8 Delivering the vision: public realm projects

Public realm objectives

The public realm comprises the streets, footpaths and open spaces of Dudley town centre which are contained by buildings and other structures. The design, quality and appearance of the public realm is an important component in defining the character of a place. It greatly influences people’s perceptions and is vital to attracting and sustaining investment.

In order that Dudley town centre has a public realm of the highest quality, appropriate to its historic context, five objectives will underpin the design approach to intervention in the public realm:

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1. **Restoration of street character**
   Some streets have become neglected through insensitive development and poor surface materials. Containment of others is disrupted by vacant land and interrupted frontages. It is vital to restore street character with good quality frontage development and hard/soft landscape treatments. Streets should be dual function wherever with measures used to control traffic speeds wherever possible. Within the Market Place, limited vehicular access during the evening will contribute to a livelier night time economy through maximising town centre accessibility.

2. **Simplify layout and eliminate street clutter**
   A clutter of signs, bollards, servicing boxes, lamp-posts, railings and pedestrian barriers not only undermines the quality and attractiveness of the public realm and detracts from the quality of the buildings, but can also confuse drivers and pedestrians. The removal of unnecessary street clutter, the co-ordination of signage and street furniture and the careful management of street vendors is important. In addition, the overly complex design and layout of spaces, particularly intricate and multi coloured paving designs, can lead to a cluttered appearance. Simplicity must therefore be allowed to prevail and there should be a natural harmony between spatial layout and built form.

3. **Pedestrian crossing points that reflect pedestrian desire lines**
   All too often pedestrians are forced to cross streets and public spaces via the least direct route. A basic principle in the design and layout of all crossings and public spaces should be to prioritise direct, unencumbered pedestrian movement. Forced alternatives that then have to be guarded using ugly safety barriers, must be avoided. Not only do they make the town centre less accessible and easy to move around but barriers also contribute to street clutter.

4. **Extensive avenue tree planting**
   Tree planting is an important structural component that enhances the character and appearance of the town centre. It can be used to help emphasise and re-enforce the identity of different parts of the town centre.

5. **High quality natural materials with simple detailing**
   Robust, low maintenance and timeless design must be a key component of any public realm works in Dudley town centre. A co-ordinated but limited palette of traditional, natural surface materials such as stone, brick and gravel will provide a strong setting for development and reflect the historic context.
Within Dudley town centre five key public realm projects are prioritised for action. These are:

- King Street Boulevard
- Market Place
- Inhedge Gardens
- Crown Square
- St Edmunds Place

The components of each project are described below.

**King Street Boulevard**

Following the construction of the southern bypass most of the through traffic that used to pass along King Street on a daily basis has been removed. As a result the street is now overly wide and has a stark, highly engineered character and appearance. However, the width and relative quiet of King Street now offers considerable potential for the creation of a pedestrian friendly, tree lined boulevard knitting together the historic northern part of the town centre with the newer development around New Mill Gate to the south. Instead of a traffic dominated divide, a rejuvenated King Street Boulevard will become a leafy, attractive, and valued part of Dudley town centre.

The key aims for the public realm around King Street will be the restoration of a 'street' character. This will be achieved through the narrowing of the carriageway with wider pavement areas, and through the incorporation of parking bays along each side of the road. As well as creating a more generous area for pedestrians, avenue tree planting will also be incorporated. Wider pavements will also facilitate spill-out space for retail, food and drink activities, particularly on the south facing side of the street.

Pedestrian crossing points will better reflect desire lines between the established shopping area and New Mill Gate. There is potential for the removal of pedestrian barriers as well as the footbridge that currently crosses the street to the rear of the Churchill shopping centre.

Transforming King Street into a new high quality public space is a major opportunity to reclaim a 'lost' area of the town centre for the community. This project presents an ideal opportunity to implement, as a demonstration project, the ‘communities’ strand of the Black Country urban park initiative. This seeks to cultivate local distinctiveness and a sense of place through community led public realm improvements.

With the development of metro, King Street will increasingly become a public transport corridor. The potential removal of vehicular traffic on Flood Street and the eastern end of King Street will provide an opportunity for improvement in the pedestrian environment.
Market Place

The Market Place is a key site within the Medieval part of the town centre and remains the heart of Dudley. The market is still a lively and well used focus for the community and lies between the Prospect Place, Central Union and Tower Street opportunity areas. There are fine views towards St Edmunds Church and the castle as well as a number of historic buildings that together help frame and define the open space. In recent years the quality of the public realm within the Market Place has become a little tired, not least because of the intensity of pedestrian activity generated within the area, and is now in need of sensitive refurbishment.

The key aims for the public realm around the market place will be to restore and enhance its identity as the heart of Medieval Dudley. In order to achieve this it will be important to reinforce the linearity of the space, emphasising its role as part of the medieval spine and the main route towards the castle. Reorganisation of the market stall layout will assist in this. A more ambitious proposal would involve off-setting the public toilets towards one side of the market place, sensitively redesigning the building to fit with its historic surroundings, would also help to restore the linearity of the Medieval through route to the castle, while maintaining a local facility. Alternatively, the public toilets could be relocated altogether to a nearby location such as the transport interchange at Prospect Place.

In order to assist with the night time economy of Dudley it may also be possible to encourage limited vehicular access during the evenings, including an element of on-street car parking. This must take the form of a uniform shared surface with simple, high quality paving materials used throughout. The paving layout should reflect the original street pattern and incorporate varying street widths that appear to be a natural consequence of the built form.
Inhedge Gardens

Inhedge Gardens is an historic open space within the south eastern part of Dudley town centre and it forms an important link from the top of the High Street and St Thomas’s Church and Wolverhampton Street. From the south western corner of the gardens there are attractive views available across the rooftops of the town towards the castle and there are also a number of fine mature trees. Currently the gardens are poorly surveilled and appear to be a neglected backwater rather than one of the town centre’s key open spaces. Furthermore, the landscape treatment does not reflect the setting, the views available or the strong pedestrian desire line leading from Crown Square to top church.

The redevelopment of the adjoining Trident Triangle opportunity area with apartments and town houses offers the opportunity to reconsider the relationship of Inhedge Gardens with its surroundings so creating an improved interface with much improved natural surveillance. Strengthening the through route for pedestrians between Crown Square and top church will enhance the accessibility of the gardens and heighten their profile as a strategically and significant space within the town centre. The new layout could provide views of the town centre and Castle and incorporate a mix of natural elements such as tree planting, gravel, grass, hedging and water. This will help to create a robust and timeless design worthy of a town park that should also be easy to manage and maintain.
Crown Square

Flowing from the revitalised Inhedge Gardens will be Crown Square, a new public square at the junction of Wolverhampton Street and Priory Street. The principally Victorian buildings around the square are of a fine character, being of a grand scale and richly detailed, and strongly define the space. The role of the square will be to mark the transition from Inhedge Gardens towards Priory Street and Stone Street Square; it would ideally provide for sitting out space for a new café/bar in one of the adjoining buildings.

The layout of the square should not detract from the strength and richness of the surrounding buildings. This can be achieved if the layout appears to be a natural consequence of the built form which defines the space. Surface detailing should therefore be kept simple and uniformed with a formal layout incorporating tree planting. Through traffic vehicle speeds must be kept to a minimum through the use of a shared surface. This will also ensure that the space is read as a unified element, rather than divided into carriageway and footpath. This treatment will be re-enforced through the use of high quality, traditional and simple surface materials such as stone slabs and setts that will echo those used in the recent and implemented Stone Street Square development.

Given that the space is at a key junction within the town centre there is an opportunity for the creation of a central focal point such as the installation of public art. This should be located to ensure maximum visual impact and could perhaps terminate the vista from Inhedge Gardens to the south.
St Edmunds Place

St Edmunds Place, located at the northern end of Castle Street is an important location on the wider Medieval route along the High Street. It is located adjoining the castle grounds and St Edmund’s Church, and is defined by a number of particularly fine historic buildings that lend the area distinction. There are also good mature trees in St Edmund’s Church yard which also contribute to the overall character of the area. St Edmunds Place is a relatively busy traffic junction, with a large number of bus movements which make it an extremely accessible location, but do impede pedestrian movement. This is the most important location for connection between the core of the town centre and the castle. Direct and safe pedestrian movement must be the priority in enhancing the space.

Key proposals must focus on the creation of a new civic space with shared surfacing to unify the area and slow traffic speeds. The street layout should reflect the building line. The layout of the space must also serve to emphasise views north towards the castle, south to market place, and also provide a quality setting for bottom church. The introduction of street trees will also help unify the space and make it feel quieter and more peaceful.