

Luton Town Centre Masterplan Baseline Report:

COVID-19 Appendix

1. Background

- 1.1 Avison Young, Allies and Morrison, Greengage and Urban Flow were appointed in late 2019 by Luton Borough Council to prepare a new vision and masterplan for Luton town centre. The idea for a town centre masterplan was conceived against a back drop of unprecedented uncertainty and recognition that to ensure the town centres future health a coordinate plan was needed.
- 1.2 The first stage of the masterplan was to undertake a robust Baseline Study, which provides a detailed assessment of Luton Town Centre and the immediate hinterland areas, with a view to establishing an evidence base to inform a set of principles and priorities for the masterplan which will evolve through an engaging and rich dialogue with the council, local community and stakeholders.
- 1.3 The Baseline Study was completed before the outbreak of COVID-19 in the UK, and the subsequent lockdown restrictions on 23rd March 2020. Therefore the data and analysis within the report should be read on that basis.

2. The Emerging Trends from COVID-19

- 2.1 The fundamental changes to everyday life, caused by the COVID-19, has changed the way people use town centres in the short term and it has potential for much longer term effects. The impacts of COVID-19 are still emerging and there is limited data available, however there has been an acceleration of some of the pre-existing trends from before the pandemic.
- 2.2 Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, the retail sector was facing significant challenges which are fundamentally changing town centres. The requirement for smaller shop footprints with more focused and nimble stock storage is emerging as a result of the full integration of online and physical stores. Furthermore there is also much greater importance being placed on the retail 'experience', encompassing activities that go beyond traditional buying and selling.
- 2.3 As with retail, the leisure has also faced significant challenges with the closure of pubs, bars and restaurants having had a detrimental impact on town centres. As restrictions are lifted, leisure and particularly food and beverage uses will have an important role to play in driving

footfall back into town centres. However it is possible this may take some time to be realised, as customers are reluctant to return due to the risk of infection. Furthermore there is a risk that restaurants, pubs, bars and food outlets will close as a result of the pandemic and this could exacerbate the lack of these uses within Luton town centre. The masterplan will need to consider how to best encourage people back into town centres and the longer term impacts of the pandemic on retail and leisure uses.

- 2.4 The distribution sector has seen increased demand for online deliveries, as a result of Government advice to stay at home, which has caused a short term pressure on distribution of certain goods. It is too early to speculate if this trend will continue in the longer term, however online retailing was on the rise before the pandemic and the masterplan will need to consider this trend.
- 2.5 Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 the office market has seen ongoing changes to the nature of occupier demand, with the flexible workspaces sector continuing to grow significantly. This trend reflects changes in the way occupiers are seeking to use space, with an increasingly significant shift towards more agile, flexible working practices. Growth in co-working and working from home, which is increasingly encouraged by large corporates to reduce floorspace costs, is driving changes to office supply. The pandemic has led to a significant proportion of people being forced to work from home. Clearly this measure is temporary, however it is likely to have a lasting effect on the way people work in the future. The masterplan will need to consider this as it evolves, given the proximity of Luton to London and its relative affordability. It is possible that occupiers will look to diversify their office base away from cities like London to secondary markets like Luton.
- 2.6 The emerging masterplan will need to consider the emerging trends within the residential sector. Currently there is limited data available to highlight what these are, however it is likely that demand from consumers will move towards improved amenities and private outside space.
- 2.7 COVID-19 has meant a dramatic change in the way people move about, not just by journeying less, but for different purposes and by non-car active modes. The obligation to stay local and the desire for physical exercise was coupled with widespread and increasingly normalised, remote working. As town centres begin to re-open this is likely to change, however it is not yet clear if the pandemic will have a long term impact on the way we move around. The masterplan will need to consider this trend, as well as the other trends observed, as it develops a transport and movement strategy.
- 2.8 It is important to consider that the landscape is changing and the Government's long term position is still emerging. The masterplan is usefully at an early stage and the team will consider the emerging trends from COVID-19 throughout future stages of development.

3. How the Masterplan Will Respond

- 3.1 The masterplan team have been working with the Council and a range of businesses and stakeholders within the town centre to develop a Recovery Plan. This plan addresses the immediate issues around re-opening, short term confidence building in the safety of the town centre and developing events and attractors to encourage visitors who have become used to online shopping. Furthermore it considers the medium term interventions to improve the experience and perception of the town centre.
- 3.2 Critically the Recovery Plan, whilst focussed on the short term, is seeking to ensure that these early interventions are coordinated with a long term vision being established in the masterplan, enabling them to be the first stepping stones to more fundamental and long term changes in the town centre. Ensuring the masterplan is a foundation for the longer term success of the town centre.
- 3.3 The masterplan will follow three overarching principles:
- Flexibility - the masterplan must be able to accommodate changes and the unexpected, it should be able to respond to changes in market trends and reflect the fact that delivering a masterplan can take many years and decades. Therefore it should offer flexibility in its proposals and provide a range of options for delivery.
 - Smart – the masterplan should embrace technology and be open to new inventions, but not embed specific technologies that might limit the town centre's ability to respond to future trends. It is likely that COVID-19 will result in long-term changes to our everyday lives and the masterplan should enable future technologies to respond to these changes.
 - Resilient – the masterplan must encourage changes and interventions that are sustainable steps and can support greater self-sufficiency and progress. Furthermore it should enable the delivery of a town centre that is economic, socially and environmentally resilient.