



**LOCAL
PARTNERSHIPS**

WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

West Midlands Property Alliance

Using assets for growth



1. Single Public Estate and Town Centre Renewal

1.1 Background

Worcestershire is a non-metropolitan county in the West Midlands with a population of 566,000 and the principle urban centre is the cathedral city of Worcester. The main settlements are Bromsgrove, Stourport-on-Severn, Droitwich, Evesham, Kidderminster, Malvern, and the largest town, Redditch, and a number of smaller towns such as Bewdley, Pershore, Tenbury Wells



and Upton upon Severn. The north-east of the county includes part of the industrial West Midlands conurbation while the rest of the county is largely rural. Kidderminster has a textile industrial heritage whereas Bromsgrove and Redditch owe more to the engineering and motor trade activities of Birmingham.

The County Council's plan for growth focusses on the M5 corridor and technology based activities which can be attracted to well-connected business parks, whilst at the same time, breathing new life into transitional industrial towns whose economic rationale has faded over recent decades and supporting the creation of new businesses in rural areas. The County Council area includes 6 District Councils: Wyre Forest, Bromsgrove, Redditch, Worcester, Malvern Hills, Wychavon.

10 years ago Worcester County Council, Worcester District Council and Redditch District Council brought their property estates management functions together as a single shared service. The success this brought about especially in the area of team performance, encouraged the establishment of a Capital Asset Partnership (CAP) which over 20 public agencies now attend. All Heads of Property are involved with a combined Chief Executive's Group overseeing the operation of the CAP.

Government Property Unit have supported this initiative. Over 10 years, approximately £120m have been achieved in capital savings plus £1.9m pa savings on management costs.

1.2 Key facts:

- ▶ Over 10 years, WCC have taken the lead on single public estate efficiencies, seeking to influence other agencies across the county. The Council recognised that customer's preferred transaction channels have changed rapidly over the past 4 years from counter interfaces to internet based communications. Just 4 years ago, 50-60% of all public caller exchanges were via manned counters whereas now 90% of contacts are via the internet.
- ▶ In response, the approach to cross-service delivery continues to evolve. The process began with a joint help desk/single access point in Evesham with the County Council, District Council, police and DWP represented. This pilot proved the technology and from here, joint customer hubs were rolled out across Worcestershire, mostly situated in libraries. Running costs were largely met by WCC and WCC owned buildings were utilised. In this way, the County Council provided an attractive offer to partners which built up grassroots level confidence in the model of shared service outlets.
- ▶ Today, many of these early generation hubs are no longer viable in their original format as the latest self-help software needs only a light touch support. But the model of sharing buildings in a convenient town centre location has taken root. Libraries will continue to be the focus and in Worcestershire, the debate is no longer about the threat of library closure but about how many services can function from within the library building. Typically, users will now include WCC, the District Council, police, CAB, Tourist Information, local health services, a national charity and Job Centre Plus. These busy multi-purpose buildings generate high footfall and will continue to play a vital role in underpinning viable retail businesses in town centres right across the county.

1.3 Exceptional characteristics:

- ▶ Creative use of WCC owned land and building assets in Bromsgrove town centre has brought about a single public estate plan which has delivered a transformed proposition attracting high calibre retailers and developers. The process started with a simple public



estate mapping exercise followed by local discussions which aimed to rationalise public sector occupied floor-space and release land for development. A Business Case was developed which blended all public ownerships in the town centre; a single report, one cost benefit exercise and a jointly agreed plan. 6 publically owned sites and one site in private ownership together formed a comprehensive scheme for Bromsgrove town centre.

- ▶ Delivery of the Bromsgrove plan has not only achieved massive rationalisation of the occupied public estate but has underpinned the vitality of the town; a complex of 160 extra care apartments, new joint police and fire station, M&S Simply Foods, cinema, restaurants and public realm improvements. A refurbished Listed Building now contains a viable library, Job Centre, registrar, shared service hub, county and district council staff offices, along with out of hours public use or meeting rooms and events space.
- ▶ A similar single plan approach is under development in Redditch town centre where the traditional high street is suffering many of the problems typical in small towns today; a large, inward looking covered shopping centre operating as a destination with surrounding streets suffering declining levels of footfall and trade and a deteriorating environment. Public estate mapping is leading to a single plan/vision and a realistic phased approach to investment which will over time regenerate the town. WCC have taken the lead by releasing a surplus site for development of a poly-clinic. Changing operational practices now mean that both the local police station and court building are too large and so local discussions will ensure that these assets are dealt with via the single agreed plan for the town. All S106 contributions from development of all public estate land is directed back into investment in the towns.

1.4 Key lessons learned:

- ▶ The Worcestershire experience has proved that the public sector is really good at coming together to have “one family” conversations and to generate commonsense solutions. There has been no need for sophisticated GIS software and databases, just a simple coloured plan and a willingness to cooperate. WCC have acted as the catalyst in bringing different parts of the public sector together to agree shared objectives and deliver a common plan within identified geographies.
- ▶ Members have recognised that it is more important to preserve vital services rather than the buildings from which they have traditionally been delivered. The realism of budgets constraints have brought about a willingness to take difficult decisions.
- ▶ The ability of WCC to take the lead and to encourage participation by other agencies in a non-dogmatic manner has created the right atmosphere at the grass-roots level.
- ▶ Generate a single plan for each town centre and make sure all public agency asset managers are intent on delivering that programme, even if this is in small incremental steps over an extended period of years. Experience in Worcestershire has demonstrated the value of “small victories” which serve to build local confidence in the shared single plan and that this approach has provided sustained improvements in efficiencies as well as in delivering local growth ambitions.

1.5 Future aims:

- ▶ The CAP initiative is poised to take a more ambitious role in the form of a Joint Property Vehicle (JPV). It is proposed that the JPV will act as agent for all participating services which are intended to be the police, fire and health services in Worcestershire alongside the County Council, Worcester District Council and Redditch District Council. This will

operate via a single transparent business case and single decision-making process. The participating agencies have agreed to follow the Cabinet Office process for project development and will produce a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) and subsequently an Outline Business Case (OBC). The project has been financially fully supported from LGA and REIP funding for the delivery of these two stages. A bid has been made under the Transformational Challenge Fund to support the detail design and implementation stage.

- ▶ The JVP will deliver the One Town Approach with assets matched to local need and with the ambition to draw in third sector and make connections with funding streams accessible via the LEP. Critically, it will be the route by which developers invest in Worcestershire's towns and urban centres, bring sites together to form commercial , viable propositions.
- ▶ WCC will continue to actively manage their small holdings estate to bring about further agricultural tenancy rationalisation so that viable farming units are preserved. Heritage assets such as listed farm buildings will be sold off and the proceeds used to fund improvements to farm infrastructure.



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