Cannock Chase Retail & Town Centre Uses Study

January 2021

Executive Summary

Context

1. WYG Planning ('WYG') was commissioned by Cannock Chase Council to undertake a Retail and Town Centre Uses Study for Cannock Chase District. The key purpose of this Study is to act as the evidence base to assist in the formulation of future development plan policy to sustain and increase the vitality and viability of the town centres across the district as well as providing baseline information to assist in the determination of planning applications for potential retail and leisure development.

2. This Study will be used to inform policy in the emerging Local Plan which is anticipated to be adopted in July 2022 and will identify how land is used and help determine what will be built where.

3. The requirement of this Study is to provide the Council with an up-to-date objective assessment of retail, leisure and other town centre development needs, together with a clear understanding of retail and leisure provision and potential strategic responses/recommendations that is compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG).

Current and Emerging Retail/Leisure Trends

4. The Study identifies that the District's town centres continue to face several challenges which have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic. These challenges will have a significant impact on the performance, vitality, viability and the future strategies of centres. It is important that the town centres are able to respond to continued changes in the retail and leisure sector and that they provide (or continue to provide) an offer/destination which distinguishes them from competing centres and out-of-centre retail and leisure destinations

5. The Study advises that Town Centre Strategies need to be able to support the continued development/changes in the 'high street' if they are to successfully compete. Such strategies may seek to:

   (1) provide a good mix/variety of retail and leisure uses;

   (2) attract a mix of additional land uses beyond retail/leisure, including residential, educational, community and office uses;

   (3) support and improve existing cultural/heritage/tourist attractions;

   (4) enhance existing town centre markets and speciality retailing;

   (5) provide a high quality shopping/leisure experience;

   (6) provide convenient, affordable and accessible town centre parking;

   (7) promote and encourage events in the town centre;

   (8) embrace, and not compete against, multi-channel retailing; and

   (9) be responsive to changes in technology (the 'digital high street').

6. The key purpose of Town Centre Strategies should be to seek to build on the existing individuality of centres, ensuring centres are a focus/hub for their communities, and extend the 'dwell time' and spend of visitors/residents visiting the town centre which in turn will support their vitality and viability

Market Research

7. The Study is informed by several key areas of original market research including a Telephone Household Survey, Business Survey and stakeholder engagement.

8. A key requirement of this Study is the detailed research and understanding of shopping and leisure patterns in terms of the use of centres and the identification of the centres' catchment areas. WYG commissioned specialist market researchers NEMS to undertake a comprehensive household telephone survey to identify consumers' habits and preferences within the Study Area.

9. In order to inform the qualitative retail needs assessment a town centre occupier/business survey was also commissioned. The survey, comprising 27 questions was hosted online and a total of 469 information sheets were had delivered across Cannock, Rugeley and Hednesford inviting occupiers of business and commercial units in each town centre to participate.

10. Separate engagement has also taken place with several other key stakeholders from across Cannock Chase District to further understand current demand and interest in the town centres, the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and to help identify potential opportunities to assist in town centre regeneration.

Socio Demographic and Sub-Regional Context

11. The Study identifies that the socio-demographic profile of the district contains a much higher than average proportion of residents classified as 'Aspiring Homemakers' (younger and settled families in affordable/modest homes/fashion conscious young singles/partners setting up home/young singles renting in family suburbs) and 'Modest Traditions' (lower income homeowners). Conversely, a much lower than average proportion of those within the district fall within the 'Rental Hubs' category (younger renters living in City Centre flats/students living in high density accommodation/singles renting affordable private flats), and 'Urban Cohesion' category (those living in multi-cultural inner-city neighbourhoods/older people living in small inner suburban properties).

12. The surrounding centres which the household survey results identified as having an influence on shopping and leisure patterns across the District are Stafford, Birmingham, Lichfield and Tamworth. In terms of the sub-regional hierarchy of centres based on Venuescore's UK Shopping Venue Rankings, Cannock, Rugeley and Hednesford Town Centres are ranked significantly lower than these surrounding centres and since the last retail study in 2015, each of the town centres in Cannock Chase District have fallen in their rankings. As the rankings are reflective of the presence of national multiple retailers in a particular centre though, they a more accurate barometer of the performance of larger centres.

Accordingly, towards the lower end of the Rankings, the importance of a centre can be overlooked or amplified based on whether a handful of national multiples are present or not.

Cannock Town Centre

13. As the principal shopping destination in the district, Cannock Town Centre provides a mixture of retail, service and leisure facilities. The town centre is found to provide a good convenience goods offer with several large foodstores around the periphery of the retail core, and there is also a reasonable retail service and financial & business service offer too. Despite this, The Study evaluates that the town centre currently displays reasonably poor levels of vitality and viability as there is a limited leisure and food & drink offer, high vacancy rates, and poor levels of environmental quality in the areas close to and within the main shopping area.

14. Analysis of the household telephone survey responses indicate that facilities in Cannock Town Centre attract shoppers from across the district and wider region with a quarter of all main food shopping trips from across the survey area made to Cannock. Due to the presence of larger centres within the sub-region, comparison goods retailers in Cannock have less of an influence across the district, though 11% of all trips made from across the survey area are still made to facilities in Cannock Town Centre.

15. In terms of food shopping patterns, the market share claimed by stores in Cannock is shown to be at a consistent level with those identified in 2015, though the comparison goods market share has fallen. It is noted that the out-of-centre retailers in the district now attract more of the market share in comparison with five years ago, particularly at Wyrley Brook Retail Park.

16. An assessment of the commercial leisure provision in Cannock Town Centre finds that the existing restaurant, café and coffee shop provision is limited, and that the town centre could also benefit from new leisure development incorporating a small to medium sized cinema, a small bowling alley and complementary food and drink uses. The assessment also finds that the provision of arts and cultural facilities in Cannock is also somewhat lacking and aside from the Prince of Wales Theatre, there are few other notable attractions. In order to maintain and improve current participation rates and to help increase the number of visitors therefore, consideration should be given to ways further promote Cannock to visitors.

17. The Study provides a detailed analysis of the quantitative need for additional convenience goods and comparison goods floorspace up to 2040. It is identified that at t present (2021), there is a minimal amount of convenience floorspace capacity in Cannock (100sq m). However, by 2031 (the minimum timeframe identified by the NPPF when allocating sites) and through to 2040, due to higher forecast turnover efficiency and lower forecast expenditure growth rates, need/capacity is assessed to reduce with no need/capacity for additional convenience floorspace.

18. Turning to comparison goods capacity, the assessment identifies that before any commitments, Cannock has a limited amount of surplus expenditure in the periods to 2040. However, when the Designer Outlet West Midlands development at Mill Green (granted planning permission under application ref. CH/17/279), is taken into account, which is due to open in Q1 of 2021, this surplus will be absorbed and as a result there will be no resultant capacity for additional floorspace in the short, medium or longer term in Cannock.

19. The Study provides recommendations for a town centre strategy and vision for Cannock based upon the need to build upon the individuality of the town centre, to provide a focus and hub for the local community and to attract a mix of additional land uses beyond retail and leisure (including residential, educational, community and office uses), extend the 'dwell time' and spend of visitors/residents visiting the town centre, and in turn the vitality and viability of the centre.

20. The Study generally supports the approach set out within the Council's recently published (September 2020) Cannock Town Centre Development Prospectus but it also considers there to be an opportunity to build upon this work with a more comprehensive strategic overview of the town centre in order to identify further regeneration opportunities.

21. It is recommended that the identified redevelopment opportunity at Church Street should continue to be prioritised above other sites. Development of this site with a mixture of leisure and commercial uses including a possible small cinema, bowling alley and food & beverage units with office or residential uses above would create a key destination which would draw visitors, extend 'dwell time' and spend, and would help to address current deficiencies.

22. Further recommendations are made including exploring strategies to maximise the opportunities for the town centre from increased visitors to the new Designer Outlet at Mill Green, the integration and strengthening of linkages to and from the town centre, and consideration of additional centrally located hotel accommodated in the town centre subject to demand from operators.

Rugeley

22. The Study finds that Rugeley Town Centre presently displays reasonably good levels of vitality and viability. The town centre provides a pleasant shopping environment with a historic core and good environmental quality. A range of independent businesses were recorded which also contribute to a distinct and individual offer within the centre. Despite this, there is evidence of increasing levels of vacancies in the town centre, and connectivity between the shopping core, railways stations and areas in the north of the town centre could be improved. The area around the indoor market and the bus station also does not provide a welcoming gateway to the town centre.

23. The household survey results indicate that the retail facilities in Rugeley Town Centre attract shopping trips from a relatively small catchment area and they do not influence shopping patterns more widely across the district. Despite this, a high level of shopping trips from those living in Rugeley are retained within the town, though the nearby larger centres of Stafford, Lichfield and Tamworth also influence shopping trips made from Rugeley, particularly in respect of comparison goods.

24. In respect of the commercial leisure provision, we do not consider there to be a need to plan for any other specific new leisure facilities due to the compact nature of the town centre, existing participation rates and the influence of other larger nearby centres. There is a reasonably good provision of leisure facilities catering to both the daytime and night-time economies.

25. The analysis of quantitative need for additional convenience goods floorspace identifies that there is presently (at 2021) a very limited amount of convenience floorspace capacity in Rugeley (200sq m net). By 2031 and continuing through to 2040, capacity is assessed to reduce to nil due to higher forecast turnover efficiency and lower forecast expenditure growth rates.

26. In respect of comparison floorspace, The Study assesses that there is no capacity in the short to medium term, and only a very minimal amount (<100sq m) identified at 2040. The Study considers it likely that once the Outlet Centre at Mill Green opens, this capacity will be fully absorbed and there will be no additional capacity for additional floorspace in the short, medium or long term in Rugeley.

27. The recommendations for a future strategy and vision for the Rugeley seek to address the identified weaknesses and threats while taking account of the positive aspects of the Town Centre. The recommendations include the prioritisation of the of the redevelopment or refurbishment of Market Hall and the bus station; promotion of the indoor market/s to drive footfall and operator interest; development of a marketing strategy to improve the perception of the town centre; and pursuing improvements from the town centre to the town’s two railway stations.

Hednesford Town Centre

28. As the smallest of the three town centres in Cannock Chase District, Hednesford serves an important retail and service centre for residents to the north east of Cannock. The Study finds that the town centre displays reasonable levels of vitality and viability with a good leisure offer for the size of the centre, an attractive shopping environment and two large convenience foodstores which attract shoppers to the centre from elsewhere within the district. The Study finds that the comparison goods offer in the town serves a much smaller catchment however, which may limit the attractiveness of the town to new businesses, and there are no banking facilities in the town centre following the closure of Lloyds Bank.

29. The assessment of commercial leisure provision in Hednesford Town Centre finds that there is no notable deficiency in leisure service provision. Given the relatively small size of Hednesford compared to the

nearby Cannock Town Centre, The Study does not find there to be a need to plan for any specific new leisure facilities in the town.

30. The Study identifies that there may be quantitative capacity for some additional convenience floorspace in Hednesford primarily due to indicated overtrading of existing stores in the town. This capacity is indicated at 1,000sq m of floorspace at 2026, continuing at this level until 2040. Given Hednesford's existing foodstore provision however, and having regard to the size and catchment of the town centre, we do not consider there to be any material qualitative deficiency in provision.

31. In terms of comparison goods floorspace our assessment identifies that there is no capacity in the short to medium term, and only a very minimal amount (<100sq m) identified at 2040. As at Rugeley, it is assessed that this capacity will be fully absorbed once the outlet centre at Mill Green opens in early 2021.

32. The Study sets out several recommendations for a future town centre strategy for Hednesford which seek to address the identified weaknesses and threats, while taking account of the positive aspects of the centre. These include exploring alternative commercial uses within the Lightworks Indoor Shopping Centre where there is a present concentration of vacancies and low footfall; exploring opportunities to redevelop the former Co-Op unit to residential or alternative commercial uses; the promotion and continued support of the newly formed Market to ensure its viability and success; and exploring opportunities to take advantage of high footfall at Victoria Shopping Park and Chase Gateway to promote linked trips to other businesses in the town centre.

Policy and Recommendations

33. The Study identifies that Cannock Town Centre continues to perform as an important town centre. The town centre provides a sub-regional role serving the District, despite a weakening in its comparison goods market share over the past five years. It is important for Cannock Town Centre to remain a strong sub-regional town centre and for policy to continue to ensure that further potential out-of-centre retail and/or commercial leisure development does not undermine its role in the hierarchy. It is therefore recommended that Cannock should continue to be identified as a 'Strategic Sub-Regional Centre' in the emerging local plan.

34. The Study finds that Rugeley and Hednesford continue to provide town centre retail and service uses and function as town centres. Accordingly, having regard to our assessment, it is recommended that both Rugeley and Hednesford remain identified as 'Town Centres' in the centre hierarchy of the emerging local plan.

35. In light of the assessments undertaken, and having regard to, *inter alia*: the current health, performance, unit and floorspace composition of each of the town centres; increasing competition from the internet; and availability of units in the main shopping areas capable of meeting potential national multiple

occupiers in each of the centres, The Study recommends that a Retail Impact Assessment threshold of 500sq m gross should be adopted for Cannock, Rugeley and Hednesford Town Centres.

36. The study sets out the recommended town centre boundaries and primary shopping areas for each of the 3 town centres. In accordance with the NPPF, town centre boundaries should be kept under review, where necessary, so that future anticipated needs can be accommodated.