



Town Centre Action Plan

Houghton Regis

Spring, 2022

Cover image: Woodland Walk, Houghton Hall Park

The document has been prepared for Houghton Regis Town Council (HRTC) by Placemake in March, 2022 with invaluable input from the Steering Committee, Town Councillors and the Town Clerk, Clare Evans.

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Houghton Regis Town Council
Peel Street, Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire, LU5 5EY
Tel: 01582 708 540
Email: info@houghtonregis.org.uk
www.houghtonregis.org.uk



1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Saelig Hoctone, Hocton, Howgton, Kyngshouton, Kynges Houghton- the settlement that is today known as Houghton Regis (or Houghton locally) has a rich history that extends as far back as the Neolithic and Iron Ages.

During this time, it has been a Roman and Saxon settlement, a royal manor and an important component of Bedfordshire's hat making heritage.

While the nearby towns of Luton, Leighton Buzzard and Dunstable grew as trading and transport hubs along the primary arteries of Watling Street and the Icknield Way, Houghton fostered a particular role as a local producer.

It prospered through the parish's fertile lands at the foot of the Chiltern Hills and the source of the River Lea and was adopted as the King's demesne land, providing for the royal households of the Saxon, Norman and Tudor periods (giving rise to the title, 'Kyngeshouton').

While retaining a focus on agriculture, the town has consistently repositioned itself to cater for different market trends and demand, from plaiting, weaving, duck breeding and small holding in the 18th and 19th Centuries to printing and engineering in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

According to Pat Lovering in 'Royal Houghton: The Story of Houghton Regis', the town's workforce was so adept at this that 'when factory inspectors visited Houghton in 1869, they found that every cottage in the village contained plaiters but that agriculture continued as before'. While, the 1851 Census records 82 straw plaiters at Puddlehill who quickly turned to smallholding and duck breeding once the plait industry began to wane!

This diversification, flexibility and ingenuity enabled the community to sustain itself during poor harvests while also keeping up-to-date with new manufacturing processes and technology.

During the 1950's and 1970's, Houghton was tasked with accommodating significant growth and expansion. According to the Conservation Area Statement (2008), the extent of this 'threatened its position and identity as a rural village strongly based upon agriculture to a larger residential settlement'.

However, while the arrangement of such development undoubtedly had an impact on the social and physical fabric of Houghton Regis, the town retained its self-sufficiency and a strong sense of identity.

Introduction 1



According to the 2021 Town Centre Benchmarking Study, over 50% of all shops are independently owned and 70% of residents shop locally. While, 78% of all residents still work in Central Bedfordshire; 20% within 2km of their homes, 35% within 10km of their homes and 23% across the wider district (Draft HRNP, 2021).

Presently, there are 17,500 residents in the Parish, including Bidwell, Sewell, and Thorn (Draft HRNP). However, committed development up to the A5-M1 link road represents another growth burst of 7,000 homes and 16,800 residents, doubling the scale and population of the current settlement.

Such expansion brings significant opportunities for historic Houghton. However, to harness these, it is important that the town centre can once again become the hub for all of Houghton Regis without damaging the particular character and sense of community that exists today.

This is clearly a delicate balance and it will take a long time to reverse the gradual contraction of town centre activities that has taken place over a number of decades. However, this document provides the first step towards regenerating and reinvigorating the town centre to cater for the daily needs of 34,000 residents.

1 Introduction

1.2 Role and Purpose

‘Central Houghton Regis - a hub and a heart: aiming for a town centre which attracts people from across the parish and beyond.’

Houghton Regis Draft Neighbourhood Plan 2020-2035

This Action Plan has been prepared for Houghton Regis Town Council (HRTC) with assistance from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Government’s Welcome Back Fund (WBF), administered through Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC).

It presents a long term strategy for the expansion of the town centre offer to meet the needs of an additional 16,800 residents while at the same time, minimising the impact on the existing community.

The significant increase in facilities that will be required from sports pitches and allotments to jobs and transportation is considered in greater detail in the Draft Neighbourhood Plan (HRNP).

This recognises the need for the town centre to become a ‘heart’ that will unify new and existing communities, ‘attracting people from across the Parish and beyond’. As the basis for engagement with stakeholders, it identifies opportunities for new accommodation within the existing urban fabric, including the two mixed-use clusters of ‘Town Centre East’ and ‘Town Centre West’.

This Action Plan is intended to support the aspirations of the HRNP and provide a particular focus on placemaking in the town centre. Or con-

versely, how the overall offer can be improved by harnessing the value of Houghton’s assets, maximising opportunities and minimising constraints. This approach is discussed in greater detail in Section 2.2.

A Town Centre Master Plan was prepared in 2007 - 2008 and is currently adopted by CBC as supplementary planning guidance (SPG). Conceived before the approval of new development in the expansion area, this is now somewhat outdated and the requirement for a revised strategy is noted in the Local Plan (CBC, 2015 - 2035). However, with construction of new homes already underway and residents arriving, there is a pressing need for a holistic strategy that can be used to inform decision making in the town centre at this time.

The principal objectives of this document are therefore to:

1. Provide a viable and sustainable vision for the town centre as a ‘heart’ and a ‘hub’ for the expanded settlement.
2. Identify key objectives and a number of short, medium and long term actions to deliver this vision.
3. Coordinate engagement with stakeholders and the appropriation of funding.
4. Consider opportunities for new development and investment.
5. Assist in informing a future Town Centre Master Plan or Framework to replace the currently adopted 2008 strategy.

Associated Documents 1.3

There is a wide range of statutory and advisory material available to inform a town centre strategy, from the aspirations of local residents and the Town Council to CBC’s placemaking design guidance, the recently adopted Local Plan and a market assessment of existing retail and commercial activities.

This document is intended to sit alongside the Draft Neighbourhood Plan, which will shortly be presented to CBC for review and hopefully, adoption as a statutory document.

In time, it is hoped the Action Plan will provide a precursor to a revised Town Centre Master Plan or Framework Plan that can be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance for the duration of the Local and Neighbourhood Plan periods.

Of particular interest has been the results of the Community Plan (2017) and the Town Centre Benchmarking Report (2021), which provide an indication of current market forces, social trends and significantly, the aspirations of local residents.

Reference should also be made to Pat Lovering’s ‘Royal Houghton: The Story of Houghton Regis of Bedfordshire’ (1986), which provides an interesting and informative overview of the town’s unique history since the Norman Conquest and chronicle in the Domesday Book of 1086.

The following material has been reviewed as the basis for the preparation of this study:

- CBC Local Plan 2015- 2035
- Central Bedfordshire Design Guide, CBC, 2014
- Local Area Transport Plan (LTP) Baseline Report - Dunstable & Houghton Regis (CBC, 2011)
- CBC Local Plan (2015-2035) – Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report (Oct. 2016)
- Levelling Up Fund Application Form, CBC, 2021
- CBC Community Plan (July 2017)
- Houghton Regis Conservation Area Statement, CBC, 2008
- Our Vision: Our Town, HRTC, 2020- 2024
- Draft Houghton Regis Neighbourhood Plan, HRTC, 2020 - 2035
- Town Benchmarking Report, People and Places, 2021



Above: Sample of current policy and advisory material

2 Context

2.1 Introduction



Above: Historic map of Bedfordshire (Grose, 1787) with 'Houghton' denoted by a blue circle

Something special is happening in Houghton Regis; while placemaking often involves creating a sense of place and identity, a number of indicators suggest these are already in existence.

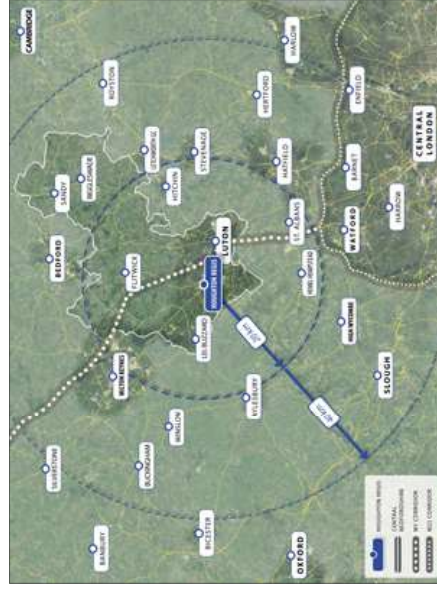
According to the recently completed Benchmarking Report (2021), half of all shops are independently owned, an above average number of residents shop and work locally and only 2% of units are currently vacant. Such figures are particularly interesting given that they are based on data that was collected during the pandemic.

Additionally, while the Parish includes above average rates of single parent households, youth unemployment and children in income deprived households (CBC, 2021), it remains 10% safer than the average district crime rate (crimerate.co.uk). The town is also one of the most culturally diverse in the district - 10% more so than the district average (CBC, 2021).

Such statistics are often seen in reverse, where higher levels of diversity and lower levels of household income correlate with higher rates of anti-social behaviour and a break down in community and physical infrastructure.

The town's apparent self-sufficiency is also unusual given its strategic location, being close to London and the M1 and in the middle of the Oxford-Cambridge growth zone. This might have originated from the town's heritage as a local producer or because of a missing link in the regional transport network. Alternately, it could be owing to the safeguarding of demesne and ecclesiastic land, through which, Houghton has retained a variety of open spaces, a semi-rural character and a degree of separation from Luton and Dunstable.

In any case, it provides a good basis for the town's ability to integrate the projected increase in population and also, for the development of a sustainable town centre strategy.



Above: Regional location plan

What is place making and why does it matter? 2.2

‘Fantastic communities don’t happen by accident; they happen because members of these communities have a clear picture of how they want their place to be in the future and take action to make their vision a reality.’

Councillor James Jamieson, Leader of CBC, 2020

In November 2020, CBC adopted a vision for how the district would be in 2050, being, ‘a great place to live and work... a place to prosper, a place to be proud of and a place to call home’. These objectives are clear and rooted in the principles of sustainable communities. However, the question is then, what constitutes a ‘great’ place?

There is a wealth of national and regional guidance to define this, from the National Design Guide (2021) and Building for a Healthy Life (Homes England, 2020) to CBC’s Design Guide and Urban Design (2014).

The NDG provides ten principles for ‘well-designed places’. Essentially, these ‘have ‘individual characteristics which work together to create its physical character. The ten characteristics help to nurture and sustain a sense of community. They work to positively address environmental issues affecting climate’.

Character, community and climate are at the core of many definitions of ‘great’, ‘successful’ or ‘sustain-

able’ communities. There is a particularly strong connection between ‘character ‘and ‘community’. Places with a clear and distinct identity also tend to have close communities. Ultimately, residents that are proud of their home town, city or village settle for longer and are more invested in it’s management and maintenance.

From the indicators that are noted in the previous section, for various reasons, Houghton Regis has fostered a strong sense of identity and through this, a close community. The basis for any visioning strategy would then be to strengthen rather than attempting to recreate this.

To achieve this, it is first necessary to understand what has generated a particular sense of place in the first instance and then, how this might be improved. These aspects are considered in greater detail through consideration of the settlement’s historic and physical context over the following pages.



2 Context

2.3 Historic Houghton



Above: Historic maps from 1800 to 1960

Houghton's past is brimming with significant events and occurrences that provide an impression of daily life throughout the history of Britain. Excavations at Maiden Bower, a Grade II Scheduled Ancient Monument, suggest Neolithic and Early Bronze Age activity and Romano-British occupation while a number of Roman villas have been discovered at Puddle Hill. According to the Conservation Statement (HRCAS, 2008), finds in surrounding fields indicate settlement activity in the parish from the Stone Age.

For a number of years, Houghton was at the unhappy interface between Saxon and Danish occupied territory (Lovering, 1986). It became a Royal manor at the end of the 1st millennium with direct links to Edward the Confessor and William the Conqueror (Lovering, 1986).

Since then, its history is intertwined with events that are rooted in British and international culture, from the naming of 'Vauxhall' - a London borough and car manufacturer to Hollywood's Golden Age through Gary Cooper, whose father was originally from the parish. Collectively, these have formed a special character and identity that distinguishes Houghton from any other place.

The town's physical form is also unique. The central core, which includes the High Street, village green and Houghton Hall, is now a designated conservation area. According to the HRCAS; 'the layout within the conservation area has changed little over the centuries. Centred on The Green, it is still largely based upon historic pre-urban roads and tracks'.

The Statement identifies a view from The Green to All Saints Church, a sense of enclosure along the High Street and active building frontages as characteristics of historic Houghton.

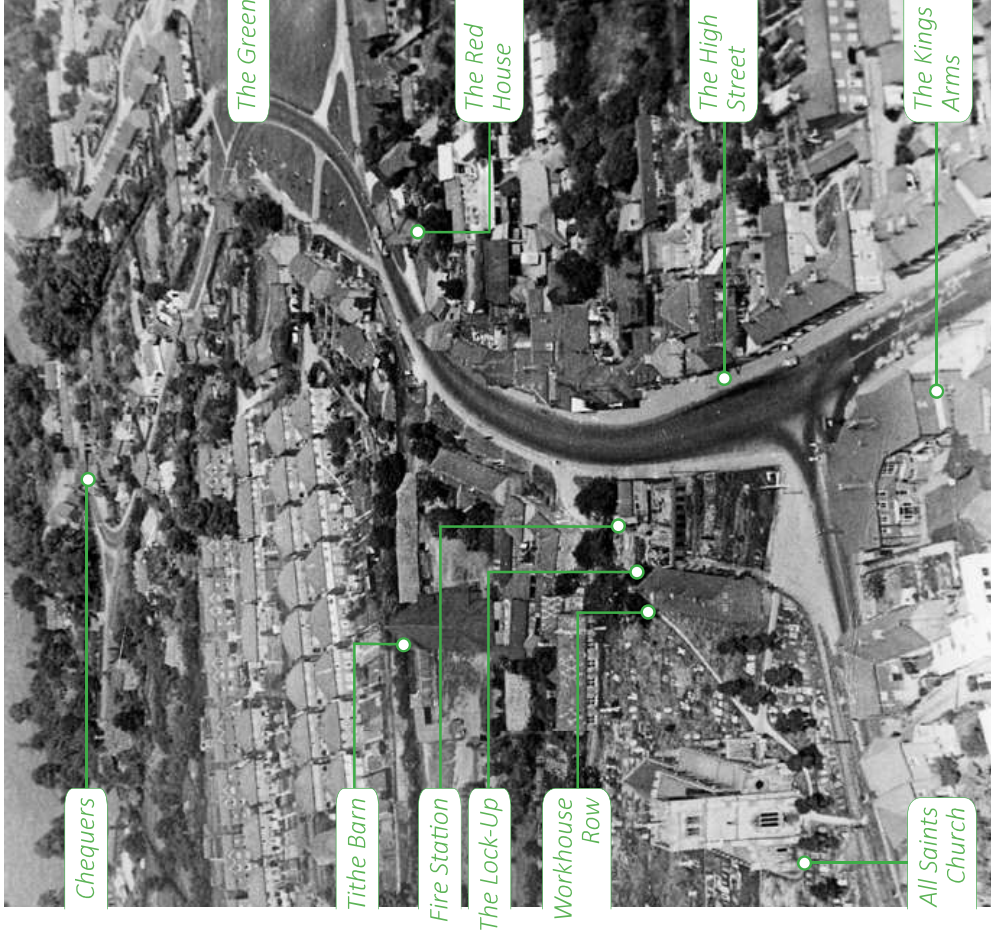
Another particularly interesting aspect is the funneling of the High Street at either side of The Green, which was presumably intended to control livestock that would have been grazing on the common land. The effect of the narrowing and widening of the High Street around the Green can still be experienced today.

The aerial image that is included on the following page provides an impression of the character of the High Street sometime after the post-war construction of new homes at Tithe Farm but before the demolition of the Tithe Barn in 1964.

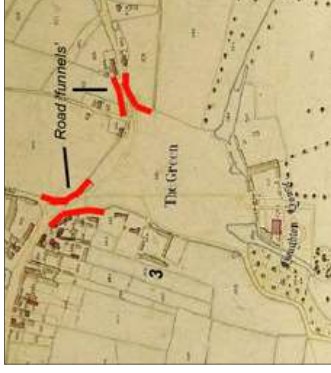
From this, the alternation between enclosure and openness is clearly apparent. This was achieved through a strong building line, which defined a series of open spaces, framed views and created active street frontages.

Unfortunately, the effect of this has been somewhat lost today. On the south side of the High Street, the current Morrisons supermarket and the recently completed mixed-use accommodation at Whitehouse Close by CBC maintain the historic building line.

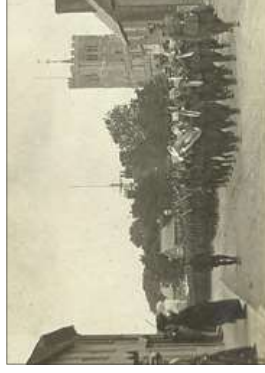
However, on the north side, the removal of Workhouse Row and the old Fire Station have reduced the original sense of enclosure. While, through orientating the shopping centre away from the High Street, the active frontages that once provided passive surveillance and an attractive streetscape around a key node have been replaced by a 160m long blank facade.



Above: Aerial image of the Conservation Area, presumably taken between 1945 and 1964 (Houghton Regis Heritage Society archives)



Above: Extract from the HRCAS showing the location of the two road funnels at The Green



Above: Historic images of the High Street (HRHS)

2 Context

2.4 Settlement Context



In the Settlement Hierarchy of the 2015-2030 Local Plan, Houghton Regis is classified as one of eight 'major' service centres and one of five secondary service centres. Slightly smaller than the 'Principal' centres of Dunstable, Leighton Buzzard and Biggleswade, secondary centres are considered to be more local in character and offering. According to the Local Plan, these have 'a range of shops including some national multiple retailers and many independent shops' and 'provide a range of services, facilities and leisure uses and (are) home to a number of businesses'.

This impression is consistent with the aspirations of the Neighbourhood Plan for, 'a 'market town' and local services offer - designed with smaller/ specialist retail as well as small/ medium food shopping' and also, with the findings of the most recent Town Centre Benchmarking Study (2021).

The plan on the following page combines existing and committed development across the parish to provide an illustration of how this will appear in 10-15 years time.

The extent of committed development (denoted by a red boundary and fill), in relation to the scale of existing town is clearly apparent. Once completed, the urban area of the settlement will extend up to the new M1-A5 link road.

Fortunately, the town centre will remain relatively centrally located and within 2km of all homes. This is important to ensure that it can become a true 'centre' for all residents while also supporting sustainable modes of transport and reducing congestion.

The plan also shows areas that are under the ownership and management of the town council and CBC. Predominantly areas of open space, activities in these areas can be influenced more easily, thereby providing opportunities for short term gains. A good example of this is the cafe at Houghton Hall Park with similar facilities at Marl Lakes and The Green identified in the Neighbourhood Plan.

2 Context

2.5 The Town Centre

The Town Centre Master Plan SPD of 2008 provides a boundary for a central area that is shown on the figure to the right. This broadly corresponds with the limits of the conservation area in addition to All Saints Church and a 500m section of the High Street up the Mill Lane junction.

At the heart of this is Houghton Green - or, 'The Green'. According to the Conservation Statement; 'The Green reinforces village character, and is an essential element of the historic layout of Houghton Regis. It remains a strong central focus, established in early times, and the remainder of the village has evolved in relation to it'.

This is apparent from the plan, which shows a number of the town's key destinations within a 600m walking or cycle distance. These include a 1km section of the High Street, the Busway, employment activities at Woodside and Nimbus Park, the source of the River Lea and Orchard Close and Windsor Drive recreation areas. The Marl Lake, Parkside, Windsor Drive and Blue Waters Wood are all located within a 1km radius.

From the old images and historic maps in Section 2.3, the High Street appears as a spine of activity. However, since 1960, town centre amenities have gradually reduced to the extent of Bedford Square - a privately owned and managed shopping centre - and the immediate area around



this. Arranged according to a 1960's fashion, the shopping centre currently faces away from the High Street and The Green, thereby limiting the potential for integration with the wider town.

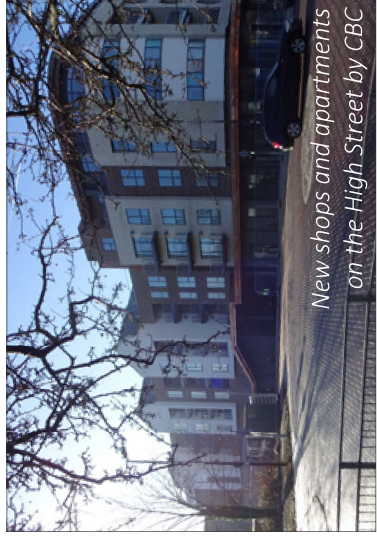
The Benchmarking Report (People and Places, 2021) provides a good health check of the current retail and commercial offer. From this, the town centre would appear to be under-performing in relation to the scale of opportunity that exists. For instance, although 70% of town centre users shop locally (26% higher than the national average) and 67% visit regularly, only 34% of all visitors stay for longer than an hour. Also, although over half of all shops are independently owned, there are no 'key attractors'.

Combined, these statistics indicate a demand for a more diverse, stimulating and engaging offer while there appears to be something that is currently deterring attractor outlets from investing in Houghton. According to the report, this could be owing to the perception of safety and visual appearance, which are both considered to be particular concerns for residents. Worryingly, 68% of residents would not currently recommend a visit to the town centre – 40% higher than the national average.

The report also identifies concerns regarding footfall, which has dropped by 1/3 on pre-pandemic levels and a potential surplus of parking provision. Conversely, 60-70% of visitors wish to see better public spaces and more community events. These aspirations accord with the CBC's Community Plan (July 2017), with residents expressing a desire for a market in some capacity.



All Saints Church (Grade I listed heritage asset)



New shops and apartments on the High Street by CBC



Beauford Square Shopping Arcade

2 Context

2.6 Opportunities

The town centre presents a number of exciting opportunities to improve and extend the current offer:

1. A strong sense of community and identity with an active and engaged town council.
2. A sustainable local economy with a particular character; an above average number of residents shop, live and work locally, only 2% of retail/ commercial units are vacant and the majority of shops are independently owned.
3. A rich history that tells a unique story; Saellig Hoctone, Houstone, Houghton, Kingshoughton, Kynges Houghton and Houghton Regis.
4. A diverse, multicultural community; 10% more residents from black, asian and minority ethnic backgrounds than the district average.
5. A number of built and natural assets within close proximity; from a SSSI nature reserve and 42 acres of Green Flag parkland to a Grade I listed, 14th century church and a Grade II listed, Scheduled Ancient Monument.
6. An interesting and compact layout.
7. A semi-rural character with a number of open spaces.
8. Strategically located; less than 10km from an expanding international airport, 5km from a mainline train station with regular services to London, 3km from the M1 and at the edge of the Chilterns AONB.
9. Committed growth that will bring an additional 16,000 visitors to the town centre's amenities.
10. The basis for a sustainable transport strategy that is integrated with the wider regional network at Luton and Leagrave mainline train stations.



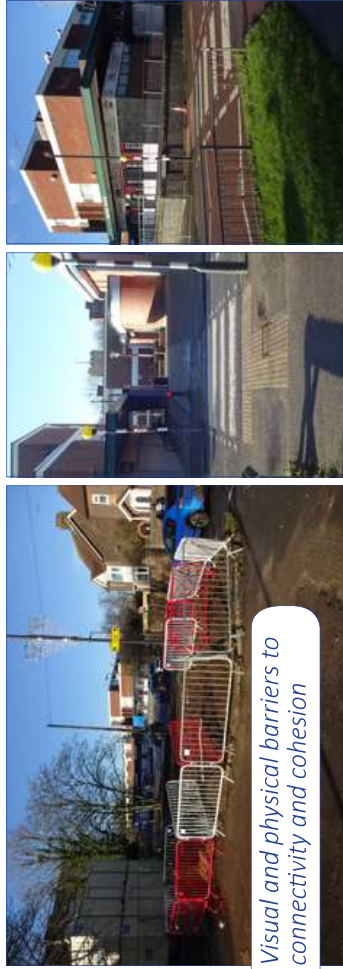
Constraints 2.7

There are also a number of aspects that appear to be restricting the potential of the town centre;

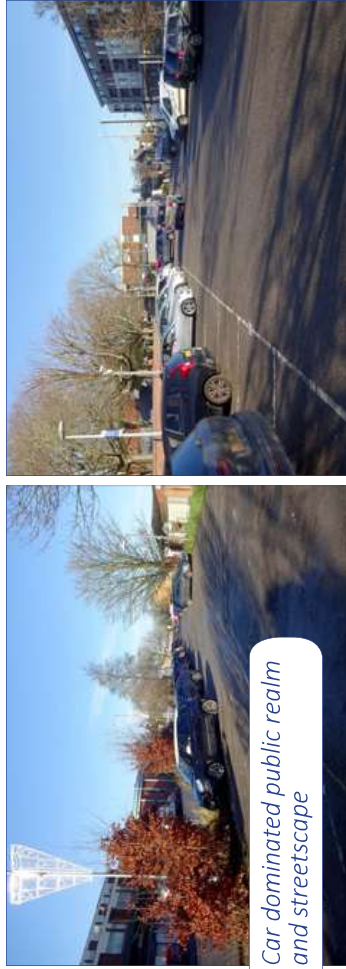
1. Poor first impression whether arriving from along the High Street or the Busway; at present, it is too easy to drive through the town centre without realising.
2. From signage and advertising to hidden heritage assets, there is little indication of 'Historic Houghton'.
3. Town centre amenities have contracted to the immediate area around the shopping centre.
4. Insufficient activities to occupy visitors for more than an hour.
5. Limited commercial space for new and established businesses; only 2% of units are currently vacant.
6. Limited variety in the retail and hospitality offer while tourism is almost non-existent.
7. Closed frontages along main roads reduce safety by not providing any natural surveillance.
8. At present, the public realm is cluttered with various barriers to movement while there is no dedicated market square.
9. Car dominated streetscapes.
10. Limited physical and visual links between the town's assets; at present, these appear to be operating independently rather than as part of a stronger, unified offer.
11. Regional public and sustainable transportation is reliant on the guided busway that ends almost 1km from the heart of the town centre and Leagrave Station, which lies outside the parish area and involves a torturous route across the town.



Poor first impression



Visual and physical barriers to connectivity and cohesion



Car dominated public realm and streetscape

2 Context

2.8 Overview

Results from the recently completed market study and the 2017 community survey suggest that the town centre is currently under-performing with demand for commercial, retail and hospitality space and activities outstripping supply.

In part, this is due to a lack of available space, caused by the contraction of town centre activities over the past 50 years. Where these extended along a 1km section of the High Street in the mid-20th Century, today's centre is limited to the shopping arcade and the immediate area around this.

The impact of this on the fortunes of the wider town is compounded by the poor arrangement of the shopping centre. Like many self-contained centres of the 1960's, this was originally planned to address a new shopping street - Bedford Square - rather than the High Street. As a result, the face of the town is currently the back of the shops.

This layout is contrary to contemporary planning ethos, which is based on providing active frontages that are visually stimulating and improve safety through passive surveillance ('eyes on the street'). Interestingly, according to the Conservation Area Statement, these were also prominent characteristics of the pre-war town centre.

Currently, blank façades, bin stores, parking and loading areas

occupy a 160m long, prime commercial frontage at perhaps the most prominent location in the town.

The impact of this on safety and appearance is reflected in the findings of the market study and the community survey. Almost 70% of residents are concerned by poor appearance (45% above the national average) and 68% would not recommend a visit (40% more than the national average).

Without passive surveillance along long sections of the public realm, almost 50% of residents are also concerned by safety - almost 30% higher than the national average.

Appearance, safety and a lack of available commercial space are perhaps the most significant constraints that are holding back growth in the town centre. Through the combined effect of these, footfall has dropped by 30-40% on pre-pandemic level. Unfortunately, without change, this trend is likely to continue as residents seek a more engaging town centre experience elsewhere and businesses soon follow in search of greater footfall and consequently, sales.

At present, residents still appear to be committed to the town centre; almost 70% shop locally (26% higher than the national average) and 67% visiting regularly.

Furthermore, 60-70% of residents would like to see the improvement of existing facilities, in particular, enhancements to the public realm for pedestrian and cycle movement and more community events.

According to the 2017 community survey, residents also expressed a desire for a more expansive and efficient public transport network. This covers the two aspects of local and regional connectivity. An efficient local system will improve social cohesion between new and existing communities. However, there is a particular concern for Houghton's regional connectivity.

For the public transport system to operate effectively, there is a need to fully integrate the local and regional networks. Currently, regional transport links are from Leagrave mainline train station, which provides direct access to Bedford and London, and the Busway, which provides direct access to Luton's Central and Parkway station.

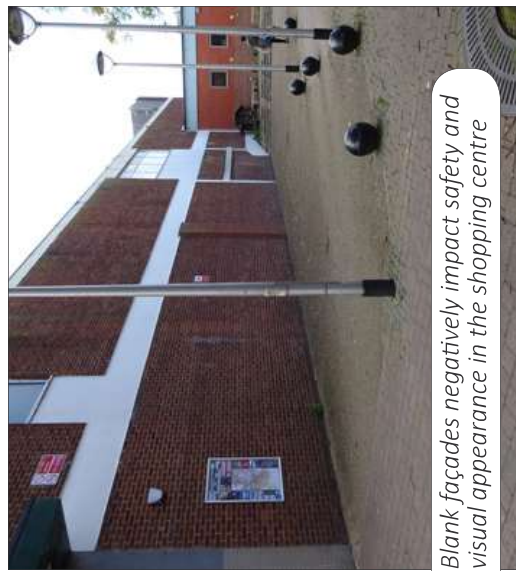
However, with the guided section of the Busway ending before the High Street and a torturous route to Leagrave Station, there is a fear that the critical link between the local and the regional/ national networks is missing.



Plans showing the urban grain around All Saints Church in 1900 and 2000



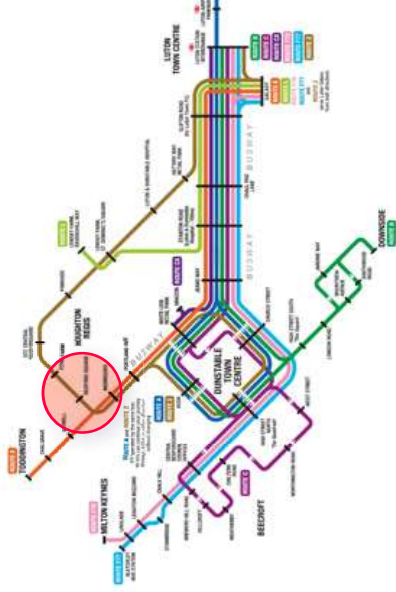
New cafe, visitor centre and offices at Houghton Hall Park



Blank façades negatively impact safety and visual appearance in the shopping centre

2 Context

2.8 Overview



While limited regional connectivity may have helped to forge a particular identity in the town, it might also be restricting access to employment, education and training opportunities further afield.

Ultimately, there are a number of constraints and opportunities that can be considered to repair and reinvigorate the town centre. Significantly though, businesses and residents would still appear to be committed to the town centre and, it is assumed, would welcome positive changes.

Furthermore, Houghton has a special story that differentiates it from the neighbouring towns and has developed a particular character, a strong sense of community and a diverse demographic. It is interesting to note that while 48% of residents believe safety to be a negative aspect of the town centre (28% higher than the national average), according to crime records, the town is in fact 10% safer than the district average. This suggests that perhaps appearance is negatively impacting the overall perception of safety.

With the influx of an additional 16,800 residents

over the next 10- 15 years, Houghton's population will be the same as the nearby towns of Hitchin (33,350), Letchworth (33,250) and Hatfield (29,616), which each have more expansive and diverse town centre offers. It will also be significantly greater than its Chiltern neighbours of Berkhamstead (19,000) and Flitwick (13,180), which have mainline train stations and direct links to London.

To accommodate this growth, it will be necessary to develop a more fulfilling and engaging town centre experience that will occupy the attention of visitors for longer than 60 minutes. This will not happen by improving the retail provision alone but through grouping a series of complimentary activities and events to form a unified offer with greater synergy and footfall between these. For instance, a route from Nimbus Park to Marl Lakes would incorporate Houghton Hall Park, The Green, High Street, shopping centre, Busway, employment activities at Woodside and the Nature Reserve.

Additionally, given Houghton's heritage and diversity of assets, the potential for tourism is seemingly untapped.

Above: Busway (guided and conventional) network



Above: End of the guided busway in relation to a 600m walking distance from the heart of the town centre



View across Houghton Hall Park; a Green Flag awarded area of public open space and the 'green lung' of Houghton Regis (CBC)

Rather than attempting to replicate the offers of other towns, a sustainable, place-based approach focuses on strengthening Houghton's 'USP'. Within the preparation of this study, the following aspects have been identified:

1. Character: Houghton has a strong sense of community and identity.
2. History: Royal connections and heritage as a local producer since Roman times.
3. Form: a variety of open spaces along the High Street.
4. Assets: a variety of built and natural assets within close proximity to the centre.
5. Self-sufficiency: despite its strategic location, an above average number of residents shop and work locally, half of all shops are independently owned and only 2% of units are currently vacant.
6. Diversity: an above average number of residents from different backgrounds compared to other towns in the district.
7. Location: at the edge of the Chiltern Hills AONB - a nationally recognised area of natural beauty and destination for tourism.

Maximising the value of these characteristics is central to the long term vision strategy for the town centre as the heart of the extended settlement.

3 Vision

3.1 Introduction

Royal Houghton has survived and prospered in many difficult circumstances over the centuries; the enormous growth of the area in the last three decades has undoubtedly presented a challenge to any faced in the past.

I am sure that the new town will not only meet that challenge in its own shrewd and inimitable way, but make from it a Houghton of which we can continue to be proud'.

Mrs. Pat Lovering, 'Royal Houghton: the story of Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire', 1986

This section provides an outline of a strategy to guide the development of the town centre as the heart of a settlement of 32,000 residents while at the same time, maintaining the particular sense of place and identity that make Houghton special.

It should be emphasised that it is not the intention of this document to replicate the 2008 Town Centre Master Plan SPD, which, according to the Local Plan, is due to be revised within the Plan period.

Rather, as noted in Section 1.2, the core objective is to establish an overarching vision for the centre as the basis for engagement with stakeholders and decision-making at a critical time that sees existing footfall diminishing at the same time as new residents are arriving to the expansion area.

In the first instance, a Vision Statement has been prepared with the intention of establishing a clear rational that can be adopted by the town council as a common goal.

This aligns with the Neighbourhood Plan objec-

tives for the town centre as a 'heart' and a 'hub' and is specifically presented in a manner that can be copied and reproduced in isolation of this document.

Following this, ten objectives have been identified as the basis for the Phasing Plan that follows in the next section. These represent broad principles for the enhancement of the town centre in relation to the predominant constraints and opportunities that are outlined in the previous section, together with Houghton's particular assets and 'USP'.

The objectives provide the link between 'analysis' and 'delivery', where each is intended to strengthen a particular area or component that is currently under-performing.

The Phasing Plan in Section 3.2 outlines different ways that each objective can be delivered in the short, medium and long term.

As the town centre has been gradually contracting for the past half century, there is no 'silver bullet' that can instantly reverse the so-

cial, environmental and physical impact of this. Instead, transformation will occur gradually through a number of actions that are aimed at tackling different aspects of the town centre experience.

As a result, the nature of the projects that are outlined in Section 3.2 vary from cost effective ‘quick wins’ that can be delivered in the short term to long term, physical projects that will require a high level of investment and collaboration with multiple stakeholders to realise.

The core intent is that all short, medium and long term actions are coordinated to tackle existing blockages and maximise the value of the town’s physical and natural assets.

Images:
Top left: The tuck shop next to the Red House and the old Free School (HRHS archives).
Top right: Cricket at Houghton Green in 2005 (HRHS)
Bottom: View towards across The Green towards Houghton Hall (HRHS)



3 Vision

3.2 Vision Statement

This section has been specifically prepared to be read independently from the body of this document.

In this manner, both short and long statements may be reproduced by HRTC for different purposes.

As a result, there is some duplication of text with other sections of this document.

A centre for all Houghton Regis: the social, retail, business and community hub of a sustainable town with a special history and character.

Archaeological studies indicate the origins of a settlement in the parish since the Stone and Iron Ages. Through its fertile lands at the foot of the Chiltern Hills and the source of the River Lea, Houghton grew as a local producer during Saxon and Roman times and became the breadbasket for the royal households of the Norman and Tudor periods (giving rise to the title, 'Kyngheshouton').

Despite its strategic location in the middle of the Oxford-Cambridge growth zone and bursts of rapid expansion in the late 20th Century, the town has retained a strong local economy. At present, half of all shops are independently owned, an above average number of residents shop and work locally and only 2% of units are currently vacant (Town Benchmarking Report, 2021).

Extensive housing development of a particular mix and without sufficient supporting facilities hasn't been without impact. Today, these areas register above average rates of single parent households, youth unemployment and children in income deprived households (CBC, 2021).

At the same time, records show Houghton Regis to be 10% safer than the district average (crimerate.co.uk). Additionally, the town has a diverse, multicultural population and a proactive town council that places social cohesion at the heart of the Neighbourhood Plan and Vision Strategy.

The overall impression is of a sustainable, self-sufficient town with a strong sense of community and identity.

Improving facilities in particular areas is clearly a priority. However, equally pressing is the necessity to strengthen the town centre to cater for the needs of an additional 16,800 residents that will be relocating to the parish within the next 10-15 years.

Such expansion also brings significant opportunities for the local economy, particularly in the areas of retail and hospitality. While, given the town's variety of natural and built assets, the potential for tourism is seemingly untapped.

With a sustainable local economy, strong sense of com-



munity and semi-rural character, the ingredients for future proofing the town centre are already in place.

However, if Houghton is to avoid becoming amalgamated into a greater urban area with Luton and Dunstable or split between ‘new’ and ‘old’ towns, it is essential that the centre becomes a hub for all residents with a distinct identity, a diverse offer and better public transport connectivity.

To do this, it will need to achieve the following aspects:

1. A centre that caters for the needs of all residents, bringing together new and existing communities.
2. A busy, mixed-use hub for a sustainable local economy.
3. A unique sense of place and identity that is steeped in history.
4. A fulfilling visitor experience with a series of activities and attractions for day, night and overnight visitors.
5. A safe, attractive and stimulating environment.
6. A well-connected place – locally and regionally.

Images:

Top: VE Day celebration at The Green in 1945 (HRHS)

Bottom: Line dancers on the High Street at the Jubilee Carnival in 2006 (HRHS)

2 Unify the assets to provide a stronger, more robust and engaging town centre experience.



A diverse mix of attractions are located within a 600m walk of The Green, including Grade II listed heritage assets, a Green Flag park, shopping centre, traditional High Street and employment activities at Woodside, Nimbus Park and Houghton Hall. A 1km cycle ride includes a nature reserve, SSSI and a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

At present, these activities are all operating independently. However, integrating them as part of a unified offer would improve access, synergy and footfall for all.

3 Welcome to Royal Houghton: improve the first impression through strengthening key views and gateways (road and bus).



At present, visitors to the town centre are currently greeted by blank frontages and 'red flags', such as the weapon drop bin, empty planter boxes and commercial bins. This creates a negative impression from the outset while weapon drops, railings and surveillance cameras can have an adverse impact on security compared to more passive measures such as active frontages, increased footfall and soft landscaping.

Ultimately, if the town centre is to attract more visitors, it is essential to improve its front door and garden.

4 Re-establish the High Street as a central spine with new opportunities to grow and diversify the commercial offer.



While the town centre extended from Townsend Farm (Mill Road) to the pond and coach houses at The Green, this has gradually contracted to the limits of the shopping centre over the past 50 years.

However, if it is to become the hub for an additional 16,800 residents, more public space and amenities are required. Within this, the High Street provides an opportunity to once again become a spine of activity through the settlement.

3 Vision

- 5 Integrate existing employment areas as part of the town centre.



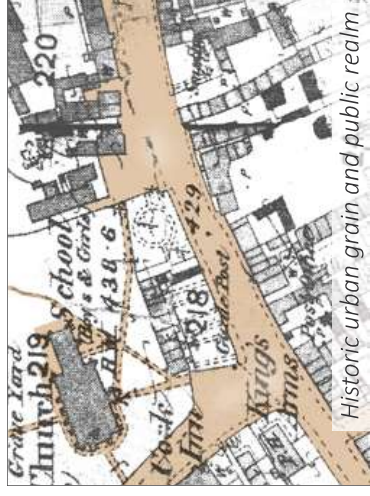
With the exception of the some accommodation at Houghton Hall and along the High Street, the town centre limits exclude the commercial areas of Woodside, Cemetery Road and Nimbus Park (Town Centre Master Plan SPD, 2008).

Given that over 50% of residents work within 10km of their homes and only 2% of ground floor units are currently vacant, there is a fantastic opportunity for synergic activity between the town's employment, leisure and retail/ hospitality areas.

- 6 De-clutter the public realm and provide a core area of public open space for community events.

The public realm through the town centre is cluttered with various signs, bins, benches, bollards, planters and flags that are restricting pedestrian movement and opportunities for communal events.

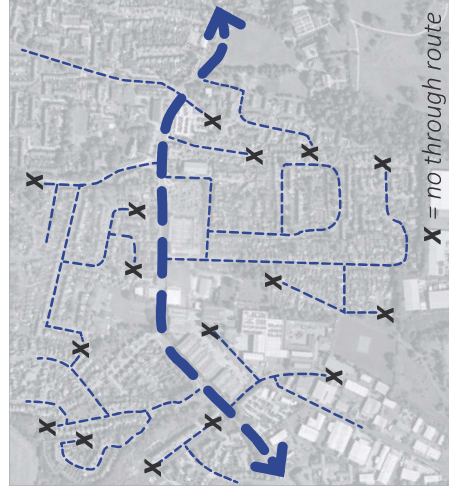
In addition, since the area in front of All Saints Church became a car park, there is no longer a dedicated area of public open space that can provide as a market place or town square.



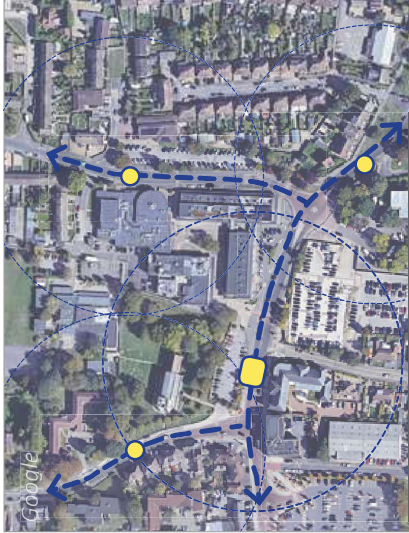
- 7 Identify opportunities to improve east-west connectivity and create alternative routes for movement.

With the exception of the High Street, there are no east-west vehicular links through the centre. As a result, all traffic is focussed along the High Street, which creates congestion at peak times and difficulties when sections of this are closed.

Creating these connections will enable the distribution of traffic across a wider network and release pressure on the High Street, while also improving access to employment areas and HH Park and stimulating pedestrian and cycle movement.



8 Develop an efficient public transport strategy that integrates local and regional services.



An effective local service will significantly improve access to the town centre, support cohesion between new and existing communities and reduce traffic along the High Street. This should be integrated with regional connections at Leagrave Station and the Busway to facilitate access to wider employment, education and training opportunities. A central hub should be located around All Saints and the shopping centre with additional stops at the employment areas, library and The Green.

9 Strengthen the open space network to provide a series of spaces for different activities, support a semi-rural character and reflect the town's heritage as producer.

A prominent characteristic of Houghton is its open space network, which combines leisure and recreational areas with a Green Flag park, nature reserve and a SSSI. Collectively, this provides a semi-rural character that integrates with the wider Chilterns AONB.

At present, some spaces appear under utilised and without any clear purpose. However, considering these as a network of spaces with a different function and character will improve efficiency, use and access. For instance, where two recreational areas are located in close proximity, the function of one may be varied to include allotments, an ecology area or a skate or splash park.



10 Establish a structure to assist and monitor delivery.



Above: Hitchin Information Centre is a multi-purpose space that includes the Town Centre Manager's office, tourist information, a shop and a gallery.

The nearby towns of Hitchin, Biggleswade and Letchworth that have similar populations to Houghton after expansion each have full or part time Town Centre Managers.

The dedicated role of these is to oversee the day-to-day operations of the town centre and work with local residents, businesses, stakeholders and contractors to consistently monitor and improve the town centre offering.

4 Delivery

4.1 Phasing Plan

The following table includes various short, medium and long term projects that will assist in delivering each of the objectives that are noted in the previous section. A number of these can be completed by the town council while others will require engagement with multiple stakeholders and investment to realise. Through this approach, transformation will occur in a phased and coordinated manner and while long term projects might generate the greatest single impact, there are multiple short and medium term interventions that can be completed to realise the common objective.

No.	Action	Delivery (years)			
		1 - 3	3 - 5	5 - 10	
1.0	Historic Houghton: celebrate the town's rich history and build a unique sense of place and identity around this.				
1	Town Council approval of the identity and vision strategy.	*			
2	Coordinated branding and marketing to enforce a clear and consistent message.	*			
3	Promote activities and events that will specifically support Houghton's identity as a local producer and a gateway to the Chilterns AONB. For instance, a farmer's market, flower show, urban farm or the beginning of walking, cycling or trekking routes into the Chilterns.	*			
4	Identify any historic dates or events that can be celebrated - for instance, a village fete or cricket matches on The Green.	*			
5	Identify any other heritage assets that might be eligible for listing.	*			
6	Identify potential funding mechanisms for improving heritage assets or access to these - for instance, Maiden Bower and All Saints Church.	*			
7	Prepare a map of attractions in the town centre.	*			
9	Review the appetite for a 'Britain in Bloom' campaign or the potential for a formal event by an organisation such as the Royal Horticultural Society at Houghton Hall Park and The Green.	*			
10	Develop a tourism strategy with a series of activities for day and overnight visitors.		*		
11	Instal signage on floors and walls to increase awareness of heritage assets or activities and events that took place at particular locations.		*		
12	Establish a centrally located tourism/ heritage office with space for exhibitions.		*		*
14	Physical restoration of particular heritage assets.				*
15	Review and update the 2008 Town Centre Conservation Area Statement SPD.				*

No.	Action	Delivery (years)				
		1 - 3	3 - 5	5 - 10		
2.0 Unify the assets to provide a stronger, more robust and engaging town centre experience.						
1	Define the main links between key destinations and identify opportunities to improve these or form new connections.	*				
2	Review the appetite for a collective organisation of business owners and operators, for instance, the Houghton Regis Business Association or Forum, with a single point of reference for ease of communication.	*				
3	Establish regular channels of communication with local business owners and operators and monthly/ bi-monthly meetings to identify opportunities for synergy.	*				
4	Review the potential for greater public access to privately owned assets. For instance, a licence for a hospitality or leisure offer at the gravel pit lake or 'Open Door' weekends with guided walks around the Red House, Houghton Hall and All Saints.	*				
5	Refresh surfaces and planting along existing key routes.	*				
6	Initiate feasibility and technical studies for physical improvements along new or existing key routes, for instance, resurfacing or new signage.	*				
7	Update and expand the 2008 Town Centre boundary to incorporate surrounding activities.		*			
8	Implement new surfacing and signage along key existing routes.		*		*	*
9	Implement the construction of new links.					*
3.0 Welcome to Royal Houghton: improve the first impression through strengthening key views and gateways (road and bus).						
1	Initiate Action Area Plans for the west and eastern gateways.	*				
2	Engagement with stakeholders to identify long and short term solutions for improving the elevation of the shopping centre along the High Street and Tithe Farm Road.	*				
3	Instal temporary screening of blank facades around the shopping centre through posters, planting or render.	*				
4	Improve existing conditions at the back of the shops and parking. For instance, surface treatment, lighting and communal bin stores with screening.	*				
5	Remove the weapons bin from the entrance of the shopping centre and any outdated signs or sign boards.	*				
6	Identify a series of key views across the town. For instance, from The Green to All Saints Church or the top of the Chalk Hills to Houghton Hall.	*				
7	Initiate a feasibility and options study for extending the guided Busway up to the High Street.	*				
8	Establish a central hub for tourism and information.		*			
9	Initiate feasibility studies for new seating and resting areas that can take advantage of key view corridors.		*			
10	Initiate physical works at the eastern gateway.		*			

4 Delivery

No.	Action	Delivery (years)				
		1 - 3	3 - 5	5 - 10		
3.0	Welcome to Royal Houghton: improve the first impression through strengthening key views and gateways (road and bus).					
11	Simplify and coordinate signage, surface treatment and street furniture along the High Street.		*			
12	Identify opportunities to reinforce the connection to agricultural production and a semi-rural character. For instance, hanging baskets, formal street planting and informal meadow planting/ rewilding along key routes.		*			
13	Depending on the result of the feasibility study, improve paving along Townsend Farm Road and a new interchange at the guided Busway or, develop a new interchange closer to the shopping centre.		*		*	
14	Initiate physical works at the western gateway.				*	
15	Renew surface treatment and street furniture along the High Street.				*	
16	Initiate feasibility studies for the improvement of surface treatment, planting and street furniture on the approach to the east and west gateways.				*	
4.0	Re-establish the High Street as a central spine with new opportunities to grow and diversify the commercial offer.					
1	Repair any damaged pavements, tarmac, signage and lighting along the High Street.		*			
2	Initiate an advisory campaign to improve street frontages along the High Street, possibly coupled with grants for businesses or land owners as an incentive.		*			
3	Initiate long and short term measures to improve the shopping centre elevation along the High Street and Tithe Farm Road.		*	*	*	
4	Engagement with CBC and landowners along the High Street to review opportunities for additional accommodation and active frontages.		*			
5	Initiate a feasibility study to review the potential for designed cycle routes along the High Street.			*		
6	Identify opportunities to diversify the existing commercial offer and provide a more sustainable mix with a greater provision of offices, retail and multi-purpose space.			*		
7	Review all signage, surfaces and street furniture along the High Street and identify components that can be renewed or replaced.			*		
8	Develop new commercial accommodation along the High Street with a focus on retail accommodation at ground floor and offices/ multi-purpose space above this.				*	
9	Renew surface treatment and street furniture along the length of the High Street.				*	

No.	Action	Delivery (years)				
		1 - 3	3 - 5	5 - 10		
5.0 Integrate existing employment clusters as part of the town centre.						
1	Update and expand the 2008 Town Centre boundary to incorporate adjoining commercial activities.		*			
2	Review the appetite for a collective organisation of business owners and operators with a single point of reference for ease of communication.		*			
3	Establish regular channels of communication with local business owners and operators and monthly/ bi-monthly meetings to identify opportunities for synergy.		*			
4	Engagement with stakeholders to identify opportunities to diversify the mix of commercial accommodation nearer to the High Street.		*			
5	Develop a programme of quarterly or bi-monthly job fairs and training events to encourage synergy between local businesses, residents and other amenities in the town centre.		*			
6	Improve pedestrian and cycle routes between the High Street and employment areas.			*		
7	Renew paving and signage along Townsend Farm Road and Park Road North.				*	
6.0 De-clutter the public realm and provide a core area of public open space for community events.						
1	Engagement with CBC to establish a timeframe for updating the 2008 Town Centre Master Plan.		*			
2	Engagement with CBC and stakeholders to review improvements to the existing public realm in the shopping centre.		*			
3	Remove the weapons bin from the entrance of the shopping centre and any outdated signs or sign boards.		*			
4	Develop a programme of quarterly/ bi-monthly events on the full or eastern section of the car park at All Saints Church.		*			
5	Prepare an Action Area Plan for the car park at All Saints and the interface between the church yard and the pedestrian arcade.		*			
6	Initiate the revised Town Centre Master Plan study, including a section with guidance regarding suitable materials, street furniture and the treatment of shop frontages.		*			
7	Review the potential for off-road bus stops near to the Action Area Plan.			*		
8	Detail design of a new market square in the Action Area Plan.			*		
9	Initiate construction of 'Market Place' or 'All Saints Square'.			*	*	
10	Develop a programme of monthly/ bi-monthly events in the new market square.				*	

4 Delivery

No.	Action	Delivery (years)				
		1 - 3	3 - 5	5 - 10		
7.0	Identify opportunities to improve east-west connectivity and create alternative routes for movement.					
1	Consultation with CBC's technical teams to identify opportunities to improve east-west vehicular connectivity away from the High Street.	*				
2	Prepare feasibility studies and conduct engagement.	*				
3	Identify potential sources of funding and investment.		*			
4	Prepare technical design.		*			
5	Initiate construction.				*	
8.0	Develop an efficient public transport strategy that integrates local and regional services.					
1	Engagement with CBC's technical teams to review the potential to extend the Busway up to the High Street, develop an interchange around All Saints church and square, improve links to Leagrave Station and identify routes for local services.	*				
2	Initiate a transport study to identify and appraise options for an integrated and sustainable public transport strategy.	*				
3	Identify potential sources of funding for technical design, construction and operations.	*				
4	Engagement with local operators to identify opportunities to improve the use and efficiency of the existing system.	*				
5	Advertising and information campaigns to improve awareness of local and regional services.	*				
6	Initiate a feasibility study to review the potential for automated signs at bus stops.	*				
7	Maintenance of existing bus stops.	*	*			
8	Technical design of new routes and stops.		*			
9	Install automated systems and seating at the most commonly used or evenly spaced stops.		*			
10	Initiate construction of new routes and stops.				*	
9.0	Strengthen the open space network to provide a series of spaces for different activities, support a semi-rural character and reflect the town's heritage as producer.					
1	Initiate a review of the use and function of different open spaces and pedestrian and cycle links between these.	*				
2	Initiate a review of the extent and condition of Public Rights of Way (PROW) that connect to the wider network - in particular, towards Sewell/ Maiden Bower and the Chiltern Hills AONB.	*				
3	Engagement with CBC's ecology, landscape and PROW teams to consider opportunities to improve the efficiency and biodiversity of existing spaces.	*				
4	Review the potential for rewilding some areas with meadow planting and natural habitats.	*				
5	Review the appetite for a 'Britain in Bloom' campaign or the potential for a formal event by an organisation such as the Royal Horticultural Society at Houghton Hall Park and The Green.	*				

No.	Action	Delivery (years)				
		1 - 3	3 - 5	5 - 10		
9.0	Strengthen the open space network to provide a series of spaces for different activities, support a semi-rural character and reflect the town's heritage as producer.					
6	Foster closer links with the Chilterns AONB, including a formal walk from a new visitor centre at the Marl Lakes SSSI.	*				
7	Review the potential for improvements to the Marl Lakes as has happened at Houghton Hall Park and identify opportunities for funding and investment to facilitate this.	*				
8	Prepare a map of local walks and cycle routes to promote use and awareness.	*				
9	Integrate The Green into the Park Run circuit and initiate regular 'Park Walks' from The Green.	*				
10	Develop an annual programme of events at The Green, from Park Runs and Walks to exhibition cricket matches and Christmas and farmers markets.	*	*			
11	Develop an Action Area Plan for The Green.	*	*			
12	Improve the River Lea corridor and Lilly Lane.		*			
13	Improve the interface between the Kitchen Garden, pavilion and River Lea with an opportunity for a resting place, sign post, information panel or kiosk.		*			
14	Provide a turning space for vehicles at the end of Redhouse Court and parking spaces along this for access to Houghton Hall and Park from the north.		*			
15	Resurface Redhouse Court with a more sensitive, semi-permeable material such as stone setts, cellular grassed paving or a resin bonded aggregate with a swale along one side.		*			
16	Initiate development of a new visitor centre and Green Infrastructure at Marl Lakes to establish this as key area of open space in the district.		*	*		
17	Improve surfaces, boundaries and furniture along PROW and bridleways.			*		
10.0	Establish a structure to assist and monitor delivery.					
1	Approval and adoption of the Neighbourhood Plan.	*				
2	Engagement with CBC to review the pros, cons and impact of forming a Business Improvement District (BID).	*				
3	Initiate the revised Town Centre Master Plan study with a design guide section.	*				
4	Review the potential for a dedicated Town Centre and Evening Economy Manager on a full or part time basis.	*				
5	Establish social media platforms to promote events and activities.	*				
6	Establish a physical presence for the Town Council in the town centre, potentially connected to a tourist information facility and a small shop selling local and 'Royal Houghton' branded produce.		*			
7	Review and update the Town Centre Action Plan.			*		

4 Delivery

4.2 Catalyst Projects

- 1 The Green: pavilion, source of the River Lea/ Houghton Brook, access to Houghton Hall Park and the treatments of Redhouse Court and Lilly Lane.
- 2 High Street frontage of Bedford Square and the view from The Green to All Saints Church.
- 3 Pedestrian and cycle access along a desire line from The Green/ Redhouse Court to Bedford Square.
- 4 Interface of the church yard, car park and the entrance to Bedford Square to create a shared surface, market place and an off-street waiting area for buses.
- 5 Junction of Townsend Farm Road and the High Street as a western gateway, including the connection to the Busway.
- 6 Junction of East End Road, Park Road North, Windsor Drive and Sundon Road as an eastern gateway to the town centre and approach to Houghton Hall Park and Nimbus Park.
- 7 Formal access and visitor centre at Marl Lakes SSSI.
- 8 Interface between Bedford Square and the library/ health centre

A number of action areas have been identified across the town centre as the basis for further study.

Strategically located at prominent intersections or focal points, these represent opportunities to improve connectivity between destinations, footfall and/ or visual impact.

A holistic approach combining urban, landscape and built form treatment should be considered for each place that will require engagement with different stakeholders and authorities to realise.

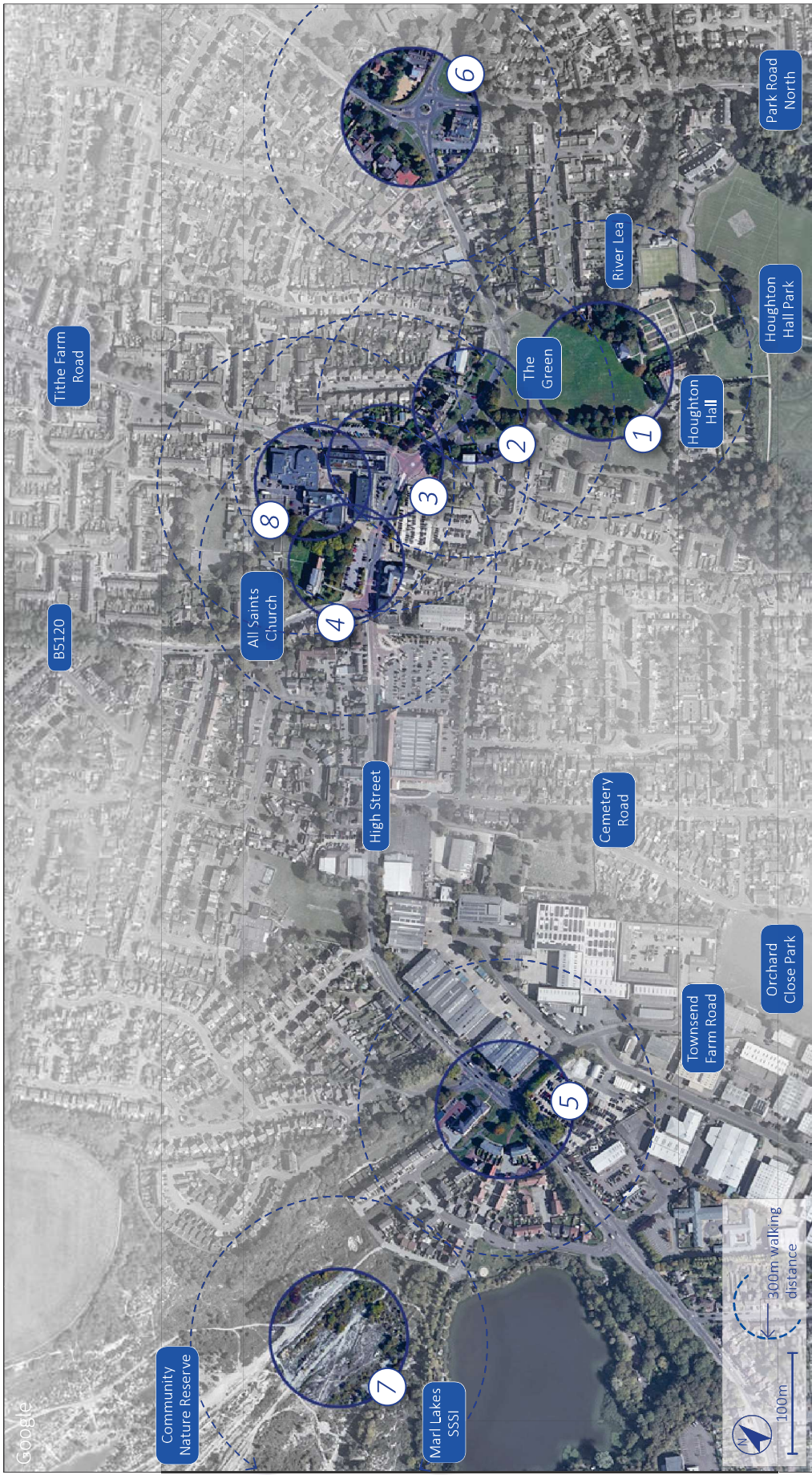
Where implementation might represent a long term process through securing funding and regulatory consents, temporary measures can be considered for quick wins and short term gains.

Additionally, each catalyst area can be treated as a separate project that can be phased and delivered independently. However, the use of common signage, paving and street furniture is recommended to maintain a unified impression.

The general location of each action area is identified on the following page with a short description and impression of potential character and treatment to follow.

Adjacent page:

Plan to show the location of catalyst projects



4 Delivery

4.2 Catalyst Projects

- 1 The Green: pavilion, source of the River Lea/ Houghton Brook, access to Houghton Hall Park and the treatments of Redhouse Court and Lilly Lane.



The Green plays an essential role in tying the town centre together; it is the historic heart of Houghton and an integral connection between Houghton Hall, the Park and the High Street.

Retaining an open area for events and activities such as a fête, a fair or playing cricket is important. However, strengthening the edges of Redhouse Court and Woodlands Avenue will frame the central space and guide cycle and pedestrian movement around this. The interface of Lilly Lane and the River Lea, the Kitchen Gardens and The Green provides an opportunity for a seating area and kiosk for a farm/ flower shop or a cafe that can integrate the surrounding activities.

- 2 High Street frontage of Bedford Square and the view from The Green to All Saints Church.

The view from The Green to the High Street and the tower of All Saints Church was a characteristic of historic Houghton. Coupled with the gentle sweep and narrowing of the High Street through the road funnels at either side of The Green, this would have created a strong sense of arrival to the town from the east.

Unfortunately, this view is now occupied by the back of the shopping centre and a landscape of commercial bins, roller shutters, blank façades and parking. These present a series of 'red flags' for visitors and a negative impression from the outset.

If the town centre is to have any chance of accommodating the increased population, it is essential to improve this view through screening or remodelling the built form while also providing an opportunity for a prime commercial frontage at a prominent location.



- 3 Pedestrian and cycle access along a desire line from The Green to Bedford Square.



At the moment, the link between The Green and the shopping centre is severed, limiting the potential for synergy and connectivity between the High Street and Houghton Hall Park.

Ideally, this link would follow the natural desire line (or as near as possible) and be treated as a signalised junction to maximise footfall.



- 4 Interface of the church yard, car park and the entrance to Bedford Square to create a shared surface, market place and an off-street waiting area for buses.

The absence of a core area of civic space in the town centre has been discussed throughout this document. While the shopping arcade has partially fulfilled this role, this suffers from poor visibility from the High Street, which limits its potential to function as a true market place.

From the plan that is included in Section 3.3, the area in front of All Saints Church appears to have been used for such activities. Centrally located and highly visible, this links the church with the pedestrian area and the library and aligns with existing crossings on the High Street.

While the area is currently used as a car park, the recent Benchmarking Report suggests there



to be an over provision of parking in the town centre. Additionally, the Conservation Statement recommends improvements to the public realm around the Grade I listed church.

The reinstatement of a market place on the site of the car park might be a long term ambition. However, in the short term, perhaps ten or fifteen spaces might be removed from the eastern side, together with the large planters next to these in order to create a central space.

This could be combined with repaving the full parking area for markets and events on particular days. If successful, the remaining spaces may be gradually removed over time.



4 Delivery

4.2 Catalyst Projects

- ⑤ Junction of Townsend Farm Road and the High Street as a western gateway, including the connection to the Busway.

At present, it is too easy to pass through the town centre without realising. Additionally, there is a need to begin expanding the central area for the doubling of the population.

The junction between Townsend Farm Road and the High Street provides an opportunity to establish a gateway before the curve in the High Street towards the shopping centre. Additionally, this location would incorporate the Busway and commercial activities at Woodside while also being within 200m from the Marl Lakes and the nature reserve.

Ideally, this would be coupled with an extension of the Busway up to the High Street to improve regional connectivity both to and from Houghton.

- ⑥ Junction of East End Road, Park Road North, Windsor Drive and Sundon Road as an eastern gateway to the town centre and approach to Houghton Hall Park and Nimbus Park.



The location of the current roundabout at Chequers presents a similar opportunity to strengthen a gateway to the town centre from the east.

Historic maps show this to be an important hub within the town (East End), with the chantry farm, a couple of inns and ponds, which were presumably used for cleaning wagons, watering livestock or as part of the natural drainage system for the River Lea.

Such a gateway would also support wayfinding to Houghton Hall Park and Nimbus Park, assisting in the integration of these as part of the wider town centre offer.

7 Formal access and visitor centre at Marl Lakes. The Marl Lakes SSSI and community nature reserve represent an invaluable area of ecology and biodiversity within 300m of the High Street. Integrating these into the town centre significantly expands the offer and creates a north-west anchor of open space to synergise with Houghton Hall Park at the south-east.

Additionally, this area provides an opportunity to improve integration with the wider Chilterns AONB landscape, drawing nature into the heart of the town. The provision of a similar offer to the visitor centre/ cafe and parking at Houghton Hall Park would help to establish this as a destination, perhaps coupled with a heritage, arts or wildlife centre.



8 Interface between Bedford Square and the library/ health centre.

In the absence of a designated area of civic space, the area in front of the library has assumed this role. However, activity within the space and footfall across this is restricted by changes in level and a collection of bollards, planters, lighting poles and trees.

Furthermore, the space is dominated by a long, blank elevation that provides no passive surveillance or visual stimulation. It is perhaps the treatment of this area that is generating the concerns of local residents for safety and appearance that are noted in the Benchmarking Report.

However, strategically located along the pedestrianised shopping street and in front of a busy destination in the library and health centre, transformation of this area can have a significant impact on the character of the town centre. Additionally, if treated correctly, it would improve access to shops, provide a space for communal activities and seasonal events and create valuable commercial front-ages.



4 Delivery

4.3 Next Steps



Above: Initial visioning plans for the town centre prepared for CBC in 2017 to support an application for funding (Source: Placemake)

This document has been specifically prepared to encourage a coordinated approach for the renewal and growth of the town centre.

The Phasing Plan that is included earlier in this section identifies a number of interventions that the Town Council will be able to deliver independently.

Proposals that are of a more physical and spatial nature are likely to involve collaboration with multiple stakeholders to deliver. In particular, this will involve engagement with the various technical teams at Central Bedfordshire Council, local business and residents associations and private land owners.

It should be emphasised that after decades of contraction, the regeneration of the town centre will require long term commitment. However, with new residents already arriving to the expansion area, there is clearly a need for direction and action at this time. Otherwise, the opportunity to improve the existing centre may be lost if new residents look elsewhere for their local amenity, social and community needs.

Hopefully this document presents a viable and sustainable vision that all stakeholders will be able to support. Initial engagement with the following parties is recommended;

- CBC, to discuss:
- the feasibility of proposals that are listed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2,
- opportunities for synergy with wider strategic initiatives,
- the impact of forming a Business Improvement District (BID),
- possible mechanisms for funding or investment and,
- the potential time frame for updating the 2008 Town Centre Master Plan SPD.
- Private land owners and operators, to determine any long term developments objectives and potential synergies that might exist.
- Local residents and business associations, to review the findings of this study and identify the level of interest in forming a collective organisation such as a BID or a Town Centre Community Association.
- Potential operators and investors (with CBC) regarding a tourism and hospitality offer at

- Marl Lakes that is similar to the current facility at Houghton Hall Park.
- Public transport operators (with CBC) to review the potential to improve and integrate local and regional services and the opportunity for a transit hub along the High Street.

In addition to engagement on these aspects, it is hoped the Draft Neighbourhood Plan can be submitted to CBC as a matter of priority for review and adoption as a statutory planning document.

It would also be of value to consider how the action areas and catalyst projects that are outlined in Section 4.2 might be phased and delivered. In the first instance, this will involve identifying relevant stakeholders, potential funding and investment mechanisms and feasibility with CBC's technical departments as the basis for further consultation and study.

BID	Business Improvement District
CBC	Central Bedfordshire Council
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
HRCAS	Houghton Regis Conservation Area Statement, 2008
HRNP	Houghton Regis Neighbourhood Plan 2020- 2035 (Draft)
HRTC	Houghton Regis Town Council
PROW	Public Rights of Way
NDG	National Design Guide, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2021
SPD	Supplementary Planning Document
TBR	Town Benchmarking Report, People and Places, 2022



Houghton Regis Town Council

Peel Street
Houghton Regis
Bedfordshire LU5 5EY

Tel: 01582 708540
info@houghtonregis.org.uk
www.houghtonregis.org.uk

placemake.



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