TURNING OUR TOWN AROUND

Advancing the Vision to create East Anglia’s Waterfront Town

Prepared for Ipswich Central

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As someone who was born in Ipswich and has worked in the town for most of my adult life, like many who read this document I will have seen plans for improving our town come forth and disappear on an all too regular basis. Although well meaning, the organisations, partnerships and bodies who have presented their suggestions, have struggled to gain momentum in seeing them through to fruition. Some may say, with a degree of accuracy perhaps, that there has been a lack of co-ordination and consistency within these proposals and so we have today a town that has many, if not all, of the essential ingredients it needs to secure a more prosperous and exciting future, but lacking a plan behind which all can work to achieve that aim.

In 2013, Ipswich Central, the Business Improvement District (BID) Company, on behalf of its members, unveiled a blueprint for development in the town centre. This included a number of bold initiatives including a revamped Cornhill and changing the way we manage the ‘flow’ of visitors to our centre, from the current east-west to a north-south axis, particularly connecting our waterfront to the ‘condensed’ retail centre and beyond to the wonderful Christchurch Park and Museum areas.

At the time, the ideas within ‘Turning Our Town Around’ were widely positively received both locally and nationally. However, despite a number of significant elements of the plan being achieved since its publication, other major priorities have yet to be completed, or indeed started.

The time for taking the initiative to bring change to our town centre is now and to assist in that process, the Board of Ipswich Central, that represents over 620 town centre levy payers, commissioned the progressed ‘vision’ for Ipswich that you see before you today. It is not just another ‘new’ plan. Instead, it takes our 2013 proposals, expands the principles of change, adding priority development areas and a strong structure for the town so that potential investors, developers and employers will understand our strategy for growth, thereby making it easier for them to invest in Suffolk’s county town.

We are ready to play a full role in the delivery of this document, in our own right, as a member of the Greater Ipswich Partnership and as a willing partner to any organisation with the aim and ability to make Ipswich a better place to do business.

This is not our plan Ipswich, it’s your plan - Now let’s all get to work and make it happen.

Terry Baxter
Chairman, Ipswich Central

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1.0 Background and progress

In 2008, as the recession was beginning to take grip, Ipswich Central, the town centre BID Company, started working alongside other partners to develop a long-term plan for the central urban area of Suffolk’s county town.

There was recognition that town centres may need to change if they were to continue to attract new investment and new customers.

By 2011, a new, forward-thinking, ambitious Vision to link the historic commercial and retail core with the newly developing waterfront (and vice-versa) had been unveiled. In the same year, the borough council published a masterplan for the town centre that was largely consistent with this Vision.

In November of 2011 the BID was renewed for a further five years through a ballot of its members. The new Vision of linking the town centre with the waterfront was the guiding principle for planned services. The renewal ballot resulted in a strong endorsement of the Vision with 93% of those businesses voting (68% turnout) registering their support. It remains the largest aggregate first renewal result of any UK BID.

In 2013, the Ipswich Vision (then entitled ‘Turning Our Town Around’) was named as winner of the Government’s X-Fund (High Street Renewal) Award and has since been used as an example of strategic thinking for how high streets need to be remodelled to suit the rapidly changing demands of businesses, consumers and investors.

In September 2013, the BID produced a paper entitled ‘Focusing Future Investment’ that set out proposals for key sites within the town centre area. This was opened up for consultation amongst its members and received widespread support.

The Greater Ipswich Partnership has now been formed to help bring partners together to deliver the Vision project, working alongside wider priorities for the town and its immediate catchment. The Partnership includes representatives from the BID, Suffolk County Council, Ipswich Borough Council, neighbouring councils, the Local Enterprise Partnership, University Campus Suffolk, Suffolk Chamber of Commerce and business and community organisations.

In 2015, Ipswich Central was awarded further funding and recognition by Government as a winner of the Coastal Communities Team prize.

Progress has been made towards the Vision of improving the town centre and linking it to the waterfront. Examples include:

- Acquisition of Tower Ramparts Shopping Centre by La Salle Investments, including substantial redevelopment proposals including re-naming to Sailmakers.
- Acquisition of The Buttermarket Shopping Centre by Capital & Regional, with investment plans to follow.
- Two new hotel developments in the area linking the town centre and education areas with the waterfront.
- Pedestrianisation plans for Queen Street.
- Redevelopment proposals for the Cornhill.
- New office developments planned for Princes Street.
- Redevelopment plans for the station forecourt.
- Purchase of the part-completed ‘wine rack’ residential development.
- Funding for an Innovation Centre as part of University Campus Suffolk.
- Plans for Enterprise Island on the waterfront island site.

Ipswich is not there yet, though. There is a need for a more concerted effort amongst all partners to plan and progress the Vision more rapidly.
**What is our vision?**

Not dissimilar to many other places, a multitude of visions have existed for Ipswich. Too many have lacked ambition and sought real differentiation. However, it is the Vision to create ‘East Anglia’s Waterfront Town’ that has caught people’s imaginations and has sustained.

It is working because it has recognised that a vision must be ambitious, forward-thinking and, perhaps, aspirational. It must set a general sense of direction and should encourage wide engagement. Ideas towards the vision should be encouraged. Not every idea will be realised but, collectively, they will contribute to the chosen direction. The essential parts of any vision for a place should be:

**Purpose** – why it ‘exists’ and what it ‘stands for’

**Promise** – what it will ‘look’ like

**Payback** – how it will ‘feel’

Accompanying any vision should be a ‘vision statement’. This must be motivational, inspirational and should spark involvement and energy. If everyone is pleased and feels comfortable with the vision, it is probably not courageous enough. If everyone thinks it is easily achievable, it is probably not ambitious enough.

To take on and attempt to deliver a vision requires the courage, imagination, collective belief and sheer determination of a ‘vision team’ whose responsibility it will remain.

The Ipswich Vision is to create ‘East Anglia’s Waterfront Town’ and demands:

- A town centre that will attract new investment
- A town centre that is true to its history
- A town centre that is bold and ambitious
- A town centre that recognises the need for change
- A town centre that will excite those who visit it
- A town centre that will appeal to those beyond its immediate catchment

If it is to succeed, the Ipswich Vision, as with any other viable vision, must be connected and anchored by three aspects:

**Historical** – the vision must be consistent with the reason why the place first developed and should embrace and celebrate the past (a portside location).

**Physical** – it must be capable of being delivered by changes - however ambitious - to the physical infrastructure.

**Emotional** – people must see, feel and understand the changes as they happen around them and be inspired by them.
Realising the vision

This advanced Vision aims to set out a process by which Ipswich can further deliver on its ambition to become a unique and sought-after destination as ‘East Anglia’s Waterfront Town’. This proposition to businesses, customers and investors is distinguishable from other, competing locations.

To succeed, it requires a greater appreciation of the opportunities of the town (a gateway to Europe, relatively low housing costs, commuter distance from London, the beauty of Suffolk, high employment rates, etc.) and an approach to tackle its challenges (poor perception, fragmented feel, poor retail line-up, strong competitor line-up, lack of a visitor attraction, perceived high car parking charges, lack of recent public realm investment, etc.).

To prosper, the town centre cannot be thought of as a collection of different elements. It is neither large enough nor varied enough to sustain this approach. The ‘experience’ that town centres must provide, needs to be unified and consistent.

For this reason, this 2015 update of the Ipswich Vision, assigns a key role to each area of the town centre and explains how these areas can be improved and can then work together as one. The aim is to connect Christchurch Park and the area around the Museum to the north, to the waterfront in the south – thereby sustaining a single, integrated experience. To achieve this, the town has to fully commit to a new north-south axis, and assign the former east-west trajectory (along the so-called ‘golden mile’ of Westgate, Tavern and Carr Streets’) to history.

3.0 Realising the vision
We have identified the essential elements that the town needs to establish itself as the place to be in Suffolk but these need to be subject to an overall strategy which identifies specific areas or Quarters. Each Quarter will have its own distinct identity and make its own contribution to the revitalisation of the town centre.

Our strategy in identifying these Quarters has been either to build upon the established uses or to put forward radical new proposals. The Quarters that we have identified create a cluster of NINE separate areas as shown and the following pages describe the unique quality of each Quarter and how they will interact to create a vibrant, attractive and viable town centre.

In identifying these quarters the conscious decision has been made to concentrate the town’s retail offer within the Central Quarter, the Link Quarter and the Maritime Quarter. This concentration is a response to the changing nature of retail which has been modified by internet shopping and the proliferation of out of town retail parks. Together they will interact to create a dynamic north-south axis which will act as a ‘driver’ for each of the surrounding Quarters.

A detailed and collectively shared masterplan for each of the Quarters should be developed. In the meantime, the town should start to talk about and promote the individual Quarters within publications, communications, signage and mapping. Progress could be made towards distinguishing one Quarter from the other by use of distinctive colouring, lighting, street furniture, planting, streetscape, etc.

1. The Northern Quarter – an area of high value housing clustered around Christchurch Park and the Museum.

2. The Central Quarter – a distinctive retail and leisure offer, with some associated employment uses, all within a predominantly pedestrianised environment.

3. The Eastgate Quarter – a mixed area with expanded areas of urban living supplemented by retail, leisure and entertainment uses alongside car parking.

4. The Westgate Quarter – a residential and cultural area surrounding the New Wolsey Theatre.

5. The Link Quarter – a mixed area structured around north-south routes bringing together new residential developments with supporting and experimental independent retail and leisure uses.

6. The Innovation Quarter – an exciting learning and creative area surrounding the University Campus Suffolk and Suffolk New College.

7. The Civic Quarter – an area of commerce, public authorities and complementary employment and sporting uses.

8. The Riverside Quarter – an area to the west of the waterfront incorporating new waterside residential developments and river walkways.

9. The Maritime Quarter – the amphitheatre surrounding the main waterfront and incorporating an island site and within which business, enterprise and leisure uses are encouraged.
Revitalising Ipswich

Businesses, visitors and investors will expect a fully integrated ‘experience’ combining history, culture, retail and leisure. In order to achieve this there are a number of priority areas which must be addressed.

New homes in the town centre

New homes will revitalise the town centre and there is considerable opportunity to develop new residential accommodation within The Eastgate, Westgate, Riverside and Link Quarters. However, this should incorporate town housing to complement flats and apartments elsewhere. Restrictions on ground floor development within the Maritime Quarter are overcome elsewhere where two to three-storey housing becomes possible.

There is an opportunity for up to 2,000 new homes in the town centre.

Demand for office space

Demand for office space will be improved through the removal of the over-supply of competing, poor grade accommodation from the market and allowing its use to change, particularly to residential, perhaps student accommodation. New high specification office developments should be located in the Civic Quarter centred around Princes Street.

Car parking

Development of new, high-specification multi-storey car park serving The Central Quarter is needed. The site of the former Crown Street car park is an obvious location, although small-scale redevelopment should be resisted and any new construction needs either a bridge linking it to the new Sailmakers Shopping Centre or dramatic improvements to and access across Crown Street. A second new car park site is to the east of Upper Brook Street on land currently used by NCP.

Commitment to competitively priced and conveniently situated car parking must continue, including (but not restricted to) encouraging people into town in the late afternoon and evening.

Rationalise public transport

There is no need for two bus stations in the town centre. A single hub should be sought. A suitable site could be that occupied by Jewsons on Franciscan Way. An alternative use for this site is as an extension to the Cardinal Park leisure offer that sits alongside it. A single bus station hub would release the Cattle Market bus station for new independent retail, leisure and/or residential development. The existing Tower Ramparts bus station area would then be available for the expansion of Sailmakers with new retail units connected to the new Crown Street multi-storey car park, or for part retail/part car parking.

Pedestrian routeways

Pedestrianised areas have been proved to work better for shopping and leisure. As soon as pedestrianised zones are interrupted by traffic, footfall suffers and business demand for space weakens. Upper Brook Street, Northgate Street (south) and Queen Street should be pedestrianised. Museum Street and High Street (south) should be a pedestrian-priority areas, conducive with new residential developments. Bus routes should be redirected to support increased pedestrianisation. They should be diverted from Museum Street and High Street to along Civic Drive on the western side, thereby bringing the new Westgate Quarter wholly within the routes; and similarly from Upper Brook Street and Northgate Street to along Tacket Street and Upper Orwell Street on the eastern side to encompass the whole of The Eastgate Quarter.

Four primary routeways should be clearly signposted through The Link Quarter to connect the town in with the waterfront and railway station. These are (1) The Saints, (2) Lower Brook Street and (3) Blackfriars. A new north-south routeway should be established leading from an upgraded station forecourt, across a dramatically improved Princes Street bridge, and along Prince Street itself where new office development should dominate.

Retail, leisure & culture

Ipswich must begin to present itself as the place to stay when visiting Suffolk. A boost to its visitor economy will necessitate that its historical, cultural, food and drink and retail offer are maintained and further improved. However, a plan to improve and simplify the offer, together with simple, consistent consumer messages about what Ipswich is and what it will be like when visited can attract increased visits.

Consumers do not differentiate between retail or leisure outlets, however there is a need to concentrate the retail offering in and around the new Sailmakers (Tower Ramparts) development and the focus for leisure facilities to become the re-developed Buttermarket Shopping Centre.

To further develop retail in the town, there is a need for modern, box retail units and the opportunity is available to build these in Upper Brook Street.

To add to this, Ipswich is served with an abundance of cultural experiences and there is a need to highlight these to the public and capitalise on the attention they bring to the town.
A distinctive retail and leisure offer, with some associated employment uses, all within a predominantly pedestrianised environment.

The Cornhill Square is the busiest and most important pedestrian area in Ipswich. It is a publicly-owned space and a priority investment need. It must be transformed into a focal point for the new Central Quarter and create an impression of a town that means business. Buildings around it must be improved. The Town Hall must be opened up into an exhibition venue and linked to The Corn Exchange; the former Grimwades/Clinton Cards unit requires major remodelling and rebuilding to suit modern retail demand; and restaurant use should be considered alongside retail for the former Post Office building (currently Lloyds TSB). These changes, together with the proposed public space improvements, would transform first impressions of the town centre.

New retail development must be encouraged within The Central Quarter, even if this means dramatic changes to existing buildings and facades to create the types of units today’s retailers demand. However, consideration must be given to the modern-day customer who views shopping, eating and drinking as a single, joined-up experience. The new Sailmakers Centre should be predominantly retail-led, with the Buttermarket converting to a more leisure-led use and extending its opening hours.

There is an opportunity to demolish the line of existing shops on the eastern side of Upper Brook Street and construct replacement, modern two-storey (5,000–10,000 sq ft) units, served with car parking from behind within The Eastgate Quarter. This could simulate ‘out of town’ style shops in a central location and would suit demand from missing retailers.

Lloyds Avenue could be a dramatic, tree-lined boulevard leading to the Cornhill Square. Consideration should be given to roofing this over and pedestrianising by relocating the taxi rank, thereby allowing the introduction of new retail and leisure units, alternative uses for the bingo hall, and opening up new entrances into the Debenhams department store.

A targeted, inward investment approach must be adopted for The Central Quarter. This must be accompanied by a plan to bring prominent vacant buildings, together with underused units, back into useful life. This cannot be dictated to by a retail zoning principle. Other uses (restaurants, bars, cafes, banks, building societies etc.) should be encouraged without fear of planning rejection. The concentration of the retail area will improve demand and the more certain direction of the town centre will bring forward new retail targets that have previously ignored or dismissed Ipswich.

The market should be relocated permanently to Queen Street to allow more street cafes, restaurants and entertainment uses to spill out over and around the new Cornhill Square. The market will require investment and change to deliver the type of product that the town requires. Alternative market uses and specialist markets should become a programmed feature.
A mixed area structured around north-south routes bringing together new residential developments with supporting and experimental independent retail and leisure uses.

Create clear lines of sight across to the waterfront from the southern end of the main access routes through The Link Quarter. Clearing and landscaping of sites within the central area of the gyratory system will assist. Sympathetic architecture of new buildings in the central area within the gyratory system will enable lines of site to be maintained and new vistas to be opened up. Pedestrian crossing points must be maintained and adequately prioritised against traffic; the discussion about re-modelling the gyratory should be reignited.

New, independent retailers and businesses should not be discouraged from The Central Quarter. However, they must be sought out and positively encouraged for locations within The Link Quarter. Thereby, it can act as a natural feed for The Central Quarter as vacancies arise there. The Link Quarter can become a fascinating, dynamic retail and leisure ‘incubation’ environment, better than any that exists in surrounding towns and cities.

New development on the existing Archant site should be residential-led and include complementary uses such as bars, cafes and small shops.
The Maritime Quarter

The amphitheatre surrounding the main waterfront and incorporating an island site and within which business, enterprise and leisure uses are encouraged.

Some prominent, vacant or underused sites require remedial action to improve their appearance. These include the demolished former warehouse facing the Stoke Bridge area.

The eastern end of the Maritime Quarter, from Stoke Bridge to DanceEast, is a priority redevelopment area. This will dramatically improve first impressions of the overall waterfront area and of the town centre more generally. Mixed use development, comprising residential, office, retail and leisure should be encouraged.

The Maritime Quarter would benefit from new enterprise uses on the island site and these will complement the Innovation Quarter. If this will also relieve traffic on the Star Lane gyratory it should be encouraged. Completion of residential developments is a priority. There is an opportunity for a signature visitors’ attraction themed around Ipswich’s maritime history. Generally, it must strengthen further as an entertainment and cultural area.

Above: Illustration for Enterprise Zone

Above: For illustrative purposes only
The Westgate Quarter
A residential and cultural area surrounding the New Wolsey Theatre.

Westgate Street (beyond its junction with Museum Street) should cease as a retail-priority area. Within the new Westgate Quarter, the focus should be upon interests serving the needs of the new residential occupiers and existing cultural experiences. This may include new service provision (doctors, dentists, etc.) alongside small-scale complementary retail. Opportunity for open-air theatre and entertainment experiences exist.

The Civic Quarter
An area of commerce, public authorities and complementary employment and leisure uses.

The natural pull of the football club in this area needs to be drawn upon. It has also become a public sector hub and there’s a natural corridor driving traffic along Princes Street. This area will become the focus of new high-specification offices to feed the demand for state of the art accommodation.

The Riverside Quarter
An area to the west of the waterfront incorporating new waterside residential developments and river walkways.

A further, new and important routeway will be from the station to the waterfront. The new Riverside Quarter provides new residential accommodation in a waterside setting. New walkways along the river can be developed here.

The vacant site backing on to Cardinal Park and facing the Novotel, the site on Grafton Way originally planned as a Tesco store, and the area to the rear of St Peter’s Church currently used as car parking. Ipswich Borough Council should be encouraged in its use of compulsory purchase order powers to bring forward development on these sites and, in the meantime, landscaping must be positively and urgently encouraged.

The Eastgate Quarter
A mixed area with expanded sites of urban living supplemented by retail, leisure and entertainment uses alongside car parking.

The Eastgate Quarter including Carr Street (in it's entirety) should be re-energised by bringing together city-style living and entertainment, leisure and food and drink. Planners must positively deter new retail occupiers in these areas and bring forward uses consistent with their end appeal. This will all lead to a concentration of the retail offer within The Central Quarter.

The Innovation Quarter
An exciting learning and creative area surrounding University Campus Suffolk and Suffolk New College.

The Innovation Quarter will be seen as the hub for learning and creativity in the town and become an area where the unexpected is possible. It will provide a challenging environment where new business ideas are incubated before they move on to bigger sites in the town.

The Civic Quarter

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Interaction between the Central Quarter, the Link Quarter and the Maritime Quarter

The Central Quarter, Link Quarter and Maritime Quarter combine to create a clear and distinct north-south axis for the town.

The north-south axis

This north-south axis will create a dynamic link between the retail and restaurants in the Maritime Quarter with those in the Central Quarter. This interaction will galvanise the Link Quarter creating a core of intensified activity which will revitalise the town centre as a whole.

The three Quarters comprising the north-south axis will also provide the opportunity for new, good-quality residential development which will make their own contribution to the life of the town.

Town centre links with the railway station and the Maritime Quarter

Of prime importance to the Ipswich Central Area as a whole is the rail link that the town has with London, Cambridge and Norwich. Improved pedestrian flow from the station through the Riverside Quarter to the north-south axis will increase the town’s attraction for both business and leisure visitors.

The Civic Quarter and Innovation Quarter links with the north-south axis

The Civic Quarter to the west of the north-south axis and the Innovation Quarter to the east will both benefit from the improved pedestrian links to the rail station and the increased activity in the town centre.

Town centre links with well-established retail areas

The activity within the north-south axis will draw in increased footfall from the well-established residential areas to town centre retail and restaurants. New high quality residential development in the Eastgate and Westgate Quarters will also benefit from this vitality.

The ‘Hourglass’

Drawing in footfall from the north of the town, improving links with the rail station together with the intensification of activity along the north-south axis can be characterised by an ‘hourglass’ figure. This analogy cannot be drawn too far but as the hourglass concentrates activity in its centre it provides a memorable image for the Ipswich Central Vision overall.
Final word from the Board of Ipswich Central

"As Britain has emerged from a long and deep recession, town centres have been a topic of much discussion.

In December 2013, TV personality and retail consultant, Mary Portas, started the debate with a report commissioned by Government. In it she wrote:

"I believe that our high streets have reached a crisis point. I believe that unless urgent action is taken much of Britain will lose, inevitably, something that is fundamental to our society. Something that has real social as well as economic worth to our communities…"

Report after report followed, some more optimistic than others. Yet, there was a constant theme running through each - it would be those town centres that embraced change by recognising that the consumer was now no longer ‘king’ but ‘ruler of the universe’ that stood the best chance of succeeding in the future.

The emergence and competition from on-line retailing, home working, flexible study programmes, lower travel costs, out of town shopping and regional centres makes the choice for the customer broader than ever. Throughout the recession, vacancy rates within town centres rose and cost bases increased as business rates combined with rents and often service charges.

Yet, there remained reasons for optimism. Businesses generally preferred to base themselves within town centres as long as the gain that their employees felt justified any additional overhead. Likewise, customers continued to prefer spending work, study, shopping and leisure time in town centres as long as the added value that they gained justified the extra time and cost it took to get and stay there. If businesses and customers preferred to be in a town centre, investment would follow that demand.

What has emerged from the recession is the new ‘experiential’ town centre. This goes far beyond mere bricks and mortar occupied by retailers. The ‘experience’ that businesses, customers and investors now demand is about seeing and feeling something that cannot be found on the internet and is not available in other competing locations. It seamlessly combines work and play in a single location.

Businesses, customers and investors will be patient; they do not expect overnight transformation. But they do expect to see clear progress against a commonly agreed plan or vision, together with ambition to continually move from one stage to the next. They will respond to clarity of communication through consistent messages from all partners that explain the progress and the end goals ahead. Overall messages about a place must bring together all of the elements that make up that place around a common theme, and each must support the other. That way, each area of a town centre plays its unique part in the overall production that is this ‘re-invention of place’.

We think that Ipswich is a very special kind of place. Perceptions of the town are not what they should be. Yet, visitors to the town (many of whom are there for business or to visit Suffolk) and newcomers (many of whom are increasingly attracted by the town’s location and transport links) alike continue to be surprised by its combined offer and, most of all, its potential.

Town and city centres up and down the country are changing. Ipswich has a simple choice. To gamble that the end of the recession will return the town to the levels of demand that preceded it, or to appreciate that customers, businesses and investors need to see and feel change if they are to continue to commit their time and money to a place.

On behalf of its members, the BID will take an active role in helping to bring about the change required to succeed in the new ‘experiential’ age.

It is now time to decide if Ipswich should be bold and accelerate change or wait and hope that the market picks up where it left off. Our suspicion is that the latter option will not result in success but, rather, the town will fall behind its competitors if it chooses this course. Ipswich needs to function in a manner consistent with its Vision Statement and “…recapture its adventurous and creative spirit (and) challenge convention, look further ahead and embrace new ideas…”

Finally, we have invested in this update to illustrate the potential that Suffolk’s county town has. However, Ipswich Central is not the sole owner of this advanced Vision. It is presented and offered to the town as something that everyone can share, help deliver and take equal credit for. It is yours as much as it is ours."