

Wednesbury Town Centre Masterplan Consultation Report

June 2024



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1. Consultation Process

1.1 Background

The draft Wednesbury Town Centre Masterplan consultation provided a significant opportunity for the community to actively participate in the planning and development at the heart of the town. By sharing their ideas, aspirations, and concerns, residents will play a crucial role in creating a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable town centre for generations to come.

The draft masterplan has been shaped by gathering input from previous engagement and consultation events, as well as considering insights from assessment of local needs and future potential.

1.2 Scheme Aims and Objectives

The Wednesbury Masterplan vision states that *"the town centre will be revitalised as the vibrant heart of Wednesbury, a historic Black Country market town with a proud heritage, and a contemporary place where people live and work that supports the needs and wellbeing of local communities. Wednesbury will boast a distinctive visitor experience that will combine shopping with a diverse evening economy and cultural offer that welcomes a broader range of visitors from across Sandwell's communities."*

The following aims have been developed based on the feedback we received in previous engagement and consultation events and recognising the need to make sure that change is balanced with making the most of the town centre's existing strengths and character.

- 1. **A welcoming and inclusive town centre** with attractive arrival spaces, better safety, good quality and easy to use signage to ensure everyone knows where they're going, and a unique character based on the identity and history of Wednesbury.*
- 2. **A well-connected place** which is easy to get to and around, has better links to the West Midlands Metro, is well connected with surrounding areas and neighbourhoods to make it easier for people who want to walk, cycle, take the bus or tram as well as those who need to drive.*
- 3. **A transformed local environment** with better quality public spaces that people will want to spend time in, fill in the gaps between buildings, bring vacant buildings back into use, more greenery, better connections between the town centre and green spaces and greater resilience against the effects of climate change, extreme weather and flooding.*
- 4. **A consolidated and strengthened retail offer** with a greater range of shops all close together, more independent businesses and an expanded evening, cultural, community and leisure offering providing more things to do in the town.*
- 5. **A diversified mix of land uses** including higher density residential development - such as apartments and townhouses - places for startups, performance spaces, more employment opportunities and housing options for older people.*
- 6. **An active and vibrant place** in the daytime and evening with high footfall in key retail streets, active ground floor uses and spill out spaces, and activities taking place in public spaces with more events, markets and pop-ups.*

1.3 Publicising the Consultation

The consultation was launched on Monday 7 May 2024 and ran until 11 June 2024. Sandwell Council has utilised a range of channels of communication to publicise the consultation including:

- Press release
- Internal council communication posts via email
- Council social media posts
- Sandwell Consultation Hub online survey
- In-person event in the town centre on 14 May at Wednesbury Library
- Leaflet drop to town centre businesses and key locations in the town
- Workshops with community groups including; Sons of Rest Wellbeing Group, Walking Group - Hill Top Community Centre, Knit and Natter Group – Millenium Centre, Coffee Morning Groups - Leabrook & St Francis Church, Craft Groups – South Staffs Water Hub & Wednesbury Library, Dance Group – Old Post Office, Wood Green Sixth Form
- Wednesbury Library – consultation materials provided

Commented [RJ1]: Are there some others to reference?

2. Methodology

2.1 Confidentiality

All responses to the survey were made anonymously and confidentially. The survey was conducted in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

2.2 Consultation Survey

The survey was a mixture of qualitative and quantitative questions, with the qualitative questions requesting people's comments to explain their views and give suggestions. A plan of the proposals was provided alongside artist impressions to provide a visual tool.

2.3 Analysis of Consultation Responses

2.3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Analysis was conducted on all responses to the quantitative questions. Percentage figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number for the majority of questions and, as a result, not all responses totals may equal 100%.

2.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Each of the qualitative responses have been analysed and assigned to a theme or themes relevant to the question asked.

3. Findings

A total of 42 survey responses were received online, and 8 paper surveys were submitted. Additionally, comments were gathered from over 200 stakeholders during in-person events, workshops, and conversations with business owners in the town centre. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the quantitative and qualitative survey responses, as well as comments from the in-person events and workshops.

3.1 Key Themes Analysis

Respondents have provided a range of comments which fall into common themes.

Table 1. – Key Themes

Theme	Summary of Comments
Vision & Aims	<p>62% of respondents to the online consultation agreed with the vision for the masterplan compared to 26% who disagreed.</p> <p>66% agreed with the aims for Wednesbury town centre. 14% disagreed.</p> <p>Creating a welcoming and inclusive town centre was considered the most important of the stated aims of the masterplan, followed by creating a consolidated and strengthened retail offer, and creating a well-connected place. A diversified mix of land uses was considered the least important of the aims. It is noted however that this aim is more conceptual and may not have elicited as clear a picture of the change advocated by the masterplan compared to the other aims.</p> <p>Relevant concerns raised include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nothing concrete proposed - There needs to be a greater focus on local identity - Insufficient acknowledgment of Wednesbury’s regional centrality - Whether and how it would be delivered - Focus on community cohesion
Development	<p>Generally (64%) of respondents were supportive of new homes in the town centre compared with 10% being unsupportive.</p> <p>Comments typically referred to the need to support local shops and businesses and that new residents would increase footfall in the town. A number of respondents recognised the positive impact more residents would have on safety and high street viability as well as potentially providing the opportunity for increased opening hours for businesses and a more diverse nighttime economy.</p> <p>Concerns were raised about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high density housing and the possibility of HMOs - that Wednesbury is already very crowded and busy - lack of parking to support additional housing

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - building houses/accommodation doesn't necessarily mean those individuals will support the local town - antisocial behaviour - the level of affordable housing and the need for a mix of tenure types - needs to be a focus on repurposing existing buildings too <p>20% of respondents said that the changes proposed in the masterplan would make it more likely that they would consider living in the town centre, compared to 12% who responded 'less likely' and 48% for whom it would make it neither more nor less likely.</p> <p>A number of respondents requested more details on the types of housing that would be provided with one in particular highlighting the overabundance of semi-detached homes, the poor access to basic amenities or many residential areas and the abundance of apartments in the area.</p>
<p>Movement</p>	<p>74% of respondents supported improved pedestrian crossings at Holyhead Road, High Bullen and Dudley Street compared to 12% who did not.</p> <p>64% of respondents support reducing traffic congestion in the town centre compared to 12% who do not. 20% of respondents said they were unsure whether they supported reducing traffic congestion.</p> <p>46% of respondents said that the proposed changes in the masterplan would encourage them to walk into or around the town centre more compared to 32% who said that it wouldn't and 18% who were unsure.</p> <p>There is not a general awareness that the Morrisons is free to use and is not exclusively available to Morrisons patrons. Additional advertising of the presence of free parking there for anyone visiting the town would help address parking concerns.</p> <p>Concerns were raised relating to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cashless payments for parking being difficult to operate - The location and availability of disabled parking - Confusion over one-way streets - The feeling that it should be easier for people to visit the town by car - Roads are very busy and dangerous, creating an unpleasant, noisy and polluted pedestrian environment - That there are enough crossings - That there aren't enough crossings - Delivery drivers/riders parking on double yellow lines and pavements - The roads are a barrier to pedestrian connectivity - Crossing timings are too short for elderly people to cross comfortably - Rat running should be stopped - Cycling on roads feels dangerous and there should be more protected routes - Cyclists using footways and pedestrian spaces are a danger to pedestrians

	Some respondents expressed support for more expansive traffic reduction measures, particularly of through traffic as well as more pedestrianisation.
Public Realm	<p>86% of respondents support improving more public spaces in Wednesbury compared to 4% who do not.</p> <p>Recommendations were made to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clean up and make safer the pedestrian route between the car park behind Farmfoods and Union Street - Removal of commercial bins from view - Ensure that public spaces were subject to an effective maintenance plan - Create somewhere to sit that is undercover so when it is raining you are not forced into the shops or having to go home - Create more spaces suitable for children <p>Concerns were raised that the closure of the passageway would make the distance between Union Street and the Farmfoods car park too far to walk.</p> <p>Further comments raised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Graffiti and vandalism - Anti-social behaviour associated with alcohol consumption impacting new seating and spaces - Delivery drivers of Union Street causing a nuisance and reportedly ignoring road signs <p>Support was expressed for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More benches, bins and CCTV - Closing the entirety of Union Street to traffic and removing the turning head at one end
Greening	<p>Support was expressed for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improving biodiversity of the town centre - Introducing more trees to the square outside the Bus Station as the space is very windy <p>Concerns were raised regarding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tree root systems affecting buildings - Fallen leaves <p>One respondent reported that although greening is welcome there is no mention of biodiversity or strategies involving swift bricks, bat boxes and hedgehog highways, quoting national planning guidance NPPG paragraph 023.</p>
Sustainability	72% of respondents support the promotion of building enhancements to improve energy efficiency compared to 10% who do not. There was also

	<p>considerable support for promoting high standards of sustainability in new buildings where SMBC and partners have additional influence (76%).</p> <p>A number of respondents were unclear as to what the proposed Net Zero Neighbourhood entails and would like to see additional detail. This is evidence from comments and the lower level of support for the Net Zero Neighbourhood Strategy (58%) compared to both unsupportiveness (14%) and those who were unsure (26%)</p> <p>Several comments stressed the need to retain the visual character of buildings that are being modified or retrofit to improve their efficiency.</p> <p>One respondent suggested that all development should support Sandwell's Net Zero ambitions, including the reduction of car-centric development.</p> <p>A question was asked regarding a district heating network for Wednesbury.</p>
Leisure	<p>76% support the ambitions for new leisure and cultural venues in the town centre compared to 4% who do not. 18% of respondents were unsure.</p> <p>Respondents also proposed a number of leisure activities or venues that they would like to see in the town centre.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ten pin bowling - Wacky warehouse style play centre - Trampolining - Cinema - Ninja warrior - Modern indoor crazy golf - Local NHS Hub - Cinema/theatre for a multifunctional varied space - A greater variety of shops that are of higher quality - Indoor market - Toilets - Entertainment for children <p>One comment expressed a perceived need to make the Town Hall more accessible to everyone and cited the cost of venue hire as prohibitive.</p> <p>Respondents expressed support for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Protecting the splinter studio in the old post office - Legislation to prevent multiple shops of the same type being clustered together - Plans for the meanwhile use of Union Yard, which was considered to be a unique offer in the Black Country and would draw in a new customer base <p>Concerns were expressed pertaining to the large numbers of barbers, nail bars and takeaway businesses as well as the low survival rate of new retail businesses.</p>

Events	<p>58% of respondents said that the proposed changes in the masterplan would make them more likely to attend events in the town centre compared to 6% who said that the changes would make it less likely.</p> <p>78% of respondents support the creation of a Wednesbury heritage trail.</p> <p>Respondents were forthcoming with ideas for events and activities that could take place in the town centre. These included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Street Food Vendors - Pop up Food Festival - Children’s Farm/Animal events - Weekends dedicated to showcasing Clubs/Groups - Outdoor Cinema - Competitions/Treasure Hunts in shop windows - Street Art - A musical/music festival - Farmers market - Fetes - Family arcades - Victorian Christmas Market - Book clubs - Street performers - Live performances - Craft Market - Fairground rides - Christmas lights - Music festival - Film screenings - Community days - Community gardening - Halloween celebration - Carnival - Farmers markets/food festivals - Black country day <p>Respondents expressed enthusiasm for a diverse range of events and celebrations, including events for St Patrick’s Day, St George’s day and Diwali.</p> <p>Concerns were raised that banning carnival floats on carnival days negatively impacted the footfall for an annual event.</p>
Metro Quarter	<p>50% of respondents said that the proposed changes in the masterplan would encourage them to use the tram more. 35.71% reported that the changes would not have any impact on the likelihood that they would use the tram more.</p> <p>Respondents outlined broad concerns relating to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Safety on public transport

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Passenger experience on busy or crowded services - The distance between the tram stop and the town centre - Better wayfinding to the town centre is needed <p>Responses to the impact of the future tram extension exhibited optimism for the opportunity presented with a number of comments indicating a belief that the improved connectivity would increase footfall in the town and increase the transport options to and from the town.</p> <p>Comments supported the contention that improved public transport connectivity to the wider West Midlands provides an opportunity to entice more visiting to the town and for it to become an attractive and more affordable place to live for people working in Wolverhampton and Birmingham.</p>
High Bullen Development	<p>52% of respondents support the key development principles of the High Bullen site compared to 12% who do not.</p> <p>Union Yard and Upper High Street were considered by respondents to be the highest priority development sites for delivery followed by High Bullen and Victoria Street.</p> <p>Concerns were raised about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The removal of parking, particularly disabled parking - Whether housing should be placed in town centres - That the site isn't being efficiently uses - There are too few homes proposed for the site - Too much car parking given its location
Upper High Street Development	<p>64% of respondents support the key development principles of the Upper High Street site compared to 4% who do not.</p> <p>Respondents expressed a preference to ensure the development is in keeping with the architectural character of the street, must provide high quality accommodation and include retail at ground floor.</p>
Union Yard Development	<p>56% of respondents support the key development principles of the Union Yard site compared to 10% who do not.</p> <p>One respondent suggested that shipping containers would be unsightly and out of keeping with the existing character of the town centre.</p> <p>Further comments included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There being too many car parking spaces proposed - That the ground floor should contain a family friendly leisure or community use
Victoria Street Development	<p>54% of respondents support the key development principles of the Victoria Street sites compared to 8% who do not.</p>

	<p>Concerns were raised relating to the closure of the police station that is implied by the repurposing of the site. Many responses showed strong support for police presence in the town and the need to relocate the police station to somewhere else in the town centre.</p> <p>Several respondents suggested that there was too much parking proposed with one likening the indicative block plan to prison barracks around a tarmac exercise yard. One respondent suggested the site is suitable for a boutique hotel and emphasized the importance in improving the public realm across the site to improve the perception of the town amongst those arriving by tram.</p> <p>Students at Wood Green Academy suggested that the blocks could be taller.</p>
Safety	<p>Responses discussing safety were included in requests for further comments or elaboration throughout the consultation.</p> <p>Concerned raised included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear of crime, particularly in the evenings - Prevalence of drug dealing, dangerous driving and antisocial behaviour - The need to advertise the presence of the new CCTV cameras - New public spaces being vandalised or encouraging loitering - Lack of police presence - Closure of the police station - Road danger, particularly for pedestrians and cyclists - Pavement parking
Shop Frontages and Retail Offering	<p>Support was expressed for initiatives to improve shop frontages with many respondents identifying problems relating to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The condition of existing shops, particularly empty units - Residential properties in poor condition - The state of the Gaumont Cinema, Old School and Town Hall facades - A loss of original and historic shop fronts
Other	<p>A number of other comments were recorded including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concerns about the market relocation - The need to provide larger canopies and power sockets for market stalls - The cost of market stalls - Better lighting needed - Lack of public toilets - Concerns over the apparent dereliction of the new building on the former toilet block site - The need for a mural from the express and star and choice cars- to bring the historic aesthetic back to bring people back into the town - The need for improvements to the adjacent park, including the possible inclusion of a mountain bike track

4. Conclusion

This report provides a summary of the responses received during the consultation. A total of 42 responses have been received online, 7 paper copy submissions, one representation from year 12 pupils at Wood Green Academy and a range of comments from the in-person events and workshops.

A range of valuable comments have been received and will inform any changes to the final Masterplan document. The consultation report will be shared with internal council colleagues and external stakeholders to ensure issues raised can be resolved.