



1.

Diagnosis

Stoke Town

Past

Before planning for the future of an area it is important to understand its past. The history of Stoke Town explains why the smallest of the six towns of the Potteries should give its name to the city as well as becoming its administrative centre.



Josiah Spode

Of the six towns only Burslem and Fenton are mentioned in the Domesday Book (1087), however the stone church of St. Peter Ad Vincula dates from 805AD and was built on the site of an older church and surrounded by a moat. 'Stoke' therefore means 'place' or 'place of worship' and the church, probably built to serve nearby Penkull, is a great deal older than the town.

For centuries other than St. Peter's, Stoke Town was little more than a row of houses on the turnpike road from Newcastle to Longton (now Church Street). This changed rapidly with the development of the ceramics industry in the mid 18th Century. Many of the potters who were to make their name in Stoke started as apprentices working in the Whieldon Works (which stood south of City Road on what is now the Sideway site). Both Wedgwood and Josiah Spode started there in the 1850s, the latter going on to buy an existing pottery works on what is now the former Spode Works site in 1776.

This was to become one of three ceramics works in the town. In 1881 Thomas Woolfe opened the Big Works at the Junction of London Road and Church Street and a few years later the Minton Works opened on the site now occupied by Sainsburys expanding to include a tile works on Shelton Old Road (now occupied by Caldwell Communications) that produced 2 million tiles a month. Minton was the largest company in the town, bequeathing the Minton Memorial and Library buildings on London Road and being remembered in the name of Campbell Place (named after Colin Minton Campbell). Josiah Spode died in 1797 and was succeeded by his son and later his grandson. The factory thrived on innovations in the production of bone china and underglaze blue printing and became one of the first nationally known brands in the early 1800s.

The Trent and Mersey Canal through Stoke was opened in 1777 and is thus one of the earliest canals in the country. It was designed by Brindley and Josiah Wedgwood cut the first sod when construction commenced. The Newcastle canal was not completed until 1800 and ran in a four-mile stretch from the Trent and Mersey canal to Newcastle. It was used by the three main potteries in Stoke but was otherwise a financial disaster. It was closed in 1921 but the first section in Stoke Town remained navigable until the A500 was built in the 1970s.

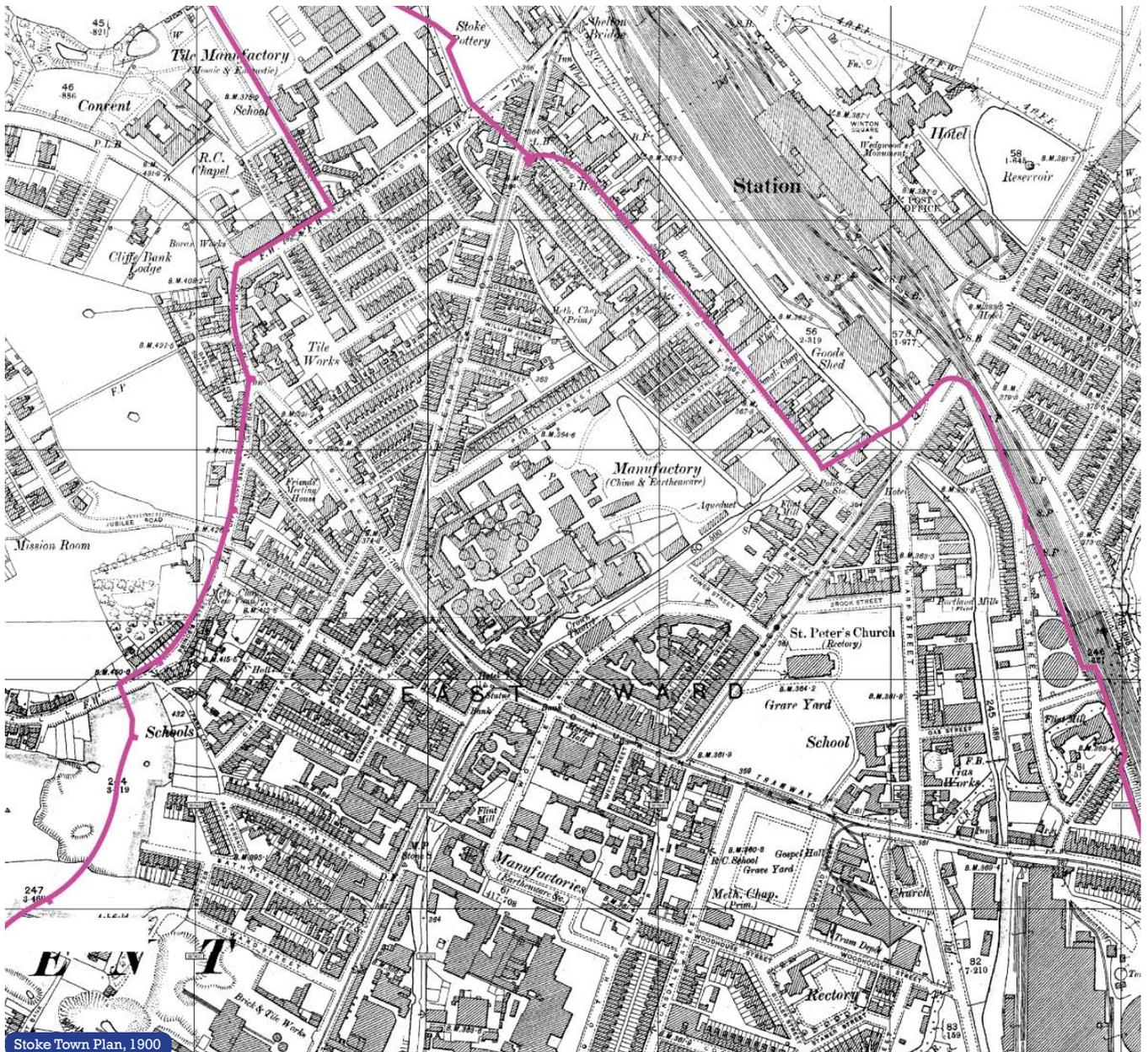
The six towns of Stoke upon Trent were amalgamated in 1910 and received city status in 1925. Stoke gave its name to the new city despite Burslem and Hanley being



Big Works, 19th Century



Minton Works, 19th Century



Stoke Town Plan, 1900

much larger because the six towns were all in the Stoke Parish. It's not quite clear how it came to be the administrative centre. This was possibly because neither Burslem nor Hanley were prepared to be administered by the other and possibly because Stoke had the biggest town hall and was a natural centre being next to the station.

Stoke's pre-eminence as a ceramics centre faded in the 20th Century. Aerial photographs from as late as the 1960s show a town dominated by bottle kilns and potteries. With the closure of Spode two years ago Portmeirion remains the last pottery in the town. This was founded in 1961 when Susan William Ellis (daughter of the founder of Portmeirion in North Wales) bought a company in Stoke and moved into the Goss Crested China Works on London Road. Portmeirion pottery remains popular and the firm also now owns the Spode Brand.



Spode Works, 1927

Stoke Town

Present



xx Street, Stoke Town

As part of the study the URBED team have carried out a baseline assessment of Stoke Town today. This shows the town to be deprived to an extent but far from being the most impoverished part of the conurbation. The town centre however is in a very poor state, caused in part by problems with the highway system.

People

The population of Stoke Town is just 6,688 people which is only 2.8% of the population of the city (Census, 2001). This however is a slightly artificial figure because the built up area of Stoke is made up of a networks of towns and neighbourhoods that flow into each other. Stoke Town is therefore not an isolated settlement but part of a conurbation of 360,000 people. However, this city-wide population is predicted to fall by 4% by 2029 (ONS, 2007).

The population in Stoke Town is younger than the national average and in ethnicity terms is 93% white. Unemployment stands at 5% with economic activity rates at 61.4% which is better than the city centre but lower than the figure for the West Midlands (65.9%). Many local people work in manufacturing (22.6%) compared to a national average of 14%, (Census, 2001). Wage levels are similar to the rest of Stoke-on-Trent but below the regional average with the Stoke Town wards featuring in the bottom 20% most deprived in the UK. These figures show that Stoke Town is far from being the most deprived part of Stoke on Trent. However, the loss of Spode and the extent to which its population is reliant on manufacturing makes it vulnerable in the current economic climate.

Housing

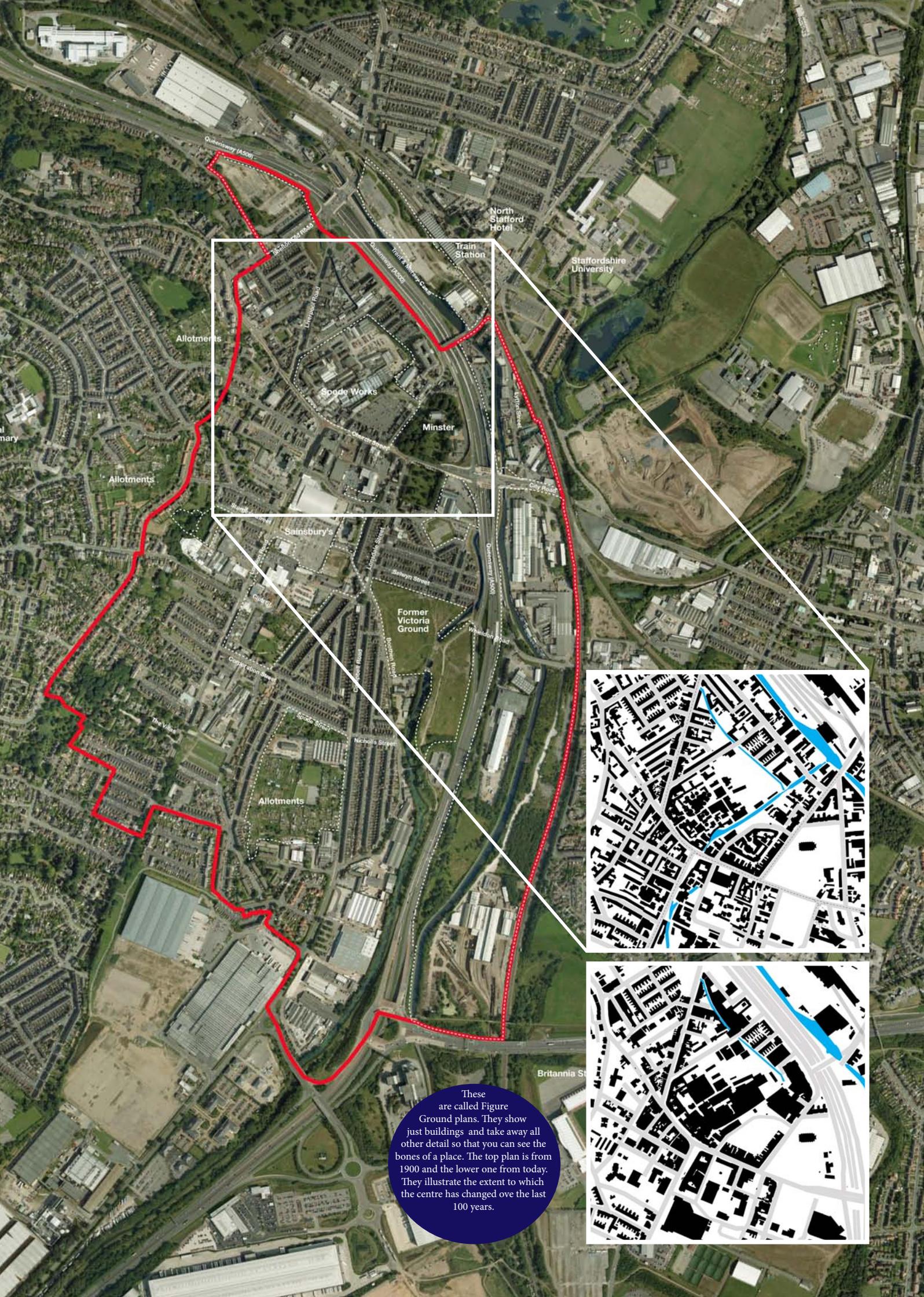
The housing market in Stoke town is complicated. The town sits at the point where the dense terraces of the city centre give way to the more suburban housing to the south and west. The poorest housing is around the station with high levels of private renting (probably to students) and low values. The terraced housing to the south of the A500 is stonger but even here there are some problems with housing condition and vacancy. The baseline review found some evidence of young professionals moving into the area, which may reflect its affordability and proximity to the station.

Shops

Stoke Town centre is a small local centre and faces strong competition from both the city centre and Newcastle. It's level of non-food retail is substantially below the national average and its vacancy rate is 28%.

Transport

Stoke Town suffers from its transport network. The A500 cuts the town in two, severing the main part of the town from the railway station and the University. The town centre also has to cope with a significant amount of through traffic (more than 80% of traffic neither starts or ends its journey in the town). To cope with this a complicated one-way system has been created which channels significant amounts of traffic around the edge of the centre, further cutting it off. There have been discussions within the council and other local bodies about a possible bypass to address the problems created by this system. In terms of public transport the town is well served. Most housing is within reach of a bus stop and the station means that rail connections are unrivalled.



These are called Figure Ground plans. They show just buildings and take away all other detail so that you can see the bones of a place. The top plan is from 1900 and the lower one from today. They illustrate the extent to which the centre has changed over the last 100 years.

Diagnosis

The baseline research undertaken for the masterplan has shown that Stoke Town faces some serious challenges. The loss of Spode is still a very fresh wound but it is also an enormous opportunity to reinvent the town, its role and image.

6,688

The population of Stoke Town, 44% of whom are aged 20-44 which is 20% higher than the regional average

(Census, 2001)

757

Number of new homes planned per year in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme, 11,523 number of homes allocated or identified (15 year supply)

(xx, 2010)

83%

Traffic in Stoke that is just passing through with no business in the town

(Arup, 2010)

577

Number of off street parking spaces in Stoke Town Centre

(Arup, 2010)

28%

Proportion of shops that were vacant in 2010

(DTZ, 2010)

The baseline work summarised on the previous page show Stoke Town as a town that is vulnerable. It is dependent on a vulnerable manufacturing sector, more than a quarter of its shops vacant, parts of its housing market are weak, while its roads are clogged with through traffic.

This story is unfortunately not unique. Across the country small industrial towns have suffered as they have lost employment and struggled to compete with larger towns and cities. URBED have worked on many such small towns, places like Darlaston in the Black Country and Radcliffe, north of Manchester. Both have lost large local employers, and have seen their town centres collapse in the face of intense competition from larger neighbours. To rub salt into the wounds they have seen their town councils amalgamated with these same larger neighbours and fear the loss of their independence and identity.

But Stoke Town is much more complicated! On the one hand it is a town that has given its name to a major conurbation. A town that far from losing its identity, is the administrative heart of the conurbation and home to the Civic Centre, Town Hall and Minster. It is indeed home to many city centre functions, the mainline rail station, the market, the University and College.

Yet despite all of this, the baseline shows it is actually in a worse state than many other small industrial towns. There a number of reasons for this that need to be addressed as part of the strategy and masterplan for the town.

- The first reason is that the decline in the ceramics industry is a very recent wound. Stoke, of course still remains a major ceramics centre through the likes of Portmeirion pottery. But it once had six



xxxxx



xx Street

local potteries, the largest of which, Spode, closed only three years ago (2008). While other towns have had time to recover and diversify, Stoke Town has lost its largest employer in the heart of a recession. The results are being felt in the local employment statistics, the housing market and the town centre shops (many of whom were sustained by the former Spode workforce).

- The second reason is the complex structure of Stoke-on-Trent. Stoke Town is one of the original towns of the Potteries, all of which once functioned as independent places. They had their own councils and fiercely loyal communities who worked locally and patronised their thriving town centres. However as workforces declined, populations became more mobile and the nature of retailing changed, the towns all started competing with each other. Trade and activity has been sucked into the City Centre (Hanley) and to out-of-town retail stores. Stoke Town has perhaps suffered most of all the towns from this process being so close to the City Centre.
- The third reason is the physical structure of the town and the barrier created by the A500, the Railway and Canal. Many of the towns institutions are either north of this barrier or accessible directly from Glebe Street. As a result the heart of the town centre feels like a different world, entirely off the mental map of individuals who either work, study or live close by. It is telling that the recent season of live music in the town's pubs was called 'over the bridge'. The one-way road system, designed for the needs of through traffic only makes this situation worse. As the centre has declined there has been less and less to draw people in, thus compounding this cycle of decline.

These trends have caused the most severe problems in the town centre but the whole town has been affected. Along London Road shops have struggled and the environment has deteriorated. The housing market is weak and prices are not keeping pace with the rest of the city. Unemployment has risen and a number of vacant sites, most notably the former Victoria Ground have remained underdeveloped for some time.

It is clear from our analysis that the situation has not stabilised. From our consultations we are aware that there are traders and other employers who would considering leaving the town due to a level of pessimism that the town is so run down. This however should be offset against the many positive things that are happening in the town, the loyalty of local people and there commitment to its future. The prognosis may not currently be very good but to quote the great urbanist Jane Jacobs, Stoke has within it 'the seeds of its own regeneration'.



Stoke Town, Town Hall

