Introduction & Purpose of the Strategy

Macclesfield Borough Council has recognised the benefits to the town of delivering a considered and appropriate public realm strategy for the town centre. Despite past investment into the public realm it has been acknowledged that a clearly defined framework for the future and on-going development of the public realm is required in order to best guide and focus future investment into the town centre streets and public spaces. This need is particularly relevant given the current interest in redeveloping a significant proportion of the town centre.

LDA Design was appointed by Macclesfield Borough Council in November 2006 to undertake a reappraisal of the town centre with a view to preparing the public realm framework for the town. The objective is to develop an over-arching strategy that will guide the location, selection and detailing of a host of elements that contribute to defining the public realm. The elements to be considered included materials; information signage; wayfinding; lighting; street furniture; structures; hard and soft landscape elements; and, public art. These are all important elements that collectively contribute to delivering a cohesive public realm. However, the delivery of a successful public realm is more than just about establishing a palette of appropriate elements and treatments. It is about the creation and definition of spaces and linkages, and the delivery of a place for social interaction and commercial activity. The public realm is also an expression of civic pride; it is the public ‘façade’ within which activity takes place.

Applying the Public Realm Strategy

This document provides the framework to inform and steer the enhancement of Macclesfield’s town centre public realm. It will inform the envisaged town centre re-development project and any other development opportunities that may occur within the study area. Developers will be able to refer to it to guide design at both pre-application and application stages. It is also intended that it will act as a broad design guide for other larger scale developments, including Cheshire County Council highway schemes and maintenance programmes. It will also stand as a wider reference document that can inform other strategies that may be developed, both within Macclesfield and elsewhere within the county.

Delivering the Public Realm Strategy – the need for Design Coding

This document is the first important step in establishing a comprehensive public realm strategy for the town centre. It does not, however, provide a range of definitive solutions for different areas of the town, nor is it a prescriptive handbook that can be referred to without the need for further detailed study prior to the delivery of improvements on site. Once the principles set out within this document are agreed a Design Coding document will need to be prepared for the town centre. This will require consultation with all those having an interest in the public realm so that matters such as materials can be agreed, funding sources identified, a programme for rollout established and priorities identified and agreed.
What is the Public Realm?

Our town centres play an important role in our society. For many people they are places of employment, shopping, business, education, leisure and entertainment. In a regional context they provide a focus for communities in terms of historical association, cultural expression and economic vitality.

The physical presence of these centres is not only the buildings, structures and architectural monuments that they contain. The public realm – the streets and places of our urban centres – is an integral part of the civic experience. The spaces between the buildings are dynamic elements that have a distinct and unique identity, whether they are spaces to move through, such as streets, or spaces to linger in, such as squares.

One of the important roles of the public realm is to act as a ‘mat’ that helps to unify the old and the new enhancing the legibility and cohesiveness of the town centre. The public realm has other jobs to do as well – it must be serviceable and robust; it must provide places for people to sit and meet in the sunshine; it must be of use consistently throughout the year; and, it should be the backdrop for a range of outdoor events that will attract people to the town centre. The public realm is also a way of articulating a sense of what Macclesfield is all about - a place that has traditionally done things well in an understated and elegant way, and a place that is rightly proud of its history.

To the visitor, and local inhabitants alike, the heart of Macclesfield is a charming place. Whilst a little tired in areas and a little neglected it is also in need of an injection of vitality and investment. The town already has an extraordinary townscape and a strong architectural and rich cultural heritage. These existing qualities make Macclesfield an enduringly popular and successful place. Rather than disregarding the past the vision needs to build upon the existing qualities of the town and marry them to an investment and development strategy that takes the town forward in a manner that is relevant and appropriate to the rapidly changing environment within which we all live and work. Political imperative and environmental pressures also require that future development is undertaken in a sustainable and environmentally responsible manner.

An attractive, well-managed public realm encourages inward investment and makes people feel good about the place in which they live, work and relax.
Macclesfield

Macclesfield, with a population of approximately 50,000, is the largest town in north Cheshire and is surrounded by attractive rolling countryside. The town is located on the edge of the Peak District and nestles in the foothills of the southern Pennines on the eastern fringe of the Cheshire Plain. The town is located about 15 miles south of Manchester (see figure 1). The historic heart of Macclesfield enjoys an elevated aspect with stunning views eastwards towards the Peak District National Park. The availability of views to the countryside beyond, particularly from around the historic heart, is a notable attribute of the town centre.

Despite its rural context Macclesfield is well connected with a solid infrastructure that links it with other regional centres of population. Key attributes of the town include:

- The River Bollin which flows northwards from its source in the hills above Macclesfield through the town centre to the Manchester Ship Canal and the Macclesfield Canal.
- The Macclesfield Canal, which dates from 1831, and traverses the town from north east to south running from Marple Junction with the Peak Forest Canal to Hall Green on the Trent and Mersey Canal.
- Macclesfield’s railway station occupies a relatively central location and adjoins the eastern fringes of the historic town centre. The main line railway, dating from 1845, links Macclesfield to both London and Manchester.
- Five ‘A’ category roads converge on Macclesfield connecting the town to many of the other major towns and cities in the area including Manchester, Buxton and Congleton.
- Macclesfield enjoys relatively easy access to both the M6 and M56.
- Manchester airport is located only approximately 10 miles to the north west of the town.
- The town has a recently completed bus station located within the heart of the town centre.

Macclesfield is thus well served by local, regional and national communication infrastructure that collectively make the town accessible to a wide number of visitors. The town centre has a potentially wide catchment that the public realm strategy needs to be able to adequately cater for and accommodate.

The Borough of Macclesfield is considered to be one of the most prosperous parts of the UK, with low unemployment and a generally thriving economy. The work force is well educated and Macclesfield itself is estimated to be amongst the 30 wealthiest towns in the country.
Figure 2: Townscape Views

1. View east from Sparrow Park towards the hills of the Peak District
2. View north from Waters Green towards St Michael and All Angels Church
3. View east from the park behind the Town Hall towards the hills of the Peak District

Figure note:
Figure 2 shows the key views within and around the heart of the town centre. There are also many views from the surrounding landscape back towards the town centre, particularly from the east.

These key views towards and from the town centre need to be protected to ensure that they remain free of inappropriate building intrusion and to ensure that the visual links to the countryside are retained. These visual links are an important part of the history and context of Macclesfield and its relationship with the Peak District.
Historical Development of the Town

Macclesfield is currently a thriving market town that has enjoyed a prosperous industrial past. The original medieval town is believed to have been sited within the heart of the existing historic centre with its naturally defensive hill slopes that overlook the River Bollin to the east.

Originally Macclesfield was part of a large estate that belonged to the Earls of Chester until 1237. When the last Earl of Chester died the land reverted back to the Crown. The Borough of Macclesfield was established in 1220 by the last Earl of Chester at which time the main business of the town was predominantly agriculture and associated trading. The Town was granted a Charter in 1261 which, in turn, contributed to shaping the historic core of the town into its present day layout. The historic street morphology of the Market Place, Jordangate, Mill Street and Chestergate all stem from this time.

Throughout the Middle Ages Macclesfield continued to grow and prosper developing a reputation as the administrative and trading centre for the surrounding region (see figure 3). During the 16th Century the town had spread to include the areas of Wallgate, Church Street and Waters Green. Many industries such as quarrying, brick works, copper works, button making, cotton spinning, silk works and dye houses were established in the following years.

It is during the 19th Century, however, that Macclesfield really prospered and expanded, earning itself the reputation of “The Silk Town” reflecting the importance of the silk industry to the town (refer to figure 4). Evidence of this rich industrial past is still visible within the town centre and contributes significantly to defining the existing built character of the town. At the time Macclesfield was considered the world’s biggest producer of finished silk and the silk industry continued to dominate the town for over 200 years until silk eventually went out of fashion and it became cheaper and easier to import silk from abroad. In the heyday of the silk industry there were over 70 mills operating in Macclesfield employing the vast majority of the local population.

1 St Michael and All Angels Church
2 Figure 3: Modern Outline Map of Medieval Macclesfield

Figure 3: Medieval Macclesfield
Despite the decline of the Silk Industry, Macclesfield has still continued to expand during the 20th Century and it remains the administrative hub of the local area. Today it is home to around 50,000 inhabitants and is recognised as one of the more prosperous towns within the country. The town retains good infrastructure connections and has been successful in attracting international companies to locate their headquarters in the area.
Figure 5: The Built Environment

1. 6 King Edward Street
2. Jordangate House
3. 8-10 Park Green
4. Waters Green House

- Listed buildings
- Buildings of visual merit
- Conservation Areas
- Historic monuments
Background
The Major Development Opportunity

The need for a public realm strategy has been, in part, prompted by the emergence of a major redevelopment scheme within the town centre. The envisaged development, a result of a developer partnership with Macclesfield Borough Council, is intended to include new retail outlets, a department store, a community arts centre, a multiplex cinema, restaurants and car parking facilities. Figure 6 identifies the development site boundary.

A close working relationship with the developer will be necessary to ensure that the proposed development enhances the public realm within the town centre. Importantly, the proposed scheme also includes proposals for a new ‘town square’ and other smaller areas of public space. These proposals are to be welcomed and have the potential to contribute positively to an enhancement of the town’s public realm. The proposed development will occupy land within the south western fringe of the town centre; be adjacent to and straddling the historic core of the town; and interface with the existing main retail streets. The development area will encompass approximately 7ha of existing buildings and key streets and occupies approximately 20% of the town centre strategy area.

There is clearly a need to ensure that the character and quality of the envisaged development relates well to the existing built fabric of Macclesfield town centre. Whilst the proposed public realm strategy has taken account of the extent and location of the major development scheme it has also, where judged appropriate and necessary, identified key issues that need to be considered in order to ensure the successful integration and ‘knitting in’ of the scheme into the heart of Macclesfield town centre.

Figure 6: The Town Centre Redevelopment Boundary
Policy Framework

Recent years have seen much national attention given to the public realm and there has been a regular stream of government directives and drivers aimed at increasing an awareness of the public realm and the important contribution that it can make to enhancing people’s lives, their sense of well-being, wealth and civic pride.

The Government is focused on improving the quality of life in our towns and cities through the Urban Renaissance programme. This work is being commissioned at a time of increased awareness of the importance of good design and a realisation that investment in the public realm makes good business sense.

Town Centres

Government policies at European, national and local levels have reinforced the importance of town centres as the focus for social and economic life in urban areas. During the 1980s and early 1990s the huge expansion of ‘out-of-town’ retail centres was threatening the economic vitality of the traditional centres. Government is now seeking to reverse this trend via a number of measures including PPS 6, Town Centres and Retail Development. This seeks to help sustain town centres. A key requirement for success will be the provision of a high quality pedestrian environment to complement the diverse retail, recreational and tourist attractions, both existing and planned, in the town centre.

Sustainable Development

The incorporation of the political commitments to sustainable development into European and Government policy has also been important. As a result, greater emphasis has been placed on town centres, where people can easily be served by public transport. Macclesfield would appear to have relatively strong infrastructure connections given the new centrally located bus station and the relative proximity of the national rail station at Waters Green.

Conservation

Protection of the historic environment has increasingly been seen as an important planning concern since the 1970s. Fundamental to Government policies for environmental stewardship is the belief that there should be effective protection for all aspects of the historic environment, particularly listed buildings and designated conservation areas. This is particularly pertinent to Macclesfield town centre given that the heart of the town embraces three different conservation areas which need to be respected in their own right and around which design needs to be sympathetic.

The Town Centre Public Realm Strategy

The identified public realm strategy area is focused upon the town centre and includes the historic core of the town. The extent of the study area is seemingly logically defined by a number of town centre arterial routes: The Silk Road and the railway to the east; Park Street, Churchill Way and Roe Street to the south; Shaw Street and Catherine Street to the west; and, the dual carriageway of Hibel Road to the north. However, with the exception of the boundary along the north west of the study area, this boundary definition subliminally re-enforces the town centre’s physical separation from adjoining areas. For the town centre to be properly integrated it ideally needs to fit seamlessly into the surrounding town morphology. Links and the bridging of perceived barriers is a key component of the town centre public realm strategy.

It is also noted that the study area includes the majority of the Macclesfield Town Centre Conservation Area and large extents of both Christchurch and Park Green Conservation Areas all of which contribute substantially to defining the underlying character of the town centre.
The Purpose of the Strategy

The objective of the public realm strategy document is to establish a set of overriding principles and objectives that will identify a set of guidelines that will, in turn, inform all future individual design projects within the area and reinforce the three key themes currently championed by Macclesfield Borough Council these being:

- sustainability
- local distinctiveness
- lasting quality

The purpose of the public realm strategy is also to capture in an easy to interpret manual all of these qualities in a way that will allow each street and space to be designed in a consistent and coherent way.

We envisage three key components to this strategy:

1. The establishment of a clear hierarchy of streets and spaces through the development of a network of ‘threads’ and ‘beads’.

2. The establishment of general public realm principles for the town centre including:
   - Local character;
   - Spatial organisation;
   - Circulation hierarchy;
   - Signage;
   - Lighting;
   - Materials and finishes;
   - Street furniture;
   - ‘Green’ Landscape;
   - Art in the public realm.

3. The establishment of public realm guidelines.

In addition, the strategy document also includes a number of pen sketches for key areas of the public realm that illustrate what might be achieved in these key spaces in the longer term.

This process will involve understanding:

- The character of the town and the existing quality of the public realm
- Circulation patterns: the way in which pedestrians move around and use the town’s public realm and how the proposed new development may affect pedestrian movement
- Vehicular movement patterns within the town centre including traffic management issues; car parking arrangements; public transport routes; servicing and cycling
- Town centre management and maintenance issues.