Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP

Growing our Towns: Priorities for Action and Investment
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Introduction and Approach
The Greater Birmingham and Solihull Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) sets out a clear objective to ‘develop thriving towns and local centres’. Birmingham is a major global city and a core driver of regional growth and investment. But the surrounding towns and local centres are themselves a crucial part of the economic and social fabric of our area. The evidence from other large regional economies is clear – our towns will play a major role in longer term development as a centre for UK growth.

Our Towns and Local Centres (TLC) Framework report, published last year, provides guidance to partners and the LEP itself, setting out examples of good practice in town centre renewal and broad priorities for future funding.

Working with 10 towns, we have now developed more detailed potential actions for future investment.

These are based on the most up to date evidence of opportunities and challenges in those towns and how they relate to the wider GBS LEP area and West Midlands economy.

This report shows:

- Why our towns centres are important and the links between our towns and the wider economy.
- The distinct challenges and opportunities that each town centre has.
- Priorities for action and investment locally, to inform future funding alongside the Strategic Economic Plan and Local Industrial Strategy.

The detailed local evidence is published on our website: [link]
This report sets out the future economic opportunity and priorities for ten towns:

- Bromsgrove
- Burton-upon-Trent
- Cannock
- Kidderminster
- Lichfield
- Redditch
- Rugeley
- Solihull
- Sutton Coldfield
- Tamworth

These are focussed on each place’s town centre.

These town centre areas are defined in the accompanying Ecosystem Report.
Methodology

The actions and potential opportunities for investment set out in this paper are based on detailed evidence, including our comprehensive Ecosystem Report. This covers:

• A review of existing town analysis and data.
• Further analysis of the key socio-economic, market and property data.
• A town centre healthcheck, which provides an impartial view on the principal issues affecting each centre.
• An extensive operator survey of local businesses that provided real-time data on the main issues of concern in the local business community.

We then worked with each town to examine this evidence and bring together an integrated set of priorities for each town centre, based on what the evidence showed were their future opportunities and strengths.

These will support decisions on future interventions and investment, alongside other regional strategies and plans, including where the LEP and may support initiatives as one of a number of partners (including, for example, local authorities, BIDs, local businesses).
Defining Priorities

• The priorities for investment and action set out in this report have been developed by integrating existing Strategic Economic Plan aims with the TLC framework, emerging local priorities, using additional quantitative and qualitative research and evidence.
• Workshops were held with each town, to bring together the evidence, local ideas, experience and priorities from the people who know the places best.
• Attendees included: local authority officers, elected members and private and third sector stakeholders from the towns. These included representatives from the retail industry, such as the managers from retail parks in the town centres and, in Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) where they existed. Each town then worked iteratively with the LEP team to ensure the results were accurate and priorities shared. The summary of each town’s opportunity was signed off by the LEP, to ensure fit with regional evidence and priorities.
• The next section captures the opportunities, challenges and potential actions that emerged for each town from this fusion of evidence, expertise and region wide priorities.
Economic Context and Town Centre Trends
The Greater Birmingham and Solihull economy contributes £41.7bn to the UK economy and employs 850,000 people. Our economy is in renaissance, with a much younger population than average, the largest full service professional and financial centre outside London, a world leading manufacturing base and a rapidly growing translational medicine and med tech cluster.

Our creative and cultural industries are growing fast and HS2 will further reduce journey times between Birmingham and London. Inward investment levels are amongst the highest in the UK. Birmingham city centre is a national and regional hub, and a focal point for recent and future growth.

But our towns and local centres are a vital part of this economy, as places to work, live and do businesses.

The evidence shows that their role in future growth is distinctive, with complementary offers to the city centre. Nationally the evidence is clear that towns and successful cities have a mutually reinforcing relationship. Towns that have close relationships with successful cities do better and cities benefit from those towns.

Nonetheless, economic success and outcomes for people vary across our area and the benefits of economic growth are unevenly distributed between people and between places. We need a more inclusive economy where communities benefit more from local economic success and opportunities.

Being clear about the distinct roles, needs and characteristics of our towns is an important part of ensuring that action and investment is targeted so it has the most impact on people and communities.
The ten town centres covered in this report are home to nearly 20,500 businesses, or 27.5% of total businesses in Greater Birmingham. These firms employ 71,500 people. And firms are increasingly looking to town centres beyond the city core to offer a high quality urban experience for their employees and clients.

The success of our town centres is central to continuing the recent success of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull area, as it adapts to new opportunities and challenges, including post Brexit labour and regulatory changes. The wider West Midlands has a high demand for commercial space and land, increasingly in town centres.

Our town centres are also important places to live, home to 670,117 people, with strong demand for more town centre housing. With affordability becoming an increasing problem in parts of the area, increasing a quality, affordable residential offer in our town centres is a real priority for local communities and people moving into the area. Ensuring transport connectivity improves to support forecast population increase and reduces poor air quality will also be important. These constraints and challenges are mirrored across the wider West Midlands.
Since 2010 the number of jobs has remained broadly stable across all our town centres, falling by 1.5% between 2010 and 2017, but there have been big differences in the performance of individual towns. Some town centres have added hundreds of new jobs, driven by increasing business & professional services, entertainment and recreation and accommodation and food services, but other centres have seen mild to moderate decline – with falling retail employment not being replaced with new jobs. In the same period, the number of jobs in both GBSLEP and the West Midlands region has grown significantly.

The overall economic output (measure in GVA – gross value added) of our towns has decreased by 7.6% between 2010 and 2017. In the same period, the GVA of Greater Birmingham & Solihull increased by 19.9%.

Some towns have seen GVA decline by as much as 30%. Whilst some of this represents economic activity moving to other parts of the LEP area, it is a concern if some of our town centres are no longer the attractive business locations they once were.

Our town centres vary significantly. All have distinct characteristics and it is striking that there is such large variation in current experience between our towns. Some have strong local economies, on an upward trajectory across a range of indictors and strong assets. Others may appear to be doing well now, but with good evidence to suggest that they are not meeting their full potential and may be less well placed to navigate the threats and opportunities of the trends currently facing town centres. Others are clearly struggling, with declining employment, low business confidence and high vacancies.
National and local trends

All our centres face the challenge of modernising and remaining relevant in the face of major trends affecting town centres. They also continue to be affected by historic decisions around the location of major supermarkets and shopping centres. In this, they are not unique and the following sections summarise these trends.

Our town centres are also affected by recent rapid growth in Solihull and Birmingham centres and the wider West Midlands. Overall our population is younger than the UK and expanding. The West Midlands Local Industrial Strategy and evidence base sets out clear commitments to tackle growing affordability, air quality and congestion and demand for employment space.

Over the long term, the arrival of HS2, expanded metro services, improved local rail and the development of UK Central will also play an important role in making it easier for people to move around the area, increasing accessibility of jobs in different parts of the region and providing a more integrated transport system between our towns and major growth centres.

The overall economic growth of the region provides different opportunities for our towns, as increasingly accessible business location alternatives to the city centre, great places to live and centres for leisure and cultural activity. But each town’s starting point is different, and its exposure to trends and economic uncertainty is different. So the interventions that will have most impact will vary. That is what this report sets out.
Trends affecting town centres (1)

• There has been a significant shift to online retail in the UK. The internet accounts for approximately 20% of UK retail expenditure and this proportion is growing steadily.

• Increasingly consumers want ‘experiences’ as well as ease, value, quality, service, and shopping. Food and drink offers are important attractors, and good quality public realm and art are integral parts of the modern experience.

• Shoppers are drawn to interesting retail offers which feel different, as well as major high street brands. Consumers like events and markets which help to differentiate centres.

• Major retailers are responding by retrenching to fewer, more profitable locations. This has been compounded by some high-profile store closures and retailers going bankrupt or entering Company Voluntary Arrangements (CVAs) to try and renegotiate rental levels.
In response to changing consumer trends, retailers are therefore looking for multi-purpose centres that will continue to attract shoppers and leisure visitors. In some places, retailers are opening later to match surrounding leisure offers.

Retailers are also taking more care to tailor their offer to the surroundings and are increasingly trading in multiple formats to match a range of settings. Retailers will choose out of town, if no suitable in town centre provision is available.

Alongside retail, leisure offers are also evolving and diversifying (including active and passive). This is creating an increasing need for more flexible space.
Principles

Our analysis of local and national trends, alongside the quantitative and qualitative evidence available leads us to adopt the following principles and conclusions that will underpin successful town centres in Greater Birmingham and Solihull. The next section sets out where there is an opportunity for the LEP to invest.

- Successful town centres will provide multiple reasons to visit to drive up footfall – strong leisure and food & drink offer alongside retail and local amenities and distinctive offers like high quality markets, events, street entertainment, pop ups,
- Travel and parking will be convenient and integrated.
- Centres will typically have more than one well integrated retail and non retail anchors.
- A strong aesthetic with high quality public and open space matters, with well designed public realm and art.
- The provision of commercial, leisure and public space needs active and careful management, to ensure the offer is right for changing occupiers and that the footprint supports the wider visitor experience.
- Town centres are increasingly places to live - new residential development needs to be integrated in a way which enhances rather than stifles the local visitor offer.
- Engaged management by a range of partners working together is vital. Collaboration is important.
- **There isn’t a single right way of doing things**, and successful places usually have a strong element of local character that provides distinctiveness. Major assets matter, but often flexible meanwhile use, community events and small scale enterprise opportunities deliver more rapid impact and lasting economic return than major capital expenditure.
Developing thriving towns and local centres
Developing thriving towns and local centres

The Strategic Economic Plan identifies strategic priorities for Greater Birmingham and Solihull, consistent with the West Midlands local industrial strategy:

- To be a world leader in innovation & creativity
- Taking full advantage of our global connections
- Stronger conditions for growth

Town centres are vital components of this economy, as set out in the sections above. The SEP commits to supporting them to succeed and the Towns and Local Centres (TLC) Framework describes the kinds of projects where investment can be made.

As per the TLC Framework GBSLEP will work with regional partners and other established local partnerships to ensure that towns can play their part in the ongoing economic success story by:

- Supporting the growth of indigenous businesses
- Supporting the regeneration of high streets

- Strengthening local cultural and environmental assets
- Unlocking residential opportunities to drive activity and footfall into town centres
- Improving connectivity within towns and local centres and to Greater Birmingham’s economic hubs

The TLC Framework and the more detailed potential actions in this report have been developed to inform future investment and action by a range of partners, setting some broad criteria for future funding and capturing what the evidence shows is likely to have highest impact and success in terms of benefits for communities and businesses. The TLC framework and this report are designed to enable smaller town and local centre projects to integrate with larger-scale investment projects across the LEP area and wider West Midlands. This integration, based on clear evidence, is vital to ensure that all communities benefit from the wider economic linkages and opportunities that exist.
In the GBS LEP Town and Local Centres Framework, the priorities for local centres are as follows:

- **Streets and spaces**
  - Diversity of use, creativity, and culture
  - Monitoring and evaluation

- **Technology adoption and diffusion**

- **Transport and accessibility to economic opportunities**

- **Partnerships and structures**

The role of the LEP will vary across these issues, with GBSLEP taking a key coordinating, strategic or policy role in some, and only a minor or supporting role in others.

### Example local aims and actions:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Category</th>
<th>Example local aims and actions:</th>
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| **Streets and spaces** | - Create more people-focussed and welcoming environments, which put the needs of pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport users to the fore  
- Improve the connectivity and flow of the area for pedestrians and cyclists  
- Have a clear strategy or master plan in place, or will deliver a coherent design approach  
- Protect and enhance existing valued spaces and buildings, as well as recognising the importance of green and open central spaces in regeneration schemes  
- Are challenging and bold, and show ambition an innovation in their approach to the public realm as a whole  
- Enhance users’ experiences of the centre through such aspects as improved lighting, layout improvements, public art, and safety measures |
| **Technology**         | - Seek to address the changing nature of the high street through future forecasting, developing appropriate technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and Augmented Reality, integrating suitable digital tools and technological infrastructure into their offer as part of a wider regeneration strategy.  
- Connect people and places through innovative transport technologies |
### GBS LEP Town and Local Centres Framework - Priorities

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<tr>
<th>Project Category</th>
<th>Example local aims and actions:</th>
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| **Transport & Accessibility** | • Improve and increase pedestrian and cycle access (where this forms an integral part of a wider regeneration strategy for a specific TLC)  
• Integrate improved public transport interchange facilities (rail and bus) into the wider regeneration strategy and provide people with better access to centres via public transport  
• Look at how to connect people to jobs via sustainable transport (where this forms an integral part of a wider regeneration strategy for a specific TLC) |
| **Partnerships & Structures** | • Come from town centre based groups (in whatever form) that can evidence that they have brought together (or begun to bring together) a wide range of interests from across the public, private, and third sectors, and where community input has been secured (or is being secured)  
• Have a well-researched and evidenced action plan/project plan  
• Have strong and effective leadership in place that has the capacity to deliver effectively  
• Undertake activities and actions that will complement rather than compete with projects in other towns. |

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| **Diversity of use, creativity and culture** | • Seek to bring significant change to the existing diversity of a town centre’s offer across the day, evening, and night time  
• Show a coherent approach to local cultural image-making / branding  
• Enhance available assets, building on the existing strengths, attractions, and resources of the area  
• Involve a group of towns and local centres working together to develop offers and coordinate actions that complement each other  
• Help to deliver additional residential accommodation of appropriate type, tenure, and size within town and local centre locations  
• Help to deliver additional office accommodation of appropriate size and quality in town centre locations  
• Take a representative approach, involving a wide range of partners and stakeholders, encouraging community input, and building consensus and buy-in. |

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<th>Monitoring &amp; Evaluation</th>
<th>Example local aims and actions:</th>
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<td>• Evidence that they have considered monitoring and evaluation issues from the inception of the project – Evaluation, even if only small scale for smaller projects, will be considered an essential part of all projects.</td>
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Turning priorities into actions

The TLC Framework sets out the broad areas for investment. The next section of this report sets out the challenges and opportunities facing each town and more detailed potential actions and investment.

Not all actions identified in this report will be for the LEP to invest in. The priorities above and those of individual towns, with the supporting evidence, to help us to identify opportunities for future investment.
GBSLEP towns: Challenges and Priorities
Bromsgrove
Bromsgrove is an attractive and affluent market town. Mentioned in the Domesday Book, in the past Bromsgrove’s economy centred on the wool trade, and then later in the nail-making industry. Its history is reflected in the buildings in the town centre.

Over 4,000 people work in Bromsgrove town centre, most in retail, though there are high numbers of jobs in accommodation and food, education and health. It has strong commuter links and a net commuting outflow, the majority of whom travel to Birmingham to work.

Business density in Bromsgrove is relatively high, at 357 per 10,000 residents, and the number of businesses has grown by nearly 16% in the period 2013-18. This reflects the growing importance of the professional services sector which has experienced strong growth in employment and economic output (GVA) since the recession. Whilst professional services remains a relatively small proportion of total town centre employment, it will be increasingly important in the future.

In recent years Bromsgrove has developed as a nightlife and leisure hub: it is an popular place to live and to go out. It continues to attract visitors for shopping and has an attractive high street and independent retail offer. Retailers describe retail conditions here as healthy, and retail employment has grown by 12% since the recession, though economic output in the sector has decreased.
Bromsgrove - context (2)

The importance of the leisure offer is demonstrated in the growing accommodation & food, and Arts & entertainment sectors. The latter in particular has seen a strong increase in economic output since the recession despite low employment growth, suggesting that the sector is experiencing strong demand.

Outside the centre are important engineering and manufacturing firms in the business parks to the southeast of the town – including a number of automotive supply chain firms and metalworking companies.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the town is the relationship between the railway station and the town centre, which are located some distance apart. This means that the town centre offer will continue to be dependent on local customers and people arriving from nearby areas by car. It also suggests that using development opportunities in the town to promote professional services growth will be important to provide a continuing source of demand for the high street as well as helping attract employment locally.

The town will continue to be an important base for commuters travelling into central Birmingham to work. The town has excellent rail links into Birmingham New Street. However, expanding the residential offer would likely require revoking areas of Green Belt closest to the station.

There are some important opportunities in the town centre itself. Bromsgrove will develop the Market Hall site to the south of the town centre, increasing the number of leisure facilities and homes, and has secured Department for Transport Investment in walking and cycling infrastructure, which it will use to expand routes in the town.
Strengths:

- An attractive public realm and thriving nightlife and leisure economy.

- A highly skilled population. Skills levels across the Bromsgrove district are higher than the GBSLEP and West Midlands averages.

- A growing professional and business services sector. This sector is growing strongly, with 75% employment growth since 2010.

- Healthy rates of new business growth indicate a strong economy. The economy is performing well, and more people are starting, or moving, their businesses to the town centre.

- Strong industrial and engineering employment offer to the southeast of the town centre.
Challenges

- **High levels of congestion due to proximity of key commuter routes.** Bromsgrove has excellent accessibility to the UK motorway network, which has led to its popularity as a commuter town, but also high levels of congestion, particularly during peak hours and when traffic attempting to avoid motorway congestion diverts to the local road network.

- **Potentially a shortage of flexible office space for small businesses.** Fast employment growth in this sector demonstrates the underlying demand but it is not clear that the provision of business space is keeping up with market demand.

- **A shortage of affordable / rental housing in the town centre.** Bromsgrove is an attractive and affluent town but this puts town centre living outside of the range of many on low and moderate incomes.

- **A thriving evening and night-time economy has led to disputes** between residents and business owners at popular locations. The close proximity of popular night-time venues to homes has increased friction between punters, business owners and residents.

- **There is a lack of youth provision in the town,** as well as a lack of green space.

- **Declining footfall in the town centre.** In recent years footfall has declined in prominent town centre locations.

- **The railway station and town centre are some distance apart which limits the opportunities to create synergies between them.**
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunities / Future role

Bromsgrove has the opportunity to benefit from ongoing increases in demand for residential and commercial space, creating more high value jobs and further improving the leisure and retail offer.

Redevelopment of the Market Hall leisure / community site at the top of Worcester road is due in the next few months. The council has commissioned landscape architects for the site, with a brief for a marquee to host events, craft workshops and businesses and pop up units for businesses / bars. This will complement the independent sector nearby and make it a community space. Public realm improvements are planned for five sites on Mill Lane, which connects to the high street and are designed to link parts of the town centre.

Priorities include:

- **Consider the opportunities for expanding flexible office space in the town centre**, either as part of new developments or as part of a considered rationalisation of the existing town centre retail stock.

- **Invest in solutions / management for the congestion surrounding the town**. The A4-A5 around Bromsgrove and the A38 which skirts the town are particularly bad, and lead to gridlock at peak times due to the high number of commuters.
Burton-upon-Trent
Burton-upon-Trent in context

Long a brewing town, Burton-upon-Trent is East Staffordshire’s main town and a manufacturing centre. 16,500 people work in Burton, with retail employment being the largest single broad sector, employing 3,500 plus people. Retail employment has declined slightly (by 1%) since 2010, though economic output in the sector has increased by 12%.

The manufacturing industry is a major employer, with 2,750 jobs locally, and the source of the majority of the town’s economic output (GVA). Burton remains a base for the large brewing companies Molson Coors and Marston’s, both of which are active in the town centre and involved in the regeneration of important sites. Manufacturing employment has declined by 21% in the town centre since the recession, though overall district level employment has grown slightly, suggesting consolidation and relocation to business parks in surrounding areas rather than decline.

Business density in Burton is lower than the average for the LEP. As the town has a high number of jobs, this suggests that employment is concentrated in several large businesses. There could be potential to encourage enterprise and start-up activity. In the period 2013-18 the number of businesses in the town centre grew by 24%, fast growth, but below the GBSLEP average of 36%.

The town is the economic centre for East Staffordshire, with a net-commuting inflow of nearly 4,000, and Burton also pulls in workers from South Derbyshire and North West Leicestershire. Although links to Birmingham are good, with regular trains offering 35 minute journey times, the commuting data does not show strong commuting links between the two places (or, for that matter, to other urban centres such as Derby and Stoke-on-Trent). Instead, the town is a focal point for inward commuting from surrounding areas.
Burton-upon-Trent in context

The town centre is healthy, with a wide variety of retailers, three shopping centres, a refurbished market hall and many household names. There are attractions near the town centre, including leisure park, leisure centre, the National Brewing Centre, and the town library, and many restaurants, pubs and bars. All of this draws people into the heart of the town. There are many heritage buildings in Burton which give the town character. Those which aren’t occupied have clear potential to be redeveloped. The Council has ambitious plans for the town centre, and regeneration is already happening in the Washlands, the area of the town centre formerly used for brewing, with homes now being built next to the site.

One characteristic of the town is the physical distance between the station and the town centre proper. The station area itself could be more attractive and the Council is investing to upgrade this.

There are challenges. Some parts of the town are in relative disrepair, and retailers note a problem with antisocial behaviour. Several vacant units across the town centre detract from its appearance and can discourage visitors. East Staffordshire Council is considering options for alternative use on some of the vacant units on some of these neglected streets along with public realm improvements.

Congestion is a challenge, reflecting the amount of industrial and logistics traffic and the A roads running through the town itself before connecting up with the A38. Addressing these infrastructure challenges will be important to unlocking the potential of the town centre and brownfield sites.
Strengths and challenges

Strengths:
- A large and active manufacturing sector, employing large numbers of people and are of central importance to the town’s economy.
- Active and engaged businesses, which contribute to and are invested in the town centre.
- A diverse and healthy retail offer, night-time economy and cultural institutions which draw people into the town and keep it active.
- The football club’s recent success and new stadium have contributed to the revitalisation of the town and have increased its profile locally and nationally.

Challenges:
- Transport investment needed to unlock the potential of key opportunity sites.
- The town has a healthy retail economy, but potentially lacks a flagship store to draw more people into the town. As one of the main retail centres in East Staffordshire, Burton has a large variety of stores and three shopping centres, but lacks street food and retailers would like to see public realm improvements.
- There are long term vacancies and dilapidated shopfronts on main thoroughfares e.g. Station Street, a pedestrianised retail corridor that runs between two of Burton’s three shopping centres. These can spoil the impression of the town at one of the main points of arrival, though work is ongoing to improve the public realm.
- Roadworks on important routes into the town have increased congestion and affected the retail businesses on these routes.
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunities / Future role

Strong forecast growth in the Greater Birmingham economy, should provide excellent opportunities for Burton’s future success as an independent economic centre, with a committed business base, young population, that is also within easy commuting reach of central Birmingham as well as Derby. Burton has a strong leisure and events offer and will continue to be a distinctive centre.

Burton’s businesses and also its largest employers are committed to the town and contribute to its development. Molson Coors and Marston’s are particularly involved, Molson Coors part-sponsoring the makeover of the Washlands, old brewing industrial units.

Priorities include:

Invest in unlocking vacant and brownfield sites to raise economic activity, both inside and outside the town centre.

- Invest in improving the area around the station to create stronger links from the station to the town centre.
- Diversify the economy by encouraging start-up activity.
- Improve the public realm on streets with high vacancies / in disrepair.
- Increase the opportunity for town centre living by preparing sites and facilitating change of use, in particular the areas surrounding the Washlands and redeveloping vacant retail units on Station Street into residential accommodation, making the station approach much more attractive and act as an anchor for the town.
Cannock
Cannock is the district’s primary retail centre and a leisure hub for the surrounding area. In the next few years, visitor numbers are predicted to grow to 3-4 million a year, with the development of a new McArthur Glen designer outlet West Midlands. As the gateway to the Cannock Chase forest, an area of outstanding natural beauty, just two and a half miles away from the town centre, it will attract increasing numbers of tourists and day trippers. Cannock will host the Commonwealth Games mountain biking competition in 2022, drawing in spectators and raising the profile of the town.

A rural community until the nineteenth century, like nearby Rugeley, Cannock developed as a mining centre in the nineteenth century. This industry lasted into the second half of the 20th century, before the last colliery closed. The town is now primarily a market town and home for commuters to surrounding areas.

Cannock is well located, with convenient access to the A5, M6 and M6 Toll. With a net commuting outflow, people commute predominantly from, and to, South Staffordshire and Walsall, Wolverhampton and Birmingham secondary destinations for commuters. Business density in Cannock is high, but the growth of new businesses low. Skills levels across Cannock Chase district are low in comparison to LEP averages. Cannock council recently played a leading role in reviving the local college – there is potential to open up opportunities to local students to get involved in running town centre businesses.

Key to Cannock’s development as a destination for visitors is the attractiveness of the town centre and its leisure and food and beverage businesses. There is a large number of independent retailers in the town centre, though in recent years retail conditions in the town have been challenging and businesses are concerned about the future.

Cannock Chase council is focused on the improvement of the town centre, and has plans to convert the central carpark into a leisure complex with a cinema. This will help to preserve the town centre’s hub status, maintain footfall and benefit the town’s large independent retail sector. The upcoming opening of the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet West Midlands will draw footfall to the town, but the town centre needs a leisure offer to benefit from this. The town centre leisure complex will provide an alternative offer and character for the town centre, complementing rather than competing with its retail offer and taking advantage of retail park footfall.
Challenges

Strengths:

- Cannock’s visitor economy will grow significantly in the next few years. The New McArthur Glen Designer Outlet West Midlands will draw large numbers of visitors to Cannock and increase footfall to the town. Directly adjacent to Cannock Chase Forest, an area of outstanding natural beauty which will host the mountain biking competition at the forthcoming Commonwealth Games, this will increase its profile as a hub for outdoor and active tourism.

- Plans in motion to redevelop town centre car park as a leisure and entertainment hub. This will help to preserve the importance of the town centre as a leisure centre and increase footfall from visitors. Cannock’s high number of independent retailers are popular and will help the town distinguish itself as a visitor destination.

- Popular local college well connected to the council and open to wider collaborations with town centre businesses.

- Well connected to surrounding towns and cities. Cannock has potential to draw in more residents and businesses.

Challenges:

- The leisure and entertainment offer in the town centre is currently underdeveloped.

- There are currently high levels of antisocial behaviour and retail crime in the town. Retailers cite this as a challenge they have to deal with. Through partnerships, local retailers and the council are working to combat this.

- Skills levels across the district are significantly lower than the regional and LEP average.

- Cannock has some of the lowest rates of business growth in the region. The rate of new business growth between 2013 and 2018 was 8.7%, second lowest to Kidderminster, and lower than the average growth rates across GBSLEP (35.6%) and the West Midlands (23.7%). This suggests a lack of business dynamism, which could adversely affect the town’s economy in future years.

- The district as a whole has low skills levels, which could impact Cannock’s ability to grow.
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunities / future role:

• **Cannock has a major opportunity to become a destination for both outdoor and retail tourism in the next few years.** The Development of the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet West Midlands is projected to bring millions of new visitors to the town and hosting the Commonwealth Games Mountain biking competition in 2022 will raise the profile of the, already popular, Cannock Chase forest. This is a good opportunity to prepare the whole town to receive more footfall, improving public space and ensuring that the town centre has a leisure and food and beverage offer of its own that helps businesses to thrive and the town centre to remain lively.

• **With this activity, Cannock must not lose sight of the opportunity to promote enterprise,** building on the links between the council and the college (which Cannock Chase council helped to revive) by offering students opportunities and incentives to set up shop in the town itself. Local students can be given the opportunity to open businesses and experiment in the town centre, giving it an alternative character to the new development and surrounding towns.

Priorities:

• **Cannock will redevelop the multi-story carpark site into a cinema and leisure complex.** Planning will begin soon – the development will take around five years to complete.

• **Preparing to link the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet into the town centre.** Cannock working to improve the routes into the town and make the walk easy and pleasant.

• **Cannock has a Town Centre Partnership,** recently established, to provide a voice for retailers as the retail park is developed and the town changes. This is already proving effective at improving the town’s public realm and the retailer response to antisocial behaviour and crime.
Kidderminster
Kidderminster in context

There has been a settlement in Kidderminster for nearly 1,000 years, and in the 19th century it became one of the centres of the carpet industry. At one point, Kidderminster had the largest concentration of carpet manufacturers in the world. Whilst it still exists locally, the industry’s decline mirrors that of the town as a whole.

Kidderminster today has the second highest outward commuting levels of all the towns studied. This commuting is largely to the area in and around Worcester. Rail connectivity is good, with major improvements underway to the station. Road connectivity is also good, but congestion in and around the town itself can be severe.

The town as a number of highly deprived wards, and business density and starts are lower than the rest of the LEP area. Skills levels in the district are largely in line with the West Midlands and LEP averages. High numbers commute from Kidderminster to surrounding areas, particularly Wychavon and Worcester.

Retail is a large employer and one of the town’s main roles, but the opening of the Weaver's Wharf shopping centre has shifted the retail focus from the town centre. The retail economy is struggling and businesses lack optimism. Vacancy rates in the town centre are high, with many large units on Worcester Street vacant over the long term.

Kidderminster is one of the towns in GBSLEP most in need of support. There are attractive buildings in the town, notably on Church street and the Weaver’s Wharf shopping centre is popular, but elsewhere the rest of the town is characterised by vacant units, with parts of the public realm in disrepair and antisocial behaviour. The significant recent growth that has occurred in other parts of the GBS LEP and West Midlands area is not reflected in employment or business numbers in the town.

The long term role of the town could change again, given the major long term population and economic growth trends forecast for the wider GBS LEP and West Midlands. With the right investment and improvements to public realm, accessibility and management of the commercial space, Kidderminster has a long term future as an affordable but connected part of the West Midlands in which to live. There are a number of major sites and opportunities which are important elements in what will be a long term plan and development journey. The Crown House, for example, which dominates the town centre, is the largest of these. This has recently been earmarked for demolition, which will open up the centre of town to regeneration.
Strengths and challenges

Strengths:

• The Crown House demolition offer opportunity for town centre regeneration.

• Kidderminster has been awarded Future High Streets Funding which will help to fund accessibility and public realm improvements to the town centre.

• The Severn Valley Railway is a popular tourist attraction and a potential source of visitors for the wider town.

Challenges:

• There are a high number of vacancies across the town centre, some of which have been vacant over the long-term. Long-term vacant units on Worcester Street have been vacant for a combined total of 72 years. Many of the vacant units are large and because of this detract from the town centre’s appearance. Some of the public realm is in poor repair and detracts from the town centre.

• There are high levels of deprivation in the town. Kidderminster is home to some of the most deprived communities, not only in the West Midlands, but also the country. Homelessness is rising.

• There are rising levels of antisocial behaviour and crime in the town centre.

• Accessibility into the town centre is poor, with poorly lit underpasses and a steep route up to the train station. The ring roads which surround the town centre cut it off from surrounding infrastructure and residential areas, and access is often only possible through the underpasses, which can be flashpoints for antisocial behaviour.

• There are currently high levels of antisocial behaviour in the town. Retailers see this as one of the main limitations to the environment and detrimental to their business.

• The Weaver’s Wharf retail park attracts most of the town’s footfall to the detriment of the town centre. Town centre retailers are pessimistic for the future.

• There are low levels of growth in business numbers Kidderminster. There are fewer businesses per person in Kidderminster and a lower rate of business growth than anywhere else in GBSLEP. This suggests that the business environment is poor and that there businesses operating in the town centre require support and new businesses incentives.
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunities / Future role:

In the long term, improve Kidderminster’s offer as an affordable and well connected place to live, as growth in other parts of the LEP area drives demand.

Priorities:

- **The council have secured the demolition of the Crown House, freeing up land to regenerate the town centre.** Demolition of the town’s largest empty property will help to free up space for development.

- **The Council has procured a developer to deliver a new mixed use cinema led development on Lion Fields**, which will be an £18m development to provide a new focal point and ‘experience’ destination within the town. This will bring other leisure providers, restaurants etc. with it.

- **Redevelopment of the former Magistrates Court into start-up / business grow on space.** The council has applied for heritage funding to do this. Business start up rates are low in Kidderminster: this will help to draw in more businesses from the surrounding area into the town and provide more opportunities for local people to start and grow businesses here.

- **Further dramatically improve the public realm and pedestrian connectivity across the town.** Currently, getting to and from the station / from Weaver’s Wharf to the town centre is too difficult.

- **Tackle the town’s social problems.** Homelessness has been a growing issue in the past few years, as is drug taking in the town centre. Providing a service to help deal with these problems is a priority.
Lichfield

Historically less effected by the industrialisation and subsequent deindustrialisation of other parts of the Midlands, Lichfield is an attractive cathedral city with a buoyant economy, growing number of businesses, strong demand for office space, an independent retail scene and a growing tourist economy.

Lichfield is well connected (90 mins to London and 35 mins to Birmingham New Street). It is an important part of the wider area’s offer – an attractive place to live for professional people who work in Birmingham, Sutton Coldfield and Tamworth, but with a strong and growing local business base which will be an important factor in the forecast growth of the West Midlands, particularly in creative and service based firms. This local business base plays an important employment role for other towns, including Tamworth and Sutton Coldfield – Lichfield has only a small net outflow of commuters. Lichfield’s workforce has high skills levels and levels of deprivation in Lichfield centre are low.

Lichfield is well placed to continue to support a growing number of local start ups and scaling businesses, particularly in the business / professional services sector. This sector is a major growth opportunity for the GBS LEP area and wider West Midlands. Lichfield also has clear opportunities to benefit from a growing arts, creative and leisure sector, which is another major growth opportunity for the Greater Birmingham and Solihull area, prioritised in the local industrial strategy.

The town has a strong day visitor economy, with the opportunity and plans in place to increase the number of overnight stays and value of visitor spend.

Reflecting its historic success and continued desirability, prices in Lichfield are high, and development viability for for residential and commercial space should be strong in the long term. Although not all developments have proceeded at pace there are plans in place for further council investment in the major Birmingham Road site and a new master-planning exercise will be the opportunity to allocate and re plan major sites.

Continuing to shape the town as a place for businesses and people to work as well as live will be important, providing both the footfall and wider economic activity needed to support (and in turn be attracted by) a thriving town centre with strong independent offer. Lichfield’s retail business are positive about the town, report good trading and are positive about the future, looking for further development of the arts and visitor offer to strengthen the town centre experience.
Strengths:

- **A desirable place to live and work, well connected nationally and to the urban core of Birmingham.** Lichfield has a high number of people employed in professional, scientific, technical and arts sectors - senior people in regional businesses live here, and local business employ people from Tamworth, Sutton Coldfield as well as the borough.

- **A growing tourism industry** attracted to Lichfield’s historic buildings, museums and cathedral, boosted by a successful tourism campaign. The BID is effective and recently ran a successful marketing campaign to bring more visitors into Lichfield. Following the marketing, the Visit Lichfield site saw a 70% increase in traffic.

- **The independent retail sector is a big draw** to the town and is performing well.

- **A large number of businesses and high business start-up rates indicate a healthy business environment.** In recent years, employment and the number of businesses have grown rapidly, leaving Lichfield with one of the highest business densities of all the towns in GBSLEP. Lichfield’s leisure economy and independent retailers are a genuine strength and draw in visitors. This will make it resilient to out-of-town retail developments.
Challenges

Challenges:

• The mixed-use development on the Birmingham Road gateway site into town recently fell-through due to lack of funding. The council are currently clearing / cleaning the site to prepare it for development, which will be decided in imminent master-planning work.

• Though Lichfield is a popular tourist destination, it currently isn’t attracting overnight stays. Lichfield attracts day visits but currently isn’t considered a destination for overnight stays. This is to do with transport connections, and the council has plans in place for a new coach park to address this, but also the variety of the tourist offer.

• There is a lack of available office space. While the city is increasingly popular as an office base for professional service firms, demand outstrips supply, which is leading to high rents. This reflects the desirability and demand for businesses to work in the centre, but also the potential for more co-working / start-up space.
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunities and Future role
Lichfield has a major opportunity to both benefit from and support the forecast wider growth of both creative businesses and professional services based firms in the Greater Birmingham and Solihull and wider West Midlands. It is a good place to start and grow a businesses and should continue to be so, by meeting demand for office space and grow on space in the town centre and embedding business for the long term.

It’s perception as a desirable place for senior managers and professionals to live, who may work in other towns such as Sutton Coldfield, Tamworth and Birmingham city centre gives it a strong market for high quality leisure, food and retail, which is doing well and will continue to a big part of the towns offer. By building on this and drawing more businesses into the centre Lichfield can further develop the footfall and market for a high quality arts and leisure offer.

This will also support the opportunity that exists to grow the tourism industry, for which specific infrastructure projects including the coach station will be important.

Priorities:
• **Lichfield is about to begin a masterplan for the city centre.** It owns property across the area and is committed to creating a plan which serves the city’s economy as a whole.
• **The council is preparing the Birmingham Road site.** Once planning permission is received, the development is expected to attract the funding it needs to proceed.
• Further developing the town centre office offer.
• Development of the coach station and wider tourism offer to increase overnight stays an the length of the tourist season.
Redditch in context

Redditch is a relatively prosperous town, with much potential to grow. It is an important residential centre and has been so for a long time, following rapid population growth after it was designated a new town in 1964.

Linked to its perception as a commuter town, growth in new businesses and business density are lower than comparable towns in the GBS area. But its connections to Birmingham provide Redditch with real potential to develop its offer to small businesses alongside increasing the number of residents in the town centre itself.

The council is looking to prepare sites and facilitate business growth to take advantage of this. Employment in the town is focused on retail, though there are also large a large number of jobs in the business administration sector, reflecting the strength of the business and professional services sector.

The retail economy in Redditch is healthy, and the Kingfisher Centre has low vacancy levels and high footfall. The managers of the centre are engaged with the town and contribute to events and improvements. Church Green acts as a hub for the town, and hosts key events and Redditch Market. Overall, the wider experience and leisure offer are limited - the town’s evening and night-time offer is poor in comparison to Bromsgrove.

There are specific priorities for public realm requires improvement, and the cycling and pedestrian infrastructure are relatively limited. There are opportunities for mixed use development projects, which will require careful curating and support to ensure they succeed and deliver the wider benefits required in terms of business growth, public realm and overall perception and offer.
Strengths and challenges

Strengths:

• A strong retail economy with an extensive line up of national and anchor retailers.

• Good connectivity to Birmingham and the wider conurbation.

• Clear potential to develop as a business and residential centre. There is clear potential for Redditch to increase the number of people living and working in the town through residential and office developments. It is an historic and attractive town with a conservation area focused around St Stephen’s Church.

Challenges:

• There is a general perception that Redditch is more deprived than it actually is.

• The town lacks a vibrant evening / night-time economy, particularly compared to neighbouring Bromsgrove. Increasing town centre living is a real long term opportunity to support and create demand for a stronger leisure and cultural offer.

• It is challenging to stimulate the right kind of residential development. Whilst growing commuting and increased demand for urban living in the West Midlands would point to growing demand, developers have not yet been providing the housing that will attract young professionals to the area. A more interventionist approach to stimulate the market may be required.
Opportunity and potential actions

Current activity:

• The council is working to unlock important sites for development, in particular residential development. The desired development of the gateway site next to the railway station (the ‘railway quarter’) has been made challenging by the current status of land ownership. The council is working with the West Midlands Combined Authority on these issues.

Priorities:

• Increase the volume of residential property in the area with the help of capital investment for key sites.

• Renovations of the ‘church quarter’ surrounding St. Stephen’s Church. The town has a number of attractive historic buildings – improving these and the public realm around them could help to attract more people into the town.

• Public realm improvements to increase pride of place. These often miss out on funding, but councillors believe them essential to improving the perception of the town and to linking its different areas with accessible, attractive walkways, signs etc.
Rugeley in context

Rugeley is one of the smaller towns in Greater Birmingham & Solihull. A former mining town, it has maintained a manufacturing base, and the town serves its local population well, with popular retailers and good internal connectivity. The redevelopment of Rugeley power station into residential and retail space will increase the numbers living in the town, which has good connectivity both North and South via its railway: most outward commuters currently travel to Lichfield and Stafford for work. As surrounding places grow, it may see an increase in the number of people living in the town, but will likely remain a predominantly residential and retail town, rather than a business centre in its own right.

Connected to the Trent and Mersey Canal, it grew from a primarily agricultural town to a manufacturing and mining town during the Industrial Revolution, the mining industry also leading to the construction of the Rugeley Power Stations and Rugeley’s development into an important economic and industrial centre for the surrounding area. Both the mining industry and the power station have since closed, the latter in 2016, and will now be developed into a mixed use site.

Today, manufacturing remains a significant employer in Rugeley, and accounts for the majority of its total economic output. As the manufacturing industry changes and becomes more advanced it will be important to provide these businesses with the opportunity to learn new skills and develop their businesses, in order to remain competitive. The large Amazon fulfilment centre in the town is a large employer, and in the future will offer opportunities for skilled work as warehouses become more advanced.

Following its decommissioning, Rugeley power station close to the town centre is being developed into a mixed use site. Cannock Chase Council has invested in improving the walkways between the site and the town centre to make sure that the two are well connected.

Cannock Chase Council has worked closely with Rugeley to tackle systemic problems. The town’s weakness to flooding meant that defences had to be put in place before any planning permission could be granted. The council coordinated with national and local partners to improve the town’s flood defences, enabling development to take place.

The town centre retail and leisure offers are small scale, but there is a variety of food and beverage businesses, a good convenience and service offer and a wide range of independents available.

The Market Hall is the gateway to the town but is falling into disrepair. It requires improvement if it is to serve as an attractive gateway into the town. As it is, the quality of the businesses and the occupancy rates of the market are declining.
Strengths and challenges

Strengths:

• The development of Rugeley power station will increase the number of homes in the town. Rugeley’s excellent rail connections North and South mean it has a lot of potential to attract more residents who commute to surrounding towns and cities. The council has invested to improve pedestrian accessibility between the power station development and the town centre.

• A popular market and independent retail scene, with a loyal customer base. The market is a strength of the town, and popular, but with improvement it could become a draw into the area and an anchor of the retail economy.

• A large manufacturing sector. Rugeley’s economy still supports a high number of manufacturing jobs.

Challenges:

• Business growth is below the average rate for GBSLEP and the West Midlands region, which suggests that conditions for starting a business are not ideal, and perhaps reflects Rugeley’s current status as a residential town.

• The town centre is becoming increasingly dilapidated and vacancies are increasing. The public realm Rugeley is relatively poor and is becoming increasingly dilapidated and which detracts from the appearance of the town.

• The town has historic buildings, but many of these are prone to falling into disrepair. The council received matched funding from English Heritage and Staffordshire County Council to give the town’s historical buildings facelifts.
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunity / future role:

• **Rugeley will likely grow in importance as a residential town.** The power station development and the town’s good connections will increase its popularity for commuters. This is an opportunity to improve the town centre for new residents and boost footfall to existing businesses.

• **The manufacturing sector is strong in the town and Amazon is a large and important employer.** Both the logistics and manufacturing sectors should be supported to open up opportunities for skilled work and good, well-paid jobs, through mentoring and schemes which tie employers into local educational institutions.

Priorities:

• **Redevelop the market building into an attractive gateway site to the town.**

• **Improve the public realm.**

• **Establish Rugeley as a tourist destination** through public realm improvements / evening offer for canal tourism.
Solihull
Solihull in context

Solihull is a successful and affluent town, which, thanks to its connectivity to the rest of the region and country, has become an important business and residential centre for the West Midlands. Skills levels across the district are high, and the town centre has a high business density: the number of businesses in the town centre grew by 24% in the period 2013-18.

Solihull is a centre of business and professional service firms, and the sector will continue to develop here as the wider West Midlands cluster grows and firms are attracted to Solihull’s environment. HS2 and UKC will further increase the attractiveness of the wider borough for this fast growing sector. Total business, professional and financial services GVA in the WM is forecast to double to £50 billion between 2015 and 2030, with output and employment growth forecast across all parts of the sector.

Solihull’s connections to the rest of the West Midlands are excellent, and with the UK Central High Speed Hub its national connectivity is set to improve dramatically. Passenger numbers to Solihull train station are set to increase significantly in the coming years, and the large numbers of residents who already commute to Birmingham for work, reflecting Solihull’s status as a residential town for skilled workers in the wider conurbation. As the Solihull Town Centre Masterplan develops demand for the centre will grow, offering a variety of Grade A office alongside mixed use residential, commercial and leisure space.
Solihull in context (2)

With an attractive and thriving town centre and public realm, Solihull is a popular retail destination for the surrounding areas. There are strong anchor retailers and good eating and drinking establishments, a number of large public squares, and, with Mell Square in particular, Solihull has a large public space which attracts a lot of footfall. The two parks in the town attract visitors from the wider conurbation.

Solihull’s challenge is to get the balance of retail, residential and office space right to the benefit of the local economy. It is well placed in that the retailers it has are performing well, popular and draw shoppers into the town from the surrounding area. It is unlikely that these need much attention, other than improving the public realm on the main shopping concourses.

Solihull has an important future as both a high quality place to live for commuters to other parts of the WM and as a growing centre for high value business services, as a hub of knowledge economy activity in the WM. This growth is a chance bring more people into the town, bolster footfall and establish this place as a hub of the knowledge economy within the West Midlands.

With the council having commenced a master planning exercise it has the opportunity to take advantage of new infrastructure developments to draw footfall and professional services into the town. As a significant landowner in its own right, it is able to set the tone, broker small business space or drive residential development.
Strengths and challenges

Strengths:

- **A growing financial sector.** Solihull’s financial and insurance sector has a high economic output, employs large numbers of people and has grown significantly over the past few years. With the professional services sector forecast to grow at pace in the West Midlands over the next few years, this should develop further.

- **Excellent connectivity to the wider conurbation and transport infrastructure.** Connectivity to Birmingham surrounding areas is excellent and is set to improve. Solihull is close to major road, rail and airport infrastructure, and the HS2 station at UK central will place Solihull just 38 minutes from London Euston. This will transform the area around UK Central and Solihull itself into a major centre of growth. Solihull also has a central role to play in EV role out and CAV testing.

- **A highly skilled resident population,** many of whom commute into Birmingham for work and who are attracted to Solihull’s lifestyle.

- **A varied and healthy retail economy and large number of food and beverage businesses.** Solihull town centre is popular and well occupied, and its businesses are keen to invest.

- **An active and engaged BID.** Solihull BID is well funded and active in supporting public realm improvements in the town.

Challenges:

- **Connectivity to the town could be improved for** drivers / people arriving by public transport. Passenger numbers are set to increase to Solihull train station, and the town is acting to address congestion surrounding the station and its accessibility. Links to key new pieces of infrastructure need to be put in place in advance for Solihull to benefit.

- **The town is not currently the leisure destination it could be,** despite its location near to the NEC and to Birmingham, and its attractive public realm. More needs to be done to bring visitors to the town, in particular young families.

- **As with many town centres stakeholders report some concerns with antisocial behaviour** in the town centre.
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunity / future role:

• Growing in importance as a financial and professional services hub, which will grow with projected professional services growth and the arrival of UK central. Solihull should prepare by brokering the development of more business space for start ups and growing businesses. Mell Square, the town centre’s largest open public space is due to be redeveloped and could form the centrepiece of wider improvements. Its national connectivity will make it a desired location for big firms looking to work with clients across the country.

• As connectivity improves, Solihull will become and even more popular dormitory for commuters into Birmingham and the wider country.

Priorities:

• Take of the HS2 opportunity. Solihull’s connectivity to the rest of the country will improve dramatically with the hub station nearby. It should make sure that connections to into the town centre are reliable and fast. Solihull should work to attract large employers looking for a base to serve clients across the UK.

• Broker the development of office space across the town centre. Solihull’s professional services and financial sectors are highly likely to grow.

• Improvement of the leisure offer and the number of homes in the town centre. The BID is pursuing public realm improvements to establish Solihull as a family centre. This includes funding for street furniture to encourage families to dwell.

• Develop an events programme for the whole year, to attempt to make Solihull a destination for weekend trips. Stakeholders believe it lacks a key attraction to bring people in.
Sutton Coldfield in context

Sutton Coldfield has long been a prosperous town, playing a major role in the West Midlands economy, and with important commuting and commercial links to Central Birmingham. As a place to live it is desirable, largely affluent and well connected, with strong demand for housing. It is home to many highly skilled professionals who commute into the urban core in Birmingham, as well as lower levels of commuting to other centres.

But Sutton Coldfield is also a major business location in its own right, with significant inward commuting from Birmingham, high demand for office space and growing employment and numbers of businesses in professional and business services. Reflecting wider trends in services, these firms are increasingly technology and digitally driven, operating across traditional sector boundaries. The wider West Midlands is forecast to see a 50% increase in overall size of the sector and over 150,000 more jobs. Sutton Coldfield is well placed to benefit – as an affluent, highly skilled centre. This is important for the wider economy, as rising issues of housing and commercial space affordability and rising population mean that centres outside Birmingham city centre become increasingly central to future success.

Sutton Coldfield has the opportunity to benefit whilst further enhancing an already highly regarded offer to businesses and residents. With Sutton Park, the town has one of the largest urban parks in Europe immediately adjacent to the town centre. The town has its own Town Council and BID, and an engaged local resident and business community. The BID has worked with local businesses to successfully achieve Purple Flag status for the night-time economy.

Sutton Coldfield is already experiencing major changes. Alongside changes to retail, which will continue, there has been a large increase in the level of employment in the town centre area over the period 2010 to 2017, largely driven by an increase in service sector jobs and businesses.
Sutton Coldfield in context (2)

Nearby developments at Langley and Peddimore will see construction of significant volumes of housing and commercial space. These are significant opportunities for the town with wider regional significance, if well integrated with the town centre and its connectivity.

Sutton Coldfield also faces challenges. A lack of flexible office space limits the potential for start-ups and SMEs locating in the town. Given the overall employment growth forecast across the LEP area and WM, the balance between residential and business space is an important one, particularly in the town centre, where further employment space is likely to be part of a wider shift.

Whilst the retail economy in the town is healthy, there are growing long term challenges. Several large units in the town centre are vacant, and their size makes it difficult to attract replacement tenants. M&S and Debenhams have recently closed, depriving the high street of significant anchor tenants. House of Fraser is an anchor for the town centre, and it remains busy, but its future nationally is uncertain. Town centre businesses were clear that considering alternative uses and bringing more businesses into the town centre will be important for future masterplanning. As will continuing to curate and develop the night time and leisure offer, and use of the park.

The railway station and the park are major assets, but continuing to improve linkages to the rest of the town will be important and the park could be better utilised for events.
Strengths

• A strong services economy, which is forecast to grow rapidly in the WM as a whole, with a large number of businesses in the town centre. Sutton Coldfield's business density is significantly higher than both the GBSLEP average and that of the wider West Midlands.

• Connectivity to Birmingham and the wider conurbation is excellent, but Sutton Coldfield is a business centre itself – people commute in and out.

• Sutton Park is a significant asset and the town has a high quality environment, with a strong leisure offer.

• The area surrounding Sutton Coldfield is growing fast. Planned housing development, focused on the 6,500 new homes at Langley, is set to increase the population by 20%. Public transport in the town is good and connectivity to Birmingham and the surrounding area excellent.
Challenges

- **There is an insufficient supply of office space in the town centre.** There is high demand for modern, medium to large floorspace with internet and transport connectivity, and Sutton Coldfield is well placed to provide this to the conurbation and grow through it. Office space is being reduced as available units are being converted into flats: around 400 residential spaces have been created from office and retail space in the town centre over the last 10 years.

- **The town’s good connectivity means that many residents choose to travel away from the town.** Many commute to places such as Birmingham, Tamworth and Lichfield for their work, culture, leisure and retail activities.

- **The town has lost anchor retailers in recent years and vacancies in some shopping centres are quite high.**

- **The town’s nightlife offer is perceived to be limited for younger people.**
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunity / Future Role

Continue as a growing centre for highly skilled, service-based employment, with a growing number of businesses and a town centre with a high-quality leisure offer for the people that work and live there, as well as those that visit. Major, high quality, housing growth, serving both the town, Birmingham city centre and wider West Midlands. A major part of the wider cluster, along with Solihull and Birmingham City Centre

- using its connectivity to attract visitors. It is easy to get to other places from the town, meaning many people from elsewhere choose to travel to Sutton Coldfield, for example to visit Sutton Park. Much of the marketing focus from the town is oriented towards people in Aldridge and Walsall since they are often more inclined to visit Sutton Coldfield compared to other parts of the region.
- developing cultural assets and leisure space in available sites, to improve the overall offer for residents and workers.
- Continuing to improve the coherence and accessibility of the town centre – linking up existing and emerging zones

Priorities:

- Supporting the development of an enterprise accommodation offer that can help local companies start-up and expand, with a focus on service sector companies. Flexible office space / an enterprise centre is needed in particular. Research is required to help better understand the levels of demand (i.e. a workspace study).
- Collaborating with emerging sector groups in the West Midlands on business and professional services – to sell SC as an important part of the wider cluster.
- The Town Hall is a significant opportunity. The Town Hall currently is able to seat 400 people and there is extensive space that could be used as a creative hub and / or for flexible workspace.
- Improving access to Sutton Park and the railway station from the high street.
- Improving signage and public realm to create a more joined-up and legible centre. Review the opportunities around a Heritage Trail.
- Considering the potential for meanwhile uses in vacant retail units.
- Supporting the programme of events and activities in the town centre to attract visitors and working to raise local awareness.
Tamworth
At the edge of – and well connected to - Birmingham, Tamworth has an opportunity to attract both businesses and residents to the town centre as Birmingham develops. The town centre is an attractive place to live and work, and property prices are cheaper than in Birmingham.

Retail is the most important employment sector in the town centre, accounting for 2,310 jobs. The retail element of the town centre offer faces some challenges. Retail conditions in the town centre are difficult, hampered by the Ventura Retail Park within walking distance with plentiful free parking, which attract a lot of the town's footfall. Footfall in the town centre has dropped dramatically in a very short space of time. This is particularly the case for the Middle Entry shopping centre at the heart of the town centre. As a result, since 2010, the number of people employed in retail has declined by 13%.

Employment growth in other sectors – particularly arts & entertainment, accommodation & food services, and professional & business services – has helped make up for the decline in retail since 2010, but overall employment growth has been static since the recession.

While business density in Tamworth is lower than many of the other towns in this analysis, the growth of new businesses is healthy, growing by nearly 20% in 2013-2018. The popularity of the Tamworth Enterprise Centre attests to this: it is currently at capacity, demand for start-up space remains, with private operators entering the market prompted by the success of the Enterprise Centre.

The local college provides vocational courses to local students, many of whom would benefit from the experience of running a business. Providing them with flexible and low-cost contracts would restore variety and activity to the town centre. This, in turn, should help local young people develop their skills and build vital experience.
Strengths and challenges

Strengths:

- A rich heritage with a historic town centre and castle. There is significant potential to grow the town’s visitor economy and use this to benefit the town centre.
- Close proximity to Birmingham with excellent connectivity into the city.
- A popular enterprise centre which demonstrates demand for the town centre for small businesses.
- A popular local college and a willingness on the part of the council to open up opportunities for students to gain experience running businesses.

Challenges:

- Retail across the town centre is struggling.
- The town has many attractive and affordable buildings, but currently these aren’t used as effectively they could be.
- Visitor numbers to Tamworth Castle are not translating into footfall for the rest of the town centre.
- Tamworth district has low skills levels in comparison to the LEP area as a whole.
Opportunity and potential actions

Opportunities / Future role:
Tamworth should benefit from and contribute to the future growth and success of the Greater Birmingham economy, as a well connected residential location for other towns and the urban core, and as a growing centre for start up and grow on businesses who are looking for a location outside the city centre.

Priorities:
• Development is taking place at the Gungate site at the edge of town. The council is taking a leading role in the development, and intends to use it to redevelop the surrounding area. It will be a mixed use development, combining housing, retail, leisure and car parking.
• Reinvigorate retail in the town centre through experimentation – short term tenancies, pop-ups, markets etc. Retail in the town centre is dominated by discounters. There is an opportunity to offer students from the nearby college, which offers catering courses, incentives to start up in the town centre.
• Increase the level of housing and office development within the town centre.
• Redevelop the historic quarter surrounding the castle to pull in visitors, and connect the town’s tourist assets to the town centre.