

DUNSTABLE TOWN CENTRE

MASTERPLAN

MAY 2011

Central
Bedfordshire

Working in partnership
Central Bedfordshire Council



AECOM



A Foreword

This Masterplan has been developed between 2009 and 2011 with the help of local residents, representatives of the business community, landowners, Councillors, the Town Council, officers of the Council and other interested parties. The significant collective involvement and effort from so many individuals and groups across the local community shows the depth of feeling that many local people have for Dunstable.

Dunstable town centre has a number of issues which need addressing but it also has significant strengths and attributes such as its location, heritage and well established green spaces.

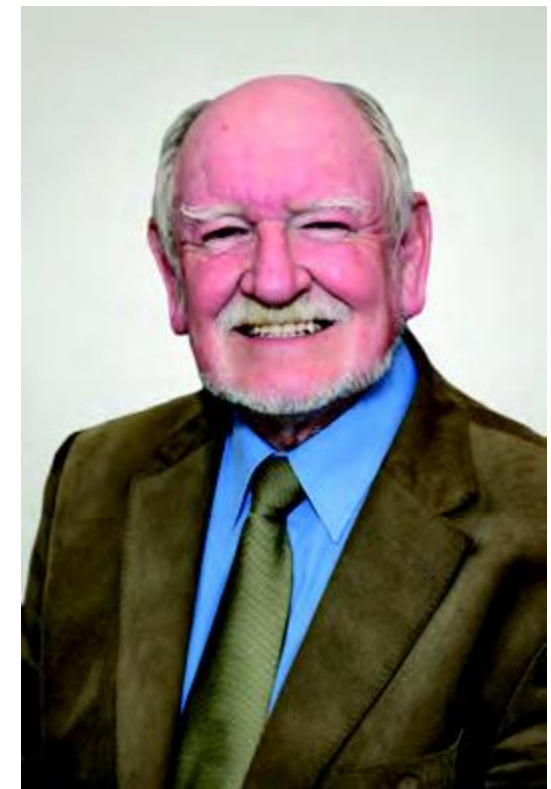
The Masterplan sets out our vision for Dunstable and how we will achieve that by regenerating the town centre over the next 10 to 15 years. Some initiatives we will hope to complete within the next 5 years, while some of the more ambitious elements are more complicated and will take longer to deliver.

The Masterplan is a major step towards setting out a programme of continuous improvements that should see Dunstable improve steadily year on year until our vision for the town centre is realised. Most of all we want Dunstable Town Centre to be a place that people want to visit and spend more time in and that supports a thriving local economy.

At the heart our proposals is an enlarged and enhanced retail offer, a new medical centre, a new library and housing for families and older people.

A key aspiration of the Masterplan is to reduce congestion through the town and the proposed A5 - M1 Link road would act as an important catalyst for significant change in the town centre. Together with improvements to the streets, pavements and open spaces this will improve the enjoyment of the town centre's enhanced facilities. Improvements to pedestrian and cycle routes across the town centre will also enhance the environment for pedestrians and cyclists.

I hope that you find the Masterplan of interest and support the initiatives proposed.



Cllr. Ken Matthews

**Executive Member for Sustainable Communities,
Strategic Planning and Economic Development**

May 2011



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PART A: INTRODUCING THE MASTERPLAN

Introduction

1

A plan for transformational change...

In December 2008 South Bedfordshire District Council (now part of Central Bedfordshire Council) commissioned AECOM Design + Planning (formerly EDAW), in partnership with AECOM Transportation (formerly Faber Maunsell), King Sturge and Architectural History Practice, to develop a masterplan for Dunstable town centre.

The catalyst for the masterplan were plans for housing growth in the sub-region, combined with an associated requirement for additional retail and a number of strategic transport interventions, such as the A5-M1 Link, Woodside Connection and the Luton Dunstable Busway.

Our area of study extends beyond what is officially known as the 'town centre boundary' and also includes the areas of Kingsway, White Lion Retail Park, Central Bedfordshire College, Priory Church and housing off West Street. Figure 1.1 shows the masterplan area.

We believe that the town's location, heritage and community spirit create great potential to significantly improve the town centre's quality and offer. This report identifies the preferred option for development and regeneration across the town centre over the next 10-15 years. As this report sets out, some improvements can be achieved within the next 5 years. Other improvements are more complicated and may take longer to deliver. This report is a major step towards setting in place a programme of continuous improvements that should see Dunstable town centre improve steadily year on year until the vision for this historic centre is realised.

The proposals put forward in this Masterplan are based on the analysis and consultation throughout this process and should be viewed as an evolution and refinement of the three masterplan options consulted upon in September 2009 and the draft masterplan consulted upon in September 2010. This document has been amended and finalised in light of the consultation findings. Further detail on the consultation findings is set out in Appendix A.

As the proposals in this plan depart from the existing Local Plan, this document will be adopted as 'Interim Planning Guidance' to articulate the Council's current thinking for the town centre. The document will then form part of the

evidence base for both the draft Core Strategy and draft Site Allocations Development Plan Documents (DPDs). These documents will be subject to formal statutory consultation, a Sustainability Appraisal and an Examination in Public. It is important to ensure that the public continue to be kept well informed and consulted upon as these documents move forward.

The need for transformational change...

The masterplan brief recognised that the existing town centre faces a number of issues. These include traffic congestion, air quality, high vacancy rates, and a declining retail offer.

The Luton and Central Bedfordshire Retail Capacity study (WYG Planning and Design 2009) states that there are indications the health of the town centre has deteriorated since 2005, particularly in terms of rising vacancy levels (17% according to GOAD 2008), shopping yields and air quality (air quality management area (AQMA) declared in January 2005). Dunstable's retail offer is in need of major rejuvenation.

Analysis of where people shop in the area show that of those living within the town's primary catchment area only 18% choose Dunstable, with most opting for Luton (28%), Milton Keynes (15%) and Hemel Hempstead (10%). In simple terms, the town needs to evolve if it is to remain competitive. A step change in the retail offer is required.

The town centre has seen regeneration, primarily through the recent development of the Grove Theatre and associated developments. However, in some instances new development, such as ASDA and its existing customer car park, have compounded issues of circulation and access.

This is further exacerbated by traffic volume, air quality and vehicular movement along strategic roads (A5 and A505) creating barriers to pedestrian movement. The town's historic development around the crossroads (an Air Quality Management Area), along with the design of the road network, including staggered pedestrian crossings also contribute towards a disjointed and poor quality environment.

As the economy emerged out of recession last year, so property values have also seen a recovery over the last 6 -9 months. However, the economic recovery remains fragile; the effects of cuts in Government spending and a tightening of fiscal policy coupled with higher taxes have yet to be felt. Some fear that the focus on reducing Government debt will lead to a 'double dip' recession.

Meanwhile the recovery of property values has stalled in recent months. Growth in values in the sector has been driven by previous unprecedented falls in market values and a lack of yield in other sectors. The market is still patchy, meaning that prime property is still in demand whilst secondary assets remain difficult sells. Some of the prices being paid have perhaps ignored the property market fundamentals, which have not improved. We do not expect to see rental growth in the short term and the occupational markets, in particular the retail sector remains weak; those tenants with requirements have taken full advantage of the general lack of demand for new space and incentive packages have been increased. Finance for development is also difficult to secure, meaning that many regeneration and redevelopment schemes across the UK have either been stopped or scaled down.

The town centre is therefore in an economically fragile state. This masterplan therefore recommends that Central Bedfordshire Council adopt a town centre first approach to retail development, working within a revised town centre boundary to deliver new retail-led mixed use development.

The drivers of transformational change...

There is a particular need for new housing and employment land in the Luton and southern Central Bedfordshire area. The Joint Core Strategy currently being produced for this area recognises the level of need and proposed significant growth totalling 28,300 new homes and 134 hectares of new employment land both within the urban area and in the form of three major urban extensions. For Dunstable, the potential for up to 7,000 homes and 40 hectares of employment land nearby offers tremendous opportunities for the town centre.

To support this growth, there are a number of planned / proposed strategic transport interventions that will have a significant impact on the town.

The Luton Dunstable Busway will provide a regular and reliable connection between the two towns and connections beyond to London, providing access to work and leisure opportunities and increasing the town's attraction to new residents, workers and investors.

The A5-M1 Link Road will enable the 'de-trunking' of the A5 and together with the Woodside Connection will improve air quality in the town centre. Such interventions will also help reduce traffic flows and congestion, in particular heavy goods vehicles, and allow for safer interaction between pedestrian and vehicles in the town centre. Detailed designs for the A5 High Street are being developed by Central Bedfordshire Council for implementation following de-trunking. This masterplan sets out the key principles, which will form the basis for improvements.

The planned growth should generate sufficient expenditure to support an estimated 21,300 sq.m of additional comparison floorspace in the town centre by 2021 (The Luton and Central Bedfordshire Retail Capacity study). While slower growth may change the scale and trajectory of growth, looking forward there is still a housing and therefore a retail need to be met.

The town's supermarkets are key assets. Collectively, they generate large (and regular) volumes of footfall. The key challenge for the rest of the town is to leverage this footfall to the benefit of its non-food offer.

As most of the retail stock is dated, with relatively small units set within a poor quality environment, new floorspace should prove an important catalyst to unlock the town's potential.

A key additional element in reviving the town's economy is the right balance of other uses, including residential and leisure uses, to attract a larger number and a more diverse range of people to the town.

Although the retail property development market is extremely difficult in the face of the current fiscal environment, this should not detract from the long-term regeneration needs of Dunstable.

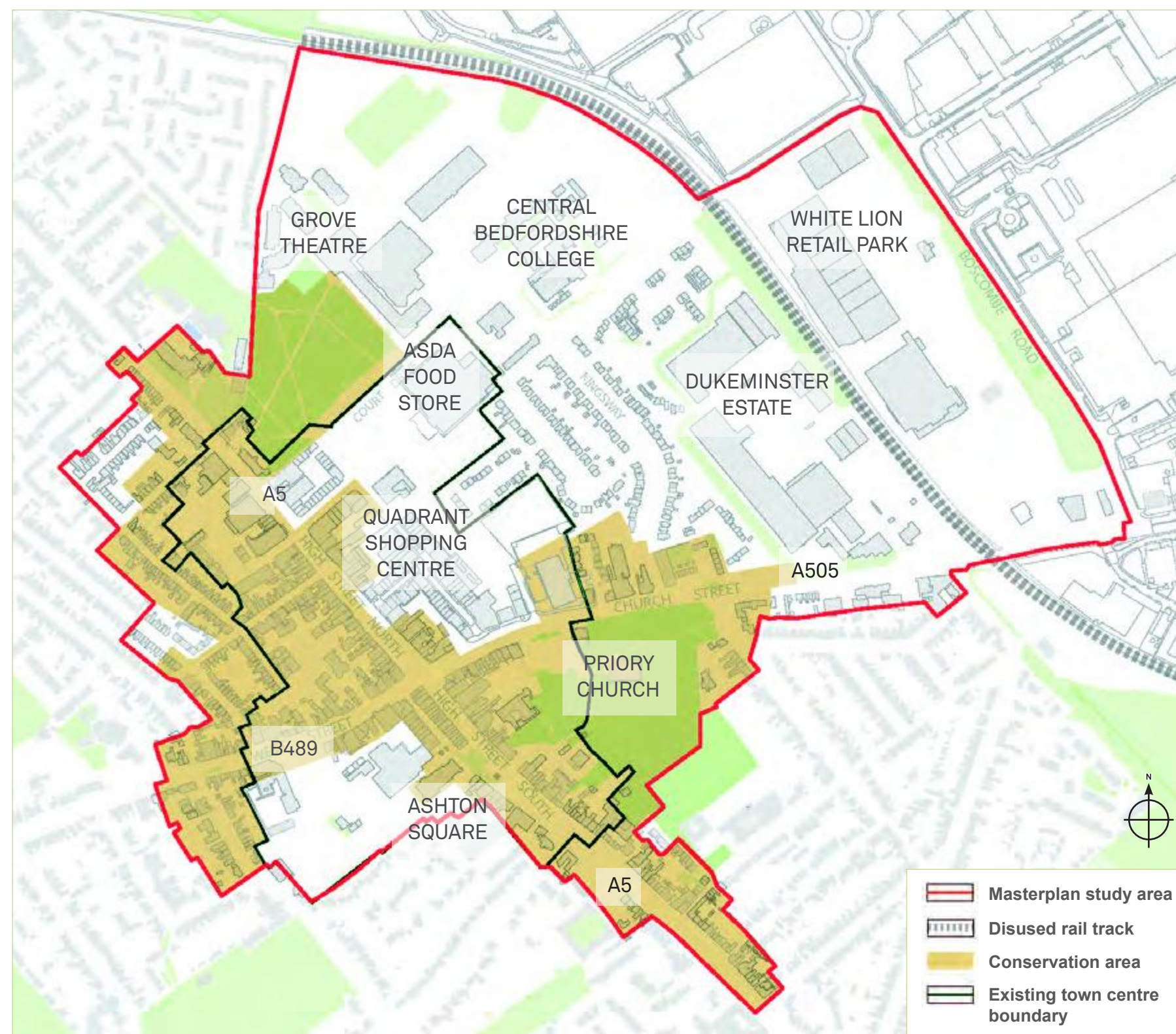


Figure 1.1: Masterplan study area

The purpose of this masterplan

The masterplan sets out a vision for the town centre and development objectives and key principles to help guide emerging proposals as they come forward. The masterplan then sets out an indicative scheme based on these principles to help articulate how the vision, objectives and principles could come forward.

It is important to emphasise that the Masterplan is a vehicle to guide and promote renewal, redevelopment and improvement of the town centre. It is not a blueprint. It sets out important guiding principles and policies, but retains flexibility to enable market led solutions to come forward and be considered. The proposals included in the Masterplan are illustrative only and it may be that the eventual development that comes forward is different from that which has been shown in the document.

The vision for Dunstable Town Centre

The vision for Dunstable builds on these challenges and opportunities. It is based on an understanding that the town sits within a hugely competitive environment and that the centre needs to find its niche to ensure the town's sustainable future. It is based on analysis by the masterplan team and feedback from public and stakeholder consultation events. It will be further tested through the next round of consultation.

“Dunstable will become a connected 21st century town centre. Building on its heritage and green space, it will become an affordable, attractive and accessible option for residents, employees, employers, investors and visitors alike. The town will bring more to a wider range of people, offering an experience that will make it stand out from the crowd.”

The masterplan – objectives

There has been significant public and stakeholder consultation to get to this preferred option. Details of the process and high level findings are set out in Appendix 1.

The masterplan is based on four overall objectives to help deliver this vision. These underpin the proposals put forward in this report:

1. A diverse mix of activities to attract people throughout the day and evening
2. A connected network of public streets, spaces and parks
3. A series of inviting landmarks, views and buildings
4. An accessible location by all available sustainable transport modes

Much of the town sits within a conservation area, designated in 1979. In 2009, English Heritage identified the conservation area as ‘at risk’. A conservation area review has been undertaken in parallel with the masterplan and its key findings, set out in an Appraisal document, have fed into these objectives set out in Appendix 2.

The de-trunking of the A5 is a key aspiration of this masterplan and it would act as an important catalyst for change in the town centre. As noted in the introduction, detailed designs for the A5 are being developed directly by Central Bedfordshire Council and their appointed consultants.

The masterplan – principles

1) ***A diverse mix of activities to attract people throughout the day and evening***

The existing town centre should be prioritised over out of town developments

In order to meet the need of high street brands, it is the intention to create bigger shop units

Larger shop units should focus on the north-eastern quadrant, with smaller shops complementing other uses in the remaining areas

Some residential areas, including Dorchester Close, may need to be acquired to allow for redevelopment of the shopping centre & car park

Key priorities for the town include a new library, a medical centre, new public toilets & housing for families & older people

2) **A series of inviting landmarks, views and buildings**

The design of development as you enter the town should help create new gateways or landmarks for Dunstable

Where appropriate active shop frontages will be encouraged to make the town feel more vibrant & safe

Shop front improvements & better management of vacant units to make them more attractive, or active with temporary uses, will be encouraged

Where appropriate the ground floors of new development should encourage activity, such as shops or offices, to make the town feel vibrant & safe

New buildings & public spaces will need to promote good design to compliment Dunstable's rich heritage, existing open spaces & nearby residential properties.

3) **An accessible location by all available sustainable transport modes**

The masterplan seeks to maximise the benefit of reduced congestion in the town, should proposed transport improvements come forward, including the Guided Bus Way (under construction), the A5-M1 Link & Woodside Connection

Long-term, this would include the 'de-trunking' of the A5 (transferring the responsibility for managing the road from national to local government), which would allow the Council to re-route Heavy Goods Vehicles from part of the town centre, to create a safer environment for all users

De-trunking would also allow the pedestrian experience to be improved by, for example, removing the "sheep pen" type crossing points and re-visiting their locations from a local view point rather than the strategic road network

Proposals coming forward should allow for a similar proportion of car parking spaces to shops as there is currently in the town centre

4) **A connected network of public streets, spaces and parks**

Proposals for the town centre should support improved pedestrian & cycle routes across town

Redevelopment of the current Quadrant Centre, ASDA customer car park & library area should look to improve views & pedestrian links between Grove House & Priory Gardens

Proposals for public areas should seek to maximise trees & planting throughout the town

If the A5 is de-trunked opportunities to widen the footways along High Street should be explored

Shared surfaces, where pedestrians, cyclists & vehicles 'share' the same space should be considered both in retail & residential areas. As detailed schemes come forward, shared surfaces would need to ensure that they are appropriate for disabled and older users

The masterplan should support the development of new smaller public spaces, both in town centre & residential areas, to complement existing larger parks & gardens



Public consultation on the stage 2 options

The masterplan – scheme concepts to deliver transformational change

Development should be brought forward to respond to both the objectives and the key principles set out above.

The illustrative masterplan (Figure 1.3) sets out how the objectives and principles could be met within the town centre. The purpose of the plan is to help guide development, but it should be underlined that the scheme is indicative and detailed design of individual schemes is likely to amend the proposals for the town as they come forward.

- A more consolidated larger unit retail offer in the area currently occupied by ASDA customer car park and the Quadrant Shopping Centre
- A focus on smaller, independent retail and food and drink along High Street North and South and other quadrants
- A new family focused residential neighbourhood in the area currently occupied by St Mary's Gate Car Park, Wilkinson's and Farm Foods
- Opportunity to either hold the market on a revamped Town Square or, in the longer-term, along the A5 High Street North
- Housing for older people at key locations within the historic core of the town
- New community facilities including a health centre, library and public toilets, along with improved youth facilities and child play areas.
- Refurbishment/redevelopment of Central Bedfordshire College Dunstable Campus to meet the needs of future generations of students
- Improved pedestrian, cycle and public transport connections throughout the town. Maximise opportunities for shared surface layouts on the town centre road network
- Tackle congestion and air quality issues through improved traffic management, including new parking arrangements and ability to exploit opportunities that could arise should the A5 be de-trunked to improve the environment for pedestrians and cyclists. A potential lorry ban on the A5 (N) between the A505 and Court Drive junctions would require both the A5-M1 Link and the Woodside Connection proposals to be implemented.

Extending the town centre boundary

The masterplan process has highlighted the need to expand the town centre boundary to accommodate the key transformational moves, such as the retail expansion and the car parks.

The proposed extension would need to include the area of Dorchester Close. Site analysis and consultation has indicated that the current north east quadrant is the most appropriate location for a consolidated retail offer. The options stage of the masterplan (summarised in Appendix A) demonstrated that it is unlikely that a new retail

scheme to transform the town could come forward without the Dorchester Close area being included, due to its location and configuration. As such, the inclusion of Dorchester Close allows for a more viable development footprint for new retail development in the area. Commercial advice recommends that other potential sites for car parking would be too far from the shopping area in order to be successful and acceptable to retailers and shoppers.

A site acquisition strategy will need to be developed in close consultation with residents ahead of any redevelopment. There are currently 8 private houses and 20 Central Bedfordshire Council owned flats on Dorchester Close and 1 property in Kingscroft Avenue.

Commercial advice recommends that the removal of these properties would be required to allow a financially viable and high quality regeneration scheme to come forward that significantly benefits the town. It will be important to keep the occupants of these properties well informed and consulted upon as the schemes become more detailed, as well as local residents from Kingscroft Avenue.

Details on the types of intervention that could improve the amenity of the car parking to avoid potential negative effects on nearby residential properties is shown on page 46.

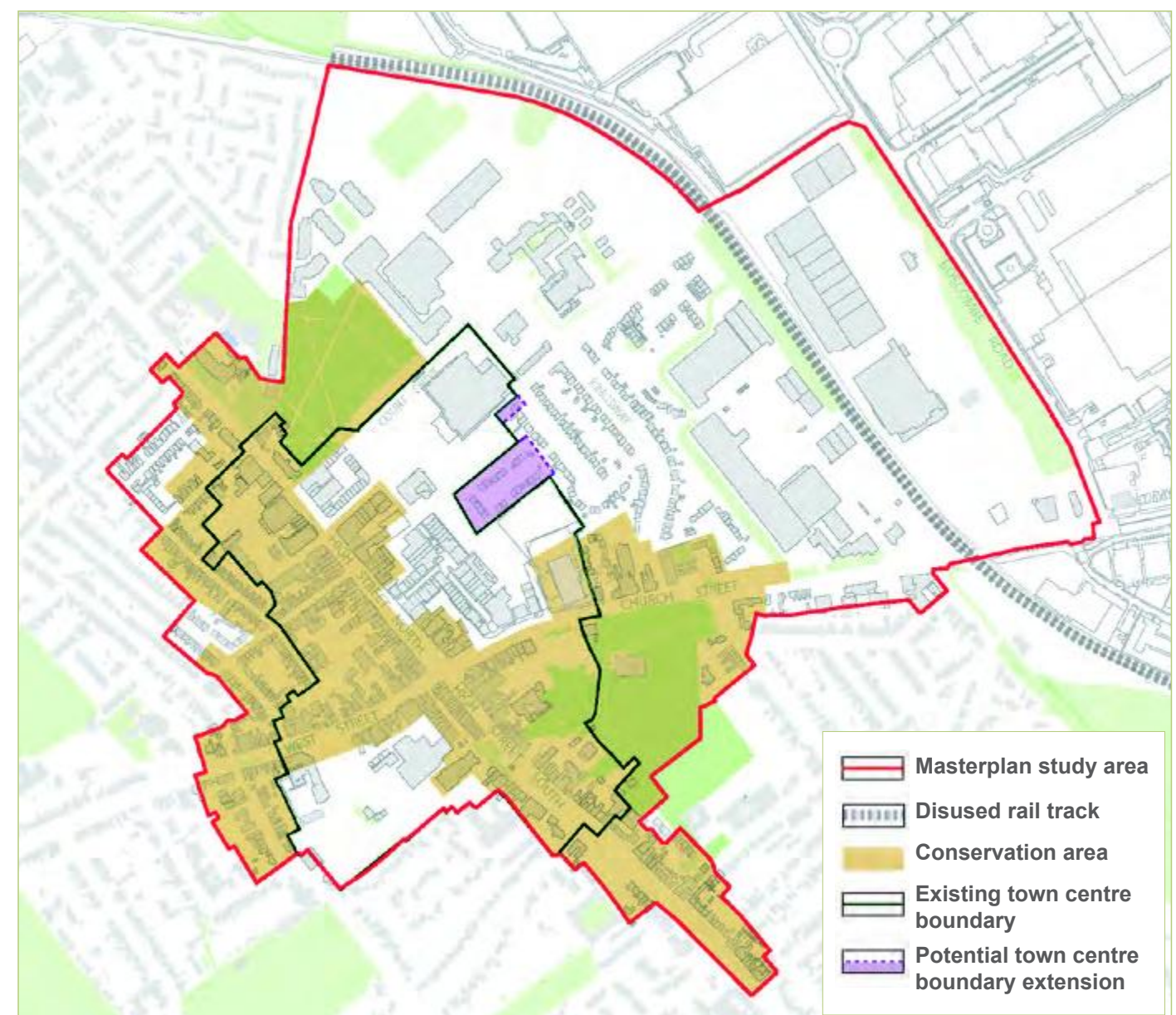


Figure 1.2: Potential town centre boundary extension



Figure 1.3: Illustrative masterplan

* Detailed designs for the A5 High Street are being developed directly by Central Bedfordshire Council and their appointed consultants.

