Overview of Current Issues and Challenges with Public Realm

Clear and Cohesive Design Principles

2.13 The Borough Council currently has a rolling street furniture replacement programme that seeks to create a unique Borough identity as well as reflecting the corporate image.

2.14 The majority of the Borough’s public realm surfacing lacks a coherent structure and comprises a palette of many different materials that have little cohesion. Ad hoc public realm surfacing improvement, utilities reinstatement or replacement, patch repairs, and cluttering of signage and road markings add to a lack of consistency and contribute to a poor visual appearance of the streetscape in general.

2.15 The public realm redevelopment that took place within South Wigston intended to formalise and uniform the centre’s streets and street furniture. The main shopping street of Blaby Road, post development, does have a relatively consistent palette and use of materials, however more could be done in reducing street clutter and the over reliance of bollarding and railing to restrict and direct pedestrian flow. It is however, a good example of how a consistent use of materials and palette can quickly improve an area.

2.16 Having clear and cohesive principles for the choice of materials, design, quality and location of street furniture, signage and planting, and their coordination with higher level strategies play an important role in raising the quality of the Borough’s streetscape.

Loss of Heritage and Local Distinctiveness

2.17 The wider Borough, town and district centres and Conservation Areas are in danger of losing their distinct character and charm as a result of informal use of materials that do not have a particular historical association with the area. Public realm design and initiatives need to take account of the locale and its heritage or ‘local’ designs, in order to negate any loss of heritage, local distinctiveness and/or character.

2.18 A particular issue, especially within areas that still have original paving materials, is utility reinstatement. As shown below, within the ‘Street Audit’ section, the required due care and attention to detail is not always taken when reinstating or matching original materials.

2.19 According to ‘Streets for All’ (English Heritage), having a clear identity for streets that have a historical or distinctive character can have a significant influence on inward investment and sense of place. It is suggested that commerce and industry, particularly in the growing knowledge based sectors,
are greatly influenced by cultural and historical signals radiated by streets and a place’s public realm.

**Usage**

2.20 The Borough of Oadby and Wigston is a place where people from all cultural backgrounds can meet, interact, shop and entertain themselves. However, in the main, the general public environment does not encourage people to pause and enjoy the centres, streets, heritage, public spaces or facilities. In general, the public realm in each centre is not currently conducive to more casual behaviours, for example, extension of nightlife to streets or the encouragement of outdoor cafes or restaurants.

2.21 The Core Strategy and the Town Centre Area Action Plans aim to increase the usage of the Borough’s streets, especially within the main centres. Streets and public spaces need to encourage a multitude of users and usages; encourage greater footfall and dwell time, leading to increased economic spend and inward investment.

**User Conflict**

2.22 There are great demands on public realm. Public realm is part of a 24 hour cycle, with joggers and walkers in the early morning, to shoppers at lunchtime, and drinkers in the evening. All public realm needs flexibility to facilitate use by a wide variety of user groups. In general, public realm in the Borough is not as flexible as it should be and does not allow for the full range of users.

2.23 Current National Government guidance, suggests that the pedestrian should be the number one user of streets and public realm, and that the motorised vehicle should not be comparable in terms of prioritisation. All users of the Borough’s public realm should be able to move around freely and safely and not feel threatened or ‘at risk’ from the motor vehicle. Changing the behaviour of our streets is a challenging proposition, but any improvements made are a step closer to the overall vision.

**Movement and Connections**

2.24 Freedom of movement is paramount if a centre is to be successful. People need to be able to get from one place to another, as efficiently as possible. Many factors play a role in ease of movement, including, how connected a place is, how cluttered a place is and what materials have been used to implement a public realm scheme.

2.25 As explained in more detail later on in section four, ‘connections’ refer to much more than physical connections, they can be visual, interpersonal, cultural and environmental. The majority of the physical connections within the Borough, more specifically the main centres are relatively good, however improvements are still sought.
2.26 In terms of street clutter, a useful premise is ‘less is more’, for example, if there is no clear public benefit for the item, then it should not be placed upon the street or within the public realm. An abundance of road markings or pedestrian signage can not only cause confusion and compromise safety but are aesthetically displeasing and in the main unnecessary.

Crime, Safety and Integration

2.27 Safety and security are an essential element of successful places and spaces, and the overall sustainable community’s agenda. Well designed and positive places are attractive environments and are places free from crime and the fear of crime, and contribute to public quality of life. Use of the correct materials, and appropriate public realm design within the Borough can help reduce crime, the fear of crime and create a greater sense of place. Furthermore, improvement of public realm, whether it be through ‘Target Hardening’ or ‘Place Making’, can dramatically reduce anti-social behaviour on streets and other public spaces. As well as target hardening and place making it is important that any public realm design takes into account natural surveillance and does not integrate enclosed spaces that could be susceptible to anti social behaviour. In general, the Borough’s public realm is reasonably open, however improvements could be made, whether it be through replacement of street furniture or improved lighting schemes.

Economic Impact

2.28 Evidence illustrates that there are direct links between the quality of public realm and economic performance. Poor quality public realm and the perception of poor quality public realm can have a dramatic impact on footfalls, visitors, and shopper ‘stay’ times. Improvements to the Borough’s public realm, especially that located in town and district centres, can have an effect on consumer spend and inward investment.

2.29 First impressions count and can have a significant effect on the vitality of an area. All public realm should entice the user in, prolong the length of stay and add to the ‘experience’, to make the user want to come back again and again.

2.30 A useful example of how a public realm scheme can have a dramatic impact upon perceptions and footfall is Corby centre redevelopment, which since completion has documented significant increases in shopper numbers and inward investment. More information regarding best practice examples can be found later within this document.
SECTION THREE

Streetscape Audit

3.1 An important part of this Public Realm Strategy is the streetscape audits undertaken for each of the three main centres. The audits are a baseline from which the strategy itself stems. The audits review the streetscape as a ‘whole’ and consider the overall condition of the existing public realm.

3.2 Specific audits for each town and district centres of Wigston, Oadby and South Wigston respectively were undertaken.

Wigston

3.3 For the purpose of the public realm audit, the Wigston centre has been broken down into three character areas; the Northern periphery; the Town core; and the Southern periphery. Note – the ‘centre’ refers to a boundary that has been drawn up around Wigston for the purpose of this Public Realm SPD and does not necessarily reflect adopted or official town centre boundaries.

Wigston Northern Periphery

3.4 The Northern Periphery of Wigston, as identified for the purpose of this document, is made up of a mix of retail, commercial and office space uses. The majority of its public realm is dated with relatively narrow pedestrian paving, restricting the use of street furniture, specifically seating.

3.5 The Northern Periphery has a mix of uses, and is not solely retail. Betting shops, banking establishments, car sales and public houses, are just a few of the different uses that are associated with the northern end of Wigston centre. A large proportion of the area is also designated public car parking (Junction Road).

Footnote: Top – map of Wigston Centre for the purposes of this Public Realm Strategy. Bottom – map of the Northern Periphery of Wigston.
3.6 Currently the northern end of Leicester Road is illustrated as a Primary Shopping frontage on the Proposal Map. As with most of Wigston, the public realm in general is of poor quality and lacks a consistent palette or use of materials. Utility reinstatement is also particularly obvious.

3.7 ‘Street clutter’ is not such an issue within the northern periphery, however there is a lack of public seating. This lack of provision may well be down to the pavements being of a relatively narrow width, although could be due to a number of other reasons, such as lack of demand for seating in this area, or highway/pedestrian access restrictions.

3.8 Pedestrian alleyways that connect the Leicester Road section of the northern area to the Junction Road public car park are relatively narrow, and are inadequately lit during hours of darkness.

3.9 The Arcade shopping area located off Leicester Road in the Northern Zone is a pedestrian only environment with a number of retail units, ranging from national multiples to local fish mongers. Within the Arcade the surface paving is relatively consistent in material and palette, and is in a reasonable condition. However, redevelopment works that improve the quality of the surface materials should be sought.

Wigston Core

3.10 The Town Core is the most important shopping destination within Wigston, and includes the retail dominated areas of Bell Street, Leicester Road and The Arcade.

3.11 Leicester Road is predominately retail in its use, however unlike Bell Street and The Arcade, is motor vehicle dominated, with the highway dividing either side in two. With only two traffic light controlled pedestrian crossings and two major road junctions without such crossings, Leicester Road is not perceived as being the most pedestrian friendly of shopping destinations. Crossing from one side of the pavement to the other, especially at peak traffic periods, is not the easiest.

3.12 With Leicester Road being vehicular dominated; there are few defined areas for sitting and relaxing, whether this is by design or need. Seating, cycle parking and litter bins are currently concentrated on the wide expanse of paving situated on the corner of Leicester Road and Bell Street, creating a busy and cluttered space. In addition to the presence of the street furniture, there is an abundance of both signage and road markings which add to the cluttering.

3.13 The key shopping destinations in this area have an abundance of signage and street clutter.