

Guildford Street

Public Realm & Building
Frontage Improvements
February Committee report

Guildford Street (north)

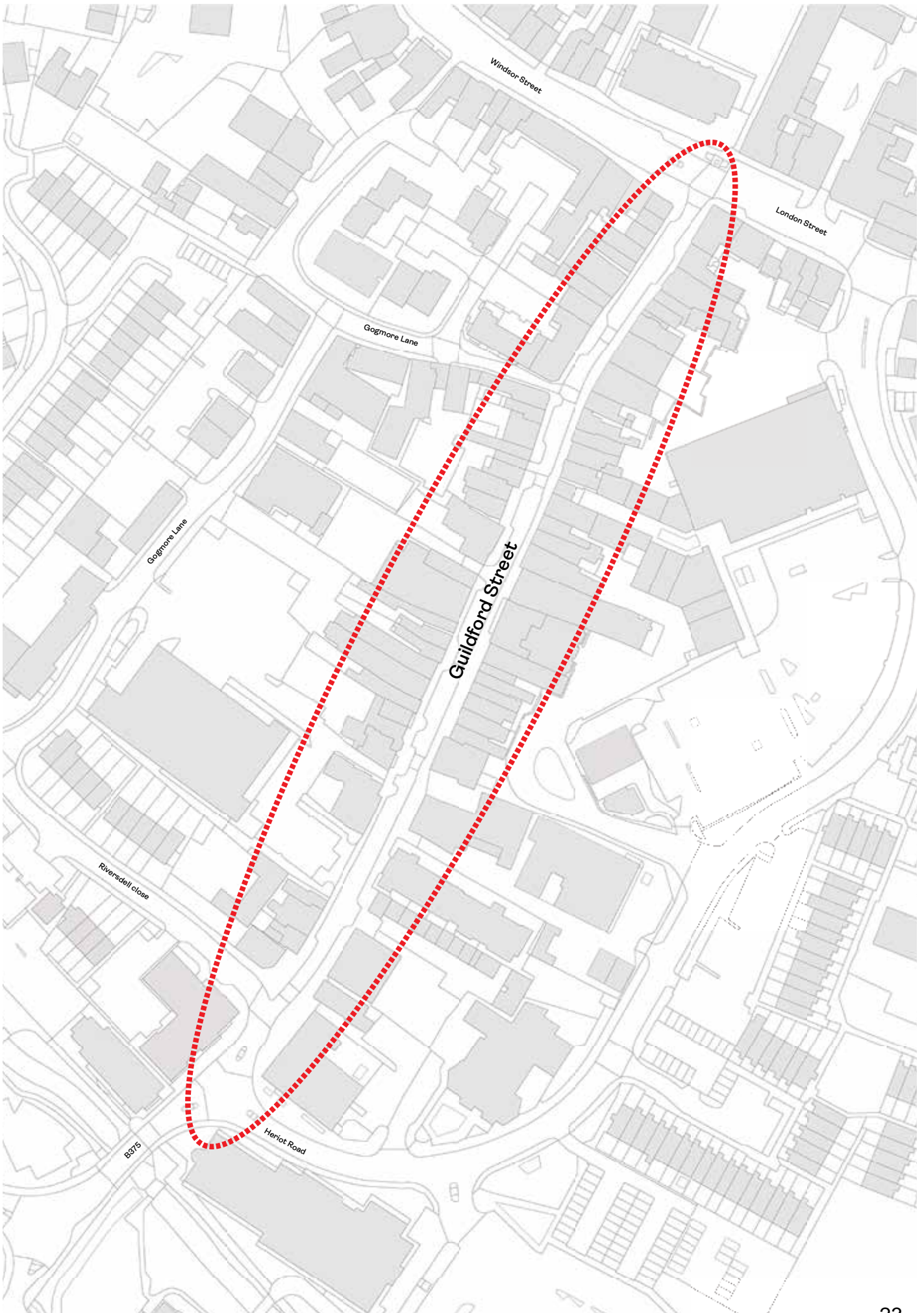
Objectives

Approximately £500,000 of funding is available from Shared Prosperity Fund for public realm improvements, environmental enhancements and business improvement grants. Using the draft town centre masterplan (which was never formally published) as the starting point, this report identifies priority areas for environmental improvements to the town centre, with Guildford Street (North) as a first phase (see plan opposite).

It is important to note that the SPF funding must be spent by the end of the 2024/25 financial year. It is essential therefore that the proposed public realm improvements can be delivered within this timescale.

£165,000 is available to support improvements to shopfronts and building frontages on Guildford Street. Grants offered will be between £5-£20,000 per building. A 15% contribution will be required from businesses. This report identifies buildings where improvements could potentially reinforce the proposed public realm improvements. Again, it should be noted that the grant funding needs to be spent by the end of the 2024/25 financial year.

The Runnymede LCWIP proposes changes to Guildford Street which would improve conditions for pedestrians and cyclists. This report highlights some of the more significant proposals for Guildford Street, and identifies ways in which the public realm improvements can help create a gradual transition towards the longer-term objectives of the LCWIP.



Focus of study area

Strengths

This section of the report considers the strengths of Chertsey and Guildford Street and how these can be reinforced by future public realm improvements. It is based on the analysis undertaken for the draft town centre masterplan, the survey work that was undertaken in Dec 2021/Jan 2022 and on more recent physical surveys of Guildford Street (north).

Foodstores and parking

Chertsey has a strong foodstore offer and a good supply of parking within easy walking distance of Guildford Street. The visitor survey showed that 37% of visitors said that the main shop they visited was Sainsburys 37%, and 16% said Aldi. Two of the main town centre car parks are also associated with these two foodstores, and it should be noted that 42% of those surveyed said they drive into Chertsey, which is significantly higher than the survey figures for Addlestone (26%) and Egham (27%).

The public realm improvements should therefore consider how they can help make the routes from the foodstores and the car parks into Guildford Street more prominent and more attractive, in order to increase pedestrian footfall on Guildford Street.

The availability of on-street parking is a strength in the evening in particular, when activity in the town centre is relatively low, and helps support take-away restaurants and deliveries. The parking bays also provide locations for market stalls.

Historic environment

Chertsey has an attractive historic core and conservation area including 18 listed buildings, and 4 non-designated heritage assets (locally listed buildings). Guildford Street is an attractive, enclosed historic street. Visitors to Chertsey said that the historic environment is the feature they like most about the town centre. St. Peters Church was identified as an important reason for people visiting the town centre.

Public realm improvements (and shopfront/building frontage improvements) need to consider how they can improve the historic character of Guildford Street and the setting of any key buildings. Improving physical and visual connections to St. Peters Church would help increase footfall by encouraging more visitors into Guildford Street.

Important views will be identified as part of the heritage baseline.

Parks and green space

Chertsey has attractive green spaces on the edge of the town centre which are important reasons why people visit the town centre. 26% of visitors in the survey said green spaces (Abbeyfields, Gogmore Farm, River) are their favourite places in Chertsey town centre. A further 8% also say the church. This shows that a large number of people are coming into Chertsey for the greenery. The public realm proposals should take the opportunity to create linkages between them and attract more footfall into Guildford Street.

Independent retailers, cafes, restaurants

Chertsey has clusters of independent retailers, cafes and restaurants, some of which are identified as important destinations in the town centre (eg Carlo's Deli and Revive Café). Food and drink is a key area of expenditure growth in town centres, including provision for outdoor seating, and the public realm improvements should focus on how they can help promote these businesses.

Service uses

Chertsey has a variety of community and 'service' uses which bring people into the town centre. According to the visitor survey, 33% of people were visiting Chertsey for 'services'. This is significantly higher than Egham (8%) and Addlestone (18%). A further 16% had it as a secondary reason for visiting Chertsey. So in total nearly 50% of visitors were in Chertsey to use 'services'. For comparison the figures for Egham were 15% and Addlestone 23%.

The pharmacy was a key destination in the town centre, as are the community uses within the Revive Café (Beacon Church) whilst the leisure centre and SSNR building are also important features. The public realm improvements need to reinforce these important uses, and create good links to those that are on the edge of Guildford Street to increase pedestrian footfall.



Weaknesses

Vacant units and Blank elevations

The recent health check notes that, since 2019 the vacancy rate has been on the rise. There are also some very prominent vacancies, including former banks and the Kings Head public house. The public realm improvements should ideally help promote interest in occupying these premises.

Guildford Street also suffers from having some prominent building frontages, and sides of buildings with poor quality blank edges. Particularly prominent areas include the Post Office Depot Building (which is an important pedestrian arrival route from Sainsbury's car park) and the SSNR building. The public realm strategy should seek to soften the impact of these blank elevations, and the shopfront/building frontage improvement grants could also be used to address this weakness.

Market

The absence of a regular street market was highlighted as a weakness. When asked what would encourage them to visit more often, the most popular response was a more regular street market. The public realm improvements should therefore ensure that provision is made for market stalls, but also that an attractive physical environment is created around the stalls that encourages people to spend time in Guildford Street. Introducing seating and planting can make the street more suitable for market vendors (particularly street food).

Dwell time and Socialising

Socialising is an increasingly important reason for people to visit town centres, particularly young people. However the surveys indicated that this is a relative weakness for Chertsey, with only 3% visiting 'to meet someone' compared to Egham 8% and Addlestone 18%. This is also reflected in a relatively low 'dwell time' with the vast majority of survey respondents spending less than 1 hour in the town centre when visiting.

The lack of seating, mish-mash of street furniture styles & materials, the lack of greenery, the narrowness of pavements and impact of traffic all contribute to making Guildford Street a relatively unattractive street for shoppers to spend time outside. Public realm improvements should seek to address this and create a more attractive environment for socialising in Guildford Street which will in turn help to increase dwell time.

Evening activity

The health check noted that relatively few businesses are open after 6pm, and that overall activity in the town centre is much lower in the afternoons than in the morning. Evening eating and drinking in the central area of Guildford Street north is focused on takeaway restaurants, and the one Indian restaurant. This is a key weakness of Guildford Street.

Street length

The healthcheck noted that "the elongated nature of the town centre, particularly the length of Guildford Street has led to areas of inactivity". Guildford Street (North), the focus of this study, is only 300m long, but it can feel longer because of the absence of focal points or distinctive areas of interest along it. The public realm improvements should seek to create such interest which will help increase footfall by drawing people into and along Guildford Street.

Gateways and Arrival

The two main 'gateways' into Guildford Street are from London St/Windsor St to the north (for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles), and from the junction with Heriot Road/Riversdell Close to the south (for pedestrians). The entrance from London St/Windsor St for pedestrians and cyclists is often dominated by parked vehicles, vehicles waiting to park and by vehicles turning into the street. It creates a poor quality arrival which undermines the historic character of the street and the visual connections from St Peter's Church. Pedestrian arrival from the south is undermined by the large empty space to the side of the SSNR building. More could be done to enhance the sense of arrival from both directions and to draw more shoppers into Guildford Street.

There are also important pedestrian arrival points into Guildford Street along its length, particularly the routes from the Sainsbury's and Aldi car parks. The public realm improvement should ensure that these are attractive arrival spaces which encourage shoppers using the foodstores to also visit Guildford Street.

Additional negative contributors to be identified as part of heritage baseline.



Opportunities

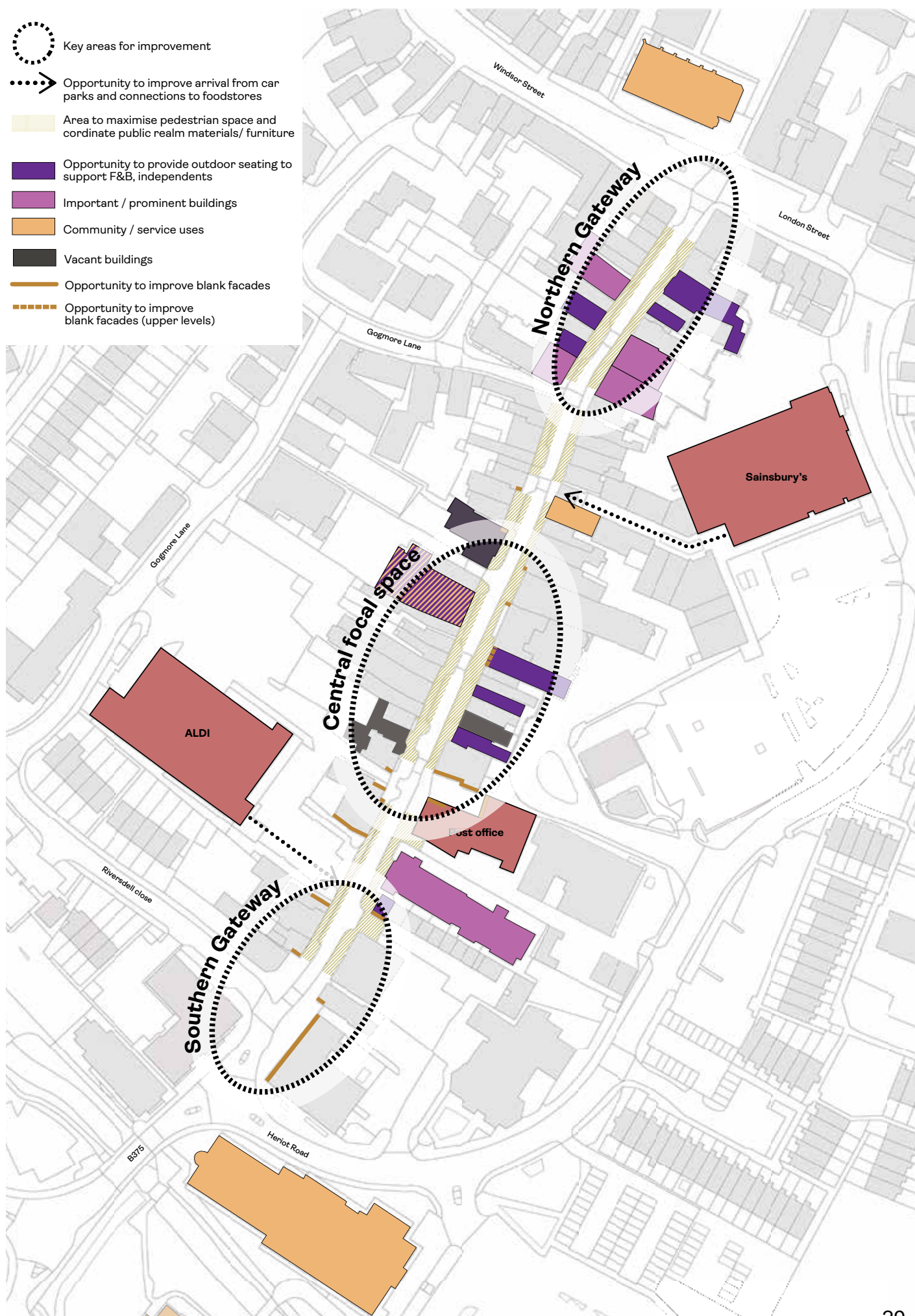
The public realm strategy for Guildford Street is based on the following key objectives:

- Support those businesses which would benefit most from an improved public realm outside their premises, particularly independent businesses, cafes and restaurants,
- Improve gateways and points of arrival for pedestrians to create a more welcoming environment and improve footfall,
- Improve the historic character of the street and individual buildings,
- Improve areas which can stimulate interest in vacant premises,
- Create focal points of interest along the street,
- Increase opportunities for socialising, with more seating and attractive places to spend time,
- Increase greenery in the street,
- Reduce the speed of traffic entering the street and travelling along it, to create a safer environment for shoppers and visitors,
- Removal of redundant street furniture/signage,
- Identify negative and neutral contributors which can be enhanced.

In terms of value for money, a key objective of the public realm proposals should also be to maximise the number of businesses, and the length of the street, that benefits from the improvements. Investment should therefore be spread across a number of areas, not just concentrated in one particular part of the street.

There is an opportunity to undertake a parking survey across the town centre to understand capacity and useage across the car parks. This could help assess the potential for trialling the replacement of some parking bays with 'parklets' comprising seating and planting to increase dwell time in the town centre.

-  Key areas for improvement
-  Opportunity to improve arrival from car parks and connections to foodstores
-  Area to maximise pedestrian space and coordinate public realm materials/ furniture
-  Opportunity to provide outdoor seating to support F&B, independents
-  Important / prominent buildings
-  Community / service uses
-  Vacant buildings
-  Opportunity to improve blank facades
-  Opportunity to improve blank facades (upper levels)



Central Focal Space

Creating a 'central focal space' around the cluster of independent businesses, community uses and food and drink premises that exist at the heart of Guildford Street north would bring a number of benefits. It would support the Beacon Church, and Revive Café, which is a key activity and prominent building at the centre of the street. Improving the public realm in this area, providing additional seating, slowing traffic and reducing the amount of car parking would also improve the environment for the cluster of restaurants and cafes on the opposite side of Guildford Street.

There is the opportunity to create a 'parklet' with improved seating, planting and cycle parking, in the space to the north of the Post Office Depot, which is owned by RBC. This is an important arrival space into Guildford Street from the Sainsbury car park. Improving the area outside the vacant Kings Head pub, would also help with the longer-term reuse of this prominent building.



Northern Gateway

Improving the gateways is an important objective. There is an opportunity to reduce the carriageway width at the entrance into Guildford Street from London Street/Windsor Street. This would reduce traffic speeds entering the street, increase space for pedestrians and seating, and make it safer to cross the street at this junction. These proposals are however being investigated in detail by the LCWIP feasibility study. It is not recommended therefore that the SPF budget be used for these improvements, but they should be coordinated, and funded, as part of the wider LCWIP proposals for London Street and Windsor Street.

The public realm proposals can however address the visual impact of the on-street parking spaces at this northern entrance into Guildford Street. At the moment there is parking on both sides of the street, meaning the view into Guildford Street is often dominated by vehicles. Providing planters at the entrance, where the pavement is wide enough, would soften the view, and significantly reduce the visual impact of cars on the street and the conservation area.

There is also the opportunity to provide additional seating, planting and cycle parking in the area outside Allure which would improve the gateway to Guildford Street.



Southern Gateway

This is an important space for drawing pedestrians north from the Leisure Centre, Library, car park, Riverside park and from other areas of Guildford Street to the south. There is a significant amount of underutilised space immediately adjacent to the blank side elevation of the SSNR building. This provides an opportunity for new planting, seating and even opportunities for 'street food' whilst still leaving plenty of room for pedestrian flow to and from Guildford Street. It would help to draw pedestrians towards Guildford Street, as well as providing a focal space for social activity which is lacking in the town centre.



Parklets

There is the opportunity to create 'parklets' along Guildford Street, areas where new planting and seating can be introduced to create spaces of visual interest, increase greenery, provide opportunities to rest and increase "dwell time". These should be located at strategic locations along Guildford Street where they can:

- Provide seating and planting to assist cafes and independent businesses,
- Attract visitors into Guildford Street from adjacent car parks,
- Create visual points of interest to draw people along Guildford Street,
- Reduce the visual impact of blank walls and poor quality buildings,
- Create social spaces to increase dwell time,
- Improve the overall greening and sustainability of the town centre.

'Temporary parklets'

It has already been noted that in order to avoid pre-judging the long-term plans for the LCWIP, the short-term public realm proposals should not involve permanent changes to carriageways or footways. This also has the following benefits:

- It reduces the capital cost and installation cost of individual improvements, enabling more areas to be improved and the benefits to be spread to more areas of Guildford Street,
- It reduces the design time, and approvals needed, to secure permission for the improvements which is essential if the proposals are to be implemented, and the budget spent, within the next 15 months,
- It enables local community organisations to be involved in the design and construction of the parklets.

It is important to note that these 'temporary' parklets will have a permanent quality to them, as shown by the illustrations. Removable planters can also be used to create a more appropriate barrier to Guildford Street on market and event days, (rather than bollards), with design, planting, signage and messaging tailored for more specific events and advertising the traders.

In the longer term, if the introduction of additional greenery and seating within the wider pavements and underused spaces along Guildford Street is welcomed, then there is the opportunity to potentially trial their use to replace a small number of on-street parking bays as part of a coordinated parking strategy across the town centre. This would also be in line with the longer term aims of the LCWIP to improve facilities for pedestrians and cyclists in Guildford Street.



Precedent images highlighting potential solutions for temporary parklets

Northern Gateway Parklet

There is space for a potential parklet at the gateway to Guildford Street, outside Allure. This could be combined with planters on the opposite side of Guildford Street, and by the use of planters to close off the street on market days and event days. This would also help to slow traffic and improve pedestrian safety.

Additional planting and seating on the area of wide pavement outside Just Relish and House of Flowers would also improve the environment for users of the cafe and help promote these businesses. It would also prevent illegal parking on this area of pavement improving pedestrian safety and reducing damage to bollards and paving.



Central Area Parklet

The central area parklet is proposed on land owned by RBC immediately north of the Post Office building, in a rather neglected space which is also an important connecting route to Sainsbury car park. There is an opportunity to provide seating and greenery here, reducing the impact of the large expanse of unattractive blank wall. Relocating the existing cycle parking closer to Guildford Street would also make it feel safer and more likely to be used.



Southern Gateway Parklet

There is an opportunity for a parklet on the wider pavement outside the SSNR building and opposite the Travelodge hotel. This would have a significant impact on this space and on arrival into Guildford Street, and could be combined with wider improvements to the area. There is also the opportunity to improve the existing space at the entrance to Aldi car park, although this relates to land in Aldi's ownership.

Improving the southern gateway, would create a strong green character to this southern end of Guildford Street (north), and a stronger connection with the Riverside Park and Gogmore Park. Together they could become a new local destination for the town centre.



