

A photograph of a narrow, cobblestone street in Colchester town centre. The street is lined with colorful buildings, including a prominent white building with a black timber frame on the right. In the background, a church tower with a clock face is visible. The sky is blue with some clouds. Two large white circles are overlaid on the image, containing text.

The 'Indies' Route

Supporting independent traders in Colchester's town centre

A report for
Our Colchester BID

HAT Projects
May 2020

About this report

This report has been prepared by HAT Projects for Our Colchester, the Business Improvement District organisation for Colchester town centre.

Our Colchester wishes to support independent traders in the town centre through sponsoring initiatives that will increase the physical accessibility and customer perceptions of the streets where the independent traders are clustered. This will lead to increased customer footfall and a positive sense of identity for the independent sector, which can form the basis of strong place marketing to local, regional and national communities.

Our Colchester commissioned HAT to undertake mapping and consultation with local businesses and users of the town centre, and to recommend design projects for implementation in response to issues identified. This report summarises the key recommendations along with cost estimates, where it is possible to identify them, and the steps required to implement them.

As with any town centre improvement plan, initiatives that will improve the prospects of independent traders will also benefit the wider business community. Many of the recommended proposals address wider deficiencies in the town centre – such as wayfinding and streetscape appearance – which have been identified in many previous studies, but which have not seen action to improve them.

With the potential Town Deal investment, it is critical that a holistic and joined-up approach to the town centre’s identity, public realm and place-making projects is put in place. This is all the more vital at this time when our retail, hospitality and leisure sector is severely challenged by the Covid-19 crisis. Planning for a vibrant town centre for the recovery period will be essential to support vulnerable independent businesses and maintain the vitality of Colchester as a destination.

Vision and principles

It is vital that the identity of the independent sector continues to demonstrate authenticity, distinctiveness and localism – that Colchester is clearly identifiable – visually and experientially – as Colchester, not any other town or city. To support Colchester’s independent sector does not mean using the same techniques as the corporate estate management. It is with this in mind that we recommend the following core principles:

Distinctiveness in the foreground; consistency in the background

- Independent businesses should visibly express their distinctive character and identity – avoid homogenous branding.
- Each street and space has a different shape and character: avoid ‘one size fits all’ solutions to public realm design.
- Implement a consistent design approach to ‘background’ elements across the whole town centre – an agreed base palette for paving materials, bins, bollards and lampposts; wayfinding signage such as fingerposts.

Help businesses to help themselves

- Raise the capacity and confidence of businesses to make their own improvements to their shopfronts and street presence.
- Ensure clear and accurate information and guidance is available to business owners.
- Support community-led initiatives.

Be agile and innovative

- Use temporary projects to pilot ideas and evaluate their impact as well as the community response.
- ‘Catch and steer’ projects led by others to maximise their benefit to independent traders.

Use local designers and suppliers

- Colchester has a very strong creative sector of designers, and a wide range of high quality local fabricators and suppliers.
- Using locally based designers and makers keeps spend local, boosting the wider economy; creates a strong brand narrative around showcasing local business; and creates a locally distinctive look and feel rather than using generic products.
- Using a local supply chain is often better value for money, and helps to reduce carbon emissions, due to reducing transport and travel distances.

Transforming the Indies Route

The images on this page show the impact that achieving this report’s recommendations could have on the town centre.

All are achievable within 12-18 months, funding dependent.

Sir Isaac’s Walk gateway

- New artist-designed arch sign (page 12)
- Kerbless streetscape for improved accessibility and appearance (page 20)
- Lighting installation draws visitors down the lane in the evenings (page 17)
- Shopfront improvements
- Removal of street clutter (page 10)

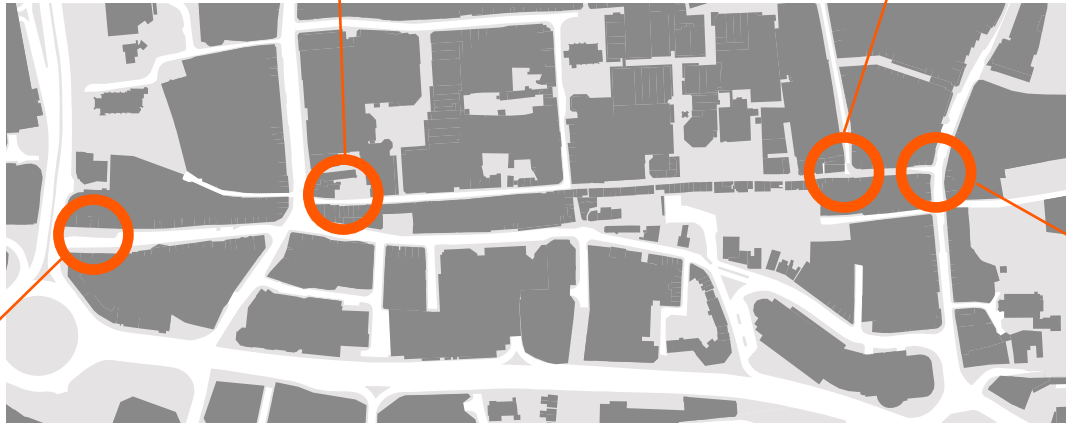


Eld Lane junction

- New artist-designed mosaic signs (page 12)
- Kerbless streetscape for improved accessibility and appearance (page 20)
- Lighting installation draws visitors down the lane in the evenings (page 17)
- Shopfront improvements (page 14)

Crouch Street gateway

- New artist-designed mosaic signs (page 12)
- Colourful street crossings (page 18)
- Removal of street clutter (page 10)
- Hanging baskets and shopfront improvements (page 14)



Short Wyre St gateway

- New artist-designed arch sign (page 12)
- Kerbless streetscape for improved accessibility and appearance (page 20)
- Colourful street crossing (page 18)
- Removal of street clutter (page 10)
- Shopfront improvements (page 14)



Where are Colchester's independent businesses?

Colchester has a very strong independent business sector in the town centre. The independent businesses are strongly clustered along a few key streets – Crouch Street, Sir Isaac's Walk, Eld Lane, Short Wyre Street, Queen Street and St John's Street, predominantly on the south and east sides of the town centre.

The focus of the recommendations in this report is therefore on improvements to these key streets, but measures that benefit independent businesses will improve the overall vitality and viability of the whole of the town centre, and likewise, wider measures will assist independent businesses to maintain their market. These recommendations should therefore be seen as a 'toolkit' of approaches that could be implemented along the independent streets in the first instance but also rolled out more widely across the BID area.



What independent businesses have told us

“If I didn’t work in town, I wouldn’t come into town”

“The new planters are a nice idea but they didn’t get noticed - they needed to be bigger ”

“there are hardly any dropped kerbs for accessibility”

“the condition of the pavements is shocking”

“As soon as it gets dark, it’s not welcoming or inviting down here”

“there’s no safe way to cross the street”

“There’s not a lot to draw people to the area”

Town centre strategy and public realm

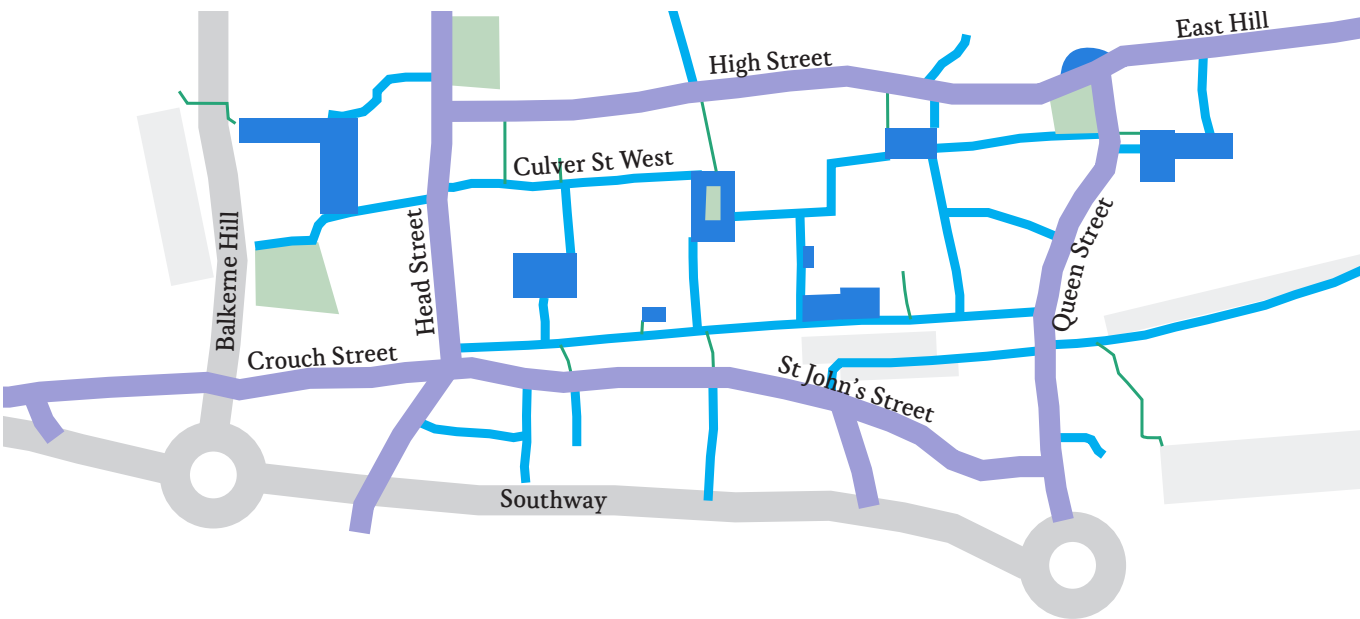
Current town centre strategies and planning policy are acknowledged to be out of date. The potential Town Deal funding presents an opportunity to implement a comprehensive new strategy, along with the required policy and guidance to support it.

A wider public realm strategy explored and consulted on with key stakeholders (including ECC Highways) in 2018 alongside designs for two key public spaces in the town centre. This has not been adopted into any formal status. The strategy recommended design approaches for the different categories of routes in the town centre:

- **Streets** - allow for public transport and vehicle through routes as required but ensure high quality pedestrian environment
- **Lanes** - transition to kerbless / shared space routes allowing vehicle access at limited times but cyclists and pedestrians prioritised
- **Alleys** - already pedestrian only
- **Squares** - upgrade public realm as the focus for social activity, creating a distinctive character and purpose to each space. Allow limited vehicle access.

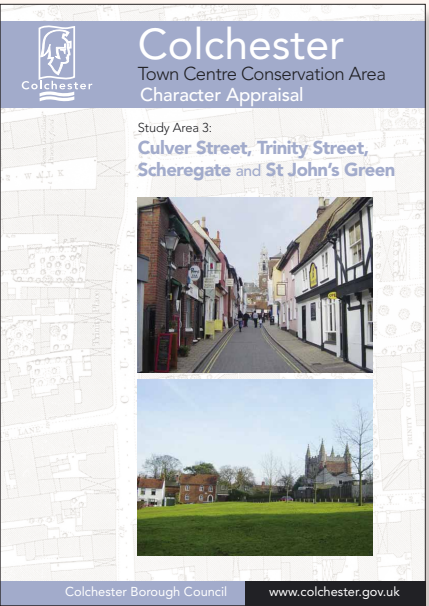
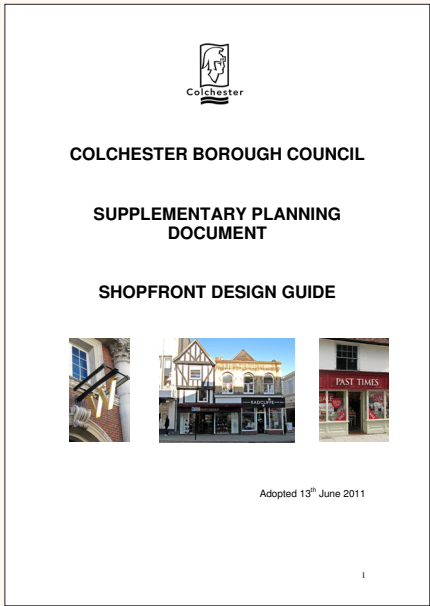
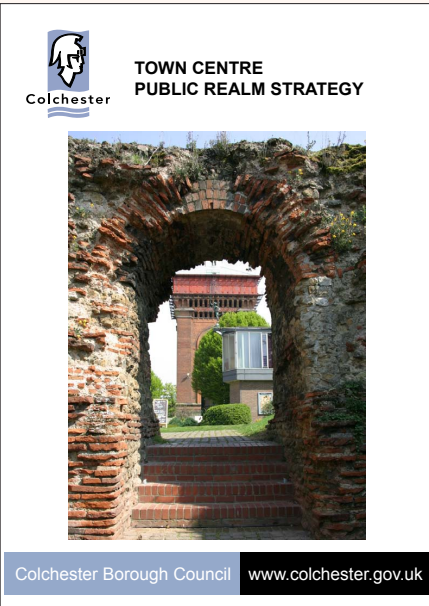
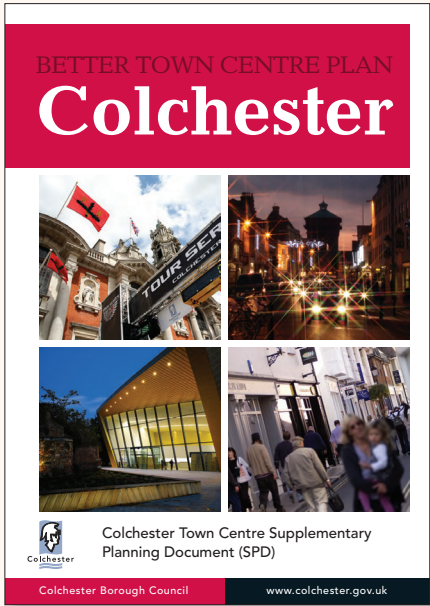
We recommend that the existing out of date policy and guidance for the town centre (see right) is replaced with a new Town Centre Design Guide as a Supplementary Planning Document which holds material weight in the assessment of planning applications (including shopfronts) and advertisement consent applications, and could be applied to highways and public realm works undertaken by the local authorities.

This would consolidate guidance into a single joined-up document and would help property owners, developers, designers and the local authorities create a consistently high quality streetscape in the town centre.



Existing policy and guidance

- Current Town Centre SPD [effectively a masterplan] from 2012 has not been fully implemented and is becoming out of date
- Public realm design guidance is very outline and does not specify street furniture ranges, lampposts, etc
- Shopfront design guide is technically accurate but gives little practical guidance or inspiration, particularly regarding advertisements/fascias
- Conservation area appraisal is very detailed but not user-friendly for businesses
- Business owners don't know this guidance exists or how to navigate it



1. Clutter and maintenance

The quality of the public realm is of key importance to perceptions of the town centre among visitors and shoppers. Unlike the shopping precincts (Culver Square and Lion Walk), the streets of independent businesses do not have a comprehensive approach to maintenance, management and design of their public realm. Putting in place a more rigorous regime would be relatively simple to achieve and should be a key objective for the BID.

1A. Declutter the streets

Colchester’s streetscape is marred by a large amount of redundant street clutter. Clutter causes:

- Visual ‘noise’, creating the sense of an uncared for and unattractive public realm
- Accessibility issues for users with different needs, including the partially sighted, those using mobility aids and those with young children
- Safety issues

Examples of clutter include unnecessary bollards and railings; upright posts no longer holding lighting or signage; duplicate streetlamps and signs; broken street furniture; redundant utility boxes. Most items are the responsibility of ECC Highways, whose team have indicated their willingness to address and remove all unnecessary and broken items. A small number belong to other owners, including CBC. Removing clutter will have a major visual impact and is an easily achievable quick win. This project should be championed by the BID and delivered in partnership with ECC Highways.

Steps to delivery:

- Agree project plan with ECC Highways.
- Audit all streetscape items and assign to be removed, repaired or kept in current condition.
- Action all items in the audit.

Timescale: 3-6 months



Above: examples of poor maintenance and redundant street clutter

1B. Zero tolerance on poor maintenance

The ‘Indies’ streets suffer from poor maintenance of street paving surfaces and street lighting. Patch repairs are regular and frequently not replaced with permanent integrated paving repairs within required timescales and non-functioning street lighting is not promptly repaired. The BID is already monitoring this and we encourage this to be continued with a firm commitment from ECC Highways to support through repairing within required timescales.

Steps to delivery:

- Continue and expand monitoring of repair issues
- Seek high level agreement on timescales for repairs with ECC

Timescale: Ongoing

1C. Agree a streetscape design palette

Current paving and streetscape surfaces, and base level street furniture (bollards, bins, lampposts) are inconsistent across the BID area and there is no agreed design palette for these. Putting an agreed palette in place will ensure that ongoing repairs and installations gradually achieve a consistent look and feel across the area, and this will also assist with ongoing maintenance over time. This could potentially form part of an updated Town Centre Design Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

Steps to delivery:

- Commission consultants to prepare streetscape design guide and material palette.
- Consult access groups, town centre maintenance operatives and contractors as part of design guide development
- Develop and sign off agreed guidance with ECC and CBC

Timescale: 3 months

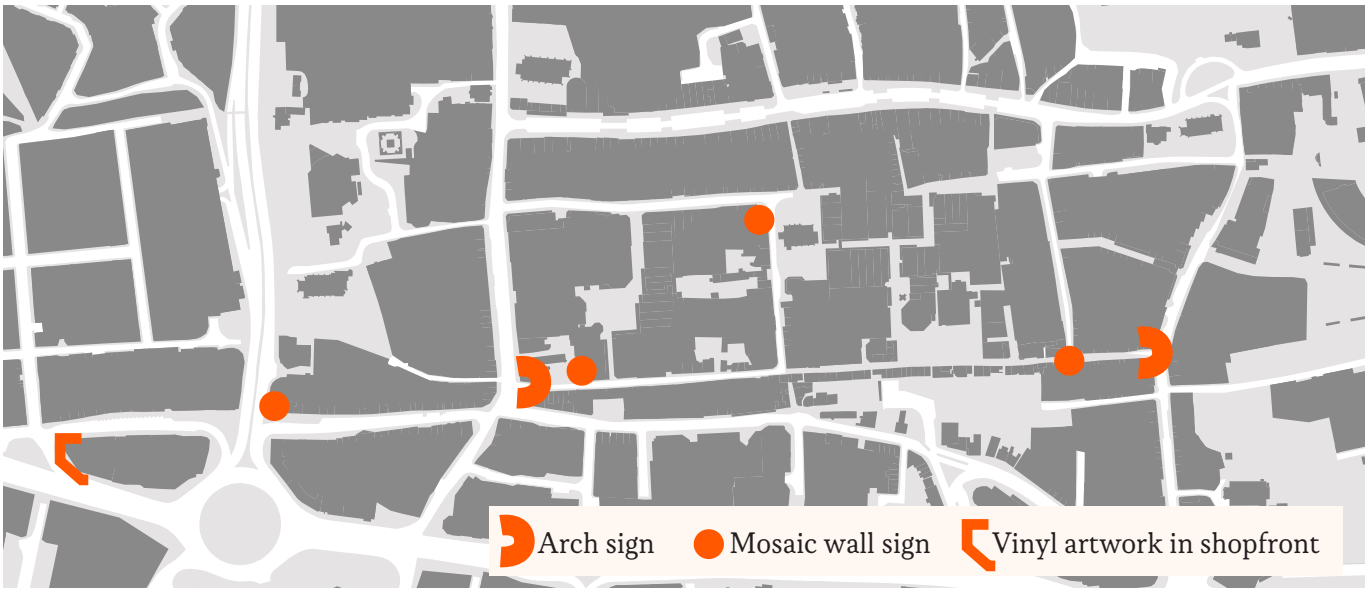


Above: examples of poor maintenance and redundant street clutter

2. Wayfinding artworks

Current street name signage is inadequate, with many streets unsigned at key junctions. Existing signage, where it exists, is either historic tiled signage or newer standard street signs, and both are visually drowned out by the dominance of retail signage and branding.

To address this we have developed a proposal for two kinds of significant street signage which would have visual presence and create a distinctive identity for the key streets. These ideas have been tested and received positive feedback from local businesses in the focus group, as well as from CBC’s planning team. We also suggest that a large scale window vinyl artwork be commissioned for the Tesco shop windows at the west end of Crouch Street, to announce the start of the route and direct pedestrians to the independent shops.



Above: Examples of arch and mosaic wayfinding artworks

2A. Mosaic signs/artworks

These signs would be bespoke mosaics created by local designers, scaled to suit their sites but we would suggest no smaller than A0. The use of mosaic would create a distinctive, Colchester-specific look and feel which ties in with the heritage of mosaic and tile in the town, from Roman mosaics through to the 1970s mosaics in underpassess, and would be social media friendly, spreading a positive identity for the town online. They would be wall mounted at key junctions and could involve a community participation aspect, for example through sourcing ceramics to reuse in the mosaics, and in the design itself. Reference images are shown opposite.

Steps to delivery:

- Seek property owner agreement in principle for desired sign locations.
- Assign budget/seek funding
- Develop brief for mosaic artists, including any community engagement element, and procure through open call for artists.
- Design and submit for planning approval
- Install

Timescale: 6-12 months



2B. Arch signs

These signs would be large scale arch signs at the ends of the key ‘Indies’ route (Sir Isaac’s Walk-Eld Lane-Short Wyre Street). These would consist of an engineered base structure with a bespoke sign element that could either be an artist commission or a more standard sign approach (such as the Carnaby Street sign).

Steps to delivery:

- Seek property owner agreement in principle for desired sign locations.
- Assign budget/seek funding
- Procure design team to deliver signage, including engineering consultant.
- Design and submit for approvals from ECC Highways and CBC Planning.
- Install

Timescale: 9-12 months



3. Supporting businesses

Helping businesses help themselves is key: raising capacity for businesses to improve their own offer to customers, their contribution to the wider streetscape and their own survival rates. This empowers businesses to take action independent of external support and provides the necessary tools for them to do so.

3A. Welcome pack

A pack for all businesses within the BID area containing essential information as well as ideas and guidance on how to maximise their success. Information will include:

- What consents and licences are required (e.g. pavement seating, advertisement consent, planning/listed building consent) and how to apply
- Key contacts in the BID, CBC and statutory providers/authorities for maintenance, utilities and highways queries.
- Ideas and inspiration for how to maximise street presence, and design guidance for signage and shopfronts developed in partnership with CBC

The pack would be available online as a webpage and given as a hard copy to all businesses including all new businesses when taking occupation. It would be produced in a format that can easily be updated by the BID team as changes are required.

Steps to delivery:

- BID to commission consultants to compile and design pack

Timescale: 3 months



Above: before and after a shopfront improvement programme in Penge.

3B. Shopfront improvement programme

Support through small grants to help business owners to improve the appearance of their shopfronts, is a tried and tested effective method of achieving change. This helps businesses to strengthen their own brand identity, create more functional display opportunities to increase sales, and make a significant contribution to improving the wider street scene. We recommend two initiatives based on feedback from businesses within the focus group:

- Free planter (hanging or pavement standing) and regular maintenance by the BID team. Planters will be from a specified range, locally sourced, to create a sense of visual consistency. Budget: TBC
- Grants to commission a local designer and fabricator to design and install shopfront improvements. This could include new awnings, fascia signage, hanging signage, painted roller shutters, or window graphics. Designers will work within agreed guidelines developed by the BID and CBC and each proposal will need to be approved prior to installation. A ‘fast-track’ advertisement and planning consent process should be agreed.

Steps to delivery

- Planters - select appropriate planter/hanging basket products from local suppliers, advertise the scheme to local businesses and implement
- Shopfront improvements: secure funding for pilot of 6-8 shopfronts. Procure 3-4 local designers and match with local businesses selected through an open call. Design and ensure proposals are costed as within budgets, using local fabricators/ installers. Submit for planning and advertising consent prior to delivery.

Timescale: 12-18 months including project setup, grant applications, design and installation



Above: Examples of shopfront improvements using local designers and artists to create distinctiveness

4. Temporary/pop-up projects

Temporary installations can help pilot approaches that could be successful as longer-term and permanent installations. They can also create seasonal interest and drive footfall to the area during periods that are otherwise quiet, or to locations that lack footfall currently.

4A. Pop-up parklets

An issue identified by businesses in the focus group is the lack of ‘dwell space’ and green planting in the town centre. There are few opportunities for street planting in the current street layout and few locations where there are benches and seating, but car parking is also a priority for businesses - and finding the right balance can be challenging. Prior to scoping more permanent public realm redesign, implementing temporary pop-up ‘parklets’ can be an effective way of creating interest in the area, and trialling a more pedestrian-focused public realm which creates more ‘dwell’, in place of parking spaces.

Businesses have also commented that seasonal footfall varies. Summer ‘parklet’ pop-ups could drive footfall, creating media and social media interest, and help support cafés in particular, which lack outdoor seating.

Steps to delivery

- Identify suitable locations in consultation with businesses and ECC Highways.
- Secure temporary permit to suspend parking bay(s)
- Commission local designer and fabricator to a set brief and budget, to create temporary parklet installation, ensuring all materials can be sustainably recycled or reused at the end of the project.
- BID to manage and maintain for the duration of the pop-up.

Timescale: 3-4 months



Above: examples of pop-up parklet and lighting installations

4B. Lighting the Lanes

The key pedestrian route along Sir Isaac’s Walk, Eld Lane and Short Wyre Street is dark and can feel unsafe at night, but it should be a primary route from east to west and particularly from Crouch Street/Lexden to the key attractors of Firstsite and the Curzon. There are a limited number of evening businesses along the route which contribute activity to the street. We recommend a series of temporary lighting installations, using existing power infrastructure used for Christmas lights, to support these evening businesses, create a safer and more welcoming route from east to west and improve perceptions of the area. If the trial proved successful, installations could be made permanent. The suggested locations for lighting would create a series of visual ‘destinations’ along the route, shortening the perceived length of the route and creating a safer, more attractive environment.

Steps to delivery:

- Scope proposed locations and seek agreement from property and business owners
- Procure lighting specialist to a set brief and budget to prepare detailed proposals in liaison with ECC/CBC with regard to power supply and technical standards, and in consultation with business owners.
- Achieve consents from ECC Highways and CBC Planning.
- Install for a trial 3 month period prior to evaluation and potential permanent implementation.



Timescale: 6-9 months



Temporary/pop-up projects (continued)

4C. Headgate crossing

Key gateways to the town centre, and particularly the independent shopping streets, are currently unwelcoming for pedestrians, and inhibit movement into and around the town centre. A key challenge is the junction of Headgate/Head Street with Crouch Street, St John's Street, Sir Isaac's Walk and Church Walk - an extensive junction where vehicle traffic predominates and the natural desire lines for pedestrians are not reflected in the location of signalled crossing points. This particularly affects footfall into Crouch Street.

The long term future of this junction will depend on a number of other key initiatives such as the potential Bus Rapid Transit route. In the interim, there is scope to use a temporary pop-up project to 'prototype' what a more welcoming and pedestrian-focused junction could look like.

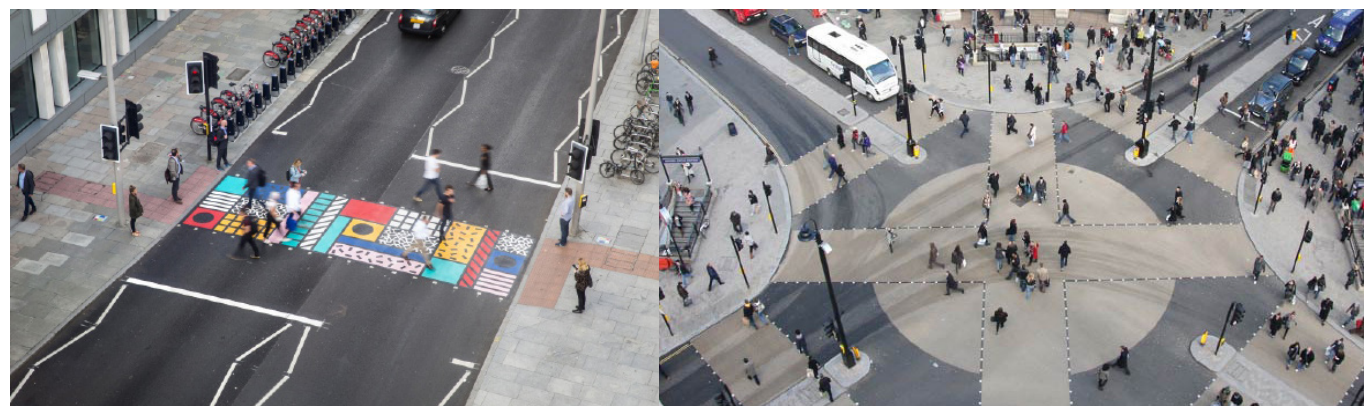
Using colourful, lively temporary designs to visually prioritise pedestrians and 'shift' perceptions of this key gateway would test pedestrian and driver responses. It could be possible to use this approach to trial diagonal pedestrian crossings, as have been installed at Oxford Circus in London, along with temporary reprogramming of the traffic lights.

In the longer term this junction should be seen as a key priority for public realm redesign.

Steps to delivery

- Agree project brief and scope with CBC and ECC Highways
- Procure design consultant/graphic designer
- Consult with local businesses, access groups, CBC Planning and ECC Highways to ensure workable as well as high quality design.
- Implement with temporary traffic management order if required.

Timescale: 6-9 months



Left: Temporary artwork to highlight crossings

Right: Oxford Circus, where a permanent diagonal 'desire line' crossing has been implemented

4D. Queen Street and Balmerne Hill crossings

Other key gateway moments are underwhelming and can feel confusing and unsafe to cross. We suggest that Queen Street is a priority for creating a more pedestrian-friendly environment, and that the crossing connecting the two parts of Crouch Street is also a priority as currently this represents a barrier to visitors.



Steps to delivery:

- Agree project brief and scope with CBC and ECC Highways
- Procure design consultant/graphic designer
- Work with ECC Highways to implement.

Timescale: 6-9 months



Above: examples of street artworks in other cities

5. Kerbless lanes

The lanes within the town centre currently exhibit a variety of streetscape designs but most are a conventional pavement with raised kerbs, despite the street width being inadequate to achieve the recommended pavement width. This presents accessibility issues as well as contributing to the cluttered appearance of the lanes, and fails to prioritise pedestrians and cyclists over vehicle users, despite these lanes being pedestrianised for most of the daytime. All stakeholders, including ECC Highways, agree that a kerbless approach to the streetscape of the lanes would be a significant improvement but to date no action has been taken to implement this.

We recommend a pilot scheme of a limited amount of kerbless resurfacing should be implemented initially, before seeking funding for a wider application of the kerbless approach. We have identified two key places for piloting a kerbless approach, where the current streetscape presents particular difficulties for pedestrians.

5A. Sir Isaac’s Walk gateway

The first priority area is the west end of Sir Isaac’s Walk where the pavement is extremely narrow and presents a real obstacle for pedestrians as well as wheelchair and buggy users. We recommend a kerbless redesign of this area to create an attractive and safe ‘gateway’ to the lane, improving perceptions of the street as a destination and encouraging visitors to use it as a route, rather than detouring to avoid it due to its inaccessibility.

Steps to delivery

- Procure design team to prepare detailed design proposals
- Consult with local businesses, access groups, CBC Planning and ECC Highways to ensure compliant as well as high quality design.
- Submit for required consents
- Procure contractor and implement

Timescale:9-12 months



5B. Short Wyre Street

The second potential pilot area is Short Wyre Street, due to the sloping nature of the street and the poor quality of the pavements as well as the confusion that frequently arises with vehicle users who try to turn into the street from Queen Street. In addition, it is a relatively short stretch of street leading to Eld Lane, which already has a kerbless streetscape. This will create a second ‘gateway’ to the independent shopping lanes, encouraging footfall into the lanes and benefitting the businesses - including the evening businesses.

Steps to delivery

- Procure design team to prepare detailed design proposals
- Consult with local businesses, access groups, CBC Planning and ECC Highways to ensure compliant as well as high quality design.
- Submit for required consents
- Procure contractor and implement

Timescale: 9-12 months



Above: examples of high quality kerbless streetscape design which does not exclude necessary vehicle access.



Above: examples of successful kerbless streetscapes in Colchester.

6. Public realm upgrades

While some parts of the town centre have seen improvements to the public realm and streetscape, the areas that have lacked investment over recent years are where the majority of independents are located.

These streets and spaces lack the ability to be used multi-functionally for events, markets, outdoor seating for cafés/restaurants, and similar, impacting on their appeal to customers and visitors. They are also poorly designed from the perspective of accessibility to all. We recommend that the BID work with CBC and ECC to create a phased delivery strategy to renew these public spaces and streets over the next 3-5 years.

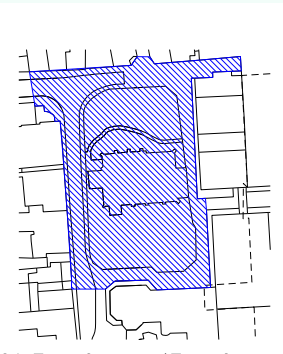
Steps to delivery for each project:

- Procure design team to prepare detailed design proposals
- Consult with local businesses, access groups, CBC and ECC to ensure best practice, high quality design.
- Submit for required consents
- Procure contractor and implement

6A. Trinity Square

Trinity Square offers huge potential to be a significant social space in the town centre. This could create a more sympathetic setting for the Grade 1 listed church as well as space for markets and events.

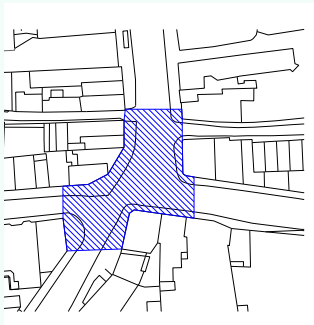
Timescale:12-18 months



6B. Headgate junction (permanent upgrade)

This junction should be transformed into a fantastic gateway space from the south of the town centre.

Timescale: 18-24 months

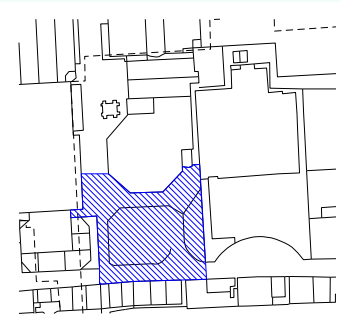


Above: examples of high quality small-scale public realm redesigns.

6C. Eld Lane Square

This space forms part of the Lion Walk shopping precinct, and currently does not fulfill its potential as a key dwell point along the ‘lanes’.

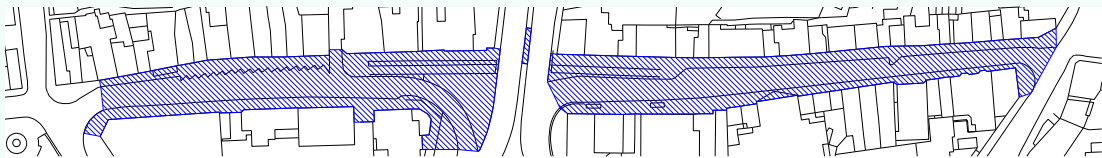
Timescale: 12-18 months



6D. Crouch Street

Crouch Street’s landscaping is poorly considered - the arrangement of parking, cycle lane, bus stops and pavement gives a poor user experience with accessibility and safety issues, as well as creating a poor setting for the shops. Upgrading the landscaping here to work better for all users would be a significant boost to independent businesses along the street, and would help maximise the investment already made in improving the eastern end of the street.

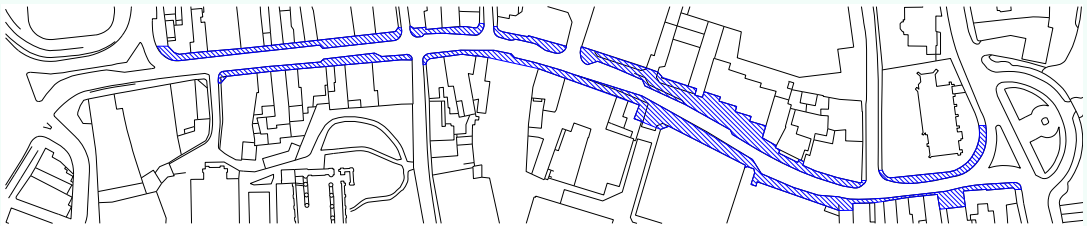
Timescale: 12-18 months



6E. Queen Street

Queen Street suffers from narrow pavements and a particularly poor quality of paving and street furniture. A comprehensive upgrade to the landscape design would greatly improve the visitor offer and dwell time along this key street which is currently underperforming. It would also maximise the impact of the development of the St Botolph’s site and its public realm.

Timescale: 12-18 months



7. Achieving the vision

Time required for completion of each recommended project

6 months	12 months	18 months	24 months
Zero tolerance approach to maintenance and repairs (ongoing)			
Welcome pack for businesses 3 months			
Create streetscape design guidance 3 months			
Pop-up parklets 3-4 months			
Decluttering the streets 3-6 months			
Lighting the Lanes - 6-9 months			
Headgate, Queen Street and Balkerne Hill 'colourful crossings' 6-9 months			
Mosaic street signs - 6-9 months			
Arch signs - 9-12 months			
Kerbless lane installations - 9-12 months			
Shopfront improvement programme 12-18 months			
Trinity Square public realm upgrade - 12-18 months			
Eld Lane Square public realm upgrade - 12-18 months			
Crouch Street public realm upgrade - 12-18 months			
Queen Street public realm upgrade - 12-18 months			
Headgate junction public ream upgrade - 18-24 months			

Prioritising projects

While achieving all the projects would be desirable, we recognise that it may be necessary to prioritise elements of the programme and funding available. With this in mind we have grouped the projects into the categories shown below. We recommend that the first two categories are prioritised in the first instance. The third category would lend itself to seasonal programming and sponsorship as part of an events programme. The fourth category requires more substantial investment for which partnership funding should be sought.

Essential guidance and baseline improvements

Welcome pack for businesses 3 months	Create streetscape design guidance 3 months	Decluttering the streets 3-6 months
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Quick wins, low costs, long-term benefit

Shopfront improvement programme 12-18 months	Lighting the Lanes 6-9 months	Mosaic street signs 6-9 months	Arch signs 9-12 months
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Temporary pop-ups

Headgate, Queen Street and Balkerne Hill 'colourful crossings' 6-9 months	Pop-up parklets 3-4 months
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Public realm infrastructure investment

Kerbless lane installations - 9-12 months
Trinity Square public realm upgrade - 12-18 months
Eld Lane Square public realm upgrade - 12-18 months
Crouch Street public realm upgrade - 12-18 months
Queen Street public realm upgrade - 12-18 months
Headgate junction public ream upgrade - 18-24 months

HAT Projects
Trinity Works
24 Trinity Street
Colchester
CO1 1JN

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