

5 Urban Design Considerations

- 5.1 The following section establishes the key urban design principles, which the Council wishes to see established as part of any redevelopment of the DBA. It is important that these tenets are taken into account when designing any scheme for the DBA.
- 5.2 Key to the success of the area covered by the SPD is achieving a high quality sustainable development. Applicants will be required to demonstrate that proposals for the DBA adhere to the urban design principles established within this document. A detailed design statement should accompany planning applications. The Council expects that the statement should cover the following:
- Key design principles
 - Density of development
 - Mix and uses
 - The timescale for development
 - Access needs
 - Assessment of any impacts
- 5.3 The urban design objectives of the DBA should include:
- To create a distinctive and memorable town centre based on an attractive public realm of lively streets and open spaces, a mix of residential, commercial and leisure uses providing a critical mass of development and activity and to improve the river environment. All new buildings and public spaces should be designed to the highest quality and meet the sustainable development and design principles promoted by the government and CABI; and
 - To improve community safety through good design whilst achieving a pleasant environment. This means lots of shop windows, development that promotes 'eyes on the street' and reducing and managing traffic speeds.
- 5.4 The following characteristics are important in considering the future development of this site:

Site Attributes and Wider Context

- High profile areas to the north and south forming 'gateways' into the town centre;
- Good public transport provision;
- An opportunity of strategic importance for Hemel Hempstead;
- New investment into the Riverside Shopping Centre, a retail centre of sub regional importance;
- Good road connectivity being close to two major routes and two motorways;
- Extensive land in public sector ownership allowing a comprehensive approach to site development;
- Established residential communities around the centre providing a loyal catchment profile that could be reinforced;
- A site that lies in the valley of the River (Figures 5 above and 7 below); and
- The unique opportunity of a river that flows through the area with a large amount of open space. (Figures 8 and 9 below); and



Marlowes Methodist Church is an imposing building. The opportunity to move and share resources in the new civic zone may mean new uses to be found.



The Carey Baptist Church is a landmark on Marlowes.



View corridors to St Mary's Church should be maximised where possible



A poor landmark. New high quality, high density development around the civic zone will help remove its prominence

Figure 7: Landmarks

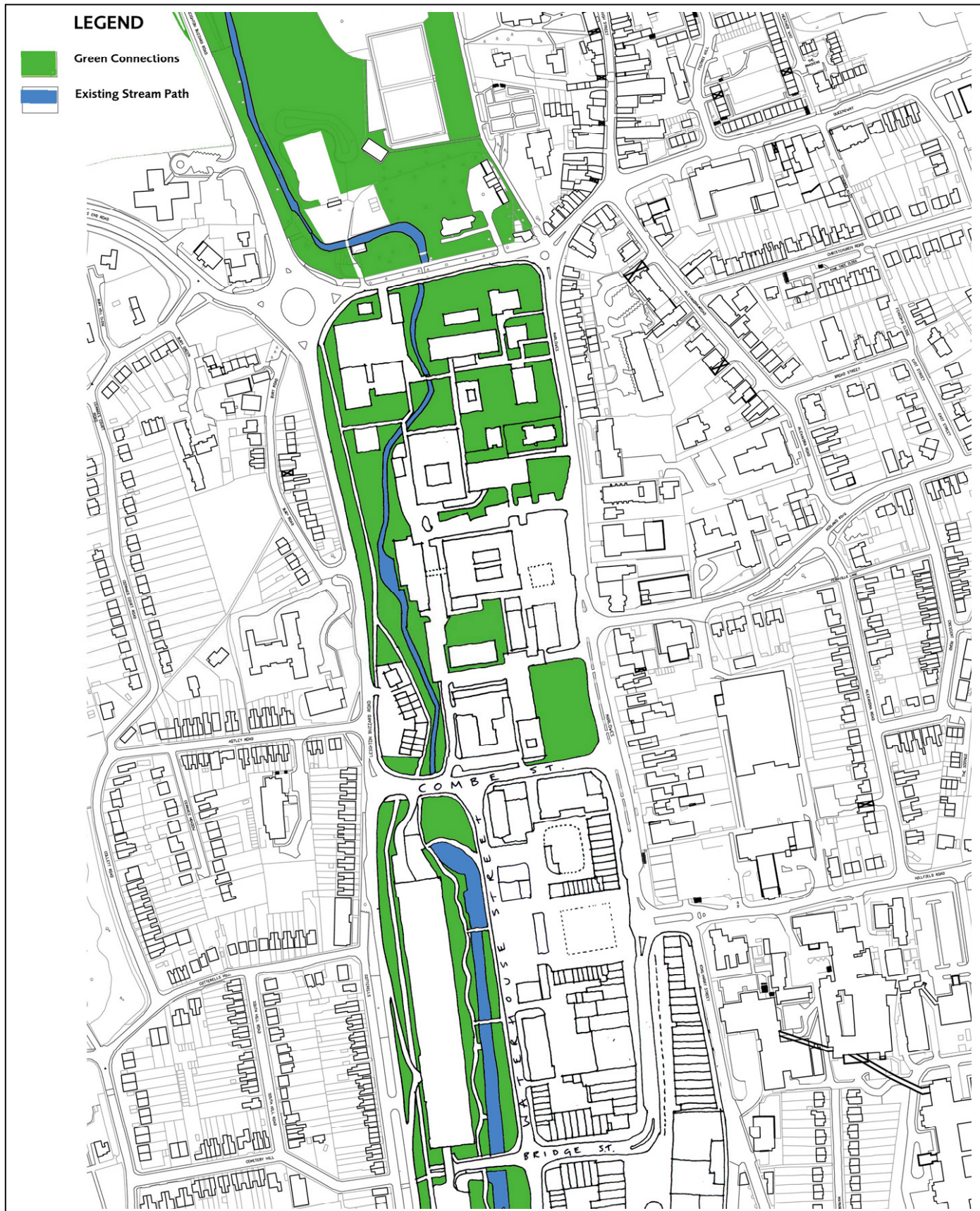


Figure 8: Existing Landscaping

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Mature landscape that could provide a setting for new residential development.



New landscape and development should make the most of the topography



The riverside edge is an asset that needs to be celebrated. A potential safe north - south pedestrian / cycle route should be created.



The removal of the car park would allow the development of a new town park.

Figure 9: Landscape Issues



There is the potential to create a central pedestrian / cycle friendly spine along Waterhouse Street.



Opportunity to rationalise bus movement and introduce concepts such as 'bus ports'. These areas can be seen as public transport hubs where a number of bus stops are grouped together.



Opportunity to create a 'place' rather than a mini roundabout.



The car parks and hedging along Leighton Buzzard Road creates a barrier to pedestrian movement.

Figure 10: Movement



The visual quality of the street at the north of Marlowes could be improved by revamping the shop facades.



Traffic barriers along the median of the street limit pedestrian movement and detract from the visual quality of the street.



The pedestrianised area at the south of Marlowes lacks spatial coherence. The space is littered with street furniture, street trees and signage making it a disorientating environment for the user.



Street trees could be used to scale down wide streets and add a sense of coherence to the street structure. The existing street planting has no coherent structure.

Figure 11: Streetscape



Access to car parking areas are threatening, especially at night. These areas are not overlooked, and are surrounded by heavy landscaping, preventing natural surveillance.



Pedestrian access to the north side of the Civic Centre is not inviting and may be threatening at night. The level changes within the building prevent overlooking of the public spaces around the building.



Much of the car parking within for the Civic Centre is separated from the buildings by extensive landscaping and have no natural surveillance. This creates spaces that are uninhabited and difficult to use.



Extensive landscaping along busy roads separates the public footpaths from the built form. These areas have poor surveillance and are threatening to pedestrian users at night.

Figure 12: Community Safety Issues

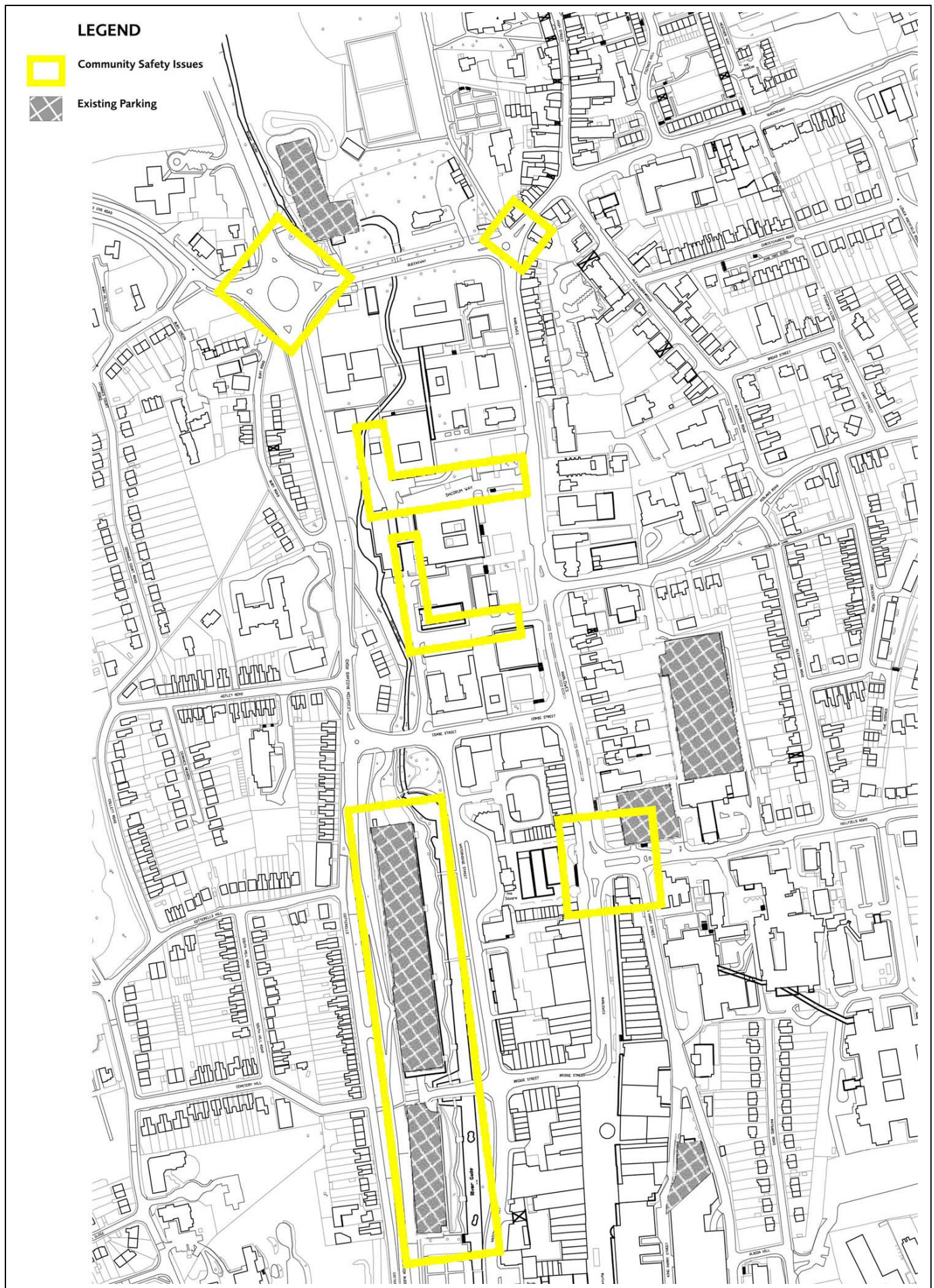


Figure 13: Community Safety Issues

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Backdrop to Leighton Buzzard Road the good frontage and character of the street is mitigated by heavy traffic.



The High Street at Hemel Hempstead is well proportioned with varied frontage defining the edge of the street.



Poor quality frontage along Marlowes. Area to be redeveloped as part of urban design strategy.



Good quality villa frontage onto Marlowes, to be improved.

Figure 14: Frontage

Site Constraints

- Poor physical and commercial linkages between the town centre and the Old Town;
- Poor connections and significant barriers to pedestrian and cycle movement. (Figures 4 and 10 above);
- Traffic dominated on surrounding roads and poor quality streetscape. (Figure 11 above);
- Area suffers from negative image and potential problems of community safety, much of which could be related to traffic and parking issues. (Figures 12 and 13 above);
- Poor physical environment – environmental assets such as the river and open spaces could be enhanced;
- Poor quality architecture adds to the negative image;
- Limited contribution to evening economy.

5.5 A series of urban design principles have emerged through the initial analysis process, recent government guidance and good practice. These are summarised below:

‘A sense of place’

5.6 The issue of local distinctiveness needs to be considered. At the core of this is the River Gade. The aim is to create a sense of identity for Hemel Hempstead Town Centre, through good quality architectural and landscape design. The key principles are to:

- respond to local features and to create a place that is unique by encouraging and celebrating the opening up of the river, making it more attractive and safer and improving the landscape;
- enhance existing buildings where appropriate;
- take into account the historic environment adjacent to the site;
- ensure a diversity of design solutions within the DBA; and
- develop a palette of materials and finishes that would help create a sense of uniqueness of place.

Making Connections

5.7 The objective is to link the town centre with the surrounding neighbourhoods. This will include better connections and better pedestrian and cycle links to adjacent areas. The principles are to:

- accommodate safe and convenient pedestrian connections;
- ensure all routes are accessible for disabled users, cyclists and pedestrians and would be safe and secure for 24 hours a day, (as set out in the provisions of the Disabilities Discrimination Act);
- reduce the dominance of the car on the local environment, and to better balance the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and bus users with other vehicles. Street design should reflect this balance to help reduce speed rather than ease traffic flow. The opportunity to ease this would be to concentrate parking in discrete locations such as undercroft and multi-storey car parks;

- ensure that cycle routes do not impinge on the functioning of the river corridor nor encroach on established vegetated buffer zones; and
- design streets as public space rather than highways.

Appropriate Urban Forms

5.8 A key objective is to create a high quality well designed development that would raise the profile of Hemel Hempstead Town Centre and create a draw for investors, residents and people working in the centre. This results in the following principles:

- to create a development of quality, with a built form that rises from the relatively low storey heights along the Leighton Buzzard Road to a series of strong architectural 'statements' around the civic zone. This would ensure that the proposed development responds to the existing context but creates a new 'sense of place';
- to ensure that all buildings address the public realm with attractive and welcoming facades along all pedestrian and vehicular routes;
- to exploit the opportunities for a landmark building/buildings of strategic visual importance for the area; and
- to create a high density mixed-use development that would encourage street activity throughout the day and evening; taking care to minimise problems relating to noise and disruption by careful management of land uses.

Townscape and Character

5.9 The town centre is set in the valley of the River Gade. There are few landmarks. Those that do exist such as the Marlowes Methodist Church and Carey Baptist Church, have some intrinsic architectural value. These are Nineteenth Century buildings of a gothic geometric style. The Council will encourage their retention. Other more modern landmarks, such as Moreland House, the multi-storey car park and Hamilton House are of limited quality. Housing fronting onto Leighton Buzzard Road provides a low-rise backdrop to the town centre. The Old Town and the 19th century villas along Marlowes give some context. However, this is compromised by poor frontages and development, such as ASDA, further up the hill.

5.10 The redevelopment of the DBA should create its own character that reflects aspirations for high quality buildings and spaces. There are some historic cues to the north with the adjacency of the Old Town, The Bury, Gadebridge Park and important buildings fronting the Marlowes. The urban design principles are set out as follows:

- To create an area primarily for the benefit of those on foot – making traffic fit the town centre not the town centre fit the traffic;
- To respond to different influences on the site including:
 - the river frontage
 - Gadebridge Park
 - the Old town
 - impact on traffic on Marlowes and Queensway
 - the retail edge;
- To link these areas together and across to adjacent neighbourhoods;

- To create a linked hierarchy of public spaces, that is in turn linked to and reinforces the River Gade corridor, where possible retaining existing mature trees;
- To create new landmarks – to reflect the importance of the DBA
- To provide continuity and enclosure of building frontages along the Marlowes. These would be designed to ensure activities and transparency;
- Any large buildings, such as a retail store, should be designed to ensure transparency (i.e. the ability for a passer-by to look into the store along its length) on key frontages. This is particularly important along Marlowes. The opportunity for 'wrap-around' uses such as residential, retail or commercial should be explored. The retail store and the parking above should be carefully designed as one building and should be planned as an integral part of a comprehensive scheme to meet the objectives as a whole for the DBA;
- No blank walls, gable ends, service areas, or backs of buildings should be exposed to the public realm. This would help avoid community safety issues; and
- Entrances should be clearly identified.

5.11 In addition the new character of the DBA would also be formed by the treatment of the riverside and development frontage along it. This could include:

- Open up the riverside for public enjoyment;
- To retain ecologically sensitive areas; and
- Retain, enhance and promote the Water Gardens

5.12 It is important that the development taking place within the town centre should be at an appropriate scale to the centre and should be compatible with its size and function and historic / architectural character.

5.13 Development proposals adjacent to the conservation area should recognise the need to conserve and enhance the historic character of the area. It is also important that design is not used to simply replicate the past, which in turn could encourage the standardisation of all new buildings within the area.

The public realm

5.14 The objective is to design an environment where people can meet, sit, walk in comfort and safety (actual and perceived). The quality of the public realm will be critical to the success of the town centre. Its design, sense of enclosure, its use both during the day and night, and the lighting and design of street furniture will all help make the sense of arrival at Hemel Hempstead a pleasurable experience. The principles that will guide this framework are to:

- Create a new public realm consisting of streets, squares and new open spaces. The streets would be designed to encourage walking and to be accessible to everyone;
- Ensure buildings with door and windows giving onto those open spaces oversee all public spaces and routes. These would be the 'eyes on the street'. Clear frontages and building lines should be set, as part of detailed design guidance and a regulatory plan. These would indicate:
 - Buildings on back of pavement
 - Buildings with thresholds and agreed set-backs

- Buildings where a more flexible approach could be considered;
- Create spaces which are safe and secure and benefit from an attractive microclimate. These spaces should be linked and integrated into a new street pattern from the town centre that encourages movement. Provision could be made for a new square. The square should be wide enough to encourage activities such as spill-out or performance and the potential for people to enjoy the sun and shade. Trees should in the main be planted on the northern side of the square;
- Design the streets and spaces, and the surrounding buildings together, to encourage activity to take place in the public realm. The form, mix of uses, pedestrian movement, street furniture and lighting would all help generate opportunities that could help build the evening economy;
- Provide public art. This would be an important contribution to the public realm;
- Provide a variety of routes that people can choose when walking through the area to include:
 - a new pedestrian and cycle main route;
 - an improved and safer riverside walk; and
 - a better pedestrian / cycle environment along Leighton Buzzard Road;
- Introduce high quality materials and designs in public areas that are durable and easy to maintain. A public realm strategy should be considered: and
- Take account of existing good quality trees within the area

5.15 The topography of the site allows for exciting use of changes of levels, especially from the Marlowes. This could facilitate the use of undercroft parking. A new high quality public realm would require robust, high quality materials and planting. In addition an appropriate management regime that would include event/activity management should be established.

5.16 To increase legibility a series of gateway and activity nodes the Council will encourage the following: :

- Gateway development at the northern edge of the development addressing the Old Town and Queensway entrances to the town centre;
- Landmark developments within the DBA that assist the orientation and 'way finding' of people coming from the main east-west routes;
- Activity nodes of different forms;
- Predominantly passive at the northern water-spaces;
- Predominantly active at the main civic spaces and waterfront/Town Park; and
- Creating and enhancing view corridors to St Mary's Church and other features.

Massing and height

5.17 The proposed height and massing of development blocks should provide:

- A gradual raising of heights from Queensway to the civic zone from 3 to 7 storeys;
- Residential development up to 5 storeys depending on the setting;
- Medium rise residential development along the riverside corridor;
- Gateway developments at the Old Town;
- Medium rise development along Marlowes;

- Building heights and massing must relate well to the surrounding areas and to the river corridor and pedestrian and cycle routes through the site and used to create a high quality environment; and
- The opportunity for a slender high-rise building within the civic zone.

5.18 Adjacent to the Conservation Area and listed buildings, the Council will encourage building heights that preserve and enhance the character of the their setting.

Sustainable Development

5.18 Whilst many aspects of sustainability are implicit in the objectives and principles set out above, a key objective will be to ensure development is sustainable. The main principles will be to:

- create development that allows change and renewal without total redevelopment;
- create development that provides employment opportunities for local people;
- ensure energy resource and water efficiency and waste management provision;
- ensure new buildings are designed for ease of maintenance and a life cycle of at the very least 50 years;
- provide high quality public realm that encourages new planting of street trees and urban nature conservation measures where possible and addresses the Council's Biodiversity Policies;
- create a development that will be an exemplar in excellence for design; and
- create a mix of uses, house types and tenure, within the town centre.

5.19 The Council will encourage sustainability testing of proposals against standard measures such as the Building Research Establishment's BREEAM Ratings. The Council will seek the highest possible standard of sustainability.

Landscaping

5.20 Suitable landscaping should be provided across the site. This will vary depending on the location and type of development proposed. The Council will require that the existing green corridor adjacent to the chalkstream is maintained. Within the pedestrianised areas the Council will encourage appropriate landscaping (hard and soft) to ensure that a pleasant and safe environment is achieved. Adjacent to Queensway landscaping proposals will need to have regard to the listed buildings and the Conservation Area in order to ensure that their setting is preserved or enhanced.