**LGA Town Centre Support: Notes from Seminar on 29th November 2017**

**Welcome & Introduction**

Kamal Panchal set the scene including emphasising the potential opportunities for a place-based focus in the Government’s recently launched [***Industrial Strategy***](https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/lga-industrial-strategy-briefing-1-december-2017).

**Case Studies**

***Soft Skills and County-wide Support*:** Mandy Walker and Rachel Baconnet, showed the value of work to support town centre development behind the scenes and between **Warwickshire** towns. This approach includes:

* ***Place-based focus*** for coordinating council services through the County Council *Town Centre Prosperity* group and external *Warwickshire Towns Network*
* ***Intellectual infrastructure*** through joint masterplanning and investment in digital through free town centre Wi-Fi
* ***Placemaking knowledge & skills*** through training on digital and attracting /retaining customers alongside marketing & research, including the role of cinemas; business viability & digital healthcheck
* ***Civic Crowdfunding*** involving using £134,000 capital pot to contribute to Spacehive local fund raising.

***Strategic Leadership and Delivery***: Andy Farrall, outlined **Warrington’s** vision for the town centre as “more than High Street” and a key area of growth including jobs and homes. The Warrington New City programme involves:

* Responding to congested space; the canal; green belt; house prices; and costly infrastructure which is expensive to maintain.
* Taking infrastructure and growth-led approach to create missing city centre.
* Involves big thinking with broad vision and masterplan for whole of ‘town centre’; retail ‘boxes’ being replaced by homes and leisure.
* Warrington Council, Home and Communities Agency and Peel Land & Property collectively own main sites for new waterfront, garden suburb and 4,000 homes to town centre (worth £700million)

***Issues Raised in Questions***:

* Prospects for business rate retention and impact on town centre support
* Need to include plans for transport and congestion as part of town centre work
* Value and approaches to engaging businesses on digital
* Governance delivered through Locality to support civic crowdfunding
* Role of issuing bonds for investment in Warrington
* Challenges of managing the green belt and growth
* The importance of defining indicators and measuring success
* Use of digital data in monitoring town centre usage

**Key Challenges and Issues**

Here we classify contributions from participants in the table session using the [***People & Places Town Centre Delivery Framework***.](http://people-places.co.uk/developing-a-town-centre-delivery-framework/)  This analysis shows the breadth of councils’ interests across ‘town centres’, as opposed to commercial ‘High Streets’ alone.

* *What are the biggest challenges your town centres are facing over the next 10 years?*

*C*ongestion (*place-shaping);* permitted development planning, greenbelt and growth, policy and inflexibility keeping policy up to date; space to grow (*planning and property);* retail disappearing, retraction of uses; changing the offer, re-invention of role (*retail enhancement);* digital data and technology, perception of place (marketing); vitality of high street compared to other destinations *(complementarity);* maintaining momentum *(strategy & Influence);* perception within council common understanding managing public & members expectations *(communications & engagement);* attracting investors *(economic investment).*

* *What have you done recently (in the last 2/3 years) that has helped improve your town centre?*

Use of data to inform policy *(evidence & impact);* protocols on outdoor seating aligning with wider strategies, use of car parks (*place-shaping);* better use of planning powers (*planning and property);* place making board, BIDs interpretation of guidance for small towns dedicated teams in house, good partnership, , partnerships in town centres *(structure & governance);*  inconsistency with national agencies, focus on local leadership, new models for visioning, collective lobbying at strategic level *(strategy & Influence);* stronger relationship with business; engaging your employees/assets *(communications & engagement);* good practice: Successful attraction of investment, investment in public realm, local authority taking leadership on investment *(economic investment).*

* *Thinking across all the services that councils provide, what more do you think your council could do to support your town centres?*

Clear on councils role in town centres (*inspiration & objectives*); long-term planning beyond local plan, collaborating on developing public sector land, move responsibility for services so as to not block development (*planning and property);* supporting community to deliver (*community & culture*); leader in place in development, take more risks, better use of legal powers, place based services *(strategy & Influence);* joined up working and communication, communication working to a common plan*(communications & engagement);* investing and valuing the public realm,mind-set of a business development  *(economic investment).*

**Different Perspectives:**

***Property and Growth***: Rachel Campbell, from the British Property Federation gave an overview of two areas where roles of councils and real estate sector can have positive synergy:

* The joint BPF & LGA report on [***Unlocking Growth through Partnerships***](http://www.bpf.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/BPF-LGA-unlocking-growth-through-partnership.PDF)(2017) defines characteristics of pro-growth councils including land assembly and developing ‘commercial mind-set’ alongside best of real estate sector that helps positively shape great places.
* The 2016 report on [***Town Centre Investment Management and Zones***](http://people-places.co.uk/town-centre-investment-zones-report/) outlines how Councils can take a strategic leadership and investment role in land assembly, development and the collective management of town centre properties.

***Private-Public Partnership Approach***:Ojay McDonald, from the Association of Town and City Management highlighted the need and opportunities for collaboration between councils and businesses as a way of combining more limited funds. He pointed to examples of good practice that include:

* Kingston Futures
* City Co Manchester
* Rotherham
* Stockport

***Understanding the Customer Experience***: Dr Cathy Hart from Loughborough Universityprovided an overview of research focusing on how customers use town centres.

* [***The Customer Experience of Town Centres***](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sbe/research/interest-groups/town-centres/) report looks at how town centres are valued as an experience. The research identified functional and experiential touch points affecting likelihood to visit, dwell times and repeat visits.
* Ongoing work on a Digital High Street Index which aims to assist in monitoring the effects of digital on High Street of digital activity.

*Issues Raised in Questions:*

* Impact on footfall of Permitted Development Rights from converting offices
* Value of Councils being proactive not reactive through “head not heart approach”
* Need to influence and support council leaders visioning & strategic leadership
* Importance of defining key performance indicators (KPIs) for town centres
* Value of evidence of impact of funding initiatives
* Understand opportunity from Government offer as defined by Industrial Strategy
* How to overcome property ownership block through knowledge and engagement
* Guidance to elected members on range of issues & coordinated responses

**Next Steps for the LGA**

* Important that town centre policy and good practice advice makes distinction between High Street and wider interests of local government across Town Centres
* Opportunity for dialogue with DCLG through LGA on specific issues such as Permitted Development Rights welcomed by participants
* Potential to develop good practice toolkit on processes & practical responses for breadth of Town Centre issues – building on what’s currently available.
* Need to engage with elected members through event(s) and guidance on taking proactive, coordinated and strategic approaches to Town Centres.

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