

Willenhall Economic and Development Programme: Baseline Review

Introduction

Willenhall is located in the west of Walsall Borough. It is bound by the borough boundary to the north, the City of Wolverhampton to the west, the M6 motorway and the Black Country route to the south. This location provides easy access to the motorway network at junction 10 of the M6 and also the Black Country Enterprise Zone (BCEZ) which is a focus for economic activity. The town is well known for being the hub for the lock industry but in recent times, like the rest of the borough, it has diversified into a wide range of industrial uses. It is also part of a priority corridor for regeneration, linking Walsall and Wolverhampton.

The Willenhall Economic Development Programme (Willenhall EDP) area, which is the focus of this report, has the district centre at its core but extends to also cover an area of surrounding industrial and employment land. The boundary of the Willenhall EDP area is provided in [appendix 1](#).

The area is predominately located in Willenhall South ward but there is also a small section to the north which is in Short Heath ward.

Background

Walsall Council's Cabinet on 19 October 2015 authorised officers to undertake a scoping/due diligence exercise to understand the economic baseline within a defined area in Willenhall, the impact of previous regeneration activity, and the opportunities to address the needs of the area to inform a future programme of interventions. A further report to cabinet is expected to outline the outcome of the due diligence review and the proposed targeted regeneration activity.

This report sets out the results of the baseline review that has been undertaken by officers in Development and Regeneration, Strategic Regeneration and Development Management. It has considered: programmes and initiatives that have or are taking place in the area, the Site Allocation Document (SAD), land ownership and future plans, business engagement, district centre management and the role of the public sector.

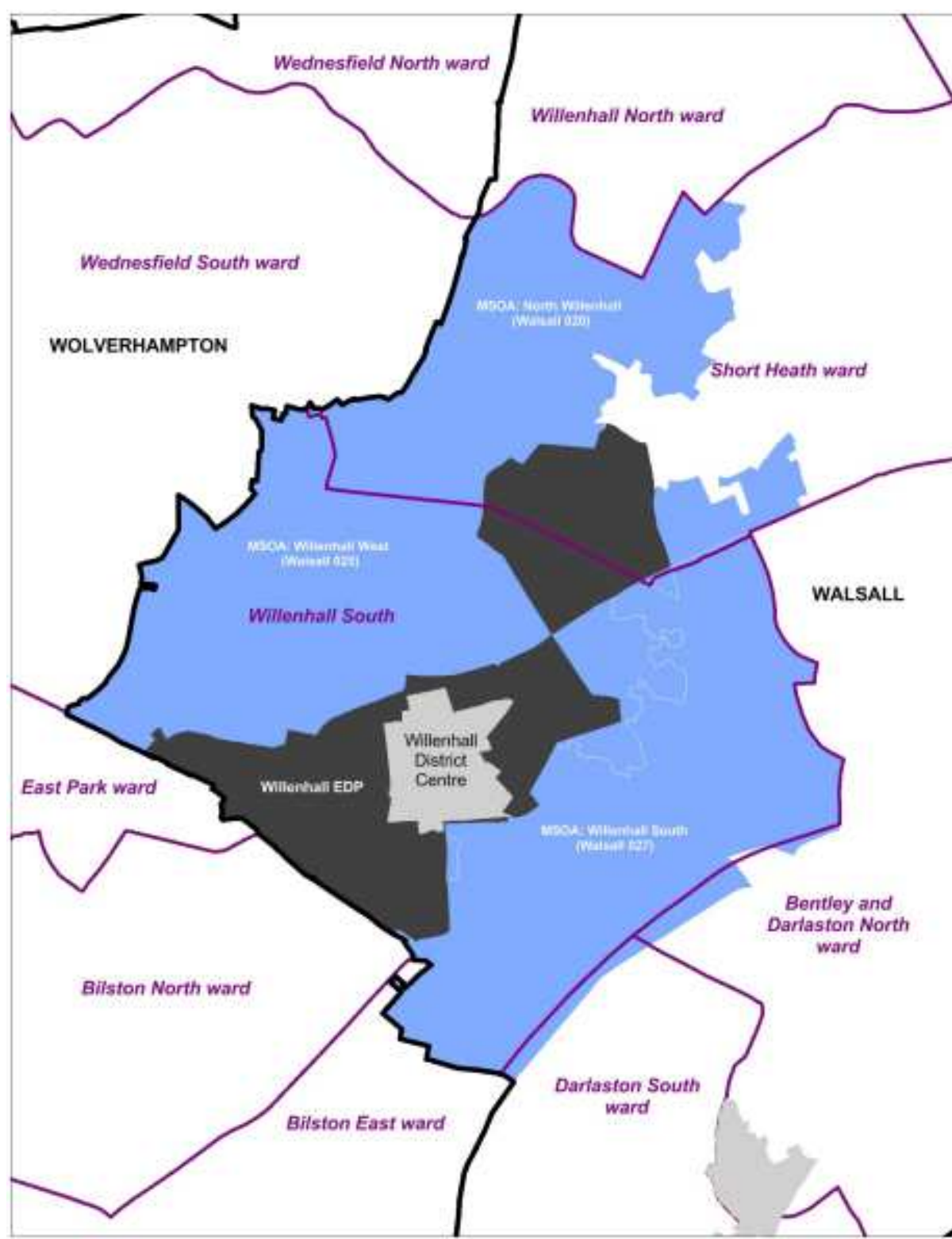
The focus of this piece of work is to develop a medium-term programme of targeted regeneration activity which might result in an investment plan to continue job and wealth creation in the area.

The Area: (key demographics and statistics)

The defined area for the Willenhall EDP does not align with other recognised boundaries; this makes extracting official sources of data for the defined area difficult. By using information available for a slightly wider geographical area which not only includes the Willenhall EDP area but also the immediate surroundings, characteristics of businesses and residents can be provided. The Willenhall EDP area covers parts of three Middle-layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs): North Willenhall, Willenhall West and Willenhall South. The information contained in **appendix 2** (Area Profile) is based on these areas.

In terms of deprivation, Walsall is the 33rd most deprived local authority in England – with Willenhall South and Short Heath being the 9th and 12th most deprived wards in the borough. However, some of the neighbourhoods in the Willenhall EDP area are amongst the 25% most deprived neighbourhoods in England.

Super Output Areas



A detailed report in appendix 2 provides information on the profile of the area. However, in summary:

- The Willenhall EDP area and the wider town share many characteristics with the rest of the borough and therefore the area is not alone in the challenges that it faces. This is reflected in the activity of the council as many initiatives are borough-wide if not across the Black Country.
- **850** local business units in the area employing approximately **12,200** people. The majority of these are micro business employing fewer than 10 people. Five of these local businesses are **Walsall's strategic companies**: AF Blakemore, Assa Abloy, Wedge Group, Middleton Paper and DX Freight. The majority of businesses are privately owned and industry in the area is likely to draw in individuals from a wider geographical area.
- High number of **manufacturing businesses**; this is higher than the rest of the borough and double the national figure and many suffer from constrained sites in a congested environment.
- There are relatively few businesses in professional, scientific and technical industries.
- The majority of people who work in the area are in full-time rather than part-time employment; this is above the borough average. However, the local workforce has relatively **low qualification levels**, with one in five workers having no qualifications and the same number with only level 1 qualifications.
- Residents of the area will not necessarily work in the area and they will use shops and services outside it.
- Adults living in the area are more likely to be active in the labour market (whether this is through employment or actively seeking work). However, they are more likely to be unable to find work and dependent on key out-of work benefits than the borough average. Residents in the area have lower qualification levels than Walsall as a whole with one in three adults having no formal qualification. This lack of formal qualification is much higher than the national average.
- The age profile of residents living in the immediate area is slightly younger than Walsall, with the majority of households being headed by a couple (married and unmarried).
- The majority of properties are owner-occupied with socially rented properties being lower than Walsall; however, there are a higher proportion of individuals who rent

privately. The housing stock is not necessarily in poor condition, nor of low quality, but is set in environments that might be unattractive and congested and which accommodate residents who are not very well off.

- There is a limited amount of open space, amenities and community/cultural facilities.
- The Willenhall EDP area includes the **district centre**: a small historic town centre which faces a great deal of competition including from other centres, out-of-centre developments and the internet. However, the number of employees within the district centre is steadily rising year on year and currently stands at approximately 1599.
- Whilst data continues to be collected around occupancy rates for Bloxwich and Darlaston District Centres the table below indicates the division of independent businesses and with national businesses are very similar. 86% of the businesses operating within the Willenhall District Centre are independent and continue to dominate the centre.

District Centre	Independent No.	Independent %	National No.	National %
Aldridge	110	76%	34	24%
Brownhills	95	75%	31	25%
Willenhall	174	86%	29	14%

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- The draft Walsall Site Allocation Document (**SAD**) highlights that within the defined boundary of the Willenhall EDP area there is potentially ***26.37 hectares** of land which could be available for development (this is a combination of vacant sites in high quality and local quality industry, local industry consider for release and housing opportunities). However, when this is considered in context of the wider geographical area (Willenhall South, Short Heath and Bentley and Darlaston Wards) there is an additional **29.87*** hectares that could be considered as an opportunity for development; this also includes new employment opportunities and local centre development opportunities.
- The council's ownership of land in the area mainly consists of green spaces, car parking and residential sites. Further details are provided in **appendix 3** which also includes facilities in the area and opportunity sites/areas.

*Vacant sites recorded as such on 31/3/2015. This is being reviewed and will be updated in January 2016.

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The Baseline Review

Walsall Council Officers have undertaken a review of the work stream/activities that have taken place in the defined area of Willenhall ranging from business support to development delivered. The following is a summary of this information captured under the key themes of

Place, Business and People. These themes are used to define the Walsall Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) adopted by cabinet in October 2015. As detailed in the background section (the area), the defined Willenhall EDP area does not align with the intelligence that is available for the Willenhall area; therefore, the information which formed the baseline review has been provided to “best fit” the defined area. In many cases it includes data on sites adjacent/near to the defined area and “people based” information is based on a wider geographical area due to the location of residential areas.

Information has been collated from key council work areas to identify activity that has or takes place in Willenhall. The key areas are: development opportunities, district centre support, housing, development management, employment and skills, employment growth and transportation.

Place: *transforming infrastructure and the environment*

To understand the market dynamics that impact upon the delivery of redevelopment activity and property investment in the study area it was deemed necessary to consider the commercial attributes of the location. A recent review of the key market areas in Willenhall by Cushman & Wakefield ([Appendix 4](#)) has concluded that the Longacres area and the sites around the Black Country route (the latter is outside the Willenhall EDP area) are of reasonable quality and will benefit from the proposed upgrades to Junction 10 due to improvements to access. Other employment land is regarded as being secondary or in the main tertiary, with pockets of land scattered amongst residential areas. It considers that some of the sites in central Willenhall could be redeveloped for residential use due to the low quality of industrial premises and the vulnerable nature of the sites in this area. Recent housing development activity in the area indicates that Willenhall could be considered to be an appropriate location for housing. Lambert Smith Hampton ([appendix 4](#)) have commented that “the success of the new housing development has demonstrated demand for good quality modern product with Taylor Wimpey in particular demonstrating that they consider Willenhall to be an appropriate location for new housing.”

Industrial businesses in Willenhall are actively looking to improve their properties by amongst other activity expanding their current sites. A review of property market trends in Willenhall by Lambert Smith Hampton ([appendix 5](#)) has concluded that the industrial market in Willenhall continues to perform well and it is expected that better quality industrial accommodation is likely to be let quickly with occupiers tending to be local companies; making it a secondary location. There is limited, if any office market in the area, and larger office occupiers are unlikely to consider the area as a possible location (without a specific business driver to locate in Willenhall). With the retail sector also being very local in nature with a reasonably well occupied and stable town centre- the industrial sector is the strongest in Willenhall and therefore provides an area of opportunity which could be enhanced by the

provision of good quality accommodation. However, viability continues to present a market failure in this area (limited amounts of investment potential and interest, but with high development costs, mostly as a result of poor ground conditions including contamination and the legacies of past mining), and therefore financial assistance may be required to stimulate the market. This market failure is not an issue for Willenhall alone but is also an issue across the Black Country.

A number of development and environmental projects have been completed in Willenhall, delivering in excess of £31.5m of investment. Further details are provided in table 1 below. Environmental improvement projects have included: war memorial enhancements, Wood St Cemetery, a heritage trail and the lock project to commemorate those who worked or work in the lock industry. The completion of the successful £1.5m + Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) in the conservation area resulted in 15 businesses being assisted to improve their properties and a further scheme has brought vacant floorspace back into use. The council is also represented on a Black Country Place Group which is responsible for identifying, prioritising and delivering all infrastructure projects across the sub-region. The role of the group is to help deliver the Local Enterprise Partnership's growth agenda via the funding mechanisms available such as the Local growth fund (LGF).

Work to develop an Area Action Plan (AAP) for Willenhall was commenced in 2008 as part of the Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF) Programme, however, due to changes in market conditions (recession) and changes in planning legislation with the local plan-making approach, this work was suspended. The initial consideration of land use in the Willenhall AAP has been reviewed and considered as part of the Walsall Site Allocation Document (SAD).

The SAD is currently being progressed by Walsall Council and covers the whole borough, other than Walsall Town Centre and the district centres. This has recently been through the 'Preferred Options' stage of consultation, which has included a Draft Plan that proposes to allocate sites for new housing and for investment in industry and to safeguard many existing industrial areas as well as open spaces and important environmental assets. It puts forward allocations and policies for many sites in the Willenhall EDP area and includes housing and industrial sites in the portfolio of sites needed to meet the development needs of the borough to 2026. The draft plan for the Willenhall EDP area is detailed in [appendix 6](#). It is intended that the 'Publication' version of the SAD will be issued for consultation early in 2016.

Willenhall is also covered by the Black Country Core Strategy (BCCS), which is a regeneration strategy for regeneration through growth. It is envisaged that the greatest growth will be in the strategic centres, such as Walsall, whilst more modest growth to meet more localised needs is envisaged for smaller town/district centres – such as Willenhall. However, as Willenhall is within one of the identified "regeneration corridors" it is a target for growth and regeneration, with the upgrading of provision for employment and housing. Therefore

any more detailed plans will need to be consistent with the BCCS and it is important to note that the proposed regeneration strategy for the Willenhall EDP area will not have any legal status; it can only be used to provide information. It cannot be used as policy when determining decisions.

Table 1: Development Projects in Willenhall

ACTIVITY IN WILLENHALL	
COMPLETED PROJECTS	ON-GOING PROJECTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £70,000 war memorial enhancements. • Wood Street cemetery environmental improvements. • Lidl development. • £30m Morrisons development. • Willenhall Community Arts project (relating to Morrisons development). • Willenhall heritage trail. • Closure and demolition of the public toilets • Residential development on the former Josiah Parkes factory at Wood Street. • 99p store locating and operating from the former Somerfield site (now Poundland). • Refurbishment of the former leisure centre site for banqueting facilities. • £1.5m+ Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) to regenerate buildings within a defined area of the conservation area. • Implementation of a lock memorial project to commemorate those who worked or work in the lock industry • Residential development at Spring Lane by Taylor Wimpey. • Disposal of Lakeside School to WHG • Little Wood Street disposal to private sector for car parking (Wedge group) • Residential development at Russell Street (former Comet site) • Willenhall flag pole. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disposal and refurbishment/redevelopment of the former Little London school site. • Assisting operational site requirements of Wedge Group. • Former Clothier Street school site, 48 units being delivered by Galliford Try and whg. • Former scrapyard at Noose Lane which is being developed for 39 housing units by Lioncourt Homes. • Continuation of public sector supported programme to maximise fibre broadband availability in Willenhall. • Willenhall In Bloom currently stands at a Silver Gilt • Upgrading of street furniture in Willenhall District Centre

The success of individual site delivery can be dependent on transport connectivity and off-site infrastructure, and therefore it is important to consider the relationship with local transport provision and future development plans. An integrated transport profile for Willenhall which provides outline information on the town and looks at transport provisions available to residents was completed in September 2010 (Report attached as [appendix 7](#)). The Black Country Rapid Transit Study, completed in October 2015, looked at the case for the development of a rapid transit network connecting the Black Country strategic centres to one another and to Birmingham City Centre. The study, which has influenced the West Midlands's Strategic Transport Plan, concluded that the reinstatement of heavy rail services between Walsall and Wolverhampton should be a priority for the Black Country with future aspirations for the corridor to include a tram train service between Walsall and Wolverhampton via New Cross Hospital and bus rapid transit to complement the tram train

service, interlinking the district centres not served by the other modes of transport. It is important to note that the current residential catchment for the proposed location for the station stop in the Willenhall EDP area is proving to have weak demand, and therefore an increase in residential properties would be of benefit.

Development work with regard to highway improvements at Dale Island (New Road/Bilston Street/Walsall Street junction) and Shepwell Green/Wolverhampton Road West, The Crescent/Crescent Road and Clarkes Lane/Walsall Road/Crescent Road junctions has been undertaken to assess various potential improvements after concerns over localised congestion. Improving individual junctions in isolation of other potential improvements within Willenhall may result in these improvements quickly being outdated.

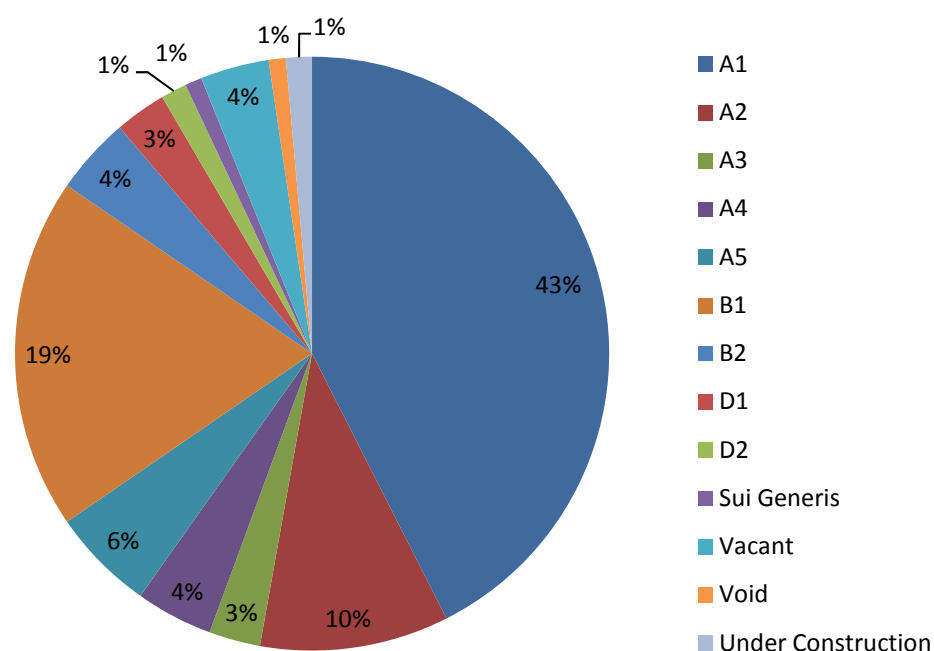
The district centre of Willenhall itself needs to continue to contribute to the vitality of the location. Chart 1 below provides a breakdown of the variety of uses within the district centre which is dominated by retail businesses. The district centre also includes the Willenhall Market which despite having faced a number of challenges including the dominance of a large supermarket, still plays an important role in the town centre and contributes to community wellbeing; 75% of stalls are let to date (2015/16) with the previous year being let at 78%. A market survey in 2012 highlighted that:

- 73.7% of traders have seen a decrease in customers and trade with the remainder seeing no change or an increase in trade
- 35% of respondents visited the market at least once a week spending around £6 to £10 each time.
- The market was rated as very important to the town centre by visitors and 42% of retailers stated that the market adds value to the overall retail and business offer.
- Suggestions to improve the market from the traders' viewpoint included increased visibility of knowledgeable market staff, improvements to stalls, toilets, market signage, more promotion through advertising, reduction of rent for Saturday trading, increase attractions to pull in more footfall and introduce a Thursday trading day.

Respondents who already use the market would visit the market more if there was an increase in the variety of stalls, free Wi-Fi and a greater range of refreshments. Comments around what could be improved included improving car parking and increasing the number of stalls.

Chart 1: Willenhall District Centre Uses

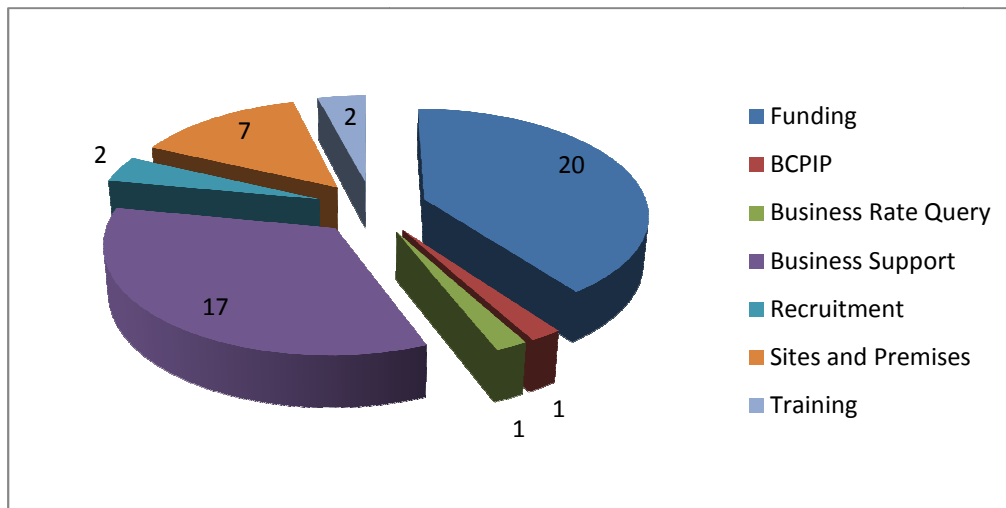
Clasification Break Down Willenhall District Centre 2016



Business: improving business and competitiveness

The council has engaged with 31 companies in the sectors of: manufacturing, logistics, retail and business services. Five of these companies are Walsall's strategic companies: AF Blakemore, Assa Abloy, Middleton Paper, Wedge Group and DX Freight. Support has ranged from property advice, to funding assistance and to business rates queries; a further breakdown is provided in chart 2 below and the Business Engagement - Data and Intelligence overview in [appendix 8](#). Business engagement has resulted in £42,000 of grant being secured, investment of £77,000, 12 job opportunities and 4 total jobs/apprenticeships for local people.

Chart 2: Nature of business support



The Council is working with the Black Country Growth Hub to fully understand business needs both in the short and long term. Further work is also being undertaken to understand the supply chain and customer base of businesses to understand connectivity between businesses and their suppliers and the potential for business to business collaboration on Research and Development. These activities will assist with supporting sustainability and help build resilience but importantly will facilitate early intervention where necessary for all businesses in particular the manufacturing sector which is dominant in Willenhall.

There is also close business liaison with the retail businesses in the district centre to contribute towards economic viability and vitality. Activity has included 1-2-1 business advice ranging from targeted support to new and relocated businesses (pre and post opening) which has resulted in a 5 year record low in vacant unit rates - currently sitting at 3.73% to business visits and audits with follow up advice and expertise on a range of topics.

Income generation is a key consideration for the council and its medium term financial plan. Income derived from business rates is a key component and to understand the contribution that the existing business base of Willenhall makes to the borough's income, a review has been undertaken. Based on full occupancy and all businesses being eligible to pay full rates, an estimate of the area's (MSOAs) total potential business rates would be c. £6.12m, based on a total of £12.5m Rateable Value. Future redevelopment of the area would need to consider the net impact on the business rate income from business relocations.

People: Raising employability, education and skills

Raising the skills and employability of the borough's residents is a priority for the council. The skill levels of people who reside within Willenhall are similar to skills levels across the borough. The largest gaps between the levels of skills possessed by Willenhall residents and national averages are in basic ICT skills. Programmes such as *Walsall Works* continue to successfully engage with residents in the Willenhall area to provide employment and skills

support. 388 Willenhall residents (Short Heath, Willenhall North and Willenhall South) are registered to access support available. The table below (table 2) provides a breakdown of the type of assistance that has been received, for example, 80 residents have benefited from Walsall Works apprenticeships.

Table 2: Walsall Works outcomes

Key Outcome	Total (Walsall Borough)	Willenhall Area Partnership (Short Heath, Willenhall North and Willenhall South)	Willenhall EDP Area
Walsall Works Apprenticeship	525	80	8
Walsall Works Pre-apprenticeships	462	49	2
Other Outcomes	936	95	5
Total Positive Outcomes	1923	224	15

Local Willenhall secondary schools (St Thomas More Catholic School, Willenhall E-Act and Pool Hayes) have also been targeted to receive help with how to make decisions on how to continue to participate in learning. An examination of school leaver destinations indicates that some institutions have had particularly high levels of school leavers who do not go onto employment or education. In the 2012/13 academic year, 15% of pupils who left the Willenhall E-ACT did not go into employment or education. In the same academic year, 8% of pupils from Pool Hayes and 7% of pupils at St Thomas More Catholic School also were not recorded as being in either employment or education after leaving school. It can also be noted that almost half (48%) of pupils at Willenhall E-ACT Academy come from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to 33% of Pool Hayes students and 29% of St Thomas More Catholic School pupils who left that year.

There is also close working with employers, developers and major contractors to make available employment and employers are registered as committed to creating apprenticeships or jobs; thus, encouraging local people to take-up potential employment opportunities.

Registered Employers	Boroughwide	Willenhall Area Partnership (Short Heath, Willenhall North and Willenhall South)	Willenhall EDP Area
Employers	558	63	38

A detailed overview of the support provided by the Employment and Skills team is provided in [appendix 9](#).

Governance and Existing Partnerships

Successful regeneration activity is always reliant on strong partnership working. Collaborative working between the public, private and third sectors in Willenhall can be demonstrated in a number of ways. A good example is the Willenhall Area Partnership which includes representatives from across the local wards and presents a forum for not only discussing local issues and opportunities but also the delivery of local priorities. As part of the baseline review, officers have attended the Willenhall Area Panel meeting and comments have been considered as part of this review.

The **Willenhall Partnership (Town Centre Partnership)** which is active in the district centre has established as a company and prepares and implements yearly action plans created to focus the work of the partnership. Work includes fund raising for implementation of the action plan, the Heart of England In Bloom Campaign and the town centre and business focused booklets which are distributed to over 30,000 homes and businesses promoting key initiatives, developments and Shop Smart Shop local campaign. The 2015/16 Action Plan and 2015/16 Annual Plan in **appendix 10** provide details of the partnership's key projects and achievements. Benchmarking has taken place during January 2016 to provide critical data on retailers and businesses in the centre to inform the Willenhall Town Centre Partnership of the health of the centre and provide evidence to shape new initiatives and develop the 2016/17 action plan.

Conclusion

Willenhall as a town has a rich heritage and strong community spirit. The review has concluded that the Willenhall EDP area has and continues to benefit from a range of regeneration activity, however, it has highlighted that whilst the area is benefiting from activity being undertaken by the council, further work should be undertaken in the short-term to inform the proposed regeneration strategy. The baseline review has highlighted a number of opportunities that could be further exploited to enhance the regeneration activity in the area and better inform the proposed regeneration strategy.

The SAD presents an opportunity to “plan” the Willenhall EDP area and address the dispersed nature of some of the employment land amongst residential areas and the low quality of some of the sites by identifying locations that could be “considered for release for housing.” At the same time, it will also be important to ‘protect’ Willenhall’s identified employment sites as the industrial sector is the strongest of the sectors in Willenhall, being the home of a number of Walsall’s strategic companies and presents an opportunity for the area. A higher than borough average of young people in and around the area will need access to good jobs and amenities to stay in the locality.

The opportunities highlighted by the review are the basis for further activities/projects, identified by officers, over a twelve month period. This proposed “work plan” is detailed in the following section and includes any budgetary implications. It is intended that the implementation of the work plan over the next twelve months is then likely to result in the production of a detailed regeneration strategy for the Willenhall EDP area.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: The boundary of Willenhall Economic Development Programme area.

Appendix 2: Willenhall Economic & Development programme: Area Profile

Appendix 3: Ownership and activity plan

Appendix 4: Willenhall Employment Land (Cushman & Wakefield)

Appendix 5: Baseline review of property market trends in Willenhall (Lambert Smith Hampton)

Appendix 6: Draft SAD plan for Willenhall

Appendix 7: Willenhall - An Integrated Transport Profile

Appendix 8: Business Engagement – Data and Intelligence

Appendix 9: Willenhall – People Overview

Appendix 10: Action Plan Willenhall 2015-16 and Willenhall Annual Plan

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