



Maidstone Town Centre Strategy

An alternate vision

Introduction

Town Centres across the country face many challenges including the decline of traditional retail and office employment activities. Maidstone is no exception to this.

In the autumn of 2022 councillors, on the advice of MBC officers, voted to approve the commissioning of a Town Centre Strategy for Maidstone. It was to provide a plan to the year 2050 and build a thriving town centre for years beyond.

During the formation of the official draft town centre strategy councillors across all parties, primarily those from town centre wards, were invited to provide feedback through a mixture of walks, user group meetings, and briefings. Despite providing in-depth feedback, as of the time of writing, no response to the feedback has been received.

Whilst the draft strategy does have a number of beneficial points we do not believe what has been produced, so far, is a blueprint to rejuvenate our town centre. The delay in the release of this document, originally it was due to be available earlier this year, is understandable given the complexity, but frustrating. We strongly feel that it is critical that what is finally adopted be in the best interests of Maidstone.

Maidstone has tended to focus on short-term economic gain without consideration for the wider environment, infrastructure, social concerns, and long-term sustainable growth. We feel that any strategy needs ambition, and must breathe life into our ailing town centre.

The Town does not make full use of its existing assets such as the rivers, its cultural attractions, and suffers under problems created by the lack of any form of sustainable transport policy. Maidstone deserves better.

In response we have produced this document, an alternative vision for Maidstone Town Centre. It builds on the work of previous discussions to look beyond and make Maidstone Town Centre a place that we can all be proud.

We are keen to receive feedback, both positive and negative. You may leave feedback on <https://www.maidstonelibdems.co.uk/TownCentreStrategy/> or by emailing hello@maidstonelibdems.co.uk.

Maidstone Liberal Democrats

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Cherish what we have

Maidstone is a town we all want to be proud of, it has so much potential. We sit astride the breathtaking river Medway, have a rich history, and are the county town of Kent. Despite extensive housing and commercial development, most of us are still only a short journey from being surrounded by nature and able to appreciate the Garden of England.

Maidstone deserves a town centre strategy that is not only visionary, but is also built on solid foundations. The town needs to be cherished and the first step in that is to get the basics of maintenance and repair done correctly.

There is so much to be proud of in Maidstone, so much heritage, so much beauty, so much history and so much opportunity. From day one the Liberal Democrats intend to do just that and make Maidstone better.



Maidstone is worth, and has the potential, to be so much more

People need to feel safe when visiting Maidstone, day or night.

Since starting in June 2022 Maidstone's Town Centre Task Force has improved the safety in the town centre with:

- A bigger policing presence.
- Identifying and stopping repeat offenders.
- Additional CCTV in trouble spots.
- Working with businesses, volunteer groups and other council teams to improve safety in the centre.

Maidstone Liberal Democrats are proud to work closely with the task force, but we need more:

- More support for the task force.
- Better lighting to support the night-time economy.
- More activities for teenagers and young adults that are more entertaining than hanging around fast food restaurants.
- Quicker response times to stop isolated incidents from getting worse.

Initiatives like the Brenchley Garden Police Hub are fantastic and are to be encouraged.



Cleaner streets

Respect for the town starts with the cleanliness of the town. Existing litter encourages more litter and fly-tipping. Once an area becomes grimy it grows and the decay spreads. If an area starts to smell of throwing out time the anti-social will keep going back.

Our council tax can only pay for so much street cleanliness. Many fines from enforcement go to central government. Years of campaigning from the likes of Keep Britain Tidy are ignored by some people. This is a huge problem. Maidstone Liberal Democrats propose that:

- The worse offending areas are tackled first to stop the decay spreading.
- The opportunity is given for people to be better: more bins, more emptying, and available public toilets.
- Targeted enforcement and cleanliness checking in known trouble spots and against persistent offenders.
- Improve the appearance of the worst areas with more greenery, proper repairs (reduced time limits for temporary tarmac), and less shabbiness.

We need to encourage pride in our town centre streets. This is how we educate, and this is how to win the fight against this endemic problem.



It is time to reclaim pride in our town centre

The town centre cannot follow the trend of becoming a concrete jungle. Green spaces, planters, trees, and small parks are an essential part of enjoying being in any town centre.

Green spaces:

- Reduce pollution and increase air quality.
- Improve well-being and boost productivity.
- Are naturally cooling in the summer and provide shelter in the winter.
- Are natural ways to provide enhanced drainage and prevent flooding.
- Provide a greater sense of community.
- Boost values of property and attract new businesses.

Green spaces also encourage a sense of pride by improving the appearance of an area.

Maidstone Liberal Democrats believe that within the town centre no one should be more than 50 metres from a green space.

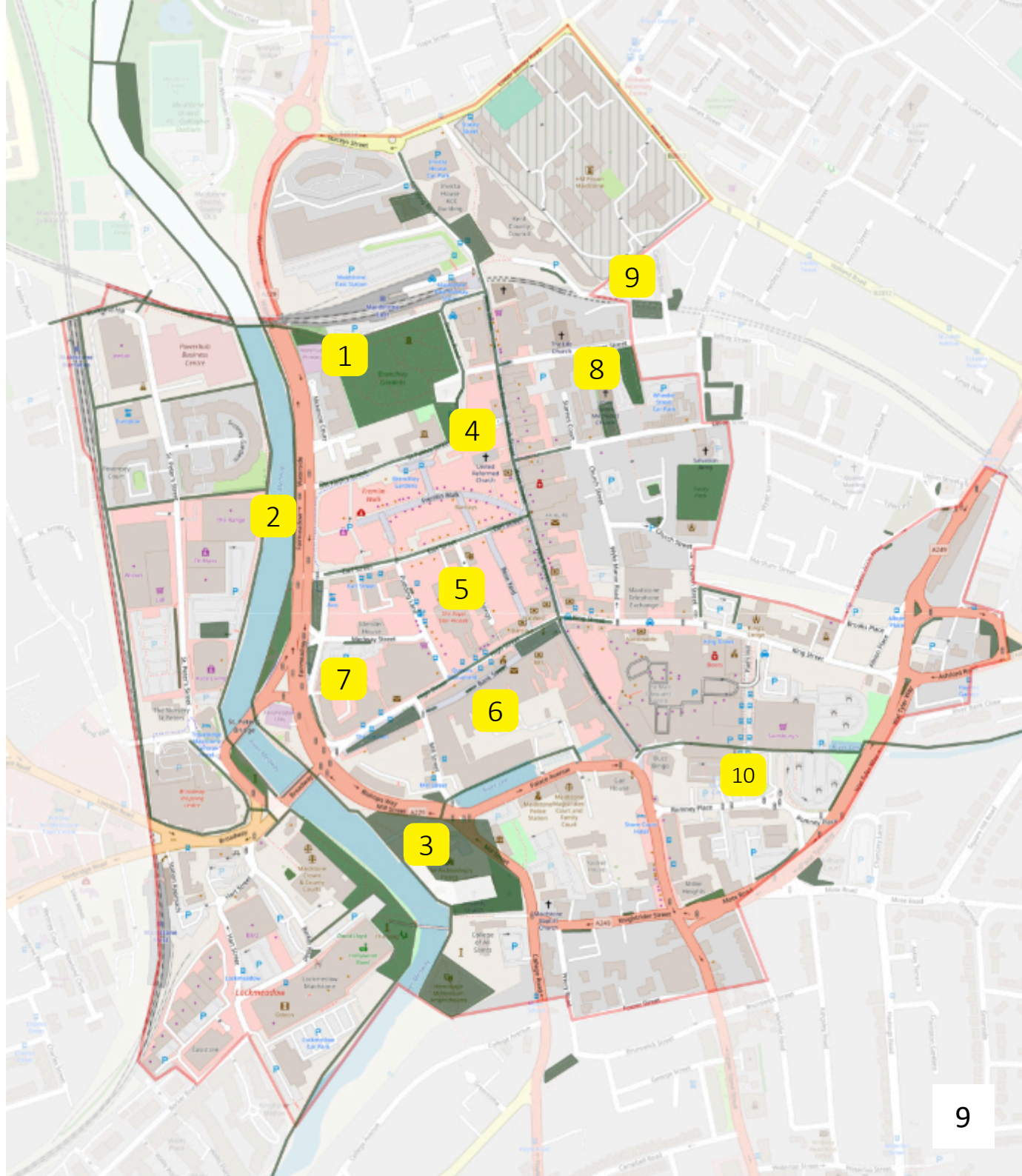
We will work hard to make that happen.

Where we now have acres of concrete and stone in our squares and pedestrian parts of the town we will create new and improved pocket parks and linked green walkways.

No more than 50 metres from a green space



1. Connecting Brenchley Gardens to Whatman Park and Buckland Hill Nature Reserve through improving the existing footpath and controlled greening.
2. Replacing the hard standing on either side of the river Medway.
3. Rerouting the A229 behind the Carriage Museum will allow the heritage quarter to be a place of reflection.
4. St Faith's Street and Station Road to become a tree lined boulevard with priority given to pedestrians.
5. Earls Street, parts of High Street and King Street and Pudding Lane given priority to pedestrians increasing opportunities for small scale vegetation.
6. Jubilee Square and the Cannon to continue to be locations for planters.
7. Existing wildflower banks to be extended by converting the present brickwork into a Green Wall.
8. Greater cooperation on / enforcement of public realm maintenance.
9. New pocket nature reserve.
10. Eventual opening and green route along the river Len.



The way we shop has changed and councils need to provide town centres that adapt and then anticipate that change. Empty shops and premium brands moving out are sure signs that a town centre is in decline.

For people wanting to shop in person there are two options:

Quick and easy by car, which is why out of town outlets are popular.

To make shopping in person a leisure experience that goes beyond buying.

The town centre and the shops within it need to follow the second option if there is any hope to make the centre vibrant again.

The shops will need to play their part, but it is the job of the council to adopt a strategy and put in place policies to allow this environment to flourish.

Out of town retail needs to be carefully managed so that it brings visitors to Maidstone and bolsters the town centre, and not suck the life from it.

Maidstone town centre has been in decline for a while now and fixing it cannot happen overnight but should be looked at in the strategy. Even in the short term the approach should be focused on making Maidstone town centre locally the place to be.



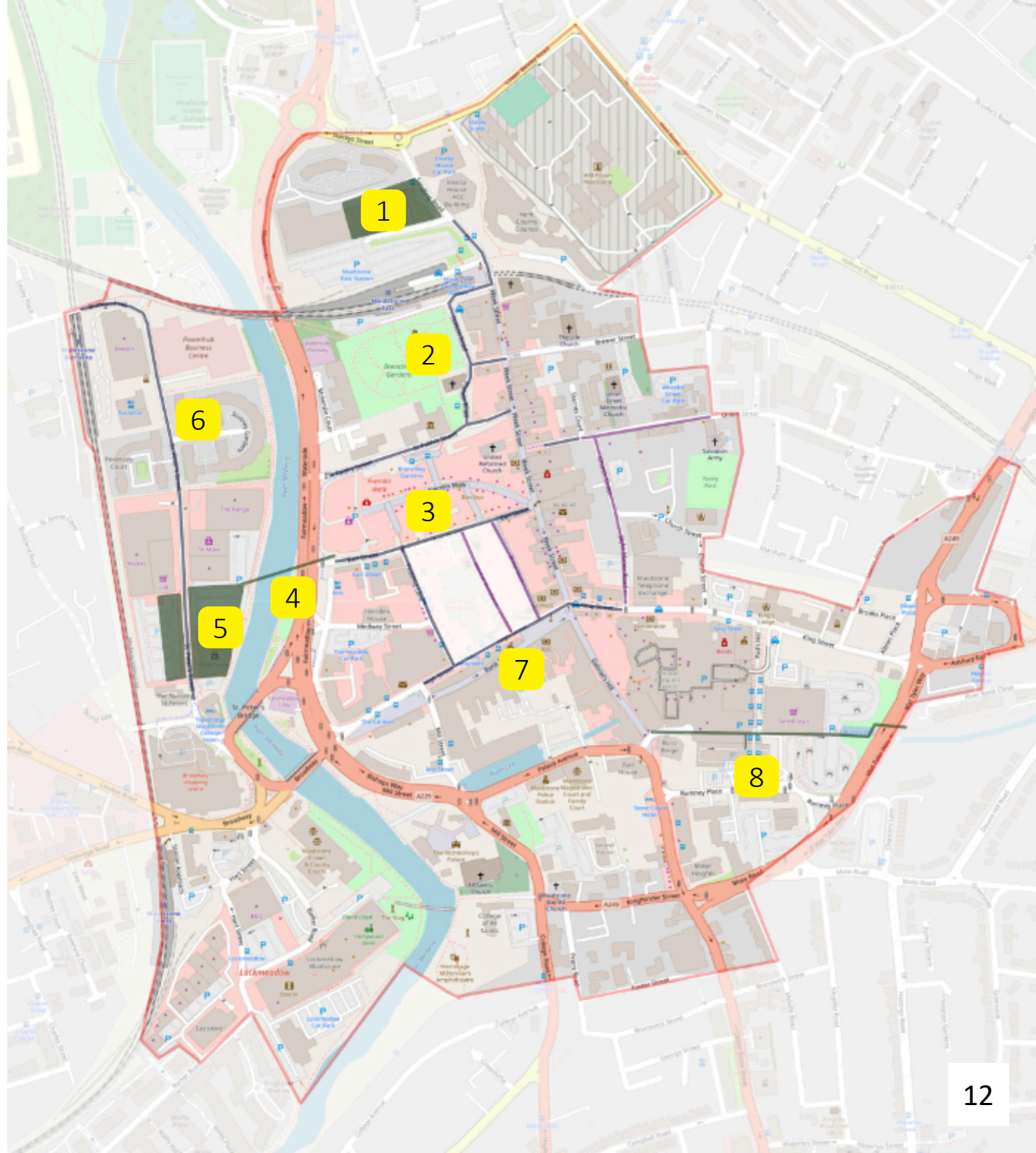
Like most historic market towns Maidstone is a warren of streets. Cafes, shops, pubs, and restaurants run along each side, and with some exceptions people are forced to squeeze by on narrow pavements. Popular destinations put people first in their town centres. No more squeezing by in stressful hustle, but time to take a breath, explore and enjoy spending time in these places.

Maidstone's warrens of streets are an opportunity to create more squares, miniature parks and places for the people of Maidstone to relax. These new places give more room for events, themed pop-up markets across the year, and the relaxing cafe culture to build on the opportunity to shop, drink, and dine.

This can be done by changing those streets in town that are already predominantly used by pedestrians into "shared spaces". These are not pedestrianised streets, but streets where people come first, cars come second, and take advantage of the flexibility that brings.



1. Proposed transport hub at the site of the Maidstone East Sorting Office with a reduced housing allocation.
2. Shared space along Station Road and St. Faith's Street accompanied by additional trees transforming this section into a tree lined boulevard.
3. Earl Street shared space extending to the lower part toward,
4. A new pedestrian and cyclist bridge crossing the Medway and potentially the A229 to better connect east and west sides of the town centre.
5. A proposed new St. Peter's square to break up the mixed use residential development as partially proposed in the local plan and extended on in further discussions and submissions.
6. Convert St. Peter's street into a shared space increasing safety for school pupils and residents
7. Increase the shared space along the High Street, Pudding Lane any they alleyways running through to Earl Street including improving frontage and greening.
8. Eventually open up the river Len to connect the town centre with Mote Park.



Heritage and nature

Maidstone is rich in historic buildings with more than 90 listed buildings within or around the town centre. Parks and nature within Maidstone are also some of the best in Kent, specifically our riverside environments.

These splendid resources are unfortunately not adequately highlighted within the town. Rich resources available to the public are situated towards the outskirts or tucked away down side streets. The town centre needs to embrace these and make them equally obvious destinations for relaxation and education.

- Station Road and St Faith's Street to become a tree lined promenade following the shared space approach.
- Brenchley Gardens to run more events and become the hub of a green network extending throughout the town centre and through to the parks and green spaces at the outskirts.
- The heritage sites within the town require greater signposting, plaques and more information for both residents and visitors alike.

The town centre needs to celebrate its rich past in industry, in nature, and as a market town. These are the history and foundations of Maidstone and, used properly, are the perfect tools with which to build the character of its future.



Reimagining museums

The Maidstone museum, the carriage museum and the Kent history and library centre are precious parts of the town and integral to its growth. These are services neither KCC nor MBC have to provide so the museums and Kent history and library centre are heavily reliant upon grants and donations if they wish to provide anything over and above a basic service.

To gain the maximum benefit from the museums for the future of the town centre we need to enter into a more equal partnership with the museums; we need to support them in:

- Awareness: Make the public aware of the service, why they might want to use it, and how and where they can use it.
 - Access: Ensure that the service can be used on the terms of the public where possible both in location and access times.
 - Attraction: Not only what will bring people in for the first time, but what would keep them coming back.
- In return the museums need to grow in value to the town centre and increase relevance; they need to:
- Cultivate their role as community hubs for both young and old.
 - Involve in, and pass on the value of heritage to Maidstone businesses for commercial advantage.
 - Become the roots of a blossoming cultural renaissance throughout the streets of Maidstone.

Innovative thinking like the utilisation of Maidstone Museum as a warm hub is a good example of thinking beyond exhibits and engaging with new audiences. Further work with third parties and possible expansion into the vacated adult education centre should also be investigated. Efforts such as these need to be applauded and encouraged.



A town to be proud of

The Challenges that the town centre faces, even in the short term, are far from easy. The opportunities that will come when the flaws are put right are bountiful.

The town centre needs to improve and evolve and that process must start now to arrest the decline which is currently so obvious to the people of Maidstone.

Maidstone Liberal Democrats will, if given the chance:

- Work to cherish what we have.
- Make the streets cleaner and safer.
- Make the town centre a pleasurable place to live, work and visit.

Even in the short term, which this section encompasses, we aim to make Maidstone a town to be proud of because it is on these foundations that the town must grow.

Please continue reading to find out how we see the town centre growing to become the jewel in the crown of the County town. The best town centre in Kent valued by residents, businesses and visitors.





Developing the Future

Building for tomorrow

What type of town centre do we want? It is a simple question, but the answer, or rather answers are far from simple.

There is a stream of thought by some that give an answer to the question, they believe the people of Maidstone want:

- A smaller town centre.
- More and more housing.

Maidstone Liberal Democrats disagree with this and having talked exhaustively with family, friends and residents we know that you agree with us. We want to see:

- A town centre that celebrates Maidstone.
- A town centre that is a pleasure for residents, businesses and visitors.
- A vibrant town centre where there is always something to do for young and old.

We also want a sustainable town centre where everything not only works, but also becomes self-improving; be it the choice of retail, the nature of dwellings, transportation, or leisure, each part of the ongoing plan should be focused on increasing the quality for everyone.



The trouble with traffic

Transportation, or as most residents and visitors experience it as murderous traffic, is the garrotte that has been and will continue to strangle the lifeblood from the town centre.

Public transport that is already not fit for purpose is in decline, and throughout the UK traditional models are no longer the solution for future transportation needs. Maidstone requires a sustainable integrated transport plan that meets the needs of today and is adaptable to meet the requirements of the future.

The challenges are apparent now:

The infrastructure cannot cope with the number of cars that need to use it.

People need to use cars because of the ever dwindling sensible and affordable alternatives.

Without sensible and affordable alternatives more and more people will use cars.

The more people move away from public transport the less affordable it becomes; options dwindle and those that remain are more expensive.

These are self-evident truths, and need to be tackled if the town centre is to thrive.



Integrated Transport

Maidstone town centre has four chief types of transport requirements:

1. Urban residential, for those that live and work in and around the town centre.
2. Borough and visitor, for those coming into the town centre.
3. Commercial, for those lorries and vans servicing the businesses in the centre.
4. Passing through, for those attempting to get from one side of Maidstone to the other.

The first three are vital to the well being of the town centre, the fourth a historic consequence of Maidstone being a market town and failures from KCC and the highways agency to deliver viable alternatives.

For the town centre to thrive a strategy needs to look beyond the boundaries of the centre, beyond the obvious, and make the centre flow. To make the road network fit for purpose we need to:

- Introduce clear signage to divert and reduce through traffic.
- Have a clear policy for commercial traffic across times and access so that it does not clog up our roads.
- Provide easier alternatives for those coming into the centre than to drive all the way in.
- Provide options for residents that are better and more practical than always reaching for the car keys.

Maidstone needs an integrated transport plan that works for Maidstone, and that needs to be dictated to the relevant authorities to deliver.



The public transport web

Maidstone, like many market towns, sits within a cluster of villages, at one time farming communities, now mainly residential. The decline in public transport has seen cuts that leave villagers, without access to a car, living in little more than islands of isolation .

These should become the boundaries of a web; the place at which people are encouraged to get out of their cars and onto demand sensitive public transport. Not huge double-decker buses running empty throughout the day, but mini-buses or people carriers providing a shared taxi like experience to the next step in the journey.

On demand services run in cooperation with private companies have been shown elsewhere in the U.K. and abroad to provide effective and cost-efficient options where traditional public transport is no longer feasible. They can also be used to deliver passengers to buses and trains, increasing their long-term viability.

Through this approach we can bring public transport back to villages, and provide an alternative to travelling into town by car.



Hop on, hop off

Park and Ride was not ideal, it was not cost-effective, it was at many times of the day underused and broken. However, it should have been fixed rather than discontinued.

Increasing the number of passengers through rural residents and visitors will enable the rejuvenation of urban services.

Those routes that were previously impractical to continue or conceive now become practical.

To reduce reliance on cars for urban residents Maidstone needs a hop on, hop off bus service and travel pass integrated with the on-demand services, longer haul buses and trains.

These need to be more than from the car park, to town, to car park; the offering that the previous park and ride scheme became, but need to service the needs and wants of those passengers they are aimed at including:

- Stopping at out-of-town shopping centres.
- Stopping at business parks.
- Having regular pick-ups and drop-offs in the town centre for shoppers and residents.
- Also stopping at well spaced intervals along the route.

They need to be regular, affordable, and provide a tangible alternative to getting in the car.



Provide alternatives that work

Cycling and walking

Whilst a majority of the proposal has been on improving pedestrian access it is impossible to ignore the role of cycling in active travel into and through the town centre.

Shared spaces make safe cycling increasingly possible, however the commitment needs to extend beyond that to:

- Further cycle routes to protect cyclists from dangerous traffic.
- Secure places to store cycles.
- Encouraging secure drop off points to enable retail to make use of hard to transit products to accessible collection points.

Since each of these will be shared with pedestrians they are suitable for each. Our plan calls for four new cycle paths through the town centre where they are most at need. Two north-south, two east-west. Four new secure bicycle storage places over and beyond on-street facilities, these are in addition to the four recently approved. The web of travel would also consider those that wish to start their journey by foot or by bicycle.

Travel into the town centre, by whatever means, where possible needs to be made with ease, be that by foot, bicycle, public transport and until alternatives are in place by car. Our town centre needs to be accessible by all.



Provide alternatives that work

The three train stations and the bus terminal within Maidstone town centre are all disconnected. It is symptomatic of the disjointed approach to public transport within the town.

Rather than the wholesale conversion of the Sandling Road development plot into residential it is a perfect site for an integrated travel hub for Maidstone:

- It sits next to Maidstone East train station, the main train station for the town.
- It is accessible from the main roads in and through the town.
- It is a short walk from the very centre of the town.

A dedicated travel hub will allow Maidstone to cater for short and medium term needs, provide a solid foundation to grow active travel for those wishing to pursue cycling and walking (including bike storage and rental), and become a focus around the future travel needs of residents and visitors.



Reclaim the Medway

Maidstone exists as it does because of the river Medway. Increasingly the rivers Medway and Len have become an afterthought in the betterment of the town centre. The local plan and further suggested development takes this a step further that will see most of the west bank of the Medway given over to housing development and shrink normal functions of the town centre to the east bank.

Greater access to the riverside and across the river should become a natural glue that ties together both sides of the town. The rivers in Maidstone should be given the care and respect they deserve.

To maximise the river Medway within the town centre it needs:

- A balance between nature and use of the riverfront and a move away from the concrete canal that it has become.
- Greater access through a new pedestrian and cycle bridge over the A229 with access to both banks.
- Growth of the west bank of the river with a vision beyond just blocks of flats to make it an essential part of the town centre.

The Medway cannot be allowed to become a boundary to the town centre, but instead should be celebrated as its centrepiece and part of the natural appeal of the town.



Bridging the Medway

A pedestrian and cyclist bridge across the river Medway is nothing new. For years it has been suggested. The need to connect the West and East banks across the Medway giving people access to and from the town centre away from vehicular traffic is established.

What is far from established is the nature of such an additional crossing. Will the proposal be reined in by the lack of vision all too often apparent, or can it make a statement as to the goals of creating a town centre to be proud of?

Maidstone Liberal Democrats believe the latter, that a statement be made, and that a new bridge become the starting block of gluing the east and west banks of the Medway into a cohesive town centre.

We would like to see:

- A continuation of the policy of spacious walkways and squares to govern the design of the bridge.
- An uninterrupted promenade that joins both sides of the town centre, with easy access to both banks.



Balancing nature

It is not only the people of Maidstone that should reclaim the Medway. Nature and wildlife have an equal right and role to enjoy the future of the town centre. In harmony, wild visitors such as the popular seals, can become an increasingly frequent part of future development.

The riverbank on each side at present is a sterile concrete canal through the centre. By its very construction the hardstanding public realm rejects nature and induces flooding. The bank sides need further softening and greening, an overly-manicured and hard engineers corridor is bad for nature, flood risk and people.

Whilst the banks of the Medway as they run through the town centre are one of the most stark examples of the brutalism of unthinking development, it is not the only part of the town centre that suffers from such ill-judgement.

Development in the town centre needs to exceed the minimum environmental requirements and ensure nature and development are truly in balance. When working with nature to allow it to win; the residents, businesses and visitors to Maidstone win as well.



When working with nature we all win

The medium-term focus for the traditional town centre to the east of the river Medway is retail and leisure to rejuvenate shopping within Maidstone. West of the river Medway has a natural continuity to reverse that and become leisure first, retail second to make Maidstone town centre an attractive place to live and visit.

The west side of the Medway already has:

- The Lockmeadow entertainment complex with bowling and cinema.
- Two health centres with swimming, tennis, gymnasiums, and other activities available.
- Two parks, and the Millennium River Walk to East Farleigh.

To demolish this foundation for the propagation of more apartment blocks is to stifle any worthwhile ambition for Maidstone's town centre.

Whilst the east of the Medway has a focus on business and shopping, the west of the river can primarily focus on fun.



Incorporating St Peter's

The redevelopment of St Peter's and the Broadway Shopping centre to become an integral part of the town centre is a huge step and requires vision. The local plan and other discussion have been helpful in their proposals to:

- Remove warehouse retail outlets.
- Demolish the monstrosity that is the hotel.
- Repurpose the Broadway Shopping Centre.

Medium-term to long-term change is feasible. What is not acceptable is the suggestion to convert this principally into blocks of flats. There is a need for dwellings in this area (which could be achieved through quality low rise apartments above commercial premises), and the rights of existing residents need to be respected.

Initially we suggest following the steps proposed for the east side of the Medway, with a focus on the issues that St Peter's faces:

- Stop St Peter's being a 'rat run', with restrictions on through traffic and conversion of the road into a shared space.
- Include it in the target of being no more than 50 meters from a green space.
- Integrate St Peter's into the cleaner and safer streets programmes followed by the rest of the town centre.
- Connect the superb Buckland Hill Nature Reserve to the riverside.

These are not a vision, but steps to incorporating St. Peter's into the town centre.



A Vision for St Peter's

A vision for St. Peter's is best achieved through an imagination and a walk-through of what this district of the town centre could become.

Imagine gently descending from the new bridge, over the naturally re-contoured banks of the Medway and the adjoining strips of wildflowers and lawns into Maidstone's newest square.

Looking across the square are:

- Covered gardens with hanging flowers and plants.
- Fountains gently gurgling.
- Restaurants, bars, and shops with the clientele spilling out into the piazza creating a gentle hubbub buoyed along by sounds of people having fun.

Exploring beyond the square there are green pathways, removed from the traffic, connecting Whatman Park, to Lockmeadow, and extending back across to Brenchley Gardens, the historic Archbishop's Palace quarter, the river Len and eventually Mote Park.

St. Peter's has the opportunity to become so much more than just another housing estate in Maidstone, and this is the direction it should take.



A place where Maidstone can relax and play

Leisure at Lockmeadow

Lockmeadow with its gym, cinema, bowling, marketplace, auction and food halls is already a destination for leisure within Maidstone. It does have its flaws, not least traffic to access or exit along Hart Street. Despite existing issues, the suggestion to convert to residential is irresponsible and verging on the shambolic.

Many see Lockmeadow as distinct from the town centre and a destination primarily accessible by car. Access from the Archbishop's Palace, the re-developments of St. Peter's, integration with Maidstone's Green Ways and improved options for public transport will allow Lockmeadow to be brought into the heart of the town centre. This will increase visitor numbers and reduce reliance on cars.

Enjoyment and entertainment will become the primary purpose of Lockmeadow leading to:

- Increased options for entertainment consulting the public and working in cooperation with private enterprise; e.g. an ice rink.
- Existing resources being used more. The auction hall which needs greater support during the week could be a venue for independent music, cinema and artists.
- Coronation Square becoming a focus for events and attractions to support businesses, entertain residents and encourage visitors to Maidstone.

Since Lockmeadow is in the ownership of MBC this constitutes even more reason to make it a success to deliver value to the residents and businesses of Maidstone. Conversion to blocks of flats would be an admission of abject failure.



The Historic Quarter

A suggestion that occurs regularly is to move the section of the one-way system that currently cuts between the Carriage Museum and the Archbishop's Palace to the back of the Carriage Museum and restore this historic quarter of Maidstone.

Provided that adequate provisions and protections are made this is a policy we are happy to support.

The reconnection of the buildings (All Saints Church, Archbishop's Palace and Tithe Barn) in this important medieval complex, while improving the Palace Gardens surrounding them, if done correctly will:

- Provide an important tourist asset to the town.
- Continue the policy of connecting the future of Maidstone to its past.
- Create a desirable quarter that will provide an opportunity for quiet reflection.

Such benefits can only be an asset to the town centre.



Reclaim the Mill Pond

The upper reaches of the river Len are beautiful, yet when it reaches the town centre, specifically by the Mill Pond, it is a smelly, rubbish strewn mess that has seriously declined in recent years.

As one of the two rivers that run through the town centre the river Len cannot be left to reside in its current polluted and abused state, especially by the Mill Pond and the Mall Shopping Centre.

If pursued correctly, the needs of the river can go hand in hand to improve access for residents and visitors into the historic quarter. By lowering the height of the sluice outfall of the Mill Pond. This increases the flow and the river can be improved for wildlife and stagnation avoided. Stretches of the river can also be 'daylighted' further improving the condition. It opens opportunities to access the Historic Quarter when travelling by foot.

This would complete the first stage of the town centre 'green way'. A proposal to have green, quiet routes, away or naturally barriered from traffic, where possible connecting all the parks that are in or around the town centre. The second stage continuing along the Len to Mote Park being a longer-term project due to buildings, not least The Mall blocking the route.



Breathing life into stagnation

Parking in the centre

Cars will not disappear overnight neither will the need for parking. Building on existing car parks negatively impacts on council revenues, makes it harder for shoppers to spend their money, and rarely leads to good quality housing.

Supported by good quality public transport, car parks need to be situated on the edges of the town centre with convenient access inward. Maidstone Liberal Democrats would seek to:

- Build a three-storey car park at the transport hub.
- Provide parking to the rear of the redeveloped Broadway Shopping Centre.
- Improve access to and from Lockmeadow to allow traffic to flow freely and better use the existing parking at this site.

The final two proposals would require a new gyratory on Rocky Hill that could only be achieved by moving the war memorial and making it the crowning centre piece of the new St Peter's square positioned to give the respect and reverence the memorial deserves.



Housing in the town centre

The town centre plan cannot be complete without addressing dwellings and the need to house the people of Maidstone. The limits imposed by the local plan are 2,500 dwellings within the town centre, to suggest a significant raise in that number would damage the town centre.

Maidstone Liberal Democrats believe that the town centre strategy needs to go beyond housing, but we are mindful that affordable, well-developed dwellings that meet the needs of those wishing to live in the centre must be provided.

We support a sensible level of residential development that does not detract from the purpose or skyline of the town centre. It is expected that any new developments within the town centre will have a measured degree of residential dwellings included within the plan.

Housing should compliment the functions of the town centre and should support the expected demographics of those wishing to live within the hubbub of the bustling vibrancy a revitalised centre will have. For those wishing a quieter place to live, integrated transport and high quality public transport that is fit for purpose will no longer alienate those in the suburbs or rural areas without a car.



Commerce in the county town

Maidstone is not great for business. For those seeking to locate to the town centre the struggle to find suitable office space is a difficult one. Transport, congestion, location and facilities are just some of the issues that owners struggle with on a daily basis for those businesses with offices within the town centre. Yet, a thriving commercial sector is vital to provide the jobs for residents and the cashflow for the leisure and retail sectors to make the town centre a success. Some of the challenges business face are addressed by solving those that residents face and have been addressed previously, for example:

- Improved transportation to remove the slog of getting to work.
- Improved environment to make working in Maidstone pleasurable and productive.
- Improved facilities to create a better work life balance.

All of these leading to Maidstone being an attractive place for businesses to relocate.

To help commerce flourish in the town centre in the future requires flexibility, this is:

- Flexible access to space, paying for empty offices in age of homeworking is an undesirable expense.
- Flexible facilities, modern businesses need to be able to turn on a pinhead and they need the framework to support that.
- Flexible resources, an ecosystem needs to be established that allows the right resource to be available at the right time.

Maidstone town centre has the buildings, the companies and the people to make this happen.



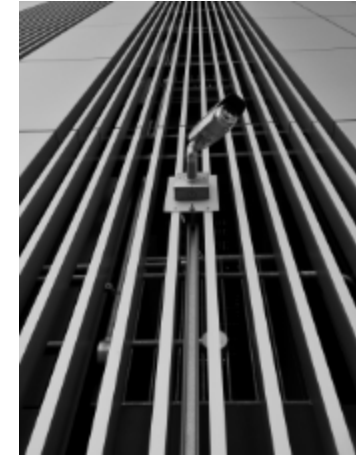
Technology and connectivity

When it comes to technology we all have plenty, perhaps too much, in our daily lives. That does not detract from it being a great enabler that can take difficult to impossible ideas and make them practical.

For the town centre to work effectively there needs to be an ongoing commitment to investigate and pursue how technology can benefit residents, businesses and visitors. Presently we would encourage:

- To investigate the possibility of a municipal mesh network within the town centre as a foundation for future projects.
- Smart use of digital CCTV (including where appropriate ANPR), to guide enforcement, discourage anti-social behaviour and automate some town services to adapt to need.
- To explore the possibilities offered by integrating commonly used devices e.g. parking meters into an “Internet of Things” approach.
- To seek to open access not only to residents and visitors through normal means like mobile phones and laptops, but to allow businesses to use and build services for the residents of Maidstone on the same infrastructure.

All these areas need to be studied, some will not be feasible, but Maidstone needs to utilise technology to create a smart town centre.



Net Zero and climate change

The challenges of establishing a vibrant town centre that works for residents, businesses and visitors often lead to looking inward. The greatest issue that will face many of us, and in which any vision for the town centre needs to play its part, is outward; Net Zero and Climate change. These cannot be areas that are overlooked in any future plans.

Many of the ideas put forward in this document will have a positive impact on achieving Net Zero and reducing the impact of the town centre on climate change including:

- The establishment of public transport and active transport as a feasible alternative to jumping in a car.
- Reducing of polluting congestion.
- Using natural methods to minimise the impact of flooding.
- Balancing the needs to nature when needing to develop.

To neglect the opportunity a redeveloped town centre would bring and stop at these points would be foolish.

The vision needs to go above and beyond including:

- Better quality buildings focused from the outset of achieving carbon neutrality.
- Focusing on the impact of design decisions on the climate as well as the financial costs of ongoing maintenance.
- Building not just for now, but for the challenges change will bring in 2050 and beyond.
- Reversing the decades of decline and damage to our environment starting with our town centre.

In these steps the aspirational and the incumbency for Maidstone's town centre to become better meet.



Building For Better

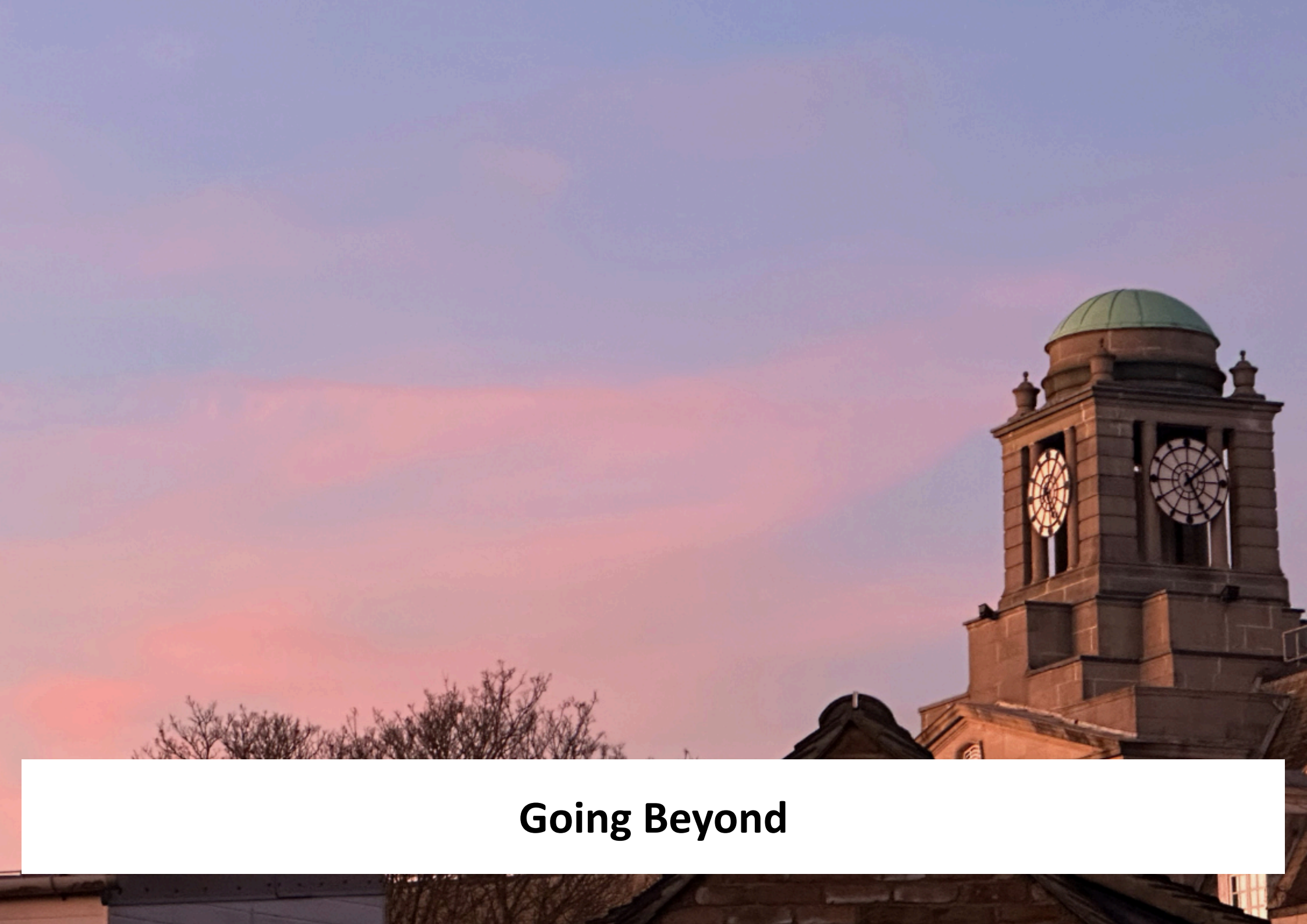
This section of our alternative vision for the town centre opened with the question: “What type of town centre do we want?”, and we were clear we wanted:

- A town centre that celebrates Maidstone.
- A town centre that is a pleasure for residents, businesses and visitors.
- A vibrant town centre where there is always something to do for young and old.

The delay in the release of the draft town centre strategy has been frustrating and discussion so far limited. We can, and feel that we must, stoke the fires of ambition. It must not be tempted to reach only for the lowest hanging fruit, but be a bold challenge to aspire to.

We do not believe in building for buildings sake; we certainly do not wish to see the town centre turned into one huge housing estate. We believe in building for better, to improve the town centre for residents, businesses and visitors. In considered balance the town centre can be improved to deliver economic, social and natural prosperity.





Going Beyond

When councillors agreed to commission a professional town centre strategy, it was with the instruction that this strategy would include steps up to 2050 and remain viable for 10 to 15 years beyond.

2050 seems like a long time away, but there are already challenges that are clear to councillors and residents that will need to be solved within this time frame, not least:

- The Mall will likely be unfeasible to maintain.
- KCC are unlikely to remain at County Hall.
- Climate change will bring an ever worsening threat from severe weather and destructive flooding.
- What can continue to shape and make Maidstone town centre prosperous, vibrant, and competitive.

Each are challenges, but they also provide the cause to think outside of the box, to consider blue-sky thinking, and to pose the question given time and a desire “what if?”

The following are some ideas to whet the appetite of ambition and think where Maidstone’s town centre could really head.



Maidstone's Green Canopy

Maidstone's Green Canopy is envisaged to be a central glassed colonnade running the length of Week Street, with native British flowers and plants in the eaves.

It will provide shade in the summer and protection from snow and rain in the winter allowing shopping and cafe culture to thrive in this part of the town centre all year around.

The canopy is envisaged to be as self sustaining as possible with rain water captured for the planters, and a central strip of solar panels to collect energy for mood lighting at night and for events.

The plants within the canopy will help improve air quality by reducing pollution and increasing oxygen, as well as providing a sweet scent.

The British weather is not kind to open air shopping, dining, or events. The proposed Green Canopy seeks to tackle that through a practical attraction that keeps the town centre pleasurable to be in all year round.



Rendering of a similar project in Bangkok

Photo: Urban Design and Development Centre

County Hall

The pressures on Kent County Council keeping County Hall up and running are great as the maintenance costs spiral, and the requirement for such large amounts of office space dwindles.

Yet for the residents of Maidstone it is an iconic building and part of Maidstone's rich heritage as the county town of Kent.

Whilst there have been the inevitable calls to turn County Hall into yet more flats, so much more could be done with the building.

Calling on inspiration from the galleria of Italy, and building upon the impressive fascias already present, County Hall could remain as a resource for the people of Kent and beyond as a publicly accessible building with space for a gallery, theatre, and boutique shopping.

Situated across from the town's main train station and on one of the new proposed squares, County Hall with a little imagination could remain accessible to the people of Maidstone and become an attraction far and wide.



Capture beauty that captivates

Invicta Park Campus

Invicta Park Barracks is currently earmarked to become another housing estate. We believe it can be so much more for the people of Maidstone, it can become the Invicta Park Campus. The Invicta Park Campus is a business and educational campus that provides a green and pleasant place to work, live, and study whilst surrounded by nature. Situated only 10 minutes away from the new transport hub it is easily accessible by public transport without putting thousands of new cars on Maidstone's roads.

Educational establishments are invited to run courses from the campus that feed directly into the work / study programmes of the businesses on campus.

The campus will:

- Bring high quality housing to the town centre without drab estates.
- Educate and provide opportunities for the youth of Maidstone.
- Protect and enhance the historic parkland, its trees and wildlife.
- Create employment, both directly through those companies based on campus, and through customers for the town centre.



The Len Creative Quarter

Soulless shopping malls are slowly dying out as our shopping habits change. This trend shows no sign of changing. As 2050 approaches it is quite likely that the cost of maintaining The Mall in its present form will be unfeasible, so what to do with a falling down building?

We propose the Mall be replaced with a new district in Maidstone in the style of the market buildings to be found throughout the town.

Using the initial title of The Len Creative Quarter it is envisaged that this will provide space for small scale retail and office space as well as above premises residential dwellings.

Small scale retail can create the character of the town. It can move Maidstone beyond the generic high streets that carry the same brands from town to town, and provide a mixture of the unique and surprising.

The jewel of this quarter would be the river Len and a riverside park. This would form phase two of the Maidstone 'green way' and would finally link seamlessly every park in and around Maidstone town centre, including Mote Park.





Conclusion

This alternative vision for Maidstone's town centre is far from complete, yet we hope it shows some of the ambition for rejuvenation. Maidstone deserves better and these are some of the steps that can be taken for the town centre to achieve that.

We'd love your feedback and when the time comes your vote so that where possible we might make this vision a reality.

Please leave feedback through:

<https://www.maidstonelibdems.co.uk/TownCentreStrategy/>

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