

3.0 Baseline Evidence Review

Chapter 3.0 sets out a summary of key planning policies, and a summary of the baseline evidence SWOT analysis. This was informed by themed analysis that included Built Structure and Form, Economics and Viability, and Transport & Carbon town centre appraisals. Chapter 3.0 also includes a summary of key Planning Policies.

3.1 Planning Policy Context

The following section sets out key planning policy and planning documents at both the national and local level, that will help shape and influence the development of the Town Centre Plan.

National Planning Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these should be applied. As such, they inform the development of policies within the emerging Local Plan and the Town Centre Plan.

The NPPG encourages economic growth and prosperity and paragraph 81 states plans should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. Paragraph 82 states planning policies should set out a clear economic vision and strategy which positively and proactively encourages sustainable economic growth.

In relation to town centres, paragraph 86 sets out that planning policies and decisions should support the role that Town centres play at the heart of local communities by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation. This should include promoting their long-term vitality and viability by allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries and allows a sustainable mix of uses (including housing) and reflects their distinctive character.

In relation to housing, paragraph 123 of the NPPF, sets out that plan policies should aim to optimise the use of land in their area. This should include seeking a significant uplift in the average density of residential development within city centres and other locations what are well served by public transport where appropriate. The accompanying National Planning Policy Guidance highlights that beyond the development plan, supplementary planning documents and permitted development rights, a range of other planning tools are available that can help to support centres to adapt and thrive.

Chapter 12 of the NPPF sets out priorities for achieving well designed places. Paragraph 126 sets out that the creation of high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve. Paragraph 130 emphasises the importance of a strong sense of place and paragraph 190 refers to the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment and opportunities to draw on the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of the place.



The Tunbridge Wells Local Plan requires the development of a strategy for the town centre which will provide the framework for the development of a future Town Centre Plan, to ensure the long-term vitality and viability of the centre over the plan period. The Town Centre Study document will inform the future Town Centre Plan.

Local Planning Policy

Emerging Local Plan

The Tunbridge Wells Submission Local Plan (October 2021), a plan which covers the whole borough) is in its final stages of preparation and examination by an independent inspector. The Submission Plan sets out the Council's proposed development strategy, distribution for growth and housing, employment and other needs for the borough and establishes the planning policy framework necessary to deliver them for the period 2020-2038.

The Submission Local Plan requires the development of a strategy for the town centre which will provide the framework for the development of a future town centre Area Plan, to ensure the long-term vitality and viability of the centre over the plan period. This Town Centre Study document will inform the future Town Centre Plan. Local Plan policy STR/RTW2 – The Strategy for Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre, sets out the overarching framework for the town centre. The Town Centre Plan should accord and align with this policy.

The emerging Submission Local Plan will replace the current adopted planning policy for the town. Until the Local Plan is adopted, the following documents are relevant to the consideration of any development within the town centre.

The Core Strategy (2010)

The Core Strategy was adopted in 2010 and covers the period to 2026. It includes specific policies relating to development within the town including approximate figures for new homes, employment and retail space specifically within the town centre. In

addition, it recognises the rich heritage and landscape value of the town, and principles related to sustainable design and construction.

The Site Allocations Local Plan (2016)

This document allocates sites for development in order to meet the levels of growth identified within the Core Strategy. Some of the site allocations fall within the defined town centre area and are allocated for a range of uses including retail, employment, residential and mixed use developments.

Any development coming forward within the town centre area will need to be considered against the above policy framework.

Other Material Considerations

The National Planning Policy Guidance, which accompanies the NPPF, highlights that beyond national guidance and the local development plan, other supporting documents and guidance prepared by a local authority to support the policies and strategies in the adopted and emerging plan can be considered. The production of this Study has also been informed by other relevant documents, including the Royal Tunbridge Wells Conservation Area Appraisal (2000), [The Royal Tunbridge Wells Urban Design Framework \(2014\)](#) the [Tunbridge Wells Civic Development Planning Framework \(2018\)](#) and the [Cultural Strategy \(2014-2024\)](#).



Should've gone savers to Spec

CONSOLE



HAVET

3.2 Built Environment

Strategic location

The Borough of Tunbridge Wells lies in the south west of Kent, bordering East Sussex. Both the natural and built environment of the borough are of high quality, and nearly 70% of the borough designated as High Weald AONB is of national significance. All areas of the borough have distinct landscape and environmental characteristics much valued by residents, with commons, village greens, and parks providing important spaces and links to the countryside. Around 22% of the western part of the borough surrounding Royal Tunbridge Wells, Southborough, Pembury and other villages, and abutting the western edge of Paddock Wood, is Green Belt. Together, the AONB and Green Belt cover 75% of the borough. The borough is also rich in historic features, and has a significant breadth of designated and non-designated heritage assets, including listed buildings and conservation areas. In addition, it supports a wide network of biodiversity sites including 10 Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

The Town Centre and surrounding area

The town centre is encircled by residential neighborhoods with linear streets, generous gardens, and mature trees. The Common, along with Calverley Grounds and Camden Park are protected as areas for leisure and recreation and fall within and adjacent to the town centre boundary. The residential areas are separated by a leafy railway cutting to the northeast and southwest, and all three parks are just a short walk from the town centre.

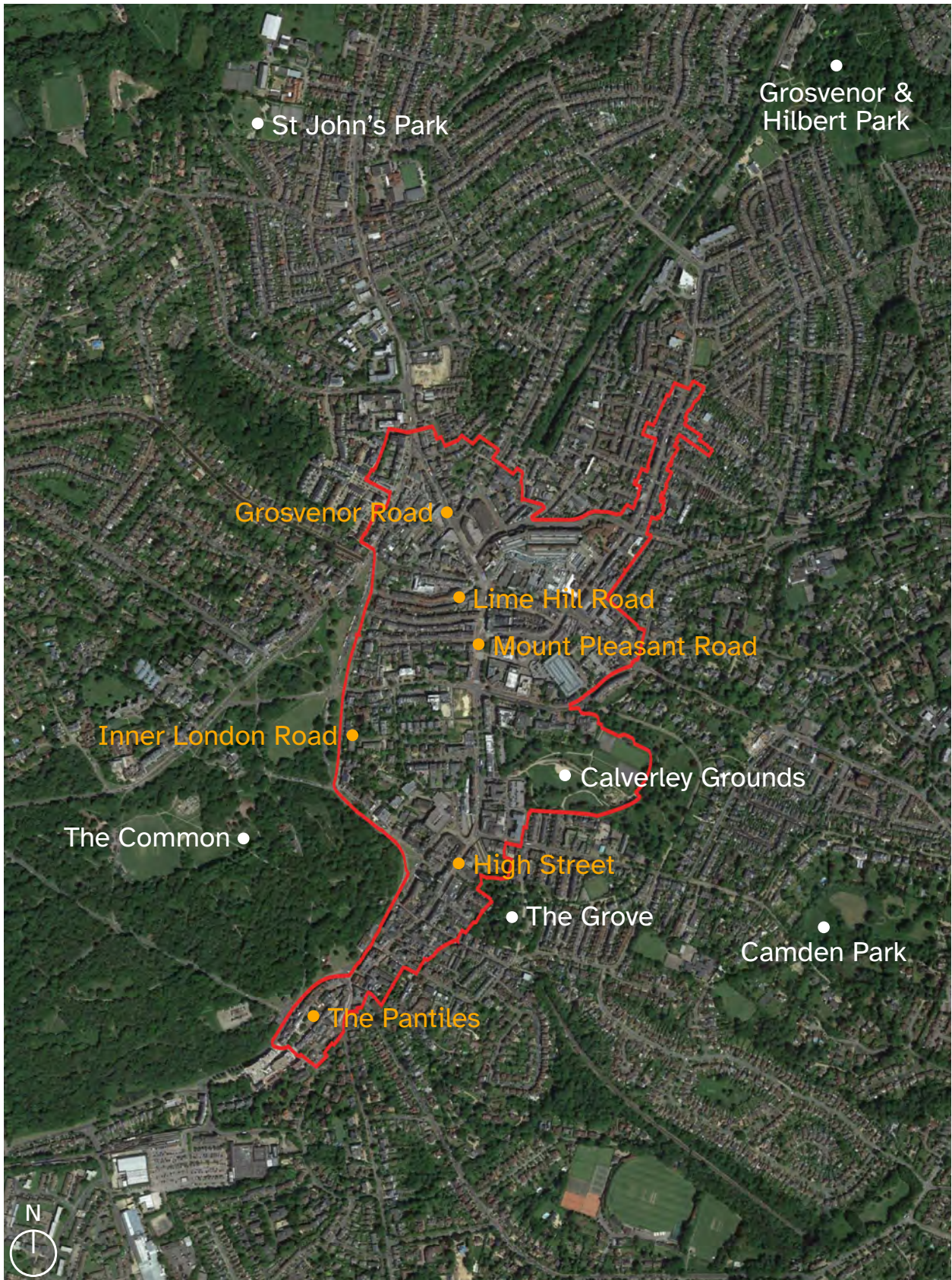
Built form

The town centre is characterised by an assortment of historic structures ranging from generous villas, terraces, and grand civic buildings. Highlights include the terraces of Lime Hill Road, Dudley Road and York Road (west), The Pantiles and historic High Street (south), and numerous current or former civic and cultural buildings in and around Mount Pleasant Road. These are contrasted by an abundance of twentieth century buildings of larger scale including offices, car parks, apartments, and retail. Much of the urban fabric contributes positively to the town centre, although some of it is outdated, neglected, or in need of transformation.

Urban structure

Royal Tunbridge Wells evolved along a linear and undulating primary route and as such is characterised with no obvious centre culminating in a mix of different retail, cultural and leisure experiences. As a result of this elongated urban structure, aside from the length of the primary route and challenging topography particularly on Mount Pleasant Road, the town centre is easily navigable north-south with just two primary streets (Mount Pleasant Road and the edge of the Common) facilitating movement. The east-west streets are of a much finer grain, with a number of terraced streets to the west of the former Opera House giving way to a more fragmented and less permeable structure to the south-west.

— Town Centre Study Boundary



Aerial photograph showing Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre and surrounding area.

Spatial character

Due to the regular intersection of linear primary route and finer grain secondary and tertiary east-west streets the town centre is distinguished by a number of different spatial conditions which are often characterised by a particular building style or use. In between, a number of nodal points exaggerate these different areas, which are often severed by highways infrastructure.

The town centres' historic streets are mostly unchanged and retain its initial spatial and built character. For instance, the historic terraces of Dudley Road (west) and the primary route leading to The Pantiles (south) are of exceptional quality. The retail areas around Royal Victoria Place Shopping Centre and Calverley Road are dominated by infrastructure. To the south-west, the built form, spatial characteristics and general connectivity is more fragmented.

The primary north-south street that extends from Grosvenor Road in the north to The Pantiles in the south is fronted by extensive retail, which is focussed upon three core areas. The Royal Victoria Shopping Centre occupies a large urban parcel and associated back of house and parking infrastructure to the north. Camden Road in the north-east is of a more domestic scale whilst the historic setting of the The High Street and The Pantiles in the south creates a finer grain and more sensitive built and spatial environment.

(See Appendix A for more detailed observations).



Royal Tunbridge Wells High Street



Crescent Road / Mount Pleasant Road



Ely Food Court on Calverley Road



Civic Way

Land use

Retail uses define much of the town centre with localised areas of retail in the north occupying Grosvenor Road, Camden Road, Royal Victoria Place Shopping Centre and Calverley Road. This is replicated to the south, along Mount Pleasant Road, The High Street and The Pantiles. Cultural and office uses mostly occupy the town centre around Crescent Road and Mount Pleasant Road. Residential uses characterise much of the north-western edge along with a number of office uses. Multi-storey car parks, places of worship, hotels, healthcare and education uses characterise the rest of the town centre.

Culture and leisure

Integral to Royal Tunbridge Wells diverse character is its strong creative economy, quoted as having one of the largest populations of creative professionals in Kent. The town centre has a long history of locally made art, including Tunbridge Ware, a form of marquetry created in the 1700s. There are three theatres in the borough offering a range of performing arts from musicals, operas, jazz and drama. There is also a strong visual arts community, with heritage and art trails and large exhibitions at art galleries displaying local Kent and Sussex artists' work. The Spa Valley Railway is situated on part of the former Tunbridge Wells West station that used to connect to London and Brighton. The steam heritage railway runs from Tunbridge Wells to Eridge.

Access and movement

Royal Tunbridge Wells Train Station has several services running every day with direct connections to London Bridge/ Water East, Charing Cross and Cannon Street to the north and southwards to Hastings and Brighton. Moreover, many bus providers serve Royal Tunbridge Wells, connecting the surrounding residential areas to the town centre, and further afield. However, there is a lack of provision for coach parking and bus layover spaces within the town centre.

Due to the ingrained characteristics of the town, including the historic built environment and available greenspaces, the overall walking experience is pleasant. Nevertheless, due to the A26 & A264 passing through the town a number of significant highway intersections prioritise the motor car, meaning the pedestrian and bicycle environment, and general movement between various parts of the town and its green spaces / civic realm is of low quality. In addition, there is an absence of cycling network infrastructure connecting wider areas into / out of the town centre and within.

Heritage designations

There are numerous heritage assets across the study area, including the town centre Conservation area, which extends across the entire town centre apart from localised areas in the north; many listed buildings with clusters around London Road, Crescent Road and The Pantiles; and Calverley Grounds is a registered Historic Park and Garden.

- Residential
- Office
- Retail



Land use plan - residential, office & retail

- Good street enclosure
- Weak street enclosure



Street enclosure assessment

- Cultural
- Other Uses
- Car Parks



Land use plan - cultural, car parks & other

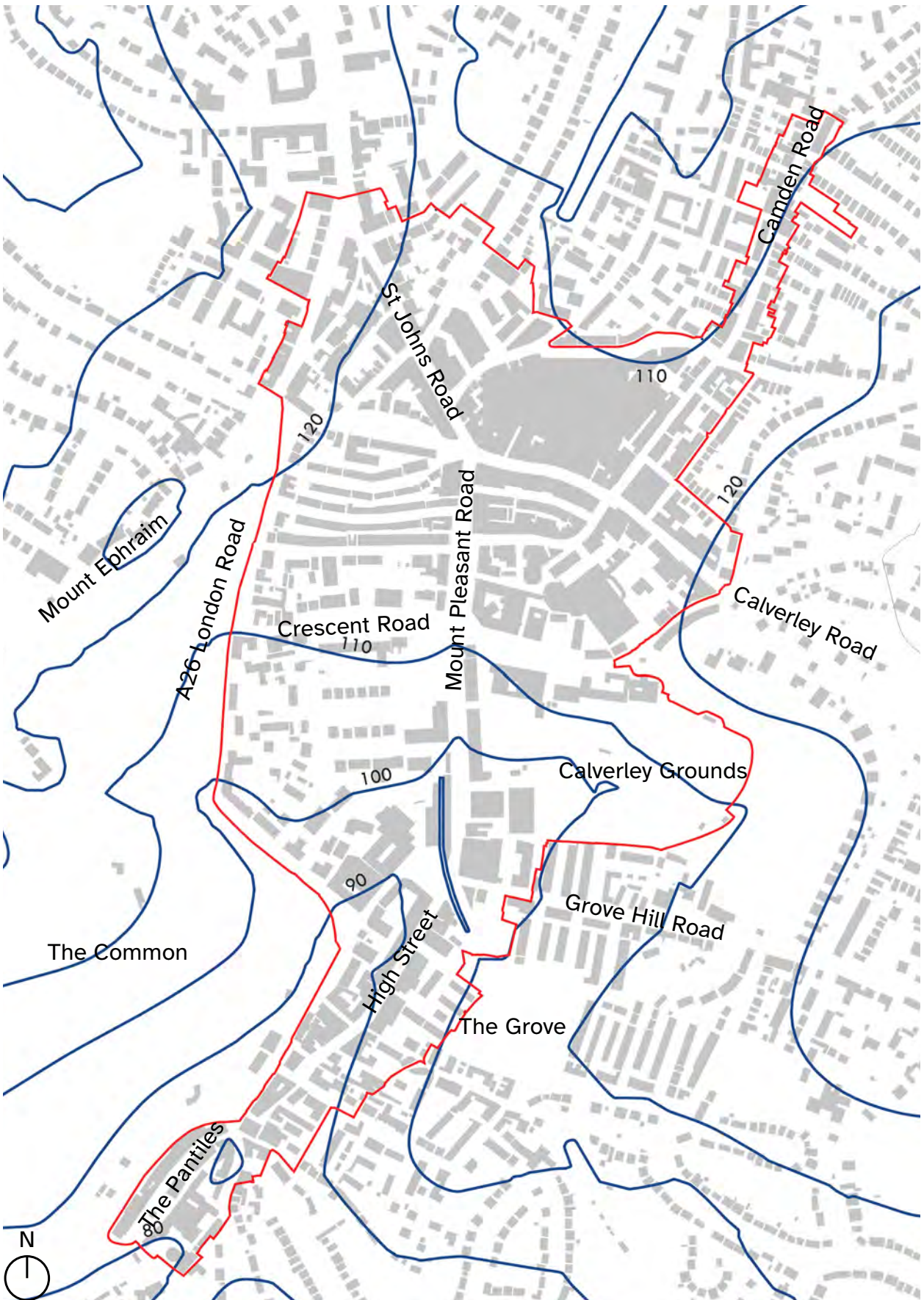
- Listed Buildings
- Conservation Area



Heritage designations & listed buildings

— Topographical contours

— Town Centre Study Boundary



Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre study area topography plan

Topography

The undulating topography contributes to the town centres' physical characteristics and urban environment. Grosvenor Road vista defines a strong northern gateway experience of entering the town centre that descends all the way to The Pantiles.

Movement and accessibility is particularly challenging along Mount Pleasant Road (south of Church Road) and upon accessing the Common from the east due to topography.

Open spaces and healthy streets

The town centre is characterised by a strong landscape framework and generous green open spaces including the Common, Calverley Grounds and Grove Park. Many of these green assets are within a short walk of the town centre. That said, these green assets are not always visible from the town centre, and the streets and spaces lack green infrastructure provision such as trees, planting and soft landscaping. With a focus on well-being and by challenging car use and overall movement, there remains significant opportunities to transform the urban environment by extending green spaces into the town centre, greening streets, introducing blue infrastructure (sustainable urban drainage) and relocating or removing on-street parking.



Open spaces plan - green infrastructure

Land ownership

The town centre area falls within a large number of different ownerships. This includes public and private bodies. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council owns multiple land ownerships within the town centre, including public car parks and other sites. It will be important to liaise and engage with key landowners within the centre in the development of the Town Centre Plan.

Site Allocations

Within the Submission Local Plan (October 2021) which is currently undergoing Examination as referred to at Section 3.1, three sites are allocated for development that fall within the defined town centre boundary. These draft allocations will provide the policy basis for making decisions on planning applications for development on these sites. Further detail is set out below, but it should be noted that these are currently in draft form:

Policy AL/RTW 1 – Former Cinema Site, Mount Pleasant Road

The former cinema site on Mount Pleasant Road is allocated for a mixed-use development, including approximately 100 residential dwellings and commercial use such as shops, restaurants, offices and a cinema. Developments must adhere to specific requirements, including a retail frontage on Mount Pleasant Road, containment of all servicing and delivery activity within the site boundary and high-quality design that conserves and enhances the surrounding Conservation Area. The proposal must also include public realm improvements, such as public art and enhanced lighting.

Planning permission has since been approved for this site in January 2023 for the redevelopment of an extra care retirement community with associated facilities, new commercial floorspace and sui generis uses.

Policy AL/RTW 2 - Land at Auction House, Linden Park Road

The site is allocated for a mix of town centre uses and could include commercial, shops, restaurants, financial and professional services, sui generis uses and residential as part of a mixed-use scheme. The development should include re-providing public car parking, improving pedestrian access to the Pantiles, enhancing the area's gateway, respecting its historic setting, delivering public realm improvements and being assessed against adopted affordable housing policy.

Policy AL/RTW 3 - Land at Lifestyle Ford, Mount Ephraim / Culverden Street / Rock Villa Road

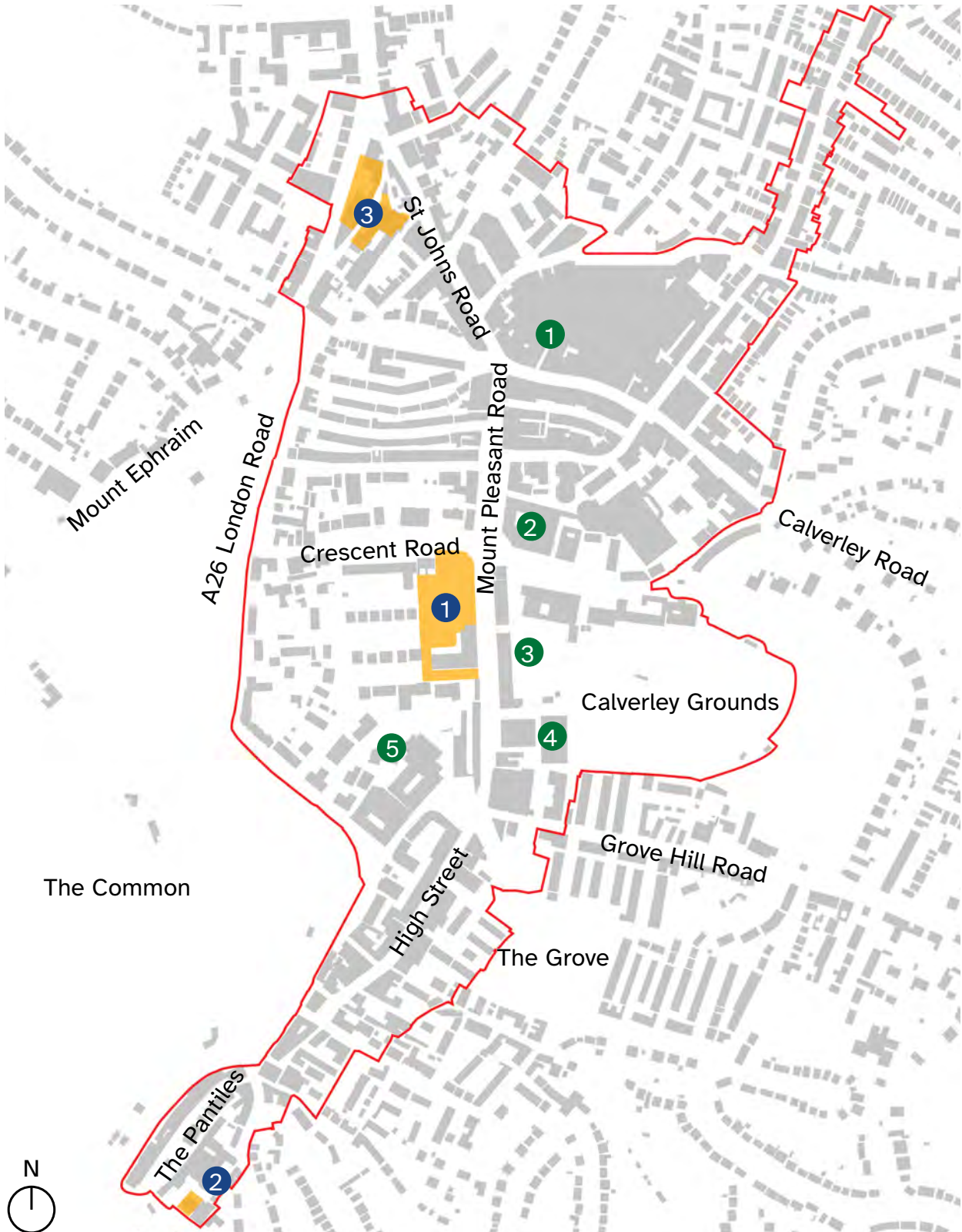
This site on Culverden Street is designated for approximately 100 dwellings, with 30% of them to be affordable housing. The development must provide vehicular access, delivery and servicing from Culverden Street and pedestrian access from west to east. The site must retain No.15 Mount Ephraim and any redevelopment must be of high quality design that conserves the Conservation Area and enhances the setting of the adjacent Listed Buildings.

In addition to the above specific allocations, a number of sites are also identified within Draft Policy STR/RTW 2 – The Strategy for Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre, as key sites. These sites are considered to be integral to the realisation of the strategy for the town centre and should form part of the comprehensive vision for the centre. The following sites are listed:

- The Royal Victoria Place shopping centre;
- Calverley Road; the existing civic complex (including the Town Hall, Assembly Hall Theatre, and Police Station);
- The former cinema site, Mount Pleasant Road;
- Mount Pleasant Avenue car park and The Great Hall car park and surrounds; and
- Torrington and Vale Avenue.

Further work will need to be carried out in regard to the future use of these sites, in terms of any landowner aspirations, suitability and mix of any proposed uses and how they can contribute to the overall future development of the town. Collaboration with landowners, stakeholders and the wider public will be required as these sites are considered.

- Town Centre Study Boundary
- Local Plan Site Allocations
- Policy AL/RTW 1
- Policy AL/RTW 2
- Policy AL/RTW 3
- Policy STR/RTW 2 Identified Sites
- 1 The Royal Victoria Place
- 2 Calverley Road - Civic Complex
- 3 Mount Pleasant Avenue Car Park
- 4 The Great Hall Car Park
- 5 Torrington and Vale Avenue



Local Plan site allocations and STR/RTW 2 identified sites



COFFEE SHOP
ANTIQUES & VINTAGE

Laven's

FLORIST
GIFTS & GALLERY

01892 545456

INTERIOR DESIGN & D

RENOVATION & PROJECT

THE
COLOUR
HOUSE

OF TUNBRIDGE
www.colourhouse

N926
MEL ANGE

Mount Ephraim Road

3.3 Economics and Viability (Knight Frank)

Overview

Royal Tunbridge Wells has many inherent strengths as a town. The underlying economic and demographic structure of the town and its wider hinterland are generally supportive of a robust town centre. The absence of another competitive centre of equal scale and quality effectively renders its catchment captive. With some areas of exception, the town remains aesthetically pleasing.

At the same time, the town could be significantly improved through an updated and revised Masterplan. Rather than total re-invention, the town needs to recognise both its strengths and weaknesses - to consolidate and build on the former, to proactively address the latter through a series of strategic interventions.

Please refer to 'Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Retail Study and Healthcheck' (Knight Frank) full report for further findings and information.

Slight reduction in total retail footprint to address current over-supply

The UK retail market as a whole is oversupplied, a by-product of over-zealous development in the past and no managed process of renewal, as much as the growth in online shopping. Most towns in the UK have a surplus of retail floorspace, which can be highly problematic.

Royal Tunbridge Wells is not an exception to this, but our analysis (which is consistent with the Councils current evidence in the form of the Retail, Commercial Leisure and Town Centre Uses Study produced by Nexus Planning in 2021) suggests that the level of current oversupply is not chronic - a reduction in overall floorspace (comparison and convenience goods) of between ca. 30k - 150k (-2.5% to -13.0%) would see the town achieve sustainable / very healthy levels of space productivity.

Less, but better floorspace

Quantifying over-supply is, in many regards, easier than implementing an 'on-the-ground' strategy to realise it. We would not anticipate fundamental change to the town's basic 'footprint' i.e. we would not recommend that any portion or section of the town's linear footprint be 'de-commissioned' for retail use. On the contrary, we believe that retail and leisure uses have a fundamental role to play the full length of the town's footprint.

Reducing the quantum of retail floorspace is likely to be achieved through space consolidation, rather than 'de-commissioning'. From an objective standpoint, the obvious focus for this would be Royal Victoria Place, which is considerably over-spaced, as evidenced by high vacancy rates and long term void units. Consolidating this scheme into something that is more fit for purpose could potentially achieve the space reduction that is considered necessary.

In general, space reduction is a difficult process that needs sensitive planning and careful management. But it would appear infinitely more viable in Royal Tunbridge Wells than it does in other more challenged towns and cities across the UK.

Royal Victoria Place and ABC Site both transformational in realising vision

We are aware of a number of potential development sites within the wider Borough. The former ABC Site is clearly the most relevant and poignant to the health and vitality of the town centre, given both its key location and protracted history. Although not necessarily formally classified as such, we would identify Royal Victoria Place as the other key development site longer term.

That is not to say that the other development sites are irrelevant, but to our mind, they lie outside the town centre core. They are likely to have considerable positive impact on the wider hinterland and indeed, further enhance the potential audience of the town centre itself.

We are of the firm opinion that development of the ABC Site and Royal Victoria Place have the potential to be transformational in resetting the town's vitality and viability. Not only are they major projects in their own right, they are also pillars upon which many of the town's other improvement initiatives can be hung.

Royal Victoria Place – floorspace reduction, consolidation, partial re-purposing

As already identified, Royal Victoria Place is a key opportunity in Royal Tunbridge Well's overall proposition. Despite some investment in cosmetic features and a degree of asset management on the part of the previous (Hermes) and current (British Land) owners, the scheme is severely challenged and in need of a substantial re-think.

We firmly believe that there is still scope for a managed shopping centre in Royal Tunbridge Wells, albeit one that reflects the future rather than the past. In very basic terms, the existing scheme has too much retail floorspace (ca. 300,000 sq ft) and has an excess of vacant units, including a number of long-term problematic voids. In our opinion, consolidation of the existing space and re-development of parts of the centre would create a more appropriate scheme and this is likely to entail relocating some of the key tenants (e.g. Next, Sports Direct, WH Smith, JD) to better units.

Objectively, we believe there should be scope to re-purpose some of the existing retail space to other uses, be they commercial (e.g. leisure, cinema, gym, offices etc.) or possibly residential. We recognise that re-purposing projects are usually more complicated and capital-intensive than many perceive them to be. On that basis, we are not in a position to be prescriptive at this stage, but believe there are a number of potential options that could be explored.

We have limited transparency on the landlord's plans for Royal Victoria Place and are not aware of any specific planning application. But we would advocate proactive engagement from the RTW Town Centre Working Group with British Land. This would extend far beyond the centre management team to key decision makers at head office. As well as understanding British Land's position on Royal Victoria Place, this may pave the way for wider collaboration and potentially open up joint-venture opportunities.

Re-location and right-sizing of existing tenants

Our retail audit highlights that a number of existing tenants in Royal Tunbridge Wells may be trading in compromised units, largely in terms of store size. Our analysis suggests that over 90 operators emerge as being 'under-spaced' relative to their sister stores in the benchmark centre. In many cases, the differential may be fairly small (<1,000 sq ft), but there are still 30+ operators where the difference is >1,000 sq ft. Some trade from units that are only around half the size of their respective benchmark averages.

Of course, many of these operators may be happy in their current premises and location and may not necessarily wish to re-locate. Nevertheless, we believe there is scope for a process of 'right-sizing' and any re-development will undoubtedly give rise to fresh opportunities.

How this process is managed is challenging. There is no specific approach to which tenant should occupy what space and the process is in many respects subject to open market forces. We would suggest that the Business Improvement District (BID) maybe the best forum through which this process could at least be explored.

Wider regeneration of Calverley Road and environs

Calverley Road is still recognised as Royal Tunbridge Wells' prime retail pitch, but it doesn't project a desperately appealing shopping experience, is blighted by high vacancy levels and appears to have been subject to under-investment for many years.

Calverley Road still has a key role as one of the hubs and focal points of the town centre as a whole, but it needs major rejuvenation. Its proximity to Royal Victoria Place is potentially a key factor in any regeneration initiatives. Any re-development of the shopping centre can prove a catalyst for wider change in the streets and areas that surround it, most notably Calverley Road itself (not least because many of the key tenants in Royal Victoria Place have frontage onto Calverley Road).

We note that 14 units on Calverley Road (2-46) are under common ownership (Evolve Estates). This is potentially a positive facilitator of change in that fragmented ownership tends to be a major barrier to progress as it is notoriously difficult to achieve consensus. Again, we would advocate proactive engagement on the part of RTW Town Centre Working Group with Evolve Estates as a major stakeholder in one of the key pitches in the town.

As part of the regeneration process of Calverley Road and the surrounding streets we would anticipate a number of streetscaping initiatives and wider public realm improvements. For more detail on these, please refer to the parallel reports produced by our co-consultants LDA Design and City Science.

Proactively targeting / 'managing' vacant units

Although vacancy levels in Royal Tunbridge Wells (ca. 18%) are not significantly worse than peer group averages, it is still in the town's interests that the figure is reduced to a more sustainable level (<10% in the short term, <5% longer-term). Given that no one has total jurisdiction over the town and it is subject to open market forces, the vacancy rate can only be actively 'managed' to a certain degree.

Many of the vacant units in the lower end of the town (The Pantiles and High Street) are of limited concern. While they may currently be vacant, occupier demand is generally strong and the prospects for re-occupation are generally sound. Some of those on Mount Pleasant, around Calverley Road and Royal Victoria Place are potentially more problematic, although any development initiatives in these areas should address vacant units by default by creating units and spaces tailored to the needs of would-be occupiers.

In our opinion, proposed Central Government initiatives to address town centre vacancy are unworkable. The proposal that vacant units are effectively 'put up for auction' to the highest bidder is predicated on the false notion that 'greedy' landlords are wilfully holding back units to deprive would-be occupiers, when the reality is far more

nuanced (and the most likely reason is there is zero occupier interest).

We would propose the RTW Town Centre Working Group keep a tentative log / database of vacant units in the town, possibly in conjunction with key local retail agents. Although opportunities for intervention may be limited, this may be as far as the situation can be 'managed'.

Attracting new / former retail tenants and new leisure / F&B operators

A continual through-put of new tenants is essential for a town's vitality. 'New blood' from both national multiples and independents is a key driver in refreshing the town centre's offer. Our analysis of Requirements highlighted more than 20 retail and leisure operators with an active interest in opening in Royal Tunbridge Wells. These include a number of high street names (e.g. Savers, Dune), F&B brands (e.g. Ole & Steen, Vapiano, Taco Bell) and leisure operators (Everyman Cinema, David Lloyd, Travelodge – whether this requirement is historic or active is unconfirmed).

Our 'gap' analysis highlights far richer potential. We are able to identify ca. 350 retailers that trade in at least two of the benchmark centres, but are not present in Royal Tunbridge Wells. Of these, around 60 trade in at least four of the benchmark centres. Included in these are a large number of high profile operators such as Primark, John Lewis, Waitrose, H&M, Zara, River Island, House of Fraser, TK Maxx, McDonalds and Nando's.

The 'gaps' basically fall into three camps: 1. Those that have traded in Royal Tunbridge Wells previously, but have since vacated. 2. Those that trade on one of the retail parks in the wider catchment rather than in the town centre itself. 3. Those that have never traded in Royal Tunbridge Wells. Those that fall in the third camp are more realistic targets than those that fall in the first two.

Of course, not all the 'gap' retailers identified will necessarily want to take space in Royal Tunbridge Wells, but the list is sufficiently long to suggest potentially rich occupier demand. Positive intervention and investment in the town centre is likely to create renewed interest amongst would-be occupiers.

Attracting new / former retail tenants and new leisure / F&B operators

The former ABC cinema site has long been a major blot on the town's vitality and viability. It has been a vacant development site for more than 20 years, adding little to the town other than ongoing uncertainty.

After multiple ownership changes, we understand that current owner Retirement Village Group has submitted plans for the site. We understand that the proposals are largely for Senior Living residential accommodation with limited commercial use, whereas previous aborted projects were more mixed-use in nature.

There is no denying that the site itself is pivotal in the overall footprint of the town. It is broadly halfway down the linear pitch and is effectively the 'link' between the southern (Pantiles/High Street) and northern (Calverley Road/

Royal Victoria Place) ends of the town. Without an authoritative offer and a centre of gravity there is a risk that the central point of the town 'sags' and doesn't punch its weight – and we believe this to be the case currently while the site remains undeveloped. Strong brands in the vicinity such as Wagamamas, Starbucks, Cote, Pitcher & Piano, Jigsaw and Russell & Bromley only partially remedy what is otherwise a weakspot in the town.

We have not formally appraised the viability of the Senior Living proposed at the site, but intuitively, it would seem to make sense. Senior Living developers favour affluent towns in the South East and demand is strongest for in-town sites where residents can readily access local amenities on foot. The ABC Site certainly ticks all these boxes.

At the same time, this does not preclude other uses being incorporated into the plan. Our retail audit identifies considerable need for new Leisure space within the town centre, particularly on the F&B side. There is also a strong case for a new cinema, which is more likely to be a boutique rather than mainstream / multiplex operator. Although this Leisure space could be incorporated into any new development / asset management in the northern part of the town / Royal Victoria Place, the ABC site intuitively feels a more appropriate location.

We understand that plans have already been submitted. To our mind, to have no significant commercial elements within the site plan would represent a missed opportunity.

3.4 Transport and Carbon (City Science)

Please refer to 'Town Centre Study: Transport & Carbon Baseline Report' (City Science) full report for further findings and information.

Policy Overview

There has been a significant policy shift over the last few years, particularly at a national level. The government has set a binding target of the UK having net zero emissions by 2050. It aims to do this through increasing clean energy production, investing in carbon capture, funding retrofit programmes to decarbonise the UK's domestic and commercial heating systems, and delivering major reform in the transport sector.

In terms of transport, focus is being put on delivering high quality walking and cycling schemes which encourage people out of their cars. Simultaneously the government has invested in public transport through the National Bus Strategy and has committed to ending the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030.

The Tunbridge Wells Submission Local Plan sets out a clear hierarchy for transport priorities in the borough: walking, cycling, public transport and then cars/vans (Strategic Policy STR6). In addition, the preparation of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) sets a framework for a high-quality walking and cycling network in Royal Tunbridge Wells.

Active Travel

Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre has some examples of pleasant streets for walking. However, there are severance issues in and around the town centre which discourage both walking and cycling. This includes congested routes including the A264 (Crescent Road / Church Road), A26 St John's Road and the Grosvenor Road /Meadow Road / Victoria Road one way system. There are no segregated cycle routes in the town centre at present.

Some data (e.g. Strava Metro) indicates that there has been a significant increase in the number of recorded journeys both for walking and cycling between 2019 and 2021, but delivery of the network of cycle routes in the LCWIP is required to make a step change in the number of journeys made by bike.



Mount Pleasant Road

Public Transport

There is good bus connectivity between Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre and Tonbridge Town Centre along the A26. There are also services linking the town centre to Sevenoaks, Maidstone and south to Brighton & Hove (via Crowborough and East Grinstead). Local services cross the town centre between Rusthall and High Brooms station / Knights Wood.

However, services have been reduced since COVID-19 due to service viability pressures and much of the rural area surrounding Royal Tunbridge Wells has very limited or an absence of bus services to access the town centre. There are also infrastructure provision challenges within the town centre itself with local bus companies like Arriva Southern Counties identifying there is a lack of bus stands (space for drivers to take a break); particularly considering future development planned for the town.

In terms of rail, there is good connectivity between Royal Tunbridge Wells and London and Hastings, with journey times to London Bridge at 55 minutes from Tunbridge Wells Station. However, there is a lack of natural wayfinding, or a sense of arrival at the station which makes it less attractive for people to walk from the station to other parts of the town centre (north and south).

Highways and Parking

There are several key arterial routes that pass through or adjacent to the town centre including the A26 and A264. Congestion is a key issue which impacts upon the town centre, contributing to air quality and safety issues and a poor amenity; underlined by the designated Air Quality Management Area on the A26 to the west of the town centre. Increased travel demand from new housing developments identified in the emerging Local Plan will need to maximise sustainable transport opportunities and reduce the threat of increased congestion impacting the town centre.

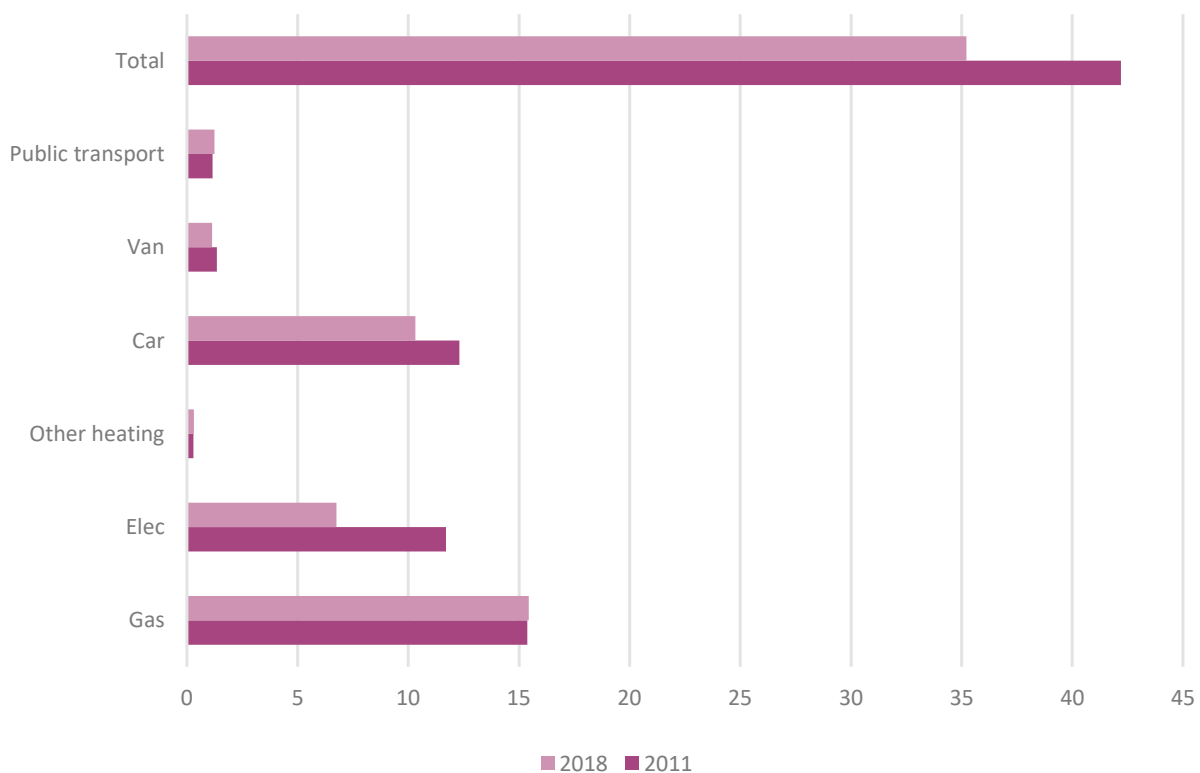
There is plentiful, reasonably priced parking within the town centre alongside many opportunities for free on-street parking, which reduces the attractiveness of sustainable modes for journeys to and from the town centre. There is also a lack of Electric Vehicle charging infrastructure either on-street or within council-owned car parks at present.

Carbon Baseline

Decarbonisation progress in the town centre of Tunbridge Wells has been similar to the rest of the UK – total CO₂e emissions in 2018 were 35.2 ktCO₂e which represents a 16.6% reduction compared to 2011 (the national average reduction for over same period for the domestic and transport sector was 12.5%). Domestic emissions which include electricity, gas and other heating consumption represented 64% of the town centre’s emissions, of which gas consumption equated to 15.4 ktCO₂e and electricity consumption 6.7 ktCO₂e.

Town centre transport emissions (car, van and public transport) reduced by 14.3% since 2011, compared to a 2.2% rise nationally. 81.3% of transport emissions in the town centre are car-related, and this figure has not changed significantly between 2011 and 2018. The key to decarbonising the town centre is investing in decarbonising domestic buildings, which accounted for 22 ktCO₂e in 2018. Within this around two thirds of emissions were attributed to gas.

The main opportunities for decarbonisation in Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre exist around renewable heat course potential (e.g. heat pumps or district heat network) which reduce reliance on gas, rooftop solar PV potential, and modal shift to active and sustainable modes for those visiting the town centre.



Summary Emissions Breakdown of the town centre (2011 vs 2018)



Calverley Ground Western Gateway

4.0

SWOT Analysis

Prior to undertaking extensive stakeholder engagement workshops and events (summarised in chapter 5.0), it has been necessary to summarise the SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) identified as part of the baseline review. Due to the morphological context of the town centre, these issues transcend the physical, environmental, social, and economic systems of the built environment and as such, require a considered and orderly system of concluding data.

In order to summarise the conclusions in a rationale way, the SWOT analysis has been structured in response to each of the project themes as follows:

Built Environment
Economics and Viability
Carbon Emissions and Decarbonisation
Transport and Movement

4.1 SWOT Analysis Summary

Built Environment

The strong heritage and cultural value of Royal Tunbridge Wells creates many strengths and opportunities for the future of the town centre. Its distinct character establishes a sense of place, with areas such as the Pantiles offering an attraction for visitors and residents. There are also a number of good quality public open spaces, however a lack of green connectivity or greening of streets means they are not fully realised. Weaknesses include physical characteristics of the town, such as topography and the linear nature of the town centre. Topographical challenges can be overcome at a smaller scale e.g. for specific sites or public realm improvements, but some more innovative approaches might be required at a town-wide scale.

A number of opportunities exist for development within the town centre, whether this is new development, introducing more town centre living, or unlocking redundant buildings and vacant development sites or re-purposing oversupplied retail or car parks.

Economics and Viability

Royal Tunbridge Wells has a strong existing strong retail and leisure offer, including a solid independent sector as seen on Camden Road. However, there are relatively high levels of vacancy and an oversupply of retail space that present as weaknesses to the town centre. Threats and Weaknesses include the economic climate and vacancy rates which are continuing to rise. Improvements to the Town should focus on attracting new tenants and capitalise on its latent potential.

There are opportunities to improve the leisure and food & beverage offer within the town, which in turn, along with the redevelopment of the ABC cinema site, will enable capitalisation of the night-time economy.

Carbon Emissions and Decarbonisation

There have been reductions in carbon emissions from all sources and more notably emissions from electricity in the town centre halved from 2011 to 2018. However, there have been some slight increases in carbon emissions in gas use in the same period. Three potential opportunities to halt this and improve and improve the carbon emissions of the town centre include implementing renewable heat sources, introducing rooftop solar and encouraging modal shifts to more sustainable modes.

Transport and Movement

As highlighted in the environmental and culture theme, the inherent characteristics of the town create a pleasant walking environment including popular walking routes through greenspaces that require little on-road routing. Notwithstanding a number of recently implemented schemes that have reduced the number of vehicles on key routes, traffic remains dominant within much of the town centre. Further technical work is required to consider if there are feasible options for re-routing traffic to both support the viability of the town centre and to promote walking, cycling and use of public transport. In addition, the plentiful supply of parking spaces in combination with the lack of provision for coach parking and bus layover spaces means that more sustainable modes of travel are not as attractive.

There are opportunities to make improvements to the public realm, and prioritise sustainable and active modes of travel that would improve the users experience of the town centre and work towards decarbonisation. Opportunities also exist for E-bikes and EV charging spaces.

4.2 Built Environment

Strengths

Heritage value

A number of historic buildings, conservation area and registered parks and gardens give RTW a strong character and identity.

Strong street enclosure

A well-defined linear primary route.

Character

Distinct character areas throughout the town centre with different attractions e.g. The Pantiles in the south.

Urban Grain

Finer network of secondary and tertiary east-west streets / connections.

Generous open spaces

Tunbridge Wells Common, Calverley Grounds, as well as Grove Park.

Cultural Provision

The Amelia Scott building provides a library, museum and other cultural and community facilities. The Assembly Hall Theatre, Trinity Theatre, The Forum and events on The Pantiles and in Calverley Grounds provide other cultural events and entertainment.

Central and southern street planting

Strong street planting along Calverley Precinct and Road, front of Town Hall and down Mount Pleasant Road.

Weaknesses

Topographical Challenges

The central part of the town centre along Mount Pleasant and Grosvenor Road to the north is situated on a hill which can Routes from rural areas of the borough into the town centre are limited, infrequent and fares are expensive walking connectivity for journeys on foot - particularly those with mobility impairments.

Minimal street planting in the north

While Tunbridge Wells in Bloom provides some planting during spring / summer months, there are limited areas of planting throughout the year, including street trees, especially in the northern part of the town centre (e.g. Grosvenor Road where the dominance of highways could be transformed to accommodate wider footways & street planting).

Parks not visually accessible

Limited or no visual connection from the primary roads to the parks resulting in a fragmented open space framework.

Low-grade architecture

There are pockets of lower grade architecture such as multi storey car parks and 3 or 4 storey dated office buildings.

Opportunities

Connect key green spaces

Reconnect green spaces to the town centre and to each other through street greening.

Meanwhile uses

Create opportunities for Markets, fairs, exhibitions, events, live theatre, and music etc. to activate the public realm and to reinforce the sense of local community.

Introduce more town centre living

Providing a mix of typologies including houses as well as apartments (subject to market demand).

Unlock underutilised buildings

Such as car parks to unlock new uses, activity, and connections.

Public realm improvements

Civic heart, shopping streets, one way road layout, station area and bridge.

Shop front design code and strategy

Simplify the approach to street signage and create some synergy and harmony with the public realm as well as the shop fronts as per latest policies.

Significant development sites

Explore future development opportunities when they arise (e.g. Public / private owned future development sites).

Royal Tunbridge Wells as a Spa Town

Emphasise the town's founding spa town foundations and celebrate its rich history.

Threats

Stagnation

Lack of future development coming forward could mean the town stagnates and the built environment would be negatively affected.

Loss of identity

New development in a different style needs to ensure that it doesn't have a negative impact on the existing character.

Maintenance and management

If infrastructure, such as cycle routes are not adequately maintained, it could reduce their suitability and therefore discourage people from using them. The same applies to areas of public open space and the need to ensure they instil a sense of community pride and ownership to ensure their longevity.

Lack of affordable housing and gentrification

A lack of affordable housing can result in social and economic inequality, with some residents unable to access appropriate housing and others forced to move away due to high housing costs.

Climate change

Future development will need to be designed to consider and respond to the impacts of climate change including undertaking a whole life carbon assessment. If this is not considered early enough in the process, there's a risk that opportunities will not be fully realised.

4.3 Economics and Viability

Strengths

Strong economic fundamentals

Royal Tunbridge Wells has inherent strengths and does not require total re-invention. Instead, a combination of measured improvement initiatives.

Limited competition

The town draws from a wide geographic area and is by far the dominant centre in the region.

Highly affluent shopper audience

The catchment area is demonstrably affluent and tend to have a higher propensity to spend.

Single shopping centre scheme

Royal Victoria Place is the only shopping centre in Town and its revamp can act as a catalyst for the whole town centre.

Strong independent sector

The town has a strong and thriving independent sector.

Pleasant shopping environment

Royal Tunbridge Wells is a popular destination due to its rich history and distinct character.

Weaknesses

Ageing population

The age profile is relatively middle-aged and the youthful age brackets are under-represented.

Punches below its weight as a town centre

In certain key retail sub-sectors if benchmarked against the peer group centres.

Long linear pitch and spread-out shopping

Parts of the town are overlooked by more popular shopping areas with better transport links.

Oversupplied in retail floorspace

The town has a surplus of retail floorspace, which can be highly problematic.

Relatively high levels of vacancy

Retail vacancy rates in the town centre are rising in recent years and there are long term void units.

Royal Victoria Place

The shopping centre is over-spaced and struggling and is a major weakness in the towns overall proposition.

Town centre living

The number of units and types within the town centre is limited.

Opportunities

Consolidate position as a top 50 UK centre

With strong economic fundamentals, the town should aspire to be a top 50 UK retail location on permanent basis.

Re-development of Royal Victoria Place

The shopping centre is potentially a key factor in any regeneration initiatives. Its redevelopment can prove a catalyst for wider change in the streets and surrounding area.

Renewed investment around Calverley Street

Calverley Road is still recognised as a prime retail pitch and a focal point, but it does not project an appealing shopping experience.

Improve / retain tenant line-up

There is an opportunity to build upon and widen the existing tenants in the town.

Improve food and beverage / leisure proposition

As a continual through-put of 'new blood' is essential for a town's vitality and offer.

New cinema / night-time economy

There is a strong case for a new cinema, which is more likely a boutique rather than mainstream / multiplex operator.

Former ABC cinema site major springboard for Mount Pleasant

The site has been a major blot on the town's vitality and viability.

Threats

Stagnation

'Doing nothing' sees the town drift and repel any potential new investors.

Increased leakage to other centres (e.g. Out of town, Bluewater, Maidstone)

There is an onus for the town centre proposition to be reviewed constantly and evolve accordingly to avoid leakage to other centres.

Vacancy continues to rise

The town centre vacancy rate in Royal Tunbridge Wells stood at a record high of 18.1% at the end of 2021 primarily due to under-investment & UK wide trends.

Inability to attract new tenants

As there is some evidence of decay and long-term vacancy, potential demand new tenants could be either derailed or deferred by drawn-out / ongoing uncertainty around the development proposals.

Town fails to capitalise its potential

If not maintained and further invested, the town might fail to capitalise on its great economic potential.

4.4 Carbon Emissions and Decarbonisation

Strengths

Carbon Emission Reduction Pace

Carbon emissions reduced by around 16.6% between 2018 (pre-COVID) and 2011 from all sources in the town centre. This was a faster rate than the national reduction average of around 12.5%.

Carbon Emissions from Electricity

Carbon emissions from electricity in the town centre almost halved between 2018 and 2011.

Per Capita Transport Emissions

Per capita transport emissions in the town centre in 2018 were around 1.0 tonne of CO₂e which was less than the national average of around 1.4.

Weaknesses

Carbon emissions reduced by around Gas Heating Reliance

Between 2011 and 2018, the carbon emissions linked to the use of gas have risen by approximately 0.4%. However, it is worth noting that this increase is lower than the national average, which stands at a 4% rise.

Overall Energy Emissions Stagnation

Carbon emissions associated with energy have remained largely static between 2018 and 2011, largely as a result of no reductions associated with gas.

Reliance on the Private Car

The high volume of car journeys in the area needs to be addressed in order to reduce carbon emissions from transport.

Opportunities

Renewable Heat Source Potential

Explore the opportunity to implement measures, such as heat pumps or district heating networks to reduce the town centres' reliance on gas as a heating source.

Rooftop Solar PV Potential

Measures should be considered to further reduce emissions from electricity consumption from the grid in the town centre, such as through measures which increase solar PV generation.

Modal Shift Potential

There is an opportunity for more trips to and from the town centre to be made by sustainable transport modes to reduce transport-related emissions.

Threats

Increased Demand

New housing developments on the edge of Royal Tunbridge Wells could increase carbon emissions in the town centre.

4.5 Transport and Movement

Strengths

Pleasant Walking Environment and The Pantiles

Walking environment in the town centre and The Pantiles is attractive, and there is a limited level of pedestrianisation in place already (Calverley Road & The Pantiles).

Green Space

Tunbridge Wells Common provides popular walking routes which provide access to the town centre requiring little on-road routing e.g. from Rushall.

Low Speed Limits

20 mph speed limits in the centre make it a better experience for walkers and cyclists.

Successful Car Club

Co-Wheels operates in Tunbridge Wells, with six cars in and around the town that have their own dedicated parking spaces.

Good Rail Connectivity

Frequent rail connections to London/Hastings.

Frequent Bus Services to Key Locations

There is a frequent bus service along the A26 between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)

LCWIP in place as framework for funding bids / S106 agreements.

Weaknesses

Poor Cycling Infrastructure

Absence of safe local transport route (LTN) 1/20 compliant cycling infrastructure providing connectivity within and into the town centre and limited space for reallocation of road space in some locations.

Traffic & Pedestrian Severance

Congested and heavily trafficked routes surrounding and through the town centre discourages walking connectivity and results in safety issues (e.g. on A26, A264, A26/Grosvenor Road roundabout).

Congestion

Congestion is a key issue, particularly in the peak periods (e.g. A26, A264) on radial routes into the town.

Dominance of the Car

Cars are the dominant mode of transport in the town centre, bringing issues such as congestion, pollution and pavement parking.

Lack of Provision for Coach Parking / Fewer Services

Lack of coach parking causes congestion and may also deter groups of visiting tourists. The National Express route to London appears to have been paused since COVID-19.

Cycle Parking

Lack of safe cycle parking provisions.

Lack of Natural Wayfinding / Sense of Arrival at Station

Not immediately obvious how visitors can walk to the town centre from the Rail Station.

Shortage of Bus Stands

There is a need for further bus stands in the town centre to accommodate the existing and expected increases in bus routes serving the town centre.

Bus Services

Routes from rural areas of the borough into the town centre are limited, infrequent and fares are expensive.

Plentiful of Affordable Parking

High levels of affordable/free parking on- and off-street reduces attractiveness of using sustainable modes for journeys to and from the town centre e.g. on Dudley Road and Molyneux Park Road.

Lack of EV Charging Infrastructure

Very limited on-street charging infrastructure to date.

Poor Air Quality

There is an Air Quality Management Area present on the A26 adjacent to the town centre.

Public Realm Issues

Some areas of the town have poor quality paving and have large amounts of clutter on the footpaths making it difficult and dangerous to navigate for pedestrians and particularly those with disabilities.

Topographical Challenges

The town centre is situated on a hill which can discourage walking connectivity – particularly those with mobility impairments.

Opportunities Active Travel

Residential areas are within a realistic walking, wheeling and cycling catchment of the town centre.

E-Bikes & Micromobility

Potential for greater use of e-bikes and micromobility to navigate the town centre topography and longer journeys.

EV Charging Network expansion

Potential to develop comprehensive charging network across the town centre for residents and visitors.

Peak Spreading

There has been a post-covid reduction in peak hour traffic meaning there are less cars on the roads during peak times than there were pre-covid. There's an opportunity to continue this trend by making sustainable travel modes an easier and more attractive choice for commuters.

Remove conflicts between pedestrians and buses

Particularly in the central spine of the town centre, reallocating road space for pedestrians and to make public realm improvements. Although it needs to be considered that this is a key route for dropping off and picking up bus users.

New LCWIP Routes

Delivery of new LCWIP routes has the potential to enhance connectivity for people cycling and walking.

Bus Fares

Many consider that bus fares are expensive. Reducing bus fare prices has the potential to draw new bus users to town's services.

Improvements to Mount Pleasant Road

Mount Pleasant Road acts as the main route to the top of the town from the station, but is currently not a pleasant environment for pedestrians. Making public realm improvements to provide a more obvious corridor and welcoming environment could encourage people to walk more rather than use taxis.

Collaboration

Between bus operators and KCC public transport with potential for innovation in service provision and improved infrastructure (e.g. real time information at stops).

Pedestrian connectivity

Improvement of connectivity throughout the town centre, including better waymarking and safer access to Tunbridge Wells Common.

Threats

Bus Service Viability Post-Covid

Bus patronage has not recovered post covid and costs have risen, leading to cuts in services and significant challenges for bus operators.

Reallocation of Road Space

Opposition (from residents, business and/or politicians) to reallocation of road space away from motor vehicles to more sustainable modes.

Increased Travel Demand

New housing developments on the edge of Royal Tunbridge Wells will increase overall travel demand in accessing both schools across town and the town centre itself which will need to be managed to maximise sustainable transport opportunities and reduce the threat of increased congestion.

Delivery Vehicles

There is a high volume of delivery vehicles both accessing the retail areas in the town centre and the surrounding residential areas.

High Levels of Car Ownership

Levels of car ownership in the town (and wider area) could make mode shift more difficult.

Funding

There are limited funding opportunities for transport infrastructure (from central government or the local transport authority).



Royal Tunbridge Wells Stakeholder Engagement Workshop

5.0

Engagement Events

Chapter 5.0 sets out a summary of the engagement events that took place in October and November 2022 to discuss the future for the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre. This engagement process was an informal first step to inform the Town Centre Study undertaken by LDA Design, City Science and Knight Frank alongside Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) and the Town Centre Working Group. The purpose of the engagement was to discuss the future of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre with local people and businesses, share local knowledge, participate in developing ideas and a vision for the future Town Centre Plan, and for the LDA Design, City Science and Knight Frank team to hear local views and reflect on the feedback. Various forms of engagement were undertaken including in person workshops, a community pop-up event and a questionnaire on the online engagement platform Talking Point.

5.1 Engagement Events Summary

A number of engagement exercises were undertaken with key groups and individuals to agree the aspirations for the town centre. They include:

A Walking Tour

A two hour walking tour of the Town Centre Study Area was undertaken with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the Town Centre Plan Working Group. Observations from the group were varied with comments focussed on the success of recent public realm works, the dominance of the car, and concerns around pedestrian connectivity amongst other things.

Stakeholder Workshops

Three workshops were held in the Town Hall in October, which aimed to engage with key stakeholders, including residents and traders. The purpose was to better understand the range of views and experiences, and to develop a shared vision for the future of Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre. The workshop findings informed a number of “Key Themes” as follows:

- A Spa Town
- Character & Experience
- A New Gateway
- Appearance and Maintenance
- Pedestrian and Cycle Connectivity
- Provision for leisure
- Attracting and retaining the younger generation

- Town centre living
- The Retail Offer
- Traffic and vehicular movement
- A Green Focus
- Parking provision and repurposing of buildings
- Future opportunities

Community Pop-up

The community pop-up was organised to enable the consultant team to speak with members of the public about their views of the town centre and its future. The pop-up was held at lunch time at the Five Ways Precinct and was well attended by people walking past and talking to the LDA Design and TWBC team. To summarise the views derived from the event, the following “Key Themes” have been established:

- Cultural Facilities & Events
- Local Economy
- Heritage & Culture
- Cycling Infrastructure & Shared Transport Hubs
- Transport & Parking
- Green Infrastructure & Public Realm
- Future Developments & Opportunities

Talking Point Questionnaire available on Tunbridge Wells Borough Council's website

The results show that both businesses and residents are concerned with the current state of the town centre, with both identifying traffic and parking as the main immediate issues. When asked to make recommendations towards the plan, businesses proposed an enhancement of the town centre, better links between the top and lower parts of the town, and an increased promotion and support for community events. Residents asked for more evening economy activities, leisure facilities, and greater range of outlets and affordable retailers.

For further information about the engagement events held, please refer to the separate Stakeholder & Community Engagement Report that should be read in conjunction with this document.



Walking Tour - Ely Court



Stakeholder Engagement Workshop



Community Pop-up event held at the Fiveways Precinct



Fiveways Precinct Community Pop-up Event

Feedback forms
Royal Tunbridge Wells
Town Centre Plan

6.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this document is to present the main technical outcomes derived from the baseline review that has informed the Town Centre Study. The review aimed to provide an in-depth analysis of various cross-cutting themes relevant to Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre, including the built environment, culture, economics, viability, movement, and decarbonisation. This document provides a concise summary of the technical studies, and also cross refers to other detailed reports undertaken by City Science and Knight Frank.

Based on the findings, Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre has many advantages that make it a desirable place to visit, work, and live. One of the key strengths of the town is its underlying economic structure, which supports a robust town centre. The local economy is diverse, with a range of businesses, shops, and services that cater to a variety of needs. This diversity, combined with the absence of another competitive centre of equal scale and quality, makes the town's catchment captive, meaning that it has a loyal and committed customer base that supports its businesses.

The town also benefits from its aesthetic appeal, with many areas that are visually pleasing to visitors and residents to walk through, dwell and shop. From its historic architecture to its green spaces, and heritage features.

To elevate its status as a sought-after destination, Royal Tunbridge Wells can capitalise on its assets, such as its compelling history, Spa Town distinctive character and identity, diverse economy, and abundance of cherished green spaces. By leveraging these strengths in a coordinated manner, the town can elevate its allure, providing an even more appealing experience for both locals, tourists and businesses alike.

Simultaneously, the town can proactively address its shortcomings, including challenges like severance and congestion, which hinder active travel. Enhancing the opportunities for town centre living and leisure facilities can also foster a more inclusive and vibrant community. Moreover, as climate change and evolving UK-wide town centre trends continue to reshape the urban landscape, Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre can take a forward-thinking stance by investing in sustainable infrastructure, such as cycle lanes and public transport.

This baseline review has provided the technical evidence base, which alongside the engagement events, have informed and shaped the vision for the Town Centre Study and the proposed areas for change.

Appendix A

Town Centre Physical Characteristics



Town Centre Physical Characteristics

In order to assess the physical characteristics of the town, character areas have been adopted from the Royal Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Urban Design Framework Supplementary Planning Document. The analysis has been summarised in schedule format on the following pages adopting the following criteria:

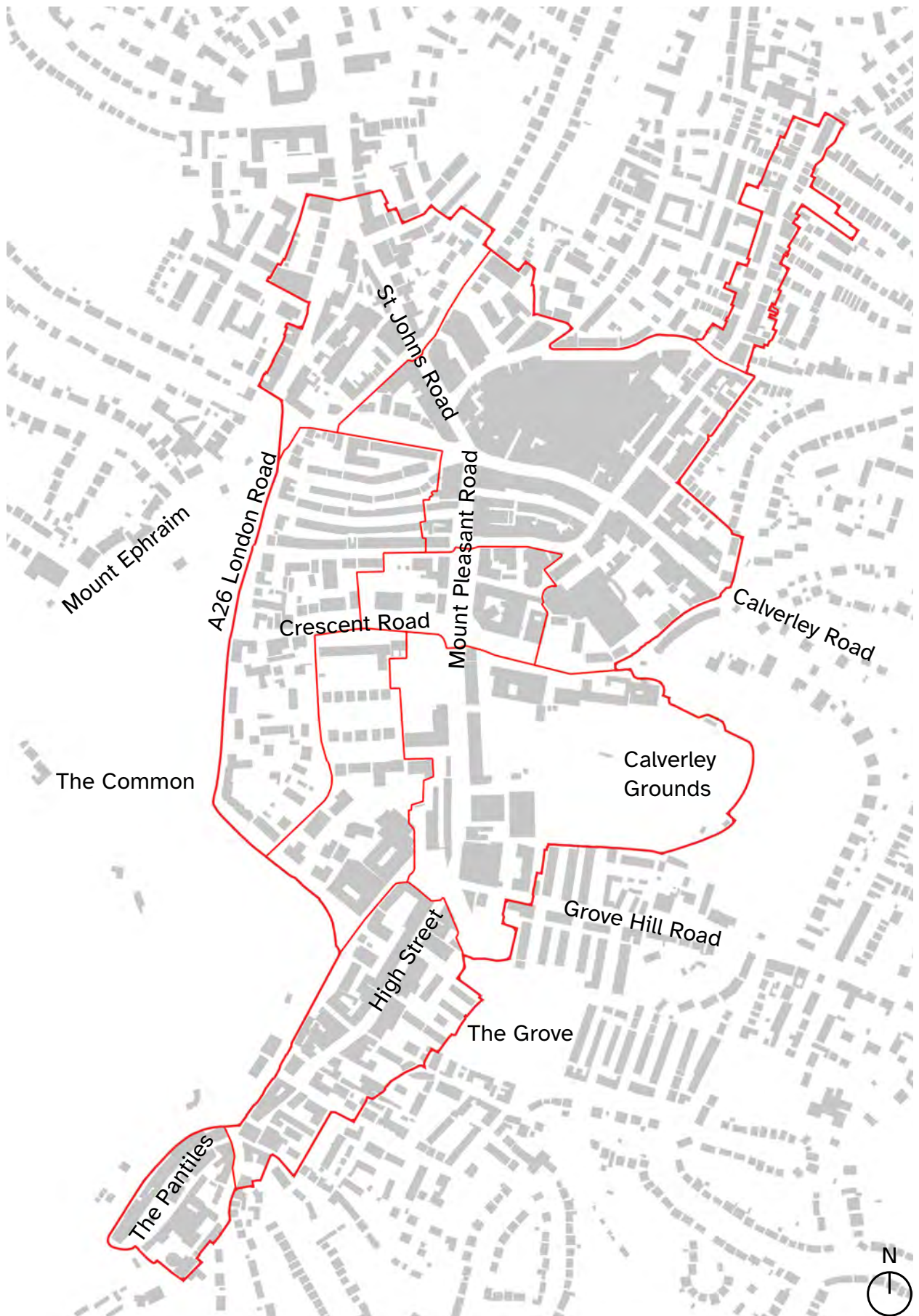
- Topography
- Uses
- Spatial form
- Buildings
- Green infrastructure
- Transport

See Chapter 3.1 Built Environment for more information.



Town centre Character Areas

1. Mount Pleasant (Incl. Calverley Grounds)
2. High Street / Mount Sion
3. The Pantiles
4. Vale Avenue / Torrington
5. Civic Quarter
6. Calverley Quarter
7. Mount Ephraim
8. Camden Road
9. Western Quarter



Identified character areas within the Town Centre Study area

1. Mount Pleasant / Calverley Grounds

Topography - strengths

- Long views over town.

Topography - weaknesses

- Landform falls c18m from north to south 300m North to south - (c1:16 not 1:20).
- Non DDA compliant Gradient defines a change in character.

Uses - strengths

- Higher end retail, independents, commercial and transport uses to the west.

Uses - weaknesses

- Some fast food take away outlets the character of which is lower quality.

Spatial form - strengths

- Transition area between north and south linear primary route.
- Public transport - Rail and 6 bus stops.
- Tree-lined wide primary street.
- Close to Calverley Grounds and The Pantiles.
- Tertiary grain of streets east & west.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- Defined by topography and vacant cinema site.
- Poor sense of arrival from the station.
- Spatially constrained over railway.
- Lack of street vitality and unwelcoming environment to the south of the station.
- The undeveloped cinema is an eye sore, offers no street enclosure or uses.
- Car dominated.
- Residential cul-de-sacs dominate the western urban structure (Vale Avenue / Belvedere Estate).

Buildings - strengths

- Architecturally / historically significant buildings and good street enclosure on the eastern side.
- Train station (Grade II architecturally / historically significant).

Buildings - weaknesses

- Lower grade 20th century buildings of different scales front the north-west and lower south-western edges.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- Mature tree-lined streets.
- Close access to Calverley Grounds.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- Visual references to Calverley Grounds are minimal.
- Calverley Grounds partly defined by backs of large commercial and car park uses.

Transport - strengths

- Train station (Grade II) provides public activity.

Transport - weaknesses

- Station provides mostly blank frontage with lay-bys in front.
- Heavily transport focussed (Station, buses, taxis, cars, deliveries).
- Northern junction to Mount Pleasant Road is car dominated and a barrier.



Low scale buildings on Mount Pleasant Road



Grand historic architecture on Mount Pleasant Road



High end retail on Mount Pleasant Road



Redundant cinema site on Mount Pleasant Road

2. High Street / Mount Sion

Historic evolution - strengths

- Historically developed as a traditional shopping street with a mix of local, convenience and specialist shops.

Historic evolution - weaknesses

- N/A

Topography - strengths

- Gentle falling gradient north to south.

Topography - weaknesses

- Elevated footway on one side.
- Contributes to character but stepped access to street along a long stretch.

Uses - strengths

- High-quality and elegant cafes, restaurants, and independent retail.
- Associated with local tourist economy.

Uses - weaknesses

- N/A

Spatial form - strengths

- Linear thoroughfare of strong character.
- Narrow and intimate street scale.
- Pedestrian dominated environment.
- Good and accessible connections to eastern residential areas and Common.

- Narrow and characterful route to The Pantiles via The King Charles and Martyr Church (Grade I).
- Great access and links to the eastern residential areas.
- Narrow street condition to the north.
- Wider street to the south with trees on one side.
- Good access to the Common.
- Common provides a green edge.
- Tertiary grain of streets east and west.
- Character overlaps well with neighbouring residential area.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- Eastern edge fragmented with a multitude of on-street parking.
- Transition between High Street / Mount Sion and Mount Pleasant is car dominated, pedestrian unfriendly and constrained.
- Urban form to the east leading to the Grove is a little fragmented.

Buildings - strengths

- Architecturally / historically significant.
- Many Grade II listed buildings.
- Contributes to the town's reputation.
- Strong street enclosure.

- Traditional RTW materials such as redbrick paving and ragstone spalls.

Buildings - weaknesses

- Some lower grade 20th century buildings.
- Western edge fronting the Common is weak in places.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- Good access and visibility to the Common (west).
- Eastern edge is very green adjacent to neighbouring residential areas.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- Some lower grade 20th century buildings.
- Western edge fronting the Common is weak in places.



High quality retail on High Street

Transport - strengths

- Close to public transport services.
- Good pedestrian permeability (via fine grain of streets) east and west.

Transport - weaknesses

- A26 forms a busy western edge.
- Connections to The Common appear dangerous and unsafe.
- Connections to The Pantiles are interrupted by heavily trafficked Neville Street and London Road. This creates a poor setting for the town's important heritage asset.
- Car parking dominates part of the western edge.



Strong architectural enclosure on High Street

3. The Pantiles

Historic evolution - strengths

- Discovery of the Chalybeate Spring established the Spa Town identity.
- Well defined tertiary grain east-west.
- The buildings are primarily Grade II listed and have significant historic value.

Historic evolution - weaknesses

- Some historic structures in need of repair particularly along the western edge.

Topography - strengths

- Some changing levels but not significant.

Topography - weaknesses

- Topography can cause severance, accessibility constraints and increase journey times for those on foot.

Uses - strengths

- High-quality and elegant cafes, restaurants, and independent galleries.
- Some commercial space.
- Associated with local tourist economy.
- Recent higher density development to the south.
- The Pantiles is used for a large number of events on a regular basis.

Uses - weaknesses

- Western edge characterised by A26.
- The frontage onto the A26 are not all well utilised.

Spatial form - strengths

- Forms a strong southern gateway.
- Instantly recognisable.
- Consistently intimate urban enclosure well separated from primary street.
- Active streetscape with outdoor seating, public furniture, and mature trees.
- Intimate scale for the pedestrian.
- Pedestrian dominated environment.
- Good and accessible connections to eastern residential areas.
- Tree-lined narrow thoroughfare.
- Outdoor seating.
- Tree-lined and wider thoroughfare.
- Close to / good access to the Common.
- Common provides a green edge.
- Tertiary grain of streets east and west.
- Character overlaps well with neighbouring residential area.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- Western edge prohibits access.
- Eastern edge fragmented with a multitude of buildings and parking.
- A number of private tertiary streets.
- The Pantiles is somewhat detached from the main activities of the town.
- Southern end characterised by some parking.

Buildings - strengths

- Architecturally / historically significant.
- Contributes to the town's reputation.

Buildings - weaknesses

- Some lower grade 20th century buildings.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- Good access and visibility to the Common (west).
- Eastern edge is very green adjacent to neighbouring residential areas.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- Little or no greening on Frant Road.
- Access to the Common difficult due to the A26, dense planting and levels.

Transport - strengths

- Characterful pedestrian walk from High Street (north).

Transport - weaknesses

- A26 forms a busy western edge.
- The Pantiles forms an island surrounded by primary and secondary roads.
- Pedestrian crossing with railings between King Charles the Martyr Church and the northern end of The Pantiles.



Upper walk of The Pantiles



Lower walk of The Pantiles

4. Vale Avenue / Torrington

Topography - strengths

- Gentle rising gradient east to west.

Topography - weaknesses

- N/A

Uses - strengths

- Some residential but mostly commercial.
- Good accessibility to retail commercial.
- Associated with crucial business roles for the town (legal, medical, and financial services).

Uses - weaknesses

- Topography can cause severance, accessibility constraints and increase journey times for those on foot.

Spatial form - strengths

- The area is characterised by linear avenues in the north that give way to a winding cul-de-sac and dead ends in the south.
- Well defined linear east-west routes extend from Mount Pleasant giving the area a strong character.
- Adjoins Mount Pleasant to the north-east and Common to the west.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- The area appears disjointed from the town centre due to lack of permeability.

- Restricted access and poor built form to the south.
- The linear streets in the north are generous in width and tree lined.
- The north-eastern corner is characterised by the former cinema site.
- A fragmented urban structure defined by larger 20th century commercial uses.

Buildings - strengths

- Architecturally significant villa typologies to the north. Strong street enclosure and clear fronts and backs.
- Well defined architectural style, density, and quality of built form (large, detached dwellings with either render or a red brick facade).

Buildings - weaknesses

- Lower grade 20th century buildings to the south with poor street enclosure.
- Torrington multi-storey car park dominates Vale Avenue from retail and commercial areas.
- The area comprises many 1960s poor quality office blocks no longer fit for its purpose.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- Mostly dense tree coverage that is both dense and informal as well as formal avenues of trees.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- No green public open space.
- Access to the Common not possible due to poor urban structure / connections.
- Lack of shared space, public furniture and play areas.

Transport - strengths

- Close to public transport services at Mount Pleasant.
- Car use appears minimal with no through roads and off-street parking.

Transport - weaknesses

- Access to the Common and transport services associated with London Road are inaccessible due to non-permeable urban structure.
- Vale Avenue is vehicle dominated, lacks greenery and therefore, creates a hostile and isolated environment with poor pedestrian permeability.



Historic Vale Road stores



Villas and commercial uses on
Clanricarde Gardens

5. Civic Quarter

Topography - strengths

- Good views and vistas uphill to the Calverley Quarter and downhill to Mount Pleasant.
- Eastern edge characterised by a change in levels and higher-level public realm.

Topography - weaknesses

- Topography can cause severance, accessibility constraints and increase journey times for those on foot.

Uses - strengths

- Predominantly retail, F&B, and civic uses with some residential to the edges.
- Adjacent access to Trinity Theatre and the Assembly Hall Theatre.

Uses - weaknesses

- A transitional space between main shopping area (north) and Mount Pleasant (south).
- Outdoor F&B uses are minimal and underused (as the time of visiting).

Spatial form - strengths

- The Civic Quarter is characterised by Crescent Road, a wide and busy east-west thoroughfare, and generous Mount Pleasant Road to the north and south.
- The Civic Quarter north of Crescent Road is characterised

by a wide street and footways and an avenue of trees to the east. Buildings of a grander scale suggest a civic character.

- Whilst the scale of street is also generous to the south of Crescent Road, the character is more urban with vehicular through traffic and activity.
- The Civic Quarter spatially occupies the centre of the town, with immediate connections to Calverley Quarter, Mount Pleasant, Calverley Grounds, Vale Avenue the Western Quarter character areas.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- Crescent Road is busy, polluted and severs the Civic Quarter and relationships to adjacent areas.
- The streets civic status and generous width is significant but is dominated by buses.
- The undeveloped cinema is an eye sore, offers no street enclosure or uses.
- Car dominated.
- On-street parking.
- The streets linear composition, bus dominated character, infrastructure focussed landscaping and lack of spatial structure all contribute to a lost opportunity.

Buildings - strengths

- Architecturally and historically significant (many listed) buildings to the north and south of Crescent Road.
- The town hall dominates the corner of Crescent Road.
- Buildings are up to 3 storeys but assume generous proportions.

Buildings - weaknesses

- The undeveloped cinema is an eye sore, offers no street enclosure or uses.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- The Civic Quarter accommodates avenues of tree to the north (eastern street edge) and south of Crescent Road.
- Denser mature tree around the Trinity Theatre.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- Lack of tree planting north and south, and along Crescent Road.
- Mount Pleasant Road north of Crescent Road is infrastructure dominated with no street greening.

Transport - strengths

- Good bus services located along Mount Pleasant Road (north-south) and along Crescent Road (east-west).
- A mostly pedestrian friendly environment.

Transport - weaknesses

- Pleasant Road is dominated by buses (north) and cars (south).
- Crescent Road is a busy and polluted highway that forms a barrier between the north and south of the town.



Civic and cultural uses on Civic Way



Beautiful terraced streets on York Road viewed from Mount Pleasant Road

6. Calverley Quarter

Topography - strengths

- The Calverley Quarter area generally falls downhill to Mount Pleasant.

Topography - weaknesses

- Topography can cause severance, accessibility constraints and increase journey times for those on foot.

Uses - strengths

- Predominantly primary and secondary retail operators with some local independents.

Uses - weaknesses

- Some empty retail units.

Spatial form - strengths

- Calverley Quarter is largely characterised by the Royal Victoria Shopping Centre, which dominates the largest urban parcel.
- Adjacent streets contribute to the retail character of the area including the northern end of the Civic Quarter.
- North of the Royal Victoria Shopping Centre, historic residential neighbourhoods characterise the wider setting.
- South of the Royal Victoria Shopping Centre, the urban realm is structured by the pedestrianised Calverley Road, and further south by the historically significant and grand Monson Road.

- The areas immediately to north and east are occupied by historic residential neighbourhoods.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- Whilst the majority of fronts are retail, the north-eastern edge of the Royal Victoria Shopping Centre accommodates broken openings, back of house service access, and multi-storey car parking.
- Existing green residential neighbourhoods back onto this infrastructure creating areas of different quality, permeability, and character.
- The area is partly characterised by complex and fragmented urban structures and built form where 20th century infrastructure meets historic street patterns.
- This area becomes fragmented by a large (multi-storey car park and commercial uses) and a multitude of smaller buildings and plots that accommodate car parks and access.
- Permeability from neighbouring residential street is often convoluted due to the complexities and scale of town centre retail.

Buildings - strengths

- Most primary retail frontages retain their historic significance.

Buildings - weaknesses

- Structures to the north and east of the Royal Victoria Shopping Centre are of poorer quality including multi-storey car parks, some retail and apartment buildings.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- The pedestrianised Calverley Road shopping street accommodates street tree planting.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- Several Calverley Quarter streets do not accommodate tree planting nor street greening and is dominated by built form.
- Access to Calverley Grounds via the Civic Quarter is blocked by a multi-storey car park.

Transport - strengths

- Excellent access to the bus network.
- Mount Pleasant Road and surrounding streets are well used by pedestrians.

Transport - weaknesses

- Access from the north is characterised by the Meadow Road one-way system and up to three lanes of movement. Meadow Road, Victoria Road and surrounding secondary streets are dominated by the motor car.



Highways dominated infrastructure



Low grade buildings and streetscape

7. Mount Ephraim

Topography - strengths

- Mount Ephraim occupies the northern edge and highest point of the town and is the gateway from the north.
- There are strong vistas and views along Grosvenor Road and Mount Ephraim.

Topography - weaknesses

- Topography can cause severance, accessibility constraints and increase journey times for those on foot.

Uses - strengths

- Predominantly retail uses along primary routes with some commercial uses to the north, and residential neighbourhoods to east and west.

Uses - weaknesses

- A complex and mixed structure of different uses, built form and urban layout including retail, commercial, residential, garages and sheds.

Spatial form - strengths

- The Mount Ephraim character area is characterised by three distinct areas that respond to the linear composition of St John's Road and its connection into Mount Ephraim and Grosvenor Road.
- Historic linear residential streets extend to the east and west of St John's Road, with some shorter streets leading to open space

at Woodbury Park Cemetery (east) and woodland (west).

- Between Grosvenor Road and Mount Ephraim to the south, the area is composed of a finer grain of secondary and tertiary historic streets that define the town centres inner northern edge.
- The areas immediately to north, east and west are mostly residential.
- The town centre is easily accessible.
- The common is well framed and enclosed to the south-west.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- In between the formal structure of linear north-south, and east-west connections, some of the urban structure is more fragmented including the areas to the east and west of Mount Ephraim.
- Spatially, the area to the north of the roundabout (intersection between St John's Road, Grosvenor Road, and Mount Ephraim) is sometimes complex with cul-de-sacs and no through roads.
- The spatial configuration of this area is of interest, but land uses and topography mean it is uninviting.
- The east-west linear characteristics of the urban form and topography mean that north-south access is more difficult away from the primary streets.

Buildings - strengths

- The built form is of mixed quality with some historic structures and buildings of interest.

Buildings - weaknesses

- A number of larger 20th century redundant structures front on to St John's Road and Mount Ephraim.
- A number of buildings fronting onto Grosvenor Road require renovation.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- The landscape is generally green in character east and west of St John's Road defined by Woodbury Park Cemetery (east) and woodland (west).

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- The area south of St John's Road forms part of the urban inner town centre. There is little greenery of tree planting.

Transport - strengths

- Excellent access to the bus network.
- Good pedestrian access to the town centre in general.

Transport - weaknesses

- Access from the north and via the town centre to the south is dominated by the motor car and vehicle infrastructure.
- Present traffic congestion increases vehicle emissions and degrades ambient air quality.



Highways dominated infrastructure on Grosvenor Road



Traditional retail frontages on Grosvenor Road

8. Camden Road

Topography - strengths

- A limited level change north to south.

Topography - weaknesses

- N/A

Uses - strengths

- Predominantly retail along Camden Road.
- Extensive retail uses providing an abundance of retail outlets, choice, and employment within close walk to residential neighbourhoods.
- Residential streets extend east-west.

Uses - weaknesses

- A multitude of different shop front designs, glazing and signage.

Spatial form - strengths

- A long linear street that is well enclosed with regular connections to east-west streets.
- Buildings and retail use along Camden Road are of a more detached typology and domestic in character.
- To the south, buildings are 2 storey terraces creating a continuous street frontage.
- Buildings and retail adjacent to the town centre are more in keeping with the scale and quality of those in the town centre.

- The areas immediately to east and west are residential neighbourhoods of mostly terraced housing.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- Footways along Camden Road vary in widths however, they are primarily narrow.
- Minimal opportunities for outside eating.
- The street appears more open.
- The road appears more constrained once out of the town centre.
- Residential streets are narrow in scale and replicate the character of Camden Road.

Buildings - strengths

- Buildings are of mostly the same age circa 18th century.
- A consistent scale of buildings (2 storey) and eaves height creates a regular scale and frontage to the street.
- Buildings closer to the town centre are more generous in scale extending up to 3.5 storeys.

Buildings - weaknesses

- The built form is of mixed quality.
- Some lower quality 20th century structures.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- Grosvenor and Hilbert Park are only a short walk from the northern end of Camden Road.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- There is little greenery or tree planting along Camden Road or adjacent residential streets.

Transport - strengths

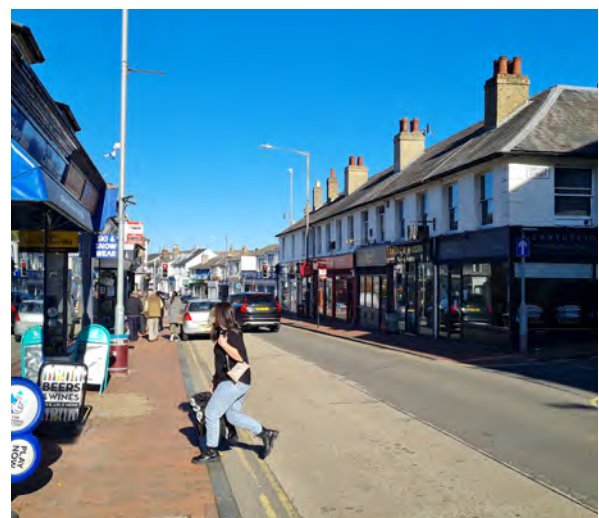
- Access to the bus network.
- Good pedestrian access to the town centre in general.

Transport - weaknesses

- Access from the north and via the town centre to the south is dominated by the motor car and vehicle infrastructure.
- Residential streets are constrained by on-street parking.



Local independent retail stores on Camden Road



A linear retail on Camden Road

9. Western Quarter

Topography - strengths

- Gradually ascends towards the northern part of the quarter.

Topography - weaknesses

- N/A

Uses - strengths

- Clearly defined residential and small to medium sized office areas.
- Great housing accessibility to central retail commercial.

Uses - weaknesses

- Western edge fronts a busy A26 road and divides the quarters and The Common.
- Western town gateway is not obvious.

Spatial form - strengths

- Long linear and well enclosed northern east-west streets.
- A large variety of housing typologies.
- Dense and well established housing typologies and styles in the north.
- Western edge clearly defined by detached housing.

Spatial form - weaknesses

- Given close proximity to key retail, the south could be more densified.
- Housing in the south lacks clearly defined frontage .

Buildings - strengths

- A consistent scale of buildings (2-3 storey) and eaves height creates a regular scale and frontage to the street.
- Housing adjacent to the primary shopping streets is denser.

Buildings - weaknesses

- Some lower quality 20th century structures.

Green Infrastructure - strengths

- A short walk to well established local parks (The Common & Calverley Grounds).
- Good amount of greenery trees and planting adjacent to streets.

Green Infrastructure - weaknesses

- Lack of planting on the western frontage to separate the quarter from A26.

Transport - strengths

- Close access to public transport & great pedestrian access.

Transport - weaknesses

- Northern residential streets dominated by on-street parking.
- Busy A26 & Church Road.



Grove Park / Grove Avenue

LDA DESIGN

London

209 - 215 Blackfriars
Road
London SE1 8NL
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 20 7467 1470

Bristol

Studio 4B
36 King Street
Bristol BS1 4DZ
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 117 203 3628

Cambridge

The Courtyard
17A Sturton Street
Cambridge CB1 2SN
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 1223 949054

Exeter

Kings Wharf
The Quay
Exeter EX2 4AN
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 1392 260 430

Glasgow

Sovereign House
158 West Regent Street
Glasgow G2 4RL
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 1412 229 780

Manchester

Hilton Square
3 Tariff Street
Manchester M1 2FF
United Kingdom
+44 (0)161 359 5684

Oxford

Worton Rectory Park
Oxford OX29 4SX
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 1865 887050

Peterborough

17 Minster Precincts
Peterborough PE1 1XX
United Kingdom
+44 (0) 1733 310 471

www.lda-design.co.uk

LDA Design Consulting Ltd
Registered No: 09312403
17 Minster Precincts, Peterborough PE1 1XX

LDA Design is a ISO 9001 / ISO 14001 accredited company