

Excellence in Place Leadership Programme 2021

Session 4: Economic Renewal

Re-imagining our town centres and high streets

"We are presented with a unique chance to tackle one of the country's greatest unresolved challenges – to re-imagine our high streets and town centres with strong communities, prosperous futures and innovative plans for regeneration."

"To evaluate the regeneration ambition and plans for Walsall town centre against the current challenges that town centres are facing, using best practice thinking and to present back any recommendations for how these plans could be strengthened."

Introduction

The last session of the 2021 EiPL programme provided an opportunity for the cohort to bring together their learning and focus on the specific challenges and opportunities facing modern town centres and high streets across the UK.

The session built on the best practice themes identified at the ADEPT Spring Conference held in May 2021. Using ideas generated in previous sessions, and stimulated by three experienced thought leaders, the cohort carried out a deep dive to examine, evaluate and feedback ideas on the current plans for the regeneration proposed for Walsall town centre.

Through a masterclass approach, the cohort were challenged to apply best practice thinking that both underpinned their learning across the year and supported the development of Walsall Council's strategy.

Background

Our towns and high streets are under pressure for survival as economic and social centres for communities. According to a recent article "What Future For Our City Centres?" by Peter Madden, Professor of Practice in City Futures, Cardiff University, the challenges faced are multiple. These include:

- the impact of online shopping undercutting physical retail alternatives;
- high property prices ruling out residential use to leave areas dominated by shops and offices;
- a 9am-5pm monoculture; and
- high car traffic undermining safety and the environment.

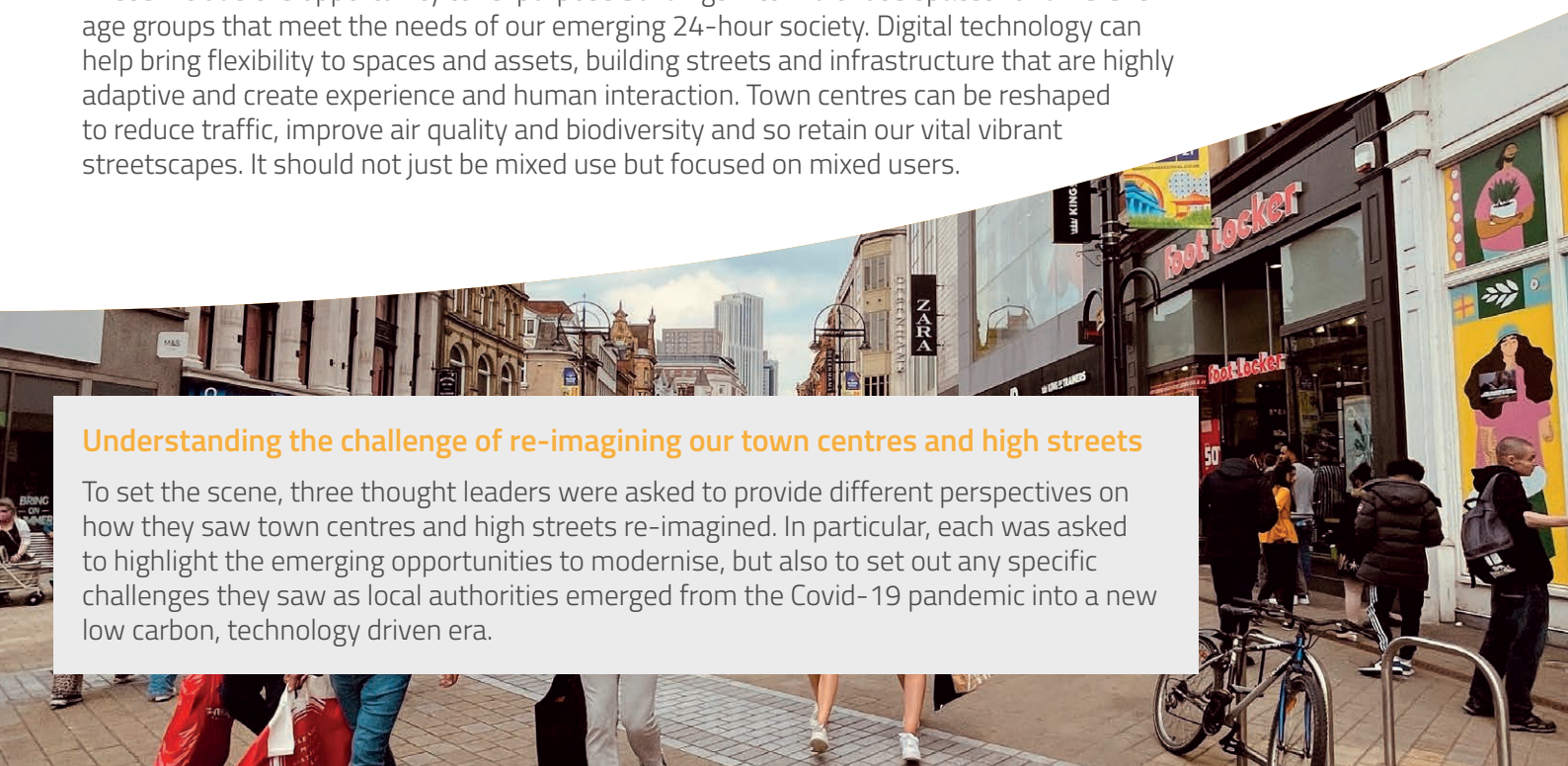
The Covid-19 crisis has exposed and exacerbated the fragility of our towns and high streets. It has highlighted the lack of space, places and facilities for existing communities and underlined the disconnect between the traditional culture built around fixed assets and the emerging culture driven by digital technology and virtual environments.

But amid this backdrop of gloom, there are also opportunities for our town centres and high streets as we move beyond the Covid-19 crisis and into this technology driven future. These include the opportunity to re-purpose buildings into multi-use spaces for different age groups that meet the needs of our emerging 24-hour society. Digital technology can help bring flexibility to spaces and assets, building streets and infrastructure that are highly adaptive and create experience and human interaction. Town centres can be reshaped to reduce traffic, improve air quality and biodiversity and so retain our vital vibrant streetscapes. It should not just be mixed use but focused on mixed users.



Understanding the challenge of re-imagining our town centres and high streets

To set the scene, three thought leaders were asked to provide different perspectives on how they saw town centres and high streets re-imagined. In particular, each was asked to highlight the emerging opportunities to modernise, but also to set out any specific challenges they saw as local authorities emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic into a new low carbon, technology driven era.



The Local Authority challenge

When re-imagining our town centres and high streets, the challenges faced by local authorities and place leaders are multiple but can be described as three key priorities, explained Laura Shoaf, Interim CEO, West Midlands Combined Authority.

Sustainability: the challenge of ensuring that development plans are part of the solution to the evolving climate emergency and meet national, regional and local targets to become a net-zero carbon emitter.

Digitalisation: the challenge of embracing the emerging culture change and the way that technology has transformed the way we all live our lives; impacting the way we communicate, work, learn, shop and play.

Individualisation: the challenge of ensuring that every civic intervention is focused on the needs of individuals and is sufficiently flexible to cope with rapidly changing individual priorities and demands.

The reality of the challenge facing place leaders requires an understanding and acceptance that these three priorities do not always necessarily sit well together and can often be at odds with each other. It is a point that was highlighted during the pandemic as the need for social distancing forced people away from mass transit and toward less sustainable personal car travel; away from shops and restaurants and toward online home shopping and the congestion and pollution of delivery vehicles; away from cinemas and theatres and towards individualised home streaming services.

The emerging and accelerating opportunities from digitisation could help to bridge the gap between the growing demand for individual services and the impact on carbon emissions, pollution and congestion that comes with these services. However, while digitisation and technology is providing new ideas daily, we are not there yet.

There are of course many aspects of life post-pandemic that we want to keep such as quieter roads, more time with family and safer places to live. The downside to many of these new norms is the potential for unintended consequences.

The key for place leaders looking to balance these three priorities, Shoaf explained, is to think hard about what kind of future town centre and high street environment they want; set fire to the norms to embrace and try out new ideas. But crucially, it is vital that we remove our fear of failure, understand that some of these new ideas will not work and accept these failures as part of the process of learning.

"Covid-19 has given us a bizarre opportunity to re-think the way we do things. For town centres this is a pivotal moment; a chance to decide and to ask what sort of town centre you want - and accept that some ideas will fail."

Laura Shoaf, Interim
CEO, West Midlands
Combined Authority



The developer's challenge

Content is king when it comes to any redevelopment and, according to Tom Bloxham, Chairman of Urban Splash, re-imagining the town centre and high street needs a focus on bringing back core community retailers such as the "butchers and bakers" as part of the 'golden era' of retail renaissance.

In a post-pandemic, digitally led society, existing retail landlords and retail models are heading for a "nightmare", requiring a transformation in thinking around the way that housing, commercial and retail is integrated and bound together by excellent design in multi-purpose buildings.

Town centres and high streets must become places people want to hang around in and places that people can build communities. His experience of redeveloping run-down and disused parts of Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield has highlighted the process of bringing entrepreneurial organisations and new people into locations. Building communities requires marketing as well as construction.

But it is also critical to get the design right and match it to the needs of the community. Key to this is seeing your tenants as customers. He gave the example of his "House by Urban Splash" business which uses off-site fabrication, modern methods of construction and a design-led process to tailor properties to customer need - accelerating delivery and boosting quality.

Placemaking, he said, is more important than the housing. The challenge is that the planning system still largely remains focused on keeping things the same. But developers should push back with the aim of leaving a city greater and more beautiful than they found it, treating people with respect by making social housing available and invisible.

"We are still far too focused on built environment rather than the content that goes behind it. The space between the buildings is more important than the building itself."

Tom Bloxham,
Chairman, Urban Splash

Photo: Manchester,
Urban Splash.



The community challenge

Active discussion with the community is key to creating the space for people to really express what they need from civic facilities and to help place leaders to better understand what really matters to the community. The Walsall for All campaign, led by Mathew Eason at the Urban Futures “Do Tank”, was focused on creating opportunities for all and defined by the simple tag line to “Inspire and Aspire”.

The work quickly identified and drew on the fact that the region had an amazing past and culture on which to build. While there were many complex challenges caused by many different economic, social and environment issues, the reality was that a huge amount was already happening locally to help re-build the community.

Digging further helped reveal that the region, leadership and community had a huge capacity for rejuvenation and was prepared to embrace innovation and change to help bring about that renewal. Furthermore there was also evidence that the leadership was prepared to empower its population to help bring about the desired change.

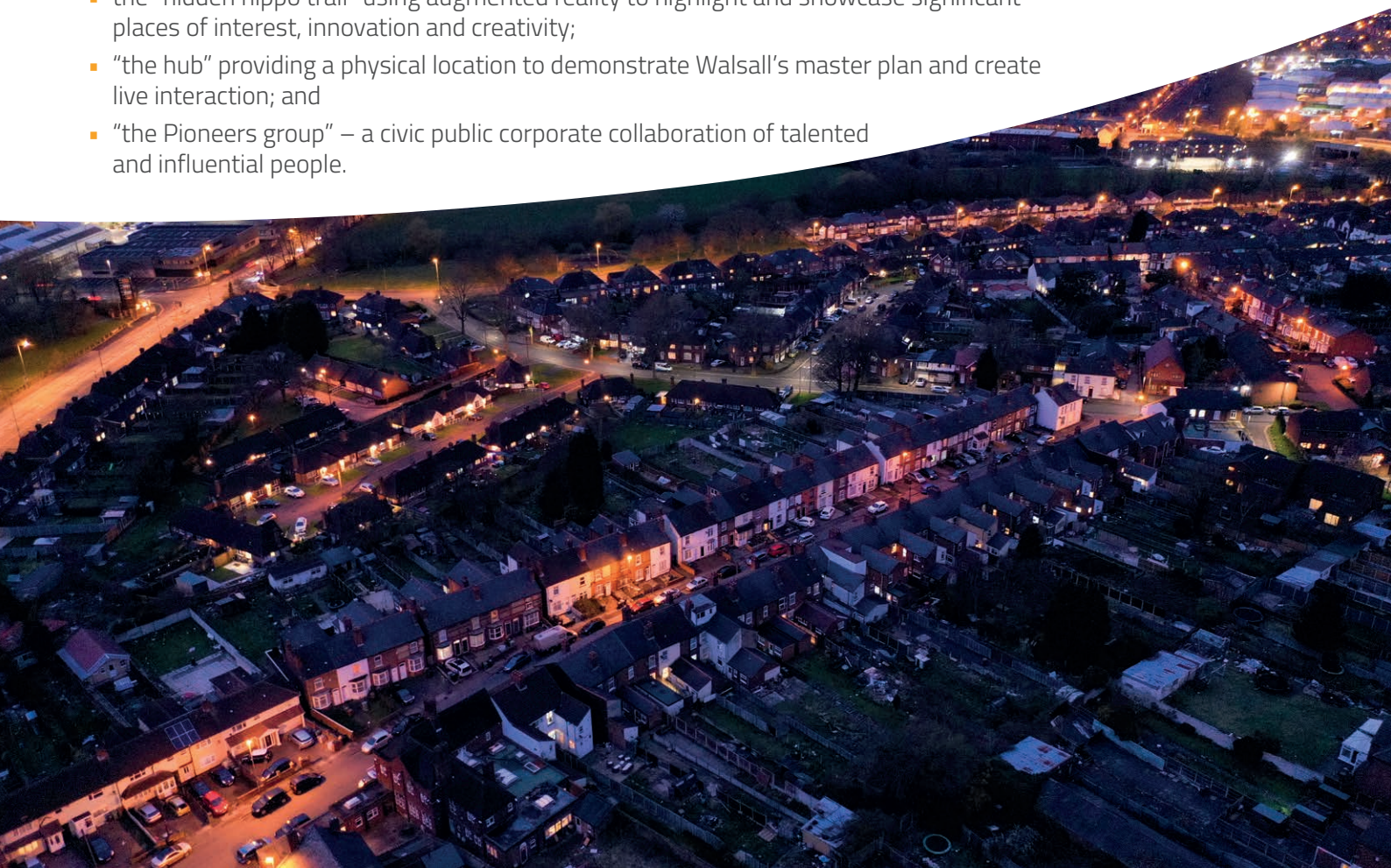
Despite launching the work during the pandemic, workshops were held to bring together community ideas, a new website was launched and social media campaign implemented to connect with a wider digital audience, and the younger generation engaged through a project to redesign Walsall using the Minecraft computer game. Bringing the community together physically was not overlooked, despite the pandemic, with an innovate drive-in carol concert at Christmas to remind people that they were still part of a community.

More activity is planned to engage the community in the change and lead Walsall towards more inward investment and partners including:

- the “hidden hippo trail” using augmented reality to highlight and showcase significant places of interest, innovation and creativity;
- “the hub” providing a physical location to demonstrate Walsall’s master plan and create live interaction; and
- “the Pioneers group” – a civic public corporate collaboration of talented and influential people.

“By empowering people, you get better results. Walsall needs passion to see the best for the town and community - to get the right balance between the high street, out-of-town retail and online services.”

Mathew Eason,
Consultant,
Urban Futures



Case study – the Walsall masterplan

At the heart of the process to establish Walsall's masterplan is the need to test exactly what Walsall want to be as a town and then to establish the best ways to achieve this goal, explained Philippa Venables, Director of Regeneration and Economy and Simon Nielson, Executive Director Economy, Environment and Communities from Walsall Council.

The ambition: The objective of the Walsall masterplan is
"Driving outcomes through regeneration" – these outcomes include:

- A prosperous, economically active and resilient town centre.
- Opportunities for all residents to capture the benefits of town and regional growth.
- A resilient and skilled labour force to attract businesses to remain in, and move to, Walsall.
- A vibrant high street within a well-connected, sustainable and active town centre.
- A town centre and wider borough that is beautiful and enjoyable to spend time in.
- A diverse housing offer within a clean, green town centre.

These outcomes enable Walsall to achieve its vision of being the healthiest town centre in the country by 2040 – "where people are proud to live and work within a healthy environment and balanced economy".

At the heart of the process is the need to create a baseline for measurable outcomes through metrics such as footfall, investment, jobs, new homes, property values, sustainable connectivity, increased high street spend and investment, increased business rates and Council Tax, sustainability and net zero principles.

The challenges: The challenges facing Walsall as a
town centre destination and cultural centre were identified:

- High retail vacancy rate due to changing national retail habits and the absence of suitable attractions to bring people into the town centre.
- The town centre can feel unsafe and uninviting.
- No clear physical or visual connections linking the key destinations of the town centre creating poor legibility.
- Insufficient public / green spaces of quality and a lack of suitable leisure offer to attract people to spend time in the town centre.
- Excellent public transport assets but unattractive and confusing arrival point at the rail station and lack of connections between transport hubs.
- Poor perceptions of Walsall and residents lack a sense of civic pride. The town centre has recently been identified as second on the list of most unhealthy high streets in the UK, leading to the local authority ambition is turn this around to become the healthiest town in the UK.

"We tend to talk ourselves down. While we have lost many historic buildings, we have also created a pedestrianised high street. The question now is how do we reconnect people to the place."

Simon Nielson,
Executive Director
Economy, Environment
and Communities,
Walsall Council



The opportunities: Key projects have been identified and are central to the delivery of the Walsall masterplan:

- **Connected Gateway** - creating a connected, modern interchange on the high street with a high quality rail concourse and good links to bus services.
- **Walsall Gateway** - a way back into the town centre with quality housing and good connectivity to reduce severance in other areas caused by the ring road.
- **Station Quarter** - attracting private investment and new residents to Walsall town centre with a mix of private and affordable housing.
- **Challenge Block** - a modern health facility in the town centre – working with partners such as the private sector, health sector and the University of Wolverhampton to develop an accessible place for residents.
- **Active Public Spaces and Gallery Square** - creating a new multi-functional public space which enhances the key assets of the New Art Gallery and Waterfront. The safe, healthy and attractive open spaces created here will be at the heart of delivering the vision of a healthy high street.
- **Performing Arts Centre** - development of a new 1,000+ seater performing arts venue providing a multi-function performance and conference space on the high street.
- **Community Learning Campus** - a town centre learning campus for adult and community education.

"Some of what you see here may feel generic and you may think it's what you'd want for any town centre and there's an element of that but nonetheless they are outcomes that a good regeneration programme should deliver."

Philippa Venables, Director of Regeneration and Economy, Walsall Council

The programme of action: A clear programme of actions and challenges was highlighted to support Walsall as it takes the masterplan from idea to delivery:

- **Plans and Strategies** – assembling the Town Centre Masterplan and Town Investment Plans alongside the plans of other directorates – reducing the ability to work in isolation.
- **Prioritisation** – setting an order of action based on funding priorities (FHSE, Town Deal) and local strategy and priorities.
- **Pipeline** – establishing what design and construction resources will be needed is essential to match short-term government funding practice with the longer term revenue requirement.
- **Partnerships** – identifying the national, regional and local government, private sector and communities who can work together on delivery.
- **Co-design and Consultation** – ensuring the right interventions are made in the right places.
- **Project and Programmes Design** – driving value through quality specification and smart resource planning.
- **Governance** – establishing the framework and structure to ensure a robust decision making process.
- **Delivery** – understanding the need to develop short, medium and long term delivery plans and the team to deliver each.



Masterclass Workshops

To tackle the brief, the cohort split into groups for two workshop sessions. The Discovery Workshops evaluated the Walsall town centre plan against current best practice thinking, followed by the Optioning and Recommendations Workshops, in which the groups made suggestions on how the current plans for Walsall town centre could be strengthened.

Four best practice themes, identified at the ADEPT Spring Conference in May 2021, were used as the basis for the workshops, with each group taking a theme to evaluate and suggest improvement to the Walsall plan from these perspectives:

1. User Driven

- *Towns are for **all***
- Be **bottom up** in approach

2. Reinvent purpose

- *It's got to be **more than just retail***
- Places for **connecting people** and experiences not vehicles

3. Leadership

- *Get to know and work with the **private sector***
- *Strong, clear and **dedicated leadership** with dedicated capacity*
- *It's hard and you need to **take risks!***

4. Strategy and Delivery

- *Clear **integrated** plans, funding, and delivery*
- *Set baseline **data** and monitor change*



Cohort left to right: Katie Moreton, Carolyn McKenzie, Mark Corbin, Nicola Monk, Rob Dunford, Carol Maclellan, Alyn Jones, Liz Kirkham, Llewelyn Morgan, Claire Wood, Owen Jenkins, Kate Langdon.



Left to right: Jenny Blackwell, Kirsteen Bailey, Anna Gornall, Victoria Weston, Katie Moreton, Mark Corbin, Matthew Eason, Carolyn McKenzie, Nicola Monk, Rob Dunford, Carol Maclellan, Alyn Jones, Liz Kirkham, Llewelyn Morgan, Claire Wood, Owen Jenkins, Kate Langdon, Neil Gibson, Antony Oliver, Sunita Dulai.

Workshop One: Discovery

To evaluate the regeneration ambition and plans for Walsall town centre against current best practice thinking.

1. User driven

Leading areas:

- The plan represents a strong broad strategy
- There is good talk of collaboration
- There is understanding that the community doesn't stand still
- There is a clear articulation of vision
- Contains understanding of the need to be light on feet and flexible in approach

Areas to challenge:

- It is not clear what the risks and the timeline is
- It is unclear what learnings have come from the Covid-19 crisis
- There is no opportunity to re-test throughout the programme
- There is need for more engagement with the younger community
- It is unclear what the metrics are and how the ambition will be measured
- It is unclear whether communities really understand why these interventions are proposed and when they will be delivered

2. Reinvent purpose

Leading areas:

- It is the peoples' ambition
- There is good overlap with education policy
- Opportunity to attract a wider range of people – and more affluent people to more expensive shops
- Provides an opportunity to encourage try-outs of vacant units at reduced rates

Areas to challenge:

- Is this plan fit for purpose post Covid?
- We need to embrace net zero - does the plan represent a post-climate emergency world?
- The healthy town centre message gets lost
- Does the healthy high streets programme build on and learn from the vaccination programme to offer, say, combined vaccination and cancer screening?
- What is the parking strategy?
- There is need to be aware of the lived experience of the community
- There is need for an opportunity to refresh the master plan



3. Leadership

Leading areas:

- Good focus and a real appetite for risk
- Evidence of accountable leadership with skills and expertise
- Great access to funding
- Good use of digital tools
- Using Minecraft is a good way to engage a younger audience

Areas to challenge:

- There are individual projects that are not connected
- Lack of local leadership and visibility
- Doesn't go far enough because of capacity of individuals
- Lacks community involvement in scoping plans
- Lack of prominent private sector involvement
- Lacks understanding of what it feels like to be a young person in Walsall – does Minecraft mean anything to the community?

4. Strategy and delivery

Leading areas:

- It is easy to read and clear
- Provides an integrated vision
- Creates more space for public realm
- Shows great passion from the team

Areas to challenge:

- Disconnect between the vision and the healthy ambitions
- Lacks clarity over delivery and impact on the community during delivery
- Not clear what the roles of education and young people are in developing this plan
- Not clear what the role of the community will play in delivering the plan
- Feels civic led – that might put people off – “is it my vision or the Council’s vision?”
- Governance is unclear - who is acting in the cocreation of this vision?
- Where are the skills to deliver this vision - is there the capacity and capability?



Workshop Two: Optioning and Recommendations

In the same groups, the outputs from the Discovery Workshops were used to create a variety of options as to how the re-imagining of Walsall town centre could be strengthened, with a set of clear recommendations.

1. User driven

1. *Reset the plan on a broader base:*
 - a. *against the climate change emergency and agile working.*
 - b. *identify non-traditional routes to engage.*
 - c. *independent facilitation.*
 - d. *non-traditional venues.*
 - e. *without asking the same questions.*
2. *Established continued dialogue with the community and stakeholders – seek true co-creation.*
3. *Understand what users want to get from the plan and their priorities.*
4. *Ensure that the plan is owned by the community – tailor the engagement.*
5. *Ask the community what it can bring and how they can engage.*
6. *Carry out a gap analysis to help get the community users more involved in the process.*

2. Reinvent purpose

1. *Validate aspirations - do people want to be the healthiest?*
2. *A Walsall for the people who live in Walsall – need a focus on people who live there first before enticing new folk in.*
3. *Master plan – will this actually be deliverable, and should it be a more fluid framework to adapt to change?*
4. *Investment – comes from all sorts of unexpected directions – make sure that no opportunities are ruled out. Is there a philanthropist to sponsor Walsall?*



3. Leadership

1. **Narrative** - be really clear around how it hangs together for different stakeholders - use behavioural insight and strong storytelling.
2. **Governance** – create a town centre board to get clarity over delivery and ensure there is a place for everyone.
3. **Actual plan** is missing pieces around digitalisation, net zero and health.
4. **Where is the delivery vehicle** – need clarity around this vehicle and joint ventures with the private sector.
5. **Community engagement** and communication from different groups beyond the project is required.
6. **Clear programme** of delivery and pipeline needed to understand what's included and how it links to funding strategy.
7. **Long term funding strategy** – clarity required around how they continue to secure funding, especially from the private sector.
8. **The team** - how will the plan build skills for the future and delivery.

4. Strategy and delivery

1. **Vision** - need for a unified vision that everyone buys into about Walsall - this should be people-centric and intergenerational – education, business, faith, etc.
2. **Co-production** - shouldn't be local authority led to remove fear and build confidence across all communities.
3. **Data** – understanding the outcomes that are being defined allows better understanding of what data to seek and collect. What does 'best' look like?
4. **Planning** – the integrated delivery plan feels like a separate project.

