

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council



Prescot Town Centre Masterplan and SPD Future Options and Next Steps

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Following the completion of the Baseline Report for the Prescot Town Centre Masterplan (PTCM) and SPD this paper sets out the future options for the town centre, from which we derive a preferred option and an overarching vision. The agreed vision and objectives will form the basis of the masterplan projects which, together, will deliver that vision.
- 1.2 The contents of this paper have been informed by meetings held in March 2015 with the Borough Council's internal steering group, members of the Council and various external stakeholders.

Baseline Findings

- 1.3 The PTCM Baseline Report was prepared in March 2015 and sets out the evidence base for the development of the masterplan. It presents the results of a number of inter-related lines of enquiry concerning the current composition and performance of the town centre, its physical environment and infrastructure, and the local property market.
- 1.4 Our analysis of the performance of the town centre identified a range of issues that it will be relevant to take into account when developing the vision and strategy for the PTCM. The town centre's existing retail offer is limited, particularly in terms of key comparison goods sub-sectors such as clothing and retail. It has suffered from the withdrawal of national multiple retail operators over recent years. Whilst convenience retail provision is reasonable, there is no significant foodstore within the town centre that is capable of acting as an 'anchor', driving footfall and supporting trade within the town centre.
- 1.5 However, there is a reasonable provision of service uses within the town centre and a small but interesting independent retail offer. Overall the town centre has a limited catchment area and is struggling to compete with the Cables Retail Park and other destinations within and outside of the Borough. This underperformance is manifested in a very high vacancy rate, with vacant units concentrated in the Prescot Shopping Centre, the future of which remains uncertain.
- 1.6 As with the town centre's retail offer, its leisure offer is also limited, particularly in terms of hospitality and the evening economy. Nevertheless, there are significant opportunities for future leisure development to facilitate the regeneration of the town centre. These opportunities include the town centre's heritage and historic links to Shakespeare, the proposed theatre at Mill Street, the identified potential for cinema development, and the capacity for other forms of leisure provision that would complement existing facilities within the town centre, the adjacent Cables Retail Park and nearby attractions such as Knowsley Safari Park.

- 1.7 Our baseline work also included a review of the local property market in Prescot. This analysis made clear that demand for additional retail development in Prescot Town Centre is weak. Many of the better quality units in the centre remain vacant and the geographic pattern of retail and leisure uses dissipates footfall and is not beneficial to the vitality and viability of the centre. However, we found that there is healthy demand for residential development in the Prescot area, which could help to support the retail function of the town centre.
- 1.8 In terms of the town centre's physical environment and its transport infrastructure, we found that Prescot has some attractive historic assets, has benefited from recent investment in public realm improvements and that there are significant redevelopment opportunities. The town centre also benefits from adequate car parking and good accessibility via public transport. However, we also found that the town centre suffers from vacant and dilapidated premises, poor visibility and a lack of clearly defined gateways, restricted north-south connections, poor and difficult pedestrian connectivity with Cables Retail Park and poor signage.

Key Issues

- 1.9 On the basis of the baseline findings, the key issues that require further consideration as part of this paper are considered to be:
- how to address the current underperformance of the town centre and, in particular, the decline of its retail offer and the large number of vacant and underutilised sites;
 - how to realise opportunities for new cultural and leisure development within the town centre and exploit its heritage assets;
 - how to facilitate residential development within the town centre and ensure that this supports shops and services;
 - the delivery of environmental improvements that address existing deficiencies and create a stronger sense of place; and
 - the need to improve the visibility and legibility of the town centre including linkages with the rest of the Prescot area and creating a stronger sense of arrival.

2 THE STRATEGIC OPTIONS

2.1 The strategic options are the main scenarios for the future development of Prescot Town Centre. Each option carries opportunities and risks, and implies certain levels of public and private sector intervention. We have identified three strategic options which we describe below and test against a range of criteria in order to assess their compliance with existing policy, market conditions and deliverability. We also set out the evidence that would support the adoption of each option (based on the findings of the Baseline Report) and the potential implications of pursuing each option for the future development of the town centre.

Strategic Option 1 – Enhanced Management

2.2 This option would focus on improved management of the town centre in order to create the conditions that would support investment. It would involve limited interventions designed to provide a coherent approach towards future initiatives within the town centre. These interventions would be focused on public realm improvements, improved accessibility and destination management.

2.3 The evidence which supports the adoption of this option includes:

- there are various opportunities available to further enhance the character and appearance of the town centre through modest and deliverable interventions in the public realm;
- there is a willingness amongst stakeholders to support initiatives and events that would raise the profile of the town centre and encourage activity and footfall;
- a range of ‘quick wins’ are available which would improve access to, and the legibility of, the town centre; and
- limited resources and funding would be required to deliver the improvements envisaged by this strategic option.

2.4 The risks associated with pursuing this strategic option include:

- this option would provide limited scope to materially change or enhance the visitor offer of the town centre;
- the risk that the level of public sector investment and involvement envisaged would fail to leverage the required levels of private sector investment;
- the consequent failure to develop key sites that detract from the appearance and function of the town centre and undermine future investment in the public realm; and
- an overall failure to deliver a ‘step-change’ in the performance of the town centre that does not reverse its recent decline.

Strategic Option 2 – Retail Rebuild

- 2.5 The second strategic option, 'Retail Rebuild', would seek to focus on the reinvigoration of the retail sector within the town centre. This would serve to reduce the vacancy rate within the town centre and improve its capacity to compete with alternative destinations such as Cables Retail Park and other town centres. Such a strategy would concentrate on encouraging independent retailers as well as retailers that would help to meet day-to-day shopping needs. Taken together this strengthened retail offer might serve a different market to out-of-centre retail parks and higher order centres.
- 2.6 The evidence which supports the adoption of this option includes:
- the need to address the high proportion of vacant retail floorspace within the town centre and longer term future of the Prescot Shopping Centre;
 - the opportunities presented by recent and future residential development within the vicinity of the town centre which might provide a stronger local market for retail operators;
 - the potential to build on the recent success of the nearby Cables Retail Park in upgrading its retail offer; and
 - the opportunity to support more sustainable shopping patterns and reduce the significant outflow of local residents' retail expenditure to more distant locations.
- 2.7 The risks associated with pursuing this strategic option would include:
- established shopping patterns and wider market trends which would indicate that it is unlikely that any significant new retail investment could be attracted to the town centre;
 - the apparent lack of retail operator interest in the town centre and the large amount of vacant floorspace which would further inhibit developer confidence;
 - the limited opportunities that retail-led regeneration would provide to differentiate Prescot from other town centres within the Borough and other competing destinations; and
 - the risk that, in these circumstances, retail-led regeneration would not be deliverable.

Strategic Option 3 – Strategic Reorientation

- 2.8 The final strategic option envisages the reorientation of the town centre's existing offer to allow it to serve different markets and encourage new uses that are currently absent or under-represented within the town centre. The focus here would be on leisure uses that would help to establish Prescot as a distinctive destination, changing perceptions of the town centre and allowing it to provide something different to competing town centres and out-of-centre retail parks.

- 2.9 The evidence which supports the adoption of this option includes:
- the existence of opportunity sites within the town centre that would be capable of accommodating new strategic developments;
 - emerging development proposals and known developer/operator interest in the provision of a theatre and a cinema within the town centre;
 - the potential for leisure-led development to complement existing and future heritage-based initiatives within the town centre; and
 - the apparent lack of retail operator interest in the town centre and consequent uncertainties over the deliverability of retail-led regeneration.
- 2.10 The risks associated with pursuing this strategic option include:
- concerns associated with the funding and deliverability of key developments such as the theatre and cinema;
 - the reliance of other leisure-led development, such as food, drink and the evening economy, on the timely delivery of these key developments;
 - the failure to find a long-term solution for the future of the Prescot Shopping Centre; and
 - ensuring that the strategic reorientation of the centre does not undermine its existing assets.

Option Testing

- 2.11 Having highlighted the opportunities and risks associated with each of the strategic options we now test the options against the key criteria discussed below.
- **Policy Compliance** – this is the extent to which the particular option would comply with relevant planning policies and strategies for economic development. A high degree of compliance is considered to be a positive indicator as this should deliver masterplan proposals that support wider objectives for the development of the town, Borough and City Region. The degree of policy compliance is also considered to be an overall indicator of sustainability. Details of relevant policy considerations are contained at Section 2 of the Baseline Report.
 - **Market Compatibility** – the compatibility of the option with known trends in key markets such as convenience and comparison retailing, the leisure sector and services (including public services). A high degree of compatibility would indicate that proposals brought forward under that option would be more feasible as they would have greater potential to attract private sector investment. Further details of market trends and conditions are contained at Sections 3 and 4 of the Baseline Report.
 - **Deliverability** – the deliverability of the specific option, taking account of existing developer and stakeholder interest, funding requirements and potential funding opportunities. A high risk would indicate potential difficulties with deliverability in terms of market interest, developing effective partnerships and securing appropriate funding.

2.12 The performance of the strategic options against these criteria is assessed below within Tables 2.1 to 2.3. The options are then afforded a rating based on their overall performance against each criterion. A green rating indicates a high degree of compatibility and/or a low degree of risk associated with the criterion, an amber rating indicates moderate compatibility and/or risk, and a red rating indicates low compatibility and/or a high degree of risk for that particular strategic option.

Table 2.1 Strategic Option 1 – Enhanced Management

Criterion	Assessment	Rating
Policy Compliance	<p>The ‘Enhanced Management’ option would support various policy objectives, including the strategic objectives of the Knowsley UDP which seek to ensure that the best of the Borough’s heritage is preserved and enhanced, to stimulate high quality design that creates a sense of pride in its constituent communities, and to make Knowsley a more attractive place to live and invest in.</p> <p>However, there are risks that this approach would not assist in realising the vision and strategic objectives of the emerging Core Strategy which seeks to enhance the role of the Borough’s town centres and improve the variety and quality of their range of retail, leisure and other town centre uses.</p>	
Market Compatibility	<p>This option would not focus on any particular market sector, although we note that the emphasis on improved destination management would fit with wider trends in the leisure sector and town centre management. In particular, events and activity programmes and heritage-led public realm improvements would support a growing section of the leisure market and help to differentiate Prescot from competing destinations.</p> <p>However, the modest level of intervention required by this approach is unlikely to tackle the negative impacts of prevailing market trends that are substantially responsible for the current underperformance of the town centre.</p>	
Deliverability	<p>This option would envisage incremental investment in the town centre in a series of generally small-scale schemes which, together, are expected to help encourage further investment. The funding requirements would not be significant but would be largely dependent on public sector sources. There would be a need for some additional resource capacity to co-ordinate and deliver the enhanced management of the town centre. We therefore consider that risks to the future delivery of this option are low.</p>	

Table 2.2 Strategic Option 2 – Retail Rebuild

Criterion	Assessment	Rating
Policy Compliance	<p>The 'Retail Rebuild' option would support Policy CS 6 of the Borough's emerging Core Strategy which seeks to provide additional comparison goods floorspace of up to 6,800 sq. m within Prescot Town Centre in the period to 2028. The Core Strategy also seeks to expand the variety and quality of the retail offer within town centres and specifically seeks to address the underperformance of Prescot's retail function.</p>	
Market Compatibility	<p>The Baseline Report has identified a high proportion of vacant retail floorspace within the town centre, a notable decline in the representation of national multiple retailers, and an increase in competition from out-of-centre retail destinations and higher order centres that has the potential to exacerbate the existing underperformance of the town centre. Interest from retail operators is currently very weak and the development of new retail floorspace is considered to be unviable (as demonstrated by the lack of interest in the proposed retail development at Sewell Street).</p> <p>Current market trends within the retail market (such as the growth of online retail and the rationalisation of major retailers' store portfolios) do not favour vulnerable town centres such as Prescot. There are no clear indications that these market trends will significantly change over the masterplan period. We therefore consider that a regeneration strategy based on the retail sector is likely to be incompatible with market trends.</p>	
Deliverability	<p>Given our conclusions in respect of the market compatibility of this strategic option, we consider that there would be significant risks to its delivery. Specifically, the lack of operator demand and developer interest would make any significant retail-led investment unviable. It is likely that considerable levels of public investment would be required to support this option, investment that is unlikely to be justified or forthcoming given the high levels of risk.</p>	

Table 2.3 Strategic Option 3 – Strategic Reorientation

Criterion	Assessment	Rating
Policy Compliance	<p>The ‘Strategic Reorientation’ option would support the objectives of both the UDP and emerging Core Strategy to improve the leisure offer of Knowsley’s town centres. The Core Strategy also places an emphasis on addressing existing gaps in provision and seeks to encourage the use of Prescot’s historic assets to maximise tourism and cultural opportunities.</p> <p>This option also supports the objectives of the City Region Growth Plan which seeks to regenerate town centres in response to changing market dynamics, expand the cultural offer and the visitor economy asset base. The Knowsley Economic Regeneration Strategy also seeks to address the existing deficiencies in the evening economies of the Borough’s town centres.</p>	
Market Compatibility	<p>The Baseline Report has identified significant deficiencies in the leisure offer of the town centre. However, there is known developer and operator interest in the development of a theatre and cinema within the town centre. These key developments could provide significant opportunities to attract other leisure operators, and particularly new types of food and drink operators, into the town centre. This potential, together with wider market trends that support growth in the commercial leisure sector, suggests a reasonable degree of confidence that the leisure and culture-led regeneration of the town centre would be compatible with prevailing market conditions.</p>	
Deliverability	<p>The deliverability of this strategic option is in large part dependent on the delivery of the proposed theatre and cinema, which would act as ‘anchor’ developments, capable of changing visitor and market perceptions of the town centre. There is currently some doubt over the funding and delivery of both of these schemes.</p> <p>However, the existence of two potential key schemes and existing developer/operator interest reduces the overall risk to the delivery of this option. We also consider that risks can be mitigated through the development of the masterplan strategy that accounts for the failure of either of the current proposals.</p>	

Preferred Option

- 2.13 On the basis of our analysis and testing, the preferred option is '**Strategic Reorientation**'. This option is considered to strike the most appropriate balance between seizing the opportunities available and managing the risks of delivery. Whilst the 'Retail Rebuild' option is considered to be unfeasible, the option of 'Enhanced Management' is unlikely to be sufficiently ambitious. The preferred option supports relevant planning policies and economic development strategies and fits with the aspirations of existing stakeholders and wider market trends.
- 2.14 This option would also help to differentiate Prescot Town Centre from competing destinations, including other town centres within the Borough, to which Prescot could perform a complementary role. This will help to create a sustainable network of local town centres. A focus on leisure-led development with a strong emphasis on culture and events would also complement existing initiatives to realise the potential of Prescot's heritage assets. We acknowledge that the delivery of the preferred option is more challenging and would be likely to require significant public sector support, but we consider that these risks can be managed through the further development of the masterplan and its associated strategy.
- 2.15 It is also important to recognise that the strategic options are not mutually exclusive and that it is possible to combine elements of each approach in developing the vision and objectives for the masterplan. We therefore consider that many of the small-scale schemes that would be the focus of the 'Enhanced Management' option could be incorporated into the masterplan and would be complementary to the overall objective of achieving strategic reorientation. This would include improvements to the accessibility of the town centre and public realm improvements/heritage initiatives.
- 2.16 A more sophisticated approach could also be taken to the strengthening of the town centre's retail function, which would seek to consolidate retail activity (as supported by the emerging Core Strategy) and reinforce it by encouraging new residential development within the town centre (as encouraged by the NPPF). There would also be potential for leisure-led development to create new opportunities for retailers by appealing to different markets and introducing new shoppers to the town centre.

3 THE VISION AND OBJECTIVES

A Vision for Prescot Town Centre

- 3.1 The vision set out below seeks to articulate the preferred approach to the development of the town centre in a short statement. This statement highlights key objectives and priorities for achieving those objectives. As concluded in the previous section, 'Strategic Reorientation' is the preferred approach to the development of the masterplan.
- 3.2 The preferred approach would envisage significant change to the town centre's visitor offer that would be facilitated by new leisure-led development which would help to realise the potential of its existing heritage assets. This would complement other improvements to the environment of the town centre, its accessibility and its physical and functional linkages with Cables Retail Park and Knowsley Safari Park.
- 3.3 However, the focus on leisure-led development would not be to the detriment of supporting and encouraging other town centre uses. In particular, there are a number of opportunity sites within the town centre that would be suitable for new residential development. Our analysis of the local property market suggests that such alternative uses would be viable. Residential development would also support commercial activity within the town centre, including its retail function which would benefit from consolidation. In the longer term, the retail offer of the town centre will be reinvigorated by attracting new visitors to the town centre, encouraging independent retailers and a programme of events such as markets.
- 3.4 The vision for Prescot Town Centre is intended to reflect all of these issues. It is set out as follows:
- 'By 2028 Prescot Town Centre will be a thriving place that is an attractive destination for local residents and visitors.***
- It will offer a distinctive mix of uses including new cultural and leisure facilities, a consolidated and reinvigorated retail offer, and excellent local services, supported by new residential development that will enable more people to live in the heart of the town.***
- The regenerated town centre will be easy to access and provide a high quality environment that showcases Prescot's heritage and creates a strong sense of place'.***
- 3.5 The vision has been subject to consultation with the Council's internal steering group and as part of workshop event to which local stakeholders were invited. Broad support has been expressed for the vision and its key objectives, albeit some concerns were expressed in terms of the timescale for the delivery of the vision and whether its content is sufficiently 'specific' to Prescot and local circumstances.
- 3.6 The timescale for the implementation of the masterplan and delivery of its vision is the 13 year period to 2028. This date accords with Council's development plan

period and also accords with our understanding of existing conditions within the town centre, the implications of the preferred strategic option and our discussions with stakeholders. These discussions have highlighted the likely timescales for the delivery of key developments and other commercial considerations, such as existing lease arrangements at key sites. In these circumstances it is our view that a shorter timescale, for example ten years, would be unrealistic.

- 3.7 Whilst the vision is intended to be a high-level statement of strategic intent, we believe that it is appropriately specific to Prescot. The content of the vision is entirely informed by the detailed findings of the Baseline Report and the consideration of strategic options that has been set out within this paper. Its wording reflects the specific opportunities that have been identified and emphasises the key local issues that will need to be addressed. The strategic objectives set out below underpin the vision and are also highly specific to Prescot Town Centre.

The Strategic Objectives

- 3.8 The strategic objectives will help to achieve the reorientation of the town centre and the realisation of the PTCM's vision. The five objectives for the PTCM are as follows:
1. Growing the leisure sector to provide a new visitor offer, develop a more diverse evening economy and change perceptions of Prescot.
 2. Consolidating the town centre's retail offer by focusing activity and footfall in key locations, supporting independent retailers and exploiting the opportunities provided by new leisure development.
 3. Restoring and enhancing the town centre environment to showcase Prescot's heritage assets, create a stronger sense of place and support further investment.
 4. Encouraging residential development in the town centre as a means to regenerate key sites and support local shops and services.
 5. Increasing the prominence and accessibility of the town centre so that it provides an attractive and convenient destination for visitors.

4 NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 The next stage in the preparation of the PTCM is to prepare a draft masterplan based on the vision and strategic objectives that have been set out in this document. The draft masterplan, which will be subject to further public consultation in due course, will contain the following:
- a clear strategy for the future development of Prescot Town Centre that introduces the masterplan projects and explains how each of these relates to the strategic objectives;
 - a set of general planning, design and transport principles for the future development of the town centre;
 - a physical framework plan showing the disposition of land uses, development projects, improvements to the public realm and accessibility; and
 - high level, indicative designs of the masterplan's physical projects to show their potential scale, layout and appearance.
- 4.2 Once finalised, the draft masterplan should be read alongside the Baseline Report of March 2015 and this paper addressing Future Options and Next Steps.

