

9. Walsall Town Centre – A Place for Investment



9.1 Introduction – The Approach

Building upon the background and issues raised in previous chapters, this section considers the options around where development should be encouraged in the town centre. It concentrates on the different areas of the town centre and proposes which uses should be allocated through the AAP for these areas. Much of the regeneration activity in the town centre in recent years has been focused around the “Big Three” development opportunities – St. Matthew’s Quarter, Gigaport and Waterfront – and along with Park Street, it is these areas which should remain the focus for change and investment within the Town Centre.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of these areas and the need to concentrate limited resources into strategic development opportunities, other parts of the town centre are also capable of attracting particular forms of investment. Appropriate uses for these additional areas are also considered in this chapter.

<u>The Approach</u>	
Approach Option 1: The AAP promotes the Big Three and Park Street as the key development opportunities as the overall approach to regenerating the town centre	Implications: These sites are promoted as the main development opportunities in the town centre, in favour of other smaller sites. Potential investment is directed towards these areas.

<p>Approach Option 2: The AAP sets out clearly the vision for the Big Three and Park Street along with the type of uses to be promoted within these developments</p>	<p>Implications: These sites are promoted as the main development opportunities in the town centre. Each site has a clear vision for the types of uses which are acceptable, and other uses will be discouraged. Focusing on specific uses should result in a stronger town centre, with developments only being delivered in the locations which are most appropriate. This would allow clarity on how the BCCS targets would be met. However refusing all alternative uses may mean that investment is not forthcoming and sites may remain undeveloped for longer.</p>
<p>Approach Option 3: The AAP is flexible about uses and the vision for the Big Three and Park Street allowing the market to lead</p>	<p>Implications: The AAP does not seek promote certain areas or to control where particular uses are delivered within the town centre. This may mean that developments can be delivered more quickly, but investment may not come forward in the most appropriate locations which could have a negative impact on the attraction of other investment. This could result in the BCCS targets for retail and office floorspace not being met.</p>
<p>Approach Option 4: The AAP sets exemplar environmental standards for the Big Three in order to drive the town centre forward</p>	<p>Implications: These buildings would have only minimal environmental impact and would set a precedent for developments in the rest of the town centre. However such high standards may bring increased costs, impacting on viability.</p>
<p>Approach Option 5: The AAP sets exemplar design for the Big Three in order to drive the town centre forward</p>	<p>Implications: These buildings would be of a very high quality and would set a precedent for developments in the rest of the town centre, improving its overall attractiveness and acting as a catalyst for further investment. However such high standards may bring increased costs, impacting on viability.</p>

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

INV:Q2 How can we market and promote investment in the town centre more effectively?

With all of the investment opportunities considered in this chapter, there are a number of occasions where different sites within the town centre would lend themselves to a number of uses, and conversely, certain uses could be deliverable in a number of locations. However, if a certain use, for example a cinema, is delivered in one location it may affect the long term deliverability of other sites. Therefore, there needs to be careful consideration given through the AAP process to competing sites and uses to ensure the long term objectives for the town centre are achieved and the implications of any decisions are carefully thought through. This would be particularly relevant to those parts of the town centre that are expected to meet the core requirements of office and comparison retail floorspace for Walsall town centre as set out in the BCCS.

Figure 9.1 on the following page identifies the sites where we think there are key choices to be made and where decisions made on one site can impact on the future of another. These are the things where we really want your views as we think they hold the key to the future of Walsall Town Centre.

INV:Q3 – INV:Q16 Do you have any views on any of the key decisions shown on the map below? If yes please state which you are responding to clearly.

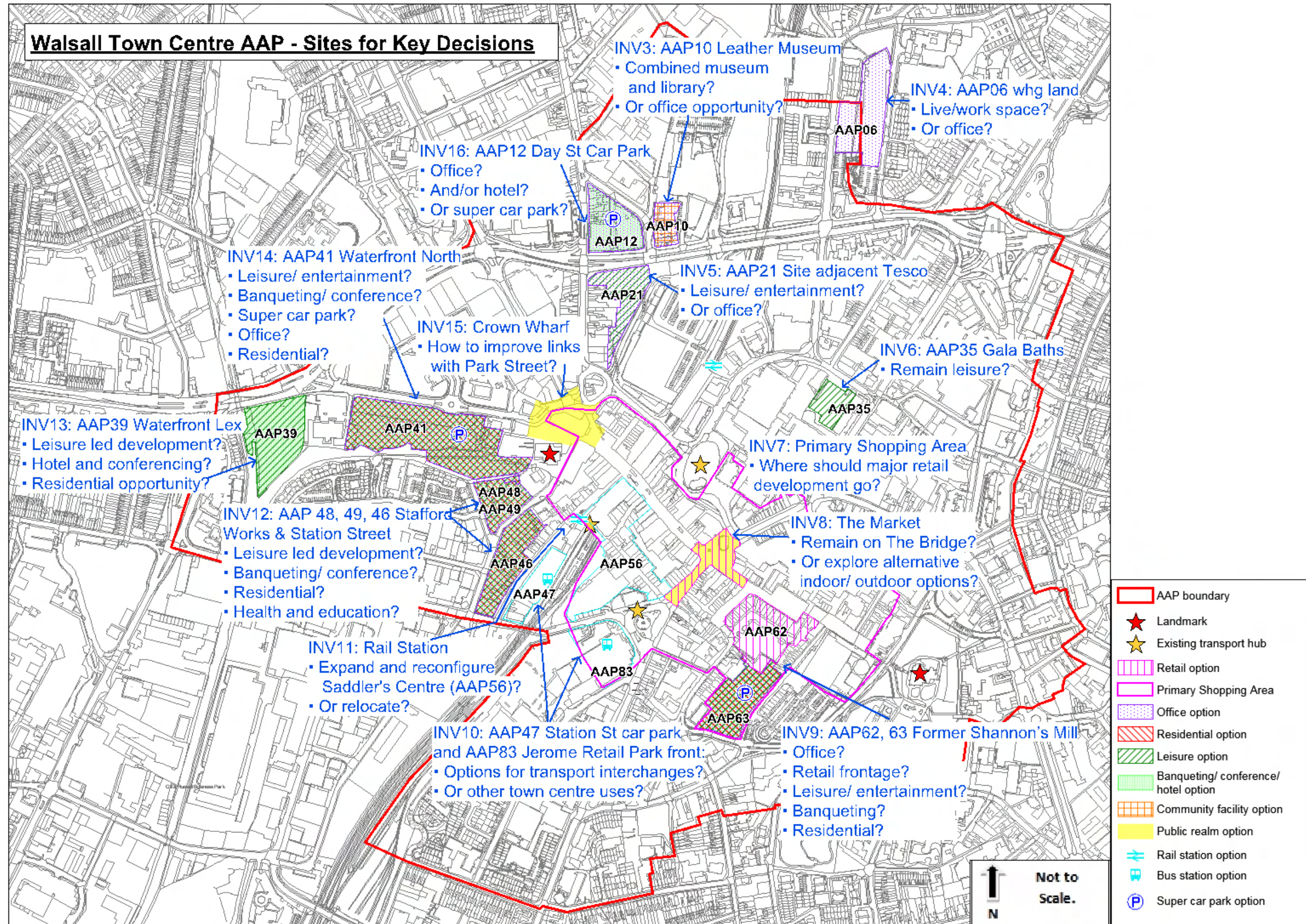


Figure 9.1: Key Decisions

9.2 St Matthew's Quarter

As noted in chapter 4 "A Place for Shopping", St Matthew's Quarter is the area of the town centre where the Council has been encouraging retail investment.

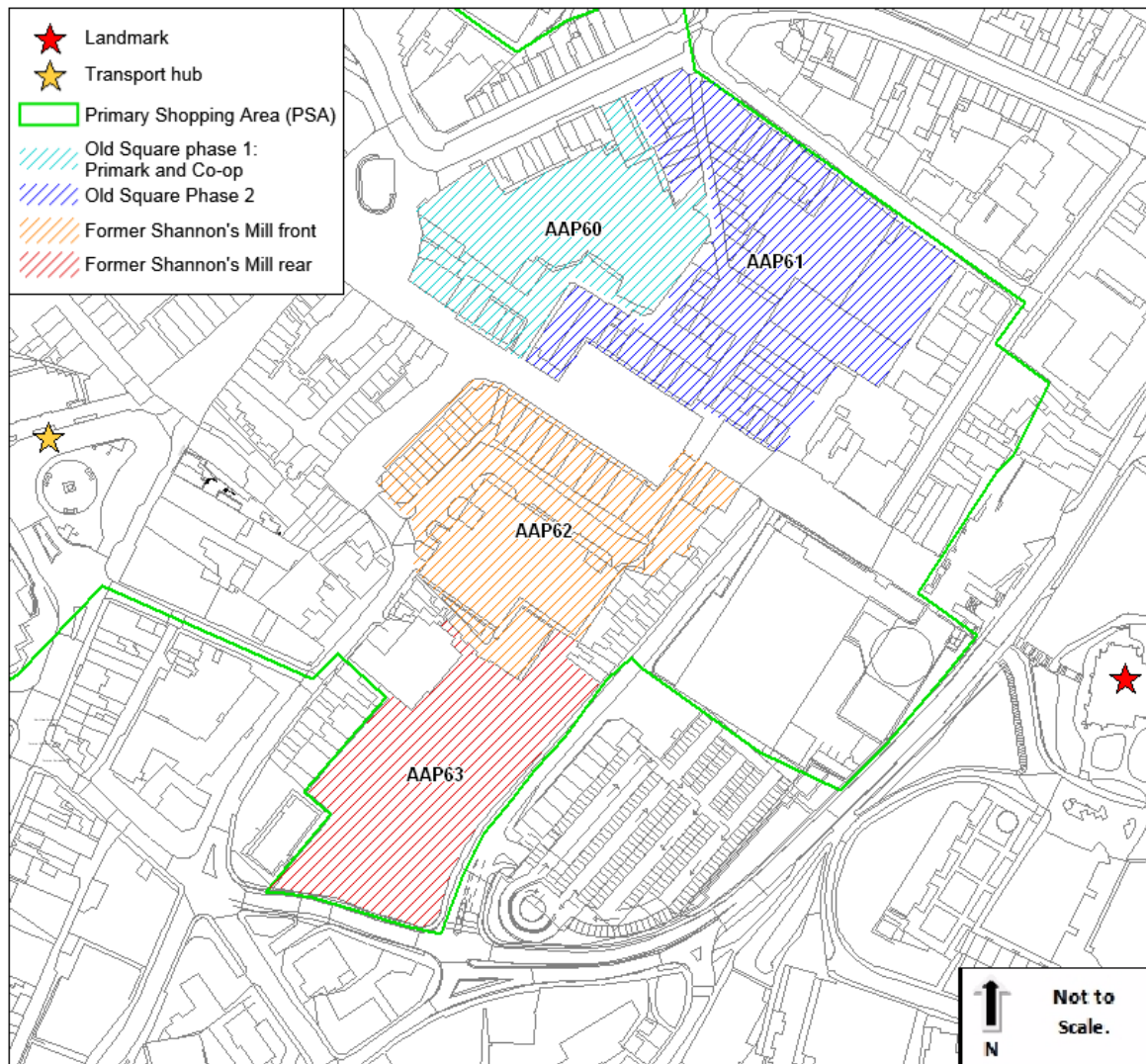


Figure 9.2: St Matthew's Quarter sites.

To achieve this aspiration, the Council has been working with the two major landowners of the Old Square Shopping Centre and the land on the southern side of Digbeth known as the former Shannon's Mill site.

For the Old Square Shopping Centre, significant progress has recently been made with the demolition of the Overstrand Restaurant and securing the planning consent for the first phase redevelopment of the shopping centre, both achieved in

September 2011. It is now anticipated that this first phase, to provide retail space for Primark and a Co-op food store, will be on site in 2013. Discussions continue about further phases, with a shared aspiration between the Council, developers and landowners to maximise the level of retail floorspace within the shopping centre.

<u>St Matthew's Quarter - 1</u>	
St Matthew's Option 1: The AAP identifies Old Square Shopping Centre to remain primarily a retail location	Implications: This will help to deliver the BCCS targets for retail floorspace and protect the core of the town centre.
St Matthew's Option 2: The AAP identifies the Old Square Shopping Centre as an opportunity to be expanded/ redeveloped to provide larger units	Implications: This may result in the relocation of some existing businesses, but could attract retailers seeking larger unit sizes which are not generally available elsewhere in the town centre, therefore enhancing the overall shopping experience and vitality of the town centre.
St Matthew's Option 3: The AAP promotes Old Square Shopping Centre as a development opportunity for a variety of town centre uses	Implications: This could lead to the redevelopment of the shopping centre for alternative uses, but would have knock-on effects on the delivery of certain uses in other parts of the town centre and may lead to other sites not being delivered. It could also mean that the BCCS targets for retail floorspace cannot be met.

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

It is considered that the Shannon's Mill front site could be retail opportunity, reflecting the Digbeth and Lower Hall Lane frontages. This site is currently the subject of a planning application for approximately 9,000 sqm. of retail floorspace. This will complement the anticipated redevelopment of the Old Square Shopping Centre, and make a significant contribution towards the BCCS comparison retail floorspace target. The rear Shannon's Mill site could be suitable as a location for a wedding or

banqueting venue (though other town centre sites at Midland Road and Station Street provide alternative options).

<u>St Matthew's Quarter - 2</u>	
St Matthew's Option 4: The AAP identifies Shannon's Mill front site to remain primarily a retail location	Implications: This will complement the retail offer at the Old Square shopping centre and the existing retail frontage to the site. A development here would help to meet the BCCS retail floorspace target.
St Matthew's Option 5: The AAP promotes the Shannon's Mill rear site as a development opportunity for any appropriate town centre uses	Implications: The AAP does not seek to control the uses delivered on this site. This may mean that developments are brought forward more quickly, but there could be knock on effects for the deliverability of other areas of the town centre. Allowing any town centre uses may also mean the BCCS retail floorspace target is not met.

INV:Q18 Which of the above proposals do you agree with most, and why?

INV:Q19 Should the retail frontage on the southern side of Digbeth/Lower Hall Lane remain?

INV:Q20 What uses would be acceptable to the rear site?

9.3 Gigaport

The Gigaport concept is located on the edge of the town centre's retail and commercial core, and evolved as the preferred location for office investment due to the availability of under-utilised land, investment secured in the new college facilities and an environment enhanced by improvements to the town centre transport package. Critically it is within easy walking distance of town centre shops and services, the railway station and bus stations, and those facilities will benefit from having Gigaport developments within such close proximity. The development of a strong office market is crucial for the strength of the centre and will be critical to improving the spending power within the town centre, and 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.

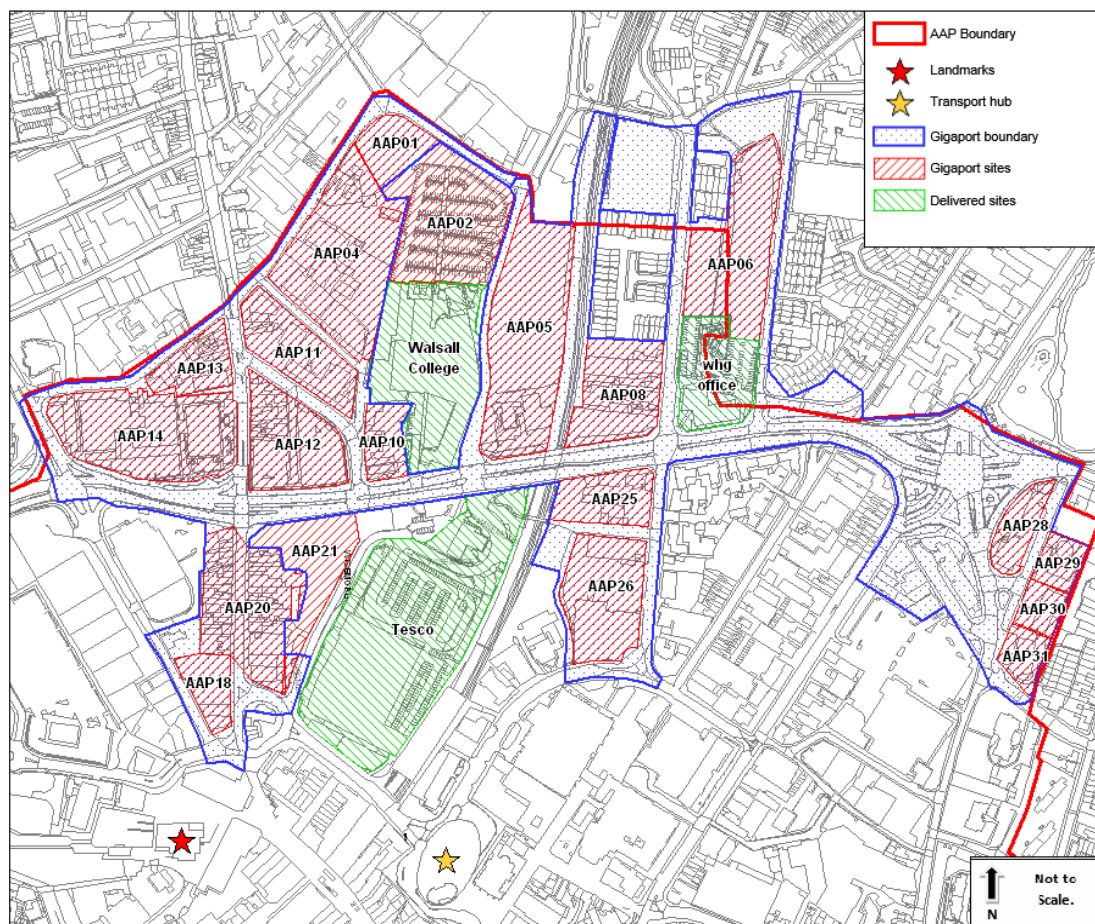


Figure 9.3: Gigaport area and the sites within.

The Walsall Gigaport masterplan aims to deliver:

- 127,000 sq m of offices (use class B1 (A)) including a Business Incubation Centre,
- 4,206 sq m data centre (including the storage of data and computer servers which can be used by the business community),
- 4,300 sq m hotel with conference facilities (use class C1),
- 23,195 sq m of live/work space,
- 5,890 sq m health and sports facility (use class D2),
- 621 sq m of retail and/or restaurant uses (use class A1/A3)

Some elements of the masterplan, for example the hotel, the data centre and some of the live/work space may not be delivered to the quantum of development specified within the permission. As such there is scope to consider larger footprints and taller

buildings within the existing outline planning permission to deliver up to 144,000 sqm of office development.

Discussions with the market have concluded that the masterplan is not deliverable as a single entity, and that a more incremental delivery approach should be made which takes advantage of the Council's land ownership along the Littleton Street corridor. Details of the sites are shown in **Figure 9.3** and **Table 6 in Appendix 1**.

This new approach reflects the land-use principles in the Gigaport masterplan, and this part of the town centre remains the primary location for office development in Walsall. The delivery of a number of office sites will have a considerable impact upon congestion and parking provision, and separate consideration is given in this document to the approach being taken to parking in the town centre. A consistent high quality design approach is required, and effective links between Gigaport sites and with the rest of the town centre will be critical to its overall success.

<u>Gigaport</u>	
Gigaport Option 1: The Gigaport is allocated and promoted through the AAP as Walsall's business district with the development of large office accommodation and associated uses	Implications: The Gigaport area would be allocated specifically for business and associated uses, and proposals for other town centre uses would not be acceptable. It can be beneficial for offices to locate close to each other and in attractive environments, and once delivered this would go some way to meeting the BCCS office floorspace targets and create much needed service sector employment. However allowing only office uses could mean sites remain undeveloped for some time, particularly as the office demand in the town centre is currently not strong
Gigaport Option 2: The Gigaport is allocated for other appropriate town centre uses and business needs are allocated elsewhere in the town centre	Implications: The AAP does not control which town centre uses are delivered in the Gigaport area. Being located away from the heart of the centre the area may not be suitable for other town centre uses. It could also be more difficult to meet the BCCS floorspace targets using

	a collection of smaller sites. Furthermore a dispersed office market is less likely to attract similar levels of investment.
Gigaport Option 3: The sites located adjacent to Littleton Street should be promoted as the first phase of sites delivered in Gigaport	Implications: These sites are the most prominent and their successful delivery will provide impetus for further investment. However focusing on these sites could lead to other less prominent sites remaining undeveloped for longer periods of time.

INV:Q21 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

INV:Q22 Should the sites which front on to Littleton Street be the first phase of development? What other phases should there be?

9.4 Waterfront

Waterfront has real potential to become a gateway destination in Walsall. There are opportunities to build on the historic canal frontage, creating a unique waterside venue for leisure and cultural attractions building on the success of the New Art Gallery as a landmark building.

Though Waterfront is split between 4 distinct development opportunities, there needs to be a consistent approach between the sites in terms of linkages, design and complementary uses. Details of the sites are shown in **Figure 9.4** and **Table 6** in **Appendix 1**.

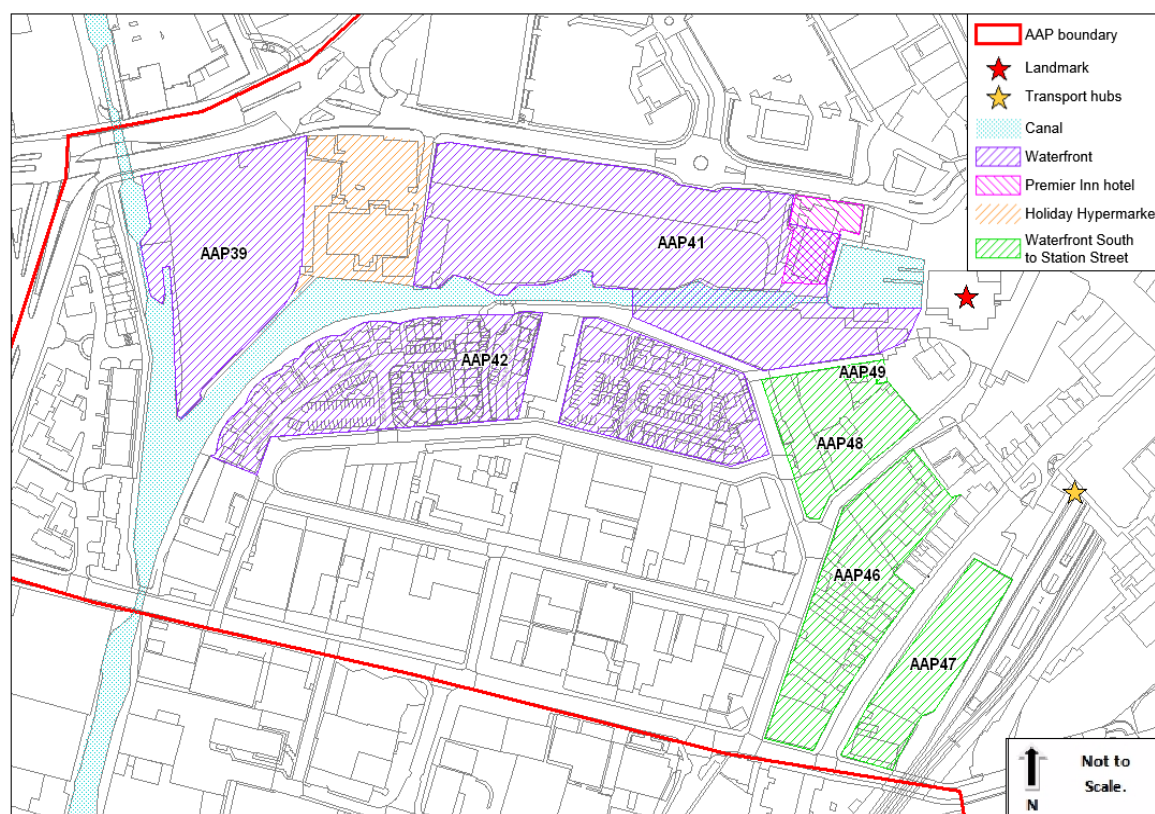


Figure 9.4: Waterfront area and the sites within.

9.4.1 Waterfront South

This site has made a considerable contribution towards the BCCS target of 450 new homes in the town centre, by delivering a high quality scheme of 322 residential units which was completed in late 2012. This scheme also includes six commercial units, four of which are let to the Manor Hospital for a midwife-led birthing unit, whilst one outstanding vacant site could accommodate approximately 5,000 sqm of office space if a suitable end user were identified. However, such a large space office end-user has proved difficult to attract, and the developer may have to consider alternative uses for the remainder of the site, such as further residential units.

INV:Q23 Are there any further improvements needed to Waterfront South?

INV:Q24 If an appropriate office user could not be secured, what other uses could be considered for the remainder of the site? What impact would these uses have for the aspirations for office space in the town centre?

9.4.2 William House, Stafford Works and Station Street

Adjacent to the Waterfront South development is a site occupied by the former Stafford Works and William House, which is held in two private ownerships. This site is currently vacant and has been the target for anti-social behaviour and arson attacks. If left in its current state may detract from the investment at Waterfront South and on the northern side of the canal (Waterfront North).

Immediately to the south of this block is a development opportunity known as Station Street, which is again in two ownerships, though occupied by a number of businesses.

There is the opportunity to consider a comprehensive development which could encompass Station Street, the railway station car park, and William House and Stafford Works. This block is a gateway opportunity adjacent to the railway station which is in a small number of ownerships and has the opportunity to link improved public transport facilities with Waterfront where it is anticipated that investment will be made in the leisure and night-time economy.

INV:Q24 What do you think would be appropriate uses for these sites? Why?

9.4.3 Waterfront North

This has been the location where the Council has sought to attract leisure development in the town centre, as per the Walsall Waterfront SPD, and the delivery of the 100 bedroom Premier Inn hotel and associated restaurant is the first investment of this nature. The next challenge therefore is to deliver major leisure and entertainment on the remainder of the site. Waterfront North needs to build on its location and its links to the town centre and Park Street with high quality public realm and improved east to west movements. There is also a requirement for the delivery of at least one bridge (possibly two) to maximise the benefit of the canalside location and complementary development at Waterfront South.

Waterfront North should complement, not compete with, other town centre sites, and therefore large retail development may not be appropriate for this site. Strategic

leisure attractions would be welcome at Waterfront North, supported by complementary restaurants and family dining.

There are aspirations to deliver a banqueting venue, conference/performance facilities and a cinema within the town centre, and Waterfront may offer the best opportunity for these uses. However, if for example a cinema were attracted to Waterfront this could have implications for development in other parts of the town centre. It should also be noted that other parts of the town centre, for example Midland Road and Station Street, may be alternative locations for a banqueting venue. Ultimately, to provide some certainty to the development sector, the AAP will need to address these options.

There has been some investment in the public realm on the southern side of the canal adjacent to the Wharfingers cottage. This area of hard and soft landscaping is used by town centre users and local residents, and it is anticipated that it will be used more regularly as further investment is delivered in that location.

INV:Q25 Do you think that this area of public space should be a development opportunity, or retain its current use or even be protected as open space?

<u>Waterfront North</u>	
Waterfront North Option 1: Waterfront North is allocated through the AAP for leisure facilities, for example cinema and conferencing facilities	Implications: Waterfront North would be promoted as the key opportunity for strategic leisure developments. The area is a good location for leisure facilities, in close proximity to the Art Gallery, with the potential for an enhanced canalside environment, and good public transport links. However dismissing other investment on this site may mean that some investment is not secured in the town centre.
Waterfront North Option 2: Waterfront North is allocated for any appropriate town centre use	Implications: Other town centre use may come forward but this may not be the most appropriate location for such uses

	and there may be a knock on effect on other areas of the town. This would make it difficult to meet the BCCS aspiration to attract a cinema, and could result in missing the opportunity to make the most of the canalside location.
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INV:Q26 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

9.4.4 Lex site

The site has been the subject of an intrusive site investigation which has narrowed down the remediation costs associated with the site, and was put to the market in May 2012. This has so far concluded that there is limited market interest until the proposals for Waterfront North are more fully known. However, with its dual canal frontage, this site may offer an opportunity for leisure led development activity if it can be integrated better with Waterfront North. This integration may be achieved by the inclusion of the Holiday Hypermarket into a more comprehensive development opportunity, or if the rest of Waterfront North is delivered as a leisure destination. Alternatively, if it is demonstrated that other appropriate town centre uses can be delivered, or a mixed use scheme can be delivered, then these would have to be considered.

<u>Waterfront Lex</u>	
Lex Option 1: Waterfront Lex is allocated through the AAP for leisure facilities, for example conferencing/ banqueting facilities	Implications: Leisure facilities at Lex would complement potential facilities at Waterfront North.
Lex Option 2: Waterfront Lex is allocated through the AAP for residential use	Implications: Residential development could be an appropriate use for this site. However the town centre's BCCS target for residential development has already been met, and allocating land for further housing may deter other town centre investment.

Lex Option 3:
Waterfront Lex is allocated for any appropriate town centre use, or a mixed use proposal

Implications: The maximum benefit of the canalside frontage may not be realised, but a mixed use scheme may ensure deliverability of the site.

INV:Q27 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

INV:Q28 Is the Lex site a good location for leisure use, if so what type of leisure should we be promoting here?

INV:Q29 Are there any other uses, or mix of uses, we should be promoting here?

9.5 Park Street

Park Street is the core of the town centre where the prime rental levels are achieved and the majority of the big high street names are congregated. Its position moving forward should remain as the retail core where retailers and complementary service providers are encouraged to locate. However if this position is to be maintained in the long term, Walsall's attractiveness to retail investment needs to be improved. Details of the sites are shown in **Figure 9.5** and **Table 6 in Appendix 1**.

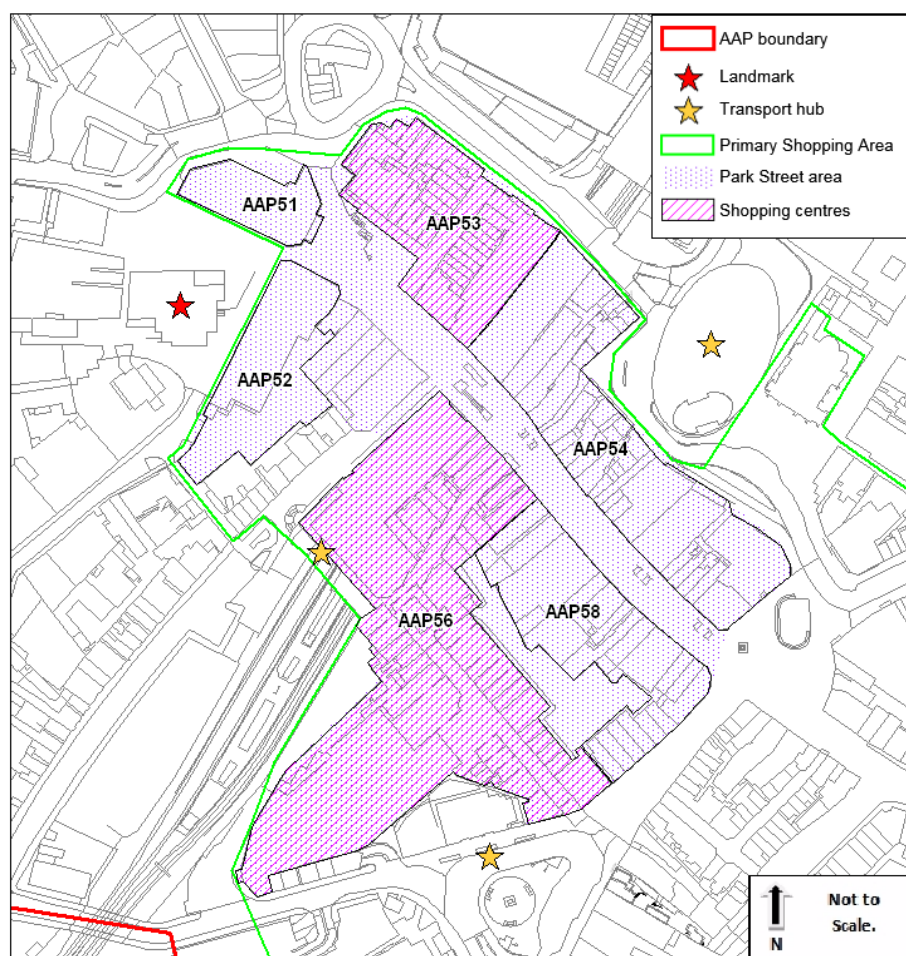


Figure 9.5: Park Street area.

One of the problems faced by Park Street is that many of the existing retail units are too small for modern requirements. Whilst there hasn't been any redevelopment of units in Park Street over the last decade, a number of occupiers have invested in refurbishment which demonstrates a commitment to the town centre and confidence in the economy. Modern high street retail occupiers tend to have a requirement for 500 to 1,000 sq m units, but most that have become available in the town centre in recent years, with the exception of Crown Wharf and the Poundland building, have tended to be considerably smaller at around 200 sq m. Landowners in Park Street need to be encouraged to invest in combining existing units to meet the market's requirements, though it is an issue that ownership is diverse rather than concentrated in a smaller number of landowners. Greatest scope therefore may lie with working with the owners of the shopping centres.

<u>Park Street</u>	
Park Street Option 1: Park Street is allocated and promoted as the key location in the town centre for retail uses	Implications: Retail investment is focused on Park Street and the retail heart of the town is maintained. Some redevelopment of units may be required as without this it could be hard to attract investment, particularly from retailers requiring larger stores.
Park Street Option 2: Park Place Shopping Centre and the Saddler's Centre should be allocated as the focus for retail-led development	Implications: Retail investment is still promoted in the Park Street area, but is focused on the two shopping centres rather than the street itself. This may offer greater opportunity to create larger units which are needed to attract retailers, but the smaller units on Park Street may become vacant.

INV:Q30 Which of the above options do you agree with most, and why?

INV:Q31 How can we reinvigorate Park Street and its shopping centres?

INV:Q32 Are there any other uses we should be promoting here?

9.6 Other development opportunities in the town centre

The map on the following page sets out the other key development opportunities which the AAP will need to explore for future potential main town centre uses such as retail, offices and leisure. These sites may also provide a key role in meeting other needs in the centre such as community facilities, residential, car parking and smaller leisure facilities. Details of the sites are shown in **Figure 9.6** and **Table 6 in Appendix 1**.

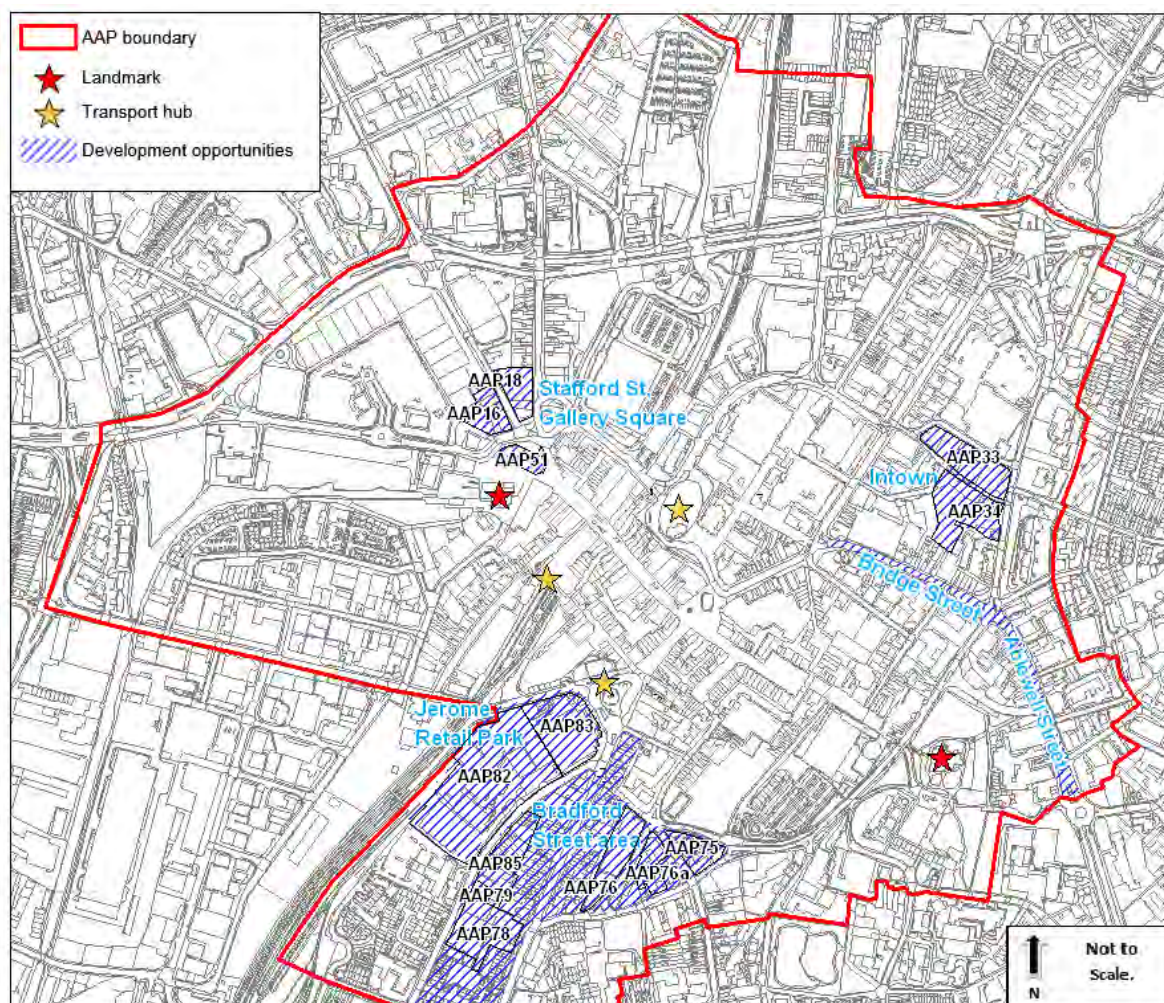


Figure 9.6: locations of other development opportunities.

9.6.1 Jerome Retail Park

The presence of Gala Bingo is a potential anchor for leisure uses and the site is dominated by older bulky/discount goods as well as a food operator. The front of the site may be better used for highway or a bus interchange but the development overall could become detached and alternative uses should be considered.

9.6.2 Bradford Street area

This represents the southern gateway to the town centre, and includes period buildings in the Conservation Area and a mix of other secondary town centre uses and residential elements. Within the area, there are some vacant buildings, particularly along Midland Road, and other under-utilised areas around Caldmore Road and Mountrath Street. If present trends continue it is likely that these areas will

become transitional zones between traditional town centre uses and surrounding residential areas, which are likely to have a greater emphasis on residential use in the future.

9.6.3 Intown, Bridge Street, Ablewell Street

Existing proposals consider that, subject to the relationship with adjoining uses, the area could be developed for leisure use, offices, a hotel, residential or an appropriate mix of these. Other appropriate uses may include health centres and related uses. There may be potential to include existing public car parks within a wider development scheme, although this would depend on an assessment of their importance in the Council's car parking strategy. In any redevelopment, links to Lichfield Street might be converted to pedestrian only, and the possibility of a direct pedestrian link to Bridge Street should be considered. Existing service arrangements to Morrisons would need to be maintained unless these too were reviewed, but this entire area close to the Civic Quarter is under utilised.

9.6.4 Stafford Street/Gallery Square

The redevelopment of the Stanley Casino site and the development of Stafford Street into a quarter that provides a setting for Gallery Square is an ambition of the Council. Negotiations are ongoing with the owners of Seymour House (currently occupied by Kiddisave) for a redevelopment which would link Seymour House more effectively with the Crown Wharf Retail Park.

If the 5Ws route is delivered, it will necessitate the demolition of the Poundland building and affect the properties on the Wisemore island. Therefore the impact of this and the opportunity to deliver a larger Gallery Square should be considered as well as regulating the direction of traffic to promote pedestrian links.

INV:Q33 Do you agree with the proposals for each of the other development opportunities noted above?

INV:Q34 What other uses should be considered for the sites?

INV:Q35 Do you think that any other areas of the town centre need addressing in this way?