

# **Formalising a Strategy to improve the visual appearance and operational function of Highworth Town Centre**



**A paper containing thoughts and ideas for discussion purposes**

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# 1. BACKGROUND

## Introduction

- 1.1 The strategy for putting forward proposals to improve the visual appearance and operational function of the Town Centre in Highworth is prepared by the Highworth Community Partnership Group (HCPG). It is a voluntary organisation comprising of local people who came together, in 2006, with the view of producing a local plan for the town. This became a reality with the adoption of the Highworth Neighbourhood Plan in July 2017.
- 1.2 HCPG has undertaken a review of the Town Centre of Highworth to confirm and understand its form and function. This exercise has identified a number of matters which HCPG consider are in need of immediate attention. This paper, and the complementary maps, is seen by HCPG as the start of the local debate.

## Development Plan

- 1.3 The Development Plan covering the Town Centre of Highworth is the adopted Swindon Borough Local Plan (2015) and adopted Highworth Neighbourhood Plan (2017). The two documents cover the period up to 2026 and 2020 respectively.

## Local Plan

- 1.4 The town of Highworth is identified by the Local Plan as being a suitable place for new development. Under Policy SD2 (c), the town is deemed to be a Primary Rural Settlement because it has a great range of services and facilities. It is also seen as being accessible.
- 1.5 The provisions of the second bullet point of Policy RA1 (a) seek to do the following:-

*“Development at Highworth shall be in accordance with Policies SD1 and SD2 and should support the following local priorities:*

- *Rejuvenation of Highworth Town Centre to create a lively, thriving and attractive focus for the town by:*
  - *Maintaining and enhancing the character and function of Highworth Town Centre.*
  - *Seeking that appropriate development contributes towards the improvement and unification of Highworth Town Centre and points of access to it.*
  - *Preventing the loss of existing shops, services and facilities from Highworth Town Centre.*
  - *Focusing shops, services and facilities at Highworth Town Centre in accordance with Policy SD2.*
  - *And improving the accessibility of Highworth by means of public transport, walking and cycling, and providing links to Swindon Borough's existing cycle infrastructure"*

1.6 The supporting text to the policy acknowledges that Highworth has a market town function within its catchment area and has a well-defined historic centre with a range of services. The Town Centre is considered to be small and suffers from a lack of 'critical mass' of shops sufficient to attract shoppers in significant numbers. Consequently, the need to maintain the viability of the shops is recognised by the town being able to accommodate new housing development.

1.7 The provisions of Policy EC3(c) defines Highworth as being a Primary Rural Centre. The policy seeks to protect the retail (A1) and non-retail (A2, A3, A4 and A5) function of the town centre's street frontage by imposing a 70%/30% threshold.

1.8 The provisions of Policy IN1 relates to the provision of local infrastructure. This is seen as being delivered in a variety of ways including on-site delivery integral to larger scale developments and through off-site investment in existing infrastructure within the vicinity of the development to mitigate the cumulative impact of it. The Local Plan considers that improvements to the public realm are covered by this Policy.

## Neighbourhood Plan

- 1.9 The Neighbourhood Plan put forward a number of objectives that relate to the town centre. These including the following:

Economic Development: Rejuvenate the town centre to create lively, thriving and attractive focus for the town.

Transport: Promote traffic and road solutions that meet current needs and plans for the future.

Arts and Culture: Use development contributions to fund community projects and infrastructure.

Protect buildings and features of local historic interest to preserve the rich and unique cultural heritage of Highworth.

- 1.10 As noted above, the town centre is deemed to be a Primary Rural Centre by the Local Plan. This status is acknowledged by the Neighbourhood Plan where the provisions of Policy 4 state the following:-

*“The town centre is defined as a Primary Rural Centre in the Local Plan (Policy EC3) and the continuation and rejuvenation of its retail and social hub in the town is strongly supported. Traffic and other environmental improvements that enhance the pedestrian and visitor experience, commercial vitality of the town centre will be sought”*

- 1.11 The supporting text to the policy advises that over the last 10 years the town centre has changed significantly. The nature of the shops is such that they sell services rather than sell goods.

- 1.12 The Neighbourhood Plan is supportive of tourism in the town. In this regard, the provision of Policy 5 state the following:-

*“Proposals for Daytime Cafes and Restaurant Uses (A3) in the Primary Rural Centre within the defined Primary Rural Centre daytime A3 uses (restaurants and cafes) will be encouraged,*

*provided that A1 retail uses occupy at least 51% of the street frontage”*

1.13 The HCPG has prepared a draft tourism strategy for the town and its countryside. This too acknowledges the role which the town centre can play.

1.14 The Neighbourhood Plans support for the funding of community projects and the provision of infrastructure stems from the need to extrapolate appropriate “planning gain” from residential and other development opportunities. Such funding would come forward under the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and/or s106 agreements and could be used, for instance, on the following projects:-

- Works required in relation to town centre regeneration
- Public Lavatories (now provided, see below)
- Podium (now completed)
- Fox Roundabout & Town Gardens improvements
- Cemetery extension
- Swindon Street
- Environmental improvements to Gilbert’s Lane
- CCTV in the High Street (now completed)
- Cycle facilities
- Children’s play areas
- Other open space improvements

1.15 In April 2015, planning permission (LPA Ref: S/14/2158) was given by the Borough Council to redevelop the existing toilet block. This involved demolishing the existing building and replacing it with another of better design (2 mixed use toilet facility, 1 disabled cubicle and a maintenance garage) and appearance (Cotswold stone walls and natural slate roof). The project was completed in 2017.

## **Other Material Considerations**

### **National Planning Policy Framework (2012)**

- 1.16 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is very supportive of town centres. It requires Local Planning Authorities, like Swindon Borough Council, to recognise town centres as the heart of their communities and pursue policies to support their viability and vitality.
- 1.17 The complementary terms of “vitality” and “viability” are seen in the context of them helping to confirm the health of a town centre. The former is a measure of how busy a town centre is, and the latter is a measure of its capacity to attract ongoing investment for maintenance, importance and adaptation to changing needs.

### **Conservation Area Assessment and Management Plan (CAAMP) (2006)**

- 1.18 The town centre of Highworth is located wholly within the town’s Conservation Area. The document recognises that “given the importance of ensuring the long term viability of the High Street it is vital to balance the commercial needs of the area against the needs of the historic environment.” This is important given that the town centre contributes, both positively and negatively, to its special character and appearance.
- 1.19 The CAAMP outlines the special architecture or historic interest that warrants designation of Highworth as a Conservation Area. The document identifies a number of negative elements affect the Conservation Area and puts forward enhancements to improve it.
- 1.20 The negative elements within the Conservation Area are identified by the CAAMP to include the traffic, particularly along Swindon Street, and the visual impact of the two public car parks located on Brewery Street. The CAAMP suggests that an environmental audit, followed by removal of gratuitous clutter and an agreed co-ordinated approach to new proposals, would significantly enhance the area.

- 1.21 The suggested enhancements relate to overhead power and telephone lines, intrusive road markings, redundant signage and inappropriate street furniture all detract from the visual amenity of the Conservation Area. This also includes the electricity substation in Brewery Street whose appearance is seen by the CAAMP as in need of improvement through landscaping and screening it.

## **2. HIGHWORTH TOWN CENTRE**

### **Introduction**

- 2.1 In January 2017, as part of the evidence base for the review of the Borough Council's Local Plan, Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners published a Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment for the Borough. This includes an assessment of Highworth Town Centre. The assessment considers that:-
- The town centre provides an important retail and leisure focus in the northern part of the Borough and although it will not attract large scale investment it should be the main focus for future town centre uses in this part of the Borough.
  - There are limited opportunities for development, which is constrained by the Conservation Area and historic built up fabric of the centre.
  - Options for development are likely to be limited to windfall opportunities and the future focus is likely to be small scale intensification and extensions.
  - In seeking to protect the retail function of the centre, consideration should be given to defining primary and secondary shopping frontages within the centre.
- 2.2 The document assesses the town centre in terms of how it is operating rather than how it looks. As noted above, it sees the Conservation Area as being a constraint rather than an opportunity. The HCPG would disagree with this and, in fact, endorses the need to undertake an environmental audit of the town centre as recommended by the CAAMP. The features to be appraised in the



environmental audit are set out in Appendix 1 to this paper. The HCPG acknowledges that the CAAMP includes much information in this regard but feels there are shortcomings particularly in the detail. As such, the list is not seen as being exhaustive.

## APPENDIX 1:

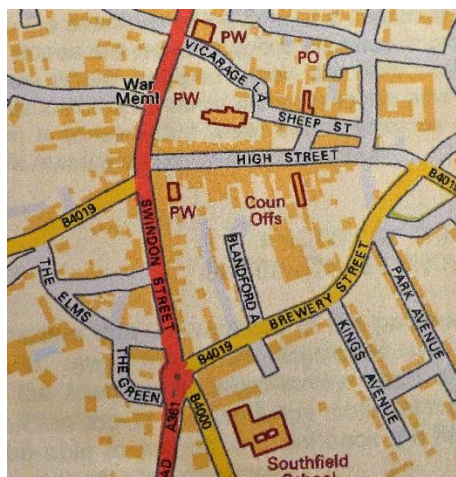
### MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION IN AN

### ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT FOR HIGHWORTH TOWN COUNCIL

#### **Area of strategy**

- 2.3 The CAAMP, in defining the boundaries of the Conservation Area, advises that it relates to the historic settlement pattern of the town i.e., its heart prior to the post war expansion. This includes the core streets of the High Street, Sheep Street, Market Place, Vicarage Lane and Swindon Street. The CAAMP also identifies other streets, and these include Brewery Street, The Elms, The Green, Cricklade Road, Eastrop, Parsonage Court and Cherry Orchard.
- 2.4 HCPG accepts that the designation of Highworth as a Conservation Area is derived from a number of architectural, historic and environmental factors and this includes the town's historic layout and street pattern. In the case of this paper, however, the town centre is defined as including the High Street, Sheet Street, Swindon Street, Brewery Street, Gilberts Lane and the Market Square.

**Figure 1: Extent of the Town Centre Strategy**



## Nature of improvements

### Visual

- 2.5 The provisions of Local Plan Policy DE1(d)(High Quality Design) specifically refers to the quality of the “public realm”. The supporting text states that the quality of the public realm is a key issue in creating and maintaining a sense of place and providing for social cohesion. The Local Plan considers that the public realm includes streets, hard and soft spaces and routes used by the public. It considers that streets perform a major role in defining the quality and character of the urban environment and so their detailed design and the integration of the buildings and other structures fronting them are key attributes to establishing local identity.
- 2.6 The CAAMP provides a very detailed review of the elements that contribute to the special character and appearance that warranted the tow centre being designated a Conservation Area in 1976. The document acknowledges that the Conservation Area has an overabundance of poorly maintained tarmac and gravel surfaces (See Appendix 2 photo 1). The CAAMP, under the heading of “floorspace” states the following:-

*“The floorscape of the conservation area is generally a black tarmac surface to both road and footway but there are areas where an earlier cobbled paving surface remains, for example at 2 and 3 Sheep Street (see Appendix 2, photo 2) The King and Queen Inn and along Vicarage Lane. Kerbs of Sarsen stone, a local stone noted for its durability, are common throughout the area. Stone setts and stone kerbs complement the natural stone used in buildings and walls and add to the character of the area. It is important to ensure that these traditional kerb stones are retained during Highway improvement works. This is especially true where dropped kerbs are introduced. The insertion of ‘foreign’ materials such as coloured concrete tactile paving can impact on the floorscape within a conservation area. Efforts must be made to ensure that more appropriate materials and methods are used”.*

APPENDIX 2:  
PHOTOS OF THE HIGH STREET AND SHEEP STREET SHOWING  
FLOORSCAPE.

**Photo 1: Patchwork of tarmac within the pavements on the High Street**



**Photo 2: Historic cobbles in Sheep Street**



- 2.7 HCPG considers that the removal of the patchwork of tarmac and its replacement with, say, traditional flagstones will improve the visual appearance of the town centre significantly. Such a flooring material has practical possibilities too in the statutory undertakers (i.e., gas, water and electricity) will be able to pull up and put back the flagstones and thus not make an obvious mess on the pavement.

### **Operational**

- 2.8 The CAAMP acknowledges the town's location is being beside a cross-roads where the north-south route, the A361 to Lechlade Road (called Swindon Street as it passes through the town), crosses a lesser route, the B4109 between Faringdon and Blunsdon. The document also acknowledges that east-west traffic is encouraged to avoid the High Street and use Brewery Street, being classed as part of the B4109 Blunsdon to Faringdon Road, while a fifth road branches from the A361 at a roundabout in the south of the town and heads towards Shrivenham. The consequence of this road hierarchy has resulted in the town centre having a distinct character.
- 2.9 The CAAMP considers that the High Street is bustling and contains a mix of shops and businesses facing each other across a roadway frequently lined with short-stay parked cars. The former market place is considered by the CAAMP to be a generous central open space used for parking on weekdays and local charter market on Saturdays. The CAAMP considers that as the High Street is not the main route through the town, then the town's shopping centre does not suffer from the high levels of noise and air pollution faced by towns whose commercial core sits astride a main road. It is seen by the CAAMP as being a relatively quiet and pleasant place to shop.
- 2.10 The CAAMP takes a very clear view on Swindon Street by stating that the A361 effectively dissects the town centre. The document sees the street as suffering from constant daytime through traffic and because of it being unusually wide it can be difficult to cross.
- 2.11 HCPG is conscious of Swindon Street's status as a through route for traffic. It is effectively a "gateway" to the town centre of Highworth

and how it looks, and functions is not helpful in giving a good “first impression” of Highworth and its town centre.

### **Improvement priorities**

- 2.12 Ideally, HCPG would like to implement all the improvements to the town centre at the same time. Consequently, it is accepted that this co-ordinated approach is not practical. In seeking to take matters forward, however, HCPG intend to prioritise the improvements by concentrating efforts on certain areas of the town centre.

#### **Priority 1: High Street, Sheep Street and Gilberts Lane**

- 2.13 HCPG agrees with the CAAMP that the town centre of Highworth is compact and focused on the centre of town, most notably, the High Street and Sheep Street. The document stresses that it is these two streets which contain the “cream of the areas 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings” and this is what gives the town “a particular architectural distinction not found elsewhere in the Borough”. The Market Square, including the podium, is an integral part of this part of the town centre.
- 2.14 In association with this, HCPG considers that Gilberts Lane also has an important role to play, particularly in respect of connecting the High Street with Brewery Street. This is acknowledged by the CAAMP in context of the historic burgage plots, located to the south of the High Street, being defined by “narrow lanes and archways”. In December 1999, for instance, planning permission (S/99/02218) and conservation area consent (SCC/99/02219) was given by the Borough Council to improve the function and appearance of Gilberts Lane and this included widening the alleyway and providing a new surface material in the form of paving blocks.
- 2.15 HCPG considers that the public realm of the two streets and the lane is in need of immediate attention. This relates to a good quality hard landscaping.

## **Priority 2: Swindon Street**

- 2.16 The CAAMP confirms that Highworth is an example of a medieval planned town, with market place, main street and church behind, laid out in a regular pattern. It acknowledges, however, that Swindon Street also performs a function by including a number of pubs, restaurants and fast food outlets.
- 2.17 The CAAMP indicates that the street, which is part of the A361, suffers from constant daytime through traffic and has a less historic ambience, except for the fine group of Georgian buildings on the crossroads beside the Highworth Hotel. It sees the street as being residential despite the presence of a hotel, pub and B&B and a number of take-away food outlets.
- 2.18 The street performs another function by allowing cars to park on the public highway unrestricted and this takes place on both sides of the carriageway. An area of concern to HCPG is the cars parked outside the Highworth Hotel and it is understood that these are local residents living in Swindon Street. The hotel occupies a prominent location on the crossroads which although controlled by traffic lights is very busy with traffic. Also, there are crossing points close by and the parked cars do utilise the pavement thus obstructing pedestrians. HCPG are aware that there is confusion over the ownership of the pavement in front of the hotel.
- 2.19 HCPG considers that there is a need to improve the visual appearance and function of Swindon Street. In terms of the former, this could be done by providing soft landscaping (specimen trees) at the centre of the carriageway and improving the quality of the shopfronts and signage. In terms of the latter, the removal and restriction (by suitable bollards) of the parked cars in front of the Highworth Hotel is considered by the HCPG to offer an improved safety situation for both road users and pedestrians. As a starting point, the ownership of the pavement in front of the hotel should be confirmed with the Borough Council, in its capacity as the highway authority. It is understood that there is a small charge for this service.
- 2.20 The need for additional car parking in the town centre is accepted. The HCPG considers that the existing car parking arrangements on Swindon Street should be changed from parallel parking to

perpendicular parking (herringbone) given that the carriageway is, as identified by the CAAMP, to be “unusually wide” allowing vehicles to pass without detriment to highway safety.

### **Priority 3: Brewery Street**

- 2.21 The CAAMP considers that Brewery Street is dominated by the Co-op supermarket where the building has a large flat roof area and tarmacked car park. It notes that Brewery Street is a Class B road that is used to avoid the High Street. The 1980’s upgrading of the road is seen by the CAAMP as helping to reduce the levels of traffic going through the High Street.
- 2.22 The CAAMP considers the Brewery Street car park to be very visible. It refers to the recycling facility as giving a “run down look” to the area but this is no longer in place having been relocated last year. The CAAMP considers that it is the electricity substation which dominates the street.
- 2.23 The HCPG would not disagree that its appearance could be significantly improved by it being screened by landscaping. The HCPG considers that the success of this will be dependent upon the landowners (Electricity Company and Arkells Brewery) being approached and included in this strategy.

### **Sources of funding**

#### **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)**

- 2.24 The Borough Council adopted its Community Infrastructure Levy in March 2015. It is effectively a mandatory tax on certain types of development and this includes housing (£55 per sq. m) and retail (£100 per sq. m).
- 2.25 The Neighbourhood Plan makes specific reference (Paragraph 4.4.4: Local Infrastructure Priorities) to the CIL. It confirms that the Town Council can benefit from 25% of the revenues from the CIL arising from the development that takes place in the local area.

## Planning Obligations

- 2.26 A planning obligation (known as a S106 agreements under the Town & Country Planning Act 1990) is private agreements made between local authorities and developers and can be attached to a planning permission to make acceptable development which would otherwise be unacceptable in planning terms. The land itself, rather than the person or organisation that develops the land, is bound by a Section 106 Agreement.
- 2.27 The planning obligation is a formal document, a deed, which states that it is an obligation for planning purposes, identifies the relevant land, the person entering the obligation and their interest and the relevant local authority, in this case Swindon Borough Council, that would enforce the obligation. The obligation can be a unitary obligation or multi party agreement and becomes a local land charge.
- 2.28 The common uses of planning obligations are to:-
- restrict the development of use of the land in any specific way
  - require specific operations or activities to be carried out in, on, under or over the land
  - require the land to be used in any specified way; or
  - require a sum or sums to be paid to the authority on a specified date or dates or periodically
- 2.29 The responsibility for extrapolating “planning gain” from developments is the responsibility of the Town Council. This is because they are the statutory consultee when it comes to making formal representation to the Borough Council in respect of planning applications.
- 2.30 In seeking to understand the process, HCPG would draw attention to a number of recent developments locally. These include the following:-
- Pentylands*
- 2.31 An application for outline planning permission (LPS Ref: S/11/0280) was submitted for 53 dwellings and associated works. The application was refused by the Borough Council and this was contested at appeal. This was allowed in 2012.



- 2.32 The legal agreement indicates that the developer made a financial contribution of £91,219 towards public realm. It is understood that this money was spent on improving the town centre of Swindon.

*Shrivenham Road*

- 2.33 In October 2017, full planning permission (LPA Ref: S/16/1781) was given for 50 dwellings along Shrivenham Road in the vicinity of Highworth Warneford School. This was subject to a legal agreement for the provision of affordable housing (30%) and a single financial contribution of £21,615 was made towards improving existing sport facilities in the town.

*Redlands*

- 2.34 An outline planning application (LPA Ref: S/OUT/17/1340) for 70 houses and associated works on land in the vicinity of Swindon Road and Redlands Close. The application is still pending. A review of the representations made so far indicate that the Borough Council, in its capacity as the highway authority, are seeking £6,000 from the developer towards to cost of a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO)

**Implementation of Improvements**

- 2.35 HCPG are conscious that in order to implement the improvements outlined in this paper the support of landowners will be needed. The town centre is owned by both the public and private sectors.
- 2.36 The roads and pavements are owned by the Borough Council in its capacity as the highway authority. The provisions of s278 of the Highways Act 1980 allow for works to be done in the public highway.
- 2.37 A number of landowners own Gilberts Lane, this includes private individuals as well as the Co-op supermarket.
- 2.38 The electricity substation on Brewery Street is owned by Southern Electric. The land within which it is located is owned, in part, by Arkells Brewery Ltd.

### **3. WAY FORWARD**

- 3.1 HCPG is very aware of the commitment in the Neighbourhood Plan to improving the town centre in Highworth. The group feels that this is just an aspiration at the moment and so in order to make it a reality there is the need to take the next step.
- 3.2 This short paper seeks to start the debate locally with the view of getting feedback from relevant stakeholders as to what direction to take as the status quo is not an option. It is hoped that a formalised strategy for the town centre will benefit everyone.
- 3.3. HCPG would very much like to have your views on the thoughts and ideas contained in this paper. You can send these to us by using the following contact details:-

Email us at:

Mr Keith Smith (Chair)

[contact@highworthpartnership.org.uk](mailto:contact@highworthpartnership.org.uk)

Write to us at:

Highworth Community Partnership Group  
c/o 35 High Street  
Highworth  
Wiltshire SN6 7AQ

Telephone: **01793 764372**

- 3.3 All comments received will be treated in the strictest confidence unless advised otherwise.

## **Extract from the Highworth Conservation Area Assessment and Management Plan (April 2008)**

### **Signage and Street Furniture**

#### Issue

- Street directional signs around conservation area are damaged and dirty.
- Inappropriate colour for waste bins, especially within sensitive High Street.
- Pavements are tarmac surfaces poorly detailed and laid in places.
- Inappropriate, insensitive signage over fast food outlets on Swindon Street.
- Inappropriate street lighting units along High Street.
- Insensitively detailed to listed front elevations.

#### Solution

- Replacement and or cleaning of existing road signs
- Clearer directional signs required to direct pedestrians and car users to High Street.
- Remove unsightly waste bins and provide more sensitive units.
- Enhancement scheme implemented to improve “floorscape” to pavement areas.
- Clearer advice and consultation in relation to advertising consents.
- Removal of obsolete street signage where appropriate.
- Liaise with Highways department to ascertain viability of more permanent solution to street lighting.
- Cellar areas under pavements present stability issue.

#### Action

Consultation with:-

- Planning & Conservation Department (at SBC)
- Liaison and co-operation with SBC Traffic Management & Highways.