sup>.

Gala Baths has offered town centre sport and leisure provision since 1961. The age and configuration of the building means that its current income is considerably less than the expenditure required to run it. This financial gap, plus the constraints of the site, would make the refurbishment of Gala Baths to deliver the facilities described above prohibitively expensive.

Meaningful improvements to Gala Baths could be made – for example the changing provision could be refurbished and the gym extended. However the capital cost would be high and the level of quality and service delivered would be less than in a

rebuild. Substantial investment in the Gala Baths would almost certainly be at the expense of Sport and Leisure development elsewhere in the Borough.

<u>Leisure Facilities</u>	
Leisure Facilities Option 1: The Council does not invest in the Gala Baths	Implications: The facility becomes increasingly run-down and inefficient to operate. It would however enable limited resources to be spent on the provision elsewhere in the Borough.
Leisure Facilities Option 2: The Council invests in the Gala Baths in its current location	Implications: The Gala Baths continues to operate with improved facilities, though operational inefficiencies may remain. This may be at the detriment of investment in facilities across the Borough.
Leisure Facilities Option 3: The Council invests in leisure facilities elsewhere in the town centre	Implications: The Gala Baths is replaced by a new provision, and the site becomes available for other town centre uses. An appropriate site may be difficult to secure and there would be no leisure investment elsewhere in the Borough.
Leisure Facilities Option 4: The Council seeks partner and/or private sector investment to deliver leisure facilities in the town centre	Implications: An alternative leisure facility would be provided within the town centre, though again it may be difficult to secure an appropriate site. This would enable the Council to invest in leisure provision elsewhere in the Borough.
Leisure Facilities Option 5: The Council does not provide any leisure facilities in the town centre	Implications: This would enable the Council to invest in leisure provision elsewhere in the Borough, however the overall attractiveness and vitality of the town centre would be compromised.

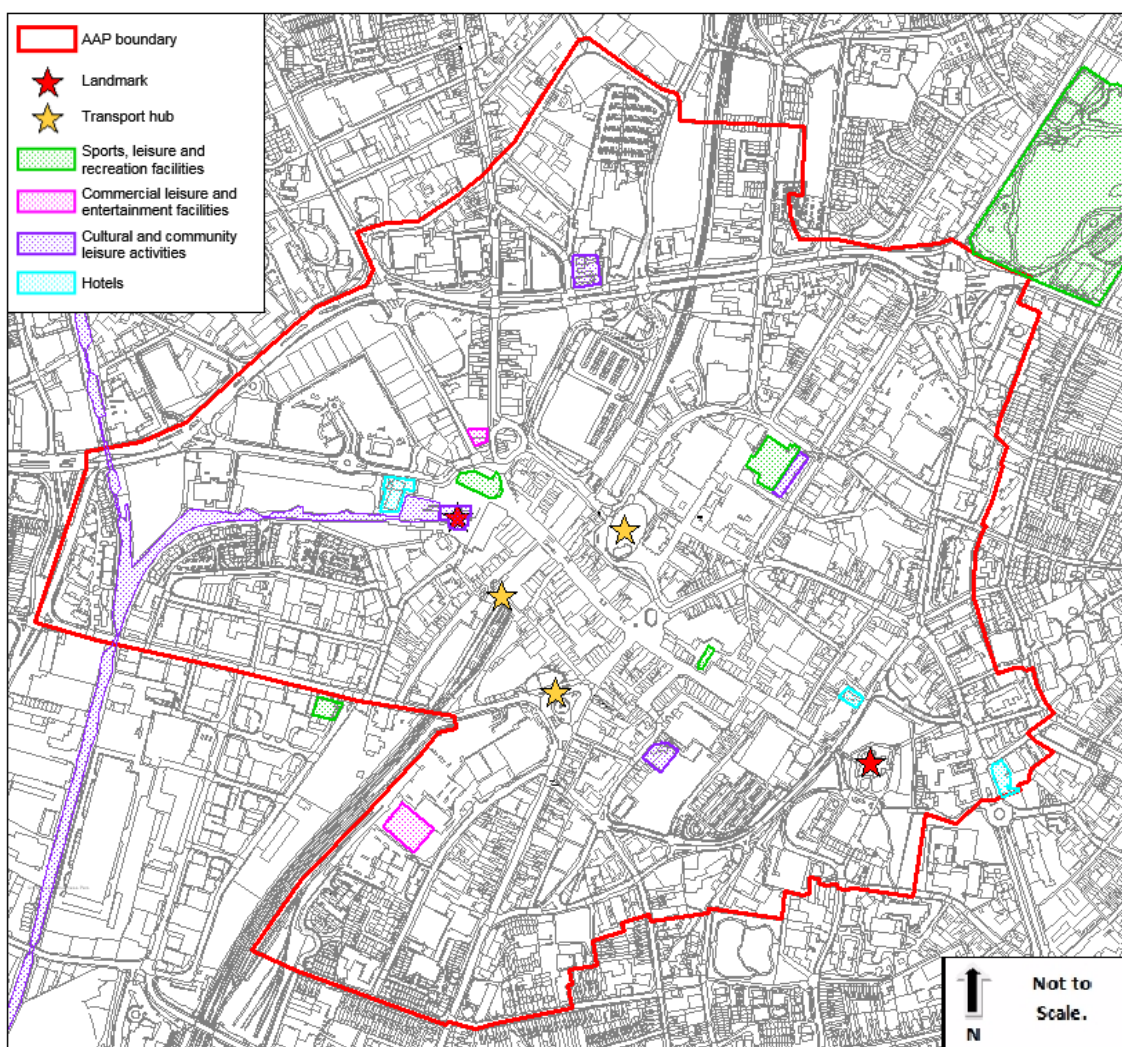
**L:Q1 Which of the above options do you agree with? Why? What should happen to Gala Baths if a refurbishment is not possible?**

**L:Q2 What sort of sport, leisure, and active recreation facilities do you think should be provided in the town centre?**

**L:Q3 Do you think these facilities should be provided in the Gala Baths? Or can they be provided in other locations? If yes, where?**

**L:Q4 What factors impact on your decision to use leisure facilities?**

**L:Q5 Do we need to allocate for protection any of the facilities identified on Figure 6.1 and Table 8 (Appendix 1)? If yes, why?**



**Figure 6.1: Current sports, entertainment, and community leisure facilities, and hotel provision.**

### 6.3 Walsall Arboretum

Walsall Arboretum is the Borough's flagship park and is a key location for leisure activities. Although not technically within the current town centre boundary, it is just a short walk away from the centre, and developments here will be of such significant value to the town centre that it cannot be overlooked in the AAP.

A £7.6m restoration of the historic core of Walsall Arboretum commenced in summer 2010 and the majority of the work was completed by March 2013, with the final phase, the building of a new Visitor Centre, due to commence in September 2013 and be completed by Autumn 2014. The opening of the restored Arboretum will be a major milestone in the regeneration of the town and will place our most historic park back at the forefront of leisure provision in the region, increasing the attractiveness of the town for residents, investors and businesses. Essential green space and high quality environmental provision is recognised as a core component of the necessary infrastructure for a sustainable and economically high performing town.

The Arboretum plays a key strategic role within a wide range of initiatives supporting the holistic regeneration of Walsall Town Centre providing the foundations from which to stimulate the local economy; providing the highest quality public realm to support Walsall town centre regeneration and significantly increasing the attractiveness of the town for housing and population growth.

**L:Q6 How do you think the physical links between Walsall town centre and the Arboretum could be improved? If so, how?**

**L:Q7 What do you think could be done to encourage more users of the town centre to visit the Arboretum? And vice versa?**

### 6.4 Cultural and Community Leisure Facilities

Walsall's current cultural and community facility offer consists chiefly of the New Art Gallery, Walsall Museum, the Leather Museum, and the Local History Centre (See **Figure 6.1** and **Table 8 in Appendix 1** for full list). While these venues are successful in attracting visitors from within and outside the Borough, it is considered that the range of cultural attractions needs to be strengthened and expanded, creating a unique selling point to bring visitors to the town. Currently, there are no

large scale banqueting facilities in the town centre, though two such facilities have secured consent through the planning process. The Council House could host events, and indeed does on some occasions, but the facilities are in need of greater investment.

There have been discussions around the possibility of combining the museum with the Leather Museum and Local History Centre in one facility, and a feasibility study has concluded that this could be located on the site of the Leather Museum.

<u>Cultural and Community Facilities - 1</u>	
Cultural and Community Option 1: The Leather Museum site is allocated as a potential location for a combined museum and local history centre	Implications: This would lead to improved heritage and museum facilities; however it would require considerable capital investment to deliver it.
Cultural and Community Option 2: The AAP does not allocate a specific site for a combined museum and local history centre.	Implications: Without a positive land use allocation for this facility it would make it more difficult to attract external funding streams.

### **Cultural and Community Leisure Facilities Questions**

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

**L:Q9 Is there an adequate range of cultural and community facilities in the town centre? Should existing facilities elsewhere in the Borough be re-located to the town centre on one site?**

**L:Q10 Do we need to allocate for protection any of the cultural and community facilities identified on Figure 6.1 and Table 8 (Appendix 1)? If yes, why?**

The town centre is also lacking a large venue for performing arts; however it does offer a range of smaller performing arts event venues through the Town Hall, the New Art Gallery, and the College, whilst the recently completed Goldmine building in Lower Hall Lane provides a small performance facility for young people. The Forest

Arts Centre is located approximately 2 miles to the north of the town centre and as such there are no obvious links and it currently competes with the town centre.

<u>Cultural and Community Facilities - 2</u>	
Cultural and Community Option 3: The AAP allocates land for a large performance venue	Implications: This would create an opportunity to attract large scale performances to Walsall. However there would be a risk that the market for large performance venues in the region is already satisfied and the land would remain undeveloped.
Cultural and Community Option 4: The AAP identifies, promotes and protects existing venues (Walsall Town Hall, New Art Gallery, Walsall College)	Implications: This would support, sustain and develop existing provision. However it would not create the capacity to host larger performance events.
Cultural and Community Option 5: The AAP leaves the location of cultural and community facilities to the Market	Implications: Allowing demand to be met by the market could result in a less desirable location for these facilities.
Cultural and Community Option 6: The AAP allocates locations for mixed use leisure opportunities which include performance space	Implications: This would attract a performance space alongside other leisure operations and potentially make it more viable to investors.

L:Q11 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

**L:Q12 What sort of acts / events would you like to see attracted to Walsall Town Centre? Where should such events be held?**

L:Q13 How can the Forest Arts Centre be better integrated into the cultural offer of the town centre?

Events within the town centre are important for its economy and in increasing a sense of civic pride. Recent examples include the Night Market and continental market which took place in October 2012 and March 2013. However there are only a small number of locations within the town centre with sufficient space to hold such

events, including outside St Paul's Church, Gallery Square, and the top of Park Street (outside Wilkinson).

<u>Cultural and Community Facilities - 3</u>	
Cultural and Community Option 7: The AAP allocates space(s) for outside performances and events that is to be protected, enhanced and promoted through the redevelopment of the town centre	Implications: The town centre would be better placed to attract visitors through events and in doing so support local business. However space allocated for this purpose could be at the expense of other uses.
Cultural and Community Option 8: The AAP does not allocate or set any policies for the promotion of outdoor performances or events	Implications: The town centre will continue to struggle to accommodate events and lose out to competing centres.

L:Q14 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

## 6.5 Evening Economy

The night-time offer in Walsall town centre is currently dominated by drinking venues which are mainly used by young people after 11pm. There is little that would encourage workers to remain in the town centre after work, or for families to stay after visiting the town centre for other purposes such as shopping. This leads to a gap in the family and early evening markets which can result in a 'ghost town' feeling in the early evening. The Lambert Smith Hampton (2007) Research study suggested the potential for the creation of a more mature family-friendly bar / restaurant circuit away from the current drinking venues, possibly in mixed developments with office or residential uses. One way of attracting further night time investment would be to zone similar uses together, but consideration would need to be given to practical implications of policing and safety matters.



<u>Evening Economy</u>	
<b>Evening Economy Option 1:</b> The AAP identifies particular zones within the town centre in which to focus investment in the evening economy	<b>Implications:</b> This may prove attractive to both customers and investors, and be more manageable from a public safety perspective, whilst not detracting from the amenity of other town centre uses.
<b>Evening Economy Option 2:</b> The location of evening economy establishments is not zoned	<b>Implications:</b> The creation of an attractive and manageable evening quarter could not be guaranteed.

**L:Q15** Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

**L:Q16** What do you think is missing from the eating and drinking offer in Walsall town centre?

**L:Q17** Where do you think such outlets should be located?

## 6.6 Overnight Accommodation

Although there is significant hotel provision on the periphery of the town centre, in particular towards M6 Junctions 10 and 7, there is a clear lack of hotel space within the town centre, and the limited current provision is of varying quality. The availability of hotel provision is important for leisure users and is also seen as essential alongside office developments. As such, the Gigaport masterplan included the provision of a hotel, but this ambition is yet to be realised.

There is a 100-bed Premier Inn hotel with bar/restaurant facilities which opened in December 2012. However, whilst welcome, this development represents the only national hotel chain found in the town centre, and it is considered that another major chain, preferably of 4 star quality with leisure and conferencing facilities, is required for the town centre to move forward as a serious business and tourism centre.

<u>Overnight Accommodation</u>	
<b>Overnight Accommodation Option 1:</b> The AAP identifies particular zones within the town centre in which to	<b>Implications:</b> This may prove attractive to both customers and investors, whilst not detracting from the amenity of other town

focus investment in overnight accommodation	centre uses.
Overnight Accommodation Option 2: The location of overnight accommodation is not zoned but is dispersed around the town centre to support different elements of the town centre offer	Implications: The creation of an attractive zone for overnight accommodation could not be guaranteed, but a variety of locations for hotels may meet a broader range of requirements.

L:Q18 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

**L:Q19 Is there an adequate range of overnight accommodation in the town centre? Where should additional accommodation be provided?**

### 6.7 The Canal Arm, towpaths and basin

The canal forms an important network for pedestrians to navigate across the town centre, and acts as an important habitat and link to the Borough's industrial heritage. It forms a crucial part of the environmental infrastructure network in Walsall. The navigation also acts as a source of recreation and as a setting to the New Art Gallery and other Waterfront developments, whilst providing links between the town centre and surrounding areas, especially via the historic Walsall Locks Conservation Area. These important environmental assets provide multi-functional benefits including, for example, providing leisure and recreational facilities, forming part of wildlife corridors, providing space for pedestrian and cycle routes, or offering opportunities for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

The development at Waterfront seeks to promote activity on the canal with buildings facing onto the canal utilising strong public frontages. The Waterfront South development of 322 residential units and commercial space by Jessup Brothers Ltd has already started to transform the canal arm and has won awards for its contribution to sustainable design, construction and regeneration.

The AAP will seek to build on the recreational value of the canal by promoting a leisure-led development in and around Waterfront, which is being led by the 100 bedroom Premier Inn hotel. Further thought to the Council's aspirations for

Waterfront are considered in **Chapter 9**. The canal basin adjacent to the New Art Gallery needs enlivening, and consideration should be given to what additional canal facilities are required for the future.

### The Canal Arm, Towpaths and Basin

<p><b>Canal Option 1:</b> The AAP sets higher standards of design for development along the canal and requires development fronting the canal to financially contribute towards the enhancement of the Canal network</p>	<p><b>Implications:</b> A better quality of environment and design is delivered and the canal is better integrated with the town centre. However there may be implications for scheme viability.</p>
<p><b>Canal Option 2:</b> No specific requirements are set for development fronting the canal within the Town Centre</p>	<p><b>Implications:</b> The opportunity to maximise the canalside location is potentially missed.</p>

L:Q20 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

**L:Q21 Are any additional canal user facilities required to enhance the canal network? For example, commercial and/or residential moorings.**

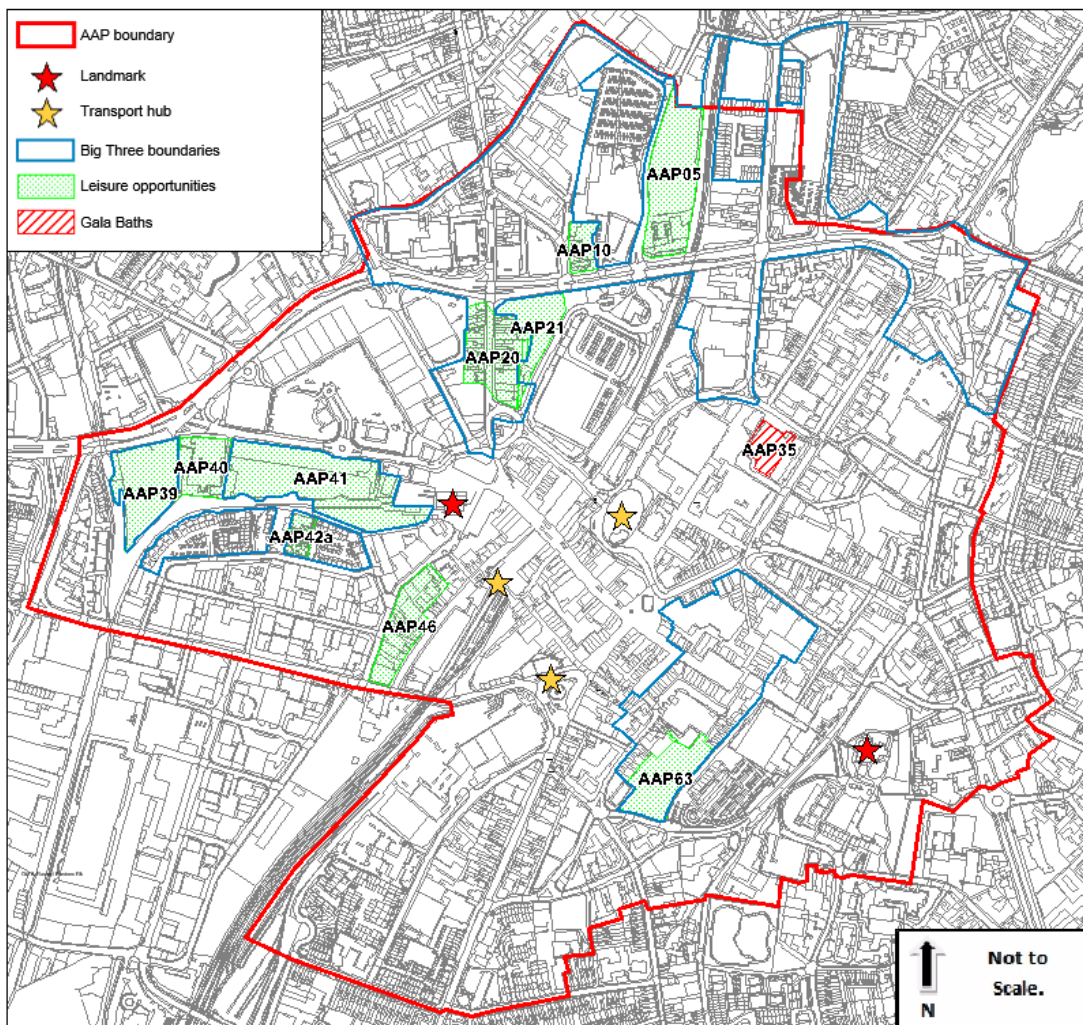
**L:Q22 How should canal-side developments be designed to enhance the canal network?**

## 6.8 The location of new leisure developments

There are a range of leisure / entertainment facilities that the Council would not normally provide, but rather facilitate the delivery of such provision by the private sector. Such facilities could include a cinema, a bowling alley, an ice rink, bingo halls and a casino. Current facilities are shown in **Figure 6.2** below and are listed in **Table 3 in Appendix 1**.

A 2007 report by Lambert Smith Hampton Research into commercial leisure demand in Walsall Town Centre highlighted “a dearth of leisure options” in the town centre. The study suggests there was latent demand for cinema provision, and that there could be the potential for tenpin bowling. Such leisure facilities should be located

within the town centre so that they are easily accessible by public transport, particularly for the above average proportion of the population who are under 16 and over 65 who may rely on public transport. See **Chapter 9** for site specific details. Whilst the cinema interest has been noted for the Shannon’s Mill site and the site opposite Tesco, Waterfront has been identified in Walsall’s UDP as the town centre’s primary location for leisure development and other sites would also be appropriate for a cinema operator. The attraction of a cinema operator as an anchor to a development scheme, with its footfall generation, will attract a number of other end users in the leisure sector. As such, if the cinema is secured for one location rather than another, it may lead to one of the sites remaining undeveloped for a longer period of time. The AAP must therefore consider the primary options for the location of a cinema operator and ultimately conclude which is most beneficial to the regeneration of the town centre.



**Figure 6.2: Potential locations for leisure opportunities**

### The Location of New Leisure Developments

<b>Location of Leisure Option 1:</b> The AAP allocates Waterfront as the primary location for large scale leisure developments	<b>Implications:</b> Waterfront is an attractive location for leisure development, and has the potential for such uses.
<b>Locations of Leisure Option 2:</b> Leisure development is allocated elsewhere in the town centre only when Waterfront is fully delivered for leisure or other uses	<b>Implications:</b> This would allow greater flexibility, but other town-centre sites may not prove as appealing as Waterfront for leisure investors.
<b>Locations of Leisure Option 3:</b> Leisure development is not allocated and the location of such development is left to the Market	<b>Implications:</b> Leisure developments often require a significant footprint and consequently if locations are not assigned, sufficient space may not be found to accommodate developments.

L:Q23 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why? L:Q24 What kind of commercial leisure facilities would you pay to use in Walsall town centre?

L:Q25 Where do you think is the best location for such facilities, especially the Cinema? What evidence do you have to support the need for such facilities and the proposed location?