

7. Walsall Town Centre – A Place for Living



7.1 Introduction

Encouraging people to use the town centre is vital to its success and so it is necessary to provide high-quality facilities that meet the needs of the catchment population in an attractive environment. A high quality environment also improves the experience for all users and can dramatically enhance the perception of Walsall for both regular users and people visiting the town centre for the first time. This chapter looks at the current housing provision within the town centre, education and health facilities, the character and quality of buildings and public space in the town, and community and environmental infrastructure.

Jargon Buster

- **Business Improvement District (BID):** a defined area within which businesses agree to pay an additional tax or fee to fund improvements within the district.
- **Residential amenity:** aspects which impact on the quality of residential areas, such as external space, noise, and access to services and facilities.
- **Public realm:** 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.
- **Environmental infrastructure:** natural and built environmental assets with a range of uses, which compliment the appearance and function of existing and new development.

7.2 The Level and Location of Housing Development

The BCCS encourages higher density housing in town centre locations with good transport connections as this is the most sustainable approach. Residential uses in the town centre also increase the vitality and help improve surveillance and activity.

The town centre has already met the housing target set by the BCCS of at least 450 new homes by 2026 and many of these have been delivered alongside the canal, creating a new neighbourhood of high quality residential units. Consideration now needs to be given to the future development of housing in the town centre. **Figure 7.1** and **Table 4 in Appendix 1** show the sites where we consider there to be potential for further residential development.

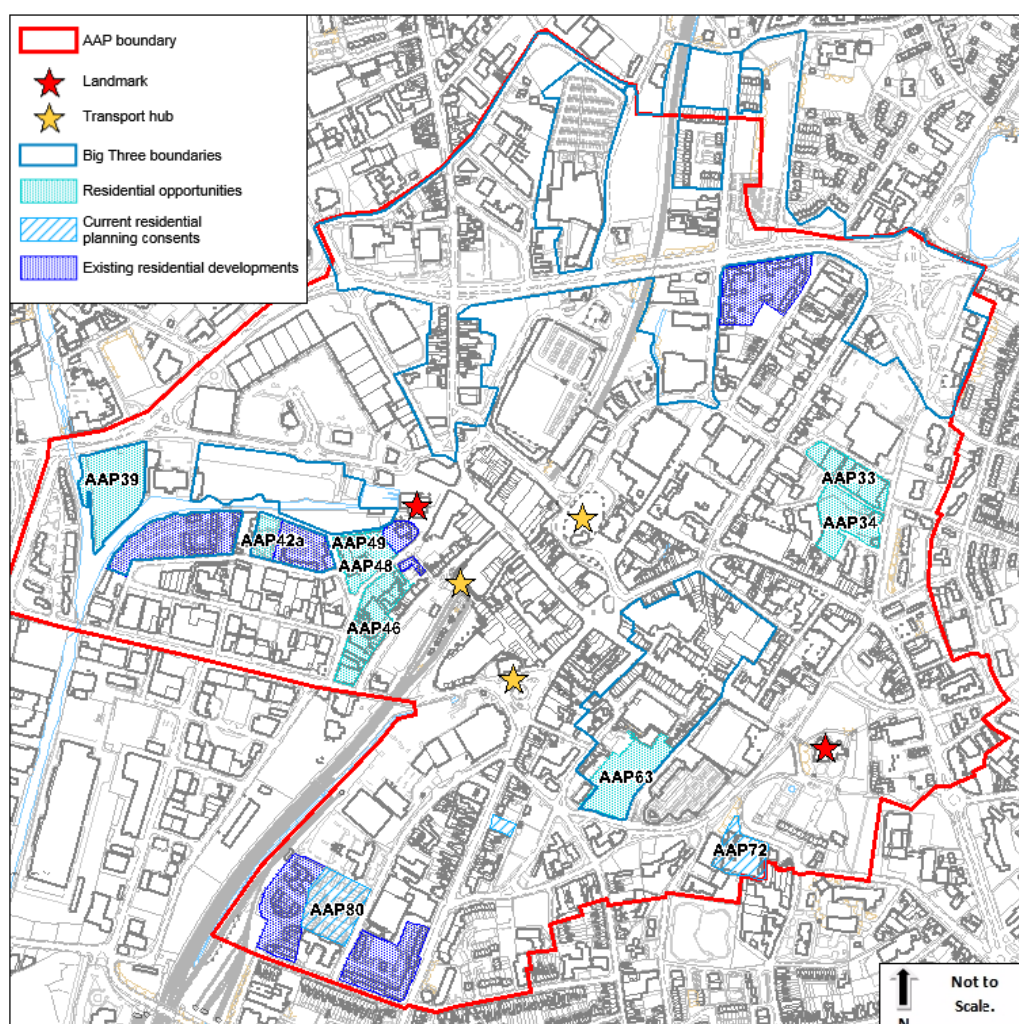


Figure 7.1: Existing residential and opportunities for future development

The Level and Location of Housing Development

<p>Housing Option 1: The AAP allocates further sites for housing development</p>	<p>Implications: Specific sites are identified for housing development, meaning in these locations this use is preferred over other town centre uses. This could impact on the ability to deliver BCCS floorspace targets for retail and offices. Whilst this would ensure a high quality environmental setting for new housing, it may have an impact on supporting infrastructure e.g. schools, services, healthcare.</p>
<p>Housing Option 2: No further land is allocated for housing development, but the use is included as an option for mixed use developments where suitable</p>	<p>Implications: There will be no further solely residential developments within the town centre, further housing will instead be provided as part of mixed use schemes which will make schemes viable and more attractive to investors. However there may be impacts upon residential amenity from neighbouring town centre uses.</p>
<p>Housing Option 3: The AAP encourages the use of flats over shops or other vacant floorspace for housing</p>	<p>Implications: Further housing is provided through the conversion of existing vacant floorspace in the town centre. There may be possible impacts on infrastructure if delivering housing where none currently exists. There may also be impacts upon residential amenity from neighbouring town centre uses.</p>
<p>Housing Option 4: No further land is allocated through the AAP for housing development</p>	<p>Implications: There will be no further residential developments within the town centre. This may mean that some development opportunities are not delivered for a considerable period of time.</p>

LV:Q1 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q2 Are we providing the right types and amounts of housing to reflect demand now and to meet future requirements?

LV:Q3 Do you think any of the sites identified in the map above or in Table 4 (Appendix 1) should be allocated for housing? Have we missed any sites you think should be allocated for housing? If yes please provide the site details.

LV:4 Should housing development only be allowed in some areas of the town centre, if so where and why?

7.3 Residential Environments

The higher levels of activity associated with town centres can have an impact on the living conditions of those residents in or near the centre. Therefore a careful balance needs to be made between residential environments and other centre uses, especially night-time activities, to ensure that residents have a high quality amenity, safety, and reasonable access to services and facilities.

<u>Residential Environments</u>	
Residential Environments Option 1: The AAP sets out requirements for satisfactory residential environments recognising the benefits and possible restrictions of housing within centres	Implications: Safe and attractive residential environments should attract more people to live in the town centre. However such requirements can increase the costs of a residential development which could affect the viability of a scheme.
Residential Environments Option 2: No specific additional requirements are set for residential environments in the town centre	Implications: Developments which do not take into account the benefits of a high quality environment could struggle to attract people to live in them.

LV:Q5 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q6 What is needed to ensure a good environment for residents in and around the town centre?

LV:Q7 What level of car parking is appropriate for town centre residential developments?

LV:Q8 Is there a need for greater links to housing outside of the town centre to the town centre via pedestrian and cycling routes?

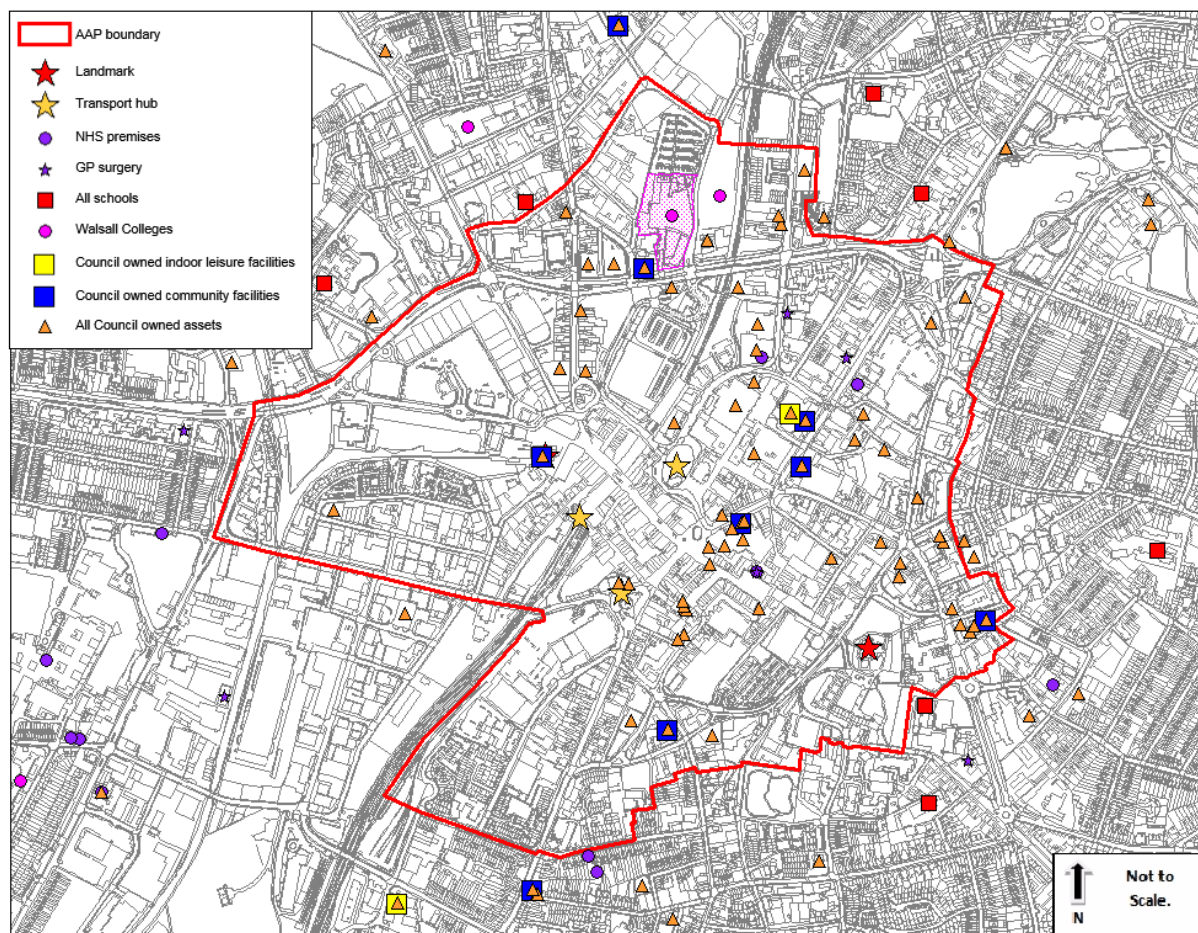


Figure 7.2: Health and education facilities, and Council-owned leisure and community facilities and assets

7.4 Education and Health

New large-scale health and education facilities have been completed recently to serve the town centre. The presence of a major hospital and Further Education College make the town one of the most important service centres in the Black Country. The College provides Walsall's high proportion of young people with access to vocational courses, and offers educational and training for adults. The Council will continue to work with the Hospital and College to help those service providers meet the requirements of the people of Walsall. There are also a number of smaller education and health facilities such as schools or GPs which are located within the town centre boundary – see **Figure 7.2** and **Table 9 in Appendix 1** for details.

<u>Education and Health</u>	
Education and Health Option 1: The AAP allocates land to deliver the future expansion requirements of the Hospital, other health providers, and the College.	Implications: The town centre would benefit socially and economically from a strengthened health and education sector. However allocating sites specifically for education and health providers could impact on the ability to deliver the BCCS floorspace targets for retail and offices
Education and Health Option 2: The AAP does not allocate land for the future expansion requirements of the Hospital, other health providers, and the College.	Implications: Land allocation is Market driven and not allocated for these specific uses. The town centre may not benefit from a strengthened health and education sector, missing out on opportunities for jobs, training, and attracting related industries.

LV:Q9 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q10 How do we maximise the hospital and college to make the most out of any opportunities they present in terms of jobs, training and related industries?

LV:Q11 Do the physical links between the town centre and the hospital need to be improved, if so how?

LV:Q12 Are there any facilities shown on Figure 7.2 and Table 9 (Appendix 1) that need to be allocated for protection through the AAP? If so which and why?

LV:Q13 Is there any further need for education and health facilities in the town centre?

7.5 Community Facilities

Community infrastructure provides an important role in the economic and cultural diversity of the town centre, and is important to both town centre residents and those from across the Borough. In this instance, community infrastructure includes civic buildings, libraries, places of worship, banqueting halls/ wedding venues, and meeting rooms. Council owned community facilities are shown on **Figure 7.2** and are listed in **Table 9 in Appendix 1**.

LV:Q14 How do we promote new facilities and safeguard the existing facilities?

LV:Q15 What scale of community development should be located in the town centre and where do we put new facilities?

LV:Q16 Should any of the sites shown on Figure 11 and listed in Table 9 (Appendix 1) be allocated for protection through the AAP? If yes which and why?

7.6 The Character of Walsall Town Centre

The town has a heritage that dates back to Anglo-Saxon and Roman Britain, with current built heritage still evident from the past 700 years. The town centre (formed around The Bridge, Park Street and High Street) has emerged over centuries and inherits an historic form that has buildings from many periods. With the onset of industrial expansion the town centre developed with clearly different areas of growth and these are still largely evident today.

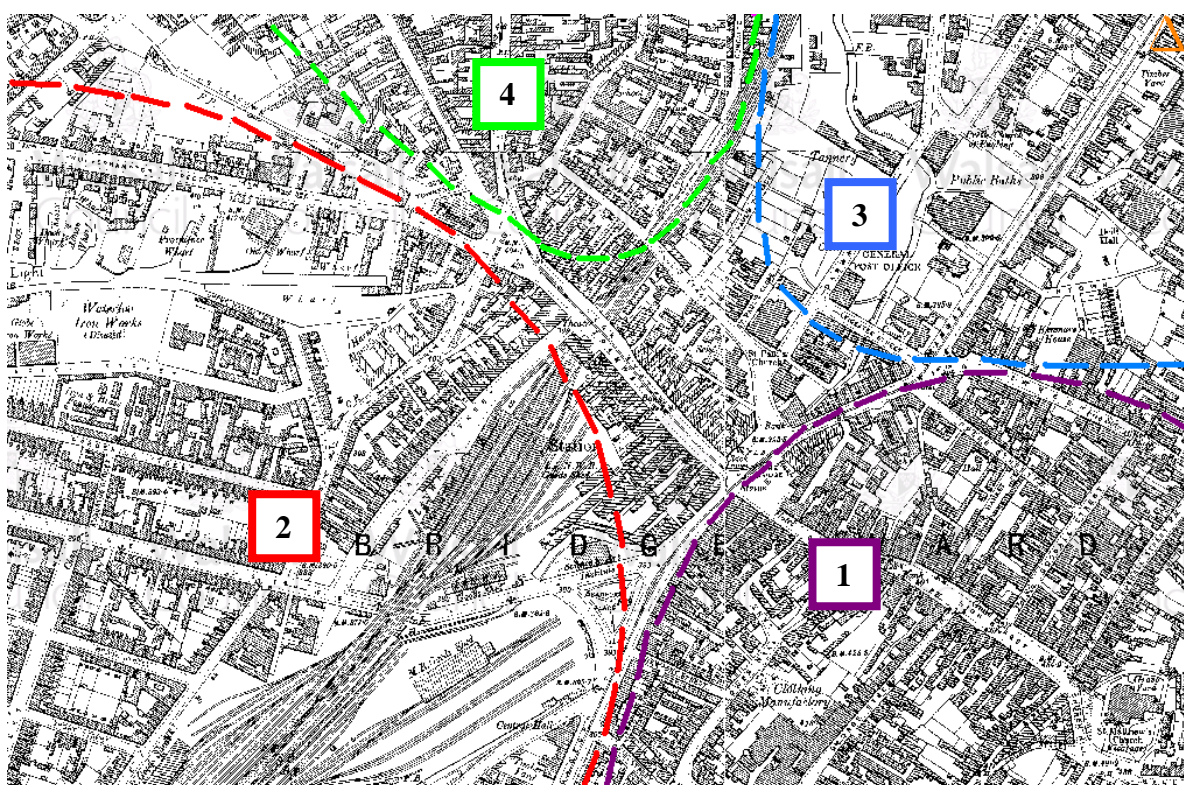


Figure 7.3: Walsall town centre historic character areas

1) Mediaeval core (south east)

The current centre of Walsall radiates out northwards from its ancient core around the original hill top settlement, of which the parish church survives. The mediaeval town circled the church, and although largely lost is still evident in the High Street that survives (linking the church to the market, held here since 1220). Beyond this was the old river crossing (still remembered in the street name of this area 'The Bridge'). Today this forms the hub of the modern town.

2) Industrial expansion (south west)

Improved connections were the catalyst of industrial growth and the canal and rail network were the motorways of the 18th and 19th centuries. Related industries, workshops, warehouses and factories naturally developed around and along these networks. In Walsall connections south west towards Birmingham were naturally the side of the town that industrialised first. Today that character remains and along the canal is where the town has seen its more dynamic urban scaled development, comprising structures such as the New Art Gallery.

3) Affluent housing (north east)

The north east of the centre became an area of relative middle class housing with fine villas extending along principal boulevards such as Lichfield Street, leading to planned neighbourhoods around the town arboretum. Later the area naturally became the preferred civic quarter with the courthouse, churches and town hall locating here. The area still boasts fine Regency, Victorian and Edwardian architecture around high quality public spaces and wide streets.

4) Housing and workshops (north west)

The area to the north west developed along radial routes leading into the town and was largely characterised by housing and workshops that contributed to the town leather industry, and this is where the Leather Museum is located today. The 20th century has altered this aspect of the town significantly and a new generation of industry and commerce is now prevalent, however, this is inter-dispersed with fragments of historic built form, particularly along Stafford Street and Day Street.



Figure 7.4: Walsall’s four character areas

The modern day quarters of the town illustrate that the town has evolved over time, however it also shows that there are still distinctly different areas around the core that make the town interesting for visitors and residents alike.

The Character of Walsall Town Centre	
<p>Character Option 1: The AAP identifies buildings that enhance the character of Walsall town centre and protects them</p>	<p>Implications: The historic character of the town centre would be retained and enhanced. However protecting certain buildings could impact on forthcoming developments by constraining the design, restricting the opportunity for comprehensive development, or adding costs. This could impact on the ability to deliver comprehensive schemes in order to meet the BCCS floorspace targets.</p>
<p>Character Option 2: The AAP identifies buildings and places that are positive to the character of Walsall town centre and seeks to ensure they</p>	<p>Implications: This would allow for new development to be positively encouraged, however, would mean that historic buildings and spaces would not necessarily be conserved in their</p>

contribute to future development.	entirety.
Character Option 3: The AAP seeks to consolidate and enhance the four identified character zones (as shown on Figure 7.4)	Implications: This approach would enhance the attractiveness of the town centre and assist in its legibility. However it may impact upon scheme viability.

LV:Q17 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q18 How important is heritage to Walsall town centre? How can we protect and enhance the historic character of Walsall town centre?

LGV:Q19 How do we allow for the legacy of post war development to make a positive contribution to the future development of the town?

7.6.1 Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings

A Conservation Area (CA) is an area of special architectural or historic interest, which is designated by the Council in order to preserve or enhance its character or appearance. Development proposals within Conservation Areas must ensure the impact on the special historic character of the area a material consideration.

Walsall town centre is covered by a number of 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.

Listed buildings are identified by English Heritage against a number of cultural, social, economic and artistic criteria as well as architectural merit. They are graded as either I, II* or II according to their importance. Locally listed buildings are identified by the Council as buildings which have local historic and architectural value and make a valuable contribution to the local scene, but that are not statutorily listed.

Figure 7.5 below indicates the extent of Conservation Areas, listed buildings and locally listed buildings across Walsall town centre.

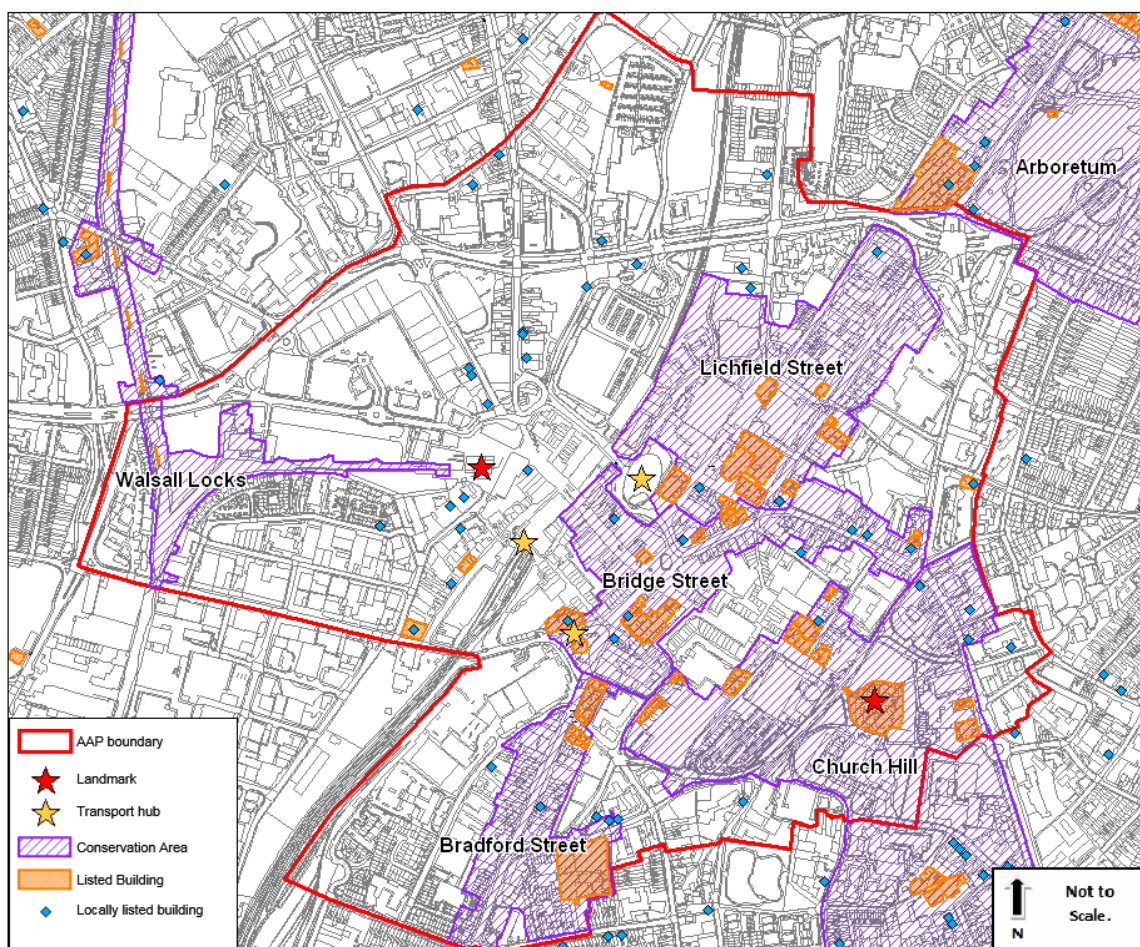


Figure 7.5: Town centre Conservation Areas and listed buildings

<u>Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings</u>	
<p>Conservation Areas Option 1: Review Conservation Area boundaries</p>	<p>Implications: This would help identify negative aspects of Conservation Areas as well as the opportunities. Rationalizing these designations will assist in their management. To work effectively this would need buy-in from community groups, civic trusts and heritage groups.</p>
<p>Conservation Areas Option 2: Prepare policies that address specific aspects of decline in conservation areas, such as poor advertisement, poor shop fronts or low quality materials.</p>	<p>Implications: This would help protect the historic environment and improve design. However it can result in prescriptive architecture.</p>

Conservation Areas Option 3: Introduce grading for locally listed buildings	Implications: Grading them would allow for different (more / less) stringent constraints to be applied to different sites, thereby making them more viable. This could include removing the listing of buildings which are protected by a Conservation Area.
Conservation Areas Option 4: Prepare a policy to facilitate learning and interpretation of the historic environment around the town centre.	Implications: Heritage is often seen as being specialist, elitist and inaccessible to many people. However, reaching out to all members of the community may be difficult.
Conservation Areas Option 5: Continue to manage the historic environment under the current legislation.	Implications: Current legislation already offers the historic environment protection, but without further work through the AAP, enhancement might not be possible.

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

LV:Q21 What buildings do you think are important to Walsall and how do we ensure that these are protected?

LV:Q22 Should other buildings in the town centre be promoted to English Heritage for listing? If yes, which buildings and why?

7.6.2 Protected Views

Views of key landmarks are valuable to users of the town centre, both in maintaining a sense of place and identity within the town, and as a method of orientation and legibility. A place that is legible will be easy to understand and pleasant to live, work or visit, and development must be designed so that people can find their way around without being confused or feeling lost.

This can be achieved by linking places and spaces using clear and visible routes. The Designing Walsall SPD states that new development should make use of new and existing physical features to help people orientate themselves, and must maximise its potential to enhance local distinctiveness by making positive visual connections with its surrounding environment, for example maintaining or creating key vistas of important buildings and landmarks.

In Walsall it can be considered that the most important view in the town must be that of St Matthew's Church. The height and form of the Church spire, combined with its elevated setting, allows views of the Church from many parts of Walsall. The recent demolition of the Overstrand has re-opened views of the church from High Street, and this should be maintained by any new development in this area. Looking west from here, the bold form of the New Art Gallery is clearly visible and provides a more modern focal point. The linear route from St Matthew's Church to the New Art Gallery forms the heart of the town centre, and these landmarks at either end act as a guide and signpost.

Other important views could include:

- Bradford Street forms an important gateway into the heart of Walsall town centre from the south, from where townscape views of important buildings such as the New Art Gallery are clearly visible.
- The Council House, with its tower at the eastern corner, can be seen in numerous views across the town
- Stafford Street may form a key vista into any future development of Gallery Square.



Figure 7.6: View of St Matthew's Church from High Street



Figure 7.7: View of the Art Gallery from St Matthew's Church

<u>Protected Views</u>	
Protected Views Option 1: Policies are set for protecting views through the management of new development within or bordering the sight line	Implications: Where views are protected, the policy would seek to prevent undue damage to the view, either by blocking or unacceptably imposing or by creating an intrusive element in the view's foreground or middle ground, and clarify development height thresholds where appropriate. This could, however, impact upon scheme viability.
Protected Views Option 2: The AAP does not seek to protect views within the town centre.	Implications: The view of these key buildings could be lost from certain directions.

LV:Q23 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q24 Are there any other views which you think are important to the town centre?

7.6.3. The Design of New Buildings

Walsall has a rich history and this is visible in many of its buildings, streets and spaces. To further improve and enrich the quality and image of the Borough, new

development must create a positive character with an identity that relates to the specific characteristics of Walsall and its historic context. The Designing Walsall SPD sets out that “Walsall seeks buildings that are designed to last, buildings that contribute delight and excitement to the townscape of the Borough and provide its occupants with good living, working, social and learning environments”.

The impact of new development of the environment must also be considered and the use of renewable and low carbon energy is increasingly important. Policy ENV7 of the BCCS requires proposals over certain size (1,000 sqm floor space for non-residential and residential units of 10 or more) to incorporate generation of energy from renewable sources sufficient to off-set at least 10% of the estimated residual energy demand of the development. It also states that combined heat and power facilities should be explored for larger development schemes. The AAP will need to consider if there is any need for further requirements from developments in the town centre that go beyond the BCCS requirements and if there are suitable locations for large scale renewable energy projects.

The Design of New Buildings	
Design Option 1: The AAP sets no design requirements above what is already needed to meet current planning policy	Implications: It may be difficult to ensure high quality design in the centre making it a less attractive as a place to visit or invest in. This may make it easier for developments to come forward.
Design Option 2: Design codes are set for the town centre requiring high quality design, setting out what level is expected and identifying key locations for exemplar buildings	Implications: New developments will be designed to complement and enhance the existing character of the town centre. However following design guidance may constrain designs or add a cost to developments.
Design Option 3: The AAP seeks exemplar design standards for new buildings in prominent locations to set a precedence for the town centre	Implications: Such buildings would set a standard for high quality design across the town, enhancing the character, environment and image of the town centre. Requiring exemplar design may mean refusing applications which do not meet these standards.

Design Option 4: The AAP sets no renewable energy requirements above what is already needed to meet current planning policy	Implications: This would mean less positive outcomes in terms of reducing emissions and improving the environmental quality of Walsall
Design Option 5: Requirements for on-site renewable energy generation are set where appropriate from town centre developments that goes beyond the BCCS requirements	Implications: This would reduce the environmental impact of some developments, and would give certainty to developers and investors in Walsall. However it may deter some developers from the town centre due to increased building costs
Design Option 6: The AAP actively allocates land for large scale renewable energy projects such as a combined heat and power facility.	Implications: This would give more certainty to the delivery of a key renewable energy project that could over time reduce the energy costs of businesses in the area and reduce the impact of development.

LV:Q25 Which of the above options do you agree with most and why?

LV:Q26 What level of design guidance should the AAP provide for new buildings within the Town Centre?

LV:Q27 Are there any areas in the Town Centre that should have higher design requirements?

LV:Q28 Do you have any evidence that a large scale renewable energy project could be deliverable in the town centre? If yes what type and where should it be located?

7.7 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.”

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.

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” (Streets for All, 2005).

The quality of the public realm across the town centre is varied and suffers from a lack of consistency. Recent developments such as Waterfront South and Tesco have led to some improvements in certain areas, and there has been investment in the public realm in the Civic Quarter. However, as a whole the public realm across the town centre needs improving. As well as the need for investment in the public realm, it is important that the current environment is maintained and that any new investment provides for its ongoing maintenance and enhancement. The Walsall Town Centre Survey (2010) found that 38% of respondents thought that the appearance of the town centre had got worse in the previous 5 years.

<u>Public Realm</u>	
Public Realm Option 1: The AAP allocates areas to prioritise for public realm improvements	Implications: The environment of particular areas well-used by the public is improved which would enhance the experience and image of the town centre. A high quality environment is also important in attracting further investment into the town centre. However such improvements can be costly. There would also be ongoing resource implications for the maintenance of these areas.
Public Realm Option 2: Sites are allocated for new proposed public realm	Implications: This would give more certainty to new public realm being created. This may however make it more difficult to meet the floorspace targets as land is used for public realm and not maximising the amount offices or retail
Public Realm Option 3: The AAP recognises the importance of public realm but does not identify specific areas for improvement	Implications: The Council is unable to lead on which, if any, areas of public realm are improved. This may also have a negative impact on town centre investment.

LV:Q29 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q30 Which areas of the town centre need public realm improvements, and how should this be done? Is any new public realm needed? If so where and why?

LV:Q31 Should businesses contribute towards the improvement and maintenance of public realm in the centre? For example through the implementation of Business Improvement Districts (BID).

7.7.1 Linkages

Park Street is the main axis of the town centre, 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. Legibility across the town centre, between the interchanges, the retail core and other important elements of the town centre, such as the Arboretum, needs to be improved. The Wayfinding project, which aims to improve pedestrian legibility between key sites in the town, has commenced this process, but the accompanying strategy will take a longer period of time to deliver.

LV:Q32 Are there parts of the centre that you consider difficult to move around? What would improve the pedestrian experience?

Park Street is a relatively wide thoroughfare which offers a good environment for shopping. However, the fabric of this environment is tired; there needs to be a single strategy for the public realm and legibility, and whilst some work has been undertaken to declutter the street scene, further work is required.

<u>Linkages</u>	
Linkages Option 1: Improvements to Park Street continue to make it more legible by the removal of planting beds, seats, lights, and signs and enhancement of the paving	Implications: Park Street would become clearer and easier to navigate due to being less cluttered. There would be further cost implications, but a failure to do so may deter future investment and visitors. This may change the way people experience Park Street.
Linkages Option 2: Park Street's character is maintained but with no further alternations to its appearance and character.	Implications: No further investment is made in improving the appearance of Park Street. Existing issues with legibility and clutter remain and may get worse with time, which may in turn deter investment and visitors.

LV:Q33 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

Many of the buildings in Park Street are of reasonable architectural quality, though some at the western end are of a lesser quality. It is these buildings, for example around Park Place Arcade/Town End House, which may be more appropriate for redevelopment if a viable scheme were to be established. This part of the town centre also needs to link in better with surrounding areas, in particular the new Tesco store and Crown Wharf. The Poundland building represents a physical barrier between Park Street and Crown Wharf. However if this building were ever demolished to make way for improvements in the public transport network, it could be beneficial for town centre legibility.

<u>Linkages - 2</u>	
Linkages Option 3: The building currently occupied by Poundland is identified to be demolished if improvements to the public transport network are delivered.	Implications: Public transport improvements could be delivered, and the removal of this building would improve pedestrian linkages. However a building which is currently in use is demolished and the businesses here displaced.
Linkages Option 4: The AAP identifies other ways in which linkages can be improved between Park Street and the rest of the town centre	Implications: Ways to improve linkages would be found, but the main visual barrier would remain.

LV:Q34 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q35 How can linkages between Park Street and other parts of the town centre be improved?

7.8 Environmental Infrastructure

The amount, location and quality of environmental infrastructure is crucial to the successful and sustainable regeneration of Walsall town centre. This includes places and spaces within the town centre that protect important features such as a historic building or part of the local canal network, ensure more sustainable new development and construction is delivered, and contributes to an attractive visual environment for users.

A high quality environment improves the experience for all users and can dramatically enhance the perception of Walsall for both regular users and people visiting the town centre for the first time. The environmental infrastructure network in Walsall should focus on protecting and, wherever possible, improving features of the town centre such as the Town Arm of the Walsall Canal or the Arboretum. 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. An important priority for improving the environment of the town centre should be to improve the linkages between important environmental features in and around the town centre.

<u>Environmental Infrastructure</u>	
Environmental Option 1: The AAP highlights the existing key environmental assets where improvements will be sought	Implications: This would create an improved environment, provide certainty to developers, but may deter some investors due to additional requirements
Environmental Option 2: The AAP sets out no specific assets for improvement or mechanisms to deliver the improvements	Implications: This could mean that the environmental transformation of the town centre is limited and the Council would find it more difficult to secure external funding opportunities

LV:Q36 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

LV:Q37 What Environmental assets should be improved? How can such improvements be delivered?

LV:Q38 Do you know of any sites in the town centre that should be allocated for public open space? If so where and why?