BOSCOMBE, BOURNEMOUTH

Regeneration measures for The Precinct to improve connections, links and visibility
This report was prepared by Hamilton-Baillie Associates Ltd
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Contents

Introduction 1
Boscombe 2
The Precinct - context 3
Access to The Precinct 4
Access constraints 5
High streets and their future 6
Outline strategy for Boscombe Precinct 7
Priority measures 8
Integrating pedestrian flows with traffic 9
Boscombe and the A35 Christchurch Road 10
The Precinct - Western Gateway 11
The Precinct - Northern approach 13
Palmerston Road and the Royal Arcade 14
The Precinct - Eastern Gateway 15
Southern approach into Sea Road 17
Summary and conclusions 18
Introduction

Retail high streets are in difficulties. Changes in shopping patterns and economic circumstances have prompted widespread reconsideration of the factors that impact on the viability and future of the market places and streets that form the heart of communities. The relationship between traffic, movement and economic vitality is critical to this urgent examination.

Boscombe in Bournemouth is one such community under pressure. Supported by an active and determined Boscombe Regeneration Partnership, the application process for the Portas Pilot initiative has spurred moves to prepare a strategy for The Precinct, the retail street at the heart of the community. ‘Town Teams’ are emerging as effective structures, and support from the Department for Communities and Local Government has provided initial support. This report forms part of the emerging Town Team’s initiative.

Efforts to support Boscombe’s retail heart tie in well with wider transport initiatives and investment in the A35 Christchurch Road, the main east-west artery through the conurbation on which the Precinct lies. Investment in this corridor through Local Sustainable Transport Funding could help achieve low-speed, smooth traffic flows to support greater pedestrian and cycle movement and access to public transport, and address some of the limitations imposed by the existing streetscapes around The Precinct.

This report builds on a wider Streets and Spaces Audit carried out in 2005 by Terence O’Rourke, and on a number of related studies relevant to Boscombe. Budgetary limitations and economic realities limit the scope to The Precinct and its immediate surroundings, setting aside longer-term strategic possibilities such as the relocation of the bus station. The aim is to provide the Regeneration Partnership, the Town Team and Bournemouth Borough Council with a set of priority measures to guide action over the coming years as opportunities come forward, to maximise the asset value and benefit of the existing Precinct, and to support the regeneration of the Boscombe community.

The study draws on growing national understanding of the physical and psychological factors that underpin successful urban spaces and market places. The Portas Review forms part of this growing awareness, supplemented by the experience of other Town Teams across the country. Equally significantly, the study explores our changing understanding of the relationship between people, places and traffic. New techniques for reducing speed, minimising congestion and improving the permeability of busy streets for pedestrians and others present opportunities to challenge long-held assumptions about traffic segregation that have damaged the vitality and accessibility of urban areas.
Boscombe

Originally an area of heathland and a coastal valley, Boscombe developed rapidly in the latter half of the 19th Century with the growth of seaside towns. Incorporated into Bournemouth in 1876, the neighbourhood has retained a distinctive identity. The opening of Boscombe Pier in 1889, and of railway stations at Pokesdown in 1883 and Boscombe in 1897 spurred the late Victorian development of shops, the Salisbury Hotel, the Royal Arcade and a Grand Theatre (now the 0² Academy). The quality and confidence of the era survives in some fine architecture and landmarks.

In common with many seaside towns, the 1970’s heralded a significant change in economic fortune, with a shift towards a more vulnerable, transient population in former holiday accommodation. The High Street on Christchurch Road continued to serve as a focal point between two larger urban centres, within walking distance of a densely populated local area.

The development of the Sovereign Shopping Centre, the pedestrianisation of The Precinct and the diversion of the A35 along the newly constructed Centenary Way fundamentally altered the structure of Boscombe’s centre, creating a very different relationship between the main shopping street, the surrounding population and passing traffic. Changes in the street pattern, junctions and the associated traffic engineering altered movement patterns and connections to give us the current arrangement.

The Strategic Assessment of 2011 identified areas of severe multiple deprivation in Boscombe, with steep contours in income and social indicators between Boscombe West and other parts of Bournemouth. The Precinct serves an economically vulnerable section of the population. The fragility of the retail centre has been magnified by the economic downturn and reductions in household income since 2008.

Despite the challenges of its economic context, The Precinct continues to survive as an active and lively centre for the community, and remains a significant asset for the wider Bournemouth conurbation. The Precinct provides a good range of retail establishments and services, together with cafés and some nightlife with the 0² Academy. The Precinct provides space for Bournemouth's only temporary outside market for two days a week, creating a focal point for a wider catchment area and an important economic asset for Bournemouth.

Overall, economic circumstances combined with an unresolved relationship with Christchurch Road have dealt Boscombe and its retail core a difficult set of cards. For such a fragile trading position, a number of planning decisions and earlier highway details threaten the future of The Precinct. But the continuing value for the local community of such a centre justifies careful attention to a number of details and physical elements that could help retain the streets continued qualities and vitality.
The Precinct - Context

The 1990's pedestrianisation has created a clearly defined high street of around 250 metres in length between the junctions of Christchurch Road with Palmerston Road to the west and Ashley Road to the east. The entrance to the Sovereign Shopping Complex dominates the centre of The Precinct, somewhat overshadowing the elegant Royal Arcade at the western end. Additional secondary commercial activity extends both east and west along Christchurch Road, but The Precinct remains the focal point for retail activity. Despite one major long-term void, the street retains around average occupancy rates for similar urban centres, reflecting its inherent value to the local population.

The Precinct itself exhibits a somewhat incoherent mixture of poorly located street furniture combined with an assembly of ageing medium quality paving. The height of the historic buildings, especially along its western half, contributes to a slightly cavernous quality, which in turn can exacerbate the wind exposure from the west. Little shelter is provided by the few assorted trees, many of which are nearing the end of their life.

Like the trees, the street furniture is a mixture of elements providing neither a clear structure to the pedestrianised space, nor designed for the needs of street stalls and the requirements of the lively markets that occupy the Precinct on Thursdays and Saturdays. The space at either end of the street are particularly cluttered, not least by oversized street bins, bollards and the location of bike stands.
Access to The Precinct

The most notable characteristic of Boscombe Precinct is the degree to which it is cut-off from easy or visible access from surrounding streets and residential areas. The engineering of the A35 to the north, the layout of the Sovereign Shopping Centre, and the street pattern to the south of the Precinct isolate and obscure the street from its essential connections. This isolation has been exacerbated by the design of the junctions at either end of the Precinct, and by the street furniture and highway elements at its principle entry points. The poor connectivity is reflected in the diagramatic street map, where the Precinct is isolated from Christchurch Road, Sea Road and its immediate surroundings.

Access from the north is limited to an indirect route through the Sovereign Centre from its car-park, or along Palmerston Road and Ashley Road. Both these streets have been severed by the very large roundabouts at either end of Centenary Way, creating very poor pedestrian links from Gladstone Road and the adjoining residential areas. The segregation is emphasized by the barrier wall along Gladstone Road West, and the indirect underpass by the bus station. The bus station obscures and isolates the eastern entrance to the shopping centre, and the indirect route to the Precinct through the centre is only available during shopping hours. The pedestrian routes along Palmerston Road and Ashley Road are marred by wide sweeping junctions and narrow pavements, and a lack of a visible destination.

Access to the Precinct from the south is equally problematic. Sea Road provides the only direct connection, but this potentially important link to the sea front is severed by intrusive highway measures related to the pedestrianisation. Otherwise links from Hawkwood Road and the main public car park are limited to two very narrow and obscure alleyways and an informal route through the Sainsbury’s supermarket. The combined limitations for access to The Precinct from both north and south place particular importance on the quality and accessibility of the two sweeping junctions with Palmerston Road and Ashley Road at the western and eastern ends of The Precinct.
Access constraints

- Oversized roundabout interrupts route along Palmerston Road
- Screen wall to Gladstone Road West
- Blank face to northern edge of shopping centre
- Unattractive pedestrian underpass under Centenary Way
- Bus Station obscures and screens shopping centre entrance
- Route interrupted by wide car park entrances and service yards
- Screen wall to Gladstone Road West
- Unattractive pedestrian underpass under Centenary Way
- Traffic signals, barriers and street clutter obscure east entrance
- Unused public owned space facing Precinct on Ashley Road
- Very narrow and constricting footways
- Wide carriageways and service road interrupt route along Ashley Road
- Informal route to Precinct through supermarket
- Very narrow and constricted links from car parks
- Under-used public owned space facing Precinct entrance
- Railings and staggered crossing obscures entrance west entrance
- Highway clutter interrupts and obscures key route along Sea Road
- Royal Arcade entrance obscured and under recognized
- Traffic signals, barriers and street clutter obscure east entrance
- Access constraints
High streets and their future

The role of high streets and town centres is undergoing rapid change. The rise of internet shopping and the growth of out-of-town superstores mean that high streets can no longer rely on a purely functional purpose as places for distribution of goods and services. Instead, a greater emphasis on social activity, individuality and diversity underpins the transformation of successful town centres to places that people decide to visit for optional reasons rather than for necessity. The change is visible in the shift away from standard goods and services such as banks towards entertainment, catering and individual trade. High streets that survive will be places that people wish to visit, rather than having to do so.

This change has important implications for Boscombe Precinct. Like many similar centres, it is under severe pressure, but continues to provide an important focal point for a relatively low-mobility local population base. Its twice-weekly market is unique in Bournemouth, and draws in a wider catchment. But the competition from alternatives means that any barriers to maintaining footfall become highly critical. High streets increasingly rely on marginal, spontaneous, optional decisions to maintain footfall, and this in turn depends on ease of access, visibility and intrigue. The shortcomings in the connections to the Precinct become more critical to its success, and any potential physical or psychological screens or barriers to potential footfall need to be minimised.

The rising emphasis on access and visibility has prompted some questioning of the continued benefits of traffic exclusion from high streets. There appear to be no definitive conclusions to the comparative benefits of trafficked and pedestrianised streets, with individual circumstances dictating the relative advantages of traffic movement compared to the quality of the public space and flexibility of use.

For Boscombe, partial or full re-opening to traffic is not a realistic or practical option for two reasons. Such a change would require substantial reconstruction of the existing street structure causing major long-term disruption to trade. Secondly, the Precinct relies heavily on the distinctive quality provided by the market, a role that would be severely compromised by the reintroduction of traffic. The patterns of use, the reasonable quality of public space, and the limited widths all weigh against any potential benefits from fundamental changes in the traffic arrangements.

Boscombe, like all other struggling high streets, will need to adapt to changing expectations by playing to its strengths and addressing the most significant shortcomings with determination. In our opinion, the qualities of The Precinct as a distinctive, flexible and traffic-free focal point for the local community enhanced by its street market role remain its key strengths and merit support. This requires addressing its links to its surroundings and enhancing its visibility and ease of access.

Physical and psychological barriers need to be minimised
Outline strategy for Boscombe Precinct

Economic circumstances limit options for major restructuring of Boscombe and its retail centre. Nevertheless a longer-term strategy is vital to guide and inform any public or private investment that may become available in the next five years. In particular, measures to improve the relationship between traffic flows, bus movement and pedestrian / bicycle activity along the A35 corridor through Local Sustainable Transport Funds (LSTF) could simultaneously enhance connections and visibility of The Precinct. Based on our initial analysis and observations, we would recommend a focus on developing a series of measures which could be developed individually or in combinations as opportunities arise. These measures include:

Palmerston Road Junction
The western entry to the Precinct could be modified to simplify access and extend the visibility of the street through a combination of measures to maintain low traffic speeds and uncontrolled pedestrian crossing points. Removal of signals is made possible by maintaining minimum carriageway widths combined with a range of measures to change the relationship between traffic and pedestrian movement, creating a recognizable square or place in place of the existing swept bend. The intervention would require a small shift northwards of the existing bus stop, and the insertion of a clear courtesy crossing point to mark the western entrance to the Royal Arcade.

Ashley Road Junction
A similar modification is required to create a clear marker square at the eastern end of The Precinct. This more complex junction could, with careful detailing, cope with existing traffic flows without the delays and costs implicit in signal controls. Visual narrowing of carriageways and changes to the layout and geometry of the intersection allows more open access the The Precinct, and we would recommend removal and simplification of the barriers and street clutter.

Sea Road Entrance
The critical southern link to the Precinct could be significantly improved through the removal of gates and bollards, and a careful emphasis on the pedestrian continuity of the route. This would involve some minor modifications to the junction with Roumelia Lane and Hawkwood Road.

Palmerston Road Approach
The scale and detailing of both roundabouts on Centenary Way create significant barriers from the north. Modifications to the Ashley Road roundabout is likely to be linked to any proposals for the bus station, and is at least served by the underpass. The Palmerston Road roundabout could be reduced in scale without loss of capacity, and simple measures introduced to widen and emphasise the continuity of the pedestrian route past Aldi and the bus tops on the western side whilst helping slow traffic approaching The Precinct.

Enhancing The Precinct
Boscombe Precinct has to be capable of fulfilling different functions at varying times - a simple promenade between shops when the market is absent, a bustling space filled with stalls and some vehicles during markets, and evening activity focused around the O² Academy. The existing paving, although not ideal, could provide at least five years' further life with some minor modifications and drainage improvements. We would recommend some removal and replacement of trees, bicycle stands and street furniture (especially the oversized bins!) into two narrow strips down both sides. Additional trees to add wind protection and create a continuous pair of lines along the street could be combined with additional anchor points for stalls and linear 24v electrical supply. In broad term we would not recommend fundamental changes to The Precinct itself.

Extending the Market Place
The sixth recommendation forms an integral part of the modifications to the junctions at both ends of the street, and would involve extending trading opportunities into the two areas of underused public land opposite the Precinct entrances. This will require further planning, but would significantly increase the visibility and presence of Boscombe Precinct and its principle attraction, helping to signal the street's presence and attractions to traffic on Christchurch Road.
**Priority measures**

- Modify roundabout to reduce scale and design speed, widening and strengthening pedestrian routes along Palmerston Road from north.

- Simplify and emphasize continuity of route along Sea Road, removing excess barriers and sign clutter to provide welcoming gateway.

- Reconfigure junction and western entry to Precinct to create distinctive square, removing barriers and making use of vacant land opposite. Introduce courtesy crossing to mark entrance to Royal Arcade.

- Extend market stall opportunities to vacant land to extend visibility of Precinct across Christchurch Road and enhance new square.

- Reconfigure junction and eastern entry to create landmark space marking entrance to Precinct, with free-flow, low speed traffic movement.

- Introduce minor modifications to rationalise street furniture, renew tree lines to define parallel service zones either side of Precinct.
Integrating pedestrian flows with traffic

The approach outlined for Boscombe depends upon the introduction of several key principles to the management of traffic on Christchurch Road. This entails reductions in the design speed for traffic flows and a reduction in formal segregation between drivers and other activities. Whilst this approach is consistent with Manual for Streets and recent DfT transport advice, it requires the introduction of measures that are relatively new to Bournemouth.

Reducing apparent carriageway widths, minimising road markings, introducing median strips and informal courtesy crossings all contribute towards the essential reductions in traffic speeds. Shorter, informal crossings help maintain traffic capacity by minimising delays from signal phases, maintaining smoother traffic flow patterns. The lower speeds and heightened driver awareness transform the relationship between vehicles and other activities, allowing flexibility and safety necessary for complex movement patterns.

Although every circumstance varies, similar approaches have been applied with success in places such as Poynton in Cheshire, Bexley Heath in London, and Ashford in Kent. All involve the transformation of highway junctions into low-speed, informal places or squares, through which traffic speeds are defined by the design elements and the movement and activities associated with the context, and provide potential precedent case studies for Boscombe.
Boscombe and the A35 Christchurch Road

The regeneration and support for Boscombe and The Precinct cannot be considered in isolation from larger scale long-term changes to the A35 corridor. Improving the accessibility and visibility of The Precinct depends critically on modifying key spaces along this artery, and modifying the expectations and patterns of traffic movement. With daily vehicular volumes of 13 - 14,000, such changes are feasible. The A207 in Bexley Heath carries slightly higher flows, and the remodelled Fountain Place in Poynton carries around 22,000 vehicles per day. Place-making and significant improvement to the pedestrian and cycling environment do not depend on major traffic reductions.

The proposed measures for Boscombe may merely provide a starting point for a larger programme to adapt the A35 and its patterns of movement. It is unlikely that resources will allow anything but minor changes short-term. The proposed junctions will therefore begin as unusual exceptions in the overall highway context. Longer term, careful consideration of the optimum design speed for Christchurch Road is needed to maximise pedestrian activity, maintain or improve safety, and generate smooth traffic flows of sufficient capacity. The road casualty record suggests that the proposed changes could bring safety benefits, with design speeds reduced through tighter carriageway widths, extended kerb lines, reduced road markings and a more legible sequence of identifiable places and landmarks.
The current configuration of the western gateway at the junction of Christchurch and Palmerston Roads is dominated by the sweeping bend of the A35. The signals, pedestrian barriers, and wide central refuge isolate The Precinct from the northwestern side, where significant areas with prime footfall lie unused. The presence of The Precinct is difficult to identify from the north or west, and the key entrance lacks any distinctive focal point amidst a collection of bollards, bins and bike racks.

Our initial sketch below illustrates the potential modification of the space to open up and celebrate access to The Precinct, through the creation of a square with a converging crossing point across a reduced overall carriageway. The narrower widths still allow for two-way bus flows, but are designed to minimise interruptions to traffic flows through shorter crossing times. Trading and activity could be encouraged on the underused land, to increase the visibility of the market and help provide the “edge friction” to introduce lower speeds.
The outline approach re-establishes the presence of The Precinct and its relationship to a new square and the surrounding streets. Contrasting shades of asphalt or deep-set blocks define the crossing point and help establish the low-speed environment at this key location.
**Precinct Northern Approach**

Access to Boscombe from the residential areas to the north is severely constrained by the daunting scale of the Centenary Way roundabout and the fragmented pedestrian routes. A reduction in the perceived scale and widths of the roundabout and its approaches would allow clearer, more legible connections to The Precinct whilst helping slow traffic and ease crossing options. The application of surface treatments would avoid the need for major re-construction whilst transforming this vital link. A consistent footway paving material should be continued across entrances and vehicle crossovers on both sides of Palmerston Road.

Reducing the widths of the crossing points at each approach to the roundabout will help to minimise the interference and delays to traffic in addition to improving the perceived accessibility of The Precinct. Some additional short-term on-street parking on Centenary Road is possible.
Palmerston Road needs to serve as a strong and clear approach to The Precinct, both from the bus stops and from further north. The street also needs to help foster slow speeds at the key junctions. To achieve this, a new courtesy crossing on a key pedestrian route could be established, creating a strong entry space to the Royal Arcade entrance. We would recommend removal of road markings to allow the new space to break the continuity of the A35 at this point, helping to link the Aldi store to the Arcade, The Precinct and the taxi rank. Subject to ground conditions and services, four additional street trees would help define and highlight the crossing and extend the perceived boundaries of the retail area, defining the taxi rank into two areas. The bus stop could be positioned slightly further to the north.
The Precinct - Eastern Gateway

The sweeping carriageway, railings and double island arrangement of this critical junction create a formidable barrier to Boscombe Precinct. More complicated than the western approach due to the junction of Heathcote Road, the space has been designed around traffic flows on the A35, interrupted by pedestrian crossing requirements, rather than as a lobby for the Precinct. Again, a large area of underused land lies to the north of the junction. The complex crossing arrangements channel pedestrians through narrow gaps, and generate traffic congestion and stop-start flows.

Our recommendations would include adapting the junction to orientate pedestrian movement towards The Precinct, to generate low-speed flows across this critical space, and to allow for the expansion of market activities beyond the Precinct onto the unused site. Tighter geometry and narrow approach lanes aim to slow speeds, and facilitate an opening up of the Precinct entrance.
Precinct Eastern Gateway

A clear geometric form at the junction combined with generous courtesy crossings and realigned carriageways suggests an arrangement that serves primarily as an extension and lobby for The Precinct. Despite the volumes, this approach permits the removal of signals and barriers, and shifts the emphasis of the streetspace towards trading and civic activity, alerting drivers to the surrounding activity.
Southern approach into Sea Road

Strengthening the connections between The Precinct and surrounding neighbourhoods is of high priority. For the three main approaches, we would recommend removing barriers, both physical and psychological, wherever possible. This is particularly important for the limited southern approach on Sea Road. Although some abuse of the pedestrianised street may increase, the risk of occasional vehicles is outweighed by opening and encouraging pedestrian access. If necessary, provision could be made for a demountable bollard, but any such street furniture and signs should be kept to the absolute minimum. A short extension of the Precinct’s block paving into the junction with Roumelia Lane and Hawkwood Road would highlight this key entry point. Some experimentation with the management regime is advised to reduce the costs of manual operation of gates, and to test the potential for defining the pedestrian area through informal cues and control rather than physical barriers and regulation.
Summary and conclusions

Boscombe Precinct merits investment and support. Despite the difficulties associated with high streets generally, and the adverse economic climate, the retail centre has the potential to achieve the transformation of role from functional retail distribution to social hub of the neighbourhood, and to underpin the regeneration of the area. The basic form of the pedestrianised market area does not require radical overhaul or rebuilding at this stage, and we would not recommend reopening the Precinct to through traffic.

Our recommendations suggest that the Town Team and the Regeneration Partnership should focus priorities on the spaces and approaches surrounding the Precinct. Strengthening the links and overcoming the physical and psychological barriers are essential in order to increase the visibility of The Precinct, extend its presence beyond its current confines and to enhance pedestrian and bicycle access. If broad consensus can be established for this strategy, significant additional design and local consultation will be necessary to implement the key modifications.

Bold changes are required, and are increasingly possible, in the design and management of the A35 corridor. Success for Boscombe depends on modifying traffic flow patterns and design speeds on the Christchurch Road in order that the key junctions are perceived as an integral part of the civic and cultural context of The Precinct, rather than as separate, segregated highway elements.

Our observations and conclusions suggest that the transformation of the key junctions surrounding the Precinct can be achieved without significant loss of capacity or journey times on the A35. With sufficient measures to create identifiable town squares, low approach speeds, and highly visible courtesy crossings, we believe the key junctions could perform safely and efficiently without the existing traffic signals. This implies some bold innovation on the part of the highway authority, but ones that could provide useful precedents for the broader transformation of the traffic corridor, helping to shift the emphasis to lower speeds and promoting a wider range of transport modes.

When resources permit, we would recommend only relatively minor modifications to the core of The Precinct. This would include replacement of a number of trees, and the simplification and rationalisation of street furniture to maintain as open a central boulevard and trading areas as possible. The addition of anchor points and a low-voltage power supply should be included in discussion with market traders, and similar facilities extended after the modifications to the unused areas either end of The Precinct.

The limitations on clear routes between the Hawkwood Road car parks and The Precinct suggest that particular emphasis should be placed on improving the clarity, legibility and quality of the narrow passageways, including continuity of paving and lighting throughout.

Removal of the barriers and clutter to the Sea Road entrance, and at either end of The Precinct creates some risk of abuse of the pedestrian areas by drivers. However there are many successful traffic-free retail areas without permanent barriers, and the protocols for The Precinct are, by now, well established. The importance of clear, legible and inviting access outweighs such risks, and, if necessary, more discreet and removable controls could be deployed.

The expansion of The Precinct’s market trading areas across the Christchurch Road to include the two underused open spaces will depend on the remodelling of the junctions at the eastern and western ends of the street. Although identifying sufficient demand for space may take time, such an expansion will significantly enhance the scale and potential of Boscombe as a market focus. Activity on these blank sites will greatly assist in the key transformation of these entry spaces into mixed-use public spaces from daunting highway junctions.

Turning The Precinct’s shop window outwards to address its surroundings requires very close integration of innovative traffic engineering with urban design and place-making. Such a strategy is justified given the critical importance of the centre and the need to build and retain pedestrian footfall. If the Town team succeeds in building broad consensus and combining the investment available, it is possible that Boscombe could regenerate around a transformed Precinct and streetscape.