

**Gillingham Town Centre
masterplan**
Final Report

November 2018



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Medway Council commissioned Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design, working with The Retail Group and Citicentric, to devise a masterplan and delivery strategy for Gillingham town centre.

The work was commissioned as one of three studies for town centres within Medway, the other two being Strood and Chatham. Whilst the studies were separate pieces of work, it is acknowledged that there are strategic issues that cover each of the three centres.

The aim of the work is to inform the strategy and delivery of the new Local Plan, which is progressing at the current time and is expected to be submitted, following further consultation of the options for growth, during 2019. The purpose of this document is to:

- Advise on appropriate approaches to development, given consideration of a comprehensive range of contextual matters, such as heritage, access, design, transport, environment, strategic ambitions for Medway's development, mix of development needs, including housing, employment, retail, leisure and community uses.
- Assess the development potential of identified opportunities within the town centre, particularly for residential-led mixed use schemes, including use of upper floors to commercial and residential uses.
- Identify opportunities to strengthen links with regeneration areas and develop high quality and functional connections, particularly supporting walking and cycling.
- Identify the ability to deliver to the development potential in the plan period, including viability and landowner intentions, the market testing of proposals, and provide recommendations to enable sites to come forward for development. This will be presented in a delivery strategy to support the opportunities in the masterplan.

About Gillingham

Gillingham is a town located in north west Kent, one of the cluster located principally on the south side of the Medway estuary. The Medway towns comprise Strood, Rochester, Chatham, Gillingham and Rainham and together the urban area is roughly 30 miles east of central London. Medway Council is the local authority, covering both sides of the Medway estuary.

The southern side of the river estuary is well developed and urban, whilst the northern side – the Hoo Peninsula – is largely undeveloped, containing small scattered settlements.

History

The historic origins of Gillingham as a settlement are a couple of miles east of the current town centre in Grange. This hamlet was described in the Domesday Book.

However, Gillingham's current centre has its origins in more recent history with the growth of the Chatham Docks. From the early nineteenth century, Brompton was the original planned village for dock workers at the Naval Docks. Gradual expansion of the military buildings meant Brompton could not itself expand as the institution did. Land was required to be found to house a growing working population beyond the dockyards defensive lines; this was initially known as New Brompton, now the junction between Brompton Road, Mill Road and the High Street. The open space between the docks and Gillingham - the Great Lines Heritage Park - has historical significance associated with the dockyard, and is protected with the Brompton Lines Conservation Area.

The railway station was established in 1858, originally to serve the expanding workforce and community. It became Gillingham as the settlement grew and absorbed New Brompton. The route between the railway station and 'New Brompton' became the High Street visible today, and the main commercial centre for these neighbourhoods.

Originally a through street, some older citizens remember the presence of cars in the street prior to pedestrianisation in the 1970s or 80s, and this period, depicted on vintage postcards, is fondly remembered as a time when the High Street prospered.

Gillingham town centre - wider context

Gillingham's growth and the town centre's location has always given it a local focus, and the greater emphasis and attraction of the activities on the river, alongside the major transport movement on the A2, has meant that the town centre is always competing with other locations. Unlike Chatham and Rochester, the centre is off the A2, away from significant vehicular movement and disassociated from the river, and perhaps disadvantaged because of this.

The town centre also has a number of competing destinations a short distance from it.

A major business park on the A2 (Gillingham Business Park) is three miles south east of the town centre and provides a estate / campus style environment for a variety of businesses alongside providing leisure activities (ice rink, trampoline park) and mixed retail (B&Q, Aldi, Pets at Home). The Dockside Outlet Shopping Centre a couple of miles to the north west provides further shopping in an outlet format alongside further leisure provision (cinema) and food and drink. A large format Asda store is east of the outlet centre along Pier Road.

Gillingham is less than two miles from the main town centre in the area, Chatham and less than five miles from the out of centre shopping mall, Hempstead Valley Shopping Centre. Bluewater, 16 miles to the west, is also an attractive draw for regional shopping and leisure facilities. Whilst Chatham has some evening activities within the town centre, Rochester's evening leisure offer is also popular within Medway.

There are opportunities for additional housing to be delivered through the regeneration of waterfront areas in Gillingham, particularly north of Pier Road. These areas, however, lack good direct access to Gillingham town centre yet are close to other out of town leisure and shopping opportunities.

The town centre is also within walking distance of the Medway Maritime Hospital and the Priestfield Stadium, suggesting that there could be potential to link trips to these places with activities in the town centre, although this may be limited because of the nature and frequency of visits to both football matches and the hospital.



Vintage postcards of Gillingham town centre just after pedestrianisation (Stephen Carr)

Gillingham Town Centre

Wider context



Located within north Kent, Gillingham is one of Medway towns alongside Strood, Rochester, Chatham and Rainham.

Gillingham's town centre is at the heart of the town, close to the railway station and surrounded by residential development, but within a short distance of the bigger town centre at Chatham.

The railway station at the eastern end of the High Street offers access directly into the centre and the town centre is well connected with surrounding streets, particularly on the northern side, though connections to the south are more constrained due to the railway.

The town centre is within walking distance of two significant educational institutions to the north west which comprise a learning campus and the sports and leisure centre, Medway Park. The latter has a large car park close to the western end of the High Street. The town centre may also benefit from being close to significant neighbouring land uses including Medway Maritime Hospital and Gillingham's football stadium.

North of Gillingham, at the riverside, are two out-of-centre retail and leisure hubs (Dockside Outlet Centre and the Asda).

To the southwest, Chatham town centre is the largest town centre in Medway, offering a higher order of shops and services. Chatham has an established evening economy based around a range of activities, including a theatre and bingo hall, though the combination of this and the food and drink offer is not yet retaining a strong evening economy. North of Chatham is the Maritime Docks Heritage Area (Chatham Dockyard), which is a significant tourist attraction.

The area between Chatham town centre and Gillingham town centre is occupied by the Great Lines Heritage Park, a significant open space and conservation area, which is wrapped up in the maritime history of the area.

Key:

	Study area		Protected open space
	Major roads		Other green areas
	Railway		River Medway
	Train stations		Major land uses / destinations
	Walking distances		Core retail areas
	Out-of-centre leisure / retail attractions		Retail allocations (2003 Local Plan)
			Educational and leisure facilities

Gillingham Town Centre

Site and surroundings

The study area

The town centre is essentially the High Street between the station and the war memorial at the Brompton Road junction. Much of this street is pedestrianised (all but the extreme eastern and western ends, where the traffic arrangements are complex). The larger units are located at the eastern end of the High Street and the smaller, more independent units tend to be at the western end. The quality, age and condition of buildings is variable, as is the public realm, but the street is largely well defined by building fronts and consistent at 2 – 3 storeys in height. The retail core comes some way south along Canterbury Street, and there is a cluster of older buildings – notably the former Technical College – south of the High Street on Green Street.

The High Street changes in character through its course, with the eastern end feeling different to the western end owing to the relative absence of trees and street furniture and the lower buildings flanking the street. The higher built form and more obvious presence of trees and seating makes the western end feel more enclosed and perhaps more pleasant. The space in the eastern end allows a twice-weekly market to exist (on Monday and Saturday) along the extent of the street. This market offers a clear opportunity to the town in terms of a potentially more distinctive and diverse offer.

The town centre lacks a circuit, is wholly linear in form and feels long. The most obvious opportunity for change, and the biggest floorspace, is the vacant superstore on Jeffery Street. This site is linked to the High Street by a very low quality pedestrian connection. It is located some distance from the primary retail frontages, but houses a lower ground floor car park beneath the store.

Surroundings

The surrounding environment north and south of the town centre is dominated by two-storey terraced housing on a grid-type street pattern. There are several infill developments and blocks that have changed that general rhythm, and the railway cuts through it on the southern side which also acts as a barrier to the town centre. Some routes from the housing to the south to the town centre are quite circuitous.

The station bookends the defined town centre at the eastern end. Balmoral Street runs south from the station and just off it lies an Aldi and the new healthy living centre. The Aldi trades well, and could be linked back to the town centre more effectively. The health centre has a car park and landscaped public garden, which appears to be popular. Footpaths lead

over the railway and into the back of the High Street and Green Street (neither attractive, clear or particularly safe) and back to the station making this site strategically important for the town centre.

Green Street has two major land users in the Post Office Delivery Office and the Telephone Exchange, both of which could be seen as opportunities.

At the western end of the High Street, the urban form of Gillingham gives way to the more open form of the Great Lines Heritage Park, itself part of the wider Brompton Lines Conservation Area. The conservation area encompasses much of the land to the north of Chatham and west of Gillingham, taking in Brompton, the Brompton and Kitchener Barracks, the Naval Memorial and the Lines themselves. Whilst the town centre is excluded from the conservation area, the 'eastern edges' of the designation - the western edge of Gillingham fronting Mill Lane and Marlborough Road - is all within it, along with the buildings at Medway Park.

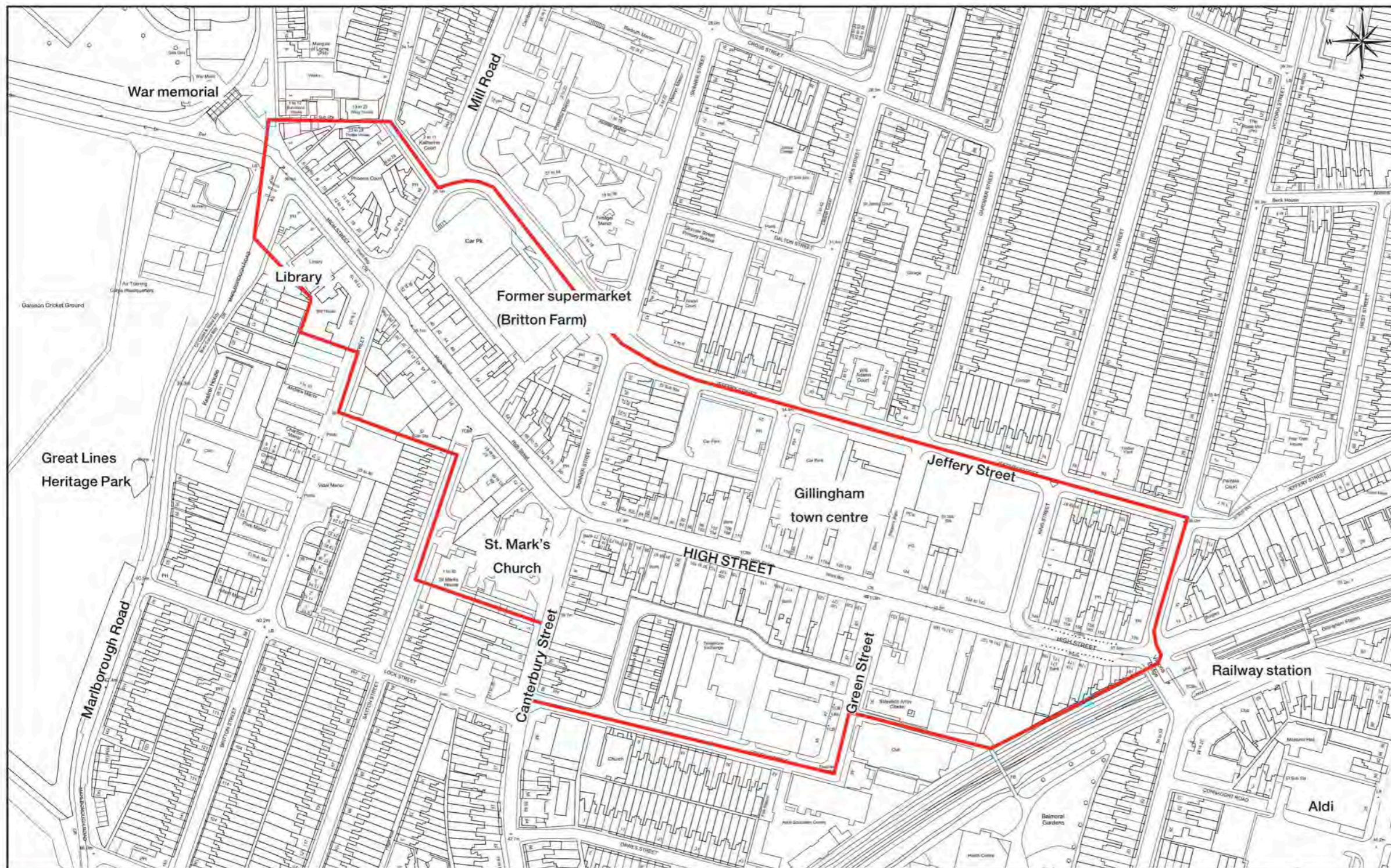
The Conservation Area Appraisal describes the history and importance of the Lines and its relationship to the development of the Naval Dockyard. The 'eastern edges' of the conservation area - this fringe of western Gillingham - is described as the desirable part of the town during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for their views over the wide open spaces and leaving the town with a legacy of, 'some of the most distinguished architecture in Gillingham'. This legacy, though diminished by alterations over time, continues to make Mill Lane and Marlborough Road, and their junction with Brompton Road, a key opportunity for the western entrance to the town centre.

Medway Park which, as a centre of regional significance to sport and leisure, offers a wide range of indoor and outdoor facilities for the community across all ages and abilities. The centre has links to the nearby universities and provides a large car park which is within easy walking distance to / from the High Street. The Great Lines Heritage Park, beyond the western end of the High Street and south of Medway Park, is historically associated with the dockyard further west and is protected as a conservation area. It does provide a walking route to Chatham a mile or so to the south west.

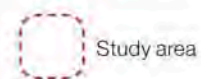
North west of the town centre is the University of Kent School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Mid Kent College Gillingham Campus, the University of Kent and the University of Greenwich. These tend to be large institutions in their own grounds and have a clear impact on movement. Their activities will attract young people to the study area which may mean that the students use local facilities or the establishments could have some influence in the town centre.



The High Street



Key:



Study area

The study area comprises the length of the High Street, from the railway station in the east to the war memorial in the west. This is where most of the retail and commercial activity in central Gillingham takes place.

The railway station is an important entrance point into the town centre, and the area around the station saw investment prior to the Olympics. The station provides direct train services to London, including into St. Pancras on the High Speed 1 route.

The main national shops are located between King Street and Canterbury Street, with Wilko, Iceland and Poundland represented, among others. This is a pedestrianised environment, with cars and public transport diverted from High Street up King Street to Jeffery Street.

Canterbury Street separates the High Street into western and eastern stretches. Canterbury Street has a number of bus routes that use it, and there are bus stops close to the High Street, particularly adjacent to St. Mark's Church. The church itself is a key building on the street.

The western side of High Street is also pedestrianised to Britton Street. It has a number of independent stores and cafés along it.

At the western end of the study area is the junction with Mill Road and Marlborough Road. The Medway Park leisure facility is close to this junction.

Green Street and Jeffery Street are also in the study area. Green Street has a cluster of older buildings. Jeffery Street is the site of the former Budgens supermarket, a site that has been vacant for many months.

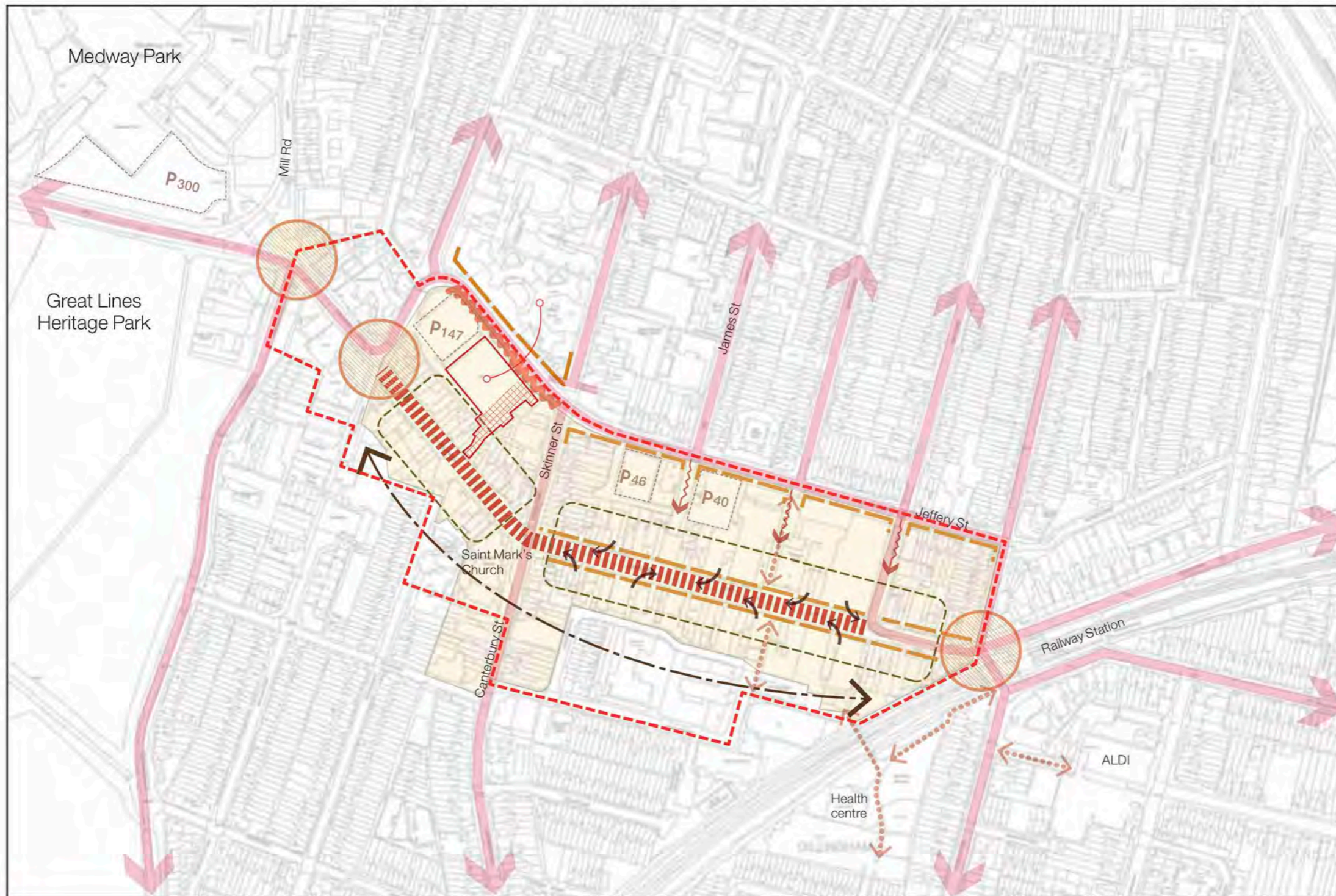
Close to the study area are Aldi on Duncan Road, Balmoral Gardens and the health centre off Balmoral Road and Randolph Road and the Great Lines Heritage Park which, at the western end of the High Street, offers open space and a walking route to Chatham.

Site Analysis

In order to advise on the potential for the town centre, and any possible policy direction in the emerging Local Plan, the current state and status of the town centre was assessed. This included the physical characteristics of the town, the traffic movement, the distribution of uses and other factors. This section sets out the constraints that exist in the physical fabric, and the opportunities there that can inform future strategy.

Gillingham Town Centre

Overview of constraints



Key:

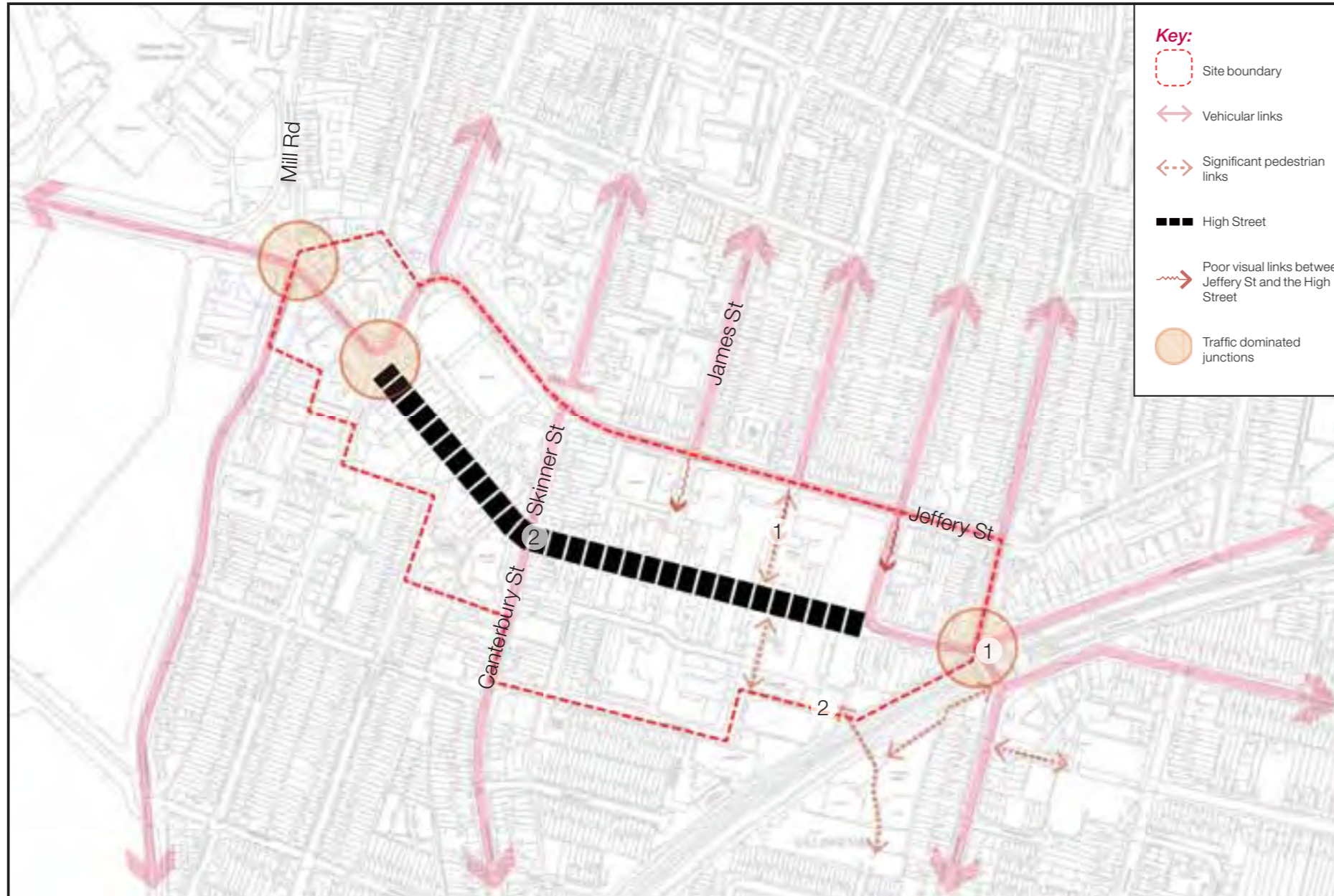


Gillingham town centre has several disadvantages that need to be addressed.

- Whilst accessibility to the town centre is good, visual and physical links between the High Street and the surrounding streets is poor. Connections to the south of the town centre can be indirect (principally owing to the railway).
- The High Street is generally in a tired, poor condition, particularly the public realm and some of the shop façades, It can undermine any sense of security or safety.
- The existing parking areas are large, well used and located close to the High Street. However, these sites are also opportunities where development could take place. There is a tension between possible development opportunities and the perceived need for parking.
- The length of the pedestrianised part of the High Street – between the station and Medway Park – is physically long and perceptually long. Shops and services are thinly spread, and there is no circuit.
- Britton Farm is in a poor condition, retaining parking underground and some retail functions (café, market) within the covered area between the High Street and Jeffery Street. However, owing to its condition it is significantly underused and has poor, unattractive links to the High Street despite being directly connected. Refurbishment would significantly increase usage.
- There are a number of poor frontages along the High Street, most prominently at Iceland and Wilko at the eastern end. However, shopfronts are generally poor and upper floors can be neglected. This does not make for an attractive town centre environment for residents and visitors alike.
- The main traffic junctions at both ends of the High Street are traffic dominated and intimidating for pedestrians and cyclists. This is a particular issue at the railway station.

Gillingham Town Centre

Constraints to movement



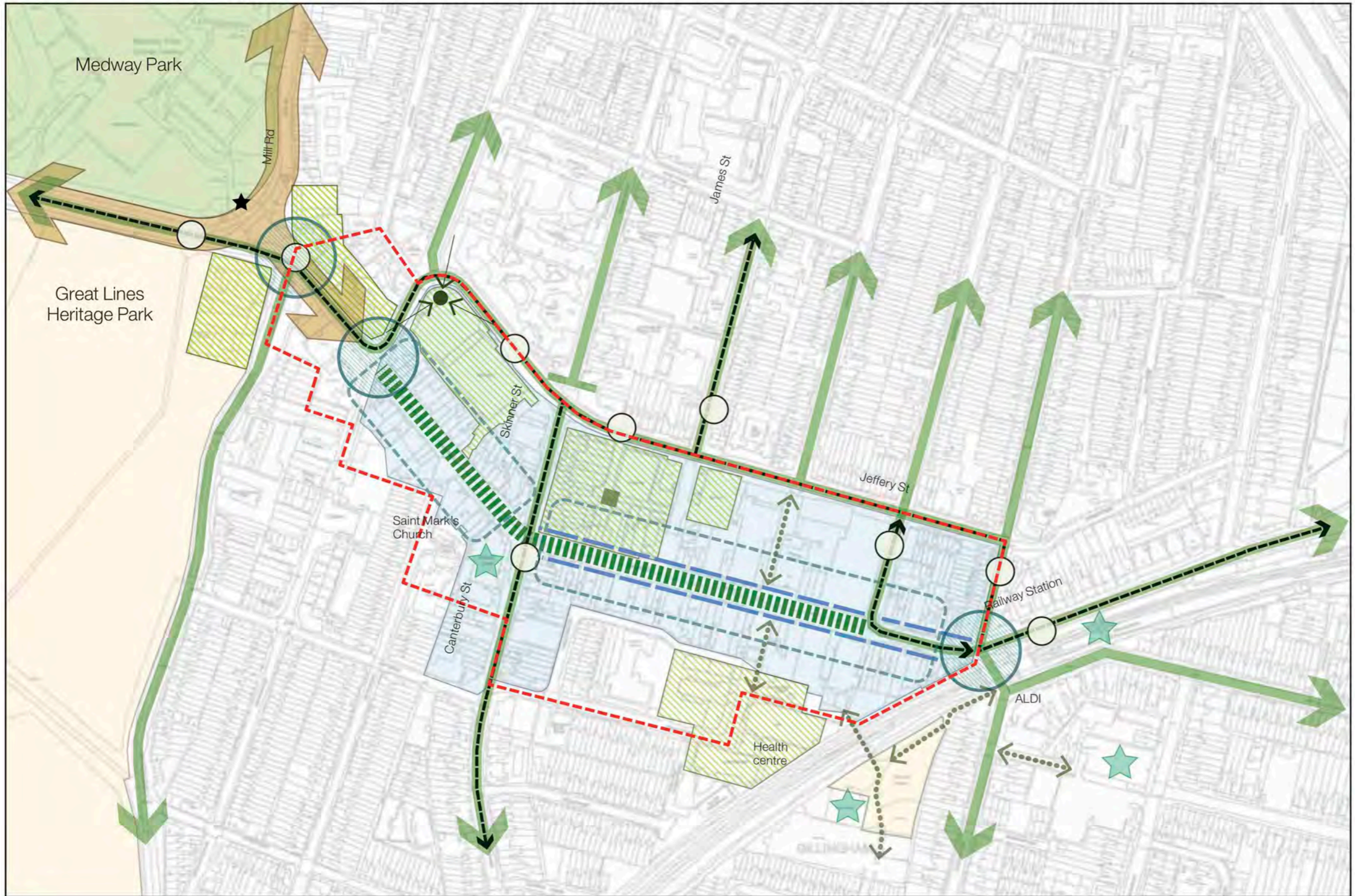
- Gillingham town centre is accessible because streets connect to the High Street - particularly from the northern residential areas - and because of the proximity of the rail station and bus routes. However, the pedestrian links and the quality of the public realm often undermine the effectiveness of pedestrian and cycle routes.
- Despite the potential for good accessibility from surrounding streets and public transport, the final links into the High Street are poor (e.g. Sappers Way), and the southern side of Jeffery Street presents a poor and unattractive front which may compromise the High Street (1).
- Jeffery Street itself is a busy road, taking all vehicular traffic around the High Street / town centre. This road is a potential barrier for people walking to the town centre before they even reach the links to the High Street. There are crossing points, but not always in locations that suit pedestrian desire lines.
- Some potentially significant links - particularly those to the Aldi on Duncan Street via Connaught Road, and links from Balmoral Gardens across the footbridge to Green Street, and the station, are underplayed making them feel indirect and unappealing (2).
- The 'gateway' junctions to the town centre seem to prioritise traffic movement, and do not welcome those on foot into the town centre. At the western side, the priorities are unclear and traffic dominates; at the eastern end the railway station has a complicated road layout to the front alongside numerous different land uses which could be improved as the entrance to the High Street (3).
- The length of the High Street is problematic, as the distance between the station and Britton Street / Medway Park feels too long. The lack of footfall and variety and the poor quality overall contributes to this perception of distance (4). Additionally, there is no opportunity currently for circulation or variety in routes - the shopping centre is a linear street and little else.

Left to right: Sappers Walk; the footpath between Balmoral Gardens and Green Street; the road junction at the station; the pedestrianised area in High Street (East)



Gillingham Town Centre

Overview of opportunities



Key:

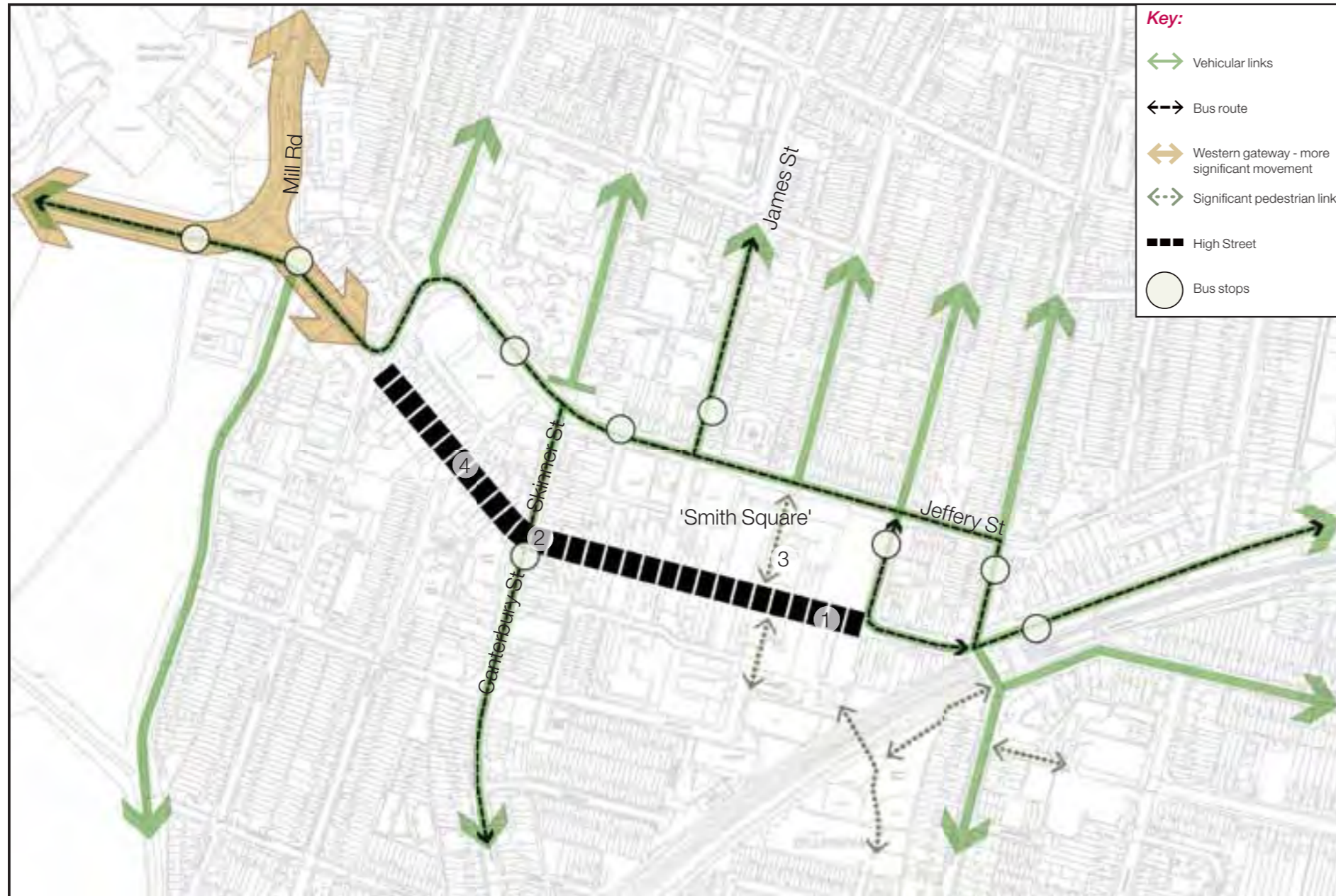
Study boundary	Western gateway - more significant movement	Poor quality elevations	Prominent point	Bus stops	Core retail area
Bus routes	Vehicular links	Destinations	Retail allocation (Local Plan 2003)	Character areas	Opportunity area
Significant pedestrian links	High Street	Listed buildings	Gateways		

Gillingham's town centre has a number of positive elements that can be improved, and important existing assets that can be used to support the role of the centre.

- The town centre is very accessible, with a high number of links directly into the High Street from the nearby residential areas and car parks. Surrounding residential areas are dense, suggesting a large catchment within easy reach of the High Street.
- Bus routes to and through the town centre are numerous, linking with the High Street at the railway station, the war memorial and at the Canterbury Street junction. Several bus stops are located on nearby Jeffery Street (Appendix C).
- Within the town centre there are effective non-vehicular links which, though currently poor, provide safe and traffic free access to and from car parks and transport nodes.
- The scale and width of the High Street is attractive and relatively unconstrained, providing opportunity for public realm improvements and possible access for vehicles to animate it at certain times.
- Buildings face the High Street, which provide a sense of activity and a certain sense of safety and enclosure.
- There are 'opportunity areas' - clusters of vacancy or under-use, or previously identified sites - which could be looked at for redevelopment or reuse. These have potential to support, diversify and add to the range of activities along the High Street and to make it more attractive for both local communities and visitors.
- The High Street has different 'character areas' along it; the western end has some sense of intimacy and enclosure, whilst the eastern end has larger retail units and a more open character and lower buildings. This provides an opportunity to consider distinct objectives for particular parts of the High Street.
- The western gateway to the town centre, at Mill Road / Marlborough Road, is well used with a combination of the car park, Medway Park and the proximity of the universities contributing to a hub of activity and emerging cluster of services in this area

Gillingham Town Centre

Opportunities to improve and encourage movement



- The town centre is highly accessible from the residential areas to the north. Its proximity to the railway station and to bus stops surrounding the High Street offers a opportunity for increasing the number of users within the retail core.
- The High Street has potential through its width and character to be re-thought; the current pedestrianised High Street is tired, but simple in its design, offering scope for a consideration of a variety of interventions aimed at improving its appeal. This could be simply about improving the public realm, but it might include re-introducing vehicles in some form to provide that animation (1).
- Though direct, the pedestrian routes feeding the High Street within the eastern half of the town centre (and particularly Sappers Walk, 2) are often neglected and don't encourage active use. They do, however, represent an opportunity for improvement, particularly for access and permeability, but also in supporting a stronger identity for the town centre.
- Two key routes, from Green Street and from Sappers Walk, converge on an informal square, known locally as 'Smith Square'. With the post office set back from the building line on the north side, a natural stopping point and focus emerges for the High Street.
- Existing bus stops (3) are well located around the town centre and rail station, and are close to places of interest such as Medway Park and the library. Bus services to and from Gillingham, around Medway, are good.
- Students coming from Mid Kent College and Universities of Kent and Greenwich use Mill Rd to access the sports centre at the western end of the High Street. Combined with its proximity to Great Lines Heritage Park, the western side of the study area has the potential to be developed as a district area for evening uses to support the other functions of the town centre (4).

Left to right: eastern exit from the pedestrianised area; Sappers Walk; bus stop on Jeffery Street; western gateway at Mill Road and Brompton Road



Gillingham Town Centre

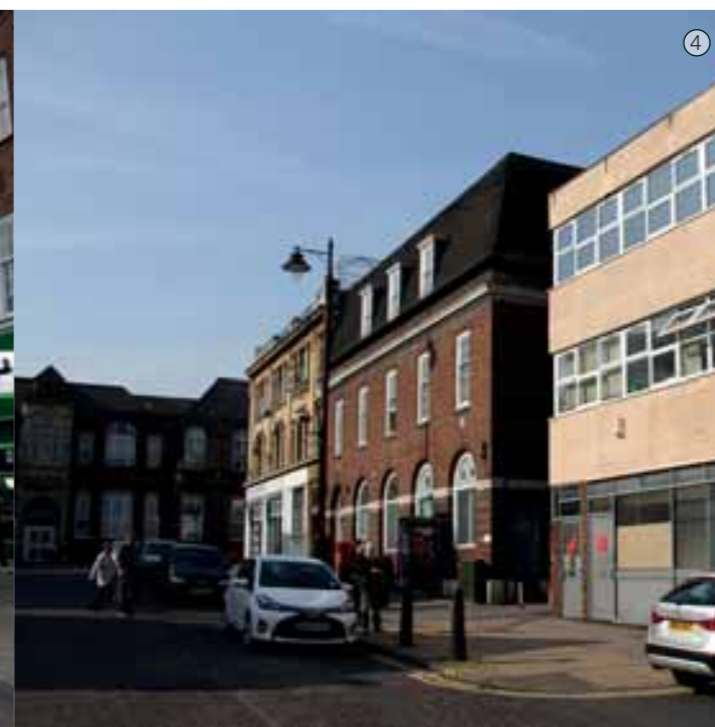
Places with potential for change



There are a number of places within and around the town centre that could be considered as having potential for change, either because they are currently underused, or because of a shared characteristic:

- 1a/1b - is located at the western end of the High Street, close to Medway Park and the Great Lines Heritage Park. Currently there's a mix of offices, homes, pubs and restaurants but considering the good quality of buildings, their location and exposure to visitors, they have further potential, particularly in providing uses that could support for an evening economy.
- 2 - Britton Farm is prominent on Jeffery Street and accessible from the High Street. The empty building and large servicing area and under-utilised car park provide the biggest single opportunity in Gillingham town centre.
- 3a/3b - 3a is a retail allocation site identified within the Local Plan 2003, though it remains undeveloped. Along with the neighbouring car park, site 3b, the site comprises poor quality small retail and residential units and surface parking for approx. 100 cars, though considered together could provide a larger opportunity. To assemble all the interests within the site to allow development would be significant.
- 4 - within Green Street, on the south side of the High Street, are a cluster of underused and vacant buildings. They vary in type and quality, though the former Technical Institute has a presence rare in Gillingham.
- 5 - the area closest to the railway station is again a mix of small scale retail development and services mixed with residential development. Given its proximity to the station, it may be an area where more intense development could be encouraged or promoted, whilst also improving the entrance to the town centre from the railway station.

Left to right: western gateway at High Street; Britton Farm from Fox Street; the former retail allocation on High Street; buildings on Green Street; the eastern block at the railway station



Built environment

Gillingham's High Street is a long, linear stretch of commercial activity connecting the railway and the leisure centre, and within this is a great deal of variety. Understanding how this changes along the High Street may also inform the way future policy works in the town centre.

Town centres are changing quickly across the country as retail habits change and the way we interact changes. Town centres with a local focus, like Gillingham, need to adapt and continue to appeal to the people who rely on it. To some extent the quality of the environment and the ability of that environment to change and adapt is as important as the offer the centre makes.

The nature of Gillingham's town centre buildings and spaces is explored here.

Gillingham Town Centre Character Areas



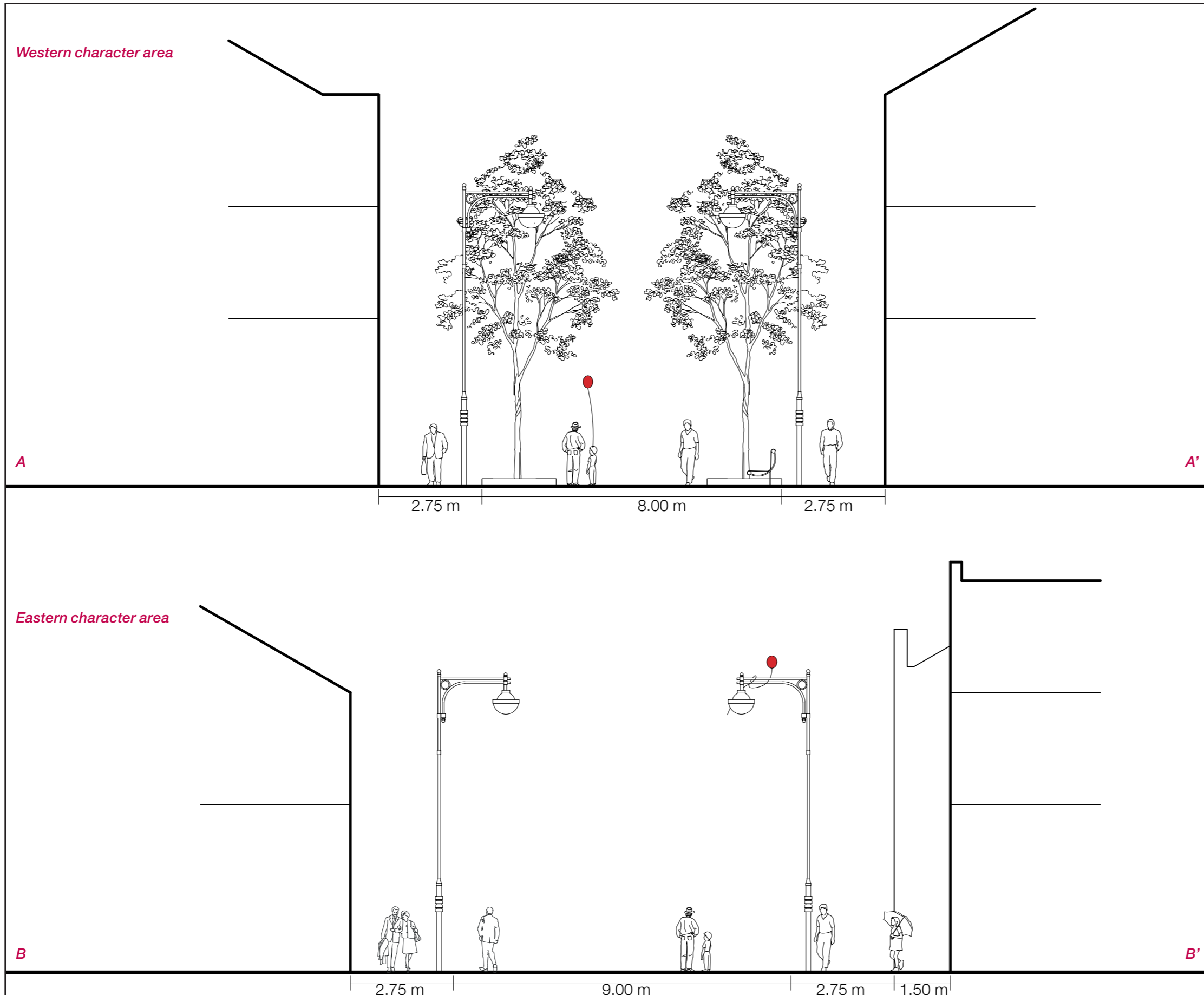
- The **High Street** has a different character either side of Canterbury Street (see sections).
- The western side is more attractive; the High Street is perceived as narrower due to the different layout of the public realm, the larger number of trees, the general physical state of the buildings and their height. Secondary uses and food and drink uses are comfortable here (1).
- The eastern side feels wider and more open, less intimate (which is not necessarily inappropriate for its predominant retail function). It also has some low quality façades, through poor signage and / or materials or the condition of upper floors (lack of use or underuse or vacancy). This compromises the possible sense of security through overlooking onto the High Street, particularly when the shops are closed, which may undermine safety after dark (2).
- The nature of the two sides may lend them to different uses. Further, the vacancy at Britton Farm (dealt with on page 16) seems to undermine the retail potential west of Canterbury Street.
- The number of residential units is greater on the western than the eastern side of the High Street. This can influence the extent to which users and residents have a sense of place or feel attracted by the area.
- Frontages on the south side of **Jeffery Street** contain parking areas, the back side of retail units fronting the High Street or poor quality buildings (the northern side is continuous terraced housing). This street does not attract people through to the town centre beyond and could be improved.

Left to right: the environment in the west of the High Street contrasts with that in the east; Jeffery Street is dominated by the back of buildings, spare land and car parks



Gillingham Town Centre

Characteristic sections



- Whilst the western and eastern areas of the High Street have a set of common features, their character is different.
- While both of them have similar dimensions and host similar activities, the eastern side of the High Street is perceived as out of scale due to its width, buildings' height and the lack of street furniture. The small number of residential units along this section contributes, as well, to the general feeling of emptiness.
- The western side of the core retail area is characterised by a different ratio between the built environment height and public realm width and hosts different activities and a larger number of street furniture elements. As a result, the area offers a sense of place and a "warmer" feeling to both visitors or users.
- The sections here are based upon the different parts of the High Street and seek to demonstrate this point.

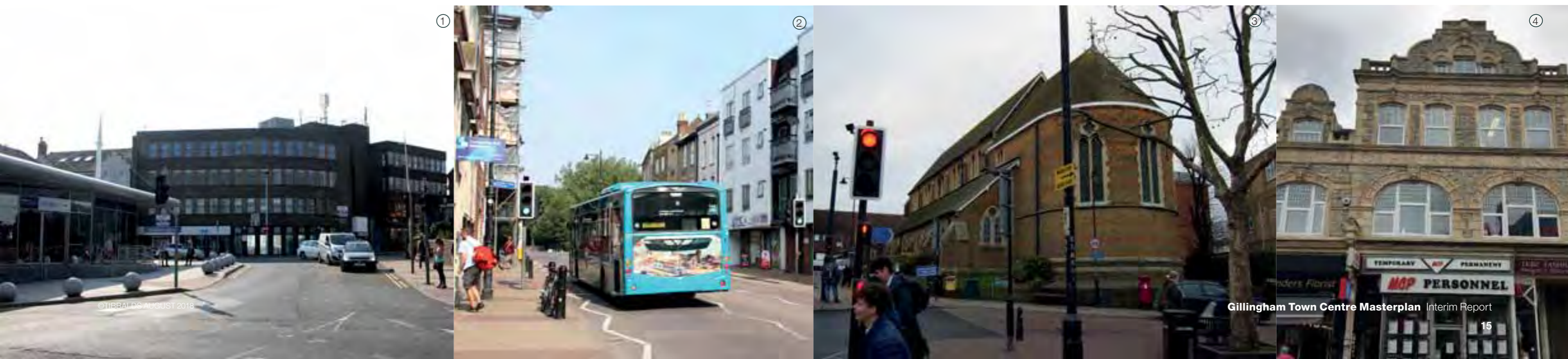
Gillingham Town Centre

Key elements of High Street



- Whilst the High Street has some buildings of merit, the dominant impression - particularly within the eastern part of the High Street - is of poor elevations and a poor streetscape.
- The eastern side has a lower number of high-medium quality buildings compared to western side. The western side also has a greater sense of place and intimacy. These different senses may be important in developing a strategy for the town centre in terms of its uses and functions.
- The identified gateways bookend the High Street. The eastern gateway (1) is adjacent to the station; the western gateway at the convergence of Medway Park, the High Street and the Heritage Park (2). They both have busy road junctions that may be intimidating or detrimental to the movement of pedestrians or cyclists. They are important points at which to focus improvements and draw people into the High Street.
- The set-back of the building housing WHSmith and the post office creates a natural focal point for the eastern end of the High Street. Known locally as Smith Square, this place already hosts some events, such as the Christmas Lights switch on.
- There are some key buildings that stand out as adding interest and identity to the High Street. These include St. Mark's Church (3), but also some of the commercial buildings along the street, particularly those from the Victorian and Edwardian era (4).
- The High Street's junction with Canterbury Street is an important entrance point to the shopping areas, given the nearby bus stop. The church, and the bank on the opposite corner, raise the status of the junction, though there is street clutter and the road can be difficult to cross. The church also seems to back onto the High Street, having no obvious entrance.

Left to right: Kingsley House and the railway station at the eastern gateway; the High Street at the library; St. Mark's Church; one of the older buildings in High Street



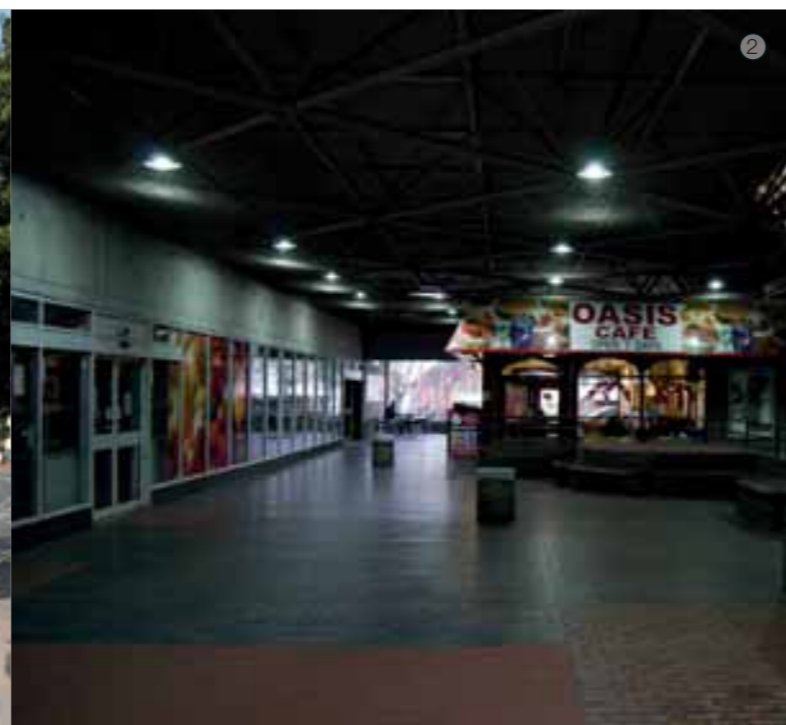
Gillingham Town Centre

Britton Farm and Jeffery Street



- Whilst a number of underused sites exist in Gillingham, and these have been seen as possible opportunities, the Britton Farm site has a detrimental effect on the town centre and its perception, and is a difficult site to deal with because of its size, location and appearance (1).
- The site is further constrained by the basement car park, which has become neglected with the vacancy in the building, and the change in levels required to access that car park.
- Britton Farm comprises the supermarket, a delivery bay to the north, the basement car park (accessed from Jeffery Street) and the covered mall to the south west, which connects back to the High Street. The mall (2) has a stairway to the car park beneath, and also contains a café. The nature of these spaces, the vacancy and the lack of natural surveillance, makes them vulnerable to anti-social behaviour.
- Further, this site faces Tintagel Manor a social housing block across Jeffery Street. This block also has a poor relationship with the road and the public realm, meaning Jeffery Street is a weak public space here (3).
- Much of the southern side of Jeffery Street offers a poor edge to the road (4), often comprising vacant and overgrown space, delivery areas or car parks. This could be improved with better presentation to Jeffery Street, or through some development. One of these sites is currently being developed for student housing.

Left to right: Britton Farm from Jeffery Street; the internal mall; Jeffery Street, and the space to Tintagel Manor (to the left); Jeffery Street



Conclusions and observations

Strengths

Gillingham's High Street:

- Is a well defined linear route linking the station and Medway Park.
- Is surrounded by residential development, much of which is well connected to the High Street, and served well by public transport connecting it efficiently within Medway and beyond.
- Has a good scale and is well suited to its commercial and retail functions, though the western half is more intimate, lending itself to a more sedate set of land uses. This change in character along the route, and the break at Smith Square, can help in reducing the perception of a lengthy High Street.
- Has opportunity to change and improve, and its proximity to the university in particular offers a way of diversifying its appeal and widening its offer.
- Has some historic buildings, which give some unique appeal and character to the town centre, including the church and the former Barclays Bank.

Though vacant, the Britton Farm site offers an opportunity to change the perceptions of the town, being prominent on Jeffery Street and linked directly to the High Street.

Weaknesses

Many of the positive elements of the town centre are undermined by the negative.

- The High Street's retail offer is spread out thinly along the lengthy High Street.
- Many of the final links from the surroundings into the High Street are poor, often affected by poor public realm, a lack of maintenance, evidence of anti-social behaviour or lacking a safe and secure ambience.
- The main gateways into the pedestrianised part of the High Street are confusing and designed for the movement of vehicles, making crossing difficult for pedestrians. Canterbury Street is also a major entrance point, but it is cluttered and dominated by the road.
- Many of the buildings, particularly at the upper, levels are empty or neglected and some have blank screens which cover buildings and offer no natural surveillance.
- Britton Farm offers the most obvious opportunity for change. However, its condition, the quality of the link to the High Street and its blank frontages to Jeffery Street all present challenges to a redevelopment, and retail development - to which the current form is perhaps best suited - would be distant to the core retail area at the eastern end of the High Street.



The set back of the buildings at 'Smith Square' creates a natural break and focus in the eastern part of the High Street.

Engagement

During the course of the work, we have sought to gather the views and feelings of people who use Gillingham town centre, whether they are residents, shoppers, traders or visitors.

Engagement

Gillingham has a lack of organised groups that seek to influence its environment and its future. There are no obvious trader, business or resident groups, though it is clear that some traders are invested in the town centre and have views about its current situation. Engagement has therefore been pursued through other means, and this has taken place through:

- A formal workshop with Council officers who have a direct working relationship with Gillingham;
- Casual conversations on the street with traders during site visits and on-site investigations;
- A meeting with the vicar and staff at St. Mark's Church
- Discussions between officers and Members
- A drop-in event in the town centre, to which around 70 - 80 people attended
- A week long display of maps and diagrams outlining the purpose of the work and the opportunities and constraints in the town centre;
- Availability of the drop-in material on the Council's website
- Feedback forms and written observations resulting from the drop-in and displays.

In addition, a major Retail Review and Healthcheck with traders was undertaken, and this is reported upon separately later in the document.

Over the course of this engagement, a range of issues have emerged in respect of its performance, appearance and performance in combination with an equally wide range of possible solutions and fixes. Some of these can be addressed through planning policy approaches, but not all; some will require a wider - perhaps a corporate - approach. Some of the issues raised are summarised below; the comments received during the drop-in event in Gillingham town centre are set out in Appendix 2.

Defining the town centre

- The town centre's extent, and what it encompasses; the role of Aldi and the health centre in the east and the role of the Medway Park end in acting as a gateway
- Defining the main shopping areas and different character areas, but ensuring and encouraging links between

Retail strategy

- Recognition that the centre is a 'local centre for local people' and needs to provide local services (rather than raising the prospect of difficult journeys elsewhere)
- Importance of services to continue to attract people, particularly those less able to travel

- The continuing importance of multiples / high street names and a good mix of shops. The mix was thought to be poor and dominated by betting shops, charity shops and take-aways.
- Recognition of the importance of the market and capitalising on its potential (e.g. devising standards for traders; looking at stall mix; introducing events or entertainment, supporting town centre shops)
- Attracting suitable retailers / operators; some users perceived as 'needed' especially convenience stores; others as 'not needed', including nail shops, betting shops and 24 hour opening
- Influencing the retail environment through funding, ownership, policy

Parking

Parking was a significant issue for members of the public, who consistently commented on both the price and quantity of parking.

- Parking is too expensive; parking should be cheaper or free
- Council parking charges were too high / Council car parking charges were inconsistent with other providers, bringing consequences for provision (e.g. commuters using shopping car parks)
- Role of Balmoral / health centre car park and links to High Street
- Basement parking at the former Co-op is unattractive with the shop unit above vacant
- Resistance to the further loss of parking / support for the provision of parking (e.g. on street or in the High Street)

Public realm

- Public realm generally poor with poor standards of maintenance and management (e.g. planters not cleaned, cycle stands ineffective; graffiti; Sappers Way dirty)
- Perceptions worsened by evident anti-social behaviour, including drinks and drugs issues, homelessness, tipping and youths on bikes making nuisance.
- Links between Aldi, Healthy Living Centre and town centre are poor and exist alongside anti-social behaviour - but these links are used and are important
- Better way-finding and sense of arrival
- There is a potential focus at Green Street / Sappers Walk / High Street (referred to as Smith Square)

Other uses to supplement retail

- Upper floor conversion to residential

- Capitalising on people moving in – widened demographic / increased commuting; promote Gillingham as an affordable, commutable location (cf. Dartford)
- Conflicts – reduction of private rented sector, availability of homes for local people, students, lack of variety in stock
- Create arts and crafts sector using vacant space for studios, galleries, performance space (e.g. Marlborough Road nursery) and additional events around Smith Square or as part of the market.
- Nurture and support small business (including financial incentives - lower rents and rates)

Role of the University

- University has a role in developing uses within the town centre (e.g. needing daily items, supporting evening economy, using town centre services)

Developable / Available / Potential sites

- Particular concern about the future of the Britton Farm retail unit
- Specific sites rarely came forward, though the snooker hall on Green Street and the desire to create a site for larger retail stores was discussed.



Retail Review and Healthcheck

In seeking to address the issues faced by the borough in meeting its future needs, the Council has sought advice regarding the performance of its town centres and advice and ideas as to how they can contribute to the borough's future success.

As part of this thinking, The Retail Group undertook a retail healthcheck of the town centre in order to identify how the retail offer is performing, as well as identifying the issues that are preventing performance improvement and growth.

The healthcheck consists of three elements; a survey of retailers and service operators within the defined 'retail core' boundary (provided by the Council and identified in the 2003 Local Plan) regarding their performance and perceptions of the town centre, a review of the current offer from the perspective of the consumer and a desk review of other relevant data.

Retail Review and Healthcheck

Survey of retailers

The final report and bespoke questionnaires prepared for the Gillingham traders is provided at Appendix X. This contains the full responses to the questions asked. The main findings were:

- Most customers are working or living locally
- People visit the centre on a regular and frequent basis
- The busiest times of the day are between 11.00am and 3.00pm
- Transaction values are low, with most below £10

Whilst retailers are generally satisfied with the performance of their own business, nearly 50% are dissatisfied with the performance of the town centre itself. They cite parking, safety, cleanliness and retail mix as the main areas to focus improvement upon. In terms of retail mix, this included a desire to see a greater number of high street multiples. The market emerged as a key issue, seen as an asset with potential to improve in itself and as a catalyst for the town centre generally.

However, trading in the town centre is mixed, and there is much pessimism about the future of the centre amongst operators.

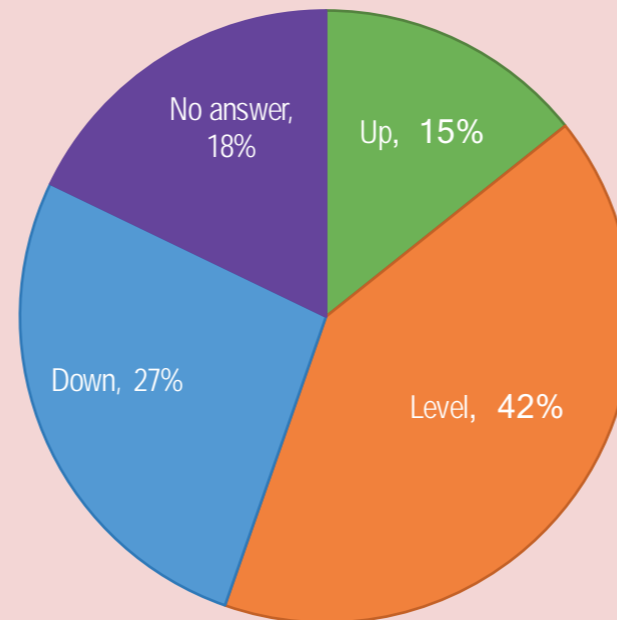
Summary of the retail surveys

The retail surveys conducted for this work demonstrated that Gillingham town centre does appeal to a local customer base that visits frequently. These are customers who are typically already near the town centre for a variety of reasons, suggesting that it's not a retail destination but a local centre for local people.

Transaction values are low, in keeping with the pattern of high frequency visits. Retailers are relatively satisfied with the performance of their shop, but not the performance of the town centre as a whole. Many desired improvements for the town centre were highlighted including parking, safety, cleanliness, facilities and the quality of the environment and public spaces and improvements sought in the retail offer were focussed around the mix, experience, ease of shopping and management of the offer.

Retailers also want to see a bigger and better market (Gillingham has a twice-weekly market), with higher quality stalls selling better quality products, and a greater number of events and visiting markets. However, there is little appetite amongst traders in joining a management group or business group to pursue change. Of more concern, is that retailers expect the future performance of Gillingham to deteriorate. This is an unusual response, and a clear indicator that Gillingham's retail offer is set to further decline, unless targeted and appropriate interventions can be delivered.

Is your turnover up, down or level compared to last year?

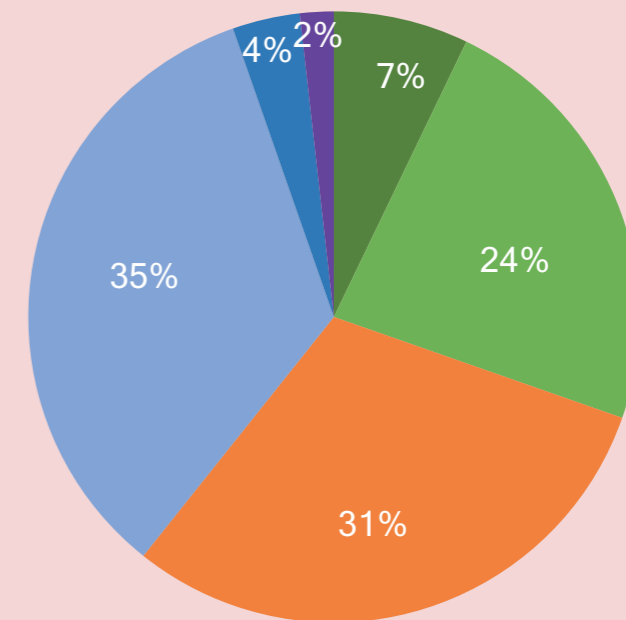


Traders were asked how they feel about their own businesses and about their perceptions of the outlook for Gillingham overall.

Trading is mixed, with most respondents trading with the same turnover as the same time last year. About a quarter of traders were down on last year but, encouragingly 15% of those answering were up on last year.

However, the majority of retailers are pessimistic about future trading prospects in the town. Less than a third of traders are optimistic about the future of Gillingham, whilst more than a third are expressing pessimism. This is of concern.

How positive are you about future trading prospects in Gillingham Town Centre?



Traders were asked if they would like to be involved in a Business Group for Gillingham Town Centre to help improve its marketing and management. Such a Forum has existed in the past and efforts are being made to revive this currently. However, the outcome of the survey suggested that 75% of respondents were not interested in such a group. This is a very high response and also suggests real concern for the town centre.

Retail Review

At June 2018, there were around 180 units in the centre. Service operators dominate (31%), with comparison shopping (23%) and food and drink (21%) also prominent in the mix. Vacancy is approximately 13%, which is higher than the national average of 9% (Springboard April 2018), though the empty units in Gillingham are in peripheral locations off the pedestrianised High Street, especially Skinner and Canterbury Streets.

The high level of service operators reflect the local needs function of the centre. Whilst previously, 10+ years ago, Gillingham was a destination visit for comparison goods, its current (and future) primary retail function is a local needs centre for frequently bought products, i.e. service, food and minor comparison goods.

A high proportion (39%) of the food and drink units are food takeaways. There is little in the way of quality, healthy or family oriented food and drink provision. The foodstore provision in the town centre is also weak and limited to a Nisa convenience store and Iceland frozen food store.

Spatial analysis

The Retail Review broadly identifies three distinct elements to Gillingham's retail offer:

- The core pedestrianised High Street: the High Street between King Street and Skinner Street, which coincides with the **primary frontages** defined in the 2003 Plan. This is the most important element of the town centre containing the twice-weekly market, main multiple anchor stores and multiple service operators including banks, building societies, estate agents and bookmakers. This area contains most of the larger units and retains the national chains. There are a handful of older buildings at the western end that contribute to the identity of the town centre.
- High Street West: principally the High Street between Skinner Street and Britton Street, including Canterbury Street and Skinner Street between Green Street and Jeffery Street. This largely coincides with the secondary frontages in this area. Analysis highlights a more contained environment, with the height of the buildings and the greater presence of both trees and street furniture creating a more open, pleasant and convivial environment. Although having Peacocks and a quality independent cycle shop, the offer is dominated by service retailers (nail bars, employment agency, tattooist etc.) and food and drink (mainly cafés and restaurants rather than take-aways).
- High Street East: the High Street between King Street and the railway station entrance. It presents a poor quality consumer experience and gateway into the centre from the railway station. The offer is poor, as is the street environment. The mix is dominated by service and food operators, typically with badly maintained narrow external façades. McDonalds was a key presence in this block, but vacated their premises in August 2018. It remains vacant.

Within the Local Plan, Green Street and King Street are not defined as either primary or secondary frontages.



Other relevant data

The Medway Citizens' Panel Report (Calli Spiers, March 2016) found that visitors to Gillingham town centre were most likely to live there, to visit frequently and during the day and to satisfy local shopping and service needs there. It was regularly cited as being the most convenient, closest centre to meet basic needs. It was less attractive for meeting leisure and food and drink needs. Some cited problems with the retail offer and the environment as deterrents to using the centre. These findings are broadly consistent with the Retail Healthcheck.

Medway Council commissioned GVA in 2018 to undertake a borough wide Retail and Leisure assessment (following an earlier survey in 2016). In regards to Gillingham Town Centre, key findings included:

- Food (36%), non food (33%) and socialising (14%) are the key reasons to visit (from 100 in-centre surveys)
- Average spend levels are low – food (£12.55), clothing / footwear (£9.21). Eating / drinking and services were especially low at £1 apiece
- 63% of people walked, 24% drove with 95% of visitors spending less than 20 minutes on their journey (in other Medway towns, around half arrive by car)
- Average dwell time is 77 minutes (Chatham is two hours, Stood is 90 minutes)
- Visit frequency is high with 35% visiting multiple times per week and 38% visiting weekly
- 75% of people who visit primarily for food also visit other shops and services

Again, the findings echo the Retail Healthcheck, suggesting the importance of Gillingham as a local centre for a local catchment. The same survey also suggested that around half of those using the Gillingham Retail Park also used the town centre.

Gillingham's town centre extent

The extent of a town centre is often defined in planning terms through the Local Plan.

However, Gillingham town centre does not have a boundary defined in the 2003 Adopted Plan, and this position is being reviewed in the emerging Local Plan. The adopted plan effectively uses the 'retail core' designation as a town centre boundary, and this includes primary and secondary frontages.

The 'retail core' defines the area within which 'core area' uses (classes A1, A2 and A3) would be acceptable. This boundary is broadly and roughly drawn and includes the whole of the High Street from the railway station to Britton Street at the western end, together with Canterbury Street and Skinner Street between Green Street and Jeffery Street.

This boundary excludes some of the study area around the Marlborough Road junction and at the extreme western end of the High Street.



Conclusions and observations

Gillingham has been under-performing for many years and is on a steady decline which is entrenched and needs serious attention. As an important local centre in the context of the Medway Towns retail hierarchy, it has seen many of its key nearby and competing centres evolve and improve in recent times.

Out of town development has undermined the role of the centre and taken trade away. These places, such as the Pier Road Asda, the Dockside Outlet, Gillingham Retail Park and Hempstead Valley Shopping Centre now deliver modern, bright retail facilities with plentiful free parking.

Given the lack of investment in Gillingham town centre over the same period, the centre has gone backwards relatively in terms of customer appeal and relevance. The town's appeal is being further weakened by online e-commerce.

Similarly the amount of community activity and interest in the welfare and improvement of Gillingham town centre is extremely limited. There was once a Town Centre Forum but this no longer meets.

Gillingham town centre provides a poor quality retail experience, with many of the softer appealing factors missing. For a convenience based trip, it is neither pleasant nor appealing. There are issues around anti-social behaviour (actual and perceived) and litter. In combination, this does not encourage shoppers to lengthen their visits and leaves a poor and lasting negative impression.

The initial sense of arrival and sightlines to those arrival points are poor. Most people travel to the town centre by foot. Typically, footways and access routes are unpleasant due to graffiti, litter or urine smells. The station gateway and sense of arrival from the train station is similarly poor.

The town centre needs additional reasons to visit from existing customers

Gillingham attracts a strong, core local customer base. Satisfying the needs of this mass market customer group must be priority (not targeting new ones). These existing customers will respond to more events and activities, extended retail offer, more food and drink and leisure provision and more appealing (and ideally free short term) car parking.

There is considerable potential for the market to grow and evolve to become much more of an anchor and draw for the town centre

The market is a massively under utilised asset for the town. It could be the best general market in the area. The market could also help to differentiate Gillingham and generate destination visits.

To do so, it needs to be bigger, better, more frequent, more consistent and appealing. It needs more and new professional traders, as well as more visiting themed markets and events. An improved market, with high quality retail delivery and product, better stalls, more choice, additional themes and more visiting markets also provide an ideal opportunity to generate additional reasons for existing customers to visit Gillingham more often.

It is very important the existing anchors are retained.

Gillingham today has less than five recognised multiple anchor retailers (i.e. a recognised brand with a size, range and condition that matches consumer demand and the role of the shopping offer as a whole). If any of these leave (especially Wilko, Sports Direct and Iceland), it will significantly reduce the appeal of town centre. These retailers need close engagement, support, encouragement and involvement in the forward planning and management of the centre in order to continue to play such an important role in Gillingham going forward.

The early evening leisure / food and drink offer is poor. Here, there is the opportunity to extend the trading day

The current offer revolves around 'greasy spoon' cafés during the day and fast food at night. A new well managed mass market pub, selling a choice of good food, such as Wetherspoon or Stonegate Pub Company, would help anchor the town centre evening offer.

The town needs targeted, soft and visible interventions to make it a more appealing place to visit

There is no 'silver bullet' to fix Gillingham. Cleaning, waste and litter management need improving. The management and enforcement against ASB need significant improvement. Landlords need to be encouraged to invest and smarten up their shopfronts. The management of the market needs improving, both in terms of enforcement, but also pro-active development.







MidKent
College

www.midkent.ac.uk

Other issues

Parking, Traffic and the University

Role of the University

Background

- Campus established in 1993/4; the lower site was largely derelict
- Regeneration funding was secured through the Labour Government of 1997 – 2007 and the campus has continued to develop, restoring the old former military buildings. This has opened up a site that was previously restricted to local people.
- Regeneration has continued, with the Deep End recently being completed, a renovation of a former swimming facility for a student union building.
- Current work is focused on maintaining the standard of the environment.

Geography

The campus is hemmed in and access to the site from Gillingham is limited. The site is surrounded by the naval dockyard, the Royal Engineers, Kent Police and the Lower Lines park. The walking route to Gillingham through the Lower Lines Park to Mill Road is the only feasible one.

Student Living

There are around 10,000 students overall using the whole campus (all universities including part-time and postgraduate students). A large majority of these live in student accommodation provided locally. Student accommodation encompasses the halls on site and nearby, largely close to the campus and around the new developments on the docks (including Liberty Quays). Some students rent privately, and are thought to be concentrated in north Gillingham in decreasing density between Mill Road and Ingram Road within Gillingham (i.e. more in homes closer to the campus). The number and range of this will constantly change.

Significant elements of the student population are commuters, both from London and from other places. This applies to full time students who use chartered buses to get to Medway, those who live independent of student accommodation outside Medway, those who combine courses with employment and mature students.

As part of 'the student life' used in promoting the university, significant assets are the nearby Asda on Pier Road, the retail and leisure facilities at

Dockside, Great Lines Park, the facilities at Medway Park and those shops and services within the Liberty Quays blocks. The university works on nurturing these, and is also seeking to develop a longer day on campus by promoting evening events within their buildings and running shuttle buses to London into the early evening. It sees potential for developing spaces within the campus for temporary events as part as wider festivals (e.g. concerts within the drill parade or lawn). It sees itself as developing this role within the whole community, and not just for students. It wants to allow local people to discover the campus..

The University does not actively promote the town centre at Gillingham because it currently offers little for students. There is some food and drink, but the one night club is more of a local facility and the bar scene is not dominant with the type of students using the campus. Some of the food establishments offer student discounts. Medway Park also offers a student discount, provided by the local authority through the leisure centre's facilities.

Aspirations for Gillingham

The university is keen to facilitate connections to and from Gillingham town centre to the university. Although Chatham station is a more likely entry point to the campus, particularly for those travelling from the west, Gillingham station is a common alighting point and the likelihood of people walking from there is high. The recommended route uses the High Street and Mill Road. The town centre is not welcoming, and the university is keen that it does not become a detractor to prospective students and employees. Town / gown clashes are not common because students quickly work out where best to go.

Whilst the route is largely clear and easy, and allows access between the station and the university in less than 20 minutes, the way-finding is not always clear and has gaps. Some crossing points could be improved and parts of the route through Lower Lines park are overgrown and lacking light.

In terms of perception, the first block out of the station presents a very poor image of the town centre. McDonalds was a particular problem, though it was not alone in attracting anti-social behaviour, litter and a cluttered High Street environment.

In addition to lacking significant attractions for a student population, Gillingham lacks a convenience shopping offer that could provide basic needs on the walk between the station and the university, or convenience food shopping for those living close to the town centre. It was thought Asda may offer a better alternative. It was commented that emerging ethnic

foodshops, and businesses set up by ethnic minorities coming to this part of Gillingham might actually offer something different that could appeal to a student demographic. The importance of nurturing a community is important to Gillingham and the Bike Shop (High Street), Falcon Café (Marlborough Road) and the Comic Shop (Canterbury Street) were cited as good examples of community-minded business.

In addition to the leisure offer aspired to on campus, a new arts venue was discussed as a potential attractor, though Chatham might be a more obvious location for such a development. Chatham already has two arts venues (Brook Theatre and Chatham Central) and has a heritage of small music venues and such like. Rochester also has a more conventional food and drink offer that might be more appealing to students that Gillingham has to offer (or is likely to offer).

The market may also be a source of hope for Gillingham and is acknowledged as important to the area. This small scale community aspect, nurturing local industry and enterprise in the smaller units that exist in the town centre was seen as a possible unique aspect that could support the town centre's viability and vitality.

Key points for the University in respect of Gillingham town centre

- Strengthen the walking route between the station and university – clarity of route, quality of public realm, signage
- Improve the gateway to the town centre from the railway station
- Improve the offer from the High Street, particularly in convenience goods
- Nurture distinct elements of the town's offer, particularly the market and community based business and enterprise and perhaps a distinct range of goods and services brought about through the presence of non-British ethnic groups
- Continue to meet the needs of the local community living closest to the town centre – the core demographic

UNIVERSITY CAMPUS: the only walking route to Gillingham leaves from the south eastern entrance. This access is understated.

LOWER LINES PARK: some of the greenery toward the northern end of the park is untidy and unmanaged, The surface at the junction with Purser Way is poor.. Lighting exists, but may not overcome this perception.

LOWER LINES PARK: whilst the path through the park is wide, it is lightly used and could be perceived as unsafe or unattractive in poor light or conditions. Lighting exists, but may not overcome this perception.

MID KENT COLLEGE: Mill Road may also be a key route for College students to use to access the western end of the High Street.

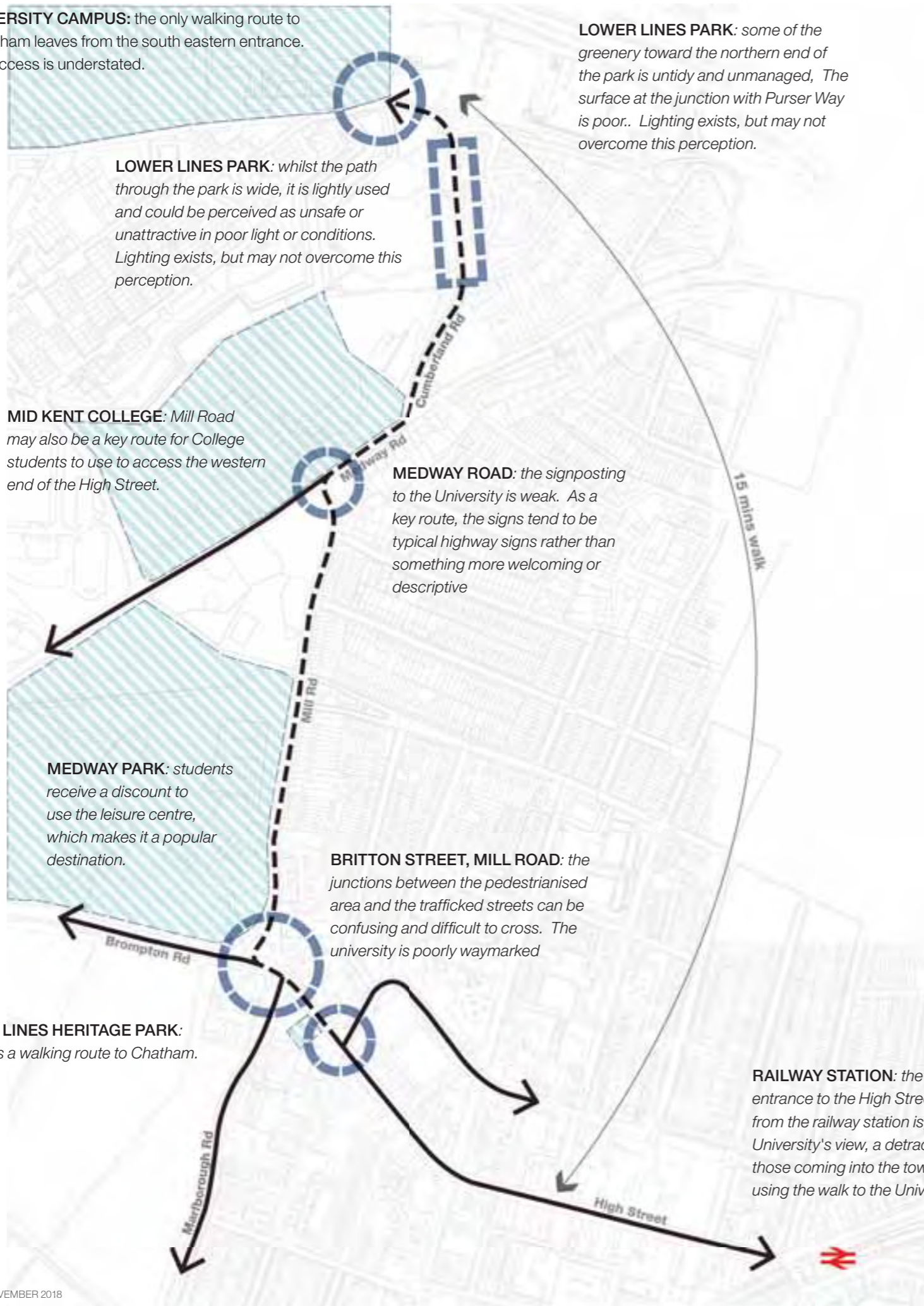
MEDWAY ROAD: the signposting to the University is weak. As a key route, the signs tend to be typical highway signs rather than something more welcoming or descriptive

MEDWAY PARK: students receive a discount to use the leisure centre, which makes it a popular destination.

BRITTON STREET, MILL ROAD: the junctions between the pedestrianised area and the trafficked streets can be confusing and difficult to cross. The university is poorly waymarked

GREAT LINES HERITAGE PARK: provides a walking route to Chatham.

RAILWAY STATION: the entrance to the High Street from the railway station is, in the University's view, a detractor to those coming into the town and using the walk to the University.



Parking and Traffic

The High Street is a pedestrianised space meaning traffic coming to, or having to go through, the town centre is diverted around the High Street, principally via Jeffery Street. Bus routes also use Jeffery Street, though Canterbury Street and Skinner Street also accommodate key bus routes for Gillingham.

Because of the width of the High Street, and the lack of sustained activity on it, it was suggested early on that traffic could be re-introduced back into the High Street, albeit in a way that did not undermine the purpose of the street and the movement of pedestrians. This has been a topic of conversation throughout the project, with no definitive view emerging as to whether this would be a good idea or not (consultation has demonstrated the value people place upon a pedestrianised environment as much as they see the benefit of introducing vehicular movement into it).

This report does not rule the idea out, but further study and consideration should be undertaken to determine whether it could have a positive impact for the street and the people who rely upon it. Further investigation should consider the factors, set out in section (a) that follows.

Parking is a significant area of concern and complaint amongst people shopping and trading in Gillingham town centre. The feedback centred on the cost of parking and the quantity of parking. The main issues are set out in section (b) alongside possible courses of action for the Council, although little can be achieved in this area through planning policy.

(a) 'De-pedestrianising' the High Street

Whilst Gillingham town centre should be easily accessible from the surrounding neighbourhoods, and serving its function as a local centre, it is not performing well at all. It may be that well-meaning pedestrianisation has undermined the vitality of the High Street and made Jeffery Street into a barrier to pedestrians seeking to cross it by making it the focus of traffic movement. Restoring its historic function as a through route and bringing back cars might strengthen its town centre status, serving local people and attracting passing trade.

At the outset, it should be said that a detailed review of this idea has not been undertaken and a further report is recommended to fully explore the benefits and disadvantages, as well as the impacts on the wider network. This report does not suggest any preferred part of the street to re-traffic, access or egress points, the volume or type of traffic that might be appropriate, the times that traffic might use the High Street or the impacts on traffic movement more broadly.

'De-pedestrianising' or 're-traffic' is not a common solution in town centres and is counter intuitive. There are few examples where it has occurred, though many town centres retain traffic in their town centres. However, it needs careful consideration. In its favour, 'de-pedestrianisation' could:

- Introduce activity in the street, including short term parking to allow quick access to town centre services and shops;
- Provide a catalyst for improving the public realm more broadly and improving the street for all users;
- Potentially provide parking within the High Street, either releasing land currently used for car parking elsewhere for other uses, or supplementing existing parking with further spaces much closer to the retail core (which could benefit less able visitors);
- Bring public transport into the High Street, making access to the heart of the town centre easier overall, and allowing passengers to see the High Street, rather than the back of the High Street on Jeffery Street;
- Bring people into the town centre in cars generally, which may change perceptions of what the town centre provides.

However, introducing traffic could:

- Change environments for the worse through noise, pollution and by creating conflict with cyclists and pedestrians;
- Divide the two sides of High Street, making it harder to cross (e.g. for older or less mobile people, or for families);
- Tend to favour cars and vehicles over pedestrians and cyclists;
- Be costly and disruptive without a guarantee for success;
- Intimidate traders who fear such disruption could be damaging to business.

There are also potential conflicts between the introduction of traffic into the High Street and other aims of the masterplan, including the impact of:

- Traffic upon the operation (and possible expansion) of the market;
- Traffic upon the aspiration to improve the ambient environment in the core pedestrianised High Street and create focal point at Smith Square;
- Traffic upon pedestrian access to the High Street from James Street and other roads running north;
- The impact of short stay parking on clutter and litter, given the known impacts of parking on the High Street at the eastern end where access is allowed.

Any scheme would need to:

- Balance the introduction of traffic with the need for servicing and deliveries to the front of High Street premises;
- Consider removing the gyratory around the King Street / Victoria Street block;
- Assess the impact upon town centre parking areas;
- Consider to what extent of the High Street vehicular access should be allowed (for instance, traffic between Canterbury Street and Britton Street could damage the more intimate street character; traffic could also make other junctions – Canterbury Street / James Street – more hostile for pedestrians)
- Judge whether traffic might be more beneficial at certain times (e.g. after retail trading hours) in order to better meet regeneration aims.

The gyratory around King Street and Victoria Street is a particular problem, often bringing traffic congestion and confusion into the eastern end of the High Street. It may be that simply pedestrianising King Street forces a solution to be considered over the respective roles of Jeffery Street and the High Street in moving vehicles around Gillingham town centre.

This masterplan does not provide a detailed evaluation of the idea nor assess the impact upon traffic, the street environment or the wider area. Neither does the masterplan specifically recommend introducing vehicles; it is an idea that needs further exploration. Re-opening the street to traffic at the current time covers the whole range of possibilities from 'do nothing' to very limited introduction of vehicles to a full restoration of two-way-traffic, but this clearly needs honing to a solution that serves Gillingham best. It also needs to ensure that the movement of the pedestrian in the street remains the priority, and that traffic does not prejudice this.

(b) Parking

Within the study area

Parking in the town centre is provided by Council owned surface car parks at James Street / Jeffery Street and basement parking / apron parking at the Britton Mall site. Parking is available for business and residents through permits on Green Street and Theodore Place. Loading is permissible on Skinner Street.

The surface car parks at Jeffery Street / James Street appear to be well used. However, they are opportunistic car parks and suffer from their size and poor circulation. Whilst the opportunity has not been investigated further, there is potential to consider acquiring the two corner buildings on James Street / Jeffery Street to improve the space and circulation associated with these parking areas.

The car park at Britton Farm is poorly used, most likely because of the poor environment created by the vacancy of the shop unit above, but also due to the poor condition, lighting and perceived issues of safety and anti-social behaviour. Britton Farm is not seen as attractive whilst the unit above remains vacant. This may be resolved with the reuse of the unit, though the availability of parking for shoppers is unclear. Britton Farm is currently the subject of proposals to reuse the vacant unit above which will bring the parking back into a form that can be used, though how much of this will be publicly available remains unclear.

There is not any obvious scope for providing additional parking within the study area. Bringing traffic into the High Street may create an opportunity to bring parking into locations closer to the shops, which may improve the perception of the town centre's accessibility, but this needs to be considered as part of any wider study into the acceptability of bringing traffic into the High Street.

Outside of the study area

Beyond the town centre, parking is widely available close to the town centre. This includes:

- Balmoral Gardens (Council, charged)
- On-street parking at Marlborough Road
- Medway Park (Council, charged although refunds are available to users of the leisure centre when parking tickets are bought with cash)
- Aldi (private, free for 90 minutes when shopping locally)
- Trafalgar Street (private, £2 per 24 hour period)

As discussed elsewhere, Balmoral Gardens is a popular car park, but the links to the town centre are weak. Strengthening the links to the town centre by improving the footbridge and the route to the town centre and improving way-finding would be helpful and help encourage linked trips.

Marlborough Road and Medway Park are also well used and located close to the western edge of the town centre. Improvements to the environment here (including maintenance), and a focus on nurturing an emerging food and beverage offer is important in maintaining the profile of this end of Gillingham, and drawing people into the town centre may be possible with an attractive public realm and clear way-finding.

Private parking is available at Aldi on Duncan Road. Whilst linked trips between Aldi and the town centre might be limited, the car park is extremely close to the town centre (observation suggested that the route is well known and used, and public feedback suggested that some use the car park as an alternative to using the paid Council parking). Linked trips could be encouraged through improvements in the route (along Connaught Road and through the eastern gateway to the town centre and by better way-finding.

There is little scope for new parking within Gillingham town centre, but the proximity of the neighbourhoods around the town centre should be conducive to walking and cycling. People who drive to the town centre could be encouraged to cycle or walk to the town centre if the routes were more attractive.

Feedback from the engagement also suggested a lack of cycle parking in the High Street and its surroundings.

Summary and recommendations

There is vocal public feedback to suggest that Gillingham's current town centre offer is not strong enough to support what are seen as high Council parking charges

Some users of the town centre are finding parking elsewhere to access the town centre, avoiding Council charges (including Aldi and Trafalgar Street)

Despite this, feedback also suggests that car parks are well used. This may suggest that short stay shoppers cannot find parking spaces for other reasons - long stay users may be using parking spaces (e.g. traders, businesses, commuters). There is no data to evaluate this.

Further study is recommended to enable to Council to understand how Council parking is being used currently by town centre users and commuters and how this affects the town centre. Work should be done to ensure that shoppers arriving by car can find parking, and those who do not need to travel by car have suitable access by other means (e.g. safe pedestrian links)



On-street parking at Marlborough Road



Jeffery Street car park



Resident parking at nearby Fox Street

Advice and Recommendations

Advice and Recommendations

Issues for the emerging Local Plan

The town centre needs additional reasons to visit from existing customers

Gillingham attracts a strong, core local customer base. Satisfying the needs of this mass market customer group must be priority (not targeting new ones). These existing customers will respond to more events and activities, extended retail offer, more food and drink and leisure provision and more appealing (and ideally free short term) car parking.

Town centre boundary – eastern end

The current Local Plan uses a 'retail core' boundary as a town centre boundary. Particularly because of the links residents make between the Balmoral Gardens health centre and car park, Aldi on Duncan Road and the High Street, the town centre boundary should be widened to include these elements.

This provides a basis to strengthen the links between these three points, especially:

- Balmoral Gardens to Smith Square via the footbridge and Green Street
- Aldi to the High Street via Connaught Road and the High Street's eastern gateway at the station
- Along the High Street between Smith Square and the eastern gateway at the station

Each of these locations can enhance links directly into the High Street and may help people rediscover and reconnect with the town centre.

Town centre boundary – western end

The current 'retail core' boundary terminates at Britton Street, but town centre uses continue towards Medway Park. In defining the town centre boundary, it would be useful to include the western end of the High Street to the war memorial in order to nurture and support food and drink uses around New Brompton and the Medway Park car park and acknowledge the role of the library within the town centre as an important destination on the High Street.. With the links to higher education further north, the war memorial junction has an important role in signposting the High Street as well as being a significant location on a number of pedestrian and vehicular routes.

Core Pedestrianised Area (current primary frontages between Canterbury Street and the King Street)

It is evident that the principal retail activity in the town centre takes place in this area. This should continue to be defined as the primary shopping area and contain the main retail offer, including national names and larger units.

Green Street and King Street are secondary locations to the High Street. Whilst they are not strong retail locations, they are directly off the core retail area, very close to the central heart of the town centre and are therefore well located. They also have footfall into the town centre from nearby housing (as well as being visible from the core pedestrianised area), so would benefit from support and / or improvement.

A focused retail offer

The Retail Review considers that the retail offer (A1) within the 'retail core' defined in the 2003 Local Plan is too stretched, and that this should be condensed within the primary shopping area, with the areas covered by the secondary frontages and the adjacent areas (such as the Marlborough Road junction) proving a supporting role to the retail offer, such as services, food and drink, leisure (e.g. gym) or other non-retail uses (e.g. residential, commercial offices, crèche or medical provision).

The clearest example of this is the location of Peacocks at the western end of the High Street. Its location at the entrance to the Britton Hall Mall on the High Street relies on the Britton Mall site successfully operating as a retail anchor, but this appears to be unlikely in the short to medium term. Peacocks would, therefore, be better located in the core pedestrianised High Street to the east.

Site allocations

The assessment of possible sites in the town centre has demonstrated that viability in Gillingham is difficult and land ownership is fragmented and complex. Britton Farm Mall is the primary opportunity within the centre, and the Council has been seeking an occupier for the supermarket. A residential scheme on the remainder could be viable and, given the location in relation to the High Street and the main retail area, is a suitable use.

In the circumstances, a policy pursuing and encouraging the use of upper floors for residential use - which there does seem to be some appetite for - could be included within the local plan, though the quality of design and amenity and the provision of parking would need careful thought.

A proactive, corporate approach to land ownership and site assembly may be more effective than planning policy in bringing significant changes in the longer term.

Other priorities

Market

Gillingham's street market is operated by the Council, and trades in the pedestrianised area of the town centre on Mondays and Saturdays. The market does a good job of animating and bringing the street to life and provides an essential social and community role in anchoring the town centre.

With a small number of exceptions, many of the market stalls are selling low quality product from badly maintained receptacles. Many of the stalls are over spaced and sprawling. Too many are using hand written signs written directly onto cardboard boxes. There is very little consistency in look and feel, and many traders are using old style traditional metal frames as opposed to modern gazebos. There is significant scope to improve the market and help it to be a fabulous local – even regional – destination for Gillingham and the Medway Towns.

The market could be improved through a number of means and measures, for instance:

- Market could be consolidated, or run externally;
- Attract bolt-ons – speciality / themed / visiting markets, events
- Adjusting the layout, avoiding gaps, clustered in 3x3 pitches, raising standards and improve offer; support traditional shops
- Focusing the market in the most profitable part of the street
- Extending into the trafficked part of the street at eastern end – promote better public realm / street closure / TROs

Public realm

The public realm in the core area is critical in improving the perception of the shopping offer in Gillingham town centre.

The entrances to the High Street at the railway station and at Marlborough Road are low key and dominated by vehicles, making it difficult for pedestrians to cross roads. These spaces need to be addressed through improvements to help people reach the High Street.

The set back of the buildings in the centre of the core area, (currently occupied by WHSmith and the Post Office, and known as Smith Square) adjacent to Sappers Walk and opposite Green Street makes for an interesting focal point along the street within this retail core. It is roughly half way between the railway station and Skinner Street and has good visibility both along the High Street and to the characterful buildings at the end of Green Street. Such a space could provide a focus for the community.

Public realm improvements could be focused on this square and the approaches to it (including Sappers Walk), through short term, small scale. Given Gillingham's association with the Royal Engineers, Sappers Walk should have some local significance and more status than it does; it is also a key route into the High Street from surrounding neighbourhoods.

Jeffery Street is a busy road and difficult for pedestrians to cross easily. The effectiveness and location of crossing points should be reviewed.

The shopping environment is basic and in need of improvement to the maintenance and cleaning routine (e.g. cigarette butts in planters). There is also considerable evidence of ASB, such as street drinking, graffiti and street urination. There is also scope for more seating, providing it's well maintained in terms of ASB. The way in which the street environment is managed could be improved. This could be stepped up, or alternative means of managing the street sought over the medium term.

■ Around High Street East

High Street East

High Street East, defined by the Retail Review, comprises the area north and south of the High Street between King Street and the station. This has been defined as a secondary frontage, and its character is different to the main core pedestrianised area. The main difference is the presence of traffic through the High Street and King Street which naturally means that walking is not prioritised. As a result, the footways feel narrow and cluttered with street furniture and commercial waste. The retail mix is dominated by service and food and beverage operators, typically with badly maintained narrow external façades (with the exception of Coral and Santander). In particular there are several fast food takeaways / kebab shops, all of which combine to provide a very poor gateway and welcome to the town. McDonalds, which had anchored this part of the town, has since closed this branch.

The analysis highlighted the complexity of the junction between the railway station and the High Street, which prioritises traffic movement to the detriment of pedestrian movement between the railway station and the High Street. This space is an important gateway to the High Street from the railway station, and it is currently undermined by the layout. The trafficked High Street to King Street also compromises the quality of the gateway. This is further affected by the quality of shopfronts at ground and upper levels, which is an issue for much of the High Street environment.

The Retail Review felt that it presents a poor quality consumer experience and sense of arrival into the centre from the railway station. The offer is poor, as is the street environment. The University echoed these points, and felt that block created a poor first impression of the town centre. The frontage here is therefore important to focus improvements upon (and it is noted that the corner pub / club has recently been repainted).

Public realm

The eastern gateway around the station entrance and the eastern entrance to the High Road represents an opportunity to improve the perception of the High Street generally. The sense of arrival in Gillingham at this point is poor. This goes for rail passengers emerging from the station, for pedestrians arriving at the junction, and for drivers arriving at a complex and contrived highway system that includes a gyratory around the King Street block.

A project to improve the highway conditions and the public realm in this location has the potential to bring benefits to all users, and should consider:

- Prioritising the needs of pedestrians and cyclists, including more vulnerable users (and particularly in crossing the road);
- Improving the sense of arrival and sense of place;

- Improving way-finding and directional signage;
- Improving the connection between the railway station and the core pedestrianised High Street
- Reducing the dominance of cars and the impact of the highway on the space;
- Removing the gyratory around the High Street and King Street;
- Addressing short term parking associated with the fast food outlets in High Street;
- Resolving the need for a 'drop-off' point for the station and balancing the need for this and for a taxi waiting area;
- Wider impacts on traffic congestion and traffic wishing to cross Gillingham town centre to get between the riverside and the A2.

Linking Aldi and Balmoral Gardens

Aldi have developed a store close to the town centre at Duncan Road, two minutes walk from the station. However, the store faces away from the town centre and has its own car park accessed from Duncan Road. A pedestrian link exists from the town centre side, via Connaught Road, but this is neither attractive nor signposted (though appears to be well used). The Aldi is understood to trade well. Whilst this has not been explored through the retail healthcheck, it seems likely that Aldi is providing a facility that the town centre does not, an offer enhanced by the adjacent parking. Aldi and the High Street are not currently linked.

Whilst the potential for linked trips between Aldi and the town centre may be limited, this is not a reason to overlook the potential for seeking to link some trips. A more attractive environment in Connaught Road and around the station, plus way-finding, could help to link the two. To reflect this, it may be worth bringing the Aldi into the town centre boundary.

Shifting the town centre boundary also:

- Brings the whole of the station frontage into the town centre;
- May provide a focus for improving the environment in this location for pedestrians walking between the Aldi and the town centre (see Gateway Focus Area).

The importance of this gateway to the High Street is therefore linked to the aspiration to nurture links between Aldi and the High Street.

Similarly, the Balmoral Gardens Health Centre is an important community facility for this part of Medway and draws people into central Gillingham. The car park for the health centre is accessible and popular, and the gardens around the health centre provide an attractive green space and setting for the health centre itself. Public engagement brought comments that the play area in Balmoral Gardens is well used and adventurous for children.

Pathways from the health centre lead to both the station and to the footbridge across the railway towards Green Street and onto the High Street. The footbridge, and the alleyway alongside the former snooker hall (see opportunity sites) are not attractive links, particularly for more vulnerable groups and at times of darkness or poor weather.

As with Aldi, extending the scope of the town centre boundary allows the opportunity to:

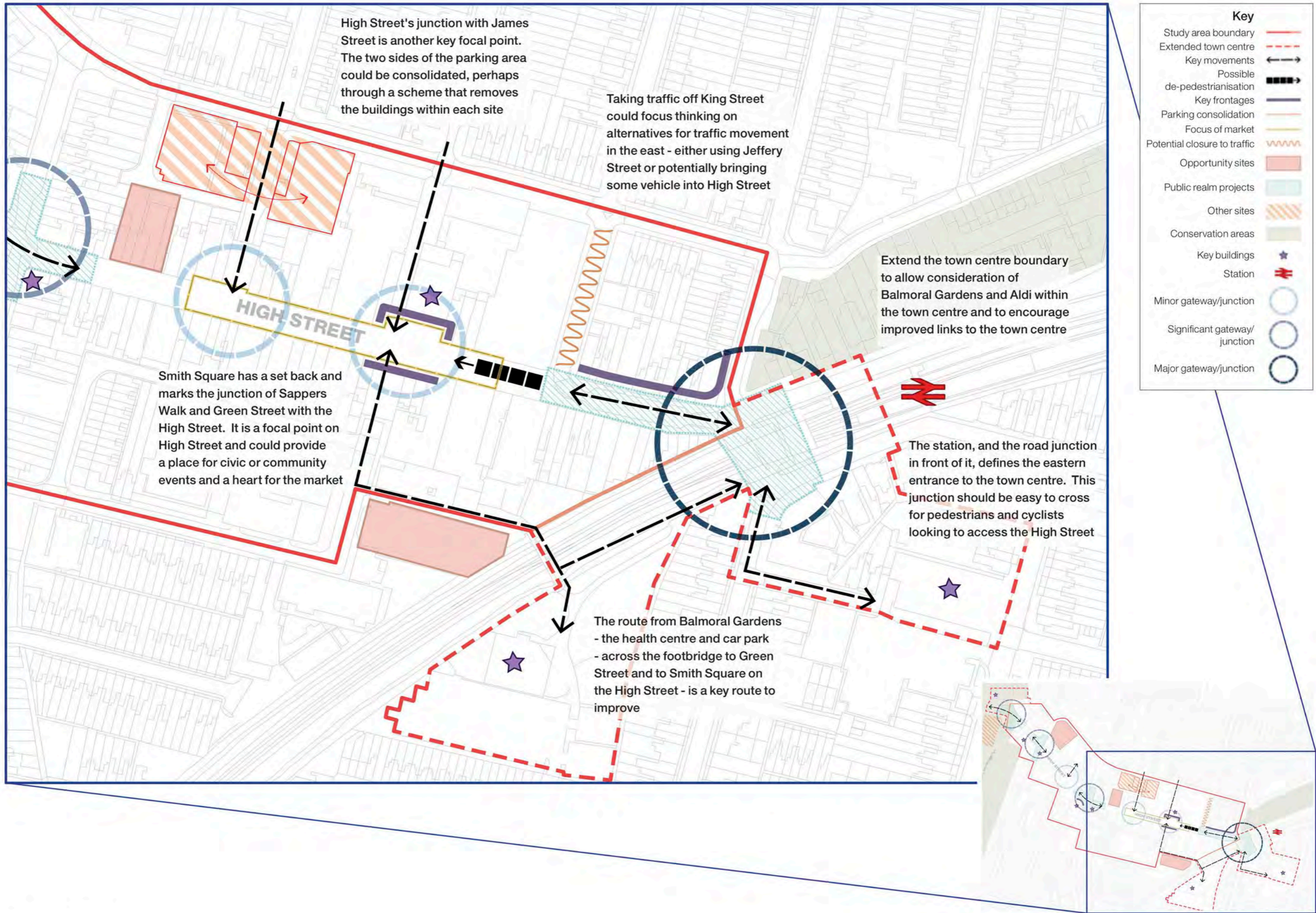
- Actively link the health centre in policy terms;
- Consider the connection between the health centre and the town centre more pro-actively, seek solutions to draw people between the two and reduce the perception that these two points are distant or poorly connected
- Consider the connection to and from the station more pro-actively.

De-pedestrianising the High Street

This report does not rule out de-pedestrianising the High Street. The idea garnered some positive comments during consultation and brought memories of the High Street prior to pedestrianisation. However, it was also clear that some people value the pedestrianised environment.

High Street East could be a logical start point for entering the High Street given that the eastern end of the High Street already allows vehicles in. Removing traffic from King Street may also focus thoughts as to the role of the High Street and Jeffery Street in moving traffic around the centre of Gillingham, though Jeffery Street must not become a barrier for pedestrians seeking to reach the High Street from surrounding neighbourhoods.

However, more work is required to determine whether some degree of de-pedestrianisation would be beneficial, whilst maintaining an accessible, safe and busy High Street.



Key

- Study area boundary —
- Extended town centre - - -
- Key movements →
- Possible de-pedestrianisation ▬▬▬
- Key frontages —
- Parking consolidation —
- Focus of market —
- Potential closure to traffic ~ ~ ~
- Opportunity sites ■
- Public realm projects ■
- Other sites ▨
- Conservation areas ■
- Key buildings ★
- Station 🚂
- Minor gateway/junction ○
- Significant gateway/junction ○
- Major gateway/junction ○

High Street West

High Street West

Commercial focus

High Street West comprises the area westwards from Canterbury Street.

The Retail Review did not include the Marlborough Road junction, where there has been an emergence of a cluster of food and beverage operators that benefit from proximity to both Medway Park and the car parking it provides. Evidence from the University, alongside anecdotal evidence, suggests that the Mill Road route will bring students into this area, which is a significant change from the position in 2003. This has the effect of elongating the High Street towards the war memorial.

The focus of High Street West should be on other supporting elements of the retail offer, such as services, F&B, leisure (e.g. gym) or other non-retail uses (e.g. residential, commercial offices, crèche or medical provision). High Street West already contains the library, which provides a number of community events and a social focus. The library in Gillingham is popular and it provides a good anchor for the supporting town centre services in this part of the town.

Public realm (traffic enforcement)

The pedestrianised element of the High Street has a pleasant character, brought about by the higher buildings and the more abundant street trees. Several independent businesses have located here, some having been present for many years. The character of this space should be nurtured.

It was noted that, despite being a pedestrianised space, traffic did access High Street West, undermining this environment. To maintain the attractiveness of the space, traffic enforcement needs to be improved.

Britton Farm

Within the High Road West area is Gillingham's largest opportunity site, the Britton Farm store, most recently occupied by the Budgens supermarket, but having hosted Somerfield and the Co-op since 2009. This store is also undefined in terms of retail frontage, and this reflects its awkward location off the High Street and distant from the other large format retail units.

The site is discussed elsewhere, but the link mall between the supermarket and the High Street is unpleasant, and attracts anti-social behaviour. The ramp to the car park from the mall also feels unsafe and undermines the use of the car park.

With the re-use of the store proposed, priority should also be given to improving the quality and condition of the link from the store to the High Street, particularly if the re-use of the store is partly justified on the benefit it could potentially bring to the High Street.

Marlborough Road ('New Brompton')

Historically, the western end of the High Street was established when workers at the docks could no longer be housed at Brompton in Chatham. New housing had to be located behind the Lines (defences); the closest location was here at Marlborough Road, which was referred to as New Brompton. It's not clear how widely used New Brompton is used now, but it may be a way to distinguish this part of the town centre to strengthen its identity.

The junction of the High Street around Marlborough Road and Mill Road has seen the development of an evening economy. There may be several factors working together to nurture this:

- The environment is historic, with inherent character drawn from the establishment of New Brompton in the 19th Century and the listed war memorial;
- The area benefits from a direct connection to the main university and further education campuses to the north (students receive a discount at the leisure centre);
- It also benefits from the large, well used, car parking facility at Medway Park, and from the community events and activities based there;
- The pathway across the Great Lines Park to Chatham also feeds into this area.

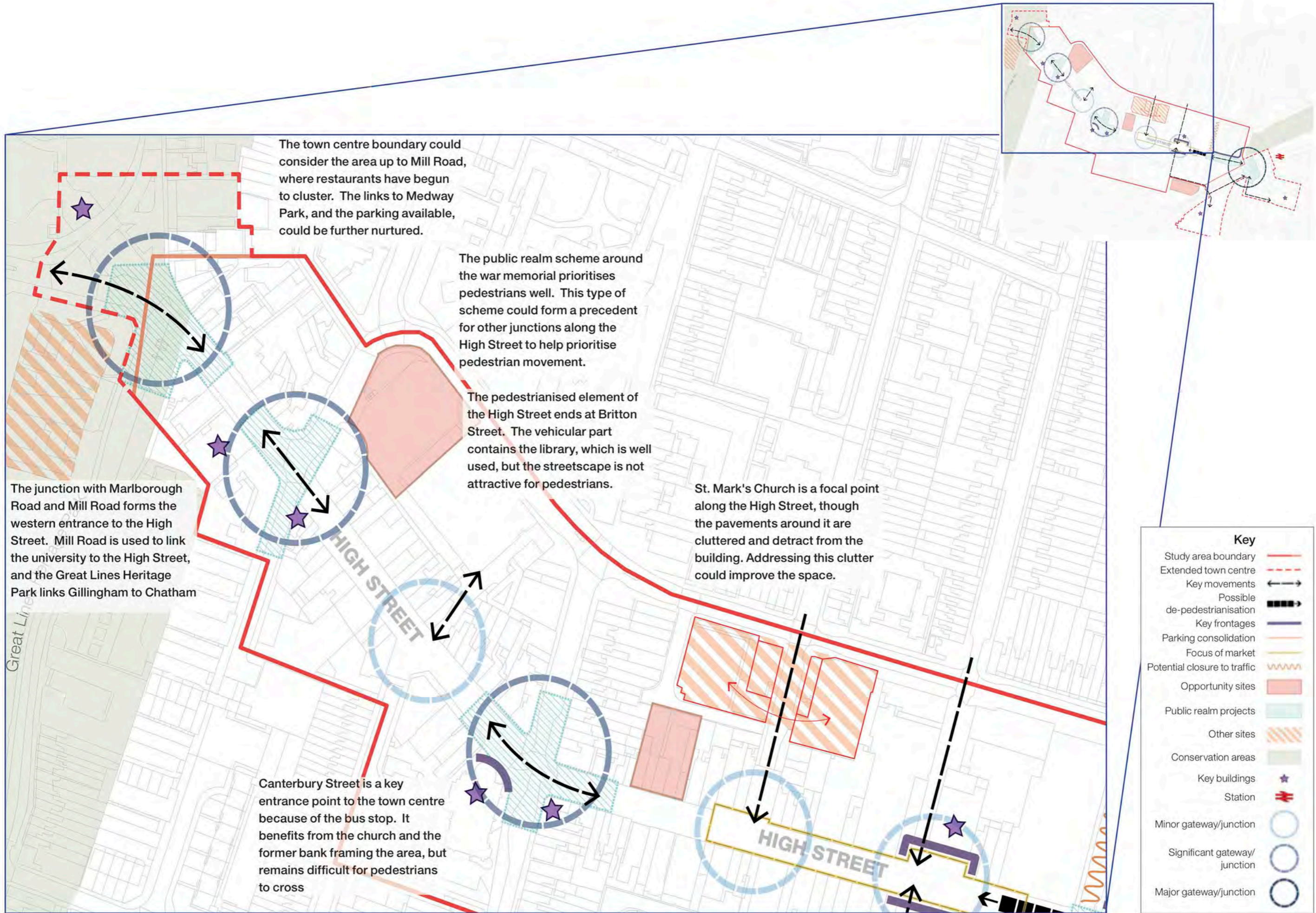
In view of this, it is worth considering this area a western gateway into the High Street, and look to further establish its significance and use this as a catalyst to further draw people into the town centre. The link to Britton Street then becomes important; removing vehicles from this part of the High Street appears to be more complex than at the eastern end, but a more favourable environment could be created for pedestrians through a range of means (e.g. public realm improvements, speed controls), particularly if they follow the natural pedestrian desire lines.



Public realm at the war memorial prioritises pedestrians



The view back to the High Street from the war memorial



The town centre boundary could consider the area up to Mill Road, where restaurants have begun to cluster. The links to Medway Park, and the parking available, could be further nurtured.

The public realm scheme around the war memorial prioritises pedestrians well. This type of scheme could form a precedent for other junctions along the High Street to help prioritise pedestrian movement.

The pedestrianised element of the High Street ends at Britton Street. The vehicular part contains the library, which is well used, but the streetscape is not attractive for pedestrians.

St. Mark's Church is a focal point along the High Street, though the pavements around it are cluttered and detract from the building. Addressing this clutter could improve the space.

The junction with Marlborough Road and Mill Road forms the western entrance to the High Street. Mill Road is used to link the university to the High Street, and the Great Lines Heritage Park links Gillingham to Chatham

Canterbury Street is a key entrance point to the town centre because of the bus stop. It benefits from the church and the former bank framing the area, but remains difficult for pedestrians to cross

Key	
Study area boundary	Red dashed line
Extended town centre	Red dashed line
Key movements	Black double-headed arrow
Possible de-pedestrianisation	Black arrow with red dots
Key frontages	Blue dashed line
Parking consolidation	Orange hatched area
Focus of market	Yellow hatched area
Potential closure to traffic	Wavy red line
Opportunity sites	Red shaded area
Public realm projects	Light blue shaded area
Other sites	Orange hatched area
Conservation areas	Green shaded area
Key buildings	Purple star
Station	Red train icon
Minor gateway/junction	Small blue circle
Significant gateway/junction	Medium blue circle
Major gateway/junction	Large blue circle

Summary of Main Recommendations

Extend the retail core boundary (as a town centre boundary) to include Aldi on Duncan Road, the Balmoral Health Centre and Marlborough Road

Each of these three locations can enhance links directly into the High Street and may help people rediscover and reconnect with the town centre.

Maintain the primary frontages (defined in the 2003 Local Plan) as the primary shopping area

The existing primary frontage designation defines the core retail area well and this should be maintained as the primary shopping area, with a focus on maintaining the existing anchors and seeking other opportunities if possible.

Associated with this, the retail offer and 'circuit' is too long. It would benefit from being condensed and focussed in the core pedestrianised high street.

Use the remainder of the town centre to support the primary shopping area function. Define use classes within policy to emphasise the characters sought in secondary areas where this is apparent or emerging

The two other components of the town centres (High Streets West and East) should focus on other supporting elements of the retail offer, such as services, F&B, leisure (e.g. gym) or other non-retail uses (e.g. residential, commercial offices, crèche or medical provision). Within these areas, it is possible to define this further through setting out aspirations for particular use classes within policy wording.

Green Street and King Street are outside of the primary shopping area, but should be improved as key entrances to the core area of the High Street.

There is considerable potential for the market to grow and evolve to become much more of an anchor and draw for the town centre

The market is a massively underutilised asset for the town. It could be the best general market in the area, giving Gillingham a unique asset, differentiating Gillingham and generating destination visits. To do so, it needs to be bigger, better, more frequent, more consistent and appealing. It needs more and new professional traders, as well as more visiting themed markets and events.

Enhancing markets is likely to be a factor in supporting other town centres as well, adding to the offer in those centres. However, Gillingham's offer would supplement the local offer rather than any visitor offer, thus distinguishing it from markets in Rochester and Chatham.

Improvements to the quality of the public environment should be sought through improved cleaning and maintenance routines.

The town centre provides a poor quality retail experience, with many of the softer appealing factors missing

For a convenience based trip, Gillingham doesn't provide a pleasant or appealing experience. There are significant ASB issues, which combined with the poor experience do not encourage shoppers to lengthen their visits.

There is excessive litter. Building façades are often poorly maintained. Street furniture has copious discarded cigarettes scattered around. These all combine to reduce the customer experience and leave a poor and lasting negative impression.

Improve way-finding, particularly to and from car parks and on key routes to the High Street

Improvements to the High Street public realm should be focused at (in broad order of priority):

- The eastern entrance to the High Street at the station
- The Green Street / Sappers Walk junction, known locally as Smith Square. This focal point could provide a site for civic and community events and a heart for the market
- The western entrance to the High Street, at the junction with Mill Road
- Canterbury Street, particularly around the church
- Other junctions into High Street (e.g. James Street)

Vehicular access to the High Street should clearly signed, and enforcement more visible in the case of cars accessing the High Street (e.g. traffic and parking on High Street West)

Key points for the University in respect of Gillingham town centre

- Strengthen the walking route between the station and university – clarity of route, quality of public realm, signage
- Improve the gateway to the town centre from the railway station (especially the appearance of the northern block)
- Improve the offer from the High Street, particularly in convenience goods
- Nurture distinct elements of the town's offer, particularly the market and community based business and enterprise and perhaps a distinct range of goods and services brought about through the presence of non-British ethnic groups
- Continue to meet the needs of the local community living closest to the town centre – the core demographic

De-pedestrianising the High Street could address some of the issues facing the High Street, allowing parking on-street and bringing activity into the street.

However, there are possible detrimental effects and a number of possible scenarios under which vehicles could be introduced. Further work into this idea and the possible impact is recommended. Ensuring Jeffery Street does not become a barrier between residential areas and the High Street is important.

Site allocations may not be appropriate owing to difficult market / viability conditions in Gillingham.

Redevelopment of sites could be achieved through policy wording and proactive encouragement of, say, residential use at upper floors or redevelopment of town centre or edge of centre sites. Particular consideration will need to be given to design standards, amenity and parking provision. The latter of these remains contentious with users of the centre.

Further study is recommended to enable to Council to understand how Council parking is being used currently by town centre users and commuters and how this affects the town centre.

There is vocal public feedback to suggest that Gillingham's current town centre offer is not strong enough to support what are seen as high Council parking charges.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Planning Policy Context

Adopted Development Plan

The development plan for Gillingham Town Centre consists of the following document:

■ Medway Local Plan (2003)

The Medway Local Plan 2003 was adopted and launched on 14 May 2003, replacing the Medway Towns Local Plan 1992 and the Medway Local Plan Deposit Version 1999.

Medway Local Plan (2003)

The Medway Local Plan 2003 was adopted and launched on 14 May 2003, replacing the Medway Towns Local Plan 1992 and the Medway Local Plan Deposit Version 1999.

The following are policies included within the Medway Local Plan (2003) that are relevant to the production of a town centre masterplan for Gillingham.

BNE1 General Principles for Built Development

The design of development (including extensions, alterations and conversions) should be appropriate in relation to the character, appearance and functioning of the built and natural environment by:

- (i) being satisfactory in terms of use, scale, mass, proportion, details, materials, layout and siting; and
- (ii) respecting the scale, appearance and location of buildings, spaces and the visual amenity of the surrounding area; and
- (iii) where appropriate, providing well structured, practical and attractive areas of open space.

BNE9 Design of Commercial Frontages

Proposals which would result in the loss of shop fronts of traditional design or materials, and which contribute to the character and appearance of an area, will not be permitted. Proposals for new commercial or retail frontages should:

- (i) respect the building's character, scale and appearance; and
- (ii) incorporate fascias and any additional features which are in proportion to the elevations of the existing building and which avoid obscuring any existing architectural details; and
- (iii) retain individual frontages when two or more building frontages are incorporated into a single unit; and
- (iv) complement the positive character of the surrounding area; and
- (v) ensure that any security grilles or shutters demonstrated to be necessary, are designed to be an integral feature of the frontage and maintain a shop window display.

H1 New Residential Development

Residential development will be permitted on the following sites, as defined on the Proposals Map, subject to the requirements set out below. All sites which meet the appropriate size thresholds will be subject to Local Plan policies requiring the provision of open space, affordable housing and a mix of dwelling types. New residential development on these sites should be in accordance with policy BNE3, which sets out the Council's noise standards.

H4 Housing in Urban Areas

Within the urban area, as defined on the proposals map, residential development will be permitted consisting of:

- (i) the use of vacant or derelict land or the change of use or redevelopment of existing buildings no longer required for non-residential use; or
- (ii) the redevelopment of existing residential areas and infilling in such areas (providing that a clear improvement in the local environment will result); or
- (iii) mixed commercial and residential uses in proximity to town centres; or
- (iv) the use of upper floors above commercial premises.

H5 High Density Housing

Housing proposals at low densities will not be permitted in, or close to:

- (i) town centres; or
- (ii) near existing or proposed public transport access points; or
- (iii) along routes capable of being well served by public transport and which are close to local facilities.

R5 Retailing in Gillingham

The Core Area of Gillingham town centre is defined on the proposals map. Within the Core Area Use Classes A1, A2, and A3 and other uses appropriate to a District Centre will be permitted, provided they support the vitality and viability of the centre as a whole.

Land at High Street/Skinner Street/Jeffery Street/James Street is allocated for a retail development to include a new foodstore (up to 2000 square metres gross floorspace) as the principal floorspace element subject to:

- (i) improvements to public transport provision to the town centre in lieu of on-site parking; and
- (ii) high quality pedestrian links to High Street and Skinner Street; and
- (iii) a high quality of design complementing the established character of the area.

R11 Town Centre Uses and the Sequential Approach

Business employment (Class B1(a)), leisure and entertainment uses, cultural and educational facilities will be expected to be located in the main centres of Chatham, Strood, Gillingham and Rainham or in the event of no suitable sites being available, on the edges of these centres. Proposals elsewhere for these uses, unless otherwise allocated in the local plan, will only be permitted if:

- (i) it is clearly demonstrated that no suitable centre or edge of centre site exists; and
- (ii) the site is easily accessible by a choice of transport modes, including public transport; and
- (iii) the uses proposed would not undermine the vitality and viability of the main centres listed.

R12 Mixed Use Schemes

Within, or on the edge of, the defined Core Areas of Chatham, Strood, Gillingham, Rainham (and at a lesser scale Rochester) mixed use developments of an appropriate scale and incorporating high design standards and which contribute to the vitality and viability of these centres will be permitted.

R17 A2 and A3 Uses and Changes of Use

Changes of use within, and on the edge of, the Core Areas of Chatham, Strood, Gillingham, Rainham and Rochester from Class A1 (retail) to A2 (Financial and Professional Services) or A3 (Food and Drink uses) at ground floor level will be permitted except where the addition of such a use within any particular part of the centre would cumulatively have a detrimental effect on the character and retail function of the centre or visual amenity.

T5 Bus Preference Measures

Within the bus corridors identified on the Proposals Map, preference measures to aid bus access, particularly on Park and Ride routes, will be developed. Such measures may include:

- (i) dedicated bus lanes, including contra-flow lanes where appropriate;
- (ii) priority to buses at junctions;
- (iii) priority within traffic management schemes;
- (iv) enhanced waiting and access facilities and information systems for passengers, including people with disabilities.

Area based policies and guides

Medway provide planning guidance to support, and expand upon specific Local Plan policies.

- Guide to Good Practice in Shopfront Design
- Medway's Air Quality Planning Guidance
- Hot Food Takeaways in Medway - A Guidance Note
- Medway Landscape Character Assessment main report 2011
- Medway Land Character Assessment appendices 2011
- Medway Landscape Character Assessment map 2011
- Parking standards
- Interim residential parking standards 2009
- The design of replacement dwellings and extensions in the countryside
- Transport Assessments guidance note
- Shopfront advertising guide 2015
- Shopfront security 2015
- Waste Management Requirements new developments
- Waste collection vehicle specifications

These guidance documents do not have the status of formal supplementary planning documents, but are a material consideration in determining planning applications.

These include guidance on:

- Areas of outstanding natural beauty
- Article 4 directions (includes Gillingham Park)
- Mitigating bird disturbances
- Conservation areas and listed buildings in Medway (includes Railway Street in the town centre and Brompton Lines to the west)
- Chatham Interface Land draft

Emerging Medway Policy

The Local Plan sets out a vision for future development in Medway to ensure that the needs of the area are met through a number of policies and proposals.

Future Medway will replace the 2003 Medway Local Plan and cover the period up to 2035 providing for the number of homes and jobs and supporting infrastructure such as transport, health facilities and parks that the area and its growing population need over time.

To inform the new Local Plan policies, a range of evidence has been compiled drawing from a variety of information sources. The sources have been grouped and linked into the following themes. The following list is not exhaustive and will be updated when new evidence is available.

Local Plan development strategy consultation

The Council has prepared a Development Strategy technical report (March 2018) for consultation as the next stage in preparing a new Local Plan for Medway along with the Medway 2035 document. This document sets out the ambitions for the plan, options for how Medway could grow and draft policies for managing development.

This report builds on work carried out at previous stages of consultation on Medway's emerging Local Plan. The Council has considered comments made at earlier stages of consultation and used evidence and analysis to find what approaches would be most successful for Medway in meeting the aims for growth.

The proposals set out in the Development Strategy consultation document include:

- Promoting the regeneration of urban waterfront and town centre sites as the core of our growth plans
- A rural town on the Hoo Peninsula, focused around Hoo St Werburgh, supported by new services and infrastructure, including transport, schools, healthcare, parks, jobs and shops
- Mix of smaller sites in suburban and other rural areas

The Council has used this growth strategy to set out four options for Medway's development:

Scenario 1 - Meeting the housing need of 29,500 homes in line with our analysis of the number of homes needed to support the area's population growth and change up to 2035

Scenario 2 - Investment in infrastructure to unlock growth – if we are successful in bids for major new funding for the area, the speed and rate of development could be boosted on the Hoo Peninsula

Scenario 3 - Meeting Government's target of local housing need of 37,000 homes, in line with a new approach to calculating the number of homes required for our area

Scenario 4 - Consideration of development within Lodge Hill SSSI – Homes England is preparing a new planning application for this area for up to 2000 homes with supporting services, which would protect much of this designated site for wildlife, but involve development on some protected areas

Emerging Retail Strategy

Whilst the focus of the progression of the plan is on testing the four scenarios outlined above, the full document contains a full set of proposed policies over a range of topics, including retailing and town centres (chapter 6). This chapter sets out policy direction for the main town centres in Medway based largely upon the North Kent Retail and Commercial Leisure Assessment, which is detailed further in Appendix Two of this document. It does not contain a specific policy for Gillingham district centre (or other centres).

The main strands of strategy state:

- Chatham is the highest order centre and should be the location for all the area's new comparison floorspace (Policy RTC1);

- The remaining four town centres – Strood, Rochester, Gillingham, Rainham – and Hempstead Valley should be the next tier down with other concentrations of retail activity such as the Dockside outlet centre and Gillingham Business Park considered as out of centre locations less preferable for new retail development (Policy RTC2);
- The town centres will be supported and protected as sustainable locations for services and proposals for town centre uses in inappropriate locations will be managed where the vitality and viability of centres could be threatened

Within the plan, the retail core areas are carried forward from the 2003 plan, and include a wide area of Gillingham's town centre (acknowledging that the 'town centre boundaries' may need review). The primary and secondary retail frontages are defined within this, with the primary frontages continuing for the whole of the High Street between King Street and Skinner Street, and the secondary frontages essentially making up the remainder within the defined retail core. The listed war memorial, Medway Park and the extreme western end of the High Street (west of Britton Street) are all outside of the retail core. The plan speculates on the potential for capitalising on the presence of students as a means of supporting Gillingham, though where this idea came from and how this might be achieved is not detailed.

Policy RTC 5 - Role, Function and management of uses in centres – Frontage

Supports non-A1 uses in the primary and secondary frontages where this is reflective of the 'role, character and function of the centre'.

Medway Strategic Land Availability

The Council has prepared a Strategic Land Availability Assessment to show the availability of potential development sites, to help inform the development of the new Local Plan.

The SLAA does not allocate development sites or grant planning permission. It considers if land is 'suitable' for development, 'available' and 'deliverable'. The SLAA does not predetermine the Council's future assessment of sites through the local plan and development management processes.

The first SLAA was published in November 2010, with six subsequent reviews and reports, the latest being published in January 2017. These were supported by official call for sites exercises in 2008/2009 and 2014. Since

then the Council has been accepting new sites and will continue to do so until the end of the Development Strategy 2018.

There are several sites in Gillingham town centre and nearby:

- 0039 Retailing In Gillingham, High, Skinner, Jeffrey Streets (0.66ha; suitable but not available). Was originally an allocation in the 2003 Local Plan. Multiple ownership. Complex. Looks difficult.
- 0663 82 Jeffery Street, Gillingham (suitable, available, residential, 11 units in 0-5 years). Has consent and looks probable.
- 0873 Rear of 47 High Street/Britton Street, Gillingham (0.23ha; suitable but not available). Currently occupied by New Look. Would want to keep the A use to the front; site has a rear parking area fronting Britton Street.
- 0874 Land at junc... of Marlborough Rd/Brompton Rd, Gill (0.22ha; suitable but not available)
- 0876 BT Switch Centre/Delivery Office, Green St, Gill (0.41ha; suitable but not available). Constrained by virtue of the current use.
- 0976 Petrol Filling Station Railway Street, Gillingham (0.21ha; suitable but not available)

Other interesting sites:

- 0875 Retail Core (High St, Jeffrey St, King St) Gillingham has extant planning permission
- 1089 Land at Priestfield (2.24ha; suitable, available, 6-10 years, 78 units)

Appendix 2: Public comments

Public Drop-in Event, Salvation Hall, Gillingham

The following comments were made on post-it notes during the drop-in event that took place in Gillingham town centre on September 13:

Lack of transport options

- People have to drive to post offices
- Lots of elderly people in the area – no services in the town centre so have to travel to get anything – health, services, shops, schools
- Better public transport, make it easier to walk to town
- Difficulty in getting to Asda by bus – closest stop is now the police station
- Lots of people round Gillingham don't use town centre – has an impact on the town centre shops and environment

Anti-social behaviour (general)

- ASB is massive problem
- People walking High Street still keep throwing rubbish on pavement than use bin – please fine this
- Anti-social behaviour and homeless people are a problem at Britton Farm
- Feel uneasy in the High Street with homeless and betting shops – some people won't come into Gillingham because of this
- Spending money on small trees in Balmoral Gardens is pointless – build larger vandal proof trees
- 24 hour shop in Canterbury Street isn't needed; it's causing ASB through the day and night, including drugs
- Where are the police?
- Too many street drinkers – intimidating experience

Anti-social behaviour (youths on bikes)

- Scooters and motorcycles come through Britton Farm
- Gangs of youths on bikes are an issue
- Too many bikes race down the High Street
- Young people need to be engaged by role models (e.g. Chris Hoy)

Britton Farm

- Anti-social behaviour and homeless people are a problem at Britton Farm
- Could use Britton Farm as a place for market traders and small traders – move them from High Street to assemble sites
- Scooters and motorcycles come through Britton Farm
- Critical of Council parking charges – have to pay in the evenings; people won't park in the Mall (Britton Farm)
- Britton Farm needs reusing
- Problem in Britton Farm Mall with the lack of cleaning
- Britton Farm Mall – plan for living accommodation should be abandoned; it conflicts with other intentions

Market (has potential)

- Market brings people in
- Market is good – more food stalls needed; more of a farmers market is needed
- More visiting markets, e.g. crafts
- Gillingham needs more craft market and special events
- If we can, different market once or twice every month
- Better market needed
- Bring back stall option for local organisation

Market (is not beneficial)

- Market has declined – not what it was. Used to be an attractor. Brings in the wrong sort

Parking (Price)

- Parking is too expensive and not enough shops
- Parking needs to be free or cheap
- Parking has to be free for Gillingham to compete
- Cost of parking has to be removed

- Parking – the station is more expensive than the council car parks; so commuters are using Council car parks
- Critical of Council parking charges – have to pay in the evenings; people won't park in the Mall (Britton Farm)
- Allow 20 minutes for parking

Parking (Quantity)

- Too little parking
- Don't want existing car parking removed
- Parking space has already been lost to student accommodation
- Need parking in the High Street
- Would welcome traffic back into the High Street – 15 minute parking; narrow street so wouldn't be a problem to cross
- Parking is difficult at times – don't take away any central car parks
- Parking is difficult
- Stop blue badge holders parking in High Street
- Park and ride to ease 'parking woes'

Public realm – management

- Pedestrian environment is badly managed – too many cyclists
- Pedestrian environment needs to be much better managed – more police needed, no cyclists
- Clean pavements
- Clean toilets
- Cigarette bins with polls (same as they have at Chatham bus station)
- Spending money on small trees in Balmoral Gardens is pointless – build larger vandal proof trees
- Problem in Britton Farm Mall with the lack of cleaning
- Entertainment in Smith Square – regularly, not just at Christmas
- More use of Smith Square with entertainment / displays
- Do not allow traffic through High Street

Retail Offer / Mix

- Another supermarket is needed
- Another foodstore needed – Tesco Metro, Sainsbury Local
- Need local shops for local people – butcher, grocer – need more than Aldi
- Needs more new retailers
- Need to get better retail mix, bigger shops – but the internet is a problem
- More shops – clothes, gentlemen's shops, bring back M&S
- Shops to reopen
- High Street west needs to be retail
- Encourage health and medical uses in the High Street
- Evening economy is non-existent – no-go area after 2200
- Parking is too expensive and not enough shops
- No more nail shops
- Need less take-aways
- Need less take-aways, more food shops, clothes shops, better mix of shops
- No to Wetherspoons – encourages early drinking – poss in Barclays Bank (sic)
- Too many betting shops and casinos in the town centre
- Too many Turkish hairdressers
- Use Iceland, local shops or online!!
- Feel uneasy in the High Street with homeless and betting shops
- Could use Britton Farm as a place for market traders and small traders – move them from High Street to assemble sites
- Banks are vulnerable

Arts and crafts

- Promoting artist space

- Music studio at nursery site; could combine a venue and gallery; close to university and leisure centre
- Could create an artist nucleus – idea could bring in other uses
- Artist, studio space in Gillingham; if cost is low, artists will come

Promoting artistic activity

- More activities in High Street like Rochester high street
- Entertainment in Smith Square – regularly, not just at Christmas
- More use of Smith Square with entertainment / displays

Business support

- Support
- More start-up businesses – more support needed
- Needs more employment

Business finance

- Encourage landlords to reduce rents
- Business rates are difficult for charity shops – these are vulnerable
- Lower business rates

Feedback forms following the Public Drop-in Event

Whilst comments were collected during the drop-in event, some people chose to fill in the comment forms provided at the event and complete these in their own time. Many of the comments on the feedback forms reflected the discussions in the drop-in, but the forms gave equal opportunity to express positive things about Gillingham as well. The main themes derived from the forms are listed below:

Use one word to describe Gillingham

The most commonly used word was, 'depressing', followed by 'sad' and 'run-down'. Words were generally negative about Gillingham.

What do you like about Gillingham Town Centre?

What comes through the forms is an appreciation of Gillingham's importance as a social place for meeting people and using the traders. It is acknowledged that traders are dedicated and friendly. The pedestrianised environment is commented on several times as a positive, along with its ease of accessibility by transport and because of the proximity to local homes. People like the market and see it as a benefit. The main shops people named as important were the national chains, the post office and Costa.

What don't you like about Gillingham Town centre?

People see the mix of shops and problematic, and express this as having too many of one thing (such as take-aways, charity shops and betting shops) and too little of another (mainly convenience and clothing stores).

Anti-social behaviour and the perception of one's safety is a constant theme, with people particularly concerned about on-street drinking, drugs, young people on bikes and the lack of a police presence to deal with these. Traders focus on these but also mention vehicles using the High Street at times when such use is prohibited.

What / where could be improved?

By far the most common area that people would wish to see improved is the retail mix, with people seeking more variety in it and suggesting financial and other support mechanisms to encourage this (e.g. lower rents, reduced business rates). Pursuing arts, cultural or community activities within the town centre came across as a popular idea to give the town centre something different.



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