

## Warwickshire Towns Update Feb 2021

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the trend that we were already seeing in terms of consumer behaviours and the shift to online shopping. The various closures and lockdowns have clearly increased the difficulties being faced on our high streets, and we have seen various business closures – particularly in some key national retail chains.

Warwickshire County Council have been pro-actively working with our partners and stakeholders to help support our town centres, both in the short-term with respect to responding to the pandemic and looking towards recovery; and in the longer-term through wider regeneration and development plans. The following seeks to provide an overview to this activity.

### 1. General Update

#### a. WTN (Warwickshire Towns Network)

Throughout the pandemic the WTN has continued to meet and provided a facilitation and enabling function to practitioners across the county.

Discussions through the network have been mainly based around the reactionary work being undertaken at a local level. Including within these conversations have been the good take up of local markets and decisions relating to summer event cancellation.

Prior to Christmas the team worked with Advent communication to promote the local offer of Warwickshire towns and this #Warksmas campaign was well received and created case studies from businesses across the county.

#### b. Towns Commission

The purpose of the Future Town Centres Commission is over the next 8 months to bring together agencies responsible for the development of place in the county, to identify the key factors that will dictate the future of Warwickshire's towns and high streets and to assess what they need to focus on to survive and thrive over the next 15 years.

This is a high-level exercise that will take a holistic view of our towns, with support from industry experts across several key themes. It will identify the fundamental infrastructure required and the steps to ensuring each town in Warwickshire can evolve positively and provide a collective understanding of the research and data available to forecast trends, evidence need and identify local gaps.

Findings will be written up into a single report to be shared with all participants. The Commission will be led by the Sustainable Communities team at WCC.

#### c. Training and Support

Warwickshire businesses across the whole county are still benefiting from the WTN digital skills programme in improving their online presence after the WTN digital skills for businesses scheme was extended from Feb 2021 until March 2021 (WCC Sustainable base budget of £79k split between the 2 financial years) Through this extension the training is being offered to more sectors including culture and tourism businesses and is

being delivered by the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce.

The advice and training is being offered as part of a larger package to support economic recovery within the county which includes the 'Survive, Sustain and Grow programme' and 'Adapt and Diversify Grants' through the Economy and Skills Team.

d. **Arts Challenge**

The project aims to enliven and provide creative ways to support safe movement, social distancing and community confidence around our town centres and outdoor spaces, to encourage shoppers and visitors back to the high street and to support active travel. Creative place curators (Creative Giants) and delivery partners will be commissioned to deliver a combined pot of £344k (£194k LEP + £150k WCC Placemaking Fund) for 8 art and culture based public realm items across the County. WCC are working closely at the moment with partners to secure the right delivery model ensuring the project continues in a COVID secure and safe manner while still engaging with local stakeholders and artists.

**2. Transforming Nuneaton**

a. **Future High Street Fund:** A provisional funding offer of £13.3m has been received by NBBC, less than the full ask of circa £20m. The Business Case prioritised the various projects within the bid and will enable key/prioritised projects (i.e. Abbey Street Development, "Bridge to Living" and Flood Alleviation) to move forward. As part of the FHSF award process an update must be provided to, and approved, by Government. It is anticipated this will be concluded by the end of March 2021.

b. **Abbey Street Development Site:** Following NBBC's approval of the draft masterplan a public consultation on Masterplan proposals was undertaken and concluded in Nov/Dec 2020 – undertaken "virtually" due to COVID19 restrictions. Subsequently a hybrid Planning Application (i.e. outline main site, detailed hotel) was submitted on 23 December 2020 with supporting drawings, plans, reports, etc. Subject to planning it is anticipated that works on site will start Summer 2021.

Refurbishment/conversion works of 22 and 23 Queens Road have commenced, using external funding, to bring these disused units back to life and opening them up for local enterprises & businesses / creative industries etc.

c. **Transport Infrastructure:**

i. **Ring Road Highway Improvements:** Following WCC's approval of CIF monies the full project team for the TN Highway projects is now in place and a full review of all schemes has been undertaken; this includes a review of all proposed designs, review of land requirements, review of modelling and assumptions, commissioned and or completed survey work of the ring road. Land assembly negotiations have started

alongside planning discussions. First scheme to be delivered will be Wheat Street junction in 2023.

- ii. **Bus Improvements:** work has been commissioned to design the re-introduction of buses into the town centre including the new super bus stops, more central routes and links with shops, and the needs and requirements of a bus station for the future.
  - iii. **Northern Access to Nuneaton Train Station:** initial feasibility work has been concluded for the design of a new access into the station from the north. This is being reviewed and will inform next steps.
- d. **Vicarage Street Development Site:** With the approval of funding for a new Library and Business Centre as the key anchor for the Vicarage Street Development site work has been progressing on the most appropriate way to develop the wider site (masterplan, high level appraisal, soft market testing, Homes England re key worker housing). A proposal is now being considered within the context of WCC establishing a new property company.
- e. **Library and Business Centre:** Design and Major Projects (WCC) who are commissioned to deliver the building are now working with the professional team from Mace Ltd to complete detailed design and planning; a new programme delivery plan is being developed based on likely timescales for gaining vacant possession of the site.
- f. **Towns Investment Plan / Towns Fund:** The Town Investment Plan was submitted to Government on 11th Dec 2020 with an ask of £24.4m; it is expected that feedback on the submission will not be until late February 2021. The Plan includes projects from WCC including Weddington Cycle Scheme, EV Charging Infrastructure, and contributions towards the ring road upgrades.

### 3. Leamington Spa

Warwick District Council have been awarded an indicative allocation of £10m from the Future High Streets Fund, compared to the £14.9m requested in their original submission. Their Future High Streets Fund bid was based around two key elements of creating significant creative hubs north and south of the river Leam, and to connect these hubs and the wider town centre through active travel measures. The aim of the programme is to drive the diversification of the town centre to a more mixed-use economy, utilising Leamington's unique creative industries as a key driver.

Warwickshire County Council is working with WDC to explore how we could reduce the initial investment in active travel to a core scheme that could be covered by the reduced allocation of funding, and develop a longer-term phased approach that could take advantage of future funding and linked to planned schemes (such as the Bath Street Gyratory). The revised bid for the reduced pot of funding is due to be submitted to Government at the end of February.

In addition, the County Council continues its work on redeveloping our Holly Walk office in Leamington Town Centre to create new office space for the town, with a particular focus on supporting the growing digital creative sector. These works are benefitting from a grant of £0,5m from the Government's Getting Building Fund, and should be completed in 2022. The County Council has also been supporting the development of the new, private sector led co-working space, 1 Mill Street. In partnership with the University of Warwick, we are helping to sponsor space that can be used by new digital creative start-ups.

#### **4. Transforming Bedworth**

The Transforming Bedworth Programme (TBP) has been developed in recognition of the need to support the revitalisation of Bedworth Town Centre, increasing footfall and attracting new investment.

The TBP vision is to see the town centre develop into a vibrant location, attracting

local residents and visitors alike, to spend more time in the centre and in turn attract

new investment and a wider range of leisure and retail outlets.

Opportunities have been identified, through a visioning exercise, to make Bedworth a more vibrant destination, offering its residents new places to go, greater access to leisure facilities and a wider range of cultural events.

WCC are working with NBBC to now look at carrying out a market demand study for Bedworth town centre, relating to the commercial and residential property market and identify potential funding opportunities that may be available to help deliver some of the identified opportunities for improvement.

#### **5. Warwick**

Warwickshire County Council will be looking to commission some work to develop a new parking strategy for the town in the new financial year in partnership with Warwick District Council to effectively plan for future provision in light of the likely future closure of Linen Street Car Park, and to help inform discussions around the future use of the County Council's estate within the town.

Work is also progressing on Phase 2 of the transport works to Warwick Town Centre to address traffic flow issues and improve air quality. Cabinet approved £4.3m of funding from the Capital Investment Fund to enable these works to be undertaken.

#### **6. Rugby**

Rugby Borough Council has announced plans for a major regeneration of the town centre through the development of a new masterplan. The Rugby Town Centre Spatial Strategy aims to create a roadmap for the regeneration of the town over the next 15 years, focusing on retail, residential, leisure, transport and tourism. WCC will look to work in partnership with the Borough Council to help bring forward this strategy.

## **7. Stratford**

The County Council and District Council are working in partnership to develop a new parking strategy for the town. The outcome of this work is expected by mid 2021. The County Council is also an active member of the newly formed Town Centre Strategic Partnership, which aims to bring all the various groups and tiers of government together to develop a jointly agreed vision and plan for the town centre.