

BLETCHLEY & FENNY STRATFOR NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

NOTE FOR JOINT TASK TEAM SESSION: JULY 2023

Purpose

The purpose of this note is to summarise the work of the Development (DTT) and Environment (ETT) Task Teams to July 2023 and to suggest policy responses for discussion at the joint session on 19 July 2023.

Background

The two task teams were each given a brief to review existing relevant data and to generate their own data from survey work, based on the general policy opportunities agreed by the Steering Group in October 2022. The survey and analysis work would inform those opportunities and enable the Group to develop more specific policy ideas.

At the same time, MKCC has been progressing its Town Deal programme with a view to making specific proposals for the station area and Brunel Centre later in 2023. And planning applications for major development schemes continue to be submitted, e.g. the former Travis Perkins site on Simpson Road in Fenny.

Insights from the Task Team Work

Development

The DTT has created a map of sites of interest for potential redevelopment in the coming years. Some sites have been discarded as they now have planning permission; some are too small to matter; and others are wrapped up in the central Bletchley masterplanning work.

Fenny

There is a cluster of sites in Fenny, especially in its Simpson Road area, which has already seen the start of what become a longer term change from industrial to residential land. This cluster seems significant enough to bring about a long term rejuvenation of Fenny as its own place, distinct from both Bletchley and wider MK. The earlier community engagement, and policy scoping session, indicated that this would be a welcome outcome of the NP. The technical work since hints that there may be enough site opportunities, together with broader place management actions, to make this real.

The analysis of Aylesbury Street indicates it has a relatively high trend (ground floor) vacancy rate of 17% at October 2021, which is higher than the average 2021 rate for 'high streets' of 9%. However the data needs to be brought up to date (July 2023), which ought to indicate a lower recent rate and the street does otherwise have a healthy mix of commercial and café/restaurant/pub uses.

It is understood that some public realm improvement ideas are being generated by work funded by the Town Deal and this initiative may help bolster commercial activity. As with many such 'high streets' their dual function as main highways (here connecting Watling Street through Fenny to Bletchley) means they have high traffic counts. But in turn this leads to higher levels of passing custom if parking is immediately available. It was also noted that one business has taken

to painting a mural on its frontage, which is distinctive and there are other examples of this type of 'public art' helping define the character of commercial streets.

The recent changes to the national planning system have made managing the mix of uses through planning policy very difficult. Most changes of use do not require planning permission at all, and many others are automatically permitted within certain conditions. The purpose of an NP policy would therefore be to signal to property owners, investors and businesses the type of 'high street' Fenny could be, bringing together the ideal mix of uses, public realm improvements and development sites.

Bletchley

In central Bletchley there are sites north and south of Queensway in Bletchley that appear beyond the focus of the current masterplanning work. And its length between Princes Way and Victoria Road is likely to see more pressures for change as the core town centre contracts to a smaller area at its western end closest to the station. The challenge has been to understand how and when the Town Deal initiative may bring forward proposals for that area so that the NP can have proposals that fit well.

The team has looked at the planning history of the sites and at the history of other recently approved and built schemes in the area as either good or bad examples of redevelopment. It has recorded types of commercial, business, service, health, housing and other uses to analyse how Queensway is changing. It indicates that vacancy rates are lower than the 17% 'town centre' average with a very strong presence of independent retailers, which is much higher (4+ independents for every multiple retailer) than the average for town centres (2.7). There is also a broad range of shops, cafes and services that reflect the multi-ethnic diversity in the town's population.

For years that metric was regarded as a weakness, with too few multiples a sign that the centre was underperforming. Now it is seen as a sign of future potential strength, if the surrounding conditions are favourable for investment. The challenge here though is to work with the key principles of the adopted Urban Design Framework (UDF) document and of the various proposals emerging from the Town Deal, most especially the redevelopment of the Brunel Centre.

Aside from the team's own work, we have identified the potential to recreate two-sided terraced streets at Albert Street and Oliver Road, the former possibly as part of the provision of a multi-storey car park to the rear and the latter as part of the Brunel Centre scheme (or at the very least a harmonious, active commercial frontage to Oliver Road to replace the building mass that blights the northern end of the street as now).

We have also identified the potential hinted at in the UDF (but taken no further) to redesign the spaces along the rear of Queensway at Cawkwell Place and Findlay Place. Both are blighted by a poor arrangement of parking, service yards, vacant space and under-used or vacant buildings that could be rearranged (with some parking relocated) to deliver high quality mews streets of primarily housing but also some complementary commercial units. In addition, the eastern end of Findlay Place coincides with the library, health centre and car wash site, which is a significant redevelopment opportunity, provided those important community facilities can be relocated within future Queensway plans at the real heart of the town. The land at Bull Lane at the far end of Queensway may also be suited to this type of redevelopment scheme.

The one matter it has not been able to progress is housing needs assessment to inform policies on the mix of new housing types and tenures that would best meet the area's needs. It required a report from the NP Support Programme contractor, but the programme has been closed to applications since March. If the project is to remain on track then this policy idea will have to be left to a later version of the plan.

Environment

The work of the ETT was focused around five areas: Green Infrastructure (GI), Local Green Spaces, Climate Change, Walking and Cycling Routes and Local Heritage Assets.

Green Infrastructure

Earlier on in the process, we produced a 'Green Infrastructure Network' map. This was comprised of land with known biodiversity value, priority habitats, woodlands, significant hedgerows and lines of trees. There were also two other version of this map produced which show opportunities for natural flood management and expansion of the national habitat network.

The focus of the group was on the first map which showed the existing network. The ETT split the map up into sections and walked around their area to verify what was shown on the original map. This process was important as the original map was created using desk-based methods e.g. habitat data and Google Maps. These data sources can sometimes be inaccurate on the ground-level or out of date in the case of Google Street View. The group has collected a significant amount of data in relation to GI, including where there are opportunities for tree planting. The data is still in somewhat qualitative format, so to round-off this policy, the ETT will need to identify which parts of the original GI map need to be amended to reflect what they found 'on the ground'.

Local Green Spaces

The idea of designating Local Green Spaces was discussed in a number of the ETT meetings. There was some confusion and the difference between Local Green Spaces and the wider GI Network. GI mainly consists of assets of biodiversity value and can include hedgerows, significant lines of trees, priority habitats, etc. Local Green Spaces are defined areas that have a specific value to the local community (beauty, historic significance, recreational value, tranquillity or richness of its wildlife) e.g. a park or play area. On the Excel spreadsheet where the group have collected their data, there have been two Local Green Space candidates identified: Leon Recreational Grounds Park and Manor Road Cemetery. It is likely there are more candidates in the Neighbourhood Area, but OH is waiting to hear back from the group on this. As part of this, the group will need to provide a description of each Local Green Space.

Walking & Cycling

On the topic of Walking and Cycling Routes, it was highlighted how little cycling provision there is in Bletchley and Fenny Stratford. It was also noted that there was a Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan commissioned by MKCC and published in late 2021. The report highlights a number of proposed routes in the area and for this reason, the group felt it wasn't necessary for them to do a full review of the cycling infrastructure, like they were doing with GI.

Local Heritage Assets

Designating Local Heritage Assets was also discussed with the ETT, including the process by which they can be designated. The group identified some initial potential candidates in some of their meeting but are yet to provide OH with a full list of candidates. An example report was shared with the ETT from another Neighbourhood Plan to show what evidence is needed to designate a Local Heritage Asset. This includes a photograph and description of the asset, including what its particular heritage value is.

For climate change, OH presented the idea of a Zero Carbon Buildings (PassivHaus) policy to the ETT. The group seemed enthusiastic about this and felt it would be appropriate for the Neighbourhood Plan to include a policy like this. As this is a template policy which has passed through examination in a number of Neighbourhood Plans, there wasn't any work or evidence collection for the ETT to complete for this area.

Other Policy Ideas

Some other policy ideas, or general objectives at least, were discussed in 2022 but were not part of the task team action plans. For completeness, ideas have been generated below for the Steering Group to consider.

Objectives

The overall objectives of the NP should be framed around the policy ideas, which themselves have been based on the following goals:

- To connect the Town Deal and Urban Design Framework initiatives in Central Bletchley (Brunel Centre and station environs) with the rest of the town to spread the economic development opportunities for maximum benefit
- To make Fenny a more successful and distinctive place that complements Bletchley and integrates Eaton Leys
- To make Newton Leys a more self-sustaining community
- To conserve the local character of Water Eaton
- To acknowledge the strategic employment and leisure role of Denbigh in MK

Emerging Policy Ideas

Of the initial policy scope agreed in October 2022, it seems most of those ideas will have value. We have taken the task teams' work and reflected on that scope to suggest the following draft list of policy ideas:

Policy No.	Policy Title	Policy Intent
BFS1	Spatial Plan	<p>Defining the key parts of the Neighbourhood Area and their distinct roles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central Bletchley – a revitalised town • Fenny Village – a thriving urban village • Newton Leys – a new sustainable community • Water Eaton – a village within a town • Denbigh – the commercial heart of MK.
Central Bletchley		
BFS2	Queensway	Defining a target mix of Class E and other uses, including residential.
BFS3	Queensway Edges	<p>Making proposals for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new mews streets at Cawkwell Way (site number 14 on the map below), Findlay Way (10) and Bull Lane (9) • new terraced housing along Albert Street (13) and Oliver Road (12) • relocation of library and health centre into redeveloped Brunel Centre and to create site (including industrial yard on Findlay Way) for new homes (10).
BFS4	Public Parking	Making proposals for consolidation of parking at a new multi-storey car park at either the Brunel Centre and/or Albert Street to create space for new mews streets and terraces.
Fenny Urban Village		
BFS5	Development Opportunities	<p>Making proposals for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watling Street/Simpson Road (2) – retain Watling Street frontage but residential redevelopment of land behind to form new frontage to the canal • Simpson Road West (Hirebase)(4) – redevelop for residential • Simpson Road East (Travis Perkins)(3) – redevelop for residential (assuming current proposals are refused) • Watling Terrace (1) – redevelop for residential • Aylesbury Street to Wharfside (5) – redevelop for mix of commercial/business and residential uses by creating a new pedestrian

		<p>link to connect Aylesbury Street with the canal (and possible new bridge to towpath)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George Street to Denmark Street (6) – redevelop for mews streets (assuming Aylesbury Street public realm improved to create more on street parking spaces) • 16-26 Tavistock Street (7) – redevelop for residential • Staple Hall Road/Watling Street (8) – develop vacant plot on prominent corner at entrance to Fenny for landmark residential building
BFS6	Aylesbury Street	Defining a target mix of Class E and other uses and encourage public realm improvements.
BFS7	Canalside	Defining design principles for any future scheme adjoining the canal (to combine with Policy BFS5).
BFS8	Business Uses	Defining land for protection from loss of business uses and to require the retention of some business uses on mixed development schemes.
General		
BFS9	Newton Leys	Encouraging the provision of additional community facilities and service uses.
BFS10	Water Eaton	Defining part of Mill Road as an Area of Special Character.
BFS11	Denbigh	Reinforcing its role as a suitable location for industrial, commercial, large retail and leisure uses.
BFS12	Infill Design Code	Defining a Bletchley and Fenny code of suitable building types and materials for use in infill schemes not defined in policies BFS3 and BFS5.
BFS13	Green Infrastructure Network	Defining the existing network (biodiversity value and recreational/amenity value) on a map to protect it from loss and to encourage its improvement and better connectivity (habitats and people).
BFS14	Local Green Spaces	Designating LGSs for protection from inappropriate development.
BFS15	Walking & Cycling	Defining the network of main footpaths and cycleways and identifying opportunity areas/routes to improve its connectivity.
BFS16	Local Heritage Assets	Defining buildings and structures of local architectural and historic value for protection from unjustified harm.
BFS17	Zero Carbon Buildings	Encourages buildings to be built to PassivHaus or equivalent standard.

Next Steps

Once the joint task teams meeting on 19 July has reviewed this paper, it will be modified as necessary for the steering group to consider on 3 August. Once it is happy with the scope and intent of these ideas, we will flesh them out and illustrate them as draft content for the steering group on 7 September to consider for the October engagement activities. The steering group will meet on 5 October to sign off that content.

Whilst much of the illustrative content will be derived from the mapping already completed, the material for policies BFS3 and BFS5 may be either be limited to very simple ideas or, if the resource is available via the Town Deal, more refined scheme ideas. Those ideas could be translated into proposals that can be taken forward by the Town Council as Neighbourhood Development Orders to lower the planning risk to encourage quality schemes to come forward from land interests.

Policies BFS3 and BFS5 Sites

