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Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Context Analysis
3. Town Centre Prosperity and Performance
4. Urban Design Analysis
5. Town Centre Best Practice

6. Implications for the Framework

Introduction

Dartford Borough Council have instructed IBI Group to develop a Design Framework for Dartford town centre (the Framework). The Framework will set out a strategy for the future design and development of Dartford's town centre. Working at a strategic scale with a long term vision the Framework will identify priority interventions for enhancement of the town centre and establish key design principles for developers to follow. The Framework will also establish quick wins which will improve the town centres appearance and economic viability improve in the short term. The Framework will ultimately set out a vision for the future of Dartford town centre and guide the delivery of an aesthetically, environmentally and economically successful place.

The production of the Framework is split into two parts.

PART 1 – Baseline and Visioning: Critical spatial and physical analysis of the town centre. Establish a vision for the town centre and identify interventions that can effectively deliver change.

PART 2 - Dartford Town Centre Design and Development Framework: The Framework setting out a strategy for the design and development of Dartford town centre, including specific project briefs and strategic design principles.

This report (Part 1) provides a comprehensive baseline analysis of Dartford town centre which will lay the foundations for an emerging vision and strategy for the design and development of Dartford town centre.

This Report

It is critical that the Framework responds to the context of Dartford. This baseline report provides a detailed analysis of the town centre to understand its context and develop a Framework that responds directly to the issues that exist. This report, therefore, provides background information and evidence to support the Framework. Ultimately this report will provide the ingredients for the production of the final Framework.

This baseline analysis focuses the following:

- Review of relevant policy
- Review of the current planning and development context
- Analysis of town centre initiatives
- Property market review and town centre 'health check'
- Townscape and urban morphology analysis
- Development constraints analysis
- Car parking review
- Stakeholder engagement

Findings of the baseline, along with ongoing consultation and engagement, will allow us to develop an ambitious vision for Dartford town centre and define the critical interventions that will make it possible.

Background

Revitalising Dartford Town Centre

As well as providing areas for working and living, town centres represent a focal point for the community by providing an area for congregation, activity and enjoyment. The importance of the town centre is highlighted in the National Planning Policy Framework (the NPPF) which focuses on enhancing vitality through generating local employment and creating attractive, diverse places where people want to live, visit and work. The adoption of a 'town centre first' development approach is encouraged within the NPPF. Dartford has a unique context within easy reach of both London and Kent. In the context of the rising property market within the capital Dartford plays a vital role in the success of London by accommodating its ever growing population.

Town centres across the UK are generally under performing in terms of their economy, attractiveness and distinctiveness. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the downturn in the economy, a rise of internet shopping changing the way people shop, a poor sense of place, a lack of efficient public transport connectivity and a lack of attractors and/or activities. In early 2015 national town centre vacancies stood at 10.4% (Springboard). This was a significant increase on the 6.9% rate in 2000. During this time there has been increased emphasis on the high street and town centre regeneration from Central Government. Mary Portas helped reignite the debate around the future of the High Street in 2011. Dartford successfully bid to become a Portas Pilot Area as part of the Portas Review which provided funding and guidance to schemes to enhance the high street of the town. The winning bid including plans for:

- Awarding bursaries to enable young entrepreneurs to start up market stalls at our markets.
- Seed funding to support a six-month Sunday Market pilot which will be boosted by free parking on Sundays.
- Putting together a programme of events that focuses on developing the evening economy of Dartford.
- Offering specialist training for local shopkeepers covering subjects such as retail marketing and promotion.
- Making the town a social network.
- Promoting the 'Dartford My Street' programme.
- Creating a new loyalty card scheme and App for 'Dartford My Street'

The Future of High Streets: Progress Since the Portas Review report published by DCLG two years on in 2013 which commended Dartford for developing skills and creating a consumer focus with the town "recognising that talented, enthusiastic and skilled employees are critical to business success". The town has undertaken partnership building with the nearby Bluewater Shopping Centre focussed around skills development in the town.

The Fragmented Ownership Steering Group recently published the Town Centre Investment Zones report which aims to focus investment to key areas and create effective leadership for town centre leadership. Dartford is identified as a pilot study for the TCIZ. It is clear, therefore, that the need to regenerate our town centres is recognised at a national level and mechanisms are being put in place to achieve this.

Adapting to these challenges requires positive action by Councils, planners, local stakeholders, retailers and all those with a commitment to their local town. Best practice has shown positive action, when supported by positive planning and concerted local action has been a success.

It has been established within the local planning policy framework (Core Strategy, Development Policies Document and Retail and Leisure Study) that interventions are required in order for Dartford to turn a corner and re-establish itself as an attractive place to live, work and visit for residents in Kent and outer London. The Council's aspiration is to create a vibrant town centre with a strong day and evening economy with an optimum mix of uses (Core Strategy Strategic Objective 4).

Regeneration Potential

This baseline study outlines Dartford's excellent location between the international centre of London and the metropolitan centres and open spaces of Kent. Dartford also has excellent international connections via City of London Airport (30 minutes via train), Gatwick Airport (45 minute drive) and Ebsfleet International (15 min bus/ drive) providing almost direct trade and visitor connections to Europe and beyond.

Despite the economic downturn the town centre and its surrounding area has seen considerable developer and land interest in recent years with outline and detailed consents granted on large sites within and around the town centre. Whilst sites to the north of the town centre (Mill Pond, Northern Gateway) are delivering at pace, some of these sites have stalled and are without a clear vision or consideration of the wider aspirations for the town centre.

Development interest and activity within the Borough of Dartford has progressed significantly with Ebbsfleet Development Corporation seeking to drive this further. The east of the Borough and the retail hub of Bluewater Shopping Centre continues to show signs of growth. The planned and committed development provides both opportunities and potential risks to the growth of Dartford's town centre. There is a need to focus on the role of the town centre as a retail, residential and leisure focus for the Borough.

Dartford's town centre requires a clear direction and an overarching vision in order to guide and support future development of individual sites. The emerging framework seeks to provide this by establishing a comprehensive vision, along with key principles and strategies to deliver this. All future applications will be required to demonstrate how the proposals respond to and address the core principles set out in the Framework and that all proposed development complies with and is not prejudicial to the overall vision, concepts and principles.

Related Studies

This study will form part of a wider ongoing framework of studies, initiatives and policies which are focused on the regeneration of Dartford town centre. In particular the study has consideration of and seeks to integrate with the following documents:

- Dartford Wayfinding Strategy, Dartford Borough Council (2016)
- Dartford Transport Feasibility, Amey/ Dartford Borough Council (2016)
- Public Transport Study, IBI Group/ Dartford Borough Council (2016)
- Dartford Creative, Dartford Borough Council (2016)
- Dartford Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, Dartford Borough Council (under review), and the ongoing flood defence proposals being developed by the Environment Agency. (2016/2017)
- Dartford Core Strategy (2011)
- Local Plan Saved Policies (1995)
- Dartford Development Policies DPD (2016/2017)

Context Analysis

This section sets the scene for Dartford town centre to understand its strategic and local context. The outcomes will provide a thorough understanding of the town centre's location, policy framework (planning and economic), historic evolution, and planning activity.

The Town Centre

To define the extent of the town centre study area we have used the town centre boundary defined by local planning policy (Core Strategy) as a starting point. The defined town centre includes the existing shopping area centred on the High Street, Market Street and Spital Street. The area includes the areas of potential development including land at Orchard Street, Lowfield Street, Spital Street and land adjacent to Dartford Train Station.

For the purposes of this study, however, we feel it is necessary to widen this area to consider critical land uses and open spaces, development sites and communities which have a direct impact on the operation, appearance and character of the town centre. We have therefore taken a "blurred edge" approach to our study area and included areas on the edge of the town centre which will be considered within the framework.

Typically the town centre is retail focussed with smaller retail units located around its high street and larger retail floor prints located at the town centre edge. The centre benefits from excellent environmental setting with the vast Central Park at its southern edge and the River Darent running through the eastern edge of the centre.

Dartford Defined Town Centre Boundary (Dartford Core Strategy)



Dartford Town Centre Framework Study Area (Shaded Red)



Spatial Portrait

Dartford lies at the intersection of the Kent and the South East's movement network. The M25, M2 and M20 motorways intersect within the Borough, providing good access to all parts of the Kent, London and beyond. Dartford also has excellent rail connections into central London (Approx. 45 mins - Charing Cross, Cannon Street and Victoria). The River Thames traverses the northern edge of the Borough providing access to one of the UK's most important freight thoroughfares with links to Port of Gravesend, Purfleet Thames Terminal and Port of Tilbury.

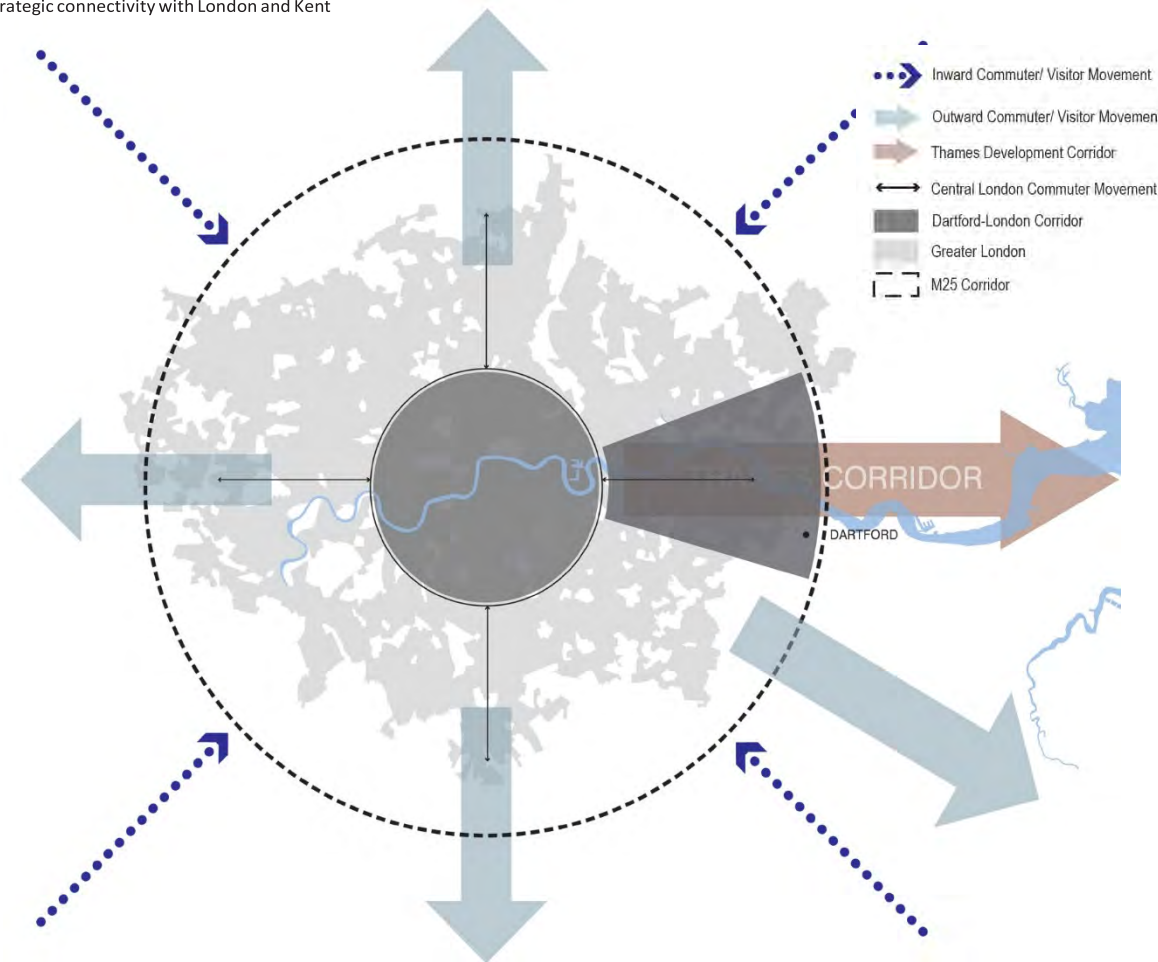
Dartford has excellent international connections with quick road and rail links to London City Airport (30 minutes) and Gatwick International Airport (45 minutes). Dartford is also located within easy reach of Ebsfleet International Railway Station (15 minutes) which offers high speed connections to Europe and into London. Dartford's Fastrack - an award winning rapid Bus Rapid Transit system - provides fast reliable transport access to Kent Thameside linking Dartford with Bluewater, Ebsfleet International, Northfleet and Gravesend.

This connectivity has enabled the Borough to develop a strong retail economy with the Bluewater Shopping Centre establishing itself as a regional retail centre in the South East. Furthermore, the town's excellent connections into London and Kent have allowed the town to maintain a residential focus with families attracted by relatively short commuter journeys and lower house prices in comparison to Greater London.

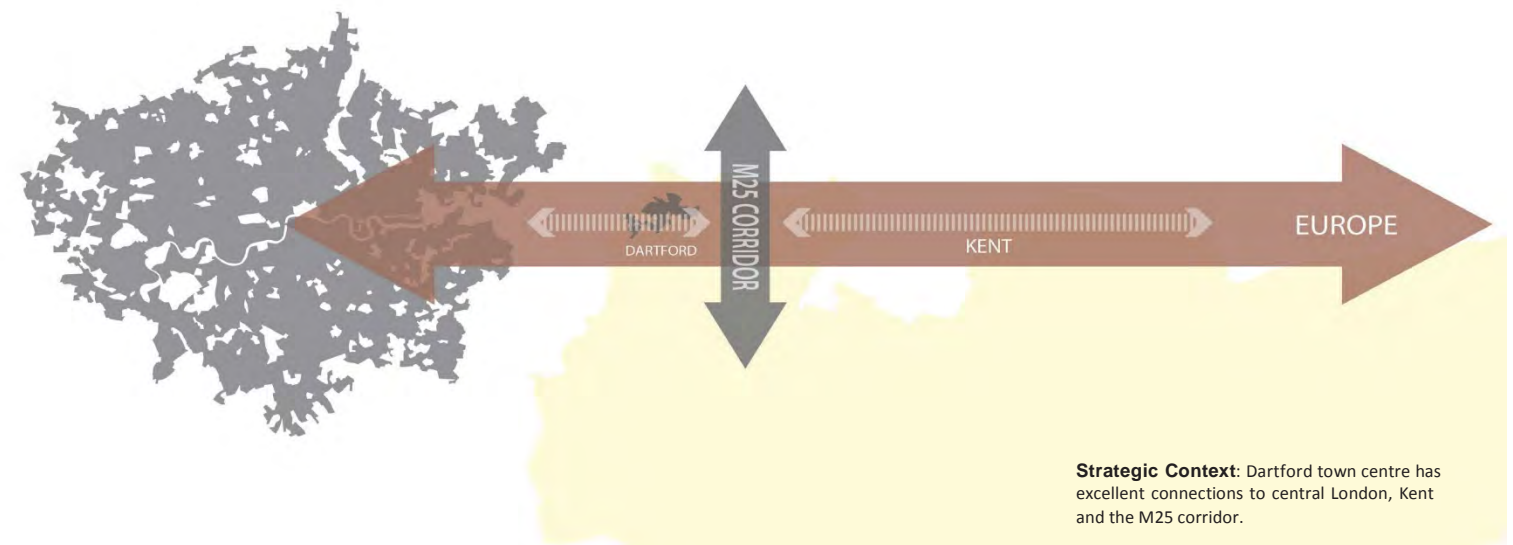
Dartford's Neighbours

Dartford sits strategically at the north western edge of Kent bordering the Greater London Borough of Bexley. This location provides excellent employment and cultural links to central London, whilst also providing direct links to the rest of Kent and its countryside. These links to jobs, culture, nature and leisure make for an excellent setting for Dartford to prosper, spearheaded by a reinvigorated and vibrant town centre.

Strategic connectivity with London and Kent

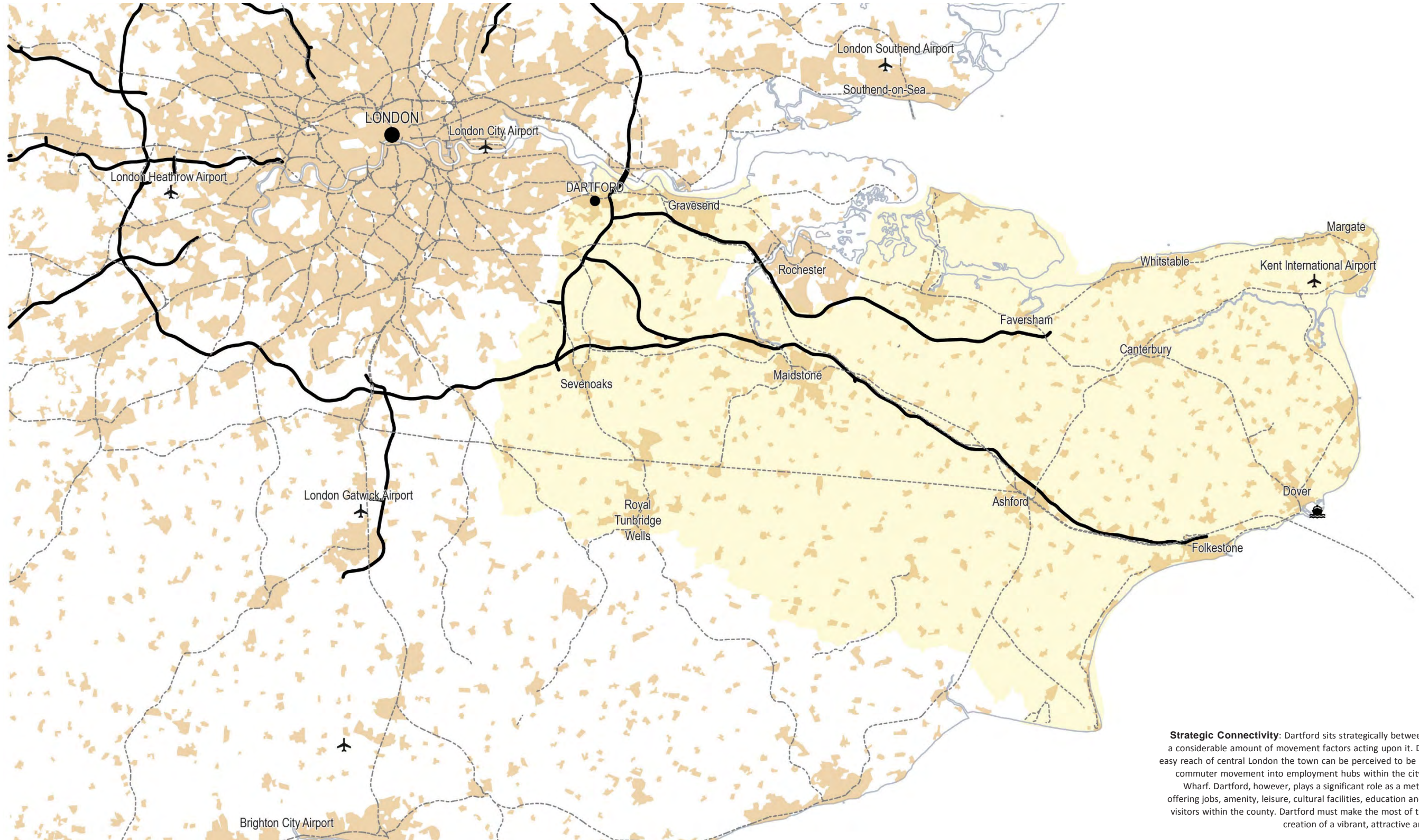


London Context



Strategic Context: Dartford town centre has excellent connections to central London, Kent and the M25 corridor.

Kent and London Context



Strategic Connectivity: Dartford sits strategically between London and Kent with a considerable amount of movement factors acting upon it. Due to its location within easy reach of central London the town can be perceived to be London facing, providing commuter movement into employment hubs within the city and the nearby Canary Wharf. Dartford, however, plays a significant role as a metropolitan centre for Kent offering jobs, amenity, leisure, cultural facilities, education and retail for residents and visitors within the county. Dartford must make the most of this dual role through the creation of a vibrant, attractive and inclusive town centre.

Policy Context

This development framework has been informed by National, London wide (regional) and local policies. The key policy documents that have influenced this study are:

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) DCLG 2012
- Core Strategy Document, Dartford Borough Council, 2011.
- Dartford Development Policies and Options Consultation, Dartford Borough Council, December 2014
- Local Plan (Saved Policies following adoption of the core strategy), Dartford Borough Council, 2011
- Dartford Town Centre Area Action Plan – Preferred Options Document for consultation, September 2007
- Northern Gateway SPD, Dartford Borough Council, 2012
- Dartford Retail and Commercial Leisure Study, Dartford Borough Council,
- Draft Borough Local Shopping and Town Centre Study, Dartford Borough Council, 2014
- Dartford Town Centre, Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, Dartford Borough Council, 2008

Dartford's Spatial Strategy is also influenced by its position within the Thames Gateway and its role as a growth area for the future economic expansion of London and the South East region.

Below is a summary of the high level policies that have set the principles for the preparation of this development framework.

National Policy: the nppf

Town Centres and building a strong, competitive economy

National Policy seeks to remove potential barriers to investment, recognising that sustainable economic growth and investment should be supported through national and local planning policy.

Competitive town centre environments are recognised within national policy as a key priority to be promoted to protect their viability and vitality, recognising the town centre as the heart of the community.

The NPPF asks Local Planning Authorities to promote customer choice and a diverse retail offer including enhancing, reintroducing or creating markets, alongside allocating a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of retail, leisure, commercial, office, tourism, cultural, community and residential development required in town centres. In particular residential development is identified as having an important role in ensuring the vitality of town centres.

Sustainability

The golden thread running through the NPPF is the presumption in favour of sustainable developments.

Sustainability has regard to economic, environmental and social factors. With regards to the natural environment The NPPF recognises that the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment is integral to the overall sustainability of places and reiterates the importance for LPA's to adopt proactive strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change including flood risk. New developments should be planned to avoid increased vulnerability and risks should be managed through suitable adaptation measures, through green infrastructure for example.

A key element of delivering the NPPF's sustainability agenda is the focus on Brownfield Land. It is suggested that planning policies and decisions should encourage the effective use of land by re-using land that has been previously developed, provided that it is not of high environmental value.

Good Design

The NPPF attaches great importance to the design of the built environment and states that it is indivisible from good planning. It is identified as a key aspect of sustainable development and should contribute positively to making places better for people.

Good design should achieve a strong sense of place, using streetscapes and buildings to create attractive and comfortable places to live, work and visit and conserve and enhance the historic environment, recognising heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserving them in a manner appropriate to their significance.

Local Policy

The statutory development plan in Dartford currently comprises two documents: the Core Strategy Document and the 1995 Local Plan Saved Policies (following the adoption of the Core Strategy).

In addition, the Dartford Development Policies document provides further detail on the adopted Core Strategy 2011 and when complete will replace the Saved 1995 Local Plan Policies.

During the development of the Council's Core Strategy, a number of documents have been produced to provide the underpinning evidence to the Policies. As part of the planning review, the relevant documents have been reviewed including:

- EB08 Spatial Strategy
- EB09 Housing Scenarios
- EB19: Population Change
- EB 26 SHLAA
- EB 21: Northern Gateway Strategic Site
- EB24: SELAA
- EB 40: Dartford's Open Spaces Technical Document
- Dartford Retail and Commercial Leisure Study, Dartford Borough Council,
- Draft Borough Local Shopping and Town Centre Study, Dartford Borough Council, 2014
- Dartford Town Centre, Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, Dartford Borough Council, 2008

In addition the council have also produced a number of Supplementary Planning Documents which have also been considered:

- Northern Gateway SPD, Dartford Borough Council, 2012
- Parking Standards SPD, Dartford Borough Council, 2012

A Dartford Town Centre Area Action Plan – Preferred Options Document for consultation was also produced in 2007 and developed until submission stage. This document was never adopted due to the progression of a number of developments including the withdrawal of GSK from the Northern Gateway/Millpond area and the ongoing development of the local plan. Therefore this document holds no planning weight. It does however provide a useful background to the town centre.

The policies in each of these documents here been summarised on a theme by theme basis to avoid repetition:

Growth

As identified within the National Policy review, growth across the Thames Gateway region has been a key driver of the spatial approach to regeneration and identity of the Borough. This has influenced the identification of employment opportunities and housing growth and resulted in the following three priority areas: Thames Waterfront, Ebbsfleet to Stone, the Town Centre and Northern Gateway.

The Core Strategy places a strong emphasis on developing the Priority Areas, and the potential for approximately 18,000 jobs is identified with approximately 5% of the floorspace capacity identified within the Town Centre.

In addition, the population of Dartford is expected to dramatically increase over the Core Strategy Plan Period (to 2026) with a forecasted increase of 74% within and around the Town Centre with 3,070 new homes.

Town Centre

A common theme running through the local policy documents for Dartford Town Centre, is the aspiration for a vibrant Town Centre, with strong day and evening economies and cultural, leisure and retail offer set within an attractive public realm (Core Strategy Strategic Objective 4).

Throughout the Local Policy documents, this is identified to be achieved through the strengthening of the retail and leisure offer in the Town Centre alongside encouraging mixed use development and supporting more residential development. The aspiration is to deliver 1,030 homes and 300 jobs (Dartford Development Policies Draft Policies and Options Consultation DP14). The spatial strategy recognises both the regeneration and sustainability benefits of mixed use development.

Dartford Town Centre is identified as a priority area to be revitalised through increasing and improving the range and quality of food, comparison shopping and

leisure offer; encouraging proposals for refurbishment, extension or redevelopment of shopping centres; and enhancing the social and recreational role of Acacia Hall and improving linkages with Central Park and Town Centre (Core Strategy Policy CS1, CS2 and CS7).

Policies also recognise the urgent need to strengthen the Town Centre as above identifying that assessments of planning applications within the town centre boundary will take into account of the urgent need for regeneration and the potential for the proposal to contribute to the overall Town Centre aims and attract more shoppers into the catchment (Core Strategy CS12 and CS17).

In addition, the Town Centre was recently a pilot feasibility study area, in relation to Town Centre Investment Management Zones, which focused on the ability on an investment management process to revitalise town centres. The summary results found that the pilots could deliver commercial returns, and presenting a basket of opportunities to private investment could help attract external funding.

The Dartford Borough Local Shopping and Town Centre Study prepared to inform the Draft Policies and Options Consultation identified three cleared/underused sites for development. These are KS1: Station Mound (car parks and civic centre building); KS2: Former Westgate Car Park on Kent Road; and KS3: Former Co-op.

Retail

An assessment of current and future retail and leisure need across the Borough was undertaken as part of the evidence base for the Core Strategy.

The retail offer of the Town Centre is a strong focus throughout local policy and is subject to numerous policies to ensure it is protected. Proposals for change of use or the redevelopment of the local shopping centres which would affect economic viability, physical attractiveness or functionality will not normally be permitted. The Draft Borough Local Shopping and Town Centre Study also suggested the loss of A1 units in the Prime Shopping Frontage needed to be managed.

In addition, it is required that proposals for the change in use or redevelopment of shops in class A need to be considered against a series of factors such as floor space, frontage and prominence of the premises within the shopping frontage before permission will be granted (1995 Local Plan Saved Policies R3 and R6, Dartford Development Policies Draft Policies and Options Consultation DP15).

Residential

Across and around Dartford Town Centre, including development identified in the Northern Gateway ambition, up to 3,070 new homes are identified to be provided (Core Strategy Policy CS10). 1,030 of these are to be provided in the Town Centre (Core Strategy Policy CS2).

With regards to residential development design the Core Strategy directs developers to the Kent Design Guide and also stipulates that residential development in the town centre should be achieving 50 dwellings/ha (Core Strategy Policy CS17).

In addition saved Local Policy stipulates that development should incorporate open space and play space provision appropriate to the scale of development and type of housing proposed.

Design

Good Design is encouraged throughout the Local Policy documents, including guidelines on conserving the historic nature of the Towns Centre and creating a local sense of place with high standards of design and the integration of the public realm (Dartford Development Policies Draft Policies and Options Consultation DP2: Good Design in Dartford). It is stated that within conservation areas, development proposals will only be permitted where they respect the character of the area concerned and have a high standard of design (1995 Local Plan Saved Policies, Policy B8).

Developers are steered in Local Policy to the Kent Design Guide (Core Strategy Policy CS17) which outlines the importance of good design and character

area guidelines for a variety of settings and scenarios.

Sustainability and Climate Change

Sustainability runs through a variety of aspects within the local planning policy for Dartford.

Encouraging sustainable travel patterns is identified as key to increasing the overall sustainability of the borough. It is recognised that a strengthening of the retail offer in Dartford Town Centre will result in more sustainable travel patterns (Policy CS12).

In addition, all residential developments above 100 units are required to achieve at least Code level 4 energy category of Code for Sustainable Homes and non-residential development over 1,000 sq m must achieve the BREEAM excellent standard. Whilst the accreditation for the Code for Sustainable Homes can no longer be achieved, the principles of the Code Levels can still be applied (Core Strategy Policy CS23).

The Dartford Town Centre Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Town Centre illustrates Dartford Town Centre as predominantly lying within Zone 3 flood zones, with many of the main strategic sites falling within the Zone 3a category (the probability of flooding 'likely'). The Flood Risk Assessment is currently being updated, however land uses need to comply with those acceptable to the Environment Agency for the relevant flooding Zones. Local Policy, stipulates that no Planning consents will be granted contrary to EA advice (Core Strategy Policy CS24).

Policy Conclusions

Theme/Policy	Opportunities	Implications to the Framework
Promotion of the Vitality and Viability of Town Centres	The vitality and viability of town centres is a key policy consideration in local and national policy. This presents an opportunity to promote the town centre. In addition the results of the Town Centre Investment Zone offer a basis to analyse the delivery of potential future schemes.	The framework should look to revitalise the town centre in line with the policies outlined in national and local policy including the identification of mixed use development sites and strengthening the retail offer. A clear vision for the town centre could help to focus the framework on achieving the required outcomes. The findings of the pilot Town Centre Investment Study should be incorporated into the framework and will help structure a realistic plan for the delivery of the town centre investment and aspirations.
The Duty to Co-Operate	Opportunity to maximise investment and economic benefit from London based activity.	Due consideration can be given to the direction of investment and the opportunity this presents (e.g the future extension of Crossrail), however there should not be too much weight attributed to developments which have not been confirmed.
Encouraging Mixed Used Development	Opportunity to revitalise the town centre with the introduction of a wider leisure, retail, community and employment offer. This will diversify the reasons for people to visit the Town Centre.	The framework should identify appropriate sites to encourage mixed uses. This can build on the existing evidence base produced for the core strategy and appropriate design guidance could further influence the impact of the developments on the regeneration of the Town Centre.
Town Centre Residential Targets	The opportunity to promote the town centre as an attractive place to live will also have a positive impact on the town centres evening and leisure economy.	The framework can consider the implications of achieving the residential town centre targets, and help to identify the services that will be required to support the residential use. As a consequence, the framework can also consider the interaction between the Town Centre and a new residential population – identifying opportunities to increase the evening and leisure economy alongside strengthening the retail offer for everyday needs.
Design	The opportunity to provide more tailored town centre design guidance.	The framework could build on the limited design guidance provided specifically for the Town Centre. Specifically, individual design guides could be developed for the key sites to ensure the proposed developments respond positively to the Town Centre and its future plans.
Accessibility	Opportunity to promote sustainable travel patterns. Encourage developments which increase accessibility.	The framework could suggest complementary parking standards for town centre uses and require travel plan provision and monitoring in addition to attracting developments which are sustainable and encourage use of sustainable transport modes. The framework could promote walking and cycling through suggested improvements to the environmental quality and public realm. The framework could also identify opportunities to minimise the impact of the ring road within the Town Centre and achieve a more pedestrian orientated environment. The framework should consider the financial investment required to upgrade existing infrastructure and how this may relate to potential development sites and investment.

Constraints to Development

Flooding

A large part of the town centre is at risk of flooding within the Environment Agency's 1 in 50 year to 1 in 100 year flood event zone. The Environment Agency has commenced work to develop flood defences and downstream storage to improve flood risk to a 1 in 100 year event plus climate change. This work will need to be considered alongside the Framework.

Surface water drainage is also a critical constraint, particularly for new development which will restrict the natural drainage of water on site. Development will also need to consider the use of sustainable drainage systems to reduce risk of local flooding events.

Archaeology and heritage

The majority of the town centre's core is designated as a conservation area which restricts the type, form and design of future development coming forward within the central belt of the town centre. Listed buildings and their setting should be protected and enhanced where possible.

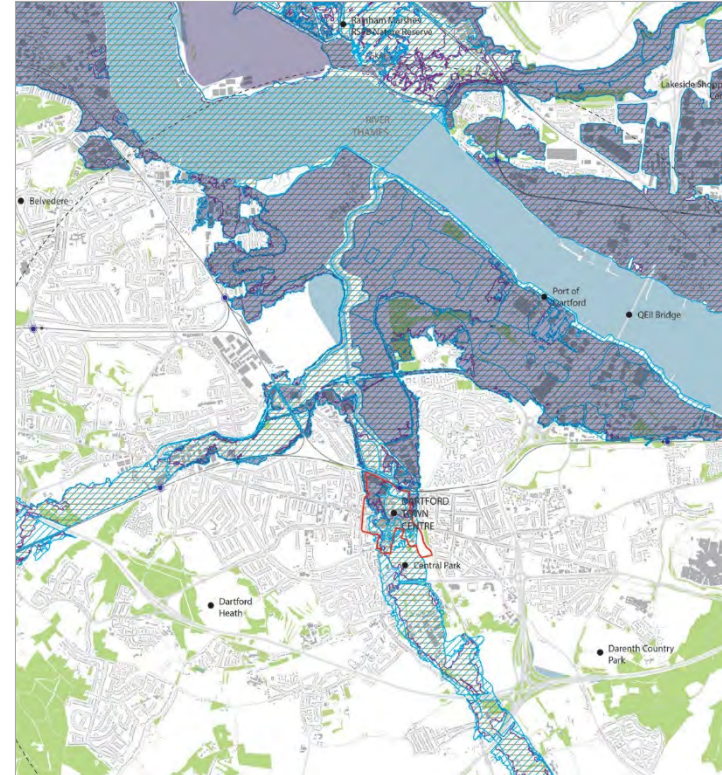
Environmental Designations

There are no environmental designations within the town centre, however Central Park and Brooklands Lakes are protected green spaces. These areas will be safeguarded and no development proposals will be permitted unless directly associated with the recreational function of the open space. Trees within the conservation area are also protected from alteration. Strategically, Dartford is constrained by the green belt to the north and south of the town centre.

Other

The scope of this study has not considered such constraints as underground services, detailed topographical analysis, ground conditions or site drainage. Further work on such matters will need to be undertaken at a site-by-site level.

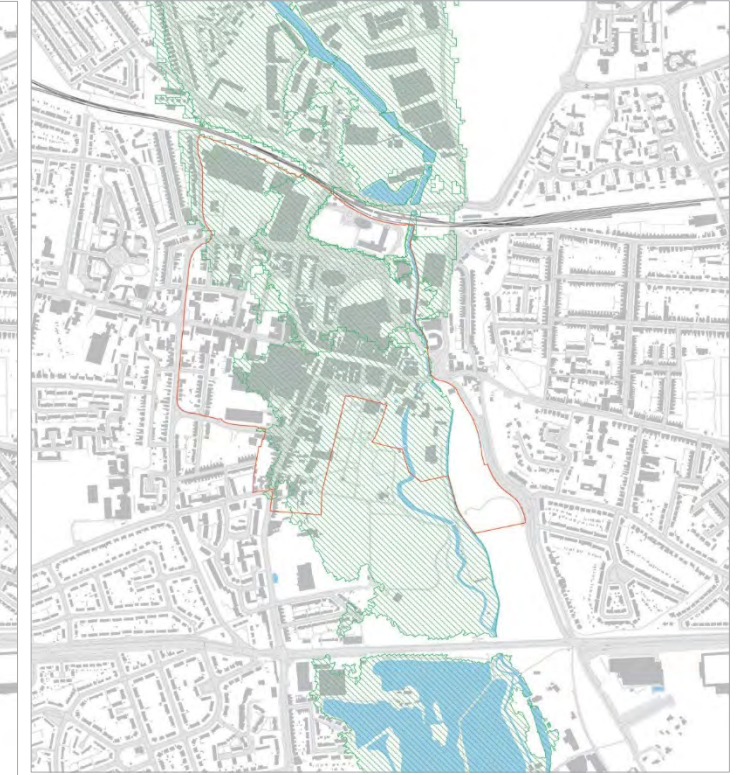
Strategic Flooding Context



Flood Zone 2



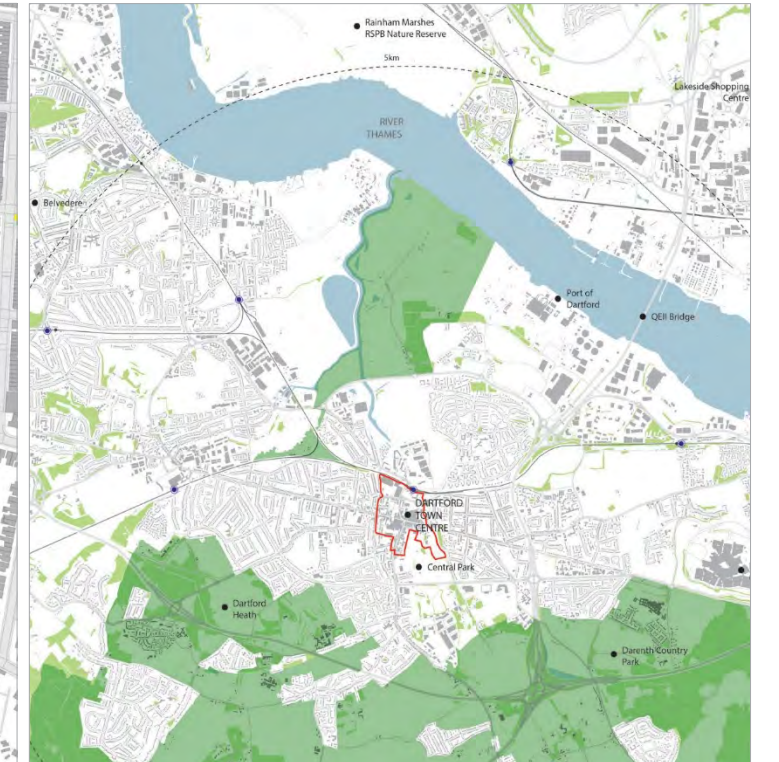
Flood Zone 3



Conservation area and listed buildings in Dartford town centre



Dartford Borough Green Belt

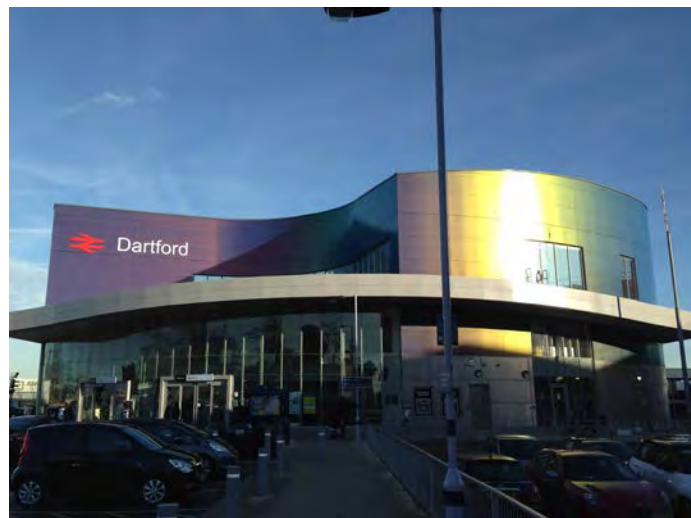


Catalysts for Development

Modern train station

The recently enhanced train station has full enabled oyster card access and provides a modern landmark for the town centre. This enhanced point of arrival signifies the town centre's aspiration to be a well connected and forward facing town.

Dartford railway station



central park

Dartford's Central Park provides significant opportunities to couple successful land uses, recreational facilities and multi-functional spaces within a town centre environment. Such a context is very unique for town centres in the UK and a major opportunity for enhanced community living within Dartford.

historic core

Dartford's historic core provides opportunities for an enhanced setting within the town centre with appropriate supporting land uses that frame, enhance and celebrate Dartford's heritage.

Land ownership

There are varied land owners within the town centre which, as evidenced within the Town Centre Investment Zones report (BPF, 2016), provides opportunities for private investment within the town centre as risks are lessened on smaller sites. There is a critical mass of public landownership in some parts of the town centre.

Darent River

The Darent River provides an excellent opportunity to provide recreational links and enhanced public space which, importantly, integrates the river into the town centre. There are however existing issues of poor maintenance, security and quality in some parts.

Quality riverside environment - St Saviour's Way



Poor quality and segregated river frontage - Bridge House Gardens



Council land ownership in and around Dartford Town Centre (highlighted in orange)



Strategic Development Context

Whilst Dartford already benefits from its proximity to London and its significant economic and residential growth as a global city, proposed new transport infrastructure, coupled with the existing excellent transport links into and within Dartford Borough itself presents a multitude of opportunities for significant growth at various sites within the borough. This is progressing at pace with the identification of a number of key strategic development sites, and the regional consideration of the wider South East area within Greater London Authority's thinking and planning.

To the North of Dartford Town Centre, significant progress has also been made towards the aspirations for the Northern Gateway. The site is bounded by the residential area of Temple Hill and the emerging strategic development site 'The Bridge' to the north-east.

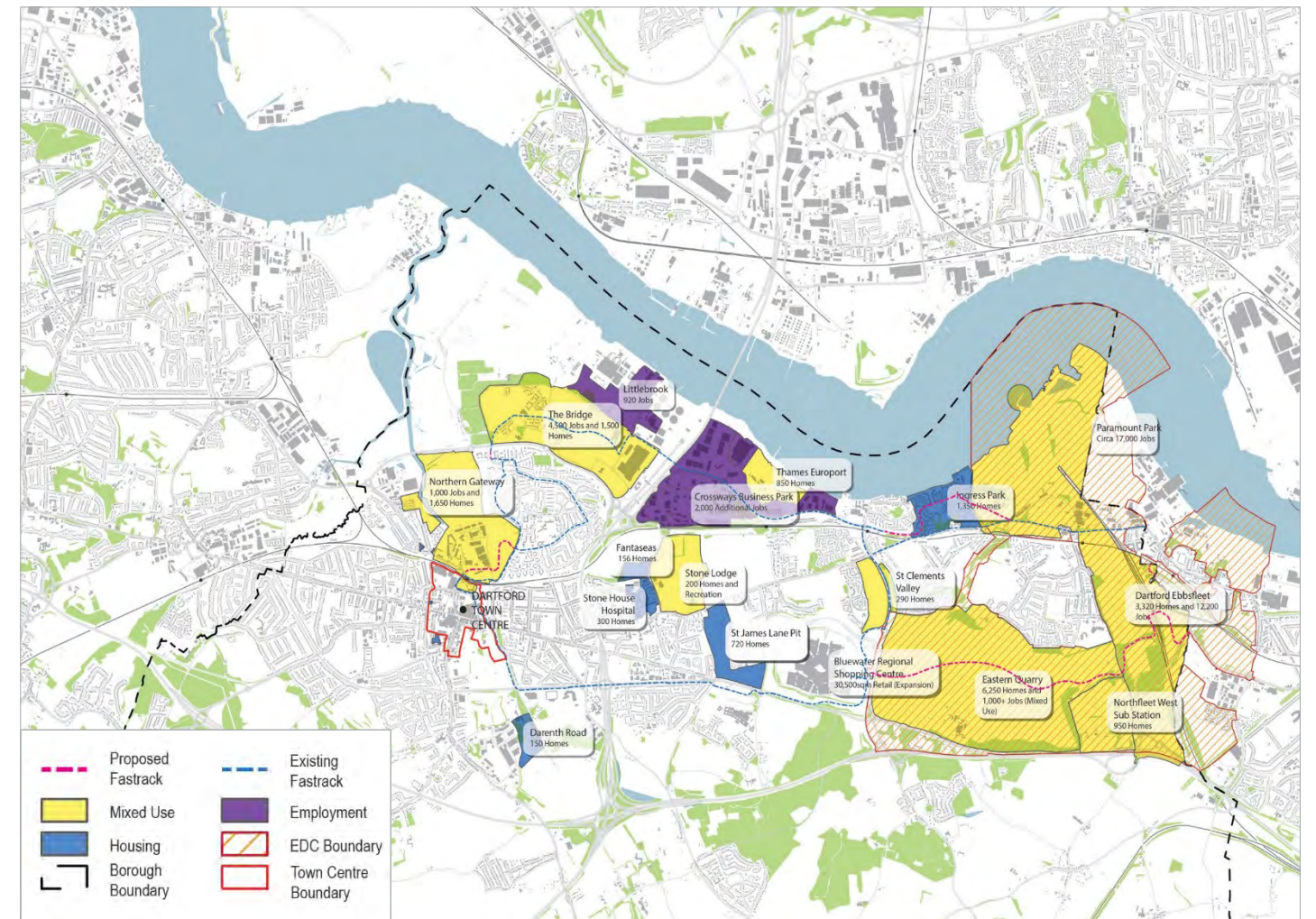
The Borough of Dartford has several areas of proposed growth identified and coming forward, predominantly to the North and East of the town centre. The Ebbsfleet Valley area within Dartford has planning permission for approximately 9,000 homes and, together with areas in Gravesham Borough Council, has been identified as Ebbsfleet Garden City to deliver up to 15,000 homes, which has the objective of delivering homes and jobs at a faster rate than is currently being achieved. These homes are linked to Dartford by the direct Fastrack rapid bus service.

1500 homes have been given planning permission for the area immediately north of Dartford and development is underway with many units occupied. New commercial development is also coming forward in this area with the potential for more development on adjacent sites.

Full permission has also been approved for 93 residential units to the north of this site (North East Parcel Central Road, 15/01508/FUL) and the council owned land adjacent to the GSK site (Temple Hill Square) also received approval for 25 residential units in January 2015 (DA/15/00083/FUL).

The delivery of such a significant number of homes and jobs across these strategic sites presents an excellent opportunity for Dartford Town Centre to maximise the benefits from this strategic investment and strengthen the Town Centre economy.

Major Development Sites within Dartford Borough Council



Emerging typologies throughout the borough



Dartford Town Centre – Planning History

key town centre policy priorities

Dartford Town Centre is identified within the Core Strategy (Policy CS2) to deliver up to 1,030 homes and 300 jobs within Dartford Town Centre in addition to those identified to be provided within the Northern Gateway area.

Sites identified in Dartford’s planning policy for the town centre include Station Mound, Kent road (former Westgate Car Park), Lowfield Street, Hythe Street (former Co-op store) Orchards shopping centre, Priory Shopping Centre and Acacia Hall. Of these, the Station Mound, Lowfield Street, Kent Road and Hythe Street are earmarked for mixed use development and proposals for the extension or redevelopment of the Orchards and Priory shopping centres are welcomed within the policy documents.

The Station Mound and Kent Road car parks are all within wholly or partly council owned land. In addition, the former Co-op site is held by the Homes and Communities Agency. This provides increased potential to co-ordinate the development of these sites to the benefit of the wider Town Centre.

In addition, the Lowfield Street site has been subject to a number of planning applications over the last 12 years which have sought to gain planning permission for retail-led mixed use development anchored by a Tesco superstore. The most recent application was approved in March 2014 (DA/13/00871/FUL) however in 2015 Tesco announced the sale of the site to Meyer Homes and that they would not be proceeding with the development. Meyer Homes have proposed a residential-led mixed use scheme on the site

other permissions on town centre sites

There are several other opportunity sites within Dartford Town Centre, some of which have been subject to successful planning applications over the past few years.

The Former Dartford Police Station Site, Instone Road has permission for a 15872m2 retail store (Lidl) and 6 residential units (a mix of two and three bedroomed flats) was approved in October 2015.

In addition, the immediate vicinity around the former Co-op site has been subject to a large variety of planning applications.

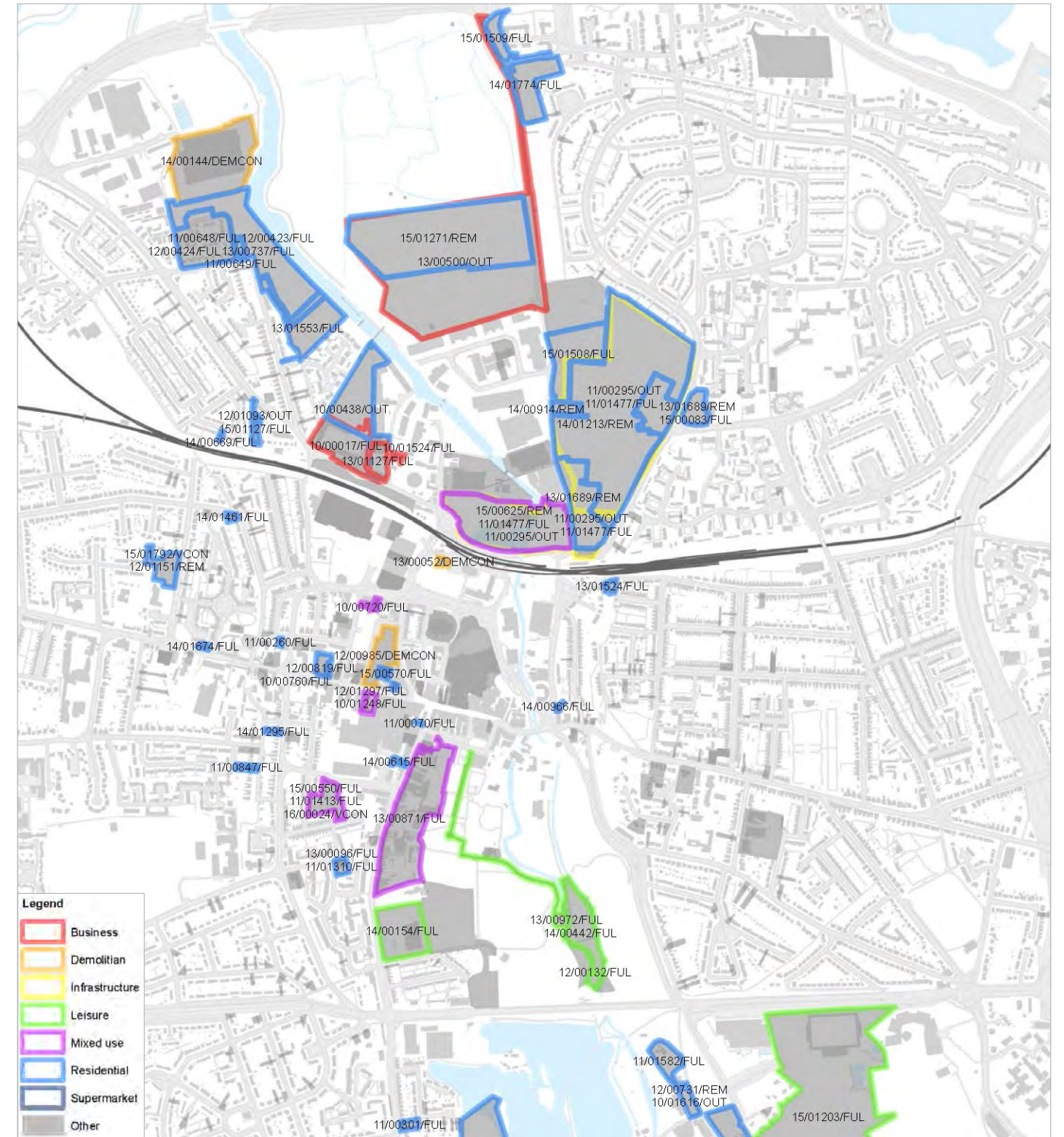
Opposite, the Site of 28 Spital Street was subject to a planning application which was approved in January 2013. This was for the erection of a four storey building with a retail unit on the ground floor and 6 residential units (a mix of one and two bedroom apartments). Construction is currently underway.

In addition the wider former courts site (22-26 Spital Street) was granted permission in February 2013 for the demolition of existing buildings and erection of a part 5/ part 7 storey building to provide restaurant at ground floor level, with banqueting/conference suites at first and second floors and a hotel with 86 rooms (Imperial Hotels). Although this permission has now expired the owners are seeking to bring forward a revised scheme.

Adjacent to this site, at 30 Spital Street (Gala Bingo) a change of use application from D2 to D1 (place of worship) was approved Jan ‘15. This included minor external modifications including the removal of the Gala Bingo signage and improvements.

There have also been several other applications and permitted development proposals for conversions of the upper floors of premises in the town centre to residential uses.

Planning permissions within Dartford town centre



Town Centre Prosperity and Performance

This section provides a brief review of Dartford town centre's performance in relation to socio-economic prosperity and urban quality. As well as a review of existing economic commentary (Retail and Leisure Review, 2010) we will assess the town centre against the key town centre health indicators originally set out within Planning Policy Statement 4; diversity of uses, amount of floor space outside the town centre, capacity for growth in town centre, retail representation/ key attractors, shopping rents, vacancy rates, commercial yields, land values and land development pace, pedestrian flows, accessibility, perception, safety and fear of crime, and environmental quality.

Property and Market Analysis

AspinallVerdi are working alongside IBI Group to assist the Council in guiding the delivery of a vision and framework for the future development of Dartford Town Centre and act as a catalyst for change.

This high level market review considers the current activity in the retail, business, leisure and residential sectors and identifies potential prospects for future development proposals in Dartford town centre.

The following section provides a high level review of current activity in the key sectors; local retail, leisure, office, industrial and residential markets to understand recent and future development.

Dartford Train Station



Retail and leisure

Retail

Dartford has an active Town Team working in collaboration with the Council and other stakeholders to build upon Dartford's heritage as a market town and to develop a plan to revive the High Street. The High Street Revival Plan is a programme of investment, events and initiatives to improve the offer of the town centre and support local traders.

A lot of progress has already been made and there is evidence of growth and improvement in the town centre including¹;

- New store openings – Aldi and Peacocks recently opened in the Orchards Shopping Centre, a new Intersport store has opened as well as a refurbished Matalan store in Prospect Place.

¹ The Dartford High Street Revival Magazine, Dartford Town Team, Spring 2015

- The Priory Shopping Centre sold in April 2015 for £33m to Curzon Capital, having been in receivership since 2013.
- The Orchards Shopping Centre has completed three phases of refurbishment; the latest phase involved splitting the former Waitrose store into three separate units, the two on the ground floor for Aldi and Poundworld and one on the first floor for a gym. Earlier phases involved refurbishment of the wallcoverings and lighting, upgrading the lifts, new entrances, customer toilets and management offices and an upgraded central atrium with a café.
- Free WIFI access is now available in the town centre, enabling local traders to inform shoppers of deals, as well as providing updates on local news and events. The town has also adopted the SCHOPP App, a mobile marketplace to market the town centre.
- The bi-weekly market has moved from the Priory Centre's car park to the High Street. An expiring lease presented an opportunity to support and enhance on this asset through re-homing it on the High Street. The move has proved to be a success

as it has made the market more user-friendly, resulting in some retailers reporting a 40% growth in sales on a Thursday.

- Purchase of Instone Road site by Lidl, which now has planning consent with development expected to commence shortly.

The former Co-op building in Spital Street was sold in 2012 to the Homes and Communities Agency, with future plans for the site still under consideration.

New plans are being drawn up for the site on Lowfield Street that was earmarked for a Tesco development. The site was sold in October 2015 to Meyer Homes Ltd who will look to redevelop the site; the scheme will be residential led with potential for retail, leisure and community uses. The aims of the new plans are to enhance Dartford's heritage through taking advantage of its position next to the Edwardian park and make a contribution to the vitality of the town centre. The encouraging news for Dartford is that investors/ developers are once more interested in the town centre and prepared to invest into development projects.

Leisure

Orchard Theatre investment - The Orchard Theatre is growing a reputation for launching new shows as well as becoming a regular stop for renowned touring productions. The Council is investing in refurbishment of the Theatre comprising; new toilets and back-of-house facilities, as well as an air-cooling system to improve the experience for theatregoers and build upon the on-going success.

Fairfield Pool has reopened following a £12m refurbishment to develop it into a first class modern leisure facility

Improvements to Dartford Central Park have been undertaken over several years. The park comprises 26 acres of formal gardens, ornamental areas and informal open space. The park hosts several popular summer events, including the popular Dartford Festival

weekend in July. Improvements include new bridges and footpaths, a new bandstand, café and skate park and a new 400-person outdoor theatre.

The improvements in the leisure offers should be used to attract both A3 uses (e.g. to service the patrons of the theatre) and also new residents who will have access to these facilities and therefore promoting a lifestyle opportunity.

Offices

In 2014, a 131,000 sqft office development was completed at The Bridge; which is on the outskirts of the town. The Bridge is a mixed-use business and innovation park that has been designed to encourage an entrepreneurial culture and the development of knowledge-based industries in the Thames Gateway. A joint venture between Prologis and Dartford Borough Council, The Bridge will integrate over 1.8 million square feet of commercial space with hotels and restaurants, new homes, community facilities and over 80 acres of public open space.

It is unlikely that new office development will come forward within the town centre on a speculative basis. However, there may be potential to consider some form of office floorspace or managed workspace within the town centre as part of a mixed use scheme; this requires further investigation.

The Base, located outside of the town centre on Victoria Road, is a managed workspace including offices. The HCA are currently planning to progress this development into Phase 2.

Residential

The Council's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) identifies specific sites which can deliver approximately 15,000 new homes between 2011 and 2026²

The Authorities Monitoring Report 2013-2014 states that total new home delivery is as follows:

- 565 new homes built (net) in 2014/15
- 466 on average (mean) new homes built a year over the period 2006/7 – 2013/14 (inclusive).³
- The population of Dartford saw a rise from 85,911 in 2001 to 97,365 at the 2011 census, an increase of 13.3% which is above the national average. Property prices in Dartford borough saw a rise of 9% in the last year alone which is almost double the national average (c.5%).⁴

The average prices paid for properties in Dartford over the past 12 months in comparison to those paid nationally are shown below. The prices paid in Dartford are significantly higher in comparison to those paid across the rest of England. Dartford has good rail and road connections to Central London (40 minutes by train) making it a popular destination for commuters.

Average House Prices in Dartford

Property Type	Average Value Paid - Dartford	Average Value Paid - England
Flat	£164,447	£261,244
Terrace	£247,633	£227,331
Semi-detached	£301,799	£236,489
Detached	£461,168	£370,140
Average Price Paid over the past 12 months (Zoopla, 2016)		

² Dartford's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, Dartford Borough Council, 2010

³ Dartford Local Plan The Authorities Monitoring Report (AMR) of 2013-2014, Dartford Borough Council, February 2015.

⁴ Dartford Property Investment Guide, YPC Group, October 2015

In January 2015, Weston Homes acquired the 7.59 acre Mill Ponds site (formerly a GlaxoSmithKline factory) adjacent to the River Darent. The development comprises 400 homes (268,990 sqft of residential accommodation), a high street (28,567 sqft of retail/ commercial space), a village pond and public open space. Development on site has commenced and the first homes on the site at Langley Square are being launched in Spring 2016. This site is part of the Northern Gateway area allocated for development in the Dartford Core Strategy 2011.

Phoenix Quarter at Temple Hill is a new residential development by Barratt located next to Dartford station. A total of 636 homes are planned with a mix of both apartments and houses around a central boulevard and green space. The first homes were released in early 2015 and development is proceeding rapidly.

Priory Mill, Lawson Road, is a Bellway development of 171 homes near Dartford Town centre, the final phase began in September 2015. Demand is clearly high, as the last batch of homes was sold immediately on release in January 2016.⁵

Further residential development is proposed at Priory Road (Weston Homes), Dunlop Close (Bellway Homes), Former GSK Car Park (Bellway Homes) and Northern Gateway Central Road (Bellway Homes).

As mentioned above, Mayer Homes has also acquired the Lowfield Street site within the town centre and is likely to come forward as a residential development.

A recent report by Rightmove.co.uk has outlined that Dartford is the fastest selling place for residential properties in the UK. With homes selling in 16 days in 2016 compared to a national average of 79 days nationally and down from an average of 49 days in 2015 in Dartford. The average asking price in Dartford in 2016 is £285,782 which marks a rise of 16.6% from 2015. This is largely attributed to proximity to London and fast commuter journeys.

⁵ Desperate House Hunters at Priory Mill, Kent Online, 22 January 2016

Town Centre Health Check

Many of the key Town Centre Health Check Indicators have been identified within the Retail and Commercial Leisure Study undertaken by GVA Grimley in July 2010. This study updated the 2006 retail study and provides the evidence base for the Core Strategy.

The health check indicators are:

- Use Mix - Diversity of uses, vacancy
- Movement - Pedestrian flows, public transport , car parking
- Environment - Environmental quality, safety
- Business/ Investment

In addition to the Retail and Leisure Review a Property and Market Review has been undertaken by Aspinall Verdi in 2016 as part of this baseline study, the findings of which have informed this health check.

Use Mix

Overall, Dartford town centre has a limited mix of uses with a large focus of its floorspace being dedicated to retail. There is a need to diversify the land use mix with residential, leisure and commercial land uses in particular.

Progress has been made within the Town Centre with several good indicators of revival. The Priory Shopping Centre sold in April 2015 to Curzon Capital and the Orchards Shopping Centre has completed three phases of refurbishment; attracting Aldi, a poundworld and a gym.

The town's comparison offer is generally aimed towards the lower to mid end of the market and includes Primark, TK Maxx, Next, Mothercare, JD Sports, New Look, Boots, as well as a selection of charity shops. More recently, Aldi, Peacocks and a new Intersport have opened and a Lidl store is due to be developed.

In terms of convenience stores, Sainsbury's anchors the Priory Centre and the store is trading very strongly compared with company average sales levels. Marks and Spencer Food is also located within Prospect Place. There is also an Iceland and several independent convenience stores.

The Experian Goad Category Report for Dartford (March 2009) identifies a total of 91,221 sqm gross of retail floorspace. It should be noted that Experian identify only gross ground floor areas so should be treated with some caution. According to Experian Goad there are 93 comparison retailers, comprising approximately 25% of all units, 9% below the national average.

Retail

Dartford town centre has an overlapping catchment with Bluewater resulting in a need for a complimentary retail offer within Dartford town centre which expands its retail capacity in the right areas. In 2011 Dartford had a combined market share of 33% for comparison goods within the Borough with the competing factors of out of town stores and Bluewater. There was an identified need to enhanced comparison goods offer within Dartfords town centre represented by a large anchor store. It is envisaged in the 2010 retail study that Dartfords catchment will contain a more affluent population in the future and evidence of this with the growing housing market is becoming apparent.

Leisure

The Orchard Theatre has a growing reputation and the Council is investing in a refurbishment to build upon the on-going success. The town centre, however, lacks a strong mid-evening that provides complimentary uses to support economic activity between the day and night time economies. A critical mass of restaurants and bars around the theatre is required.

In terms of other leisure offer, this includes main franchises such as McDonalds and Burger King, as well as independent operators such as The Pie Shop Café and Mandarin Palace Chinese Restaurant. .

Residential

Dartford's population is currently increasing alongside increasing property prices. Planning policy identifies a requirement for an increase in Town Centre Residential accommodation, targeting 1030 homes within the Town Centre. Several residential developments are in the process of coming into fruition (see Investment).

Vacancy Rates

The proportion of vacant retail property is a key indicator of the relative vitality and viability of a centre. However, it is not an absolute measure and must therefore be treated with caution as vacancies can arise in even the strongest performing of centres. Conversely, the absence of any vacancies, or very low vacancies, can be an indicator that the demand for retail space is outstripping the current supply. This can often restrict new and existing retailers from securing new or enhanced representation.

Vacancy levels on the High Street are currently low and vacancy within the Priory Centre and Orchard Centre is currently being managed with meanwhile uses such temporary art galleries. Vacant property on Lowfield Street is earmarked for development.

Commercial Yields

Commercial yield levels are a key indicator of the confidence of investors in the long-term prospects of a centre. The yield on property investment is worked out as the return (in the form of annual rental income) as a percentage of the initial capital outlay (the capital value). Property investments do not usually produce a fixed income, as leases tend to make provision for rent reviews. The greater the prospect of future growth (i.e. upward rent reviews), the lower the initial yield the investor is prepared to accept. In this way, yields are a useful indicator of the general economic outlook for a centre, where low yields can be interpreted to indicate a centre with healthy prospects from an investment point of view.

Yields in Dartford have been declining since 2004, indicating consistently improving investment prospects for the centre over this period. Yield levels are currently at 6.25% which compares well with the neighbouring centres of Gravesend, Bluewater, Bexleyheath, Bromley, Orpington and Maidstone. This indicates that despite low rental levels, Dartford is seen as a fairly good investment location with prospects that have been improving over time.

Commercial Rents

The level of rent which retailers are prepared to pay for retail space within a centre is a useful indication of the perceived strength of a centre (although factors such as the supply of floorspace have an impact on rental value). In 2009, Prime Zone A retail rents in Dartford were £430 per sqm, which is a 33% increase on 2000 levels; however, there has been a 20% decrease between 2008 and 2009, which is likely to be a consequence of the extremely difficult circumstances facing retailers in the current economic climate rather than location specific factors.

An analysis of recent commercial transactions has outlined the following:

RETAIL

In terms of transactional evidence, EGi has recorded 7 retail lease deals in Dartford Town Centre since the beginning of 2015. The average rent was £16,414 per annum or £211.50 per sqm. However, Prime Zone A retail rents are much higher. A unit in the Orchards Shopping Centre on the High Street was rented at a value of £8,500 per annum for 18 sqm (£459.77 per sqm) in November 2015.

An investment sale was also recorded for the Westgate House building (retail at ground level and offices above) on Spital Street in February 2015 at a value of £1,575,000. With an advertised rent of £159,660 per annum, this works out at a yield of 9.86%.

According to EGi, there are currently 11 retail units on the market in Dartford Town Centre. The average rent is £323.73 per sqm (£30.00 psf). It should be noted that Prime Zone A retail rents are much higher than the average. A unit in the Orchards Shopping centre is currently advertised at a rent of £16,000 per annum for 23 sqm (£695.65 per sqm / £64.65 psf).

OFFICES

In terms of transactional evidence, EGi has recorded a lease deal for an office unit (160 sqm) in St John's House, Spital Street in October 2014 at a value of £25,000 per annum (£156.51 per sqm/£14.54 psf).

There are currently 8 offices on the market in the town centre as listed on EGi. The average rent is £186.24 per sqm (£17.30 psf). This ranges from £127.91 per sqm (£11.89 psf) for a unit at Adams and Moore House, Instone Road, to £338.46 per sqm (£31.46 psf) for a managed workspace unit in Basepoint, Victoria Road. Rents for units in managed workspace centres are higher as extra services are included, for example reception staff, cleaning, meeting rooms and administration support. A useful comparable is a ground floor office unit in St John's House which is recently refurbished and comes with parking, the rent is £30,100 per annum (£187.51 per sqm / £17.43 psf).

LEISURE

EGi has recorded 2 leisure transactions since 2010 in Dartford including Farningham Village Hall (£400,000) in 2012 and the sale of Bluewater Shopping Centre in 2010 (value not provided). EGi showed that no leisure properties are currently available in Dartford Town Centre

movement

Strategically Dartford has excellent accessibility with strategic links through Fastrack and rail links into London and Kent. Locally, however, congestion is a critical issue for the town causing severance and curtailing ease of movement through the town. Pedestrian connectivity needs to be addressed to increase accessibility and footfall within the town centre's core.

Accessibility is a key factor when considering the health and future prospects of a centre. Ease of access and quality of parking are important factors underlying the success and attraction of a centre for customers, businesses and visitors. Dartford is located to the south east of London and has good road, bus and rail links.

Situated on the A226, the town is linked with the A296 and the A2 to the east and Crayford and the A207 to the west. The A2 skirts the town to the south and the M25 runs north to south through the town's eastern extremities. The road network ensures easy vehicular access to the town centre's edges, however the road layout of Home Gardens, Lowfield Street, Highfield Street and Instone Road effectively creates a ring road which can easily become congested as vehicles try to access key attractors and car parks. Congestion is further exacerbated by overly engineered and large junctions on the edges of the town centre.

Pedestrian Flows

Dartford Borough Council has carried out surveys of pedestrian footfall as part of the evidence base for the Dartford Town Centre Area Action Plan. Surveys were undertaken on the following days:

- 26 and 28 September 2006 • 16 and 18 October 2007
- 12 and 14 December 2006 • 11 and 13 December 2007

A total of 51 locations were surveyed across eight key strategic locations in the town centre. The table below provides a summary of the results, displaying the total number of pedestrians surveyed at the eight key locations.

Highest pedestrian flows were recorded along the High Street between No's 33-35 and One Bell Corner, as well as at the entrance to the Priory Centre on Lowfield Street.

Pedestrian movement in Dartford

Location	Total Pedestrians Monitored
High Street	82,080
Priory Shopping Centre	70,950
Lowfield Street	45,180
Spital Street	44,070
Orchards SC/Bulls Head Yard	43,620
Hythe Street	35,670
High Street Entrances	28,020
Spital Street Entrances	7,460

Bus Routes

Dartford's main bus terminal is located on Market Street and comprises a row of bus shelters. It is connected to Central Park and to the town centre through Market Place and Lowfield Street. Local buses provide links to surrounding settlements and outlying rural areas. There is also a number of bus bays located at Home Garden with step access to the railway station. Fastrack bus stops are also located here.

Rail Links

Dartford Rail Station is segregated from the town centre by a dual carriageway, and although there is a pedestrian footbridge linking the station to the town centre, there is potential to strengthen pedestrian linkages to the town centre.

Train services connect Dartford with London in approximately 45 minutes, as well as providing services to suburban areas, Gravesend and the Medway towns. A new station building was opened in August 2013 and provides an iconic gateway to passengers.

Environment

The Dartford Town Centre has a number of excellent features including Central Park, the Town Centre Conservation Area and a number of high quality historic buildings. These features, however, are undermined by late 20th century planning and architecture. Therefore, there is scope for environmental enhancement within the town centre.

Dartford Town Centre Conservation Area covers most of the town centre, thereby protecting the town's historical core based around the High Street. There are some attractive older buildings in this area, including Holy Trinity Church, Victoria and Bell Hotel and the Wat Tyler Public House. Central Park provides an exceptional open green space which is unique for a central urban area within the UK. The pedestrianised high street also provides an amenable public area with the Town Centre. The public realm along the High Street, Hythe Street and Spital Street is, however, poorly maintained and has had piecemeal interventions which make for a disjointed public space.

Perception of safety and occurrence of crime

Discussions with the Community Safety Officer at Dartford Borough Council, has led to the understanding that Dartford town centre has a vibrant late evening and night economy. It is largely centred around the pubs in the town centre, as well as the Air & Breathe nightclub on Essex Road. As a result a proportion of the crime carried out in Dartford during the evenings is alcohol-related.

A review of Crime data available from Police UK indicated that in November 2015 the highest percentage of crime (mapped) was due to anti-social behaviour, followed by violence and sexual offences. This could also be linked to the previous research indicating a large proportion of the crime was evening related. There was however low rates of theft, burglary and bicycle theft.

Crime Type	Number of incidents	%of total crime
Anti-Social Behaviour	32	12%
Bicycle Theft	2	1%
Burglary	2	1%
Criminal Damage	10	4%
Drugs	6	2%
Other Crime	0	0%
Other Theft	14	5%
Possession of weapons	0	0%
Public order	10	4%
Robbery	0	0%
Shoplifting	23	8%
Theft from a person	3	1%
Vehicle Crime	7	3%
Violence and Sexual Offences	23	8%
Other unmapped crime	143	52%
TOTAL	275	

Summary

Based on the high level market review and town centre health check we have summarised some of the key issues emerging and sectors/uses which could help to drive forward proposals within the town centre:

- Developer/Investor Interest: Given the recent activity within the town centre (e.g. acquisition/ refurbishment of shopping centres & development sites being acquired) the signs are encouraging; with developers/investors once more prepared to invest in the area.
- Retail: Given the recent acquisition of the Priory Shopping Centre and the works undertaken to improve the Orchard Centre suggests that investors are confident in the local retail market. The town also has a successful street market and patronage has increased following its relocation. It does appear as though the town centre is geared towards local retail needs and there is the potential to develop this by seeking to improve the local and niche retail offer. Overall there is a need to enhance the market

catchment of Dartford.

- Leisure/A3: To build upon the theatre/leisure centre works and aim to attract/improve the A3 offer in the town. Coupled with the recent investment into Central Park and the potential to deliver new residential there is an opportunity to create a 'lifestyle' offer within the town centre – an urban village – where the retail and leisure offer is focused on local needs. The emerging focus should be to address the need for a mid-evening economy which is currently lacking.

• Residential Use: Dartford is becoming one of the most sought after territories

residential locations in the region. An increasing population, proximity to London and a centrally renovated railway station, as well as good road links, means that the town is an attractive location for residential development. A number of different housing products should be considered, from family (town) houses through to apartments (serviced) as part of a PRS offer. Increasing the number of residents within the town will also help to generate demand for local needs retail and A3.

- Environment: The environment of Dartford town centre requires improvement in order to improve the pedestrian experience and enhance footfall past commercial and leisure uses. The key public spaces of the High Street, Central Park, Hythe Street and Station Mound offer significant opportunity for enhanced commercial frontage and economic activity.
- Movement: Congestion within the town is causing issues related to travel time for public transport and the desirability of the town centre as a destination for retail and leisure. Enhanced connectivity and ease of movement will ensure the continued viability of Dartford as a place to work, live and enjoy.

Urban Design Analysis

This section provides a detailed analysis of the urban setting of Dartford town centre. The aim is to gain a full understanding of the town centre with consideration of the key urban design principles; form, use, movement and space. The outcomes of this analysis will fully inform the emerging vision and development outcomes of the Framework.

Urban Morphology

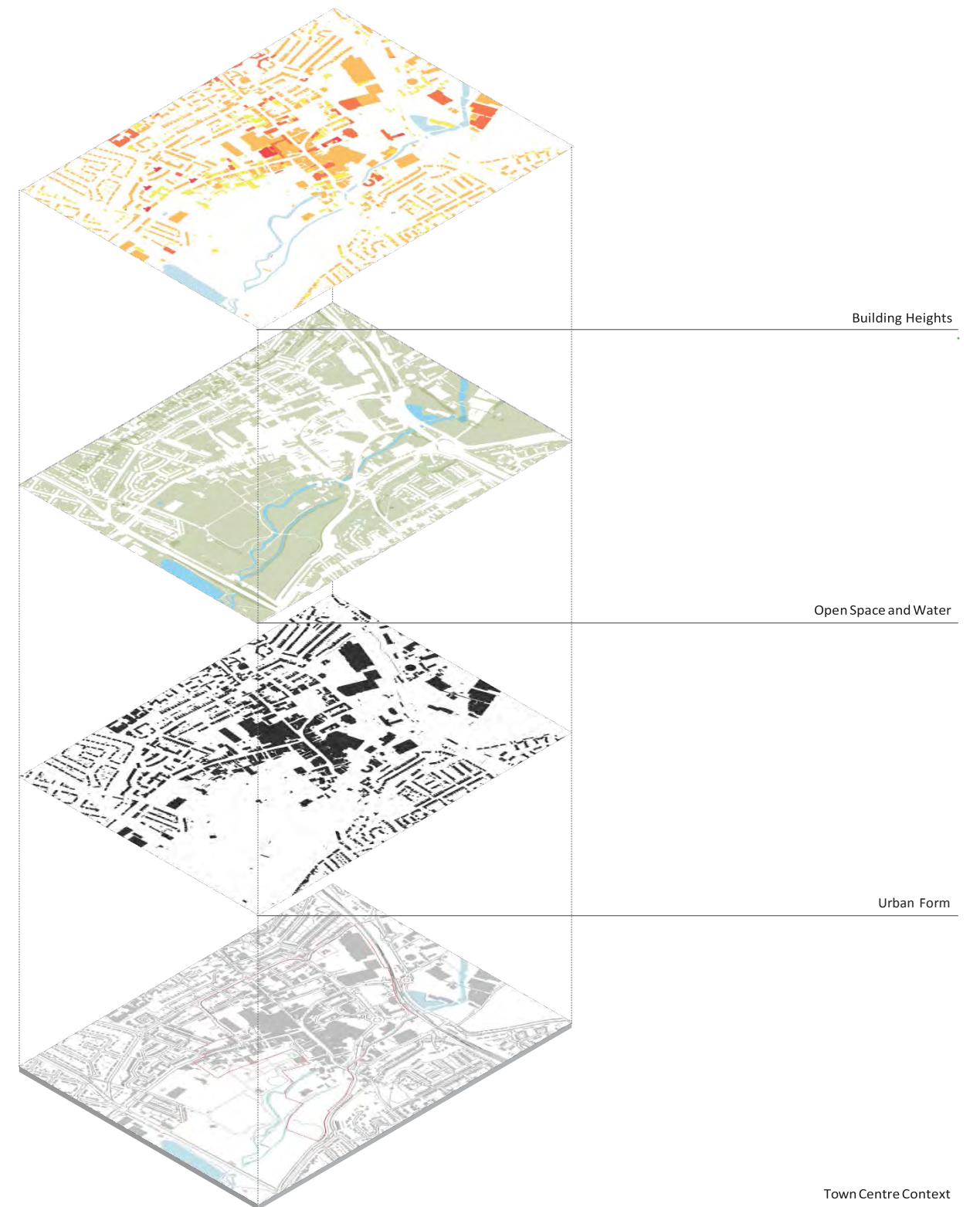
Dartford's urban setting has several significant factors acting upon it. The town's form provides a typical intensity of uses, densities and building heights which defines the centre and creates spaces for economic activity and social interaction.

The centre is unique in that it offers a major regional scale park within its town centre boundary which provides green space and recreation for the town. The town has a rich heritage which provides several buildings of architectural and historic merit which contributes towards a distinctive sense of place.

Modern development and the emergence of the car as a means of transport has led to the reconfiguration of the town's urban grain, with large retail blocks and car parks emerging as a typical character.

This chapter analyses the urban makeup of Dartford town centre with consideration of the following critical issues.

- Form – landmarks/ gateways, massing, height, environmental issues, materials, frontages, edges, legibility, building condition, orientation, density, shadowing, urban grain, views.
- Movement – pedestrian routes, permeability, traffic movement, public transport, legibility, corridors, linkages.
- Space – public realm, private and semi-private spaces, public art, street furniture, street clutter, signage, topography, lighting, soft and hard landscaping, parks, river frontage, hierarchy of spaces.
- Use – land uses, active frontages, crime, adjacency, overlooking, heritage, servicing.



Historic Evolution of the Town Centre

Dartford has a distinct heritage which has left a legacy of historic buildings, medieval street patterns and distinct vistas. Due to its historic location on the main road between London and Dover the town became an important trading post and eventually established itself as a market town.

The industrial revolution brought train lines to the town allowing the town to develop industries, providing a booming economy and population for the market centre of the town to thrive. This industrial growth and booming population led to Dartford establishing itself as a key urban centre within Kent.

The historic development of Dartford has left a legacy of a medieval town centre with a dense urban grain and a residential edge defined by rows of terraced housing. The town centre is punctuated by several historic buildings and sites which provide a number of landmarks for the town.

The historic development of Dartford town centre shows the original street pattern of the high street and its surrounds have remained largely unchanged. Hythe Street and Spital Street/ High Street has remained a prominent axes for the town centre providing clear movement into and through the main retail core.

The historic maps clearly show a defined cross road structure to the town with a strong north-south (Hythe Street and Lowfield Street) and east-west connection (Spital Street and High Street). This definition was lost following the emergence of the ring road which created an impermeable edge to the centre for pedestrians and vehicles alike. Coupled with the emergence of an edge of centre large retail model this has created a new urban form which is largely highways focussed. Pedestrian permeability and prominence of Central Park has since been lost and there is a need to work with the historic street pattern to create a defined, pedestrian focussed urban structure.

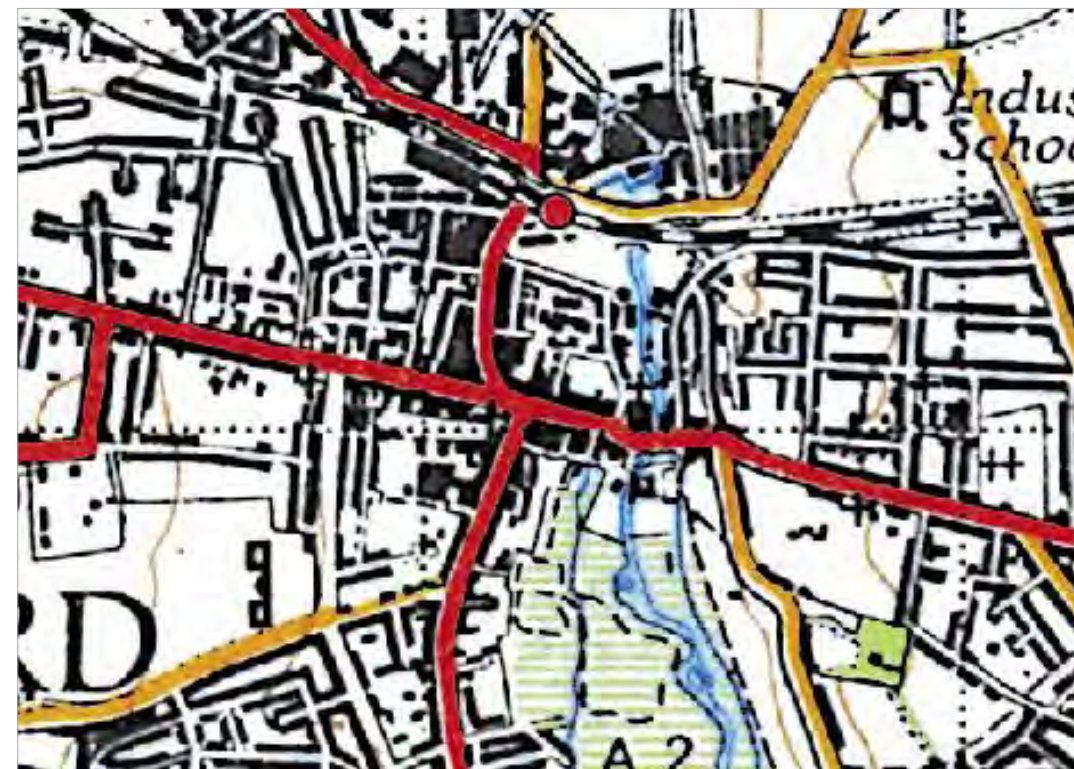
Dartford in 1896



Dartford in 1919



Dartford in 1945



Dartford today

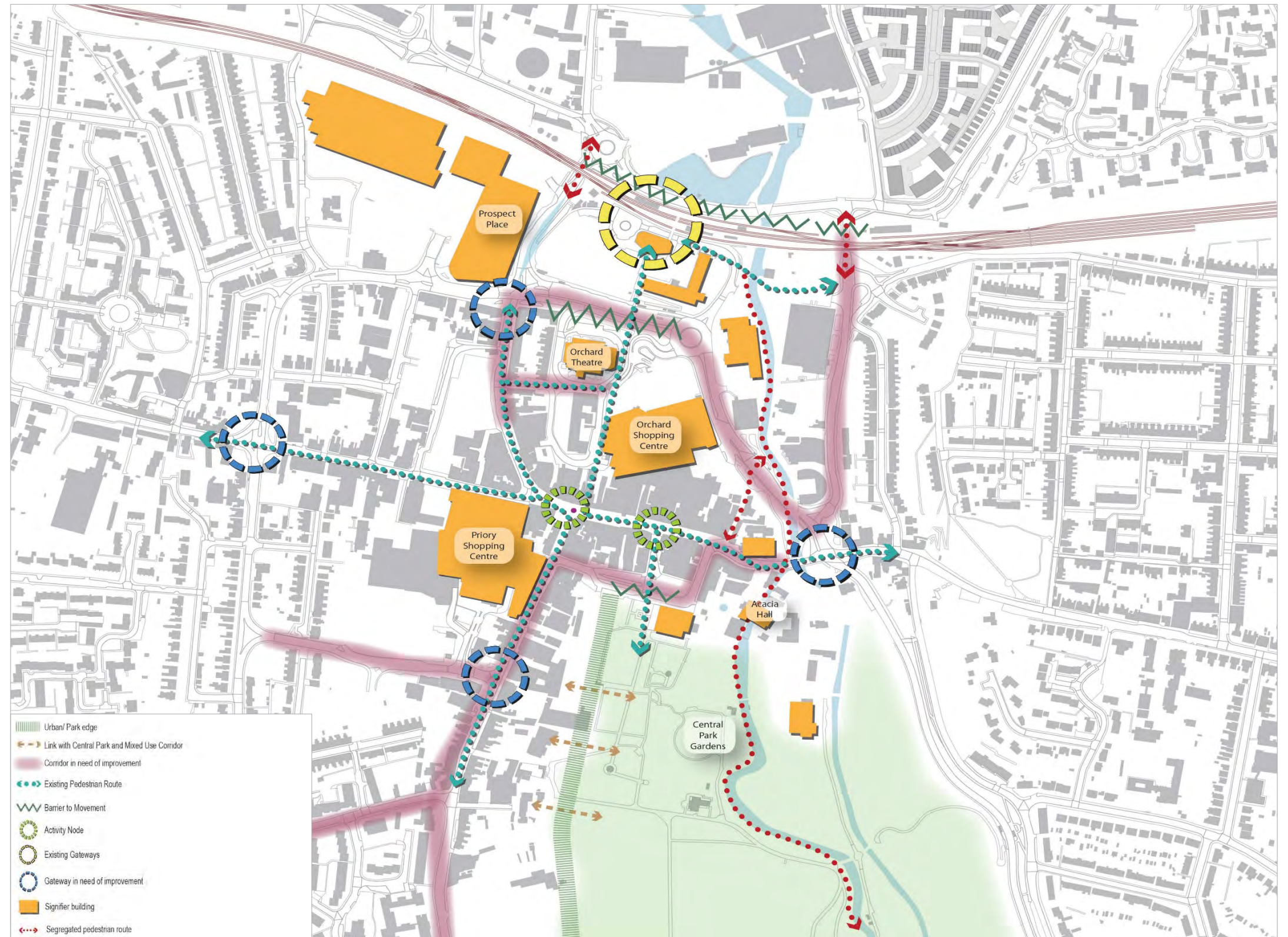


Townscape Analysis

The townscape of Dartford has been analysed based on the four key principles of urban design; form, movement, space and use. The adjacent plan provides an overview of the key constraints and opportunities for the town centre which include:

- Compact town centre providing opportunities for enhanced pedestrian circuits and corridors
- Gateways into the town centre are in need of improvement to draw pedestrians into the town centre and guide vehicles appropriately, as well as create an improved sense of arrival
- The rail line and northern extents of the ring road (Home Gardens) create significant severance for north-south pedestrian movement
- The western interface between Central Park and the Lowfield corridor is currently poor
- Corridors surround and leading to the central core of the town are in need of environmental and access improvement
- Significant focal points on the town centre (Lowfield Street and Market Place) with opportunities for enhancement
- Opportunities to continue enhancement of river corridor and integrate into existing and ongoing enhanced pedestrian environment.

Townscape Analysis



FORM

Heritage

The town centre is characterised by an overlay of patterns and periods of development from Roman times to modern mixed-use development in the town centre. The Roman, medieval and later history is still evident in the streets, buildings and spaces which comprise the town centre. This forms the core of the town in the 21st century and its local distinctiveness.

The Roman axial route from London to Canterbury still passes through present day Dartford from West Hill to East Hill. Also evident are the overlays of Medieval, Victorian, Industrial and Modern periods of development, and many key buildings from these earlier periods of development have been preserved within the town centre.

The core historic spatial design of the town centre laid out along the east-west Roman road, and the subsequent reinforcement of this strategic spine in Mediaeval and Victorian growth, has been largely preserved by the Town Centre Conservation Area. The area encloses the Town Centre along High Street, to West Hill to the west, to East Hill to the east, running south down part of Lowfield Street and Central Park.

The 'L-shaped' layout of the town centre (Hythe Street feeding onto the High Street) has been present since medieval times and has survived to this day, with the

prominence of the historic street pattern has been lost due to the emergence of the ring road as the primary movement network through the town.

The resultant architectural language of the town is diverse in its history and a number of buildings have listings. These buildings contribute significantly to the character and distinctiveness of Dartford.

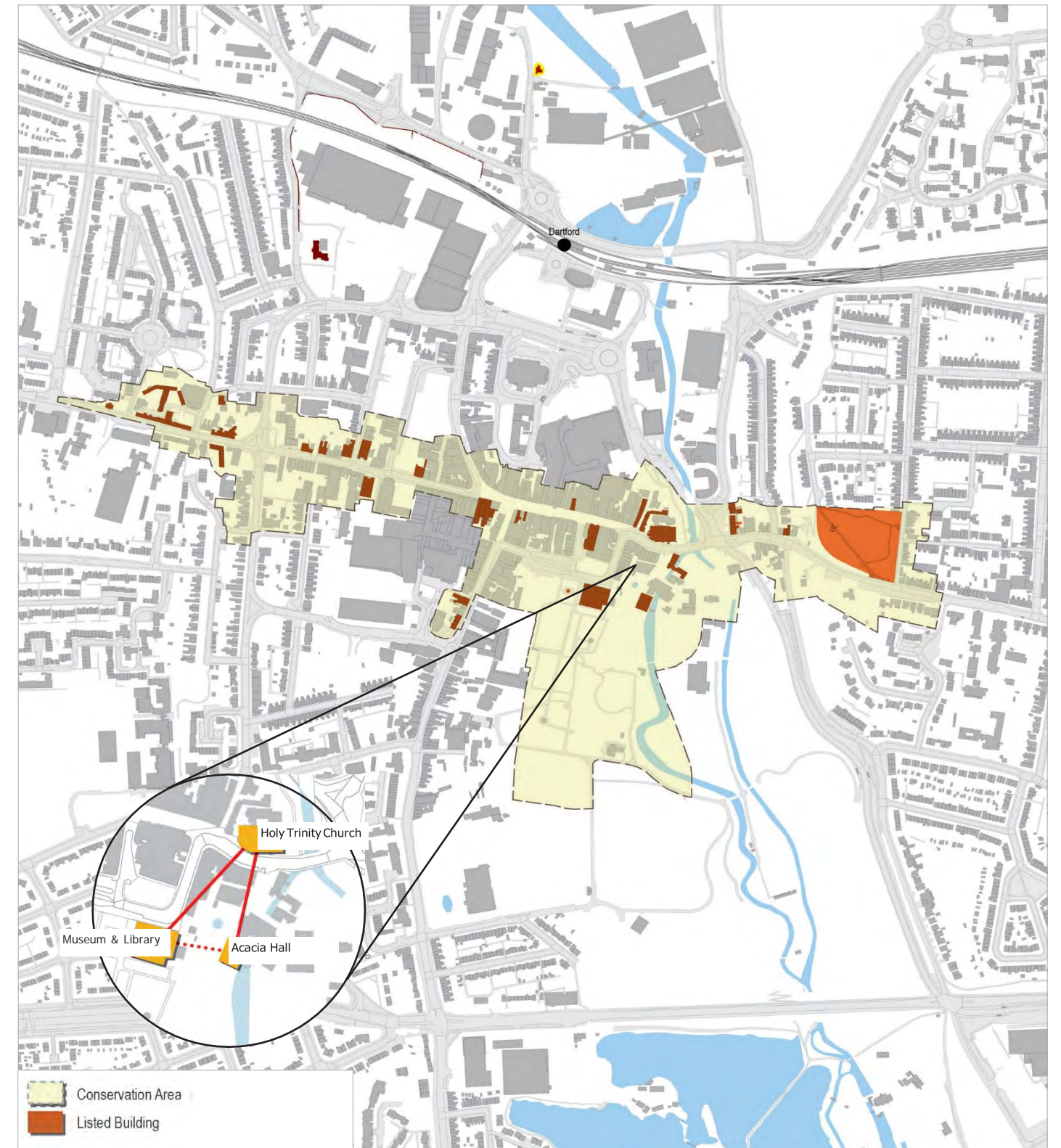
Holy Trinity Church (Grade 1 Listed Building) and Surrounds



A potential link between the Museum and Acacia Hall is blocked by public facilities and high wall. A potential heritage/ cultural loop (see insert) is lost.



Conservation Area and Listed Buildings



Landmarks and Focal Points

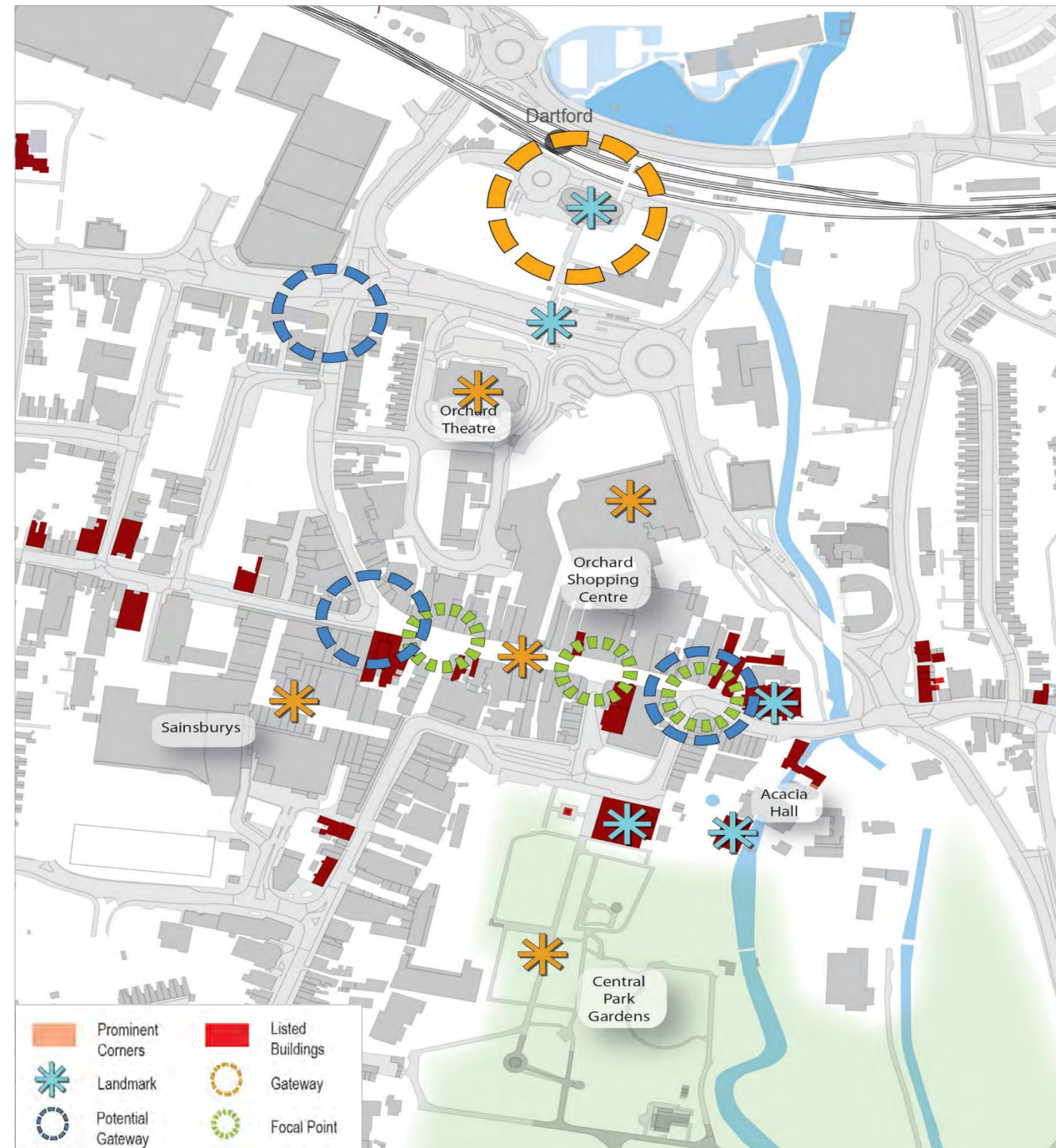
Dartford town centre possesses a variety of quality landmarks made up of cultural buildings, heritage, modern development, key open spaces and popular leisure facilities. These landmarks are supported by focal points or nodes, located at key junctions, corners and public spaces, which help create a sense of place for the town centre.

Key landmarks include:

- Holy Trinity Church
- Hanau Bridge
- Dartford Railway Station
- Acacia House and grounds
- Library and Dartford Museum

There is currently poor recognition of these landmarks and focal points. Work is needed to frame landmarks and enhance focal points through a process of public realm enhancement and building facade treatment. There is also a need to use Dartford's existing and new landmarks to emphasise the hierarchy of the town centre, using landmarks and focal points to define the centre and its supporting axes of streets.

Landmarks, Corners and Pedestrian Gateways within central core of Dartford Town Centre



Train station - modern landmark and gateway



Library and Dartford Museum



Holy Trinity Church and associated space



Gateways

Visitors to the town centre predominantly arrive by car and enter the town centre at key gateway points. These gateway points are shared with pedestrians.

- Northern Gateway: Vehicles and pedestrians enter the town centre under the railway viaduct via the A2026 or Overy Street off Mill Pond Road. Both routes provide little sense of arrival, however the A2026 does provide clear site lines along Hythe Street towards the town centre. The train station with pedestrian links provided over the river through the Wickes car park. This seems to suggest a clear separation between vehicle (A2026) and pedestrian (Overy Street) movement from the north.
- Eastern Gateway: Vehicles and pedestrians enter the town centre to the east via Overy Liberty off East Hill. East Hill provides a raised approach into

The gateway is traffic dominated with the location marking the junction of Home Gardens, East Hill, Market Place and the dedicated Fastrack route. The historic features and vistas into the town centre along Market Place past Holy Trinity Church, as

attractive gateway into the town for both vehicles and pedestrians.

- Southern Gateway: The southern gateway into the town centre is via Lowfield Street. The built form intensifies and becomes more urban as you move along Lowfield Street at Heath Street and Instone Road which marks a sense of arrival into the town centre. Beyond Instone Road the road becomes one way (south bound) which restricts vehicular arrival from the south however pedestrians are allowed to continue into town. The current condition of properties is poor along the northern extent of Lowfield Street with the urban block turning its back on Central Park. The Lowfield Street corridor is due to be regenerated which will enhance this key arrival point for the town centre and Central Park. A pedestrian underpass is currently provided under Instone Road, this underpass is unsafe and unnecessary for this junction.

- Western Gateway: Vehicles and pedestrians approach the town centre via West Hill. West Hill provides clear views along Spital Street which provides an attractive and active corridor into the town centre. The gateway into the town at Highfield Road is traffic dominated, however is well framed on all corridors and clear pedestrian routing is provided. Instone Road to the south is exit only for vehicles and the pedestrian environment is poor and lacking a destination point at its conclusion with Lowfield Street. Heath Street similarly lacks a destination point for pedestrians and there are limited links into Central Park at this point are not currently taken.

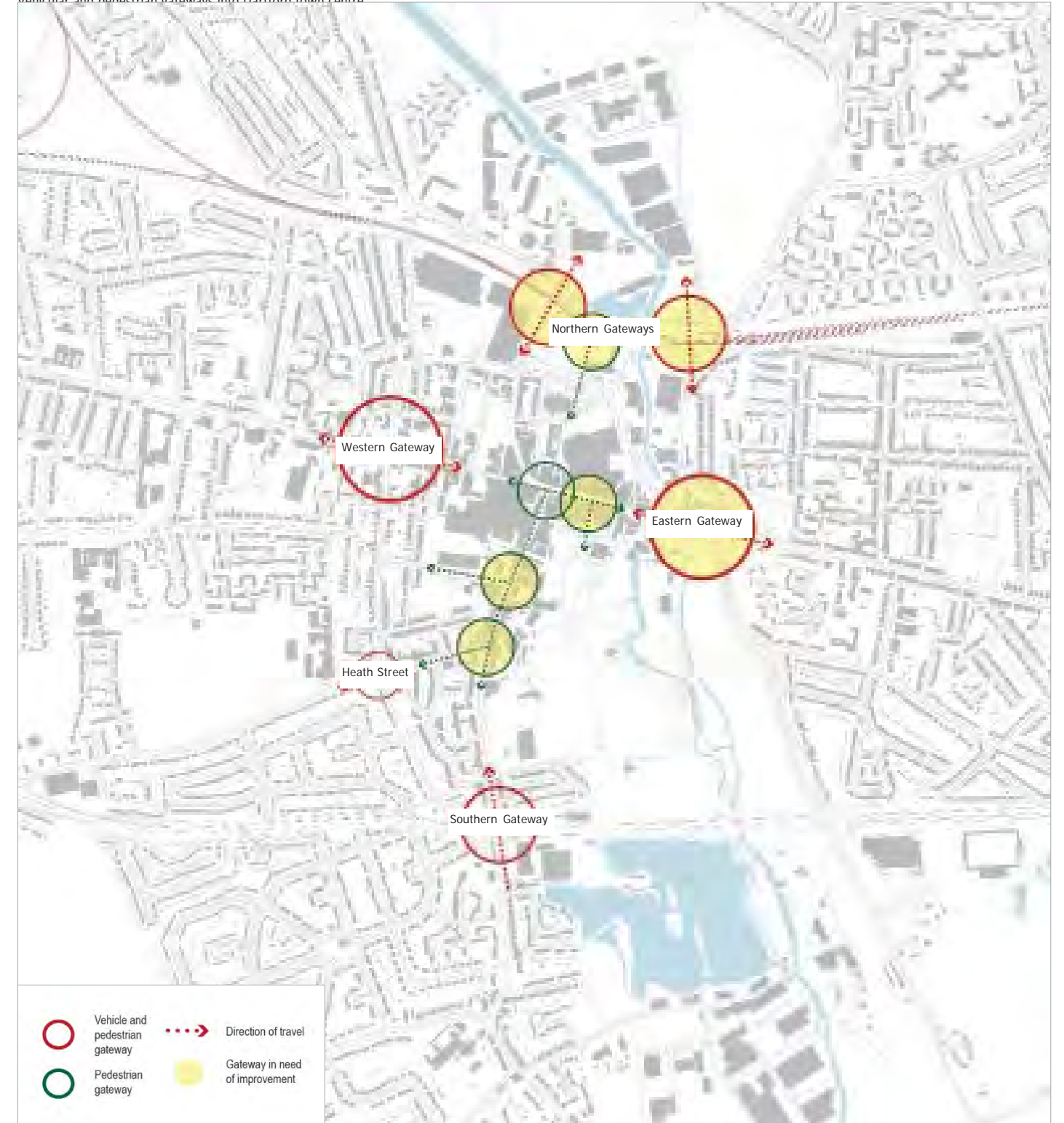
Dedicated pedestrian arrival points within Dartford town centre they are limited to the key public transport hubs at Dartford railway station and Fastrack bus stops (Home Garden). There are however a number of internal pedestrian gateway points which mark arrivals into key

- High Street Gateways (Spital Street, Market Street and Lowfield Street)
- Central Park Gateway (Memorial Gardens)
- Bullace Lane via underpass
- Hanau Bridge and Orchard Theatre

These arrival points are key gateways to the towns core, however are currently under-performing in their function. In particular gateways into Central Park are very limited and the town centre currently turns its back on this critical asset.

There is a particularly poor sense of arrival for pedestrians when arriving by train, being quickly faced by a large car park and cluttered public realm, without clear sight lines or wayfinding towards the town centre. A similar issue faces pedestrians when arriving by bus with Home Gardens providing a barrier to movement and a lack of active corridors towards the central core.

Vehicular and pedestrian gateway into Dartford town centre



Edges

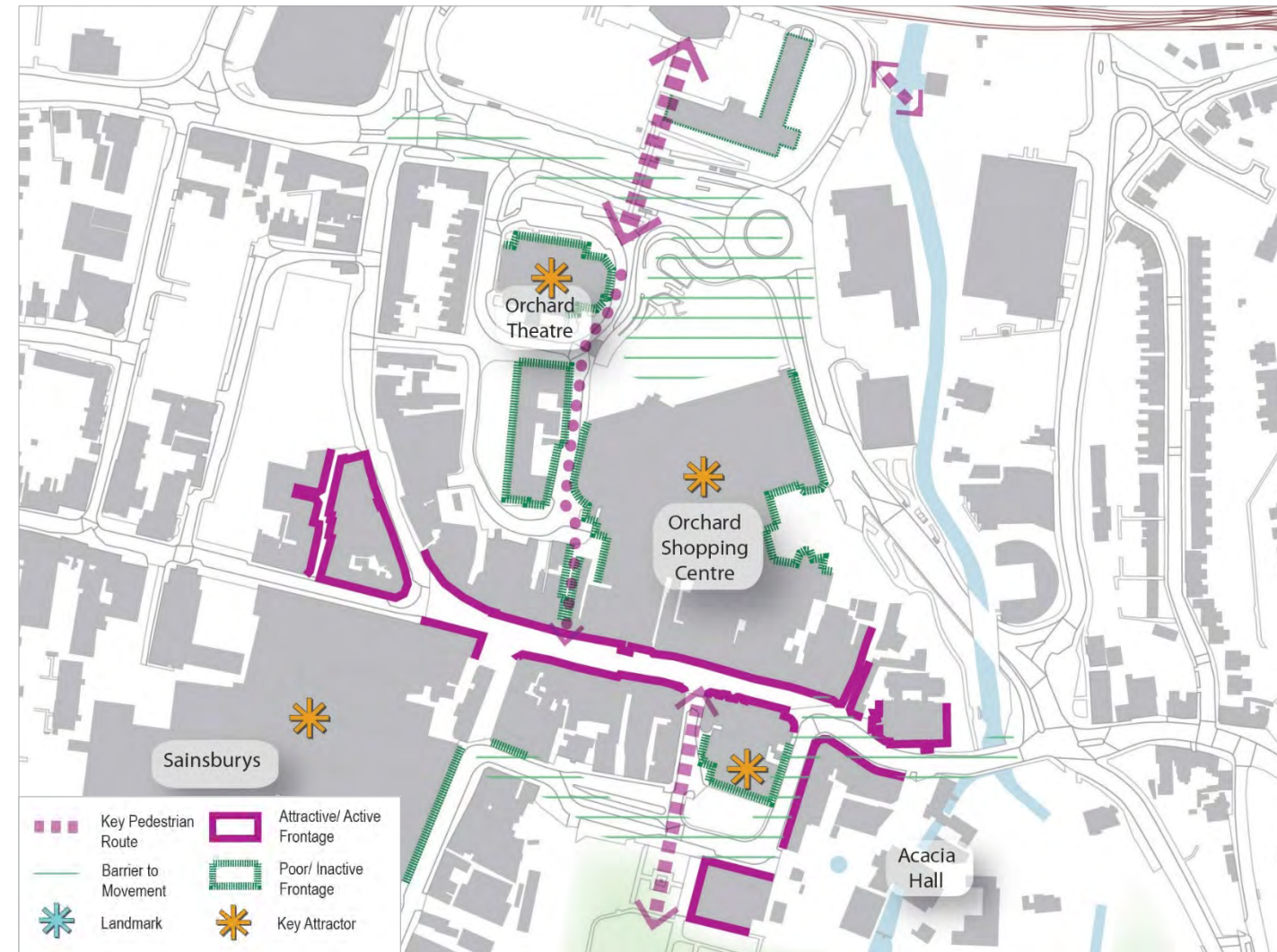
The town centre is currently very disjointed and suffers from inactive spaces caused by poor edge treatment. There are examples of unattractive, poorly maintained and inactive building frontages which results in unwelcoming and unsafe spaces within the town. Critically the main pedestrian route into town via Suffolk Road guides pedestrians along an inactive route which is backed onto by service yards and parking areas. The key active edges in the town centre are the High Street, Spital Street and Hythe Street, however Hythe Street is currently under utilised and only faced on one side.

Home Gardens currently creates severance between the station and the town centre resulting on a poorly defined northern edge to the town centre and a poor sense of arrival. Whilst the Hanau Bridge provides pedestrian access into the town there is currently a lack of an distinctive edge and routes towards the high street have poor legibility.

The strategic edges of the town centre are defined by the park to the south, residential typologies to the east and west and the Northern Gateway site to the north. These edges provide an appropriate synergy between central and sub-central land uses, however the town centre lacks a distinct edge in places and clear routes into the central core of the town are limited.

Highfield Road to the west assists in defining the town centre and is more easily crossed for pedestrians and Spital Street providing a clear corridor into the town centre with active and attractive edges helping to define the corridor. The remaining western edge of the town centre is less well defined with Instone Road and Lowfield containing a number of derelict properties and inactive or poor quality commercial frontages.

Edge activity in the town centre's core



Central Park defines the the southern edge of the town centre, however the scale of the park and its gated edge results in the southern extent of the town being slightly separated from the central core. Strengthening the role of the Lowfield Street corridor will assist in this issue.

The River Darent marks the eastern edge of the central core and Bridge House Gardens and the Overy Liberty Bridge creates an historic edge and gateway into the town centre. East Hill provides a clear corridor into the town.

The ring road separates the central retail core from the rest of the town centre, creating severance within the town.



Current pedestrian route to High Street from the train station - unwelcoming and inactive



Active high street - although poor first/ second fl or occupation



urban grain

The tight urban grain of the historic town centre provides a distinctive street pattern for Dartford. The urban grain plan highlights the importance of the axis of the High Street/ Spital Street (East-West) and Hythe Street/ Lowfield Street (North-South). The High Street, Hythe Street and Spital Street provide a particularly pleasing building rhythm with the intensification of densities and street patterns creating a sense of activity and enclosure which defines the town centre.

The blocks adjacent to the High Street have gradually been infilled with larger development creating impenetrable blocks including the shopping centres, multi-storey car parks and big box retail units. As a result the town has become less permeable and issues of inactive spaces which are backed onto have emerged.

Dartford's urban grain



massing and scale

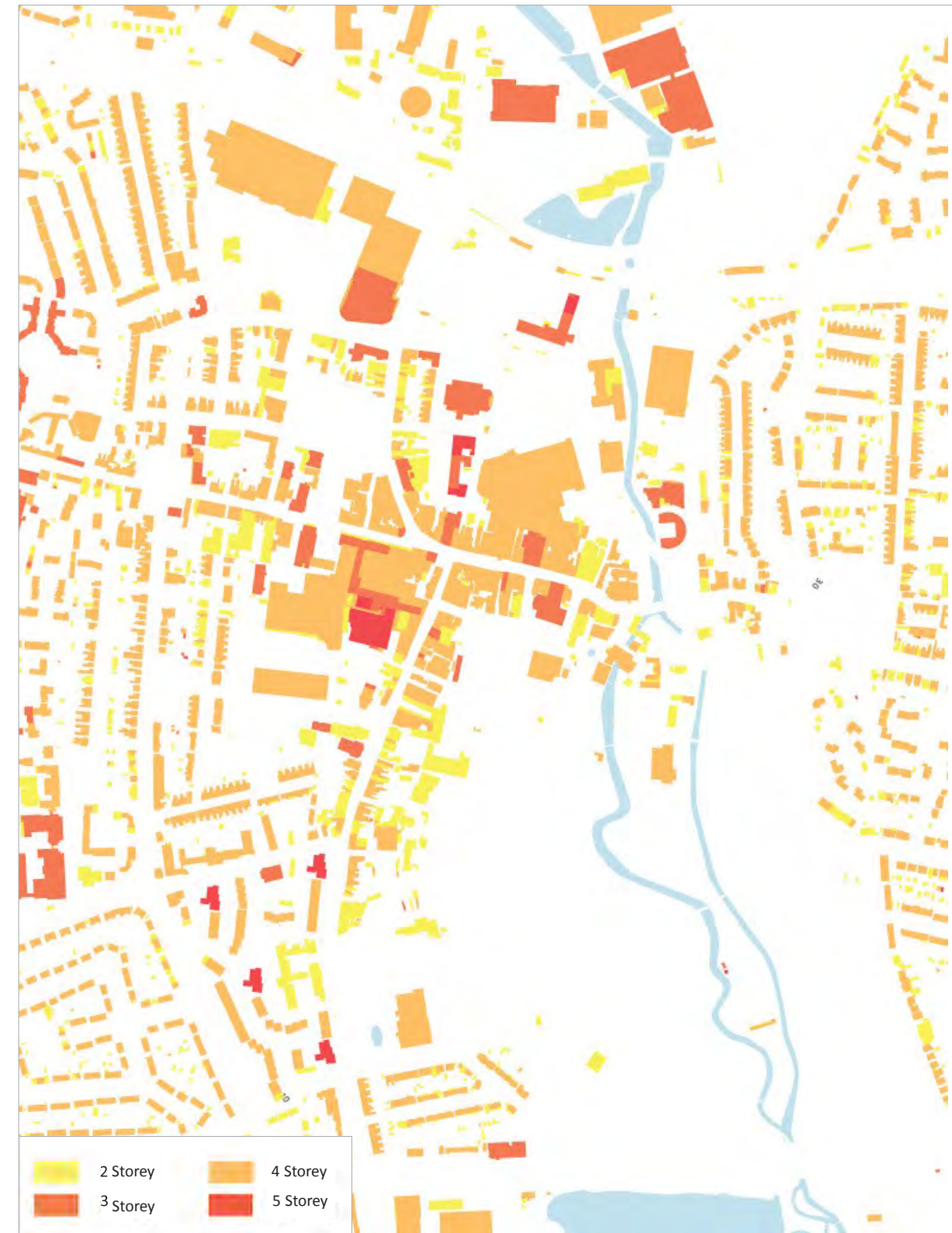
There is variety in the scale and massing of buildings throughout the town centre, but prevailing scales can be identified which set an important context for future development; a context that must be respected in order that future development integrates with the existing built form and townscape. As illustrated by the height analysis below, the majority of the town centre is 3 storeys along the High Street with appropriate increases in height at key junctions (Spital Street and Market Street) which provide a cohesive and legible vertical rhythm to the town centre. The central area contains a limited number of buildings of a more substantial scale (four or more storeys). The tallest buildings comprise leisure (Orchard Theatre), retail (Prospect Place) multi-storey car park (Priory Shopping Centre) and offices (Civic Centre). The residential areas surrounding the town centre are largely of 2 storeys and reflect the typical massing of late Victorian and modern developments.

There a number of proposals for increased heights and density around the Railway Station, including apartments. This is an appropriate location for such development and will assist the town centre develop a sense of arrival and provide a gateway into the town.

The raised platform around the railway station serves to enhance the perceived height of the Civic Centre and any architectural design response in this area will need to consider ground re-profiling and/ or appropriate massing to consider sight lines of the site.

The scale of buildings within Dartford is largely appropriate, however buildings such as the Civic Centre and the BT Exchange Depot dominate the skyline of Dartford and lack cohesiveness with the town centre. Emerging tall buildings should be located appropriately to create a cohesive skyline and frame critical views into and around the town centre.

Building Heights



Excellent vertical rhythm along High Street



Appropriate massing around railway station from bridge



BT Exchange Depot dominates key pedestrian route into town



Topography

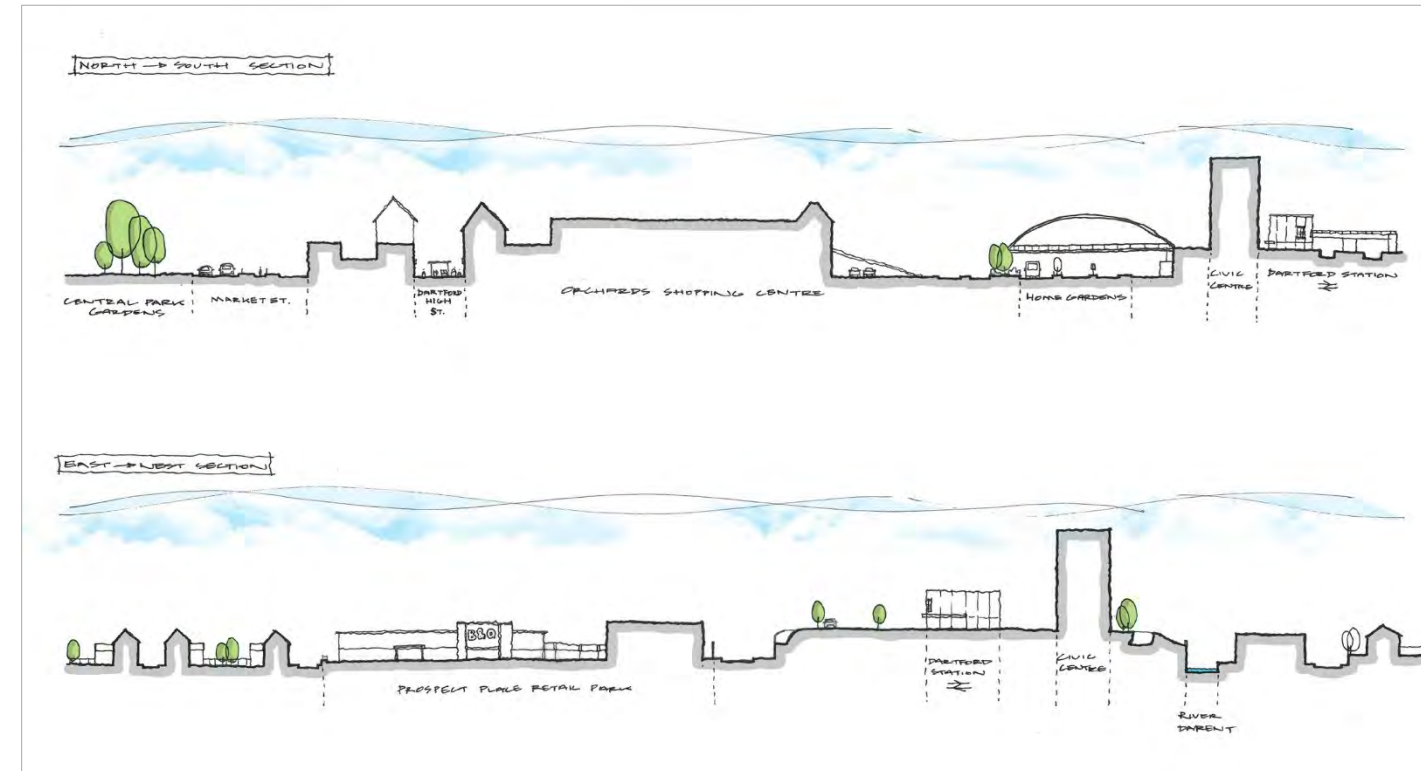
The topography of Dartford is a defining factor in the function and character of the town centre. The town centre lies at the floor of the Darent Valley meaning that the centre is largely flat and sits below the surrounding residential areas.

Land around the station has been artificially raised to meet the train viaduct and sits in a prominent position high above the surrounding area. The raised platform around the station creates a disjointed form which separates the station from the town centre and requires a land hungry bridge to move pedestrians from the station down to the town centre.

The topography of the town means that the roofscape and form of the town centre, particularly the station area, is visible from surrounding areas and particular care is needed to respect this visual reception. The valley context also means that surrounding residential areas have clear views into the town centre and clear routes along West Hill and East Hill are achieved and should be celebrated.

The flat topography through the town centre provides opportunities for cycle and pedestrian access through the town. The topography of the area also provides opportunities for enhanced vistas along key streets and into Central Park which are uninterrupted by natural undulation.

Illustrative topographical and building site sections



Architectural Quality

The town centre comprises a variety of buildings including attractive early 19th century buildings, high quality Victorian/Edwardian/mock Tudor buildings, poor quality late 1960s/70s, and more modern infill buildings such as the shopping malls with entrance pavilions onto the High Street and to their associated car parks. The older buildings along the High Street have a strong vertical rhythm that reflects the individual narrow fronted buildings which grouped together form strong urban blocks, this has been diluted by later infill development in the form of 'big box' units, such as the Priory Shopping Centre and the Orchard Shopping Centre.

There are a number of buildings which are out of scale with the surrounding architectural form and create unwelcoming and illegible spaces for pedestrians.

- Orchard Shopping Centre dominates town centre with large footprint, large surface car park at key pedestrian arrival and backing onto key frontages (Suffolk Road, Home Gardens) which creates blank and impenetrable edges
- Poor architectural quality of Iceland building located on Market Street
- Poor quality food outlets and commercial frontages facing Lowfield Street and Hythe Street
- BT Exchange Depot dominates a key pedestrian corridor into the town centre creating an inactive and unwelcoming pedestrian environment
- Modern development within the Acacia House complex detract from the architectural and heritage quality of the site

There are several listed buildings in and around the Town Centre, including the Royal Victoria and Bull, 44-45 High Street, the Royal Oak on Spital Street, Two Brewers on Lowfield Street, Holy Trinity Church on High Street, Acacia Hall, The Flying Boat 53-55 Spital Street, the Library and the Bridge House. These buildings bring a distinctive historic character to the town centre and are clustered with associated buildings and spaces of historic or cultural merit. As well as high quality historic buildings an emerging modern typology, including the railway station, emerging typologies within the Northern Gateway and the YMCA building complex on Overy Street, which have set a high architectural standard.

Key Views

Local views to landmark buildings allow people to orientate themselves within the town centre and promote legibility.

A number of key vistas, strategic views and vantage points exist within Dartford town centre which should be considered and respected when delivering change in the town centre. The adjacent plan identifies these views, corridors and vistas within the town centre.

Key views to be retained include:

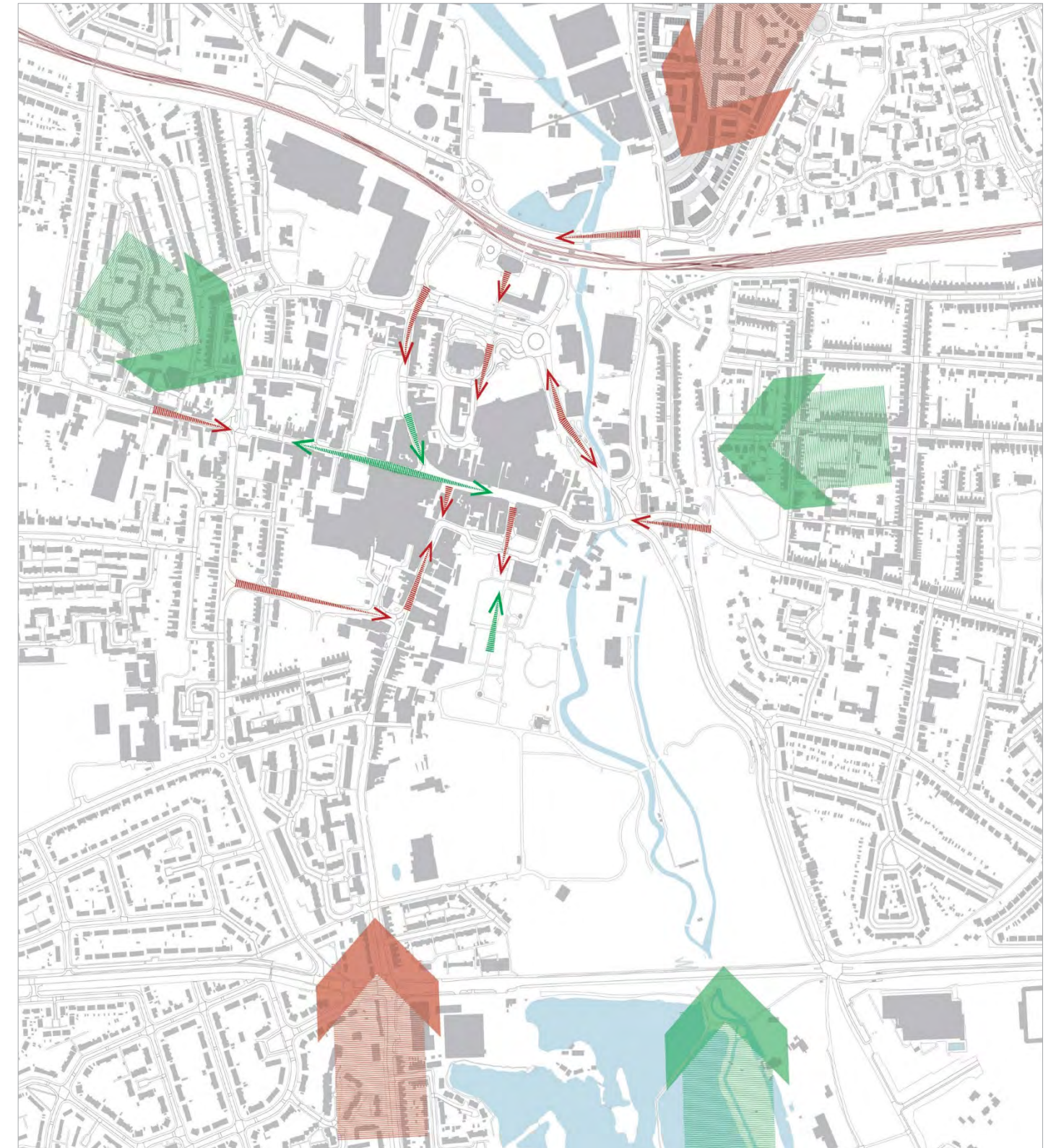
- Strategic views into the Darent Valley from surrounding residential areas - appreciation of the town centre skyline should be fully considered
- High Street from Hythe Street
- Spital Street towards West Hill
- High Street towards Holy Trinity Church
- Town centre from Central Park

Views in need of improvement include:

- Station towards Hanau Bridge and town centre
- Suffolk Road and town centre from Orchard Theatre
- Town centre from Lowfield Street
- Lowfield Street from Instone Road
- Town Centre from West and East Hill
- Hythe Street from Home Gardens
- Home Gardens corridor to rear of Orchard Shopping Centre
- Town centre from north of railway line
- Central Park from Market Street and High Street

There is currently a lack of views out of and into the town centre, particularly towards Central Park and to the north towards the train station. This is largely due to the tight urban grain of the town centre, however work can be done to address key views and vistas with new development and public realm in the town centre.

Views, vistas and corridors



There are a number of prominent views, corridors and vistas within the town centres core including:

1. The High Street looking east from Spital Street, west from Holy Trinity Church and east/ west from the top of Market Place
2. War Memorial Gardens and Central Park from Market Place and Market Street
3. Lowfield Street and Market Street from High Street
4. Station Quarter and Civic Centre from Overy Street
5. Home Gardens from Hanau Bridge (east-west)
6. Mill Pond and Northern Gateway from Dartford Train Station/ train line
7. Clock Tower and pedestrian route into town centre from Priory Theatre
8. View of Dartford town centre from Dartford Train Station

1a. Looking east from top of Market Place towards Holy Trinity Church



1b. Looking west across High Street from Holy Trinity Church



2. War Memorial and Library with Central Park beyond.



3. Market Place/ Street from the High Street



4. Station Quarter and Civic Centre



5. Home Gardens looking west from Hanau Bridge



View locations



6. Mill Pond development site from Dartford Train Station platform



7. Clock Tower and pedestrian route into town from Priory Theatre



8. View of Town Centre from Station Quarter



SPACE

Public Realm Quality and Provision

The pedestrianised High Street forms one of the only public spaces in the town centre and, as would be expected, is the most highly used in terms of footfall. The space is generally pleasant and includes some interesting public realm features.

Public and private space within the town centre is currently poorly defined due to buildings backing onto spaces and private drives crossing public spaces. Suffolk Road is an example of how poor public and private space definition leads to an unwelcoming and confusing pedestrian environment.

There is a need to clearly define what is public and what is private in Dartford in order to clarify pedestrian space. There is scope for private space to be utilised for public use, with examples of such approaches in London showing how an enlivened space can enhance economic activity for the local area.

There is a clear need for space to function in several different ways within Dartford's town centre in order to cater for the needs of pedestrians, vehicles, cyclists, service access, events and commercial practices. This multifunctional operation is a challenge but done successfully can enliven spaces and encourage activity.

The High Street provides a dedicated linear pedestrian space through the town centre linking Spital Street and Market Street. The space is well framed by historic buildings of an appropriate height which activate the space well. Issues exist with public space leading to or directly associated with the High Street:

- Bulls Head Yard/ Suffolk Road
- Lowfield Street
- Market Place
- Bullace Lane/ Market Street
- Spital Street

This results in the High Street being somewhat isolated as an effective pedestrian space.

The pedestrianised High Street contains high levels of street furniture and seating areas although the mix of pedestrians, cyclists and the street clutter creates confusion and impedes accessibility.

Although the High Street is the primary public space in Dartford it links a number of key spaces including:

- One Bell Corner is an important space within the town centre providing a gable end mural and small square often utilised for events and market stalls.
- Hythe Street/ Spital Street provides a semi-pedestrianised space with a raised platform and alternative paving provided to slow traffic and encourage pedestrian movement across the carriageway. However, the surface is poorly maintained and does not succeed as a fully shared surface.
- The Market Place and Market Street area is flanked by key landmarks (Central Park, Holy Trinity Church and the Library), however public space is narrow and cluttered with traffic dominating the space. Significant opportunities to enhance this area for pedestrians exist.
- Central Park and the War Memorial Garden is of significant quality offering recreation and amenity for the town, however there are limited connections to the town centre.

- Public space outside the Orchard Theatre provides an arrival point after the Hanau Bridge. The space, however, is dominated by the ramp access for the bridge and the space lacks a design feature to provide definition to the space. The route from this space to the High Street via Suffolk Road has an excellent surface treatment, however the space is poorly framed by surrounding buildings and service areas resulting in an unattractive and uninviting space.
- Copperfield is an attractive mews passage running between Hythe Street and Spital Street and is home to a small number of restaurants and bars which activate the space.

There are a number of areas where cafés 'spill-out' into the street on the High Street. This creates activity, however could be better managed and designed to ensure consistency in layout and design of outdoor areas. Opportunities for cafe space on secondary pedestrian streets is limited due to the restrictive width.

There is a twice-weekly (Thursday and Saturday) street market which takes place on the High Street and Copperfields after recently undertaking a successful move from the Priory Centre surface car park. This market is a popular attraction for the town, creating activity and interest along the street, and has brought a number of retail initiatives to the community of Dartford.

The general quality of the public spaces in Dartford town centre is poor and lacks integration with key gateways (i.e. Dartford railway station). The piecemeal improvement and maintenance of the public realm has further enhanced the inconsistency in design and quality resulting in a poorly connected pedestrian network.

Street furniture and wayfinding is of poor quality and clutters the street and a coordinated strategy is required to ensure legibility and quality. We are aware that the council are currently undertaking a design and location strategy for wayfinding. It is encouraged that this strategy considers the design and location of other street furniture and is flexible enough to integrate design changes in the future as the town develops.

Our analysis has identified high quality existing public realm, areas of public realm in need of improvement and poor pedestrian environments associated with highways corridors. This analysis has largely focused around the public realm within the town centres core where footfall is high and the commercial importance of public realm is paramount.

High quality public realm:

1. Orchard Theatre Entrance
2. Hythe Street and Spital Street
3. High Street/ One Bell Corner/ Market Place (northern end)
4. Bullace Lane
5. St Saviours Walk

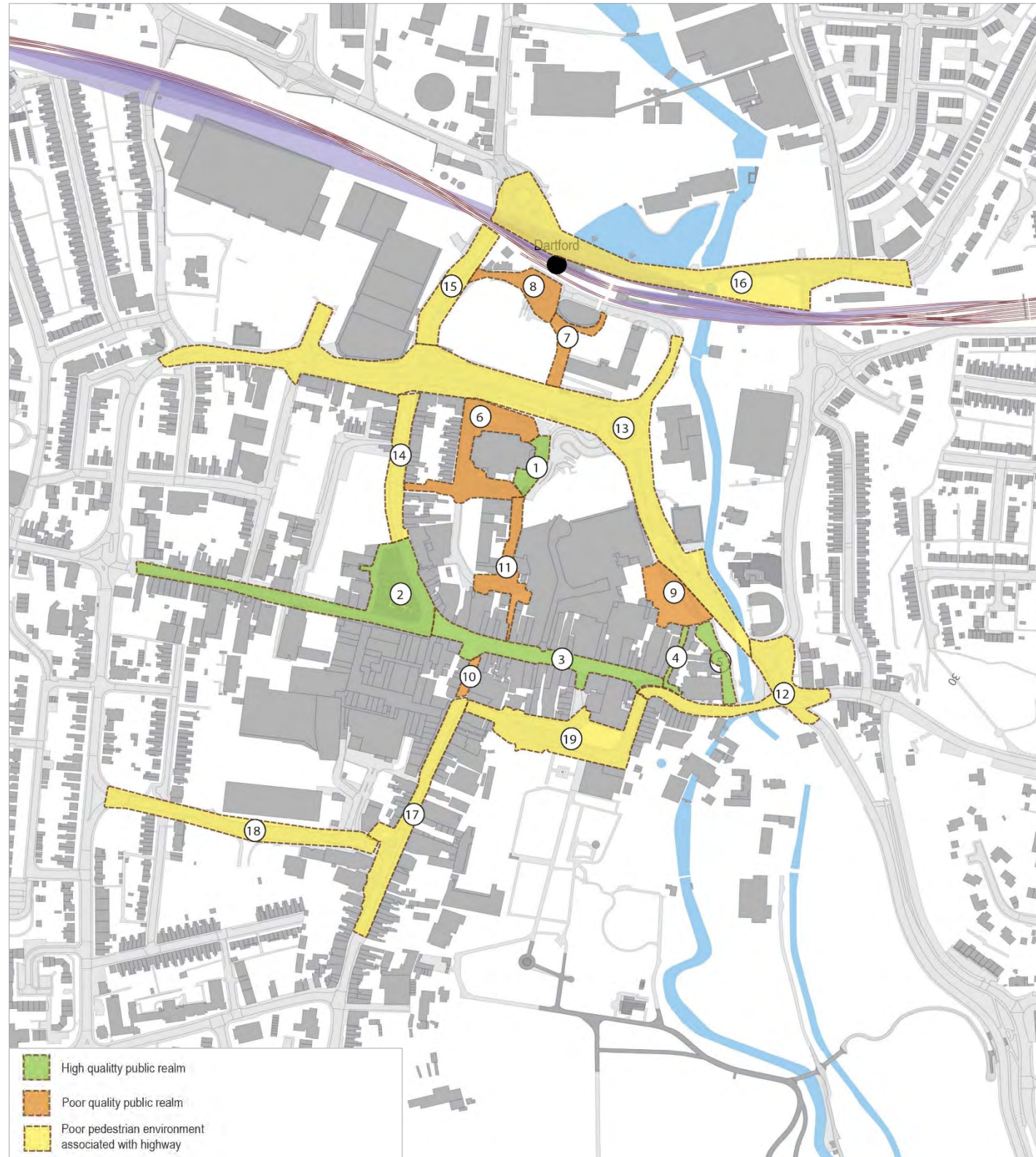
Areas of public realm in need of improvement:

6. Rear of Orchard Theatre (Suffolk Road)
7. Station Arrival
8. Station Approach
9. Rear of Orchard Shopping Centre/ Bullace Lane
10. Northern part of Lowfield Street
11. Suffolk Road

Poor pedestrian environments associated with highways:

12. Eastern Gateway (Overy Liberty, Market Street)
13. Home Gardens
14. Hythe Street
15. Northern Hythe Street
16. Mill Pond Road
17. Lowfield Street
18. Instone Road
19. Market Street

Public realm and public green space in Dartford



1. High quality paving to front of Orchard Theatre providing good landing area from Hanau Bridge. The space is cluttered to the south as the route continues towards the town centre.



2. Hythe Street offers a multi-functional space which provides an enhanced public space as pedestrians approach the High Street. The quality of the space can be improved through new surfacing and de-cluttering.



3. High Street provides a well used space with good vertical rhythm and enclosure that frames high quality views to the east (Holy Trinity Church) and west (Spital Street).

4. Bullance Lane provides a link to the Fastrack bus stop on Home Gardens next to the courts. The lane is well framed by tudor style buildings providing a heritage character. The northern extend of the lane requires enhancement (see image 9).



5. High quality setting of St Saviours Place with river access. Home Gardens dissects the site to the north which detracts from the space.



6. Space to the rear of Orchard is framed by backs of buildings, disjointed surfaces, service yards and has poor legibility.



7. The arrival from the station is dominated by the car park and does not provide a clear route into the town centre. A more defined sense of arrival is needed.



8. Station approach does not provide a clear route out of the station area to Hythe Street and the clear priority is to get cars in and out of the site. A safer and more legible access point is needed.



9. The Orchard Shopping Centre backs onto a key pedestrian space to the north of Bullance Lane which links the Courts and bus arrivals into the High Street. Opportunities to link pedestrians into the shopping centre from Home Gardens providing a secondary frontage.

10. The northern part of Lowfield Street lacks adequate street widths, active frontages have been lost and legibility into the High Street is poor.



11. Suffolk Road is currently the key route into the town centre from the station but is backed onto by rear of buildings, service areas and blank facades creating an unwelcoming space to move through.



12. The eastern gateway into the town centre from Overy Liberty provides a high quality heritage corridor into the town however the gateway is dominated by highways and the pedestrian environment is congested and unwelcoming.



13. Home Gardens and the wider ring road creates a barrier to pedestrian movement offering little space for footpaths and limited crossing points.



14. Poor quality shop frontages, cluttered spaces and narrow footpaths creates a poor pedestrian environment dominated by parking and highway.



15. Northern access to Hythe Street lacks active frontages and is backed onto by service yards (Prospect Place) and offers a poor gateway into the town.



16. Mill Pond Road provides constricted footpaths with no clear routes towards the town centre or the station.



18. Instone Road provides an unwelcoming and disjointed space which lacks a legible route into town and an unsafe underpass which is not underused.



19. Market Street is dominated by a surface car park and a bus layover space, whilst the ring road which dissects this important space.





Green Spaces

The main green space for the town is Central Park. This regional park offers roughly 26 acres of park land with a mix of formal and informal recreation and amenity spaces. The Council has invested heavily in the park to introduce sports facilities, open air performance space,

football pitches, cafe, arts building and cycle facilities.

Central Park provides a top class green space for Dartford and the surrounding area, providing a unique public green space within the centre of the town. The park, however, currently has poor visual and physical connections with the town centre and work is needed to integrate the park into the town to enhance both. The

of the park and improvements to the public spaces of Market Street provide significant opportunities to address this issue.

The Brooklands Lake to the south of Central Park provides green open space as well as offering leisure fishing for the town. Further leisure facilities are provided within the Acacia complex which provides playing fields.

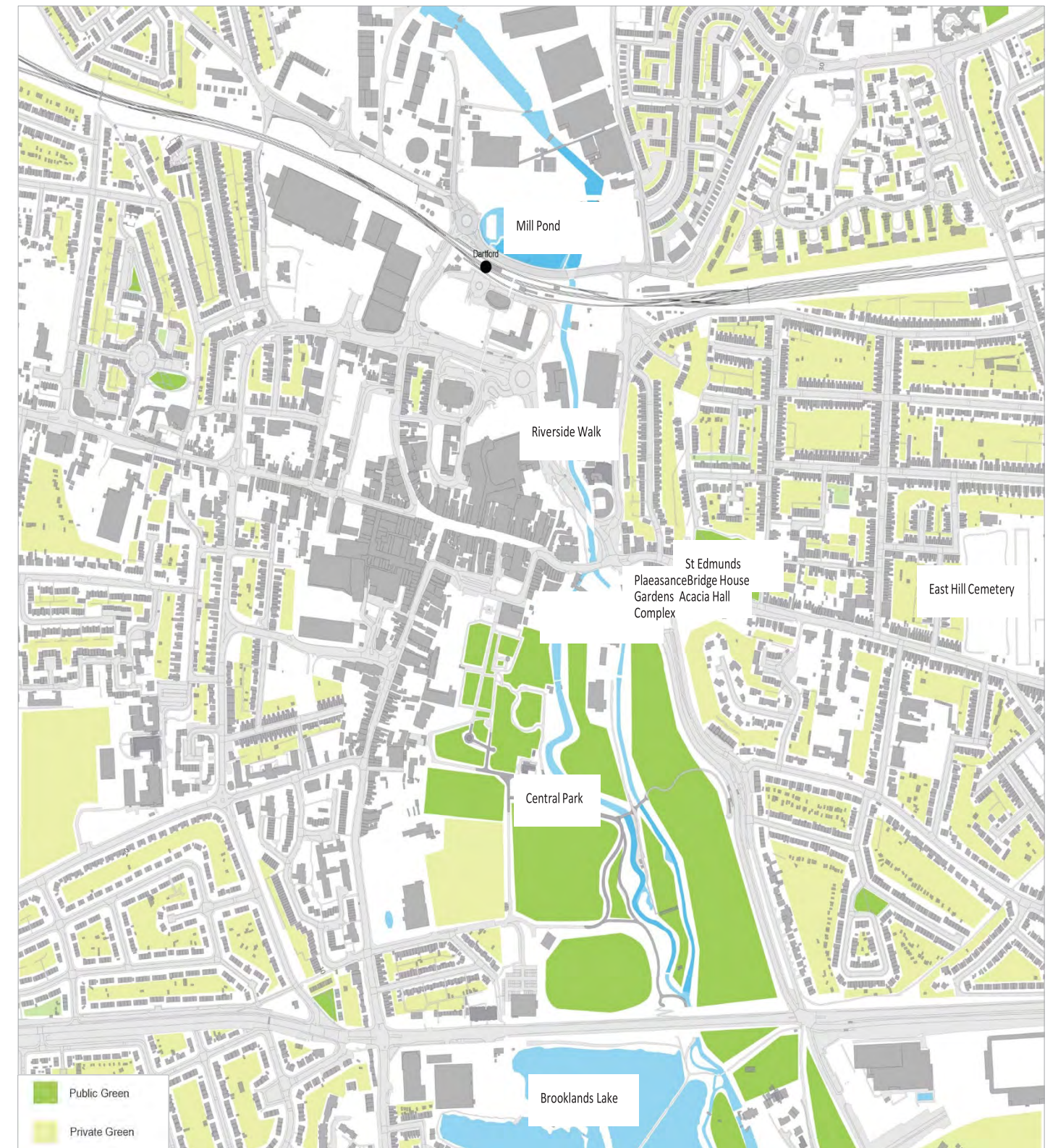
To the east of the town centre the Bridge House Gardens provides a small green space associated with the River Darent and provides a pleasant green gateway to the eastern approach to the town centre. The public space associated with the river frontage is however disconnected and poorly maintained detracting from the quality of the setting. Further to the east St Edmunds Pleasance sits above the town centre providing a open green space for surrounding local residence.

A river walk along River Darent will connect Central Park and the Mill Pond development to the north of the railway station which will enhance riverside space and enhance pedestrian connections within the town.

The adjacent plan highlights the prominence of Central Park within the town centre and its importance as a

the park and the integration of the park into the wider town centre to make the most of this excellent asset - something which is currently lacking.

Public realm in Dartford town centre



USE

Land Use Character

Dartford has a unique setting with excellent connections to London, the M25, Kent and the Bluewater Shopping Centre, as well as a large catchment population within Dartford and adjacent boroughs. However, the lack of quality and diversity in the town centre offer and competition from other retail centres, including Bluewater, has had an adverse impact on the performance of the town centre and the perception of Dartford has suffered.

The land uses in the town centre can be broadly characterised into a number of distinctive character areas. The linear core of the town centre is generally split into three parts:

- Eating, drinking and small scale retail at the town centres core
- Large scale retail and civic buildings at edge of town centre core
- Residential and recreation to the south

The town centre is circled by residential land uses which are accompanied by small scale amenity uses. In addition there is an emerging mixed use and high density residential land use character to the north of the railway line within the Northern Gateway area.

Land uses including the weekly market and outdoor cinema have enlivened the land use offer for the town centre and proved economically successful. The market is bi-weekly (Thursday and Saturday) and has a market charter in place which prevents other competing markets being established within a certain distance of Dartford's. This historical charter remains important to the success of the town centre.

Vacancy

Accommodation within the town centre is generally well occupied, however 1st floor vacancy is evident which detracts from the appearance of the town centre with a number of boarded up windows and poorly maintained upper façades.

There are particularly high levels of derelict buildings along Lowfield Street, however there are proposals in place to develop this site for residential/ mixed-use.

Vacant buildings, blank façades and poorly routed pedestrian routes to rear of buildings has resulted in areas of poor surveillance and potential risk of crime.

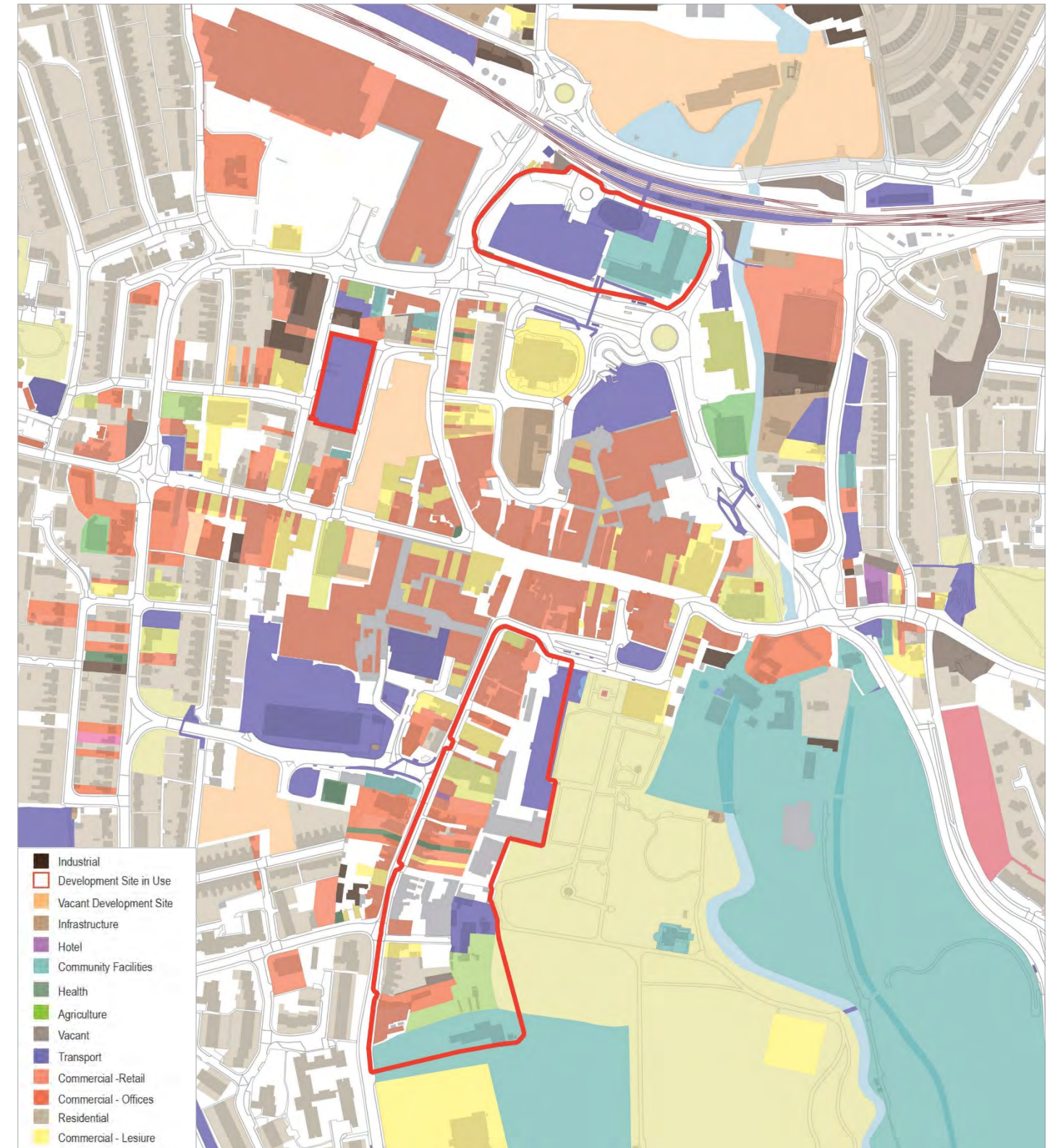
Land Use Blocks and Adjacency

The primary core of Dartford is dominated by retail land uses and has, as a result, become heavily reliant on the sectors success. More broadly the town can be clearly divided into a series of land use zones. These zones currently act independently leading to mono-centric land use areas which lack character and activity at certain periods of the day. The town lacks a mix of uses which would bring activity, footfall at different times of day within different parts of the centre and, most importantly, bring a community to the town centre. Work is needed to provide a critical mix of uses which enliven the centre and its economy to create a community and sense of place for Dartford.

Mix of Uses

The town centre currently lacks a critical mix of uses and services which would sustain pedestrian activity throughout the day. The town centre requires an integrated strategy to cluster uses and provide clear links between day time (retail, employment, education), mid-evening (theatres, cinemas, evening classes, restaurants) and evening (pubs, bars) uses to enliven the towns buildings and spaces.

Land Uses in Dartford - Day Time Overlay



Strategic Land Use Context

Outside of the town centre Dartford is predominantly residential with large areas of open space utilised for leisure to the south of the town (football clubs, golf courses, fishing lakes) and commercial and light industrial areas to the north of the town centre.

The Northern Gateway will provide residential, employment and mixed use land uses to the north of the town centre which will enhance the land use character of the town through choice of residential and employment space.

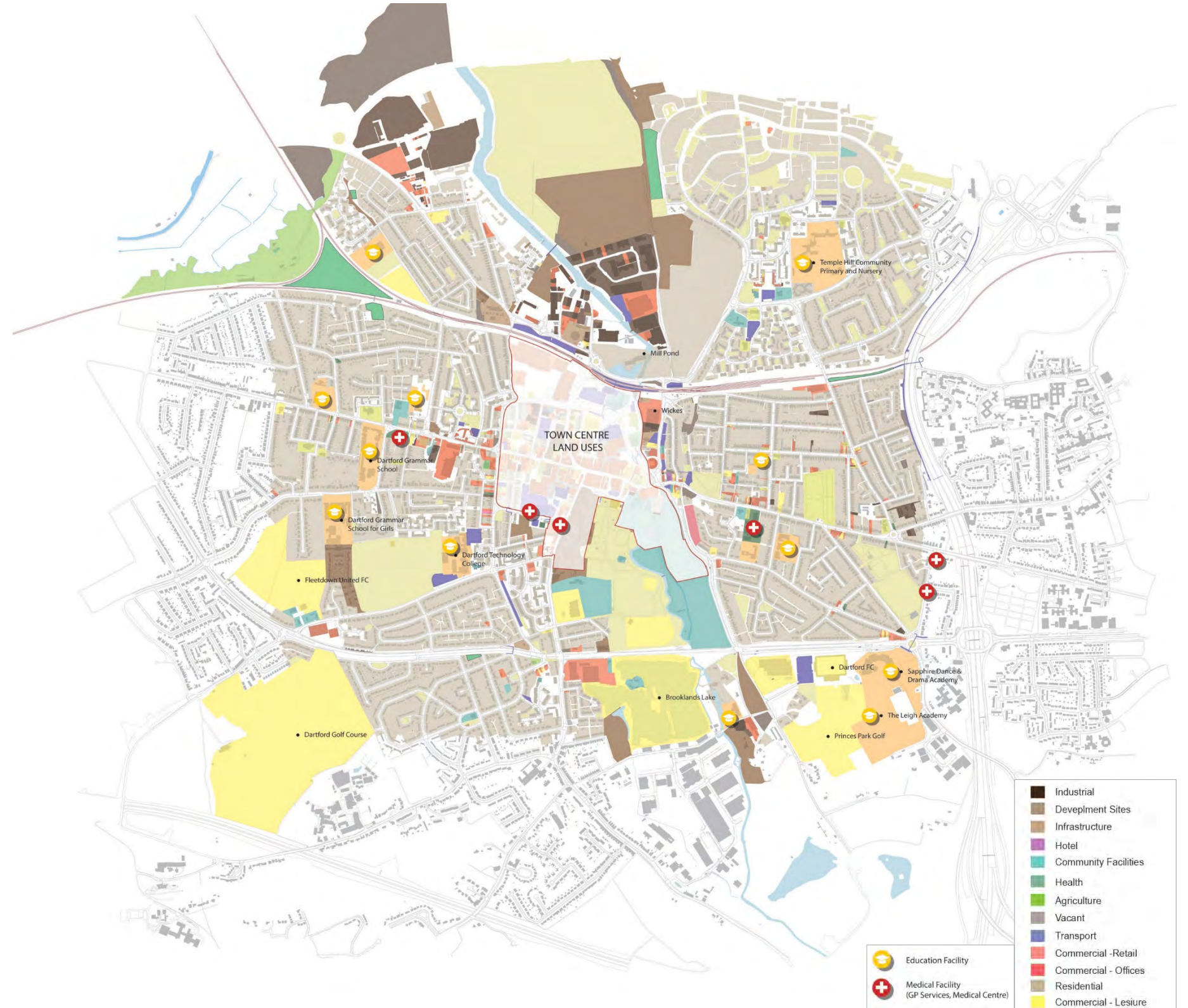
At a Borough level there is significant areas of employment and retail. Two retail anchors (Bluewater and Lakeside) provide key attractors to the Borough, whilst Dartford provides a limited mixed use focus for the borough.

Dartford is not competing with the retail offer of Bluewater Shopping Centre and should, therefore, define its own role within its strategic context. Key to this role will be emphasising a diverse mix of uses which define a unique destination for the borough of Dartford, Kent and East London.

As illustrated by the adjacent diagram, the town centre contains a number of services and facilities for the local community, including places of worship, healthcare, schools and education, youth and community groups, and other services. While the quality of those services has not been fully audited, it is important that the framework adopts an assumption for retaining, re-providing and improving the access to community services and facilities. This will be an important principle to adopt in serving the population of the town centre that will increase due to the addition of new living accommodation, but is accentuated by the need to plan for expected population growth.

Importantly, the town centre does not currently contain any public sector educational facilities and has limited healthcare provision. There is considerable education provision at all levels outside of the town centre which serves the residential areas surrounding the town centre. Healthcare provision is limited largely to the East and West Hill corridor through the town. As the town centre community grows a strategy for the provision of essential community facilities will be needed.

Strategic Land Use Context



MOVEMENT

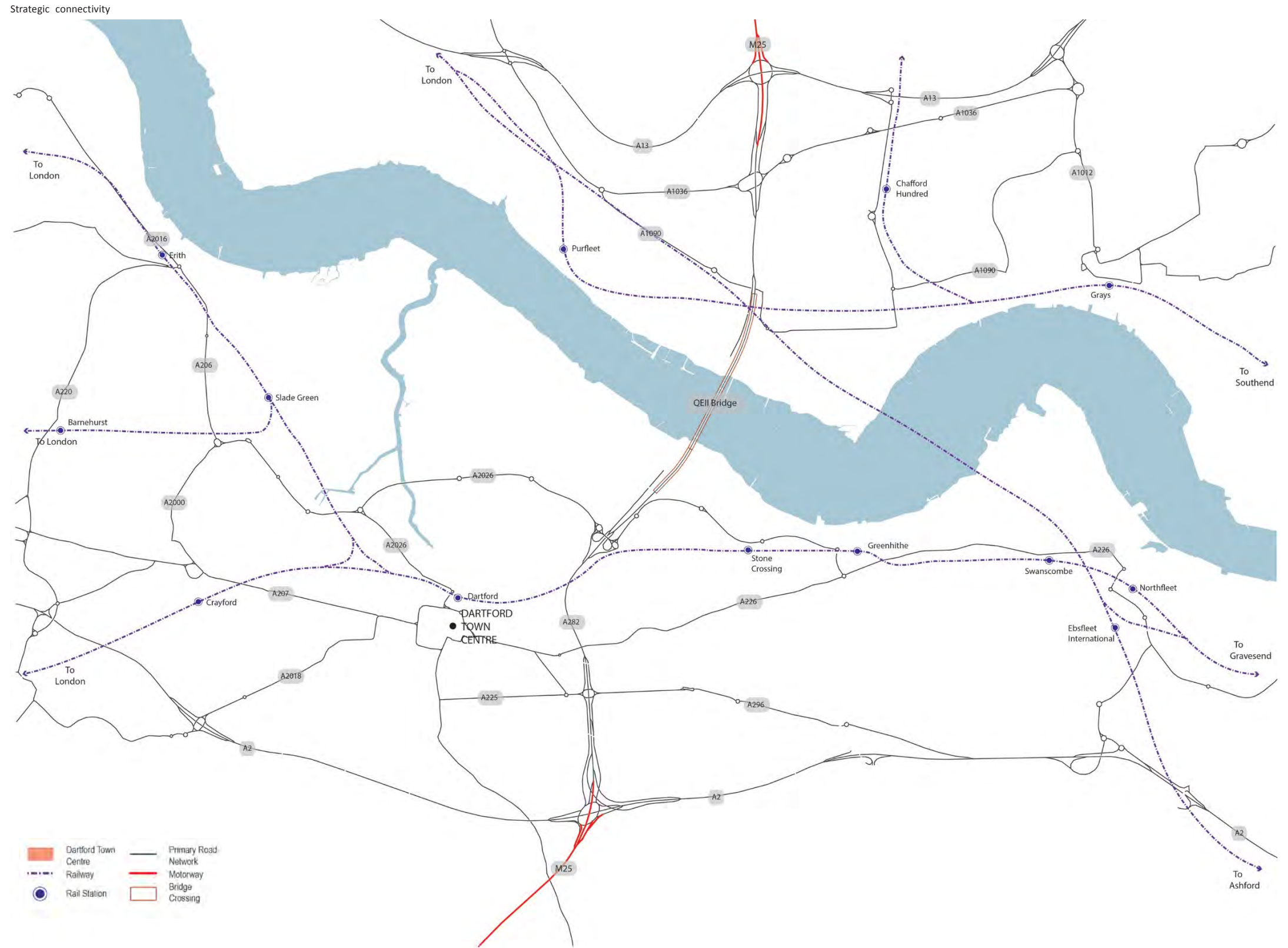
Movement around Dartford town centre is largely dominated by the private car with the ring road currently creating a restrictive barrier for pedestrian movement into the town centre from its fringes. The ring road also means that pedestrian movement is contained within it, whilst bus and car movement does not permeate into the central areas.

Movement throughout the town is focussed around four key modes of transport which have varying levels of connectivity. The following outlines the key modes of transport and defines the key issues and opportunities related to their connectivity. A critical issue is a lack of integration between all modes of transport in Dartford in order to create a multi-modal transport system which is set within a clear transport hierarchy. This hierarchy needs to preference sustainable modes including walking and cycling, something which the current town centre set up does not do.

Strategic Movement

Dartford town centre has excellent strategic links via rail, bus and road throughout the south east and the rest of Kent, as well as into London. Whilst providing opportunities the proximity to the strategic road network can cause congestion issues within the town centre when incidents or road works cause capacity issues on the M25 and the Thames crossings.

Fastrack provides rapid bus transit throughout the Borough linking the town centre, Gravesend and Bluewater. Fastrack, however, is affected by the same congestion within the town centre which has affected patronage of the service.



Vehicle Movement

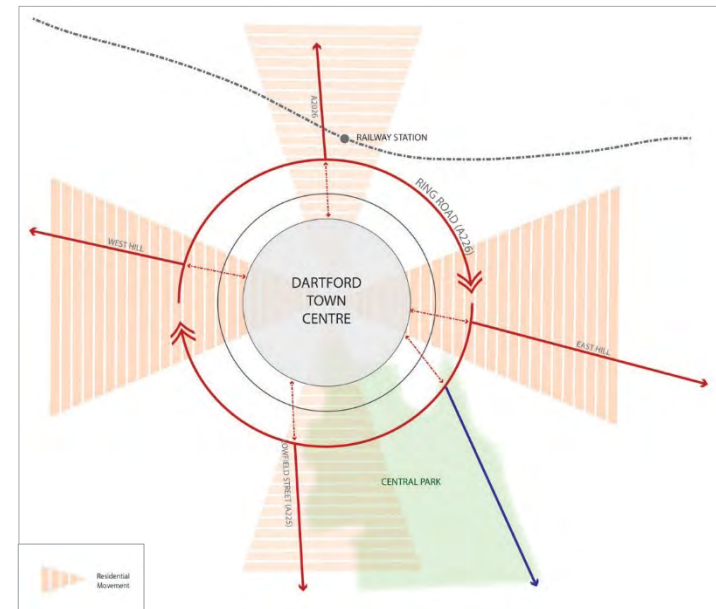
The car remains the preferred means of transport within Dartford resulting in highways remaining a dominant land use within the town centre. Key routes into the town centre from the surrounding residential areas are focused around the key corridors of East and West Hill. The railway line to the north creates a barrier to vehicular movement from residential and employment areas to the north of the town centre.

- **Congestion:** The northern part of the ring road (Home Gardens, Westgate) is a particular pinch point, whilst the southern part of the ring road (Market Street, Lowfield Street) has limited trips on it and is largely free of congestion. As a result vehicle movement, and as a result pedestrian and cycle movement, are restricted in key areas within the town centre. This congestion is caused by a combination of poorly designed highways/ junctions and strategic traffic flow being diverted through the town centre. Currently, the town centre suffers significantly when the nearby strategic road network reaches capacity or there is an incident causing congestion. There is a need to improve traffic flow into through the town centre for vehicles visiting the town centre and ensuring vehicles passing through are able to reach the strategic road network without impacting unnecessarily on the vehicular movement in the town centre.
- **Dissected Urban Form:** Home Gardens runs directly between the central core of the town and the train station. The road is excessively wide, including two bus lanes and verges, and is flanked by bridge access which creates significant severance for the town centre. Significant work is needed to activate this important space and hand this area back to the town.
- **Permeability:** Vehicle movement is currently largely focussed around the ring road (Home Gardens and Market Street) within town centre. There is a lack of a clear strategy for access into key attractors and car parks to take vehicles off the road at critical points and provide logical transport nodes within the town centre. A focussed transport and parking strategy would reduce congestion and provide gateways for development at key points.

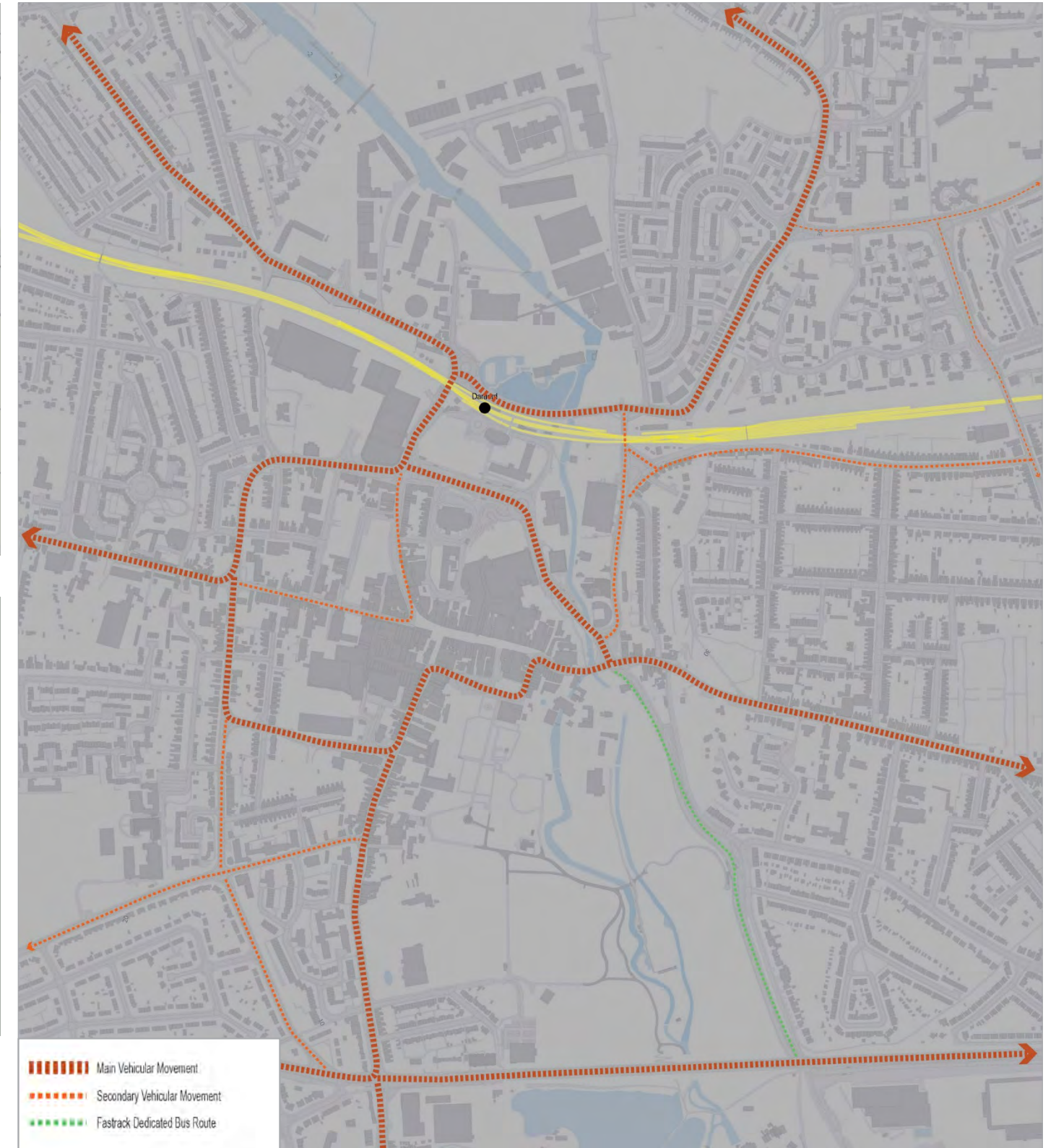
Dartford connections



Vehicular movement patterns



Transport hierarchy / key vehicular movement



Pedestrian Movement

Pedestrian movement within Dartford town centre is generally focussed around residents, visitors and town centre workers accessing retail located around shopping centres (Priory and Orchard) and the High Street to create a morning, lunch time and mid-evening level of footfall. The evening economy of the town centre gives rise to a further level of pedestrian movement which utilises differing parts of the town centre (Spital Street) and its spaces.

The linear urban form of Dartford town centre creates clear north-south pedestrian desire lines from the railway station to the High Street. This desire continues into Central Park, however there is currently a poor of pedestrian enter leading into the park. Pedestrians are currently guided into the town centre from the station via Hanau Bridge and Suffolk Road which takes the pedestrian to the rear of retail units. A more obvious desire line could be via Hythe Street, providing a more active street frontage and gateway to the High Street along with Spital Street.

East-west connections connect the central core, and its services, with the surrounding residential areas. Spital Street and High Street provide a clear corridor for pedestrians to arrive and orientate within the town centre. North-south links from the High Street (Lowfield Street, Market Place, Bullace Lane) need to be improved to enhance secondary pedestrian links and integrate spaces into the pedestrian core.

- **Arrival:** With the car being a popular means of travel into Dartford, the majority of pedestrians arrive into Dartford via one of the town centre car parks. This creates issues of controlling the sense of arrival for pedestrians and diminishes the pedestrian hierarchy quite rightly focussing on routes from the railway station. Car parks currently back onto the town centre and offer little in terms of routes towards the towns shopping core. An integrated car parking and pedestrian strategy is required in order to create key gateways and focal points through the town centre at the railway station, key car parks and strategic gateways (West Hill, East Hill, Lowfield Street and Central Park).

- **Legibility:** Pedestrian movement through the town centre is difficult due to a lack of clear routes into the town, poor wayfinding and poorly defined public spaces. A clearer network of pedestrian routes and circuits is needed to integrate pedestrians with key spaces, focal points, attractions and landmarks within and around the town centre.
- **Permeability:** The current north-south pedestrian routing from the station guides movement to into the rear of the High Street block resulting in pedestrian routes being backed onto and lack legibility. The historic east-west orientation of the High Street, however creates good permeability on this axis. The ring road and excessive transport infrastructure, including large surface car parks, has led to a centre which is dominated by the private car and has turned its back on the pedestrian. Features such as the Hanau Bridge and two underpasses (Home Gardens and Instone Road) create unsafe spaces and use a significant expanse of land which could be utilised for other more positive development. The rail line creates a further barrier to movement to the north of the town centre.
- **Integration of Public Space:** Key spaces such as Central Park are not sufficiently integrated into the town centre and the wider pedestrian network. The spaces are, therefore, lost to the pedestrian and efforts are needed to integrate them through improvement of views, wayfinding and treatment of access routes.
- **Quality of Public Realm:** The perception of Dartford's pedestrian environment is poor, particularly in the evening when safety and lack of activity are key issues. Pedestrian links need to function throughout the day to provide spaces that are flexible enough to encourage movement into the evening, allowing evening land uses and spaces to flourish - the town does not currently do this, e.g. the Orchard Theatre sits alone as a mid-evening land use to the north of the town centre with a lack of complimentary uses resulting in limited pedestrian activity and movement. As outlined in the 'Space' chapter there are several areas of poorly maintained and designed public realm which make for an uninviting and clumsy public spaces which do not encourage walkability.

- **Dominance of Transport Infrastructure:** Too much land within the town centre is handed over to transport infrastructure including verges, central reservations, surface level car parks, roundabouts, junctions and highway. This excessive land take reduces the amount of development land within the town centre. Where possible highways and adjacent spaces should be reconfigured to provide enhanced development and space enhancement opportunities.

The adjacent plan outlines key pedestrian desire lines. The plan outlines routes which require enhancement to enhance pedestrian arrival and encourage movement.

Routes in need of improvement include: Lowfield Street towards High Street, Heath Street towards Central Park, Market Street, Hythe Street (north-south), north of trainline (Northern Gateway) via Station Approach and Overy Street, riverside footpath between trainline and Home Gardens.

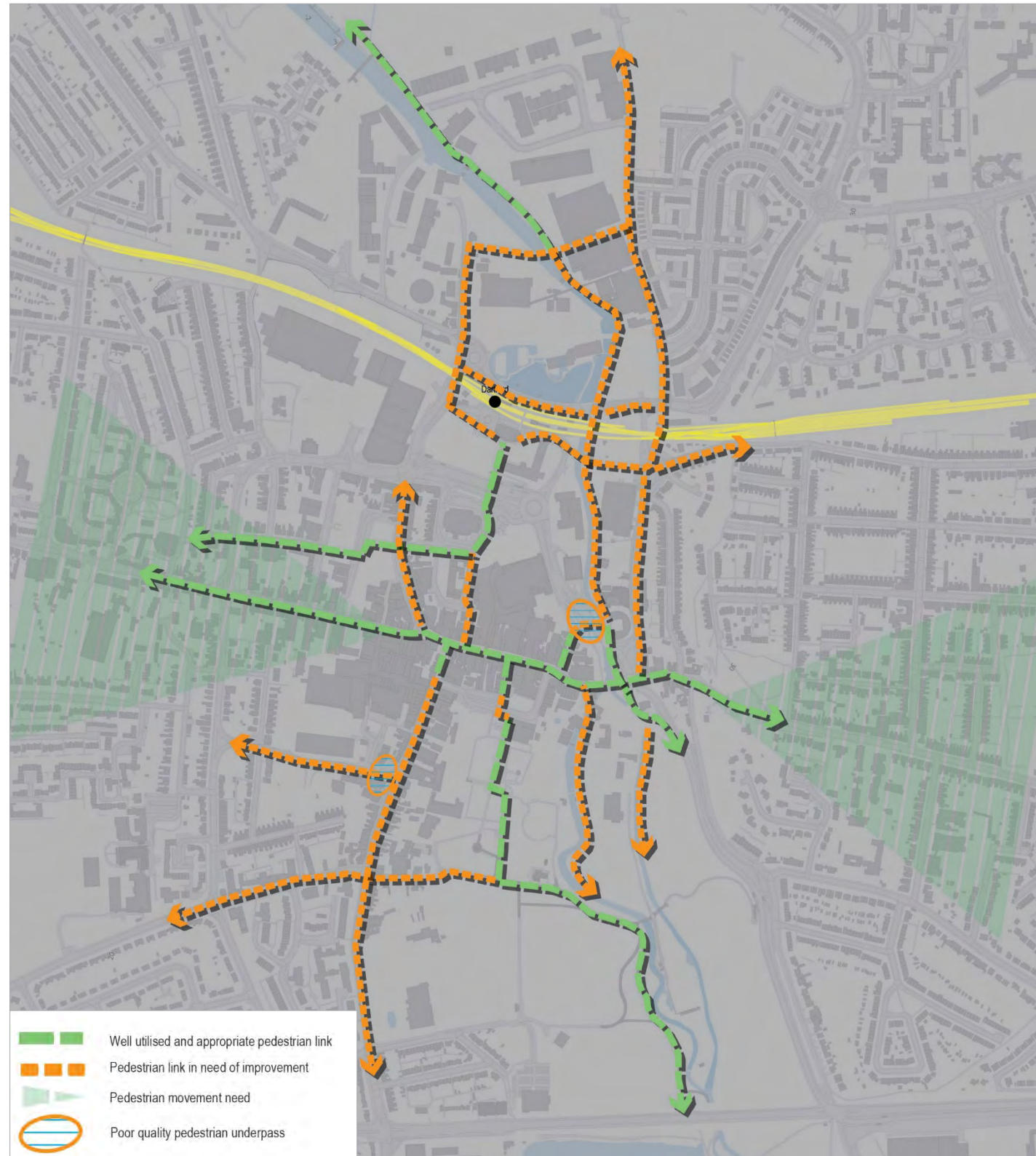
Cycle Movement

Cycling within Dartford is a key consideration with its growing popularity and the opportunities for commuting provided by the railway station. The current road network does not provide a safe and legible cycling environment with segregated cycle routes, poorly designed cycle priority lanes and a general lack of connectivity.

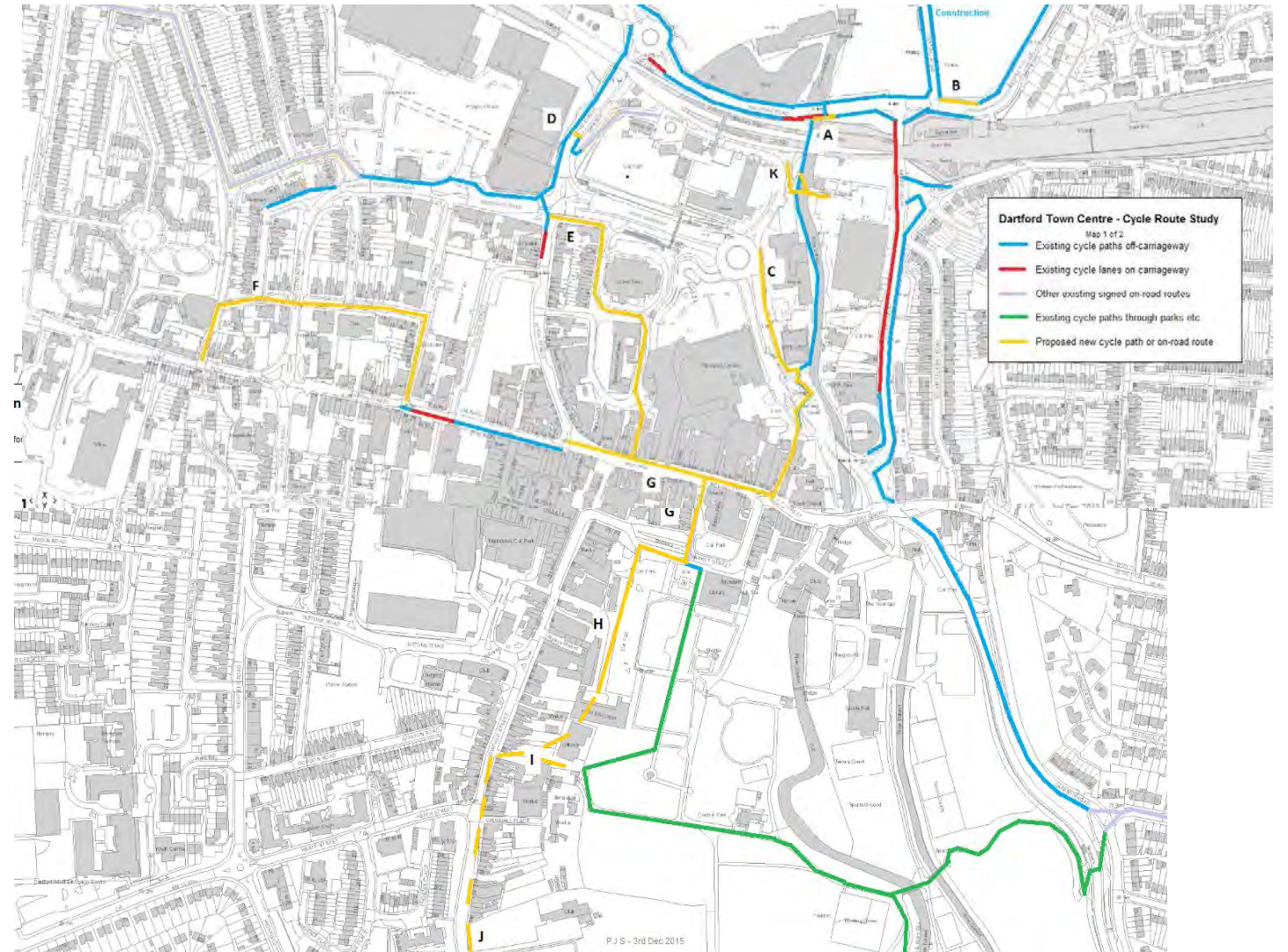
- **Connectivity:** The relative flat topography throughout the town centre makes local cycle movement feasible, however cycle connections through the town is poor and movement is low. Long distance cycle/ commuter cycle routes provide strategic links into the town centre, however these are not connected into and through the town centre. The ring road and one way system through the town centre provide further constraints to movement.
- **Cycle Facilities:** Facilities within the town centre are limited and of poor quality, missing the opportunity to define spaces with quality cycle hubs or stands that can create a sense of place for Dartford.

- **Integration:** Commuter cycle movement is a key factor for Dartford given the relatively quick routes into London, however little is done to connect cyclists to the station. There is currently a lack of secure cycle parking and clearly distinguished cycle links to the station off the highway (e.g. via Station Approach). This disconnect can largely be attributed to the raised platform that the station sits on which makes it difficult for cyclists to access.
- **Conflict:** The one-way systems and disjointed road hierarchy results in a number of conflicts with other modes of transport for cyclists as they move through the town centre. Key conflicts exist for cyclists travelling north from Lowfield Street as cyclists are required to travel against the flow of traffic and cross the pedestrianised High Street in order to avoid cycling on the ring road. A more integrated approach is needed which allows cyclists to cross the centre quickly and safely is needed to encourage cycle movement in the town with a more legible and safe network which connects cyclists north-south and east-west.
- **Leisure and Commuter Cycling:** Dartford's topography and the town centres location within easy reach of surrounding residential areas provides excellent opportunities for commuters accessing the town centre for jobs or leisure. There is, however, little evidence of strategic links within the town centre providing safe, dedicated links to the surrounding area. More needs to be done to encourage this movement and linking cyclists into the central core of the town.

Pedestrian connectivity



Cycle connectivity



Public Transport

Dartford has excellent public transport connections which connect the town locally, regional, nationally and internationally. Local services suffer from localised congestion issues and a key constraint is the northern extent of Home Gardens which is a pinch point for vehicular movement and bus stops.

- **Connectivity:** Dartford has excellent regional (train and FastTrack) which connects Dartford with regional attractions such as Bluewater and provides commuter movement into London (on Oyster Card network) and Kent. Local bus services provide further connections throughout the Borough with Fastrack providing fast links to key locations. Due to the existing transport network being congested, caused in part by Fastrack buses traversing lanes when pulling out of stops. Fastrack is currently not operating as efficiently as it should and is being slowed considerably in the town centre, reducing its attractiveness for patrons.
- **Integration:** The train station and town centre bus stops are poorly integrated into the town centre and do not provide optimum connectivity for pedestrians. Work is needed to ensure bus services provide direct access to focal points within the town centre and drop passengers off in attractive and safe areas. The opportunity to use public transport stations and stops to enliven spaces and create activity should be recognised.
- **Quality of Facilities:** The newly regenerated train station is a key landmark and gateway for the town centre, however bus stops are poorly located and drop passengers in inactive, unsafe and unattractive locations with limited direct access to key points of arrival. Furthermore, poor crossing facilities associated with bus stops results in pedestrians crossing the ring road at un-designated and unsafe places (e.g. junction of Home Gardens and Hythe Street).
- **Bus Stops:** The location of the bus stops creates clear arrival points at Home Gardens, Market Street and Instone Road. However these areas suffer from a poor pedestrian environment and there are no complimentary land uses to activate space and improve safety.

Public transport routes and stops in Dartford



Town Centre Best Practice

This section considers comparative town centres within the United Kingdom which operate within a similar context to Dartford, sharing the issues and opportunities that exist for the town.

Introduction

It is important for Dartford to understand the experiences of their peers within comparative local authorities where lessons have been learnt in the regeneration of town centres.

This section sets out four examples of town centres that have been regenerated successfully and have a similar context to Dartford in terms of location, socio-economic condition and urban capacity. The case studies considered are:

- Altrincham, Greater Manchester
- Dalston, London
- Bexleyheath, Greater London
- Ashford, Kent

The precedent studies consider key drivers to change within the town centre, the key projects which spearheaded their regeneration and lessons for Dartford to learn from.

Altrincham, Greater Manchester

Altrincham sits on the outskirts of Manchester with direct connections into this major employment hub via tram (approx. 30 mins) and direct connections onto the M60 strategic road network. The town was chosen as a Portas Pilot Town in 2012 which spearheaded investment and change within the town centre.

Drivers to Change

- Declining retail offer due to online shopping and neighbouring Trafford Centre
- High vacancy rates – 79 Units vacant in 2014
- Connectivity issue across the Town Centre with a lack of wayfinding for pedestrians
- Poor arrival gateway
- Lost opportunities to maximise heritage offer
- Widen the scope of activities to make it attractive to all age groups
- Lack of a defined town centre core
- Heavily office and retail (112,000 sqm of office space and 50,000 sqm of retail floorspace)

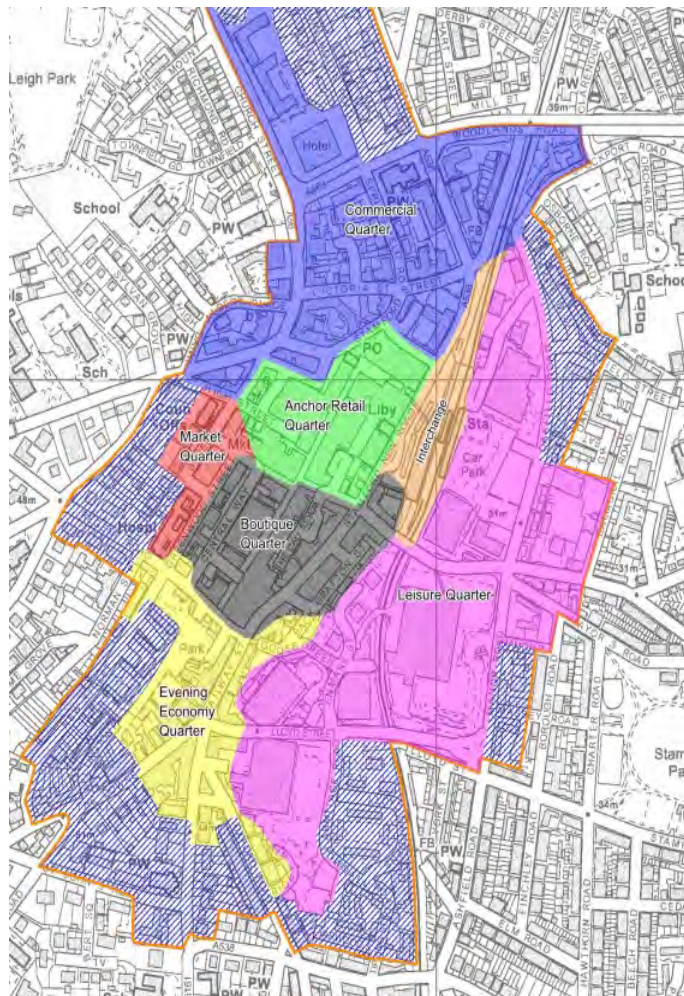
Key Projects

- £19 million redevelopment of the interchange - Enhanced gateways will mark the arrival into the town centre
- Grade 11 listed Market House – Refurbishment to provide a heart to the town centre
- Stamford Quarter redevelopment. Phase 1 completed in 2009 – future phase to include the redevelopment of older frontages to provide a more attractive environment, delivery of more active uses and public realm enhancement.
- Leisure Quarter - Altair site – identified within the core strategy for mixed use development. Outline planning consent granted for £70m mixed use anchored by an ice rink and leisure facility with supporting restaurant and café uses office space and residential use
- Increase in Town Centre residential population
- Public realm Improvements including the decluttering of the street scene, a distinctive pallet of materials, landscaping or artwork, widening of footpaths, use of historic ginnels and creation of active frontages at key destinations will help enhance pedestrian connectivity across the town centre whilst building on Altrincham's unique character

Key Lessons

- Use character areas to direct appropriate change.
- Altrincham Strategy TMBC July 2014
- Strong commitment at the local level to deliver a revitalised town centre
- Altrincham Forward established in 2011 to bring the stakeholders into a partnership
- Maximise Green Assets – Stamford Park, John Leigh Park and Denzell Gardens in the heart of the Town
- Public realm enhancement as a driver for private investment
- 'Joined Up' Approach – engaging communities and key stakeholders at an early stage.

Altrincham precedent images: character driven regeneration, enhanced street scene and public realm, public transport interchange, independent indoor market, enhanced retail setting and mixed use high street.



dalston, central london

Dalston has become a key creative, leisure and residential hub for East London, emerging from industrial decline. The area benefits from a successful outdoor market and has taken an adaptable approach to land use regeneration.

Drivers to Change

- Opportunity to capitalise on existing public transport and new infrastructure
- Encourage new business premises to support the growth of the hospitality and accommodation, cultural and creative, research and development and manufacturing industries
- Identification as an 'Opportunity Area' within Hackney's Regeneration Delivery Framework
- Continue the Success of Ridley Road Market
- Strong residential demand
- Dalston's proximity to the City Fringe and good public transport has led the council to push for the creation of new business premises to support the growth of hospitality and accommodation, cultural and creative, research and development and manufacturing industries.

Key Projects

- Dalston Square is the flagship regeneration scheme in Dalston. Comprising 250 homes and commercial space centered round a landscaped square which provides space to host outdoor events

Key Lessons

- Temporary Use of Space has allowed a community led cultural and arts led to maximise vacant spaces and encouraged the transformation of the area
- Funding has been secured for a public arts strategy for Dalston Square, which contributes towards a vibrant and innovative cultural programme that involves local residents and local arts organisations
- Involvement of community and engagement with small business and stakeholders has been essential
- Regeneration continues as the Council look to develop Dalston Quarter, using Council owned sites / buildings around Ashwin Street and Dalston Lane. This will involve part refurbishment, part development to strengthen the role and presence of the key cultural, community and third sector industries and businesses

Dalston precedent images: cultural facilities, creative lead, public realm enhancement, community building, temporary and adaptive land uses and town centre residential.



Bexleyheath, Greater London

Bexleyheath is located to the direct north west of Dartford sharing its transport connections to London and the south east. The town centre secured funding from Transport for London to revitalise and enhance transport connectivity in the area. The town centre also has a strong historic environment.

Drivers to Change

- Funded by Transport for London – focus on Transport and public realm improvements
- New Developments including Crossrail at Abbey Wood, the Paramount Leisure Development and 'Garden City' at Ebbsfleet
- Opportunity for population growth and construction of new homes within the borough

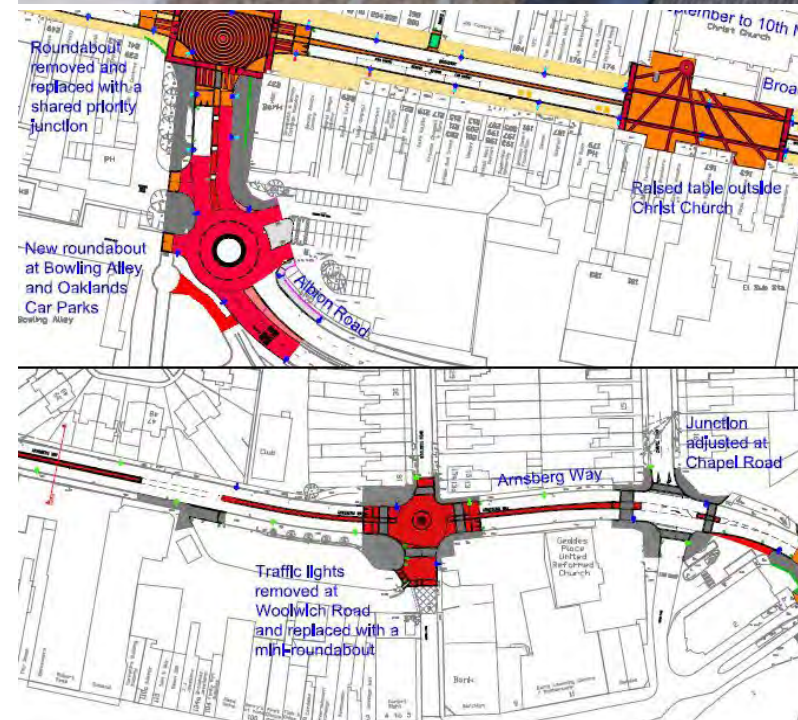
Key Projects

- Major redesign and improvement works on the eastern part of Broadway winning the 'Excellence in Walking and Public Realm' category at the London Transport Awards 2014
- New paving, lighting, planting of trees and street furniture. Legible London way finding signs on footways and pedestrianised area
- Innovative shared space concepts including a new roundabout, a pedestrian friendly junction to symbolise a gateway to the town centre, the creation of a public space and an expanded and improved pedestrian crossing
- Enhanced gateways into the town centre
- Digital display screens with live transport information

Key Lessons

- Phase One of the scheme has transformed the town centre both aesthetically and functionally – reducing vacant shops on Broadway from nine to four
- Busiest shared space scheme operating in London but has reduced collisions whilst providing significant time and journey savings for pedestrians

Bexleyheath precedent images: shared space at historic nodes, junction improvements for improved pedestrian environment, realtime/ smart travel systems.



Ashford, Kent

Ashford has undergone considerable redevelopment in recent years in order to accommodate an expanding population resulting from enhanced connectivity into London and internationally. The town was constrained by a wide ring road which turned its back on the town centre.

Drivers to Change

- Rapidly expanding population
- Combination of high speed domestic and international rail services has created the opportunity for the town centre to increasingly be a major focus for employment growth
- Improvements to the training and skills base
- Desire to improve the character of the town centre including providing an attractive range of shopping and places to eat, drink and enjoy leisure time

Key Projects

- The Area Action Plan identified various infrastructure projects which need to come forward including public realm improvements, multi-storey car parks, park and ride sites, the 'Learning Link'.
- Public Realm improvements surrounding the International station have been undertaken which provide an improved pedestrian route from the railway station to the town centre. The road – Victoria Way creates better access into the heart of the town in an attractive environment, unlocking investment opportunities along its route.
- Park Mall – The council have obtained the Park Mall shopping centre in the heart of Ashford as part of the regeneration strategy to transform the town's leisure and retail offer. This has already attracted significant investment.
- Industry leading shared surface approach to tackle severance of the ring road.

Key Lessons

- This has resulted in two schemes being brought forward by property Regeneration Company U+I to develop more than 800 homes and new amenities with a gross development value of £180 million. The plans also include a new supermarket, brewery and hotel

Ashford precedent images: shared space (ring road & town centre), enhanced wayfinding, integrating modern and existing development



Summary

The following outlines the key outcomes from this analysis for Dartford to consider in its emerging Framework:

- Focus on character as a driver for change.
- Ensure a sense of arrival is delivered through consideration of gateway enhancements to the town.
- Deliver a strategic vision to lead specific change in the town.
- Maximise the towns assets to successfully deliver enhancements (Central Park, historic environment, River Darent, defined high street, clear gateway locations).
- Statement of intent with a flagship development and/or public realm space to spearhead regeneration
- Use public space to celebrate heritage space and increase footfall.
- Use of shared space to enhance connectivity and tackle severance issues.
- Deliver aesthetic and functional quality within emerging public realm.
- Focus on enhancing gateways into the town.

Proposed re-distribution of potentially lost car parks and resulting occupancy

Stakeholder Engagement and Consultation

As part of the baseline study IBI Group and Dartford Borough Council undertook an intensive series of individual stakeholder workshops with representatives from Dartford Borough Council, local landowners/ developers, Kent County Council, bus operators, the Environment Agency and the Homes and Communities Agency. These workshops sought to inform the team of critical issues, opportunities and focus on the vision for the future of Dartford Town Centre.

The outcome of workshops was based around the following critical points which were discussed in detail with the stakeholders:

1. What are your interest in Dartford town centre? – scope / issues and objectives
2. How can the ongoing regeneration of Dartford town centre be further enhanced?
3. What is your vision of the successful regeneration of Dartford town centre?

These simple questions were posed to ignite debate regarding the current state of Dartford town centre and identify opportunities for its regeneration with an emphasis on the stakeholders specific interests.

The following provides a summary of the stakeholder workshops and details the key outcomes that will inform this study.

All meetings were attended by Mark Graham and Marcus Wilshire from IBI Group and Sonia Bunn from Dartford Borough Council. Teresa Ryszkowska from Dartford BC was also in attendance for part of the day.

Dartford Borough Council

Attendees:

Dave Bennett (Parks and Open Space), Dave Thomas (Waste Management), Matt Roberts (Community Safety Officer), Tony Phillips (Architect), Lewis Kirnon (Town Centre Manager).

Outcomes:

- Need to identify how the 'Town Centre' varies for different people.
- Regeneration should be character driven, based on the identity and distinctiveness of Dartford.
- There is a need for more commonality in architectural style and streetscape/ wayfinding.
- Improvement to the town centre has been piecemeal and has left inconsistent and disjointed regeneration. Need for a joined up and cohesive strategy for the whole town centre.
- Quality of public realm puts off business investment and makes for a poor perception of Dartford.
- Dartford needs a brand and role within Dartford borough – not competing with Bluewater or

Paramount but carving its own path. The role of town is evolving and will change further e.g. potential for Paramount/Crossrail going ahead.

- Crime prevention issues should be considered (public/ private space, overlooking, CCTV, changing cultural shift)
- Challenges associated with increasing residential use in town centre:
 - Social integration (changing demographics)
 - Provision of amenities, open space etc.
 - Potential conflicts/nuisance
 - Definition of public/private space
 - Limited Council resources for community development (no dedicated team).
- There is a leisure need in the town centre.
- Appropriate retail push including comparison goods and thriving weekly market.
- Management of parking and congestion issues needed. Congestion perceived to be deterring shoppers.
- Attractors for the town centre include markets, Central Park, river (although shouldn't distract focus from TC), the Acacia Hall complex, events, skatepark, good place to eat out, emerging arts scene, FastTrack services, Oyster Card zone.

- The town centre has good compact retail offer with cultural attractions (theatre, historic core, museum), restaurants and emerging arts scene.
- Recreation offer for Dartford should be celebrated (Central Park – running track, skate park etc, football club, Judokwai, gym, swimming pool, cycling).
- Market brings vibrancy becoming more multi-cultural (artisan food offer) with opportunities for expansion.
- Business start-ups attracted to town centre with low rents, town centre wi-fi and incubator space
- Perception of Dartford and confidence in future is poor following issues with Lowfield St.
- Council needs to take the lead and make Dartford a more attractive place.
- The late evening economy is fairly strong but the mid-evening economy is limited.

Kent County Council (Transport)

Attendees:

Adrian Pigott (Strategic Transport), Dan Bruce (Policy and Strategy), Graeme Smith (Public Transport)

Outcomes:

- Reliability and service key to future of Fastrack – currently getting stuck in Dartford traffic.
- Create “human space” around Market Street – management of bus lay downs required.
- Extend Fastrack into town centre to provide tangible town centre service into Dartford
- Lack of area for buses to stand.
- Hierarchy of transport users needed with pedestrian, cyclists and buses at top. Allowing congestion to discourage cars from entering the centre.
- Need to connect cyclists and pedestrians to centre from northern gateway – inc. lighting of public space under viaduct.
- Quick win – de-clutter and simplify streets
- Need to connect nodes for cyclists (currently restricted due to one-way roads)

Arriva Buses

Attendees:

Mark Coleman (Operations Manager)

Outcomes:

- Confirmation of delays
- Junctions overloaded causing congestion and lane conflicts outside train station
- Central interchange would be advantageous
- Conflict for buses turn around Iceland car park on market street

May Gurney/ Barton Willmore

Attendees:

Huw Edwards (Partner), Hardeep Hunja (Town Planner)

Outcomes:

- Need to find a role for Dartford. Address poor perception and create an accessible centre.
- How will Lowfield St sit within town centre regen, any development directly related to Lowfield St site.
- Lowfield Street brief out to 5 architects (Barton Willmore to confirm) with 3 week turnaround.
- Park facing development. How does development address private park? Possibility to extend into park or make public?
- Hybrid application (Outline and Full – phase 1 (northern part of site)) expected in summer of 2016 and decision before end of year.
- Desire to redevelop buildings fronting junction of Market St and Lowfield St. Retention of facades required within conservation area.
- Residential focus with limited ground floor retail to north of site. Possible inclusion of nursery.
- Questions over viability of terrace/ town house development.
- Narrow pedestrian highway at Lowfield St to be addressed.

Kent County Council (Community Services)

Attendees:

Stephen Dukes

Outcomes:

- General KCC development requirements/ need:
 1. Enhance library and museum
 2. Social care – provision previously provided in Lowfield Street. Ground floor.
 3. Multi-Agency Space (120-170 sqm) – within larger community provision (e.g. leisure site, school)
 4. Adult social care
 5. Health centres
 6. Primary school

Homes and Communities Agency

Attendees:

Nick Young

Outcomes:

- HCA have ownership on two of the major sites together with DBC and Network Rail (Station Quarter, Co-op/ Hythe Street)
- 45-63,000 sqft across sites.
- Important consider Dartford in its strategic context (Bluewater, Paramount, Ebbsfleet)
- Improved perception of Dartford (Lowfield, Mill Pond) would assist in viability of sites.
- Base Point expansion currently stalled due to need for flood defence improvement.

Environment Agency

Attendees:

Jonathon Atkinson (Strategic Flooding), Michael Wilkinson (Surface Water Flooding), Jennifer Wilson (Planning Liaison)

Outcomes:

- Options are being developed for flood defence in the town centre to improve from current (50-100 yr event) to a 100 year event plus climate change.
- Timeframes:
 - Initial Assessment to consider design feasibility and viability (April 2016)
 - Detailed appraisal and preferred option (April 2016 to end of 2016)
 - Construction (commence early 2017 – year long construction period)
- Mixture of upstream and town centre fluvial storage, conveyancing, flood defence walls and bank management.
- Surface water management to be considered within development sites. Due to proximity of groundwater infiltration of surface water will not be acceptable due to contamination. Preference for on site attenuation rather than feeding into river.
- Implications to the framework:
 - Consider two scenarios for the town centre and its sites (one with defences and one without) – indication of flooding extents at “with” scenario will be needed for this.
- Establish strategic town centre principles related to flooding:
 - Prior to defence completion - Habitable accommodation above 100 yr flood level (+300mm freeboard)
 - Once development defences completed – Habitable level at GF permitted, however sleeping accommodation on 1st floor and above only.
 - Development should not result in loss or obstruction of flood storage
 - Reduce discharge to river and attenuate on site.

- Works close to river would need approval from EA
- Works near to or on the river should protect biodiversity, not impact on conveyancing and encourage controlled public access to river.
- Site specific principles to consider surface water drainage and flood management. IBI to liaise with EA as frameworks develop.
- Scope to consider improvement of waterway to north of Acacia Hall with particular emphasis on ecology improvement with a softer edge. Tony Phillips is developing ideas for this area.

Ellandi and Savills

Outcomes:

Ellandi are owners of Priory Centre, one of a portfolio of 28 town centre investments. They are currently upgrading the Priory Centre (by Summer 2016) including:

- Recladding Spital St frontage,
- New signage and branding (Dartford Warbler logo)
- New LED lighting
- Redoing toilets

They have re-let units including additional A3 and A5 (Starbucks and KFC).

Issues

- Ellandi claim 10% drop in footfall when market relocated to High St.
- Agree bus routing and traffic problems need sorting but concern at further loss of footfall if bus stops move;
- Fragmented ownership – how to organise a coherent package for whole town centre?
- Needs better quality food and drink offer;

- Needs Leisure choices;
- FE College/Academy in Town Centre?
- Marketing Dartford as convenience shopping location, Dartford's brand?
- Need to exploit increasing local population and attractive commuter location;
- Overall, view is that Dartford is not doing too badly within the TC core.

Opportunities

- Vehicle for coordinating town centre offer and getting owners on the same page - is it light touch 'facilities management' approach or something more formal e.g. BID?
- Priory Multi-Storey – take back management in-house, run events from top deck (usually empty), review tariff structure, park & ride for commuters? Needs imaginative ideas. Can Council put in matched funding?
- Coordinated Town Centre public Wi-Fi provision
- Happy to contribute to more strategic thinking for Town Centre and have ideas on better mix of operators.
- Happy to work with local charities, sports and social clubs in Dartford

Overall Findings and Implications to the Framework

- Perception of Dartford is poor, therefore the strategy needs to work hand-in-hand with branding efforts to remedy this to improve investment opportunities.
- Public realm improvement (paving material, active spaces, street furniture) is essential to improving environment and perception.
- Number of initiatives ongoing (creative Dartford, market, events, wayfinding) which will assist in the improvement of the vitality of the town.
- Attractors to Dartford need to be celebrated and integrated into the town centre.
- Need for a joined up approach to regeneration to tackle piecemeal and disjointed action throughout town

- Ensure that all development sites and interventions are considered as a whole and principles of delivery are clear.
- Viability issues on two HCA sites is a key consideration which needs to be qualified in strategy.
- Create legible, attractive pedestrian and cycle routes through town.
- Celebrate recreation opportunities for Dartford – Active Town Centre.
- Major congestion issues and suggestions for improvement should be considered, however a wider problem for Amey study to consider. Cross working required.
- Role of Fastrack to be enhanced.
- Do not compete with likes of Bluewater, Ebbsfleet and Paramount – find a role for Dartford.
- Crime prevention measures should be considered within design principles.
- Limited mix of uses.

Implications for the Framework

This section considers the findings of the analysis undertaken within this baseline and the specific implications these findings have on the content, scope and focus of the framework. The following briefly summarises the findings of each section and outlines what this means for the outcomes of this baseline and beyond into the framework.

The following outlines the outcomes of each section and the resultant implication for the Framework.

context analysis

Dartford's town centre is exceptionally well located with strategic links to London, Kent and the rest of the south east. The centre, however, has a number of competing factors and it is essential that the town centre discovers its own role within its strategic context. There is clear support for town centre enhancement within national and local policy, however Dartford needs to ensure that it maximises opportunities from growth in South East London.

There are considerable extant planning permissions within the town centre which illustrate investor interest for development in the centre.

Implications for the Framework

- The vision and strategy must find define the economic and strategic role for Dartford within its regional context.
- The Framework should support and reflect planning policy (sustainable design, strong sense of place, mixed use (residential led), conservation).
- The Framework must consider all extant planning permissions and site allocations when developing concepts for the town centre.
- The Framework must work within the existing land ownership context for the town centre, however opportunities for consolidating ownerships should be considered.

- Development proposals must have consideration of risk of flooding and the phasing of flood defence works (Environment Agency).

town centre prosperity and performance

Dartford's town centre is performing relatively well and is attracting investor confidence within the region. The town centre has capacity and potential to strengthen its existing retail offer, whilst developing leisure, A3 and residential land uses as outlined by the Retail and Leisure Study 2011 and supported by recent analysis of commercial opportunities. There is a need to strengthen the market share within the immediate catchment area in order to draw back expenditure from neighbouring centres and retail anchors.

Implications for the Framework

- Opportunities for mixed use, residential and leisure land uses should be identified.
- Increase the retail market catchment for Dartford through enhanced and focussed retail offer.
- The town centre is currently under performing in terms of its local movement (pedestrian and cycling), and land use mix. There is a need to increase the critical mix of land uses within the town centre to energise the town centre by injecting new communities (residential land uses) and employment offers to move away from an overreliance on retail land uses. Furthermore, the town centres public realm is in need of enhancement to improve visitor and resident experience.

- Establish a strong land use framework for the town which is viable and effective.

urban design analysis

The attractive historic urban form and townscape of Dartford has been compromised at the edges by large edge of centre retail blocks and road, as well as a lack of a legible pedestrian network. The key assets, landmarks and attractors to Dartford (Central Park, Library, Orchard Theatre, Holy Trinity Church, River Darent and Acacia Complex) are not integrated well into the towns urban realm. The town lacks clear gateways and is in need of an enhanced sense of arrival.

Implications for the Framework

- An improved sense of arrival is needed through enhancement of gateways into the town centre.
- The Framework needs to knit the town centre and Central Park to create clear vistas and linkages with the towns key assets.
- The listed buildings of Dartford need to be reintegrated into the centre.
- Create meaningful public realm and development interventions within the town centre to increase activity, improve frontages and facilitate movement.
- A clearer strategy for public realm, landscape, architectural style, pedestrian/ cycle movement and public transport is needed.
- Improve edge treatment to facilitate pedestrian circuits through the town.
- Reduce severance caused by the Ring Road.
- Encourage mixed use, gateway development and active frontages.

- The framework needs to improve movement within the town centre through facilitating cycle movement, improving pedestrian routes, crossing points and networks and minimising unnecessary vehicular travel around the ring road.

stakeholder engagement

The stakeholder engagement exercise highlighted some critical challenges and opportunities for Dartford.

Implications for the Framework

- Work needs to be done to improve the perception of Dartford to encourage investment and residential market confidence.
- A more integrated and consistent approach to public realm design and quality is needed.
- Framework should provide space for "soft" interventions such as street markets, outdoor cinemas and performance, recreation uses (cycling, skating etc) to encourage activity.
- Framework should provide for "soft" interventions such as active learning, pop up parks and art installations and other community events which will engage emerging communities with the town centre.
- Congestion is a critical challenge for Dartford and needs to be tackled.
- Integrate public transport into the town centre to encourage patronage and increase town centre usage.
- Clearly define private and public space to clearly define spaces and address fear of crime.
- Ensure viable uses and designs are identified for development sites.
- Tackle piecemeal development and public realm.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- Excellent strategic connections throughout the South East of England, London and Kent.
- Strong public transport connections to London, Kent and locally.
- High quality historic core - conservation area and listed buildings.
- Strong retail core and popular bi-weekly market
- Strong policy backing for town centre regeneration including a number of initiatives (Creative Dartford).
- Number of planning approvals for major development and ongoing development within the town centre.
- Connected high street (WiFi).
- Popular high street with strong day time economy.
- Central Park and River Darent.
- Nighttime economy - leisure uses including theatre and several pubs and nightclubs.

Opportunities

- Establish the train station quarter as a key gateway into the town centre.
- Projected population growth in Dartford (74% increase by 2026)
- Number of development opportunity sites within the town centre - opportunities for landmark buildings.
- Significant opportunities for enhanced public realm to improve pedestrian experience, desire lines and urban form.
- Enhanced high street and economic performance of retail core.
- Introduce enhanced mix of active land uses and communities to the town centre.
- Enhance edges and frontages to encourage vitality and improve cycling/ walking movement.
- Linear form provides logical urban structure to town providing opportunities for enhanced movement.
- Strategies for delivery - Town Centre Investment Zone.
- Strategic borough wide development - Bluewater expansion, Paramount and Ebsfleet - promoting

- Number of good quality schools within close proximity of the town centre
- Attractive and historically important landmarks within the town centre (Holy Trinity Church, Library, Acacia Hall)
- Sports and outdoor recreation facilities with walking distance on the High Street. Fairfield leisure centre, running track, Dartford football club, golf course, fishing, Dartford cricket club, Darent Valley footpath, Sustrans cycle route, green gym, skate park, open air theatre, arts facility, band stand and sports pitches.
- High speed of delivery and strong uptake of current and emerging development sites.

- housing growth and market confidence within the town centre.
- Create enhancement pedestrian routes and desire lines to create networks of movement .
- Improve interface with Central Park - greening of the Town Centre
- Create a dedicated public space for public events, markets and activity.
- Establish communities - town centre living.
- Potential enhance connection through Crossrail bringing investment.
- Strengthen and encourage use of Darent Valley path and Sustrans route into town centre, facilitated by supporting uses and opportunities to attract users into town centre uses.
- Highways England work on existing Thames crossing and new secondary crossing reduced incidents of resultant congestion in the town centre.



- Poor perception of the town leading to reduced investor confidence up until recently.
- Large retail units backing onto pedestrian spaces leading to un-welcoming spaces and poor connectivity.
- Lack of anchor retail and employment offer within the town centre - lunch time economy.
- Limited quality food and drink offer.
- Poor legibility and pedestrian networks - lack of clear vistas and poor frontages.
 - Inactive and unsafe spaces.
 - Piecemeal development - disjointed form.
 - Road and pedestrian congestion - leading to reduced rather than enhanced bus patronage.
 - Severance and loss of developable space from ring road
- London Plan focussing on development of South East London - drawing investment and residents away from Dartford.
 - Over reliance on retail land use.
 - Multiple land owners and CPO issues.
 - Increased car movements.
- Borough wide development - Bluewater expansion, Paramount and Ebsfleet - drawing residents away and providing competing land uses (retail and leisure), particularly the mid-evening economy.
- Lack of investment and confidence in the market.
- Poor integration of existing and emerging communities.

Weaknesses

- Poor integration of Central Park - disconnected due to lack of frontage onto space and no clear vistas into park.
- Lack of local design guide - Kent Design Guide used.
- Inappropriate car parking leading to uncoordinated arrival points and congested roads.
- Poorly maintained public realm.
- Lack of investment and development within town centre core - currently focussed on centre edge.
- Poor treatment of landmarks.
- Limited mid-evening uses to retain theatre goers in the town centre and their spending as well as encouraging family uses.

Threats

- Lack of facilities (community & services) to serve new residential development in and around the town centre.
- Speculative and poor quality development based on Dartford's location in relation to London.
- Increased incidents on strategic road network causing increased levels of congestion as traffic diverts through Dartford's town centre.

Developing a Vision

It has been made clear during the baseline study that an integrated and consistent strategy is needed to guide the future development of Dartford's town centre. A clear vision for development will be critical to this. Stage 2 will seek to develop this vision through visioning workshops and consensus building. The analysis we have undertaken within Stage 1 (Baseline) has established several key themes that should be considered within this vision:

- Strategic Links - key links to London, Kent and international airports.
- Connected Town - WiFi ready high street, emerging SMEs and young population.
- Active Town - recreational opportunities in town centre (Central Park, leisure centre) and strategic cycle links.
- Community Focus - young people, cultural diversity, emerging communities, residential land uses/ mixed use.
- Independent Town - street market, SMEs, young population, distinctive from Bluewater.
- Historic Dartford - distinctive historic core with high quality heritage (buildings and townscape) and cultural links.

The above themes will be examined whilst developing a vision for the future development of Dartford town centre.



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