

Agenda Item No: 13

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 26/11/2020

Report Title: Town Centre Reset

Report Author & Job Title: Hannah Clayton-Peck, Town Centre Regeneration Manager and Dan Carter, Team Leader - Spatial Planning Team.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Gerry Clarkson and Cllr. Paul Clokie
Portfolio Holder for: Leader of the Council and Corporate Property and Projects



Summary: The Town Centre Reset seeks to consolidate areas of focus in Ashford town centre. Concentrating on market investment demonstrated from the International Station in the past 5 years, this report emphasises defining an investment corridor and area of emphasis along Elwick Road and Bank Street. Corporate, cross-departmental projects will be established to identify areas of opportunity with a clear direction for the future.

Key Decision: YES/NO (delete as appropriate)

Significantly Affected Wards: Victoria Ward

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is recommended to:-**

- I. Adopt the Town Centre Reset**
- II. Delegate authority to the Ashford Town Centre Redevelopment Advisory Committee to develop the action plan and monitor the delivery of this document.**

Policy Overview: The Town Centre Reset is part of the Ashford Recovery Plan 2020 under the theme 'Place Making, Regeneration and Infrastructure'.

Financial Implications: £340,000 has been identified in the recovery plan to support the delivery of the work streams arising from the TC reset. Specific project funding requests /future funding bids will be reported to the Ashford Town Centre Redevelopment Advisory Committee and Cabinet as appropriate.

Legal Implications: N/A

Equalities Impact Assessment: Not required because this plan doesn't relate to the delivery of specific individual programmes of work. Assessment on the impact on protected characteristics will be undertaken on each individual project at the appropriate time.

**Data Protection
Impact**

Assessment:

Not required because this plan doesn't relate to the delivery of specific individual programmes of work. Assessment on the impact on data protection will be undertaken on each individual project at the appropriate time.

**Risk Assessment
(Risk Appetite
Statement):**

Not required because this plan doesn't relate to the delivery of specific individual programmes of work. Risk assessments will be undertaken on each individual project at the appropriate time.

**Sustainability
Implications:**

Under the Corporate Plan one of the three emerging themes is 'Green Pioneer' citing the Council's ambition for carbon neutrality. This theme is referenced as a key objective in the 'Overarching Approach'. The Town Centre Reset and all of the projects which flow from it will ensure sustainability is considered as a priority.

**Other Material
Implications:**

N/A

**Exempt from
Publication:**

NO

**Background
Papers:**

Town Centre Reset

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Report Title: Town Centre Reset

Introduction and Background

1. The Ashford Town Centre Reset (attached as Appendix A of this report) is part of the Ashford Recovery Plan and takes into consideration the emerging Corporate Plan and the Ashford Ambition to 2030. Before COVID-19 town centres were undergoing an evolution, with a clear contraction in retail following the impact of online shopping and the growth in popularity of out of town retailing experiences. The report was compiled following a series of consultations with heads of service and members and created using their responses. This document has since been considered by the Ashford Town Centre Redevelopment Advisory Committee, to incorporate views before bringing this document to Cabinet.
2. COVID 19 has expedited this contraction and we are currently at a vacancy rate of 19.9% which is the highest it has been since we began recording 12 years ago. With 40% less footfall than we were seeing last year, we need to consider the role of the town centre and understand its relevance to the recovery of Ashford's economy.

Proposal

3. The Town Centre Reset seeks to consolidate areas of focus and investment in Ashford town centre. Focussing on the market investment demonstrated around the International Station in the past 5 years, this report focusses on defining an investment corridor stretching from the International station, through Elwick Road and up to Bank Street. Corporate, cross-departmental projects will be identified to realise these ambitions. This will identify delivery, investment and areas of opportunity to show a clear direction of travel for the future by defining 5 key themes;
 - a. The influence of the International station
 - b. Key destinations
 - c. The declining role of retail
 - d. The role and type of residential use
 - e. The role of community and the cultural offer.
4. The primary purpose of this study is to consider the role the Council can play to directly influence any 'reset' for the traditional town centre area so that it can remain relevant within the wider context. It is clear that the traditional town centre area needs to provide an offer that complements offers elsewhere, and must adapt to survive.
5. This has been the case for some time. That is not to say retail and leisure uses won't have a role to play, it is more that they need to diversify and create a place that can meet the everyday needs of the surrounding communities. A place to live, work, visit and invest. This document takes into account developments already identified and being taken forward in the town centre

- and its surrounding areas such as; Newtown Works, Park Mall and Vicarage Lane.
6. New Ashford residents will create greater demand for independent shops, start-up enterprises, cafes and eateries. But the Council must understand where to intervene, where stimulus can be created, and where partnerships can be most powerful.
 7. The Council are well-placed to help facilitate this 'reset' with the ability to influence both private and public sector stakeholders.
 8. To deliver the reset as set out in this study, three key questions arise which need to be addressed as next steps;

What are the key Placemaking aspirations for Bank St and Elwick Rd?

This study provides a useful starting point. However, this narrative needs to be articulated and further refined. Once a role has been more refined, an SPD can be produced to give some guidance to the market and a phasing strategy will be produced defining how and when change in the area will occur.

What are the barriers to delivery?

Barriers to delivery are areas that we must address in order to deliver the mission statement. Key considerations will be;

- The role of KCC as a delivery partner
- The movement of people in Bank Street
- Maintaining and growing strong relationships with stakeholders and investors
- Communication of the investment opportunities in Ashford town centre
- Multiple ownership creating vacancy and property dilapidations
- Corporate collaboration
- Geographical and environmental constraints, including the conservation area.

How do we create the optimum movement framework?

Movement is critical for areas like the traditional town centre. Once there is a better understanding as to the future role of the areas identified in this study there will be a need to review existing strategies to ensure they deliver the optimum movement framework to support any reset. This would include;

- Review of pedestrian and cycle routes as part of the Local Cycling, Walking and Investment Plan
 - The frequency of car journeys alongside our Carbon Neutral Strategy and Green Pioneer role
 - Parking and it's form and function in the town centre
 - Buses and the safety and accessibility of their routes and drop off points.
9. However, we accept that we can't do it alone and that the climate is a difficult one, even pre COVID-19. This significant setback to our economic and social journey requires great care to be taken, ensuring that we can help address challenges which our community face.
 10. That said, we now have an opportunity to focus on outcomes and respond in a way that makes best use of our resources. Creating this study, with a clear

emphasis on longer term ambitions, means that by 2022 our resources and investment can be targeted in the most effective way and much needed interventions can take place.

Equalities Impact Assessment

11. Not required because this plan doesn't relate to the delivery of specific individual programmes of work. Assessment on the impact on protected characteristics will be undertaken on each individual project at the appropriate time.

Consultation Planned or Undertaken

12. Interviews were undertaken with leading Cabinet Portfolio Holders and Management Team to identify common areas of agreement in developing this Ashford Town Centre Reset document. The Ashford Town Centre Redevelopment Advisory Committee were consulted at their September meeting to seek wider member and officer views to feed into this draft Town Centre Reset.

Other Options Considered

13. The option to not take forwards this piece of work was considered. It was deemed of critical importance to the recovery of Ashford Town Centre's economy and community to ensure that a longer term plan and intervention was taken forwards. This is in the context of the Council's unique and powerful role as landowner, community champion and influencer, planning authority, key employer, service deliverer and cultural champion.
14. In consulting with leading members and officers, different options were considered in terms of the focus for the Town Centre Reset document, but broad consensus was provided around the Investment Corridor and area of focus identified in the Strategic Diagram on page 4 of the document.

Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended

15. The production of a Town Centre Reset document was agreed as a priority action in the Ashford Recovery Plan. This document will provide an agreed, focused approach moving forward.
16. This document provides a deliverable and clear direction of travel that understands what the council's role could be in the future but also the fact that the Council are not able to influence things alone and will therefore need the support of stakeholders and the market.
17. There is good consensus amongst Members and Officers around the key geographical areas within Ashford Town Centre, which this document articulates.
18. It is a study that will take time to implement and this is reflected in the contents and will need to be recognised, however failure to act will result in a traditional town centre that fails to achieve its potential – vulnerable to decline.

Next Steps in Process

19. The Ashford Town Centre Reset doesn't prescribe timeframes, however pending the decision on Cabinet the next steps will be to co-ordinate the work already contributing to this Reset. That will involve creating an operational working group, which it is recommended report progress to the Ashford Town Centre Redevelopment Advisory Committee.

Conclusion

20. The Ashford Town Centre Reset provides a focus on interventions in Bank Street and Elwick Road, in the wider context of an investment corridor which takes into account other key development sites. Bank Street and Elwick Road connect these areas creating an area capitalising on both Council and external investments with maximum benefit.
21. It is hoped that a coordinated approach with a clear vision will ensure that vital council resources, in a time when such resources are limited, are targeted in the most appropriate way for the best solution that responds to the situation.

Portfolio Holder's Views

22. Cllr Gerry Clarkson, Leader of Ashford Borough Council; "Ashford Town Centre Reset is the blueprint to establish the future success of Ashford Town Centre. However it must be agile and flexible in its use to respond to changing circumstances and future opportunities."
23. Cllr Paul Clokie, Portfolio holder for Regeneration and Corporate Property; "With the rapid evolution of town centres and the opportunities Ashford town centre has, this Reset provides a direction and vision to work towards, whilst maintaining its' flexibility. We must also look forward to the time when our new residents start to return to normal life, although it is inferred in the this report, we must take advantage of this reset to regain the wow factor of the original Ashford High Street.

Contact and Email

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The Ashford Town Centre Reset

S e p t e m b e r 2 0 2 0



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The Overarching Approach

This study sits alongside the recent and ongoing visioning work for the corporate plan and the Council's recovery plan post COVID-19 and takes into consideration the future of the borough relating to the Ashford Ambition to 2030 and beyond.

This work has identified the following three themes:

- **Green Pioneer** – where businesses, communities and the public and third sector have come together to become carbon neutral, respect the local environment and ecology, and embrace a more sustainable way of living.
- **Caring Ashford** – A caring and supportive place to live, with rich heritage; great schools; high-quality housing; a plethora of cultural activities and events; and a strong sense of civic pride.
- **Targeted Growth** – A place where productive, innovative, responsible urban and rural businesses offer good quality work to an agile and skilled local workforce who have embraced a culture of lifelong learning.

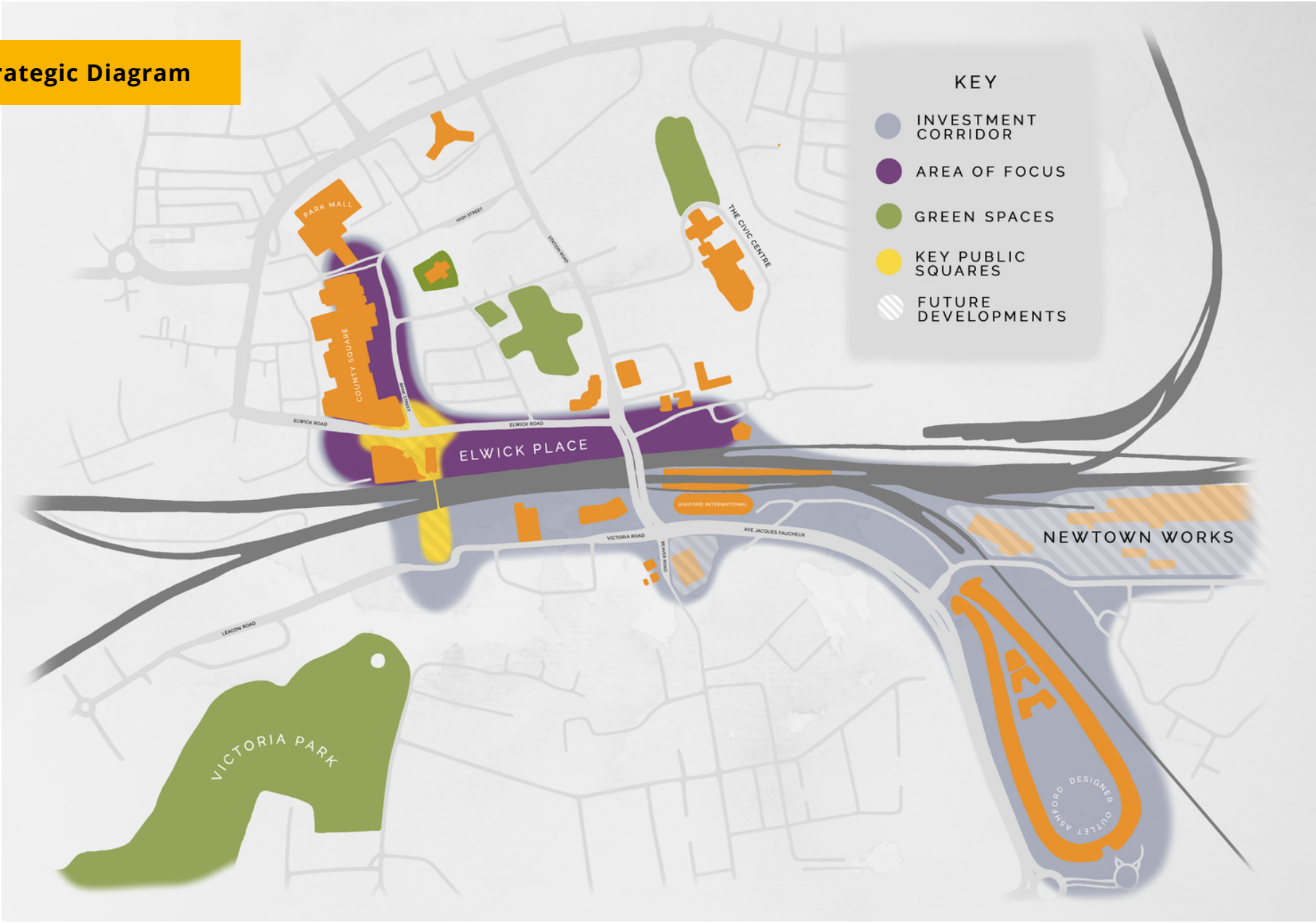
This study focusses on the how these themes can be applied in a spatial way to the traditional town centre area and as such has identified the following Mission Statement:



The Council will drive a reset of the traditional Town Centre area by focusing resources towards the defined 'Investment Corridor'. Bank Street and Elwick Road will be our main 'area of focus'. (see *Strategic Diagram*). It will become a quality place that has a clearly defined new role, meets the needs of the existing and future communities and reflects the trends of the local retail/leisure market to provide a place which complements the nearby areas.



Strategic Diagram



Introduction

In the past, nothing said more about a town than its centre. It was always the place synonymous with the feel, character and reputation of a town and the place which would be compared to others.

This position has changed. Now, many towns have areas or districts that in themselves have become great places. These now help shape and define a town's identity.

Ashford is no different. It has many distinctive neighbourhoods and districts, centred on established and emerging communities.

In combination, these areas create the character which makes Ashford what it is. These areas include the train station – the central hub of the town and the place where most people arrive, who come to visit Ashford. Radiating from the Station are a number of recently developed areas, distinct in their own right. These key developments include the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet, Connect 38, Curious Brewery, Ashford College and Elwick Place. Victoria Park is also planned to undergo significant investment to enhance its already important recreational leisure offer in serving town centre residents.

New areas and communities continue to be planned, all within close proximity to the station, including the exciting, transformative Newtown Works proposal.

It will bring with it new 'forward thinking' and 'creative' workers, from completely new areas and thriving sectors of the market.

The expansion of the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet, will also enhance this wider place, strengthening the link between this broader district and the station.

The Victoria Road area, located next to the International Station's entrance, is also undergoing significant change, driven by the market. Here a thriving residential offer is being generated, with excellent links to Victoria Park, Bank Street and the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet.

It is clear that districts and neighbourhoods within the town have an important role to play, which will be enhanced over time.

The primary purpose of this study is to consider the role the Council can play to directly influence any 'reset' for the traditional town centre area so that it can remain relevant within the wider context. It is clear that the traditional town centre area needs to provide an offer that complements offers elsewhere, and must adapt to survive.

This has been the case for some time. That is not to say retail and leisure uses won't have a role to play, it is more that they need to diversify and create a place that can meet the everyday needs of the surrounding communities. A place to live, work, visit and invest.

New Ashford residents will create greater demand for independent shops, start-up enterprises, cafes and eateries. But the Council must understand where to intervene, where stimulus can be created, and where partnerships can be most powerful.

The Council are well-placed to help facilitate this 'reset' with the ability to influence both private and public sector stakeholders (further referenced in sections below). However, we accept that we can't do it alone and that the climate is a difficult one, even pre COVID-19. We accept that this significant setback to our economic and social journey requires great care to be taken, ensuring that we can help address challenges which our community face.

That said, we now have an opportunity to focus on outcomes and respond in a way that makes best use of our resources. Creating this study, with a clear emphasis on longer term ambitions, means that by 2022 our resources and investment can be targeted in the most effective way and needed interventions can take place.

Our Role

Critical to the success of this study is its deliverability. For that to happen we must understand the Council's role as a key player to influence and drive change.



Landowner

We have significant land ownership in the traditional town centre area, as broadly shown by the map above.

Our role has been and remains significant. With the power to have direct impact on the market, we can create the places we want on the ground. We can also use these opportunities to directly influence and deliver other areas, by creating and generating footfall movements or delivering complementary development, such as residential development that can support any retail and leisure areas nearby.

Community Champion

Great places need great people and great people make community. Ashford will be welcoming thousands of new residents over the next few years. To support the new community we need to continue to build resilience and strengthen our communities, engaging them to deliver our outcomes.

Influencer

We have built strong, diverse partnerships with the private sector in the past few years, with projects such as Elwick Place, Connect 38 and Ashford College. This experience makes us well placed to create meaningful projects and draw on market trends.

Planning Authority

We have the opportunity to deliver guidance to the market in the form of Supplementary Planning Guidance that could set out how our mission statement will be delivered through new development. This can include uses which are envisaged, whilst also establishing some key design criteria such as storey height, scale and density.

Key Employer

Ashford Borough Council is a major employer with staff imbued with vast experience and knowledge of the local area. This wealth of knowledge will help drive the projects forward.

Service Deliverer

The Council's own presence, and potential enhanced presence, in the investment corridor provides us with the potential to directly influence the delivery of the mission statement in the form of taking up more space and creating animation.

But we can't do this alone. Partnerships will be key in our ability to deliver as we face a more challenging financial position. Before COVID-19 the traditional town centre was already in decline, this has simply accelerated the inevitable.

Not responding at all would be the wrong approach. Further decline would merely continue to happen. So a bold approach is needed as outlined in this study.

Cultural Champion

We have an opportunity to build on the success of the many cultural and creative organisations. This study could be powerful in resetting Ashford's identity alongside the delivery of Newtown Works.

The defined investment corridor provides underdeveloped land and therefore opportunities. In the short term, this could be a temporary solution meeting more immediate demands. This could also help to understand demand and build a reputation, allowing a longer term, and perhaps, more permanent offer to be established.

Taking Stock & Moving Forward

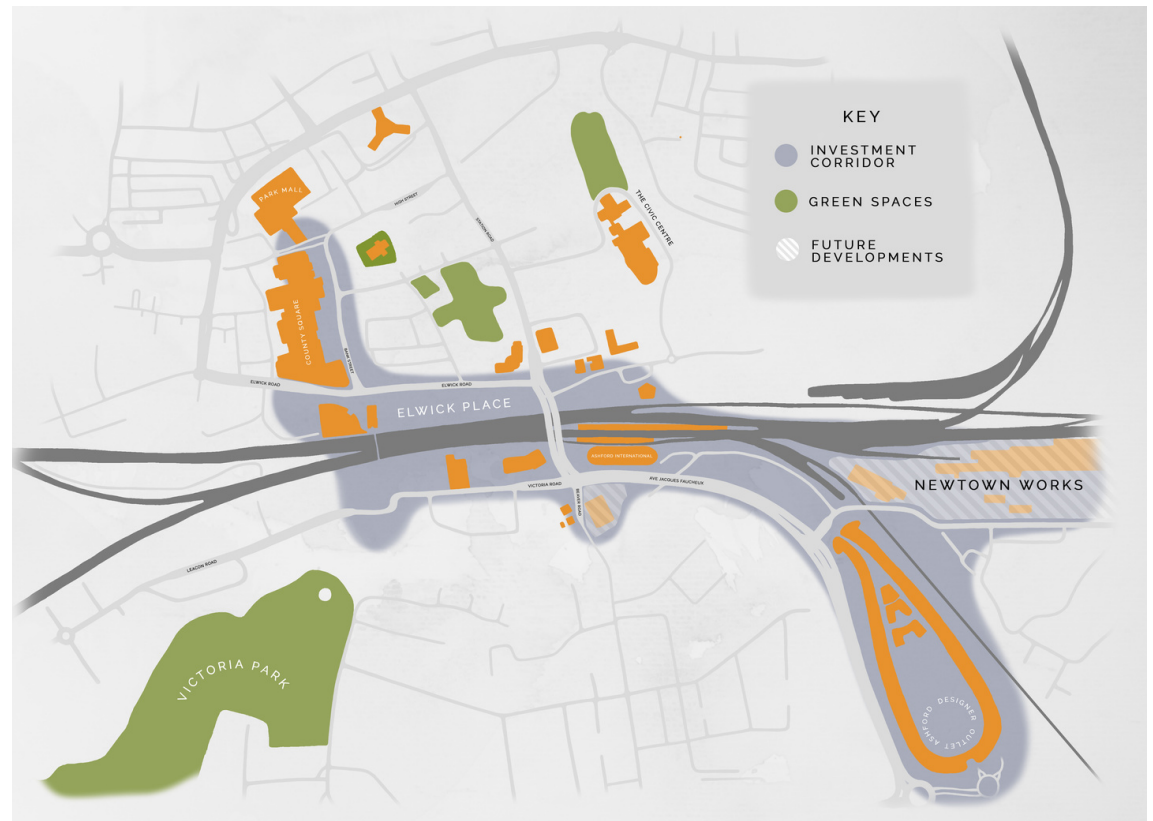
The Study Area

Successful places with thriving communities interact seamlessly whilst maintaining a distinct role, therefore this study deliberately doesn't provide a clearly defined area. However, in broad terms, the study has looked at a number of key districts and neighbourhoods within the central area of the town. These include the station, the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet, Victoria Way, Bank Street and Elwick Road as well as the remaining areas of the traditional town centre (see map below).

The work that has underpinned this Study creates a clear picture of what the key influencing factors are within this broad area, what roles certain areas could play moving forward. The key outcomes are as follows, under identified themes.

Understanding the Themes

The study is a culmination of a range of work areas that have come together to identify a number of themes that influence the outcomes of this study as set out below.



Theme One - The Influence of the Station

Substantial market investment has occurred in the Town in recent years, radiating directly from the Station with its excellent links to London and Europe. Such investment includes the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet, Connect 38, Curious Brewery, Ashford College, Elwick Place and ongoing construction of significant levels of new flatted development along Victoria Road.

Ashford International train station is the fulcrum of the town centre, a role that has been enhanced with the delivery of HS1 and has seen the radiating effect of market delivery. There is no doubt that the station will continue to play this 'central hub' role.

Theme Two - The Key Destinations

Places evolve over time and in doing so new purposes are created which become key destinations in their own right. Often, this can trigger the need for other areas to evolve and respond, so they complement these places rather than competing with them.

In Ashford, it is clear where the market focus has been and how new investment is focused around a core area that radiates from the Station. Almost all of the new developments coming into the central area of the Town in recent years have been focussed on these areas rather than the more traditional high street.

Here investment has been almost exclusively limited to the re-use of existing buildings. The result is a number of what can be termed 'anchor destinations'. Alongside the station, these include:

- **The McArthur Glen Designer Outlet** - arguably the town's most successful development in recent years attracting over 3.5 million visitors per year, with an expected increase to 5 million with the new expansion. The Outlet is a comparison retail attraction that is the envy of other places and is often cited as an exemplar scheme to be mirrored elsewhere.
- **Connect 38** - the biggest office building to be built in Kent for 20 years, this 80,500 sq ft office building developed close to the international station by Quinn estates has created a hub of business activity. With many businesses moving from regional Kent offices to this location for access to the International station, this has also seen a rise in footfall.
- **Ashford College** - this project has created opportunities locally for students to better access an educational facility in its new location opposite the train station. Its state of the art facilities and modern design is yet to be fully realised, however there are plans to extend the building to accommodate greater capacity and a more varied programme. This is an important part of the fabric of the borough and its future role in supporting the economy in the future.
- **Elwick Place** - the 100,000 sq ft leisure and restaurant development includes the first ever newly built Picturehouse cinema, nine retail and restaurant units and a Travelodge hotel. This development has transformed this area opposite the traditional retail hub of County Square. With recent tenants Macknade demonstrating that demand for high quality, local, independent restaurant and retail, the future prospects of Elwick Place are promising.

Ashford Town Centre Reset

- **Coachworks** - the Coachworks is a 'meanwhile' development transforming Dover Place in Ashford, by reviving disused industrial buildings in the area, directly outside the International train station, which includes a new co-working space, a food & drink destination and an outdoor event space.
- **New Town Works** - this new development aims to put Ashford at the forefront of the digital revolution, by offering state-of-the-art film and TV production space in the heart of Kent. With quick links to London, Newtown Works in Ashford makes for an ideal location for key players in the online streaming, film and TV industries. This exciting transformative project has the potential to stimulate the Ashford economy through the potential longer term economic impacts of COVID-19 and create the Ashford of the future.

These areas are now important destinations and attractors in their own right. They are places many people visit and have become part of the urban fabric of the town. In effect, they now complement the existing and more traditional destinations, such as:

- **St Mary's Church** - nestled just off Ashford high street St Mary's Church stands with over 1000 years of history. In 2011 Revelation Ashford was launched, Ashford's pop up arts venue hosting international artists and providing 'up close and personal' cultural experiences. Since then Revelation has welcomed renowned artists and developed projects with schools and groups, all the while working with the church community to bring continued life to the area.
- **Middle Row area** - these medieval buildings and narrow streets were known as the Butchers' Shambles and are some of the oldest in the town. This is the original site of Ashford's market, and if you look closely you'll see hints of this period, such as the hooks on the wall where the butchers' meat was hung. This area has untapped potential with its history and heritage forming the story of Ashford, something crucial to its identity.
- **Park Mall** - purchased by the Council in 2015, this previously struggling shopping centre has been one of the town centre's success stories. Home to one of the town centre's most successful pop up shops, Made in Ashford, Park Mall is home to more than 30 retailers. This has created the beginnings of a town centre business community, something which this document seeks to harness through proposing managed displacement of these businesses to the Bank Street area accelerating the long term vision for residential development on the Park Mall site.

- **County Square** - County Square spurs off the traditional high street with its biggest (currently empty) unit facing the recently developed Elwick Place. In recent years this centre has seen highs and lows with its historic footfall achievement surpassing 6 million in 2018, to losing its anchor tenants Marks and Spencer's and Debenhams in the year that followed. Despite the steady vacancy rate across the rest of the centre, County Square is facing similar fates to that mirrored across shopping centres and in comparison retail nationally and we need to work with them to ensure that they contribute to the core retail offer in Ashford town centre.

Theme Three - The Declining Role of Retail

Retail (particularly comparison retail) has struggled to survive in many traditional high streets for some time. Competition from online retailers, out of town retail parks and other retail hubs, such as Bluewater, have become a destination for huge numbers of visitors. Also, many retail operators have responded to market demand through needing more out-of-centre destinations.

Ashford is no different. It has been successful in delivering high quality, big name, retail stores close to the traditional Town Centre such as Waitrose and John Lewis. These all positively contribute to the wider retail offer within Ashford and are welcomed. However, in the traditional town centre areas many large attractors have been lost such as Woolworths, Marks and Spencer's and recently Debenhams. It is clear that the future role for large scale comparison destination retail, will mostly be fulfilled by the nearby McArthur Glen Designer Outlet. It is therefore about how the traditional town centre area can complement this offer and not necessarily try to compete.

The pressure and decline of the traditional high street retail area will not subside, certainly not for the large traditional anchor retail stores demonstrated in recent losses of Marks and Spencer and Debenhams in County Square. The model for these stores is hugely challenged, with the majority unlikely to want to change their out of centre location for traditional town centres.

Also, the impact of COVID-19 is yet to be fully realised. However, there are clear signs that the pandemic has negatively impacted on the retail and leisure sectors, exacerbating the change in consumer habits. Many commentators consider that COVID-19 has accelerated the decline in retail that would have happened anyway.

That is not to say that retail won't play a role in more traditional high street areas, including comparison retail. However, it is much more likely that this will be in the form of independent traders and shops which require small footprints.

This is the type of retail we should be trying to encourage moving forward – an offer which caters for the everyday needs of the residents and workers in the area. Independent retailers that can be fleet of foot to swift changes in consumer demand, rather than being a destination to come to dwell and spend significant retail or leisure time. We have seen evidence of this through examples such as Salata, Macknade and Stag coffee, all businesses who have pivoted rapidly and to positive effect during COVID-19.

Theme Four - The Role and Type of Residential Use

Traditional town centres have always been a place where people have lived. Ashford is no different. These residents are an important part of the borough's wider community and their needs and aspirations need to be understood, met and respected. However, new communities coming to Ashford will become new residents and their needs and aspirations are also important.

For the traditional town centre area, this is a particular issue. Many thousands of dwellings are proposed to be delivered over the next few years, with many more almost complete. This will lead to a significant local population increase – all residents calling this area home. They will be a diverse and mixed new community, with new ideas, needs and expectations and we have the opportunity to create the places that they want to use.

The new residents surrounding the Bank Street and Elwick Road areas will not only create increased footfall potential, but they stimulate need for more routine services and demand for that central area to serve their daily needs.

This residential buffer frames the investment corridor and provides an opportunity to define a central nucleus in Elwick Road and Bank Street, as they will be areas residents will travel through to access the International Train station and other nearby destinations.

Creating a defined quality space with an attractive public realm and a specific purpose along Elwick Road and Bank Street presents an opportunity for both residents and businesses to thrive. More residential use will provide greater animation and support local retail and leisure uses.

This influx will provide much needed activity during the day, with many of these new residents looking to work from home, as well as creating demand for the night time economy.

The Council can directly influence the residential concentration of the Vicarage Lane and Park Mall areas, given our role as landowner and developer. These are areas on the periphery of the investment corridor, but by extension provide that 'buffer' and will generate significant footfall movements to support our aspirations.

Theme Five - The Role of the Community & Cultural Offer

Successful places have an active community and a thriving cultural offer, helping to give a place clear identity. This is recognised by the Council and we have already agreed – in liaison with community leaders – to develop an ‘action plan’ for the wider town centre area to identify needs, improve community resilience and sustain the excellent work of the volunteer sector. This consultation will provide a vehicle to give the new and existing local community a voice, to increase engagement, participation and collaboration.

Successfully integrating the new community with the existing one will be crucial. This cohesion will be needed, and active work on achieving this community will be required.

In the past couple of years cultural projects and programmes have delivered incredible successes for the traditional town centre. Snowdogs, Illuminates, Revelation, Create festival and Made in Ashford have all engaged the community and evidenced demand. Ashford is lucky to be surrounded by many cultural organisations who understand and are engaged with our place development. With this reset we must examine how culture can deliver some of the outcomes, in a way that aligns to the roles being created at Bank St and Elwick Road.

The Timeframe

Things are already moving forward and this study does not aim to prescribe timeframes. It does however provide a clear direction of travel for the traditional town centre area, with a renewed focus on the Bank St and Elwick Rd areas. This is our long term vision and future projects will take this study into account. Delivery in the short term, must not prejudice the ability to achieve these longer term aims.

Establishing the Roles

Bank Street & Elwick Road

The key area of change and the focal point of this study, utilising its accessible position from the Station, the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet, Victoria Park and the traditional town centre area. It is the area which will become framed by new, high quality, residential development.

Bank Street will be transformed to become a focal point for the community and will be where many now consider the 'new modern high street' to be. The main complementary retail and leisure uses will be focused here. It will mainly look to cater for people's everyday needs although County Square may still continue to meet more comparison based shopping needs.

The new offer, and quality of place and associated public realm will act as a key attractor of footfall movements. In doing so, it will complement Elwick Place, the uses around the northern part of Bank Street and the uses within County Square. It will be where people dwell and mingle, with a variety of independent shops, eateries and cafes. These uses will support the daytime and evening economies.

This attractive place will provide an offer that will complement the nearby McArthur Glen Designer Outlet which will be delivering an enhanced comparison retail role.

With Newtown Works on the horizon Elwick Road and Bank Street will act as the catalyst to inspire potential new residents to make their home here. Knowing that this is a great place to live, work and connect them to London and Europe. Not just a dormitory town and a place to work and commute.

Elwick road will continue to be redeveloped with a mixture of uses, including residential and potential varied use on the ground floor. It will act as a clear entrance into the newly transformed Bank Street area and effectively become the key gateway into the new high street, particularly from the Station.

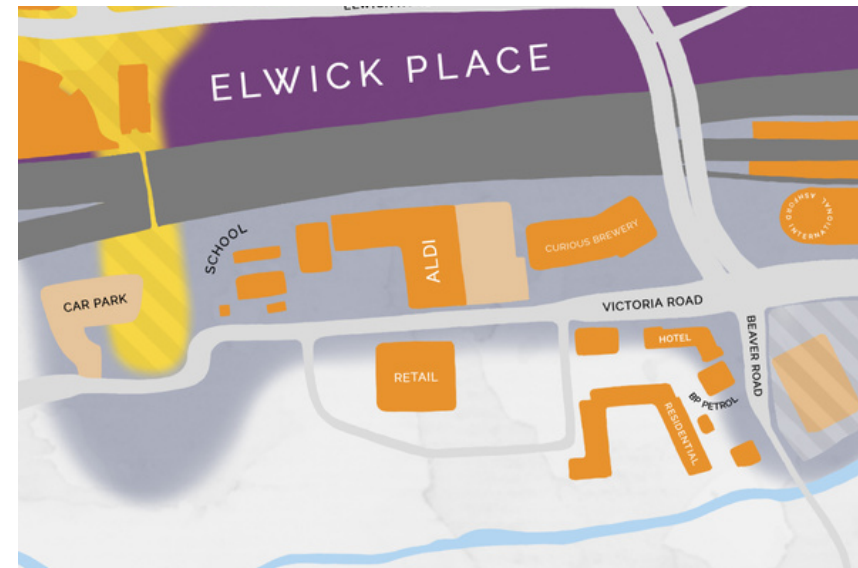
Public realm improvements, and key cultural facilities will be delivered to complement this role and create an attractive thoroughfare. In doing so, it will increase the likelihood of movements and links between the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet, Newtown Works and Bank Street.



Victoria Road

This area will continue to grow and change in response to the market. It will be a regenerated area that provides a range of secondary retail and leisure uses, interspersed with key destinations such as the Curious Brewery. It too will act as a key gateway into a newly transformed Bank Street area and a newly improved Victoria Park, a key council-owned green space area that is due to undergo significant enhancements, which in itself will become a key footfall generator.

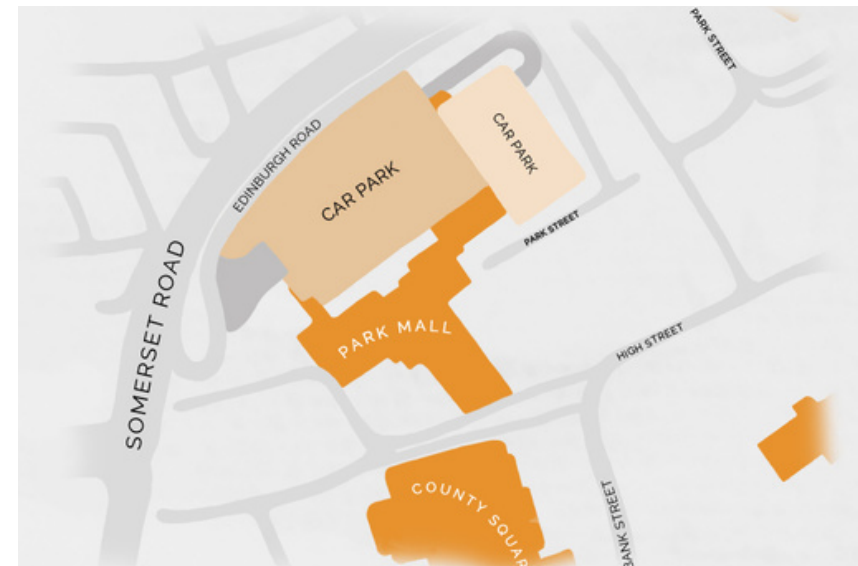
This area will be home to thousands of new residents, many of whom will work from home regularly and in doing so provide animation during the day to the Bank Street area as well as supporting the evening economy.



Park Mall

There are suggested plans that Park Mall will one day become a new residential community within the heart of the town. In this instance, independent businesses will be offered opportunities to move to the Bank Street area. The residential offer will house a variety of different people and become key footfall generators in their own right which will, in turn, will support the transformed Bank Street area and beyond.

At Park Mall, the provision of a new multi storey car park or utilising the existing one, will be explored as a means of providing more footfall generation and to help anchor and deliver the aspirations surrounding the Bank Street area.



Vicarage Lane & Lower High Street

The Lower High Street will continue to evolve, with the market playing a key role. New residential uses will have been delivered at Vicarage Lane and this will be complemented by an increased residential offer within the wider Lower High Street area.

This area will continue to offer more secondary uses in terms of retail and leisure use, but could also have a wider community focus in the form of everyday facilities being located here and potentially new community space - although this will be dependent on how the market responds to this wider area and, as such, is a longer term aspiration.



Phasing & Flexibility

It is recognised that the roles identified in this study will take time to establish. This presents the opportunity to look at how some of the areas might be phased as a means of potentially delivering some 'quick wins'. For example there are currently a number of key underdeveloped sites along Elwick Road which will remain underdeveloped for potentially some time.

These are large sites with significant space to utilise, close to the station and the Bank Street area. This could provide some opportunities for temporary uses being delivered here in the short term if desirable. Such uses could focus on promoting an enhanced art and cultural offer

through a variety of events and exhibitions or 'pop up' facilities and attractions. Such an approach will allow the Council to test the demand for such space, should a permanent use be sought in the longer term, whilst continuing to strengthen Ashford's reputation as an arts and culture hub.

The timeframe for delivering change also means that the Council will need to keep the study's outcomes under review and monitored so that they remain fit for purpose and can react to changes to the market. This flexibility will be crucial as the market will continue to fluctuate and adapt. It is therefore vital that the Council continues to ensure that any interventions made have the maximum benefit so that the Council can continue to play a lead role in influencing the market and our public sector partners.

Delivering the Reset

To deliver the reset as set out in this study, three key questions arise which need to be addressed as next steps.

1. What are the key Placemaking aspirations for Bank Street and Elwick Road?

This study provides a useful starting point. However, this narrative needs to be articulated and further refined. It is envisaged that a further round of visioning workshops will be undertaken.

This work needs to feed into the wider visioning work which has already been completed for the Ashford Ambition to 2030 and beyond. It also needs to be cognisant of the Council's Recovery Plan 2020.

Once a role has been more refined, an SPD can be produced to give some guidance to the market on future uses, storey heights, design aspirations and public realm improvements to be delivered through development. Work could also include an investment strategy that explores opportunities at Bank Street, including whether some of the independent shops at Park Mall could be relocated.

In addition a phasing strategy will also need to be produced which will look at how and when change within the investment corridor will occur and what impact this could have on areas within the traditional town centre which fall outside the investment corridor.

2. What are the barriers to delivery?

Barriers to delivery are areas that we must address in order to deliver the mission statement. Many of these issues are established and perennial, however these are areas which are crucial to the delivery of projects to tackle and influence the investment corridor and potential future success for the borough.

The role of KCC will be key, with our district deal and already good working relationships with the County authority, we must ensure that they are quickly established as a delivery partner and understand the wider impact this area could have.

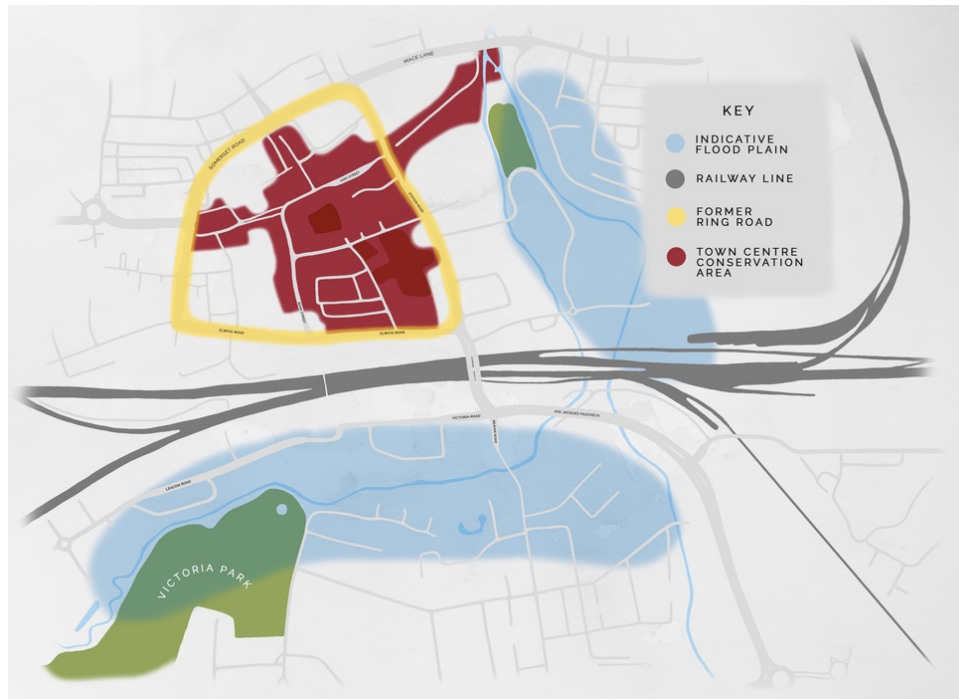
The movement of people will be critical in this area with the increased residential demands and therefore a strong relationship with KCC as highways authority is important. What role the buses, and all their associated infrastructure play, in the future of Bank Street is also a key consideration. If not Bank Street, then a suitable and accessible location for buses will need to be established.

Across the authority we have strong relationships with investors, with planners, AshfordFOR and our economic development team we can work together to ensure that the opportunity of Ashford is communicated clearly. However, as with many of the projects coming from the study it will require collaboration from across the authority.

Multiple ownership of property and ownership of land are other barriers. Bank Street in particular raises a number of issues, however this needs to be further explored as to what the short, medium and longer term opportunities are.

Ashford Town Centre Reset

There are also geographical and environmental constraints that also need to be acknowledged. These include; the flood plain, the railway line, the former ring road and the heritage assets within the traditional town centre area including listed buildings and the conservation area (see map below).



For pedestrian and cycle routes, this relates to ensuring that routes are created that connect Bank Street, the Station, the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet and Newtown Works. These routes will need to be direct, attractive and accessible to encourage as many sustainable modes of transport as possible. Here, the recently produced Local Cycling, Walking and Investment Plan will help inform the debate. Also the presence of the established green corridor within and around the traditional town centre area will play a key role.

For car traffic, the likely frequency of car based journeys in the future needs to be factored in, as does whether the traditional town centre area wants to become more pedestrian focused in the future. This work area all links to the emerging Council's Carbon Strategy and our 'Green Pioneer' role in respect of trying to achieve carbon neutrality in the borough by 2030.

However, technological advances might mean that all cars are solely electric by this point. In this context, they will still be important generators of footfall movement into the traditional town centre area and therefore the placing of future car parks needs careful consideration.

For buses, these remain important footfall creators and are the favoured mode of transport for many. Careful consideration will be needed about alternative drop off points within the traditional town centre area, so that a solution can be found that allows the aspirations for Bank St to be delivered, yet provides safe and accessible access to it from a nearby point.

3. How do we create the optimum movement framework?

Movement is critical for areas like the traditional town centre. Once there is a better understanding as to the future role of the areas identified in this study there will be a need to review existing strategies to ensure they deliver the optimum movement framework to support any reset.

Closing Remarks

This study is seen as an important policy document in the Council moving forward and complements the work being done on the Ashford Ambition to 2030 and beyond and the COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

It is a study with a clear direction of travel, that is deliverable and that understands what the council's role could be in the future. It also acknowledges that we can't influence change alone and will need the support and collaboration of partners and the market.

The Town Centre Reset will take time to implement and this is reflected in its content. This needs to be recognised as failure to act will result in a traditional town centre that fails to achieve its potential.

With council resources limited, this approach aims to provide a steer and a flexibility in delivery to enable continued responsiveness to changes in the marketplace. The Council accepts that it will need to monitor and review the aspirations in this study and will need to react accordingly. It is hoped that a coordinated approach with a clear vision as expressed in the mission statement will ensure that vital council resources are targeted to create a fundamental reset in Ashford Town Centre.

