

7. Public Realm Strategy

This report refers you to Plan 7: Indicative Ideas for the Public Realm, within Appendix 1.

7.1 Introduction

A well conceived public realm and landscape design will help to unify and integrate the town centre as a whole enhancing its image and visual quality, strengthening local identity, providing comfortable, safe and accessible public spaces and contributing to a network of green spaces and streets. Key proposals for public spaces are set out below together with design principles for the coordinated design of key surfacing and paving, street furniture, signage, lighting, public art and planting elements; a detailed public realm strategy will be developed as these proposals are taken forward.

7.2 Public Spaces

Existing public spaces will be enhanced and new public spaces will be created; the detailed design of these spaces will require careful consideration of the range of functions they need to accommodate.

Church Plaza

The function of this new high quality plaza to the south of the Church is to provide a major new focus and social gathering area within the heart of the town centre; the detailed design will need to accommodate opportunities for public events, potential market stalls, kiosks, seating areas and occasional Church related parking on Sundays, e.g. weddings and funerals.

It is envisaged this will be of contemporary design and could include high quality paving, dramatic lighting, innovative street furniture, public art and water features.



A balance between kiosks, stalls and activity and open circulation space will be made in Church Plaza

The Green

The Green provides a significant recreation resource for the town centre and will be retained and enhanced for recreation, leisure activities, children's play and events.

In addition the provision of a new footpath link from the southern end of Redhouse Court to the main Houghton Hall park entrance, together with appropriate directional signage will draw people to this entrance, especially as at present, it is not obvious from The Green.

Additional potential for enhancement of The Green includes:

- provision of improved more attractive play facilities
- tree and shrub planting to soften and integrate the play area and the basketball court
- low level pedestrian lighting
- a more attractive railing design
- interpretation of the history of the Green through a display board.



Overlooked public open space is safer and less prone to anti-social behaviour

The High Street

The High Street will accommodate enhanced public realm. Its main function is to support a vibrant town centre shopping street yet allowing for activity such as spill out uses such as stalls, chairs and tables to be accommodated.

Widened pedestrian footways will be enhanced with high quality surfacing materials, planting, integrated street furniture, signage and lighting.

Heavy traffic may preclude a shared surface treatment but crossing points could be marked by subtle lines of paving and a coordinated streetscape design will be essential to minimise signage and street furniture clutter.



The introduction of street trees between the High Street and The Green will improve legibility, introduce visual interest, increase biodiversity and help combat pollution

A strong green structure will be established overlying the enhanced built structure. This will comprise an extension of The Green into the town centre. Landscape features could include grass verges, trees avenues, ground cover shrub planting. Features will then connect through to the High Street, providing a visual amenity, shade, shelter, screening and separation of pedestrians from heavy traffic.

Houghton Hall Park

This registered park and garden is a major greenspace and informal recreational resource for the town which has benefited from previous Heritage Lottery funded enhancements.

The creation of a significant new water feature (a lake with fountains lit at night) within the meadow area to the south of the Hall would provide a major new attraction and focal point to the park and help to draw people to the area. Such a proposal would need to be the subject of appropriate archaeological evaluation and it would be important that any design respects the historic character of the park.

There is also the opportunity for provision of a new entrance to the park from the Business Park to the south, including appropriate signage. This could help encourage employees to use the park more and to walk through the park to the town centre. In addition, the existing green corridor footpath link on the western park boundary would benefit from provision of signage to the town centre at the point where it joins Porz Avenue.



The introduction of water features can add interest to a space, while the co-ordination of entrances can link spaces together

7.3 Surfacing, Paving and Edge Treatments

The selection of surfacing and paving influences the use of space by drivers, pedestrians and cyclists and can make a major difference to perception of the quality of place and local distinctiveness. Paving may include a simple palette of traditional materials, such as gravel, brick paving and granite sett detailing, that both reflect local / historic character and are of high quality.

There is the potential for a hierarchy of treatments using bound gravel, to denote highway areas on the main gateway approaches with a greater level of investment in paving treatments to the main public spaces and the central section of the High Street.



High quality materials enhance identity and enjoyment of a place

7.4 *Street Furniture*

The location and design of street furniture has an important influence on the quality of streetscape in managing movement and reducing the need for physical barriers and improving sense of place.

Street furniture should be simple and elegant and bespoke design should be considered

Furniture should be kept to a minimum, and clutter removed; over use of bollards should be avoided.

Style, colour and siting should be coordinated.

Bus shelters should be of contemporary design and sited where surveillance of them can be maximised.

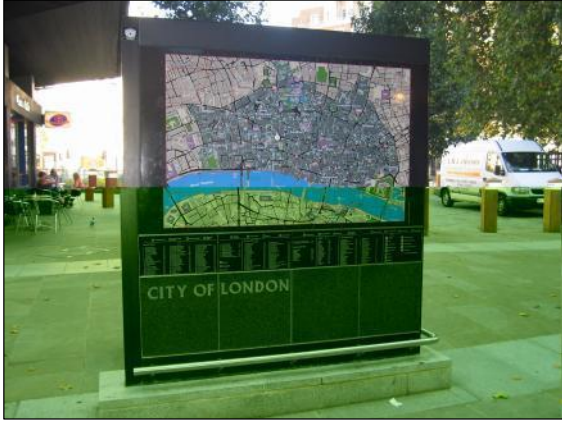
Extensive pedestrian guard-railing should be avoided.



A high quality, co-ordinated approach to street furniture enhances identity and use of a space

7.5 Signage

A comprehensive signage and way-finding strategy for the area should be developed. This could include provision of interactive advertising events screens, simple elegant directional signage at key nodes and interpretation boards for key features of historic interest. The strategy will also need to include consideration of shop front fascias; types, styles, colouring and lettering.



A co-ordinated and legible approach to signage is required

7.6 Lighting

Good quality lighting will extend the use and enjoyment of the town centre, providing a more exciting and safer environment and foster the evening and night time economies.

As well as functional highway lighting, consideration should also be given to building lighting, and the use of LED pavement up-lighters to demarcate key pedestrian routes, and to light trees and water.



Lighting can enhance a street, public square or buildings and can enhance legibility and safety and increase use of a place in the evenings

7.7 Public Art

The use of public art within the town centre will help to create a sense of place and a unique quality. It is essential it is conceived as part of an integrated landscape design. This could take the form of unique sculptural pieces or particular elements of decorative paving, street furniture, lighting, and water features.



Public art enhances identity of a place and can be created with community support

7.8 Planting and Green Buildings

Planting will be a key element of the enhanced public realm, to contribute to visual amenity, biodiversity and to provide shade and shelter and health benefits. This will include;

- Bold avenue street tree planting
- Simple, colourful, contemporary style shrub planting

In addition, the creation of green roofs, green walls and vertical gardens will further soften the townscape, promote biodiversity and absorb runoff.

A comprehensive landscape strategy will need to be developed as proposals are taken forward.



Landscaping and greenery in an urban setting can be incorporated in many ways

7.9 Supporting Strategy for Heritage and Conservation

A key principle of an approach to heritage and conservation in Houghton Regis is to maintain and enhance its historic environment and cultural assets. Appreciation of historic and cultural assets engenders the development of a sense of place, lived experience, reminiscence and civic pride. The significant relevance of the town's historic environment is discussed more fully in the draft Houghton Regis Conservation Area Statement and Management Plan, produced by the Conservation Section of South Bedfordshire District Council in 2008.

English Heritage commissioned MORI to find out about what people in England thought about the historic environment and its future, and what they value. The poll confirmed strong public interest in caring for the historic environment as a vital part of modern life, and as something significant that defines the country's character and the identity of its people. The results were published in *Power of Place – the Future of the Historic Environment* (2000) and a fundamentally important conclusion was that;

"...the historic environment is an irreplaceable asset representing the investment of centuries of skills and resources. It gives places a unique competitive advantage. It generates jobs. It attracts people to live in an area, businesses to invest and tourists to visit; most of it is in everyday use; it is capable of an economic future; it is an asset that we squander or degrade at our peril".

Regulation governing Listed Buildings and guidance concerning Historic Parks and Gardens does not seek to fossilise these assets but rather to protect and enhance them for public appreciation, enjoyment and education. In fact, in the case of Listed Buildings, English Heritage is clear that Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning and the Historic Environment (PPG15) should permit alterations which do not affect the historic character and features of Listed buildings but facilitate them being maintained in beneficial and appropriate use so that they do not appear on the Buildings at Risk Register.

In the *Houghton Regis Draft Conservation Area Statement*, particular attention is drawn to a number of points as follows;

- The character of the Conservation Area as a rural village based on agriculture as reflected in its layout and in the type and character of its historic buildings
- The important focal and historic buildings of All Saints Church and Houghton Hall and the key views of them from The Green
- The contribution of The Green to the historic layout as a key focal element and important open green space
- The contribution made by Houghton Hall Park to the green open character of the Conservation Area, the setting of Houghton Hall and its historic development in relation to the development of the town
- In the Conservation Area the relatively consistent building height is two storeys, with some one-storey cottages with attic rooms

These are all points which have formed the basis for the principles adopted in the Preferred Option.

The main strategy for heritage and conservation that accompanies the Preferred Option is based on the opportunities identified in Supporting Document 1: Baseline Report and should be considered in conjunction with the Public Realm Strategy.

For instance, baseline proposals included a heritage trail based on the core area around The Green; tracing the development of the town through the ages illustrated by a sequence of maps, some of which could be included in a pamphlet (or on GPS handhelds) in conjunction with the local library; an oral history / genealogy project, together with the library / local museum, to record memories of the town prior to 1950 could be produced; archaeological investigations resulting from the redevelopment of sites - in particular in the High Street - are likely and some might involve

public involvement through volunteer opportunities, open days, viewing platform, site display and pamphlets.

All the above could be incorporated into an extensive 'outreach' programme including a media programme, school visits etc., by agreement between the Houghton Regis Town Council, the local library and Luton Museum.



The view of the Church from The Green will be enhanced through building design and enlargement of the public realm along the High Street



Examples of the incorporation of heritage features into an urban setting