

BILLINGSHURST NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

FUTURE OF THE VILLAGE CENTRE OPTIONS PAPER – DRAFT 1 - APRIL 2018

Introduction

1. Over the past few decades, the role of high streets has gradually shifted away from a predominantly retail focus as shopping habits have changed. With retailers finding it more difficult to sustain their businesses – even the largest companies affected - towns and villages across the country have had to find ways to adapt their offerings accordingly to try to retain a vibrant core. Based on the feedback gathered locally and using examples drawn from similar settlements, this paper explores the implications of these changes and sets out, within the local context, how Billingshurst might respond to ensure that its high street and village centre remains a focus for not only retail but also wider community activity.

The changing nature of high streets

2. In settlements such as Billingshurst, the village centre has always played a central role in community life. The primary focus has traditionally been built around trade - a place to buy and sell goods – which in turn has created a catalyst for community life, with the high street acting as a natural venue for residents to meet one another and also to exchange news with those passing through. In recent decades, however, there has been a major shift in the way people buy goods and this has had a major impact on the retail role of the high street with reduced footfalls and expenditure.
3. The main drivers of change have been:
 - The rise of regional shopping centres in the late 1980s/1990s and out-of-town retail parks – these pulled retailers and consumers away from the high street, making it more difficult for those left behind to sustain their businesses.
 - Increased use of the Internet and online shopping - many of the new wave of retailers have no physical stores, such as Boohoo and ASOS. Consumers, often time-poor, no longer have to leave their homes to shop. The advent of smart mobiles has exacerbated this, with shoppers able to purchase products wherever they are. Established high street retailers are relying more heavily on internet sales to maintain market share, thus physical stores have a diminishing role.
 - The dominance of supermarkets – often out-of-town and selling products beyond just foodstuffs, this again has eroded the market share for on-street retailers.
4. Despite government interventions, such as the ‘town centre first policy’, on-street retailers have found it difficult to compete in this rapidly changing landscape, exacerbated further by rising rents and rates. Many shops, both large and small, have suffered with some having to close down. In April 2018, The Local Data Company, which studied the top 500 British town centres, found there were 4,083 new store openings in 2017, the lowest since 2010.
5. The 2011 Portas Review suggested that high street retail had reached a crisis point and set out to try to understand the situation and suggest solutions to reinvigorate town and village centres. At the core of the Review was the message that high streets need to reimagine their role to one beyond retail first. Creating spaces where the public can meet and share in a sense of community would help to encourage footfall and activity, which in turn would support retailers and service operators co-located there. In essence, whereas in the past it was trade creating the focus for wider community activity, now there is a need to consider the wider village centre experience in order encourage more people in, for longer periods of time and ideally to spend more in local shops. So

for instance, building a focus on tourism to attract visitor-related shops can be one way of attacking the problem. Another is to develop a ‘café-society’ with e.g. tea-rooms and mid-range restaurants, along with a visitor centre, local museum and ideally an art gallery or two.

A portrait of Billingshurst Village Centre

6. The Horsham District Planning Framework (HDPF) classifies Billingshurst as a ‘secondary centre’, along with Henfield, Pulborough, Southwater, Steyning and Storrington, The promotion and encouragement of activities and in village centres is encouraged as a prime focus for community life. A summary of the key policies as they relate to Billingshurst’s village centre are summarised below:

Policy	Implication for Billingshurst
Policy 11: Tourism and cultural facilities	Encourages measures that will support tourism and enhance local cultural facilities
Policy 12: Vitality and viability of existing retail centres	<p>Identifies Billingshurst as a ‘secondary centre’ after Horsham, encouraging activities that will retain its role as a focus for community life including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a mix of uses – retail, leisure, residential, entertainment, arts, culture, sports and recreation, business and commercial • a well-designed public realm • promotions, outdoor events and entertainment and markets • choice of travel and adequate car parking • respect for historic character • Encouraging A-class usage (i.e. retail/eating) • Suitable residential use • A vibrant evening economy • Encouragement for innovative improvements in retailing activity
Policy 13: Town centre uses	<p>A Village Centre boundary has been identified for Billingshurst within which activity should be focussed.</p> <p>The neighbourhood plan can revise this if felt helpful.</p> <p>Changes from A1 to other A class uses, at ground level, will normally be permitted.</p> <p>No more than 30% of a designated retail frontage length should be taken up by non-retail use.</p> <p>Permission for out-of-town centre boundary locations must adhere to the sequential test.</p>
Policy 14: Shop fronts and advertisements	<p>Shop fronts, including temporary ones, need to be in keeping with the local context. Existing architectural features should be retained or restored, including the use of appropriate materials and colours.</p> <p>Advertisements should be suitable sized and not visually detrimental to the surrounding area.</p>

7. In 2016, the Billingshurst Village Centre Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) was published which defines the village centre as comprising two main areas – the High Street and Jengers Mead shopping parade and library car park - sandwiched between the northern and southern high street extremities (see Figure 1). This is largely included within the Conservation Area.

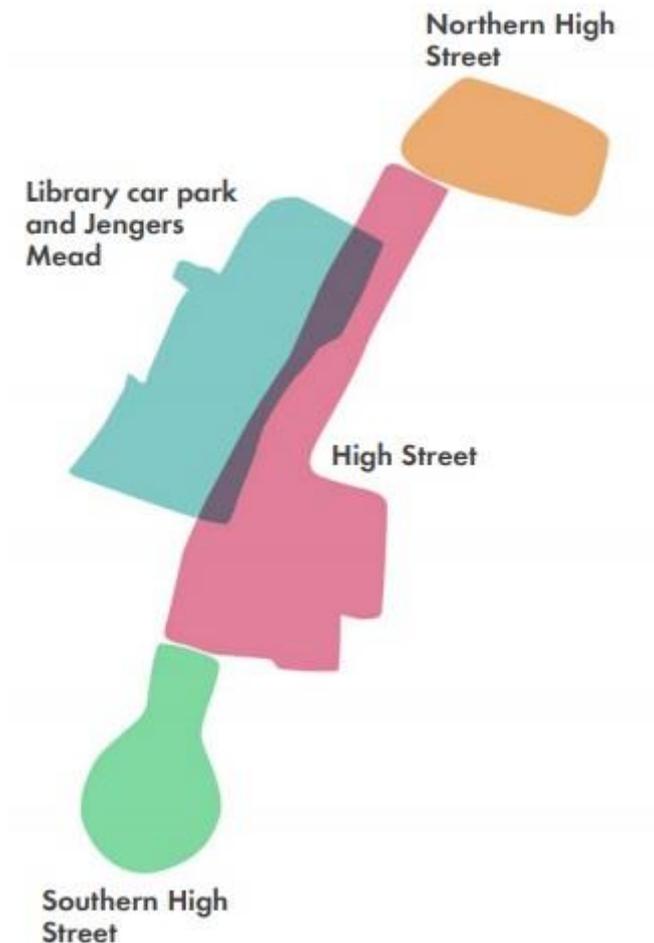


Figure 1: Main components of the village centre

8. This SPD provides a useful set of suggestions about how to make improvements to the area, many of which are still valid today. Some of these might be suitable for inclusion in the neighbourhood plan. The areas and associated suggestions are summarised below:

High Street: The main core of the high street runs between the Jengers Mead roundabout and the A272, where there is a Post Office and Sainsbury’s store. The units in between are fairly small in size and house a mixture of chain stores, independent shops and restaurants as well as local services such as hairdressers. There are a number of estate agents, some charity shops and a bank. The buildings reflect a broad architectural style ranging from listed cottages to post war architecture, resulting in a lack of cohesion across the piece.

The SPD suggests that there is scope to ameliorate the public realm and make the high street more pedestrian friendly. Planters and trees have been added and the pavements are fairly wide in parts, enough for shops and cafes to display outside, and which could also offer scope for on-street activities.

Whilst the SPD recommends the provision of a modest amount of on-street parking, the road itself is fairly narrow so there are limited opportunities for this. Instead there may be scope to improve the existing car parks at Jengers Mead and the library and access between them and the high street.



Examples of varying styles of buildings along the high street. Source: Google Earth

Jengers Mead and library car park: Sited just off to the west of the main high street, Jengers Mead houses a separate parade of shops with its own parking area. To the south west, slightly disconnected at least for vehicles, is the library and library car park. The SPD recommended improved linkages between the two parking areas and possible amalgamation. Certainly better signposting was called for. It also suggested a variety of public realm improvements including improving Jengers Mead and the library areas as pedestrian friendly environments. In terms of expanding the village 'offer, the SPD recommended that the library car park and other hard spaces might be suitable for housing temporary events and markets. Equally, there is scope, as opportunities arise (the library and sorting office are mentioned), to re-use the historic and community buildings for community, cultural or village centre activities.



Source: Google Earth

Northern and Southern high streets: These areas act as gateways into the village centre and the SPD suggested that ways to reduce vehicle dominance and improve the space for pedestrians would be helpful. At the very northern end of the high street is the Community and Conference Centre, which is separated from the main high street by residential housing. The SPD recommended that pedestrian access between the two should be improved. There may be scope too to include this whole area as a site for redevelopment, should the opportunity arise, to improve its look and feel and make better use of the space available.

Whilst some changes have taken place in the village centre, the neighbourhood plan engagement revealed a series of ongoing concerns that still need to be addressed:

- **Access and parking** - Safer pedestrian and in particular cycle routes were welcomed and the idea of reducing vehicles was floated as a way to cut down on HGV traffic. The development of a spine road, and relocation of industrial areas may help to reduce traffic through the main high street. Several locations were identified where parking was a problem. In the centre of the village, there is insufficient public parking, with the parking at Jengers Mead frequently mentioned. Electric vehicle charging points – both private and in public parking locations in the village.
- **Enhanced retail and services offer:** The loss of shops and services was seen as a threat to Billingshurst. In particular, banks were mentioned on multiple occasions and it was felt that a more flexible approach to the use of shop units and in retail provision may be of benefit.
- **More cafes and bars:** An opportunity was seen in providing for more bars and restaurants to make Billingshurst village centre a more attractive place for tourists to visit, with an emphasis on 'longer stay' and the 'evening economy' as opposed to simply day visitors.
- **Public realm improvements:** Many people suggested that the village centre could be made more attractive. Jengers Mead in particular was cited as 'scruffy', 'in need of redevelopment' and 'an eyesore'.

Options for the Neighbourhood Plan

9. The neighbourhood plan is well placed to support the reinvigoration of Billingshurst Village Centre as a shared community space offering a range of retail, cultural and other experiences, to create footfall, extend length of visit and encourage spending.
10. The table below gives examples of the options available with examples of where these have been taken forward in other neighbourhood plans.

Issue	Options to consider with examples from other neighbourhood plans
<p>Promoting a vibrant village centre</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining the boundary of the village centre, based on the footprint provided in the Billingshurst Village Centre SPD. This could include core areas (for instance the high street and Jengers Mead) and secondary including the northern and southern gateways. The introduction of local shops • Restrict change of use away from retail/eateries (A-use) within the village centre boundary – Arlesey include a policy in favour of small, less than 150m², retail unit proposals. There is a presumption against changes of use away from use classes A1 (shops), A2 (Financial and Professional Services), A3 (Restaurants and Cafes) and A4 (Drinking Establishments) in order that non-Class A uses do not dominate or detract from the core objective of providing retail outlets for the shopper. This would also be helpful if trying to promote a ‘café society’ coupled with visitor attractions (including walks). • Making use of empty shops – Petersfield include a policy to enable the temporary change of use of vacant premises to pop-up shops. Lichfield also encourages non-A-class uses will be supported, provided it does not result in the loss of existing retail premises. Such uses include ‘pop up’ shops and cultural, creative and leisure uses introduced on a temporary basis or for specific events. • Encourage residential/ office use above retail units – Sandbach include a policy which permits the use of upper floors for residential or business use in the Town Centre where appropriate. • Re-using historic buildings in the village centre for community purposes – St Neot’s support the re-use of historic buildings within the Town Centre for town centre uses. Any alterations to historic buildings will need to be sympathetic to the historic and architectural significance and character of the building. This might be a consideration for Billingshurst, for instance if there is interest in developing a cultural asset such as a museum, or visitor centre that might even be operated on a community basis.
<p>Improving the public realm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use public space flexibility - consider options for a town square/ pocket park, potentially as part of the redevelopment of a site, which can be used to house temporary events or displays, community events, or street markets. Sandbach include a Markets policy which suggests that development and expansion of viable outdoor and indoor markets throughout the town centre will be supported where sustainable and commercial viability can be demonstrated.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide village centre wifi – Uppingham’s Plan supports the installation of community wifi in the town centre area and in public buildings. This is a really helpful way to support footfall, particularly with many shops now trying to make use of wifi in their promotional offers to passerbys, and for cafes to attract homeworkers. • Consolidating signage - Improve signage into and around the village centre for pedestrians and motorists – Uppingham include an example of this, aiming to simplify navigation around the village core that in turn can underpin associated heritage trails and tourism signage.
<p>Protecting and enhancing public car parking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrict the loss of existing public car parking – Arlesey include a policy that restricts the loss of publicly accessible off-street car parking. Any proposals that would result in the loss of existing publicly available ‘off-street’ car parking spaces must provide at least an equivalent number of spaces in an equally accessible location. • Support additional car parking – Possibly as a part of a redevelopment or identifying spaces along the high street itself, using the suggestions in the SPD as a guide. Proposals for new development that provide additional off-road car parking spaces, to alleviate parking congestion including along the High Street, will be supported.
<p>Creating greater connectivity to and within the village centre</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the pedestrian link between Library and Jengers Mead car parks – this would ideally involve relocating the BT Exchange, but this is still operational and may not wish to relocate. There would be merit in discussing options with BT, who might consider a smaller footprint building if relocation is not an immediate option. HDC are acquiring the Lloyds Pharmacy building and there are plans to convert the western end of the rear garden to car parking, which could create a news pedestrian link to Jengers Mead Car Park – Lichfield includes a policy which seeks to improve pedestrian linkages between key parts of the settlement and centre. • Linking new developments to the village centre – ensuring that all new housing developments incorporate non-vehicle routes to the village centre to encourage footfall. Shifnal include a policy that establishes a series of Primary Walkway Routes to ensure that residents can walk safely to public transport facilities, schools and other important facilities.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic calming/ pedestrianisation - Explore options to (part-?) pedestrianise the high street or install traffic calming/ make improvements to the NatWest roundabout, in order to improve navigation for pedestrians. No definite plans but there is a move to look at High St traffic calming etc once the new spine road is completed, which should remove further thru' traffic and allow for an HGV ban etc.
<p>Improving Billingshurst as a visitor destination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging tourism infrastructure – Explore options generally in the parish that improve Billingshurst’s offer to visitors. This will help to bring greater footfall into the village centre, supporting its vibrancy. Leominster include a policy setting out that proposals which help to expand and improve Leominster’s tourism offer such as hotels and other accommodation, improved cycle tracks, footpaths and bridleways, sensitive regeneration of historic buildings, and expansion/relocation of the Museum.
<p>Village Centre redevelopment sites</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify specific village centre sites that are suitable for redevelopment – The Lichfield NDP includes a policy that supports redevelopment schemes which deliver high quality design that demonstrates full regard for the historic environment of the City Centre, and demonstrate that any main town centre and residential uses proposed will positively contribute to the viability and vitality of the City Centre. <p>Sites to consider could include: Jengers Mead, the Post Office building, the telephone exchange and could incorporate relocation where necessary. Each site would need a description of the purpose of the redevelopment and criteria that must be met, for instance, provision of car parking, opening up pedestrian routes, protection of sight lines to the church.</p>