Setting the scene

Existing Attributes

Macclesfield is special. It has an extraordinarily rich central townscape with a strong architectural and cultural heritage, and an attractive physical location. These qualities make Macclesfield a popular and successful place. Within the town centre there still remains a rich, although vulnerable, architectural heritage, and the sense of community in the town is evident. The town centre still retains much of its historic fabric and urban morphology. The key positive attributes of the town centre include:

- Its relative compactness
- Its architectural wealth and cohesiveness
- The relatively uniform sense of scale and massing of the built form
- The interesting landform, in particular the steep change in level that wraps around the east of St Michael and All Angels Church
- The town centre’s elevated location overlooking the Bollin Valley
- The availability of distant views to the Peak District National Park
- Its relative accessibility by all forms of transport from surrounding settlements
- The River Bollin and the River Bollin Walkway (albeit at present sadly “lost” and neglected)

In addition, the town centre includes a wealth of attractive buildings as indicated on the built environment plan. Figure 5 identifies the listed buildings within the town centre. These include the important listed buildings of:

- St Michael and All Angels Church
- Christchurch
- Macclesfield United Reformed Church
- Town Hall
- Library
- Silk Museum and Heritage Centre
- Paradise Mill
- Chapel Mill
- Stanley and Brockslehurst Court
- Jordangate House
- 6 Jordangate
- Queens Hotel

These distinctive buildings are supported by other attractive and visually important buildings all of which, collectively, contribute to defining the character and quality of the town centre. Macclesfield should be proud of its building fabric the character of which has been carefully considered in formulating a strategy for the town centre. The character of the buildings also assists in giving a design steer to the treatment of the external public spaces and the specification and design of materials, street furniture and other site elements.
Understanding the Issues

In spite of Macclesfield’s range of positive attributes the town centre has a lack of vision. There is clear evidence of a confused approach to the public realm and a general lack of cohesiveness and integrity in the detailing of the external spaces. This is, in part, a reflection of the different times at which the public realm works have been implemented. Circulation priorities and routes are confused, and retail opportunities could be improved and the town centre enlivened. In spite of its existing mix of retail opportunities the town centre feels dated and unable to respond in a positive way to individual development approaches. The quality of its public realm has not been helped by the recent larger-scaled infill development between Waters Green and Park Green.

The town centre is also noticeably segregated from its surrounding neighbourhoods and the inner ring road acts as a clear barrier between the town centre and the adjoining urban fabric. Hibel Road, The Silk Road and the southern end of Churchill Way all act as strong barriers, isolating the town centre and fracturing the historic urban grain. Figure 7 identifies the existing street hierarchy and the circulatory “inner ring road” (shown as part of the primary route network). This is particularly evident, for example, in the vicinity around Park Lane and Parsonage Street which have become cul-de-sacs and isolated from the residential and employment areas to the south of Churchill Way and Park Street. In a similar vein, Hibel Road separates the northern fringe of the heart of the town centre from the areas to the north. The width of the inner relief road and the tunnelling effect of the road profile further contribute to severing the town centre from areas to the north. The southern half of Churchill Way also follows an alignment that is unsympathetic to the built form and integrity of the town centre. This is not an uncommon characteristic of many of the country’s towns and has clearly arisen as a solution to other priority pressures of the time. The dominance of vehicular traffic can, however, if not carefully managed, significantly detrimentally effect the very heart and soul of our towns. The current major development opportunity adjoining Churchill Way will need to be particularly sensitive to its relationship with, and public face onto, Churchill Way if it is to engage with the road rather than turn its back on it.
CASE STUDY: Queen Square in Bristol has recently seen the removal of a former dual carriageway inner ring road in favour of the restoration of an important historic square and the retrieval of the Square for pedestrian usage and relaxation. Formerly empty office units have since been taken up by new businesses moving into the area, buildings have been refurbished, crime rates have dropped, the city has benefited from organising events in the Square that bring in an income and the surrounding streets have prospered from re-investment.

Macclesfield has struggled to remain a cohesive, attractive and successful town in the light of the decline in industry previously located within its centre. It does, however, still remain relatively prosperous yet could prosper more substantially than it presently does. There is the desire within the Borough to ensure that Macclesfield continues to thrive and this is reflected in the major development opportunity that has been identified between Mill Street and Churchill Way. This is a crucial site and, given that it forms a substantial proportion of the town centre, it is important that the ultimate scheme for the site knits in well with the existing built and spatial fabric of the town centre. The range of perceived issues that the public realm strategy ideally needs to address is as follows:

‘Aesthetic’ Issues:
- A confused, dated and poorly defined public realm
- A lack of quality external spaces where people can meet and relax
- The visual fragmentation of the streetscene
- A fragmented and fractured townscape into which inappropriately scaled development has been imposed
- A lack of greenery within public spaces
- The poor quality and limited provision of existing street furniture
- A confused palette of surface materials
- The neglected appearance of some of the historic buildings within the town centre
- The ‘lost’ River Bollin - a badly under utilised resource

‘Practical’ Issues:
- Repeated vehicular and pedestrian conflicts
- The periodic traffic congestion that occurs at key junctions
- The partial physical isolation of the town centre due to the ‘severance’ effect of the inner ring road
- Inadequate pedestrian links between, and within, the town centre to adjoining areas
- Inadequate lighting provision and the poor design quality of the lighting
- Poorly conceived and inadequate information signage and wayfinding
- A poorly accessible River Bollin and its historical walkway

However, the limits of the public realm strategy means that not all of these issues can be addressed in the short term. Many require longer-term resolution and are inherently bound up with the pressing need to rationalise and restrict the extent of parking within the town centre.
Opportunities for Improvement

Whilst significant sections of Macclesfield town centre are attractive and exhibit a cohesiveness other parts of the town centre have clearly seen better days. Within the heart of the town there are significant tracts of land where the built form is in a poor state of repair, where temporary landuses predominate (often in the form of temporary car parks), where the morphology of the historic town has been detrimentally scarred by road developments or by development in the 1960’s. The poor state of repair of the urban fabric in some localities has been recognised given the promotion of the major development opportunity currently being explored by a developer. Other potential opportunities for the improvement and enhancement of the public realm also exist within the town centre (refer to figure 8) and include such areas as:

1. Waters Green – presently dominated by visually intrusive car parking
2. Park Green – another potentially important town centre space used by traffic and parking
3. Parsonage Street – areas of unused/neglected land adjoin this street
4. The River Bollin margins – smaller areas of neglected/waste land occur along the river (eg towards Park Green) and could usefully be incorporated into the River Bollin Walkway
5. Exchange Street - large areas of temporary car parking straddle the street to the north and south. Pickford Street, Lower Exchange Street and Sunderland Street – various car parks, some associated with more recent development, adjoin these streets and visually dominate the townscape
6. Cumberland Street roundabout – dominated by traffic and unsympathetic road junction
7. Jordangate – an area of temporary car parking behind King Edward House
8. Great King Street / Churchill Way – characterised by poor built form, road geometry and neglected land
9. Christchurch – a recent car park intrudes into a potentially attractive setting for a key landmark building within the town centre
10. Sparrow Park - a marginal / ‘lost’ town centre park
11. River Bollin Walkway – an historic and potentially attractive route that is presently lost to the town and largely concealed by the railway line and the Silk Road

All of these sites offer opportunities for improving the public realm of the town centre if a mechanism can be found to release their potential. Development of the sites could usefully take on different forms but would need to be commercially deliverable. Land ownership will undoubtedly be a key issue but a combination of building development with the delivery of an enhanced public realm could be realisable on a number of the sites.
The Public Realm Strategy

The Design approach

Macclesfield has decided to undertake a review of its public realm and to seek a new vision that will enable the town to realise its full commercial, creative and cultural potential and to strengthen its position as an attractive destination.

Ultimately the vision is about making Macclesfield a delightful and attractive town that people will want to come to visit and reside in. It is about delivering a town centre that functions well economically and socially and in an environmentally sensitive manner.

This means bringing into question some of the norms that people take for granted in their daily lives. It means actively seeking to reduce the dominance of the motor car; it means delivering an accessible pedestrian-friendly environment; it means fostering a climate that encourages investment in the town centre; and it means delivering an attractive, functioning and sustainable town centre in which people wish to live, work and spend their leisure time.

The vision, to be delivered through a range of different strategies, seeks to enhance and better define the town’s character and identity; engender an enhanced sense of pride of place; encourage business development and community enterprise; and, deliver a high quality and attractive public realm.

Foremost of the strategies is the concept of a series of ‘threads and beads’ that will knit the town centre together, the ‘threads’ being the pattern of key pedestrian routes and the ‘beads’ the envisioned network of both ‘green’ and ‘hard’ spaces located within the town centre. Moreover, in seeking to deliver a high quality public realm people’s aspirations must be raised. This requires engagement with the community and the developing of a sense of ownership and civic pride. These broader objectives are to be achieved by:

‘Aesthetic’ objectives:
- Enhancing the quality of the town’s routes and public spaces (the ‘threads’ and ‘beads’)
- Delivering a more cohesive and less visually fragmented streetscene
- Better unifying the town centre through the judicious specification of materials to create a simple and visually unfussy public realm
- Establishing parameters for the incorporation of a coordinated range of street furniture
- The incorporation of public art to enhance the public realm and strengthen town identity
- Identifying opportunities for the ‘greening up’ of spaces and / or routes
- Building upon the town’s strong architectural heritage
- Better drawing upon the town’s surrounding landscape to strengthen identity and ‘bring the countryside into the town’

‘Practical/Functional’ objectives:
- Reconciling areas of pedestrian and vehicular conflict
- Encouraging a review of the transportation system and traffic management within the town centre
- Delivering a more pedestrian friendly environment
- Encouraging the use of other, more sustainable modes of travel such as cycling
- Reducing the physical dominance and visual impact of cars
- Reducing the physical dominance and visual impact of cars
- Identifying opportunities for improvements to the building fabric
- Identifying opportunities for the creation of new public spaces – hard or ‘green’
- Ensuring that the River Bollin and its walkway are restored to prominence and opened up to the public
The Town Centre Redevelopment

The town centre’s major development opportunity is being drawn up by Wilson Bowden Developments in partnership with Macclesfield Borough Council. The area of land earmarked for redevelopment comprises approximately 7ha of land that straddles the Christchurch Conservation Area and is located immediately to the west of Mill Street, the main town retail street, as shown on figure 9.

The proposed development will consist of:
- New shops including an arcade and department store
- A central pedestrianised “street”
- Community Centre
- Multiplex cinema
- Numerous restaurants and cafes
- A new public square
- Other areas of public space
- Replacement and enhanced car parking
- Residential units

The proposed Wilson Bowden scheme is ‘thought to begin to bring together the old and the new’ within the town centre. It is also intended that the proposals are ‘on a scale that will not swamp the existing town centre. They are sympathetic to its character and preserve the best features of the town’. The emerging scheme seeks to replicate the tight streetscape of the town, and reflect the existing character of mill buildings that dominate the southern half of the town centre.
Analysis of the Wilson Bowden Development

In order to ensure the successful integration of the major development into the existing town fabric in a manner that is compatible with the emerging public realm strategy the key objectives of any proposed redevelopment should be to:

- Respond to the existing street morphology.
- Maintain and enhance links to the east and west of the development.
- Ensure the delivery of animated frontages onto all streets.
- Ensure that the scale and massing of new buildings will work with existing ground profiles and the existing built form/massing.
- Ensure that the character of the new streets relate to adjoining linking streets.
- Avoid the creation of sterile service yards.
- Identify a clear use for all new spaces.
- Reappraise the relationship with Churchill Way south of Roe Street.

Specific observations on the current proposed development include:

- The ‘grain’ of the proposed development broadly reflects the historical character.
- The scale of the development in the southern portion of the development site should not dwarf the surrounding built fabric.
- The south western edge of the proposed development suggests that it will reinforce the severing effect of Churchill Way. This should be reviewed and a scheme proposed that properly and effectively links across Churchill Way.
- The proposed new Town Square is well located and of an appropriate scale to deliver a meaningful new public space.
- There is uncertainty over the envisaged use of Duke Street courtyard. Ideally the space should be animated and invite public use rather than solely being a service courtyard.
- The proposed retail units to the west of the Dukes Street courtyard could benefit from a dual façade.
- At present the proposed central spine ‘reads’ as an internal ‘mall’ with the proposed retail units focused on the mall thereby turning their ‘backs’ on the town.
- The relationship of the proposed new build/car park with Great King Street should be re-appraised - a new quality urban space should be delivered in this location.
- The proposed green wedge at Churchill Way roundabout west of the proposed department store should be reviewed. The provision of the green space is welcomed but its current location and form means that there are significant concerns regarding its practical useability, accessibility and contribution to the public realm. The space needs to have a function and to be animated if it is to be a meaningful part of the public realm.
- At the southern end of Mill Street and Park Green the important opportunity to enhance the Park Green area and provide an attractive entrance into the new shopping area should be taken.