



# Understanding the challenges facing Tamworth town centre

June 2021

A research report by



Didobi



RISE ASSOCIATES

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# Introduction

Tamworth has a rich history and takes its name from the river Tame. It began as a Saxon settlement in Staffordshire and its population grew rapidly over the last century. The town has changed significantly over the years, though has remained a market town with a strong and enduring heritage. This includes a bailey castle dating back to William the Conqueror at the heart of the town centre.

The town is also well connected, with the centre one mile from the A5 and five miles from the M42. It is also close to the M6, M6 toll, M1 and M5. This connectivity means the town competes with

other regional centres such as Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham, Lichfield, Nuneaton and Solihull. In recent years, the town has started to lag behind some of these neighbouring areas, particularly where the town centre retail offer is concerned.

Despite once being the capital of Mercia, one of the most powerful kingdoms of Anglo Saxon England, Tamworth's proud history now sits uneasily with a modern identity that's less defined.

The most symbolic manifestation of this is its town centre, which, like many other towns across the country has lost major high street chains over the

years, including John Lewis from Ventura Park, due to changing consumer behaviour and shopping channels. Tamworth currently suffers from a reliance on low aspirational retail and a poor cultural and dining/evening economy offer.

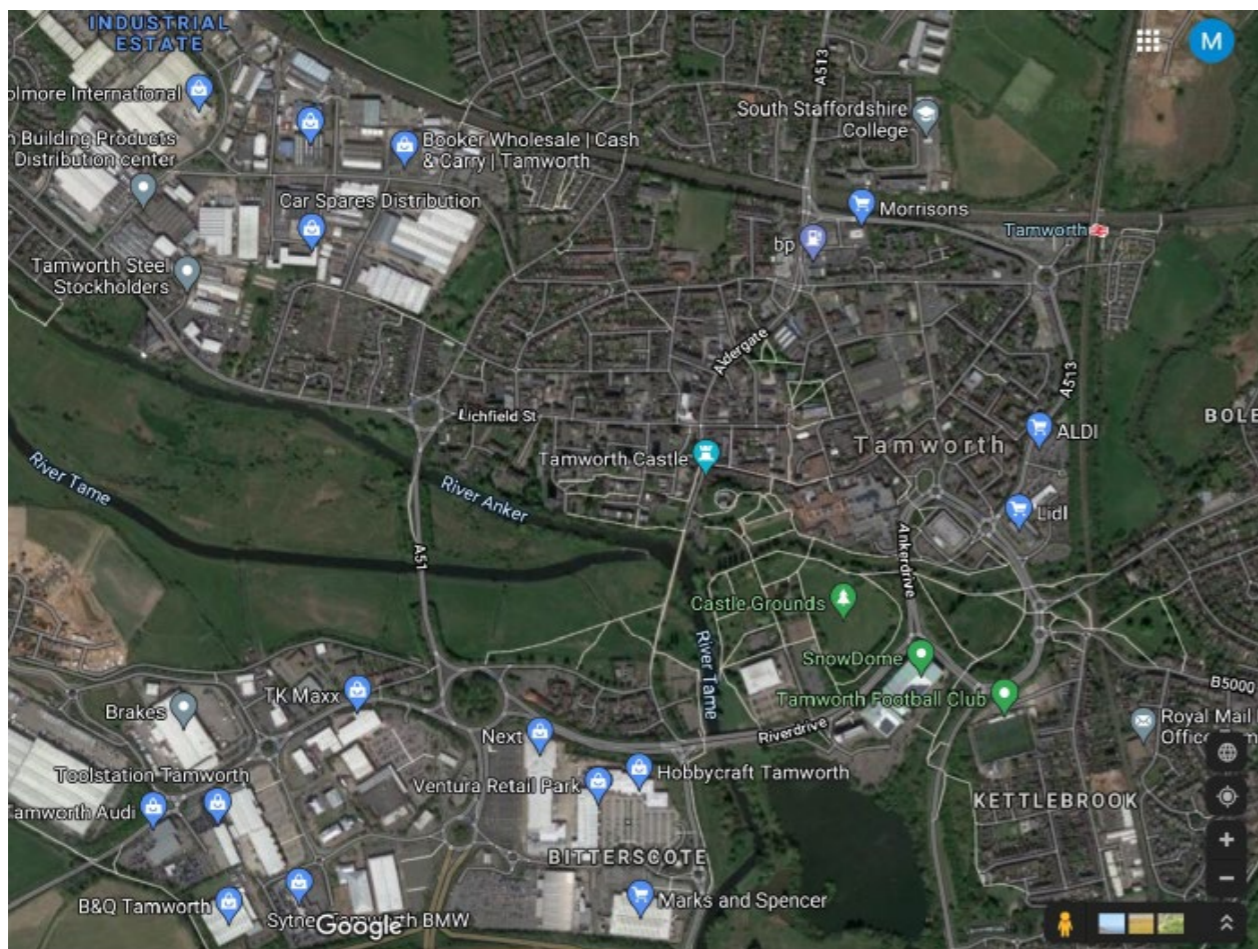
As a result, the town centre is experiencing significant retail decline. Increasing competition from out-of-town retail, particularly Ventura Park, a 1990s retail park located less than 1km from the town centre, has resulted in spending moving away from the historical retail core. Other than retail and services such as banks, there are currently few other uses to encourage people into the town centre. The decline of retail and lack of food and drink businesses are therefore resulting in the decline of the centre overall and has led it to being demoted from a Major Centre to a Local Centre.

These challenges are not unique to Tamworth. It is very encouraging that the Council are keen to turn around its fortunes and have started this journey. Boosted by an award of £21.65million from the Future High Streets Fund, they are advancing a bold ambition that will build the foundations for change. For Tamworth to achieve its potential and maintain relevance, this ambition must be achieved. It will take many years to achieve. The milestones, messaging and curation of the town centre will be critical to success during this time.

To ensure this investment makes the most impact, we have been asked, as Local Government Association (LGA) Economic Growth Advisers, to help the Council achieve the following objectives.

- To consult with local businesses to establish a greater understanding of the barriers preventing new, diverse businesses from starting up in Tamworth
- To ensure that local businesses are more engaged and willing to take on an active role in supporting the Council with their plans to transform the town centre
- Make specific recommendations for how Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) monies could be used in achieving delivery proposals (further report to follow)

This work was delivered between February and June 2021.



Tamworth aerial view (Google Earth)

## Our approach

**After meeting with the Council on 23 February, we began a literature review including council and other documents, reports and the Future High Streets Fund (FHSF) bid to gain deeper insights into the challenges facing Tamworth along with an understanding of the plans to transform the town centre. A 'walkaround' with key council officers and analysis of further data, helped provide a clear picture of Tamworth's current position.**

We subsequently carried out stakeholder mapping to determine who to speak with and developed a programme to engage businesses and other key figures who are stakeholders and interested bodies in the town centre. Consultation was, however, made more difficult by Covid-19 and the Lock-down restrictions. It was not possible to hold public meetings and most businesses and other key institutions were closed. This meant a much greater emphasis was placed on remote consultation and working with strong local networks to secure buy in to our research and analysis.

Our programme included a blend of face-to-face engagement where appropriate, telephone interviews and an online survey.

All stakeholders were given the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences of operating in Tamworth town centre and to identify challenges they face along with barriers they believe are discouraging greater business diversity and preventing other businesses from investing in Tamworth. They were also asked about the Council's regeneration plans and their willingness to take a more active role so that future plans can be genuine partnership arrangements and have the greatest chance of success.

Respondents to our consultation have been mostly anonymised in order to encourage people to be open and honest and speak without fear or favour. A number of people only engaged with us on this condition.

## Engagement with businesses and other key stakeholders

**In total, over 50 local businesses and other stakeholders were engaged during our consultation period and this secured in-depth feedback on the issues raised above.**

These included key local business figures, asset managers who own property in Tamworth, the Police, Tamworth Market operators, transport operators such as Arriva, food and drink operators, hotel owners, the library, shop owners, caterers, pubs, councillors, the local chamber of commerce and community interest companies (Tamworth is Open).

Key engagement activities included pro-actively emailing target stakeholders and setting up telephone interviews; emailing a range of service, convenience, leisure and comparison goods businesses inviting them to take part in an online survey, setting up Zoom calls with groups such as Tamworth Is Open and carrying out face-to-face interviews with shop owners when the shops were allowed to re-open after lockdown.

The activity that generated the lowest level of response was the online survey, which did not get the pick-up that we would normally expect. We identified a degree of consultation fatigue and it was only when we were able to connect with local networks and fully explain our role and purpose then we secured a positive response. Those who contributed to the consultation showed considerable passion, civic pride and a clear attachment to Tamworth. They were very keen to share their views and wanted to play a part in shaping the town's future.

## Executive Summary

**The purpose of this report is to show how we have engaged with the Tamworth business community to better understand the barriers they face and see whether there is sufficient appetite for businesses to take on a more active role in helping shape the future of their town centre.**

We have identified a number of barriers, not just for existing businesses but also potential investors and entrepreneurs considering setting up a business in Tamworth.

These are the impact of Ventura Retail Park, the relationship with the council (in particular, elected members), the perception of crime, the market, public transport, business operating costs, communications, and the lack of a vision that people can rally around, reduced footfall and a common view that the town is losing its identity.

In our findings, we explore these barriers in more detail and highlight ways in which they can be overcome. Within all of these barriers, we believe there are opportunities to turn them to Tamworth's advantage and kickstart a renaissance. We are especially encouraged that, despite some friction between businesses and the Council, there is a willingness to contribute to and be involved in shaping the town's future.

Businesses are ambitious for Tamworth and want local leaders to set their sights high. A recurrent theme throughout our discussions, be it in person, over the telephone and online, was that Tamworth is 'punching below its weight' and not fulfilling its potential. This frustration could easily be turned into passionate advocacy and a reservoir of support for change if the Council build better relations and present a clear vision for the immediate and long-term future.

For this to happen, we recommend that the Council focuses on three priority areas to support wider physical regeneration plans and concentrate minds on the human scale changes that are needed to breathe new life into Tamworth.

These are:

- a. Supporting and encouraging aspirational local independent businesses (both physical and digital)**
- b. Transforming Tamworth's food, drink and cultural offer to diversify away from retail and create a stronger night time economy**
- c. Putting great experiences at the heart of the town centre by holding more events. These should play to Tamworth's strengths and rich heritage, and encourage a wider catchment, including visitors to Ventura Retail Park, to come into town**

The recommendations at the end of this report are suggested interventions to start to affect the cultural changes that will need to accompany physical regeneration changes. This will help Tamworth make a decisive break with a 20th century retail model and embrace a positive future.

Feedback from stakeholders on barriers to progress for existing business and future investment are summarised under the headings below. All feedback was gathered through engagement with key stakeholders either in person or through telephone or Zoom interviews.



# Main findings

## 5.1 Identity

Despite having good employment figures, favourable transport links to the M42 and strong assets such as the Castle, there was a consensus among those we engaged with that Tamworth was losing its identity. It should be said, however, that this was felt acutely precisely because civic pride was strong and local people wanted the town to reflect their aspirations and Tamworth's former stature.

Respondents felt that it had been overtaken by neighbouring towns, there was an absence of a vision, a low aspirational retail offer (according to the Local Data Company 48% of the offer is classed as Value Retail) and limited choice, a weak food and cultural offer and concerns the market is "sad, full of tat and tatty". In recent years this had been exacerbated by an increase in empty shops and deteriorating appearance of shops and facades in the town centre. Local Data Company vacancy statistics shows Tamworth as having a vacancy rate of 14.4% (July 2020) versus the national average of 13.8%.

*"Tamworth is supposed to be a market town with a historic castle. Yet the market is second rate and the castle is under-used. If we're going to reclaim our identity, we need a much better market and more events around the council."*

*"Tamworth has become a depressing place with nowhere for families with kids to go."*

*"Confidence is low in the town. People don't*

*want to spend their money here. They'd prefer to go elsewhere. Lockdown has devastated our business and Tamworth can't carry on like this. We need big changes."*

*"Tamworth used to be great in the 1990s. But we've lost our cultural offer. We can't just rely on shops."*

A further challenge that reinforced the need to strengthen the town's identity and ensure it projects a more ambitious view of Tamworth was raised by some stakeholders working on the outskirts. Tamworth is home to a number of high-end firms providing well-paid, good quality jobs and a view from some of those in this demographic was that they would not consider going into Tamworth with clients.

*"We like working in Tamworth but go elsewhere after work because there is nothing for us. Some of the bars are a bit rough and it needs a better food offer. If it had that, we'd gladly meet with people after work."*

*"I've been to Christopher's a few times but there's not a lot of choice, so I tend to go elsewhere after work. We need some more high-end bars."*

In summary, it was felt that Tamworth's town centre offer was lacking diversity, too tired and too limited to low aspirational retail. This had a direct impact on business. One of the biggest property owners in the town told us that, *"Tamworth is the most challenging site I have in trying to get business to fill units"*. There is, however, the

catchment and spend in the area that could and, for many, would support a Tamworth that addresses these gaps.

## 5.2 Ventura Retail Park

There was a unanimous view that the Ventura Retail Park (704k sq ft and in top 20 UK retail parks) has had an adverse effect on Tamworth's high street, as it has sucked shoppers away from the town centre. Some of the comments we received on this issue are below.

*"The beginning of the end of the high street."*

*"People don't cross Ventura to town. There's nothing for them to come for."*

*"Interesting and unique offer needed. People don't walk 100 yards into town."*

*"Why are we trying to compete with Ventura? We need more independent shops."*

Our view is that while Ventura Retail Park is a major regional shopping and leisure destination due to the SnowDome, it does present a great opportunity, due to its proximity to Tamworth town centre, to provide an additional and complementary offer to attract the footfall that visits not just Ventura but also Jolly Sailor Retail Park and Cardinal Point.

## 5.3 Relationship with the Council

There was a willingness among the overwhelming majority of people we engaged with to work more productively with the Council to shape the future of the town, but this needs to be caveated with a range of constructive criticism.

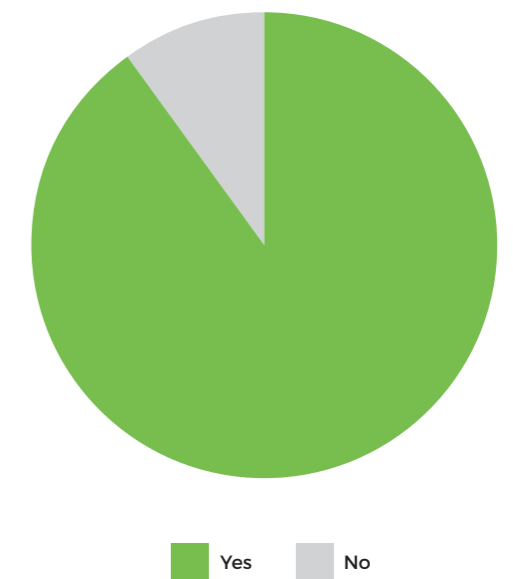


Fig 1. Would you like to play a part in helping the Council improve the town? (From Survey Monkey questionnaire)

While key members of the economic regeneration team, Matthew Fletcher and Lorraine Farley, were singled out for praise, the general consensus is that the council is not best placed to lead the charge on improving Tamworth's image, particularly in relation to a fresh, contemporary food, drink and culture offer, leaving *"shopkeepers disillusioned"*.

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For businesses at the coalface, the elected members drew considerable criticism with a number of people arguing that councillors were rude, aloof and did not understand their needs.

On this issue, some of the feedback we received is quoted below.

*"I've never had a conversation with a councillor. We've all suffered during lockdown and they're nowhere to be seen."*

*"Councillors are rude at best. They show no empathy or understanding of local business."*

*"One councillor blames the business for the state of the town. He doesn't seem to understand what the Council's role is."*

*"Really difficult people who don't make it easy for businesses"*

*"They need to go from 'can't do' to 'can do'"*

*"Councillors don't listen – do nothing"*

While such criticism related to experiences over many years with the Council, people were willing to recognise the importance of government funding and recognised that the Council were working hard to make this investment count. This was reflected in views such as:

*"There is more goodwill these days and people can see that the Council are trying to turn things around."*

However, others views emphasised the need for better communications, which suggested that clearer communications from the Council were needed to strengthen this goodwill.

Lack of communications and a better understanding of what was happening on the high street was cited by several respondents. A general view was: *"we need more on what's going on."*

*"They need to look at new forms of communication. The monthly Zoom brief from St Giles Hospice gets 100 people attending."*

A new regeneration website is under way by the Visit Tamworth communications team.

The council newsletter goes to 850 businesses, but communications get *"low feedback or updates"*.

Central to the barriers facing business growth and investment is a clear communication challenge with existing operators, wider businesses and the council itself. The council has a strong external communications function, but engagement is low. Businesses are disillusioned by a lack of direct communications on licences and decisions. A clear message on the vision, plans and the point on the journey would encourage greater understanding and engagement (see annex A for the Better Towns Road map example)

### 5.4 Digital maturity

**Furthermore, the use of digital and social media by existing operators is limited. A new regeneration website is under development by the Visit Tamworth communications team, which is an opportunity to frame and share the exciting vision for the town. But this alone won't kickstart fresh, engaged communications. A root and branch review of communications styles, platforms and channels, exploring what works, what doesn't, re-engaging and upskilling current operators to become brand ambassadors for Tamworth is clearly a pressing need.**

This low digital footprint is a barrier to investment, as it suggests low aspiration and confidence. Existing traders currently use digital and social for sales purposes, mostly led by Facebook. There is low engagement of online channels to grow audience base or bring the Tamworth story to life. Analysis of Google Trends data shows an interesting, and in some areas, strong picture of search traffic for Tamworth versus Lichfield but not in all areas as the charts illustrate (over).

In the absence of information from them, the Council PR team has to physically doorstep food and drink businesses to ask about their plans and events, and trawl through their social media for shareable content. Hashtags like #TamworthMatters, #AmazingTamworth and #VisitTamworth have potential to unite positive conversations about the town, but they aren't used effectively or widely. Where the Council creates events like the coffee trail or festive windows initiative, the responses rely on push communications rather than active, in real life and digital engagement.

## Main findings

Figure 2. All search traffic for Tamworth and Lichfield 2016-21 (Source Google Trends)

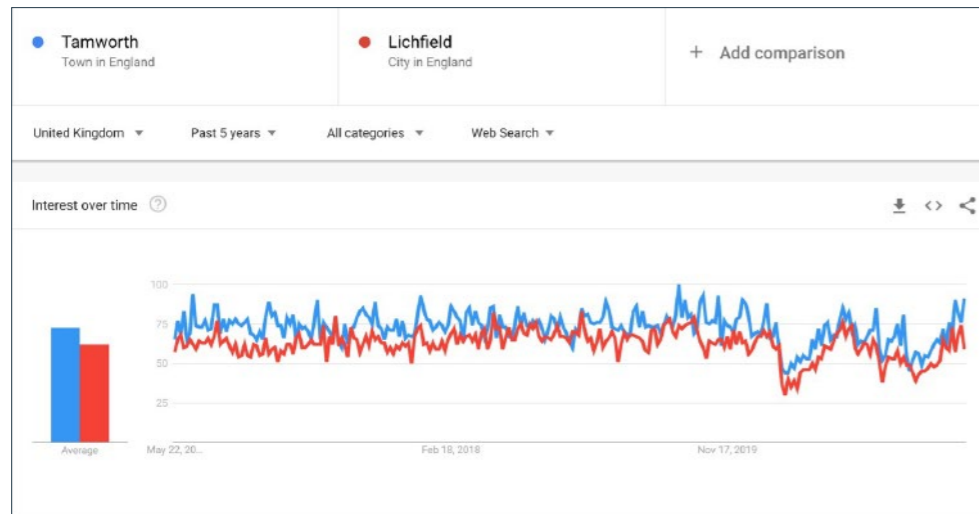


Figure 3. Food & Drink search traffic for Tamworth and Lichfield 2016-21 (Source Google Trends)

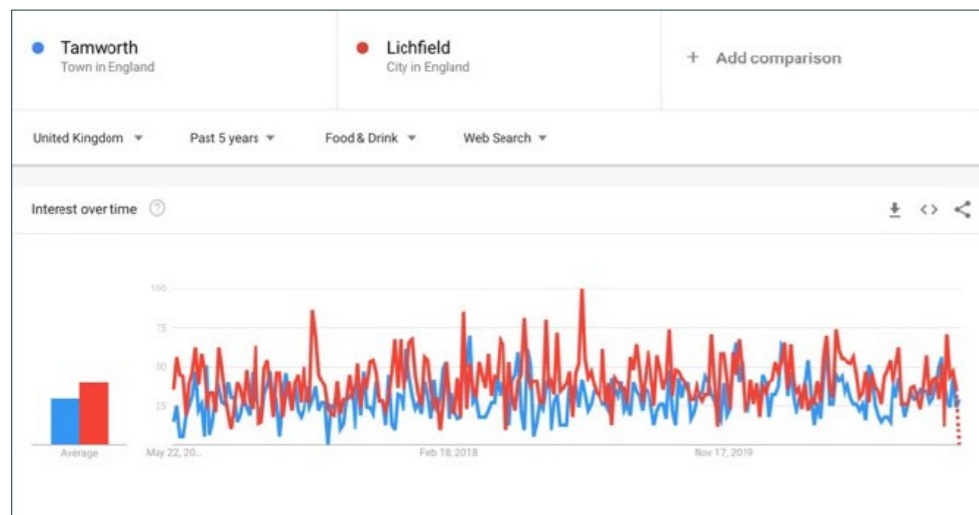


Figure 4. Shopping search traffic for Tamworth and Lichfield 2016-21 (Source Google Trends)

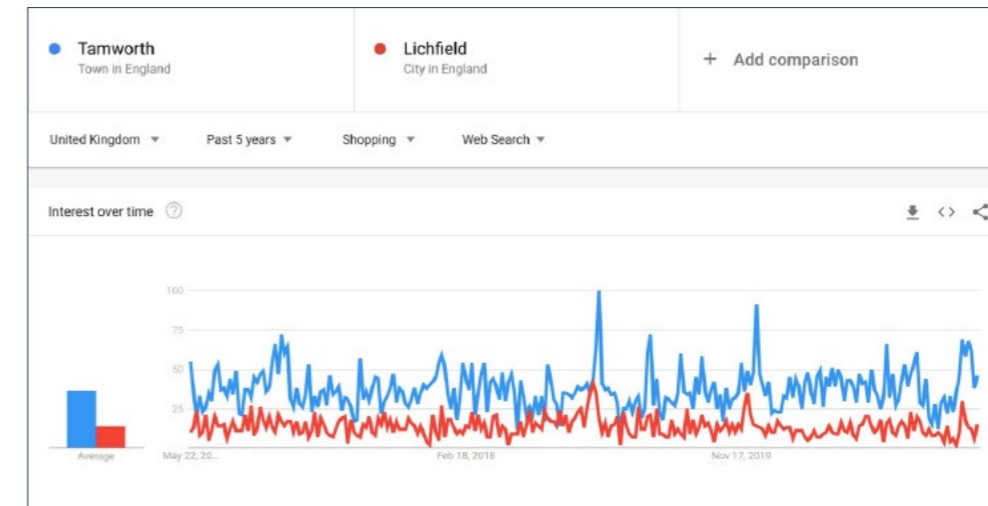
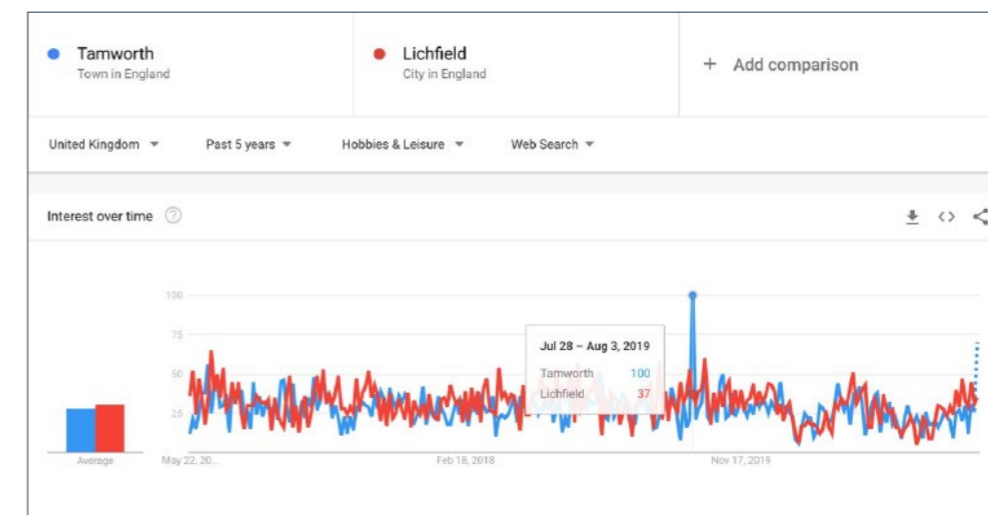


Figure 5. Hobbies and Leisure search traffic for Tamworth and Lichfield 2016-21 (Source Google Trends)





## Main findings

### 5.5 Perception of crime

**Feedback frequently referred to the need for an improved night economy coupled with a more ambitious food and drink experience.**

*"I feel unsafe as woman on own,"* was a comment that came up a few times from female business owners.

Perhaps the most interesting insight into this, however, was provided by the police. Feedback from the Tamworth Commander suggested that although Tamworth was one of the safest areas in Staffordshire, steps could be taken to make it even safer and address negative perceptions.

One of these was to ensure there was a stricter enforcement of banning orders to remove problem drinkers from the town centre.

*"We have had some intelligence to suggest that security staff were allowing people into pubs that they were banned from,"* he said. *"Pubs have also been tipped off that we are doing walkthroughs and banned drinkers have been seen jumping over the back wall."*

To address negative perceptions of crime, he suggested more could be done to improve the town's cultural and food offer in order to make it more family and attract different people into the centre.

*"You need more social/family pubs and a better cultural offer. We have seen in other areas how*

*this makes people feel safer,"* he said. *"When there is too much emphasis on drinking pubs and nightclubs this puts families off. Tamworth has about the same level of crime as Lichfield, but Lichfield has no nightclubs and Tamworth has two."*

### 5.6 The Market

**The market is also seen as a deterrent to the aspirational, lifestyle-led offer stakeholders and residents are keen to attract.**

We spoke to the current market operators to get a better sense of the challenges here – and recognised that they too wish to provide a more ambitious market offer.

The challenge as they see it is that there is not enough footfall at present and that the town attracts too narrow a demographic to provide a modern offer. It's very much a 'chicken and egg' situation in that it's difficult to understand what is holding the town back. Is it the low footfall? Or the poor offer?

The market operators argue that market traders are not like retailers. They do not have long term agreements on properties and take a short-term view. If the trade isn't there, they are not prepared to wait for the custom to arrive. They will go elsewhere.

### 5.7 Public Transport

**We spoke with the General manager for Tamworth and Telford at Arriva. He highlighted wider national policy issues that have impacted the provision and operation of bus services which has resulted in a marginalised and undervalued service. The bus services for Tamworth are split between local routes and inter urban routes. An issue in our view is the fact that the terminus for each of these services is at the opposite end of the town to each whereas as central terminus would great a transport hub and greater convenience and therefore use of the bus services that operate locally and between large neighbouring centres.**

*"Neither location can accommodate all the services that operate into Tamworth Town Centre"* (Arriva)

The growth in car ownership by 49% in the last 25 years (Source Department for Transport statistics) has impacted the use and commercial viability (this results in reduced timetables by frequency of service and operating hours and days) of bus services. Passenger data shows that a large proportion of passengers are either the young or the old who depend on this transport to access essential services including the offer of the town centre.

Tamworth is fortunate to have a train station on the edge of the town and a service that has a direct service to London (90 minutes) and Birmingham (22 minutes). This provides a great opportunity to

attract commuters and visitors from outside of the immediate area to Tamworth. Both the town and the station would benefit from better signage in order to guide people to and from the station. Overall, there is an opportunity to create greater engagement between the transport operators and the town in order to facilitate the movement of people into and out of Tamworth town centre.

### 5.8 Communications

**While most people knew about the Council's plans to regenerate the town centre, few could explain what the vision for change was and a good number held sceptical views on how successful the plans would be. A number of respondents also raised concerns about the wider social media narrative around the town, with several arguing that it was a barrier to investment and that there was a need for Tamworth champions to express a more positive vision of the town on social media. When stakeholders were asked what factors they felt discouraged people from starting up a business in Tamworth, a typical comment was:**

*"The sheer amount of Tamworth people slagging it off on social media. The Herald giving fuel by the way they post. The town centre needs a business forum - strictly town centre businesses, not people from Polesworth and Lichfield."*

Furthermore, efforts to coordinate and drive new food, drink and culture experiences has been disjointed and personality-led. This has resulted in ill feeling, loss of trust and a fractious

## Main findings

relationship with entrepreneurs, some of whom have conflicting interests. There is a perception that the council is not sufficiently business-oriented, fast moving and does not do enough to promote enterprise.

### 5.9 Business operating costs

One of the barriers to business investment that was frequently mentioned was prohibitive business operating costs. Complaints about rent, business rates and inflexible agreements mirror national concerns that in a world of unsympathetic landlords, upward only rent reviews and outdated taxes, high streets do not support entrepreneurs. Some of the comments we received on this subject were:

*“This is a question that is continually asked of businesses in Tamworth. Approach the independent landlords, help to make buildings fit for purpose and more ‘turn key’ so that start up business can move straight in and not have the worry of huge set up costs.”*

*“Cheaper rents to allow independent different businesses to afford to trade and attract new customers.”*

*“High rent and low footfall is a deadly combination.”*

### 5.10 Footfall

**Arguably the biggest reason given as to why existing businesses found the current climate challenging and why other businesses were cautious about committing to Tamworth high street was the lack of footfall.**

Since emerging from lockdown, footfall has shown signs of recovery, but it is still considerably down on pre-pandemic levels.

Total UK footfall for the month to May 1 remained 40% down on the same month in 2019 despite the re-opening of retail, according to the British Retail Consortium.

Businesses in Tamworth suggested that weak footfall was a long-standing problem with the area and that more reasons to attract people into the town were needed apart from retail. Analysis by neighbourhood of the E-Food Deserts Index (EFDI) illustrates an example of a footfall detractor due to the lack of daily essentials food retail within the town centre. The EFDI is a multi-dimensional composite index for GB which measures the extent to which neighbourhoods exhibit characteristics associated with food deserts across four key drivers of groceries accessibility: Proximity and density of grocery retail facilities, Transport and accessibility, Neighbourhood socio-economic and demographic characteristics, E-commerce availability and propensity.

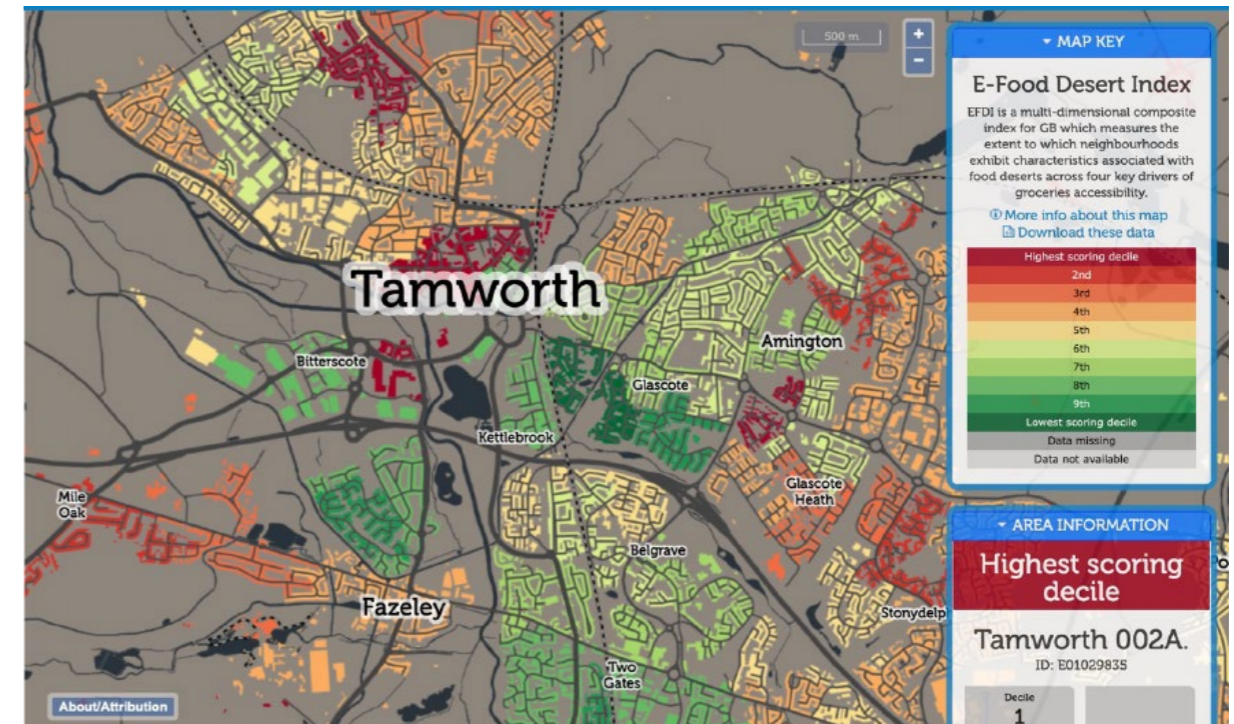


Figure 6. E-Food Desert Index for Tamworth neighbourhoods (Source Consumer Data Research Centre).

# Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

## 6.1 Strengths and Opportunities

**Tamworth is a densely populated borough that's home to a number of successful businesses. It has its share of deprivation but also enjoys significant pockets of affluence. There appears to be a captive audience of up and coming and successful businesses that have been engaged in previous years. Dave Harper who set up the Tamworth Business and Community Awards said 180 businesses entered the last one in 2019, with 2020 tipped to be a big year until the pandemic arrived.**

As well as a robust business base, Tamworth appears to have a healthy level of civic pride – and with its rich history, ancient landmarks and former status as the capital of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Mercia, there is a great opportunity to build on its heritage and carve out a distinctive identity.

However, to unlock this potential, the town needs to a decisive shift from being far too reliant on low aspirational retail. Instead, it needs to embrace food, drink, culture, experiences, and events.

The opportunity to develop a bigger experiential offer is huge and every stakeholder and entrepreneur we spoke to about Tamworth's food, drink and culture offer, argued that there is a strong demand for an improved offer. The disposable income exists, but it "doesn't come into town". Lichfield was most cited as the popular destination for locals, with a vibrant independent offer including Ego and Whitehouse. Events run by Tamworth Brewing Co, like the evening with a Bat

expert, are well attended but the view is that when the event ends "there is nowhere else to go".

In order to attract more people in the town, there needs to be more events and a better food and drink offer.

The heritage and setting of the town can be tapped into for a unique proposition that brings Tamworth's story to life in an engaging and compelling way. In the way that St George's Day provides a focal point for celebrations in the castle grounds, there's an opportunity to look at some of Tamworth's standout features to build a distinct food, drink and culture offer that has a strong local identity. Tamworth Pigs could be a great starting point, with a nationwide focus on ethical butchery and sustainable eating. Interestingly, Joules Brewery send their spent brewer's grain to the local pigs at Fordhall Organic Farm and support Market Drayton's Ginger and Spice Festival.

A number of towns have done this successfully, notably:

- Wakefield's four-day Rhubarb festival: <https://www.wakefield.gov.uk/events-and-culture/events/rhubarb-festival>
- The Isle of Wight's Garlic Festival: <https://www.garlicfestival.co.uk/>
- Lymington's Seafood Festival: <https://www.lymingtonseafoodfestival.co.uk/>
- Pontefract's festival celebrating its heritage as the centre of the British liquorice industry: <https://calendarcustoms.com/articles/pontefract-liquorice-festival/>
- <https://www.whitstableoysterfestival.co.uk/>

- Macclesfield's use of a centuries old treacle spilling accident and Treacle town name: <https://www.treaclemarket.co.uk/>
- Market Drayton's Ginger and Spice Festival that nods to its colonial past and its status as the "home of the gingerbread" (see Annex C)

There is potential to harness the entrepreneurial flair in the town and make it easier for a can-do spirit to thrive. There has been a rise in start-ups across the UK during the pandemic and capturing a local entrepreneurial spirit and encouraging people to set up businesses in Tamworth should be a post-pandemic priority.

New entrepreneurs are drawn to areas where there is demand and growth, and a "set" to be part of. While a number of businesses came together for the BID, they have now disbanded, and there is an understanding that the Council isn't best placed to lead the charge. There is an opportunity to create a platform or group to unite the existing talent and leverage them to draw in other like-minded independents and artisanal brands from further afield.

We identified a particular opportunity around improving the food and drink offer in the town and there is evidence of a growing confidence among some businesses to invest in this area. James Dance of Something For The Weekend barber shop, for example, has expanded to an upmarket coffee shop and new pub The Crafty Two has recently had a £400k investment and been taken over by local councillor and event organiser Paul Brindley.

Every stakeholder we spoke to about food and

drink saw the opportunity and talked about the aspiration for more upmarket, independent and artisanal outlets.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to kick-start Tamworth's cultural offering in the re-opening of Tamworth Assembly Rooms. In a recent announcement, the manager Adey Ramsel, alluded to the venue receiving much interest from promoters and relooking at its schedule of outdoor events. This interest provides a chance to establish exciting links to entrepreneurs and operators and incorporate more of a diverse cultural offer, linked to events like Black History Month, Chinese New Year, British Food Fortnight and National Vegetarian Week. The café, for instance, used to be open only during the day. Evening openings, ongoing music residencies and pop up operators should be considered to enhance Tamworth's culture offer. In West Yorkshire, for example, Armley community theatre is hosting a pop-up arts and crafts market. In Fife, Kirkcaldy theatre teamed up with local food and drink producers, to host a "pop up outdoor café" while its indoor space was closed in lockdown. It was so popular last year that it's back this year.

There is a further opportunity to utilise other key assets in the town for cultural reasons to expand this offer. Tamworth's library, for example, is one of the largest in Staffordshire and has considerable potential to offer more services. Staff at the library have expressed an interest in opening the library later and putting on cultural events, possibly including live music as proposed by Get It Loud In Libraries. This could help support a safer and more inclusive evening economy.

# Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

## 6.2 Weaknesses and Threats

**Tamworth Borough Council's Local Plan 2006-2031 (adapted 2016) acknowledges there is a need to diversify the town and this remains a fundamental weakness. The same report acknowledges that Tamworth is unusual in having a large amount of retail floorspace in proportion to the town centre in an out of centre location that is relatively close to the town centre. There are a number of retail parks near to Tamworth town centre and, with the recent opening of Primark at Ventura Park, there is simply too much retail nearby for the town to compete solely as a shopping destination. The purpose of towns is now about multi-functional places where people live, work, eat, drink, shop, socialise, learn and have access to the services they require as citizens.**

High Street bricks and mortar retail has been shrinking across the UK for over a decade. The Covid19 pandemic has accelerated the change that is being driven by technological, societal and consumer behaviour trends. Retail experts at KPMG previously expected high street retail space to shrink by 25 per cent by 2025, but now see that happening by 2022-23. As national chains continue to move out of secondary locations, this trend is going to put even more pressure on smaller centres such as Tamworth. These places now have to look at repurposing retail space to quickly diversify its offer if it's to remain relevant and a socially and economically viable town in this fast-changing landscape.

The fact that Tamworth has seemingly bucked a national trend in maintaining a high number of banks in its town centre can be seen as a success. But it could also be seen as a 'stay of execution', as banks continue a relentless programme of high street closures. It would seem inevitable that some of these banks, which occupy large buildings, will close in years to come. This will leave further gaps in the town in prominent locations.

A further perceived weakness by those we engaged with was that the Council is seen as too risk averse and not sufficiently pro-business to drive the bold changes needed to help the town adjust to changing needs.

Management efforts of the council were deemed to be heavy handed by several entrepreneurs. One event organiser, who works with a number of councils, said, "Tamworth is more difficult than other councils. More thorough, with more hoops to jump through," to get anything done. They cited the example of other nearby councils needing licences for one-off events, whereas in Tamworth organisers also need a premises licence, more public liability insurance and security than in other towns they host food events in.

It's important to note that this is not unusual feedback for councils around the country, particularly those that do not have a delivery vehicle like a Business/Community Improvement District to help build a stronger understanding between business and the local authority.

The lack of a BID/CID remains a weakness for Tamworth and there is a pressing need for an alternative delivery vehicle and/or business grouping to assume a more proactive role in the town and work more closely with the council to deliver change and some experimentation.

There are plenty of examples of this emerging across the country from placemaking groups, independent retail associations such as Indie York and Community Interest Companies. Many of these groups are taking on responsibilities for driving events to breathe new life into their high streets. In Washington, Tyne and Wear, for example, a new Sunday food market has come about as a result of Washington Does Culture, which is a collaboration between An Open House Community Interest Company, and business consultancy LexSpark LTD. The group are planning a number of cultural events and food experiences across Washington, kickstarting the summer with the food market.

While in York, the Bishopthorpe Road Traders Association have organised street parties, Christmas lights and a party where 10,000 people attended the Tour de France cycling race, which passed through Yorkshire in 2014.

The rise of a younger customer in millennials and Gen Z's will see the experience economy continue to grow. Leisure, food and drink and culture will become more important as we emerge from lockdown and regain cherished freedoms. Those towns that embrace this can have a bright future while those that cling to a 20th century retail model will suffer. Neighbouring towns that make food, drink, culture and other experiences a key part of their high street offer will pose a further threat to Tamworth.

## Conclusion

**Tamworth is at a critical juncture and it's vital that Government high street investment is used wisely to transform the town centre. This report has highlighted a number of key challenges that the Council must address if it's to reverse years of decline and diversify its town centre offer so that it serves the needs of all communities.**

But within all of these challenges – notably a weakened identity, reduced footfall and an over-reliance on non-aspirational retail – lies an opportunity to reinvent the town and reimagine Tamworth as an exciting destination with a unique heritage that's based around great food, drink and cultural experiences.

This is not wishful thinking, as many people we spoke to were quick to evoke a similar picture of the future they felt Tamworth should embrace. There are still some who pine for a vision of the pre-Internet era where high streets were synonymous with just shopping, but many now recognise that high streets have to offer something more to be relevant.

The award of £21.65million through the Future High Streets Fund is a major success for Tamworth and it will enable the Council to make key structural changes to lay the foundations for transformative change in the town.

However, the ambitious programme of changes that the Council is planning also presents challenges – mainly in the disruption it will present to businesses and shoppers in the town centre due to building works.

For this change to achieve the widest impact, it needs to not only capture local people's imagination and win hearts and minds, but also be supported by a cultural change programme to encourage different behaviours, empower local people and ensure they have a strong stake in the new town centre.

This needs to combine a number of smaller initiatives to foster a stronger enterprise culture and make it easier for entrepreneurs to take on premises and try new ideas in Tamworth. There is also a need to build better relations with

councillors and ensure there is an improved understanding of business needs. The friction between elected members and business owners is an unnecessary barrier that could slow momentum and lose goodwill around regeneration plans.

Similarly, as the evolving high street landscape becomes ever more complex, there is a growing national recognition that local authorities (which have lost a lot of planning and placemaking skills over the last decade due to cuts), cannot deliver everything on their own.

The need for partnership bodies or local delivery vehicles to work in collaboration with the Council to drive change remains pressing. The failure to secure a BID was a blow for Tamworth, but alternative arrangements must now be sought to find a group to represent business interests and help progress some of the challenging work that needs to be done to remove barriers.

In the Council's Future High Streets Fund bid, it declared a wish to achieve a greater leisure offer (including places to eat) and also a greater variety of smaller independent shops. It will not be able to achieve these ambitions without the support of other partners in the town.

Finally, communications is also a key issue that needs to be resolved to inspire confidence in the regeneration plans, reduce barriers for business and rally people around a shared vision for a brighter Tamworth future.

A worrying finding from our engagement was that while the majority of people we spoke to knew of the Council's Future High Street Fund plans, no one had a clear idea of what the vision for the town is.

A targeted programme of communications is needed to change this and start to capture people's imagination on what Tamworth's future could look like. This should include positive advocacy from 'Tamworth champions', an inspiring social media campaign, destination branding and a compelling narrative around the positive change that is happening.

Above all, Tamworth needs a story that is not just about hard hats and high viz vests and big structural change. It needs a human scale story that conveys people's passion for the town, showing their commitment to Tamworth and what it means to them. This needs to be about small incremental changes, new experiences and local people combining to raise ambitions for the town. Such a story should be measured against one key outcome: breathing confidence into the town and making it an attractive environment for investors and entrepreneurs.

We feel confident that Tamworth has an authentic story to tell and the following recommendations should help foster a more business friendly environment and encourage the cultural change that's needed to ensure the Council's ambitious regeneration plans achieve the maximum impact.

## ARG Grants

**The Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG 4) provides local councils with grant funding to support businesses that are severely impacted by restrictions. Local councils can determine which businesses to support and determine the amount of funding provided from the ARG scheme.**

Under this grant scheme, Tamworth Borough Council has received a lump sum from Government amounting to £20 per head of population. It is intended for Businesses liable for Business Rates who have been severely affected by Covid-19 restrictions and who have not received previous LRSG-Closed Grant and/or a Restart Grant.

The grants will be made as a one-off grant payment and are available for businesses with fixed business costs who experienced a loss of income of over 30% that was directly related to, or as a result of the national restrictions in place from 16th February - 12th April 2021.

Businesses may be eligible for grant amounts of either £10,000, £17,500 or £25,000 depending on their rateable value.

During our discussions with businesses, we spoke to many that had experienced a huge loss of income due to the pandemic. We have subsequently contacted all those we approached, including business networks and associations, to alert them to this opportunity and encourage them to contact the Council to see if they are eligible for support.

## Recommendations

### **a. Councillor training to ensure a better understanding of small business needs**

Most councillors are only used to dealing with residents and don't always have the best understanding of the needs of small businesses and the contribution they make. A bespoke training programme could help remove the friction between key stakeholders and elected members. Unless we improve relations between councillors and businesses then regeneration efforts will be hampered.

### **b. Tamworth is Open to assume a bigger role as delivery vehicle**

In the fallout from the failure to win sufficient support for a BID, the Tamworth is Open CIC has emerged as an interesting and motivated group of stakeholders that are keen to help shape the future of their town.

There are some concerns about their governance and accountability that need to be addressed first, but this group has great potential to take a more active role in the town centre. They should be supported where possible, particularly around advice of securing funding from a range of sources and helping create an events programme.

### **c. A much bigger events programme**

There was a widespread consensus around the need for more events to drive footfall and attract permanent traders and operators to Tamworth.

However, this was tempered with considerable frustration at a failure for certain events to go ahead and bureaucracy often acting as a blocker to efforts to bring more events and attractions to the town centre. For example, deep frustration was expressed at the fact that this year's Tamworth Food Gusto will not be happening this summer in the Castle grounds as a result of a charity event in the bandstand and perceived conflict.

Similarly, one member of the Christmas Lights Committee expressed frustration at the failure to move the switch on to the castle grounds. *"They can't see the bigger picture,"* he said. *"There's a real Vicar of Dibley committee feel to everything. It feels far too old school and not future focused."*

One of the main property owners in the town also echoed this. *"We need events on a weekly basis,"* he said. *"It can't just be a big fireworks night in November. The only way to get people into the habit of coming into the town is to put events on all the time."*

### **d. Better use of heritage and green space**

Several respondents were quick to point out how major assets in Tamworth are being under-utilised and key stakeholders frequently shared the view that more should be done to maximise the potential of the castle. The general manager for Tamworth and Telford at Arriva, for example, said more needs to be made of the Castle and Gardens as Tamworth has the opportunity to

## Recommendations

create a multi-purpose trip.

The canal side setting is also a great strength and a readymade location for special events. Roving canal traders and a floating market, in association with the Roving Canal Traders Association for instance, would bring a lively, artisanal event to the centre of the town.

### e. Business support initiatives to encourage independents

There are growing numbers of Brits who want to start a business in 2021 for a variety of reasons. Some have lost their job, taken redundancy or see post-pandemic opportunities that they wish to take advantage of.

Many of these businesses naturally gravitate towards the Internet, as it is far easier to set up an online business. But there are still many entrepreneurs who wish to have a bricks and mortar presence and recognise that the changing high street landscape offers new opportunities.

Towns that recognise stirring animal spirits and support entrepreneurs will be best placed to develop a vibrant start-up culture. We would recommend a targeted programme to support fledging businesses and also, where appropriate, work with landlords and make it easier for new ventures to start up on the high street.

There are many examples of good practice across the UK that you may wish to borrow

from and adapt to local needs. We have listed two examples here, but more details will be included in the recommendations for the dispersion of ARG grants.

#### • **Meanwhile in Oxfordshire**

This programme was launched earlier this year and is said to be the first of its kind in the UK. Funded by the LEP to the tune of £1.9million, it aims to turn areas where shops have shut because of the pandemic into a testbed for new ventures. They recognise that investor confidence is low because there is a lot of uncertainty around the high street at the moment. But, by working with landlords to provide affordable rent, they are giving people the confidence to open shops and start to animate streets.

#### • **Enterprise Arcade (Stockton-on-Tees)**

Since opening in 2012, The Enterprise Arcade has provided over 70 independent traders with access to a prime retail space in Stockton town centre to sell their wares. The striking 140-year-old building is packed full of interesting retailers selling high quality and often unusual items, from delicious ice cream to clothes, plants, unique art and baby gifts.

The arcade is the ideal place for fledging businesses to test their trade as well as access tailored business support, marketing and financial advice. It charges £50 a week rent for retailers, which includes business support, and aims to help them grow so they can take on a location in their local high street.

Retailers operating from within the space include Lazy Gurl, which specialises in hand-made ladies' fashion, EmmsGems, a quirky store selling bespoke jewellery, and Sombrero's, which offers up a range of tropical plants, succulents and cacti to brighten up any home or work space. A number of retailers also provide a range of product related services, including alterations and art workshops.

#### • **Hello Tamworth**

This is an initiative led by Enterprise Nation with partners to enable towns to:

- Identify and connect with Online sellers and small businesses
  - Attract digital businesses out of their homes through offering the opportunity to Pop-Up in a retail space
  - Deliver support and training that boosts confidence and enables the businesses to grow beyond the shop and onto employing people and investing in the town
- The key stages are Data – Delivery – Growth. See Annex B.

Further examples of initiatives by large corporates in this space include:

- Uber Business Builder - <https://www.enterprisenation.com/uber/business-builder/>
- Amazon Small Business Accelerator - online training on how to build the digital aspects of business <https://www.enterprisenation.com/accelerator/>
- Westfield offers space to side hustlers

<https://www.retail-focus.co.uk/westfield-celebrates-the-capitals-side-hustle-heroes/#:~:text=In%20support%20of%20the%20capital's,%20Dessential%20retail%20re%20pens.>

- Morrisons looking for small suppliers <https://twitter.com/emmaljones/status/1394559464372588544>

### f. Prioritise food and drink

One of the key trends over the last year has been a resurgence for speciality food with convenience stores, independent delis, farm shops and artisan food businesses gaining an increased market share. We are also seeing a huge growth in food halls in town centres across the UK, as they become a major part of the eating out market.

Key to this is diversity, freshness and a modern food offer. It's a trend Tamworth can ill afford to ignore and offers a major opportunity to diversify away from retail and make the town more attractive to residents.

Currently, there is a serious lack of diversity in the cuisine on offer with one respondent saying there are "*too many Indian restaurants*" (according to Local Data Company Tamworth has three times more Indian restaurants than the UK average for a town of its size). This is not aligned with the family-oriented demographics of the town, particularly in the affluent outer areas. Newsletter partnerships with fresh opportunities in Tamworth with the likes of Great British Chefs, Code Hospitality and the

## Recommendations

Guild of Food Writers would attract entrepreneurial chefs and cooks, many of whom are out of work and exploring new lifestyles and challenges post pandemic. This would address a wider issue for the town centre in that it is falling behind current trends in food and drink, including vegetarian and vegan eateries, artisanal bakeries and products (ferments, preserves etc), eco-friendly and sustainable operators, street food vans and trucks and ethical butchery to name a few. Vegetarian and vegan options, in particular were flagged as a miss, even at one-off events. Attracting fresh talent with the promise of a town in the throes of economic development and regeneration would appeal to a new breed of entrepreneurs that are keen to invest in Tamworth's food, drink and cultural opportunities.

### g. Low cost enhancements to the public realm

In order to increase dwell time and create a better environment for a high street based around experiences, we recommend making some changes to the public realm to create space for community uses and encourage gathering and interaction.

For example, parklets are normally seen as a pavement extension that sits in parking bays, but in Tamworth's case, where a good portion of the high street is already pedestrianised, the wide pavement could be expanded. There are some spaces that are sufficiently wide enough to create quite generous parklets offering benches, seats, planted areas and recreation space.

As the images opposite show, these could incorporate bike racks, seating, eating areas, soft play and even a space for yoga etc. This would create some small flexible spaces that could add real value to the high street and help it evolve into a more sociable place over time.

### h. Root and branch communications review

For the Council to not only gain wider business support, but also win local people's hearts and minds, it needs to share its vision for the town and set out the changes it will be making to get there. The majority of people we engaged with did not feel this was happening.

Communications are key to generating excitement and a buzz around planned changes to shape the future of the town. But this cannot be done in a piecemeal fashion. It needs a clear narrative and focused strategy to tell a story that will capture people's imagination. Achieving this would help gain stronger local buy-in from key stakeholders and potentially encourage investors and local businesses to commit to the town's future.

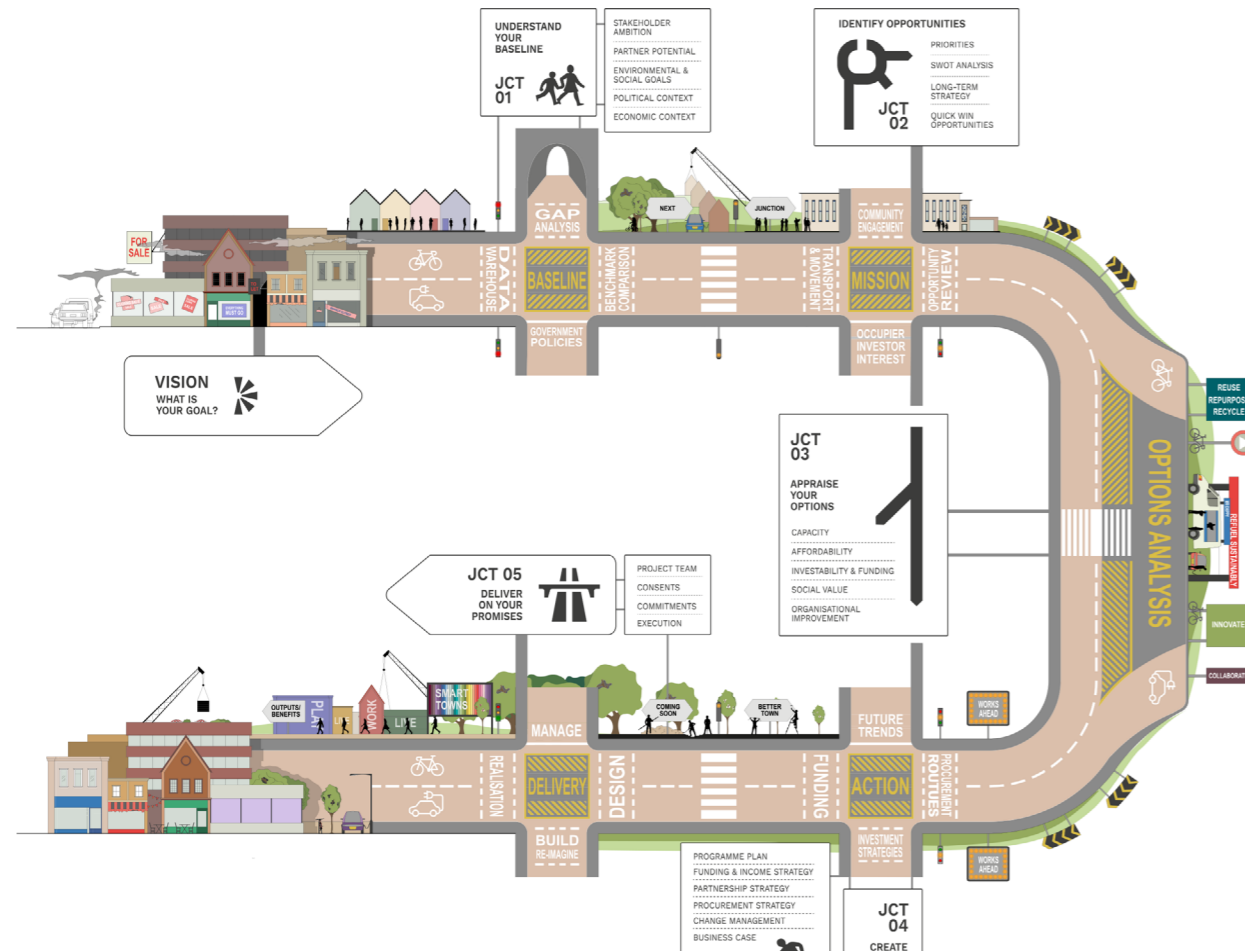
A root and branch review of communications around town centre regeneration would need to look at the audience, the channels and clear messaging for each interested group. It should incorporate destination branding, social media and video, print, tv and radio, and building a stronger group of advocates.





# Annex A. #BetterTowns Roadmap Example

# Annex B. Hello Tamworth



www.bettertowns.co.uk

# Hello, Tamworth

Small business support programme to boost growth and recovery in your town

May 2021

## Delivering Hello, Tamworth

There is opportunity to deploy a small business support programme in your area. With High Streets having suffered over the past 12 months, there is potential to apply Additional Restrictions Grant money or High Street funds to a dedicated retail and small business support programme. There are three key strands of delivery:

- Small business data and identification
- Retail incubation space
- Growth support and training

The results of each element will be tracked and reported to the council and stakeholders.

The following slides offer detail on each element.



Gabriel Unger, co-founder, Chai Guys

## Data and identification

Local Authorities have become much closer to their small business communities through distribution of COVID grants. As these grants were delivered to businesses operating in physical premises, the data and insight to be addressed in this programme is the thousands of businesses trading on digital platforms and run efficiently from home.

- These are the businesses that have prospered in the past 12 months, have significant potential to grow, and will be looking for a physical retail experience. We will identify them through:
- Trading marketplaces: incl Amazon/Etsy/Uber/Faire.com/Nextdoor etc
- Social platforms: incl Facebook/Instagram/TikTok etc
- Banks: who have lent to small businesses and are now looking to support them to make sales and re-pay loans

Enterprise Nation has strong relationships with these brands and is currently delivering support programmes for a number of them in a position to secure involvement in data collation.

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## Retail experience

With businesses identified through the data and insight collation stage, they will be encouraged to make contact through opportunities to PopUp in a Sook store. Opening such a store on your High Street will deliver:

- A small business magnet: attracting online sellers with high growth potential who want to test physical retail
- Retail incubation space: offering brands a showcase space and opportunity to meet customers and wholesale buyers in person, and safely
- Business support hub: as in-store sessions are hosted on topics from accounting to packaging, HR and PR
- Marketing & promotion: of council programmes as the store offers on-site retail opportunity plus 24 hour digital signage

The Sook commercial model involves working with Local Authorities that have a High Street site and/or private landlords. Sook shops are based on a sustainable income producing model that can run in perpetuity rather than a finite project. Small businesses will pay an affordable level of rent to test physical retail in the store.



Meena Misty, founder, Whigley Moly

## Food & drink offer

Consumers will be enticed back to the High Street with the offer of experiences. This can be delivered through a strong food & drink offer, activated in this project through:

- Data: mapping of the number of businesses in Tamworth within the food & drink category codes of Companies House (data sourced via MIRA each)
- Routes to market: connecting home based food & drink businesses to stall opportunities on Tamworth market and approaches to Uber Eats and Karma Kitchen with regard to set up of commercial kitchen space in Tamworth
- Growth support: dedicated advisory services for food & drink businesses offering support on packaging, pitching, exports etc. This mirrors a 'Food Fellowship' programme Enterprise Nation delivered in March 2021 for Uber Eats, supporting food businesses to scale.

The lead for this strand of specialist work will be food & drink expert, Malika Basu, also founder of SIZL Spices.



<https://www.enterprisenation.com/hello-world/>

## Appendix C. Case Study - Market Drayton's Ginger and Spice Festival

Market Drayton Traders CIC was set up in the absence of a chamber of trade within the town and an apathetic Town council deemed not particularly interested in supporting business. The group promotes business trade all year round and encourages people into the town. They have run campaigns like Fiver Fest, set up a walking market and are keen to set up a regular farmers market. They also lobby the local town /Shropshire council on current and prescient matters.

The Ginger and Spice Festival at Market Drayton is a heritage food & drink festival hosted by Rocket Communications, members and partners of the CIC. It takes place annually during British Food Fortnight. The festival celebrates the town's history and culinary heritage through an eclectic mix of events focussing on telling the town's unique story as well as promoting seasonal and locally produced food, often with a ginger or spicy twist!

A partnership between public, private and not for profit organisations, the event has:

- Attracted over 5,000 visitors
- Created a media reach of over 6 million including national coverage in Telegraph, BBC and Times
- Won 2 awards (including a Guinness World Record) and been shortlisted for 2 others
- Generated increased footfall & spend to the town and local economy
- Attracted five new permanent artisan food businesses within the town and a few other operating just outside.





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