**The future of our Town Centre – Skeleton draft**

**Introduction**

Shaftesbury has some powerful advantages that set our town centre apart: the unique hilltop location with the iconic views from Gold Hill; its historic and picturesque character; and the range of its independent shops. Evidence from a recent independent study suggests that it is holding up reasonably well in the face of the multiple threats affecting high streets throughout the UK. However, shopping and leisure habits are changing rapidly. The internet is affecting virtually every aspect of our lives. If our town centre is to continue to thrive, it will need to adapt and make the most of its assets to create a distinct and compelling offer.

**Evidence**

The latest evidence comes from the *Joint Retail and Commercial Leisure Study – 2018*, undertaken by Carter Jonas for the North Dorset, West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland Councils. This was prepared in the context of the *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) and drew on advice set out in the *National Planning Practice Guidance* (PPG) which places significant weight on the development of positive plan-led visions and strategies to help ensure the vitality of town centres. The summary findings of the “health check” for Shaftesbury town centre, which was designed to help inform plan-making and development management decisions, are set out below.

**Summary findings of Shaftesbury Town Centre Health Check**

Overall Shaftesbury is a vital and viable centre. Some of the key strengths and weaknesses of the centre identified include the following:

o The town not only supports a good range of shops, but is also a tourist and cultural destination.

o The centre has a good convenience provision which is anchored by Tesco supermarket.

o The centre’s comparison offer is also good. It is mainly characterised by independent retailers including craft and gift shops, jewellery stores, general clothing stores and art dealers.

o Shaftesbury also has a good service offer with above average retail and financial service offer.

o The centre’s leisure offer is below the national average.

o Vacancy levels within the town are significantly below national averages and as such Shaftesbury is considered to be performing well and is a healthy town centre.

o Environmental quality within the town is considered to be good. There may however be an opportunity to increase provision of recreational open space and street furniture.

o The town centre’s accessibility is poor and we consider that improvements are needed to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of the town.

o Due to the compact historical layout and topographical constraints, there is somewhat limited scope for retail expansion within the town centre. Nonetheless, land to the east of the town centre is the focus for regeneration to provide community facilities, and retail and housing provision. There is further development potential for housing and employment land in areas outside of the town centre.

This is a largely positive picture. On most measures Shaftesbury fares better than national averages and other towns in rural Dorset. For example, the shop vacancy rate is recorded as 3.9% compared with a national average of 11.2%. A small household survey carried out for the study suggests why Shaftesbury is doing better. 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%).

But not all is rosy. The health check was based largely on 2016 data, and since then there has been some deterioration with more shop closures and empty premises. Surveys of public opinion carried out as part of the Neighbourhood Plan process have highlighted concerns with traffic congestion and parking. There are also questions about how well the town centre now serves the new developments to the east of the town.

**Vision/Objectives**

The challenge is to preserve and enhance what people like about the town centre, while addressing the issues that concern them, and responding to changing expectations and habits. This will not be easy as there are limited resources and tensions between objectives. For example, preserving the historical character of Shaftesbury limits what can be done to address concerns about traffic congestion. Nevertheless, the Neighbourhood Planning Group is optimistic that the town centre can adapt and thrive, and that having the right framework of planning policies and projects, agreed and supported by the local community, can make a difference.

Our vision is that between now and 2030 the town centre should [box]:

* retain a varied retail offer with a strong presence of independents
* strengthen its leisure offer and night time economy
* enhance its attractiveness and character for visitors and residents alike
* offer a distinct, lively and safe experience
* find imaginative ways to improve its accessibility, balancing the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and car users
* be a vibrant social centre for the whole community.

This Neighbourhood Plan sets out a framework to promote and support the achievement of this vision.

**Policies and Projects**

**1. Town Centre and Shopping Area Boundaries**

First, the plan defines the boundaries of the town centre and its shopping areas and frontages, see map x. This is important as it will influence how the new unitary Rural Dorset Council applies its planning policies when making decisions about how buildings and sites can be used in the centre of Shaftesbury. Until now the position has been unclear and reliant on outdated information.

The key definitions used for town centre planning purposes and how these have previously been applied to Shaftesbury are as follows: [these could be put in an explanatory box]:

* Town centre boundaries – these define the preferred location for main town centre uses including: retail development, leisure, entertainment facilities, certain intensive sport and recreation uses, offices, and arts, cultural and tourism uses. Shaftesbury has not previously had agreed town centre boundaries, but account has been taken of draft town centre boundaries identified by North Dorset Council in 2005 (North Dorset Council 2005 Annual Monitoring Report, p 58).
* Primary shopping areas – these define the area of the town centre where retail development is concentrated. Shaftesbury has not previously had an agreed primary shopping area, but account has been taken of recommended boundaries identified by a 2008 Joint Retail Study (Joint Retail Assessment: Christchurch Borough Council and East, North and Purbeck District Councils: Volume 1 Capacity Analysis, Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners (March 2008), Appendix C)
* Primary and secondary shopping frontages – these define more specifically where retail uses will be protected by planning policies, with the focus being on retaining shop uses for the ground floors of primary shopping frontages, with some more flexibility allowed for other defined uses within secondary shopping frontages. Shaftesbury’s primary and secondary shopping frontages have until now been defined by the North Dorset District-Wide Local Plan 2003, with account also being taken of the recommendations in the 2008 Joint Retail Study.

In reviewing previous definitions and recommendations, this plan has taken into account:

* Policy 12 in on Retail, Leisure and other Commercial Developments in the existing North Dorset Local Plan
* the latest evidence from the 2018 Carter Jonas Joint Retail, Commercial and Leisure study
* changes that have taken place in actual town centre usage
* Shaftesbury’s growing population with new and planned developments
* the introduction nationally since 2015 of additional “permitted planning rights” (enabling change of use in some circumstances without requiring planning permission)
* discussions with the Shaftesbury Town Council, Chamber of Commerce, and major landlords affected.

Key decisions and changes made are:

Town centre and primary shopping area boundaries

* the definitions of the town centre boundary and primary shopping area have been aligned so they are the same. This reflects that there are only minor difference between the 2005 draft town centre boundaries and the 2008 Joint Retail Assessment proposed primary shopping area boundaries, and that in practice current North Dorset does not distinguish between them in how it applies planning policies.
* where there were minor differences between previous proposals, the more extensive definition has been chosen so that the new unified definition includes all of the area that was included in the previous proposals.
* one other significant change has been made which is to extend both boundaries to encompass the land between the Post Office and Christy’s Lane. This includes both the Tesco supermarket and car park and the Cattle Market site. Within the current North Dorset Local Plan, this area of land, much of which is in public ownership, is already identified as a site for mixed-use regeneration. The reason for adding it to the town centre and primary shopping areas is to recognise that its future development and use is of crucial strategic importance to the future of Shaftesbury town centre, its retail offer and how this connects to the new eastern developments.

Primary and secondary shopping frontages

* the primary shopping frontage has been designated on the basis of the 2008 Joint Retail Assessment, with one significant change to add the Tesco store frontage. A more extensive definition to include other sites at the edges which are currently in retail use was considered. However, if the frontages are defined too widely there is a risk of having long term empty shops and blocking evolution for other uses that could contribute to the town.
* secondary shopping frontage has been designated where there are currently clusters of shops beyond the primary shop frontage, so there is still some protection but with more flexibility beyond pure retail uses.

Policy on the town centre/primary shopping area, and primary and secondary shop frontages

Policy 12 of the North Dorset Local Plan regarding uses in Town Centres and Uses in Primary and Shopping Frontages will be applied to the boundaries of the town centre area and primary secondary shopping frontage as defined in map X [help needed to draw up definitive map X].

Local Plan Policy 12 reads:

* Uses in Town Centres - Development for retail and other main town centre uses, including mixed use schemes that may include an element of residential element, will be supported within a town centre provided that: a) it is of a type and scale that will maintain or enhance the role and function of the town in the catchment it serves; and b) it is designed to respect the historic character of the town centre; and c) in the case of non-retail main town centre uses, the proposal does not undermine the focus on retailing in primary shopping areas.
* Uses in Primary Shopping Frontages - Within the primary shopping frontages of town centres, development resulting in the change of use from an existing ground floor A1 Class use within a unit fronting a street or pedestrian thoroughfare will not be permitted where this would result in any loss of retail frontage or ground floor net retail floorspace.
* Uses in Secondary Shopping Frontages – Within secondary shopping frontages, development resulting in the change of use of an existing ground floor A Class use within a unit fronting a street or pedestrian thoroughfare will not be permitted. Change of use from A1 Class use to financial and professional services (Use Class A2), restaurants and cafes (Use of Class A3), drinking establishments (Use of Class A4) and hot food takeaways (Use of Class A5) will be permitted.

In applying these policies to Shaftesbury, the future planning authority should have regard also to the evidence that the Shaftesbury leisure offer is currently below the national average, while ensuring that any future development permitted are in keeping with the historical character of the town.

2. Character and Design

* Design brief for the town centre to be developed by Virginia.

3. Parking

* Factual description of current position on provision.
* Results from parking study.
* Policies/projects to make the most of existing provision and create new capacity if needed.

4. Traffic flow

* Results of study if commissioned.
* Project defined to tackle next steps

5. Vibrancy/night-time economy

6. Strategic sites – Cattle Market?

7. Forum with landlords/short-term leases for pop-ups?