

Exploring the Impact of Town Centre  
Governance on Commercial Measures of  
Vitality and Viability

A F HEHIR

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Exploring the Impact of Town Centre  
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ALAN HEHIR

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Department of Marketing Retail & Tourism /  
Institute of Place Management, Manchester  
Metropolitan University

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## **Abstract**

It is well documented that recent changes to the retail landscape in the United Kingdom have had a negative impact on the commercial vitality and viability of town centres. Retail consumers are becoming uninterested in town centres, and, they are adopting alternative ways to shop. The effects of change can be seen in the retail landscape of town centres, where a preference for retail investment has declined in relation to the investment in edge of, and out of centre locations. What is less well documented, or understood, is the effect that government policy and, local governance has had on the pace of retail change over the past fifty years. For example, have policies and local governance ameliorated, or exacerbated changes to the retail landscape of town centres over the past fifty years? This research, through a comparative case study of four United Kingdom town centres, explores how local governance impacts on the retail landscape of town centres, and as a result how local governance impacts on town centre vitality and viability. The evidence suggests that the retail development approach of elite influencers is a result of the interaction between their cultural paradigms, and the resource capacity available to them. When influencers enact a centrifugal approach, they effectively push retail development away from the town centre, thus decreasing commercial vitality and viability; When influencers enact a centripetal approach, they effectively pull retail development into the town centre, thus retaining a higher level of commercial vitality and viability. The conclusions raise some interesting questions for further research; the most obvious being that if the culture of influencers is perceived as being a contributing factor towards the commercial decline of town centres, how do we influence that culture? For if we cannot influence the culture of local governance, how can we influence the vitality and viability of town centres?

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

There are few that would disagree with Findlay and Sparks when they suggest “healthy and vibrant town centres are important for the nation and its constituent communities” (2009 p.2). Indeed, town centres are important not only for the people that live and work in them, but also their sustained economic vitality and viability provides a wide range of social and cultural benefits (Jones, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2016). To reflect the economic, social and cultural importance of town centres UK governments, of all political persuasions, have devised policies to maintain viability, defined in terms of the strength of commercial markets and investments in town centres, and more recently to advise on how local influencers can create and maintain vitality, defined as the general busyness of the centre (Cox *et al.*, 2000).

Government policies to stimulate viability can be evidenced via preferential planning guidance and sequential testing (for example PPG6 DoE, 1996); impact tests (DCLG, 2012b), or the promotion of town centre first initiatives (DCLG, 2012a, 2014). Policies to stimulate vitality can be evidenced via processual directives (for example recommendations for the management of town centres (DCLG, 2012a); the introduction of formal/legal partnership initiatives through Business Improvement District (BID) legislation; a focus on localism; or advice for town centre teams (DCLG, 2012a). Distinguishing between policies that acknowledge not only the impact of retail change on town centres, but also policies that consider how local governance reacts to retail change, is apposite. This is because any “fractures” (Gaffikin and Warf, 1993 p.71) caused by changes in the retail landscape of town centres have also purportedly fractured the local governance structures that influence them. It is apposite, therefore, to not only understand how retail change affects the town centre landscape, but also how local governance has, contributed to and, reacted to change. For example, it is acknowledged that the political, and planning dictums of the past fifty years have had a detrimental effect on the vitality and viability of the high street, and by association town centres (Hughes and Jackson, 2015). Questions remain however, whether it is the policies, or the local interpretations of those policies, that have a detrimental effect. Have the actions of local influencers ameliorated town centre decline, or exacerbated it? Have local influencers reacted to change at the same rate that change has affected their

environments? In other words, has local governance evolved with change through successive “waves” of retail decentralisation (Schiller, 1986; Thomas *et al.*, 2006; Pacione, 2009; Fernie *et al.*, 2015) into more flexible, democratic and collaborative responses to what are now perceived as more holistic challenges (Coca-Stefaniak and Carroll, 2015)?

There are many local influencers that are embracing forms of local governance that adopt an overtly neo-liberal approach, as evidenced by over 600 town centre management (TCM) initiatives, of which 300 are Business Improvement Districts (see Institute of Place Management, 2019). Yet, in the UK, there remains a significant number of town centres without evidence of any “urban management” (Hogg *et al.*, 2007) schemes. Moreover, the traditional hierarchies of the 1960s, to a greater or lesser extent, still dominate local governance structures, and influence local strategies (Davies, 2002, 2011). Indeed, Teune acknowledges a resistance to change by suggesting that local governments “differ more in what they govern than in how they govern” (1995 p.16), implying that local governance within town centres still contains a high degree of similarity (Pierre, 1999).

The contradiction here is that local governance, in most of the UK’s town centres, adopts similar strategies to meet challenges to vitality and viability that are complex and volatile, - and where change is indiscriminate. This creates a problem, for while policies to react to the effects of change tend to be prescriptive and generalised, there appears to be no prescriptive, or general best practice of local governance that can be applied to all centres (Healey, 2004). How local governance strategists create and maintain vitality and viability within changing environments is therefore reliant on how skilful local influencers are at interpreting change, and how they use general policy directives to adapt to change in *their* town centres.

To explore how local governance strategists plan for, and react to, changes in the retail landscape this thesis conducts case studies of four UK town centres to determine what impact local influencers have on commercial vitality and viability. In doing so, it reflects on both changes in the retail and political landscape over the past fifty years, and academic perceptions of how evolving forms of local governance purportedly react to the effects of such change (Jessop, 2016). Chapter 1 contextualises this analysis by discussing how

changes in the retail landscape in the period 1960–2019, with the decentralisation of retail activity, and subsequent policies to address decentralisation, have the potential to impact on local governance structures that aim to meet the challenges that retail change presents.

### **1.1 Local governance as a response to change in the retail landscape from 1960 to 2019**

All town centres are exposed to retail change; however, it is unlikely they will be subject to the same challenges, nor will they respond to retail change at the same pace, or in the same way. How they react, through local governance, becomes relevant to their local challenges, and in an ideal world the governance form they adopt will reflect the context of their environment. For example, retail change may necessitate new forms of local governance, where fractures in the traditional retail fabric may require some adjustments to what were perceived as the traditional ways to govern. Despite this, Teune (1995) implies, there will be local influencers that retain the rigid hierarchical structures and strategies that were associated with the 1960s and 1970s regardless of the changes in the retail landscape of the town centre.

In many town centres a resistance to change may be due to inflexibilities in internal governance structures, or the culture of local influencers, or there may be other mitigating factors where, for example, private sector stakeholders have no desire to collaborate due to a perceived lack of economic value within that particular town centre. Other local influencers, due to their own unique and contextual circumstances, may embrace more formal and/or legal partnerships; for example, Town Centre Management (TCM), or Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). Some may adopt a less formal mode of collaboration where “self-organising inter-organisational networks” (Rhodes, 1997 p.53) develop through cracks in traditional structures (Amin and Thrift, 2002), where “a series of different actors accomplish a task, though not actually putting together a single over-arching body, as each of the different actors remains independent” (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.49). Similarly, some smaller district town centres may have neither informal collaboration, forms of collective action, nor formal structures. In effect, they follow the free market-mediated anarchy (Jessop, 2003, 2016) of private enterprise and opportunity to adapt to change (Ravenscroft, 2000; Jessop, 2003, 2016).

What has become evident during the past fifty years, is the increased level of government interest and intervention in the “urban management” (Hogg *et al.*, 2007 p.1514) of town centres, as Local Authorities, are asked to embrace democratic localism and the individuality of place through collaborative partnerships. Sections 1.1.2-1.1.4 discuss periods of change in the retail landscape from the 1960s to the present day, changes that have prompted a political response. These political responses, in turn, have created local governance initiatives that attempt to maintain the vitality and viability of town centres.

### 1.1.2 The 1960s and 1970s retail landscape: from post War decline to retail alliances?

Retail landscape	Government policy response	Local governance response
<p>Town centres develop retail centric shopping malls which have a “profound effect on urban morphology...within which a strong retail core is considered an essential element of vitality and viability” (Tallon, 2013 p. 183).</p> <p>Increased competition, with the abolition of Resale Price Maintenance in 1965 coincides with the origins of the first wave of decentralisation (Schiller, 1986), and the out of centre development of convenience goods shopping.</p> <p>The “golden age of shopping centre development” (Schiller, 1986). Between “1965–1989, 8.9 million square metres of retail floor space was provided in 604 town centres” (Tallon, 2013 p. 183) re-enforcing the perception of a strong town centre retail core.</p> <p>The emergence of a second wave of decentralisation (Schiller, 1986) consists of “free standing retail warehouses and retail parks...with household furnishings and domestic appliances sold in “crinkly sheds” (Guy, 2000 p.389; Thomas <i>et al.</i>, 2004, 2006)</p>	<p>The Town and County Planning Act (1947) suggests “the neatness of the traditional hierarchy should be maintained due to its value in terms of efficiency and equitability (Guy, 2007 cited in Tallon, 2013 p.188)</p> <p>Central government has a distrust of Local Authorities to deliver economic and social change (Bailey <i>et al.</i>, 1995). This creates the rise of top down market led public/private partnerships, where central government bypasses Local Authorities, “offering tax incentives, deregulation and privatisation, all of which had geographically uneven impacts” (Tallon, 2013 p.44).</p> <p>Government policy retains a focus on retail development within town centres where “the maintenance of existing town and district shopping centres should always be a high priority” (Greed and Roberts, 2014 p.170)</p> <p>The retail landscape is influenced by “Local Authorities [who] seem to be the determinants of competition policy rather than retailers” (Fernie <i>et al.</i>, 2015 p.25)</p>	<p>Local governance structures reflect a Local Authority led process where “urban planning and management was developed...as a means of delivering public services by public authorities for long-term collective goals of perceived public interest” (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008 p.155-156).</p> <p>Divisions of labour exist between Local Authorities and retailers leading to top down governance through government led (Davies, 2002) command and control structures.</p> <p>Retail change creates the seeds of urban entrepreneurialism which advocates a more neoliberalist approach, favouring economic liberalisation (Tallon, 2013). This, in turn, signifies the fracture of ...Fordism, Welfarism and Keynesianism” in urban regeneration (Gaffikin and Warf, 1993 p.71) and effectively brings with it a “purported” shift from local “government” to local “governance” (Jessop, 2003)</p>

Figure 1. 1; 1960s and 1970s town centre retail landscape, government policy responses and local governance reactions

### *Local governance reactions to change in the 1960s and 1970s*

Bennison and Davies set the context for town centre retail development in this period;

“The accommodation of new retailing facilities in Britain [was] markedly different from that in most other advanced western economies. Since the last World war...Britain sought to graft the new pressures for growth onto a traditional pattern of shopping locations. In particular, through...strong planning constraints, she has sought to guide most new resources to existing town and city central areas” (1980 p.11).

“...this strategy culminated in over 80% of planned shopping centre schemes (over 50,000 square feet) being built in exiting town centres, as both...planners and most multiple retailers...sought to preserve the established spatial order and protect the trading health of the existing high street” (1980 p.23).

At a macro-level, local government in the 1960s and 1970s became an agent of the State, where “local” was replaced by an increased national-level presence and governance framework (Morris, 2017). This was a political move aimed at diminishing the influence of local elites into, instead, stakeholders who “no longer had an influence on local policies” (Shapely, 2013 p.1289–1290). Consequently, the influence of Local Authorities in local governance was marginalised by national governments that exerted greater controls over the creation and implementation of economic and social policy.

It is understandable, during this period, to assume that local governments suffered a loss of autonomy, effectively becoming a conduit through which the State managed policy (Shapely, 2013). This was not however to suggest that local stakeholders were stripped of all influence, for as Rhodes (2007) argues any understanding of British politics needs to move beyond the politics of Westminster, and anyway, the relationship between central and local government was never clearly defined. Indeed, in several areas Local Authorities still wielded power and influence, and local governance strategies often consisted of Local Authorities forming economic and social alliances to construct not only public buildings, roads, housing estates and schools, but also the new office blocks and shopping centres that would shape the retail-centric strategies that came to dominate the 1960s and 1970s (Shapely, 2013). Therefore, although the State increasingly influenced policy decisions centrally, “councils still retained the ability to make design choices and enter into contract agreements with private developers” (Finnimore, 1989 p. 241). Consequently, “development coalitions emerged which included local government not simply as a passive

agent of the State, but as an active and influential force in its own right” (Cullingworth, 1966 p. 64).

To explain the contradiction of rhetoric and action Shapely (2013) examines the relationship between local governance and capital. He suggests that although capital, through national and international business, superstores and supermarkets, was increasingly being organised on a national scale, developers still needed local access to receive planning permission as part of the Local Authority plan. Local governance, in the 1960s and 1970s reflected these forms of mutual alliance, where “technocrats had the power of knowledge and expertise; business had their own specialists; [and] local councillors ...were desperate for the resources that would lead to the renewal of their rundown city centres” (Shapely, 2013 p.1292). Ward claims in this respect local alliances were ““one of the few ‘traditions’ maintained by local government after the war, the old civic elites may have gone but, partly as a result of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, the partnership between local government and business became stronger” (1999 p.233).

Retail change, in the 1960s and 1970s, offered a window of opportunity for the alliances of Local Authorities and private partners, and they “often had to take bold, quick and decisive action to take advantage of major investment opportunities” (Shapely, 2013 p.1292).

Inspired by the United States of America’s shopping malls, and complemented by the rise of the car, virtually every major city built new, and often expensive shopping centres, and alliances formed between central government and businesses who, not only, combined to radically change the infrastructure and fabric of large parts of the nation’s cities (Hardwick, 2003), but also provided the catalyst for the future structure of local governance. Indeed Shapely (2013) suggests the post 1979 focus on collaboration emerged as a reaction to the economic and political shifts and challenges over time as agencies, both public and private, took the lead in different policy initiatives, coming together to create a series of varied partnerships.

Despite any coming together, Davies, in his discussion of evolving forms of governance, refers to the 1960s and 1970s as a period where “government” prevailed as a form of local governance, where hierarchies operated with clear divisions through “a process where the Local Authority delivers the welfare state, with few non-statutory interactions between



council and business leaders” (Davies, 2002 p.22). In this context local governance was perceived as being formal and exclusive, where the local State controlled resources to urban redevelopment through “socialist ideals which formed in the post-war reconstruction” (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.47). The socialist ideals created a clear cultural dichotomy between Local Authority hierarchies and the influence of free market retailers (Jessop, 2016), a distinction that was probably true (and still is today in many town centres). However, there was also evidence of collective action, and a commercial edge to post-war reconstruction through the creativity and opportunity of local alliances. By the end of the 1970s there were changes in the retail and political landscape that aimed to fracture some of these traditional forms of local governance suggesting neo-liberal, democratic approaches to collaboration through created, “forced” partnerships (Reeve, 2004).

### 1.1.3 The 1980s and 1990s retail landscape: a period of retail change and collective responsibilities?

Retail landscape	Government policy response	Local governance response
<p>A period of further retail decentralisation (Schiller, 1986) as government planning policy allows “comparison and specialist goods which had previously been confined to the high street” to locate out of centre (Tallon, 2013 p.185).</p>	<p>Property led central government strategies emerge where “Central Enterprise Zones and UDC’s encourage the development of retail centres on brownfield sites” (Tallon, 2013 p.192)</p>	<p>Increased out of centre development creates the emergence of TCM. Is it a reaction to commercial change? (Warnaby <i>et al.</i>, 1998); or, is it a symptom of political change? (Evans, 1997; Otsuka and Reeve, 2007). Either way the desire to protect retail interests invokes a more integrated local governance approach to town centre vitality and viability.</p>
<p>By 1984 the second wave of decentralisation accounts for “50% of all shopping floor space” developed out of centre (Schiller, 1986 p.48). Further decentralisation (Ferne, 1995, 1998) occurs with the development of factory outlet malls, outlet shopping and leisure facilities, and large format convenience stores “colonising abandoned larger units” (Tallon, 2013 p.186).</p>	<p>The government launches Planning Policy Guidance No.6 suggesting that “planners should not consider the competitive effects of large new centres on the existing system except where they are on a scale that would seriously affect the vitality and viability of a nearby town centre as a whole” (DoE, 1988 cited in Tallon, 2013 p.189)</p>	<p>The integration of public/private interests increases calls for a more inclusive form of local governance with a “common understanding” (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008 p.161) of urban challenges through collaborative planning (Healey, 1997); consensus planning (Woltjer, 2017) and communicative planning (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008).</p>
<p>Decentralised development by the end of this decade accounts for 30% of non-food retailing (Guy, 2000)</p>	<p>The “planning gain” offers inducements to community projects, creating further opportunities to develop out of town and PPG13, the reverse car culture policy, encourages transport linkages to out of town sites.</p> <p>URBED reports for the DoE on <i>vital and viable places</i> (1994) suggesting quantifiable commercial measures of success, or failure.</p> <p>New Labour is elected bringing socially inclusive Policy Action Teams, and a focus on the third way”, a blend of “an uneasy and problematic marriage of the large-scale anti-poverty programmes of the post-war social democratic state, with the economic imperatives of Thatcher neo-liberal urban policy” (Johnstone and Whitehead, 2004, p.9)</p>	<p>The adoption of Town Centre Management as a way of delivering change is evident. In 1991 there are a handful of town and City managers in place (Jacoby, 1996), by 1995 there are 125 (Hollins <i>et al.</i>, 1997)</p>

Figure 1. 2; 1980s and 1990s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions

### *Local governance reactions to change in the 1980s and 1990s*

The pace of change in the retail landscape during the 1980s and 1990s created calls, from both government and private interests, for a shared responsibility of partnership to react to local challenges. Some suggest “the contemporary importance of partnership should be seen within the broad political context of the crumbling of the post-war consensus regarding the balance between the public and private sectors, and the resulting polarisation of political ideology” (Bailey *et al.*, 1995; Oatley, 1998; cited in McCarthy, 2016 p. 17), others that the rise of partnerships were a reaction to commercial change, where private partners in particular were keen to protect their commercial interests (Warnaby *et al.*, 2004). Whether political evolution, or economic change was responsible (and there are arguments for both), this period created local governance ideologies that Hubbard (1998 p.6) argued incorporated approaches;

“that offer something for all local governments; to the left, the entrepreneurial approach promises a way of asserting local co-operation, promoting the identity of place and strengthening municipal pride; to the right, it supports ideas of neo-liberalism, promotion of enterprise and belief in the virtues of the private sector”.

A conduit to affect positive change was the adoption of “urban management” (Hogg *et al.*, 2007) schemes of various guises (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013). Schemes that would serve to free town and city centres from the “laissez-faire approach that leads to city centre decline”, extolling the virtues of “intervention which means city centres can be retained and grow” (Tallon, 2013 p.189). The catalyst for these was rooted in two schools of thought; a competitive reaction to protect the retailer’s interests in town centres, or neo-liberal ideologies which make the management of town centres politically desirable (Lloyd and Peel, 2008). Equally divided was the motive behind any action; for some it was a strategy “promulgated by the dominant class to restore power” (Harvey, 2007 p. 2), for others it was described as a qualitative transformation of the practices of the State (Peck, 2001; Jessop, 2002), which reduced State control by promoting local supply side strategies through business competitiveness (Morange and Fol, 2014).

An area of consensus was the fact that Local Authorities had little choice but to work closely with quasi autonomous non-government organisations (QUANGOs) and private sector

partners in partnerships that were markedly different from the collaborations of the past (Shapely, 2013). Within these partnerships, a form of governance that proved particularly popular was the rise of TCM, and the academic interest in them was significant. A handful of town centre TCM schemes in 1991 increased to 125 by 1995 (Hollins *et al*, 1997), rising further to around 230 in 1999 (Medway *et al.*, 2000).

### 1.1.4 The retail landscape from 2000 to 2019: towards an alternative future?

Retail landscape	Government policy response	Local governance response
<p>The perfect storm of recession and lease expiries intensifies with “the spectacular emergence of internet retailing which represents the ultimate level of decentralisation” (Pacione, 2009 p.259).</p>	<p>The National Retail Planning Forum, the Need Test and PPS6 all acknowledge the importance of town centres, widening the focus to include leisure and entertainment (see Guy, 2004, 2007)</p>	<p>BID legislation in 2004 enables a more democratic funding mechanism to improve vitality and viability in town centres. In 2008 there are 72 BIDs; by 2012 they more than double to 150 (Tallon, 2013); and by 2019 there are more than 300 in operation (Institute of Place Management, 2019).</p>
<p>To compound the effects of further decentralisation, there is a major global collapse of financial markets and “a period of seismic change in consumer’s use of Britain’s town centres and high streets”. As a result, consumer confidence collapses and the number of vacant retail properties more than doubles in the period 2008-2013 (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015 p.6)</p>	<p>Part 4 of the Local Government Act (2004) and Business Improvement Legislation (2004) enables Cities, and towns in the UK to set up Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)</p>	<p>The functionally, divisive governance forms of the 1960s “purportedly” (Jessop, 2003) evolve into more democratic processes with the emergence of a “coming together” of like minds to form institutional capacity (Healey, 1997, 2003) and institutional thickness (McCarthy, 2007), where cracks in traditional hierarchies create alternate forms of governance (Amin and Thrift, 2002)</p>
<p>Despite external pressures town centres retain a high profile as “the performance of high street retailers [are] often now seen as key performance indicators of the British economy” (Hallsworth and Orchard, 2009 p. 142). Despite this by 2011 “less than half of retail was on the high street” (Portas, 2011 p.8).</p>	<p>The DCLG publishes a guide of “how to manage town centres” to explain “why effective management is essential for enhancing and sustaining their vitality and viability” (Foreword, Baroness Andrews, DCLG, 2008).</p>	<p>Localism adopts an increasing role with the emergence of “place patch” management (Kalandides <i>et al.</i>, 2016 p.355), where specific local acts, have an understanding of how to replace and enhance vacant retail space and how to renew urban areas in an age of austerity (Kalandides <i>et al.</i>, 2016).</p>
<p>Tallon (2013) claims town centres from 1960–2013 have witnessed a sales transference to alternate formats; low investment levels; restrictions on consumer choice; environmental deterioration and social polarisation</p>	<p>The Localism Act emerges (2011) as a town centre policy, however government ministers acknowledge there is no single solution to a complex problem (Shapps, 2009).</p>	
	<p>A revised National Planning Policy Framework for town centres is launched (DCLG, 2012b). Included in the objectives are aims “to ensure the vitality of town centres” by “liberalising the planning system to facilitate infrastructure and property development, in the context of devolving more power to the local level of governance” (Tallon, 2013 p.108-109).</p>	

Figure 1. 3; The post 2000 town centre retail landscape, government policy responses and local governance reactions

#### *Local governance reactions to change from 2000 to 2019*

The new millennium brought further calls for more inclusive, democratic, and alternative approaches to the local governance of town centres, as it was thought that town centre regeneration was unlikely to come from the retail-centric models of the past. This was

considered an appropriate response to changes in the retail landscape as town centres generally had too much retail stock in the early 1990s (BNP Paribas, 2012), and a relaxation of certain government policies towards town centre retail strategies continued to facilitate retail investment away from the traditional town centre (see advice regarding a replacement of the needs test with the impact test, DCLG, 2009). Despite this government policy generally reflected an approach of the “town centre first” initiative (TCF) which “recognise[d] town centres as the heart of their communities [therefore influencers should] pursue policies to support their vitality and viability” (DCLG, 2012a para.23).

The reference to communities in the post 2000 period resonated with a growing academic philosophy. For example, in her reflections on a life in urban planning spanning several decades, Patsy Healey proposed a normative view that local governance should reflect a more contemporary outlook of “place governance”, where local governance should be about “searching for ways of making place qualities better than in the past” (2017 p. 107). Healey reflects that place qualities are unique, and although this was a normative view, there was a growing sense that local governance should focus on local solutions for local challenges. Effectively, due to the effects of retail change, the focus had shifted from a reliance on retail, to strategies that were more inclusive of economic, social and physical space, the metaphoric “three-legged stool” (Jones and Evans, 2013), where influence is sought not only from commerce, but equally from “economic, social and environmental [areas] each contributing to building a strong, responsive and competitive economy... supporting strong, vibrant and healthy communities...[and] contributing to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment” (DCLG, 2012a, para. 7).

Consequently, as the retail landscape gathered pace towards the ‘perfect storm’ (Pacione, 2009; Millington, 2017) of recession, and the ultimate level of decentralisation with the rise of the internet (Pacione, 2009), policy responses emphasised a more organic strategic role of how to manage town centres, rather than a framework of statutory planning (Ravenscroft, 2000). This reflected what Chaney (1994 p. 167-168) perceived as the increasing influence of the “professionalism” of local governance, expressed in a rhetoric of partnership and collective action. As a further move to facilitate “professionalism” and improve direct local funding, legislation was passed in 2004 that enabled cities, and towns,

to create their own funding mechanisms through the adoption of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). This was a move that had parallels with the shopping centre revitalisation strategies of the 1960s and 1970s, as once again policy makers turned to the United States of America for inspiration through TCM and BIDs (Cook, 2009). Much like their retail centric predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, these schemes proved increasingly popular, with over 600 TCM schemes in operation by 2016, of which more than 300 operated as BIDs (Chaperon *et al.*, 2016; IPM, 2019).

In the context of governance change, it was worth noting how urban management schemes themselves evolved, particularly as BIDs appeared to have a growing preference as a form of partnership. Both TCM and BIDs shared similar characteristics and genealogies, as both were partnership-based, and both were focused on creating conducive conditions for business profitability (Ward, 2007), by “seeking to encourage more visitors, more investors and more sales, while fending off the increasing competition from elsewhere” (Cook, 2009 p. 10-12). Cook suggests however, that TCM and BIDs had “five important distinguishing factors; (1) they had diverging funding arrangements; (2) BIDs were frequently extensions to TCM schemes; (3) although stand-alone BIDs were emerging, very few were in urban centres and the majority of these were in out of centre industrial estates and business parks, places that TCM had not emerged within; (4) there were considerably more TCM schemes than BIDs in operation in England; and (5) business occupiers were allowed to vote on whether or not BIDs could be established...an opportunity not available to businesses if a TCM scheme was planned in their district” (2009, p 12-13).

It was suggested that BIDs had advantages to form town centre partnerships over TCM in both their structure; as formal legislative processes (where TCM was considered informal and non-statutory (Prentice and Porter, 2015)); and, their inclusiveness; by offering a more connected, democratic outward looking perspective which “increasingly work[s] with local partners to manage places and influence their economic development... achieving real place improvements that reflect local needs” (IPM, 2019). However, perhaps a more significant explanation for the preferred adoption of BIDs is, as Cook suggests, that BIDs offer a more stable funding position as they are more democratically funded. A point of consensus was that with the rise of urban management schemes came a requirement to measure the

relative performances of town centres to justify funding (Mitarai and Suebsuk, 2017), BIDs increasingly so as every five years they must go through a voting and approval process for the scheme to progress.

In 2017, government policy guidelines, through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), acted to guide Local Authorities to conduct sequential and impact testing to prefer development within town centres, to maintain vitality and viability, to increase consumer spending and lower vacancy rates (Ward and Cook, 2017). However, despite years of successive policies, the challenges for local governance as a reaction to retail change have become increasingly difficult. For despite the increase in detailed information (with the rise of marketing and statistical agencies) and the adoption of professional business practices, the Centre for Retailing Research suggests the UK, in the wake of years of turbulent change is facing a crisis (Parker *et al.*, 2016), with almost half of the UK's economically monitored town centres suffering the negative effects of retail change (LDC, 2017). Furthermore, despite sequential and impact testing, more than three quarters of all new development has occurred away from town centres (ACS, 2013). As a result, there is a real fear that investors and customers are turning away from town centres, a trend that not only affects commerce but, also by association, the physical, social and cultural aspects of place.

## **1.2 Critique and research questions**

The figures in section 1.1 identify how changes in the retail landscape since the 1960s have impacted, not only on subsequent policy responses at a national level, but also on local governance action. Ideally, the reaction to retail change ought to have brought a corresponding change in governance. Out with the inflexible government led hierarchies of the 1960s and 1970s; and in with forms of “forced” collective action (Reeve, 2004) as changes in the retail landscape necessitate a more collaborative approach. Examples of the idealised approach are evidenced with the meteoric rise of “urban management” (Hogg *et al.*, 2007) schemes of TCM and BIDs that aim to influence the vitality and viability of town centres. As a model of best practice, however, the impact of such schemes is limited by both the form they adopt, and the effect they have on sustainable vitality and viability.

There is little doubt that the past fifty-nine years have witnessed changes that have had a profound effect on the place of individual town centres in the retail hierarchy, and thus their importance to consumers, investors and successive governments, and furthermore, how local influencers respond to change has stimulated a significant academic interest in how to recreate vitality and viability in town centres. This, in many town centres, has focussed away from the traditional retail centric models of the past to the question of what to do with vacated commercial space, for with the acknowledgement that town centres generally pre-2008 had too much supply (BNP Paribas, 2012) comes the realisation that they now require a level of intervention to create alternate forms of vitality and viability (for examples see Coca-Stefaniak, 2013; Powe and Hart, 2017). Turning the focus too far away from commerce, however, contradicts the premise that high street retailers are often perceived as barometers of the British economy (Hallsworth and Orchard, 2009), and subsequently there is still an awareness, among academics and practitioners of the commercial importance, and performance of town centres (Jones, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2016; Sparks, 2016; Parker *et al.*, 2017; IPM, 2019). In particular, this is manifest in pedestrian flows, or footfall (the number of people visiting centres); the proportion of vacant street level properties, (the number of vacant commercial units in a defined area); commercial yields and rents, (a financial return on investment) and diversity of use (a mix of commercial and social attractions) (Ravenscoft, 2000; DCLG, 2014 para. 5).

Therefore, as the town centre retail landscape evolves, moving away from solely retail centric strategies, academics and practitioners have determined a new balance of land uses which offer an increased chance of sustained vitality and viability, where;

“retailing is conspicuous... [where] a healthy retail sector [has a] good retail mix, choice, [and] diversity... [where there are] low vacancy rates, low turnover, good physical fabric, competitiveness and capacity for change. A vibrant centre will be one where ...co-ordinated management and planning occurs in an effective way. Change must be planned for and managed so as to sustain consumer and business confidence. Above all a vibrant town centre should be a place for the local community in which they take pride and seek involvement for multiple activities” (Findlay and Sparks, 2009 p. 3-4)

What is conspicuous in this definition is both a requirement to manage change, and a recognition of the natural symbiosis that exists between economic and social environments,

a point the NPPF acknowledges suggesting that strategic “roles...should not be undertaken in isolation because they are mutually dependent...economic growth can ensure higher social and environmental standards” (DCLG, 2012a para. 8). Consequently, an appetite for the debate surrounding commercial change is relevant not just for economic wellbeing, but also for the impact the economy has on strong, vibrant and healthy communities. However, despite an awareness of the causes of retail decline in town centres there appears no clear governance solutions to the challenges decline brings, as the impact of local influencers to react to decline are limited by; (a) inadequate and ambiguous policy guidelines; (b) leading to the adoption of strategies that have limits on meaningful change; which fail to (c) keep pace with the nature of change itself. These issues are discussed in more detail below;

- (a) *Inadequate and ambiguous policy guidelines* – The NPPF advocates a “town centre first” (TCF) approach stating that “planning policies should be positive, promote competitive town centre environments and set out policies for the management and growth of centres over the plan period”, where “a positive vision or strategy for town centres, articulated through the Local Plan, is key to ensuring successful town centres which enable sustainable economic growth and provide a wide range...of benefits” (DCLG, 2012a, paragraph 23). Despite calls for the abolition of TCF (Institute for Economic Affairs, 2013) government ministers re-emphasised their commitment to it in 2015 (see Jackson, 2015), however in practice the guidelines of TCF are criticised as inadequate and in some cases its language is open to ambiguity and interpretation (see Katkowski, 2015).

For although TCF guidance advocates at least a consideration of town centre first development, commissioned research by the Association of Convenience Stores found that "planning decisions [are] being driven by developers rather than local people and destroying high streets up and down the country. The NPPF is simply not being applied properly, as under-resourced councils fail to get to grips with making coherent local plans and out of town developers fill their boots. This is a vicious circle that only central government can break by monitoring planning decisions and strengthening the town centre first policy." (ACS, 2013).



(b) *The adoption of strategies that have limits on meaningful change* - “The people who need to understand the resultant changes...must also understand the complexity of forces that influence change” (Clarke, Bennison and Pal, 1997; Hernandez, Bennison and Cornelius, 1998; Pioch and Byrom, 2004) (cited in Parker *et al.*, 2016 p.3), especially forces that are particular to the governments measures of “success” or “failure”. There are concerns that the impact influencers have on NPF measures of success are limited, for example, even though BIDs are adapted, modified and transformed to fit with their local institutional and political environment, they focus typically on superficial strategies of cleaning, security and marketing (Wrigley *et al.*, 2015; Ward and Cook, 2017) rather than creating deeper culturally collective strategies that promote inward investment and diversity. Without a deeper collective structure, it is difficult to perceive how local actors could influence locational, environmental or functional obsolescence (Hughes and Jackson, 2015), or indeed influence retail or commercial diversity. As an example, in their “comprehensive review of the evidence” Wrigley *et al.*, comment that the UK2020 High Street study (Millington *et al.*, 2015) suggests “a weak inverse relationship between the influence that local actors can have on factors affecting... performance and influence over a towns vitality and viability—in other words, as a rule of thumb, the more a factor influences health, the less local actors can do about it” (2015 p. 86).

(c) *The nature and pace of change itself* – The pace of retail change is providing the biggest challenge to town centres, mainly due to the relative positioning of retailing as an investment class (Jones, 2010); the position that many towns find themselves in with surplus retail stock (BNP Paribas, 2012); and changing consumer preferences. From a local governance perspective, the changing retail landscape has facilitated an idealised shift in focus from retail regeneration to the regeneration of place; in other words, a more holistic approach to town centre redevelopment (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013; Coca-Stefaniak and Carroll, 2015; Healey, 2017; IPM, 2019). This has the potential to further challenge the cultures, structures and strategies of influencers by introducing another set of stakeholders.

For example, retail vacancy patterns suggest that policies in future may better reflect a more balanced approach with alternative use for redundant retail space (Hughes and Jackson, 2015), an approach that has been recognised by the NPPF encouraging a change of use from retail to residential (DCLG, 2012b), warning against a long term retail regeneration strategy, instead considering the possibility of “flexibility between classes of use from certain...retail uses to residential use, to increase responsiveness within the planning system (HM Treasury 2013 p.41; 2014 cited in Hughes and Jackson, 2015). The pace of retail change therefore necessitates a rethink on strategies that could influence a more diverse town centre, and “success” is unlikely to be delivered by local governance structures in their present Local Authority/retailer guise. If influencing change was considered a challenge between Local Authority’s and retail developers, where planners can find it difficult to ensure the public good is delivered without their decisions being contested by developers (Williams *et al.*, 2017), how does the introduction of another set of stakeholders add to what is already a seemingly “wicked problem” (Rittel and Webber, 1974)?

These critiques raise questions about the impact local governance has on town centre vitality and viability, which constitute the research questions for this thesis; in particular:

[RQ 1] What impact do local influencers have on NPPF commercial measures of vitality and viability within their town centres?

[RQ 2] Do alternative forms of governance affect the impact they have?

[RQ 3] Do local influencers show a willingness to create any meaningful collaboration to address the impact of retail change?

### **1.3 Research aims and objectives**

This thesis addresses the research questions by conducting a qualitative, inductive study of four town centres through a contrasting case study approach (Yin, 2017). An inductive, qualitative case study approach was apposite as it allowed me to draw on my experiences of

over forty years in town centre retailing; a tenure that brought with it an intimate understanding of the daily routines of town centre life, both from a business and, a political perspective. The research draws from literature on specific measures of vitality and viability (for example Ravenscroft, 2000; Cox *et al*, 2000; Findlay and Sparks, 2009; Portas, 2011; DCLG, 2012; Wrigley *et al.*, 2015), and forms of governance within town centres, and urban places (for example Davies, 2002; DCLG, 2012; Coca-Stefaniak, 2013; Healey, 2005, 2008; Jessop, 2003, 2016; McCarthy, 2016), to consider in the wake of retail change how local influencers adopt strategies to create vital and viable town centres.

At the heart of this thesis is an attempt to understand local issues, which forms the basis of the research aims;

1. To develop a framework, for analysis, of purportedly evolving local governance forms.
2. To explore and to understand the impact local influencers have within these forms on NPPF measures of commercial vitality and viability.

It is suggested that the debate surrounding vitality and viability has stalled over a number of issues, including an oversimplification of causes and effects (Findlay and Sparks, 2009).

What is not in question is that retailing plays a significant role within town centres and the vitality of the town centre is inexorably linked to the “health” of the high street (Findlay and Sparks, 2009). The context of this thesis therefore adopts a commercially orientated focus.

The objectives within each of the governance forms (i.e. governance by government; governance through created partnerships; governance through collective action; and governance through market mediated anarchy), which are discussed in the contrasting cases, are to:

- Identify the local influencers.
- Explore the impact they have on the NPPF commercial measures of vitality and viability.
- Explore whether their impact varies with the form of governance they adopt.

## **1.4 The structure of this thesis**

This thesis consists of ten chapters, and proceeds in the following way.

Chapter 2 identifies from a literature review the extant forms of governance commonly found within town centres. It reviews the popular concepts of TCM and BIDs. However, it looks beyond these urban management schemes to widen the debate to other forms of governance, including institutional capacity. At the end of chapter 2, a framework of governance forms for data collection and analysis is provided. Chapter 3 conducts a literature review of commercial vitality and viability measures and, after suggesting interpretations, identifies the a priori measures that form the basis of this study.

Chapter 4 discusses the author's philosophical position, the methodology and methods adopted in this thesis to form the research strategy. Chapters 5 to 8 contain the case studies with discussion and analysis on the impact influencers have on local town centres relevant to the a priori measures. Chapter 9 considers the cross-case themes that arose from the case studies. Chapter 10 summarises the thesis, revisits the research objectives, and offers closing remarks in terms of limitations of this research, and also avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2: Forms of local governance in UK town centres

### 2.1 Introduction

At the heart of this chapter are “a set of topics that have attracted the attention of scholars from many disciplines” (Garrard and Goldsmith, 2017 p.15). From urban historians to geographers, from place marketers to institutional theorists, the nature of governance, as the interaction between the State and society, is “all the rage in the political science literature” (Garrard and Goldsmith, 2017 p.15).

But what is governance; is it amorphous (Pierre, 2005), or can we conceptualise it? Garrard and Goldsmith (2017 p.15) suggest that governance is “the set of institutions, rules and procedures by which a political system is governed”. Héritier and Eckert (2008) argue it should be understood as the administration of access to, and provision of rights, services and goods that are explicit, or implicit in governmental practices. Burris *et al.*, comment that “good governance is not merely about governability or management...it also implies goals towards which systems are being directed, and so governance as a process is inextricably linked to normative questions of what the governor is seeking to accomplish” (2008 p. 9-11), and ultimately “the challenge...is not to adapt to a changing social and physical environment, but to adapt rationally and fairly” (2008 p.66). Bevir argues that governance cannot be understood unless one considers the dynamics that move the field, namely that governance is practice, theory and dilemma all at the same time: “Governance refers to various new theories and practices of governing and the dilemmas to which they give rise... the practices create dilemmas and encourage attempts to comprehend them in theoretical terms. The dilemmas require new theoretical reflection and practical activity if they are to be adequately addressed.” (2011 p.1). Horvath synthesises many of these conceptions into a cross disciplinary review of governance over the past fifty years as;

“a set of structures, regulations, rules, norms, standards, mechanisms, processes and practices—formal, informal and embodied—that both regulate, coordinate, steer and/orchestrate [inter] actions as well as [re] produce socio-cultural, economic and political relations and values, while at the same time impact upon, define, and determine the outcomes of such transactions. The scope is usually to achieve field specific, practice-oriented goals, broadly and narrowly defined. All these understandings of governance carry

the (implicit) assumption that actors are embedded in, determined by and also shape such structures and processes” (2017 p.9).

From these many conceptions, a normative view of governance would be a process created by a set of institutions which has democratic access; it is a reflective and iterative process of adjustment that should be goal driven, and it is mindful of all environments. These normative conceptions have evolved with time, from what were relatively simple and stable functional structures in the 1960s and 1970s, that relied on public/private alliances to get things done (Shapely, 2013), into purported forms of integrated, inclusive and complex collaborations (Jessop, 2016). The catalyst for change - and a call for greater inclusivity in governance - was a realisation of the limitations of the State to react positively to retail change, where Morris (2017) suggests something happened in the late 1960s, as political administrative systems reached a point of diminishing returns, and the State sector was perceived to be delivering neither increases in welfare, nor in economic growth due to three limiting factors within economic and social environments. These were: (1) an increase in complexity and diversity; (2) the speed of change; and (3) a realisation that interdependence could mitigate loss and exploit gain.

These factors suggest that the effects of retail change have not only had economic consequences for town centres, they have also created strategic challenges as policy makers, aware of the limitations of the State to react positively to change, seek to steer and advise - rather than lead - through the Local Authority (Shapely, 2013). This is not to denigrate the role of the Local Authority; as Morris suggests “local government was, and still is a crucial element of local governance” (2017 p. 7); however the relationship between the State and society is changing to a position where Local Authorities are perceived as commissioners of services, rather than providers of solutions. In calling for “more market, less State” and, a “growing theoretical and practical interest in the potential of co-ordination, through self-organising networks, partnerships and other forms of reflexive collaboration” (Jessop 2016, p. 71), policy makers are contributing to a paradigmatic shift from the State influenced government structures of the 1960s, into more neo-liberal inclusive governance structures in the post 1980s period (Jessop, 2016). This shift has

allegedly repositioned local governance from hierarchical and exclusive forms into flatter more, inclusive heterarchical structures that prevail in many social spheres (Jessop, 2016).

How these purportedly evolved forms of local governance impact on the vitality and viability of town centres is at the heart of this thesis. Whether they appear as forms of “urban management” (Hogg *et al.*, 2007), which extol the virtue of formal partnership, and promote centre ground movements through flatter, non-hierarchical organisational structures (Coca-Stefaniak, 2016), or as less obtrusive forms of State intervention, for example as forms of informal collective action through “collibration” where rather than create a formal process of partnership a Local Authority “sensitive to the dynamics of such social processes, can without imperilling the social governance produced “tip the scales” a little to serve specific policy ends” (Dunsire, 1993 p. 5). Or indeed whether local governance appears as a natural rebalancing of several forms, where Adam Smith’s “hidden hand” and Herbert Spencer’s view of the market as Nature’s equivalent at the social level of the “survival of the fittest” mechanism of evolution would work if only left alone (Dunsire, 1993). Due to personal interpretation, and the purportedly evolving nature of local governance, none of these forms offer a definitive representation of the many diverse forms that exist. Indeed, it is understood within the complexity of political systems that governance is a “messy field” (Horvath, 2017 p.37). What is less understood is how governance works in town centres, how it impacts on commercial vitality and viability, or how the process of reconstruction (Peck and Tickell, 2002) from a State-led apparatus, to a collective relationship evolves.

To develop a framework that explores local governance forms, this chapter considers the shift from the government forms of the 1960s and 1970s, to the purported post-1980s flatter, non-hierarchical forms by reviewing the extant literature of town centre governance. From this it adopts an institutionalist perspective to aid an understanding of the “messiness” of local governance before developing a framework of four forms; *governance by government*; *governance through collective action*; *governance through partnership*; and *governance through market mediated anarchy* (Jessop, 2016). The framework is created with a caveat that rather than compiling a comprehensive review of all forms of governance, it aims for the “reduction, not the reproduction of complexity” (Hendriks, 2014 p.3).

## 2.2 The distinction between government and governance

Distinguishing between the government and market mediated anarchy forms of governance that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s, to post-1980s governance through co-ordination (collective action and/or partnership) as forms to influence strategy, has become a significant discussion point for scholars. Indeed, Jessop (2003, 2016) suggests the debate has been instrumental in a revival of the study of governance itself, as it is linked to certain paradigmatic crises in the social sciences in the past fifty years; crises partly due in turn to dissatisfaction with academics' capacity to describe and explain the 'real world'. The discussions centre on a purported shift over time "which imply that important new economic and social conditions and attendant problems have emerged which cannot be managed or resolved readily, if at all, through top-down State planning, or market mediated anarchy" (Jessop, 2003 p.5).

In the 1960s and 1970s town centres were influenced by dichotomous forms of Local Authority government (as a form of top down State planning) and market mediated anarchy, (as a form of free market enterprise). Top down State planning reflected the dominant strategies of the State where Local Authority's held influence through alliances with local elites as local planners, and developers revitalised town centres through retail centric strategies (Shapely, 2013); market mediated anarchy, exhibited a form of free market enterprise where Smith's "hidden hand" and Spencer's "survival of the fittest" mechanism of evolution would work if only left alone (Dunsire, 1993).

In the early 1980s, due to changes in the retail and political landscape, it was suggested that neither of these forms was effective in keeping pace with, or affecting change, particularly the form of State-influenced government (Stoker, 1998; Jessop, 1998; McGuirk and Dowling, 2011; Fairbanks, 2011). As Healey *et al.*, asserted in 1995, urban management cannot be understood in terms of 'top down' or 'command and control' forms of governance, as they contain a bias that is too often focussed on their own interests. The acknowledged limitations of both forms (government and market mediated anarchy) to react to change has provoked academic discussions of how local governance could evolve from the State as



hierarchical, authoritative functional processes that relied on transient alliances, into more inclusive, democratic structures.

What we know of governance is that it pervades time through “the sets of institutions and procedures through which a political system operates. In other words, the patterns and processes which create and organise authority, provide access to resources, provide for the delivery of services, and generate and deliver policy” (Morris, 2017 p.1). Moreover, as Healey suggests;

“there is always governance, the processes of collective action...it is always double faced, both authoritative and generative [and whilst it is] constraining, disciplining and stabilising [it is] also enabling, releasing of capacity and innovating. What form(s) local governance adopts through time relies on context and the relative balance between the forces of authority, or their influences, and the subsequent equity of the distribution of opportunities and constraints” (2004 p.14).

The balance to which Healey refers is between the role of government, as the State (or Local Authority), and what Jessop (2003, 2016) defines as market mediated anarchy, or; the independent, informal market economy where the motivator is for private organisations to create a profit (Cook, 2009). For example, if one were to define governance as “how societal steering has been dispersed across society” (Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998; Scott; 2004, cited in Steurer, 2013 p.389), “government” and “market mediated anarchy” would be forms of “societal steering”. They differ in that government is particular to the influence of formal, authoritative control; market mediated anarchy to the influence of informal, but influential private enterprise. Somewhere between State influenced government, and free market anarchy are alleged forms of heterarchy, which exist as group influences that are more dynamic and fluid than traditional hierarchical structures (Aime *et al.*, 2014). This distinction is relevant to town centres as policy directives in Britain are defined by the relative balance of influence between government, which is defined by an “adversarial/hierarchical Westminster model [which proposes] an impositional style”; and governance which “emphasises the importance of bargaining and consensus...via a process of power sharing between government and interest groups” (Richardson, 2018 p.1).

The premise is that heterarchic governance offers stable, flatter power hierarchies which facilitate collective decision-making, which in turn motivates actors and improves co-ordination and co-operation (Anderson and Brown, 2010; Halevy et al., 2011), whereas unstable power hierarchies, where influence is in the hands of the few, either through government or market mediated anarchy can promote ambiguity and conflict, or as Locke describes “organisational chaos and anarchy” (Pearce et al., 2008 p.284). It remains a premise, however, for while government policy holds a view that improved vitality and viability could be best obtained through forms of collective action, it does so whilst recognising that change is indiscriminate, and that local influencers resist strategies that react to change (Teune, 1995). Heterarchic governance therefore may offer an ideal of how local governance should evolve from forms of hierarchical government, or market mediated anarchy to collective action, however the subject covers a wide remit and it offers no specific prescriptive forms to meet specific local challenges.

Jessop (2016 p.5) suggests the ambiguity of heterarchic governance is due to the complexity of the self-organisation of inter-organisational relations, which “emerges where materially interdependent but formally autonomous organisations, each of which controls important resources, must coordinate their actions to secure a joint outcome which is deemed mutually beneficial”. Therefore rather than evolve into one collective, best practice and over-arching governance form that moves with time, town centre influencers retain their organisational independence, but create permeable boundaries between public and private organisations (Stoker, 1995, 1996), where “governance is about the capacity to get things done in the face of complexity, conflict and social change; [where] organisations empower themselves by blending their resources, skills and purposes with others” (Kearns and Paddison, 2000 p.847). In this context heterarchic governance has the potential to be as individual as town centres.

What we recognise through the “permeable boundaries of organisational independence” (Stoker, 1995, 1996) is that government and free markets are not dichotomous forms, but continuous variables; in effect, town centres are governed by factions of government intervention/influence, where as one moves along a continuum of forms towards heterarchic governance, the form of government becomes diluted by a configuration of

many institutions that define the context within which politics and governance take place (Healey, 2005; McCarthy, 2016; McCann, 2017). Jessop (2016 p.73) explains this as meta-governance, where markets, hierarchies and heterarchies exist in a context of;

“negotiated decision-making. Thus, market mediated anarchy is balanced by co-operation where the invisible hand is combined with a visible handshake, and the State is no longer the sovereign authority as it becomes but one participant among others in the pluralistic guidance system and contributes its own distinctive resources to the negotiation process”... [in effect there exists a] “sterile debate about State versus society ...an interest in the State and an interest in governance are not mutually exclusive...the State is an object of governance” (Jessop, 2016 p. 73).

In developing a framework to explore the impact of local influencers on commercial vitality and viability it is therefore apposite to acknowledge government and market mediated anarchy as distinct (although impure) governance forms with heterarchic governance, or collective action, as a form of centre ground. To explore, if and, how the centre ground develops from opposing forms this thesis adopts institutional theory to discuss how local governance works in four different town centres. A theoretical underpinning is discussed in more detail below.

### **2.3 Governance theory in UK town centres**

Academic interest in “not only why cities are the way they are...or how urban built environments, societies and political economies are shaped and reshaped... but also how they are made to be the way they are through the concerted actions...of everyday life” (McCann, 2017 p.313) prevails as an area that was rarely commented on in urban studies before the 1990s. While Harvey’s paper on the rise of “entrepreneurial governance” (1989) enlightened the debate about temporal shifts in State–market–society relations (McCann, 2017), it is the relationship between governance forms of top down State planning and market mediated anarchy (Jessop, 2003) that have provided an area rich in academic discourse.

With an accepted premise that governing town centres is a task that is too overwhelming for public organisations (Beauregard, 1996; Stoker, 1998; Stone, 1993), or free markets to

influence alone, academics, and policy makers have turned their focus onto why Local Authorities need to work in concert with private interests in an attempt to enhance collective goals (Whyatt, 2004; Peel, 2003; Pierre, 2005; Brańka *et al.*, 2016). Before discussing the theory of how the space between forms of government and market mediated anarchy is occupied within town centres, it is important to consider the theoretical underpinnings of heterarchic governance.

### **2.3.1 The theory underpinning heterarchic governance.**

Theory suggests that an ideal convergence between forms of government and market mediated anarchy are forms of heterarchic governance, a concept based on reflexive rationality. Maesschalck (2017) suggests this is not a form that is easy to adopt, as it is an ambitious process that aims to transform the roles and forms of normative production through collective processes that tend towards the resolution of problems. The key to the success of heterarchic governance is a continued commitment to dialogue which generates and exchanges information. In this sense, the rationality of governance becomes dialogic rather than monologic, and it locks governance partners into a range of interdependent decisions over a mixture of short, medium, and long-term time horizons, encouraging solidarity among those involved (Jessop, 2016).

Due to its transformative nature, heterarchic governance is where theory is marked by the “tectonic shifts and [the] splintering” (MacLeod, 2011) of the relationship between local influence and politics; where the purported hollowing out of the State (Swyngedouw, 1992; Jessop, 1997) represents not only new ways to govern (Martin *et al.*, 2003), but also new ways to theorise over the changing relationships between the State and local actors. Therefore, to aid any transformation, policy directives are not solely concerned with creating vital and viable places, but also the re-education and re-orientation of the public sector and community groups towards a “privatist, entrepreneurial ethos, which, despite promises of openness and participation are nearly always perceived as a one sided and less than democratic process” (Hastings, 1996; McCann, 2017 p.316). Swyngedouw (2005) suggests this is where heterarchic governance exhibits contradictions as it offers the promise of greater democracy; however, such promises are paralleled by democratic deficit,

where all actors are free and are encouraged to participate, but ill-equipped to understand the rules of engagement. Local actors, therefore become limited to forms of “provisional governance” due to the State’s rule over who is allowed to participate and on what terms (Allen, 2004). Comment, however, is not solely confined to a critique of the State’s role in collective action as academics also recognise the “bottom up” limitations of local actors (McGuirk and Dowling, 2011; Fairbanks, 2011). To better understand the “real world” between forms of government and market mediated anarchy, academics increasingly adopt institutional theory to explore how “cracks” (Amin and Thrift, 2002) in what were traditional structures could create new forms and structures of local governance.

### **2.3.2 The role of institutional theory in heterarchic governance**

“Interpretive policy analysts have helped to understand...that 'politics' has expanded out of the formal arenas of representative democracy into the complex interactive worlds through which policy formulation and delivery are accomplished. This suggests that policy is made not necessarily in the cauldron of ideological politics, but in the evolution of knowledge and frames of interpretation that develop within policy communities. These policy discourses in turn shape the design of policy interventions regulatory tools, programmes of investment and management, moral exhortations. They influence the evolving practices through which governance is performed (Healey, 2007 p. 17).

In this statement, Healey implies that stakeholder’s experiences, through time and the company they keep, both informs the practice of governance and the formation of policy, where local governance is not “voluntarily formed around a shared understanding of purpose...rather [it is] formed around organisations with a history, sometimes positive and sometimes negative, with different interests and varying levels of power” (Rowe, 2007 p.54). Institutionalism attempts to understand the relationship between political and non-political stakeholders as it considers not only the endogenous nature, and social construction of political institutions within the town centre, but also the effect of exogenous inputs from the government and private consultants. It is worth noting however, that as each town centre is unique, institutionalism as a theory is as amorphous as governance, as any individuality of place is reflected within the collaboration that occurs within the context of its surroundings. March and Olsen (2004) reinforce this by commenting that although institutionalism comes in many flavours, they are all perspectives for understanding and

improving political systems; systems which at a macro theory level differ somewhat from the micro theory of collaborative practice.

For example, at a macro level a core assumption is that institutions create elements of order and predictability; they carry identities and roles and they are markers of a polity's character, history and visions as they provide bonds that tie citizens together in spite of the many things that divide them (March and Olsen, 2006). At a micro level, local governance refers to how the form of government, which gave a strong role to the State in supporting the economy and civil society, moves towards a form of economic and civil co-operation to self-manage what had previously been provided by the State (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 2001; Gonzalez and Healey, 2005). Healey (2007) suggests from the micro perspective it is possible to explore the diverse and changing evolutions of governance, and indeed the role of government within it to understand how the worlds of politics and administration connects with other social worlds to generate the many ways in which the State and civil society interact, how these are changing, and what opportunities may open up for more socially innovative governance practices.

To emphasise the macro/micro argument, Healey (2006) suggests that institutions are not solely defined by formal laws and organisational competences, where governance practices are attached to a specific organisational form that can be created and shifted in a straightforward manner by the formalised institutions of politics (Le Gales, 2002; Cars *et al.*, 2017;). Rather governance is a result of the practices that;

“evolve in an historically and geographically situated way, through all kinds of synergetic encounters, contradictions, conflicts and active struggles...formed in a wide range of governance arenas and political outcomes [and] are shaped by many, often transecting, conflicting political dynamics, raising difficult questions of representation, accountability and legitimation” (Swyngedouw, 2005 p.226).

These local struggles in many cases leads to the serendipitous outcomes, which Healey (2006) suggests is a limitation of 'best practice' models to identify and assess socially innovative practices, as these are never fully transferable. In effect, an “institutionalist perspective assists with the understanding of social, economic and political activity, within which the concepts and practices of urban regeneration policy are embedded, [where]

individuals do not exist as autonomous units in terms of their choice of actors and make rational choices in a linear fashion to maximise their interests. Rather this approach acknowledges that we act and make [strategic] decisions through the links we have with other people” (McCarthy, 2016 p.2). These reactive, intersecting collaborations between actors form the basis for the institutional capacity (Healey, 2006) that some believe is to be encouraged as individual organisations could find the task of creating and maintaining suitable strategies to create and maintain attractiveness on their own difficult (Peel, 2003; Whyatt, 2004).

Institutional theory acknowledges that influencers can, and do, act independently (Healey, 2006) however due to their locale they share a “strong institutional presence and shared cultural norms and values [thus] encouraging the development of trust and co-operation which seem to be critical to the stimulation of entrepreneurship and economic development” (Amin and Thrift, 1995. cited in McCarthy, 2016 p.2). Therefore, rather than divide by function or form, institutional capacity considers how influencers interact to form mutual bonds that could have a holistic impact on their centre, however transient such interaction may be (Davies, 2002). Effectively where the “levers of influence” (Evans, 1997 p.97) or “elites” (Hallsworth and Evans, 2008) come together for the greater good, irrespective of form.

### **2.3.3 Creating heterarchic governance through institutional capacity**

Gonzalez and Healey (2005) suggest the relevance of institutional capacity to town centre governance arises from the fact that it focuses the analysis of micro-dynamics through a set of four commonly accepted premises;

- Institutions are typically distinguished from organisations, as they are understood as the formal, and non-formal frameworks of norms, rules and practices that structure action in social contexts (Giddens, 1984; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991);
- Their focus is on interactions, not decisions *per se*. Further, these interactions do not occur in a vacuum, nor in a clearly bounded ‘action space’, rather they “penetrate the organisation, creating the lenses through which actors view the world and the very categories of structure, action and thought” (Dimaggio and Powell (1991, p.13).

- Analysts working with these concepts emphasise how institutions change and the role of intentionality in promoting such change (Dimaggio and Powell, 1991; Hajer, 1995).
- While some analysts focus on the micro-politics of interactions between actors for example, as created partnerships, sociological institutionalists have a strong interest in the issue of governance capacity itself.

The commonly accepted concepts of sociological institutionalism suggest that it is difficult to determine the origins of institutional capacity as it is conceived as a continually evolving social dynamic that develops through innovation and struggle in all kinds of institutional sites (Gonzalez and Healey, 2005). This means that, when looking for socially innovative practices, researchers also need to consider deeper frames of reference and cultural practices which structure how people make sense of their collective worlds and engage cognitively and bodily in their daily routines (Hajer, 1995; Healey *et al.*, 2003; Innes and Booher, 2003, 2016).

It is the daily routines that create town centre governance, and the forms it adopts are a consequence of the cracks where alternative practices create insurgent forces (Amin and Thrift, 2002); indeed, the cracks, in turn, may come to have a considerable power to transform existing governance relations (Gonzalez and Healey, 2005). The space between the cracks however is where heterarchic forms of local governance become “messy” (Horvath, 2017) as stakeholders who are often used to relatively fixed routines, through for example their organisation’s cultural paradigms (Schein, 1993; Johnson *et al.*, 2011) are asked to adapt to new ways to govern. New ways where cultural differences can get in the way, and collective culture is often hindered by influencers who say one thing yet do something completely different. Schein (1993, 2010) suggests, therefore, that to better understand the action versus rhetoric “messiness” we need to look for the values that govern influencers behaviour, many of which will be entrenched in their past actions;

“In identifying such values...we usually note that they represent accurately only the manifest, or espoused values of a culture. That is, they focus on what people say is the reason for their behaviour, what they ideally would like those reasons to be, and what are often their rationalisations for their behaviour. Yet, the underlying reasons for their behaviour remain concealed or unconscious” (1993 p.2).



Due to its focus on action, the cultural paradigm is crucial to governance structures as it considers how unconscious ties that hold organisations together revise their form through attitudes and actions “into interrelated assumptions that form a coherent pattern” (Schein, 1984 p.2). These ties are the collective action that reflect the revised values of influencers, for as Schein argues, “there cannot be a culture unless there is a group that owns it”.

Culture that is “owned” becomes embedded in groups that; (1) have been together for a period of time, and have seen and overcome problems; (2) have had the opportunity to solve those problems and, to observe the effects of their solutions; and (3) have taken in new members who share their values (Schein, 1994). Thus the strength of the cultural paradigm, and the influence it holds, is defined by the homogeneity and stability of the group, where a strong cultural paradigm has faced many difficult challenges that it has overcome together, conversely a weak cultural paradigm has a constantly shifting membership that has not been exposed to, or overcome many problems (Schein, 1994).

As Gonzalez and Healey (2005) note, all governance initiatives have the potential to change the embedded cultures in which they are institutionally located, however change, especially in Local Authority influenced town centres can create greater challenges because the internal complexity, embedded power structures and relative inflexibility of public institutions are generally unresponsive to change. In this context, any centre ground does not necessarily re-form traditional structures; rather those with power, or influence retain organisational independence but take a lead in any new process (Fretter, 1993; van den Berg and Braun, 1999). This can create an outline plan of ‘organising capacity’ around that influencer, who then ‘enlist[s] all actors involved and, with their help, generate[s] new ideas to develop and implement a policy designed to respond to fundamental developments and create conditions for sustainable development’ (Van den Berg and Braun, 1999 p.995).

In summary, institutional theory attempts to look beyond the dichotomous relationships of blending and co-ordinating public and private interests, to what Pierre (1999, 2005, 2016) defines as the search for processes and mechanisms through which significant and resource-full actors’ can co-ordinate their actions, and resources, in the pursuit of collectively defined objectives. Heterarchic governance through institutional capacity is therefore as much

about 'bottom-up' influencers as it is about 'top-down' influencers, it is where local strategies 'fit' local challenges, where visions and actions (whether commercially, or socially motivated) provide "a clear understanding of what is desirable, of what you want to achieve" (Fretter, 1993 p.165). Warnaby *et al.*, (2005) suggest from this, capacity adopts an iterative and ongoing process towards the strategic planning of urban place, which is only possible if, at the outset, the vision and strategy are collectively entered into. One can draw from this that if there is insufficient capacity, influencers will be constrained in their pursuits. As a result, without institutional capacity sustainability is compromised, and the effectiveness of private and public influence towards sustained vitality and viability becomes marginalised.

## **2.4 Suggested routes to heterarchic governance within UK town centres**

Local governance forms to address the impacts of change over the past fifty-nine years within town centres have generally been categorised as: 1) forms with function (Evans, 1997; Pal and Sanders, 1997; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2009); 2) forms of formal partnership (Medway *et al.*, 2006; Coca–Stefaniak *et al.*, 2009); and 3) forms of temporal collaboration, for example "institutional thickness" (McCarthy, 2016 p.11), or capacity (Healey, 2005).

The forms of temporal collaboration as a "coming together" of stakeholders have been introduced in sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3, forms within function, and partnership are introduced here.

### **2.4.1 Governance by function**

In *Regenerating Town Centres* (1997) Evans notes that interests 'shaping' urban centres can be usefully divided into those who produce value in them (property owners, developers, retailers, street artists), those who use them (employees, shoppers, residents, tourists), and those who intermediate between the producers and the users (local and national government, estate agents, amenity organizations and pressure groups). He acknowledges that interactions occur between these groups, to the extent that networks are created, which inevitably result in the formation of power and dependency relations. However, the

most commonly used criteria for categorising and classifying urban stakeholders relates to their functions within the public, private or voluntary sectors, or a combination thereof. These forms continue to be adopted in 2019, either implicitly or explicitly, by both practitioner organisations, (for example the Association of Town and City Management), and scholars (for example, Jung *et al.*, 2014; Ng *et al.*, 2013), who suggest that classifying stakeholders by their sectoral affiliation represents a useful starting point for understanding the key actors involved in urban partnerships.

The reference to functions as a starting point is apposite, because an acknowledged critique of functional forms is that they focus on stakeholders in terms of what they are, and where they come from, rather than what they do (Le Feuvre *et al.*, 2016). When Evans (1997) considered the impact of functional governance on vitality and viability, it was in the context of understanding the “nature of the relationship between retailers, developers, local authorities, shoppers and other users” (p. 97), within a town centre environment which considers economic, physical and social space (Pal and Sanders, 1997; Evans, 1997). He suggested that stakeholders hold a “lever of influence” over strategic direction in town centres, as they each contribute to the strategic process via one of three functions; as producers of value; consumers of value; or as intermediaries in the process of such values, a simplistic functional perspective shared by academics and practitioners alike (Pal and Sanders, 1997; ATCM, 1996; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2009). Evans did offer a caveat, namely that in practice actors perform a number of these roles simultaneously, however the categorisations themselves are useful for “discriminating different motives” (1997, p. 98). Function, however, remains an idealised governance structure that pre-occupies many scholar’s thoughts as the root of organisational friction, where any collaboration is criticised as being divisive (Peel, 2003; Reeve, 2004; Whyatt, 2004); secular (Hogg *et al.*, 2004); and possessing “ontological insecurities” (Peel, 2003).

The principal critique of a rigid concept of functional governance as a form is that it generalises what stakeholders are, rather than what they do in a local context. This is relevant as each action has a reaction, each as unique as the town centre environment it influences. Defining stakeholders within functional governance therefore offers the beginning of a story without a middle, or an end. To quote Innes and Booher (2003) it fails

to “connect the dots” between functions. For example, producers of value are categorised as “property owners, developers, investors, retailers, construction and design professionals and informal producers such as buskers and pavement artists” (Evans, p. 97). However, when “the passive behaviour of property owners proves problematic” (Evans, 1997 p. 99) their action impacts on more than the function of property, it also effects investors, developers and commercial practices, as well as the social well-being of the town centre and any perception of its relative vitality and viability.

Indeed, Jones (2010) suggests that such passive behaviour from landlords with vacant units impacts on the traditional view of the UK high street as an investment, which has witnessed diminishing investment to the point that the number of high street shops in investment portfolios has halved since the mid-1990s. A relatively simple vacant property therefore becomes the start of a story which creates an intricate web of association, where passive property owners (producers) impact on pension funds as investors of property, on retailers (users) as occupiers of the property through commercial leases, on residents (users), and consumers of town centre services, on Local Authority’s (facilitators) as custodians of the public realm, banks (facilitators) through mortgages, consumers (users) through consumption, and employees (users) as providers of labour.

A further critique is that functional forms attract conflict, which is not solely through a difficulty in defining function but through a primary acknowledgement that most UK town centres regardless of context, are complex and multi-dimensional spaces. They are therefore open to a plurality of interpretation. For example, practitioners often adopt hard physical and mechanistic modes of enquiry and understanding, proving evidence of worth through key performance measures (KPI); in effect, they consider the silo mentality of protecting their interests to be of primary concern; by contrast, Local Authorities may be inclined to consider the softer, more inclusive social concerns of the public realm. It is difficult therefore to see how the fluid complexities of local governance could be understood, or explained by functional forms, where stakeholder meaning, motive and interpretation within degrees of complexity decree that “reality” exists within continuums of interpretation within multiple environments (Pal and Sanders, 1997). To summarise Le Feuvre *et al.*, articulate cogently the difficulties with functional governance:

“Classifying urban stakeholders as being of a function or sectoral ‘type’ is problematic. Certainly, where behaviour is concerned, different recipients of that behaviour may have varied views on how they are treated by a particular stakeholder; and where attitudes are concerned, these may change over time. Furthermore, in trying to understand how an urban partnership works (or more critically how it might work better), then examining the shifting, fluid—and sometimes nuanced and paradoxical-interplay of stakeholder interactions is as important as understanding the individual/organizational characteristics of the stakeholders themselves....[subsequently] efforts to categorize urban partnership stakeholders by their inter-dependency and influence (Savage *et al.*, 1991), or by their entrepreneurial ethos (Logan and Molotch,1987), are arguably hampered by regarding stakeholders per se as the unit of analysis, rather than their interaction(s)” (2016 p.63)

#### **2.4.2 Governance by partnerships**

Peck and Tickell comment that;

“So-called "partnership" approaches have come to dominate the fields of urban regeneration and local economic development. Partnership, like apple pie, is undeniably a good thing. Partnership stands for cooperation, mutuality and understanding. Partnership invokes notions of efficiency, of pulling together and getting things done; it implies a meeting of minds, a pooling of resources, maybe even a baring of souls. It is difficult, however, to be critical of partnership without also appearing at odds with these entirely laudable principles. Yet somehow, we have to find a way of distinguishing between good and bad partnerships. And to do so, it is necessary to cut beneath the rhetoric of partnership, to examine both the institutional and political balance of power which underpins different kinds of partnership, and what the different partners are bringing to the table” (1994 p. 251).

In short, partnerships are “desired by the government who argue that by working across organisational and sectoral boundaries, better value will be derived from public spending...at the same time, the business sense of the private sector would be tempered by the social agenda of the public, voluntary and charitable sectors” (Rowe, 2007 p. 46). In this context, partnerships may suggest a panacea to the many complex challenges that town centres face, however evidence would suggest they rarely do as they fail to appear in an idealised form, more often appearing as hybrids of networks of varying form and inclusiveness (Rowe, 2007; Bevir and Rhodes, 2016). Despite their obvious complexities there appears a great appetite, at least by policy makers of successive governments, to bring together public and private partners to create shared values - in effect, ‘created partnerships’. These are normally manifest as relationships with opposing views of what a town centre should represent (Reeve, 2004; Peel, 2003; ATCM, 2012), and subsequently opposing views of what constitutes vitality and viability.

For example, much has been written on the neo-liberal created partnerships of town centre management, (TCM) and business improvement districts (BIDs). However, the source of any partnership remains vague: are they part of Government policy to create togetherness within centres as places of civic pride and commercial opportunity? (see Peel, 2003; Reeve, 2004; Whyatt, 2004; Coca-Stefaniak, 2013); are they a form of collective action to respond to changing consumer preferences? (Schiller, 1996; Bromley *et al.*, 2005; URBED, 1994; Guy, 1994; Medway *et al.*, 2000; Whyatt, 2004; Hogg *et al.*, 2004; Otsuka and Reeve, 2007; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2009); or is the form of created partnership more complex and interesting than purely an economic reaction to change, or a policy dictum (Evans, 1997; Reeve, 2004; Otsuka and Reeve, 2007) where;

“Competitive pressures from out of town retail competition are an inadequate explanation for the growth of a radically new form of urban management. The fact that retail and property have largely driven TCM interests is of course true. Shopping is usually the main activity and provision in UK town centres (Lockwood, 1997, 1999). But town centres are not just shopping centres without a roof and doors. The way in which TCM took off as an idea needs to be explained by more than simply a threat sensed by vested money interests, and by more than the claims of such interests to be acting in the public good.” (Otsuka and Reeve, 2007 p.226)

Evans (1997) and Reeve (2004) synthesise these views by suggesting created partnership, as a governance form, has its roots at the end of the Thatcher period in the early 1990s when private business pressed to create what it regarded as a more coherent urban management approach that was more responsive to its interests. A form of created partnership thus became a political response to a perceived need for a new form of urban management - a form that “encouraged” partnership between public and private stakeholders to manage public resource with contributions from private capital. Created partnership in this context becomes an activity both discrete from the Local Authority's traditional role as overseer of public space provision and servicing, and the private sector's role as market driven provider of amenities based on consumer demand (Reeve, 2004). In this guise, created partnership receives favour from central government, and more broadly amongst built environment professionals (Reeve, 2004).

Indeed, the 1994 Select Committee on the Environment acknowledged the potential of TCM for urban regeneration (see British Property Federation, 1995), whilst the revised Planning Policy Guidance (PPG, 1996 p.226) noted that:

“Effective management and promotion of town centres will help to enhance their vitality and viability. Many factors affecting the quality of a town centre lie outside the planning system. In partnership with the private sector and the local community, Local Authorities should develop a town centre management initiative, which may lead to appointing a town centre manager to improve links between public and private sector initiatives”.

A critique of created partnerships is that in theory they appear to possess merit; however in practice they attract dissenters who argue that if TCM is a regenerator of commerce, then why are so many town centres failing to attract consumers, retailers and investors, becoming, in the words of Evans (1997 p.137) “boring, predictable, over commercialised places devoid of any cultural significance, tolerated as a necessary inconvenience by those that have no choice and avoided by those consumers that do”, adding that “remarkably few are a joy to work in, or visit anymore”. Furthermore, rather than maintaining the commercial heart of the centre, thus retaining any vitality and viability in the high street, TCM actually contributes to what Barney (2001) describes as strategies of competitive parity that promote conformity in their delivery.

As a form of governance, Reeve echoes the sentiment of many when he concedes that TCM, as a created partnership, “really only defines a set of aspirations...and the conflict of cultures between public and private remains in many cases unresolved”. He goes further to suggest that:

“as a strategic body the ATCM exists to promote the idea of TCM, to organise conferences and seminars as a means of developing good practice, to provide information about various aspects of town centre management, to develop practical research in the field, and to provide appropriate skills training for the job... but it suffers because it is solely concerned with good practice, and is therefore proselytising rather than objectively distanced” (2004 p.19)

Furthermore, Otsuka and Reeve (2007) suggest that the value of a TCM project can often only be underwritten by the willingness of the private sector to support it, a willingness that potentially affords a commercial bias. Consequently, TCM encounters criticism as a generator of sustained vitality and viability as it fails to address holistic issues, where

economic reaction is less of a consideration and a number of Local Authorities have been cautious about encouraging the growth of a new form of urban management (Reeve, 2004). Notwithstanding its limitations, a core theme of created partnership, in the guise of TCM, has been co-operation (Medway *et al*, 2000), where “the combination of both private and public-sector interest in maintaining and improving the vitality and viability of town centres is ...changing attitudes about the way in which town centres are managed” (Pal and Sanders, 1997 p. 70).

Indeed, Davies (2002) concedes that created partnerships could facilitate Government’s influence over business leaders, as well as being a means to focus Local Authority’s on growth and efficiency; however, he is also critical of them, suggesting “local partnerships are conduits of government policy, with little local autonomy, trust or collaborative synergy” (p.22). He suggests that governance through created partnership is a “case of creeping centralisation because policy partnerships tend to reflect central political priorities, sometimes down to the detail of individual projects. In fact, the influence of the centre over the locality appears to be growing, rather than contracting” (p. 21). This perception of created partnerships is shared by others who suggest they are purely instruments of central government, where any collaboration is not a “partnership of equals, rather it is about drawing local ‘stakeholders’, including business, into supporting and carrying out the UK government’s agenda for regeneration in the locality” (Davies, 2002 p.23) ‘in the name of achieving broad public sector goals’ (Peters, 1998 p.29).

Notwithstanding these critiques governance by partnership, since the 1980s, has been perceived “as a means of marshalling different stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors, to plan and implement regeneration initiatives” (Le Feuvre *et al*, 2016 p.55), which, in turn, has become a key strategy for many town centres as they attempt to respond to global economic restructuring, using partnerships as part of a broader transition as urban political processes evolve from one of government to that of governance (Goodwin and Painter, 1996; Dicken, 2015). Indeed, Cochrane (2000 p.536) suggests that the role of partnership collaboration is embedded to the extent that “each new policy generation seems condemned to rediscover and identify” its merits, a philosophy that is not only embedded in urban literature, but also crosses the boundaries of a number of social



disciplines namely geography, politics, public administration, tourism and urban studies (see Bailey, Barker and McDonald, 1995; Hastings, 1996, 1999; Carley, Chapman, Kirk, Hastings and Young, 2000; Roberts and Sykes, 2000; Carter, 2000; Diamond, 2001; Hemphill, McGreal, Berry and Watson, 2006; Whitehead, 2007; and Timur and Getz, 2008).

In summary, the premise behind created partnership is that actors might be encouraged to engage in a more pragmatic form of “smart pluralism” (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007), guided by compromise within collaboration rather than by coercive dominance. This contrasts with governance by function as it considers what actors do, rather than what they are (Le Feuvre *et al.*, 2016). However, the compromise is tempered by the complexity of public/private collaboration, a complexity that Harris (2003 p. 2542) describes as “an immensely complicated, variegated and non-standardised world of governance”, which offers little for the textbook, as the importance of locality and context again raise concerns about its viability.

## **2.5 Developing a framework of governance forms**

In developing a framework of governance forms into a unifying framework I am mindful that;

“All contributors to academic literature come from particular trajectories...authors develop their ideas in interaction with other authors, with colleagues and with their own life experiences...our particular trajectories shape what we focus on, how we focus and the terms and languages we use to express our ideas and findings (Massey, 2005 cited in Healey, 2007 p. vii).

In line with Massey’s thoughts, many scholars have defined governance forms that are consistent with their particular area of interest. For example, Pierre (1999, 2016) advocates political models of efficiency (managerial); distribution (corporatist); growth (pro-growth); and welfare (re-distribution) as institutional acts that increase the city’s “capacity to act” (Stone, 1989). DiGaetano and Strom (2003) define governance forms as outcomes of the relationships of key influential decision makers, where the formality and inclusiveness of structures define political outcomes. Bulkeley and Kern (2006) suggest governance is relevant to the goals and actions through four distinct forms, namely: self-governance, governing by provision, governing by authority, and governing through enabling. And,

Davies (2002 p.22) proposes three “distinguishing” forms of governance in his empirical study of four English boroughs; governance by government; governance by partnership; and governance by networks, within which he also explores the role of hierarchy as a continuing struggle for hegemony under neo-liberalism (Davies, 2011). Of the many conceptualisations there are two themes that influence the nature of forms of local governance in town centres, namely;

*(1) That town centre governance can evolve as a reaction to change;*

Jessop (1997, 2003, 2016), for example, acknowledges forms of anarchy, hierarchy, heterarchy and solidarity, within which he adopts three forms of heterarchic governance namely; interpersonal networking, self-organization of inter-organizational relations and inter-systemic steering. He concedes these forms are speculative; however, in doing so he acknowledges that governance has the capacity to evolve through “the intersection of different kinds of social relations and this, in turn, creates the possibility of adopting different approaches to their interactions” (2016, p.75).

Davies (2002 p. 25) acknowledges the potential for contextual local forms which “offer[s] greater potential for the growth of networking because they are fashioned around local concerns, local initiative and local resources”. This implies that forms have the capacity to evolve as a response to their local challenges. Rhodes (1996 p. 667) suggests that these locally organised networks as “governing without government” are “set fair” to offer alternatives to forms of market mediated anarchy and traditional hierarchies. Jones and Evans (2013) expand the theory of market mediated anarchy, hierarchies and self-organising networks as forms to include the regime theories of Stone (1989); and Healey (2007 p.15) offers an explanation for evolving theories noting that “cities are essentially dynamic [and] policy formulation must work with this; it must not think in terms of some final, formal plan, nor work with an assumption of a reachable permanent harmony of peace. The order of cities is a dynamic-and frequently conflictual-order. A new politics for cities must be equally fluid and processual” (Amin *et al*, 2000 p. 8–10).

*(2) That town centre governance is influenced by an “inner circle” (Useem, 1984 p.3) of movers and shakers.*

To address the challenges of change local governance requires influential local “Mr Bigs...to redevelop and generate *their* cities” and towns (Peck, 1995 p. 16). Influencers could be elected Local Authorities, unelected private business elites, or an amalgamation of both. What matters is that the “Mr. Bigs” influence others as real decision makers. This is “founded on the idea that if you really want to accomplish anything in the urban domain, you need to accost the business elites and other key figures in society and involve them in the decision-making process” (Hunter, 1953; Lauria, 1997; Stone, 1989, cited in Hendriks, 2014 p. 6–7). There are arguments that suggest that local governance “should not only be for citizens but also by citizens” (Hendriks, 2014 p.7). However, as Davies (2002) suggests, there are always some citizens who are more equal than others, particularly in an urban context where political, and economic influence and local power is “licenced by the state”, and “the recruitment of business leaders onto local organisations, [is] orchestrated directly by central government” (Jessop, Peck and Tickell, 1999 p. 25).

A consideration that governance has the potential to adapt, and that governance is influenced by an inner circle of elites, leads to the proposed forms of evolving governance discussed in sections 2.5.1–2.5.4. These four forms are not considered mutually exclusive as influence is timely and contextual, and there are always changes that shape a town centre through actions to local circumstances, some planned, some serendipitous. Rather, as general forms they reflect time within governance boundaries that are worthy of study. These forms are referred to as; governance by government; governance through partnership; governance through collective action; and governance by market mediated anarchy.

**2.5.1 Governance by government** – is “a process where the Local Authority delivers the welfare state, with few non-statutory interactions between Council and business leaders” (Davies, 2002 p.22). Governance by government is a highly formalised and exclusive governance form where the State controls resource to urban redevelopment through “socialist ideals which formed in the post-war reconstruction” (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.47). This form was a political consensus that was purportedly broken by the government of

Margaret Thatcher, who perceived such ideals as an inefficient means of delivering public services. Subsequently, “Local Authorities, condemned as corrupt and inefficient, had severe restrictions on how they could raise and spend revenue” (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.47). Consequently, there was a suggested shift towards the Local Authority’s involvement in areas where other sectors could provide a better delivery of services, through the introduction of public/private partnerships.

Davies (2001) suggests, however, that within partnerships there are always some partners that are likely to be more equal than others and “hierarchies remain the most important structures in urban regeneration”. Any partnership co-operation therefore is criticised as not being an exchange of equals and the word partnership implies that the State remains the dominant factor in this form of governance (Davies, 2001 p15-16). Indeed, Davies (2001) concedes that, at heart, town centre structures are still predominantly driven by government top down forms, with formal division and a non-inclusive process, where collaboration only exists when the Local Authority invites actors into the public realm to provide a function within any initiative. The defining characteristics of this form are outlined below:

**Government:** Collaboration is normally through formal planning departments and the relationships they hold with developers, managing agents and investors. Generally, a closed system of command and control through legislation, government policy and Local Authority vision. This mode rarely engages a wide remit of actors and is often perceived as a secular process with strategic direction from externally commissioned reports. Examples are Local Authority hierarchies, where relatively few influencers determine strategy.

**2.5.2 Governance through partnership** – is a process where sustainable vitality and viability is achieved through formal, and inclusive structures. The premise is that structures that have degrees of formality and inclusiveness, between public/private institutions have a more realistic chance of achieving sustainable vitality and viability because they allow public, social, and private interests to engage in strategies which cross over physical, social and economic environments, thereby becoming democratic and self-serving (Coca-Stefaniak *et al*, 2009, 2013; ATCM, 2017).

Created partnerships, as neo-liberal movements, recognise that local public departments have “considerable expertise and local knowledge that [posits] them well placed to co-ordinate locally based regeneration projects” with private developers who have access to capital (Jones and Evans, 2013 p. 49). Subsequently, there is a recognised need for partnerships within urban areas and town centres to embrace a more entrepreneurial ethos (Cook, 2009). Adopting an entrepreneurial ethos, however, requires the State to enter into some degree of collaboration with private partners, a strategic decision that has implications, as inevitably any such collaboration increasingly affects the character, fortunes and diversity of local areas, through the bias of various interests and agendas represented through this constellation of actors from different cultures. Because of the diversity of interests and perspectives the scope for organisational conflict is, of course, ever present (see Boyle, 1997; Peck, 1995). The defining characteristics of this form are outlined below:

**Created partnership:** Collaboration is through inclusive and formal structures. These could represent the interests of Local Authority, prominent retailers, developers and place marketers. Generally, a more open system of command and control with a more inclusive process. It attempts to engage a wider level of inclusivity through town centre boards, representing actors from a diverse range of backgrounds and interests. Examples are TCM partnerships, BIDs and developer owned town centres.

**2.5.3 Governance through collective action** – is a form of heterarchic governance determined through “self-organising inter-organisational networks” (Rhodes, 1997 p.53), through strategies that “bring together a series of different actors to accomplish a task, though not actually putting together a single over-arching body, as each of the different actors remains independent” (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.49). The lines of responsibility are somewhat blurred as the State remains the dominant player in the regeneration process, and regeneration schemes are dominated by the public sector as they still act as the catalyst, through funding or organising capacity.

Collective action has similarities to partnership as a form however, it recognises that Local Authority’s hold a greater influence in the balance of power. Stakeholders come together because “when bidding for resource they [are] required to demonstrate that a network /partnership had been set up” that creates a more inclusive network (Jones and Evans,

2013, p.49). Ysa (2007) suggests that the seeds of TCM and BIDS evolve from this category, where there is a desire to act on behalf of local traders to improve the attractiveness of their centre, however there is little, if any formality to the organisation, rather there exists sufficient interest to form alliances that may evolve into more formal structures.

Collective action recognises that local government initiatives alone are not enough to revitalise town centres, however as a form it falls short of defining formal roles and responsibilities. van den Berg and Braun (1999, p. 996) emphasise that the interdependency of various stakeholder's forms "the backbone of the network", however it is perceived as being project specific, rather than an "ideal", or "best practice" of sustainable collaborative action between all town centre stakeholders. The defining characteristics of this form are outlined below:

**Collective action:** A collection of non-strategic informal actor networks with a level of trust that recognises a degree of symbiosis between environments. There exists a form of collaboration where strategies are shared for the greater good. Examples are local actor marketing networks and soft re-generation initiatives.

**2.5.4 Governance through market mediated anarchy** - refers to a form that is distinctive among institutions that hold a lack of formality, and a lack of formal power. They do not depend on direct, or delegated power from the State, nor do they depend on delegated legitimate force that takes on a proprietary form (Benkler, 2013). Market mediated anarchy is a collection of institutions that follow the "invisible hand of uncoordinated market exchange based on the formally rational pursuit of self-interest" (Jessop, 2016 p.3). A survival of the fittest, where in a void of meaningful partnership actors adopt reactive strategies to change however, they do so independently of each other through a "laissez-faire" form of governance, where the invisible hand of Adam Smith (1776) is a determining factor in sustaining vitality and viability through a form of rational analysis. Namely, the tendency to assume that decisions reached individually will, in fact, be the best decisions for an entire society. The defining characteristics of this form are outlined below:

**Market mediated anarchy:** Non-formal strategic actor networks with relationships based on neither command and control, or trust. The invisible hand plays its role in determining the vitality and viability of the town centre. Examples can be found in many town centres where no overt stakeholder collaboration exists

## 2.6 Summary

Time has implications for town centres, as changes in the retail and political landscape impact not only on the economic and social fabric of town centres, but also on the governance forms that influence, and react to change within them. Scholars suggest an idealised route to respond to changes in the retail landscape is through forms of heterarchic governance, recognising that town centres are no longer able to be influenced by free market enterprise, or State-led governance alone. What form governance ultimately adopts however divides opinion. There are those who suggest local stakeholders could, and should, create formal partnerships that co-exist parallel with their own cultural paradigms, lauding in principle the role of TCM and BIDs, even promoting them as best practice (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013, 2014). Others deride such partnerships as a meaningless concept (Lawless, 1991), that the role of partnership is limited in principle and practice (Reeve, 2004; Peel, 2003; Whyatt, 2004), and evidence would suggest that organisations only come together to “paradoxically compete by collaborating...in order to lever in information, resources and capabilities” (McLaughlin, Osborne and Chew, 2009 p.36).

Notwithstanding, the general consensus is that influencers must do something to untangle the knots that inhibit collective action, and subsequently end paralysis around important issues (Rittel and Webber, 1974). It would appear however that there is no easy way to affect this, as governance forms of best practice are dismissed (Healey, 2005) due to not only the complexity of place, but also the culture of organisations within place. What is evident is that change demands a reaction, and Local Authorities are in a difficult position, as they often have to play the roles of entrepreneur and facilitator, generating consensus and/or collaboration (Sweeting, 2002).

Traditional forms of division by function, or created partnership have limitations, as have forms of top down and market mediated anarchy governance. There exists therefore, a requirement to be more creative in any approach to local challenges, and institutional theory offers a less rigid perspective where actors come together through shared values as “thickness”, or “capacity”, however there has to be a reason to come together, a motivator for all parties concerned, for as Freeman (2010) notes, it is the interactions of actors

towards a common purpose that really matters. In this context is it important whether governance takes the form of partnership, or an amount of 'social untidiness' (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007) if it gets the job done? There is no doubt that town centres are unique, and governance ought to react accordingly. However, what form it takes within the "multiple conceptions and viewpoints" (Peel, 2003 p.148) that are "likely to be rooted in ideological as well as pragmatic interests" (Palfrey and Thomas, 1996 p.278) becomes contextual to its surroundings.

What we assume of governance is that it is pervasive, as studies *a priori* assume its existence (Horvath, 2017). We recognise that normative forms of "governance [are] necessarily incomplete and as a necessary consequence must always fail" (Malpas and Wickham 1995 p.40) due to the inhibitions of strategic partners in protecting their own interests (Rowe, 2007). We feel however a need to intervene, either through theory or practice, in town centre governance because "to recognise the inevitability and centrality of market and State failure alike would surely be a recipe for pessimism" (Malpas and Wickham 1995 p. 39). What we know of governance is that it can refer to any form of co-ordinated interdependent activities (Jessop, 2016). We can hypothesise forms, however the hypothetical expanse between hierarchical/adversarial government and market mediated anarchy is considerable. To suggest a one size fits all would be misleading, and it is rightly recognised by academics and practitioners as such. What we can do is explore how different forms of governance impact on recognised measures of "success", a theme which this thesis now adopts.

To create identifiable measures, Chapter 3 discusses how policy directives attempt to quantify the worth of town centres through key performance indicators (KPIs). The KPIs discussed consider not only consider economic measures, but also the symbiotic relationships of economic, social and physical environments, however in doing so they create four a priori indicators that can adopted to measure the impact of the four different governance forms discussed in sections 2.5.1–2.5.4.



## Chapter 3: Measures of vitality and viability

### 3.1 Introduction

A requirement to measure the relative performance of town centres through vitality and viability indicators is a consequence of the impact of both retail change, and government policies, which over time, have had a detrimental impact on the economic situation of many town centres. After the second World war, the planning policies of the 1960s and 1970s created a short-term economic stimulus, where over 80% of development was contained within the traditional town centre (Bennison and Davies, 1980). However, decisions by successive governments to allow initially convenience goods, and then comparison goods, to trade outside of traditional retail centres, eroded any advantage this earlier town centre development created. By 1984, “50% of all [convenience] shopping centre development was out of town” (Schiller, 1986 p. 48); by the end of the 1990s decentralised development accounted for 30% of comparison retailing (Guy, 2000); and by 2011 “less than half of UK retail was on the high street” (Portas, 2011 p.8).

The rise of TCM, as a form of urban management, was seen by many as a response to these structural retail changes, and with it came a need to justify, through key performance indicators (KPI), the investment decisions of both public bodies and retailers. However, the disparity of TCM funding, and a need to address the long-term strategic issues of retail decline (Hogg *et al.*, 2007), rather than the short-term janitorial orientations of TCM (Warnaby *et al.*, 1998) guided the government to formalise a more stable, and democratic funding process. Policy makers again looked to the United States of America for inspiration, and in 2003, a document to guide the future strategies of Local Authority’s was devised from the BID schemes that prevailed there. Policy guidelines (DoE PPG6, 2003, 2006) recognised both the importance of town centres as “part of our national and civic heritage...securing their health [not only] helps to foster civic pride and local identity...it also helps promote sustainable development” (PPG6, 2003 section 2.1), and also a requirement to measure their relative “health” (a metaphor for well-being). To assess their “health” the government proposed KPI’s which recognised not only their retail worth, but

also, mindful of retail change, their value to residents, wider commerce, culture and transport.

Once the initial data of relevant measures was collected, the guidance document offered advice to “enable early signs of decline to be identified...and appropriate action to be taken” (DoE, 1993,1996 section 2.6). In recognising the limitations of retail as a means of urban regeneration, the government suggested “diversification of use may be the best way forward” (DoE, 1993 section 2.6), not only because the decline of retail in traditional centres necessitated a fresh approach, but also because town centres were increasingly being perceived as places that hold diverse values of attraction (Coca–Stefaniak and Carroll, 2015). To measure the effectiveness of urban management schemes, therefore, necessitated a fresh approach, and KPIs should reflect not only the output of retail performance statistics, but also how the underlying holistic nature of town centre life impacts on those statistics. To reflect this, Local Authorities were guided towards “health” measures of diversity, culture, transport and accessibility as well as commercial worth, where vitality and viability were inextricably linked, as “the “relative level of ‘busyness’ (vitality) is seen as a significant component in new investment decisions (viability) and, concurrently, the continued development of new facilities (viability) generates an enhanced attraction for visitors (vitality)” (Ravenscroft, 2000 p.2534).

Consequently, as changes in the retail landscape threatened the economic vitality and viability of town centres through decreased footfall, and increased vacancy rates, a broader, more diverse response from government was apposite to revitalise them through a “comprehensive and integrated vision and action...which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in their economic, physical, social and environmental condition” (Roberts, 2008, p. 233). Jones and Evans (2013 p.111) metaphorize the symbiosis between these environments as a “three-legged stool”, where each leg represents *physical*, *economic* and *social* environments. This metaphor does not attempt to oversimplify the complexity of town centres, as there are many interpretations of each ‘leg’, however it does serve to create an awareness of the inter-dependence of physical, economic and social environments, and how strategies that aiming for improvements in one, ideally creates complementary improvements in others. Measures of vitality and viability therefore

become part of a symbiotic, and iterative process, where economic measures of town centre success in isolation are not definitive but become part of a process that has an impact on other environments. For example, PPG6 recognises not only the retail worth of a town centre, but also the diversity of use, and the impact that residents, commerce, culture and transport have on vitality and viability. Section 3.2 discusses how PPG6 and its policy successors measure the vitality and viability of town centres.

### **3.2 Measures of vitality and viability**

The UK Government set out in Planning Policy Guidance 6 (PPG6, 1993) criteria for the evaluation of vitality and viability in town centres. Funded by the Department of the Environment, and directed by consultants URBED, '*Vital and Viable Town Centres*' (DoE, 1994) was a wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary analysis of the pressures facing town centres, combined with suggestions on suitable responses and good practice. The report introduced a specimen method for conducting "health checks", as part of its recommendations on good practice, suggesting that indicators are useful to detect the first signs of ill health in a town centre, but that further tests are required for a more rigorous diagnosis and prescription (Cox *et al*, 2000). The suggested indicators were:

- (1) **Commercial yield on non-domestic property** - Thereby demonstrating the confidence of investors in the long-term profitability of the centre. Primarily concerned with economic performance, commercial yield is indicative of investment return.
- (2) **Shopping rents for Zone A** - Again, primarily an economic indicator, the rental value is indicative of demand and reflects the attractiveness to commerce and developers. Zone A refers to the proportion of the commercial property that is most prominent.
- (3) **Pedestrian flow** - Maintaining the vitality of space by measuring the number of people on the streets at different locations at different times of the day and evening.
- (4) **Diversity of uses** - Reflecting the changing balance of space usage, between offices, retail, cultural, entertainment, restaurants, education and housing; the premise being

that a balanced centre with greater diversity will attract more consumers, and subsequently more investors, increasing the amount of time spent in the centre (dwell time).

- (5) **Accessibility to the centre** - Considering the convenience of access by a range of means of transport, including the quality, quantity and nature of car parking (including charges), the frequency of public transport services and the quality of provision for pedestrians and cyclists.
- (6) **Physical structure of the centre** - Considering in particular the apparent opportunities and constraints involved, for example fitness for purpose.
- (7) **Business representation, and intentions to change representation** - Confidence factors of those currently in the centre; those wishing to locate in the centre and those intending to close their businesses.
- (8) **Proportion of vacant street-level property in the primary retail area** - Recognising the spatial change of town centres. A result of economic and functional obsolescence, vacancy rates are an indicator of a lack of demand for goods and services from consumers and are intrinsically linked to a lack of demand for property by retailers.
- (9) **Customer views** - To obtain feedback to enable subsequent monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of town centre improvements and of town centre management. Evans (1997) suggests that consumer views are generally ignored, commenting that consumers are assumed to act on the actions of marketers. Consequently, customer views are considered as a secondary consideration, being primarily influenced by increased demand.

In 1996, PPG6 revised these nine indicators to eleven, with further revisions in 2005 and 2009 broadening the number of indicators to thirteen and fourteen respectively (see figure 3.1). The most recent English policy guidelines (NPPF revised, 2014) suggest ten measures, which broadly represent the indicators from 1996, with variances being to replace retailer

demand with shopping rents, and a focus away from the physical structures of town centres onto more subjective interpretations of accessibility, customer views, perceptions of safety and environmental quality. Indicators from the Scottish Government (Scottish Planning Policy 8, 2006) are broadly in line with the NPPF 2014 guidelines, save for the inclusion of 'retailer demand' to replace 'environmental quality'. Guidelines in Wales (Technical Advice Note 4, 2016) are also guided by NPPF 2014 guidelines; however, they include a unique category of turnover in relation to floor space. And, in Northern Ireland (Planning Policy Statement 5, 2006) variances from NPPF 2014 are the removal of retailer representation and perceptions of crime.

The full range of KPIs over time are listed in Fig 3.1, where it can be noted that, since their inception in 1993, four indicators have consistently featured in all policy directives from UK governments, namely; *diversity of use*; *the proportion of vacant street level properties*; *commercial yields on non-domestic properties*; and *pedestrian flows* (highlighted in bold in Fig 3.1). It is argued that the continued inclusion of these four measures is due to their transference as longitudinal, measured statistics, which are relatively easy to accumulate, have less impact on time and money to collect, and can form reference banks for subsequent studies (Ravenscroft, 2000; Guimarães, 2017).

More interpretative perceptions of vitality and viability, for example the individual views of business owners and customers, have been less frequently used. This is a view which polarises the academic debate surrounding town centre "health" indicators, as some suggest guidelines - and health checks in general - are to be viewed as just that; *guidelines* that are not necessarily applicable as a formal check-list for vitality and viability. This is summed up by Cox *et al.* who state, "quantitative indicators are necessary but not sufficient to evaluate the health of town centres [as] they need to be accompanied by qualitative data and information, analytical interpretation and prescription 2000 p. 13).

Arguments from both sides of this debate form the basis of section 3.3, evaluating measures of vitality and viability.

Indicators	PPG6 (1993)	URBED (1994)	PPG6 (1996)	PPS5 (1996)	PPS6 (2005)	SPP8 (2006)	PPS5 (2006)	PPS4 (2009)	NPPF (revised) (2014)	TAN4 (2016)
<b>Diversity of use</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Retailer representation	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Retailer demand	X	X	X		X			X		
Shopping rents			X		X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Proportion of vacant street level property</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Commercial yields on non-domestic property</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Pedestrian flows</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Accessibility			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Customer views & behaviour			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Perception of safety & occurrence of crime			X		X	X		X	X	X
State of town centre environmental quality		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Physical structure of the centre	X	X								
The amount of retail, leisure & office floor space in out of town & edge of town locations					X			X		
Potential capacity for growth or change of centres in the network					X			X		

Figure 3. 1; UK vitality and viability indicators in the period 1993–2016 (adapted from Guimarães, 2017)

### 3.3 Evaluating measures of vitality and viability.

The wide variety of town centres precludes a form of generic evaluation. For example, economic success can be measured as hard, tangible outputs of economic performance, or improvements in the built environment. Equally measures of success could be more intangible; for example, improved social interaction and equality, or town centre identity and perception (Ravenscroft, 2000; Olsson and Haas, 2013; Leigh and Blakely, 2016). Both perspectives hold value through an acknowledged symbiosis, where improving economic performance contributes to social vitality as “a better environment attracts more people, improves trade and helps to stimulate new investment” (Bromley *et al.*, 2003, p. 145); this creates an increase in business investment and economic diversity (Padilla and Eastlick, 2009; Whitehead *et al.*, 2006); which attracts business investment and creates higher revenue rents (Lowe, 2005; Padilla and Eastlick, 2009); which, in turn, increases employment due to a rise in new and/or improved businesses (Whitehead *et al.*, 2006).

It is understandable that a preference from policy makers for economic measures as hard, quantifiable KPIs prevails, as indicators act as validators of funding mechanisms (Alexander, 2006) that are “useful to support policy decisions to improve the performance of ongoing and future programs” (Wholey, 2010 p.652). In a process where compiling ‘health’ reports commits hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money annually (Ravenscroft, 2000), and the resultant strategies commit many millions of public monies to regenerate town centres (for example Welsh Government, 2017; Warrington Borough Council, 2016), it is prudent that safe guards are put in place to ensure that funding is managed properly, not only to inform investment decisions, but also to continually justify those investments (Guimarães, 2017). This is not to suggest that economic KPIs in isolation indicate perceptions of worth, as evaluations that primarily espouse Hatry’s sporting analogy that “unless you are keeping score, it is difficult to know whether you are winning or losing” (1978 p.28) offer a binary perspective to success, or failure. Rather, environments create an iterative cycle, and how one evaluates success or failure depends on where one enters the debate.

For example, worth could be expressed from an economic perspective, where central place theory (Christaller, 1966), and bid rent theory (Alonso, 1964) define a town centres value? Central place theory suggests that town centres owe their existence to their geographical centrality; that is their ability to serve surrounding district centres and rural areas by providing a more extensive range of goods and services; bid rent theory suggests that centrality offers economic value in the desire to bid up for land which is in the most central locations, thereby displacing alternative uses which are deemed less significant. It is understandable that economic theorists offer the most contemporary perception of town centres as places where commerce dictates restructuring and redevelopment, through purpose-built environments that are influenced by powerful retail and commercial interests. It is also convenient for practitioners to adopt a material bias, where any investment decisions are reliant upon providing a quantitative measure of worth through the adoption of statistical KPIs.

Equally, however, worth could be expressed by social initiatives that attempt “to create commercial advantages [by] using the place as a unique selling proposition” (Colomb and Kalandides, 2010 p.175), where a “focus on cultural production as an urban survival strategy” (Harvey, 1989; Garcia, 2004 cited in Campelo, 2017 p. 10) creates a point of attraction through indigenous, or manufactured culture (although for some it misses the essence of culture as “what the promoters never grasp is that culture is what happens between museums, on the street, in markets and pubs” (Sinclair, 2011, p 250 -1)). The difficulty with social worth is how one measures a “pot-pourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings” (Proshansky *et al.*,1983 p.60).

How we evaluate worth depends on our interpretation, which raises some questions. If we evaluate worth through economic KPIs, does that marginalise the more interpretative psychological aspects of place and culture? Equally, if we evaluate worth through the psychology of place, does that preclude a positivist understanding of the role of economic KPIs? Or, is worth contextual, iterative and symbiotic? Thus, how one evaluates worth depends on where one chooses to enter the debate. In 1993, when the government proposed KPIs, and in 1994 when URBED suggested evaluating them as economic measures, it was in



the context of the impact of retail change at that time. UK government policies, in the intervening years have however, shown a remarkable consistency in suggesting four primary measures as mentioned above, namely;

- diversity of use;
- the proportion of vacant street level properties;
- commercial yields on non-domestic properties;
- pedestrian flows.

Acknowledging these four as primary measures does not denigrate all other measures, or studies. Indeed, in the intervening period since 1993 there have been many alternative KPIs suggested. For example, Hogg *et al.*, (2004) from a marketing survey of 87 town centre managers suggested primary KPIs as; car park usage; town centre footfall figures; vacant property rates; and town centre theft. Shoplifting was a close fifth, diversity did not feature, and commercial yield was a distant 13<sup>th</sup> out of 17 indicators. Parker *et al.*, (2016; 2017) and Millington and Ntounis (2017) from a substantial evidence base suggest local actors feel more able to influence local priorities of activity hours, appearance, vision and strategy, retailer diversity and place attractiveness. Balsas (2004) adopts Jane Jacobs' (1961) theme of liveability as KPI commenting that measures of vitality and viability are the capacity of a place to attract investment and to remain alive; thus relevant KPIs are population demographics, employment, retail vacancy and performance, car parking, footfall, crime and cleanliness. Wrigley *et al.*, (2015), by contrast, adopt a contemporaneous tone of adopting on-the-go technologies as a means to boost town centre vitality, and, by association, viability.

What these four measures, as commercial indicators, do is offer is a way into the debate. Of course, they are limited by "difficulties in gathering relevant data" (Hogg *et al.*, 2004 p.313), and a more subjective approach to local KPIs would provide rich data that qualitative research can unearth, where the individual soul of the centre is bared (Cox *et al.*, 2000). They are considered myopic (Cox *et al.*, 2000), and have limitations in spatial variances, predictive capabilities, and a suitable framework to evaluate success or failure (Ravenscroft, 2000;

Guimarães, 2017). However, they do provide an evaluation process that provides an opportunity for all participants to discuss what is working (or not) and why (Whyatt, 2004). And they provide “a smaller set of well-established indicators that...would be [a] better solution [to] give an overview of the evolution of a certain town centre” (Guimarães, 2017 p.6). A concise set of commercial indicators also offer objective, impartial evidence for Local Authorities who have “a lack of confidence or experience on their part, or the importance of having a recognised ‘brand’ of health check/impact assessment at public enquiry” (Cox *et al*, 2000 p.18), and they are recognised by both academics and practitioners. For example Javelin’s market position index of Venuescore; Management Horizons Europe glam-glum index; Experian’s Retail Centre Ranking Reports; and Harper Dennis Hobbs 2017 collaboration with the NPPF on a quarterly town centre vitality index, are frequently adopted by Local Authority’s to determine their relative retail ranking (for example City of York Council, 2004; Bolton Council, 2008; Sunderland City Council, 2008; Wirral Borough Council, 2009; Warrington Borough Council, 2017; Blackpool, 2017).

Indeed, the limitations of commercial indicators does not detract from the impact retail has on town centre “health”. It is acknowledged that retail change has affected local towns and there is a need for both local and social factors to be taken into account as part of the overall strategy (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Hall, 2011). However, as Whyatt (2004 p.347) argues “it is important to acknowledge the major role that retailers play in town centre regeneration”, where many academics recognise that town centres are primarily places to shop (Evans, 1997; Reeve, 2004; Coca- Stefaniak, 2013). It is also recognised that the impact of the retail sector reaches well beyond measures of economic output, where empirical research has shown that a diverse retail offer can also contribute to the social well-being of local communities (Hallsworth and Worthington, 2000; Wrigley *et al.*, 2004; Hosler, 2009; Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2010). In fact, retail has made a significant contribution to urban regeneration (Otsuka and Reeve, 2007) and the vitality and viability of town centres in the UK for decades by contributing to their socio-economic health (BIS, 2010). It is in this context that I consider four primary measures of vitality and viability. In doing so I recognise their limits, but also the impact they have on other town centre environments.

### 3.4 Summary

Commercial measures of vitality and viability pervade town centre management and academic literature. They are adopted by over 90% of “Local Authorities [who] are unanimous in their support...using them principally for monitoring local plans and development control, but also in local plan preparation” (Cox *et al*, 2000 p. 6), and by a private sector that is dependent on commercial liveliness for its own sustained success. How they are formed, as homogenised “health” checks, is questionable as they are mostly created by external consultants with standard, templated, prescriptions for what are essentially local illnesses (Cox *et al*, 2000), and their limitations have been referred to in this review. Nevertheless, they are common as requirements and justifications of funding, and have a utility as barometers of attractiveness throughout the media.

What positive impact local governance influencers have on measures of economic vitality and viability is an obvious question [RQ1]. This is particularly relevant at a time of public sector austerity, where the financial benefit of compiling information annually, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money is questionable, especially in a process that is not necessarily determined by policy intervention, but equally by the entrepreneurial action of opportunity seeking organisations and individuals (Fosberg and Nelson,1999; Ravenscroft, 2000; Hambleton, 2014). Is the collection of KPIs taken too literally, acting as a convenient excuse for abdication, where local actors take advantage of quantifiable measures to justify their means, or relative position, or can local influencers really do something to positively address the impact of retail change?

Prescribing policies to increase vitality and viability appears relatively straightforward, save for how you measure “success”. Influencing positive change is considerably more difficult as one enters the muddy waters of local governance to get things done. Is influencing positive change more achievable in forms of government, where hierarchies prevail; in forms of collective action, where actors pool resources; or do the effects of change naturally adapt over time; is free market enterprise the best way forward and should we step back and let it happen? [RQ 2]

If local influencers cannot positively impact the effects of retail change what does the future hold for town centres? Are they able to adapt to new forms of use, and are the people that influence them able to create vital and viable places in a post-retail world? If so, do they alter their structures to adapt to change (do they create capacity, or collaborate)? [RQ 3]

Chapter 4 discusses the research strategy to address these questions.

## **Chapter 4: Research strategy and methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Crotty (1998) suggests that research design should consider four questions; (1) What epistemology, or theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective, informs the research? (2) What theoretical perspective and philosophical stance lie behind the methodology? (3) What methodology governs the choice and use of methods? and (4) What methods, techniques and procedures are proposed to answer the research objectives? Not only do these questions show the inter-related levels of decisions that go into the process of designing research, they also inform a choice of approach, ranging from the broad assumptions that are brought to a project, to the more practical decisions made about how to collect and analyse data (Creswell, 2013). Chapters 1-3 examined the key arguments made in the literature regarding governance structures within town centres, and the use of KPIs as barometers of viability and vitality. This chapter explains the research strategy and methods employed to fulfil the research objectives, which are; (1) to identify local governance influencers; (2) to explore the impact influencers have on National Planning Policy framework (NPPF) commercial measures of vitality and viability, and (3) to explore whether the impact influencers had on vitality and viability varied with the form of local governance they adopted.

Following this brief introduction, section 4.2 considers the research philosophy; and, section 4.3 outlines the research strategy, which consisted of a comparative case study approach, incorporating four urban places – Warrington, Wrexham, Covent Garden and Stockton Heath - which have differing governance structures, with the data collection including in-depth interviews, site visits and documentary analysis in each case.

### **4.2 Research philosophy**

Discussions of the philosophy underpinning social studies generally derives from a branch of philosophy which is reflected through the nature of our perceived reality (ontology), and what we know of reality, or the character of our knowledge of the world (epistemology)

(Willis *et al.*, (2007). As a means of simplifying philosophical debates, many authors begin by examining ontologies at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum of objectivity and subjectivity, namely positivism and interpretivism (Crotty, 1988; Remenyi *et al.*, 1998; Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2015; Burrell and Morgan, 2017). By doing so, it becomes easier to locate other philosophical positions that are situated within the general theoretical assumptions of laws and techniques that members of a scientific community adopt, referred to as paradigms (Chalmers, 2013).

For example, at the objective extreme of thought are the functionalist theoretical positions of positivism, proposed by August Comte in the seventeenth century to distinguish science from metaphysics and religion. Comte suggested that positivism assumes that “all isolated empirical observation is idle and even radically uncertain...[therefore] science can only use those observations which are connected, at least hypothetically, with some law...[where] the observer would not know what he ought to look at in the facts before his eyes, but for the guidance of a preparatory theory” (Comte, 1854, cited in Willis *et al.*, 2007 p.13). Consequently, the assumptions of a positivist approach are that reality is external and objective (Ackroyd, 1992), and only careful scientific research can accurately represent objective truth and meaning, since knowledge is only of significance if it is based on observations of external reality (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). From a positivist perspective, our knowledge of town centre governance would therefore derive from quantitative methodologies that can be analysed statistically (Crotty, 1988), thereby allowing data to be generalised, hypothesised, reduced and treated independently (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015).

At the subjective extreme of interpretivism (i.e. solipsism) there is no “external point of reference...[therefore] knowledge must be limited to what we as individuals experience” (Burrell and Morgan, 2017 p.239). Due to its inward-looking nature, solipsism “offers no scope for the development of a philosophy, or social theory which can be shared in any realistic sense” (Burrell and Morgan, 2017 p.239), as it relies on a purely subjective form of reality. Opposing positions of positivism, and solipsism therefore limit our knowledge of town centre governance, for although they are relevant as reference points within the objective (positivist)/subjective (interpretivist) continuum, they offer an incomplete picture of reality. Where we position ourselves on that continuum however, defines not only our

philosophical position, but also determines the methodology we adopt to confirm our philosophical position by representing the “foundational assumptions, the givens that are assumed to be true” to us (Willis *et al.*, 2007 p. 6). This is because our interpretation of reality not only shapes our world view, for example by adopting an interpretive centre ground (i.e. social constructionism) we hope to understand; or by adopting a centre ground of realism (i.e. pragmatism) we hope to explain, it also determines the methods we choose to explore reality through qualitative (more subjective), or quantitative (more objective) methods. This is particularly relevant in town centres, where reality consists of a plurality of interpretation; and subsequently town centres offer a comprehensive context for study within many disciplines - for example geography, economics, urban planning, marketing and organisational theory.

Yet, although these many disciplines interpret town centres with different ontologies, they generally provide two strands of academic interest; (1) the outcomes of social processes (for example, KPIs that provide evidence of “success”) or; (2) the processes of social interaction that generate an outcome (for example, local governance). How we interpret reality depends upon where we enter the debate. For example, outcomes of social processes offer an abundance of comment, particularly around a positivist tendency to put faith in statistics, and in this context KPIs are convenient as they offer a reality of *outcomes* that is somewhat generalisable, and easy to quantify. Empirical evidence on the *processes* of social interaction within town centres, however, is less evident, and where academic comment does appear, it tends to offer advice towards the management of town centres (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013), or it is critical of economic processes (Peel, 2003; Whyatt, 2004; Reeve, 2007). What is obvious is that, regardless of the specific nature of this academic comment, town centres as social processes continue to function, despite a paucity of research into understanding influencers’ roles, or motives. For, although it was suggested over twenty years ago that an understanding of how public/private co-operation works requires close empirical, case study-based research to “asses[s] their impact on the vitality and viability of the town or city in which they are involved” (Warnaby *et al.*, 1998 p. 29), to date little empirical research has been conducted into role of influential stakeholders in local governance, or how they impact on their town centre’s vitality and viability. Acknowledging that process and outcomes are part of an iterative cycle this research adopted a stance that focused on process.

From this perspective, it would suggest that local influencers had an opinion of what constituted vitality and viability in *their* town centres, and how they reacted was “as social beings, [that] respond[ed] to interpretations and definitions of situations, not to the situations themselves” where their response was “very much tied to interpersonal interaction, group membership, culture, history, power, economics, and politics”. (Andrews, 2012 p.236). Therefore, the action of influencers reflected that culture, where “individuals...in positions of power [had] the ability to control information, define values, create myths, manipulate events, and ultimately influence what others [took] for granted” (Andrews, 2012 p.236). To understand how institutional culture works many social scientists adopt a philosophical position of social constructionism (Innes and Booher, 2003; Healey, 2003; Andrews, 2012; De Magalhães *et al.*, 2017).

Social constructionism is usually traced back to the work of William Isaac Thomas and the Chicago sociologists, as well as the phenomenological sociologists and philosophers, for example Alfred Schutz. It emphasises the idea that society is actively and creatively produced by human beings, and as such society exists both as objective and subjective reality, where the interaction of people with the social world, in turn influences people, which results in routine (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Consequently, strategies originate not from inside the person, but from the social realm, where socialisation takes place through influencers who mediate the objective reality of society, and render it meaningful (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Burr, 2003).

Sense, within social constructionism, is made from people's feelings and communications about *their* environment, rather than the environment itself (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998); therefore, suitable methods to explore reality include case studies as they attempt to understand reality through detailed studies in isolated situations (Crotty, 1988; Stake, 2005). What exploring the process of town centre governance through the lens of social constructionism may help with is an understanding of the iterative and holistic nature of town centres, which may go some way to bridge the divide of private and public perceptions. For example, it is recognised that businesses, which can operate without social regard, or social strategies that can fail to acknowledge the contribution business can make, will not realise their full potential. In this spirit, Porter (1992) suggests that city and, by



implication, town) centres have a moral obligation to produce local wealth, for it is wealth that allows social programmes and regeneration to occur. This is, arguably, the basic tenet of a holistic strategy; if the town centre social environment is “healthy” there is a good chance that the commercial environment will be “healthy”, and vice versa. How elite influencers create “healthy” environments is at the heart of this thesis.

### 4.3 Research strategy

Bearing in mind the above discussion, I am mindful of an acknowledged caveat when exploring how elite influencers impact on town centre vitality and viability, namely that;

“Elite interviews provide valuable information from perspectives of power and privilege. However, the information elites provide may be biased or inaccurate, and researchers must be knowledgeable about the elites they interview. Therefore, the use of triangulation in studies using elite interviews is crucial” (Natow, 2019 p. 1).

Aware of Natow’s observation that “knowledgeable” implies the Janus-faced political nature of elites (Schein, 2010), this research adopts a qualitative, inductive approach via a comparative case study method (Yin, 2017). This approach triangulates: (1) documentary analysis (for a more objective starting point for discussions); (2) in-depth interviews and discussions (to explore how influencers interpreted their impact on vitality and viability); and (3) site visits (during, and after the research period to compare the rhetoric of influencers with the consequences of their actions), in order to explore how local influencers impact on the vitality and viability of their town centres. Triangulating data was deemed appropriate for, as Yin suggests, the adoption of a case study in asking *how* questions, as part of exploratory research, is a preferred method. However, it is also recognised that influencers do not necessarily equate action to rhetoric (Schein, 1993, 2010). Therefore, as Schein (1993, 2010) implies, to understand what impact local influencers have on vitality and viability it is necessary to compare what they say, with what they *do*.

### 4.3.1 The comparative case studies

The aim of this thesis was to explore the dynamics present within single setting case studies, which would ultimately lead to the development of cross-case themes across four case studies (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). I considered the case study method to be consistent with research of this type, where single, or multiple case studies could lead to numerous levels of analysis (Yin, 2017), and indeed, the possibility that “levels of analysis” could be found became increasingly evident through a constant iteration, both backward and forward, between cases during the two-year period of study (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). This iterative process is reflected in the cross-case model, shown in figure 4.1, of the four sampled town centres (Warrington, Wrexham, Covent Garden and Stockton Heath), where the dashed constant feedback loop informed new ways to understand the data, and to convergence it onto a single theoretical framework as the research progressed (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

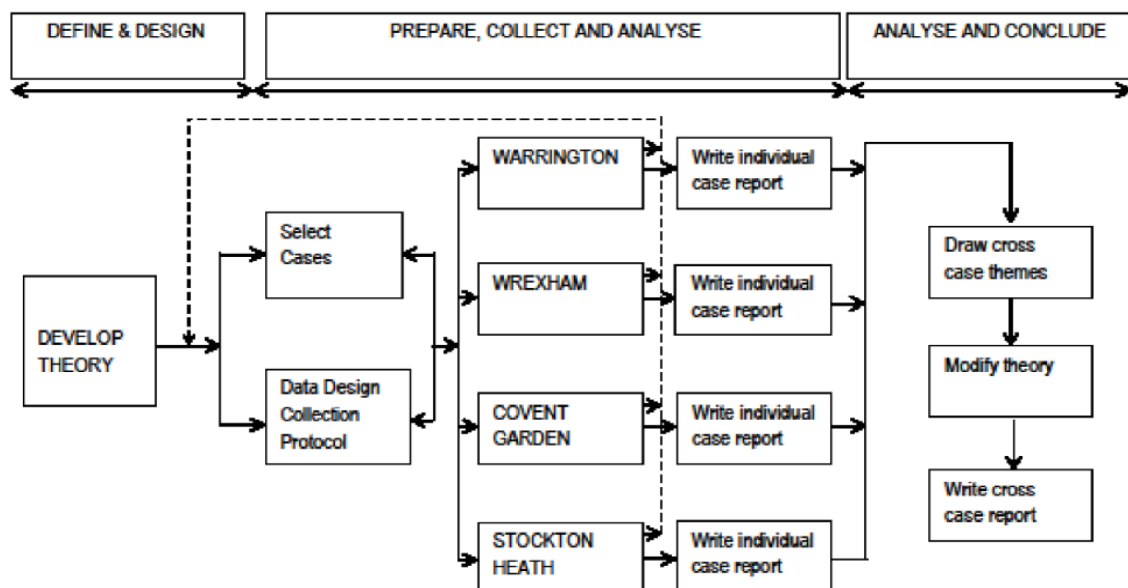


Figure 4. 1; The multiple replication case study approach framework (adapted from Yin, 2017)

### 4.3.2 Sampling strategy

An important consideration in this research strategy was the number of cases, and the selection of research sites. The decision as to the number of cases to incorporate into the

research was guided by the four forms of local governance suggested in Chapter 2 (Government; Collective Action; Created Partnership; and, Market Mediated Anarchy). Therefore, adopting Yin's (2017) advice that two, or three literal replications would suffice when the theory is straightforward seemed to fit, as did Eisenhardt and Graebert's (2007) suggestion that a number between four and ten cases works well - as research with fewer than four cases often has difficulty generating theory with much complexity, and its empirical grounding is likely to be unconvincing, unless the case has several mini-cases within it. As this thesis was exploring the impact of purportedly evolving forms of local governance, the use of four cases were consistent with both stances.

A premise of this research was that local governance adopts many different forms; therefore, to define local governance as being contained within four distinct forms potentially risks over-simplification. I did, however, have four general forms (Government; Collective Action; Created Partnership; and, Market Mediated Anarchy), and to select examples of each type I was guided by Pettigrew's (1990) assertion that research sites should reflect extreme situations of the phenomena being studied. Pettigrew suggests that if one is faced with a relatively small number of cases due to time and funding constraints, one should consider cases where any progress, or phenomena observed is;

*"transparently observable, as from this small number of cases, data collection can provided a drama that can allow varying readings over time with people, events, time and processes, where each offers an opportunity to consider the development, or decay of the mechanisms that lead to, accentuate and regulate the impact of each drama"* (1990 p.275).

To reflect the four general forms of local governance, (Government; Collective Action; Created Partnership; and, Market Mediated Anarchy) I was initially guided by the research I had conducted in Warrington where I evidenced a Local Authority response to a town centre that had a low private sector demand, high vacancy rates, and low rental yields. Because the Local Authority felt an obligation to act (or at least they said they did), and private interest was low, local governance had adopted a form that had a hierarchical Local Authority influenced structure that excluded private partners. Warrington became the *Government* mode as a form of local governance that had not evolved beyond Davies's (2002) assumption that hierarchies are still the most prevalent form of local governance.

Adopting Pettigrew's example of opposites to Warrington's formal, exclusive and hierarchical local governance form necessitated a town centre that exhibited a more collaborative form of local governance, one that had a less formal structure, and was relatively inclusive of a range of actors. This form of governance had the potential to evolve into a more formal, created partnership. However, at the time of the study any activity between influencers had to be informal, consisting of different institutions loosely coming together to influence vitality and viability. I was fortunate that Wrexham was a featured town centre in the High Street 2020 research (Millington *et al.*, 2015) and I was introduced, by Professor Cathy Parker, to a town centre where a local governance form of *Collective Action* had ambitious plans, but limited financial resource; therefore it relied on an increased level of local collaboration to get things done. I considered *Collective Action* to be the opposite of *Government* as it had more inclusive private/public dependencies, where local governance brought "together a series of different actors to accomplish a task, though not actually putting together a single over-arching body, as each of the different actors remain[ed] independent" (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.49).

The third case example had to be a formal version of *Collective Action*. Again, I was fortunate to be guided to Covent Garden by the Managing Director of Culture Warrington as a model of town centre management that she aspired to. I found, through documents, that the local governance of Covent Garden functioned as a *Created Partnership* between historic trusts, community groups, and private enterprise and, although Covent Garden was not a typical town centre it was, and is, under the auspices, and subject to the controls, of a prominent London council (Westminster). Indeed, Covent Garden has defined boundaries, and located in the centre of London, it encounters the contemporary, competitive challenges that many town centres have.

The final case example of *Market Mediated Anarchy* had to be the opposite of the formal and inclusive *Created Partnership*, where local governance evidenced neither formal structure nor collective overt strategies. Academics suggest, rather loosely, that regime theory (Stone, 2005; Elkin, 2015) has some relevance here, where taxes and legislation allow self-governing collaborators to create and retain local autonomy. Undoubtedly regime theory has an organic, local appeal; however, it would also have formal structures as a

funding mechanism and a political body, and it also, in a UK context, “would seem to be somewhat of a red herring” (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.51). I considered there must, however, be many town centres that exist without formal local governance structures, overt political interference, or created partnerships. I realised this was unlikely to be found in large town centres, as many have adopted some type of formal schemes; therefore, the ideal place had to be a town centre where local governance had neither formal structure, nor any overt collective action, or strong Local Authority presence. I chose Stockton Heath, a district centre of Warrington that I knew well having been an independent retailer in the town centre for the past fourteen years. It had commissioned documents, it was influenced by independent retailers, it had a Parish Council input that rarely became involved in the town centre, and its properties were owned by independent local landlords. Stockton Heath became the final governance form of *Market Mediated Anarchy*.

#### **4.3.3 Identifying Influencers**

Local influencers were the “inner circle” (Useem, 1984 p.3) of movers and shakers, the influential local “Mr Bigs...[that] redevelop and generate *their* cities” and towns (Peck, 1995 p. 16). They consisted of elected officers of Local Authorities, private sector business elites, or influencers who assumed dual roles. What mattered was that interviews and discussions were conducted with the “Mr. Bigs” who influenced others as real decision makers. Gaining access to elites - i.e. “Mr.Bigs” - is often seen to be problematic (Harvey, 2010) however, I was fortunate that my experiences at a senior management level in retailing for over forty years in town centres offered an understanding of who the potential influencers could be and, more importantly how interviews, or discussions, could be conducted. I found that one had to exude a level of confidence when accessing Leaders of Local Authorities, and multi-million-pound private business Leaders, and possess a mindset that when interviewing them that you were able to communicate on a level with them. My experiences certainly helped with both attributes.

To identify influencers, I was guided by Hallsworth and Evans’s (2008) suggestion that interviews, or discussions should be held to establish the extent to which any influence can actually be deduced, and by Cook’s comments that “power ...is by no means synonymous

with presence” (2010 p. 35), therefore it was plausible that influence was not held in the town centre itself? It was in this spirit that I approached town centre influencers “as unevenly open and connected” (Cook, 2010 p. 36), as in effect, at the outset I did not know who the influencers were.

### *Ethical considerations*

I recognised that there were certain protocols that must be obeyed when interviewing elites. There is an argument that some like to be interviewed because it is a sign of their status within the organisation (Clark, 1998), and indeed I found that many elites provided a different analytical lens for understanding how organisations work (Schoenberger, 1991). However, transparency was essential in terms of ethics and gaining the interviewee’s trust and, maintaining good etiquette with different subjects throughout the research process was vital in order to achieve high professional standards (Harvey, 2010). I was mindful that a researcher is representing not just themselves, but also the University to which they are affiliated. My position as a doctoral researcher afforded me a level of access that brought privileges, both in time spent with influencers, but also in the links they had with other elites. My approach therefore relied on a level of trust; trust that they had in me (that I was worth seeing); and trust that I would be discreet in how I conducted the discussions and any subsequent writings. I never betrayed the trust they had in me; for one it would close the door on any future discussions and secondly, I wanted to tell their story of influencers as part of a cultural organisation, rather than personally identifying them for what were collective decisions. Therefore, although there are references to positions within organisations the respondents themselves remain anonymous.

### *Influencers in Warrington*

To follow Hallsworth and Evans’ lead, I needed a “way in”, and I was fortunate to have access to the Leader of the Local Authority through a business colleague who had worked with the Leader on development projects. Due to the informality of our introduction, our discussions were frank, and often critical, and it quickly became apparent that open discussions would be of greater value, at this level, than a pre-set questionnaire (although I still referred to a topic list). The overview of town centre influencers he provided was

invaluable to both my perception of place and politics, and these discussions shaped the context, and content of this thesis. For the Leader's part, he had a desire for a more inclusive, diverse town centre model, instead of what he perceived to be the apparent futility of retail centric models. Whilst his rhetoric was convincing however, it became increasingly apparent during our discussions that the town centre had difficulties in attracting private investment, a situation he suggested was not unique in a market where the private sector was generally reluctant to invest. Snowballing contacts from the Leader therefore focussed on public sector employees, or past employees, that now influenced the town centre through de-commissioned organisations (for example Culture Warrington). A discussion was held with the Deputy Leader who had responsibility for the daily operations of the town centre, whose perception of the current position, and the direction the Local Authority wanted to take the town centre was of interest as he drew inspiration from not only the town centre, but also the cities that impressed him as he carried out his civic duties.

It became apparent that the rhetoric of the political elites had to be delivered by the Executive Board of the Local Authority; therefore, it was of interest to explore the depth of their influence. Subsequent introductions to the key members of the Board were made through the Leader, with the Director of Planning outlining a regenerative "renaissance" plan that included a mixed-use town centre. The "renaissance" plan was also discussed at length, over seven meetings, with the Managing Director of Warrington & Co., a publicly driven regeneration arm, whose role it was to deliver the plan, not only within the town centre, but also the wider economic area. To gain a perspective of place, and "soft" regeneration, I had eleven discussions with the Managing Director of the recently formed Cultural Trust. These were particularly interesting in gaining an understanding of both the political processes of town centre governance, and the role of "soft" regenerators, for example place marketing, in maintaining vitality within the town centre whilst long-term strategic development projects were being implemented. The views of members of the Cultural Trust were also invaluable in this respect, as were the social perspectives provided by the Leader of the town centre board, a cleric who had an alternative view to the commercially ambitious plans of the Leader of the Local Authority, and who offered an understanding of his perceptions of the societal obligations of town centres.

To understand how commerce functioned within the town centre, I had three discussions with the two managers of the town centre's principal shopping centres, where influence was also held through tenants' forums, which acted as a conduit to the retailers themselves. Discussions with the two shopping centre managers therefore focused not only on their perceptions of the town centre, but also those of their tenants and managing organisations, both internally and externally, for example managing agents. To supplement these perceptions, I sought the investment selection criteria, specifically for Warrington's town centre, from two national retailers that Warrington's influencers aspired to bring to the town centre, namely the John Lewis Partnership and Primark. Both these retailers featured highly as target retailers, and they offered insights into their perceptions of the town centre, and factors that affected their investment decisions. Finally, I sought investment perspectives from property agents who offered insights into the "health", the fluctuations and the vagaries of the town centres property market.

### *Influencers in Wrexham*

Wrexham was a town centre that had grand ambitions on the part of the Local Authority; however, there was also evidence of influence from grass-roots traders, something that was not obvious in Warrington, and it suggested there could be a form of local collaboration in the town centres governance. Professor Cathy Parker offered a "way in" to influencers through the Chair of the local independent traders' association, and our sole discussion, on a rainy day in a cake shop in the town centre, focussed on the challenges he had in creating vitality, and his political frustrations with the Local Authority. The relationship between his group and the Local Authority initially became the focus of what I termed *Collective Action*; 'collective' because there was evidence through discussions that both the public and private sectors had a desire to create vitality and viability; and 'action' because it was evident that something tangible was happening between them. My discussions with the traders' association focussed on the micro regeneration of keeping the town centre alive, whilst the macro political ambitions belonged to the Local Authority. The Chair of the traders group suggested that, in order to gain an understanding of physical and economic redevelopment, I should approach the Local Authority, identifying key influencers as being the town centre manager and senior officers of the Local Authority. I gained access to the Leader of the Local



Authority via email, and he introduced me to members of his team namely, the Deputy Leader; the Director of Economy and Place; the Director of Culture and the Arts; and the town centre manager. Discussions here were more formal than the cake shop chat with the Chair of the local traders, and more guarded and political from some, indeed brutal from others. One had the impression that the town centre was the world to the traders, a means to an end for the Executives of the Local Authority, and a small cog in a bigger political wheel to the politicians.

If there was any obvious bridge between the traders' association and the Local Authority it was through discussions with the town centre manager, and the Director of Economy and Place, who were helpful in that they were somewhat distanced from the political emotions of the Local Authority, and the frustrations of the local traders. Indeed, I met the town centre manager five times and our discussions were often an attempt to understand how politics and policies affected the town centre. My two discussions with the Director of Economy and Place were also invaluable in understanding not only the politics of potential redevelopment, but also the constraints and challenges of the public sector in delivering change.

### *Influencers in Covent Garden*

My interest in Covent Garden came from a conversation with the Managing Director of the Cultural Trust in Warrington, who suggested a visit to London to see how a town "should be run". She provided the reference for Capital and Counties as a "way in" and I approached the Chief Executive via email. He arranged a meeting, at their London offices, with his Director of Planning and Redevelopment, where she outlined the strategies of what appeared to be a private enterprise model that was created to increase wealth for shareholders. This was the first of the seven discussions we had in her office, and on the telephone, and she offered a perspective of local governance that had similarities to the local governance of Warrington's town centre; however, the emphasis in Covent Garden was on private interest and public exclusion, rather than public interest and private exclusion. Our discussions ranged from structural and commercial diversity, to how Capital and Counties plc. interacted with other influencers, if indeed they needed to? As a

spokesperson for the company, commercial tenants and many residents, her comments were invaluable to my understanding of the commercial influences of local governance in Covent Garden.

The Director of Planning and Redevelopment at Capital and Counties plc. identified additional influencers in town centre governance as the Covent Garden Area Trust, and the Covent Garden Community Association, who both had an input on the redevelopment of the town centre. To understand their perspectives, I had two discussions with the secretary of the Covent Garden Area Trust who offered a potted history of the place and gave valuable insights into the dealings with both Capital and Counties, and the political abdication of the Local Authority; and the Chair of the Community Association who gave equally valuable insights into the history of the social and political challenges that the community have faced in the town centre. I realised from the conversations with the Area Trust and the Community Association that influence is contextual to time, and it was relevant to consider the cultural strengths of those who have had influence, but no longer have it to the same degree. I also realised that despite the obvious differences and motives between Capital and Counties plc., the Cultural Trust and the Community Association they appeared to complement each other, although having spoken with them at length their ideologies could not have been further apart.

### *Influencers in Stockton Heath*

From my fourteen years as a retailer in Stockton Heath, I knew that the influencers were Warrington's Local Authority, the Stockton Heath Parish Council, and local independent traders and landlords. In my many discussions with the Leader of Warrington's Local Authority, he repeatedly referred to Stockton Heath as the "jewel in the crown", and he was proud that he had influenced its commercial success through a late-1990s planning consent of a listed building that in turn had attracted national tenants and positively altered the economic course of the town centre. My assumptions of the influence of the Parish Council was as a facilitator between the Local Authority and the local traders, and both my discussions with them did little to disconfirm that view. I held two meetings with the Leader of the Parish Council, and I attended eleven Parish Council meetings in the two-year period,

and from these meetings it became clear that, although the Parish Council viewed the town centre in high regard, any input towards vitality and viability was limited to an advisory role. In the absence of an overt Local Authority, or Parish Council presence I realised the real influencers of Stockton Heath were the local traders and the local landlords.

In this regard, the study of local governance in Stockton Heath was more straightforward than the other cases as having been a retailer in the town centre, I had many contacts and I had witnessed, at first-hand, many changes. My evidence base, therefore consisted of fourteen years-worth of informal chats, attending numerous meetings of the local traders' group and through numerous negotiations with local landlords and property agents. I gained the impression that there was no overall influence that was driving the relative "success" of low vacancy rates, high yields and healthy footfall and there were no overt collective strategies from independent businesses, the Parish Council appeared to be interested in conservation, and the Local Authority appeared to have no overt strategic influence on the town. Despite this, the town was considered by Warrington Borough Council in 2012, and WYG consultants in 2015 to be 'healthy'.

In forms of evolution, local governance in Stockton Heath could be perceived as the antithesis of controlled space, however, as I reflected on this thought I realised that influence was still present. Indeed, in the absence of overt collective control it was as present as in any other form. Influence here though was created by the mainly independent traders, local landlords and local consumers, where vitality was created by individual competition, and a viability driven by a local knowledge that accessible investments had an element of security.

#### **4.3.4 Method**

The method consisted of data from three sources; (1) documentary analysis from commissioned "health-check" reports; (2) notes from elite interviews and discussions; and (3) observations from continuous site visits during the research (figure 4.2). These three data sources were synthesised in four separate case studies to form a cross-case analysis, where "thematic analysis" (see Braun and Clarke, 2019) was applied to draw out common

themes from the documents and the elite interviews. The following sections discuss the methods adopted in more detail.

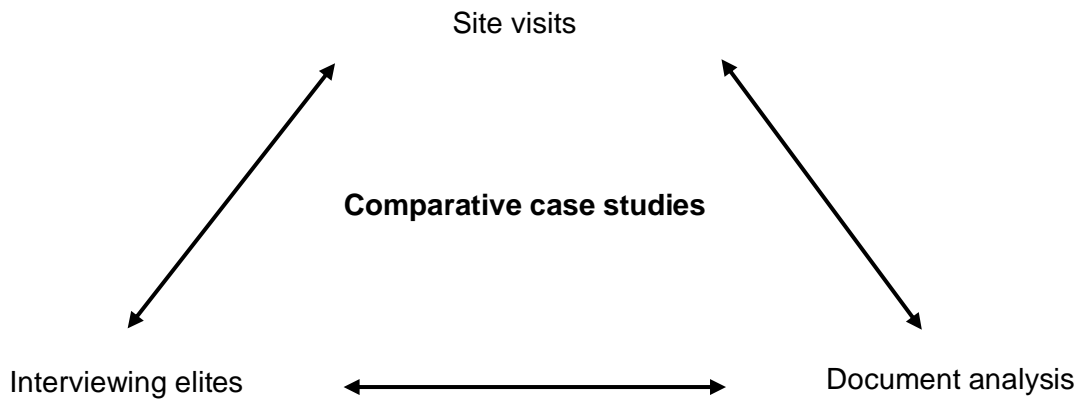


Figure 4. 2; Triangulating data from document analysis, in-depth interviews and site visits.

#### 4.3.4.1 Documentary analysis

Documents were understood as written texts that served as a record, or a piece of evidence (Smith, 1974), that generally consisted of commissioned reports that were either generated by consultants (who were external to the cultural paradigms of influencers), or reports that were conducted by the employees/officers of the organisations in question as part of a Local Area Plan strategy. I considered it was important to compare “internally” generated documents with “externally” generated documents where possible, as potentially there was a chance of a greater bias in “internally” generated reports (Schein, 2003, 2010). Therefore, documentary evidence was taken from both categories and comparisons were drawn from the areas of interest. As the evidence on commercial measures of vitality and viability was generally defined in quantitative terms, there was little deviation between external and internal reports, rather the narrative changed with suggested courses of action from “external” consultants to that provided in “internally” generated reports. The documentary evidence of commercial measures of vitality and viability consisted of the following reports;

## *Warrington*

Documentary sources to inform the Warrington case study were as follows;

- *The Warrington Borough Council, Warrington Retail and Leisure Study* (White, Young, Green planning, 2015) a 123-page report of current and emerging retail trends, Local Authority planning policy context, market research, population and expenditure, retail capacity and future retail strategy recommendations that formed part of the Local Area Plan strategy of 2015-2020;
- *The Warrington Town Centre Health Check Assessment* (White, Young, Green planning, 2014) a Local Authority commissioned 13-page supplement to the main report which isolated the relative retail performance of Warrington's district centres of Birchwood, Westbrook and Stockton Heath, and;
- *The Town Centre Heath Check* (Warrington Borough Council, 2012) a 20-page report produced by the Borough Council to assess the town centres diversity of uses, the amount of retail, leisure and office floorspace in edge and out-of-centre locations, the potential capacity for growth, retailer's representation and intentions to change representation; shopping rents; the proportion of vacant street level property; commercial yields on non-domestic property; land values and the length of time key sites have remained undeveloped; pedestrian flows; accessibility; and, customer and resident views and behaviour.

## *Wrexham*

Documentary sources to inform the Wrexham case study were as follows;

- *The Wrexham Town Centre Masterplan*, (Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016) a 76-page "evidence base for the emerging Local Development Plan and a framework with which to market the town and encourage investment" (p. 1). Commissioned at a cost of £100,000 the Masterplan "informs the emerging Local Development Plan (2013-2028) and Our Wrexham Plan (2013-2024)" (WCBC, 2016 p. 2), and;
- *The Wrexham Retail Assessment* (Peter Brett Associates LLP, 2014) a 70-page report that "provides a review of the performance of Wrexham Town Centre and existing

shopping patterns, a full assessment of retail needs within Wrexham, and a review of existing town centre boundaries to inform the preparation of the revised Local Development Plan” (p. 1).

### *Covent Garden*

Documentary sources to inform the Covent Garden case study were as follows;

- The *Central Activities Zone Frontage Shopping Area 9: Covent Garden* (Westminster City, 2008) a 22-page “shopping area health check survey” which identified retail diversity, rental yields, town centre attractions and pedestrian flows. The “health check” aided the City Council is in the process of producing its Local Development Framework (LDF) and replaced its Adopted Unitary Development Plan (UDP) of 2007.

### *Stockton Heath*

Documentary sources to inform the Stockton Heath case study were as follows;

- *The Warrington Borough Council, Warrington Retail and Leisure Study*, (White, Young, Green planning, 2015) a 123-page report of current and emerging retail trends, Local Authority planning policy context, market research, population and expenditure, retail capacity and future retail strategy recommendations that formed part of the Local Area Plan strategy of 2015-2020;
- *The Warrington Town Centre Health Check Assessment* (White, Young, Green planning, 2014) a Local Authority commissioned 13-page supplement to the main report which isolated the relative retail performance of Warrington’s district centres of Birchwood, Westbrook and Stockton Heath, and;
- *The Town Centre Heath Check* (Warrington Borough Council, 2012) a 20-page report produced by the Borough Council to assess the town centre’s diversity of uses, the amount of retail, leisure and office floorspace in edge and out-of-centre locations, the potential capacity for growth, retailers’ representation and intentions to change representation; shopping rents; the proportion of vacant street level property; commercial yields on non-domestic property; land values and the length of time key

sites have remained undeveloped; pedestrian flows; accessibility; and, customer and residents views and behaviour.

Evidence contained in the documents was both quantitative and qualitative, and the themes drawn from the four KPIs by “thematic analysis” both formed a basis for the comparisons against the national averages that appeared throughout the case studies and acted as an ongoing reference during discussions. What became apparent was that because the documents were all commissioned by the relevant Local Authority’s, they all held a bias. For example, the impartiality of the reports was potentially compromised by those who commissioned the report; consequently, the reports could be viewed as a justification for funding, or marketing (Hogg *et al.*, 2007), or simply to communicate that the Local Authority’s ongoing strategies were effective (Wolfe and Gertler, 2004). Indeed, the Strategic Director of Economy and Place in Wrexham explicitly stated that, “if I am paying for the report, I can say what goes in it”. Therefore, although “health-check” documents offered a relative comparison of town centre vitality and viability, as a single piece of evidence they could be compromised by bias and, one had to validate reports with interviews, and discussions with influencers to explore the back stories to commissioned reports to draw out the biases they held.

#### **4.3.4.2 In-depth interviews and discussions**

Berry reflects on the best advice he was given by an influential teacher;

“The best interviewer is not one who writes the best questions. Rather, excellent interviewers are excellent conversationalists. They make interviews seem like a good talk among old friends. He didn't carry a printed set of questions in front of him to consult as the interview progressed; yet he always knew where he was going and never lost control of the discussion. He gave his subjects a lot of license to roam but would occasionally corral them back if the discussion went too far astray” (2002 p.679)

It is recognised that “elite interviews, from people who hold powerful positions that have an individual and unique knowledge, or information from a privileged perspective, can be a crucial data source for studies examining public policy, politics, and power relationships” (Natow, 2019 p.1). Interviewing elites was therefore a crucial part of the research, for as

Davies notes, “the most difficult aspect of [the] triangulation process is not the process of corroboration through multiple sources, but the incorporation of additional information from first-hand accounts” (Davies, 2002 p.78). The first-hand accounts in this research were compiled over a four-year period (2014-2018) with evidence collected during several visits, and phone conversations, with influencers from each town centre. As an initial point of contact, I aimed for the Leader of the Local Authority, or in the case of Covent Garden a Director of the private landlord, as I found this approach offered a better “way in” to the cultural paradigms of each organisation. From these points of contact came other influencers who had an interest or an expertise in the areas of discussion. I found a “snowballing” technique where “one subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on” (Atkinson and Flint, 2001 p.1) allowed me to be both reflective, and reflexive in what I found. For example, in Wrexham the Leader of the Local Authority arranged a day of interviews with influencers that he considered would be of benefit as they held politically strategic roles in the Local Authority, and they were duly “on message” with their rhetoric. There were, however, many subsequent interviews that came from these initial conversations that offered a more ‘realistic’ view of how the political message could, or more importantly *would*, be actioned. These influencers were not necessarily political; they were executive members of the Local Authority who had a job to deliver on the political promises. What became apparent, quite quickly, was that from the initial high-profile meetings, it was relatively easy to gain access to junior officers by mentioning the Leader’s name.

Initially interviews with influencers were conducted with a tape recorder and a pre-defined set of questions that were drawn from the themes that arose from the “health-check” documents. For example, interviews regarding vacancy rates, and diversity would follow a prescribed pattern, and would get a prescribed answer along the lines of “we are relatively ok” or “vacancy rates are a national problem and we are no different”. In subsequent interviews however, there were many occasions when there would be a whisper to “turn the tape off” and I would duly oblige, from where the interviewees would open-up about their real challenges to vitality and viability. Many of these were political point-scoring comments, and although none of the data was used in the case studies, it took some time to learn that I would get more from influencers if I turned the tape off and discarded the pre-



defined questions. The questions were still there, however; they were guides in a notebook, which acted as informal prompts to guide the conversation (Davies, 2001). Walker defines this approach as a 'depth interview';

"a conversation in which the researcher encourages the informant to relate, in their own terms, experiences and attitudes that are relevant to the research problem ... the researcher is not bound by a rigid questionnaire designed to ensure that the same questions are asked of all respondents in exactly the same way ... He is therefore free to follow up interesting ideas introduced by the informant" (1985 pp.4-5).

Indeed, Saunders (2012) suggests this form of unstructured interview is ideally suited to exploratory research to provide insight into the research project, and due to its success in Warrington (i.e. the first town centre under investigation), I adopted it for all other case studies. I found that through building relationships with influencers the back-story became richer and more relevant to their challenges, and any intended action. Figure 4.3 summarises the contacts in each location and the dates of the discussions.

	Warrington	Wrexham	Covent Garden	Stockton Heath
<b>Local Authority</b>	Leader of the Local Authority (6, 2012-2016); Deputy Leader of the Local Authority (1, 2012); Director of Planning and Regeneration (1, 2014); Managing Director of Warrington & Co., (7, 2014-2016).	Leader of the Local Authority (4, 2014-2018); Deputy Leader of the Local Authority (1, 2014); Director for Place and Regeneration (2, 2014-2016); Town Centre Manager (5, 2014-2016); Chair of the Arts & Cultural Trust (1, 2016);		Parish Council meetings (11, 2014-2017); Leader of the Local Authority (6, 2012-2014); Deputy Leader of the Local Authority (1, 2012); Board Members of the Parish Council (2, 2014-2017).
<b>Private Sector</b>	Independent and Multiple Retailers (2, 2014); Primary Shopping Centre Managers (3, 2014); Commercial Property Agents (4, 2014-2017); National Retailers (2, 2014);	Chair of the Wrexham Business Group (1, 2014); Private Landlords (2, 2014); Independent and Multiple Retailers (4, 2014-2016); Commercial Property Agents (2, 2016).	Director of Planning and Development at Capital and Counties plc, (7, 2014-2017); National Retailers (2, 2014);	Landlords (26, 2014-2018); Retailers (32, 2014-2018); Commercial Property Agents (4, 2014-2018).
<b>Third Sector</b>	Leader of the Town Centre Board (1, 2016); Managing Director of Culture Warrington (11, 2013-2016);		Secretary of the Covent Garden Area Trust (2, 2015); Chair of the Covent Garden Community Trust (1, 2015).	

Figure 4.3; Elite respondent details table (frequency and date(s) of discussions).

#### **4.3.4.3 Site visits**

Site visits were made to all four town centres prior to, during, and after the interview and documentary data was collected. One of the reasons I made repeat visits was as a result of a conversation I had with a consultant who had an input into the *Warrington Town Centre Health Check* in 2012. He commented that there was no requirement to visit the town centre prior to compiling a “health-check” report as the information was readily available from external agencies (for example, Colliers, Springboard and Verdict). It appeared to me that the town centre, in his view, was a commodity, where in effect “health-checks” could be templated, and reported on, through external information (indeed, he admitted that he had compiled a report for a town centre with another town’s heading on the report). Having been a retailer in many town centres for over forty years, I recognised the local nuances that town centres have, something that cannot be seen on paper, or statistical reports. It was important for me, therefore, to understand the geography of the place, the competing retail offer, and compare the back-story of previous “health-check” reports to the timeline of retail development in each town and town centre. What I did not expect was that during the research my understanding of each town centre’s local governance was further informed by a combination of meeting elites, revisiting “health-check” reports, and continual site visits. For, as I discovered more about local governance, I had a more informed view, and I became increasingly interested to see if the grand plans of influencers matched their rhetoric, or if the advice of the past was heeded, or indeed, if their plans ever reached fruition.

#### **4.3.4.4 Triangulating data**

Davies (2001) notes that triangulation is particularly important in research that involves elite interviews, as it allows a fuller picture to be obtained, particularly in areas that are politically sensitive. Triangulation, in this research, refers to the relationship between documented “health” reports, elite interviews, and site visits, for I found that by constantly referring to different evidence bases not only added to the validity of this research (Denzin, 2008), it also informed my arguments as I constantly moved between documentary evidence, discussions, and site visits. In this way I followed Flick’s advice that consistency comes from applying triangulated methods to the same cases, as the resulting findings can “act as a

validation strategy, as an approach to the generalization of discoveries, and as a route to additional knowledge" (Flick, 2004 p. 183). Changes over time, and the opportunities and constraints change brings to town centres, are woven through this research and, studying town centre "health-check" reports, as sequences of social drama over time, could not, on their own, provide an understanding of the evolution, transformation and conceivable decay of town centres (Pettigrew, 1998). Neither could site visits, or potentially politically loaded interviews with elites. Therefore, to catch "reality in flight" (Pettigrew, 1998) I found it was necessary to constantly cross-reference what was being said, with what was being done.

#### **4.3.5 Analysing data**

Thematic analysis was applied to the documents and elite interviews to draw "themes" that were relevant to the research objectives. "Thematic analysis" offers an insight into "patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set"; patterns that allow a researcher to identify "themes" that are important "to the particular topic and research question being explored" (Braun and Clarke *et al.*, 2019 p.57). It can be used in three ways; one of which is as an "inductive bottom-up approach, where themes are "driven by the data. What this means is that the...themes derive from the content of the data", so that what is analysed matches the content of the data (Braun and Clarke *et al.*, 2019 p.58).

#### **4.4 Themes from the documents and elite interviews**

To draw themes from the documents, that were relevant to the KPIs, I downloaded the "health-check" documents for each of the four case locations as PDF's and utilised the "find" facility in Microsoft Word to locate specific references to "footfall", "rental", "rental yields", "rental values", "diversity", "vacancy rates", and "vacant". Drawing themes from "health-check" documents before I conducted interviews was useful, as the evidence both provided an objectivity to balance the political rhetoric (Schein, 2003, 2010), and a base for an ongoing discussion that could not deviate from the KPIs. The initial themes that emerged from applying thematic analysis to the documents were;

*Footfall* – The emphasis on footfall within the documents was largely advisory. The authors of Wrexham’s “health-checks” for example, held aspirations to “drive” and “encourage” footfall; Warrington and Stockton Heath’s references were how convenience goods retailing could aid footfall; and, Covent Garden’s sole reference regarded the avoidance of retail vacancies as they contributed to low footfall. The advice was considered anecdotal because it was offered against a backdrop of not really knowing what footfall was, how it had changed over time, and what “drove” it. The questions that were guided by the footfall narrative in the documents included; Did influencers measure footfall? What changes had there been? and, how could they influence it?

*Rental yields* – Rental yields was also low on references in the documents; however, there was some evidence that in Covent Garden and Warrington that this KPI was considered important. In Warrington and Stockton Heath, rental yields, or rental values, were perceived as either a negative symptom of change, or as a relative measure against other town centres. There was no mention of rental yields, or rental values in either Wrexham’s 2014 retail audit, or in the subsequent Masterplan. Questions from the documents were guided towards; Are rental yields important? And how can they be influenced?

*Diversity* – Diversity, in the documentation relating to all town centres, was mentioned extensively. It was perceived to be positive for the vitality and viability of town centres, although it was mainly an aspiration. It was recognised that diversity was seen by many as the key to “success”, it was written into policy documents, and it had symbiotic properties. Questions were guided towards what diversity meant to influencers? And how could they influence it?

*Vacancy rates* – Vacancy rates, or “vacant” was referenced the most in all documents. It was perceived by external consultants to hold both positive and negative values; however, it was also seen as an opportunity for future use. Questions were guided towards; How vacancies occurred? What did influencers do when there was a vacancy? And could they influence and manage vacancies going forward?

The frequency of KPIs that were relevant to the a priori indicators of “footfall, rental yields, diversity and vacancy rates” are summarised in figure 4.4; (the figures represent the number of times the words were referenced in the “health-check” documents, and the year the document was released). The themes that were relevant to the a priori KPI, along with indicative examples of the contexts within which these terms were referred to in these documents are summarised in figure 4.4;

	<b>Footfall</b>	<b>Rental yields</b>	<b>Diversity</b>	<b>Vacancy rates</b>
<b>Warrington</b>	18 (2012) / 8 (2015)	18 (2012) / 5 (2015)	12 (2012) / 14 (2015)	14 (2012) / 49 (2015)
<b>Wrexham</b>	13 (2014) / 19 (2016)	0 (2014) / 0 (2016)	6 (2014) / 16 (2016)	15 (2014) / 2 (2016)
<b>Covent Garden</b>	1 (2008)	5 (2008)	6 (2008)	15 (2008)
<b>Stockton Heath</b>	0 (2012) / 1 (2014)	0 (2012) / 1 (2014)	2 (2012) / 6 (2014)	2 (2012) / 11 (2014)

Figure 4. 4; Word frequencies within documents (frequency and the date of the document)

<b>Footfall</b>	<b>Rental yields</b>	<b>Diversity was an aspiration</b>	<b>Vacancy rates were perceived as negative, positive...</b>	<b>...and as opportunities</b>
<p>“The lowest pedestrian flow was recorded by a vacant unit on 17-18 Floral Street” (Covent Garden, 2008 p. 15)</p> <p>“encourage footfall” (Wrexham Masterplan 2015, p. 9); “increase footfall” (p. 10); “help draw footfall” (p. 12); “drive footfall” (p.15, p.19, p.23, p.30, p.31, p.51, p.68); “encourage a greater flow of footfall” (p.22)</p> <p>“in areas of the town centre where footfall is more limited or vacancies are high, the lack of activity and active frontages do not help to foster a feeling of safety” (Warrington, 2015 p.67)</p> <p>“The position of the footfall counters... make it difficult to ascertain if any individual streets have fared any better than others” (Warrington, 2012 p.15)</p> <p>“presence of the popular food store helps to underpin the performance of the centre as a whole by bringing footfall to the centre” (Stockton Heath, 2015 p. 118)</p>	<p>“The prime rental level in Covent Garden is now the highest of all the 19 CAZ areas and frontages” (Covent Garden, 2008 p.11)</p> <p>“There is a possibility that online retailing will continue to put pressure on retail rental growth over the next five to ten years...smaller town centres are likely to be the subject of greater ongoing impacts from online retailing” (Stockton Heath, 2015 p.13)</p> <p>Warrington’s yield also compares very favourably with other sub-regional centres in the North West...indicating high levels of investor confidence in Warrington town centre within the region” (Warrington, 2012, p.20)</p>	<p>“Excluding retail there continues to be only a limited range of other uses in Warrington Town Centre...for a sub-regional centre, diversity is not good” (Warrington, 2015 p.60)</p> <p>“The centre has several strengths, including a diverse range of national and independent retail stores, and a market, which acts to provide a competitive shopping destination” (Covent Garden, 2008 p.12)</p> <p>“The high proportion of independent operators present in the centre helps to create a diverse and niche offer” (Stockton Heath, 2015 p.118)</p> <p>“Service uses within the town centre fall below the national average and this is particularly true of the restaurant, café and coffee bar sub-category. Such food and drink uses are increasingly important in attracting visitors to retail destinations” (Wrexham Retail Assessment, 2014 p.15)</p> <p>“the Council will support proposals in and on the edge of Stockton Heath district centre that contribute positively to the character, diversity and vitality of the centre” (Stockton Heath, 2015 p.22)</p>	<p>“Warrington town centre is suffering from a high vacancy rate when compared to the national average” (Warrington, 2015 p.65)</p> <p>“not wishing to see vacant properties” (Wrexham, Masterplan, 2015 p.15)</p> <p>“The proportion of vacant floorspace is substantially less than the national average which is a key indicator of a healthy centre” (Stockton Heath, 2015 p.69)</p>	<p>“we consider that the Council should seek to plan for the reuse, refurbishment or redevelopment of the existing vacant premises in the town centre wherever possible” (Warrington, 2015 P.113)</p> <p>“vacant and underused buildings in the town centre...are opportunities for alternative uses” (Wrexham, Masterplan, 2015 p.28)</p> <p>“Warrington town centre currently accommodates a high level of vacant floorspace...it would be prudent to plan for the reuse, refurbishment or redevelopment of these existing premises wherever possible rather than grant planning permission for additional comparison goods floorspace outside of a centre” (Warrington, 2015 p. 90)</p>

Figure 4. 5; Initial themes that emerged from document analysis

To draw out themes from the elite interviews “thematic analysis” was again applied to the recorded, and transcribed data from where several initial themes emerged. The key themes – along with indicative examples of the context within which they were used, are as follows;

*“Leadership determines the retail approach”*- in Local Authority influenced town centres, the leadership, or bias of the Leader, was considered a factor in how the Local Authority approached retail development, and by default vitality and viability

*“Cultural differences and Cultural togetherness”*- identified an “us and them” attitude between Local Authority employees and private sector employees/owners. Examples of *“cultural differences”* where how influencers reflected on past experiences (e.g. “the Council were too naïve... property developers are buggers, they really are”), and recognised conflicts (e.g. “I would hate to get them [private and public partners] in the same room though”, and “all the traders are negative...they stick two fingers up to us”). There was also evidence of *“cultural togetherness”* for example, “politicians were seen as a bit of an irritation...[but] you are there to carry out their ideals” and “we are very council-ese... we do have people we keep in a cupboard and we bring them out when we need to communicate better”.

*“A lack of influence over vacant units and diversity”*- examples of a lack of influence over diversity were evidenced in Local Authority planning documents where “in planning terms, it is for example, impossible to distinguish between an outlet of a large national multiple shop which is present in every High street in the country, and a unique business serving a specialist market, as both are shops within Class A1 of the Use Classes Order 1987. Therefore, in planning terms the change from one business to another is not material and does not even require planning consent” (Cooper and O’Donovan, Covent Garden Area Trust, 1998), and from interviews where “if we introduce residential, we need more space for parking etc., there always appears to be a problem, rather than a solution” and “we have no influence over who comes, we can only let the letting agents do their job and attract them”. Evidence of a lack of influence over vacancy rates were generally along the lines of “national and institutional landlords are impossible to deal with, so we are stuck with empty units”.

*“A retailer preference for out of centre development”*- this theme was evidenced from a retailer’s perspective where “if I was given a site on a roundabout in town, or one edge of town next to a multi storey car park which one am I going to go for?” and the Local Authorities perspective “The fact that retailers were threatening to pull out made us develop the area”.

I considered these five themes could be reduced by condensing *“cultural togetherness”*, *“cultural differences”*, and *“leadership preferences”* as the *“cultural paradigm”* (i.e. the unconscious ties that hold organisations together through attitudes and actions “into interrelated assumptions that form a coherent pattern” (Schein, 1984 p.2)). This theme could equally reflect the cultural paradigm of either public institutions, private institutions, or a collective culture created by a combination of both. The themes of *“retailer preference for out of centre development”* and *“a lack of influence over vacancies and diversity”* were considered as stand-alone themes that could be defined as external factors to the process of local governance. Indeed, it was not surprising that retailers would want to migrate away

from the centre (Medway *et al.*, 2000), or that influencers had a limited influence on vacancy rates, and diversity (Wrigley *et al.*, 2015). Figure 4.5 gives an indication of indicative contexts in which these themes were identified.



Figure 4. 6; Initial coded themes from elite interview

From the themes drawn from elite interviews the “cultural paradigm” was considered an important component of local governance, but how did culture impact on vitality and

viability? For the next part of the analysis it was necessary to compare the themes from documents and observations from site visits to find consider how the cultural paradigms of influencers, over time, impacted on the retail landscape of their town centres.

To do this I compared the rhetoric of influencers, with evidence of their actions over time. What became apparent from documents was that there was detailed evidence of advice from successive consultants to follow a course of action. By comparing the advice with the action taken, it became apparent that the strength of the cultural paradigm could play a part in whether the advice was heeded, or not. If the cultural paradigm was strong there was a good chance the advice would be ignored (Warrington), conversely if the cultural paradigm was weak there was a strong chance the advice would be heeded (Wrexham). For example, when I revisited the cases to find evidence of how culture impacts on the retail landscape in Warrington, I found that the influencers’ cultural paradigm was shaped by a New Town policy directive in the late 1960s that encouraged retail development away from the town centre. In effect the commissioned “health-check” reports were ignored because the cultural paradigm over-ruled it. By comparing the documents, interviews, and site visits, figure 4.6, it became evident that the cultural paradigms, and the opportunity to develop away from the town centre had an impact on vitality and viability.

	<b>Document themes</b>	<b>Interview themes</b>	<b>Site visit observations</b>
<b>WARRINGTON</b>	Resist development away from the town centre	Culturally acceptable to develop out of centre as part of the NTDC	Extensive out of centre retail development
<b>WREXHAM</b>	Extend the town centre boundaries and redevelop the town centre with housing and a café culture	A weak culture created by a political landscape that has no overall majority and a lack of town centre focus	Extensive edge of centre retail development
<b>COVENT GARDEN</b>	Retain retail in the Central Activities Zone and increase diversity	Culturally acceptable to retain retail development in the town centre	Retail development contained within the town centre
<b>STOCKTON HEATH</b>	The “jewel in the crown”. Retain, and protect retail development in the town centre	Culturally acceptable to retain retail development in the town centre	Retail development contained within the town centre

Figure 4. 7; a summary of the analysis which led to the concept of the retail development approach (by the cultural paradigm and the available resource)



I phrased the relationship between the cultural paradigm and the opportunity to develop out of centre as the Retail Development Approach and discovered that if the cultural paradigm consented to development away from the town centre, and influencers had the available resource to do it then the vitality and viability of the town centre could be compromised. From this I concluded that if influencers consented, through their cultural paradigms, to allow retail to migrate from the town centre to edge of, and out of centre sites, then the chances of participation in town centre local governance would decrease, as the Local Authority would effectively isolate itself in the town centre due to a lack of private demand. Conversely, if the Local Authorities cultural paradigm acted to retain retail - development in the town centre the local governance form had the potential to be more inclusive, as there was evidence of a private sector interest in what was going on.

This inference could not be drawn from the interviews alone, rather it was a combination of documentary analysis (what had the Local Authority been advised to do in the past, and what had they done); site visits (what the Local Authority actually did for example, was there evidence of edge of, and out of centre retail development?) and the cultural and political landscape of the past (for example, Warrington's New Town policy in the late 1960s that shaped the retail development of the next fifty years). In this sense, the data was analysed through triangulated methods, as evidence from the documents and site visits confirmed, or disconfirmed the intents and actions of the influencers.

#### **4.5 Verifying data**

Morse *et al.*, (2002) consider verification as the process of checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain, which in qualitative research refers to the mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity, and thus, the rigor of a study. They suggest due to the iterative nature of research these mechanisms are woven into every step of the inquiry to construct a solid product (Kvale, 1989; Creswell, 2013) by identifying and correcting errors before they are built in to the developing model, and before they have a chance to subvert the analysis. Morse *et al.*, (2002) define five key factors to determine a framework to ensure verification as;

1. *Ensure methodological coherence, where the questions match the method, which matches the data and the analytic procedures.*

The methodological coherence of this thesis is rooted in the governance literature of town centres through comment on partnerships, collaboration, sociological institutions, capacity, free-market practices, and the roles of influential actors within institutions. The nature of the study is founded on a priori constructs of vitality and viability, which due to the nature of commissioned reports hold a relevance and applicability to academics and practitioners alike. The research questions are consistent with government generated KPIs that are relevant to the study, and the nature of town centres as urban places, and within KPIs the interpretive nature of town centres is recognised as relevant and timely. Therefore, influencers are not solely elites, but any actors that can - and do - affect change and have the ability to create capacity through emerging forms. Literature suggests that governance within town centres ideally evolves with change, which renders the probability of forms as unique as town centres. In effect, governance forms are as amorphous, fluid and changeable as town centres. To better understand different forms of local governance, and to explore whether it could influence vitality and viability within them, I adopted a case study approach, which I considered to be consistent with this method of enquiry, as is the method of discussions to inform theory within an inductive, iterative study. The analysis, based on the questions of perception and capacity, is equally consistent within this paradigm and fit within extant literature and current theory.

2. *Ensure that the chosen cases are appropriate, that is the samples best represent, or have knowledge of, the research topic. Sampling adequacy ensures that all aspects, including possible negative outcomes, are represented. Ensuring replication verifies and ensures comprehension and completeness.*

The sample of four town centres is considered adequate (Pettigrew, 1990; Eisenhardt and Graubner 2007; Yin, 2017). They all had access to, and used the a priori KPIs, and the stakeholders interviewed all recognised a desire to improve the vitality and viability of their towns. In sampling four towns that were considered extremes the samples could theoretically represent all governance forms within

town centres and urban areas. In the spaces between these samples, and there are many, exists all other forms of heterarchic governance, collaboration and capacity within town centres and urban arenas. Therefore, the samples best represent the totality of governance modes, although as extremes they are not reflective of all.

3. *Collect and analyse data concurrently, that is maintain an ongoing iterative interaction between data and analysis.*

The nature of this research over a period of four years has witnessed many changes, where micro-discussions have informed a process of macro-analysis. This has been a result of context and time informed by the influencers within the towns as part of a constantly iterative study, therefore any analysis throughout has been informed by a constant layering and learning process. Consequently, when the research questions are re-visited responses are both an expression of the influencers, and of my understanding of town centres. I would suggest this could not have been possible if I had devised and sent a questionnaire, or if I had visited the centres once and not returned to observe intended actions with actual actions.

This is not to suggest that evidence was presented and confirmed, rather discussions created new lines of thought and understanding, which were then built into the research. This was pertinent as being immersed in a political process leaves one at risk of believing promises, rather than seeking evidence of action, change and personal collaboration. During the study there were several opportunities to re-visit the scene, to witness if change was possible, or at least that stakeholder's perceptions changed over time. The limitation is that time is finite and this study captures a moment of it, where the perceptions and composition of actors and the capacity to create change are reflective of it, but I believe that during the period of this research I took every opportunity to catch Pettigrew's "reality in flight".

4. *Think theoretically in relation to new data, or new ideas that arise from the data collected. Small steps build a solid foundation.*

In developing this study, a significant part of the iterative process was not only the interpretations of what makes a place vital and viable, and the constraints that

brings, but also how academic comment within different disciplines informs the whole. For example, exploring the governance in Warrington required theory that involved more than commerce, planning and culture. Its challenges impacted on politics, organisations, commerce, social space, planning regulations, finance, abdication of ownership, geographical position, obsolete units, devolved power to district centres, and its competition with other centres to name a few. Reflective consideration was therefore not only given to the outputs, but also to the process of those outputs.

Therefore, *wicked problems* were not confined to a priori measures but were part of a larger, interwoven web. Within this the KPI helped to ground the study to build a better understanding, however discussions created new ideas on where one enters the social–economic debate; how success is perceived; how political approaches of the past affect the present; or, how retail change necessitates fresh approaches and the implications they hold. These are some of the new ideas that came from discussions.

5. *Develop theory from the micro to the macro, that is move between micro perspectives of the research and a macro understanding of theoretical concepts. This is attained as a reflective outcome of the research and as a basis for development of existing theory.*

Yin (2017) suggests the analysis of case study data is one of the least developed and most difficult aspects of the process. This has been relevant to this study, possibly due to the amount of data collected, its nature as conversations, its reflective and iterative process and my limitations as a novice researcher. In suggesting developments to theory, I am aware that sometimes researchers can fall into a trap of making the evidence fit the argument, a mistake I wanted to avoid. So, although there has been a structure to the research, it has principally developed through dialogue, and my own increased knowledge. Case studies are at their most valid when the study is rooted in theoretical propositions and evidence fits those propositions (Yin, 2017). Within a study that is exploring an amorphous concept, it is difficult to determine what those propositions are? I was not seeking causal

explanations however, I was aware of providing a *complete* case study, that is paying attention to the phenomenon being studied and its context (Yin, 2017). Within this though the context, and to an extent the phenomenon changed constantly, and as Trochim (1989) suggests, if any contradictory observations arose, they should be treated with the same primacy as that of extant knowledge.

Phenomenon though were contextual, and I was mindful that we should not consider any theory as true, at least true to all academics (Cook and Campbell, 1979). As Chen and Rossi (1987) comment, it is an acknowledged embarrassment that social science theory is not well enough developed that appropriate theoretical frameworks and schema are ordinarily easily available “off the shelf”. However, the absence of fully developed theory should not prevent one from using the best of what is already at hand to explore how human organisations work and how social problems are generated (Chen and Rossi, 1987). They comment that within this process research is only as good as the investigator, as it is the researcher’s creativity, sensitivity, flexibility and skill in using the verification strategies that determines the reliability and validity of the evolving study. In this respect, I purposely tried to be as reflective and reflexive as possible.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

Chapters 5-8 seek to achieve the research objectives of identifying local governance influencers; exploring impact local influencers have on National Planning Policy framework (NPPF) commercial measures of vitality and viability and, exploring whether the impact influencers have on vitality and viability varies with the form of local governance they adopted. To do this Chapters 5-8 discuss each of the case studies in more detail. Chapter 5 studies Warrington as a form of *Government*, a town centre that exhibited traits of hierarchical local governance due to a lack of private demand; Chapter 6 studies Wrexham, a town centre that had evidence of *Collective Action*; Chapter 7 visits Covent Garden, a unique town centre in the heart of London that, due to its past, had a governance form of *Created Partnership*; and finally Stockton Heath, a town centre on the outskirts of

Warrington that had “healthy” vitality and viability indicators without overt collective influencers.

## Chapter 5; Warrington-Governance mode: Government

### 5.1 Context

The gateway to the North West of England from prehistoric times, Warrington emerged as a place of commerce in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> Century when Charters to hold markets and fairs ensured the town's dominance over neighbouring settlements and drew visitors from a wide area to its centre. A settlement developed in its present location in 1285, and by the mid-15<sup>th</sup> Century the town had become an important node on a network of long-distance coaching routes (Warrington.gov.uk., /info/local history, 2018). The town continued to grow as a commercial, civic and cultural centre for an expanding industrial population during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and major public buildings were constructed within its boundaries, principal thoroughfares were introduced, and the erection of fine shopping frontages complimented the setting for the fine Palladian mansion which became the Town Hall in 1872. For the next Century the town continued to be vibrant, with a town centre that had a diversity of uses and strong road and rail networks (Local Plan Core Strategy, 2014). Indeed in 2015 the town centre remained relatively "healthy", although it was acknowledged that further investment had to be made both to retain the town centre's share of catchment area consumer spending, and to accommodate the changing space requirements of retailers (White, Young, Green [WYG] planning consultants, 2015).

The local governance of the town centre has always had a strong Local Authority influence. In the 1960s the Local Authority influenced planning decisions and invested in the town's shopping centre; in the 1970s it permitted edge of, and out of centre developments as part of a New Town policy, and; from the 1980s it accelerated out of centre developments to create a form of competition to the town centre (echoing the "edge city" concepts of Garreau, 1991). The changes to the retail landscape however are now raising questions about the Local Authority's approach to town centre retail development, especially since many of the contemporary challenges the town centre faces are considered a result of its past actions (White, Young, Green, 2015).

In its defence the Local Authority accepts it has neglected the town centre in the past and has now adopted a Local Plan Core Strategy (LPCS) which has a vision that the town centre will be “the vibrant focus of the borough for retail, leisure, culture, entertainment and business” by 2027 (LPCS, 2014 p.113). Sections 5.2-5.4 adopt the retail change structure of chapter 1 to provide a summary of the changing town centre retail landscape in the period 1960–2018; the policy initiatives which have impacted on it; and the local governance initiatives to create a “vibrant focus”.

## 5.2 The 1960s and 1970s retail landscape; from post War decline to retail alliances?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
The town centre retains a focus as the primary destination for retail and commerce.	A New Town status is granted, and the masterplan is accepted by government in 1968.	Local governance structures reflect a Local Authority led process where “urban planning and management [is] a means of delivering public services by public authorities for long – term collective goals of public interest” (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008 p.155-156).
A new indoor market and multi – storey car park opens in Bridge Street (1975)	The New Town Development Corporation considers not only the town centre but also the district centres as development opportunities.	Natural divisions of labour exist between the Local Authority and retailers leading to a top down command and control form of governance.
Marks and Spencer anchor the new shopping centre which opens in 1974.	Planning policy recognises the “convenience” needs of the district centres and encourages retail development away from the town centre.	
The Queen formally opens the Golden Square shopping centre in 1979.		

Figure 5. 1; 1960s and 1970s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Warrington town centre

Photographic evidence of Warrington’s town centre from the early 1960s portrays a vibrant place with a significant amount of retail activity, and many traditional high street names vying for space.





Figure 5. 2; Warrington town centre in 1965

There are two developments in this period that cemented the reputation of the town centre as a retail destination; the construction of a new indoor market hall in 1974, and the construction of the Golden Square shopping centre in 1977. These developments, along with new and improved roads, new car parks, a new bus station, and the pedestrianisation of the principal shopping streets served to consolidate the town centre's role in the retail hierarchy. The seeds of change however also emerged in this period, with Warrington's newly adopted New Town status in 1968. The New Town Development Corporation (NTDC) policy was a central government restoration initiative to aid towns negatively affected by the Second World War through a strategy that had two main tasks; to provide houses, jobs and services for a new population of 40,000 and; to deal with the "needs of Warrington", including the restoration of nearly five square miles of derelict military installations. Retail expansion was considered a key component of the NTDC's activities, and from the 1960s onwards a level of convenience goods retail was diffused away from Warrington, whilst the town centre remained the primary location for comparison goods. To support the new district centres the highway network was restructured, and five new areas were created to supplement the increased employment within the New Town, one of which (Gemini) was to become a significant focal point of retail change over the next thirty years.

### 5.3 The 1980s and 1990s retail landscape; a period of retail change and collective responsibilities?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
A New Town district shopping centre opens out of centre at Birchwood in 1980.	Warrington Borough Council becomes a Unitary Authority in 1998 and accelerates edge of, and out of centre retail developments as part of the New Town Development policy.	Natural divisions of labour exist between the Local Authority and retailers leading to a top down command and control form of governance.
One of the town centres two cinemas closes in 1982, the last one closes in 1995.		
ASDA anchors a new edge of centre development in 1984.		
A new town centre shopping centre at Time Square opens in 1984.		
B&Q open an out of centre megastore close to the M62 in 1985.		
IKEA opens its first UK store out of centre at Gemini in 1987, Toys R Us follow suit in 1988.		
An out of centre retail park is developed on the disused site of a FIAT distribution centre in 1989.		
Marks and Spencer open a store out of centre at Gemini in 1994.	There is no evidence of any overt form of Town Centre Management during this period,	

Figure 5. 3; 1980s and 1990s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Warrington town centre

Throughout the 1980s, Warrington’s town centre continued to prosper, however out of centre development also gathered momentum, with IKEA opening its first UK store at Gemini in 1987, and new shopping centres were developed in all the district centres. During the 1980s, out of centre retail development was no longer restricted to a convenience need and many of the new developments increasingly attracted comparison goods retailers. Indeed, the increased migration of comparison goods retailing away from the town centre in the 1980s and 1990s created a level of competition to the centre, particularly in an out of centre site at Gemini (now the site of one of the largest Marks and Spencer’s in the UK), and along the main arterial route linking the town centre to the motorway network. A result of the Local Authority’s approach to retail development in the 1980s and 1990s was that off-centre retail floor space (excluding district centres) in this period equated to that within the

primary core. Other off-centre locations, notably the Trafford Centre (1995), and the off-price McArthur Glen development at Cheshire Oaks (1995) also emerged in this period as competitors for consumer spending within Warrington’s trade draw area.

#### 5.4 The retail landscape from 2000 to 2019; towards an alternative future?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
The town centres Pyramid Arts venue stages its first performance in 2002.	The first female Chief Executive of WBC holds a social bias for town centre strategies.	A town centre managers position is created, in 2012, as part of the Local Authority’s neighbourhood team. He subsequently resigns, in 2013, and is not replaced due to financial cuts.
Legh street swimming baths closes in the town centre in 2003.	WBC issues over 10,000 town centre parking tickets in a seven – month period in 2005.	
WBC approve plans to bring a cinema to the town centre in 2006.	WBC announces that planning will remain in – house.	The Warrington Retail Partnership is created between the Local Authority, Legal & General, and Lend Lease to extend the footprint of the Golden Square shopping centre in 2007.
The Golden Square shopping centre is redeveloped in 2007 and attracts many retailers from the town centre to its centre.	In 2011 Labour gain control of the Local Authority for the first time since 2006.	
WBC approves plans for a new £28 million leisure facility out of centre in 2008.	The female Chief Executive leaves her post. She is replaced by Professor Broomhead who holds an economic bias.	Warrington & Co; is established as a Local Authority led developer in the town. Culture Warrington is created as a partnership between the Local Authority and Live Wire (the Local Authority town centre partnership). it raises over £1 million of town centre funding in its first year.
TJ Hughes and Peacocks close their town centre stores in 2011 and 2012.	In 2012 Culture Warrington is launched, and the “it’s all going on in Warrington” initiative is launched by the Local Authority.	
An NHS drop in centre opens in the town centre in 2012.	Warrington unsuccessfully bids for the City of Culture 2021.	
The Cultural quarter opens in 2012.	The LCPS reiterates a retail hierarchy of town centre, then district, then neighbourhood in 2014.	A successful BID is passed in 2018. It aims to raise additional funding of £360,000 per annum.
Fordton leisure centre becomes an out of centre retail park in 2013.		
Primark and B&M bargains open in the Golden Square, and “Love Warrington” is launched by the Local Authority in 2015.		
Marks and Spencer close their town centre store in 2017.		

Figure 5. 4; The post 2000 town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Warrington town centre

The first retail impact study, commissioned by the Local Authority in 2000, suggested that consumer spending within Warrington’s town centre could sustain some 19,000 square metres of additional comparison goods floor-space (excluding retail warehousing) in the period up to 2011. The report, by Chesterton consultants, advised the best means of ensuring the town centre retained its market share of growing consumer spending was to

consolidate and enhance its primary shopping area, to attract a departmental type store and to diversify the evening economy. To facilitate this approach a major extension of the Golden Square shopping centre was completed in 2007, complete with a new Debenhams, and a Local Authority funded £350,000 redevelopment of the town centre designed by Boston artist Howard Ben Tre. The £350,000 redevelopment aimed to attract new investment and consumers to the town centre, but unfortunately many of the established retailers within the town centre relocated to modern premises within the redeveloped Golden Square shopping centre, a consequence of which was that much of the town centre outside the Golden Square had high vacancy rates, and social blight.

The redevelopment of the Golden Square in 2007, and the increased out of centre development diluted the attractiveness of sections of the town centre, which appeared to awaken something in the Local Authority to revitalise the town centre. With its “renaissance strategy” the Local Authority created three public organisations to address the social (Warrington Partnership, 2012); economic (Warrington & Co., 2010); and retail needs of the town centre (Warrington Retail Limited Partnership, 2004). To assess the impact on the town centre of Local Authority policies, and of retailers relocating to the Golden Square, WYG planning consultants were commissioned in 2015 to update the town centre KPI database and to inform Warrington's Local Development Framework (LDF). The narratives that follow in relation to KPI are comments from this, and previous evidence bases.

## **5.5 Relative performance of vitality and viability measures**

### *Rental Yields*

Rental yields in Warrington decreased annually from 6.75% in 1994, to 5.75% in 2006, prompting a strategic response from the Local Authority to increase vitality through marketing initiatives and the retail redevelopment of the Golden Square shopping centre in 2007. Combined the effect was to increase Zone A rents to £183 per square foot, an improvement from the £145 achieved in 2005, placing Warrington in the top 10 of the North-West area. Commercial yields on non-domestic property improved 0.25% to 6% in July 2008, again comparing favourably with competing centres. However, the period 2008–2015 proved particularly challenging, as the redevelopment of the Golden Square in 2007,

and the economic corrections of 2008 impacted on the remainder of the town centre, confirming the projections of BNP Paribas (2012) that the town centre was potentially over-supplied with retail units. The effects of an over-supply of retail units and the economic downturn contributed to a reduction in Zone A rents in the period 2008–2012 (from £145 per square foot to £85 per square foot).

What concerned WYG planning consultants was that whilst any fall was reflective of a pattern of falling Zone A rents nationally, Warrington failed to increase the 2012 figure of £85 per square foot. And while it performed well in terms of prime Zone A rents when compared to other smaller scale town centres in the surrounding area, such as St Helens, Runcorn, Widnes and Northwich, it fell significantly when compared to Liverpool and Manchester, which had the effect of placing the town centre in the middle of a local hierarchy of centres competing for trade.

### *Diversity*

The Local Authority provided most of the non-commercial and leisure activities with several offices employing 1,550 people in civic and public administration in the town centre, and a further 2,470 people in commercial offices, many of whom were linked in some capacity to civic and public administration. At the time of the 2015 report, the town centre did not have a recognised higher education establishment, although Chester University had a facility within the Borough. There were a limited range of town centre leisure and tourist facilities, although the creation of a culture department within the Local Authority had gone some way to address this with the redevelopment of the Pyramid and Parr Hall Arts Centres hosting events including theatre, music and dance, and the Warrington museum housing special exhibitions. Additionally, a cultural offer was facilitated by the Golden Square shopping centre, which provided the Local Authority with space to be used for exhibitions, promotions and other activities, for example Summer music festivals.

Despite the presence of the Local Authority within the town centre there were few complementary businesses, and the town centre was not perceived as a major office location, indeed the "State of the Cities" database (CLG) recorded around 98,000 square metres of office floor-space in the town centre in 2015, which compared to the "Area of Town Centre Activity" database recorded in 2000 of around 92,000 square metres of office

floor-space. The town centre had therefore seen an increase of around 6,000 square metres since 2000, of which the principal occupiers were the Local Authority with civic and administrative functions.

There were a number of bars and night clubs in the town centre, however successive consultants (Chesterton, 2000; Tonks, 2012; WYG, 2015) suggest they promoted a negative impression, and the only cinema in the Borough was located four miles outside the town centre. The reliance on the public sector, and a lack of an attractive evening, or night economy created a place of function rather than leisure, a place that people left at the close of business, which in turn, limited the dwell time and did little to extend the life of the town centre to create economic and social benefits. In summary successive consultants (Chesterton, 2000; Tonks, 2012; WYG, 2015) suggest there was a limited range of uses in the town centre that contributed to vitality and viability, and for a sub-regional centre diversity was not considered good.

#### *Vacancy Rates*

In 2015 there were 476 commercial units recorded in the town centre. Of those 76 were vacant, representing a vacancy rate of 16% of available units, with a proportionately higher balance of retail vacancies (17.5%) than leisure (10.9%) (LDC, 2016). In 2015 all recorded vacancies were above the UK averages, a result of forms of obsolescence (Hughes and Jackson, 2015) within Bridge Street, an area that had witnessed significant commercial change with many comparison goods retailers relocating to the redeveloped Golden Square shopping centre. Whilst this argument had an element of validity, the spread of vacant units across all categories of retail use was consistent, indeed, there were also vacancies inside the Golden Square shopping centre, which suggested that although the Golden Square development was a contributor to town centre vacancies it could not be considered the sole cause. What was significant was the comparison of retail activity, and vacancy rates in edge of, and out of centre developments when compared to the town centre, which could provide a simpler explanation for the increase in town centre vacancy rates, namely a greater demand for investment away from the town centre. Indeed, successive consultants (Chesterton, 2000; Tonks, 2004; and WYG, 2015) suggest that Warrington's vacancy rates were a consequence of three factors;- 1) an over reliance on retail development strategies,

which created too many units; 2) the relocation of principal retailers to the Golden Square, which created areas of retail inactivity; and 3) the continued development of comparison and convenience retailers on the periphery of the town centre.

### *Footfall*

WYG consultants suggest the lack of diversity within the town centre was a contributing factor in failing to attract consumers, as it limits footfall to a predominantly daytime economy. Within the town centre there was an acknowledgement that the Golden Square dominated retail space and promotions, therefore the flow of consumers was heavily influenced by the events and actions of the shopping centre. This was reflected by evidence which suggests that although footfall within the Golden Square was slightly down on the previous year, it had recovered from the steep declines of 2008. Footfall figures outside the redeveloped shopping centre were significantly lower with a decline of over three million annual visitors since 2011. A caveat to the decline in numbers outside the Golden Square was that the collection of any data was at best random, as footfall within the town centre could be contaminated by “a van parked across a reader that could mean for two weeks you get no readings at all” (Local Authority representative). What had become evident, through the decrease in footfall outside the Golden Square, was that the redevelopment in 2007 affected not only the flow of consumers around the town, it also created a fracture between the Golden Square and the rest of the centre.

### *Summary of the relative performance across the four indicators*

The retail study of 2015 concurred with previous audits suggesting the overall “health” of Warrington town centre was mixed, for although the Golden Square shopping centre was performing relatively well, there were areas of high vacancies in the rest of the town centre. This was concerning because although the town centre performed an important retail role in the Borough, its retail market share had reduced in recent years. What was evident, to WYG, was a growing distinction in the retail performance of the town centre when compared to the Golden Square shopping centre, and the retail activity in off centre sites. To correct this imbalance WYG advised the Local Authority to use the Bridge Street redevelopment to improve the town centre’s market share by directing some of the

requirement for additional comparison goods floor space to the town centre through the reuse and redevelopment of vacant units.

## 5.6 Local governance

### *Influencers*

Hall and Siais (1980) note that relationships between influencers are constrained by the choices they have, where frameworks for interactions are determined by the ability to change within context (Gonzalez and Healey, 2005). Thus, actors and institutions that interact and change are influenced by a process of attraction. For example, if there is a high private demand for investment within parts of the town centre, the interaction between private and public institutions will most likely be high. Conversely, if there are areas of low private demand, interactions between public and private institutions would depend upon either private investors, or Local Authorities creating a demand. In Warrington's town centre, successive consultants suggested private demand was low with high vacancy rates, low rental yields, poor diversity, and falling footfall (Chesterton, 2000; Martin Tonks, 2012; WYG, 2015). Due to the low demand from private investors, the Local Authority had limited governance options; it could create a private sector demand, or; could ignore the consultant's findings. The Local Authority in Warrington chose the former however, it did so with a mistrust of private developers that had been galvanised by past experiences, most notably the redevelopment of the Golden Square shopping centre in 2007;

“The Council were hoodwinked regarding the re-allocation of retailers into the Golden Square, leaving the Local Authority with empty unsuitable units, and Golden Square with all the key players. To compound the problem the Golden Square pays the rent on the vacant units to stifle competition and drive the retail offer to their part of the town through a more attractive retail environment. The council were too naïve [with the Golden Square] and you do have to be really tough with property developers, they are buggers, they really are. They promise you everything and we should have thought more into the future. Guarantees were given at the time, but when the political leadership changed, we weren't on the case. We should have enforced ourselves more on them” (Managing Director of Culture Warrington).

By excluding private partners from decision making in local governance, the cultural paradigm of the Local Authority adopted a form that was influenced by the polity of the Local Authority, and unsurprisingly, influencers comprised of institutions of public origin namely; *the Warrington Partnership*; consisting of social and cultural partners from the



Local Authority and public health; *Warrington & Co*; a Local Authority strategic planning and development arm consisting of senior planners from the Local Authority and a representation of select private partners, and; *the Warrington Retail Limited Partnership*; consisting of private and public actors within the Golden Square. Between them these three institutions commissioned, created and borrowed over £100 million for a “renaissance” plan that aimed to transform the town centre over the next thirty years.

*The Warrington Partnership*

The Warrington Partnership is a strategic body to assess social health and well-being in the town centre. To achieve its aim the partnership brings together the elites of organisations from public, private and voluntary sectors under the banner of the Local Authority. Normally town centre strategies to improve commercial vitality and viability would not form part of its remit, as its aims are to improve the quality of life for local people and as such it holds a social bias. There are however two strands within its organisation that are of interest to commercial vitality and viability, namely; that in line with PPS6 guidelines the partnership contains the town centre board; and it also contains the Local Authority’s cultural regeneration arm, Culture Warrington.

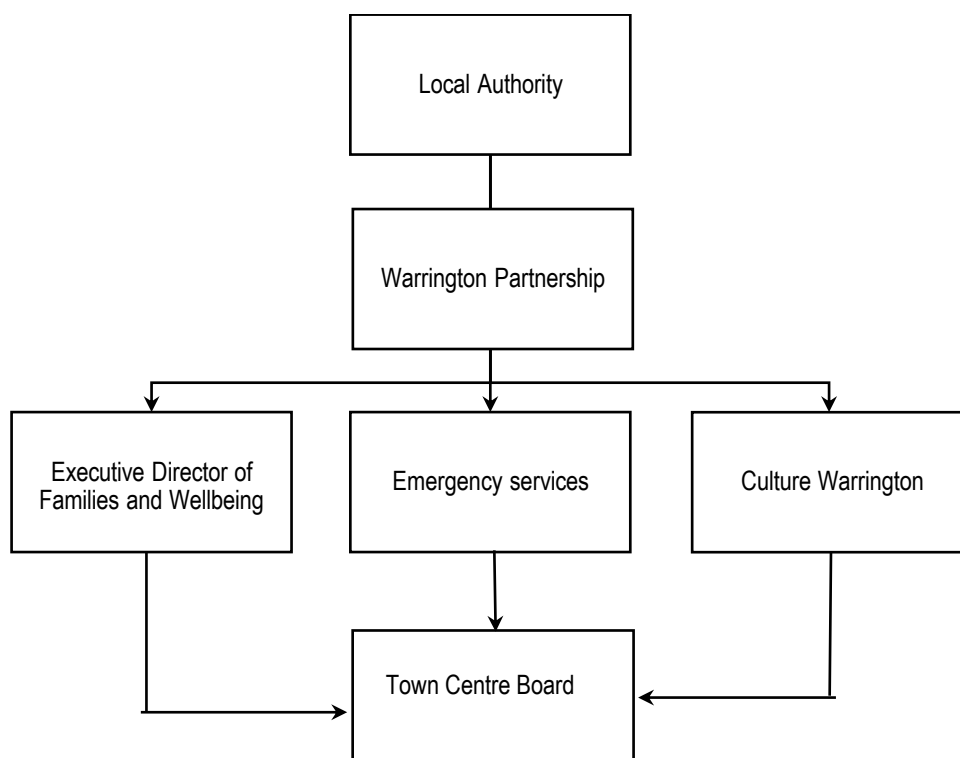


Figure 5. 5; the Warrington Partnership organisation structure

The diversions from what were predominantly social aims into what had become the increasing commodification of culture caused conflicts within the partnership;

“The leader of the partnership is a Methodist cleric who has a vision that Warrington should be seen as a room at the inn, and this is where it clashes and it’s hitting our business. Now I’m saying to the politicians, would you come into the town if you saw people peeing and doing drugs in the centre. Now with my social services hat on we should be helping and supporting these people but, putting a makeshift shelter in the town isn’t doing the people or doing the town any good. So, with my hard hat on I’m saying what is the greater good, because if we have economic decline that will impact on those people because we won’t get business rates and things like that. So, you have to politically negotiate to get a more measured view and we know the political process.” (Managing Director of Culture Warrington)

Despite the conflicts, the influence of Culture Warrington was vital to the “renaissance” as it promoted the “it’s all going on in Warrington” initiative, a local strategy which aimed to increase footfall through an extensive marketing campaign, and it also provided funding, and expertise, that could not be accessed by the Local Authority;

“We are more successful at raising money than the council, we got a £750,000 lottery bid for the museum and £250,000 the year before, so we brought a million pounds worth of investment into the town centre. People realised that the way we invested in the place needed doing differently and a cultural trust that is a non-statutory provision has opportunities for a better funding mechanism. We also have people on the boards with a wealth of experience and it’s given those people the chance to get involved and they are really itching to make a difference. I think some of the people on the boards are better than some of our full-time employees” (Managing Director of Culture Warrington)

In local governance action however, there were visible fractures in the partnership;

“The hoops we have to jump through and all the other things. One of things I have to do is respond to the public and the politicians. Members [politicians] were seen as a bit of an irritation, but you have an awareness as an officer of the council that the Leaders were democratically elected, and you are there to carry out their ideals. There is no other public body as politically accountable as local government, and local government manage town centres, but politicians are elected because they know about their ward, they are not elected because they know about culture, or town centres” (Managing Director of Culture Warrington).

The fractures in the partnership were also evident in the town centre board, something which was perceived as being a largely tokenistic requirement of central Government. Here there was apathy from commercial stakeholders, in that rather than providing any strategic

input towards improving vitality and viability the board was merely serving a policy requirement;

“The town centre board is something we have to be an active part of because of our sheer size and influence over the town centre but, if I`m being completely frank I haven`t yet seen anything massively life changing come out of this board, because everyone has got their own budgets and interests. It`s like a sharing forum, with an opportunity to buy into things, so most of it is driven by the Council to say this is what we are doing to promote the town in the next few months, but it`s more informative than strategic. It`s better than working in isolation, and with the new set up of the Cultural Trust it`s not beyond the realms of possibility for the Local Authority to create a structure where people pay to be a member, because at the end of the day the council should be responsible for the promotion of Warrington town centre, but the resource or the capabilities don`t seem to be there from a skills point of view in order to drive it” (Manager of the Golden Square)

### *The influence of the Warrington Partnership in town centre governance*

As a strategic organisation to deliver commercial change, the Warrington Partnership appeared an unlikely option, and there was a transparent unease of both the role of Culture Warrington as a town centre funding mechanism, and the role of the town centre board as a purposeful strategic regenerator. In addition, Culture Warrington had funded a £23 million leisure complex at an off-centre site, which not only removed a leisure facility from the town centre, it also created another retail park in the immediate vicinity. There were those who say they had the vitality and viability of the town centre at heart, most notably the Managing Director of Culture Warrington.

However, her actions appeared to be as a fund-raiser for external development, whilst her rhetoric was to develop a quadrant of the centre as a cultural quarter, a work in progress that will never reach fruition. Equally, the manager of the Golden Square shopping centre had a rhetoric that had town centre vitality and viability at its heart, although his actions were centred on his particular piece of real estate.

*Warrington & Co.,*

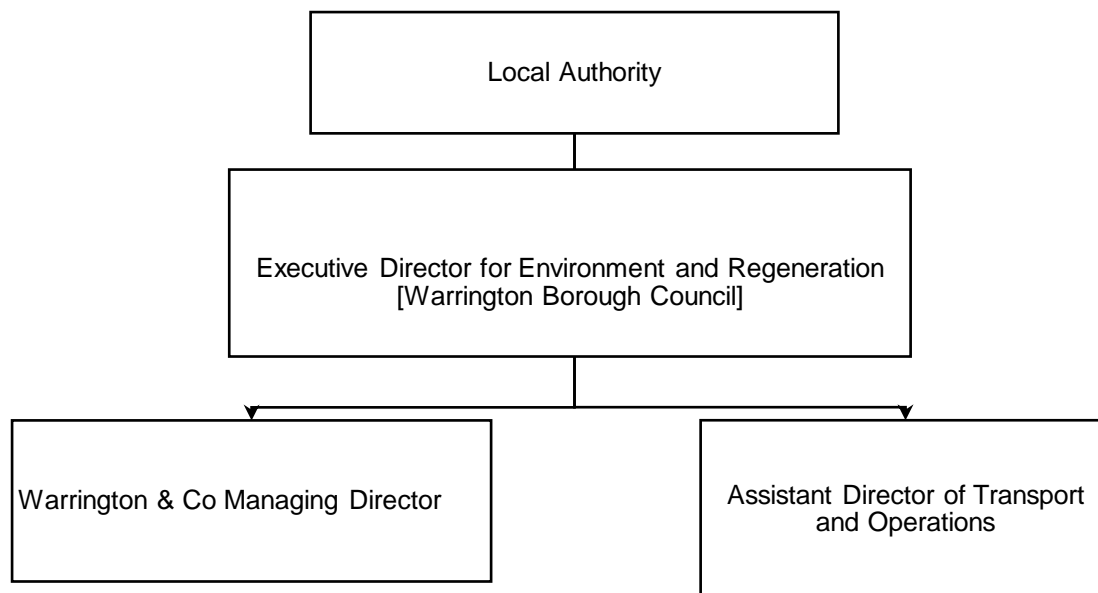


Figure 5. 6; Warrington & Co., organisational chart

Warrington & Co. is the strategic regeneration arm of Warrington Borough Council, that aimed to bring together the private and public sector to promote economic development in the Borough. It had six developments in progress, two of which directly relate to the town centre, namely; Time Square, a £100 million publicly funded retail and leisure led development; and; Cabinetworks, a town centre redevelopment to create new residential link between Palmyra Square and the Time Square development.

As an organisation Warrington and Co., aimed to guide, monitor and implement a regeneration framework, as well as providing a forum for all the key agencies involved in regeneration in the borough. Strategically it evolved during this study, from a “sleeping giant that was full of solicitors, that needed people with vision and experience” (Leader of the Local Authority), into an organisation that heavily influenced infrastructure projects along the M62 corridor. Structurally it remained a politically influenced organisation as the Managing Director was the former Local Authority’s Deputy Director of Planning, the Chairman was a former councillor, and the planners were all former council employees.

### *The influence of Warrington & Co., in town centre governance*

The positive influence of Warrington & Co. in town centre governance was as the overseer of a publicly funded £100 million redevelopment of Bridge Street. Principally the development was a consolidation strategy by the Local Authority to relocate their many offices into one publicly owned property, however the Bridge Street redevelopment also offered opportunities for increased diversity and, a chance to revitalise an area of the town centre that had high vacancy rates. The organisation, however, also had a negative influence on the town centre as it provided opportunities for investment in edge of, and out of centre sites, which again appeared to be a conflict between action and rhetoric. For example, there was a direct organisational link from the Leader of the Local Authority to the Executive Director of Planning for the Borough, and the Managing Director of Warrington & Co., These three people consistently allowed developments of comparison and convenience goods retailers away from the centre at a rate that concerned successive consultants, despite it contradicting their vision that by 2027 the town centre will be “the vibrant focus of the borough for retail, leisure, culture, entertainment and business” (LPCS, 2014 p.113).

### *The Warrington Retail Limited Partnership*

The Warrington Retail Limited Partnership (WRLP) was a joint venture between Legal & General, Lend Lease and the Local Authority, that was created to manage the extension of the Golden Square shopping centre in 2007. Lend Lease undertook the development management role for WRLP, Legal & General acted as landlords, and the Local Authority acted as head landlords (for which they received over £6 million in 2012). In 2007 the development doubled the retail footprint of the existing centre, adding an additional 365,000 square feet of space, 60 new retail units and a flagship Debenhams department store to create a fashion-led retail destination for the affluent residents of Cheshire. For the Local Authority the WRLP complimented the social aspirations of the Warrington Partnership, and the physical redevelopment aims of Warrington and Co., however its commercial impact on vitality and viability was specific to the Golden Square shopping centre, where it competed rather than complimented the rest of the centre;

“The Council have told me to look after the retail offer and they will look after the rest”  
(Manager of the Golden Square).

A consequence of its myopic strategy was that although it has a significant influence on the town centre it caused fractures in the retail activity, particularly after consent was given by the Local Authority to expand its retail footprint in 2007;

“In theory our strategy is quite vertical, for although the Golden Square is owned and operated as a limited partnership, essentially Lend Lease manage it for the partnership. The council do have an interest because they are our landlord, so if want any major changes to take place we have to make sure they buy into it. But essentially it is Lend Lease calling the shots” (Manager of the Golden Square)

The non-altruistic motives of Lend Lease partly insulated the Golden Square from the effects of retail change, however their motives had consequences for the remainder of the town centre which had declined significantly since its development;

“It’s no good Golden Square sucking retailers out of Bridge Street and no one comes to the town because the main retail square doesn’t look nice, it doesn’t work. The idea was that Golden Square was going to be an anchor, that created pathways around the town, but it’s not really worked” (Leader of the Local Authority)

#### *The influence of the Warrington Retail Limited Partnership in town centre governance*

The WRLP was created in 2007 to redevelop the Golden Square shopping centre, and having served its purpose, it was formally dissolved in 2017 from whence its influence has been absorbed within Warrington & Co., through the proposed BID (March 2018). During the ten years of its operation it aggressively targeted retailers from outside its walls with more attractive rental offers, a strategy that had an enduring effect on the town centre. For example, in enticing Boots away from its anchor role in Bridge Street in 2011 it lowered footfall in the Southern area of the town centre and, many comparison goods retailers either relocated to the new shopping centre or closed their doors. A legacy of the governance of the Golden Square redevelopment is that the Local Authority now feels obliged to revitalise the area that has been most affected by its myopic strategies, a revitalisation that comes at a cost of over £100 million worth of publicly funded investment.

#### *Influencers’ strategies*

Gonzalez and Healey (2005) suggest emerging local initiatives have difficulties in accumulating enough power to shift dominant local governance cultures within which they

are situated, something which particularly applies to the practices of the Local Authority as they become difficult to transform because of their internal complexity and embedded power structures. This was evident in Warrington's local governance through the actions of Local Authority organisations, where strategies were influenced by hierarchical, and exclusive formal organisations. The formal structure of *governance by government* was not influenced by equals within the town centre, rather influence was held within the polity of local government, where strategies were politically biased and influenced by the Leader of the Local Authority who had ambitious plans for the Borough and the town centre. An example was the town centre "renaissance" plan, which aimed to regenerate a neglected part of the town centre with a £100 million publicly funded scheme to bring Warrington's town centre into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century through a strategy of overt action;

"If we buy vacant units we can then say to investors, look what do you want and 1,2,3 bang, knock them into one and off we go. We are in the main retail quarter and we can let them. So instead of waiting for the market to return, and instead of waiting for these investors to make a decision about one bit of a portfolio, of which they've got billions of pounds of investments, we can decide our own future. At the moment, I'm looking at a strategy to look who owns them, see if we can get through the door to them and I want to do a more proactive approach and put life back in the retail core. Because if you can do that just before the market picks up, you're ahead of the game. So, I don't want to be like everybody else and wait, I want to get on with it." (Leader of the Local Authority)

Whilst this strategy was generally welcomed by stakeholders from Warrington & Co., and the Warrington Retail Limited Partnership, there were those within the Warrington Partnership that questioned whether sustained vitality and viability could be achieved through the Leaders ambitious physical redevelopments;

"We said what you are doing on the physical regeneration side is great, but unless you tackle the social side the towns going to be dead before the building starts. The regeneration was planned for three years and that's a long time in a recession. If you do nothing on the cultural side the town will be dead" (Managing Director of Culture Warrington)

It was evident that experience, and culture influenced the Local Authorities redevelopment strategy, where a lack of private demand posited the responsibility onto a political Leader, who along with chairing Warrington and Co., was also an active board member of the Warrington Partnership, and informally, at least, influenced the Warrington Retail Limited

Partnership. Due to the Leader's influence in all main organisations, his political bias had a bearing on the strategic direction and allocation of resources in the town;

“Politics mean the town centre gets neglected if there is change and the new people don't focus on the centre. If the leader has a social, rather than economic bias this is reflected in policy and understanding, if the bias is commerce this will surface in its aims. Therefore, leadership is the key to success.” (Leader of the Local Authority)

From a strategic perspective the political balance of power in Warrington had implications for any strategies that could shape change, as within a closed system of *government* there were few cracks (Amin and Thrift, 2002) that could allow any meaningful collaboration to evolve, something which was evidenced by the actions of the Deputy Leader of the Local Authority;

“I wanted the town centre to be arty rather than the usual cobble streets and hanging baskets, nice as they are. I wanted something different, so I used the many hundreds of thousands of pounds from the sale of a waste facility to instruct a Boston artist [Howard Ben Tre] to redevelop the centre. Some people objected to the design, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Some people might think the Mona Lisa is a work of art and some might think she is a miserable old cow. I got a slating politically and de-selected, but £100 million worth of investment came on the back of that redevelopment. The Golden Square and the bus station came about because I redeveloped the centre, and because of my role in the town centre they wanted me to become Deputy Leader and look after the town centre again when I was re-elected” (Deputy Leader of the Local Authority)

## **5.7 Influencers' impact on measures of vitality and viability**

### *Impact on rental yields*

To create a positive impact on property yields, influencers need to create a demand for investment. In a predominantly retail environment this comprises three major components; demand factors, supply factors and consumer interactions (Dolega *et al.*, 2016). To create demand there are important dimensions, and constraints that require consideration (Cheng *et al.*, 2007; Birkin *et al.*, 2017), most notably the town's position as a retail hub within a hierarchy of other retail centres, considering size, attractiveness and the geographical extent of a retailer's influence (Guy, 2000; Powe and Shaw, 2004). Within this competitive sphere, rental yields can be largely explained by a combination of the previous year's rental price, and the current year's vacancy rate (Sirmans and Miller, 1997). A challenge for the influencers in Warrington's town centre is how, in the face of devalued property assets and



a subsequent lack of interest from investors, they create demand. The Local Authority espoused a positive spin, however the reality in 2018 was less than ideal as evidenced by a local commercial property agent;

“Warrington hasn’t moved on in the past thirty years. We have just done a deal with a shop just outside the Golden Square that sold for £1 million in 2003 and which we bought for £300,000 in 2015. So that’s a drop of £700,000. The guy that owned it in 2003 has just gone to the bank and said here are the keys. So, the bank has lost half a million and he has gone bump. That’s one shop!” (Local commercial property agent)

The influence the Local Authority had on rental yields was limited to strategies that determined who owned vacant retail units and then either attempting to put pressure on them to do something, or to negotiate a sale to the Local Authority via a compulsory purchase order (CPO). Either strategy appeared unlikely, although the CPO option was considered by the Leader of the Authority as a viable aim. A local agent however suggested the CPO strategy could be more about convenience than an attempt to improve investors returns;

“The Council could CPO legally and the landlords have no say in it. They would pay present market value, not a factor of what it might be worth after development, but the value at the time of the CPO. There are properties on that block [Bridge Street] and they would have to buy the whole block. Some of these were bought for £1.8 million and are now worth £350,000 so you can image that? Is there a way the council could develop the Golden Square and leave the rest to rot and take advantage of that? I don’t know. They are redeveloping to relocate their offices, but it’s convenient isn’t it?” (Local commercial property agent)

It is recognised that the value of assets, and the subsequent attractiveness of the town centre, is diminished if;

- there is an over-supply of retail units (BNP Paribas, 2012),
- there is a historic stock of retail units that are not fit for the purpose of modern retailers (Mansfield and Pinder, 2008; Findlay and Sparks, 2010), or if units are ‘seen as hopelessly old-fashioned in ... the accommodation that they offer’ (Morgan and Walker, 1988, p. 1),
- existing consumer profiles fail to match the commercial aspirations of commerce, or;
- retailers fear investment would “cannibalise” their existing retail operations (for the latter points see the property executive comments below).

Within Warrington’s town centre it was difficult to see how Local Authority influencers could positively influence any of these factors. For example, the causes of low private

demand in the town centre were complex and, purchasing property and redeveloping would not necessarily address them all. An example of this was the Local Authority's attempts to bring Primark and Waitrose to the town centre where for Primark the physical amenities, and over exposure were main considerations;

“One of the reasons we haven't gone into Warrington has been Liverpool. We want to avoid cannibalisation, where we open a store in one place and open another down the road and all you do is share part of your business...It's about situations that will achieve a return for us, and if Warrington offers that we will do it. We are not going to do a deal just for the sake of it, we are business orientated and returns are what we are in it for” (Property Executive, Primark Stores Ltd.,)

For Waitrose it was consumer profiles that influenced investment decisions;

“We are not hugely scientific, but generally we are looking at towns with a population of 100,000 plus, and probably the top 200 or so towns in the UK. When we have a profile, we then look for areas of the country that match with pockets of affluence that match our needs. We give that list to our development colleagues in each region and they will find a site in the particular town we have identified. We follow the sequential test, but from a locational planning perspective that's not always ideal, because we end up being tucked away in some compromise sites. If I was given a site on a roundabout in town, or one edge of town next to a multi storey car park which one am I going to go for? Hard economics do play a part and however much we would like to go into a place, hard economics do play a big part, so we would not go into Warrington” (Property Executive, John Lewis Partnership plc.,)

### *Impact on footfall*

Millington *et al.*, (2015) suggest footfall measures the popularity of a town centre and is an indicator of potential spend (BIS, 2010). Although an accurate collection of footfall data was flawed (particularly outside the Golden Square), it did indicate a decrease of more than three million annual visitors to the town centre in the period since the 2007 Golden Square redevelopment. The Local Authority had created initiatives to address the decline, however these were proving costly and difficult to monitor. An example was the “it's all going on in Warrington” campaign in 2011, an initiative that by their own admission had a positive effect as “the branding of “it's all going on in Warrington” increased the footfall by over 30,000” (Managing Director of Culture Warrington). The sustainability of the initiative however was questionable as it failed to continue an upward trend. By contrast, the Golden Square was more successful in increasing the numbers of visitors to its stores;

“140 stores new stores opened in 2007. We almost doubled our footfall overnight and the catchment increased as well” (Manager of the Golden Square)

It was not necessarily the number of visitors that caused both the Golden Square, and the Local Authority concerns, rather they had difficulty attracting what they perceived as their “ideal” customers;

“The shopping population tend to come from the inner wards around the town, they are the people that are Warringtonian’s at heart and always have been. It is no surprise they don’t spend a lot of money because they haven’t got any money. The people who live on the periphery, who work in Manchester and Liverpool don’t consider themselves Warringtonian’s and don’t shop here. We need an offer that gets those people in. Look we have one of the biggest Marks and Spencer’s and IKEA’S in the UK, with 4 million people within 45 minutes travel time, but the skill is getting some of those people into Warrington, but they don’t come, they go home instead” (Leader of the Local Authority)

The influence of the Local Authority, and the Golden Square, was therefore limited to increasing footfall numbers to create a positive spin, rather than meeting their strategic aims of redeveloping the centre with diverse businesses that matched either, their aspirations, or created strategies that improved the “quality” of their consumers.

#### *Impact on vacancy rates*

Parker *et al.*, (2014) suggest vacancy rates are a symptom of change, most notably vacancies arise from a competitive change in surrounding communities, a change in planning policies, or commercial demands on location and, or their function (Hughes and Jackson, 2015).

Vacancy rates can also however be part of an overt strategy to manage diversity, for example, in high demand centres developers and landlords will often wait for the tenant that matches their aspirations. Unfortunately, in Warrington’s town centre the demand from private investors was low, and vacancy rates were high. There were marked differences however in how influencers managed vacancies. For example, the Golden Square aggressively addressed them when they arose;

“We have a leasing team, based in head office working on our behalf who are constantly working trying to fill these units. The beauty of us having these agents is that they work across so many retailers and so many shopping centres that they know pretty much every retailer that’s out there. So, if they are sorting out a deal in Basingstoke they might say, do you know we have a unit that’s right up your street in Warrington. So, the agents work hard

on our behalf. We also have a bespoke leasing team and a smaller commercial manager that works on site in Warrington, that looks after the smaller short-term leasing shops. For example, we have given a charity shop free rent as it negates the business rates, turns the lights on in a unit and ticks a stakeholder box. So, where possible, especially at this moment in time, it's about turning lights on, not making much money from rental but increasing the valuation of the centre with a tenant. The deals now are a lot tighter than they used to be" (Manager of the Golden Square)

Outside the Golden Square the Local Authority was less aggressive at marketing vacant units, as it appeared to feel constrained in any action it took;

"Empty shops have problems with mortgage ratios determined at expected rents; once the rents fall below that figure it triggers revaluations and re-mortgages. Everybody knows the rents are too high and the correction will come, but the strategy is to bury your head in the sand and hope it doesn't. It's the old part of the centre which is the problem because they are small units. Retailers just want a big box that has a service at the back and a door at the front" (Planning Executive, Warrington & Co.,)

"Retailing has evolved so much over the last 15 years that the likes of the old-style town centres, without a lot of work, are just getting left behind. I think we have to be quite savage now about how we use the town centre and whether it's retail or something else. The empty units are an issue and they have always been an issue, but unfortunately you are in a downward spiral here, because it's very difficult to know who owns some of these premises" (Leader of the Local Authority)

### *Impact on diversity*

Retailer representation and diversity are factors over which local actors feel they have a level of influence (Millington *et al.*, 2015). Despite this, there was a recognition from influencers that market forces determined commercial diversity, and, in Warrington town centre, they generally had a negative effect. For example, the deputy Leader of the Local Authority, who had the strategic responsibility for the town centre lamented;

"I don't want too many pound shops and too many charity shops, the more of them you've got the worst your town centre is" (Deputy Leader of the Local Authority)

The Local Authority recognised that rather than focus on commercial diversity, which they felt was beyond their control, it should provide an opportunity for diversity through redevelopment. This would create a more holistic town centre model that moved away from the retail centric models of the past however, it was realised that this strategy also had complications;

“You do need a strong retail core, don’t get me wrong, but town centres appear all the same. I want people to come into the town centre not just to buy new shoes, or a new dress, I want them to come into the town centre for the cultural quarters, leisure, entertainment, whatever it is, it’s a mix of a vibrant diverse centre. But every action has a reaction so if we need more commerce we need the infrastructure, car parks, road networks etc., If we introduce residential, we need more space for parking etc., there always appears to be a problem, rather than a solution” (Leader of the Local Authority)

## 5.8 Discussion

### *Local governance*

Evans observed that local governance is constantly in flux “as a result of constantly shifting liaisons and confrontations between sets of interests with fundamentally different motives” (1997 p.109). What was apparent in Warrington was that flux was contextual to time and demand. To make sense of the “shifting liaisons” in local governance, figure 5.7 offers an overview of areas of strategic activity in the town centre in the period 2014–2018.

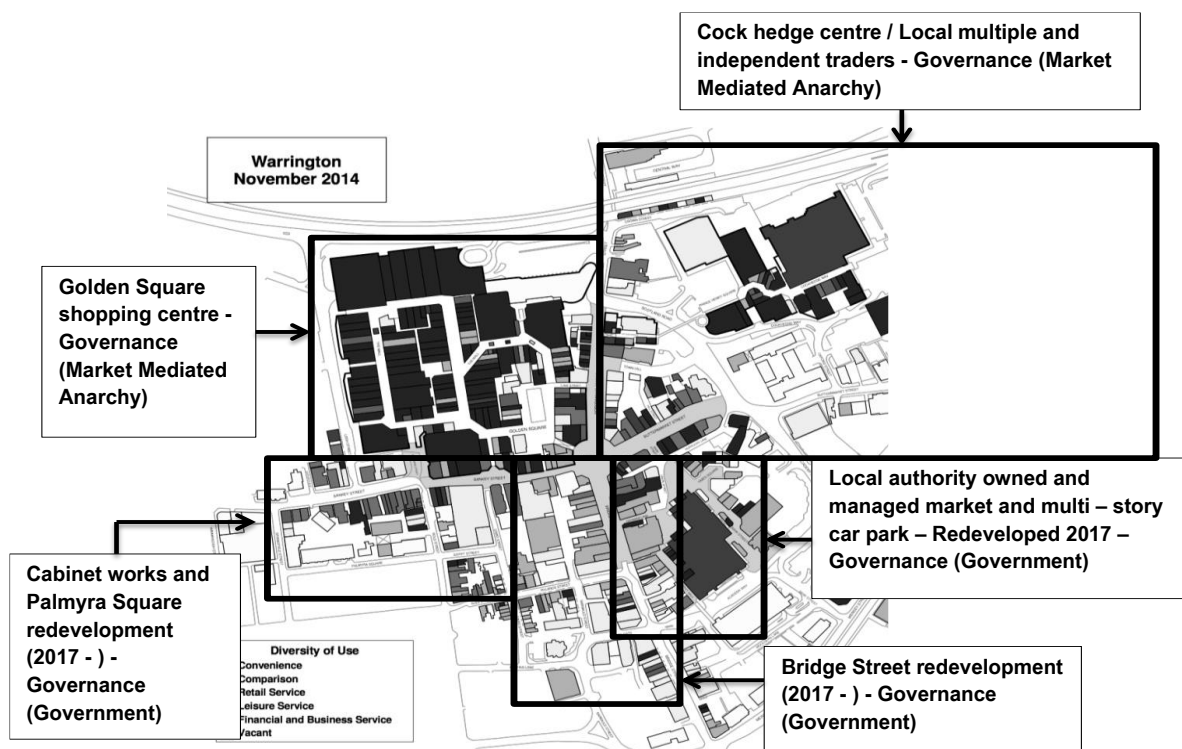


Figure 5. 7; Local governance map of Warrington town centre 2014 – 2018 (Source: OHMS, 2018)

What this map identifies are pockets of local governance activity, rather than an over-riding governance form. For example, in the North West area of the town centre there was

evidence of a loose form of created partnership which influenced the Golden Square shopping centre. Loose, for although there was a Local Authority influence as a development partner, the Local Authority appeared to have abdicated from the partnership, and consequently the Golden Square management team and tenants influenced the strategies of the shopping centre through a form of market mediated anarchy. In the North East area of the town centre, a private company shopping centre had Asda as the anchor tenant on a long lease, however the churn rate around the supermarket was high, and they lost many retailers to the more attractive retail environment of the Golden Square (for example TK Maxx and Shoe Zone). Any Local Authority influence in the North–East area was limited to a regulatory role, and there were no overt strategies save for the ubiquitous presence of meta–government (Jessop, 2016). To the South of the town centre, the bars and nightclub economy also functioned without any overt Local Authority influence save for regulatory planning and licencing consent, whilst the central area of the town centre was, from 2017 onwards, under the Local Authority’s influence as part of the “renaissance” development to consolidate Local Authority offices, and to create a new leisure hub.

What figure 5.7 identifies is several strategies in operation at any given time, each with their own motives, and each with their interpretations of what constituted a “healthy” town centre. For example, the Golden Square measured “healthy” as high rental yields, low vacancy rates and the “right” retailers; the Cock hedge Centre by comparison had expectations of survival rather than growth; “if we can fill our unit’s we will be happy” (Cock hedge manager), and; the Local Authority gauged “health” by a return on their investment (hardly surprising as they were borrowing over £100 million to relocate their council offices). Several strategies operating independently is acknowledged by institutional theorists as a norm (Healey, 2006) however, to form a collective strategy (for example a created partnership, or a form of collective action), actors would need to share “cultural norms and values... which seem to be critical to the stimulation of entrepreneurship and economic development” (Amin and Thrift, 1995. cited in McCarthy, 2016 p.2). In Warrington, the barrier to shared cultural norms was the ubiquity of an intransigent Local Authority, who as a partner in the Golden Square encouraged retail to the shopping centre, by restricting development at the Cock hedge Centre; and, as a planner and developer

allowed retail and leisure developments to migrate away from the centre at an alarming rate.

It is therefore too simplistic to define Warrington purely as a *government* form of local governance, as there was evidence of strategic activity in both created partnerships and free market forms. Notwithstanding, the Local Authority’s culture pervaded local governance either through its policies as a developer (Warrington & Co.); a cultural promoter (Warrington Partnership); or as a shareholder in retail development (WRLP).

*The impact on commercial measures of vitality and viability*

Influencers	Rental Yields	Footfall	Vacancy Rates	Diversity
<b>Warrington Partnership</b>	Limited to the impact of Culture Warrington in creating footfall to create demand.	A minimal level of influence through the “it’s all going on in Warrington” initiative and the promotion of Culture.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.
<b>Warrington &amp; Co.,</b>	A level of influence over future commercial property values and yields of existing properties through the physical redevelopment of the town centre.	A level of influence through redevelopment of the Bridge Street site. Whether this increases footfall or redistributes existing footfall remains to be seen.	No evidence of any influence	They can create a level of opportunity for mixed use through redevelopment, but not commercial diversity.
<b>Warrington Retail Limited Partnership</b>	A level of influence through redevelopment and creating demand by attracting retailers that increase footfall and like – minded opportunities.	They actively promote and market the shopping centre, which has a positive effect on the town centre. Footfall however is still falling.	They actively market vacant properties however they still had an 11% vacancy rate in 2018 (LDC, 2018).	A level of influence, however they are reliant on retailer’s perceptions of the town centre.

Figure 5. 8; Influencer’s impact on commercial measures of vitality and viability

Figure 5.8 identifies the impact influencers had varied. For example, the WRLP had a level of influence on rental yields as they determined the value of the rents on units within the Golden Square shopping centre. This, however, was conditional on demand being created to warrant

an increase, and the WRLP's influence over demand was constrained by the retailers it was able to attract. The attraction of the "right" retailers was a symptom of increased footfall of the "right" people, however they were constrained by the diversity of the centre outside their walls and this is something they could not influence. The Local Authority, through the guise of Warrington and Co., held a level of influence through its "renaissance" redevelopment to relocate its offices, where it could create an opportunity for increased diversity, however this could not influence commercial diversity which was, again, dependent on attracting the "right" people. The Local Authority, through the guise of the Warrington Partnership, could also exploit the role of Culture which temporarily influenced footfall, however this was not sustainable, and its strategies appeared to sit uneasily with the social aims of the partnership. An area where the Local Authority did have an impact on the vitality and viability of their town centre was in its continued strategies to migrate retail development away from the town centre, despite costly advice to resist this course of action (seventeen retail audits between 2000-2015 at an average cost of £35,000 (Martin Tonks, 2018)). It was these strategies that created a necessary intervention into town centre governance. In its defence the Leader of the Local Authority argued that "if we didn't do it the retailers and developers would just go to Widnes or St. Helens. So, it is better to have them here at least". And yet whilst the Local Authority acknowledged the value of development away from the centre, it also acknowledged that the town centre had been neglected.

What the Local Authority had in 2018 was a political opportunity to take advantage of a capital redevelopment, an opportunity that would generate future capital revenue which politically could be used to offset cuts to its revenue budget. What they did not have was an impact on the commercial vitality and viability of their town centre and there was little to suggest governance in this form could have a sustainable influence on footfall, diversity, rental yields or vacancy rates.



## Chapter 6; Wrexham - Governance mode: *Collective Action*

### 6.1 Context

Wrexham was still a small settlement in the late 14th century when the town was granted the right to hold a market, where once a year people would come from the far corners of Wales and Cheshire to buy and sell their wares. From these humble beginnings Wrexham grew as a place of religion, education, and commerce, and in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century it had a thriving craft industry and a population of around 2,000 people. The catalyst for change arrived in the late 18th century when Wrexham was transformed by the industrial revolution, as John Wilkinson (1728-1808), affectionately known as 'Iron Mad Wilkinson', created an iron foundry at Bersham (1762) and a smelting plant at Brymbo (1793). The effect of industry on the population of the town was profound, in 1801, it was recorded at 2,575; by 1841 it had reached 5,854; and, by 1881 it was 10,903. Steel, coal and bricks replaced the wool and leather industries, and to quench the thirst of the workers German lager was first brewed in Wrexham when Otto Isler and Ivan Leverstein created the Wrexham Lager Beer Company in the early 1880s.

The increased demand for commerce also brought social benefits; gas light in 1827; the first hospital in 1833; and in 1849 the railways came to town. In the town centre a Market Hall was built in 1848, and purpose-built retailing and leisure facilities, attracted a growing population as industry continued to thrive in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century however, the traditional industries had entered a steep decline and coal mining and steel production in the area ceased with Gresford Colliery closing in 1973, followed by Bersham Colliery in 1986, and the steel works at Brymbo in 1990.

Today, Wrexham is the fourth largest town in Wales and is often referred to as the capital of North Wales. With a growing population of 136,700 people, a third of whom reside in the town centre, the town is perceived as a modern industrial hub, with over 300 companies located within its boundaries, many of whom are household names (for example Kellogg's, Sharp UK Ltd and BICC cables). These two attributes have led the consultants of the most recent retail assessment (Peter Brett Associates LLP, 2014) to suggest the town centre is in a

strong position to compete as a retail destination with the major cities of Manchester, Chester and Liverpool (figure 6.1).



Figure 6. 1; Wrexham in relation to the North West England Cities of Manchester, Liverpool and Chester (Source ONS, 2018)

What is concerning the consultants, however, is that while the town is relatively attractive to investment, there is a sense that the town centre lacks a clear identity. A contributing factor is that it is increasingly dominated by discount retailers, lacks an evening economy and diversity, and is beginning to look tired and at times unattractive. Peter Brett Associates subsequently suggest that a redevelopment strategy would address these weaknesses, and at the same time increase diversity by developing more restaurants and a high-quality independent retail offer.

Having commissioned the report the Local Authority accepts the findings that the previous model of retail continually driving town centre growth has become outdated. Therefore, any town centre strategy requires a model where future growth will come from a greater variety

of town centre uses, ostensibly a new heart with a diverse range of accessible shopping; increased leisure uses; and niche speciality retail in a quality public realm and environment that is identifiable as “being Wrexham” (Masterplan, Wrexham Town Centre Vision, 2016). An obvious question at this point is what is “being Wrexham”, and how does a new vision relate to the existing town centre? Does “being Wrexham” reflect the town centre’s heritage, its culture or its commerce?

For example, there is strength of heritage and pride reflected within the people of the town, from Wrexham lager, to the collieries that contributed much to the area and economy, the town retains a pride that lives on in the present. And although the coal and brewing industries themselves are a shadow of their former glory, their names are preserved in the names of retail parks and shopping centres. From a cultural perspective there are many points of interest in the town; a hotel that retains its original fittings and furniture from 1909; the Hippodrome theatre with its famous art deco light; St. Giles tower which is one of the “seven wonders of Wales”; and associations with the American elite University Yale, whose name derives from a local benefactor of the town. Equally, commerce has always been central to the heritage of the town, and the town centre had a demand for fresh local markets that attracted people from far and wide.

Despite its definition, the desire to create the “new Wrexham” has presented those who will influence the transition with some distinct challenges, namely, to create their vision with limited public funds, a low private sector demand and political instability. Nevertheless, the Local Authority is convinced it can create change through strategies which promote diversity, where a repopulation of deprived areas through residential and occupied town centre office space can drive footfall through the town centre during the daytime, thereby supporting the retail functions and providing a market to develop an evening economy. To create appropriate strategies the Local Authority have devised a “Masterplan”, an eight year, £100,000 publicly funded evidence base of thirty–three academic and commissioned reports which aim to guide investment in the town centre and inform the Local Development Plan from 2013-2024.

Sections 6.2-6.4 of this Chapter adopt the retail change structure of chapter 1 to provide a summary of the changing town centre retail landscape in the period 1960–2018; the policy initiatives which have impacted on it; and the management initiatives to create the “Masterplan”.

## 6.2 The 1960s and 1970s retail landscape; from post War decline to retail alliances?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
<p>The town centre retains its place as the primary destination for retailing and commerce.</p> <p>The popular “beast” market operates from the car park at Eagles Meadow an edge of centre site.</p> <p>The Wynnstay Arms, a mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century building, is threatened with demolition in the late 1960s. Campaigners successfully save it.</p> <p>The town centre has four busy markets – the “beast” market, the butcher’s market, the general market, and the vegetable market.</p> <p>Despite the success of the “beast” market” ASDA are given permission to open an edge of centre convenience store at Eagles Meadow in the early 1970s.</p>	<p>The local economy gradually changes with the closure of Llay pit in 1966, and Gresford colliery in 1974.</p> <p>The Welsh Office is created in 1965, shortly after the creation of the Secretary for Wales in 1964.</p> <p>The establishment of the Welsh Development Agency in 1974 promotes a planning policy that reflects the changes in social and economic environments promoting inward investment, and employment schemes on derelict land (Harris, 2014).</p> <p>In addition to inward investment the growing tourist industry in Wales replaces employment opportunities in others (i.e. mining) (Harris, 2014).</p>	<p>Local governance structures reflect a Local Authority led process where “urban planning and management [is] a means of delivering public services by public authorities for long – term collective goals of public interest” (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008 p.155-156).</p> <p>Natural divisions of labour exist between the Local Authority and retailers leading to a top down command and control form of governance.</p>

Figure 6. 2; 1960s and 1970s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Wrexham town centre



Figure 6. 3; Wrexham town centre in 1965 (source; the Francis Frith Collection)

The retail landscape of Wrexham's town centre in the 1960s appeared to be typical of many of that time, with busy streets, cars, and recognised high street names vying for space (figure 6.3). Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s development within the town centre was contained within its historic boundaries, and there were no planning applications to alter this save for ASDA's permission in the early 1970s to open a large convenience store on the edge of the centre at Eagles Meadow.

Politically and socially however, the town was dealt a huge blow with the closures of Llay pit in 1966, and Gresford colliery in 1974, which prompted a reaction from the newly established Welsh Development Agency (1976) to further economic development and investment in Wales by clearing derelict land, thus encouraging the growth of new local industries. There is no documented evidence in Wrexham to suggest that anything other than a retail model that followed a free market form, and a Local Authority that was responsible for the public realm. Consequently, it is assumed that local governance followed

a government pattern of natural divisions of command and control relationships (Davies, 2002).

### 6.3 The 1980s and 1990s retail landscape; a period of retail change and collective responsibilities?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
Mealor hospital opens in the town in 1986.	The Welsh Development Agency invests in a new bypass (A483) intending to bring investment to the town in 1988.	Reflect a Local Authority led process where “urban planning and management [is] a means of delivering public services by public authorities for long – term collective goals of public interest” (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008 p.155-156).
The public baths are reopened as privately - owned Water World in 1998.	Wrexham becomes a County Borough Council in 1996.	Natural divisions of labour exist between the Local Authority and retailers leading to a top down command and control form of governance.
Developers at Central Retail Park and Island Green Retail Park are granted planning permission to develop a 130,000 square feet edge of centre retail site.	Further local industry changes occur with the closure of Bersham Colliery in 1987, and Brymbo Steelworks in 1990. In 1990 one in five males are unemployed due to pit and steel work closures.	Following the TAN 4 directive in 1996 the Local Authority passes a motion to establish a town centre forum (21 <sup>st</sup> November 1996).
Developers at Plas Coch Retail Park are granted permission to develop an edge of centre retail site in 1991. The shopping centre is anchored by Sainsburys.	Technical Advice Note (TAN 4) is issued by the Welsh Government in November 1996. It advocates the appointment of a town centre manager who may facilitate better communications; research into retail trends; improve resources; better promote the town centre; and, offer a more effective achievement of development plan objectives.	
ASDA close their Eagles Meadow store and relocate out of centre at Maesydre in 1991.	The bias of TAN 4 is towards population change, retail provision, and retail expenditure. It suggests eleven primarily economic KPI (see figure 3.1)	
The vegetable market is demolished in 1992 and is replaced by a Peoples market.	Following a referendum on Welsh Devolution in 1997, Wales created a devolved government. Devolved powers included agriculture, environment, education, health, housing, transport, energy and economic development. It had primary law-making powers over devolved areas and newly acquired, albeit limited, tax raising powers on areas including Land Transaction Tax and Landfill Disposal Tax. The Central Government in Westminster retained powers over defence, foreign policy, immigration and tax policy.	
Cheshire Oaks (McArthur Glen Outlet Village) is granted planning permission in 1995.		
The town centre’s cinema relocates to an edge of centre site at Plas Coch in 1997.		

Figure 6. 4; 1980s and 1990s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Wrexham town centre

In 1991, the Local Authority exacerbated changes to the town centre's retail landscape when they consented to an edge of centre convenience goods development at Plas Coch retail park. The development was granted to meet a convenience goods need, and for the vast part of the 1990s it had little effect as the town centre retained its place as the primary destination for comparison goods and leisure services. In 1999, the Local Authority again exacerbated retail change with a development on the edge of the town centre at Central Park and Island Green, this time in the form of a 130,000 square foot development of convenience and leisure goods retailing. Although this was a significant development, what had wider consequences for the future of the town centre was the metamorphosis of Plas Coch, from a convenience goods retail park to a comparison and leisure goods provider, when in 1997 the cinema relocated there from the town centre.

Politically and socially, the town encountered further economic and social change with the closure of Bersham Colliery in 1987, and the steelworks at Brymbo in 1990. Unemployment in the town affected over 20% of the male population, and the newly formed Welsh Development Agency acted swiftly to bring alternative investment into the town by extending the A483 bypass link to North West England. Local governance in this period appeared to change little from the 1960s and 1970s, except for a directive from the Welsh Government (TAN 4) in November 1996 which advocated the appointment of a town centre manager to facilitate better communications; to research retail trends; to improve resources; to better promote the town centre; and, to offer a more effective achievement of development plan objectives. The Local Authority duly passed a motion to establish a Town Centre Forum on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1996.

## 6.4 The retail landscape from 2000 to 2019; towards an alternative future?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
Plas Coch Retail Park attracts Boots, Aldi, Homebase, Pets at Home, Argos, Frankie & Benny's and a DW fitness centre in the period 2002-2018.	Wrexham lager brewery closes in 2000. The first Wrexham retail study is conducted in 2001, updated in 2004. Wrexham becomes the largest town in North Wales (2002).	There is evidence of collective action between the Local Authority and a local trader's group – the Wrexham Business Group.
The Eagles Meadow Shopping Centre opens in 2008. The £100 million edge of centre development attracts Marks and Spencer, Debenhams and over 40 other retail and leisure stores.	The Local Authority offers the vacant land at Eagles Meadow for private tender in 2003. The Urban Development Plan (UDP) planning policy PS7 of 2005 suggests that priority areas for shopping and commercial activities should be within the defined boundaries of Wrexham town centre. section 2.11 (p.8) states that the Council should “ensure the vitality and viability of Wrexham town centre and district centres as focal points for shopping, community and leisure services”.	A Local Authority employed Town Centre Manager is appointed in 2000. The vibrant and viable places initiative suggests that “strengthened governance is needed” and “partnership is critical” (2013 p.7).
The edge of centre Plas Medoc swimming centre reopens as Splash Magic in 2015 through a leisure trust. Boots, Dorothy Perkins, River Island, Top Shop, Next and Wallis all relocate from the town centre to the edge of centre Eagles Meadow development in 2008.	A town centre strategy is presented to the Executive Committee of the Local Authority. It considers the impact of Eagles Meadow on the town centre, suggesting that the development has been a positive regenerator (November 2009).	The Healthy High Streets initiative is launched in 2014.
The town centres Hippodrome cinema burns down in 2008, remaining derelict until 2015. Greenwoods, Peacocks and Barclays Bank all relocate to the town centre in 2008.	The town applies for City status for the third time in 2012.	A town centre task and finish group is created in 2014. The group sign a declaration for meetings and membership; a town centre action plan; partnership values; and, membership / attendance guidelines (2017).
Woolworths closes its town centre store in 2008.	Peter Brett and Associates LLP are commissioned to provide a retail assessment of Wrexham's town centre, and Manchester Metropolitan University chooses Wrexham as part of its High Street 2020 study (2014).	
Simon Boyd furnishings closes its town centre store in 2008, relocating to the Island Green Retail Park.	Ten Labour councillors resign over a decision to close Plas Coch leisure facility.	
The ODEON cinema closes at Plash Coch in 2009, relocating to Eagles Meadow.	The town centre Masterplan is launched in 2016.  TAN 4 is revised in 2016. Its objectives are to “promote viable urban and rural retail and commercial centres, as the most sustainable locations to live, work, shop, socialise and conduct business. Sustain and enhance retail centres vibrancy, viability and attractiveness (2016 p.3-4).	

Figure 6. 5; The post 2000 town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Wrexham town centre

Retail change in the town centre during the period 2000–2018 was shaped nationally the economic recession of 2008 and locally by the policy decisions of 2003, when public land at Eagles Meadow was offered for tender by the Local Authority. Before 2002 there was little



comparison goods migration away from the centre, save for the forays of convenience retailers into the comparison goods markets, and the location of “crinkly sheds” (Guy, 2002) to the peripheries at Plas Coch, Island Green and Central Park. Eagles Meadow however, differed to the previous developments in two crucial ways; firstly, it attracted many multiple, and national high street retailers away from the town centre. many of whom traded from sizable units; secondly, it came at a time when the economic corrections of 2008 evidenced the closure of many other high street names (for example Woolworths, Peacocks, T J Hughes).

The social and political landscape in this period was equally active. The first retail study was commissioned in 2001 (updated in 2004), where the rhetoric extolled the virtues of a town centre first approach, indeed the Welsh Assembly endorsed this approach in 2013 with a “vibrant and viable” places initiative, and Peter Brett Associates were commissioned to provide an evidence base for the funding required. Academic interest also surfaced when the Manchester Metropolitan University chose Wrexham as part of its High Street 2020 study, providing evidence which contributed to the “Masterplan” in 2016. The local governance rhetoric, during this period, moved from a form of *government* to *collective action*, with the creation of a town centre manager’s post, the formation of Wrexham business group and the multiple retailer driven Healthy High Streets initiative ([www.bitc.org.uk/healthy-high-streets](http://www.bitc.org.uk/healthy-high-streets)). These combined to espouse a more inclusive approach from the Local Authority and retailers, to the challenges that the town centre faced, the conduit of which was the town centre steering group which aimed to;

“Develop a co–ordinated, partnership approach to respond to actions required within the Town Centre as identified by the Town Centre Action Plan” (Wrexham Town Centre Forum & Steering Group–Memorandum of Understanding, Appendix 1, 01/12/16).

Section 6.5 summarises the findings of the vitality and viability audit from Peter Brett Associates from 2014, particularly the relative performances of the a priori measures of rental yields, diversity, vacancy rates and footfall.

## 6.5 Relative performance of vitality and viability measures

### *Rental Yields*

Zone A rents in 2015 were £65 per square foot in Wrexham, compared to an average of £63 per square foot in Wales, offering a yield of 7% compared to a national average of 6%. For investors this reflects well on occupied properties within the town, however the demand for properties was low; for example, Cost Focus' report (2014) indicated that published operator requirements (demand for commercial units in the town) declined from a peak of 44 in October 2007 to just nine requirements in January 2010. Indeed, further investigation revealed that operator requirements for Wrexham declined further since 2010, and in 2015 there were only 6 requirements.

### *Diversity*

Commercial diversity in 2014 was statistically in line with UK averages, with a good representation of greengrocers, butchers and fishmongers in the town centre. Additionally, the town centre rose in relative attractiveness when compared to surrounding retail areas, a result of an improved comparison goods retail performance which had, to some extent, cushioned Wrexham against the effects of the recession, and the continued growth in on-line retailing. A contributor to the increase was the Eagles Meadow scheme which had both a positive, and a negative impact on the town centre, for while in comparison goods at least, it dramatically improved Wrexham's position in the national retail rankings (Javelin, 2016), it also displaced much of the traditional comparison goods offer of the town centre, creating concerns that it had exposed a "qualitative" weaknesses within the comparison goods retail offer of the town centre.

Peter Brett Associates suggested the voids created by retailers relocating to Eagles Meadow created challenges that necessitated a change of use from retail, to a more diverse town centre model. The Local Authority, from the commissioned evidence, agreed that attempting to repopulate functionally obsolete units with comparison retail would be unlikely, and therefore preferred to repopulate vacated properties with commerce from the restaurant, café, and coffee bar sub-category, an area that was identified as having a "qualitative" strength within the town centre comparison offer.

Consequently, the Local Authority believed the effects of retail change provided an opportunity for increased diversity, as the town centre naturally lent itself as a place that could be attractive for a vision of restaurants, cafés and good quality independent retailers. There was a caveat that adopting this approach could bring new challenges as any strategy to create diversity through the conversion of functionally obsolete units into office space and residential use was fraught with financial and political constraints. However, the Local Authority was confident it could create development opportunities for office space as the town centre was seen as an accessible and sustainable location for such development, and re-populating the centre with living space, offered further opportunities as the borough was forecast to have population growth higher than all the other authorities in North Wales combined. An important consideration for the Local Authority was that its retail development approach aligned with a national policy, effectively reinforcing the importance of regenerating town centres by creating destinations, not only for retail but also a wide range of services and leisure facilities to support the surrounding community.

#### *Vacancy Rates*

Wrexham had 449 commercial units within the town centre, of which 81 (17.4%) were vacant in December 2015 (LDC, 2016). Significantly, 20.5% of retail units were vacant, whilst leisure was below the national average at 6.1%. Therefore, whilst the headline figure was higher than UK averages (11.3% in 2015), the vacancies could be indicative of changes in the comparison goods and service goods markets. Indeed, of the 81 vacant units over half were previously comparison goods units. It is worth noting that although Eagles Meadow had an edge of centre presence it too had a higher than national vacancy rate of 15.2%.

#### *Footfall*

Peter Brett Associates comment that whilst there were no recognised footfall measures within the town centre it was observed that footfall on many streets had remained resilient. They suggest that during the day there were relatively good levels of footfall throughout the town, with the heaviest traffic ironically concentrated in areas of the highest retail vacancies, a contributing factor they determined was the presence of a new Primark store which helped to drive footfall past these units. There were also reasonable volumes of footfall at the edge of centre development of Island Green Retail Park where the surface

level car park was very busy, a factor that could offer an opportunity to improve the existing pedestrian links between Island Green and the rest of the town centre. The Eagles Meadow development, at the time of the survey, was quieter than the rest of the town centre, which was surprising given the concentration of national and multiple retailers. This caused some concern as the pedestrian links between Eagles Meadow and the traditional retail core were important in terms of the town centre's ability to operate as a single destination and for the creation of a retail circuit that drives footfall around the centre.

#### *Summary of the relative performance across the four indicators*

The findings from Peter Brett Associates suggested the vitality and viability of Wrexham's town centre was mixed, and a major contributor to this was the Local Authority's decision to develop an edge of centre retail development on disused land at Eagles Meadow. The positive effects of this development have been noted, however whilst the Eagles Meadow provided a significant increase in the amount of comparison goods floor-space within Wrexham, it also created areas of deprivation, and affected footfall to areas of the town centre. The Local Authority recognised that the voids within the town centre were unlikely to be filled by retailers, as rental values were low, and operator demand was poor, therefore it believed that retail change had created opportunities to redevelop the town centre with a more diverse offer through high end retailing, the arts and culture, and an evening economy.

## **6.6 Local governance**

### *Influencers*

Wrexham's town centre influencers were a Local Authority that had ambitious plans to provide opportunities for private investors, and an independent retailers group that had galvanised local support to increase the town centre's vitality. The resultant form of *collective action* emerged due to the political, and financial constraints of the Local Authority allowing cracks (Burt, 2002) to appear in what was previously a hierarchical *government* structure. These cracks, motivated by a frustration at the lack of political action, created an opportunity for a grass roots movement to "shame the council to act" (Leader of the Wrexham Business Group), subsequently retail development strategies within the town centre were influenced by two institutions, namely;

- **Wrexham Borough Council**, an elite, formal, exclusive organisation politically led by an independent councillor, within a predominantly Labour chamber;
- **Wrexham Business Group**, an informal, relatively exclusive and emotional, lobbying group of mainly local independent traders, seemingly frustrated at the lack of action by the Local Authority;

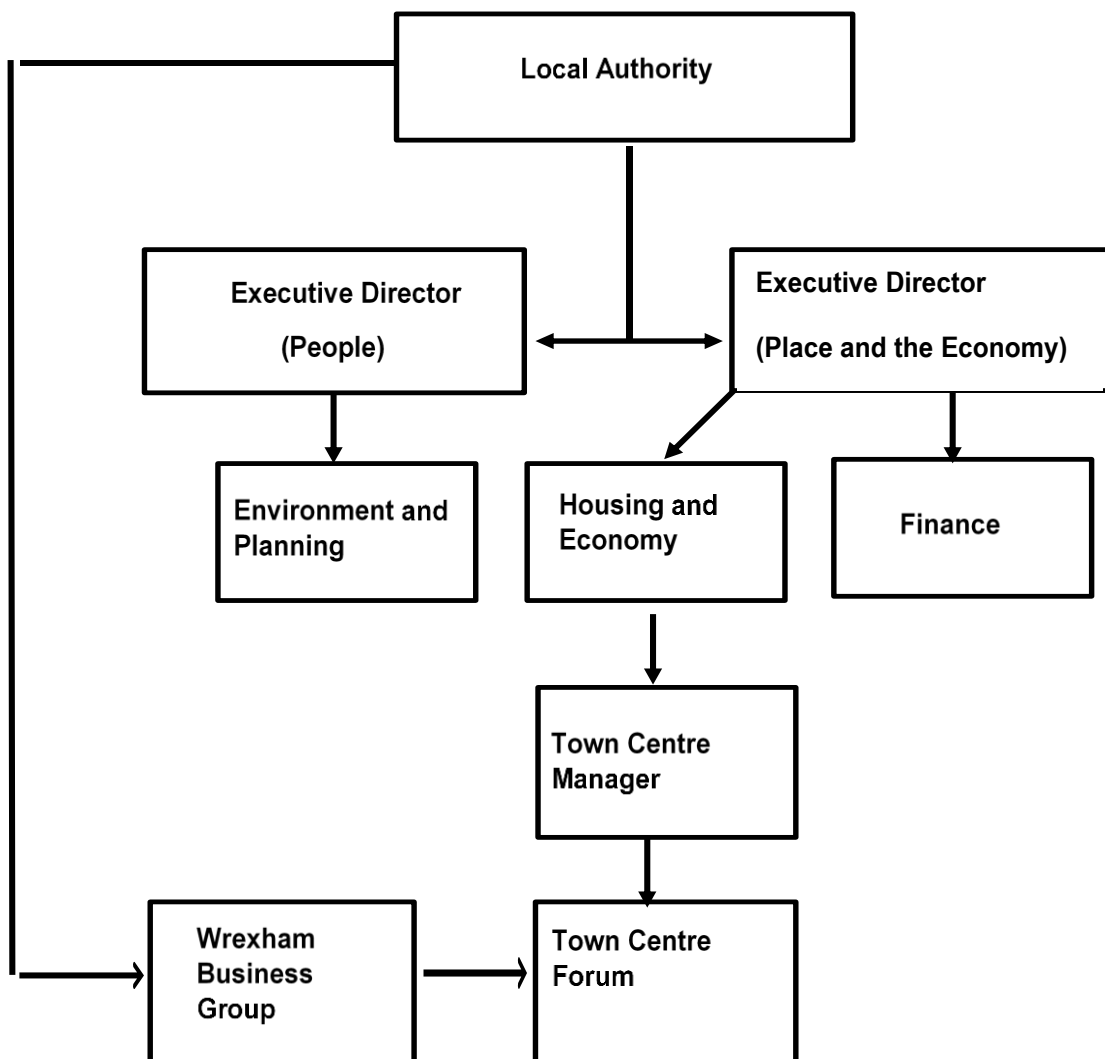


Figure 6. 6; Organisation chart of Wrexham's influencers

### *Wrexham Borough Council*

Wrexham Borough Council, like Warrington, was a Unitary Authority (i.e. responsible for the provision of local government services within a district). Unlike Warrington, the Council's political stability was "in a state of flux" (Leader of the Local Authority), with a political leadership disrupted by resignations that resulted in no overall political control. The Leader suggested that influencing change, in this environment, necessitated a level of compromise, both within Council chambers and with external partners if the Local Authority was to meet its objectives. In effect the Local Authority was forced to rely on a form of *collective action*, which in a political environment was a challenging task, as the Leader notes;

"Have you seen the film Kingdom of Heaven? There is a line at the end when he says, what is Jerusalem? He replies "nothing". He then turns around and says "everything". That is politics in town centres, nothing but everything"

The impact of politics was felt not only on the legitimacy of his, and the Council's authority, it also affected the sustainability, and funding, of any strategies they may adopt;

"Sustainability within the political world is the biggest problem and we have to make commitments while we are in office to get it into the "Masterplan". We can submit the plans and do all the reports, but when it gets to Cardiff [the Welsh Assembly] they ignore it because it doesn't fit into their political pocket" (Leader of the Local Authority)  
"The money from the Welsh Assembly is used to regenerate the Peoples Market, but we can't just have the money there are conditions attached. They like to give us the responsibility but then tell us how to spend it. They have no trust in what we do so they micro-manage the project themselves" (Leader of the Local Authority)

The Local Authority's interest in the town centre (post the TAN (4) directive in 1999) awakened a desire to "do something" about the town centres decline, something the Leader has regretted in the past;

"I will be honest with you, we haven't invested in the town centre in the past, we really haven't and that shows"

However, his thoughts did not reflect an overt strategy, rather in a similar vein to Warrington, any interest in the vitality and viability of the centre reflected the bias of the Leader of the Council during his, or her, tenure;

“There is a bias in the council that affects the town centre. When the Welsh Development Agency folded the Chief Executive went to Liverpool and then came back to us. The response was very positive for the centre as had the T J Hughes and BHS buildings built on the back of that. The Leader now is interested in children’s studies, so that is where the bias is”

Evidence suggested the political uncertainty within the Council chamber, a lack of past consideration for the town centre, and a requirement to go “cap in hand” to the Welsh Assembly for funding, resulted in a Local Authority that was culturally weak on town centre retail development, subsequently the Local Authority required objective evidence to fund local initiatives;

“The Welsh Assembly insists on objective reports. They are very evidence based and independent evidence at that. As everything has to be evidence based, we have no alternative” (Leader of the Local Authority)

The fallacy of this rhetoric, however, was that objective evidence was biased towards the Leader of the council and his political aims;

“The reports are commissioned so we have to have a strong evidence base for any development or funding. But if I am paying for the report I can and do, heavily influence what goes into it” (Executive Director of Place and the Economy)

### *The influence of the Wrexham Borough Council on town centre governance*

A weak cultural paradigm within the Local Authority, which stems from a lack of political control and a lack of collective struggle over the town centre, limited the Local Authority’s influence to that of an opportunistic facilitator between the Welsh Assembly, and the private sector. For example, the consultants suggest the Local Authority should redevelop the town centre as part of a £14.5 million match-funded national Vital and Viable Places (VVP) initiative, and indeed the redevelopment was the foundation of the Local Authority’s “Masterplan”. The “Masterplan’s” aims however, were to redevelop the centre through diversity, a café culture and chic independent retailers, whereas the VVP’s aims came from a different direction, a direction the Leader was keen to exploit;

“The “Masterplan” came from a statement from Vital and Viable places that suggests residential regeneration is the key to re-generating the town centre. If we can repopulate the town centre it becomes self-policing, retail and leisure are attracted to the area and the evening economy becomes vibrant. What we are seeing is a virtuous circle here”

The influence the Local Authority had, therefore, was not an overt and self-financed strategy for town centre redevelopment, rather it was limited to facilitating the planning process to meet a national requirement for housing;

“The VVP money comes with conditions. I think 6 out the 9 projects are housing related. The main reason for the money is to create jobs, employment and skills, so it really isn’t about the town centre as such”

The rationale was that, all things being equal, the VVP initiative would attract investment, which in time would create a social and physical environment that could complement commerce and provide an impetus for a more diverse town centre. This strategy however was more an aspiration, rather than influential. As the Executive Director of Place and the Economy suggests;

“If 50% of the Masterplan is achieved, I will be amazed. If 25% is achieved I will be delighted”

Where the Local Authority did have an impact on the town centre’s vitality was at a grass roots level where they had access to public monies for short term promotional events;

“Every VVP area has to submit spending and if there is an under spend, we can bid again for that money. We have an extra £40,000 raised for pipeline projects by re-bidding. We know the rules, as long as you bid for projects under £10,000, we have a good chance of getting them” (Town Centre Manager)

The Council also had access to more sustainable funds through a newly created Arts Trust, which aimed to create cultural interest within the town, however this again was reliant on the Local Authority meeting the funding requirements of the Welsh Assembly, and in a culturally weak Authority the funding created party divisions;

“Arts is the beacon that we need to improve the town, but we have to realise that £4.5 millions of public money is being invested in a time where we are being asked to save £32 million out of a £230 million annual budget. Questions will be asked why. Why are we cutting spending on the libraries, or health, or education but investing £4.5 million in the Arts? It is because we are passionate about the town centre? We recognise that the arts and culture do not make a profit in the town, but they add to the footfall and market value. The redevelopment will have an impact on its immediate environment, but its impact will be low on the town centre”

There was little doubt the TAN (4) directive in 1996 awakened a Local Authority interest in the management of the town centre. How that interest evolved in the last twenty-two years



has depended on the political bias of the Leader, the amount of funding for specific town centre projects and a gradual, somewhat reluctant, acceptance that partnership was necessary to meet both funding and management objectives. What TAN (4) exposed was a weak town centre culture in the Local Authority that constrained their good intentions. For example, the Council deliberated for eight weeks to reduce parking fees on council land to £2 for 1 hours parking, whereas, by contrast the decision from the Eagles Meadow management to reduce parking on their land to £1 for 1 hours parking was taken in a matter of hours. It is this collective cultural weakness on town centre governance that frustrated local traders who wanted local action on the town centre to save their businesses. From these frustrations came the Wrexham Business Group.

### *Wrexham Business Group*

The Wrexham Business Group (WBG) was a small, informal pressure group of forty-four independent traders, who through the involvement of an enthusiastic marketer, championed the cause of local independent traders within the Council chambers. The group formed in January 2014 to unite Wrexham's independent traders to;

“Speak with one strong voice, a voice which the council, Welsh Government and other bodies would take seriously”.

The Leader of the Business Group suggested that in times of public spending cuts, the town centre's independent traders should be prepared to do more to help themselves, through strategies that promote small businesses and provide moral support, advice and practical help for local retailers. As a lobbying group they had access to “very senior” Council officers and elected members and met regularly to discuss ways to work together to achieve more for the town centre. There were however conflicts with the Local Authority's plans for redevelopment, some of which surfaced with the proposed arts centre development;

“The Peoples Market has been earmarked for a multi-million pounds grant from the Art's Council for Wales, but the traders in the market don't want to go, but they had no voice with the Council. So, we formed a sort of union and lobbied the Council to change its mind. Now the Council didn't want to lose face with the people, but after a lot of work we managed to change their minds. So, the compromise is that half the Peoples Market will stay and half will become a new arts centre. The Council have the arts centre and the Peoples Market gets additional funding”

In addition to their political aims the WBG aimed to revitalise the town centre by organising regular events and, members attempted to support each other financially by endorsing their products to others where they could. As their influence grew, they aimed to collaborate more with the Healthy High Streets team, and the Town Centre Forum to improve pride in the town, increase footfall, reduce the vacant units and increase employment. Politically they felt their affiliation to the Cheshire and North Wales Chamber of Commerce added weight to their collective voice and they cited an immediate success in their lobbying with the Council, particularly in consideration to the parking charges;

“Eagles Meadow has slashed most of its prices and introduced a new £1 for 1-hour rate, a move which has already produced a noticeable increase in footfall in the shopping centre. To compliment this, we got the council to reduce their fees in their car parks. We may well not have got these changes without a lot of hard work which was done behind the scenes by Business Group members, who spent many hours throughout the year arguing the need for reductions”.

#### *The influence of the Wrexham Business Group on town centre governance*

WBG were a pressure group, with a self-proclaimed aim to “shame the traders and the Local Authority to act”. Frustrated at what they perceived as a Local Authority disconnect with the immediate needs of the town centre, WBG sought to engage with the Local Authority to create some internal vibrancy to “get things moving”. Admittedly this adopted a form of short-term promotional events, for example cleaning parts of the town centre with volunteers from local businesses and the Local Authority. However, by doing this the WBG aimed to demonstrate that although they had limited funding, they could have a positive influence through a pride in the town centre.

#### *Influencers’ strategies*

The Local Authority had ambitious plans to create a new Wrexham, one that had a more diverse economy, distancing itself from what it perceived as the broken retail centric models of the past. Its strategy was contained within a “Masterplan” which, at a commissioned cost of £100,000, detailed the outline for a change of use from vacant retail units to residential and office space. To complement the change of use the Local Authority also aimed to develop an arts and cultural hub that would re-vitalise the centre through education, workshops, creative workspaces and restaurants, where the town centre could not only

become a focal point for a currently vibrant, but low profile and dispersed arts scene, it would also attract other leisure, arts and cultural activities, providing a critical mass of complementary attractions which will help support an evening economy.

The aims of the “Masterplan” were to complement the core retail circuit, helping to drive footfall through the town and encourage visitor dwell time in activities such as leisure, arts, culture and restaurants. Delivery of the “Masterplan” rested with Local Authority officers, where ongoing responsibilities included;

- reviewing actions, priorities, funding and identifying barriers to delivering the “Masterplan”
- identifying delivery opportunities and co-ordinating and monitoring the delivery of “Masterplan” actions
- reviewing involvement of key stakeholders and how best to engage them in the future delivery of the “Masterplan”
- making potential development sites more readily available, de-risked and attractive to developers, so that when the market improves the right conditions will be in place to enable the private sector to get involved
- embedding the “Masterplan” into the operations of the Council and the Local Development Plan

The strategies of the Business Group were not as ambitious, or as capital intensive. Their strategies were based on a form of collaboration between the Local Authority and the local traders to produce immediate action to revitalise the town centre, by preserving and maintaining its attractiveness, increasing awareness, improving promotional activity, and by creating a sense of collective pride. To achieve their aims, they conscripted an army of volunteers, from the lower echelons of the Local Authority and local retailers, and although funding was an issue it was not a barrier, as their initiatives were expected to be delivered through goodwill.

An area of conflict between the retail development approaches of the Local Authority and the Business Group was the clash of cultures where “council officers have difficulties moving away from established routines, language and practices [subsequently] they come to [a] partnership with a pre-defined behaviour and attitude” (Gonzalez and Healey, 2005 p. 2065). Indeed, within a governance form of *collective action* it was natural to assume that pre-defined behaviours and attitudes existed not only within the council, but also within

other influential institutions (Schattschneider,1960). Consequently, the coming together of institutions with different cultural paradigms had the potential, not to suppress bias but to amplify it to a level of conflict, a conflict which, in turn, affected the ability to create a collective cultural paradigm, or capacity;

“The Wrexham Business Group fails to see the priorities or the politics in the situations. All the traders are negative, negative, negative. We suggested that the town centre traders start a BID to get more money into their centre, but they stuck two fingers up to us. We could raise council tax by 2% to give them a million pounds, but what would they do with it? And the residents would ask what am I getting for the rise?” (Deputy Leader of the Local Authority).

“The Leader is weak on town centre matters. There is a Town Centre Manager, but her role is limited. She is employed by the Council and she has to deal with four different managers and five different departments. Five layers of government, how can that be effective?” (WBG spokesperson)

Conflict, however, was not solely confined to external relationships, as internal divisions were also apparent. As an example, there was a level of cultural conflict within the Local Authority’s chambers, especially among some of the older, longer serving councillors, where voices were raised on the contemporary relevance of the town centre;

“The problem with Wrexham is the people. They want it to be wrapped in aspic. The blue rinse brigade don’t want to shop in town anymore as they feel it has changed too much. They are very parochial, they remember how the town centres were and they don’t shop in them now, that’s just how it is” (Deputy Leader of the Local Authority).

These biases were not solely confined to rhetoric as they also impacted on strategy, and action as evidenced by the Leader;

“The Local Authority owns around 24% of the car parking space in the town. From May 2016 we will be subsidising that to cost £2 for a full days shopping in the town. It took me 18 weeks to get that through Council, with all the meetings and objections from Members, as well as the cost of commissioning the report. So that shows you the political problems we have”

Within this apparent mutual distrust there was a rhetorical desire, from the Local Authority, to create positive change through a form of collective action;

“We have to drive it, but in a partnership role. I meet with the town centre forum once a month, that’s 30-40 people with an interest in the town, from traders to politicians. I have an open-door policy with any of them, I really do. If they need me, I am here, but the local

traders have to do more themselves. Look at the retail offer; look at the fact when we put events in the town on that they close early. But they blame us for their problems, they blame us for everything. We had an extra 6,000 people in for the Tour of Britain, but the most successful retailer was the burger van on the town centre green. They must do more themselves. We are creating a strategy with the town centre traders, but the town centre forum is a meeting place, not a strategic forum. So instead of criticising each other we are trying to build a strategy that suits us both" (Leader of the Local Authority)

Reality, however, suggested that collective forms of compromise were ideals, as the leader of the Arts Trust commented;

"We have to put the vision over in such a way that other partners will come with you. The Art's council have a different agenda than the town centre traders and we have to appease both. I would hate to get them in the same room though"

To move beyond the rhetoric of compromise, both internally and externally, Gonzalez and Healey (2005) suggest governance should draw on like-minded "sediments" which endure within influencers. They argue at this level, "the search for socially innovative transformations needs to explore the assumptions and habits shaping emergent discourses and practices and the extent to which these are derived from, or deliberately challenge, dominant forms of governance" (p.2056). Within Wrexham the "sediments" were reliant on a commitment and sentimentality towards the town centre, and indeed, there was some evidence at the grass roots level of interactions between local traders and the Town Centre Manager, but quite how these could change the retail development culture of the Local Authority was questionable. For as Fainstein and Hirst (1995) suggest, initiatives arising from civil society mobilisation (in this case the WBG) are unlikely to succeed where they challenge dominant economic forces, and mainstream political parties and ideologies. Whilst this was relevant in Wrexham it remained contextual, and there was much that was done on the ground to change the hearts and minds of local political leaders, mainly through the leader of the WBG, who met with the Town Centre Forum and executives in the Local Authority. He was ubiquitous in any "movement" on short-term strategies, being involved at strategic and process levels of consultation and delivery, and as such he had a voice on the local political bias. It was difficult to look past this entrepreneurial spirit within Wrexham, as he created a level of collective culture, as governance capacity, between the Local Authority, at least at a micro level through his relationship with the town centre manager. Any capacity, however, was at best transient and fractious, and reliant on his

dogged enthusiasm. It also had limits on its effectiveness as it focused on micro-level solutions to what were macro-level challenges.

## **6.7 Influencers' impact on measures of vitality and viability**

### *Impact on rental yields*

Although there were ambitious plans to redevelop the town centre, any impact on viability was a result of the Local Authority creating an opportunity for private sector investment;

“We have to develop our own properties and let them see what we can do and make them feel like investing in the town. We have the view of redeveloping it and let's see what happens. Developers are risk adverse, so they say you do it and let's see what happens” (Director of Place and the Economy).

This strategy relied on the Local Authority committing to a funding plan that would provide the catalyst for investment, however, a local property agent suggests that developers were waiting to see what the Local Authority did with the “Masterplan” before they committed, and he suggested they had a significant way to go;

“There is no value in Wrexham. I am letting the units for nothing they only have to pay the rates and they still can't make it pay”

### *Impact on footfall*

Footfall was considered a priority to both the Local Authority and the local traders, however, there are no official methods of collecting data;

“We have no counters in the town centre, so two of us go out four times a year with clickers to count the people in the town. We do two market days and two non-market days. Footfall is pretty much about the same as last year. I don't really see the relevance of counting people, if they like what you are doing, they will come, if they don't, they won't. I know Eagles Meadow do headcounts, and Marks and Spencer do as well. We don't have access to their figures, but I am sure they would share them if we wanted to” (Town Centre Manager).

There appeared, therefore, to be a disconnect between a macro strategy to increase footfall without any identifiable methods to capture or analyse it;

“We have aims to generate footfall to the areas that are in need, but there are no plans apart from redeveloping the areas which will get people through” (Director of Place and the Economy).

### *Impact on vacancy rates*

Although there were attempts to reduce the number of vacant premises, and strategies to address the issue, there was a frustration that more could be done to influence the higher than national averages. The WBG again blamed the Local Authority;

“The Council has some units that aren’t even marketed, nowhere, not even on their site, not by commercial agents, nobody. We wanted to use the Council’s units for a Saturday promotion. So, we approached them, and the response was that legally we couldn’t occupy without a formal agreement, so we would have to pay £250 for each unit, that’s £1,000. This is for a promotion in the town centre! So, we approached a local agent, who let us occupy four units free of charge and now two of those units are permanently let”

The Local Authority however suggested that vacant units are a necessary symptom of retail change;

“Before we developed Eagles Meadow it was a market with 300 traders. Now our markets have 35-40 traders, and times have changed. Eagles Meadow took the major retailers away from the centre and a developer walked away from a central scheme. Now Marks and Spencer ran a Sale shop in the town, and they threatened to pull out if we didn’t go with the scheme in 2006 and they now have a new store and a beautiful food hall in the new centre. Eagles Meadow increased the retail capacity of the town by 25% but 10 of the top retailers left the main area, and the developers of Henblas Square blamed us for that and have done nothing with the area since. But Eagles Meadow had all the money. That and the fact that retailers were threatening to pull out made us develop the area, but we were criticised, I still am for that decision. Yes, we lost some of the stores to the new centre, but if you look at the space they took in the new centre it was a lot more than they were taking in the town centre, so it was worth it” (Director of Place and the Economy).

Furthermore, the Local Authority suggested it was the responsibility of retailers within the town to address the spate of vacant units;

“We have 24 shops in the town centre, of which 20% are unoccupied. The challenge is for retailers to provide what the customers want. The offer that they have is not good, so why would you shop on the High Street?” (Deputy Leader of the Council)

Any influence over vacated premises was divided by short-term strategies from local traders that attempted to reduce the number of vacancies through increased marketing, and long-term strategies under the guise of the “Masterplan” which aimed to create the new

Wrexham with “up–market independent retailers, cafes and bars”. The short-term strategies offered immediate action, whilst the long-term strategies of the Local Authority were hindered by a lack of information of who owned the properties they wanted to develop, and how they created their vision of a new Wrexham;

“Local landlords are easy to deal with, as vacant units can be negotiated. They would prefer somebody in and not to pay the business rates. But national and institutional landlords are impossible to deal with, so we are stuck with empty units. The TJ Hughes building is a prime example, it went into administration and has changed hands a few times, but we still don’t know who owns it. But there is now some movement so hopefully we can influence what happens to that. The best we can do is to provide the opportunity for the retailers to come. We have no influence over who comes, we can only let the letting agents do their job and attract them” (Leader of the Local Authority)

### *Impact on diversity*

Diversity was the cornerstone of the “Masterplan”, however the Local Authority’s plans for a change of use differed from the funding requirements of the Vital and Viable Places initiative. For example, in Wrexham the Vital and Viable Places grant of £10.4 million from the Welsh Assembly was funding to re–populate the town centre. The Local Authority, in providing an opportunity for investors, hoped that like-minded investment would follow, however these were aspirations, as any direct investment was reliant on the private sector perceiving an opportunity to increase the value of their investment;

“We have a landlord loan scheme that could help turn empty units into residential units. If the landlords are finding it hard to access loans to do the property up, we could lend them the money through the Welsh Assembly. The money is theirs until we are asked for it. There is an incentive in the landlord loan scheme which if they have no money will enable them to convert the properties for residential use” (Town Centre Manager)

Whilst there was an acknowledgement that diversity offered potential for the town centre the Local Authority also recognised that internal politics and the motives of private investors would provide challenges;

“Wrexham opens at 9.30 and closes at 5.30. I was in Manchester the other day for a concert and through the night the place was alive. Now when I lived there the City had about 500 people in it. Now it has tens of thousands. That is all to do with the Manchester regeneration plan and we need to look at that and learn. But if we develop



the units as residential there are problems with parking. We know that we don't need to provide any parking for units, but some of the members insist that we have a least one parking place. That causes problems with planning and time as they insist on parking spaces. Additionally, families won't want to live in town centres, because there is nothing for them to do as a family. Individuals will, but there are problems then because of parking and overcrowding in areas. When agencies get involved in residential there is a collapse with integration" (Director of Place and the Economy).

The "Masterplan" expressed a desire to change commercial diversity from the current discount model, toward a more up market offer driven by independent retailers. Indeed, Peter Brett Associates' report suggested this would benefit the town centre as re-establishing a diverse comparison goods offer would increase the leisure use, would increase the dwell time and would extend the life of the centre. The Local Authority believed that in developing Eagles Meadow they had gone some way to achieving this;

"We wanted Debenhams and there was no way they would come to Wrexham if we hadn't built the centre. In 2004, Eagles Meadow was an Asda car park. Many of the town's retailers were threatening to pull out, including Marks and Spencer's who had a sale shop in the town. They used the town as a clearance outlet, so we never got new customers with the new stock we always used to get the sale customers. When we redeveloped the car park, we had 24 expressions of interest in the new centre. One was Debenhams which we needed, and Marks and Spencer's committed to a new store with a fabulous food store. When the retailers relocated to the new centre, they increased their retail space tenfold, so we now have more retail in the town than we had before" (Town Centre Manager)

Influencing commercial diversity, however, was about more than providing an opportunity for retail displacement for example, the WBG considered commercial diversity as protecting the town centre by integrating more diverse businesses into their local environment, a perception that also formed the cornerstone of the "Masterplan". Within a changing retail landscape, however, influencing commercial diversity was a seemingly impossible task as short-term temptation (in a period of political instability and austerity) could divert long-term aims, an example was the sale of the redundant police station in Wrexham;

"To make the Masterplan work we have to lead with our own properties. The council offices building is being sold, the police station is being sold next year and the school is going. So, this whole area is due to be redeveloped as residential with mixed retail use. But residential is hard and retailers have the money. We have valued the police station at £500,000-£750,000 and Aldi have offered £2 million. So that is where we are at" (Director of Strategic Planning)

## 6.8 Discussion

### Local governance

The local governance map of Wrexham (figure 6.7) evidenced pockets of local governance rather than an over-riding form of *collective action*. An example was the edge of centre retail parks (Island Green, Border Retail Park, Central Retail Park and Eagles Meadow) who competed with each other through *market mediated anarchy*, an example being the town centre's cinema which started its life in the town centre in 1961 at the Hippodrome, before relocating to the new development at Plas Coch, from where it relocated to the newly developed Eagles Meadow shopping centre in 2009. Further examples in the town centre were evidenced through the relocation of Boots plc., and Marks and Spencer's plc., to the Eagles Meadow development in 2008.

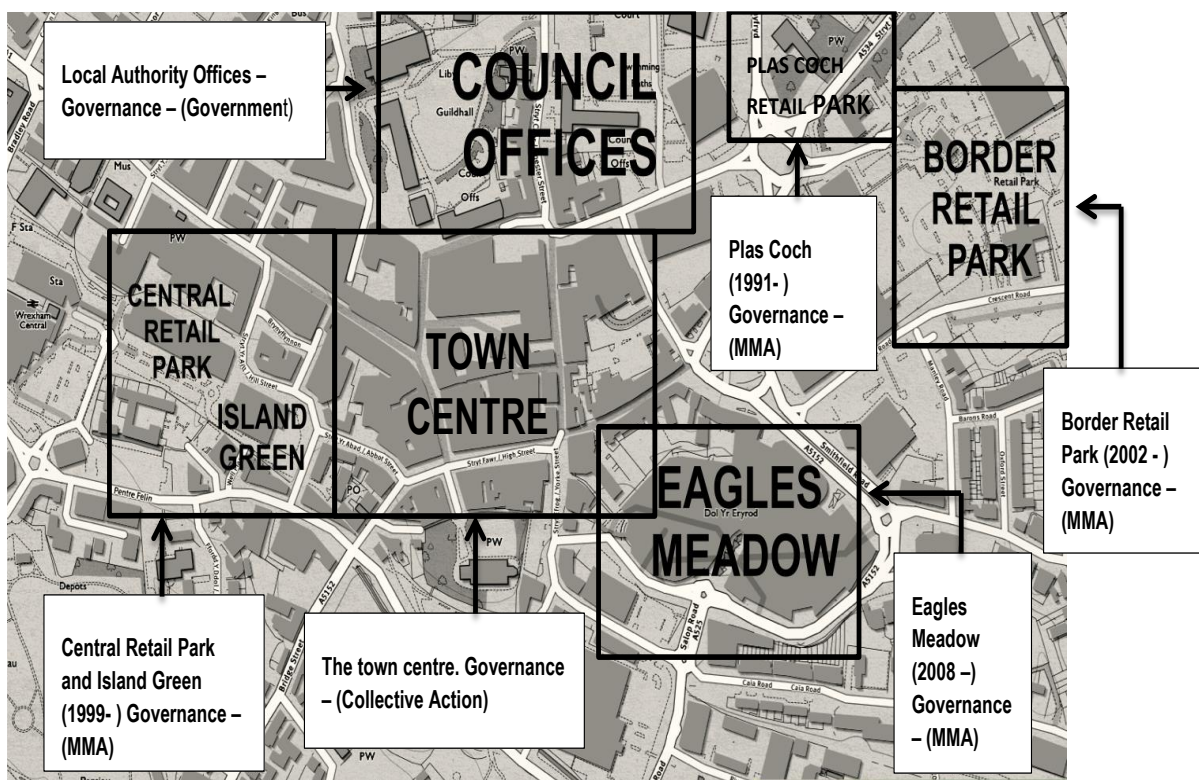


Figure 6. 7; Local governance map of Wrexham town centre

In the North of the town centre the Council offices, the law courts, the police station and administrative buildings were influenced by a form of *government*, however a number of these buildings were for sale and will no doubt, given the Local Authority's current attitude

to retail development, provide more competing edge of centre *market mediated anarchy* forms in the future. What remained in the heart of the town centre was an area of commercial inactivity. This was the area which adopted the form of *collective action* between a Local Authority (who had funding through the VVP initiative to re-populate the area), and the WBG (who were trying to protect their independent businesses). Within this area the Local Authority realised, or were at least informed, that increased retail saturation was unlikely to add to the vitality and viability of the town centre, as the properties that were vacant were either obsolete, or they were attracting the unwanted discount retail sector. Advice suggested therefore the Local Authority should aim to regenerate the centre with a more diverse offer, however a lack of political cohesiveness, and funding, limited their actions and they were finding “a multitude of steps between political imperatives and actually getting to the stage of laying one brick on top of another” (Jones and Evans, 2013 p.226).

The influence of the Local Authority was constrained by issues of funding, and trust; funding, as the need for an impartial evidence base necessitated a lengthy process which led to political procrastination; and trust, as a lack of a collective culture created internal divisions that were entrenched, bitter, and blocked progress for the sake of political gain. It was therefore hardly surprising that time had allowed cracks in the established *government* form for a grass roots movement to mobilise (Amin and Thrift, 2002). The cracks however offered hope; indeed Gonzalez and Healey (2005) argue that any ‘failure’ in a governance initiative may inspire creative learning that may lead to more innovation than would an apparent ‘success’, however “there is a tension between institutionally-driven and strategy-led cultural regeneration and the bottom-up, more informal, self-organising and community led form of cultural activity” (Tallon, 2013 p.253). It was this tension which surfaced on numerous occasions and hindered any meaningful togetherness; for example, the redevelopment of the Peoples Market, where the local traders bemoaned a loss of income for some of their members, whilst the Local Authority were informed the market was outdated, and surplus to requirement. The Local Authority negotiated a multi-million-pound grant from the Welsh Assembly for an Art’s Centre; the local traders created a lobby group to stall progress, and neither side suggested the development would have a sustainable effect on the vitality, or viability of the town centre anyway.

The challenge for the influencers in Wrexham was to make the “Masterplan” a reality. The Local Authority have spent £100,000 and waited eight years to get the evidence base for its strategy, however, to realise its plan requires more than a comprehensive evidence base, it also requires an expertise and knowledge of development strategies to realise it, and if a town centre has no obvious governance form driving change it can be a complicated process, especially for organisations with minimal expertise, capacity and funding (Kures and Ryan, 2012). In Wrexham creating these structures should be the first challenge.

*The impact on measures of vitality and viability*

At the time of this study (2015-2018) the impact of influencers on the a priori measures of vitality and viability was generally low (figure 6.8) however, upon revisiting the town centre in 2018, there were some improvements, and the Local Authority had started to reverse the vacancy rates in the town centre through a proactive approach to both the occupation of its own properties with local independent businesses and as a broker between private, and public investors.

Influencers	Rental Yields	Footfall	Vacancy Rates	Diversity
<b>Wrexham Borough Council</b>	Limited to the “Masterplan” creating demand for investment in residential property, which could have an impact on the value of commercial property.	A minimal level of influence through the marketing initiatives with the WBG.	In 2016 there was no evidence of any influence. However, in 2018 the vacancy rate on council owned properties stood at 2.8%. The % of vacant private sector properties in the same period was 15.8%.	No evidence of any influence.
<b>Wrexham Business Group</b>	No evidence of any influence	A minimal level of influence through short term marketing initiatives.	A limited influence through pro –active short - term measures, however there were no meaningful long - term influences.	No evidence of any influence.

Figure 6. 8; Influencer’s impact on commercial measures of vitality and viability

An example was the deal brokered with MCR properties who successfully bid for the blight on the town centre that was Henblas Square in 2017, a development that included the vacant T. J. Hughes building, and the recently vacated BHS building. A consequence of this negotiation was that MCR properties, and the Local Authority subsequently brokered a

further deal with the local university and the Welsh Government in 2018 to create a technical centre in the T. J. Hughes building, a building that closed in 2011, and has stood vacant ever since. The catalyst for change was the Leader of the Local Authority who adopted the mantra of “you can’t stand by and do nothing, can you?” His support for the voids of inactivity in the town centre has been both financial; for example, utilising budget shortfalls to create an element of pride with new walkways; and political, in persuading council members, and private investors to see value in the regeneration of the town centre. There are further indications that Local Authority town centre strategies are impacting on vitality and viability as there have also been some positive results with footfall in the centre, which are subsequently being utilised to promote the town centre to potential tenants and private investors. What the Local Authority cannot influence however, is the diversity of these developments. They are hopeful that MCR properties will provide a mixed-use development, and they are also hopeful they will be able to move away from the discount culture that prevails, although a visit in 2018 suggests the town centre is still attracting a significant proportion of this category.

What is of interest, in relation to local governance, is that as the Local Authority has adopted a retail development approach that looks inwards on the town centre the requirement to consult and compromise with external actors has diminished. In effect the cracks (Amin and Thrift, 2002) which arose from neglect, have been smoothed over. In 2018, there was a sense that the Local Authority has the wind in its sails, and the Business Group had been relegated to consultations on short-term promotions. This could be a symptom of a change of leadership at the Business Group? Gone is the confrontational ex-marketer, replaced by an aspiring politician, and the chair of the Wrexham Tourism Partnership. Whatever the reason, from a governance perspective there appears to be less friction, and more Local Authority control. Whether that will be positive for the town centre remains to be seen.

## Chapter 7; Covent Garden - Governance mode: *Created Partnership*

### 7.1 Context

Covent Garden's name derives from the 14th century convent garden, which provided the monks of Westminster Abbey with a source of fresh vegetables. The garden was seized in 1536, as part of King Henry VIII's plans to dissolve the monasteries, and it was duly gifted to John Russell, the first Earl of Bedford in 1552. The Garden sat dormant in the Russell family estate until the 1630s when the fourth Earl built a house on the North side of the Strand and commissioned the Royal architect Inigo Jones to build a square with houses;

“Fit for the habitations of Gentlemen, and men with ability. As an afterthought, he built a place for them to worship, however having exhausted most of his funds he asked for the church to be no more elaborate than a barn, to which Jones replied, Sir, you shall have the finest barn in England, and the impressive St. Pauls' church has been at the centre of Covent Garden ever since” (Epsey, 2012).

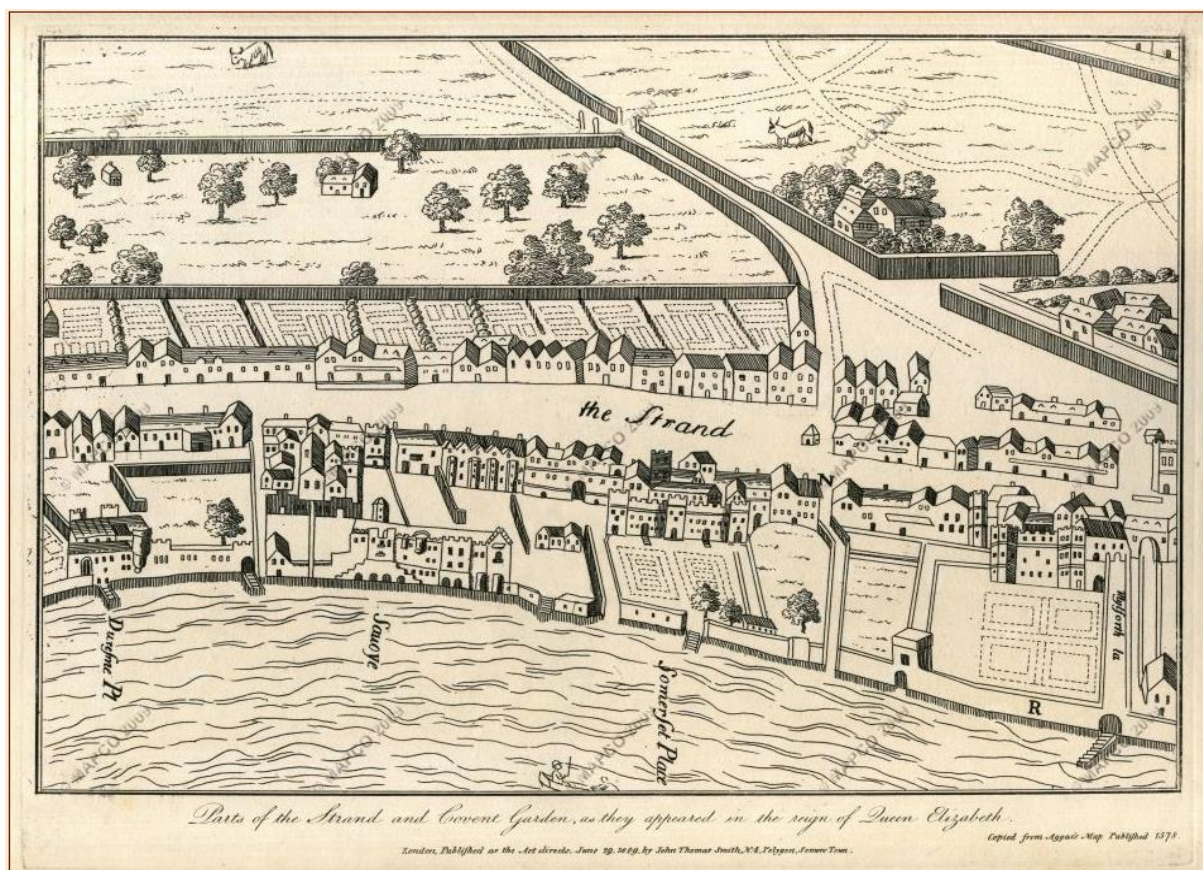


Figure 7. 1; Covent Garden in 1578 (source; Antiquities of the City of Westminster, J. T. Smith, 1807)

The first commercial market arrived at Covent Garden in 1656, although it was the town's location rather than its commerce that had the biggest impact in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, as it had the fortune to escape the worst of the plague in 1665, and the ravages of the Great Fire in 1666. Central London's loss was Covent Garden's gain as Londoners migrated to the area, and the town exploded with activity. As the population grew so did commerce, and in a bid to regulate commercial growth King Charles II granted a Royal Charter, in 1670, to formalise the market's presence.

A consequence of the increase in commerce and population was that the nobility moved out to gentler pastures, although the addition of two theatres probably hastened their decision, as the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane opened in 1663, followed by the Royal Opera House in 1732. These were the only theatres in London to have a Royal Charter allowing them to perform spoken drama and, they brought with them a bustling night life, which in turn brought a rich trade in prostitution. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, most of the aristocracy had left the area, and their converted homes became taverns, coffee houses, book shops, gambling houses and brothels (Epsey, 2012).

Commerce flourished in this hive of activity, and in 1830 Covent Garden was re-organised with a Central Market in the piazza, from where it would trade for a further 144 years. The success of the Central Market was such that it outgrew its narrow access points at the Strand and Long Acre, and more recently questions were asked as to whether it could sustain its present location. The decision came in 1961 and the Covent Garden Market Bill was passed, determining that the State controlled Central Market would move to Nine Elms. A direct consequence of this decision became the catalyst for further social change in the early 1970s, when Covent Garden was the subject of major development proposals from the Greater London Council (GLC), who at that time owned the soon to be vacated Central Market site. The GLC proposed a redevelopment that many believed would have destroyed the cultural, and commercial environment through the demolition of most of the now listed buildings and, the outcome from the dissentient voices from those who lived and worked in the area became the catalyst for the Covent Garden Community Association (CGCA).

The conflict between residents and politicians galvanised the cultural paradigm of the CGCA as a social pressure group to influence local planning policy. Pressure was brought on the then Secretary of State for the Environment Geoffrey (later Lord) Rippon, who subsequently ordered the listing of more than 250 buildings, making the implementation of the GLC's comprehensive Covent Garden Development Area Plan impossible. As a result of local pressure from the local Community Association the GLC rethought its policy and the Covent Garden Action Area Plan was written in 1978.

In 1985, when the GLC was abolished by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government and its powers devolved to Local Authorities, the residents of Covent Garden were greatly concerned to ensure the continuance of the precepts of the area plan, and this concern provided the catalyst for the Covent Garden Area Trust (CGAT). Responsible for the upkeep and preservation of the area, the Area Trust influences historic and cultural attractiveness and retain the head-lease of the 150 acre site via a peppercorn rent, payment of which is a weird and wonderful occasion when the Chairman and trustees of the CGAT march around the piazza, accompanied by the town crier and a jazz band, to pay the head lease rents of five red apples and five posies of flowers for the buildings, known as "the protected lands".

Covent Garden today, attracts over 42 million annual visitors and has become one of the most visited parts of London, a draw for tourists across the world and a reputed place of pride for its residents. Demand, as in the past, has quite understandably attracted investment, the most recent of which is Capital and Counties plc., (CAPCO) who, perceiving an opportunity to increase value from what they believed to be an underperforming land asset, purchased the freehold on both the iconic Central Market building and several other properties in the immediate area for £870 million in August 2006.





Figure 7. 2; Covent Garden area map identifying CAPCO’s asset portfolio in the town centre shaded in blue (source; CAPCO, 2016)

In 2016, the local governance of Covent Garden was influenced by the three institutions that have shaped its contemporary environment, namely Capital and Counties, the Covent Garden Area Trust, and the Covent Garden Community Association. Each of these institutions holds an influence, for although commercial activities and the vitality they bring are important to Covent Garden, any over-exposure could threaten the Trust’s objectives, and the very soul of Covent Garden itself. Indeed, this fragile balance between commerce, culture, and community is the cause of some anxiety as some feel the town centre is again in danger of becoming a victim of its own success. *Created partnership* governance explores how influencers realise their individual aims, whilst ensuring Covent Garden maintains its identity and attractiveness.

Sections 7.2-7.4 adopt the retail change structure of chapter 1 to provide a summary of the changing town centre retail landscape in the period 1960–2018; the policy initiatives that have impacted on it; and the commercial, cultural and social initiatives which have contrived to create the Covent Garden we see today.

## 7.2 The 1960s and 1970s retail landscape; from post War decline to retail alliances?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
<p>In the 1960s and 1970s Covent Garden was home to market traders, potters, bookbinders, tanners, ballet shoe - makers, costumiers and many more small and diverse independent businesses.</p>	<p>The Conservative government effectively nationalises the "Market" when they create the Covent Garden Market Authority in 1961.</p>	<p>Local governance was through clear divisions of MMA (through mainly independent businesses) and government (Westminster Council, Camden Council and the GLC who influenced Covent Garden as Local Authorities).</p>
<p>Modern distribution creates difficulties for the Central Market, and in 1965 the GLC make the decision to close the "Market" and relocate it to a 68 - acre site at Nine Elms.</p>	<p>When the decision is made to redevelop the area Labour control the GLC, the Conservatives control Westminster Council, and Labour control Camden Council. Together with Bovis, the Prudential, and Taylor Woodrow the politicians create the Covent Garden scheme (1966).</p>	
<p>After the decision to relocate the "Market" the GLC deem the 96 – acre site right for development (1968), and the GLC creates the Covent Garden Development Committee to plan for grand hotels, little open space and expensive accommodation (1972).</p>	<p>Over 3,000 residents live in the town centre, many in social housing. A survey suggests 84% of them want to stay (1967) and the Covent Garden Community Association (CGCA) is formed in April 1971 as a protest against proposed change. The Covent Garden scheme is revised after a resident's survey, by which time all three Local Authorities are under Conservative control (1971).</p>	
<p>Incoming developers increase existing rents to five times the current value, which changes the bohemian nature of the town centre (1972).</p>	<p>By the time of the local enquiry into redevelopment (1971) Camden Council is under the control of Labour. They now oppose the scheme they helped to create in 1966.</p>	
<p>Incoming developers increase existing rents to five times the current value, which changes the bohemian nature of the town centre (1972).</p>	<p>The GLC loses control to Labour in 1971, and Conservative MP Lady Dartmouth resigns her position as Chair stating the development is out of date with public opinion.</p>	
<p>The "Market" relocates to Nine Elms in 1974.</p>	<p>Geoffrey Rippon effectively kills the Covent Garden Area Plan by adding 250 buildings to those already protected by historical and architectural merit (1973) and, the CGCA has most of its demands met and 9 out of 10 sites planned for demolition are saved (1976).</p>	

Figure 7. 3; 1960s and 1970s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Covent Garden town centre

The political and social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s was a direct consequence of the relocation of the Central Market, a change deemed necessary as modern transport systems failed to meet the growing demands of commerce. What was significant about the 1960s and 1970s was how the political and social influence of local governance shaped the town centre's landscape for the next forty years. For as commerce continued as a form of free market enterprise, with mainly diverse local and independent businesses, the social unrest, caused by the relocation of commerce across the river to Nine Elms, created a socio-political

maelstrom that left an indelible imprint on the town centre. The catalyst for change was the Covent Garden Area Plan created in 1966, when the Labour and Conservative parties jointly agreed to redevelop what had become the nationalised Central Market. By the time of the redevelopment however, the political influence rested with the Conservatives, and Labour undoubtedly realised that political gains could be made from resident's surveys suggesting most of the local voting population did not want to leave the town centre. Labour regained control of both Camden Local Authority, and the GLC in 1971 and subsequently opposed the scheme they had helped to create.



Figure 7. 4: Community Association posters produced during the fight for Covent Garden

The change in the political stance of the Labour party, and the social pressure brought about by the newly formed CGCA to “keep the elephants [the GLC] out of the garden” (figure 7.4) echoed a local governance influence on Covent Garden that was recapitulated by Anthony Crosland MP, the Shadow Environment Secretary in his impassioned statement in the early 1970s;

“Excited by speculative gain, the property developers furiously rebuild the urban centres with unplanned and aesthetically tawdry office blocks; so, our cities become the just objects of world-wide pity and ridicule for their architectural mediocrity, commercial vulgarity and, lack of civic or historic pride (A Crosland, *The Conservative Enemy*, 1975)

By 1974, the Central Market had relocated across the river, and the frantic political and social activity was diffused by the introduction of statutes that aimed to protect the town centres historical and architectural merits. In the 1980s and 1990s, these statutes were formalised as Trusts, however as the political and social influences ebbed the re-structuring of commerce created the next chapter in the town centre’s history.

### 7.3 The 1980s and 1990s retail landscape; a period of retail change and collective responsibilities?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
<p>The GLC creates the Covent Garden Shopping Centre on the site of the relocated Central Market. The centre, the first in Europe, is intended to provide a local business offer that compliments the local community. A total of 40 vacancies are created for the prestigious shopping and restaurant centre, for which there are 1,000 applicants. The GLC stipulate no denim retailers, and no tourist souvenirs (the Londoner, 2016).</p>	<p>Phase 2 of the redevelopment of the Covent Garden area plan is scheduled for completion in 1980. The third phase in 1985.</p> <p>The GLC is disbanded in 1986.</p> <p>The resident population rises to 5,000 by 1986 a more private housing is developed in the town centre.</p> <p>The Covent Garden Area Trust (GCAT) is established in 1988 to protect the historical and architectural heritage of the town centre.</p>	<p>Local governance was through clear divisions of MMA (through mainly independent businesses) and government (Westminster Council, Camden Council and the GLC who influenced Covent Garden as Local Authorities).</p>
<p>The freehold of Covent Garden is purchased by the Guardian Royal Exchange (GRE) in 1988.</p>		
<p>Following the sale to GRE the commercial rents increase annually, and the independent business model of the GLC is gradually replaced by national chains and multiple retailers.</p>		
<p>The rental increases continue as tenants become responsible for a service charge that effectively doubles the rental values.</p>		

Figure 7. 5; 1980s and 1990s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Covent Garden town centre

The social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s gave way in the 1980s to a period of commercial change, as the GLC attempted to complement the social movement of the Community Association by creating the “Covent Garden shopping centre”. The first of its kind in Europe, its aims were intended to complement the community spirit of the town centre, by introducing favourable rents and dictating commercial diversity for forty local businesses.

The shopping centre experiment, however, had an entirely different outcome to that intended, for when the GLC was disbanded by Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1986, political control was divested to the Local Authorities of Westminster and Camden and one of the first actions of these Local Authority’s was to sell the GLC’s shopping centre assets to a private investor (Guardian Royal Exchange). The community shopping centre - and bohemian retail landscape - underwent a major transformation under private ownership as the landlord adopted a free market form of local governance, and, it was not long before independent, community retailers were replaced by national and multiple retailers who were able to pay the increased rents.

#### 7.4 The retail landscape from 2000 to 2019; towards an alternative future?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
<p>The GRE sell the freehold to a collaboration between Scottish Widows and Henderson Global. Together they form the Covent Garden Market Ltd., partnership in 2001.</p>	<p>Westminster Council conduct the first health audit in 2008</p>	<p>MMA and government prevail as a form until the sale to CAPCO in 2006.</p>
<p>Capital and Counties plc., (CAPCO) purchase the freehold from the partnership in 2006 for £870 million, aiming to create a premium department store model.</p>	<p>Public services are taken under private control with the sale of the freehold in 2008</p>	<p>Following the sale of assets in 2006 CAPCO assume the role of Local Authority and commercial developer.</p>
<p>Rental increases follow the CAPCO purchase, as the premium model effectively excludes independent retailers and creates a national and multiple retail offer.</p>	<p>In 2008, 6.000 residents live mostly in social housing. This represents half of the available housing, the other half are occupied as holiday homes, hotels and temporary lets.</p>	<p>Local governance, after 2006, becomes a created partnership between CAPCO, the CGAT, and the Community Association.</p>
<p>CAPCO influence the diversity of the town centre adding commercial and residential to their property portfolio, by 2018 they have a million square feet of developable space.</p>	<p>The political landscape is increasingly influenced by CAPCO as they effectively replace the Local Authority in public realm decision making.</p>	
<p>CAPCO revise their retail offer in 2018 to reflect the middle market aspirations of their customers.</p>	<p>CGAT’s role diminishes with CAPCO increased asset base, as does the role of the CGCA. Both CGAT and the Community Association still however hold influence over development and planning.</p>	

Figure 7. 6; The post 2000 town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Covent Garden town centre

Local governance in this period was increasingly influenced by commerce as the private ownership of Covent Garden continued to impact on the town centre following the sale of assets by GRE to Scottish Widows and Henderson Global. Together they formed the Covent Garden Limited Partnership, which was acquired for £870 million in 2006 by Capital and Counties plc., This was not to suggest that the Area Trust's - and the Community Association's - influence had been denigrated, indeed the cultural paradigms of the Area Trust and the Community Association held a strong voice on local planning and development decisions. What is noticeable in this period however was that the influence of Capital and Counties assumed a more overt influential role in local governance. Time has therefore formed a *created partnership* between these three organisations, in effect a symbiotic partnership that balances influence over the town centre; Capital and Counties assume commercial and public responsibility; the Area Trust influences cultural and architectural stewardship; and, the Community Association retains a strong cultural paradigm that Covent Garden above all is a place to live.

## **7.5 Relative performance of vitality and viability measures**

### *Rental yield*

Covent Garden consistently outperformed the London Central Activities Zone (CAZ) averages in the period 1997-2016. In the retail audit of 1997, Westminster City Council reported an average Zone A rental of £3,766 per square metre, a figure that had risen to £5,113 per square metre by 2008. In 2016, Capital and Counties had increased the rental figure per square metre further to £10,250, a yield that continued to be significantly above the averages in the London CAZ area. The increases in rent, and yield, show little sign of abating, with operator demand within the 186 units managed by Capital and Counties quoted as "good". In 2016, there were nine deals in the pipeline and a healthy demand from retailers to trade in the town centre, a result of which was that Capital and Counties placed many new tenants on turnover rents where the value of increased retail spend was shared by landlord and tenant respectively. This strategy ensured that Capital and Counties profited from their efforts to promote the town centre as a collective asset, however, it also created a potential liability should the town centre lose its attractiveness.

### *Diversity*

The Local Authority-commissioned retail audit in 2008 implied that the vitality of Covent Garden had a direct influence on the town centre's commercial diversity, and viability, as "success" increased rental values to the point where only multiple and national businesses could afford to trade. Therefore, the "success" of the town centre influenced commercial diversity as it often precluded small quirky independent businesses, and those serving the local resident community. The audit suggests the impact of this influence was felt most by the community, particularly the decline in community businesses (for example butchers, bakers and greengrocers serving the local population), as vitality created a demand for businesses designed to cater for large numbers of visitors such as pubs, restaurants and large multiple stores. This raised concerns among the local community that the town centre was at risk of losing its identity. However, the Local Authority believed a barrier to directly influence commercial diversity was that planning regulations stipulated general categories of use, rather than the nature of business that was occupying the space, as evidenced by comments from the Westminster Council's planners in 2008;

"As planning authorities our powers to control the commercial pressures which threaten the special character of the area are limited. In planning terms, it is for example, impossible to distinguish between an outlet of a large national multiple shop which is present in every high street in the country, and a unique business serving a specialist market, as both are shops within Class A1 of the Use Classes Order 1987. Therefore, in planning terms the change from one business to another is not material and does not even require planning consent".

The consultants compiling the retail audit in 2008 suggested a direct effect of such market mediated anarchy was that national and multiple businesses would pay a considerably higher rent than independent and speciality businesses, which was something that commended national and multiple businesses to landlords and land owners wishing to sell, or rent, property. However, the Area Trust contest that a negative effect of a market-led model is that the presence of national and multiple retailers could be destructive to the character which attracted them to Covent Garden in the first place, for as the volumes of visitors to the area increase, the "experience" of visiting Covent Garden becomes less attractive to a large part of its present constituency. The sale of the freehold to Capital and Counties, went some way to alleviate this apparent economic and social disconnect, although Capital and Counties' desire to close the rent gap on Bond Street and Westfield,

and take advantage of a potential shortfall in rental income, arguably created a new “experience”, as Capital and Counties micro-managed commercial diversity as a product, with the introduction of premier retailers and expensive residential properties.

### *Vacancy rates*

The Local Authority-commissioned retail audit in 2008 declared 464 commercial units in the town centre of which 8.4% were vacant, a figure that compared favourably at that time with a UK average of 11.6% (LDC, 2016). Of the 186 commercial units that Capital and Counties acquired, there were six vacant units (3.2%) in 2016, which again compared favourably with a UK average of 11.3% (LDC, 2016). Statistics were not readily available (pre-privatisation) for the wider area of 464 units, as many have changed use, or were redeveloped in the period 2008–2016, however if comparisons were drawn on the wider Covent Garden Conservation Area, comprising 242 commercial units, there were seven vacant commercial premises. Due to the demand and commercial negotiations in progress with Capital and Counties, one could reasonably assume the six vacant units within their control were the result of an ongoing strategy (i.e. commercial positioning), rather than a lack of investor demand.

### *Footfall*

The retail audit of 2002 noted the busiest part of the town centre had a footfall of 122,900 pedestrians per week, compared to an average of 39,790 per week for the town centre as a whole. At that time the average weekly footfall ranked sixth out of the fifteen Central Area Zones in London. The footfall had improved over the intervening period to the point where data obtained from Capital and Counties quoted that weekly averages more than doubled in the period 2002-2016 to over 80,000 per week. This was, of course, an average and in many areas of the town centre this would equate to a flow of 247,000 per week in high traffic areas (assuming the methodology adopted in 2002). (It is worth noting that the calculations for the retail audit in 2002 involved a standard methodology to estimate total weekly flows gathered from surveys on Friday’s and Saturday’s. The results were then grossed up by a factor to allow for the days that were not enumerated. This use of a standard methodology enabled comparison over time, as well as comparison with other centres. In contrast, the



data provided by Capital and Counties, via thermal imagery, was more sophisticated, and timely).

#### *Summary of relative performance across the four measures*

A summary of the 2008 retail audit commissioned by Westminster Council, declared Covent Garden's strengths to be the provision of a high number of multiple retailers, restaurants and bars in addition to its cultural attractions (for example the Royal Opera House and transport museum). Furthermore, the evening economy was considered strong due to the high proportion of restaurants, public bars and entertainment uses. Therefore, vitality and viability were considered 'healthy', as investor demand was high, vacancy rates were below the UK averages, commercial diversity was evolving but nonetheless was considered attractive, and footfall was in the upper quartile of the Central Area Zone. The Local Authority had concerns however, that changes to the commercial diversity were threatening the uniqueness of the commercial and cultural offer, yet despite these concerns the sale of the freehold to Capital and Counties went ahead. In 2018 an increase in national and multiple retailers had created a premium shopping centre environment, where the prime motivator had become "an increase in asset value and rental income" (Capital and Counties, 2016), and whilst commercially this strategy had been positive for the town centre there were concerns from the Area Trust, and the Community Association that a focus on purely commercial aims could eventually erode the uniqueness of Covent Garden.

## **7.6 Local governance**

### *Influencers*

Covent Garden's influencers were a private property company that had ambitious plans to increase its asset value; a statutory Area Trust; and, a Community Association that still held a strong residents voice. Together these three adopted a form of *created partnership*, which evolved over the past forty years as layers of social and economic struggle. The foundations were laid with the political and social pressure as a resistance to change in the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a desire to protect the town centre's heritage from further political interference; and, in 2018, the foundation of social and cultural layering was

complimented (some may say exploited) by the commercial management of Capital and Counties.

*Capital and Counties plc.,*

Capital and Counties are an investment company who have held an interest in property in London for over eighty years. They merged with Transatlantic Holding plc, (subsequently Liberty International Holdings) in 1992 and they manage their assets in Covent Garden through their subsidiary Covent Garden London. Since acquiring the commercial rights to the town centre and the “protected lands”, they have increased their assets to the extent that their holding now entails one million square feet of retail, residential, leisure and office space (Capital and Counties, 2018).

The value of their Covent Garden London assets in 2018 was £2.7 billion, declaring an annual investment uplift on like-for-like assets of over 9% year on year. Capital and Counties claim this increase was attributable to its strategies to transform Covent Garden into London’s world class retail and residential offer, through a vision that maximised the estate’s potential by transforming its diversity whilst maintaining the character of the area. The over-riding strategy was to bridge the rent gap that existed pre-acquisition from under £600 per square foot rental, to over £1,000 per square foot rental, a figure subsequently achieved in December 2014. A spokesperson commented that although in 2016 they were still positive about growth it did have its challenges;

“The value has increased in ten years from the £870 million we bought it for, to over £2.2 billion today. So, it hasn’t dried up yet. But the businesses we are targeting are different. We have nine units going through this month, so we are still ok, but we are constantly changing” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

Capital and Counties’ strategy, to increase asset value through commercial diversity, was guided by the retail offer of Bond Street, which followed the introduction of premium comparison and convenience goods brands. To complement the premium retail offer Capital and Counties converted an area of the town centre to luxury residential apartments, which it argued was both bringing Covent Garden back to its 17th century residential roots and setting new standards for quality and pricing in the area. They suggest the decision to move

to a premium offer, in commerce and residential, complemented this strategy in that upmarket tenants were willing to pay higher rents, thus increasing their asset value.

### *The Covent Garden Area Trust (CGAT)*

The Covent Garden Area Trust was created in 1988 to preserve the historic architecture, environment and special unique qualities of the Covent Garden area. The Trust comprised of a council of representatives from its surrounding Local Authorities, community groups and nominees of designated bodies who reflect the public interest, and “ordinary” Trustees who are elected each year by the members at the Annual General Meeting. This composition however was an ideal, rather than a reality though as evidenced by the secretary of the Trust;

“It is difficult getting Local Authorities to sit on the Trust board, they promise they will send someone, but they are reluctant to get involved for some reason. Councils should be represented but they rarely turn up”

The aims of the Trust included the conservation of the Covent Garden area, its architectural character, its buildings and features of historical, or architectural interest, and the development of its special qualities in the public interest. By meeting these aims, the trustees hoped to protect and maintain the integrity of the town centre’s “protected lands”;

“The Trust has no direct involvement in attracting customers, or investment, we are here to control the protected lands. Our challenge is to balance the area with its roots, whilst meeting the modern needs of retailers, but retailing has changed from the 1980s when it was all independents, now it is all corporate and we need to develop our own tenant mix as we feel in some areas it is going too far” (Secretary of the Trust)

Whilst the Trust admitted a level of frustration at the direction of the commercial diversity of Covent Garden, it had little influence to shape it save for an influence over planning, development, and the promotion of the growth of new and traditional uses appropriate to the area, especially within the central core. Even this influence, however, was diminishing through the increased private ownership of Capital and Counties as they increased their asset base. In 2016, the Area Trust’s influence extended to a 150-year lease granted to the Trust, giving it specific preservation powers and duties over the “protected lands”, for which it received funding as an income on the ground rent. The Area Trust’s role in local

governance was through formal meetings to consider matters submitted by freeholders of the “protected lands”, therefore a priority for it was to continue to work closely with Capital and Counties, and the City of Westminster, as a Local Authority, to ensure that the recommendations of these meetings were delivered through their One City Programme. An example of the influence of the Area Trust was during the dispute of 1996 when the Trustees refused permission for a 700-seat restaurant, proposed by the then freeholder Scottish Widows, where although the Trust was taken to arbitration, it won its case.

#### *The Covent Garden Community Association (CGCA)*

The Community Association emerged as a response to the position of the Greater London Council’s decision to abolish and redevelop Covent Garden in 1971, when the community galvanised, and organised, through local actors to oppose plans to redevelop the area into a business and leisure district. As it transpired the development failed in part due to the economic downturn of the early 1970s, but the movement of the CGCA was established, not only as a preserver of community, but also as a regenerator as a voice of the community. In the early 1970s, after the Central Market had relocated and political procrastinations stalled redevelopment, Covent Garden became neglected and local bohemian activists, and artists took root and created “something different”. Unfortunately for the Community Association, their “something different” created sufficient interest in the mid-1980s to attract national and multiple retailers, and although their initial applications were blocked by the CGCA, the multiples and national retailers found a way into an area that was increasing in vitality and viability.

Despite the many changes in commercial activity since, the Community Association has continued to be the representative voice of the residents, business community and working population of Covent Garden, actively protecting and promoting their interests through close monitoring of - and robust responses to - planning and licensing applications, housing, traffic management, street lighting, the public realm and public safety. The Community Association aimed to be a neighbour with a specialised knowledge and skill gained from years of experience of successful negotiations with Local Authorities, central Government, developers and “all the powers that be”. It received no direct funding and relied on the generosity of volunteers who met once a fortnight to discuss how planning applications

affected the community, a community that offered a social foil to the economic bias of Capital and Counties, or the preservation policies of the Area Trust. Evidence from a member of the committee offered a social perspective of the challenge's residents encountered through retail change;

“There is a lot of noise, it is very dirty, and the area is full of drug dealers. You would think it would be quiet, but it is a very noisy business. The area has been affected by the right to buy policy, which changed the community. When you think you could buy a property and treble the value pretty much overnight, you could see the temptation. I live in a one bed roomed maisonette, owned by a housing trust. I still have the right to buy, but my property is now worth about £2 million and I would need a million to buy it, and I can't afford it even if I wanted to. Most Local Authorities now have little voice on planning applications, there is a new right to buy coming through and the Mayor can call in any application he wants, so the commissioning of services and the relaxation of planning applications has weakened the Local Authority. Decisions are now being made by external bodies, and they are not as concerned with local areas. When we first came to Covent Garden the applications were to convert flats to offices, now nearly every application is to convert offices into flats, so we have come full circle”

One would imagine that an increase in population would strengthen the hand of the Community Association, however the nature of the tenants, as will become evident from extracts from community spokespeople, had increasingly more in common with commerce than local socialism.

### *Influencers' strategies*

The constitution of the Community Association holds both social and physical influences, as it declared three primary objectives;

1. to stimulate public interest in the Covent Garden area, promote high standards of planning and architecture and to preserve and protect development and the improvement of buildings or features of historic or public interest;
2. to advance the education of the public in matters relating to mental, physical and social welfare; and,
3. to provide or assist in the provision of housing and associated amenities for persons in necessitous circumstances upon terms appropriate to their needs.

The Area Trust, by comparison has a legal obligation to maintain and preserve the “protected lands”, where preservation was defined as the conservation of the Covent Garden area, its architectural character, its buildings and features of historical, or architectural interest, and the development of its special qualities in the public interest. In addition, the Area Trust aims to promote high standards of planning, and to improve the promotion of the growth of new and traditional uses appropriate to the area.

Capital and Counties’ strategies are to prioritise a growth in economic value as a property company with a strong emphasis on distinctive place-making, and to deliver sustainable growth and long-term market leading returns for shareholders. Focussing on central London developments, Capital and Counties aim to grow creatively, commercially and responsibly, through strategies that continue to drive rental growth through granular asset management, acquisitions and selective development. These objectives are met by attracting tenants who will increase rental values and, set new pricing levels for residential space.

Finding a common ground between these three institutions, as a form of *created partnership*, had the potential to be more problematic than other local governance forms, primarily due to a coming together of strong – and very different - cultural paradigms. For example, the cultural paradigms of the Community Association and the Area Trust had been forged through quite dramatic social struggles, since the early 1970s, into cultural paradigms that believed Covent Garden “should be of the people and for the people”. This had contrasting beliefs to the commercial motives, and economic values of Capital and Counties. Admittedly there was more natural empathy between the Area Trust and the Community Association, as both held social motives however, there was also little evidence that they consulted each other on matters of mutual importance. At first glance, therefore, any meaningful and shared cultural values as institutional capacity amongst all three would appear unlikely, however institutional capacity is not always perceived purely as a Gramscian, hegemonic coming together of “intellectual and moral unity ... on a ‘universal’ plane” (cited in Davies and Trounstone, 2012 p.2691) rather it is, as Gonzalez and Healey (2005) suggest, often created by actors who contribute by challenging existing boundaries with new practices within not only “the setting of struggle”, but also “the stakes of that

struggle” Kipfer (2002, page 138). The “struggle” in Covent Garden was not typical of many town centres, as its strategic components were culturally diverse (commercial gain, social responsibility, and cultural preservation) however, there was a commonality to be found amongst the parochial natures of these dominant influencers, where a degree of institutional togetherness was forged by the absence of a State authority. For example, following the sale of the freehold in 2008, Capital and Counties assumed the responsibility of commercial landlord, and the provider of local services. Within this process the State was effectively reduced to a facilitator of services;

“Westminster Council has no money...they are supposed to maintain the area, but we do it for them...and we employ ex-Council officials to smooth the development of the area”  
(Capital and Counties spokesperson)

What a culturally weak Local Authority created was an equally strong private authority, one that had local interests at heart. This was not to suggest there was an absence of Local Authority, for as Morgan *et al.*, (1999, p. 196) suggest the notion of “governing without Government” is a “fatal conceit”, however in the cracks created by the diminished role of the State, Capital and Counties assumed the role of State and landlord, a position that wielded a significant influence as evidenced by a member of the Community Association;

“The trust is soft with Capital and Counties, and they get 99% of what they want. Plus, the Trust only has influence over the protected lands, for which it receives a rent from the head-lease. So, it has no influence over most of Capital and Counties property and they are expanding, so their influence is less”

In assuming the role of the State, any sustainable institutional capacity in local governance was heavily influenced by Capital and Counties, for although the Community Association, and the Area Trust held influential positions they had diminished roles in most decisions, as evidenced by first the Community Association, and latterly the Area Trust;

“We have block meetings to ensure residents are aware of developments, but of the 6-7,000 residents only half are in social housing, or housing associations. The rest are very expensive properties that are bought off plan as soon as they are available, normally by private investors, who rent them out, or leave them vacant until they need them. There is consequently a smaller community than in the past, but we still have a strong core and are still passionate about what we do. We still have ties with developers as they will normally

come to us before they submit planning applications, as do the Trust, but I don't know of any developer that doesn't have a Local Authority planner on board to get things through".

"The Trust provides action when we need it. We cover all levels of government, from Local Authority to national Government and we are a powerful voice. No, not powerful, but influential. If diversity is within the protected lands the Trust decides what is acceptable and it doesn't go to planning approval. If diversity or change of use is outside the trusts area, then it goes to the Community Association to consider".

What differed with a private, as opposed to a State, authority is that Capital and Counties had to respect the legal boundaries of the Area Trust, and the Community Association, when devising their strategies. Therefore, rather than create any meaningful capacity of shared goals Capital and Counties compromised with the Community Association, and the Area Trust to "get the job done" (Le Feuvre *et al.*, 2016);

"The challenge with the Area Trust is that they want it all to look like a film set, but retailers don't want that anymore, so we have to try and work with both. How do we make grade 2 listed buildings meet changing retailers needs and keep the Area Trust happy? A lease is coming to an end on King Street and we aim to dig the basement out to make it more attractive. But how do you do that with a grade 2 listed building? You can consider the mess, but that is part of the challenge" (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

There was therefore some evidence of a coming together within each influential institution that embedded itself in a loose form of governance capacity, which in a town centre was to be expected. Thus, if the aims of the Area Trust were to protect and preserve the lands; the aims of Capital and Counties were to exploit the lands for commercial gain; and the role of the CGCA were to provide a social voice, then one would expect a level of compromise for a common cause. This was the fulcrum of a *created partnership*, in effect a compromise of mutually beneficial outcomes, where despite the strong cultural paradigms of each influencer there was enough common interest in the town centre to create an element of capacity. In effect, the differences they had created something that had a substance and process that was co-constituted, and not solely considered within their roles as separate spheres (Gualini, 2001).



## 7.7 Influencers' impact on measures vitality and viability

### *Impact on rental yields*

The significant increase in the value of rental yields could be attributed to the strategy adopted by Capital and Counties;

“Our strategy is based around the opportunity in the asset value of Covent Garden. The area was attracting £400-£500 per square foot when we took over the head lease, now we have passed the £2,000 per square foot barrier for the first time. When you consider that Bond Street and Westfield were achieving £800 per square foot in 2013 the estate was massively undervalued”

### *Impact on diversity*

Covent Garden had a strong retail sector and a vibrant night-time economy, both of which owed much to the town centre's position within the city of London. To take advantage of the vitality of its location, Capital and Counties attempted to micro-manage commercial, and structural diversity with aggressive strategies, which shaped their vision of the town centre;

“We make tough decisions if we feel that a tenant does not fit with our aims. We had a pasta restaurant that had a very successful business, but he didn't look the part and we wanted him out. The problem was that he had a long lease, so, we paid him off to the tune of £2 million to get him out of the lease and relocated him out of the main commercial area. We would still consider buying a lease, but we are not paying over the odds, we would not pay market values now. Retail is still the key for us as residential is slow, although the rental market is very good, we had to keep the two penthouses off the market for a couple of years and they are now on and getting some interest. Commercial always goes in cycles, always has, one year it's up and the next its down, but retail is the best value and still our priority. We are keen to get new, interesting retailers into the centre, Steak Shack only has one other outlet in New York, so on a recent trip we convinced them to open in Covent Garden and the result has been phenomenal. Equally, we were very keen to get Chanel in as it then attracts other retailers, so we allow them the space they want at peppercorn rent and, again the shop has been very successful. Our aim is to be a place for first's that creates its own interests. For example, some of the guys don't like the fact that Tesco is on the estate, they feel it is too downmarket and they would like it gone”

By contrast, the influence of the Area Trust over diversity was limited to maintaining the cultural heritage of the town centre, which in turn had an impact on vitality through increased tourism. The Area Trust however suggested they did have an influence on planning, which Capital and Counties had to be mindful of;

“We have no direct involvement in attracting customers, or investors. That’s Capital and Counties’ area, we are here to control the protected lands. Our challenge is to balance the area with its roots, whilst meeting the modern needs of retailers which has changed from the 1980s when it was all independents and nobody but them wanted to be here, now everybody wants to be here. We have lost that balance, that individuality, but that’s the way now, it is all corporate. So, our role is increasing due to changing shopping habits. We are a Government appointed body for the area, to preserve and protect the central area, so development within this area is not approved if we feel it is unsuitable”

“Capital and Counties know not to ask for things they know will not get past us, so we have never felt the need to refer decisions. We have only had one dispute and that was in 1996 against Scottish Widows, who held the freehold before Capital and Counties, which we won, along with the Community Association and another small organisation that looks after an adjoining area. We had an application for a 400-seat restaurant where the Apple store is now. We were never told what the restaurant would be, but we had a feeling it had a yellow M in it” (Area Trust spokesperson)

The lack of influence on diversity led to a frustration on the part of the Area Trust, as they felt in some areas that consumerism was going too far however, they conceded that influencing diversity and change required a level of compromise. Capital and Counties had improved the town centre, and change necessitated a degree of flexibility the Area Trust felt they did not have. As if to highlight the flexibility required, Capital and Counties commented on the seemingly impossible task of matching commercial diversity to a consumer base that was constantly changing;

“High end retail is losing ground, so we are moving on from that. Chanel will sell sunglasses and make up, but it won’t sell handbags, so we have moved on from the luxury targets, we realise we have to try and match the people of Covent Garden with our retail offer. Now in times of such retail change that is a real challenge because people are shopping differently now” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

### *Impact on vacancy rates*

Vacancy rates in Covent Garden were more reflective of strategic positioning, than a symptom of retail change;

“We have a commercial team that actively chases retail and leisure to ensure we have the best fit and we don’t mind if there is an empty unit. We have a definite plan of where we want to be. Generally, we grant ten-year leases with a five-year break, but if we like you it may be longer. If we don’t we will only offer a five-year deal, and all are outside the Landlord and Tenancy Act, so you have no right to renew the lease on completion” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

Although the town centre in 2016 was considered healthy, with a small number of vacant units deemed necessary to control market rents and the tenant profile, the rates revaluation planned by the Valuation Office (VOA) in 2017, in which they were anticipating rates rises upward of 33%, caused some concern for Capital and Counties;

“Something that concerns us greatly is the rates review next year. We have had meetings and have been told they will rise significantly. Now we have retailers that will be subject to these rates rises, and that could be tough for them. Although we are cushioned with leases the results could be that retailers go out of business, or pull out of the leases, something we don’t want. Our plan is to try and put a package together that has both rent and rates, but that is still in process and we won’t be able to reduce the rates, but it is something we are considering. A further challenge is that some of our leases are turnover leases, so if the retailer loses money so do we. So, we have to find a way to keep investors coming to Covent Garden” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

If Capital and Counties had unexpected vacant units, they adopted short-term strategies to maintain the attractiveness of the centre;

“We will offer vacant units as pop-up shops for short periods, but they would still be targeted retailers. These normally result in a lease which can then be negotiated and perhaps in a different area of the estate. The one exception was the rugby World cup, but that was a one off and was very successful” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

### *Impact on footfall*

Footfall within Covent Garden was monitored hourly, and the trend was that it was falling, as it was across London. There was a recognition that with changing consumer behaviour, footfall would continue on a downward trend;

“Footfall is down right across London, so we are not on our own and we don’t expect it to increase in the foreseeable future because people are shopping differently. People may go into Bobbi Brown or Clinique and have a treatment, but that doesn’t mean they will buy from them, as they may go home and buy it online. So, the way people shop is changing, and we have to be aware of that” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

With a decrease of retail consumers, footfall became increasingly reliant on the diversity that Covent Garden could offer to sustain customer flows. This again was primarily influenced by Capital and Counties through a significant marketing budget, although the Area Trust had an influence through licences to the street traders that attracted a significant volume of tourists. To complement the strategies of the Area Trust, Capital and Counties

created an interest through cultural installations that offered an alternative to the historic culture of the protected lands. These served a dual purpose as they created a form of theatre that complimented the cultural heritage of the town centre, a theatre that was maintained even during preservation works that were essential to the maintenance of the town centre;

“For 2016 we have to do some glazing works and we have a reduced marketing budget, so we will tie in with the hoardings around the Piazza to make it an attraction. People don’t want to see scaffolding and hoardings, so we make a feature of it, to try and turn a negative into a positive that creates interest...we also have a repair programme where we are repaving the area around the Church and parts of Henrietta Street. Now it will look great when it’s done in York stone, but we have to manage that so that it doesn’t put people off” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

Despite the success of Covent Garden, there were constant challenges to maintain footfall to the town centre. For example, the proximity of competing centres (cited examples were Bond Street and the Westfield Centre) required a constant re-invention of the town centre which required a significant capital investment, not only to promote the town centre but also, in the absence of a State presence, to preserve the maintenance and security of the area;

“Two of our greatest challenges are keeping the area clean and tidy, and security. Cleaning should be down to the Council, but they have no money, so we do it ourselves at a considerable cost. And what happened in Paris [the Bataclan attack] is at the front of everyone’s mind, and it is perhaps our biggest challenge going forward. We have increased our security guards from eight to twenty-one in the day and put fourteen extra on at night, at a cost of around £1.5 million, so that is a huge cost. But if the same thing happened in Covent Garden it would be horrendous. The result of a terrorist attack would be disastrous, so we have no choice but to show a presence that will hopefully act as a deterrent” (Capital and Counties spokesperson)

## 7.8 Discussion

### *Local governance*

To define Covent Garden as a *created partnership* would appear a misnomer, for although there was evidence of a cross-over of mutual local interest, there was little evidence of a sustained partnership, or indeed any formal coming together towards a common purpose. A contributing factor was that Covent Garden’s influencers had radically opposing cultural

paradigms, therefore the *created partnership* in the town centre consisted of no more than informal, temporal collaborations in space and time (Davies, 2002; Carmona, 2014). Furthermore, whilst there was little doubt there was a mutual interest in the town centre, any influence over commercial KPIs was weighted towards Capital and Counties, as a landlord and as a provider of funding, a role that was galvanised as a consequence of a shrinking of the local State (Smith and Jones, 2015).

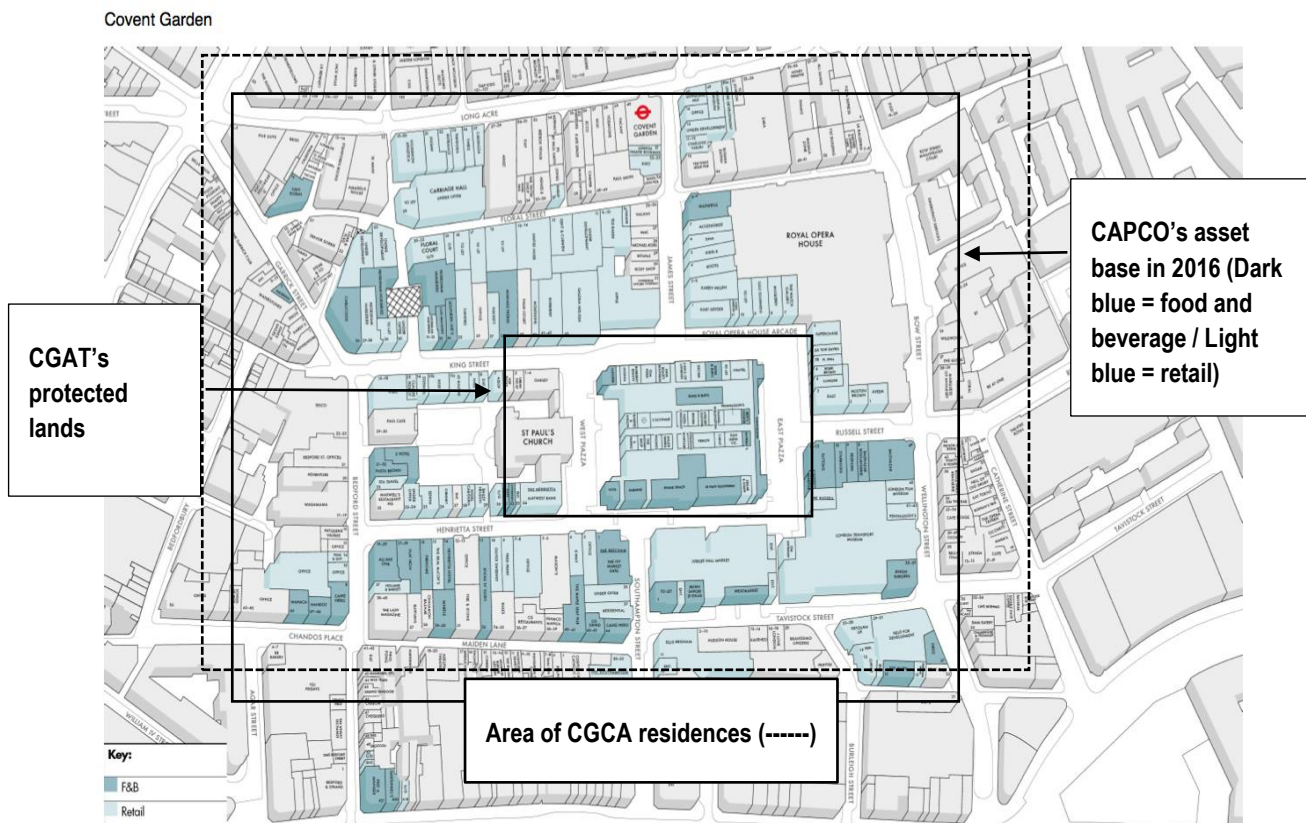


Figure 7. 7; Local governance map of Covent Garden

We should however not be too alarmed by the myopic strategies of Capital and Counties, for as Cook suggests “business elites, and businesses, view their participation in local governance as an ‘investment’ that needs to accrue significant financial returns...in the absence of the State, or a diminished State involvement, the “partnership” adopts a commercial bias that perceives financial return as the benchmark of success or failure” (2009 p.2). This view supports Peck’s (1995) argument that it is State restructuring and the licensing out of State power that creates the institutional space for business elites and businesses to occupy in the first place. Capital and Counties’ position therefore was purely a

transfer of influence, one which reflected time. As Carmona (2014 p.26) suggests “left to their own devices, the “natural” but unknowing processes of use will continue to shape and re-shape the existence of place. Rarely, however, is urban space left to its own devices as almost all space [to a greater, or lesser degree] is managed”. Consequently, any management posited the “greatest power in the hands of those with the resources to actually deliver new development, the developers and investors” (Lang, 1994 p.457).

This did not alter the fact that change in who influenced had the ability to frustrate other players (Hebbert, 1998), however influence was/is temporal, in both time and place, and any “processes of change are continually defined and moulded by allied historic and contemporary process of place, polity and power” (Carmona, 2014 p. 33). Subsequently when the public freehold of assets in Covent Garden were sold, a significant portion of political influence was sold with it therefore, the polity, processes and influence of Covent Garden were therefore a reflection of time, or at least the time of this thesis.

For example, in the 1970s, Covent Garden required radical social action to oppose unnecessary and damaging redevelopment; in the 1980s, it required direction and funding to protect its heritage; and in the present day it attracts people and commerce as a place that embodies consumerism. Capital and Counties accepted that compromise through a *created partnership* was a pill it must swallow, however it did so in the knowledge that any partnership would enhance the profitability of its assets. As Wood *et al.*, (1998) argue this is not to say that other factors, such as a cultural attachment to place, were not important rather, it is to say that they were often only secondary considerations.

Time has therefore “created” a local governance where the Area Trust, Capital and Counties and the Community Association function as a “partnership” through a “purposeful strategic relationship between independent firms who share compatible goals, [and] strive for mutual benefit...to achieve goals that each firm, acting alone, could not attain easily” (Mohr and Spekman, 1994 p. 135). The economic agenda is influenced by Capital and Counties; and the cultural and community agendas by the Area Trust and the Community Association. Are they created? Yes, much in the same way that evolving change requires collaboration and different ways to address challenges, however any influence over vitality and viability was

not met as part of a collective group, rather it was influenced by following individual goals. In 2018, Capital and Counties had created a shopping centre model, the major elements of which were the tenant mix, the product range and the atmosphere (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Capital and Counties strategies were seen as timely and the most capable, therefore it was incumbent on it to increase the centres attractiveness of diverse formats and consequently enhance competitiveness (Jones *et al.*, 2016), and as it owns the freehold it would be natural to assume any bias would reflect its interests. Capital and Counties perceived diversity as an essential element of the economic vitality of the town centre (Jones *et al.* 2016), where the composition of a successful centre was a combination of location, layout, market forces and physical environment, with high rental/market values signifying attractiveness. It is hardly surprising therefore that Capital and Counties retained a distance from the Area Trust and the Community Association as their cultural values differed fundamentally from each other.

Capital and Counties' influence however, is as fragile as the previous custodians of the Garden. At present it is the dominant institution, however its influence is in maintaining a balanced tenant mix, balanced not only within its strategic aims, but also with the town centre consumers. This is an art, performed by the town centres' commercial management team, however as each possible mixture of tenants makes a distinctive contribution to the image of the shopping centre, how is it possible to identify an ideal, or balanced tenant mix (Yuo *et al.*, 2004)? Moreover, tenant mix is not a static condition as the market changes over time, as do the customer preferences and fashion trends. Therefore, even the ideal condition achieved in one season, or period might not be suitable for the next. This has implications not only for the influence of Capital and Counties, but also by association for the Area Trust and the Community Association.

*The impact on commercial measures of vitality and viability*

<b>Influencers</b>	<b>Rental Yields</b>	<b>Footfall</b>	<b>Vacancy Rates</b>	<b>Diversity</b>
<b>Capital and Counties plc.</b>	Rental yields have increased significantly since the privatisation of Covent Garden	Although footfall is falling across the capital it is starting from a base that has seen significant increases since privatisation-	Vacancy rates are low and most probably a consequence of waiting for the right tenant, rather than jeopardising commercial diversity	Covent Garden is micro-managed for a balanced economy. Tenants are chosen for their contribution to the “centre” and fit a strategic model
<b>CGAT</b>	No evidence of any influence	The cultural and historic piazza, along with St Pauls forms a major attraction for visitors in Covent Garden	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.
<b>CGCA</b>	No evidence of any influence.	There is evidence that the CGCA contributes to footfall through their robust stance on planning applications.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.

Figure 7. 8; Influencer’s impact on commercial measures of vitality and viability

At the time of this study, the impact of influencers on commercial measures of vitality and viability were generally high with rental yields, footfall and vacancy rates all measuring favourably with inner London, and UK averages. This was not particularly surprising as Capital and Counties micro-managed its commercial environment, however what was of interest was how Capital and Counties, and other influencers, achieved their “success”;

1. Firstly, the flexible retail strategies of Capital and Counties were both local and timely. Furthermore, Capital and Counties sought retailers that would add to the uniqueness of Covent Garden, which diverged from the retail strategies of Wrexham and Warrington’s influencers as it avoided a homogenous model of retail development.



2. Secondly, the influencers of Covent Garden each had a specific, yet independent, and complementary role in town centre governance. For example, Capital and Counties were free to experiment with their commercial strategies because the attraction of Covent Garden allowed them to do so. Undoubtedly there were constraints on how far they could go as they were held in check by both the Area Trust and the Community Association however, they were initially attracted to “something” in 2006 and they were careful not to damage it.
  
3. Finally, Warrington and Wrexham’s influencers lamented that due to retail change they had to “create something” in the town centre, and whilst Covent Garden undoubtedly had advantages as a central London location, and a focus of commerce for the past 300 years, it too had been neglected, resurrected, and shaped by retail change. In effect the town centre was subjected to the same choices that faced both Wrexham and Warrington’s influencers, yet although central London is a competitive place Covent Garden continues to be a commercial “success”. A contributing factor was undoubtedly the myopic and parochial mind-set of its influencers, who were local with a big “L”. They were passionate about their local business, their local community, and their local heritage, in effect their cultural paradigms aided the vitality and viability of the town centre.

## Chapter 8; Stockton Heath - Governance mode: *Market Mediated Anarchy*

### 8.1 Context

Stockton Heath is a district town in Cheshire, which unlike Covent Garden, does not possess any unique cultural heritage, nor any national political value. Neither does it have many of the political, and economic challenges that Warrington's, or Wrexham's influencers face. What it does have is a vitality and viability rating that is the envy of many town centres, with low vacancy rates, relatively high yields, and a diverse retail offer. Moll's map of Cheshire, in 1739, recorded Stockton Heath as a "hamlet of little consequence". Located two miles outside Warrington, it is a town that, in many ways, has remained of "little consequence".

Its cultural heritage consists of a public house that has traded in the town since 1725; a local church at St. Thomas's, erected in 1868; the Manchester Ship Canal, whose waters have passed through the town since 1772; and a tenuous connection to the popular music hall entertainer George Formby, whose family moved to Stockton Heath in 1914. Equally, its national political value is of "little consequence" as its political influence falls under the auspices of a local parish council, a council that still proclaims one of its finest acts was to rename 'Pigeon Bank' in the centre of the town as 'Victoria Square' in homage to Queen Victoria in 1897.

The political landscape did change in the late 1960s when Stockton Heath was incorporated into Warrington Borough Council as part of the New Town Development Corporation however, the influence of Warrington's Local Authority on the retail landscape has been to retain the village's charm, rather than any radical retail development. Where Stockton Heath's town centre is of "some consequence" is in its commercial value. In this respect it shares similarities with Covent Garden, and is the envy of both Warrington and Wrexham. Indeed its consistently low vacancy rates, and relatively high commercial yields prompted White, Young and Green (WYG) consultants, in 2015, to suggest that with an affluent population of approximately 6000, and Stockton Heath's status as a conservation area, the town centre has a broad appeal, attracting consumers from all areas of the borough; to the North from Appleton, an area of significant and affluent residential development; to the

South from Warrington, particularly Stockton Heath’s restaurants and bars; to the West from Lymm; and to the East from Runcorn, and Widnes.

Warrington Borough Council, who in 1988 designated much of Stockton Heath a conservation area to preserve its character, go further declaring the town centre as “their jewel in the crown”, a perception that was further enhanced in the late 1990s when Victoria Square was redeveloped to attract key national tenants, an increased leisure facility and several new bars and restaurants. What is of interest is that the town centre has achieved its elevated commercial position with relatively little State intervention, or co-ordinated private strategies. Indeed, the footprint of Stockton Heath’s town centre today has changed little over the past hundred years. What has changed is its commercial diversity, which has been both fluid and dynamic, as the timber yards and ironmongers of the past have been replaced by restaurants, wine bars and fashion boutiques. This has created a demand for space within the town centre, a demand that ensures low vacancy rates and relatively high yields. Sections 8.2-8.4 adopt the retail change structure of chapter 1 to provide a summary of the changing town centre retail landscape in the period 1960–2018; the policy initiatives that have impacted on it; and the commercial, cultural and social initiatives which have created the retail landscape of Stockton Heath’s town centre.

## 8.2 The 1960s and 1970s retail landscape; from post War decline to retail alliances?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
<p>In the 1960s and 1970s the town centre retail landscape consisted of mostly small and diverse independent businesses.</p>	<p>Stockton Heath Parish Council is incorporated into Warrington Borough Council in 1968.</p> <p>The New Town Development policy attracts new retail investment into Stockton Heath.</p>	<p>Town centre governance is through clear divisions of Market Mediated Anarchy and local government.</p>
<p>The “Forge” shopping centre opens in 1968 attracting fashion and food retailers from Warrington to the growing affluent district of Stockton Heath</p>		

Figure 8. 1; 1960s and 1970s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Stockton Heath’s town centre

Photographic evidence of Stockton Heath in the 1960s depicts a town centre that remained relatively unchanged from that of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (figure 8.2). It was a town centre retail landscape that catered for a local population, consisting of ironmongers, timber yards, record shops, fishmongers, cafes and bookstores, amongst many other local businesses that was comprised mainly of independent retailers who lived and traded in the town centre. The retail landscape of the town centre did witness some change in this period with the redevelopment of the Forge shopping centre, created as part of the Warrington's New Town initiative in 1968. Anchored by a new large convenience store, the Forge provided additional retail space for fashion and comparison goods retailers who had relocated from Warrington's town centre.



Figure 8. 2; the landscape of Stockton Heath's town centre in 1965 has changed little since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (source; The Francis Frith Collection).

### 8.3 The 1980s and 1990s retail landscape; a period of retail change and collective responsibilities?

Retail landscape	Political landscape / macro policy response	Micro governance response
<p>A large section of the town centre is designated a conservation area by Warrington Borough Council to protect its heritage, with planning policies designed to preserve the “jewel in the crown” (1988)</p>	<p>The planning application for Victoria Square is initially met with local objections as it proposes a solely food venture for nine restaurants</p>	<p>Town centre governance is through clear divisions of Market Mediated Anarchy and local government.</p>
<p>The Co-Operative open a 10,000 square foot supermarket in the Forge shopping centre, replacing the Safeway store (1995)</p>		
<p>Sainsburys open a 3,000 square foot convenience store in the town centre (1997)</p>		
<p>Local fashion retailers and hairdressers move into the town centre, replacing ironmongers and record stores. The town centre has four banks, three building societies, a post office, a fishmonger, three bakeries, a greengrocer, and two butchers among its retail offer.</p>		
<p>A planning application to redevelop a 30,000 retail and leisure facility at Victoria Square is lodged in 1999 by Capital and Provincial, a London based property developer.</p>		

Figure 8. 3; 1980s and 1990s town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Stockton Heath’s town centre

The retail landscape of the 1980s and 1990s was largely a period of organic change, as the Co-Operative took over the supermarket lease at the Forge shopping centre, the Local Authority protected the architectural integrity of Victoria Square by designating it a conservation area, and independent retailers organically evolved (when the ironmongers and record shops closed they were replaced by fashion shops and cafes).

There were also two significant developments in this period; the first in 1997 when Sainsbury’s signed a 99-year lease on 3,000 square foot convenience store on redeveloped land on the site of the old timber yard; the second was a planning application, lodged in 1999, to redevelop Victoria Square, a conservation area that had fallen into a state of disrepair. The planning application came from Capital and Provincial, a London based

property whose mission was to “identify and invest in added-value situations, providing focused knowledge-based expertise to a variety of commercial opportunities” (Capitalandprovincial.com, 2018). Originally built in the late 1800s, Victoria Square housed a restaurant at first-floor level, and various retail outlets facing the town centre. The commercial opportunity for Capital and Provincial came in the form of a new 30,000 square foot restaurant and retail development that would sit behind the existing façade. The plan was to extend the ground floor forward in order to create a terrace at first floor level and add two facsimile wings on the open land. There were no recorded interventions into town centre governance in this period; therefore it was assumed that governance followed a form of market mediated anarchy, which influenced organic changes in the retail environment, and the Local Authority who created a conservation area and supported the planning application from Capital and Provincial.

#### 8.4 The retail landscape from 2000 to 2019; towards an alternative future?

Retail landscape	Political landscape/macro policy response	Micro governance response
The Victoria Square redevelopment attracts national retailers and restaurants when it opens in 2003, and retail diversity evolves further when national and international chains are also attracted to the town centre.	The Parish Council designate a town centre committee specifically to enforce the conservation area guidelines.  The planning application for Victoria Square is passed in 2000. The application is revised to six food outlets and three comparison goods units. It opens in 2003	Town centre governance is through clear divisions of Market Mediated Anarchy (through the activities of mainly independent businesses) and local government (WBC and the Parish Council who influence Stockton Heath as Local Authorities)
The town centre’s fire station is sold to a private property developer in 2003. Nando’s sign a forty-year lease in 2006 on the redeveloped property.	The first Stockton Heath festival is planned for 2006. Its aims are to increase the attractiveness of the town centre to residents and visitors. By 2014 the festival had outgrown the town and was relocated to a community field on the edge of town. In 2019 it competes directly with the retailers of the town centre with stalls and fast food retail offers.	
In 2009 two building societies close. They are replaced by a fashion boutique and a charity shop.	The Parish Council become the first “village” to achieve “Purple Flag Status” in 2011. The scheme is disbanded in 2014 having achieved its aims.	
In 2017 two of the four banks in the town centre close and the Post Office relocates to a small store in a secondary area. They are replaced by restaurants and cafes.	Peel Holdings propose the “Atlantic Gateway” development utilising the Manchester Ship Canal as a freight highway from Liverpool to Manchester, choosing Warrington Borough Council as a strategic partner.	
The café culture increases in the town centre accounting for over 40% of the available floor space.	The first retail audit is conducted in 2012 by Martin Tonks. This is followed by a more detailed assessment in 2015 by WYG consultants.	

Figure 8. 4; The post 2000 town centre retail landscape, policy responses and micro governance reactions in Stockton Heath’s town centre

In the early noughties, the retail landscape was heavily influenced by the redevelopment of Victoria Square (figure 8.4), a collaboration between the Local Authority, who consented to a planning application on a rundown conservation listed part of the town centre, and a London based property developer, Capital and Provincial.



Figure 8. 5; the redevelopment of Victoria Square (before redevelopment, left, 1997– after redevelopment right, 2003)

The original application was submitted for an upmarket restaurant development however pressure from residents, and local businesses resulted in a mixed development of restaurants and leisure. The impact of the redevelopment, when it opened in 2003, was significant, as it effectively changed the dynamic of the town centre. The area around the Victoria Square suddenly became attractive to many complementary retailers for example, a 10,000 square foot disused fire station on London Road was redeveloped with a national food retailer taking a forty-year lease, and many national retailers were attracted by the town's increased vitality, as Costa Coffee, ALDI, and Marks and Spencer all opened retail units in the town centre. To complement the influx of retail development many local independent boutiques and beauty therapists also moved into the area around the new development at Victoria Square.

A further effect of the redevelopment was to create a divide of leisure and function within the town centre through retail agglomeration, the old area became a home to functional retailers (the Post Office, banks, funeral parlours, fishmongers and butchers); the

redeveloped area became a home to restaurants, beauty therapists and boutiques. In the late 2000s, this divide created an area of retail change when many of the functional retailers closed their doors or relocated away from the town centre (the fishmongers closed in 2008; the Post Office relocated in 2015; and, the banks and building societies closed in 2009 and 2017). In time, the functional retailers were replaced by cafés, beauty therapists, fashion retailers and charity shops thus defining the town centre with an increased leisure offer.

## **8.5 Relative performance of vitality and viability measures**

### *Rental yield*

Rental values in primary areas of the town centre increased from £38 per square foot in 2006, to £45 per square foot in 2016, with rental yields remaining constant at 5-6% over the same period. Rental values in secondary areas of the town centre also increased from £22 per square foot in 2006, to an average of £28 per square foot in 2016. Again, they offered a similar yield value of between 5–6%. WYG consultant's report of 2014 suggests that asking rents in Stockton Heath's town centre were the highest of Warrington's three district centres.

### *Diversity*

Commercial diversity was considered "good" in the town, although the proportion of convenience goods units in the centre was slightly below the national average. This could largely be attributed to a Morrisons supermarket located in an edge of centre position, which being the largest unit in the immediate area, provided a substantially greater level of floor-space than the small-scale traditional units present in the town centre. To complement the edge of centre Morrison's store the town centre also had a strong convenience offer, with representations from Aldi, Marks and Spencer's and Sainsbury's. However, whilst the convenience diversity compared well to national averages WYG consultants noted that the town centre was under-represented in relation to comparison goods, when compared to national figures. They suggest this was not surprising as most of the retail units were operated by independent retailers, something that was considered both as a positive for the town as they provided a unique offer, and a negative as the size of available units restricted use to this type of retailer. To complement the unique independent offer the town was well



represented in the service industry with banks, health and beauty services, restaurants, fast food take outlets, cafes, bars and public houses.

#### *Vacancy rates*

In 2014 the town centre had eight vacant units representing a vacancy rate of 5.7%, which was significantly below the national average. These vacancies were dispersed throughout the centre, indicating that there were no areas that were perceived as being undesirable to operators. At the time of the Warrington Retail Centre Report in 2012, there were three vacant units present in Stockton Heath district centre thus there had been an increase in the number of vacant units present in the centre since 2012. However, the units which were vacant in 2012 differed from those in 2014, indicating that there has been a recycling of space, rather than long-term retail vacancies. In June 2018 there were two vacant units in the town centre, ensuring that the town centre had maintained a vacancy rate that has consistently out-performed UK averages for the past ten years. In addition, operator demand in the town centre was high, a contributing factor arguably being the desire of local landlords to react and negotiate rents on obsolete units.

#### *Footfall*

There were no official statistics for the town centre readily available, although WYG consultants suggested that general pedestrian flows in Stockton Heath district centre were noted during their site visit on Monday 10th November 2014. They observed reasonable levels of pedestrian flows throughout the centre, with the greatest levels of activity along the main arterial route of London Road, the Forge Shopping Centre and the edge of town Morrisons store. Some pedestrians were witnessed walking between the Morrisons store and the remainder of the district centre, however a majority of customers appeared to be arriving at the store by private modes of transport.

#### *Summary of the relative performance across the four indicators*

In summary, WYG consultants noted that Stockton Heath's town centre provided a diverse retail and service offer, where specialist shops and independent retailers helped to create an interesting retail offer. There was a good representation from national multiple retailers, which combined with the independent retailers, provided a good balance of complementary

facilities, and in addition there was a good representation from the leisure service sector which helped to create a vibrant night-time economy. Vacancy levels, of available commercial units, were low which helped to create an attractive and appealing centre, and although the town centre contained a lower proportion of comparison goods floor-space when compared to the national average, this was to be expected given the scale of the centre and the footprint of the available units. The consultant's suggested the town centre had an advantage over nearby towns, due to a higher proportion of respondents visiting Stockton Heath in the evening. A potential weakness, however, was that the town centre can become busy at times in terms of traffic, and although the centre benefited from a strong walk-in catchment, respondents to the in-street survey considered the centre would benefit from additional car parking.

## **8.6 Local governance**

### *Influencers*

A governance form of market mediated anarchy, or free market governance, may suggest few, if any, dominant influencers. Rather influence is held in the hands of many competing interests who collectively create something through a sum of their parts. The caveat, within academic literature, is that forms of governance without an element of government influence is a "fatal conceit" (Morgan *et al.*, 1999, p. 196), therefore there is a recognition that there will always a level of government influence in the governance of town centres (for example, in the guise of planning, highways and infrastructure). However, in a market mediated form of governance the influence of government, on day to day commercial vitality and viability, is limited to roles of an advisory and regulatory capacity, rather than being overtly strategic in influencing footfall, diversity, rental yields and values or vacancy rates.

The governance form of *Market Mediated Anarchy (MMA)* in Stockton Heath therefore acknowledges the strategic role that Warrington Borough Council, and the Parish Council performs, however it suggests that influence over day to day commercial vitality and viability, is held with the independent retailers and landlords, as they own, and occupy, over eighty percent of available properties. Thus, the influencers of Stockton Heath's commercial

vitality and viability are identified as; the Stockton Heath Parish Council; a collective movement of independent traders (the Promote Stockton Heath Group), and; the local independent retailers and landlords.

### *The Stockton Heath Parish Council*

The influence of the locally elected Parish Council extended to preserving the conservation status of the village; raising and championing local issues that affected the village with the Borough council (for example, parking facilities); and working in association with external stakeholders to promote the village. To perform its civic duties, the Parish Council received funding by the way of an annual precept of £79,000 from the Local Authority (the 2016 nominated percentage of band “D” properties). One of the most notable achievements of the Parish Council was their collaboration with the Association of Town and City Management to gain the award of the “Purple Flag”. They were particularly proud as they were the first “village” in Britain to achieve the standard, which demanded a commitment to high and sustainable standards, and rewarded communities that made their town centres vibrant, clean, welcoming and safe. The criteria for the award was based on the merits of Stockton Heath’s varied and vibrant shops; its attractive park, floral tubs and hanging baskets; its lively and thriving cafes and coffee houses; and, its diverse and popular restaurants, and well managed and family friendly pubs. The Parish Council believed the award also had social benefits as it promoted inclusivity by bringing together the young and the old, amateurs and professionals, and residents and community leaders to form the steering group that guided the bid. The Council identified some of the initiatives from the “Purple flag” that benefitted the town centre as; liaising with businesses to make toilets available to the public; making business and domestic properties more attractive to buyers; establishing standards in which all partners co-operated in achieving and are working to maintain; and providing a boost to the village economy.

In addition to the “Purple Flag” award the Parish Council identified other town centre initiatives it believed contributed to the “success” of Stockton Heath as an annual Summer festival, and Winter market; and an annual walking day parade. There was little doubt that the Parish Council, and indeed the Local Authority, held the town centre in high regard, and to maintain their influence they appointed a village committee that met several times

during the year to maintain standards. The advice the village committee gave during 2016 included guidance on; shop signage; street planting; festival flags; Christmas decorations and maintaining the War Memorial.

Evidence taken from the minutes of Parish Council meetings, in the period December 2014–April 2016, identifies the strategies, and activity of both the Council and the village committee specific to the town centre;

*A Spring clean of the village centre*

“As a community involvement project, plans are being developed for a tidy and clean of Stockton Heath village centre...involving up to fifty college Students. The Parish Council is working closely with Warrington Borough Council for assistance, to borrow equipment, to ensure the event is run safely and is a success. Consideration is also to be given for the clerk to write / email the local traders to tell them about the event and to ask them for their support to keep the village looking tidy. A suggestion was made to rename the event as ‘Clean for the Queen’ to fit in with the national campaign”

*Shopfront Design Guide*

“The council have devised a ‘Stockton Heath Parish Council Shopfront Design Guide’ which brings together advice from Warrington Borough Council and elsewhere. The aim is to show support by the parish council for businesses and to promote high quality design standards across the village. The guide is for anyone wishing to open a shop, make changes to their existing shop or display advertisements. Copies of the guide might be placed with commercial estate agents in the area in order to share information with traders at the earliest opportunity”

*Christmas Lights Switch On*

“As previously agreed, there is to be no stage this year, but it is hoped to have a small podium on which the Chair will be able to stand to switch on the Christmas Lights. The Clerk told Members that discussions with the Parish Council’s risk management support services provider, Terrain, and Warrington Borough Council events department recommended the placing of marshals at the breaks in the railings around Victoria Square to prevent pedestrians stepping back into oncoming traffic. A councillor volunteered to help with this and to hand out carol sheets”

*Parking*

“There has been some upset in the Village from traders...regarding parking in the area. A local retailer has reported that all traders have noticed a distinct drop in footfall since the arrival of Marks and Spencer’s. He has written a letter to the Assistant Director of Transport and Environment, Warrington Borough Council, and to South Warrington News, to consider an emergency measure of offering a free 20 minute parking period and then a charge of £1 for three hours to incentivise people to extend their visit into Stockton Heath Village... the meeting found a consensus in favour of developing a ‘Considerate Parking Campaign’ led by the Parish Council with assistance from the other bodies represented at the meeting”

#### *Re-paint Planters in the Village*

“The Clerk enquired if the Members thought the planters in the village required painting prior to Summer bedding. The Members agreed to request the Parish Ranger to brush around and clean the planter adjacent to the bus stop before making any further decisions. A Councillor advised that there were the ‘A’ boards of a local retailer to both sides of the planter outside their premises. It was agreed by Members to ask the Highways Inspector to inspect the area as it was understood that he had met recently with the owner to discuss curtilage and the display of ‘A’ boards.”

The evidence suggests the direct influence of the Parish Council was as a preserver of the town centre’s heritage as a conservation area. There was no evidence to suggest it had, or was considered to have, an influence over commercial measures of vitality and viability, except that in aiming to make the town centre more attractive they increased, or at least added to, vitality through an increase in footfall.

In effect, the Parish Council’s strategic influence over commerce was either as a preserver of aesthetic qualities, or in the absence of full authority to defer town centre matters to the Borough Council. Furthermore, the minutes of both the Parish Council and the village committee identified little evidence of the £79,000 annual precept being used to benefit the centre, rather any activity appeared to be on a voluntary basis.

The Parish Council did however have close cultural ties to the Local Authority, which had a level of local and political influence on the town centre. An example was the proposed “Atlantic Gateway” development, which aimed to increase trade on the Manchester Ship Canal as a freight route between Manchester and Liverpool. The Borough Council were mindful of the economic benefits of development however, the Parish Council were concerned that the town was not unnecessarily impeded by the developer’s desire to increase swing bridge openings on the main arterial route through the town centre. Evidence from the Parish Council’s minutes identified their concerns;

#### *Peel Ports Working Party*

“Overall, bridge swing openings have reduced from 728 in 2013, to 568 in 2014, with a reduction in peak period openings. The number of bridge swings has reduced partly as a result of Peel Ports using larger ships, and partly due to a short-term loss of business contract. The following was noted that Peel Ports suggest that all swing bridge issues are directed via Warrington Borough Council. A copy of the letter was provided to all Members present and Councillors felt that the content and tone of the letter was unhelpful and agreed that the

Working Party should meet as soon as possible to formulate a response and discuss a course of action”

### *The influence of the Stockton Heath Parish Council in town centre governance*

The Parish Council did not directly influence the commercial vitality and viability of Stockton Heath through any overt strategies however, it did endorse the decision to redevelop Victoria Square in the late 1990s, which arguably provided the catalyst for investment into the town centre. Whether one can define their influence as positive, or negative depends on your view, as from a more positive perspective the development created a commercial demand and provided local landlords with increased rental incomes from both local and national retailers; however, from a negative perspective the redevelopment created a national and multiple-led leisure offer that had a sense of multiple retailer commercial fragility about it. Furthermore, whilst there was an acknowledged pride in the town from the Parish Council, any pride related to the wider reaches of the town, not specifically the town centre. This could be evidenced by the annual festival, which had grown beyond all recognition since its inception in 2006 into what has now become a direct competitor to the commercial vitality and viability of the centre.

### *The Promote Stockton Heath Group*

The Promote Stockton Heath group served a small number of independent retailers as a lobbying vehicle and a mutual interest marketing group. There has been an element of collaboration among independent traders of the town centre, over the past forty years, which had generally provided a forum for discussions relating to disquiet against the actions of the Borough Council. The Promote Stockton Heath Group differed from these earlier efforts as it served a mechanism to actively lobby the Local Authority, usually with some form of co-operation from the Parish Council. However, it also acted as a collective forum to promote the village through forms of internal marketing. The result, in both cases, consisted of an enthusiastic and emotional start, followed by a realisation, that in the words of one trader; “it never goes anywhere, and nothing ever gets done”. The latest incarnation of the group appeared in 2008 as a small collective of four traders to provide a “voice” for the town centre opposed to parking restrictions from the Borough Council. The lobbyists felt frustrated at what they perceived as “unfair discrimination” against the affluent population

South of Warrington, who they felt were effectively subsidising poorer areas of Warrington. An addition to the lobbyists in 2016 was a local trader who provided a bridge between new and old incarnations of the group, and who assumed the lead role in attempting to re-galvanise a collaborative movement to lobby the Local Authority on parking issues, true to his perceptions that “it never goes anywhere, and nothing ever gets done”. However, the parking pleas fell on deaf ears at the Local Authority and, in 2018 the group had refocussed as an internal marketing movement that aimed to promote independent retailers. Evidence from the minutes of meetings from the period February 2014-May 2016, outline their strategies to influence the commercial vitality and viability of the town centre;

#### *Internal signage*

“We are in the process of setting up two business location/signs in the Forge shopping centre, one by Lloyds Chemist, and one by Marks and Spencer. It will take the form of an Ordinance Survey Map, embedded in plastic resin. For the sum of £50, each business requesting a listing, will be given a name plate that they can have engraved and will be sighted at the side of the map that will also correspond to a number on the map. We have initial spaces for fifty businesses. The sign has a ten to fifteen-year life span, and the copyright will belong to Promote Stockton Heath, who can then print copies for our own use and/or in estate agents welcome packs for newcomers to the village”

#### *Favourite shop within the town*

“It was agreed at the last meeting we would ask shoppers/visitors to vote for their favourite business in Stockton Heath. A list of businesses/logos in the Promote Stockton Heath group will be displayed on the stall at the festival and visitors can vote for their favourite. A prize for the winner, drawn from the votes of winning business, was decided as a hamper. We also need volunteers to man the stall, for the Saturday and Sunday. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> July Can we have a volunteer from the group to organise a rota for the stall. Last year we did 1 or 2 hours each. Please volunteer”

#### *Internal promotions to improve footfall*

“Report on Bunny Hop. We had over 100 entries and winners of the bunnies had their photograph taken and covered in South Warrington News. We were asked if next year the bunnies can be collection from each shop, which is something to discuss nearer the time. It was agreed that this would simplify things, but concerns were noted about the collective photograph from a publicity point of view. Thank you everyone who joined in with a bunny, a great team effort that everyone at the meeting felt paid dividends and there was a buzz in the village. Everyone was in agreement that this had been a very successful event and is something we should repeat next year”

### *The influence of the Promote Stockton Heath Group in town centre governance*

The representation from the Promote Stockton Heath movement was relatively small (less than 4% of the retailers in the town centre), therefore its impact on commercial vitality and viability was low. Any influence was limited to the promotion of the members’ businesses

and, to an extent, the redistribution of existing consumers around the town centre. The group had some influence as a lobbying group with the Parish Council, however any influence was diluted when it reached the council chambers of the Local Authority.

#### *Independent retailers and landlords*

Independent retailers and landlords had a direct influence on vitality and viability as they occupied 81% of the available floorspace (WYG, 2015). Indeed, any local governance form of collective action would have to include this group, the majority of whom appeared to have their own non-altruistic interests at heart - a point which is rich in academic literature (Medway *et al.*, 2000; Carmona, 2014). Therefore, it would appear improbable that the independent traders, and landlords from Stockton Heath would prove an exception to the rule. The influence of this group, however, extended beyond the occupation of available commercial space as they also held an influence over rental yields, vacancy rates and diversity. For example, local landlords owned over 90% of available commercial floorspace, which given their local knowledge, influenced both rents and vacancy rates; rents as they invariably knew the “going rate”, and vacant units as they needed to fill units quickly to prevent a loss of rental income.

Any influence over town centre diversity was less obvious however it was still apparent. An example was a local trader who owned three properties in the town centre, who would not consider allowing retailers into premises that competed commercially with his own, so he indirectly influenced non-competitive uses that complemented his business rather than allowing someone to compete with it. Due to the politics within the town centre there were other local landlords that wanted to compete with him, and he had no influence over them however there was evidence that these actions influenced the diversity of the town centre as local landlords attempted to create monopolies for their own products.

#### *The influence of independent traders and landlords in town centre governance*

The impact of this group was significant; they lobbied the Parish Council; they determined rental values, and yields; they controlled vacancy rates, and; they had an indirect influence on diversity and footfall. What they did not have was any influence as a collective, therefore local governance comprised of competing interests with no overriding strategy, when the



competing interests complimented each other there was a balance within the town centre, when interests collided there was an altogether different scenario.

### *Influencers' strategies*

Within the context of the vitality and viability measures the Parish Council acceded a large degree of influence to the Local Authority, for although evidence obtained through minutes of, and attendances at, monthly meetings suggested they took a pride in the town centre, that interest did not necessarily transfer to an influence over it. Indeed, the Parish Council perceived their role as a protector of the conservation area, and as such facilitated the Local Authority, without any direct cost, or accountability. The strategy of the Parish Council therefore was to act as a conduit between independent traders, and the Local Authority, where their understanding of local political cultures could have some influence on matters of vitality and viability.

The local independent traders each had independent cultural paradigms, and independent strategies, subsequently any coming together existed within a small number of traders within the "Promote Stockton Heath Group", where a collective strategy relied on the traders supporting the movement with time and initiatives that would ultimately provide a value to them by increasing the patronage to their businesses. Landlords strategies were aimed at maintaining a tenancy at the highest cost, a strategy which held some benefit as the consultants noted that the rental values in the centre were the highest of all Warrington's districts.

The only evidence of any strategic interaction between politics and commerce was for task specific initiatives, particularly between the Parish Council and the "Promote Stockton Heath Group". However, these were unlikely to create any meaningful capacity that had a sustainable impact on the vitality and viability of the town centre. For example, there was a level of rhetorical collaboration over the local trader's location map in the local shopping centre;

"We have applied for funding for £2,000 and, we are hoping that Stockton Heath Parish Council will match this. The two signs will cost approximately £4,300 for one at the Lloyds

Chemist wall and the other by Children Society Book Shop facing the car park. The remainder of the cost will be made by each business having an entry of a cost no more than £50”  
(Promote Stockton Heath spokesperson)

The rhetoric however, failed to match the actions, and match funding was not forthcoming. In addition, the map, whilst being informative and possibly providing direction to sponsored businesses, had a minimal impact on any attractiveness to consumers (vitality), or potential investors (viability), as many were local and already patronised the town centre. There was evidence of a collective culture, or capacity between a small number of independent retailers however, this was generally limited to conversations, either as customers, or as social comments about general trade or footfall, therefore, the over-riding commercial strategy of the town centre was determined by individual retailers who collectively created change, as each reacted to their changing environment. This contributed to the ongoing evolution of the town centre, but as there was no collective institutional strategy any coming together was considered minimal.

### **8.7 Influencers’ impact on measures vitality and viability**

#### *Impact on rental yields*

There were two factors that interacted to determine the impact on rental yield, namely; the actions of landlords, many of whom were local to the area; and the price retailers were prepared to pay for retail units. There was a suggestion from a local property agent that both were inflated due to the locality, and the availability of a small number of units;

“I don’t know why but there is a kudos to owning a shop in the town, with a number of people waiting to have bragging rights in the pub over who owns what. This inflates the price of the shops to both the landlords and the retailers, to the point where only independent retailers will pay the asking rents. That’s why there are so many of them. There is now a situation where the independents can’t pay, because they can’t make any money, and the multiples won’t pay because the rents don’t make sense to them”

The rent paid for units ultimately came down to the landlords who had a risk versus reward decision to make; for example, to negate risk the landlord preferred national and multiple retailers, consequently if there was a demand from a multiple retailer the landlord was willing to accept a lower yield on the property as there was less risk. If the risk was

increased by offering the unit to an independent retailer, who presumably had less capital than the national, or multiple retailer, the yield had the potential to dramatically increase. The demand for units therefore influenced the yield, and with inflated rents, and an unwillingness from multiple retailers to pay, independent retailers created the opportunity for high yields, providing there was a ready supply of willing retailers to pay for them;

“If you had come to Stockton Heath 10 years ago the rents would have been half what they are now. The Victoria Square development changed all that. The people with vision moved in and changed the whole town. What was £60,000 ten years ago is £350,000 now and that is all down to Victoria Square and the desire to own a shop in the town. It is one of a few in the North of England, its own little bubble. Investors are happy to take short term gains, knowing that the value of their property is safe. What will be a challenge for the town is the rates revaluation in 2017, the rates are low at the moment and they will rise significantly, Warrington will fall as it has been too high for a long time, but when they revalue at the 2015 valuations expect a shock” (Local property agent)

The influence of local landlords therefore was limited to one that balanced risk and reward;

“You can’t have greedy landlords without retailers willing to pay. The landlords will test the market, they know what the other guy got down the road and while they are paying no rates for three month’s they will try their luck. Now if someone wants to pay, they will take it, and that is usually independents. So, you can’t have greedy landlords if there is no demand”

### *Impact on diversity*

There was evidence of a limited influence over diversity; for example, retailers had an influence over the product diversity of their retail offer; local landlords had an influence over commercial diversity through demands for rent, and local competition with resident tenants; and the Local Authority had an influence on commercial diversity through the redevelopment of Victoria Square, as noted by a local property agent;

“Diversity is easy to do when you have the development. We did it with Victoria Square and balanced the offer with restaurants and leisure. Off the back of that came the attraction for other retailers around it”

In many instances however, diversity was influenced by the interaction of “increasingly powerful retailers with decreasingly powerful planners” (Hallsworth and Coca–Stefaniak, 2018 p. 139), as planning controls were exploited by commercial interests that had non-

altruistic motives. Although the Parish Council, and the Local Authority idealised about a diverse “jewel in the crown” in many cases it was the retailers who held any influence;

“The parish council have some teeth, but they are really only offering their opinion to the planners in Warrington. The problem with Warrington is that developers know that Warrington has a history of going to appeal and being done for costs, so they know they can push it, because they are nervous” (Local property agent)

Ultimately, therefore commercial diversity was influenced by local market forces, which created a fragility in the town centre. Fragile because the local landlords were chasing the highest rents from an increasing independent sector, which, in turn, affected the balance of retail diversity in the town centre;

“Multiple and national retailers will not see the attraction of the town. They will put the postcode into a sausage machine and the expected returns and rents will come out the other side. We have it now with a national, they want to come into the town but believe the rent is worth £30,000 and the landlord is asking £45,000, so there is no deal. Will the landlord give in? He may split the unit and get £50,000, so at the moment he is weighing it up. How much does he need them?”

#### *Impact on vacancy rates*

The town centre was considered attractive to investors, consequently there were few retail vacancies, and when they did arise units were quickly filled. A contributing factor to low vacancy rates was that most of the retail premises were owned by local landlords, and occupied by local retailers, therefore, independent traders, by being local, assessed the risk involved (i.e. unit size and cost) and if there were opportunities in the market, they made a swift decision to invest. If there was a high demand for units, retailers mitigated their risk as it was easy to sell that unit on, if there was a low demand for retail units, local landlords reacted accordingly to ensure their property was generating revenue.

#### *Impact on footfall*

There was no collective strategy to impact on footfall, indeed there were no recognised methods of collecting data. Rather, local traders influenced town centre footfall through individual marketing strategies that were specific to their businesses. For example, social media was specifically used by independent, and multiple retailers to create an individual demand. However, the individual strategies of over one hundred independent traders, along

with the national marketing campaigns of convenience stores and restaurants, created a collective impact on the footfall of the town centre. In this way, the town centre's attraction was a product of collective independent marketing strategies. To facilitate their social media marketing campaigns local traders also exploited the town centres position as a main arterial route between Warrington and the motorway network through external signage, for example "A" boards and window displays. This "stop me and buy one" strategy in many cases attracted consumers to both their stores and by default increased the vitality of the town centre. The limitation of this strategy was that Stockton Heath became no more than a sum of its parts. If the individual parts attracted the "right people", rather than the right number of people, businesses would feed of each other and the place would become vibrant with like-minded consumers; if they attracted the "wrong people", or their individual marketing strategies did not have an affect the attraction of the town centre diminished.

In this way, complementary businesses increased footfall, and dwell time. If, however the parts were non complementary, for example through a change in diversity, then the sum of those parts was diminished, and the footfall and dwell times were reduced, as there was nothing to hold the cumulative attraction of the town centre. In Stockton Heath the closure of the banks, over-zealous parking attendants, political correctness, and the rise in betting and charity shops were all diluting the attraction of the town centre to the "right people";

"I had a meeting with our Member of Parliament about the lack of footfall. There is a drop in the daytime footfall in the town due to car parking issues, traffic in and around Stockton Heath, over keen traffic wardens, the arrival of Marks and Spencer and the impact of its car park, the exorbitant rents and rates of properties and the arrival of a large number of charity shops. We talked about the post office moving away from the main area, and subsequent arrival of another café/bar. All these have an effect on the day-time trade and what was once a thriving town is turning into an evening town. It might help if we could get some rates linked to turnover, rather than rateable value, but I feel there is a lack of support for small business from the Government and our Member of Parliament can do nothing about it" (Local trader)

## 8.8 Discussion

### *Local governance*

There was little doubt from WYG consultants, and the Local Authority, that Stockton Heath was a vital and viable town centre. What was of interest was that it retained a level of vitality and viability despite the influencers of Stockton Heath having no obvious collective strategies, except to preserve the town as a conservation area and a desire from independent local traders to sustain their businesses through independent strategies. There was evidence that independent local traders created vitality and viability in the town centre; however, in doing so they relied on the sum of their parts, rather than a purposeful collective movement to create something sustainable. When the “sum” was in balance the free market form created something positive, however when there was an imbalance it created something quite different. At the time of the empirical research Stockton Heath was considered healthy, however there were concerns that its attractiveness was fragile. Due to its present affluent and healthy position the town centre may be categorised within “preservation” guidelines, where it generally fits the definition of being of “advantaged population dominant” (Otsuka and Reeve, 2007 p. 443). This implies the town is self-sufficient and requires a minimum amount of intervention, or influence because it is perceived as possessing a healthy economy. Where Otsuka and Reeve’s defined areas of preservation could be challenged is in the perception that affluent towns are “well supported by private and corporate interests” (2007 p.443) and therefore not necessarily in need of managing, or regenerating. However, what we know of town centres is that they are in constant flux and if truth is indeed the daughter of time, then town centres in a similar position to Stockton Heath require at least monitoring, rather than more distanced preservation strategies.

For example, statistically Stockton Heath’s town centre had a higher than average diversity rating and relatively low vacancy rates; measures that ordinarily would suggest it required the minimum of intervention, and indeed preservation was an appropriate strategy. What the measures failed to recognise was the change in the quality of the retail and leisure offer, for example, in Stockton Heath the number of charity shops increased four-fold in two

years. This could be an aggressive strategy by charities to target an affluent town centre as the charity perceives it will generate better donations, or alternatively, the increase could be influenced by landlords who have individual interests as a priority, and rather than wait for private tenants take the option of filling a unit as a priority. Whatever the reason any “health” measurement suggests that charity shops are leisure activities and do not carry a negative burden, however as evidenced by a Local Authority response from Warrington “the more of them you have, the worse your town centre is”. The reality could therefore be that the town centre’s health was compromised by the presence of too many of them.

It would appear therefore, that in line with other governance forms, a free market form has disadvantages, and advantages. The disadvantages in Stockton Heath were that independent traders functioned as independent entities, and a reliance on them potentially carried a risk vis-a-vis larger multiple retailers, as they could have disproportionate costs of compliance with legislation (Schmidt *et al.*, 2007); inherent financial problems (Smith and Sparks 2000); and inadequacies in management (Kirby, 1984). The advantages were that independent retailers reacted well to market change due to a flexibility and closeness to their customer base, indeed this is viewed as a “key determinant of success” (Megicks and Warnaby, 2008 p. 105). It is clear that many independent retailers run successful businesses, and their success is likely to stem from the adoption of strategies appropriate to the market conditions they face, and their own unique capabilities, or distinctive competences (McGee and Petersen, 2000).

Therefore, what independent retailers lack in corporate, and management knowledge, or aptitude is arguably compensated for in market guile, a guile that has an effect through a greater understanding of the local market and a greater appreciation of the service requirements of customers, providing a potential source of competitive advantage (Byrom, Medway and Warnaby, 2003). This may offer some understanding to the success of an independent retailer led free market form of governance, namely that independent retailers possess a philosophy of doing business, which incorporates customer orientation, goal attainment and an integrated marketing effort (Cravens and Piercy, 2006). This is not to be confused with a collective marketing effort, rather it implies that individual marketing creates something greater than the sum of its parts, which, it is argued, is also an important

element of organisational culture and behaviour (Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1999). It could follow that in “developing and implementing a culture which is geared towards satisfying customer needs and achieving superior customer satisfaction” (Megicks and Warnaby, 2008 p. 113), independent retailers create not only their individual competitiveness, but also the collective attractiveness of the town centre.

By remaining close to individual customers independent retailers have an impact on the community, and as a result make a positive contribution to the culture of the place. Subsequently, if there are enough traders that are close to the right kind of customers, the place will hold an attraction to those consumers. In effect a form of free market governance, through independent retailers, has a collective impact on vitality and viability by providing “a sense of location and locale” through “social and community infrastructures”, an impact that “brings dynamism and local adaptation to the retail situation” (Smith and Sparks, 2000 p. 205 - 208). Indeed, there is growing evidence base that suggests a thriving small and medium independent retail sector, amidst residential areas and high streets, can have a positive influence on community cohesion (Bennison and Hines, 2003; Schmidt and Pioch, 2004; Coca-Stefaniak, 2013); diversity of consumer choice (O’Reilly and Haines, 2004); vibrant town centres and, ultimately villages, towns and cities that are more liveable for all (Phillips and Swaffin-Smith, 2004).

In effect what independent retailers are good at is understanding the concept of the “local”, especially the importance of interpersonal relationships between customers and shop owners as an element of both marketing competitiveness (Bianchi and Mena, 2004; Klemz *et al.*, 2006) and a *raison d’etre*. This is achieved in the absence of any obvious overt collaboration, and while it remains fragile it is perhaps no more fragile than a managed environment?



*The impact on commercial measures of vitality and viability*

<b>Influencers</b>	<b>Rental Yields</b>	<b>Footfall</b>	<b>Vacancy Rates</b>	<b>Diversity</b>
<b>Stockton Heath Parish Council</b>	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.
<b>Promote Stockton Heath</b>	No evidence of any influence	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.
<b>Independent Retailers and Landlords</b>	There was a level of influence through a local understanding of the rental values in the town centre. There was also an opportunity to increase the rental yield via an artificially inflated premium paid by local retailers.	There was a collective influence through individual strategies, which had the potential to increase like-minded consumers to the town centre.	Local landlords held a high level of influence over vacancy rates, through a local knowledge of retailers and rents.	There was evidence of a political influence through redevelopment, however there was no evidence that landlords, or traders could influence diversity

Figure 8. 6; Influencer’s impact on commercial measures of vitality and viability

There was a level of influence within a market mediated anarchy governance form, particularly on rental yields which were influenced by landlords through an awareness of market rents, and a desire from independent retailers to pay premium rents for a shop in the town centre. The opportunity to increase rental yields was a result of several contributing factors; (1) many of the units could be purchased for around £300,000, which was affordable for local entrepreneurs looking for alternative investments; (2) the willingness of independent retailers to pay increased rents for a retail unit in the town centre was high; (3) the Victoria square redevelopment undoubtedly acted as a positive catalyst for vitality and viability; (4) the unattractiveness of surrounding town centres made Stockton Heath the best local option; and (5) the independent retailers created sense of community. However, although these factors were enough to influence the rental yields and the vacancy rates, they were not enough to influence footfall and diversity.

## Chapter 9; Cross Case Themes

When conducting a cross-case analysis of the four town centres three key themes emerged; (1) Influencers enacted either a centripetal, or a centrifugal approach to town centre retail development; (2) The empirical evidence suggests the balance between the cultural paradigm and the available resource capacity influences the retail development approach (RDA), and; (3) The retail development approach both created the governance form and impacted on the vitality and viability of the town centre.

*(1) Influencers enacted either a centripetal, or a centrifugal approach to town centre retail development;*

The concept of centripetal and centrifugal force was introduced by Sir Isaac Newton in his 1686 publication “Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis”, where, according to Newton’s first law of motion, every object (in this context a town centre’s retail offer) will remain at rest, unless compelled to change its state by the action of an external force. In urban geography Colby describes centripetal force (pull influences) as influences that “hold certain functions in the [town centre] and attract others to it”. In effect centripetal forces create town centres that are “the center of gravity for the entire urbanized area”. The opposing centrifugal force (push influences) create town centres that “impel[s] functions to migrate from the [town centre] towards, or actually to or beyond, its periphery”. In effect, centrifugal forces “are a combination of uprooting impulses in the [town centre] and [the] attractive qualities of the periphery” (Colby, 1933 p.1).

Colby recognised that the strength of centripetal and centrifugal force constantly changes through new additions and relocations as part of a push–pull mechanism created by many factors. Centripetal “pull” influences include;

- *the site attraction of the town centre*—often the quality of the natural landscape
- *the functional convenience of the town centre*—the town centre as the place of maximum accessibility (for example is there a sufficient car parking provision?)

- *the functional magnetism of the town centre*—a force that attracts like-minded retailers to relocate to a specific town centre (see planned and unplanned retail agglomerations, and the direct impact of “tenant mix” and “merchandise value” on “sustainable attractiveness” (Teller and Reutterer, 2008 p.23) and,
- *the functional prestige of the town centre*—town centres that benefit from a developed reputation (for example Bond Street in London, which is the destination for many luxury, designer brands).

Centrifugal “push” factors often consist of a desire from private capital to migrate from town centres. Push factors include;

- *spatial force*—when congestion in the town centre uproots and the empty spaces of the periphery attract
- *site forces*—the disadvantages of the intensively used town centre in contrast to the little used landscape of the periphery
- *the situational force*—which results from unsatisfactory functional spacing and alignments in the town centre and the promise of more suitable alignments in the periphery
- *the force of social evolution*—high costs and planning inhibitions within the town centre create a desire to relocate to a newly developed area, and
- *the status and organisation of occupation*—a force for change, in which factors such as functional and locational obsolescence (Hughes and Jackson, 2015), transportation facilities and traffic congestion stand in opposition to more highly satisfactory facilities out of town (see Putnam *et al.*, 2014)

Colby recognised that although centripetal and centrifugal forces are determinants of investor choice, they are ultimately influenced by the *human equation*, an interpretative governance force that adopts the approach to retail development (Putman *et al.*, 2014). For example, the human equation could be manifest through the cultural paradigms (Johnson, 1992; Johnson *et al.*, 2011) of the influential institutions, either consents, or does not consent, to the available resource capacity being utilised. It is the human equation, made evident through the cultural paradigm, that ultimately triggers investment away from, or into, the town centre.

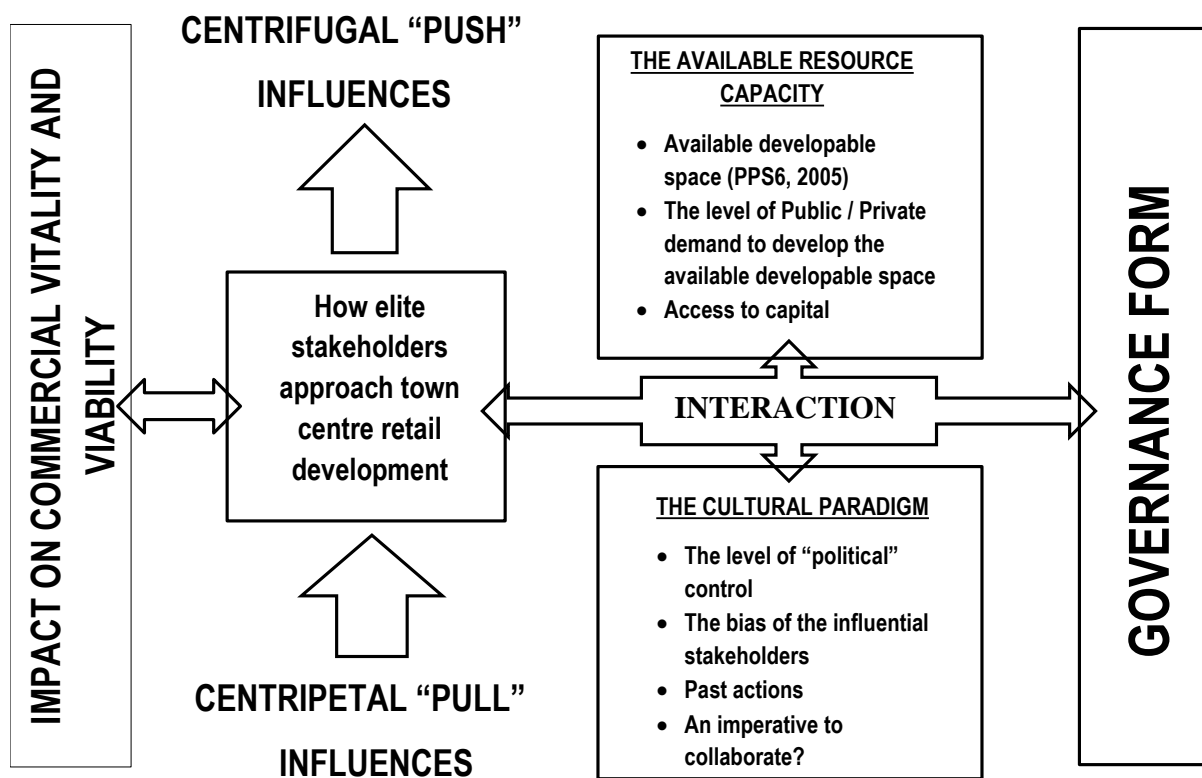


Figure 9. 1; Contrasting approaches to town centre retail development

(2) The empirical evidence suggests the balance between the cultural paradigm and the available resource capacity (figure 9.1) influences the retail development approach (RDA).

The available resource capacity was defined by;

- *The available developable space*-PPS6 (2005 p.31) identifies the following definitions of spatial preferences;
  - Edge-of-centre: for shopping purposes, a location that is well connected and within easy walking distance (i.e. up to 300 metres) of the town centre;
  - Out-of-centre: A location outside a town centre boundary but within defined development limits;
  - Out-of-town: A location outside defined development limits of settlements;
  - Town centre: for the purposes of this PPS town centre refers to city centres and town centres which provide a broad range of facilities and services and which fulfil a function as a focus both for the community and for public transport.
- *The level of public/private demand*-This considers the desire of each sector to commit resource within the available developable space—where Colby’s forces of *site attraction* (as the quality of the natural landscape of the town centre for retail activity), *functional convenience* (the town centre as the place of maximum accessibility), *functional magnetism* (the force that attracts like-minded retailers to relocate to a specific town centre) around planned and unplanned retail agglomerations, and the *functional*

*prestige* (the town centres developed reputation) of the town centre and the competing outer layers all come into play. For example, is the town centre attractive to investors? If it is, is there sufficient demand to redevelop the town centre (centripetal pull influences), if it is not, is there an alternative?

- Finally, in the cases where there is a lack of private, or public demand, did the Local Authority, or private investors have *access to capital*, whether through borrowing or reserves (and a corresponding culture to take risks) to create demand?

The Cultural Paradigm considers the impact of the varying sets of core beliefs and assumptions that influencers hold that are “specific and relevant to the organisation in which they work, and which are learned over time”. These cultural values are important as “strategies do not appear by chance”, they are the results of years of “guidance” that give rise to “experience, as a filter of external and internal stimuli, within a politicised social setting” (Johnson, 1992 p. 29). In this specific context, the cultural paradigm is crucial to how influencers approach retail development in their town centres. It was based on;

- *The level of “political” control*-The level of influence elite stakeholders had over their organisations, and by default their ability to impose their core values on the organisations that devised, and enacted strategy. This could relate to “political” in the sense of a political party majority, or “political” in the sense of polity as a group of people, for example a partnership, who are collectively united by a self-directed force, such as identity, and are organised by a form of institutionalised hierarchy (Ferguson *et al.*, 1996). “Political” control could refer to public, or private sector organisations.
- *The bias of elite stakeholders*-Did elite stakeholders hold an economic or a social bias? A comment from Warrington suggested that the political bias of elite stakeholder’s determined the cultural approach towards town centre retail development. In effect if the elite stakeholders held a social, rather than an economic bias this was reflected in policy and understanding, conversely if the bias was commerce this would surface in its approach to retail development.
- *The past actions of elite stakeholders*-Johnson (1992 p.28) comments that “we need to be careful about building too much upon what managers [as influencers] espouse...if some discernible patterns of strategic direction emerge in an organisation it must be because there is some guidance to that strategy”. This implies that past actions are more informative about “guidance” than political rhetoric. For example, what have elite stakeholders done in the past that informs their cultural paradigm. Have they redeveloped retail away from the town centre, and if they have how have they approached, or embraced a potentially revised town centre cultural paradigm arising from their approach? Have they shown a willingness to take risks or to go it alone if, as organisations, they cannot embrace change?
- Finally, did elite stakeholders have a desire to create a *capacity to collaborate*? We assume that Local Authority influencers hold a cultural rigidity that differs more “in what

they govern than in how they govern” (Teune, 1995 p.16), that in the face of environmental complexity “many organisations create a relatively homogeneous approach to those complexities” (Johnson 1992 p.29). It was of interest to note whether elite stakeholder’s cultural paradigms evolved through a “growing theoretical and practical interest in the potential of co-ordination, through self-organising networks, partnerships and other forms of reflexive collaboration” (Jessop 2016, p. 71). Did they as influencers have a desire, and an organisational culture, that facilitated a shift from the *government* structures of the 1960s, into the *governance* structures of the 1980s and beyond (Jessop, 2016), a shift that purportedly repositioned local governance from the hierarchical and exclusive forms that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s, to flatter more, inclusive heterarchical structures that prevail in many social spheres (Jessop, 2016)?

*(3) The RDA influences the nature of the governance form and impacts on the vitality and viability of the town centre;*

If the RDA created a demand for town centre space from the private sector Local Authority influencers had governance options. For example, they could retain a *government* form (Davies, 2002); adopt a form of *collective action*; create *informal and/or formal partnerships* (forms of heterarchic governance); or, allow free market forces to dictate retail development (*market mediated anarchy*, Jessop, 2016). Alternatively, if the demand from the private sector to invest in the town centre was low, and there was no desire to collaborate with the Local Authority, public sector elites had fewer governance options to call upon. They could create demand, either by providing a planning opportunity, or by taking a financial risk in the hope that private demand would follow (a form of Keynesian economics (a central tenet of which is that government intervention can stabilise the economy (Jahan *et al.*, 2014)). Alternatively, they could simply do nothing and wait for the market to correct itself.

Examples of how the RDA affects governance are threaded through all cases, although the centrifugal cases (Warrington and Wrexham) offer the best insights. In Warrington, the New Town Development Corporation (NTDC) created an opportunity for the Local Authority to redevelop the town. The policy, in 1968, intended to develop not only the town centre, but also the districts whose now defunct military bases required a stimulus after the Second World War. Through the 1970s, and early 1980s the NTDC’s available resource, and the emerging Local Authority’s cultural paradigm, created an RDA that encouraged retail development away from the traditional town centre. By the time the NTDC was disbanded

in 1989, the Local Authority had adopted a cultural paradigm that accepted a centrifugal approach to retail development, evidenced by their current actions to continue to develop retail away from the town centre. Retail audits (of which there were thirteen between 2000-2018) advising a change of strategy had little effect as the Local Authority could not change their cultural paradigm. It was the RDA of the Local Authority that created areas of inactivity in the town centre and contributed to a low private demand for space, and it was the RDA that created the conditions for the local governance form, where low private demand created a highly formalised form of *government*.

In Wrexham, the pre-1990s available resource was limited to the edge of the town centre, and the Local Authority were content to retain comparison goods retailing in the town centre. What appeared to change the Local Authority's cultural paradigm was the TAN (4) directive in 1996 to adopt a more inclusive stakeholder "management" of the town centre; in effect a dictum to encourage a cultural shift from a *government* form of governance to a *collective action* form of heterarchic governance. Part of the inclusive "management" process allowed an objective assessment of the town centre's retail offer, and external consultants were invited into the Local Authority's cultural paradigm to commission a report to that effect in 2000. The consultants advised the Local Authority that, as the town centre had an under provision of comparison goods retailers when compared to national statistics, and as there was insufficient space within the traditional centre, the Local Authority could - and should - extend the town centre boundaries to include edge of centre sites. The introduction of specific comparison goods retailers (through a reference to national league tables) would add vitality and viability to their "revised" town centre footprint. In effect, it became culturally acceptable to develop comparison goods retailing away from the traditional town centre. The Local Authority had the available resource (Eagles Meadow), and a more inclusive culture change witnessed the birth of the Eagles Meadow development, a project that consequently ripped most of the comparison goods retailers from the town centre and along with them a sizable portion of vitality and viability. Thus, the RDA of the Local Authority created the conditions for local governance as the voids of inactivity awakened a local trader's movement that challenged a form of *government*, into a form of *collective action*.

What was of a greater consequence was the effect the RDA had on the vitality and viability of the town centre, where generally centrifugal approaches had a negative effect, and centripetal had a positive effect. This however was a generalisation as all cases had limitations on the impact on commercial success. Sections 9.1-9.3 discuss the RDA of individual cases in more detail and summarise the impact of the RDA on local governance and commercial measures of vitality and viability.

### **9.1 Retail Development Approaches**

Local Authorities (Warrington and Wrexham) enacted centrifugal (push) approaches to retail development by utilising additional retail space away from the traditional town centre. Although Local Authority RDA's came from different available resource capacities and cultural paradigms, their approaches to town centre retail development had the effect of at best competing with, or at worst displacing, the town centre's retail offer. A centrifugal approach to town centre retail development from both Local Authorities contributed to a diluted investor demand in the town centre. In effect, the *site attraction*; the *functional convenience*; the *functional magnetism*; and, the *functional prestige* of the traditional town centre was relocated to edge of, and off-centre locations.

By contrast, the two private sector influenced town centres (Covent Garden and Stockton Heath) enacted centripetal (pull) approaches to town centre retail development. A centripetal approach may have been the result of a lack of available resource capacity, or a low demand for off-centre space, or it may be a conscious decision from influencers to retain a level of vitality and viability within the traditional centre. In this research, a centripetal approach was the result of an asset base within a clearly designated spatial footprint, that was limited by ownership of land. The centripetal approach to retail development had the effect of containing the retail offer within the town centre, thus maintaining a relatively high level of retail demand in the town centre itself. In effect, the *site attraction*; the *functional convenience*; the *functional magnetism*; and the *functional prestige* were retained within the traditional town centre.



The following sections discuss the RDA's that influencers enacted in each of the case studies.

### *Warrington*

In the 1960s and 1970s Warrington's town centre was defined by the physical barriers formed by the railways and roads that surrounded a central retail core. Retail investment was contained within the retail core and the town centre prospered as a result. A new indoor market was constructed in 1974, along with an adjoining multi-storey car park a year later, and a purpose-built shopping centre was opened by the Queen in the late 1970s, anchored by a new Mark's and Spencer store.

In the 1980s the retail core retained its place in the retail hierarchy as the preferred investment choice for retailers and Local Authority planners, however there were also several retail developments away from the town centre. Convenience goods retailers relocated to the edge of the town centre at the Cock hedge development in 1984 (Gateway) and B&Q were granted permission for a hardware store out of centre at Junction 9 of the M62 in 1985. Neither of these developments were against the national trend at the time; indeed as Schiller (1986) reminds us, the emergence of a second wave of decentralisation consisting of "free standing retail warehouses and retail parks...with household furnishings and domestic appliances sold in "crinkly sheds"" (Guy, 2000 p.389; Thomas *et al.*, 2004, 2006) was nationally accepted as a preferred course of retail development throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In time the preference from retailers and developers for edge of, and out of centre retail development would evolve into Thomas's "high streets in the suburbs" (Thomas *et al.*, 2006 p.43) and Warrington was no exception. In Warrington's case however, the transition from town centre "high streets" to edge of, and out of centre "high streets" was accelerated by the New Town Development Corporation (NTDC) policy directive. The RDA, under the New Town Development policy considered not only the town centre, but also the district centres of Birchwood, Westbrook and Stockton Heath as viable retail development destinations. Initially, the planning policy of the NTDC recognised a convenience goods requirement for the newly formed district centres and encouraged such development. In a short period of time however, the NTDC policy of the Local Authority also encouraged comparison goods retailing away from the town centre, and this increased the

threat from outside the town centre, as the edge of, and out of centre gained momentum. A New Town district shopping centre opened at Birchwood in 1980; IKEA opened its first UK store at Gemini retail park in October 1987; and Toys R Us followed a year later. Alban retail park was developed between the town centre and Gemini at a former distribution centre in 1989, and Marks & Spencer was granted permission to open a Superstore at Gemini retail park in June 1994. Conversely, as retail development outside the town centre intensified, the attraction of Warrington's town centre as an investment choice diminished.

Evidence from the first health check in 2000 (Chesterton's) appeared to awaken a consciousness from the Local Authority to reverse some of the damage done to the town centre in the previous decades. The Pyramid Arts Centre staged its first theatrical performance in 2002; the town centre Time Square shopping centre was redeveloped in 2005; the Local Authority approved plans to bring a cinema to the centre in 2006; the Golden Square shopping centre extended its retail footprint in 2007; and a Local Authority led Cultural quarter and NHS centre opened in the town centre in 2012. Every attempt to revitalise the town centre however was met with a greater force in the opposite direction. The swimming baths closed in 2003; Boots left its Bridge Street store, relocating to the Golden Square in June 2007; TJ Hughes closed its doors in 2011, and Peacocks ceased trading in 2012. It appeared the *functional prestige* of the town centre in the 1960s and 1970s was being replaced by a functional insignificance in the 1990s and 2000s as the town centre became a preferred choice for discount retailers and charity shops, with Primark arriving in 2013, closely followed by the first 99p store and B&M bargains. On the edge of, and out of the town centre, retail development continued unabated, as the *functional convenience*, the *functional magnetism*, and the *functional prestige* was encouraged to migrate away from the town centre by Local Authority planning policies. The competition from edge of centre developments was epitomised with the redevelopment of Marks & Spencer's Gemini store in 2014, and the subsequent closure of its town centre store in July 2017.

Figure 9.2 summarises the RDA of Warrington's Local Authority influencers who adopted a centrifugal approach to retail development due to a sizable available resource capacity which created an opportunity for retail development over an area of thirty-six square

kilometres of developable space (compared to a town centre developable space of .135 square kilometres). The expansion of retail development away from the town centre however, was only made possible by the cultural paradigm of the Local Authority, who since the early 1970s had actively decentralised retailing away from the town centre under the guise of the New Town Development Corporation, and although the NTDC was disbanded as a development strategy in the late 1980s (see Hansard, Warrington–Runcorn NTDC, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1989) its philosophy continues as a viable approach to retail development in 2018.

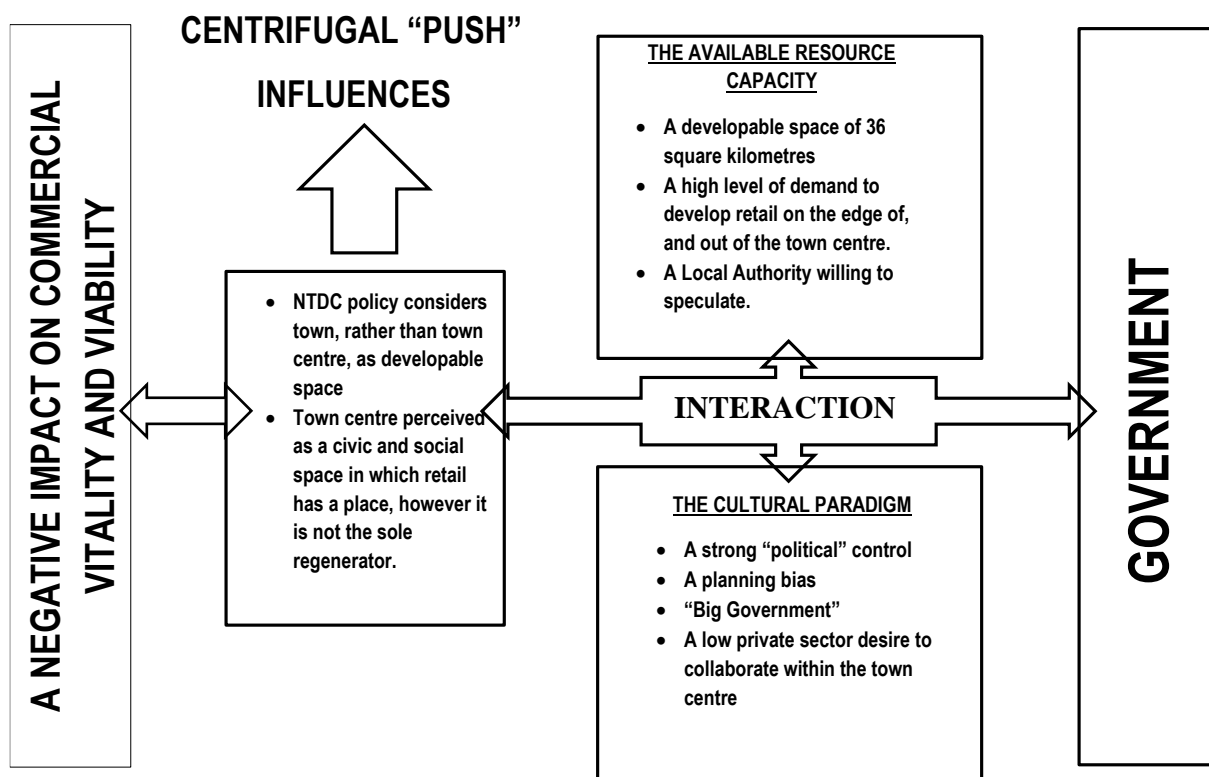


Figure 9. 2; The centrifugal town centre RDA of Warrington’s elite stakeholders

The cultural paradigm of Warrington’s influencers, due to the Leader’s planning bias, a majority political government, and an entrepreneurial approach to borrowing, created a form of “big government” (Levi-Faur, 2012; i.e. extensive bureaucracy and intrusive regulations and policies) where continued investment away from the town centre, to retail parks at Gemini, Alban and Riverside, along with the New Town Developments at Stockton

Heath, Westbrook and Birchwood created a town centre that was a “doughnut within a doughnut”, where retail development became a secondary consideration for retail investors. The subsequent absence of private demand within the town centre created a governance form where the Local Authority had little option but to maintain a governance form of *government*. As there was no desire from the private sector to collaborate with the Local Authority, public sector elites had a choice to create demand, either through a provision for planning opportunities; take a financial risk in the hope that private investment would follow; or do nothing.

The Local Authority have chosen to create demand, at a cost of more than £110 million of borrowed monies, with a redevelopment strategy that perceives the town centre as more than a retail model. Rather, the town centre in Warrington will be a place of civic and social pride that can offer a diverse economic and social benefit, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century town centre that is “fit for purpose”, where retail has a place; however, it not the sole reason to visit. In a study that considers whether influencers can impact on town centre vitality and viability KPI it is clear that Warrington’s influencers have exacerbated the decline of their town centre as a direct result of their retail strategies over the past forty years. It remains to be seen whether their renaissance plan offers an alternative future.

### *Wrexham*

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Wrexham’s town centre was the preferred destination for retail and commercial investors. Four local town centre markets created a level of vibrancy for convenience and comparison goods within a town centre that held a resistance to change. Two examples for the preference for retail investment to remain in the town centre were the Hippodrome cinema which closed in 1959, only to open two years later (it continued to trade for another twenty-eight years), and a local 18<sup>th</sup> Century hotel (the Wynnstay Arms) which was threatened with demolition until a local campaign saved it for the local population. There was a convenience goods move away from the town centre in the early 1970s when ASDA were granted permission for a food store at Eagles Meadow; however, this was an exception and it was not until the early 1990s that changes in Local Authority planning allowed the retail footprint to extend to edge of centre sites.

The catalyst for change was the Plas Coch retail park, which was granted permission to open an edge of centre site in 1991. Plas Coch was anchored by a Sainsbury's convenience store and the Local Authority argued that consent could be given, for although the development provided a convenience food offer away from the town centre the policy was in line with national trends at that time. The decision however appeared to be a catalyst for retail change as ASDA responded by closing their Eagles Meadow store on the edge of the town centre, reopening on an out of centre site at Maesydre in 1991. A growing preference, from retailers and investors, to develop on the edge of Wrexham's town centre during the 1990s was met with an open approach to retail development away from the town centre by the Local Authority. The public baths reopened on the edge of the town centre as Water World in 1998; the Central retail park and Island Green shopping centres were granted permission to open a 130,000 square foot development on the edge of the town centre in 1999; and the Border retail park was granted planning permission to open on the edge of the town centre in 2002.

These developments were initially intended to provide a convenience goods need, and again were not against a national trend of the time (Schiller, 1986). The challenge for Wrexham's influencers was that a move to provide edge of centre leisure facilities, and comparison goods also gained momentum from retail developers. The resilient Hippodrome town centre cinema finally closed its doors in 1997, replaced by a new multi-screen facility at the Plas Coch retail park the same year, and several town centre based comparison goods retailers were attracted to the edge of centre Plas Coch retail park in the early 2000's (Boots, Aldi, Homebase, Pets at Home, Argos, Frankie & Benny's and a DW fitness centre all relocated to Plas Coch in the period 2002–2018).

The preference for edge of centre development gained further momentum in the noughties, and this period witnessed the most radical change in Wrexham's town centre retail landscape. The Eagles Meadow development was an example of how available resource capacity and a change in the cultural paradigm combines to affect changes in the RDA.

When ASDA vacated the Local Authority owned edge of centre Eagles Meadow site in 1991 it became a part-time market, part-time car park. The vitality and the viability of the town

centre during this period was starting to show signs of decline due to a preference for retail development on the edge of centre boundaries, although it retained an attraction for the local markets, and it was an increasingly preferred choice for discount retailers (as in Warrington the town centre, as a retail destination, was on the path to *functional insignificance*). Concerned about the national decline of town centres in general, the Welsh government issued a technical advice note (TAN 4) directive in 1996. TAN (4) advocated the appointment of a town centre manager to facilitate better communications; research into retail trends; improve resources; better promote the town centre; and offer a more effective achievement of development plan objectives. Wrexham's Local Authority duly responded by passing a motion to establish a town centre forum on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1996, a process which created a town centre manager in 2000 (a change in the town centre cultural paradigm).

Conscious that the Eagles Meadow site was providing a limited purpose as an asset, the Local Authority put the site up for private tender in 2003 (thus encouraging private sector offers for an available resource through a change in the Local Authority's cultural paradigm). As part of the "management" process of what to do with Eagles Meadow the Local Authority consulted with external consultants who suggested the town centre had a lack of comparison goods provision in line with national trends. The Local Authority felt justified (through a combination of an impartial evidence base, an available resource, and a directive to become more engaged with the town centre) to consent to a £100 million private development retail scheme on the edge of the town centre.

With this consent the Local Authority consciously permitted a retail development which attracted most of the comparison goods retailers away from the town centre. In its defence, the Local Authority argued that the town got a new Debenhams department store, a Marks and Spencer food store, and improved leisure attractions. Unfortunately, however most of the established comparison goods retailers were also attracted to the new Eagles Meadow development with Boots, River Island, Dorothy Perkins, Top Shop, Next and Wallis all relocating from the town centre to Eagles Meadow when it opened in 2008.

What the Local Authority could not realise was that the opening of Eagles Meadow would coincide with a national recession, however the decision to permit the development contributed to a town centre with high vacancy rates, abandoned private sector developments, and a discount retail offer that radically changed the face of the town centre. The transference of *functional prestige* and *functional convenience* from the town centre following the decision to allow Eagles Meadow was evident; the Hippodrome cinema burnt down in 2008, and remained derelict until a charity organisation saved it in 2015; Woolworths closed its doors in 2008; Simon Boyd furnishings relocated to the Island Green retail park in 2008; Stead and Simpson and Adams Kids closed in the town centre in 2008; and T J Hughes closed its doors in August 2011 (the site was still vacant in 2018). There was some consolation for the Local Authority when the British Retail Consortium praised Wrexham for its approach in tackling high street shopping issues, citing the town as an example to others in 2009, and on a positive note Greenwoods, Peacocks and Barclays Bank relocated to the town centre in 2008. However, the Eagles Meadow development cemented its place as the retail destination and continues to attract both consumers and investors away from the traditional town centre.

Figure 9.3 summarises how Wrexham's Local Authority influencer's RDA over a twenty-year period, contributed to voids of inactivity in the town centre retail landscape, as the *site attraction*, the *functional convenience*, the *functional magnetism*, and, the *functional prestige* of the town centre was relocated to an edge of centre offer.

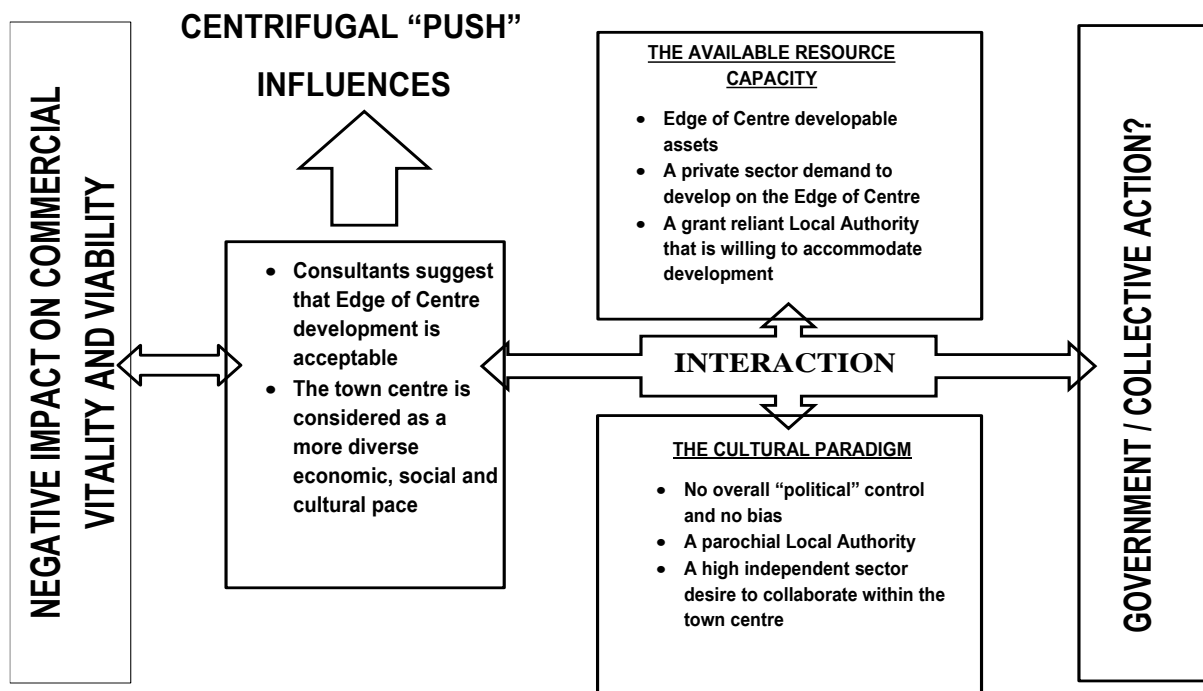


Figure 9. 3; The centrifugal town centre retail development approach of Wrexham’s elite stakeholders

The resource available to Wrexham’s influencers was not as large as Warrington’s; however, there were similarities in how culture impacted on the vitality and viability of the town centre in an equally destructive way. In the 1980s, the cultural mindset of Wrexham’s influencers was not a result of a national planning policy, rather it was a culture that responded to retail pressure. Undoubtedly, the decisions to allow retail park developments at Plas Coch (1991), Island Green and Central (1999) and Border retail parks (2002) contributed to a retail shift away from the town centre. However, it was the decision to allow the Eagles Meadow development in 2003 that had the greatest impact on the town centre’s vitality and viability.

What the Eagles Meadow development identified is how a change in the cultural paradigm (in part due the TAN 4 directive to improve the Local Authority’s understanding of the town centre, however this could only change the paradigm in the absence of strong leadership from a politically divided Local Authority) can create a need to engage with non–altruistic private developers. The result was that the Local Authority relied on advice from planning consultants (who suggested the edge of centre could sustain an increased comparison goods offer) to enact a strategy that had a devastating effect on the vitality and viability of their town centres retail landscape.



### *Covent Garden*

Covent Garden in the 1960s and 1970s was a home to market traders, potters, bookbinders, tanners, ballet-shoe makers, costumiers to local theatres and many more small and diverse independent businesses. These businesses, many of them unique to this central London town centre, relied on the vitality brought to Covent Garden by a nationalised food and flower market. The catalyst for change in Covent Garden was not dissimilar to the cultural approaches of developers in both Warrington and Wrexham, in that influencers perceived that the town centre no longer suited modern retail needs. What differed in Covent Garden was that the pace of change was more radical, as the heart of the town centre was effectively ripped out in 1974 when the Greater London Council (GLC) decided to relocate the central market to Nine Elms. The speed of retail change was made possible by Covent Market's publicly owned status, and the GLC's political desire to relocate it. The fact that the market was publicly owned however also created a political maelstrom that shaped the governance of the town centre we see today.

In 1968, after deciding to relocate the publicly owned market, the GLC deemed the soon to be vacated site suitable for redevelopment, and, in the early 1970s, their preferred option was to populate Covent Garden with hotels, little open space and expensive accommodation. Renamed the Covent Garden scheme, the GLC's ambitious plans had the support of private commerce, but it did not, however, have the support of over 3,000 residents who failed to share the GLC's vision of their town centre filled with expensive office and residential space. Dissatisfied with the GLC's actions, the residents formed the catalyst of a social movement (the Covent Garden Community Association (CGCA)) which vociferously challenged the GLC's commercial plans. The strategic approach of the CGCA was to solicit political assistance to list, and thereby protect, historic and architecturally merited buildings, through a quasi-social vision that the town centre should be "of the people, and for the people", and in the mid-1970s many of Covent Garden retailers reflected their rather bohemian outlook. Unfortunately for the CGCA, the success of the unique retail landscape attracted non-bohemian retailers and investors, and by the late 1970s the town centre became a beacon for retail investment (a consequence of which was that private landlords increased existing rents to five times their current values).

In the early 1980s, in a conscious attempt to protect the town centre from over-commercialisation and to appease the CGCA, the GLC created the *Covent Garden Shopping Centre* on the site of the relocated central market. The centre, the first in Europe, was built on the premise that independent local businesses could complement the local community. This socially considerate retail experiment however was dashed in the late 1980s when the GLC was disbanded and the freehold of the *Covent Garden Shopping Centre* was purchased by Guardian Royal Exchange (GRE). Following the sale to GRE, the retail landscape reverted to a form of market mediated anarchy, and rents increased significantly, Eventually the business model of the GLC (oriented towards the independent retailer) was replaced by national chains and multiple retailers willing to pay increased rents for a stall in an increasingly vibrant Covent Garden; one result of which was that the town centre consistently topped Westminster Council's vitality and viability measures in the Central Area Zone.

The GRE sold the lease to Capital and Counties in 2008 for £870 million, and to outsiders it may appear the social bias on housing and heritage was lost to a town centre that adopted a private shopping centre model. Due to the cultural legacies of the past, however, Covent Garden's influencers (Capital and Counties, the CGAT, and the CGCA) exist in a symbiotic relationship of self-interest. They each hold the town centre in high esteem, they are protective of its heritage, and, although they have different motives, they look inwards in their approach to its vitality and viability. There is little doubt that Covent Garden is unique as a town centre, and it would be beyond the realms of many public, or private investors to acquire the assets of a town centre.

So, although in many ways the influencers in Covent Garden have created a town centre that is a policy makers dream, it is unlikely that dream could be a national policy reality. There are similarities of how change has affected the privately-owned realm of Covent Garden, and the public realms of Warrington and Wrexham, where retail destruction, (through a preference for out of town retail), social construction (through a re-population of the town centre), and holistic/commercial regeneration is a recurring theme. Where their paths diverge is in their approach to retail development, as Covent Garden's influencers are all focused on the heart of the town centre. The CGCA has the available resource of the

community, and a cultural paradigm that continues to provide a voice for them; the CGAT has the available resource of the “protected lands” and a cultural paradigm that protects the heritage of place; and Capital and Counties have an available resource of their asset base, and a cultural paradigm that aims to maximise the value of those assets.

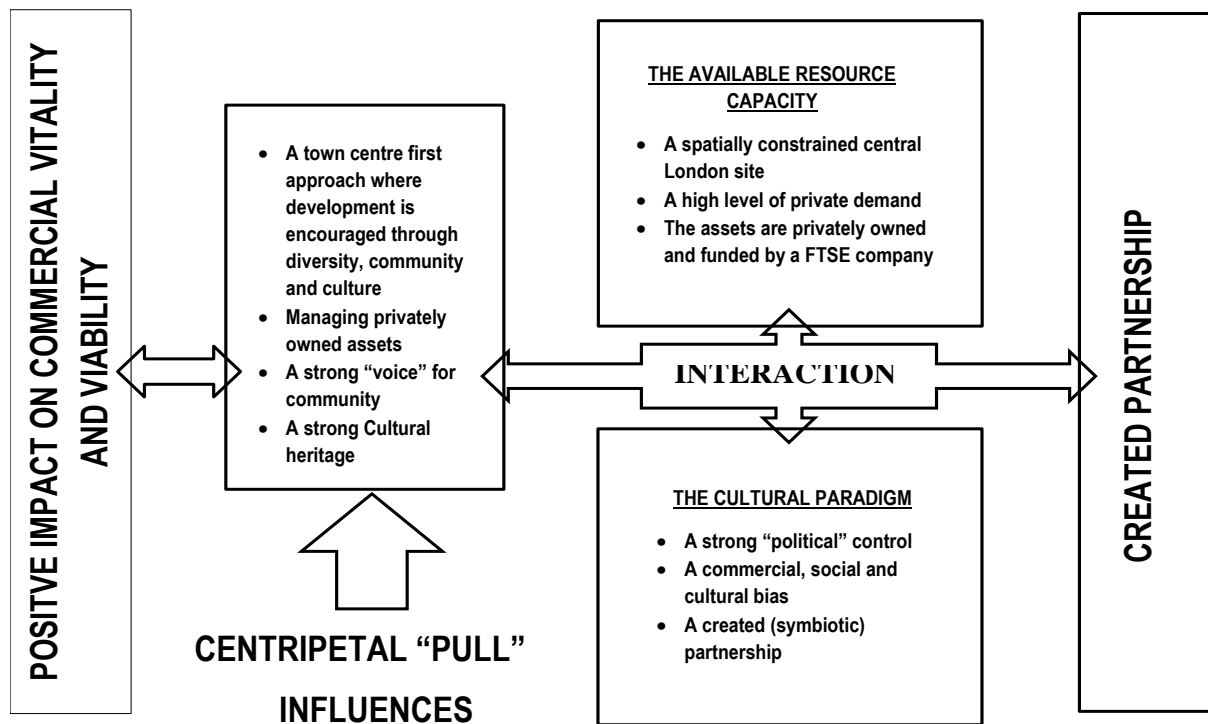


Figure 9. 4; The centripetal town centre retail development approach of Covent Garden’s elite stakeholders

What we see today in Covent Garden is a tapestry of interwoven resource capacities and cultural paradigms that have evolved over time. To suggest that Covent Garden is influenced by a single created partnership therefore is a misnomer, as the organisations that influence the town centre have different strategies and motives. What they have in common is an inward approach to development; on community through the CGCA; on architectural culture through the CGAT; and on commerce through CAPCO. The intersections of these interests (Freeman, 2010) creates a positive impact on vitality and viability in their town centre and is the envy of many.

### *Stockton Heath*

Stockton Heath's retail landscape has not been subjected to the level of change evidenced in the other three case studies, although there was an influence from the New Town policies of Warrington Borough Council in the late 1960s with the Forge shopping centre, and evidence of further Local Authority planning intervention throughout the 1970s and 1980s when convenience goods retailers allowed to develop on the edges of the town centre. Retail change however was generally contained within the confines of the town centre itself, an RDA that had similarities with Covent Garden although the similarities end there as Stockton Heath's town centre has neither the cultural or architectural history of Covent Garden, nor does it have a managed and co-ordinated strategy to influence vitality and viability. What Stockton Heath's town centre does have is a local demand for space created by a limited number of available properties, and a protective arm from over development from a Local Authority that realises its charm as the "jewel in their crown". In the late 1960s, Stockton Heath's town centre benefitted from the Local Authority's New Town policy (NTDC), which provided additional retail space and encouraged comparison and convenience goods retailers to relocate from Warrington's town centre. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and 1980s the addition of NTDC space attracted retail investment that complimented the existing town centres diverse retail offer, and the town centre prospered as a result. The development monies continued when the NTDC was disbanded, and in the late 1980s when Victoria Square fell into a state of disrepair and many locally owned properties became outdated and unoccupied, the Local Authority intervened to preserve its status as the focal point of the village. To protect the buildings, Victoria Square was granted Local Authority conservation status, and in the late 1990s, the Local Authority encouraged interest from a London based property business to redevelop the site.

The London property business (Capital and Provincial) realised the economic potential of the redevelopment, and the Local Authority facilitated the private purchase of Victoria Square with a robust planning strategy. After a lengthy, and objection-filled planning consultation, the development was passed as a mixed-use retail facility and Victoria Square again became a vibrant commercial space. A serendipitous outcome of the Victoria Square development was the positive effect the investment had on the vitality and viability of the town centre, particularly from local landlords who were now benefitting from increased rental values as

the demand from retailers grew. In this respect, Stockton Heath’s town centre held parallels to Covent Garden, where the sale of a Local Authority resource provided a catalyst for private investment, which in turn improved the vitality and viability of the town centre.

Figure 9.5 summarises the RDA in Stockton Heath, where elite stakeholder’s, through an inward-looking investment strategy held cultural similarities with a post privatised (post 2008) Covent Garden. Both town centres’ influencers approached retail development, and investment within a defined space, without any distractions from retailers, or developers who wished to extend the town centre footprint. Was this a conscious decision, or were influencers limited by the confines of space? Whatever the reason the lack of expansion does not appear to make Covent Garden and Stockton Heath’s town centres less attractive; in fact, it creates the opposite effect.

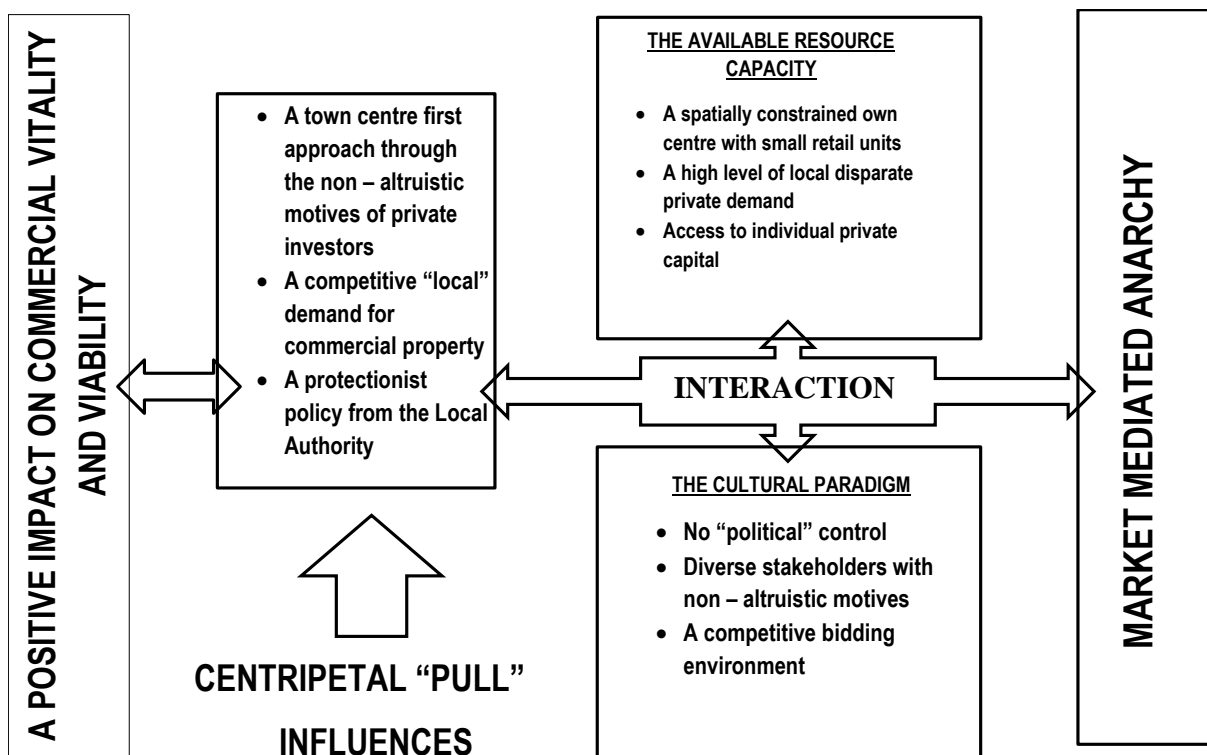


Figure 9. 5; The centripetal town centre retail development approach of Stockton Heath’s elite stakeholders

There is no doubt the RDA of Stockton Heath's influencers was defined by the Local Authority's desire to retain investment in the "jewel in the crown"; however, the Local Authority does not overtly influence Stockton Heath's ongoing vitality and viability, rather this is influenced by the cultural paradigms of many separate organisations, each with their own motives and strategies. In the absence of an overt Local Authority presence there is no political control, and the polity consists of many competing forms. The result is a centripetal approach to retail development that holds similarities to Covent Garden, in that it looks in towards the town centre. Therefore, although the structure and governance differ the impact of influencers on the town centres vitality and viability was equally positive.

## 9.2 Governance form

The four forms of governance explored what were expected to be different approaches to retail development in town centres. *Government* assumed that governance reflected the hierarchical forms of the 1960s and 1970s; *Created Partnership* that the approach to retail development had evolved into a more consensual form; *Collective Action* that there were informal factions that came together with a common purpose to influence vitality and viability; and *Market Mediated Anarchy* that assumed there was no overt form of governance, rather governance was a free market survival of the fittest. Evidence suggested, however, that to define governance as blanket forms was too simple. Indeed, the "messy field" (Horvath, 2017 p.37) of governance, with its changing flux as a "result of constantly changing shifting liaisons and confrontations between sets of interests with fundamentally different motives" (Evans, 1997 p.109), precluded any broad definitive forms that could be studied for meaningful solutions to the decline in the vitality and viability of town centres.

What the case studies did identify was that local governance was; (1) a result of the interaction between the available resource and the influencer's culture; and (2) it was fragmented by spatial governance action.

(1) If local influencers had an external available resource capacity, combined with a culture that permitted retail development away from the town centre, they adopted a centrifugal (push) approach to retail development. If local influencers had no available

resource capacity, and a culture that retained development within the town centre, they adopted a centripetal (push) approach to retail development. It was the interaction between the cultural paradigm of the influencer's organisations, and the available resource capacity that both created, and constantly informed their governance form. Examples of this interaction can be evidenced in the tables in Chapter 1, where we are reminded that in the 1960s and 1970s there was little need for public sector intervention into the retail landscape of town centres. Retail development was contained within the town centre, and governance was generally conducted as an "us and them", between the guardians of the public realm, and those who wished to gain profit. The purported changes to local governance (from hierarchical governance to a form of heterarchical governance), in part, arose from the retail development strategies of centrifugal approaches from the 1970s onwards, as centrifugal approaches contributed to voids of inactivity (ostensibly vacated retail units as a result of low private demand). The voids of inactivity, exacerbated by the retail development approaches of Local Authorities, asked questions about the local governance of their respective town centres. In effect, voids of inactivity required governance to evolve from the hierarchical models that had prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s, to become more inclusive forms that have become "all the rage in the political science literature" (Garrard and Goldsmith, 2017 p.15).

Centrifugal approaches encouraged the migration of private investment and development away from the town centre, which had the effect of isolating the Local Authority in town centre governance. In effect, as there was an insufficient demand from retail partners to form meaningful partnerships, that would fill the voids of inactivity, there was no requirement from Local Authorities to evolve from forms of hierarchical forms of government. The political rhetoric of centrifugal influencers was to seek partners through government dictums to fill the voids (for example DCLG, 2005; BID legislation, 2004; a focus on localism, 2011; or advice for town centre teams, DCLG, 2012). The rhetoric however, appeared to be at odds with Local Authority cultural paradigms, and it was difficult to see where cracks (Amin and Thrift, 2002) could appear where outsiders could enter their worlds. For example, comments from Local Authority's that "town centres were better before they needed managing" (Managing

Director of Culture Warrington), or “you can either do nothing or do something” (Leader of Wrexham Borough Council), had an air of reluctant participation. In effect Local Authority influencers viewed a need for public sector town centre intervention with an element of disdain. It was a problem, just not their problem.

The contrast between espoused rhetoric and action continued in their governance forms. In both cases, Local Authority influencers purported to be democratic and inclusive. Both Warrington and Wrexham influencers followed government advice to create town centre boards, they both embraced the BID culture, they both (for a brief period) appointed a town centre manager. The conflict was that their cultures were autocratic and exclusive, while policy dictums advised governance in town centres to be democratic, and inclusive. Both Local Authorities recognised that retaining vitality and viability required a collective approach to address the challenges town centres faced, however there was no evidence of collective decision making, or any desire to reverse the contribution to town centre decline they had made.

Centripetal influencers also had voids of inactivity however these voids were quickly addressed by local stakeholders as they were both contained and managed. When a void of inactivity appeared in Covent Garden it was usually the result of a strategic decision by Capital and Counties to either create an alternative use for a property, or an attempt to manage diversity. For example, when a pasta restaurant no longer fitted Capital and Counties commercial profile, they bought them out of their lease and the pasta retailer was replaced by a company that provided a better strategic fit. Similarly, when a void of inactivity appeared in the free market of Stockton Heath it was usually quickly repaired through the informal network of gossip in the town centre.

The governance structures of Covent Garden and Stockton Heath did not have the reality/rhetorical conflicts of Local Authority case studies. Because they were “managed”, albeit in different ways, any issues that arose were more easily addressed as the lines of communication were so much clearer and less complicated. Because both Covent Garden and Stockton Heath were locally “managed” the questions of; Who is to blame for the void? Who is responsible for fixing the void? How will we fix the void?



And, who will fix the void? resulted in less of a rhetorical discussion to forge new relationships with a different set of stakeholders. In effect, as there was a desire from the retail sector to invest there was no requirement to create an alternative demand, and no requirement to collaborate outside the governance forms they had.

(2) What also emerged from the case studies was that town centre governance could not be defined within a single form. Rather town centre governance was a tapestry of many forms of governance activity, where the shifting complexity over time affected different parts of the town centre’s fabric. To illustrate these complexities figures 9.6-9.8, reproduce the governance maps of Warrington, Wrexham and Covent Garden from the case studies.

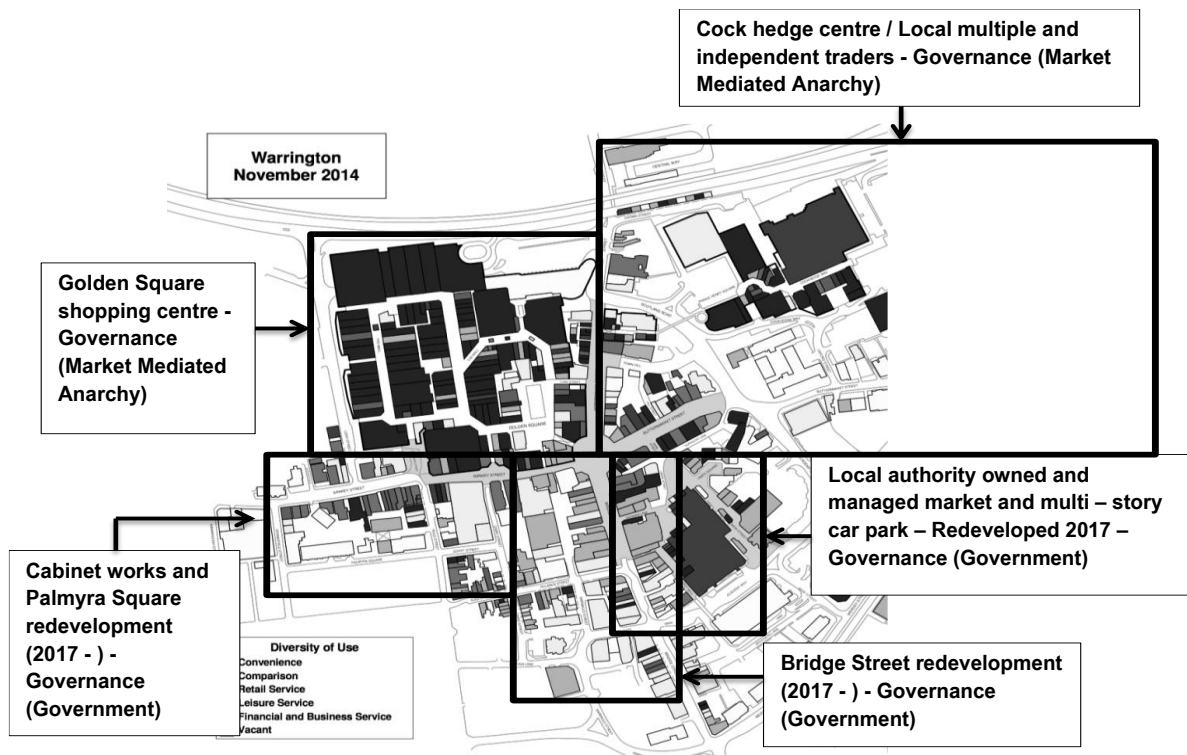


Figure 9. 6; The governance map of Warrington town centre

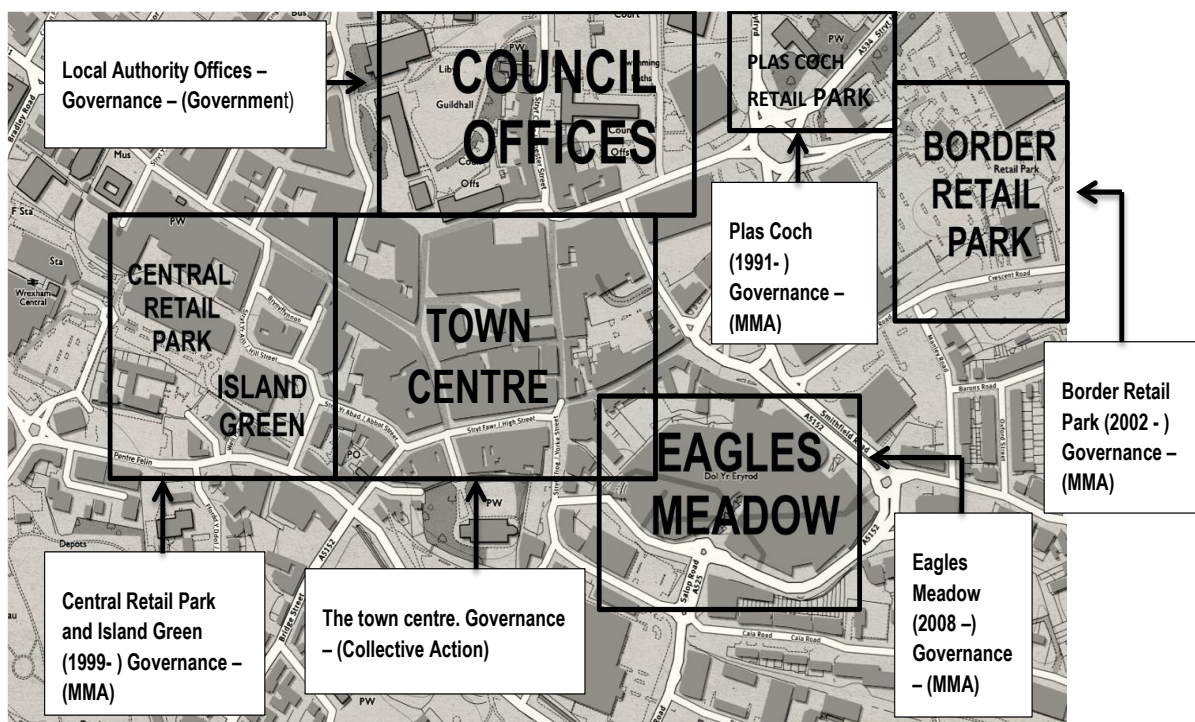


Figure 9. 7; The governance map of Wrexham

What these maps identify are distinct areas of spatial governance activity, rather than any overall defining governance form. For example, it was suggested that Warrington functioned as a *government* form, and whilst there was an overriding Local Authority influence within the town centre, there were also areas of market mediated anarchy, which were influenced by free market forces. For example, the shopping centres (Golden Square and Cock hedge) both enacted forms of market mediated governance, actively competing for tenants with each other and from all other areas of the town centre. Where a *government* form was evidenced was in the areas of low private sector demand. These areas created opportunities for the Local Authority to redevelop their new civic offices, and to bridge the newly formed cultural square with the heart of the town centre. The Local Authority may have dressed these actions as a strategy to save the town centre however, they were largely reactive strategies to redundant space caused by their RDA rather than any overt management initiative to create vitality and viability.

Centrifugal town centre approaches created the potential for governance complexity and conflict, as voids of inactivity stimulated policies that invited outside agencies into established cultural paradigms. For example, a relatively high number of vacancies created a

political requirement from the Local Authority to provide an impartial evidence base (because the “funding bodies don’t trust us” Wrexham’s Director of Planning) to offer advice on how to repair voids of inactivity. Policy dictums suggested an inclusive approach to share the burden by advising Local Authorities to create town centre boards, through forms of heterarchic governance. The rationale being that if stakeholders from all areas of the town centre had an input there would be a greater chance of success.

The invited external agencies however had a limited effect on both the vitality and viability of town centres, and on more inclusive forms of local governance as evidenced in both public sector cases where in Warrington thirteen independent commissions for retail audits were issued in fourteen years, however the Local Authority influencers largely ignored the findings, and in Wrexham where an eight-year £100,000 study of impartial evidence from thirteen different institutions was heavily influenced by the Local Authority’s Director of Planning: “if I am paying for the report, I decide what goes in it”. From a governance perspective, a centrifugal approach created a potentially fertile ground for partnerships, or collective action to develop. Unfortunately, the fertile ground remained barren as Local Authority cultural paradigms did not allow any sustainable collaboration to take place.

By contrast, centripetal influencers required neither impartial evidence, or outside intervention as they created vitality and viability through a retail offer that was local and de-homogenised. They had no requirement to create collective forums. However, this was not to say they were not mindful of other stakeholders; for example, Capital and Counties in Covent Garden had to accede to the Area Trust’s and the Community Association’s cultural and legal statutes. As a result, governance in centripetally influenced town centres was less complicated, for although Covent Garden and Stockton Heath had governance forms that were at opposing ends of the purported evolution of governance (Jessop, 2016), each set of influencers created strategies that were specific to their locale. In Covent Garden there was a symbiosis between influencers, although each retained their independence; In Stockton Heath local actors competed as a collection of institutions that followed the “invisible hand of uncoordinated market exchange based on the formally rational pursuit of self-interest” (Jessop, 2016 p.3).

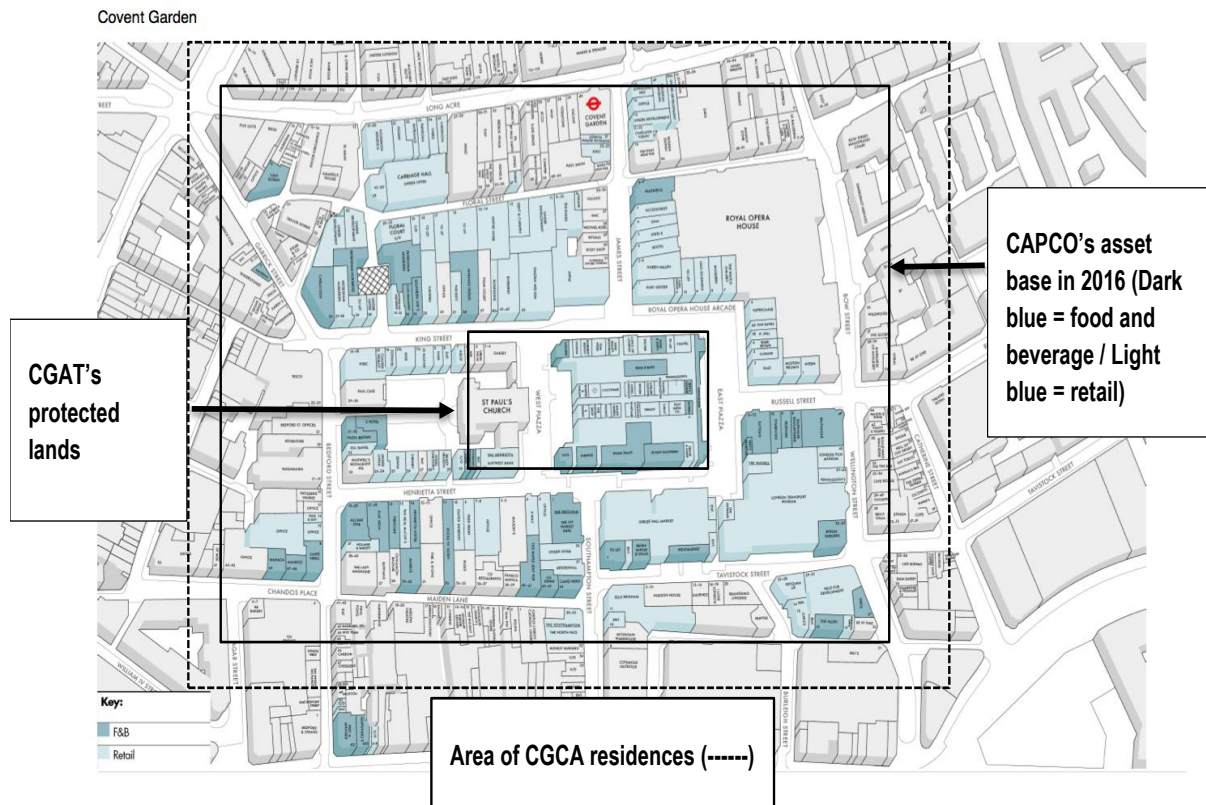


Figure 9. 8; The governance map of Covent Garden

What centripetal influencers did was to retain a focus on a spatially defined area, and when voids of inactivity inevitably appeared, they were addressed more expediently. This focus, ultimately, had a positive impact on the commercial vitality and viability of the town centre.

### 9.3 The impact on vitality and viability

The case studies identified contrasts between centrifugal approaches, which had a limited influence over a priori measures of vitality and viability, and centripetal approaches which had an influence on all but commercial diversity. Figure 9.9 summarises the findings of influencers on the a priori measures.

<i>Town centre (RDA)</i>	Influencer's Culture	Available Resource Capacity	Impact on rental yields	Impact on footfall	Impact on commercial diversity	Impact on vacancy rates	Governance Form
<b>Warrington (Centrifugal)</b> <i>Acceptable to develop retail out of the town centre.</i>	A strong Local Authority culture where external consultant's advice was generally ignored	36 square km of available developable space.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	<b>Government -</b> Formal and exclusive due to a lack of private interest, effectively isolating the Local Authority in town centre action.
<b>Wrexham (Centrifugal)</b> <i>Acceptable to develop retail on the edge of the town centre</i>	A weak Local Authority culture that was influenced by external consultants	Private and Local Authority assets on the edge of the town centre	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	Some evidence of strategies to reduce vacancies in private properties.	<b>Collective Action-</b> Exclusive and formal with signs of grass roots action due to frustration.
<b>Covent Garden (Centripetal)</b> <i>Retain development within the town centre.</i>	Strong complementary cultures between Capital and Counties plc.; The Covent Garden Area Trust; and The Covent Garden Community Association that retained a focus on the town centre.	Spatially constrained Central London location with defined privately owned /influenced boundaries.	Evidence of an increase in property values.	Evidence of strategies to actively target the "right people".	Evidence of a strategy to influence commercial diversity.	Evidence of strategies to manage vacancies.	<b>Created Partnership-</b> Symbiosis of competing cultural, economic and social cultures each with clear responsibilities.
<b>Stockton Heath (Centripetal)</b> <i>Retain development within the town centre.</i>	Culture was "owned" by local landlords and retailers consequently development retained a focus on the town centre.	Spatially constrained town centre that was protected as the "jewel in the crown" of the Local Authority.	Evidence of an increase in property values.	No evidence of any influence.	No evidence of any influence.	Evidence that vacancy rates could be managed by local landlords.	<b>Market Mediated Anarchy-</b> Informal and exclusive. A free market form of the survival of the fittest.

Figure9.9; Summary of governance impact on four measures of commercial vitality and viability

The evidence suggests that a centripetal approach to retail development retains a greater level of commercial vitality and viability in the town centre; conversely a centrifugal approach facilitates a greater level of competition from outside the town centre, and thus, compromises the commercial vitality and viability of the town centre. There is a caveat here that land ownership issues often add complexity to influencing vacancy rates. For example, Quin *et al.*, (2019) suggest that “landlords are critical to shaping the use of physical assets in town centres. However, some [are] divorced from local decision-making or, willing to play a proactive role in regeneration” (p. 6 section 4.1.2.). Examples of a lack of influence over landlords was evidenced in both Local Authority town centres, and land ownership arguably contributed to any influence they could have on vacant retail units. In town centres where the landlords were locally known (Covent Garden and Stockton Heath) this was less of an issue. Absentee landlords therefore contributed to a degree whether vacant units could have a negative impact (in the cases of Warrington and Wrexham), or a positive impact (in Covent Garden and Stockton Heath) on commercial measures of vitality and viability.

What is interesting, across all cases, is that although influencers can adopt short-term strategies to compensate for vacant units and, indirectly, temporarily, assuage the rental yields of property through demand, none of the influencers can influence what goes into those units (diversity), or how many people visit them (footfall). Where diversity was influenced (Covent Garden) there was a greater chance that commercial “health” would follow, however the challenges of even a micro-managed business model relied on dedicated effort. Where there was less of a concerted effort the challenges were amplified to the point of impotence.

Chapter 10 concludes this thesis by revisiting the research objectives and suggesting avenues for future research.

## Chapter 10; Conclusion

This concluding Chapter revisits the research aims and objectives, considers the limitations of this research and suggests avenues for future research.

### *Achieving the Research Objectives*

The research aims of this thesis were to develop a framework, for analysis, of purportedly evolving local governance forms, and to explore, and to understand the impact local influencers have within these governance forms on NPPF measures of commercial vitality and viability, namely, vacancy rates, diversity, rental yield and footfall. The aims led to the research objectives of this thesis, which were; (1) to identify local governance influencers; (2) to explore the impact they have on National Planning Policy framework (NPPF) commercial measures of vitality and viability, and (3) to explore whether their impact varies with the form of local governance they adopt.

(1) In relation to the first research objective, to identify local governance influencers, it was necessary to develop a framework of local governance forms that could be inclusive of different forms of governance. The framework originated with the extremes of hierarchical Government (Davies, 2001), and the opposing free market forms of Market Mediated Anarchy (Jessop, 2016). From these two positions, a centre ground was identified with two forms of heterarchic governance, one had a formal structure (Created Partnership), the other was informal (Collective Action). The rationale for developing these centre ground positions was that forms of Created Partnerships could be inclusive of many contemporary forms of local governance (for example, TCM and BIDs), and Collective Action could be inclusive of a “coming together” of like-minded influencers who were not yet at a formal stage of partnership, although they could be in the future (Ysa, 2007). These four “general” local governance forms - namely, Government, Created Partnership, Collective Action and Market Mediated Anarchy - provided the framework for the choice of case studies in relation to data collection and analysis.

To identify the influencers of local governance within the case study locations characterising each governance form, I was guided by Hallsworth and Evans' (2008) suggestion that interviews, or discussions should be held to establish the extent to which any influence can actually be deduced, and by Cook's observation that "power ...is by no means synonymous with presence" (2010 p. 35), implying that influence is not always held by local stakeholders. I assumed, from literature, and my experience as a town centre retailer for forty years, that retailers could be thought of in terms more like transient journeymen who would travel from town to town to earn a profit, in doing so I considered local influencers to be the administrative custodians of *their* town centres, because they were "rooted" to *their* town centres. In publicly owned town centres the custodians were the Local Authority, in privately owned town centres the custodians were private landlords.

Identifying who held influence was a snowballing process of interviews and discussions where in Warrington, Wrexham and Covent Garden, I found that the influencers were the Leaders of the Local "Authority" (whether the institution was public, or private); in Stockton Heath, local influence over vitality and viability was held mainly by individual landlords and retailers, although there was also evidence of a Local Authority and the Parish Council influence over structural infrastructure.

(2) In relation to the second research objective, to explore the impact local governance influencers had on National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) measures of commercial "success", it was necessary to identify the KPIs that local influencers considered a priority. Guimarães (2017), through a comprehensive review of KPIs used in UK town centre planning policies over the past twenty years, identified four constants, namely – vacancy rates, diversity, rental yield and footfall (see figure 3.1). These four measures became the benchmark NPPF measures of commercial "success".

To explore what impact influencers had on vacancy rates, diversity, rental yields and footfall, it was necessary to gather evidence from sources other than interviews and discussions, as evidence from interviews and discussions in isolation could exhibit intent, rather than action or influence (Schein, 2003, 2010). To compare rhetoric against action, therefore, required evidence that could objectively confirm, or disconfirm, what impact



influencers had on vitality and viability. The sources of corroboratory evidence were found in “health-check” documents, and site visits. From interviews, “health-check” documents and site visits it was useful to compare the actions influencers had taken over time with the rhetoric of our discussions.

By applying thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) to the documents and discussion notes, it was evident that there was a disconnect in Warrington and Wrexham between the consultants’ advice and the actions of influencers. In Warrington, consultants’ advice (over a fifteen-year period) was to resist retail development away from the town centre; the Local Authority however continued to migrate retail development out of centre. In Wrexham, the consultant’s advice was to redesign and extend the town centre; something which the Local Authority found politically challenging. The themes that arose from interviews and documents suggested that this disconnect in Warrington and Wrexham was due to the cultural paradigms of Local Authorities; indeed, this factor was the primary contributor to the impact local influencers had on vitality and viability. The disconnect in Covent Garden and Stockton Heath was not as apparent as there was no specific external advice given.

What became apparent was that the cultural paradigms of custodians (whether public or private) created two types of influencers; one that would resist development away from the town centre and thus retain the town centre’s place in the retail hierarchy (a centripetal approach to retail development), and one that would allow retail development away from the town centre (a centrifugal approach). The influencers that adopted a centripetal approach to retail development seemed to have a negative impact on vitality and viability, whereas the influencers that adopted a centrifugal approach to retail development had a greater chance of maintaining vitality and viability in their town centres.

(3) In relation to the third research objective, to explore if the impact of influencers varied with the form of local governance they adopted, there were differences within retail development approaches, and a recognition that local governance rarely impacted on the town centre in a uniform manner; rather it was specific to the reactive challenges that retail change brings (see the governance maps in Chapters 5-8). Indeed, the latter point raises the

question of whether town centres function as distinct forms, or are they an amalgam of forms, an issue worthy of future research.

What was evident was that none of the influencers had a positive impact on all four KPI together. Covent Garden's and Stockton Heath's influencers did have a more positive impact on vacancy rates and rental yields than Warrington's and Wrexham's. However, none of the town centre influencers had a positive impact on diversity, which was discouraging as this indicator was perceived to be a key component of retail resilience (Dolega and Celinska-Janowicz, 2015), or on footfall, which had fallen in all the town centres under investigation. It could be said that the impact on vitality and viability, therefore, did not change with local governance form.

What was evident, however, was that excluding certain stakeholders from the process of local governance limited the influence stakeholders had on vitality and viability. For example, in Warrington (Government) the decision to spend £350,000 of public monies on regenerating the town centre with "something different" by an obscure American artist did little to improve the town centre's vitality and viability, yet the rhetoric resulted in the political figure being "re-elected as a result" (Deputy Leader of the Local Authority). In the same town centre, the influencers committed a further £60,000 on consultants to re-name the newly developed "Time Square" project. The consultants spent six months deliberating, only to suggest that "there was nothing wrong with Time Square" (spokesperson for Warrington & Co.), a decision the Local Authority duly accepted. That the decisions of influencers in Warrington could go unchecked created something of a monopoly over local governance. The influencers continued to commission "health-checks" (another has appeared in 2019 see Nexus, Warrington Town Centre Health Check) without heeding the recommendations of previous "health-checks", as they continued to migrate retail away from the town centre. In this respect, Government as a form exacerbated a decline in town centre vitality and viability, and its effect on vitality and viability was limited by its exclusivity.

In Wrexham, there was evidence that the Collective Action form of 2016, was returning to a Government form in 2019. However, the question remains whether Collective Action had a different impact to that of Government? There was evidence that the grass roots of the

Wrexham Business Group had an impact on vitality. They organised events in the town centre to generate footfall, they took a pride in their town centre by cleaning buildings, and they tried to convince the Local Authority to let their vacant units to local businesses. There was however, always an “us and them” feeling in Wrexham between the traders’ and the Local Authority, and in the end the political machinations of the Local Authority appeared to wear the traders’ enthusiasm down, to the point where the traders’ lost interest in the process of Collective Action. This form did however have a positive impact as the Local Authority used the impetus of the traders’ movement to recreate an interest in the town centre. The Leader suggested in 2018, that the Local Authority’s retail units were now being let, that footfall had increased (and it was now being monitored), that they had reached a deal with a local property company to purchase Henblas Square, and they had committed monies from other Council budgets to improve the fabric of the town centre. Would this have happened without the local traders’ bloody mindedness? Probably not. Therefore, Collective Action, however short a life it had, did eventually have a positive impact, as it changed hearts and minds.

In Covent Garden there was evidence of a Created Partnership formed between the strong cultural paradigms of three institutions; Capital and Counties plc, the Covent Garden Area Trust, and, the Covent Garden Community Association. What these three combined to create was a “checking system” where the town centre retained a focus as a special place. Capital and Counties wanted to create value for their shareholders, the Area Trust had a legally binding responsibility for architectural integrity, and the Community Association had the weight of residents and a political know-how. If any of these three had an exclusive influence the vitality and viability could be compromised, but together they created a town centre that had low vacancy rates, high rental yields, (relatively) high footfall, and a measure of influence over diversity. There is a caveat here that not all town centres can be privately owned, nor can they be influenced by passionate organisations that, over time through struggle, have created an inward-looking focus on their place. However, there are things that can be taken away from the Created Partnership approach that can be applied to town centre governance in other town centres; namely if there are checks in place to ensure that the action taken is commensurate with vitality and viability; that a “meaningful voice” is

given to stakeholders, a “voice” that carries weight; and, if possible that the assets of town centres act as a trust where value is shared.

These factors were also evident in Stockton Heath, where there was evidence that vitality and viability was retained in the town centre through local ownership where, although influencers could not negate the effects of retail change, they could maintain a level of vitality and viability through an inward-looking strategy. In this respect, Market Mediated Anarchy achieved a level of “success” that was only bettered by Covent Garden. There is, however, a concern that Stockton Heath is more vulnerable to the effects of retail change than Covent Garden, as diversity is changing the town centre to one that has an evening economy. In this respect, diversity affects footfall during the day, and although KPIs will still register Stockton Heath a “success” as rental values will be high, and vacancy rates will be low the town centre lacks balance, a balance that comes by offering a “meaningful voice” to more than private landlords.

In summary, was form a factor? Yes, it was, although it was not the form per se that mattered, it was the focus on the place, and an interest from influencers with a “meaningful voice” that created a positive change.

#### *Limitations of this research*

I believe the limitations of this research lie in attempting to capture the complex realities of local governance within town centres through the lens of four measures of commercial vitality and viability, within four case studies. In attempting to catch “reality in flight” (Pettigrew, 1998) through such a simplified lens it would appear ambitious to construct a “general” framework of forms that could represent local town centre governance. However, although local governance forms of Government, Created Partnership, Collective Action and Market Mediated Anarchy, are “general” forms they do reflect extant literature, and it is really the degree of “coming together” that is open to question. To what extent, and how, local governance “comes together” is, a big question, and I recognise that there are probably as many forms of local governance as there are town centres. My intention was to explore how different local governance forms impacted on vitality and viability, and I believe I did that to the best of my ability at this time in my development.

In further defence to the limitations, I would say that my ability as a researcher has grown throughout this thesis, both through the interactions and advice from my supervisory team, and through my experiences in the field. Indeed, through this PhD, and after working in town centres for the past forty years, I believe that I have a better understanding how retail change affects town centres, it is my ability to relate and communicate that understanding in an academic manner that I hope to improve on in the coming years.

#### *Future research avenues*

There are many avenues this research could follow, although one that comes to the fore is, why do local influencers adopt centrifugal retail development approaches when there is evidence that such an approach exacerbates the decline of retail in town centres? From this research it is evident that by engaging more influencers in local governance it is more likely that influencers can have a positive effect on the causes of retail decline in town centres, therefore if influencers engage in more 'meaningful' local governance which allows influencers to 'check' the actions of others it could more easily address how policy makers can offer better advice on how individual town centres can adapt to *their* retail change.

Of course, evidence suggests that culture plays a pivotal role in how influencers approach town centre retail development, and how, and why, stakeholders are 'allowed in' to influencers 'inner-circles' is crucial to an understanding of governance itself. To better test the validity of this claim it would be of benefit to conduct research across a wider range of town centres to explore how centripetal and centrifugal approaches to retail development occur. This is perhaps more relevant today as the retail landscape in town centres is changing at pace, and the latest developments are asking for a response that increases diversity, and other uses that compliment retail, rather than retail being the driver. How that change is managed is through an empirical understanding of how local governance works is crucial to an understanding of how town centre influencers both create and, sustain vital and viable places.

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