

UPDATED

Trafford Town Centres Framework

September 2019



**TRAFFORD
COUNCIL**

Contents

- 1. Introduction.....3**
- 2. Purpose of Framework.....3**
- 3. Area Profiles.....4**
 - 3.1 Altrincham**
 - 3.2 Sale**
 - 3.3 Stretford**
 - 3.4 Urmston**
- 4. Progress against Local Strategies7**
 - 3.1 Altrincham**
 - 3.2 Sale**
 - 3.3 Stretford**
 - 3.4 Urmston**
- 5. Property Market.....10**
- 6. Policy Context.....11**
 - 6.1 National Planning Policy Framework**
 - 6.2 Greater Manchester Strategy**
 - 6.3 Greater Manchester Spatial Framework**
 - 6.4 GM Mayor’s Town Centres Challenge**
 - 6.5 Local Plan / Core Strategy**
 - 6.6 Economic Growth and Housing Framework 2016**
 - 6.7 Trafford Housing Strategy 2018-2023**
- 7. Future Priorities.....14**
 - 7.1 Buildings and Place**
 - 7.1.1 Heritage**

- 7.1.2 Physical Condition of Buildings**
- 7.1.3 Public Realm**
- 7.1.4 Highway ‘Clutter’**
- 7.1.5 Safe Spaces**
- 7.2 Transport and Access.....15**
 - 7.2.1 Car Parking**
 - 7.2.2 Disabled access**
- 7.3 Leisure – Food and Drink Offer.....17**
- 7.4 Offices / Commercial.....17**
- 7.5 Housing.....17**
- 7.6 Markets.....18**
- 8. Town Centre Management and Business Support.....19**
 - 8.1 Business Support**
 - 8.2 Town Centres Business Growth Programme**
- 9. Marketing and Promotion.....20**
 - 9.1 Investment Brochure / Retailer Targeting**
 - 9.2 Branding**
 - 9.3 Cross promotion and encouraging linked trips**
 - 9.4 Online Activity and Social Media**
- 10. Monitoring Town Centre Performance.....21**
- 11. Community / Partnership Working.....21**

1. Introduction

Trafford Council recognises that its four main town centres, Altrincham, Sale, Stretford and Urmston are crucial components to the economic, environmental and social wellbeing of the borough. Each town centre provides a unique but complementary offer, where Trafford's residents and visitors can easily access a range of facilities and services; and businesses can grow and reach their full potential.

A number of the town centres have undergone, or are undergoing, major public realm improvement works to make them more vibrant places for people to enjoy shopping, working, visiting and living. In recent years the focus has been on developing strategies for each of the individual town centres. However, there has not previously been an overarching Strategic Framework to set these individual strategies in context.

The Town Centres Framework has been produced to cover each town centre within the borough and to act as a strategic 'umbrella' to coordinate future development and activity.

The Framework is intended to complement Trafford Council's Corporate Priorities, the Economic Growth and Housing Framework and the activity of partner organisations such as Altrincham Unlimited. It also aligns with existing and future studies of the town centres such as:

- Altrincham Strategy / Public Realm Strategy
- Sale Improvement Plan / Public Realm and Movement Strategy
- Urmston Improvement Plan
- Stretford Masterplan

2. Purpose and Aims of the Framework

This Framework is intended to provide an overarching strategic approach for the town centres. It provides the direction of travel to create more prosperous and investable locations which meet local needs and ensure that each town centre has the right offer of retail, food and drink, community and leisure uses, as well as supporting infrastructure.

It will help to deliver the Council's Corporate Priorities, particularly around creation of Successful and Thriving Places, and it is intended to guide the development of strategy for each of the local areas. It is important that activity within each centre is tailored to meet local need and harness individual strengths and distinctiveness.

The ambition is to create improved town centre environments that are vibrant and attractive, with a strong and distinctive identity that helps set them apart from their competitors. They should be places where businesses feel that they can start up, grow or invest. Moreover, they should also be places where residents can access the facilities and services they need, and provide a strong sense of place which the community are proud of and engage with.

With excellent transport links into all the town centres, the Framework aims to capitalise on these strengths and to encourage people from the local area and further afield to visit.

3. Area Profiles

In recent years, town centres nationally have suffered from a combination of competition from out-of-centre retail destinations, the economic downturn, the growth of internet shopping and a loss of unique identity and character. These challenges have had an effect on Trafford's town centres resulting in changes to the way they operate as 'places' and 'destinations'. Ensuring the vitality of each town centre is a priority for the Council.

3.1 Altrincham

Altrincham, the borough's principle town centre, has been a market town for more than 700 years and has a rich and varied history. It is renowned for its outstanding schools, the quality of its residential offer and its proximity to both the Manchester City Region urban area and the Cheshire countryside.

Altrincham benefits from excellent road and public transport connections. The A56 and A560 provide connections from the motorway network. Altrincham Interchange, located in the heart of the town, provides regular connections from destinations across Greater Manchester and beyond by Metrolink, bus, train, and taxi.

The town centre contains a diverse mix of national retailers, independent shops, services, restaurants, offices and residential properties. There are also a large number of buildings of heritage and architectural significance in the town and there is good provision of both private and Council operated car parking.

The town centre is a hub for small to medium sized businesses, particularly in the retail, finance and professional services sectors. Businesses are attracted by competitive rents compared to Manchester City Centre, while workers are attracted to the town's lifestyle offer. The

town has a significantly higher proportion of senior, managerial and professional occupations than the national rate, as well as a higher percentage of local entrepreneurs.

However, Altrincham town centre has not always enjoyed its current reputation as a destination in its own right and has undergone a significant transformation in the last decade. By the time of the economic downturn, the town centre had major challenges that were preventing it from fulfilling its potential. There were issues with its image and perception, including: poor environmental quality and public realm; an underachieving retail, commercial and visitor offer; developer inactivity and stalled developments.

In 2010 Altrincham's town centre vacancy rate was over 30%, the highest in the UK. Altrincham Forward (AF), a public-private sector partnership, was formed to address the challenges driven by the vision to make Altrincham a 'Modern Market Town'. Its Action Plan, led by Trafford Council with key stakeholders, brought forward investment including public realm improvements, a new Hospital, Transport Interchange and a refurbished Market House.

As a result of this activity businesses voted to establish a Business Improvement District (BID). It launched in April 2016 as 'Altrincham Unlimited' and is delivering a programme of activity to improve the town centre. Key projects have included:

- A cost reduction scheme to save businesses money on utility bills and merchant services.
- Specialist deep cleaning of paving across the town.
- Business training e.g. use of social media.
- Maps and new website.
- Supporting the evening sector, improving safety and accessibility.
- A directory of local services resources for businesses.

- An annual programme of events e.g. Christmas lights switch on and a summer music festival.
- Promotional activity including regular national press coverage, town centre tours and campaigns such as #shoptober and #amazingaltrincham.
- Appointment of a Town Ranger to provide an approachable, uniformed presence in the town and report and follow up issues.

The town centre is now performing well with a vacancy rate of 7.2% (June 2019) and is expected to fall further with a number of units being refurbished for new uses. Altrincham has become a destination that is known for its quality food and drink offer with the Market House catering for over 7,000 customers each week and many complementary businesses, including restaurants, bars and cafes opening nearby. The footfall count has continued to rise year on year compared against an overall decline nationally. The count for 2018 was up by 11% compared to 2015.

In March 2018, Altrincham was named as the best place to live in the North-West by The Sunday Times and in November 2018, Altrincham was announced as the Champion High Street in England in the Great British High Street Awards.

3.2 Sale

Sale town centre primarily serves local residents from neighbouring areas including Ashton on Mersey, Brooklands, Sale Moor and Sale West. These areas have differing demographics, which make for a distinctive and diverse place. It is a very sought after location for families due to its high performing schools, attractive housing offer and excellent transport links.

The Waterside, Sale Waterpark, and the Bridgewater Canal provide a cultural and tourism offer which attracts visitors from outside of the

Trafford borough. There is also a strong office/employment offer in and around the Town Centre, including large modern office blocks on the A56 Corridor along Washway Road and Cross Street. The food and drink sector is also growing and improving in quality particularly around Northenden Road and the Waterside Plaza.

Sale has a town centre vacancy rate of 6.6% (June 2019) which is below the national average (9.9%, Source: Local Data Company). However, there is a poor mix / quality of retail in the town centre considering the demographics of the local area.

It is recognised that more needs to be done in order to improve the quality of the town centre offer to ensure it continues to meet the needs and aspirations of local residents, businesses and visitors as a high quality retail, leisure and employment destination. The quality of public realm throughout the town centre has deteriorated which has made the environment less attractive to residents, visitors and potential investment.

In 2017, the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) report 'The Best Places to Live and Work' identified Sale as the fourth most desirable place to live and work in the UK (2017).

3.3 Stretford

Stretford is a densely populated area with a diverse social mix. The town centre is located in a prominent position along the A56 corridor, which allows it to benefit from good links to the M60, excellent public transport connections and access to the Bridgewater Canal.

Until the 1960s the town centre contained a wide range of retail, leisure and entertainment facilities, within a conventional suburban neighbourhood. In the late 1960s and early 1970s significant development took place in the area with the widening of the A56 to six

lanes and the completion of the Arndale Centre, now known as Stretford Mall, which dominates the core of the town centre. The mix of leisure uses has diminished over the years but there is an emerging night time economy on the Chester Road frontage with the arrival of Stretford Food Hall, Longford Tap and Head bar, and further openings are planned. The Town Centre vacancy rate remains consistently high, currently standing at 21.8% (June 2019).

A number of important community facilities are located in the area, including Stretford Public Hall and Stretford Library. Its immediate surroundings contain a number of major retail, sporting and tourist destinations including Manchester United Football Club, Lancashire County Cricket Club, the Imperial War Museum North, Trafford Quays Leisure Village, intu Trafford Centre and MediaCity:UK. Trafford Park, located to the north of Stretford, is a major employment destination and home to over 1,300 businesses, employing over 35,000 people.

To the south of Stretford, the Mersey Valley provides an area of countryside that connects the north to the south of Trafford. This area has the potential to build on its current status and become a more significant facility for the local community and a major visitor attraction.

Historically Stretford Mall has suffered from a lack of investment, competition from other centres and the loss of several major occupiers such as Tesco, Iceland and B&M.

Since the Mall changed ownership in 2014 there has been investment, including c£2m in 2016 to deliver an Aldi food store, refurbishment of the multi-storey car park and new technology to provide three hours free car parking. However despite this the vacancy rate has continued to rise. A major redevelopment of the Mall was completed in 2019. This helped to consolidate the retail offer of Stretford Mall and created a new strategic site for redevelopment which will complement other nearby development proposals, including Lacy Street.

3.4 Urmston

As a shopping and leisure destination, Urmston town centre primarily serves local residents from the north of Trafford, including the nearby areas of Davyhulme and Flixton. The town centre has easy access to the M60 motorway and has a direct rail connection on the Manchester to Liverpool line.

In 2007, a major transformation of the town centre commenced when the old shopping precinct was demolished and a £45 million retail, leisure and residential development named Eden Square was constructed on the site. Other assets in Urmston include the monthly artisan markets and nearby green space at Goldenhill Park and the Memorial Gardens which provide recreational facilities. Market 41, a new indoor food hall on the site of the former Outdoor Market, has planning consent and is due to be completed in early 2020. It is hoped this will prove to be a significant draw for visitors.

Although Urmston has managed to maintain a town centre vacancy rate below the national average, the town centre is not immune from the pressures which have caused many town centres across the country to decline. However, a strong independent business community has helped keep Urmston town centre vibrant and it has developed a strong food and drink offer. In February 2015, the Manchester Evening News reported that Urmston was being revitalised by a community of enthusiastic independents in an article headlined the “Suburb Winning the Fight against the Big Boys”. The vacancy rate is consistently very low, currently standing at 4.8% (June 2019).

4. Progress against Local Strategies

As part of Trafford Council's strategic approach, each town centre has its own plans which are at various stages of implementation. It is expected that the plans for each town centre will be refreshed periodically. The following sections describe the progress that has been made in each town centre against the relevant strategy.

4.1 Altrincham

The Altrincham Strategy was approved in 2014. This provided a comprehensive vision for the town centre and a framework to support the delivery of development opportunities within Altrincham. Many of the objectives of the Strategy have now been met, including proposals to:

- *“Bring forward development to realise the full potential of Altrincham Town Centre”* – Altrincham Hub, which includes the new Library, opened in December 2018; plans for residential development at Altair Phase 1 are progressing; and the Council has acquired Grafton Centre and is seeking a development partner. These key developments will increase footfall and ensure the town centres provide a range of functions to meet the needs of residents.
- *“Improve the quality and diversity of Altrincham’s offer to support an increase in footfall and dwell time”* – Many new businesses have opened which have diversified Altrincham’s offer. This includes a huge growth in the food and drink offer, as well as offerings such as a new soft play centre, a specialist running shop and flotation spa.
- *“Promote and enhance the development of Altrincham’s visitor economy”* – A year round programme of events is delivered through Altrincham Unlimited alongside a growing leisure offer including the Market House and other food and drink vendors which now attract visitors from around the region and beyond.
- *“Widen the scope of activities in the town to make it attractive to all age groups”* – Many businesses have tailored their offering to meet the needs of customers of all ages, including The Treehouse children’s play centre and restaurant; and Two Brothers coffee shop offering free tea and toast for pensioners on Wednesdays.
- *“Place Altrincham Market and the surrounding areas at the heart of plans for the future of the town centre”* – The Market has proved to be successful winning national awards and raising the profile of Altrincham. The Market Quarter has been revived as a leisure destination and is now one of the most popular parts of the town.
- *“Promote an increased town centre residential offer”* – The increased desirability of the town centre as a place to live has been shown through the high number of residential conversions and plans for new apartments at Regent Road, Altair and Clarendon House.
- *“Provide increased opportunities for smaller independent town centre businesses and entrepreneurs”* – There has been a strong growth in the numbers of independent businesses, which has been supported by Council initiatives such as the Town Centres Business Growth Programme.
- *“Link key town centre destinations through high quality public realm, green infrastructure and improved pedestrian and cycle routes”* – £3 million has been spent to date on improving the public realm on Shaw’s Road, Cross Street, Stamford New Road and Goose Green. This has led to increased footfall in the town centre.
- *“Improve access by public transport and maximise the benefits of Altrincham Interchange”* – The new Interchange has improved the experience of those arriving in Altrincham by train, tram, bus and taxi.

The Altrincham Neighbourhood Business Plan was adopted by the Council in 2017. The Vision and Objectives reflect a range of economic,

social and environmental issues raised by the community. The Vision states that Altrincham Town Centre should evolve into an economically, environmentally and socially attractive centre providing the widest possible range of high quality services and facilities to meet the needs of its population.

4.2 Sale

An Improvement Plan for Sale was produced in early 2017 which set out priorities and aims for the town centre with an emphasis on improving 'quality' and the overall experience for visitors to the area and those who live and work there.

The Plan aims to create a strong sense of place within Sale town centre with a clear and distinctive identity that takes advantage of its cultural offer, its excellent accessibility by foot, cycle and public transport and its environmental assets including links to the Bridgewater Canal. It identifies a need for a balance of quality independent retailers, alongside national chains in a high quality, attractive and well maintained shopping environment.

Many of the objectives of the Plan are now being progressed, including:

- *“Bringing forward sustainable development and encouraging private sector investment.... including residential development.”* – The developer, Maloneview, has submitted a detailed planning application for the proposed £70m redevelopment of The Square Shopping Centre. Following the partial demolition of the existing Shopping Centre, the scheme would create c.202 homes and c.30,000 sq. ft. of retail and leisure, a six-screen cinema, improved access and public realm and a replacement for the multi-storey car park. The Council have also purchased the former Magistrates Court site and potential redevelopment options are being assessed but will be residential led.

- *“To improve the quality of the public realm throughout Sale, with a focus on School Road, Northenden Road, and The Square to create an attractive shopping environment”* – The Council commissioned Planit IE and Civic Engineers to produce a Public Realm and Movement Strategy for Sale Town Centre to guide targeted investment in public spaces, support the local economy and provide an improved environment appropriate for town centre uses. There is a particular focus on improving the linkages between the main areas and attractions in the Town Centre and providing a better environment for pedestrians and cyclists. The Strategy was approved by the Council in summer 2018 and various funding opportunities are being explored to deliver it.
- *“To maintain a low percentage of vacant properties within the town centre”* – The Town Centres Business Growth Programme provides opportunities for businesses to open or relocate to the town centre.
- *“To provide clear signage and improve pedestrian and cycle accessibility through the area”* – The Public Realm and Movement Strategy includes provision for improving signage and pedestrian and cycle accessibility.

4.3 Stretford

The original Stretford Masterplan was approved in 2014 to deliver change and growth and set out how Stretford can maximise the opportunities of its key assets, link key spaces together and create a strong and attractive destination of choice meeting the needs of the community. The Masterplan provided a coherent framework for the Council, property owners, prospective developers, existing occupiers and community stakeholders which will assist in realising the opportunities which exist within the Masterplan area.

Since 2014 there has been significant progress and investment, including:

- Delivery of £1.75 million worth of improvements to the A56/Edge Lane junction.
- New openings at Stretford Mall, including a new Aldi store and an emerging leisure and night time economy on the Chester Road frontage.
- Stretford Public Hall has been taken over by the Friends of Stretford Public Hall Group.
- House price growth in the area above the local and national averages.
- A significant remodelling of Stretford Mall, including a partial demolition, is underway which will create a new key development site.

Although great progress has been made, the vacancy rate within the Town Centre remains high, and the redevelopment of a number of important sites has not progressed. Therefore a new approach was required for the town centre to achieve its full potential. In early 2018, Trafford Council approved a revised Stretford Masterplan which included new ambitious and exciting opportunities to revitalise Stretford. The Stretford Masterplan builds on the work completed to date and will help to secure the transformation of the Town Centre and the wider Stretford area. This will harness emerging opportunities and help to secure significant new development and investment. The Masterplan is focused on introducing a wider mix of uses, delivery of major projects, reusing historic buildings, developing an enhanced evening economy and improving the linkages between assets such as the Bridgewater Canal and Mersey Valley.

The catalyst for updating the original Masterplan was the University Academy '92 (UA92) proposal, an innovative higher education facility in partnership with Gary Neville and the 'Class of '92', Lancaster University, Trafford Council, Microsoft, Trafford College and Bruntwood.

UA92 is set to create jobs, bring people and investment into the area and offer young people, from the local area and further afield, a very different approach to higher education that will develop the skills crucial to becoming future leaders in sport, media and business. Crucially it will also potentially enhance the local economy by around £26 million per year. The proposed main UA92 campus is the former Kellogg's office on Talbot Road and will open in September 2019 taking c550 students in its first year.

The UA92 campus forms part of the new Civic Quarter Masterplan SPD which is due for completion in spring 2019 which proposes developing the area around the Town Hall and Lancashire Cricket Club. The revised plans will support further investment in the town centre and delivery of retail, food/drink and leisure uses, the revival of the Essoldo building for beneficial use by the whole community, new high-quality student accommodation and opportunities to bring forward the development of several other sites.

The Council is planning further phases of public realm improvements along A56 Chester Road and Edge Lane which will improve the look and feel of the town centre.

4.4 Urmston

The heart of Urmston town centre was transformed with the Eden Square development which was completed in 2012. The Urmston Improvement Plan was produced in 2015 in order to identify and realise further opportunities which exist within the town centre and provide a prosperous, vibrant, attractive and safe destination.

Many of the objectives of the Plan are now being delivered, including proposals to:

- *“To encourage private sector investment that realises the full potential of Urmston town centre”* – Planning consent has been granted for an indoor food court, Market 41, on the site of the existing outdoor market with a new covered artisan market also be included within the development. This is due to open in early 2020 and this will help to strengthen Urmston’s status as a destination, similar to how the Altrincham Market House has helped to revitalise Altrincham town centre.

The existing Indoor Market has recently changed ownership with the new owner planning a mixed use refurbishment including creating residential flats above the retail space below.

- *“Improve the overall quality of the town centre and improve its retail, leisure and services offer, particularly the evening economy”* – The quality of the town centre offer has improved in recent years, particularly with new businesses opening in the food and drink sector, leading to a vibrant evening economy.
- *“Maintain the percentage of vacant properties within the town centre below the regional average and develop unused, under-used or derelict properties for a mix of uses”* – Urmston has consistently maintained a vacancy rate below the regional and national averages. The Town Centres Business Growth Programme has assisted in achieving this objective with ten new businesses receiving loans from the Council.
- *“Promote the town centre shopping and leisure offer and increase footfall, dwell time and spend”* – The Council assisted the monthly Urmston Artisan Market to move to a new site on the Goldenhill Car Park in April 2018, which has helped to secure its future.
- *“Create a strong sense of place within the town centre and improve key town centre gateways”*. – Minor public realm improvements were carried out in 2014 including planting trees, improving parking bays and improvements to Goldenhill Park.

5. Property Market

The property market in Altrincham, Sale and Urmston is thriving. Quarterly data collected by the Council shows that the overall town centre vacancy rate improved over the past five years from June 2014 to June 2019 with the overall rate across all the town centres having fallen from 8.4% to 7.9%% (Table 1). Significant improvement continues to be made in Altrincham, with Sale and Urmston remaining consistently below national averages. The national average town centre vacancy rate for January 2019 published by Local Data Company was 9.9%. It should be a priority to maintain vacancy rates at these low levels and encourage further reductions where possible.

Table 1 – Town Centre Vacancy Rates

	Vacancy Rate (%) June 14	Vacancy Rate (%) June 19
Altrincham	19.5	7.2
Sale	11.9	6.6
Stretford	42.0	21.8
Urmston	7.8	4.8
	18.4	7.9

The high vacancy rate in Stretford is an ongoing concern. The demolition and reconfiguration of part of the Mall has reduced the number of vacant units but there have also been a number of recent unanticipated closures. On a positive note, there have been a number of new business openings along the Chester Road frontage with further openings planned. These openings mostly relate to the food and drink sector.

One of the key drivers behind this Framework is to enable Trafford's town centres to compete with similar nearby centres and make them unique and attractive to potential investors and developers. Although the property market is influenced by wider economic trends which are outside the Council's control, there are also factors which can be influenced locally by providing business engagement and support, marketing and promotion and incentives such as The Town Centres Business Growth Programme.

Bringing forward development of underutilised sites will enhance the offer and appearance of the town centres. Examples of proposed schemes include the proposed Altair scheme in Altrincham and Lacy Street in Stretford. Although many of the sites within the town centres are in private ownership, there may be opportunities for the Council to help facilitate development.

6. Policy Context

6.1 National Planning Policy Framework

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies for England. It is driven by economic, social and environmental sustainable development objectives. It says that local planning authorities should:

- define a network and hierarchy of town centres and promote their long-term vitality and viability – by allowing them to grow and change in a way that supports a diverse retail offer, provides customer choice, allows a suitable mix of uses (including housing) and reflects their distinctive characters;
- define the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas and make clear which uses will be permitted in such locations;
- retain and enhance existing markets and, where appropriate, re-introduce or create new ones;
- allocate a range of suitable sites in town centres to meet the scale and type of development needed;
- allocate appropriate edge of centre sites for main town centre uses that are well connected to the town centre, where suitable and viable town centre sites are not available;
- encourage residential development on appropriate sites;
- support diversification and changes of use where town centres are in decline while avoiding the unnecessary loss of facilities that are important for meeting the community's day-to-day needs.

The NPPF says that local authorities should seek to improve the quality of parking so that it is convenient, safe and secure, alongside measures to promote accessibility for pedestrians and cyclists.

6.3 Greater Manchester Strategy

The Greater Manchester Strategy entitled “Our People, Our Place” (2017) includes the aim of “putting pride back in our town centres”. It recognises that town centres are critical to the future success of GM and states that proposals will be brought forward for how our town centres can be re-purposed and modernised so they can become quality places to live and work. This involves balancing new higher-density residential development with quality cultural facilities, public spaces, a good environment for walking and cycling, public services, retail, entertainment, and employment offers, as well as key access points to an integrated transport network. It proposes a brownfield and town centres first approach to housing and employment site development.

6.3 Greater Manchester Spatial Framework

The Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF) is a joint plan for GM that will provide the land for jobs and new homes across the city region. The framework is being produced by all 10 councils working together in partnership, to ensure that the right land is available in the right places to deliver the homes and jobs that are needed up to 2035, and will identify the new infrastructure such as transport, schools, health centres and utility networks required to achieve this.

The GMSF focuses on making the most of GM’s brownfield sites and recognises that town centres are critical to the success of GM. It proposes that town centres are improved so that they become quality places to live and work. It places a new priority on town centres for more residential development and sets minimum targets for affordable homes.

6.4 GM Mayor’s Town Centres Challenge

In November 2017, the GM Mayor launched the GM Town Centres Challenge. Each local authority in GM nominated a town centre to be included as part of the Challenge and Stretford was nominated by the Council.

The Challenge aims to create world class town centres to support the growth of GM as a whole and redefine them as long term, sustainable, and highly sought after investment options. A number of components for a successful town centre ‘offer’ are identified including:

- Residential development
- Restructured retail
- Business space
- Attractive transport hubs
- Food, beverage and leisure
- Public service delivery hubs
- Venues for events
- Cultural offers
- Attractive places for people to interact in

The Challenge aims to assist in tackling constraints to growth, particularly in areas of market failure. However, it is recognised that each town centre must develop an approach embedded in ‘place shaping’, building on unique strengths and aspirations.

6.5 Trafford Core Strategy and Local Plan

The Core Strategy highlights the need to enhance their vitality and viability of the town centres with improvements to diversity, accessibility

and environmental quality. It recognises the importance of attracting high quality residential uses.

The Strategy states that Altrincham, as the Principal Town Centre, will be the focus for high quality comparison retail supported by a range of retail, service, leisure, tourism, office and residential uses. The main development opportunity is the Altair mixed-use development to the east of the Altrincham transport interchange.

The other town centres will be a focus on the consolidation and improvement of the convenience and comparison retail offer, with the potential to strengthen and enhance the retail offer where suitable, as well as diversification to other uses such as offices, services, leisure, cultural and residential, as appropriate.

The Council are currently developing the Trafford Local Plan which will eventually become the main land use planning document for Trafford. The Issues Paper, produced for consultation in 2018, identifies town centre specific issues which could be addressed by the plan including:

- Availability of sites to meet the demand for retail, leisure, offices and other main town centre uses.
- The need to increase the vitality and viability of the town centres. The need to promote the 'evening economy' within town centres.
- The increasing importance of culture and leisure uses within the town centres.

6.6 Economic and Housing Growth Framework 2016

The Trafford Economic and Housing Growth Framework sets the strategic priorities for growth in the borough. It identifies that Trafford is a strong performer in GM and recognises that Trafford has particular strengths in the four prime 'capabilities' which are key to driving future economic growth i.e. Business, Finance and Professional Services, Manufacturing, Health Innovation, and Digital. It also recognises that

Trafford benefits from excellent digital connectivity, a highly accessible transport network and a strong /desirable housing market.

6.7 Trafford Housing Strategy 2018 - 2023

The Trafford Housing Strategy plays a key role in delivering the priorities set in the GM Strategy and the emerging GM Housing Strategy. The Housing Strategy supports the opportunity for significant residential growth in the borough. The growth sites for development are identified in the GMSF, and include Trafford's town centres.

7. Future Priorities

7.1 Buildings and Place

7.1.1 Heritage

Heritage can have significant benefits for town centres. Evidence shows that places with strong, distinctive identities are more likely to prosper than places without them. Heritage can add to the unique character of places, signifying the culture of places and playing an important part in shaping peoples' perceptions of the attractiveness and quality of place. This can attract people, businesses and investment, and can provide places with a competitive advantage.

Both designated and non-designated heritage assets can help make the four town centres distinctive, support sustainable growth and act as a focus for regeneration activity e.g. promotion of Altrincham as a 'Modern Market Town'.

It will be ensured that architecturally significant buildings within the town centres are well maintained and where they are vacant, such as the former Essoldo cinema building in Stretford, efforts will be made to bring them back into use. There is no statutory obligation under which owners of listed buildings must keep them well maintained, however the Council will use the powers at its disposal to take action to secure repair when it becomes evident that a building is being allowed to deteriorate.

Initiatives which promote the heritage assets within the town centres will be supported e.g. Altrincham Walking Tours which promote the history and culture of the town centre.

7.1.2 Physical condition of buildings

The physical environment within a town centre can significantly affect perceptions of an area. A well maintained town centre increases the likelihood of return visits, increases pride in an area and makes it feel safer and more welcoming.

The Council will undertake regular appraisals of which properties in the town centres are in need of improvement and work with landlords / agents to ensure that these properties are improved. Initially, the Council will contact the owners of the property to highlight the condition and offer guidance on how the building will be maintained. This is an approach that has previously been used successfully in Altrincham. Unfortunately, the Council has limited powers to force landlords to carry out maintenance works, except in the most severe cases where enforcement powers can be used. The Council could consider options for acquiring land and/or property if landowners cannot be found or will not engage in dialogue.

The Council will identify potential development sites that could be brought forward which are causing negative perceptions of the town centres, and start a dialogue with the relevant landowner/freeholder to encourage suitable developments in line with the Council's planning policy and aspirations. If development opportunities do not progress in the short term, it is important that sites are made to look visually more attractive e.g. ensuring that sites are well maintained and use of appropriate imagery / art / information on hoardings.

7.1.3 Public Realm

The Council has shown its commitment to improving the public realm within its town centres. The Eden Square development in Urmston

significantly enhanced the core offer of the town. More recently Altrincham and Stretford have seen major public realm and highway improvements with further phases planned. These improvements have had a positive effect on the town centres, including helping to reduce congestion and boost visitor numbers. Further investment in public realm improvements is planned in Altrincham and Stretford subject to funding, and a Public Realm and Movement Strategy for Sale town centre has been completed.

The Council has taken a strategic approach to public realm enhancement whilst considering movement and linkages between town centre destinations. The recent Public Realm and Movement Strategy for Sale followed a similar approach to the studies that preceded the Altrincham and Stretford works. The Council will continue to support public realm improvements and explore all opportunities for funding and delivering improvements. The phasing of improvements will be carefully considered to ensure that it addresses the areas in greatest need of improvement and delivers the maximum economic benefit.

7.1.4 Highway ‘Clutter’

The amount of street furniture (e.g. benches, lampposts, planters, signs) and private sector equipment such as shop ‘A’ boards, bins, tables and chairs can detract from the character of the town centres, making the shopping streets appear cluttered and cause obstructions that can make movement more difficult, particularly for those with disabilities. Many of these items serve a purpose, but some are unnecessary and could be reduced to improve the appearance of the town centres. Some items could be removed, repositioned or be potentially combined. The future phases of public realm works taking place in the town centres provide an opportunity to reconsider and rationalise some the ‘clutter’ on the highway where appropriate.

Although there are policies and processes in place for controlling equipment on the highway e.g. applications for outdoor seated areas, other areas need to be controlled effectively e.g. use of ‘A’ boards, bins. The Council will produce a policy to control private sector equipment on the public highway which will give clarity on what is permitted, prohibited or requires a licence to improve the character of the street scene.

7.1.5 Safe Spaces

A ‘Safe Spaces’ scheme will be developed in the town centres to provide places to go for anyone lost, bullied or in need of help or support. Libraries are consistently seen as safe spaces, so work is underway to look at how these can be promoted as safe spaces. There is a potential opportunity for the Council to work across GM libraries to create a number of ‘Libraries of Sanctuary’.

7.2 Transport and Access

Trafford’s town centres are extremely well connected with good road links as well as direct connections by tram and/or rail. However, some of the centres suffer from problems of vehicle congestion at certain times. Public realm improvements can help to address issues with traffic movement across the town centres. The Council will also explore opportunities to encourage alternative modes of transport including the provision of improved cycling and pedestrian links. This will include developing schemes, and securing funding from the Mayor’s Challenge Fund, to improve walking and cycling links, and encouraging the Bridgewater Canal as a walking route. The schemes being developed include:

- Stretford Cycle Way:
 - White City Way / Seymour Grove
 - Talbot Road / Great Stone Road junction

- A56 Talbot Road junction
- Wharfside Way / Europa Way / Moss Road
- Urmston Active Neighbourhood Pilot
- Sale Town Centre to Sale Water Park

Wayfinding signage for both pedestrians and vehicles is something that is often lacking, out of date or inconsistent. This will be an important component of future public realm improvements in the town centres.

Bus stops and stations are often the first and last place a visitor sees in town centres, so it is important that these places leave a positive lasting impression. Ensuring that they are adequately signposted with the necessary information (e.g. tram times, bus timetables, and maps) is essential. These facilities will be considered as part of public realm improvements, particularly considering the sense of arrival and connectivity.

Transport infrastructure such as Metrolink is a major strength and every opportunity will be taken to promote the ease of access to the town centres from across the GM region. Increasing number of users has caused crowding and delays to journeys at peak times. The Council will work with Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) and GM Combined Authority (GMCA) to continue to improve the tramline through the borough and increase tram capacity.

7.2.1 Car Parking

The town centres are all accessible by public transport and in the longer term, it would be desirable to reduce the amount of traffic to lower congestion and mitigate against environmental health impacts. However, the availability of parking remains a vital component of successful town centres and is crucial to maintaining existing, and attracting new, visitors and supporting local retailers and businesses.

Therefore a balance needs to be struck between car parking provision and effective and efficient public transport provision.

Altrincham has a mix of Council, privately owned and on-street parking. Conversely most of the provision in Sale, Urmston and Stretford is privately owned with some on street parking in Sale and Urmston. Car parking capacity will be monitored and, where there is a need for additional capacity, opportunities for increasing provision will be explored e.g. the development of a new multi-storey car park on Regent Road in Altrincham. It is vital that car parking is well signposted, safe and secure.

The effectiveness of initiatives such as 'free after three' (implemented over Christmas 2017 and 2018) will be evaluated and reintroduced if found to have had a positive impact on visitor numbers.

7.2.2 Accessible Town Centres

It is important for both social and economic reasons that town centres are as accessible and inclusive as possible for disabled people. It is essential that disabled people are able to access key services and spend money at retailers and other businesses to support the town centre economy.

A project group has been set up to develop an 'Accessible Town Centres' scheme which will support disabled residents and other users with access issues and help to expand the appeal of the town centres to a wider audience. This will also help to deliver the Council's priority of supporting people with dementia and autism. Best practice schemes from other areas will be explored and local businesses, Town Centre Partnerships and local disability groups will be engaged to determine which initiatives are of greatest priority, most beneficial and deliverable.

In terms of accessibility, it is imperative that people with disabilities are engaged throughout the design process for future public realm improvements and other town centres initiatives. Improving accessibility will play a key part in the development of walking and cycling schemes as part of the GM Mayor's Challenge Fund. For example, the Urmston Active Neighbourhood Pilot aims to improve crossings, junctions and create 'quiet routes' and this will be developed in partnership with a range of disability groups and local residents.

7.3 Leisure, Food and Drink

The functions of town centres have changed in recent years, and it has become clear that the leisure and evening economy is an important element of a successful town centre. A strong leisure offer can help to make town centres distinctive and competitive destinations, and help to reduce the numbers of unoccupied units.

Altrincham, Sale and Urmston all have a lively (and growing) food and drink offer extending into the evening with a mix of restaurants, bars and pubs. Stretford has lagged behind in recent years but is starting to see growing interest on the Chester Road frontage of the Mall. There is a new four screen Everyman Cinema in Altrincham as well as a six screen Vue cinema. There are also proposals for a cinema in Sale as part of the plans for the redevelopment of The Square Shopping Centre.

The Council encourages these uses through the Town Centres Business Growth Programme which has provided loans to help 17 businesses open up within this sector. It also provides assistance for businesses within this sector including helping to locate premises and signposting to training and business support opportunities.

Investing in public realm improvements can help to encourage growth within the food and drink sector. This has been evident in Altrincham

where a strong café culture has developed in areas which have been enhanced.

In order for town centres to be able to meet the needs of the day time, evening and late night economies, they will have to be attractive and safe with local police engaged to identify and reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. The provision of CCTV and good public realm design, including ensuring that areas are well lit, can also help to reduce anti-social behaviour.

Hotels can act as an anchor for town centre regeneration, drawing people into an area and increasing its vitality and viability. The Council would like to see more hotels in the borough and would support the development of new hotels in appropriate town centre locations.

7.4 Offices / Commercial

Increasing employment in the town centres has wider benefits in terms of supporting local communities and the retail and leisure offer.

The A56 is a key business location, with a high concentration of office premises particularly around Sale, Stretford and Altrincham providing some of the most significant locations for office space outside of Manchester City Centre. It is important that this offer is promoted effectively. The Council will explore opportunities for further promoting this in partnership with the private sector, including key landlords and agents.

7.5 Housing

It is vital that housing development is encouraged in town centres to increase the vitality, offer and attract further investment. Those living in the town centres use the shops and services on offer, making the town centres more sustainable in the long term. Increasing the numbers of

residents makes the town centres more active outside of traditional shopping hours, increasing feelings of safety and supporting an evening economy.

Due to changes in shopping habits and the way people use them town centres are contracting, which provides the opportunity for residential development to boost their sustainability and viability. Residential conversions can be a suitable use for former office space, such as space above retail units, which is no longer viable for that use. In addition, residential development in town centres helps to deliver the aspirations within the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework.

Residential accommodation in Trafford's town centres is likely to increase significantly due to large redevelopment schemes such as Altair in Altrincham and The Square in Sale. A number of other smaller redevelopment schemes and conversions are already taking place. With all residential development, it needs to be ensured that issues such as parking and waste management are given proper consideration.

7.6 Markets

It is clear that Markets can be a positive asset to town centres, bringing increasing footfall, spend, vibrancy and encouraging entrepreneurship.

Altrincham Market has proved to be successful since it was refurbished and relaunched in 2014 and has acted as a catalyst for change in the town centre. It is hoped that the plans for the redevelopment of the Market site in Urmston as Market 41 will also have a similarly positive effect. Occasional street markets and food fairs in Sale and monthly artisan markets in Urmston have proven to be popular attractions.

Recent consultation on town centre initiatives has highlighted that the general public are supportive of markets and there has been a wave of

requests from residents for markets in their local areas. There have also been a number of applications from markets looking to operate in the town centres on a regular basis. A clear Market Policy and application process that encourages markets to operate within the confines of the Altrincham Market Charter is vital to ensure that the town centres can take advantage of opportunities that arise.

8. Town Centre Management and Business Support

8.1 Business support.

To ensure the successful management and growth of the town centres, the Town Centres Team will continue to support businesses, develop and deliver town centre focused projects, support the activities of Altrincham Unlimited and the Town Centre Partnerships; and respond to day to day issues within each town centre.

The Town Centres Team is the first point of contact within the Council for businesses looking for support. This includes premises enquiries, funding advice, start-up / growth support and/or demographic data. The Team also works closely with providers such as GC Business Growth Hub to assist businesses.

8.2 Town Centres Business Growth Programme

The Council has operated a Programme to encourage businesses to occupy vacant units in Trafford's town centres since 2013 and this has helped 37 businesses to open, including both retail and leisure uses. Over £420,000 has been loaned to businesses leveraging over £1,400,000 of private sector investment and creating c161 jobs as a direct result of these openings.

In July 2017, the Council introduced new loan opportunities through a Business Growth Programme to help fund business marketing and training costs. This currently offers the following:

- Up to £10,000 to businesses which will bring vacant ground floor premises back into use
- Up to £5,000 to help promote and market a business and ensure that it remains competitive.

This has been a successful initiative and has acted as a key tool in helping to bring down the town centre vacancy rates. The Programme will be monitored on an annual basis to ensure that it continues to operate effectively and allow resources to be allocated to where they are most required.

Opportunities will also be explored for working with outside organisations such as Altrincham Unlimited to add additional value to the Programme. Marketing and promotion is one area where value could certainly be added, along with possibilities for marketing resources. This could allow the scope of the scheme to be expanded or amended to target resources most effectively.

9. Marketing and Promotion

9.1 Investment Brochure / Retailer Targeting

A brochure has been produced to promote the strengths and opportunities within each town centre. This is available in both print and electronic format, and is promoted online and through partner organisations. It is aimed at potential businesses, developers and investors and can be targeted at specific businesses and sectors where 'gaps' in provision exist. These will be identified through regular vacancy surveys and prioritised through discussions with partner organisations.

Activity will be carried out in partnership with other key organisations such as shopping centres, town centre partnerships and Altrincham Unlimited to provide a comprehensive package of support.

9.2 Branding

Each town centre, to varying extents, has its own identity with organisations such as Altrincham Unlimited, the Town Centre Partnerships and the various shopping centres promoting their own areas. However, there is not a co-ordinated approach to link the town centres across Trafford, with development and marketing initiatives tending to take place on an 'ad hoc' basis without a recognisable brand identity.

To maximise the benefits of recent improvements and investment and uplift in the town centres, a unified branding strategy will be developed to enable better promotion and recognition of the town centres individual strengths. A single consistent message would also enable the town centres to be promoted more easily alongside the wider Trafford visitor and tourism offer. This would include encouraging linked trips

and movement between the town centres to maximise potential footfall, dwell time and spend in the town centres.

9.3 Cross promotion and encouraging linked trips

The town centres all contain a unique offer and are well connected by road and public transport, therefore cross-promotion across the different town centres could be developed to highlight the individual strengths to visitors.

Trafford also contains many regionally and nationally significant tourism attractions including the Imperial War Museum, Manchester United Football Club, Lancashire County Cricket Club, Trafford Centre, Chill Factore and Dunham Massey. Opportunities will be explored for how linked trips can be encouraged between these attractions and how Trafford's tourism offer can be promoted holistically. A Trafford 'Driving the Trafford Visitor Economy' Group has been set up to address this objective. The overall purpose of the group is to increase visitor numbers to the borough, which will, in turn, improve the economy of the borough and its town centres,

The Group contains a number of private leisure operators, including those listed above.

9.4 Online Activity and Social Media

Trafford Council's existing social media accounts (e.g. on Twitter, @Trafford Council, @TraffordBiz and Facebook) will share information on town centre developments, activities and events. The town centres content on www.investintrafford.com will be kept up to date with access to information about town centre developments, data / statistics and key documents.

10. Monitoring Town Centre Performance

In order to determine whether the activity taking place within the town centres is successful, data collection is required to initially understand the baseline position then the direction of travel. The Council conducts quarterly vacancy surveys of the town centre. These provide an important record providing comparative data which can be evaluated over time.

To fully understand the bigger picture within the town centres, further data would be required e.g. how well Council owned car parks are performing and information from public transport providers, giving an indication of visitor numbers. It can be very difficult to get sales / performance data from shops, but this can also be very useful.

Footfall data is also an important indicator of a healthy high street and there are currently footfall counters in Altrincham. Consideration should be given to the introduction of a footfall monitoring system in other centres which would help to monitor the impact of activity and retail trends and help direct future investment; however there would be a cost for collecting this data.

11. Community / Partnership Working

Trafford Council recognises that it is important to consult and work in partnership with public, private and community/voluntary organisations as well as the local communities. Within Trafford, there are a number of diverse stakeholder groups working to help improve and support the economy and vitality of the town centres such as Altrincham Unlimited, the Town Centre Partnerships and a wide range of community/resident led initiatives ranging from arts/culture, environmental and educational activities.