

Kidderminster Town Centre – Public Realm Design Framework and Phase 1 scheme(s)

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The urban design qualities of Kidderminster Town Centre have suffered from successive redevelopment programmes dating back to the 1960's. Although there are some interesting pockets of heritage value and high quality townscape these are often randomly placed and the town lacks a coherent structure. This is largely the result of the layout of highways and movement corridors in the town which is in turn largely influenced by the town centre ring road. Arrival points, particularly on foot, are incredibly poor and the town centre is devoid of any quality meeting and rest space, event and performance space, or green space. These factors have been highlighted as part of the ReWyre Initiative and the more recent State of the Area debate as crucial elements that are holding back the economic potential and image of the town.
- 1.2. Wyre Forest District Council, working closely with Worcestershire County Council Highways, has appointed a consultant team to lead a dynamic and progressive programme for delivering a comprehensive scheme of public realm improvements in Kidderminster town centre and the Comberton Hill area.

2. Project Objectives

- 2.1. The Public Realm Design Framework (PRDF) will provide an over-arching masterplan to help guide future development and to ensure that individual development schemes contribute towards a 'bigger picture' to create a well-designed and functioning town. The project will include a fully costed Phase 1 Public Realm scheme or schemes for an area of the town centre that will be influenced by the early development of the design framework.
- 2.2. The District Council has committed £300k in capital funding to invest in the public realm and will be looking to use this as match-funding to lever in additional funding with a target of £1million for the implementation of a Phase 1 Scheme(s).
- 2.3. The PRDF will be commercially aware and genuine capable of delivery. It will help to set the priorities for public and private investment in the public realm of the town centre and provide a framework in which to inform development decision making. The framework will be used to influence the Development Management process whilst providing the basis for attracting and competing for investment.
- 2.4. The PRDF will include the following core aspects/themes:
 - Streets and Spaces – movement patterns & public realm framework
 - Scale, Massing and Enclosure
 - Nodes, Landmarks and Features

- Green Infrastructure
- Place Identity/Public Art
- Environmental Quality & Building Design
- Activity and Land Use
- Programme and Implementation
- Viability/Funding, Delivery

- 2.5. The PDRF will also recognise and take into account the multifunctional nature of streets and spaces, and particularly public open spaces/squares, and allow a variety of different users and uses. Arts and events will be a key consideration within this, ensuring that the public realm is capable of hosting performance events. Kidderminster also has a regular street market and the occasional speciality markets and it is important that these still have the infrastructure in which to function.

3. Key Areas

The PRDF area will include the Town Centre and Comberton Hill. However, there are some key areas of focus:

The Worcester Street Area

- 3.1. The street stretches from Blackwell Street/Coventry Street to the north and Prospect Hill/New Road in the south, with a significant pedestrianised section the middle of the traditional 'high street'.
- 3.2. The Weavers Wharf retail park on the western side of the town has become a major shopping attraction within the town centre. However, as a result the retail focus has of the town has shifted towards the west and has had a detrimental impact on the areas on the eastern side. The viability and vitality of Worcester Street has particularly deteriorated and there is a stark level of vacancy of retail units with a declining footfall with the primary retail in Kidderminster town centre now focused on Weavers Wharf. This has created a major imbalance within the town centre and eastern side is in decline and facing an uncertain future. In addition to this economic decline there has also been a decline the quality of the urban environment. This isn't helped by the empty shops, but the public realm in the pedestrian area is of a poor quality.

The Eastern Gateway (Bromsgrove Street Site)

- 3.3. The Council through the Kidderminster Central Area Action Plan and the preparation of a Concept and Feasibility study of the site in the Eastern Gateway are looking to bring forward the development of a new food store, with associated parking. At this stage WFDC working with WCC in undertaking a traffic analysis of a potential new store on this site and assessing the highway and transport issues including the future function of Worcester Street and its relationship with the site to the rear which is the proposed/preferred site for an anchor food store. This includes the possibility of re-introducing vehicles and buses in to Worcester Street to breathe new life in to this area of the town centre. This area has seen steady decline with the focus for 'high street' retail having moved west towards Weavers Wharf.

Town Centre Public Realm

- 3.4. The area of focus for town centre public realm is the main traditional retail areas which consist of Vicar Street, High Street and Worcester Street and spaces at the Bull Ring and in the vicinity of the Town Hall. These are pedestrian streets that formed the traditional key retail circuit in the town. The public realm in these areas is in a poor condition and it is apparent that there has been little investment in the environment here. Maintenance and repair work has been carried out on a piecemeal basis and has not been completed to a high quality. The paving consists of a disorganised mix of brickwork, concrete slabs, and tarmac. Not only does the brickwork look tired, where it has been necessary to infill and repair these areas this has been done with tarmac. The result has been an unattractive patchwork of surfaces.

Town Hall to Kidderminster Railway Station

- 3.5. This is the main route from the town centre (starting at the Town Hall) up to the mainline and Severn Valley Railway stations on Comberton Hill. It is a busy route with people walking from the railway station (and surrounding areas) to get into the town centre and involves going through the Comberton Island subway. With the Severn Valley Railway being a major tourist attraction in the town, this circuit is vital in getting tourists into the town centre itself and will also become an important tourist route when the Carpet Museum opens on Green Street. Overall, as the train station is quite separated from the town centre, making this route as easy and as clear as possible will be important.
- 3.6. There is poor visual and physical connectivity along this route and this provides a significant barrier to movement and a poor sense of arrival. The route also involves crossing the Comberton Island subway network which adds to its unattractiveness. There is little in terms of signage or legibility that would indicate the correct route to take. In terms of public realm, there is a wider mixture due to the length of this route. However, none are particularly inviting and it is very vehicle-dominant. This lack of consistency of design also detracts from the legibility of the route. There is a real lack of signposts along the route also and does not help the pedestrian find their way.

Town Hall Square

- 3.7. At the moment Kidderminster doesn't have a recognisable 'centre', a civic heart and gathering point for events. The area outside the Town Hall provides a good setting for such a space with a listed public building as its backdrop as well as being centrally positioned geographically. There is already some public space here but it is limited and not particularly well organised, but it provides the potential to create something better. Therefore there is ambition to create a high-quality piece of public realm that is multi-functional, allowing for events.

Bull Ring

- 3.8. The town centre suffers from lack of public open space and there are limited opportunities for people to gather and sit. The Bull Ring is a future area that has been identified as having the potential to be a new public square. The potential redevelopment

of Crown House provides a significant opportunity to provide a new space integrating with the currently culverted section of the River Stour.

4. Timetable

- 4.1. The Public Realm Design Framework is due to be completed in February 2013 accompanied by a detailed and fully costed phase 1 public realm scheme for an area of the town centre.
- 4.2. Depending on the need for planning permission the implementation of this phase 1 scheme on the ground could begin in July 2013, with this possibly being delayed until November 2013 if planning consent is required.