

Agenda Item No: 12
Report To: Cabinet
Date of Meeting: 24 November 2022
Report Title: Ashford Town Centre Reset - Strategy & Action Plan
Report Author & Job Title: Andrew Osborne, Head of Economic Development
Portfolio Holder Cllr. Nathan Iliffe
Portfolio Holder for: Economic Development



Summary:

There has never been a more important time to set out a clear focus and strategy for Ashford Town Centre. We know the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on our High Street, and we understand the challenges that our Town Centre residents, businesses, users and community groups still face. It is therefore vital that we continue to invest in carefully thought-through innovative ideas and solutions to help bring about significant change, for the benefit of all.

The Council commissioned consultants Milligan to undertake a detailed research into the town centre and take forward the prioritisation of areas of impact within the town centre that would help shape new actions over the next 3-years. This has resulted in the production of the Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy.

Officers have already successfully responded to the principles of the strategy by delivering some small scale pilot interventions which has brought about positive improvements for the town. Accompanying the strategy is an Action Plan of suggested projects to be delivered over the next 3-years, highlighting resource requirements, including identifying use of new and existing budgets, UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocations, as well as use of timely Section 106 agreements to improve the vitality and viability of the town centre.

The Town Centre Reset Action Plan will be delivered alongside the large-scale strategic town centre projects such as the regeneration of the former Odeon building and the masterplanning of the redevelopment of Park Mall shopping centre, which sit outside of this Action Plan.

It is estimated that an additional £1 million is required through to March 2025 to support the delivery of the Town Centre Reset Action Plan, and it is suggested that this is funded through Section 106 funding and UK Shared Prosperity funding to improve the vitality of the town centre.

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: All wards, and more significantly for Victoria.

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

- I. Adopt the Town Centre Reset Strategy and note the key strategic priorities
- II. Adopt the Town Centre Reset Action Plan and approve the recommended financial commitment as set out in the Action Plan from the range of identified funds to help deliver a programme of project activity, physical interventions and outputs.

Policy Overview: Town Centre Reset – including the revitalisation of our High Street is a ‘Super 6’ project, and a key component for delivering against our Corporate Plan 2022-24 which highlights the need to: Stimulate a vibrant, accessible and sustainable Town Centre for residents, visitors and business (TG5).

There are a multitude of opportunities and benefits that a Town Centre Reset can support, promote and deliver against including: Increasing productivity and job opportunities (TG1) and Supporting growth in the visitor economy (TG4) to ensure our town centre is lively, safe, and where people of all ages live, work and visit, to come together and to enjoy events and activities.

The projects set out in the Action Plan do not include the existing large scale strategic Town Centre projects such as the former Odeon building & Park Mall redevelopment, which will be delivered alongside these interventions as part of the overall Town Centre Reset Strategy.

Financial Implications: The cost to deliver identified opportunities is estimated at £3,114,493 over the course of 3-years (current financial year, 2023/24, 2024/25) from the range of identified sources including existing Council budgets, UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocations, and Section 106 agreements specifically allocated to support the vibrancy of Ashford Town Centre.

These allocations are based on the current estimates for budget allocations and officer staffing resources for the Council for 2023/24 and 2024/25. With the budget process currently underway for 2023/24 and not yet approved, and with a challenging economic climate where savings will need to be made over the next few years, there is a risk that not all budgets and resources will be available for all projects moving forward if changes to the estimates are made that affect the projects in the Town Centre Reset Action Plan. Any implications will need to be reported through to the

Council as part of the budget setting process.

Legal Implications: Project delivery will include officers working in close partnership with town centre stakeholders and partners to bring about the recommended change. Some projects may require partnership and funding agreements, changes in traffic orders, planning permission, as well as the usual tendering and contracts with a variety of contractors.

Equalities Impact Assessment: Many of the areas of deprivation that exist in the Borough are within the Ashford Urban Area and within the town centre. The Town Centre Reset Strategy and associated activity, would help regenerate the town centre, creating the right environment for business growth and thus job opportunities as well as potentially improving the access to services for residents.

Data Protection Impact Assessment: N/A

Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement): The action plan will require additional resources to be allocated outside of the Council's existing budgets to take forward these projects. The Section 106 and UK Shared Prosperity Funding will need to be secured and approved to ensure the full project action plan can be implemented. The Council is currently awaiting the response to its UK Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan submission from central government.

An internal corporate officer group has already been set up to look to take forward immediate interventions in the priority Town Centre areas this year. There are resource considerations in: Economic Development; Corporate Property; Parking, Highways and Transportation; Grounds Maintenance and Aspire; Communications; and Urban Design, which will need to be allocated to this project in order to take actions forward. There is a risk through the budget setting process over the next few years and pressures from other projects, that not all internal resources and budgets will be available to take forward the Town Centre Reset Action Plan, with the requirement for the Council to make savings. If internal resources are not available, this could cause delays or require projects to be put on hold within the delivery programme set out in the Action Plan.

Sustainability Implications: This strategy acknowledges its vital role in providing innovative responses to current sustainability challenges, whether it's linked directly to the Council's 'Green Pioneer' theme, or wider sustainability issues such as access to social infrastructure, economic inequality, health and wellbeing or public safety. The strategy and action plan highlights clear sustainability opportunities to be taken forward (i.e Electric

Vehicle Charging Points, and new use of public spaces).

Other Material Implications:

Continued support from key officers, across all departments, is required for the successful delivery of the Action Plan. This has been raised as a risk if this resource is not available to deliver out the projects set out in the Action Plan.

Exempt from Publication:

N/A

Background Papers:

The Cabinet approved an initial Town Centre Reset document for Ashford Town Centre in November 2020. This set out the priority areas for Ashford Town Centre as the areas around Bank Street and Elwick Road. This new Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy (see Appendix A) evolves this earlier document, developing the themes and focus areas.

Appendix A – Ashford Town Centre Reset, Strategy and Projects Autumn 2022

Appendix B – Ashford Town Centre Reset – A Plan for Action

Appendix C – Equality Impact Assessment

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Report Title: Ashford Town Centre Reset - Strategy & Action Plan

Introduction and Background

1. High Streets have been seeing considerable change over many years with the increase in online shopping, movement by retailers to out-of-town retail parks, and the closure of many department stores and brands. Ashford has been affected like many High Streets up and down the country with the closure of Debenhams and Marks and Spencer in Ashford town centre along with other retailers, and then the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the retail and hospitality trades. In recent years Ashford has also seen the introduction of new eateries, a cinema and hotels within the town centre to respond to this diversification of offer, but Town Centres will need to evolve and innovate moving forward in order to provide a destination and focal point that attracts residents to meet, for face to face services, retail and entertainment to be provided and for businesses to thrive.
2. The last few years have seen online sales increase from 19.1% in Feb 2020 to 25.3% in Sept 2022, peaking at 37.8% in Jan 2021 due to the COVID restrictions. The COVID pandemic has sped up this change in the way people purchase goods and access services, with Town Centres now challenged to respond to these changing habits.
3. The increase in inflation and cost of living crisis has also impacted the recovery post-covid, with retail sales only just getting back up to pre-covid levels, and footfall in high streets also only now recovering to pre-covid levels (2019). Ashford's footfall on the High Street has bucked this trend with figures showing a 20.9% increase in footfall year to date in 2022 compared with 2019. This shows that people are still engaging with Ashford Town Centre, which provides opportunity if the offer and environment can be improved.
4. What is clear is that the space required for retail in town centres is shrinking, vacancy rates in retail and leisure premises in Ashford Town Centre stands at 15.5% in July 2022, above the national average of 11.2% and considerably above the Ashford Town Centre low of 8% in 2017. The Town Centre Reset will need to seek to support this evolution of the market place, creating the right environment for businesses and residents to come together to provide a place that people visit and where businesses and organisations can thrive.
5. The Cabinet approved an initial Town Centre Reset document for Ashford Town Centre in November 2020. This set out the priority areas for Ashford Town Centre as the areas around Bank Street and Elwick Road.
6. The Cabinet agreed to the development of an action plan to take forward the Town Centre Reset aspirations. This was also supported through projects identified in the Ashford Recovery Plan 2020.

7. Using part of the Welcome Back Fund provided by Government to support Town Centres to recover from the Pandemic, the Council commissioned Milligan to undertake more detailed research into the town centre and take forward the prioritisation of areas of impact within the town centre that would help shape new actions over the next 3 years and shape longer-term plans for Ashford Town Centre.
8. This work was undertaken between the autumn of 2021 and the spring of 2022. This has resulted in the production of the Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy document which is appended to the report as Appendix A.
9. To test out some of the principles set out in this draft document, and to keep up momentum, the Council has already implemented some small temporary interventions in the town centre. The 'Parklets' installed in Bank Street and Middle Row for a 10 week pilot period between August and October 2022 aimed to change the perception of these areas, taking parking spaces and re-purposing them for the public to use as places to sit and dwell, offering food outlet businesses more outside seating space, enabling the Council to test this concept so that the results can inform future interventions.
10. The experience and feedback to this project, which included additional street bunting and decoration to empty shop windows has been collated, and officers across the organisation have continued to respond to the public feedback and the over-arching themes of the strategy to draft an Action Plan of suggested projects to be delivered over the next 3-years (attached as Appendix B). This plan outlines key opportunities to meet identified needs of the Town Centre; highlights staff and financial resourcing; and ultimately sets a new, clear and exciting direction of travel for the Town Centre.

Proposal

11. It is recommended that Members adopt the Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy (attached as Appendix A), endorsing the suggested Strategic Priorities, Action Areas, and Type of Action. Members are also asked to adopt the Town Centre Reset Action Plan (attached as Appendix B), noting the range of projects, and budget allocation.
12. The Strategy suggests four key intervention areas which are:
 1. **The T (Priority)** – the junction of Bank Street, High Street and Middle Row as a key connecting point in the heart of the town. This area is proposed to become an area embracing independent boutique retail and eateries, becoming the core of the wider commerce and business districts.
 2. **Lower High Street** – providing improvements to compliment the proposed development of the Former Odeon building. This area will see the development of cultural, community and entrepreneurial space, alongside neighbourhood commercial, utilising the great potential public realm in the Lower High Street area.
 3. **Lower Bank Street** – considerations for a more pedestrian sensitive bus and transport core. This area will need to see improved and upgraded public realm over time

4. **Elwick Place** – continued focus as the leisure core to the town centre, with the Cinema and eateries making this a key destination during the day, but also importantly into the evening.
13. The report highlights “The T” as the area for immediate and concentrated effort, setting the challenge to reveal and uncover its natural character, to improve signage and activate blank walls, as well as creating new contemporary and colourful solutions, including introducing new greenery and seating within the public realm to support biodiversity, local business, and becoming more pedestrian friendly.
14. Officers have already started to respond to this challenge by delivering some small scale pilot interventions in Bank Street and Middle Row which has brought about positive improvements for the town. A survey of local businesses recently conducted tells us that they would want the scheme to return again next year, to be implemented earlier, and to be in place for a longer period of time. Alongside this, a programme of successful events and festivals (Ashford Events & Festival Framework) has enlivened this area with performances and associated decoration. Underpinning all of this positive town centre output are the promotional tools and platforms ‘Love Ashford’ and ‘Ashford For’.
15. From the broad suggested ideas and initiatives recommended by the consultants Milligan, ABC officers have identified key priority actions to focus on, to continue on with the transformation, identifying resources and timescales in a Town Centre Reset Action Plan. These proposed projects include integrated play; feature lighting; the suspension and reuse of parking bays in Upper Bank Street and Middle Row again in 2023, with longer-term plans developed; a study of vehicle usage beyond the Bank Street barrier, and review of the barrier itself; a Town Centre Shop Empty Premises Grant Scheme; Streetscape improvements to the area around the Band Stand; and a Street Art Event.
16. The Action plan is being considered as part of the projects to be delivered under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocations, and will seek to deliver Section 106 budgets to improve the vitality and viability of the town centre.

Finance and Resourcing

17. To maximise available resources, a cross-department officer group has considered officer resourcing and are seeking to fund many of the projects from a range of sources including existing committed budgets, allocations from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and identified Section 106 provision.
18. Key to the success for delivery is demonstrating value for money and supporting the key strategic developments being brought forward within the town centre, creating a strong investment plan, in line with the council’s commercial approach.
19. The budget within the Town Centre Reset Action Plan (attached as Appendix B), shows that these projects can be funded through the Council’s existing budgets alongside S106 and UK Shared Prosperity Funding. The overall

estimated spend in this financial year and through to March 2025 is £3,114,493 from these range of funding sources.

20. A potential challenge will be the requirement for officer time and resources to deliver this action plan over the next few years with the continuing pressure on the Council's financial position and medium term financial planning due to reduced funding and inflationary cost increases, and the requirement to make savings. Impacts on the resourcing of teams to deliver these actions, or on core budgets that support the town centre, could result in the delay or reduction of the scope of the delivery of the Town Centre Reset Action Plan.

Equalities Impact Assessment

21. Members are referred to the attached assessment, which highlights the positive impact the Town Centre Reset Strategy and Action Plan aims to have in helping to revitalise, enhance, and improve the town centre by defining key points and locations where investment is needed to serve all the communities, residents, workers and visitors.

Consultation Planned or Undertaken

22. Officers have worked with consultants Milligan, alongside specialist research teams and leading place making consultants to define and frame the objectives of the Town Centre Reset Strategy. An initial Town Centre Reset document was approved by Cabinet in November 2020 following considerable consultation through roadshows and consultation surveys. These priorities have been incorporated into the new strategy. The delivery and development of the strategy and action plan will require continued consultation with key partners such as Kent County Council, as well as with residents and businesses.
23. As part of the development of this evolved strategy, Milligan led extensive consultations and workshops with appropriate Members and Officers who have a town centre stake, and many of the suggested projects in the Action Plan have come directly from these discussions.
24. Since then some early pilot projects have been implemented in consultation with local businesses, as well as discussed in recent Town Centre Business Forums. All this has helped to shape a more focussed and achievable Town Centre Reset Action Plan for the next 3-years.

Other Options Considered

25. We know that the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns had a devastating impact on Town Centres and High Streets up and down the country. We also know that the current economic climate will continue to present significant challenges for many of our Town Centre partners and stakeholders. To 'do nothing' would likely accelerate the ongoing negative national Town Centre trends.
26. The Town Centre Reset identifies a number of areas that require improvement and intervention, and these areas have had to be prioritised to

focus available resources over the next few years. Other options could be to focus these resources on other areas, but it is recommended that these resources support the revitalisation of the core “T” area of the Town Centre within this next phase of interventions. The Action Plan considers available resources and prioritises those actions that can be resourced within suggested budgets, and initiatives that continue to meet the needs of our residents, businesses and visitors alike.

Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended

27. The Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy is a high-level strategic document that considers incremental regeneration activities able to be delivered within a 3-year time frame. The research in this document evidences the remarkable transformation that Ashford has already undergone over the last few years. The research also uncovered very exciting and much needed opportunities for further change. With the Town Centre reset positioned prominently within the Council’s Corporate Plan, and part of the new ‘Super 6’ campaign – now is the ideal time to adopt this holistic approach, and accompanying Action Plan to accelerate Town Centre change, alongside all of the other transformational initiatives around the borough.

Next Steps in Process

28. Key steps will include promotion of the strategy and action plan with businesses, residents, and local town centre groups following Cabinet approval, as well as implementing some early interventions to keep the momentum going from recent summer projects.
29. Project briefs and procurement documents for the suggested activity and commissions will be developed.

Conclusion

30. This evidence-based ‘Reset’ Strategy sets out an incisive starting point for the next stage of development and regeneration of Ashford Town Centre. The Action Plan recommends a balanced mix of activity with a clear delivery approach, and suggested budget available, supporting the Council’s Corporate Plan as a ‘Super 6’ project.

Portfolio Holder’s Views

31. “As the borough council, we recognise our role as an organisation that can foster our town to be an even better place in which to live, work and enjoy. This strategy provides a framework for making the town as attractive and dynamic as it can, and should be. However, we believe that we are all stewards of the places in which we live and work. We all, therefore, have a role to play. We also have to accept that no single, short-term intervention can effect this change. Therefore this ‘Reset’ Strategy and associated Action Plan builds upon the work that has already been undertaken to kick-start the regeneration of Ashford Town Centre, and provides a range of scalable options, suggested activities and practical steps which can be used to help facilitate further growth and improvements. To be successful, we must be brave, ambitious, and distinctive. This Strategy and Action Plan is clear about

what we stand for; it highlights what gives Ashford Town Centre its identity and how we can build on its strengths; and it intends to galvanise our community and stakeholders to help and support us in prioritising and delivering these actions over the months and years to come”.

Cllr Nathan Iliffe, Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Economic Development

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Ashford Town Centre Reset

Strategy and Projects

Autumn 2022

Milligan
with
Allies and Morrison,
CACI and PRD

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Precis

Ashford Town Centre Reset is a research and town centre strategy initiative set forth by Ashford Borough Council in 2021/2022.

The reporting of this initiative rests in two volumes:

- Ashford Town Centre Reset Project Handbook Volume 1
- Ashford Town Centre Reset Project Research Volume 2

The project was funded by The European Regional Development Fund, HM Government and Ashford Borough Council.



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Executive summary

The Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy and Projects Report is a high-level strategic document that considers incremental regeneration activities able to be delivered within a 3 year timeframe. This is an effort with a focus on areas for regeneration for Ashford Town Centre which has been funded by the Welcome Back Fund. The aim and vision is to help revitalise, enhance, and embrace the intent for town centre regeneration by defining key points and locations where investment will create a vibrant, connected, and improved town centre which serves all its communities, residents, workers and visitors.

Ashford Borough Council (ABC) have worked with developer Milligan to define and frame these objectives working with leading consultants and specialist research teams to craft the strategy and list of suggested projects. The Plan focusses on short, medium and near-term development and public realm improvement strategies allowing ABC to achieve its ambitious and exciting vision.

The primary area of focus for the project comprised the collective of both Lower and Upper High Streets, Bank Street to Elwick Place and Elwick Road. This collective forms the backbone of the four active nodes of the

town centre:

1. The commercial heart of town and the "T" which is comprised of The Upper High Street, Middle Row and Upper Bank Street
2. The entertainment and leisure district in Lower Bank Street and Elwick Place
3. The independents, start-ups and cultural quarter
4. The emerging academic district. The study proposes that initial efforts and investments focus on the "T".

The first stage of work ran from September 2021 – December 2021 and focussed on data collection and research, collecting data and insight which would help inform strategic, evidence-based recommendations for ABC's Town Centre. Compiling the evidence-based research set a critical basis of understanding for the project and ensured that Ashford had an incisive starting point for the next stage of the Town Centre Reset strategy plan.

The research evidenced the remarkable and successful transformation that Ashford had already undergone over the last few years. The research also uncovered very exciting opportunities for further change. So despite a term of incremental successes, the research



demonstrated that ABC has an opportunity to do and embrace more change. It was time to adopt a holistic approach to accelerate the transformation of the Town Centre alongside all other greater Ashford initiatives that transforming areas outside of the town.



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Embracing the town centre successes, the team proposed that they be seen through a newly defined polycentric mapping of the town centre that would foster consolidation of uses where required, defining of activity and engagement districts and bring clarity the proposed new activities and uses that support those districts. The research highlighted 12 key points of differentiation for Ashford which are shown below and are outlined in more detail within the document.

- **Leadership** – the evolution of the town centre will require ‘ownership’ and a champion to lead the transformation.
- **Initiative formed by success** – bring the polycentric and individual developments into a cohesive, thriving community plan.
- **Strategy** – short-, medium- and longer-term transformational regeneration is required.
- **Adaptations** – to attain short term and medium term change, existing fixed assets would be best used to reposition and renew the town centre fabric and occupiers. We suggested ABC should to promote, in partnership with owners, an immediate and comprehensive regeneration of select buildings and sites to accommodate the growth needs defined.
- **Socio-cultural** – ABC should provide leadership in the delivery of a more curated, cultural and learning offer.
- **Demographic** - The town centre visitation comes from a wide spectrum of demographic and thus ABC should foster and grow the engagement of all these groups ensuring an evolving and engaging diversity in users and visitors.
- **Business and Offices** - The region shows evidence of significant business growth and thus the town centre must do a much better job at supporting the existing and attracting the emerging businesses.
- **Residential** – The town centre must become a living place, a place for young adults, early adopters and first home investors to live, work and enjoy.
- **Commercial** – A clear strategy of consolidating and redistricting the commercial map of the town centre needs to be developed with a mission to reduce/redefine retail footprint and then strengthen smaller, use specific areas of stable retail that are rights sized to the market.
- **Hospitality** - The Town Centre holds opportunity for growing both the leisure and the business hotel offer.

- **Cultural** - Ashford is a centre of gravity for creativity and cultural production in the region. The town centre has a role to play in serving as a platform for these activities, ensuring that their economic and social potential is maximised.
- **Transport and Parking** - there is a definitive need to clarify a Town Centre Parking, Traffic and Transport Strategy.



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Strategic priorities



The second stage of work looked at analysing the research collected in order to frame and develop **Strategic Priorities** for ABC to initiate in Ashford Town Centre. The work produced over 100 outline suggested projects to be considered, prioritised, and focussed down to a manageable size of realistic projects ready for adoption. These suggested initiatives are largely small to modest scaled interventions, as the challenge was to identify actions that could be taken in no more than three years, which ruled out a new building programme of note. Therefore, the strategy of delivering multiple, smaller tasks to achieve substantive change has been adopted.

From the broad list of initiatives, ABC identified key priority initiatives to focus on, which will start the transformation to the community:

- 1. Integrated play** – finding multiple physical and operational ways to make the Town Centre ever more a family friendly destination.
- 2. Upper Bank Street transformation** - eliminating car parking, introducing seating and planting and street food alongside activation of vacant shopfronts to create relaxing, urban setting.

- 3. Lighting** – bring animation to the buildings and streets with a diversity of lighting strategies . initially the lighting of trees and landscape.
- 4. Bank Street Barrier** – an initiative to remove a street barrier and caretaker hut and by closing the street to active traffic allowing disabled parking only.
- 5. Shop frontage improvement grant** - continue and expand the existing town centre shop improvement grant programme, helping owners to freshen their commercial frontages and signage.
- 6. Blank walls and murals** - ABC adopted the proposed initiative to address blank walls and building surfaces by introducing murals painted by local artisans.
- 7. Band stand improvements** - central to the Upper High street is an historic band stand whose setting, environment and accessibility needs improvement to promote more frequent use.

The first three projects are seen as vital to improving and enhancing the Town Centre. These three projects aim to be integrated into the Town Centre as quickly as possible. The next four projects are priority projects but will take a bit more time to implement



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therefore will be developed after the initial three. These projects provide ABC with a clear action plan of strategic objectives that have been developed via the evidence-based research. Once these projects are successfully integrated into Ashford, ABC will look to provide a further list of the next priority projects for Ashford Town Centre.

The impact of this plan will be significant in guiding Ashford's Town Centre regeneration in a rapidly changing market. ABC are a significant investor in the Town Centre and this work contributes to strategic priorities already defined in the Pandemic Recovery Plan and the emerging New Town Centre Corporate Plan.





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Introduction to project and team

A Vision for Ashford Town Centre

Ashford, Kent has for all of time been a crossroads; and important and significant destination along a passage. Ashford has thrived, supported the growth of most successful businesses and individuals. In the ebb and flow of time Ashford has struggled, yet always survived and in doing so manifest a next wonderful future.

This is again, one of those times. Ashford is emerging and growing and reforming itself as a most important setting in the heart of an emergent and very creative Kent. Ashford remains an important business and commerce hub. Greater Ashford is emerging as an astonishingly rich and fast growing residential conurbation as the growth of new homes runs apace.

The Town Centre Reset mission is a challenge whose focus was to embrace that which had been devised historically as opportunity and weave that into a greater, all encompassing research and evidence based strategy that moves from project regeneration into community regeneration.

Our research came to evidence the remarkable, “quiet” transformation the leadership of Ashford had years ago set in motion. It made evident that at this time, at this moment is when the leadership must adopt a brave and holistic ambition to accelerate the regeneration transformation of the Town Centre through simultaneously growing all aspects of the Town Centre community – office, commercial, residential, hospitality, office and culture – at the same time – in earnest and at pace, for our research told us the marketplace is ready, it wishes for it and is willing to partner with Ashford to deliver it.



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Introduction to project and team

Professional Team

The team assembled to embrace the Town Centre Reset Challenge combined the necessary skills of data analysis and understanding, commercial expertise and experience, and creative design and planning. The initial stage of work focused on a deep dive research effort to understand the challenges and opportunities. This was followed by a context-led and sensitive strategy response to guide the delivery of transformational interventions.

The team was comprised of;

Milligan Ltd – urban strategists and property development professionals;

Allies and Morrison – regeneration specialists, urban planners, public realm designers and architects;

CACI Ltd – human behaviour/social behaviour analysis in demographic, affluence, income, behavioural, and catchment data to deliver valuable insights;

PRD – provide socioeconomic and macro economic assessment for investment strategies for places, partnership and delivery structures, impact monitoring and evaluation, and asset strategies for social value;

Gleeds – providing high level cost management and delivery strategy

Timing and required outputs

The Town Centre Reset review and strategy effort was set to run for a 6 month term, completing by the end of March 2022.

The output was to be a “Business Plan” that was framed over a three year window and outlined a layering of strategic initiatives that would address short term, medium term and long term initiatives with the intent of being able to show aspects of change in the Town Centre from shortly after adoption of the plan.

It was recognised that more complex development based initiatives would only begin within the three year window and carry on for years after as each project required.

The team decided that given the project centric and essential delivery requirement of the findings, the final report would be best less traditional business plan and more a very agile “Working Handbook” of insights with flexibility to support a heady pace of delivery.

Methodology and Process

A demand of the Town Centre Reset challenge was to assure that all strategic recommendations were founded in and defined by evidenced based research.

Therefore the team adopted the overall fixed six month term of the process and divide it in two:

- three months in research, knowledge search and collective understanding and then based on these learnings;
- three months assessing transformational change, devising implementation strategies and setting in place process and scope to deliver them.

The output the team positioned for each aspect of the delivery programme will be of a strategic and conceptual nature. Each specific delivery will require the appointment of leadership and a team to detail the effort and deliver it to completion.

The team have endeavoured to provide very high level scoping costs of key initiatives so as to inform decisions and the future positioning of delivery strategies.



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Evidence-based insights

1.1 Insights

Town Centre Reset - ABC Objectives

The Town Centre Reset (TCR) 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;

1. The influence of the International station
2. Key destinations
3. The declining role of retail
4. The role and type of residential use
5. The role of community & the cultural offer.

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. 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.

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.

Evidence Based Urban Strategies

An obligation of the Council proposition to the delivery team was to, through concerted research, make strategic recommendations that were evidence based.

Our teams used multiple and various digital and traditional research tools in the first three months of this six month effort to nurture a deep and rich understanding of the Ashford marketplace, the behaviours of it's residents, consumers, visitors and families. Our research efforts uncovered a regional community of remarkable depth for it held a rich and valuable diversity of age, culture, education and business focus. Ashford had to this time been exceedingly successful in delivering select projects. Our research suggested that when the energy of individual project missions is brought to a Town Centre wide mission, there is great, great transformational success to be had.

Research Insights

The high level findings of our research is represented in the following 12 key points of differentiation for Ashford.



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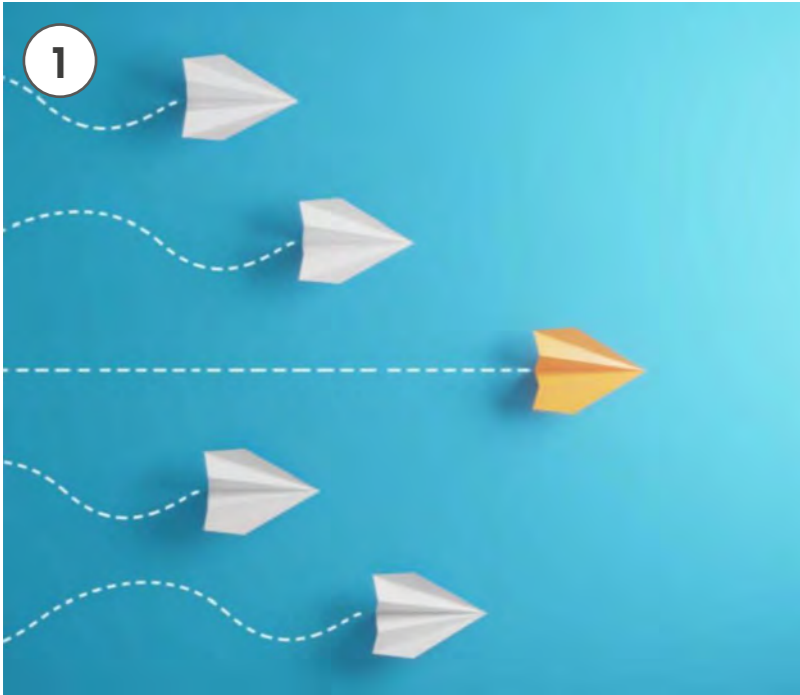
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Leadership

The Leader of the Council made clear this effort was not to be another Master Plan but more a workplan of initiatives and projects with distinct objectives and deliverable missions in regeneration.

The challenge and clarity in mission shared has within this effort has delivered a series of research and evidence-based initiatives, with distinct objectives, to be undertaken at pace and with vision and leadership

This plan will require "ownership" to be realised. The objectives are brave and the scope of work immense, yet the fruits of success will be sweet. What is required to manifest this success is the voice of a singular or collective leadership that owns the narrative of the plan, espouses a passionate belief in the plan and that owns the authority and ability to work through all to deliver the plan.



Initiative formed by Success

Ashford have made good progress developing elements of the town centre, yet it is now time to bring these polycentric and individual developments into a cohesive, thriving community.

It is now important to weave those success stories together, engage with the wider town centre and build upon other opportunities that exist - forming community. Through research we learned that the self-perception of Ashford often belies the reality. Ashford and the Town Centre have manifest many success stories, created grand opportunity and delivered on many a promise . . . yet there are threads of low self-belief, limited self-adulation and very little singing from the rooftops. This plan, when embraced by focussed leadership, intends to bring together the voice of all the success already owned and use message of it to be catalyst and inspiration in delivering the vision herein.



Strategy

This mission requires short term, medium term and near-term transformational regeneration.

The only manner this can be achieved is to work primarily and entirely with properties and places and practices wherein ABC hold substantive control of.

Focus short term initiatives on promotional and policy based adaptive change opportunities. Focus medium term and near term initiatives on land or buildings owned and controlled - Vicarage Lane, Park Mall, Elwick Place.



Adaptations

The Town Centre must exhibit regeneration transformation soon, in the very near term. .

New development takes time to design and plan and deliver - too much time for this initiative. Ashford Town Centre enjoys a very lovely Victorian/Edwardian built fabric. We know people wish to live, work, office and enjoy in the Town Centre today, thus answering that need today is an imperative.

The plan outlines an initiative for the ABC to adopt which promotes the immediate and comprehensive regeneration of the upper floors of many of the lovely buildings in the high streets. It promotes them to be early adopter residential or small, economical yet modern workspace and offices. This initiative alone will be a most important catalyst to initial transformative regeneration.

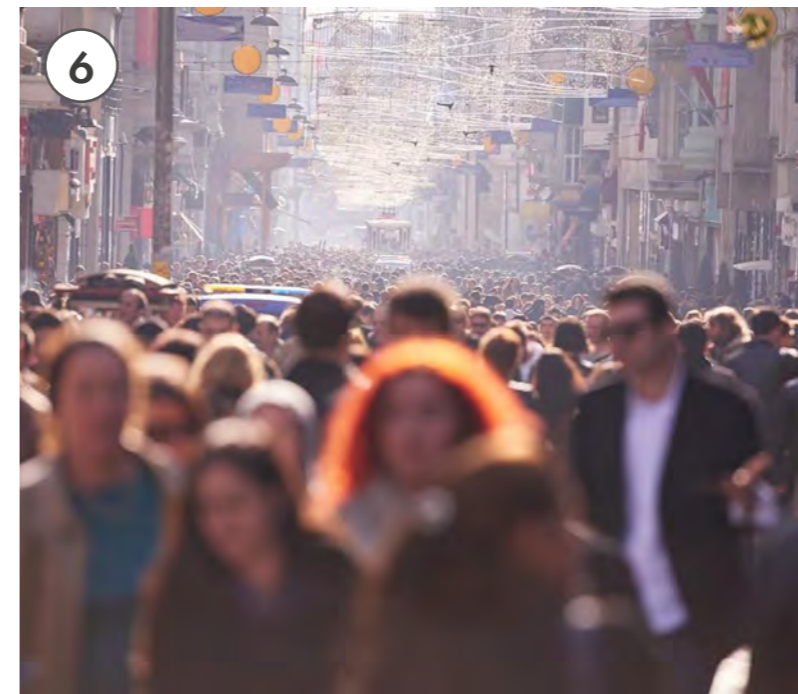


Socio-Cultural

Ashford enjoys a catchment of huge potential with a diverse, discerning population.

The broader community of Ashford Borough and nearby Kent exhibit a proportionally large level of higher disposable income families that to some degree visit Ashford Town Centre already.

To make Ashford Town Centre more attractive to the regional demographic this effort must bring a richer and more complete community with a more curated commercial offer, new residential, more offices and a greater cultural and leisure base.



Demographic

Ashford visitor profile has become more affluent. The town centre population has grown by 36% in ten years with a 45% growth in those aged 25 - 66. Of all visitations to the greater borough, 48% visit the town centre. The Town Centre Visitation is nearly evenly split between the top 5 Acorn categories and the bottom 5, suggesting a rich balance of demographic.

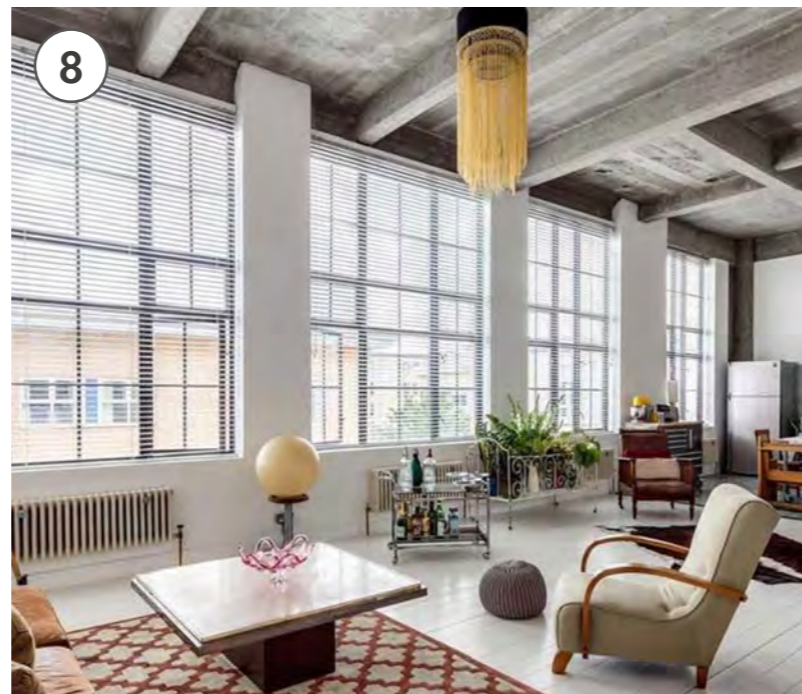
The Town Centre must provide greater depth and richness at all levels of demographic offering to earn the best from this visitation. Introducing more town centre residential - either repositioned or new - that caters to the middle income is important. The knowledge industry, creative community and start-up community exists and is growing exponentially, whilst economical occupancy alternatives, professional business support networks, business culture practices and residential opportunities provided in the Town Centre are lacking. The town centre must also now commit to reintroduce a cultural soul to the town centre to support those cultural industries that thrive there.



Business and Offices

Ashford is a regional business hub supporting the head offices of many emerging companies which in turn are supported by an emergent hospitality sector.

Ashford comprises the 9th largest economy in the southeast. Ashford has seen a 22% growth in business locations since 2015 and overall are home to nearly 30% knowledge industry companies. More importantly in 2020 Kent and Ashford showed a 32% uplift in the registration of new businesses, signalling a strong marketplace for innovation and entrepreneurialism. The Town Centre must do a much better job at catering for existing and emerging businesses. Modern, contemporary and flexible office spaces within the heart of the town, enveloped in a business culture setting that fosters their growth. The Town Centre is woeful in support for the emerging and growing new businesses and must provide flexible, small and economical office space.

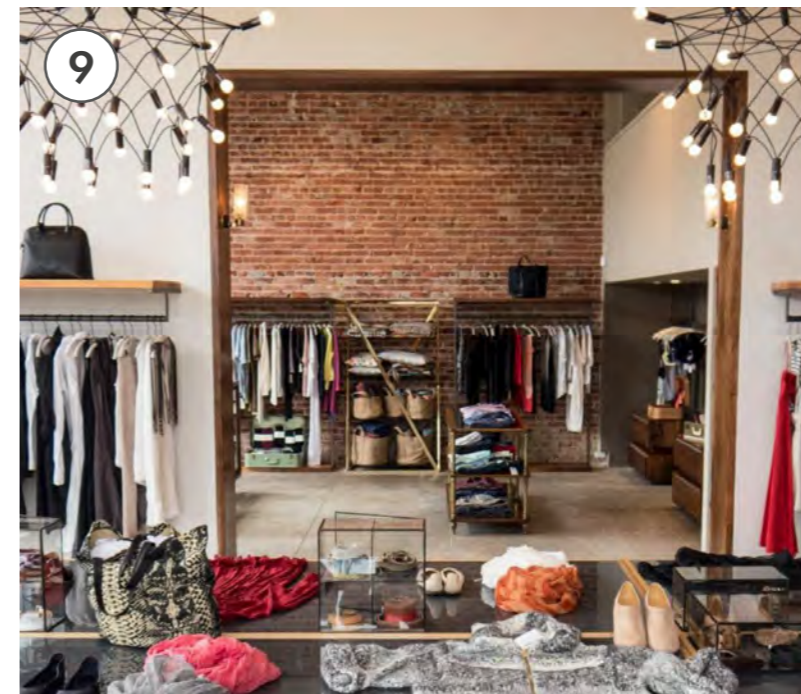


Residential

Ashford town centre must become a place for young adults, early adopters and first home investors to live, work and enjoy.

Greater Ashford has considerably grown in residential terms over the past decade. There are over 13,000 homes that are either in construction, have been granted planning, have submitted planning, are awaiting determination or within the Local Plan allocations in Ashford. Despite the large number of homes being built or due to be developed in the coming years, most of this development is planned for areas out of the core Ashford Town Centre - defined broadly as the High Streets, Bank Street, Elwick Road and Station Road.

This plan must make Ashford a very special town to live in. It should weave in homes for the young business entrepreneurs who otherwise leave; homes and flats for the growing number of young adults wishing to move away from the larger cities and for the mature population wishing to find a vibrant and exciting community to retire in.

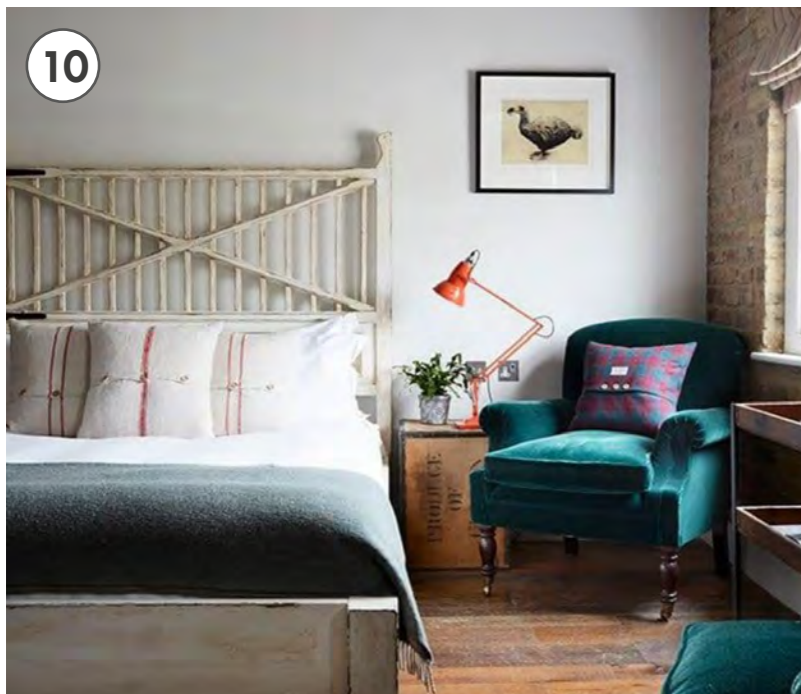


Commercial

Ashford is used by many people in many different ways attracting a variety of visitors & independent brands to the new town centre.

There is a rise in localism with more people visiting their local high streets. This provides another opportunity for Ashford to embrace, enable and transform. Ashford holds more commercial space than it needs. The commercial marketplace is shrinking fast and the mall and high streets are challenged by it with swathes of empty fascia's

This plan outlines a strategy of consolidating and redistricting the commercial map of Ashford Town Centre with a mission to strengthen smaller, broader areas of stable retail offering.



Hospitality

Ashford is known as a business hotel destination and in locations on the periphery enjoys a handful of business hotels with meeting and event capacity.

Yet with the International Station, being a multimodal portal to Kent, a spring board to Europe and having the regional draw of the Outlet one would imagine a modest offering of a more boutique, tourist offer.

This plan feels that growing the business hotel offer in the Ashford perimeter, where it largely exists, is prudent.

As the Town Centre begins to transform, there may well be a growing opportunity for smaller, more specialised and diverse offers in short and long term hospitality.



Cultural

Cultural endeavours, interests and passions live deep within the Ashford community yet they crave support and place that will bring their exciting experiences to a more formal setting in the Town Centre.

Ashford has emerged as a genuine centre of gravity for creativity and cultural production. The town centre has a role to play in connecting these activities, ensuring that their economic and social potential is maximised.

The plan identifies the Lower High Street, the Odeon and elements of Vicarage Lane car park as the destination for a hub of cultural activities and creative engagement.



Transport and Parking

Our work has made evident that there is a definitive need to clarify a Town Centre Parking, Traffic and Transport Strategy.

As fundamental regeneration transformation is the ultimate mission of this task, surely a comprehensive review and assessment of attitudes to the car, the use of the car, the parking of cars and the weaving of public transport into the fabric of the new vision.

ABC must embark on an internal transport and parking analysis with urgency. It is the view of this plan that the analysis be not solely how these transport issues work or do not work as of today, moreover the analysis should be guided by a distinct vision of how leaders wish their town centre of the future to perform.



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Strategic priorities

2.1 Strategic priorities

The big picture

Town centres are places of intense use and activity. They are historically some of the oldest parts of our urban and social fabric, yet are often places experiencing the most acute stresses and strains associated with innovations in society and the demands we place on our environments.

In many ways Ashford is no different to town centres up and down the country, experiencing similar struggles to regenerate and stay relevant to contemporary lifestyles. Whilst many of the same questions are being asked, the responses to each deserve to be bespoke and nuanced.

Whether it's the climate emergency, access to social infrastructure, economic inequality, health and well-being or public safety, town centres have a vital role in pioneering responses to contemporary challenges and opportunities. This has become no more acute as the COVID-19 recovery of our towns and cities takes places.

Ashford is well placed to draw on its distinctive character and assets and begin transforming the ways in which people experience and perceive the town centre.

This handbook contains a number of projects to kick start change over an immediate and short timeframe. This said, it is essential to see these in context and as short term steps towards broader objectives. In other words, it's important to see the big picture.

A set of priorities have been developed in collaboration with the Council to set out direction and context for short, medium and long term projects. Projects should reinforce one or more of these priorities to deliver change in areas considered essential to improving the town centre.

Incremental and coordinated

The strategic priorities will be best addressed through coordinated and holistic strategies that consider the town centre and its environs as a whole. Projects can still be rolled out incrementally, as long as they form a part of a broader strategy, rather than piecemeal improvements developed and delivered in isolation.

Methodology

The Strategic priorities shared were hewn from a rich and broad collection of research data compiled in the first phases of the Town Centre Reset Project, evidenced in their collective whole in

Ashford Town Centre Reset Project Research Volume 2

The research effort considered consumer behaviours, socio economic trends analysis as well as documenting the physical realities and challenges of the Ashford urbanity.

The effort also worked to articulate the activities, projects and ongoing missions of Ashford Borough Council as well.

Once gathered and assimilated, the research and the Council missions together framed our the Strategic Priorities shared herein.



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Rewilding the town centre with a multifunctional green infrastructure network, drawing on Ashford's Stour Valley setting and Kent's landscape heritage character as 'The Garden of England'.



Improve quality and ease of walking, cycling and public transport journeys into the town centre by improving wayfinding, overcoming severance of the ring road and enhancing points of arrival through a series of 'front doors'.



Encourage active and healthy lifestyles by introducing informal play opportunities throughout the town centre, attracting young families into the town centre to meet, play and dwell in a safe and social setting.



Promote safety initiatives including improved lighting in the town centre, using this in creative ways to contribute to placemaking objectives whilst enhancing the sense of safety into the evening and night time.



Build on Ashford's unique cultural production assets, embedding these activities within the town centre, recognising the integral role that they can play in helping it evolve as a diverse, resilient, distinctive and exciting place.



Support the town centre's production and knowledge economy jobs, anchoring more of this within the town centre; ensuring Ashford continues to be a commercially sensible and value adding location for enterprise and business.



Ashford's population continues to grow and the town centre has an important role to play in uniting the diverse communities it serves. Growth and change should focus on addressing challenges around prosperity and inclusion.



A growing food and drink scene has the potential to flourish into the evening and night time, alongside leisure and entertainment uses. These sectors need support to extend hours of operation and draw footfall into Ashford.

2.2 Town Centre Initiatives

Ashford Borough Council Town Centre Management Initiatives

Various Council departments own responsibility for the life of Ashford Town Centre. Those departments include Economic Development, Corporate Policy, Corporate Property & Projects, Communications, Planning and Development, Housing, Community Safety & Wellbeing, Culture, Environment & Land Management, Finance and IT.

These departments engage in a diverse, agile and ongoing suite of town centre activations and management strategies, some of which are shared here. The Town Centre Reset sits within the wider context of what these departments are already delivering in Ashford Town Centre including street cleansing and waste bins to grounds maintenance and floral displays.

Communications

- Communication and marketing of strategic projects
- Communication and marketing of key community services and activities in the town centre

Economic Development

- Town Centre Business Grants
- Business Grants
- Town Centre Business Support Forum
- Made in Ashford
- Love Ashford (web)

Culture

- Ashford Festival & Events Framework
- Revelation Ashford
- Review of Arts and Creative Industries Strategy
- Ashford Creative Network

Community Safety & Well Being

- Safer Streets Project
- Parking Strategies
- ANPR in ERCP & Park Mall
- Installations of EVCP'S
- Shared Space Improvements
- Automation of Bank Street Barrier.
- One You Shop
- Parking Fees in ERCP and Park Mall

Corporate Property & Projects

- Vicarage Lane / St Mary's Fields Redevelopment
- Park Mall Redevelopment
- Tank/St Georges Square
- Victoria Way Car Park
- Elwick Place Management
- Park Mall Management

Environment & Land Management

- Street cleansing
- Waste bins
- Grounds maintenance
- Parks
- Floral displays



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Making change

3.1 Targeting success

A Town Centre which is economically and commercially successful, socially inclusive and environmentally resilient.

A successful town centre will be one which recognises and embraces the aspirations and motivations of its full range of users and stakeholders: from local residents, through to businesses and their employees, and to commercial landowners, developers and the council itself.

Ultimately, adopting a long term approach where partners and communities embrace a shared vision for the town centre, offers the best opportunity, delivers maximum outcomes for residents, businesses, investors and strategic partners alike. This means balancing and prioritizing economic, social and environmental value and outcomes alongside commercial and financial ones.

This is our tool to assess and measure the holistic success of single or better multiple sets of initiatives, providing a consistent and relevant analysis of all opportunity.

This approach to defining success provides a framework to set objectives for future investment and delivery in the town centre.



A holistic framework for understanding success



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Economic Success

The vibrancy, diversity and productivity of the town centre economy



Social Success

Prosperity and wellbeing of Ashford residents



Environmental Success

The quality and sustainable of the physical environment



Financial Success

Returns for investors and stakeholders (public and private sector)

Delivery objectives

- Strengthening the quality and distinctiveness of Ashford’s high street economy – for residents, workers and visitors
- Building economic diversity, reinforcing the towns reputation for culture and creativity and embedding a future facing range of sectors
- Embedding enterprise within the local economy, encouraging and incubating new ideas and enterprise
- Strengthening the retention of value within the local economy by building the supply chain and networks.

Delivery objectives

- Creating healthier and more inclusive spaces which encourage participation.
- Enhancing quality of civic infrastructure and facilities, enhancing satisfaction and enjoyment of residents and visitors
- Improving access to employment, training and enterprise opportunities for residents
- Enhancing the quality and diversity housing for local communities

Delivery objectives

- Greening of the town centre via investment in public realm and public space
- Encouraging active and sustainable modes of travel within the town centre
- Embedding built environment zero carbon principles within the town via new investment
- Prioritising environmental responsibility within the local business community.

Delivery objectives

- Leverage of additional public sector funding
- Leverage of investment for reinvestment in local community infrastructure – S106
- Wider revenue generation for reinvestment in economy and service provision – business rates, council tax
- Value uplift for residential & commercial land value – encouraging further investment.

3.2 Delivery approach

Planning for the long term

Securing positive change and evolution within Ashford Town Centre must be viewed as a long term and ongoing process. The Town Centre Reset provides a framework to guide that change, ensuring a consistent and coordinated approach to securing investment, working with partners and delivering projects.

However, while the project is long term in nature, focused action in the short term will have a crucial role to play in laying the foundations for future growth, supporting the evolution of a more successful and resilient town centre in the long-term.

Short term intervention will:

- Help to respond proactively to the post pandemic context
- Set the tone for future investment - both in terms of quality and focus
- Build delivery capacity and infrastructure for others to take the lead in the future.

Scale and depth of public sector intervention

Immediate term

early activation and piloting - creating 'sparks' and energy

Short term

deeper intervention and investment to unlock value (e.g. public realm enhancements & curation of assets and uses)

Medium to long term

development and investment stimulated and realised

Scaling delivery over time



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Delivery principles

The delivery of projects linked to this plan will only be part of the process which will deliver 'success' in the town centre: the day to day investment and decision making of town centre partners and stakeholders will play an equally important role in shaping future change. In this context it is important that Ashford Borough Council sets a clear tone and standard in its overall aspirations and in the way projects are delivered,

To inform this a set of principles have been identified to support delivery:

- **Collaborate:** in the context of limited government funding it will be essential to make the most of the capacity, resource and energy which exists across the town centre (and Borough more widely) across the public, private and civil society sectors. This means building on and strengthening existing partnerships, brokering new relationships, and helping to build organisational capacity. Key partners will include strategic partners (e.g. Kent County Council), landowners and investors, local businesses, local institutions and civil society partners (community groups, organisations and leaders)

- **Build foundations for community participation:** Projects should not be imposed upon people and places. All delivery partners must seek to constantly support local citizens to develop their individual and collective capacity to develop ideas and participate (and ideally lead) delivery
- **Activate existing assets:** There are already existing, under-utilised assets across the town centre, some of which are in public ownership. Activating these assets should be the immediate to maximise the short-term capacity and opportunity for action
- **Plan for net zero:** Delivery must support the long term evolution of Ashford as a sustainable and environmentally resilient place; the scale and urgency of the net zero challenge makes it an imperative to hard-wire these considerations into delivery from the outset.
- **Remain footloose and agile:** The past five years has been a period of significant uncertainty in macro conditions and drivers, and, looking ahead, it is likely that this uncertainty will persist. It is important that partners remain aware of broader economic and social trends (positive and negative) and are able to respond appropriately.

The Role of Ashford Borough Council

The council has a key role to play in driving forward change in Ashford town centre: through leadership, influence and investment. This role is multifaceted, and a coordinated approach is required to ensure a consistent approach to delivery. Key roles include:

- Policy & Strategy – ownership and evolution of the policy framework and levers needed to support delivery
- Use of Assets – activating assets owned, occupied or secured by the council; exploring use of private sector and other partner assets inc. community assets; and development or delivery of new assets
- Funding – opportunities for discretionary expenditure, discretionary reliefs and securing and deploying grant funding
- Advocacy & Facilitation – developing local partnerships; place, project & opportunity enablement / promotion; and strategic & operational coordination
- Measurement & Monitoring – ownership of the success measures and responsibility for forecasting, measuring & evaluating and communicating issues & impacts

3.3 Monitoring and Evaluation: Tracking Success

An evidence focused approach

Robust evidence has a crucial role to play in supporting future delivery in Ashford Town Centre. It is needed to:

- Understand evolving 'need' and 'opportunity' within the town centre's places and communities
- Adapt to a changing situation in challenging times, tailoring strategy, delivery and investment to maximise value and impact
- Celebrate achievements and successes, while also learning lessons for future delivery
- Support case making for future investment.

Reflecting the ambition and strategic importance of the Town Centre Reset, it is important that robust mechanisms are put in place to ensure that the performance and impact of delivery is understood. Good evidence and insight will enable:

- The Council to track the impact of investment, communicate the value of this investment to internal and external partners, support delivery planning, and help to make the case for future funding

- Kent County Council to understand change across the region and the extent to which delivery is aligning with local objectives, and inform strategy development
- Business and investors to understand how the area is evolving, enable a better understanding of local needs and priorities, and support the development of closer partnership working between the public and private sector
- Local communities to have a clear understanding of aspirations and delivery within the town centre, and access to robust and democratic information to support active participation and engagement
- Central government to understand the scale of ambition across the area and the need and case for continued support and investment.

The importance of good evidence is a focal point within the governments Levelling Up White Paper.

Success measures

The success framework provides a consistent basis against which future change can be tracked and benchmarked. Examples measures and KPIs which could be used to track the performance of delivery are set out below. These focus on:

- Establishing a balanced understanding of success against economic, social, environmental and financial outcomes – in the short, medium and long term.
- Providing a core set of overarching success measures which will provide a more holistic understanding over the medium to long term.

These outcomes are designed to be linked to the specific delivery activities of Ashford Borough Council and its partners, to ensure that the causality and consequence of investment can be understood.



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Collecting evidence

Evidence can be collected via a number of sources:

- Government datasets will provide ongoing insights as to the evolution of the Ashford economy and community – allowing change over time to be understood and performance to be benchmarked. The forthcoming release of Census 2021 data in summer 2022 provides an important opportunity to establish more granular insights on the local population than is usually possible. Information on residential values can also be drawn from publicly available datasets
- Commercial / proprietary data (e.g. mobile phone and agency data) will help to provide an ongoing insight on levels of footfall, spend and commercial values within the town centre
- Primary research: the perceptions of town centres users (visitors, residents, businesses) should form an important part of evidence collection, through periodic surveys of businesses, residents and visitors. The focus should be on gathering targeted insights which can be used to understand evolving motivations, and inform investment approaches and decisions.



Long term success measures

- Delivery and take up of town centre space
- Reputation and perception of Ashford TC, among different groups
- Overall size and productivity of town centre economy



Core success measures

- Town centre footfall and spend
- Proportion of creative jobs
- Business start up rates in town centre



Core success measures

- Resident use of town centre for different activities
- Residents accessing new jobs or training
- Take up of exercise and wellbeing focused activities in town centre
- Sense of satisfaction and belonging



Core success measures

- Business rates income
- Funding levered
- Residential and commercial values



Core success measures

- Local air quality
- Take up of active transport
- Amount and use of public space



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4.1 Big ideas

A step change for the town centre

There are a number of strategic opportunities in the town centre that could unlock economic and placemaking potential across Ashford; adding value and enhancing an overarching sense of place for local people and visitors alike.

The plan opposite and following pages set out these opportunities and projects for addressing them. Some are nascent having been identified through analysis and engagement with the Council (see Project Research Volume 2) and others are more advanced, drawing on existing initiatives and projects pioneered by different stakeholders. These projects go beyond the immediate and short term initiatives set out in this handbook, with most being long term and requiring a coordinated approach across stakeholders to achieve delivery through partnership working.

Addressing these opportunities comprehensively will deliver a step change for the town centre, repositioning it both within local people's minds as well as the regional economic landscape.



Plan of big ideas distributed across the town centre



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The T - Middle Row and Upper Bank St

The junction of Bank Street and the High Street is a key node in the heart of the town centre. It also presents significant opportunities for quick win and high impact enhancement. “The T” should become the focus for investment at the heart of the town centre in the short and medium term.



The Odeon and St Mary’s Fields

The Odeon building on the High Street presents a unique opportunity for heritage-led regeneration. A bespoke retrofit project could breathe new life into this unique asset by introducing a rich mix of public-facing uses and encouraging cultural activity.

The building extends southwards towards the Vicarage Lane car park; a low density and inefficient use of important town centre land. This site has been identified through the St Mary’s Fields project as suitable for new homes, increasing the residential population within the town centre. A range of buildings, streets and spaces will also serve to ‘complete the block’ and improve sense of place in the town centre, including the setting of St Mary the Virgin Church.



Park Mall

Shopping malls are increasingly at odds with resilient town centres owing to their locked-in reliance on retail uses; limited adaptability to alternative functions and activities; and their land hungry mass that creates a coarse and impermeable grain.

Park Mall is a prime opportunity to reimagine such a prominent site and its relationship to both the town centre and its immediate setting. Opportunities should be explored to understand how a design-led process could intensify the site - introducing a range of new homes - as well as repairing the urban fabric through new routes and spaces.



Vehicular access strategy

An important step in unlocking the potential of town centre is to review and overhaul vehicular access. The strategy should ensure that the town centre is sustainably accessible - this means prioritising low carbon modes over the private car whilst at the same time making sure it is easily accessible for those with mobility concerns.

The strategy should be user focused. Parking provision should ensure disabled spaces are provided within close proximity and easy access to the heart of the town centre. Whilst the quantum and position of general parking provision should be managed to simultaneously encourage alternative transport modes and drive pedestrian footfall along key routes.



Buses review

Public transport is essential to sustainable towns and forward steps in technology will continue to improve the efficiency and quality of the experience. The town centre faces a challenge of how best to accommodate buses, with Bank Street and Park Street currently the most central pick up and drop off points but both under strain.

Collaboration with Kent County Council and bus providers should explore alternative locations for hosting buses, as well as new technologies for transforming public transport vehicles and infrastructure. High quality electric buses, on-demand services and app-based ticketing systems can transform user experience around reliable, comfortable and affordable public transport.



Active travel bridge

A walking and cycling bridge across the rail lines currently connects Elwick Place to Victoria Road south of the town centre. It represents a critical link between the town centre and new residential development coming forward along Victoria Road.

Fostering positive connections and relationships between emerging residential communities and the town centre is essential to encouraging behaviours of regular use and enjoyment the town centre offer.

Delivering investment to the bridge in the short term (through lighting and wayfinding) should be a priority to encourage its use by residents living south of the town centre.



Elwick Place Phase 2

Elwick Place phase 2 will introduce new residential buildings to Elwick Road, establishing an important edge and frontage. A later phase of the original mixed use Elwick Place phase 1 project, this will help establish a critical mass necessary to animate this part of the town centre.

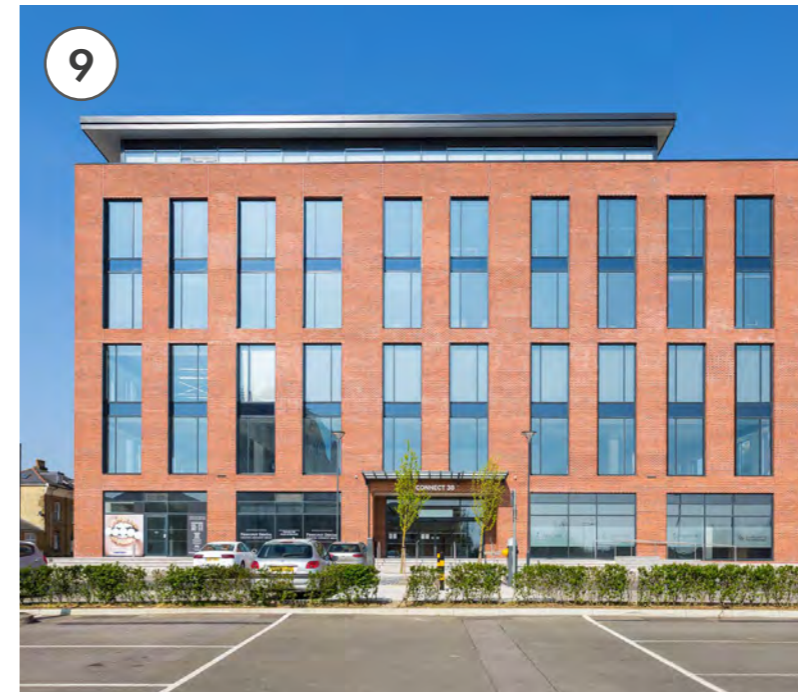
Increasing the residential population in the town centre can help support local services and infrastructure, as well as bringing much needed daily domestic activities to the street e.g. walking to school and meeting friends.



Ashford College

The expansion of Ashford College with a new building along Station Road will deliver a new Engineering Hub. This will include cutting edge equipment, workshops, classrooms, and computer lab spaces for the teaching of specialist, technical qualifications in Business, Engineering, Computing and other Digital Technologies.

Attracting an increased student population will animate parts of the town centre, as well as increasing Ashford's prominence in the knowledge economy. Developing a complementary student offer in the town centre could help unlock footfall and spend which is otherwise spent elsewhere.



Commercial Quarter

The Commercial Quarter is one of the town's main business hubs, with three office blocks offering high-quality commercial space, including Connect 38 (pictured). Inspired by existing brick warehouses in the borough, Connect 38 is the largest speculative town centre office block built in Kent in the last 20 years.

Delivering later phases of the Commercial Quarter could reinforce the town centre's working population and create a positive anchor of uses in close proximity to the train station.



The Bowling Green

The Bowling Green is a local asset currently exploring a relocation to new premises, which could free up this prominent site in the town centre. A corner site, which provides the opportunity to create a community that builds upon Kent's Garden of England theme and could offer new public realm and play space. This area could contribute to the local townscape and improve sense of arrival via Church Road and Tufton Street.

A clearer, more positive relationship with the surrounding blocks and Memorial Gardens could be established by fronting streets and open spaces. Proposals should be prepared in response to forthcoming plans for St Mary's Fields to establish a coherent sense of place along Vicarage Lane.



Former Debenhams building

The former department store building lies vacant since the collapse of Debenhams. A relatively new building occupying a prominent site, new occupiers should be sought to activate this part of the town centre, including Eliwck Place.

Retrofit and adaptation to accommodate non-retail uses within the shopping centre should be explored, such as opportunities for office, leisure and civic. Indeed, layering different uses across stories could establish a critical mass of activity and transform the building mass into a key attractor and anchor for the town centre.

Any proposals should emphasise active ground floors, resolve access to County Square Mall and reinforce the building's interface with Elwick Place and Elwick Road.



Station Square

Ashford International Train Station is a major asset to the town centre with rapid connections to London and Europe. A public realm and landscape project should redesign the immediate environs of the station, creating a new station square and public space.

A new public space would improve sense of arrival in the town centre and repair the urban fabric with the nearby Commercial Quarter and Great Stour river.

The redesign should facilitate the continued operation of pick up and drop off activities but rationalise the amount of space allocated to vehicles, placing greater emphasis on the pedestrian experience.



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Action areas

5.1 Action areas

A Polycentric Town Centre

Ashford Town Centre has grown over time into a series of notable series of unique districts defined by activity, physicality and use. The richness of this polycentric collection allows this plan to redefine and re-characterise these nodes with a new intent.

Our work has identified five primary nodes that comprise:

1. The T - defined by a series of spaces and streets that form the shape of a T and comprised of three zones - Upper Bank Street, Upper High Street and Middle Row. These zones will become areas of renewed commerce in legacy discretionary retail, areas of independent boutiques and the emerging core of an office, business district.
2. Elwick Place will remain the leisure core to the town centre and made a more notable landscape setting.
3. Lower High Street will adopt a focus of more neighbourhood commercial as well as a community of entrepreneurial and incubator brands, including the development of the Odeon and St. Mary's Fields.
4. Lower Bank Street will see upgraded public realm and a more pedestrian sensitive bus and transport core.
5. Academic & Commercial Quarter is a growth quarter envisaged as a future phase.

Focused intervention

This section of the project handbook sets out the proposals for areas 1 to 4. Following an assessment of possible interventions, a set of target projects have been identified that the team recommend as priority interventions.



The 4 key areas for intervention



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5.2 Type of action

The interventions proposed are grouped according to the key purpose or nature of the change.



Quality and environment

Primarily public realm enhancement interventions related to urban greening, space design and pedestrian environment.



Animation and identity

Interventions focused on activities/events programme within the public realm or artwork or signage to support wayfinding.



Place management

Interventions to alter how spaces are accessed or managed, in particular vehicular access and servicing.



Building adaptation

Opportunities to adapt existing vacant or underused buildings to support the intensification and diversification of uses.



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5.3 The T

“The T” is the heart of the town centre and takes in the junction of the High Street and Bank Street. It includes two priority locations for intervention:

- Middle Row
- Upper Bank Street

Challenge

The challenge is to reveal the strong character and assets that have been underinvested in. This will involve regenerating unbalanced and mis-used commercial frontages into a series of vibrant new commercial, office and residential districts. It will include promoting the regeneration of upper floors into small office re-use.

Mission/Strategy

Improve, renew and refresh the public realm. Refresh signage.

Invest in buildings strategically and use lighting to celebrate them. Begin to use colour on buildings to define districts or to animate aspects and elements of the town centre.



Area 1: “The T”



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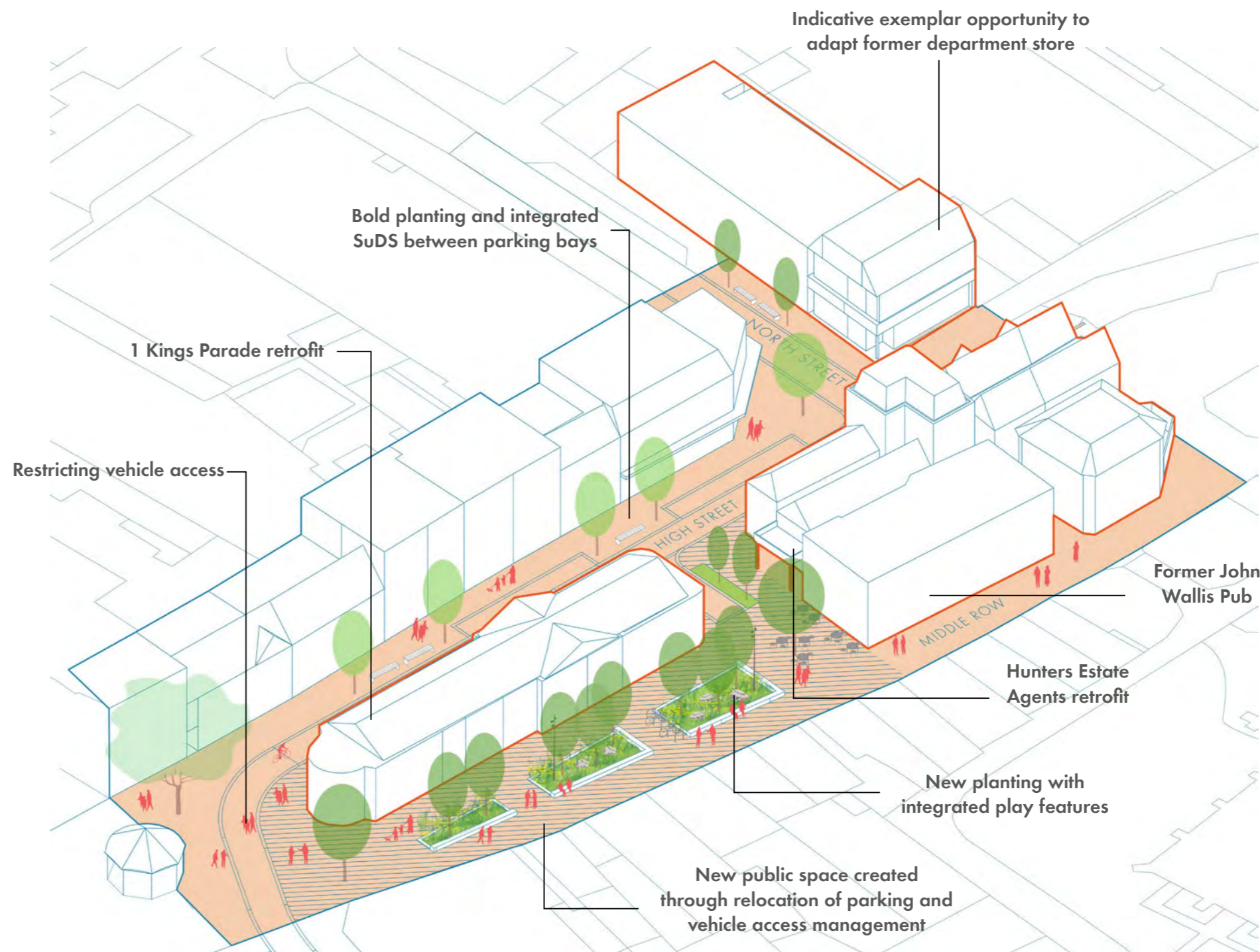
Middle Row/The High Street

Middle Row is a key area in the town with a strong bone structure with good historic fabric. There is a significant opportunity to invest and reveal this characterful gem.

In the short term, the priority for Middle Row and the High Street will be to make small interventions that re-prioritise pedestrians and create a high-quality, green environment, encouraging people to enjoy the area.

In the medium term, ABC should seek to purchase leading assets and work with existing owners to reposition Middle Row as the home for fashion boutiques, accessories and homewares

In public realm terms, the priorities revolve around removing vehicles, as far as possible, and managing servicing access to create inclusive spaces for people and bold planting. This would ideally be complimented by upgrades to street furniture and surface materials to improve the overall appearance of the area.



Axonometric illustrating the transformation of Middle Row

Upper Bank Street

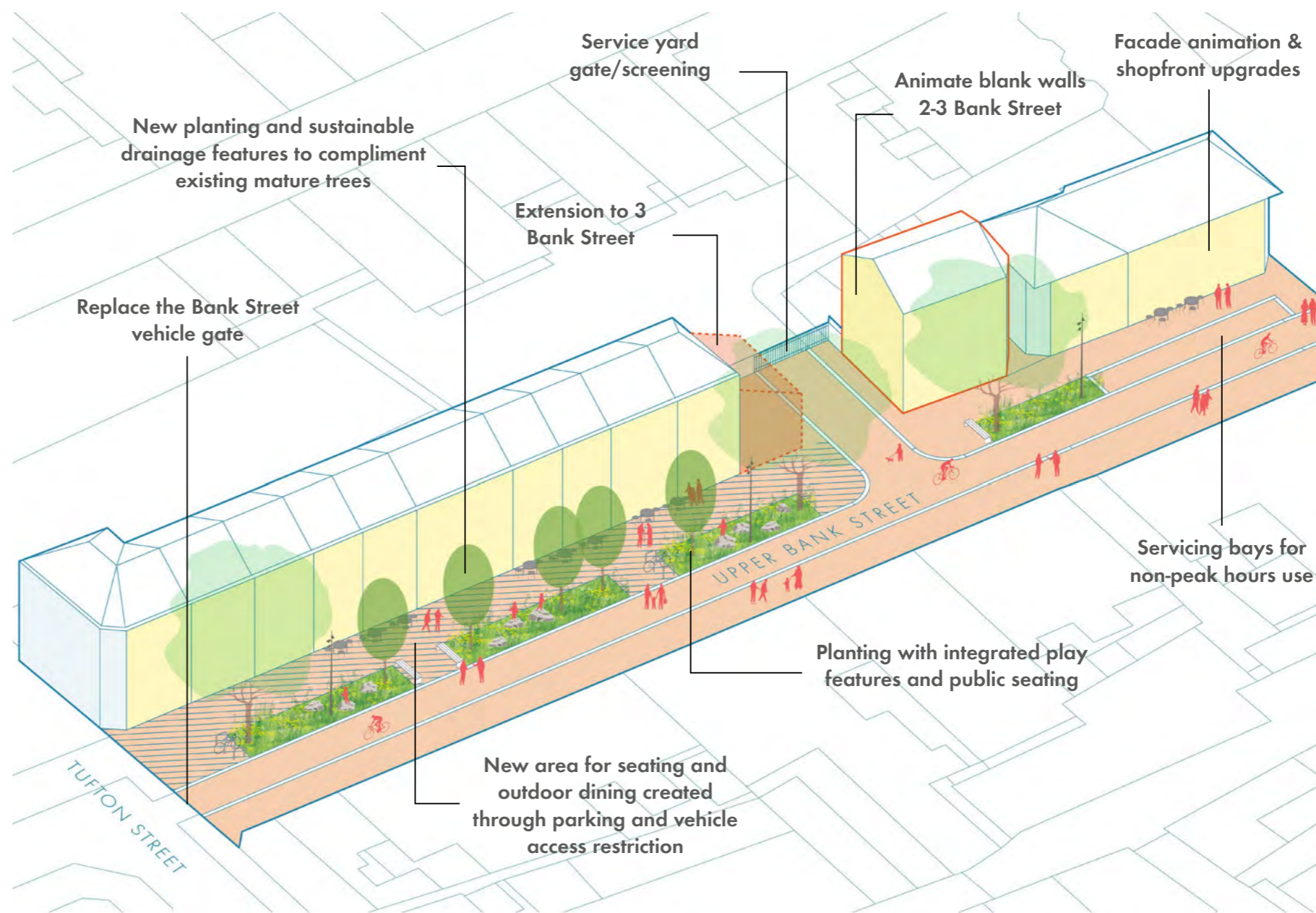
Upper Bank Street is a well-fronted and enclosed street section with space to do much more in the public realm once car access and servicing times are resolved.

The immediate actions are to focus on decluttering the public realm - taking out signage, infrastructure and street furniture that duplicate or impede the use of space, and removing parking bays. This will set the stage for streetscape enhancement and the refurbishment of buildings to accommodate new uses.

ABC should seek to work with ownership to position a boutique/food and beverage stretch of units which could animate spaces create through the removal of car parking.

In the longer-term, projects would explore options to animate and strengthen the identity of Upper Bank Street through interventions such as feature lighting, bold planting and integrated play features.

The retrofit of key properties and facade upgrades could also help to improve frontages and animation along the street. An infill building next to 3 Bank Street would also seek to mitigate the gap created by the County Square service yard access.



Axonometric illustrating the transformation of Upper Bank Street



Middle Row / Upper Bank Street Key project precedents

0-18 Months:



Existing image of Middle Row with a potential zone for depaving and planting highlighted.



Existing image of Upper Bank Street with a potential zone for depaving and planting highlighted.

Further thought will be had on the safety and security (e.g. CCTV coverage etc) of this area if this project is implemented

18-36 Months:



Top left:
Precedent of bold planting and sustainable drainage retrofitted to an urban street.

Bottom left:
Precedent of planting and sustainable drainage

Top right:
Precedent of uplighting to trees and low level lighting to adjacent public realm

Bottom right:
Example of a tree pit surround integrated with the surrounding paving pattern and materials

5.4 Elwick Place

Elwick Place is an important entry point to the town centre and has seen significant investment over the last 5-10 years. Much has been achieved, but further work is needed to consolidate the early success and ensure this part of the town centre continues to thrive.

Challenge

The challenge for Elwick Place is to transform it from a space still defined by vehicles into one more fully for pedestrians, that brings into play all the corners of the junction. This will involve introducing a scale that gives it stronger form and the object of Elwick Square to personalise it.

Mission/strategy

The integration of free standing planters and further greening should be used to reclaim the space here and better join the two sides of Elwick Road.



Area 4: Elwick Place



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Commercial activation

Former Debenhams Department Store (18 months)

Initiate an investigation with the new owners of County Square Mall into the prospect of leasing the street level, ground floor spaces to an outward facing, leisure entertainment use to compliment the existing leisure activation in Elwick Square.

Restaurant below residential (0-6 months)

Support the proposed restaurant with improved public realm

Elwick Place Retail Letting (0-6 months)

Actively promote a letting to an outward facing leisure occupier.

Former Debenhams Department Store

Improved public realm

Improved public realm

Improved public realm

Elwick Place retail letting



Activation strategy plan

**County Square extension
(18 months)**

Explore opportunities to bring in office uses within the County Square extension.

Office activation

Elwick Road

Monitor and promote office upgrade as marketplace allows.

**Elwick Place Phase 2 (18 – 36 months
- subject to Stodmarsh solution being
found)**

Actively promote the use at the ground plane to be of an office occupancy nature.

Residential activation

Elwick 2, Elwick 3 (36 months+)

Delivery of 200 residential units in this stage with the alternative of progressing east along Elwick Road as the market demands.

County Square extension

Former Debenhams
Department Store

Elwick Road office
upgrades promoted

Improved public realm

Elwick Place Phase
2 new residential
development



Activation strategy plan

Elwick Place

The proposed interventions for Elwick Place build on the significant work already completed here. The approach is to further reduce the space given over to car and further increase the prioritisation of pedestrians.

Urban greening is an important element and should be used to enhance the character and function of the space. Such a scale of greening would have a bold impact and would reinforce Ashford's Garden of England identity.

The adaptation of the former Debenhams building will be an important step in activating all four corners of the space. This large footprint building could become an anchor for indoor leisure uses, complementing the existing use character of this part of the town centre.



Axonometric illustrating the potential transformation of Elwick Place

5.5 Lower High Street

The Lower High Street is a wide space that already accommodates a wealth of activities from outdoor dining to markets. The fine grain of buildings supports a range of uses with limited ground floor vacancy.

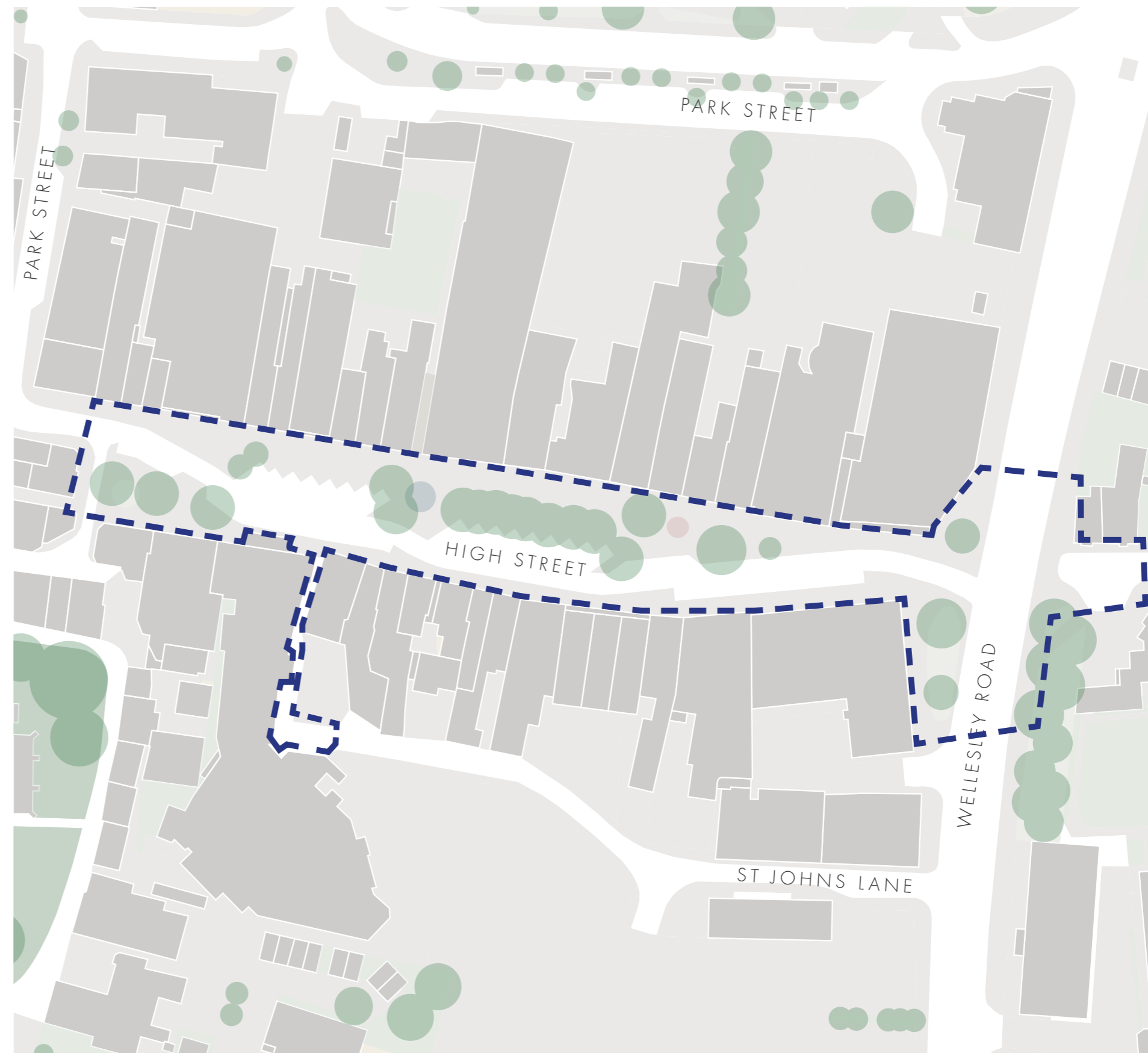
Challenge

As a collector, the Lower High Street gathers the interests of so many important aspects of life in the town centre that it must be nurtured as a focus for the local community and possibly the home of the new Ashford entrepreneurs, makers, creators, innovators and emerging businesses. A village heart that serves the growing town centre residential and commercial community.

Mission / Strategy

Allow the public realm to further evolve to support ground floor activities. Work to transform empty upper floors on the north side of the street into small offices for start-ups. Consider promoting the regeneration of the two larger and most easterly buildings into workspace providers or studios/workshops for makers.

Consider transforming any collection of vacant upper floors into small, modern flats. Assess the ability to take forward the redevelopment of the Former Odeon and Vicarage Lane site.



Area 2: Lower High Street



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Lower High Street as “collector, enabler, place”

As a collector, the Lower High Street gathers the interests of so many important aspects of life in the Town centre that it must be nurtured as a heart of the community and possibly the home of the new Ashford entrepreneurs, makers, creators, innovators and emerging businesses. A village heart that serves the growing town centre residential and commercial community.

Office Activation

Work to transform empty uppers on the north side of the street into small offices for start-ups. Consider promoting the regeneration of the two larger and most easterly buildings into workspace providers or studios/workshops for makers.

Residential Activation

Consider transforming any collection of uppers into small, modern flats. Assess the ability to take forward the redevelopment of the Former Odeon and Vicarage Lane site.



Activation strategy plan

5.6 Lower Bank Street

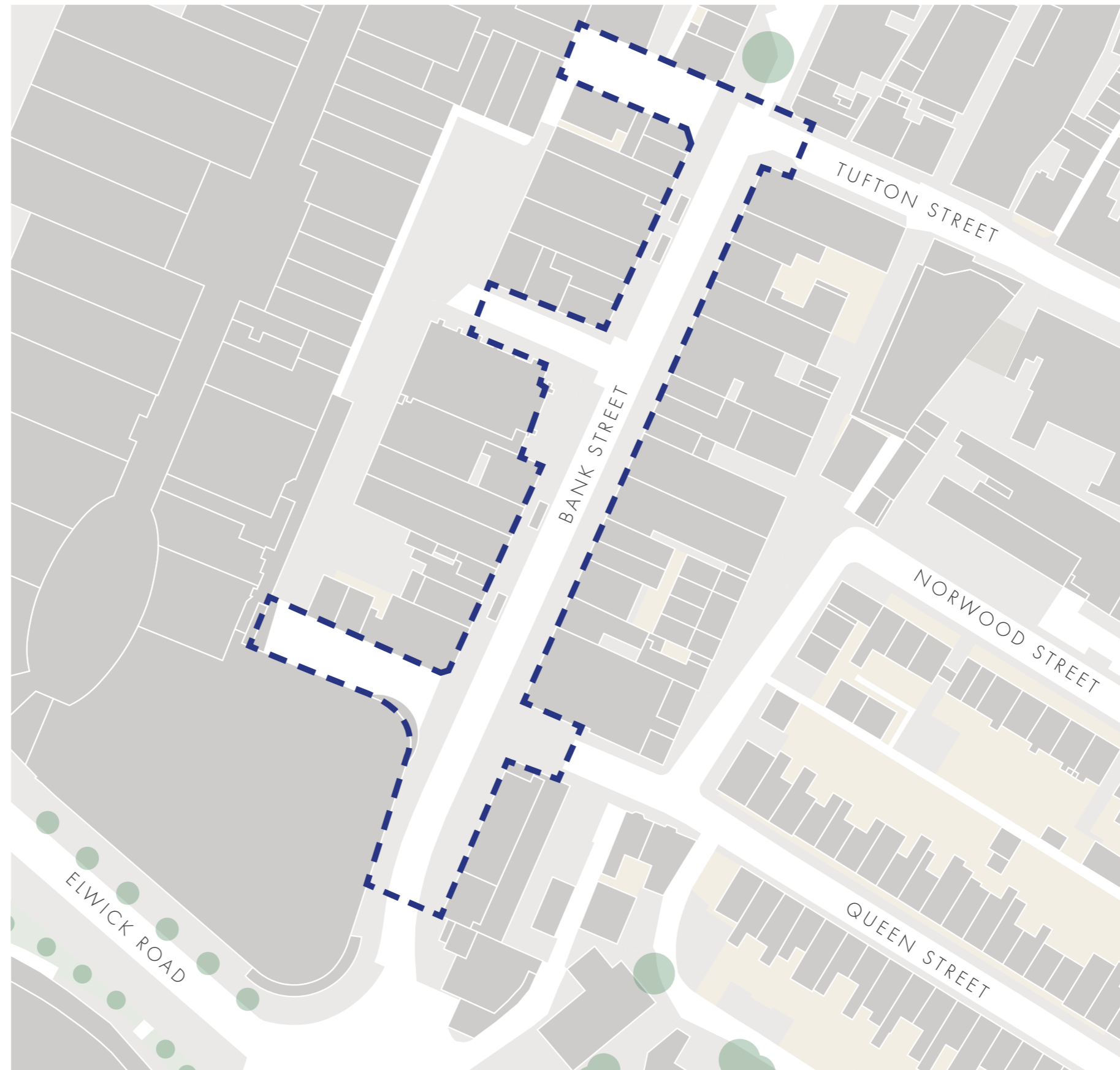
Lower Bank Street has been a part of the town centre that has struggled over the last decade. It operates as an important location in the bus network, bringing people close to the heart of the town centre. However, investment in the public realm has been problematic and there is a real need to resolve existing issues and invest in urban greening.

Challenge

The challenge for this area is to transform a vehicular and public transport dominated space into a safer pedestrian place that also fosters growth in retail activity.

Mission/strategy

There are two key strategies for this section. In the immediate term it is about working to make it the nicest bus “station” it can be. In the medium term it is about resolving the relocation of the bus stops and layover spaces elsewhere and releasing this space.



Area 3: Lower Bank Street



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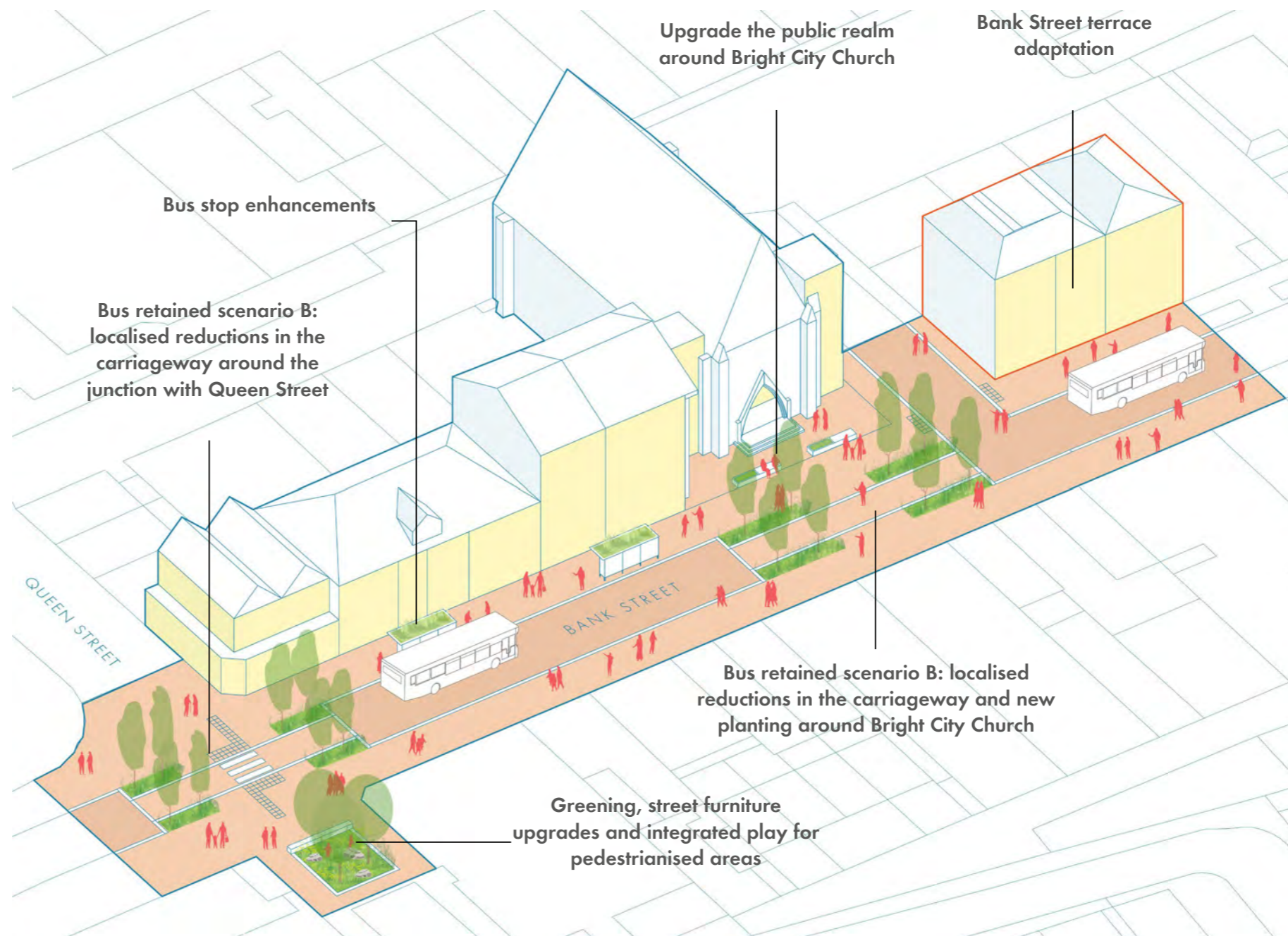
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Lower Bank Street

The priorities for Lower Bank Street focus around resolving vehicular access and the street's role as a key access point to the bus network. Once a short term and longer term strategy has been agreed, investment should involve targeted investment and upgrade.

This will include enhancing the space around Bright City Church and celebrating this key point on the street. There will also need to be active encouragement of building improvements - both shopfront improvements as well as the adaptation of buildings to support new uses at upper floors and encourage new activities at ground floor.



Axonometric illustrating potential project interventions on Lower Bank Street

5.7 Delivery on the ground

Time in Transformation – Step 1 - 2023

The Business Plan challenge was to identify a series of initiatives that might be undertaken in the near term that would seed or inaugurate transformation.

The team suggested the most effective manner of manifesting these initiatives in the first year to 18 months would be to leverage either Council ownerships or areas where through Council process a third party change might be supported.

The diagram here suggests an indicative mix of actions and initiatives the might be seen as plausible in delivery in the first year. Some will be able to be completed, such as the public real decluttering, improved lighting and landscaping and possibly the reconfiguration of vehicular access and parking. A few projects will have just begun and whilst not complete will be evidence of the transformation intendent.



Activation strategy plan



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Time in Transformation – Step 2 - 2025

With the benefit of a bit more time, the developments of scale will begin to formulate and greater transformational change will become more evident. They will take another 3-4 years to manifest an impact, yet evidence of the investment and realisation of change will positively impact a range of wider success indicators as set out below.

Instrumental in these initiatives will be the delivery of the Odeon regeneration and the completion of Elwick 2, alongside the positioning of the next stage of signature initiatives in Middle Row and in potential partnership with the new owners of the County Square Mall, the repositioning of the Debenhams.



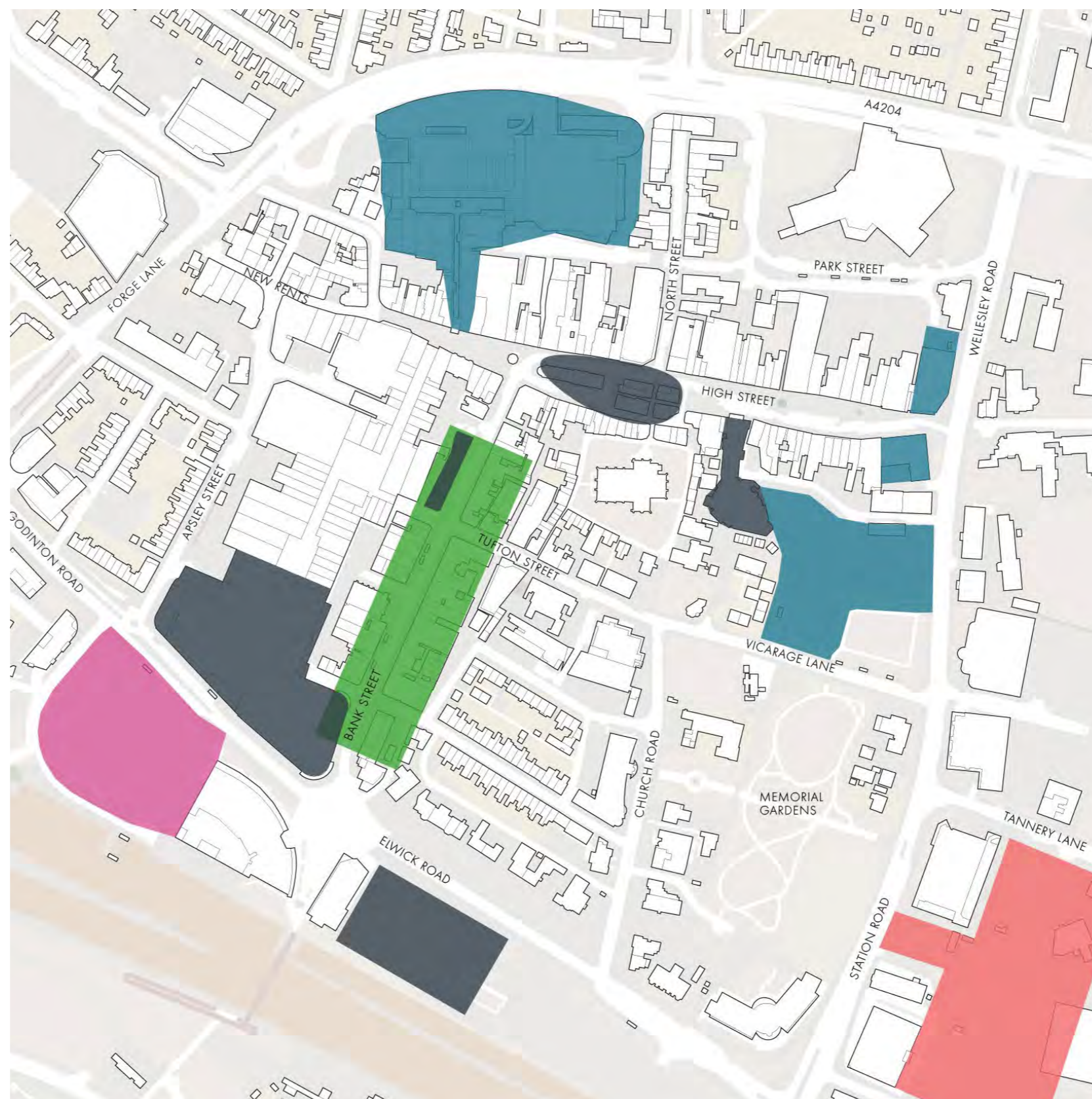
Activation strategy plan



Time in Transformation – Step 3 - 2028

If projects of scale are inaugurated at their very first opportunity, in a five year window they will begin to completely inform and define the community that is Ashford Town Centre and in doing so manifest a a holistic spectrum of successes as set out below.

Therein at the last of the three year delivery strategy rests the importance of positioning the notable and longer term redevelopments that will have a most significant transformational impact on the Town Centre. The regeneration of Park Mall, the Vicarage Lane car park and the whole of lower Bank Street will move the character and offer of the Town Centre into a whole new dimension.



Activation strategy plan

5.8 Rationale for action success targetted

The team devised a effective measuring tool as a manner to test each initiative against the other in the sifting process. This Public Value measurement exercise will form an important benchmark for discovering the highest value and best benefit of any initiative considered

Contribution Towards Town Centre Vitality

Short term: increase in number of visitors as a result of meanwhile, activation and public realm interventions (see 'In Focus' box)

Medium term: activation of vacant buildings (e.g. department store) creating new jobs and diversifying the town centre offer with new leisure and cultural uses. Adaptation of key buildings could accommodate xxxx jobs.

Longer term: long term increases in footfall and spent resulting in reduced vacancy and improved perception and enjoyment.

Opportunities and Benefits for Local Residents

Medium to long term: creation of new opportunities for residents to engage / participate in culture; health and well-being benefits for those using and enjoying new spaces and places.

Enhancing the Environment

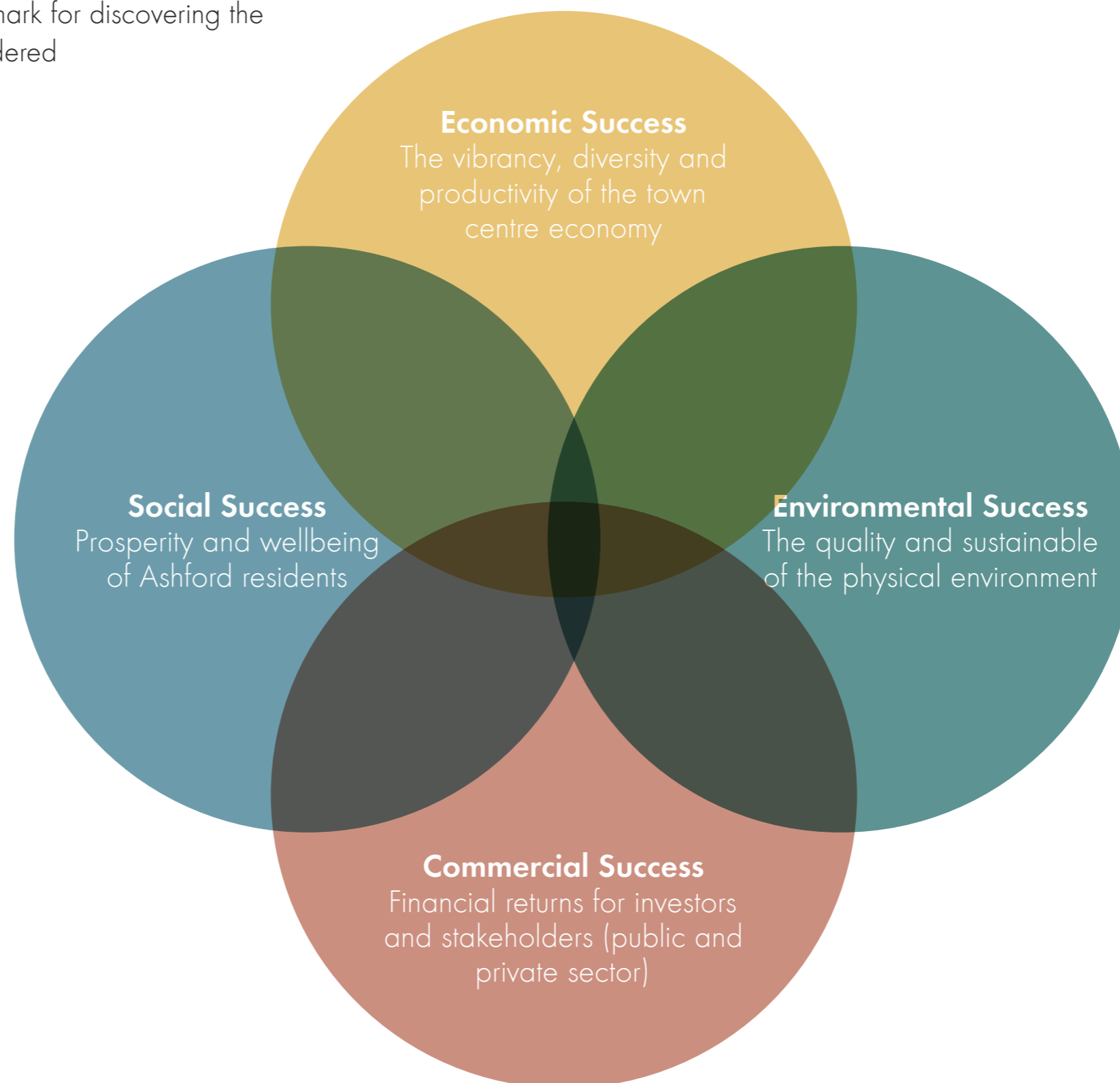
Short term: Greening and public realm enhancements resulting in more resilient and sustainable town centre environment

Medium to long term: re-purposing and retrofitting of vacant buildings demonstrating leadership in environmental responsibility and contributing towards net zero objectives

Longer term: long term increases in footfall and spent resulting in reduced vacancy and improved perception and enjoyment.

Building Commercial Resilience

Medium to long term: improved footfall, spend and perception improving visibility and attractiveness of this part of the town centre to commercial operators.



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European Union
European Regional
Development Fund



HM Government



Ashford
Borough Council

Appendix B

TOWN CENTRE RESET - A PLAN FOR ACTION

This plan is Ashford Borough Council's response to Milligan's draft Town Centre Reset Strategy & Projects document. It is a list of detailed actions to be undertaken between now and March 2025 to support the revitalisation of the Town Centre. These actions will be delivered alongside the large-scale strategic town centre projects such as the regeneration of the former Odeon building and the master-planning of the redevelopment of Park Mall shopping centre, which sit outside of this Action Plan. This plan outlines the expected costs of projects, and the funding available across a range of sources to deliver, including allocations available from Section 106 and UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Projects

The projects under Town Centre Reset fall under three categories: Economic Development, Safety and Wellbeing and Environment and Land

Economic Development and Culture	Safety and Wellbeing	Environment and Land
Town Centre Business Support Programme Helping to revive areas across the town, providing financial support to help local businesses bring empty commercial properties back into use	Safer Streets Project Using external grant award to make Town Centre streets safer, particularly for female residents, visitors and commuters	Feature Lighting Scheme Bringing animation to the buildings and streets with a range of lighting strategies, initially looking at the lighting of trees and landscape
Made in Ashford Supporting social enterprise on the High Street, providing a base for creative businesses in Ashford and wider Kent	Parking Strategy Developing a holistic and longer-term approach to resolve parking related issues and meet the needs of residents, visitors and commuters	Installation of Play Equipment and integrated play within the Town Centre Finding multiple physical and operational ways to make the Town Centre ever more a family friendly destination
Love Ashford ABC's digital support platform for Ashford Town Centre promoting news, stories, offers and events	ANPR in ERCP and Park Mall Investment in our car parks to introduce automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) technology	Temporary Bank Street and Middle Row Public Realm Works Delivering pilot projects and interventions in these areas to improve the look and feel of the High Street such as seating and green spaces
Town Centre Business Grants Providing support to landlords or tenants to make improvements to their business premises and attract investment into Ashford Town Centre	Installation of EVCPs Increasing the number of Electric Vehicle Charging Points (EVCPs) in council-managed car parks	Town Centre Capital Permanent Works Opportunity to improve the town with permanent structures and public realm works based on success of temporary pilot schemes
Ashford Festival & Events Framework Enlivening spaces, strengthening civic pride and increasing visits and footfall in the town through a year-round programme of cultural activity including addressing blank walls and building surfaces by introducing murals	One You shop Delivery of a variety of free health services, support and advice to our community	
Revelation Ashford (St Mary's Arts Trust) Ensuring a regular, year-round, high quality and innovative arts programme in the heart of the town	Edinburgh Road Car Park Repairing and adapting this large multi-story car park to meet the needs of our Town Centre visitors	

Grassroots Arts & Cultural Facility opportunity scope / Business Plan Support the ambition of existing arts and cultural businesses in Ashford to stabilise and grow, exploring opportunities to create a multi-purpose grassroots arts facility in the town centre	Shared space and Lower High Street Improvements Joint ABC/KCC project improving the look and feel of the town centre as well as enhancing pedestrians spaces	
	Automation and/or removal of Bank Street Barrier A series of interventions to alter how the high street is accessed and managed, in particular vehicular access and servicing	
	Town Centre Business Accessibility Study Study to seek opportunities for improvements to the accessibility and wider quality of town centre locations	

Projected budget

Projects	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025	Totals
Economic Development and Culture	£245,701	£238,500	£258,500	£742,701
Safety and Wellbeing	£1,542,000	£170,000	£120,000	£1,832,000
Environment and Land	£50,000	£138,000	£351,792	£539,792
	£1,837,701	£546,500	£730,292	£3,114,493

Income sources

Between now and March 2025 there is £710,406 available in three S106 agreements aimed at improving the town centre. Beyond the S106 funding, there is also an allocation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund aimed at supporting the Town Centre Reset. Ashford's UKSPF Local Investment Plan is yet to be approved by Government but provisionally £282,000 could be available between April 2022 and March 2025. The UKSPF funding is intended to contribute to Pride in Place and supporting businesses and communities.

Income Source	Amount	Purpose
Section 106 Funding	£710,406	S106 funding from the Designer Outlet, The Range and John Lewis developments intended to drive footfall and improvements to the vitality of Ashford town centre
UKSPF	£282,000	To support footfall, placemaking and business prosperity in Ashford town centre. This funding is awaiting approval by central government.
ABC Secured Funds	£840,087	This funding is subject to the setting of Council budgets for 2023/24 and 2024/25
Other/External Safer Streets Fund Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) Kent County Council	£550,000 £232,000 £500,000	Have enabled the Streetwise app delivery, creation of Safer Spaces, 8 new CCTV cameras, other public safety projects, EV charging points in ABC's car parks (match funded by the supplier) and delivery of the Shared Space work in town.
Total	£3,114,493	

The total investment opportunity into the town centre, through current work streams and bespoke projects could be **£3,114,493**. This income sources table shows how this investment can be made through existing budgets and funding sources, and the allocation of S106 funds and UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Equality Impact Assessment

1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is a document that summarises how the council has had due regard to the public sector equality duty (Equality Act 2010) in its decision-making. Although there is no legal duty to produce an EIA, the Council must have **due regard** to the equality duty and an EIA is recognised as the best method of fulfilling that duty. It can assist the Council in making a judgment as to whether a policy or other decision will have unintended negative consequences for certain people and help maximise the positive impacts of policy change. An EIA can lead to one of four consequences:

- (a) No major change – the policy or other decision is robust with no potential for discrimination or adverse impact. Opportunities to promote equality have been taken;
- (b) Adjust the policy or decision to remove barriers or better promote equality as identified in the EIA;
- (c) Continue the policy – if the EIA identifies potential for adverse impact, set out compelling justification for continuing;
- (d) Stop and remove the policy where actual or potential unlawful discrimination is identified.

Public sector equality duty

2. The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on the council, when exercising public functions, to have due regard to the need to:
- (a) Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
 - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - (c) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it (ie tackling prejudice and promoting understanding between people from different groups).

3. These are known as the three aims of the general equality duty.

Protected characteristics

4. The Equality Act 2010 sets out nine protected characteristics for the purpose of the equality duty:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership*
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

*For marriage and civil partnership, only the first aim of the duty applies in relation to employment.

Due regard

5. Having 'due regard' is about using good equality information and analysis at the right time as part of decision-making procedures.
6. To 'have due regard' means that in making decisions and in its other day-to-day activities the council must consciously consider the need to do the things set out in the general equality duty: eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. This can involve:
- removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
 - taking steps to meet the needs of people with certain protected characteristics when these are different from the needs of other people.
 - encouraging people with certain protected characteristics to participate in public life or in other activities where it is disproportionately low.
7. How much regard is 'due' will depend on the circumstances. The greater the

potential impact, the higher the regard required by the duty. Examples of functions and decisions likely to engage the duty include: policy decisions, budget decisions, public appointments, service provision, statutory discretion, decisions on individuals, employing staff and procurement of goods and services.

8. In terms of timing:

- Having 'due regard' should be considered at the inception of any decision or proposed policy or service development or change.
- Due regard should be considered throughout development of a decision. Notes shall be taken and kept on file as to how due regard has been had to the equality duty in research, meetings, project teams, consultations etc.
- The completion of the EIA is a way of effectively summarising this and it should inform final decision-making.

Armed Forces Community

9. As part of the council's commitment to the Armed Forces Community made through the signing of the Armed Forces Covenant the council's Cabinet agreed in November 2017 that potential impacts on the Armed Forces Community should be considered as part of the Equality Impact Assessment process.

10. Accordingly, due regard should also be had throughout the decision making process to potential impacts on the groups covered by the Armed Forces Covenant:

- Current serving members of the Armed Forces (both Regular and Reserve)
- Former serving members of the Armed Forces (both Regular and Reserve)
- The families of current and former Armed Forces personnel.

Case law principles

11. A number of principles have been established by the courts in relation to the equality duty and due regard:

- Decision-makers in public authorities must be aware of their duty to have 'due regard' to the equality duty and so EIA's must be attached to any relevant committee reports.
- Due regard is fulfilled before and at the time a particular policy is under consideration as well as at the time a decision is taken. Due regard involves a conscious approach and state of mind.
- A public authority cannot satisfy the duty by justifying a decision after it has been taken.
- The duty must be exercised in substance, with rigour and with an open mind in such a way that it influences the final decision.
- The duty is a non-delegable one. The duty will always remain the responsibility of the public authority.
- The duty is a continuing one so that it needs to be considered not only when a policy, for example, is being developed and agreed but also when it is implemented.
- It is good practice for those exercising public functions to keep an accurate record showing that they have actually considered the general duty and pondered relevant questions. Proper record keeping encourages transparency and will discipline those carrying out the relevant function to undertake the duty conscientiously.
- A public authority will need to consider whether it has sufficient information to assess the effects of the policy, or the way a function is being carried out, on the aims set out in the general equality duty.
- A public authority cannot avoid complying with the duty by claiming that it does not have enough resources to do so.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has produced helpful guidance on "Meeting the Equality Duty in Policy and Decision-Making" (October 2014). It is available on the following link and report authors should read and follow this when developing or reporting on proposals for policy or

service development or change and other decisions likely to engage the equality duty. [Equality Duty in decision-making](#)

Lead officer:	Andrew Osborne, Head of Economic Development
Decision maker:	Cabinet
Decision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy, project, service, contract • Review, change, new, stop 	Adopt the Town Centre Reset Strategy and the Town Centre Reset Action Plan
Date of decision: The date when the final decision is made. The EIA must be complete before this point and inform the final decision.	24 th November 2022
Summary of the proposed decision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims and objectives • Key actions • Expected outcomes • Who will be affected and how? • How many people will be affected? 	<p>The Town Centre Reset Strategy has been produced to help take forward the prioritisation of improvement projects in areas of impact in the town over the next 3-years. This has resulted in the production of an associated Action Plan.</p> <p>Both documents highlight and demonstrate that there are a multitude of opportunities and benefits that a Town Centre Reset can support, promote and deliver against including: Increasing productivity and job opportunities (TG1) and Supporting growth in the visitor economy (TG4) to ensure our town centre is lively, safe, and where people of all ages live, work and visit, to come together and to enjoy events and activities.</p> <p>The Strategy suggests four key intervention areas, therefore proposed work would affect all town centre stakeholders and partners, most especially in the following areas: The T (the junction of Bank Street, High Street and Middle Row); Lower High Street; Lower Bank Street; and Elwick Place.</p> <p>The strategy highlights the importance of the continued involvement and engagement of local community groups, businesses, residents and wider stakeholders to ensure our Town Centre offer is viable, of quality, and widely enjoyed and valued.</p> <p>The Action Plan lists a series of projects that will look to be taken forward to deliver the strategy. These projects will need to develop Project Plans that will need to assess the impact of the individual actions on Equality. These projects include public realm schemes as well as works to car parks that will need to consider the accessibility of any new interventions as part of their development and implementation.</p>
Information and research: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline the information and research that has informed the decision. 	Urban strategists and property development professionals Milligan were commissioned to develop the strategy, who assembled a team of wider experts to provide the necessary skills of data analysis and understanding, commercial expertise and experience, and creative design and planning.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include sources and key findings. 	<p>The initial stage of work focused on a research effort to understand the challenges and opportunities. This was followed by a context-led and sensitive strategy response to guide the delivery of transformational interventions.</p> <p>The evidence-based insights in the report suggest a range of Strategic Priorities, Delivery Approaches, Ideas and Action Areas for adoption.</p> <p>A continued and extensive consultation took place internally between the report authors, relevant portfolio holders, and officers across departments who have a role in supporting Ashford Town Centre from Planning, Safety & Wellbeing; Economic Development, and Environment & Land Management. It will be this group, led by Economic Development that will continue to monitor and review the agreed recommendations.</p>
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<p>Consultation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific consultation has occurred on this decision? • What were the results of the consultation? • Did the consultation analysis reveal any difference in views across the protected characteristics? • What conclusions can be drawn from the analysis on how the decision will affect people with different protected characteristics? 	<p>As noted above there has been and will continue to be consultation cross-departmentally within the council, as well as using recent findings and feedback from recent projects and initiatives with key stakeholders and town centre representatives, most notably the town centre forum.</p> <p>The strategy notes that:</p> <p><i>This plan will require “ownership” to be realised. The objectives are brave and the scope of work immense, yet the fruits of success will be sweet. What is required to manifest this success is the voice of a singular or collective leadership that owns the narrative of the plan, espouses a passionate belief in the plan and that owns the authority and ability to work through all to deliver the plan.</i></p>
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Assess the relevance of the decision to people with different protected characteristics and assess the impact of the decision on people with different protected characteristics.

When assessing relevance and impact, make it clear who the assessment applies to within the protected characteristic category. For example, a decision may have high relevance for young people but low relevance for older people; it may have a positive impact on women but a neutral impact on men.

Protected characteristic	Relevance to Decision High/Medium/Low/None	Impact of Decision Positive (Major/Minor) Negative (Major/Minor) Neutral
<u>AGE</u> Elderly	Medium	Positive
Middle age	Medium	Positive
Young adult	Medium	Positive
Children	Medium	Positive

<u>DISABILITY</u> Physical	Medium	Positive
Mental	Medium	Positive
Sensory	Medium	Positive
<u>GENDER RE-ASSIGNMENT</u>	None	Neutral
<u>MARRIAGE/CIVIL PARTNERSHIP</u>	None	Neutral
<u>PREGNANCY/MATERNITY</u>	None	Neutral
<u>RACE</u>	None	Neutral
<u>RELIGION OR BELIEF</u>	None	Neutral
<u>SEX</u> Men	None	Neutral
Women	Medium	Positive
<u>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</u>	None	Neutral
<u>ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY</u> Regular/Reserve personnel	None	Neutral
Former service personnel	None	Neutral
Service families	None	Neutral

Mitigating negative impact: Where any negative impact has been identified, outline the measures taken to mitigate against it.	This strategy acknowledges its vital role in providing innovative responses to current sustainability challenges, whether it's linked directly to the Council's 'Green Pioneer' theme, or wider sustainability issues such as access to social infrastructure, economic inequality, health and wellbeing or public safety. The strategy and action plan highlights clear sustainability opportunities to be taken forward.
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Is the decision relevant to the aims of the equality duty?	
Guidance on the aims can be found in the EHRC's Essential Guide , alongside fuller PSED Technical Guidance .	
Aim	Yes / No / N/A
1) Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation	N/A

2) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it	N/A
3) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it	N/A

<p>Conclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how due regard has been had to the equality duty, from start to finish. • There should be no unlawful discrimination arising from the decision (see guidance above). • Advise on whether the proposal meets the aims of the equality duty or whether adjustments have been made or need to be made or whether any residual impacts are justified. • How will monitoring of the policy, procedure or decision and its implementation be undertaken and reported? 	<p>Due regard has been made to the equality duty throughout the development of the strategy and action plan. This work takes into account the need for the Town Centre to diversify and create a place that can meet the everyday needs of the surrounding communities. A place to live, work, visit and invest.</p> <p>There will be no unlawful discrimination arising from the decision.</p> <p>The proposal meets the aims of the equality duty as it is hoped that all members of the public will benefit from suggested improvements in the identified areas.</p> <p>Monitoring of the policy, procedure or decision and its implementation will be undertaken and reported by the Head of Economic Development on behalf of the core cross-departmental working group.</p>
EIA completion date:	14 th November 2022