

Town Centre Core

Existing Character and Land Use

The Town Centre core is physically defined by a series of roads and streets. The area has been divided, in the Ashford Town Centre Character Appraisal (Nov 2005), into 9 distinct character areas as follows:

Area 4: North of the Centre: Charter House and Park Mall

Area 5: The High Street and North Street

Area 6: Memorial Gardens

Area 7: Churchyard and Tufton Street

Area 8: Elwick Road, Queen Street and Norwood Street

Area 9: Bank Street

Area 10: County Square

Area 11: New Rents

Area 12: Apsley Street, East Street and Regent's Place



Location map

Area 4 – North of the Centre: Charter House and Park Mall



Charter House

Historically an area with a fine urban grain, land use and built form similar to the adjacent medieval core to the south and 19th century housing to the north. However, the area was completely cleared in the late 1960s early 1970s to make way for the ring road and two large modern commercial developments (Charter House and Park Mall).

Charter House stands as a 10 storey monolithic landmark, but the quality of the townscape in this area is poor.

The Park Mall development is a low rise retail development which sits north, and to the rear of, Upper High Street. This helps to limit its visual impact when viewed from the High Street. However, connections to the north, through the development, are poor.

Area 5 – The High Street and North Street

The High Street and North Street represent Ashford's earliest development and the first medieval streets of the town. This area makes one of the most significant contributions to Ashford 'sense of place'. It is also the retail and commercial centre of Ashford.

A pleasant variation in building styles and heights produce an eclectic street frontage. However, inappropriate modern shop fronts and signage overwhelm and detract from the original architecture of the majority of buildings.



North Street

Key views in this area include a view of St. Mary's church tower from North Street. Unfortunately, other key views along the High Street are severely compromised by mature trees, planted as part of previous streetscape 'improvements'.

A large amount of street furniture and other additions such as the band stand, monuments, the fountain and signage also creates a cluttered

appearance and hinders views and movement within the pedestrian environment.

There does not appear to be any surviving precedent for streetscape materials. A combination of materials adds to the general visual discordancy of the space.

Area 6 – Memorial Gardens

See the Memorial Square Urban Quarter Design Principles.



Memorial Gardens

Area 7 – Churchyard & Tufton Street

St Mary's Church and Churchyard is one of the most significant and distinctive areas in Ashford town centre. The Church, which dates from the late 14th or 15th century, is constructed in the local Kentish ragstone and represents an important recognisable landmark when viewed from the surrounding townscape.

The Churchyard is a very compact, regular space, enclosed on all sides by fine historic buildings which front directly onto the space.

Historic passageways provide narrow and popular pedestrian routes between Tufton Street and the High Street.



Church Yard

Tufton Street developed in the 19th century when Norwood Street and Queen Street to the south were also laid out. Redevelopment in the 20th century has led to an uncoordinated mix of expansive, inactive 20th century frontages on the south side, and a varied and attractive combination of 19th century frontages on the north side.

Car parking along the northern side of the street, heavy one-way vehicular flows and narrow footways creates a traffic dominated environment.

Area 8 – Elwick Road, Queen Street & Norwood Street

This area developed in the mid 19th century as a purpose built residential development targeted at the middle class residents of Ashford.

Queen Street and Norwood Street are lined with

good quality terraced houses forming a consistent and positive built form along these streets.

Larger plots to the north and east of the 19th century terraces are associated with 20th century development such as the local library located between Norwood Street and Queen Street.

Development along the northern side of Elwick Road was laid out in 1865 and consists of monumental semi-detached villas built on large plots. Commercial and professional use has significantly altered the appearance of the northside of Elwick Road. The original large front gardens are now given over to car parking.

The character of the road itself has changed significantly in the past 3 years. The one way traffic flow has been re configured as a two way street. Investment in high quality materials and the introduction of shared space principles has seen huge improvements in the quality of this main town centre route.



Elwick Road

Area 9 – Bank Street

Bank Street was laid out as a special development from 1855 in response to pressures for increased commercial space in the centre. The upper and lower halves of Bank Street display different characteristics.

Upper Bank Street was laid out as a single enterprise and lined with two classical terraces. Cropped (rough) setts for parking bays and around the base of street furniture compromises the clarity and simplicity of the ground plane. The amount, type and location of street furniture also creates a somewhat cluttered appearance.



Upper Bank Street

Key views in Upper Bank Street consist of near views along each street frontage, a glimpsed view through to Bull's Yard and St Mary's Church, and a long view southwards out towards the countryside surrounding Ashford.

Lower Bank Street was developed over an extended period and displays more variation than Upper Bank Street. These contrasts provide an interesting and

pleasant variation in the visual experience.

The street itself has seen major investment in the past 2 years. Introduction of new high quality paving materials such as paving, street furniture and art works have created a simple uncluttered setting for this visually interesting street.

To the edges of Bank Street, a series of narrow pedestrian routes, passages and cut-throughs create an interesting and diverse series of routes and spatial experiences.

Area 10 – County Square

Historically this was an area of open land which has been subject to piecemeal development for most of its history. The site was subsequently cleared in the late 20th century to make way for County Square, a large internal shopping mall that remains today.

The large building plot is bound to the east by service areas the rear of the properties along Bank Street; to the west by Apsley Street; by the High Street to the north. The recent southern extension to County Square has meant the removal of Godington Road with new retail frontage to Elwick Road. The northern edge of the development presents an acceptable frontage to the High Street. The western edge of the development is allocated for access and services with a blank tall brick wall running along the majority of the eastern side of Apsley Street.

Area 11 – New Rents

This area is characterised by a fine urban grain with a winding historic streetline and a smaller more domestic scale architecture than in the High Street.

Where the area abuts Somerset Road, the built edges become undefined and fragmented, and the historic street pattern has been lost.

Away from Somerset Road, the streetscape is pleasant, has a consistent brick paved floorscape and is relatively uncluttered.

Area 12 – Apsley Street, East Street and Regent's Place

A mid-19th century purpose built development consisting of two storey flat-fronted workers housing laid out in terraces in a rectilinear street pattern.



Apsley Street

Construction of the former ring road and County Square has led to the loss of similar streets and terraces in this area. This has resulted in the terraces becoming isolated. Leftover pockets of vacant land, in particular in the southwest corner of the character area, also add to an overall neglected appearance.

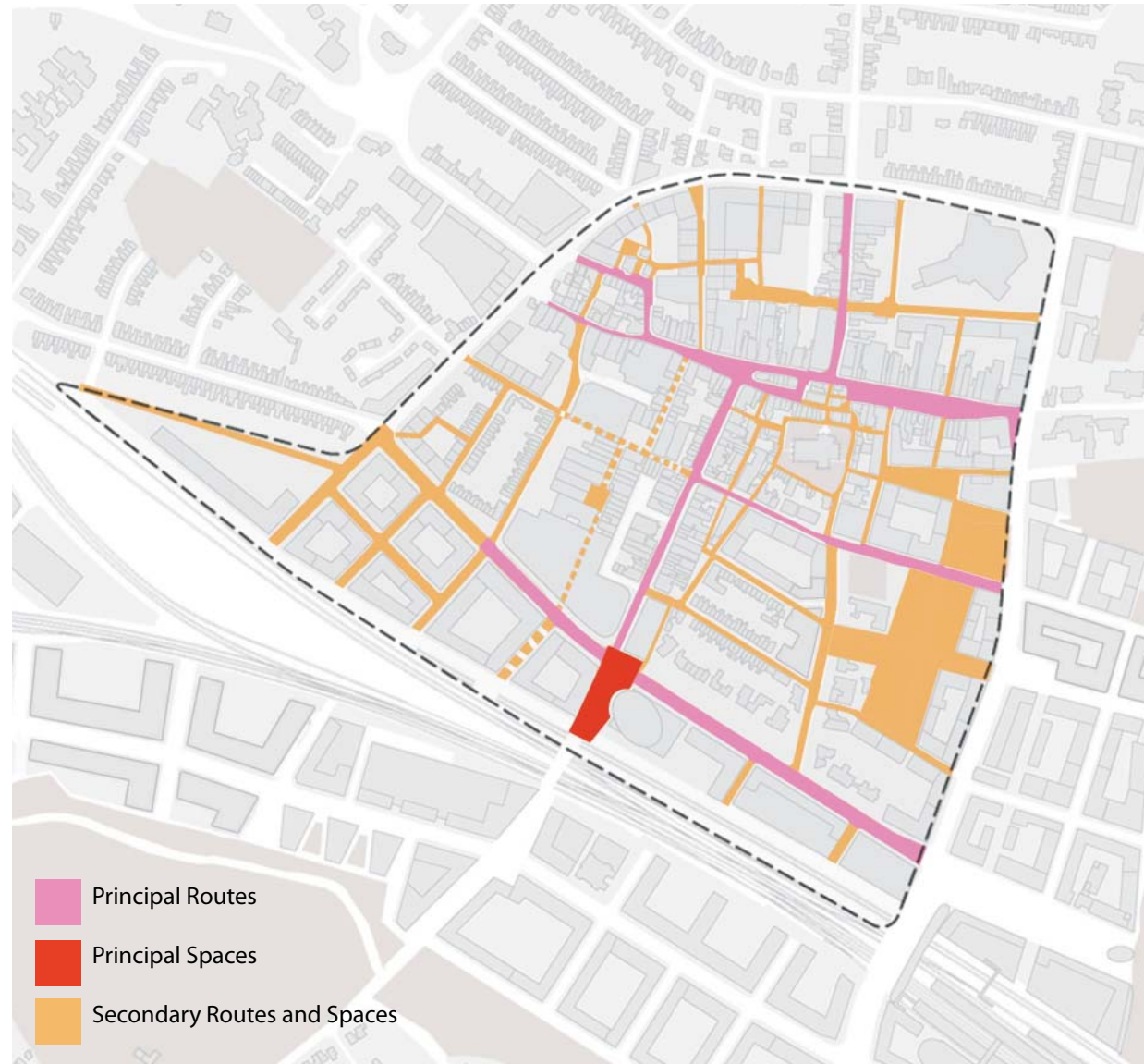
Despite the poor quality fragmented edges, some interesting near views along the terraces remain.

Proposed Character and Land Use

The conservation and enhancement of the historic form and character of the existing town centre core will be the driving force behind development in this quarter. New development should seek to re-establish or strengthen building lines and preserve the existing urban grain. Heights of new development should generally be 3 – 5 storeys high and shall respect key views to St. Mary’s Church, important near views within the town centre, and recognised long views out towards greater Ashford.

In contrast to the pleasant environment of the historic core, many of the boundary sites, particularly around the former ring road, are vacant and underused or of poor townscape quality. The development in these areas will focus on creating improved street frontages and establishing connections to the wider Ashford community. A range of uses is essential to the creation of a vibrant town centre. The retail focus shall remain around County Square, Park Mall, Bank Street and the High Street with complementary uses such as leisure, arts, culture, restaurants, bars and cafes. In addition to Memorial Square, the evening economy will have focal points around Vicarage Lane and the Bank Street area.

To the north of the railway line development would have a residential focus at the western end of Elwick Road with the remainder of the sites comprising large floorplate retail, civic and commercial uses with residential above. The proposed buildings shall form a strong street frontage and presence along Elwick Road ranging in height from 4 to 6 stories.



- Principal Routes
- Principal Spaces
- Secondary Routes and Spaces

Public Realm Vision

Physical and Visual Connections: An intricate diverse and interconnected network of clearly legible streets, passageways, squares and open spaces which reveals and celebrates the unique existing historic character and form of the town centre while helping to re-stitch the fragmented edges with the surrounding townscape.

The Medieval T will remain the key axis through the town centre connecting to areas north, east and west, with Bank Street becoming the key connection to the south. A simple, restrained and consistent treatment of these routes will help reveal their unique form, scale and architectural heritage.

The four points at which the key axes meet the former ring road will become new spaces. This will reinforce their significance as the historical gateways into the town centre.

The existing grid pattern of secondary streets, found in particular in character areas 8 and 12 shall be preserved and enhanced. Development in adjacent urban quarters shall respect and extend this street pattern forming logical connections between the town centre core and surrounding areas.

The intricate network of intimate passageways characteristic of Middle Row and St Mary's churchyard shall be enhanced and extended in particular to the west, creating connections into Bulls Yard, and to the east through sensitive infill development on Vicarage Lane car park. Proposed development in this area shall act to channel views towards St Mary's Church.

Additional pedestrian routes shall be created to the

north of Park Mall to improve connections into and through this existing development.

Interpersonal Connections: A vibrant mixed use core providing the retail, leisure and entertainment focus for the town. The introduction of additional residential accommodation will ensure activity throughout the day and into the evening, increasing safety and security.

An increase in the dominance of pedestrians over vehicles will be encouraged through the designation of the Town Centre Core as a restricted area with 20mph traffic speeds. The Medieval T and Bank Street shall remain the retail focus with the extent of existing pedestrian only areas also remaining unchanged. Streetscape improvements such as removal of street clutter will facilitate ease of pedestrian movement within these spaces.

Nodes of activity will be established around key buildings and spaces. Variation in the character and scale of these spaces will add to the diversity and experiential interest of the quarter, and provide a focus for social interaction.

Environmental Connections: These will focus on the distinctive geographical character of the Town Centre Core and its historical development as a market town intimately linked to the River Stour, yet located on land rising safely above the floodplain up to a high point around St. Mary's church. Expression of this topographical characteristic will be most appropriate in the steeply sloping routes along Bank Street and Lower High Street, and in the retention and enhancement of long, hilltop views out to greater Ashford.

Cultural Connections: This will focus on the management of existing and planned new uses with particular emphasis on opportunities for the introduction of discrete public art events which celebrate and reinforce the historic and geographical character of this quarter.

DRAFT



Design Principles

PRINCIPAL ROUTES

- Key town centre axis (Medieval T & Bank St.)
- Elwick Road/Civic Spine- Church Street to Station Road
- Elwick Road/Civic Spine- West Street to Church Street (Works Completed)

SECONDARY ROUTES + SPACES

- Minor roads
- Minor roads downgraded to become shared surfaces
- Existing passageways around St Marys churchyard
- Extension to the network of passageways
- Improvements and extension of the passageways around Park Mall
- 1 Improvements to St. Georges Square
- 2 Vicarage Square
- Memorial gardens

MISCELLANEOUS

- New development
- Existing buildings
- 'Gateways' to the town centre core
- Tree planting as a landscape buffer to screen poor views and create 'green edges'

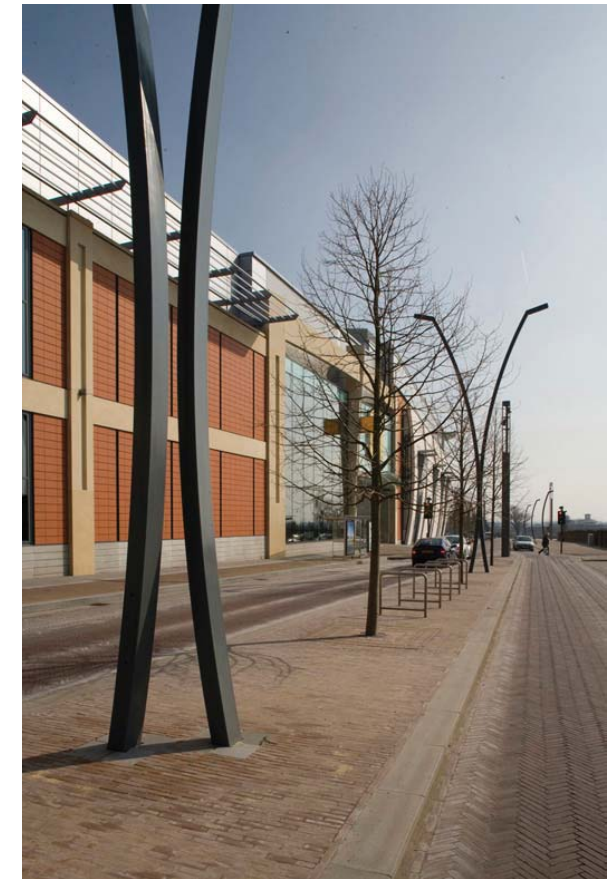
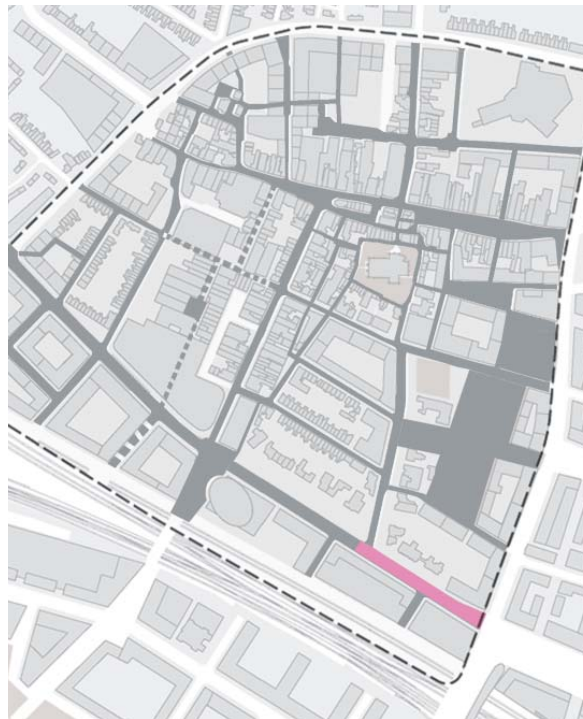
Principal Routes

Elwick Road/Civic Spine

- The section of the former ring road between Station Road and Church Street is considered a priority public realm project which should deliver the final section of streetscape improvements to Elwick Road
- The road shall reflect the downgrading that has been implemented from the Bank Street/Elwick Road junction to the Church Street/Elwick Road Junction. The reduced traffic volumes and extension of 20mph zone will create a shared linear civic space in recognition of its importance as a key route between the station and the town centre. Regular tree planting, lighting columns and surface materials shall match those used in the recent improvement scheme to create a pleasant tree lined promenade with equal priority for all users. The central carriageway shall be reduced in width to 6m and subtly defined with a nominal kerb line. The footway space along the frontage of new development shall be increased in width with opportunities for the Bank Street linear art feature to be continued along Elwick Road to form a logical termination at the River Stour at the bottom of Station Square.



A shared civic space



Elwick Road, Integrated streetscape

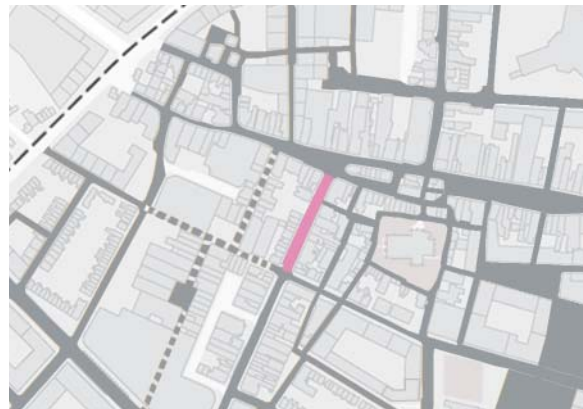
Principal Routes

Bank Street

- Recent improvements to lower Bank Street (between Tufton Street and Elwick Road) have focused on the removal of standardised highway layout and materials and the creation of a integrated street. The treatment of the street responds to it's context and importance in the overall hierarchy of the town centre streets.
- It is proposed that the design language and materials palette (natural clay pavers and granite detailing) used in the Lower Bank Street scheme be extended into Upper Bank Street. This will help to unite the two halves of Bank Street and place the emphasis on the unique qualities and characteristics of the town centre – namely it's architecture, distinctive urban form, and the variation and quality of near and long views that this affords.
- Short to medium term – general vehicular access, including buses, to remain unchanged. 20 mph speed limits imposed and overall levels of traffic reduced by opening Church Road.
- Long term aspiration - buses relocated to Church Road and existing town centre restricted access scheme extended south to the junction of Elwick Road.
- Short term provision for raised areas to accommodate leaning buses in Lower Bank

Street can be removed if bus stops are relocated or used as level terraces for external dining areas to serve adjacent restaurants.

- Rationalise and replace street furniture, removing raised planters and other unnecessary clutter.
- Locate lighting on face of buildings and restrict seasonal decorations to appropriate times.
- A linear art work which takes the form of a decorative drainage channel should be extended to run the length of the street. This artwork is intended to form an integral part of the public realm vision to engage the public with current important discourses about wider environmental issues but specifically water management within Ashford. The piece is designed as an abstracted diagrammatic 'river' within Bank Street and acts as a functional surface water drainage system such that the normally hidden, engineered processes of rainwater collection, conveyance, treatment, use and disposal are celebrated and revealed to the public.



Public space in front of Centre Piece Church

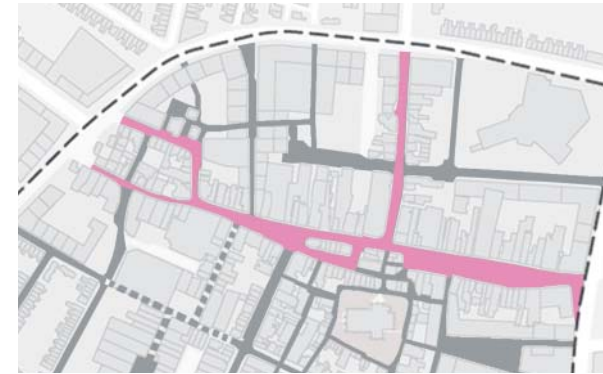


Detail of public art work

Principal Routes

Medieval T (High Street, New Rents and North Street)

- Currently a pedestrianised space with controlled and restricted vehicular access but no buses.
 - Surface materials to be replaced with a restrained palette as for Bank Street. This will help to clearly express these streets as the key structuring routes through the Town Centre Core and allow the fine historic architecture and unique form of the streets to dominate.
 - De-clutter and simplify the High Street to re-establish the distinctive scale and form of this important space. Specific consideration should be given to the relocation of the existing fountain and the removal of trees which currently block important view and act to reduce the scale of the High Street.
 - The restricted parking zone utilised along Elwick Road should be extended to cover the High Street and North Street to facilitate the removal of highway lines and signs from the town centre core.
 - The simplification of this space will also allow this important town centre space to be easily adapted for a range of different uses such as the focus for regular markets or one off cultural events. This will help to re-establish/reinforce the High Street as the town's traditional and primary civic space.
- 'Object' public art such as freestanding sculptural pieces are less appropriate in this space as the focus should remain on the uniqueness of the space itself and the visual interest afforded by the urban form and architecture. The promotion of an events programme may better serve to invigorate the cultural life of the town in this particular instance, with the High Street providing the focus for this.
 - Locate lighting on face of buildings and restrict seasonal decorations to appropriate times.
 - In the New Rents area, the relocation of the existing tank and canopy structure would release St. Georges Square for the creation of a small public space adjacent to the Prince of Wales pub. An element of soft landscape and tree planting would be appropriate in this space to provide colour, interest and shaded seating areas without compromising important views or pedestrian movement patterns.

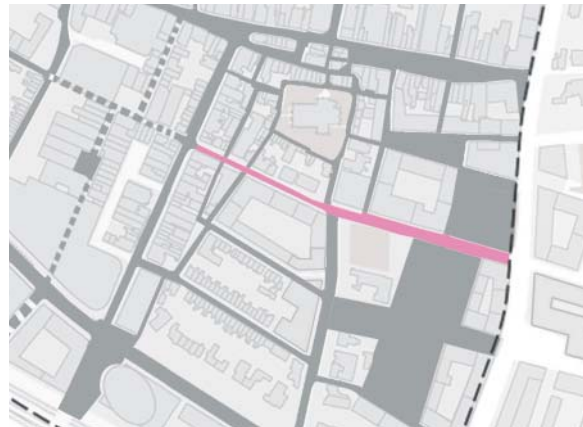


Prominence of High Street reduced by cluttered appearance

Principal Route

Tufton Street

- Tufton Street has been identified in the Movement Hierarchy as an important east-west route connecting the town centre with the Civic and Educational Quarter and existing residential areas further east. The street also contains a number of bus stops and therefore acts as a point of arrival in the town.
- The treatment of the street will place greater emphasis on pedestrian activity through the use of shared surface principals to create an integrated street.
- The layout and materials should reflect those already used at the western end of Tufton Street, at it's junction with Bank Street.
- Flush kerbs should be considered up to the junction with Church Road with nominal kerbs and raised bus kerbs where necessary used between Church Road and Station Road.



Principal Spaces

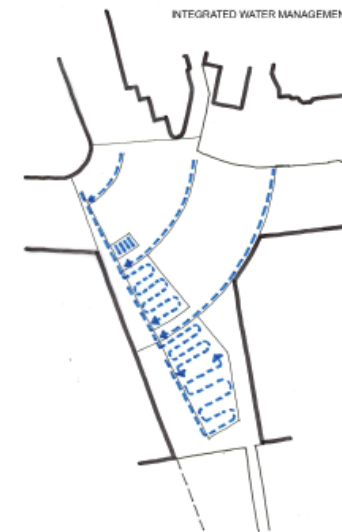
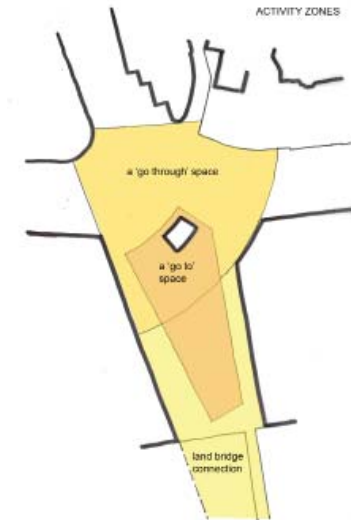
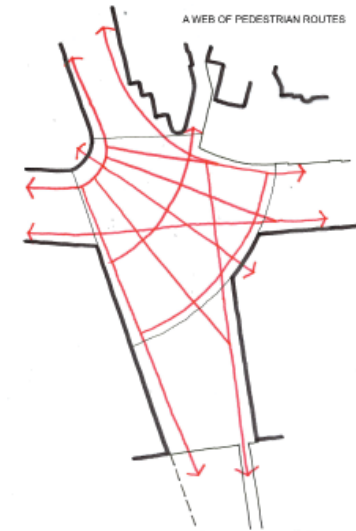
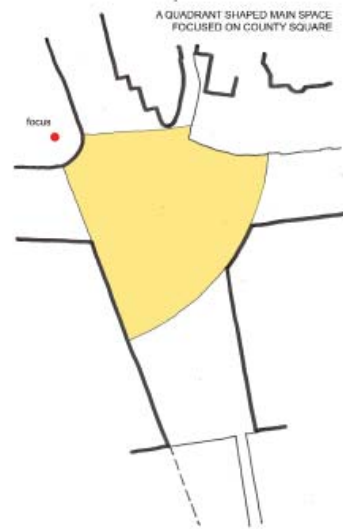
Elwick Square

- Elwick Square has been created at the intersection of the Learning Link, Elwick Road and Bank Street, and forms a southern gateway space into the key central axis which runs through the historic town centre.
- The extension to County Square acts as an earlier flagship development on the corner of Elwick Road and Bank Street, and forms a focus for the new square in the short term until future development helps give greater definition to the space along its southern edge.
- The square has been arranged / aligned to establish improved short term connections between the existing bridge and Bank Street. Development sites to the south of the new square should accommodate the longer term aspiration for improved connections to a wider 'Learning Link Bridge' structure. Existing level changes between the bridge and Elwick Square shall be removed to allow level access between the two.
- The junction of Elwick Road and Bank Street has been designed to facilitate free and shared movement of pedestrians and vehicles. A visually open and simple plaza with one continuous, high quality floorscape treatment in granite which extends across the entire space removing all barriers to movement and helping to maximise sightlines and the potential for eye contact amongst users.



Elwick Square- Completed works

- Activity around the space will be generated by active ground floor uses associated with the retail and commerce uses envisaged to the south. West facing elevations present the best aspect for external dining facilities. Opportunities also exist to accommodate a stand alone pavilion style coffee shop and or information pod in the centre of the space. This would benefit from the potential for south facing external dining space and help to bring a focus of activity to the heart of the square.
- Major artwork commissioned as a focal point within the square could also double as the café/pavilion structure.
- Opportunities also exist for integrating the educational story of water and integral water management systems such as exploiting existing level changes for underground storage and re-use of grey water for feeding water features (e.g. in Elwick Square), for irrigation, and for toilet flushing in adjacent buildings. This system should also allude to a link with the decorative drainage channel which stretches down the length of the Bank Street.



Concept design sketches of Elwick Square

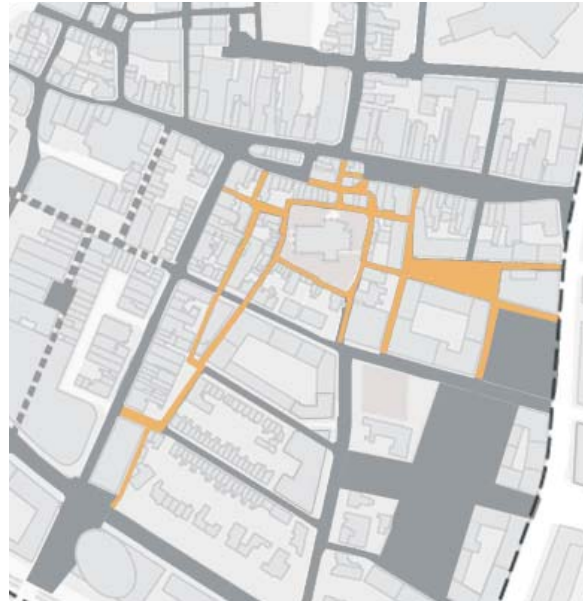
Secondary Routes and Spaces

St. Mary's Churchyard

- Although this space currently functions well as an intimate and peaceful retreat away from the busy High Street, low key improvements should be considered in order to lift the overall quality of this important historic space.
- Repaving the perimeter route in Yorkstone flags and the replacement of the existing drain with a Yorkstone channel would provide a simple high quality floorscape in appropriate materials.
- Opportunities also exist to reviews the existing street furniture and remove unnecessary items. The use of one-off bespoke designs for seating and other furniture in this space would be appropriate to help reinforce its identity as the Medieval heart of the town.

Pedestrian passageways and narrow lanes

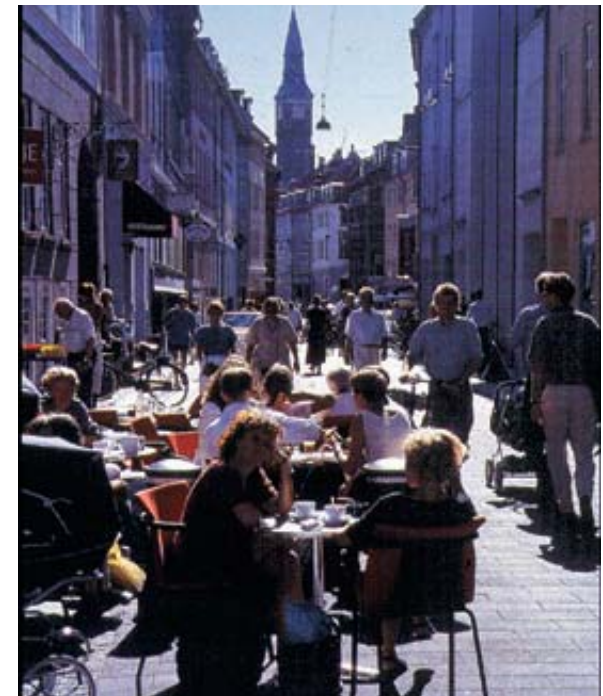
- The limited but highly distinctive network of narrow pedestrian passageways currently focused around St Mary's Church shall be extended westward into Bulls Yard, eastwards into the proposed development on Vicarage Lane car park, and through to the south across Tufton Street.
- The same high quality treatment proposed for the perimeter route around St. Mary's Churchyard should be extend throughout the proposed passageways to create a legible distinctive and interconnected network.



- Bulls Yard is currently privately owned but the physical connections already exist for this route to be opened up for public access.
- To the east of St Mary's opportunities for a possible connection between the Churchyard and the new development and network of passageways proposed on the existing Vicarage Lane car park.
- In the centre of the network of passageways to the east of St Mary's a new space shall be created (Vicarage Square). The form of this space should act to focus views towards the Church tower. Footways around the perimeter

of this space would allow the central area to be used as more of a passive space which could accommodate seating and an element of soft landscape.

- The space would be livelier in contrast with St Mary's Churchyard. Active ground floor uses such as cafes/bars and restaurants would provide opportunities for outdoor dining areas. A small stand alone pod style café/information point could be accommodated in this square.
- The height of development should respect views to St Mary's Church and limit overshadowing in the new square.



Paving could accommodate seating

Secondary Routes and Spaces

North of the Centre: Charter House and Park Mall

- Public realm improvements around Charter House should focus on the establishment of development to the south of Park Street to provide a frontage along this street, the downgrading of Park Street to create a shared surface with defined vehicular routes used primarily for access to adjacent developments and, the planting of a line of large trees around the perimeter of Charter house to establish consistent 'green edge' along adjacent streets and to provide scale to the monolithic building.
- The key to improving the public realm around the Park Mall area will be the creation of pedestrian links between the High Street and the residential areas to the north of the existing ring road. A simple, consistent and high quality treatment of these routes and active ground floor retail uses along the edges will encourage movement through these spaces. By way of contrast with the openness of the High Street, the scale of these routes and spaces should be similar to that seen in the medieval passageways around St Mary's Church, thus extending the existing fine grained urban form characteristic of the Town Centre. The height of development in this area should respect views from the High Street.



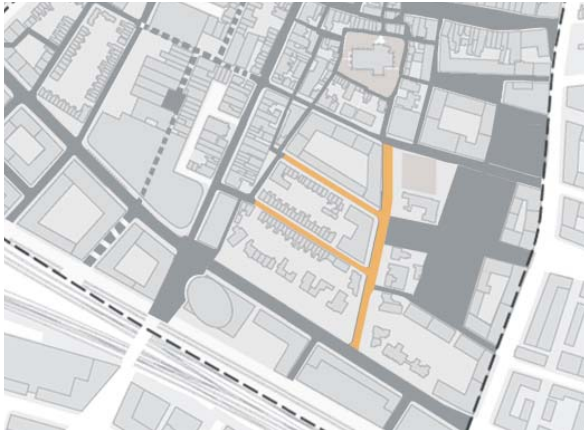
Fine grained urban structure around St. Mary's



Simple treatment of pedestrian links

Secondary Routes and Spaces

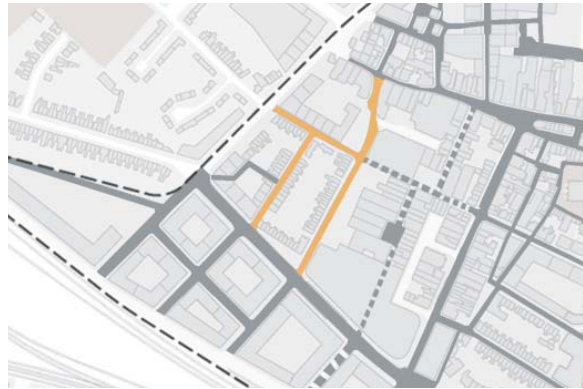
Minor roads located in and around character area 8



- The treatment of these minor routes (Queen Street, Norwood Street, Church Street, Tufton Street and Vicarage Lane) shall conserve and enhance their historic layout and character.
- New development between Tufton Street and Norwood Street should show sensitivity to its context, be in scale with the surrounding built form front directly onto the pavement.
- The existing streetscape is generally clutter free with tree planting limited to that planted within private plots along Church Street and Vicarage Lane.
- Public realm improvements shall respect the existing streetscape where the narrow residential streets are open in character, generally clutter free, and devoid of any street trees which would otherwise compromise near views along the terraced street frontages.

- Where new development is proposed on Church Street, between Norwood Street and Queen Street, some tree planting could be accommodated within the plot boundary facing onto the street. This would be in keeping with the characteristic facing onto the street. This would be in keeping with the characteristic leafy appearance of this street established by the canopy of mature trees planted within the forecourts to private properties.
- Proposed development on the site of the existing bowling green shall seek to retain existing mature trees which add to the character of Vicarage Lane.

Minor roads located in character area 12



- Regents Place and Apsley Street will be used primarily for by residents in properties around East Street and by service vehicles heading for County Square.
- The carriageway and raised footway arrangement along East Street, Regents Place and Apsley Street shall remain largely unchanged. New development along the

northern side of Regents Place will improve the frontage with small street trees providing some much needed greenery to this rather sparse street. Reduction in width or removal of the footway on the eastern side of Apsley Street would allow the harsh service yard brick wall to be softened with a combination of tree and shrub planting and improve the outlook of residential properties on the opposite side.



Simple environmental improvements to residential streets