1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The report seeks Members approval to adopt the Masterplan as evidence base for the Local Development Plan (LDP) and to use the Masterplan as a framework for decision making for proposals within the Masterplan area. The Masterplan is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

1.2 The purpose of the Masterplan is to help guide investment, raise the town centres profile, provide planning guidelines for development and inform the emerging Local Development Plan (LDP).

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 The requirement for a Masterplan comes from the need for town centre regeneration following the impact of international, national and local economic events and trends, together with a need to provide firm planning policy and guidance to allow regeneration to be delivered.

2.2 The Masterplan was included as one of the projects in the successful WCBC Vibrant and Viable Places (VVP) funding bid that was awarded in April 2014 to revitalise the town centre and its surrounding neighbourhoods.

2.3 The Masterplans purpose is twofold; to help in delivering investment, regeneration and raising the town centres profile; and to support planning in the emerging LDP and in dealing with planning applications in the Masterplan area.
2.4 The Masterplan was led by Assets and Economic Development but managed and produced by the Planning Policy team, hence two lead members for the report; this arrangement reflects the twin role of the document as a tool to aid town centre regeneration and as planning guidance.

2.5 The Masterplan has been prepared over a period of two years with extensive engagement; starting with member and lead officer workshops to give the project a strategic steer in 2014; key site owner/agent/developer engagement to gauge investors interest/intentions; key stakeholder workshops to test the Masterplan strategy concluding with a round of public consultation in October/November 2015. Section 4 background information contains a more detailed breakdown of the consultation process and responses. In summary, the Masterplan aims, objectives, actions and interventions were very positively received.

2.6 The next stage of the Masterplan process is to adopt it as evidence base for the Local Development Plan (LDP) and to use the Masterplan as a framework for decision making for proposals within the Masterplan area. This will deliver a WG VVP output under the terms of Welsh Governments funding contract and give the Masterplan weight in the determination of planning applications.

2.7 Once the LDP is adopted (scheduled for March 2018) it will set the formal policy framework for retail and the town centre with the Masterplan providing guidance to the policies contained within the LDP. During preparation of the LDP the Masterplan will together with the evidence base help inform the emerging LDP town centre strategy and help provide development guidance in the interim period before the LDP is adopted. It will also form the basis of a town centre prospectus for marketing and promoting town centre development.

2.8 Ordinarily the Masterplan would be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) to an adopted development plan. However, the adopted plan, the Wrexham Unitary Development Plan 1996-2011 has passed its end date with policies that may be out of date in relation to changes to national policy, evidence that has arisen since adoption and other material considerations. Consequently the approach is to adopt the Masterplan as evidence and a framework for decision making for proposals within the Masterplan area.

2.9 The Masterplan document contained in Appendix 1 sets out the strategic land use planning guidance for Wrexham Town Centre. The guidance has been informed by a number of national and local pieces of guidance, strategies and evidence together with stakeholder and public consultation.

2.10 In brief the Masterplan sets out a vision for the town centre as attractive, distinctive and accessible where people want to live, learn, work, visit and invest. To realise this the strategy sets out 7 key objectives against which development proposals will be considered, in order of priority:

1. Improve Town Centre Identity
2. Improve the Visitor Experience
3. Improve Accessibility
4. Improve the Evening Economy
5. Provide Opportunities for Town Centre Living
6. Accommodate the Needs of a Growing Population
7. Make the Town Centre Greener

2.11 The town centre strategy (represented spatially by Figure 1 below) promotes the creation of a town centre destination, improved public space, a diversified mix of leisure, arts and culture supported by development of niche and specialist retailing. Improved accessibility will help draw footfall through the town centre from and to key edge of centre destinations such as Eagles Meadow and Island Green. This will be supported by the delivery of key development sites, access improvements, public realm works, design improvements and the delivery of residential development.

Figure 1: Spatial Diagram

2.12 Planning Policy Panel (11th March 2016) – Resolved to ‘Note and endorse the report and the content of the Masterplan….and recommend to the Executive Board that this is approved for adoption as evidence base for the Local Development Plan (LDP) and a framework for decision making for proposals within the Masterplan area at the meeting on the 12th April 2016’.

The endorsement by Planning Policy Panel was subject to some minor clarifications required in the Masterplan document concerning the VVP Masterplan and wider VVP boundary. These amendments have been included in the final version of the Masterplan (Appendix 1) presented with this report.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 That the ‘Wrexham Town Centre Masterplan’ be adopted as evidence base for the Local Development Plan (LDP) and to use the Masterplan as a framework for decision making for proposals within the Masterplan area.
REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To inform the emerging Local Development Plan strategy for the town centre and to provide guidance to developers making planning applications in the Masterplan area.

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Town Centre Background

4.1 The last 10 years have seen dramatic changes in the retail landscape with clear impacts on Wrexham Town Centre that require a long term strategy of intervention. Changes since 2005 (adoption of UDP);

- A global banking crisis, international recession with reduced availability of investment finance making investors risk averse and funding scarce;
- Structural changes in consumer retail behaviour (growth of value shopping – decline of supermarkets, growth of internet trading); loss of major national retail brands (Woolworths, Blue Inc. East, HMV, Bank, Phones4U, Internationale, La Senza, Comet, Jane Norman, Past Times, Ethel Austin, Walmsley’s, Julian Graves, Clinton Cards, TJ Hughes, JJB);
- Opening of Eagles Meadow and a re-shuffling of operators within the town centre

4.2 The latest Wrexham Retail Assessment commissioned for the LDP (Peter Brett Associates 2014) identifies many positives about the town centre (good mid-market presence, diversity of goods, high retention levels, relative accessibility etc.) but there are also significant issues (discount and value dominated centre, vacant hot-spots, fragmentation, gaps in provision etc.).

Masterplan and Vibrant and Viable Places

4.3 In March 2014, Members were made aware (ref: HAED/12/14) of funding being secured from Welsh Government’s VVP investment programme for the development and delivery of a programme of 9 projects within Wrexham town centre, one of which was the development of a Masterplan. Adoption of the Masterplan will deliver a VVP output WCBC are contracted to deliver under the terms of the Welsh Government VVP funding.

4.4 The focus of the VVP Programme is physical regeneration of town centres, increase in housing supply and community benefits for Communities First clusters. The vision for the WCBC VVP programme in and around Wrexham Town Centre is to ‘revitalise the town centre and its surrounding neighbourhoods through the delivery of new and improved homes, the creation of businesses and jobs and growth of the arts and creative industries sectors to strengthen its regional position and make it the place people choose to live, work, visit and invest.’ Of the nine projects the first is ‘Redefining Wrexham Town Centre – a master plan to provide a clear vision for the future development of the town centre in terms of its retail, residential and housing offer’.

4.5 The Masterplan, while only a small project in terms of financial outlay in comparison with the other projects, plays an important role in land use planning

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1 & 2 SOP 2nd Stage Application WCBC Nov 2013
and economic regeneration/promotion in delivering the wider VVP strategy and long term legacy.

4.6 Welsh Government is due to announce details of a second round of Vibrant and Viable Places regeneration funding. The Masterplan and work commissioned to support it has identified a number of opportunities for additional regeneration funding which could inform a future bid.

**Masterplan, the LDP and Planning Guidance**

4.7 The statutory planning framework is set by the development plan however the Unitary Development Plan 1996-2011 has passed its end date with policies that may be out of date in relation to changes to national policy, evidence that has arisen since adoption and other material considerations.

4.8 Consequently WCBC is working on the Local Development Plan (LDP), the Preferred Strategy was presented to members (HCWD/02/16) for consultation approval in February 2016 for public consultation between the 12th February and 1st April 2016. The LDP will set the strategic land use planning framework for delivering sustainable development for the period 2013-2028. The Delivery Agreement schedules the LDP for adoption in March 2018.

4.9 The Masterplan has been prepared taking into account more recent and relevant evidence than the adopted UDP using the latest national policy guidance, LDP evidence base and evidence commissioned specifically for the Masterplan. It can be adopted for use as a material consideration in determining planning applications and it can be used to inform the emerging LDP retail and town centre strategies. In the interim period until the LDP is adopted it will provide the most recent guidance for development in the town centre until the adopted LDP is in place as the statutory planning framework. Once adopted (scheduled for March 2018) the LDP will set the formal policy framework for the County Borough, including retail and the town centre. The Masterplan will provide guidance to the policies contained in the LDP.

4.10 The Masterplan together with the evidence base will help inform the emerging LDP town centre strategy, this is already reflected in the Preferred Strategy with a town centre objective (SO3 - Regeneration of Wrexham Town Centre) and a strategic Policy (SP3: Wrexham Town and Wrexham Town Centre). Policy SP3 gives weight to the Masterplan, once adopted, and draws significantly on it for its aims (mirroring the themes and aims contained within the Masterplan – see point 4.14). As the Deposit plan emerges it will continue to draw heavily on the Masterplan to help shape the strategy for the town.

4.11 In the interim period before the LDP is adopted the Masterplan can be used to inform decisions on planning applications in the town centre.

**Masterplan and Regeneration**

4.12 The Masterplan is also a regeneration tool for use by Assets and Economic Development as a means of marketing and promoting the town centre. It provides a vision and objectives to shape development proposals, identifies development opportunities and provides guidance for a number of Council owned assets (Bodhyfryd and Bridge Street). Close partnership working with AED and other council services has ensured that the Masterplan provides a
coherent and consistent strategy that will help reduce developer risk while increasing confidence.

**Masterplan Summary**

4.13 The Masterplan document contained in Appendix 1 sets out the strategic land use planning guidance for Wrexham Town Centre. The guidance has been informed by a number of national and local pieces of guidance, strategies and evidence together with stakeholder and public consultation.

4.14 In brief the Masterplan sets out a vision for the town centre as an attractive, distinctive and accessible town centre where people want to live, learn, work, visit and invest. To realise this the strategy sets out 7 key objectives against which development proposals will be considered, in order of priority:

1. Improve Town Centre Identity
2. Improve the Visitor Experience
3. Improve Accessibility
4. Improve the Evening Economy
5. Provide Opportunities for Town Centre Living
6. Accommodate the Needs of a Growing Population
7. Make the Town Centre Greener

4.15 The town centre strategy (represented spatially by Figure 1 below) promotes the creation of a town centre destination, improved public space, a diversified mix of leisure, arts and culture supported by development of niche and specialist retailing. Improved accessibility will help draw footfall through the town centre from and to key edge of centre destinations such as Eagles Meadow and Island Green. This will be supported by the delivery of key development sites, access improvements, public realm works, design improvements and the delivery of residential development.

![Figure 1: Spatial Diagram](image_url)
To deliver the Masterplan vision and objectives six cross cutting and complementary themes have been developed relating to key town centre functions of shopping, visiting, living, working and key issues of accessibility and attractiveness. Each theme supported by action points aims to make Wrexham Town Centre;

**A Place to Shop** – ‘for Wrexham to build on its strong sub-regional position as a major shopping destination, diversifying the offer and developing complementary leisure, restaurant, cultural and arts attractions in an attractive environment’;

**A Place to Visit** – ‘make Wrexham a great place to visit with a wide range of diverse retail, leisure, arts and cultural attractions’;

**An Attractive and Distinctive Place** – ‘support the Masterplan vision and objectives by developing an attractive and distinctive environment with high quality buildings, streets and spaces that enhance the character of the town, help contribute to a sense of identity and improved visitor experience’;

**An Accessible Place** – ‘to ensure high quality access to and within the town centre by a range of modes, prioritising walking, cycling and public transport, but maintaining high quality road access to the centre’;

**A Place to Live** – ‘to make Wrexham town centre a great place to live with a wide variety of new homes attractive to a diverse range of people with supporting social infrastructure’;

**A Place to Work** – ‘for offices and vacant office space to make a positive contribution to the role and function of the town centre as a place with a wide and diverse range of attractions’

Roles are set for key agents, WCBC, national government, and private sector in delivering the Masterplan. With limited public funding a key role for WCBC and WG will be to use resources to promote private investment by building confidence, reducing risk, identifying/promoting opportunities, removing barriers to development and in creating a step change in perceptions.

A table of timescales for action is set out reflecting priority actions over the short, medium and long term. Some of the key spatial areas are Henblas Street, Queens Square, Bodhyfryd, Island Green and Bridge Street.

A number of key sites have been identified with specific development and design guidance; these are Bridge Street (east and west), Bodhyfryd, an aspirational town centre destination, Wrexham Fire Station.

**Masterplan Consultation**

Collaborative working has underpinned the production of the Masterplan. From the outset it was recognised for the Masterplan to have any value to planning and economic regeneration that close partnership working would be necessary both internally within the Council and externally with our stakeholder partners. The Masterplan has been produced with the need to provide a consistent and coherent approach to the town centre, it has been led by Assets and Economic Development, day to day managed and prepared by Planning Policy supported by a mixed disciplinary team from across Council services. Stakeholder consultation has been an ongoing process with a variety of methods and exercises;

**Member Workshops** – Two member and lead officer visioning workshops were held on the 1st April and 3rd June 2014. The outputs from these workshops
identified the vision and list of priority objectives for the town centre that led to those detailed in section 4.7.

4.22 **Key Stakeholder Engagement** – Identification of key town centre site ownership, agent and developer interest. For key town centre sites and landholdings, ascertain constraints and opportunities, site owner strategies, investment opportunities and willingness to engage in the Masterplan and the future of Wrexham Town Centre. Site owners and key agents were written to with follow up meetings and telephone/letter/email exchanges (engagement was constrained by the fact that much of the town centre is owned by large, often London financial institutions). This commenced in October 2014 with ongoing dialogue during the preparation of the Masterplan.

4.23 **Key Stakeholder Workshops** – Two facilitated (Planning for Real - PFR) workshops were held on the 4th and 11th March 2015 with a report of the workshops prepared by PFR. The workshops sought to bring together a range of stakeholders from business, community, landowners, developers, and representatives of community groups including disability and equality groups in order to test the Council’s draft Wrexham Town Centre Strategy – its Vision and Objectives and Strategy Options at a stage in the process that gives stakeholders a real opportunity to shape the direction of the town centre.

4.24 The PFR Team were tasked with ensuring that the Workshops were inclusive, consultative and participative thereby ensuring that all who attended were able to put forward their views, generate ideas, and that there was opportunity for constructive discussion.

4.25 Officers of the Council were keen that the engagement process ensured that local knowledge added to an understanding of how the Town Centre works now and how it could be made to work better in the future; that potential conflicts and ways in which they can be resolved were identified; and that there was agreement / consensus around opportunities, constraints, objectives and principles.

*Comments made about the draft strategy vision* - On the whole stakeholders agreed and supported the vision. Comments were received about the importance of differentiating Wrexham and capitalising on its assets, the vision was also observed to be bland and not locally specific.

*Comments made about the draft objectives* - Overall both workshops recognised the identity of the Town Centre; improving the visitor experience; town centre living; improving the night time/evening economy; and accessibility as the most important / key objectives to meeting the Vision.

*Comments made about the negatives/positives in the town centre* - Stakeholders were invited to identify strengths/positives, weaknesses / negatives for various themes. Stakeholders were most positive about Wrexham as a place to visit where the town is seen to have many strengths (e.g. historic churches, university, Eagles Meadow, football ground). Shopping and attractive/distinctive place also received many positive comments but also many negative; this contrast captures both the opportunities to capitalise on the general retail strengths of the town and areas of local character e.g. around St Giles but also the weaknesses in the shopping/leisure offer and poor quality of buildings,
design, public realm, connectivity and spaces that can be found. Wrexham as a place that is easy to get about received the most negative observations (congestion, parking, signage, barriers to pedestrian movement and rail use). Further detail on the strengths and weaknesses is contained in the Planning For Real report.

4.26 **Public Consultation** – Ran from 5th October to 13th November 2015 (6 weeks). Stakeholders were invited to comment and publicity was generated through the corporate communications team (social media, press release etc.). All stakeholders were encouraged to use an online questionnaire hosted on the ‘Your Voice – Wrexham’ platform.

4.27 Drop in sessions were held in the foyer of Wrexham library on the 27th and evening of 28th October (half term). Equality groups were also encouraged to engage and to discuss any special arrangements. Two specific workshops were held for KIM Inspire (female mental health development) and a Vision Impairment group.

4.28 From the on-line survey nearly 350 responses were recorded, the majority of those responding were from Wrexham town centre; an equal number of men and women completed the survey and 25% were over 60; 9% were under twenty; and 64% were in the 20 – 60 age bracket.

4.29 The three areas of concern highlighted were the identity of the town; the quality of the shops (including restaurants/family entertainment) and car parking. Those responding were interested in supporting retention of character buildings; the arts space and encouraging more niche providers. Most respondents supported mixed use development at Bodhyfryd.

**Response on the draft objectives** – Sense of identity (87%) received the most support closely followed by improving visitor experience (78%) and improving access (64%). The other objectives were supported by around 50% of respondents.

**Response on the retail aims** - Very strong support (around 90%) to diversify the mix of town centre uses to include higher quality retail, leisure and restaurants and promotion of the historic core. While there was strong support (74%) for greater diversity in the peripheral areas of town (King Street, Rhosddu Road, Chester St (part), Lord St, Charles St) this is less unanimous than the town centre.

**Response on the access aims** – This issue was clearly significant for respondents with almost unanimous support for improving accessibility for cars, pedestrians and public transport users.

**Response on attractive and distinctive aims** – Again strong support for improving this aspect of the town centre.

**Response on living in the town centre** – While there is a clear majority of support for making Wrexham a great place to live (93%), there is greater support for edge of centre living (83%) than support for housing in the centre (75%).
**Response on town centre offices** – There is support for improving the quality and range of office space (69%) but this is the weakest of all the Masterplan aims. There is greater support for encouraging alternative uses for empty and poor quality office units (82%).

4.30 In addition to the survey responses, representations were received from; Offa Community Council fully supporting the Masterplan; agents making representations on behalf of Aldi (criticising the Masterplan as not going far enough to identify a site for a new store); Royal Mail (raising awareness of the sensitivity and incompatibility of its operations if residential development were adjacent to its depot on Mold Road); Wrexham Business Group and Wrexham Area Civic Society.

5. **IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 **Policy Framework** – The Wrexham Town Centre Masterplan has been prepared in accordance with supporting guidance contained in National Planning Policy (Planning Policy Wales (edition 8, January 2016) including Technical Advice Notes (TAN’s) and the draft TAN for Retail Centre Development (September 2015). It is reflective of the Wales Spatial Plan (WSP, 2008 update) vision and aspirations for the area, the Local Service Board’s (LSB) Single Integrated Plan: Our Wrexham Plan (2013-2024) and Wrexham County Borough Council’s Economic Prosperity Strategy (2015) and Destination Management Plan (2012-2017). The Masterplan also directly supports the Council Plan (2014 – 2017) strategic themes of Economy, People and Place.

5.2 **Budget** – There are no direct budget implications as a result of this report.

5.3 **Legal** – There are no direct legal implications as a result of this report.

5.4 **Staffing** – There are no staffing implications associated with the recommendations of this report.

5.5 **Equality/Human Rights** – Members are advised to consider the full Equality Impact Assessment which is available at [http://vmwinsqld/equalityisalive/Menu.aspx](http://vmwinsqld/equalityisalive/Menu.aspx) report number (CWD/EIA00031/2015). A summary of the Equality Impact Assessment is attached as Appendix 2.

5.5.1 **Risks** - The current development plan for the County (the Unitary Development Plan, 1996 – 2011) expired in 2011, since the UDP was adopted in 2005 there have been significant changes in the evidence base and there will be a time lag before the Local Development Plan is adopted in 2018 (which itself runs a risk of delay). The longer the town centre strategy is based on out of date evidence the greater the risk of being unable to respond to changing national and local retail/town centre trends. Delay in adopting the Masterplan will limit opportunities to re-position, market and promote the town centre.

Adopting the Masterplan before the end of March 2017 is a required output from Welsh Governments Vibrant and Viable Places Regeneration investment to which WCBC are contractually bound. Failure to deliver this output may run the risk of financial penalty from WG.
Failure to adopt the Masterplan may weaken investor confidence in the town centre and threaten opportunities to capture additional town centre regeneration funding on the back of the Masterplan.

6. CONSULTATION

See section 4, Masterplan Consultation.

Planning Policy Panel (11th March 2016) – Resolved to ‘Note and endorse the report and the content of the Masterplan….and recommend to the Executive Board that this is approved for adoption as evidence base for the Local Development Plan (LDP) and a framework for decision making for proposals within the Masterplan area at the meeting on the 12th April 2016’.

The endorsement by Planning Policy Panel was subject to some minor clarifications concerning the VVP Masterplan and wider VVP boundary. These amendments have been included in the final version of the Masterplan (Appendix 1) presented with this report.

7. EVALUATION OF OPTIONS

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