

2. The Town Centre



2.1 The Town Centre: Key messages and aims

The context

Shaftesbury has some powerful advantages that set our town centre apart. It has a unique hilltop location with iconic views from Gold Hill. Shaftesbury centre is historic and picturesque and enjoys a range of independent shops. Economically, it is holding up reasonably well compared to other towns.



However, if our town centre is to continue to thrive, it will need to adapt and make the most of its benefits. Shaftesbury town centre needs to remain distinctive and to retain its appeal to both residents and visitors. There could be more leisure activities offered in the town centre.

Surveys have highlighted concerns with traffic congestion and parking. Although the Neighbourhood Plan cannot

solve traffic problems, we do cover parking and we have recommended some projects that could help.

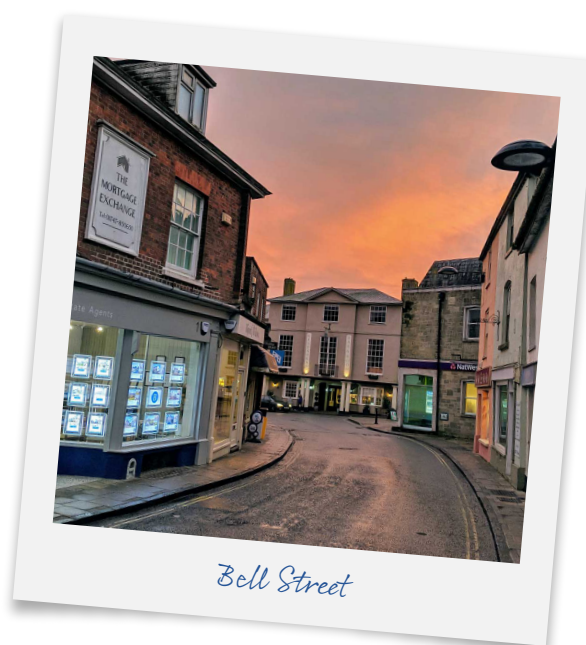
Key feedback from consultation

The policies developed have tried to take account of all the earlier consultations undertaken.

Key themes from these were:

- ▶ There is support for a varied selection of shops with independent stores and the market.
- ▶ Residents want to keep our distinct character and heritage.
- ▶ There are concerns about parking and congestion.

The initial consultation, conducted in February 2019, tested our draft policies, which indicated that people were in favour of the four draft policies for the town centre, but were not keen on the idea of allowing the upward extension of buildings in the town centre. So that idea was dropped.



What has changed since this plan was first made?

Business and shopper surveys carried out in 2020 indicated a strong level of support for the partial pedestrianization of High Street, which had been trialled during that year. An Artisan Market was trialled in 2023 and is now a permanent visitor experience on the second Sunday of each month.

The new Lidl Store on Christy's Lane was opened in late 2021—it is unfortunate that a direct pedestrian link from there through to the Town Centre could not be provided. Three banks in the town centre closed their doors during 2022/2023.

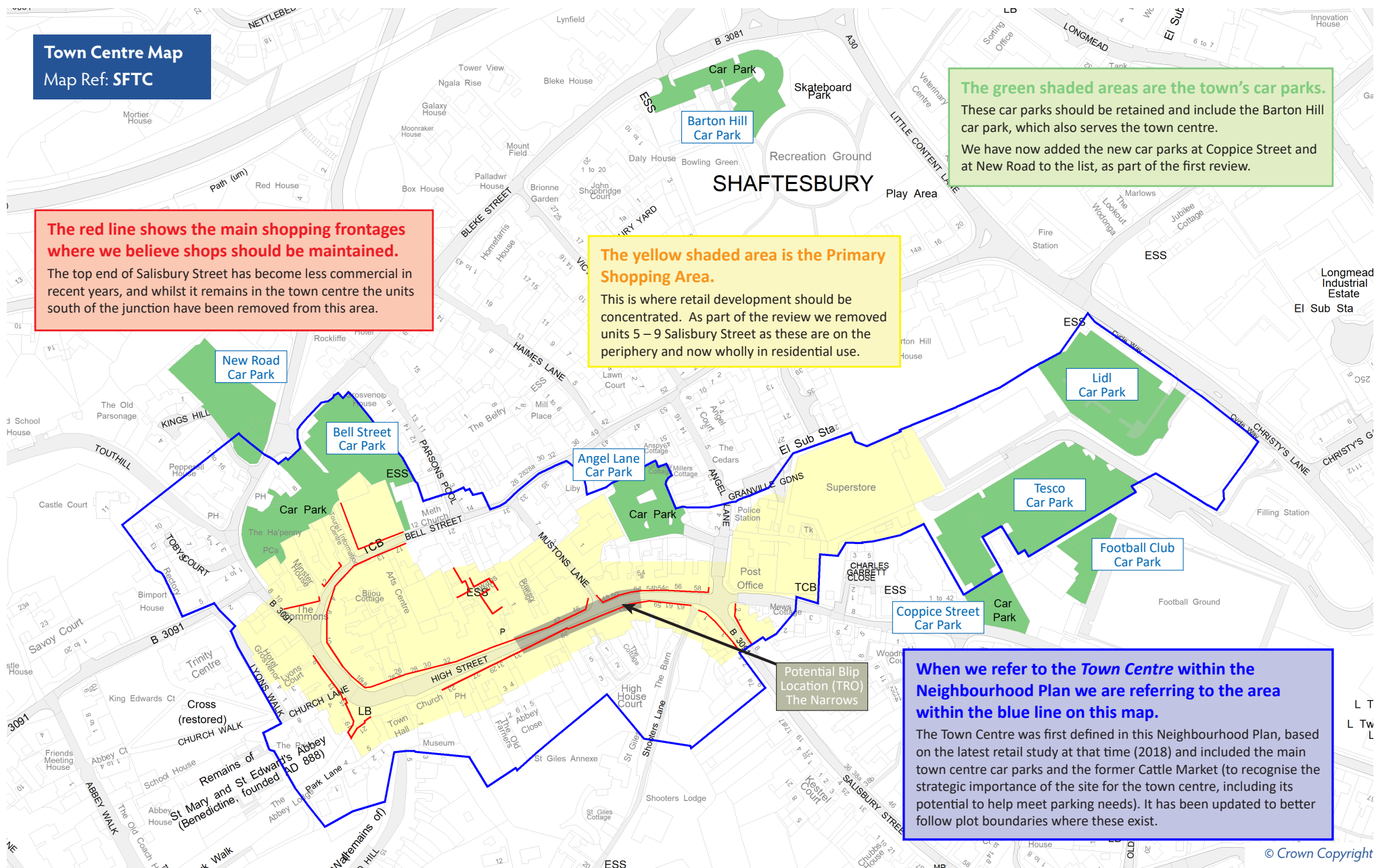
Land in Coppice Street, owned by the Town Council, was laid out to provide a further 32 long stay parking spaces to serve the town centre. An additional 70 spaces have been added with the opening of a privately run car park off New Road.

Dorset Council published a new retail and leisure study (2022), which made a number of suggestions on how planning policies can support our town centres. The evidence does not suggest any need to expand Shaftesbury town centre, recognising that sites in more peripheral locations may be more economical as housing.

Key messages for the town centre

- ▶ Retain a variety of retail businesses and a strong presence of independently owned shops
- ▶ Strengthen leisure-based opportunities and be a vibrant social centre for the whole community.
- ▶ Enhance the centre's attractiveness and character for visitors and residents alike
- ▶ Improve its accessibility, balancing the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and car users.

2.2 What is the Town Centre?



2.3 Development within the Town Centre

What does Policy SFTC1 set out to do?

To define the Town Centre and our priorities for development in that area.

This includes independent shops, enhanced leisure and tourism, the potential for commercial offices and flats above shops, and a welcoming and charming historic environment.

Details:

Our survey has told us what you value from our town centre and what could be made better.

In line with national and local plan policies, any retail development outside of this area must not adversely affect the vitality and viability of the town centre. The latest Dorset Council retail study advises applications for new shops or other town centre uses outside of the town centre with a floorspace over 280m² will therefore need to be accompanied by an impact assessment.



High Street Shop

POLICY SFTC1

Development proposals within the town centre area (the area within the blue line on [Map SFTC](#)) will be supported if they meet one or more of these following aspirations and do not undermine others:

- ▶ maintain a strong and vibrant retail presence within the town centre area.
- ▶ enable the continued presence of a varied range of small independent shops.
- ▶ ensure the continued operation of the street markets.
- ▶ enhance the leisure activities for both residents and tourists. These could include cultural, arts and community venues, additional overnight accommodation and food or drink establishments.
- ▶ provide opportunities for office-based employment, which complement and support the town centre's vitality and viability.
- ▶ offer opportunities for housing on otherwise underused upper floors where these are shown to be no longer suitable for commercial use.
- ▶ protect and enhance the town centre's historic and architectural charm.
- ▶ create a safe and pedestrian-friendly public space.
- ▶ provide sufficient public and private car parking for the town centre and the parking provision caters for forecast future needs.

Why is enhancing leisure important?

Leisure uses, such as cafés and restaurants, cultural and recreation facilities all bring people into the area and strengthen the commercial viability of the town centre as a whole.

i The range of leisure services offered in Shaftesbury is limited and in 2018 made up only 13.9% of total outlets compared to the UK average of 23.9%.



Town Hall



High Street Shop

Why do we need to maintain a vibrant town centre?

The findings of the 2018 'health check' for Shaftesbury town centre painted a largely positive picture. On most measures Shaftesbury fared better than national averages and other towns in rural Dorset. For example, the shop vacancy rate was recorded as 3.9% compared with a national average of 11.2%.

The Covid pandemic posed the most significant challenge to the commercial leisure industry in recent years, challenging businesses to rethink how best to connect to their customers. This has, if anything, reinforced the importance of flexibility (supporting changes in how businesses can best meet customer needs), and the importance of the outdoor environment in creating attractive and healthy places.

During public consultation, many members of the Shaftesbury community raised concerns about the level of traffic in the High Street. A project is underway to look at the potential of the partial pedestrianisation of the town centre (limited to certain times/days). This, however, will need to consider practicalities, cost feasibility, and impact on deliveries, footfall and retailers.

i When people were asked what they most liked about Shaftesbury Town Centre, the two key features most frequently mentioned were "attractive environment/nice place" (29.4%) and "good range of independent shops" (17.1%).

Why is tourism important?

i Tourism is important to Shaftesbury's economy. Each year, our town receives 472,000 day visitors and 19,000 people stay overnight. Visitors spend £18.3 million locally each year and that supports 370 local jobs.



Grosvenor Arms Hotel



Artisan Market

Quick Read

What does this policy mean and why is it important?

The term 'town centre' means different things to different people. This is a planning document and we need to make sure we are clear about the precise area that we are referring to.

It also sets the scene in terms of what is important to consider when planning decisions are made.



Busy High Street, Fringe Festival

2.4 Uses allowed within the Primary Shopping Area

What does Policy SFTC2 set out to do?

To define the primary shopping area and main frontages, and the different uses/changes allowed that should support the vitality of the town centre.

Whilst shops remain important, other uses that bring people to, and generate activity in, the town centre will also be encouraged.

Within the section known as The Narrows, the restricted width causes major difficulties for deliveries and collections.

POLICY SFTC2

For the main shopping frontages within the primary shopping area (as shown by the red line on [Map SFTC](#)), the use of ground floor or street level units should fall within one or more of the following use classes:

- ▶ Commercial, Business or Service (Class E)
- ▶ Learning and non-residential institutions (Class F1)
- ▶ Local community (Class F2)
- ▶ Other sui generis uses deemed compatible, including: public house or drinking establishments; hot food takeaway establishments (except within the section known as The Narrows, as shown on [Map SFTC1](#)); live music venues; theatres; cinemas; concert halls; bingo halls; and dance halls.



Bell Street Shop



Thursday Market

Quick Read

What does this policy mean and why is it important?

If all of the shops in the High Street became offices or residential properties, the town centre would soon feel very different.

Local jobs and our town's economy could be affected. We don't feel that a row of offices should be allowed to replace retail shops in the High Street, for example.

However—because there are national permitted development rights, not all changes require planning permission. A short explanation of the Use Classes and Permitted Development Rights are provided in Appendix O.

i A minor change has been made to the primary shopping area at the top end of Salisbury Street, to reflect the fact that it has become less commercial in recent years.



Bell Street Shop

2.5 Town centre shop fronts and public realm design

What does Policy SFTC3 set out to do?

To preserve and enhance the character and design of our historic town centre through the application of character and design guidance to any proposed future development or redevelopment.

The historic buildings and character of the town centre already have a high degree of protection because of the large proportion of Listed buildings and because much of the area is also part of the Shaftesbury Conservation Area (since 1970). The Dorset Historic Towns Survey of Shaftesbury (2011) usefully describes the town's historical development and how this has shaped its character.

An important emphasis is that any new building will be of very high quality, that enhances the town centre, both in its architecture and materials used. This does not mean that it must reference the surrounding historic architecture or local building materials, but that in its heritage-led design and realisation, it is a development of which the town can be proud.



High Street Signage

As part of the review, we have included a Shop Front audit under Project TC3 to help monitor changes to shop fronts and inform future decisions on how to improved the High Street.

POLICY SFTC3

In Shaftesbury Town Centre any street lighting, street signs, litter bins or benches should be consistent with the guidance set out in the Shaftesbury Design Guidelines.

Shopfronts need to retain entrances and openings so people can access them from the street and so they appear connected with, and provide interest to, the street.

The loss of historic shopfronts will be resisted. They should be maintained and enhanced through adopting the following principles:

- ▶ Shop front signage should preserve and enhance the historic character of the shopfront—painted fascias and swing signs will normally be preferred; plastic signs are discouraged
- ▶ The introduction of solid or perforated external security shutters that would have a detrimental impact will be resisted
- ▶ Any alterations or replacements of windows and doors should favour painted timber as the primary material. Doors and windows should retain the traditional design and glazing, where possible, although more energy-efficient glazing options may be supported, including where this would help improve visibility into retail units.
- ▶ The merging of adjoining shops or units together may be favourably considered provided that the external integrity and historic nature of the front of the building(s) is preserved. The design must be reversible.

The redevelopment of late 20th and early 21st century buildings that detract from the historic character of the town centre will be encouraged where this would enhance the historic character of the area.



High Street

Quick Read

What does this policy mean and why is it important?

Shaftesbury is unique. If our town centre streets are altered without consideration for their heritage, they will be ruined, perhaps forever.

However sometimes changes may be necessary for a variety of good reasons—such as where more energy-efficient glazing would overcome issues relating to condensation or poor visibility within the shop premises. Where this is the case, the design can still aim to reflect the traditional shop fronts as far as practical.

2.6 Town Centre parking

What does Policy SFTC4 set out to do?

To ensure that planning decisions pay full regard to congestion and the need for parking in the town centre, as the provision of sufficient and affordable parking is critical to the centre's continuing success.

National planning guidance recognises the need to improve the quality of parking in town centres so that it is convenient, safe and secure, alongside measures to promote accessibility for pedestrians and cyclists. The Government also sees a role for plans to take a 'vision-led approach to identify transport solutions that deliver well-designed, sustainable and popular places'.

Whilst this plan fully supports the provision of a well-connected network of safe and attractive walking and cycling routes that connect the town centre to the outlying residential areas (see **Policy SFCL3**) and the Sustainable Shaftesbury Action Plan proposals for Travel and Transport, the town's topography, rural hinterland and tourist economy all contribute to the fact that many people using the town centre will continue to arrive by car.. The Shaftesbury Parking Study provides further evidence of the importance of retaining sufficient parking spaces for the town's vitality.

With increasing levels of take-up of electric vehicles, it is also important to ensure provision is made for electric/ ultra-low emission vehicle charging points. Where and how these are installed to serve the town centre should be carefully considered, to best meet parking demands.

Since the Neighbourhood Plan was created, the Cattle Market site has been redeveloped by Lidl and includes 119 spaces, but with poor pedestrian links to the town centre. The Town Council has provide a further 32 long-stay spaces on land at Coppice Street (and acquired a further 30 at the rear of the Football Club on a long lease). The old ATS site off New Road is now a car park with 70 spaces.

POLICY SFTC4

Proposals that increase the level of parking provision for the town centre should be strongly supported.

Developers may be required to provide financial contributions to help fund the provision of additional off-street parking spaces and improvements to parking management. This would apply if the development, cumulatively with other planned developments, would increase parking pressures in the Town Centre area causing an unacceptable level of harm.

Proposals that reduce the number of off- street parking spaces to serve the town centre will be resisted.

Proposals for installation of electric/ultra-low emission vehicle charging points should be supported. This should not harm existing heritage assets or the roots of protected trees.



i Planning policies that seek to increase parking provision are unlikely to be sufficient on their own. Practical measures are needed to manage demand and congestion. The recent Shaftesbury Parking Study proposes options including using signposting, altering the length of stay and better enforcement. This needs to be done in partnership with Dorset Council, alongside wider transport considerations.

Community, Leisure & Tourism Policy 3 also sets out to achieve safe walking and cycling routes that are well connected with the town centre and other key areas.

Quick Read

What does this policy mean and why is it important?

The Neighbourhood Plan commissioned the Shaftesbury Parking Study. Data collection and surveys were undertaken in late 2018 for the four car parks serving the town centre at the time—Bell Street, Angel Lane, Tesco and Barton Hill.

Observations were also undertaken of on-street parking.

The main conclusions of the study are:

- ▶ Car parking is in high demand in Shaftesbury.
- ▶ Car parks are heavily used.
- ▶ Demand has increased since the previous survey in 2005.

The Town Council will continue to monitor the impacts of changes to parking serving the Town Centre.