PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report updates members of the Combined Authority on the Town Centre Challenge, setting out the next steps in this process and some of the related work already taking place within the authority.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the GMCA consider the issues set out in Sections 2 and 3 of this report and note the town centres which have been put forward as part of the challenge.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Town Centre Challenge was agreed by the GMCA in October 2017 and saw a media launch by the Mayor in November, inviting councils across Greater Manchester to put forward a town centre to be part of the first phase of this initiative. The Challenge aims to combine the ambition of local authorities with the support of the GM Mayor so that a combination of powers and resources can be aligned to the benefit of the town centres which are part of the Challenge. In particular the Challenge will work with Local Authorities to support the long term potential of town centres for a range of uses, building on existing assets and supporting schemes with a catalytic impact.

1.2 The initiative gives the opportunity for creating a tailored approach to supporting each town centre, raising its profile and using the convening powers of the Mayor to galvanize delivery and support the work of local councils to unlock the potential of these places.

2. CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FACING TOWN CENTRES

2.1 Each town centre is very different, and needs to find its own path, but there are some common issues around which efforts can best be focused for greatest impact. The GM wide town centre study, undertaken in 2012/13, looked at the challenges facing the eight principal town centres in GM (Altrincham, Ashton, Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Stockport, Rochdale and Wigan), demonstrating the retail revolution underway and that this would result in 21% less retail space and 31% fewer stores in town centre venues by 2020. At that time recommendations for future development in the primary town centres in each District was proposed, with many of these plans focused on mixed use development including housing and non-retail business uses.

2.3 Many of these recommendations have since been acted upon. However, there is still a long way to go before all of the town centres in Greater Manchester fulfil their potential and contribute to the wider prosperity of the city region. Town centres need to be re-imagined to make them relevant for current and future generations, redefining them as long term, sustainable and sought after investment options. We have a long and successful history of regeneration across all districts in Greater Manchester. We now need to bring our place-making knowledge and experience together to make our town centres sustainable and inclusive places, fit for the next generation. Recent work by Place Directors in all ten Greater Manchester districts has started to define the underlying barriers to achieving the scale of change required, as well as the solutions that could be available by working together in the Town Centre Challenge. Their work identifies a number of barriers which need to be overcome including:

i) Viability and investment: current values in most centres are low when compared to the build costs, and there are few established market comparators to support investor confidence. GM needs to optimise the housing growth that can be accommodated in town centres which have better transport links, are accessible to more people and can offer local services like shops and restaurants. Our ambition is not about ‘building numbers’ but about creating liveable neighbourhoods with high quality public realm incorporating essential ‘green infrastructure’ for example tree planting, open space and imaginative use of our rivers and canals.

So there is a need to identify which projects are most important and will have that catalytic impact to genuinely reshape a place and the investment opportunities it provides. Our infrastructure led development approach is one of the key mechanisms to tackle congestion, mitigate the impacts of climate change and address air quality issues, however
this needs a multi-agency approach and the Mayor can work with local authorities to help bring together the people needed to identify these projects and support their development.

ii) **Public and private sector drive**: public and private sector stakeholders are critical to success. At a very basic level, public sector land ownership is significant in all our town centres and this could be a great asset if deployed correctly. But the number of public and private land owners in town centres is very complex and a barrier to land assembly and investment.

The town centre challenge can help address this in a number of ways – using the convening powers of the Mayor working with local Leaders, it will be possible to get land owners, investors and others together to bring forward opportunities. Working with local authorities there is also the option of enacting compulsory purchase powers or Mayoral Development Corporations, where this could release new investment.

Where a solution cannot genuinely be found, the Mayor also has the opportunity to raise these very real issues with the Government to encourage changes at a national level or better Government support. The forthcoming review of the National Planning Policy Framework will provide an opportunity for GMCA to feed any early learning from our Town Centre Challenge work into the consultation.

iii) **Releasing the hidden demand**: despite some successes, lack of delivery of new town centre schemes at scale means that there are too few examples of success to demonstrate demand. But where local authorities have delivered speculative schemes, more often than not they are let or occupied quickly (eg Stockport Exchange offices and car park, conversion of Oldham’s old town hall to a Cinema).

So there is a hidden demand for new town centre businesses and homes. Local authorities are taking some tough decisions to acquire land and invest in these types of schemes and the Town Centre Challenge can help support this in more places. The best advice, specialist skills, market knowledge and other information will be needed to identify trends, define opportunities and inform these decisions.

3. **NEXT STEPS IN THE TOWN CENTRE CHALLENGE**

3.1 Since the launch of the challenge in November last year, all ten GM districts have offered to support the initiative and nominate a centre. Several town centres have already been put forward to be part of this, to date these include:

- Prestwich
- Farnworth
- Withington
- Oldham
- Stockport
- Swinton
- Stretford
- Leigh

3.2 The next step will be for the Mayor to meet key stakeholders in each town centre in the coming months so that issues and potential solutions can be considered in much more detail and more bespoke actions can be agreed for each centre. These meetings will
begin in early February and are programmed to take place as quickly as possible over February and early March.

3.3 Based on all this information, there is also the potential for the Mayor to convene GM wide meetings to ensure that key public sector bodies, like transport or government agencies, are working in a more joined up way to the benefit of these town centres. A number of other organisations, including private sector developers, house builders and environmental groups, have also offered support to the town centre challenge and these will be brought into the process as their areas of expertise are matched against the needs of different centres.

3.4 Given the ongoing dynamics of this initiative it will be important to continue to share information and experience between the ten GM districts, so that lessons from different projects can be applied more widely across Greater Manchester. The outcomes of these initial meetings will also help to inform the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, with a focus on developing viable housing markets in our town centres and supporting sustainable communities which are well linked to the public transport network as well as local retail and leisure facilities.

3.5 It is envisaged that further rounds of the Town Centre Challenge will be undertaken if the approach proves to be successful, so that other centres can be the focus of joint work as experience is gained and progress is made. Some district councils are already preparing for this and officers from all ten districts will continue to work together and maintain a strong focus on all of the town centres in GM.