

## **Introduction and Background**

Rochford District Council is preparing Area Action Plans for the District's three main centres of Hockley, Rayleigh and Rochford. These Area Action Plans are used to set planning policies and allocate land for the respective centres, and on adoption form part of the statutory development plan for the District. The Rochford Core Strategy (2011) sets out what the Area Action Plans will deliver, and the Rochford Area Action Plan is required to be consistent with the Core Strategy.

The Rochford Area Action Plan will be used to guide appropriate development within Rochford town centre and direct future public and private investment in the town.

The Rochford District Core Strategy identifies the importance of Rochford's well preserved and unique historic character and layout, as well as the limitations that are imposed on its function as a town centre due to the small size of most retail units. It is envisaged that Rochford will build on its heritage assets and existing position as a small market town to attract visitors and provide for the retail needs of its local population. Opportunities are also identified for improvements to the Market Square.

Production of the Area Action Plan is at a very advanced stage. In November 2013 the Council submitted the version of the Plan it proposed to adopt to the Government.

The Rochford Area Action Plan submitted to the Government included policies on the Market Square, following on from those in the Rochford Core Strategy. The Rochford Area Action Plan also included two potential layouts for the Market Square, reflecting how the Market Square could look if the policies were implemented.

The Secretary of State appointed a Planning Inspector to examine the plan to determine if it was sound and could therefore be adopted by the Council.

An examination hearing session was held on 19 February 2014 at which the various aspects of the plan were discussed, including the future of Rochford Market Square. Following this hearing, the Planning Inspector wrote to Rochford District Council and has requested the Council identify its preferred option for Rochford Market Square for inclusion in the Rochford Area Action Plan.

As such, the Council is now seeking views on which of the options for the Market Square should be the one included in the Area Action Plan – the option the Council will seek to realise for the Market Square.

This document explains the evidence base in relation to Rochford Market Square; summarises what people have said previously about its potential layout; explains the existing policy position (including what the adopted Rochford Core Strategy says and what is set out in the Rochford Area Action Plan); and sets out and explains the options that were included in the submitted Rochford Area Action Plan.

The main purpose of this document however is to encourage those with an interest in the future of Rochford Town Centre to make their views known as to which of the Market Square options is preferred, or whether other options should be considered.

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Representations can be submitted via the Council’s online consultation system at <http://rochford.jdi-consult.net/ldf>.

Any representations made must be submitted by **5pm on 8 May 2014**.

### Rochford Market Square and the Evidence Base

A raft of planning-related evidence has been produced over a number of years that is used to inform the Council’s planning policies. This evidence has been used to inform both the Rochford District Core Strategy and the Rochford Area Action Plan. The following extracts from the evidence base are particularly relevant to Rochford Market Square. They do not represent the Council’s views on the issue, but they are used to help the Council come to a decision.

Evidence base document	Relevant comments on Market Square
Rochford District Retail and Leisure Study (White, Young, Green – 2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The pedestrianisation of Market Square could provide a clearer focal point for the town centre and encourage a complementary “café culture”.</li> </ul>
Sustainability Appraisal/Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Rochford Area Action Plan Submission Document (Enfusion – 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Full or part pedestrianisation of the Market Square would provide a number of positive benefits for communities, health and safety, economy and employment, cultural heritage, landscape and townscape and air quality.</li> <li>Removal of the bus route and taxi rank from the Market Square and West Street was assessed as having the potential for a negative effect on elderly and disabled members of the community.</li> </ul>
Property market overview within the Rochford Area Action Plan (Allies Morrison Urban Practitioners – 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhancements to the town centre’s physical environment, especially around the Market Square area, will help to encourage further investment and interest from potential occupiers.</li> </ul>
Rochford Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan (Essex County Council – 2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A consequence of short stay car parking in Market Square is that there are often queues of cars backing up into South Street waiting for a parking space, this creates a dangerous situation at Horners Corner. Traffic and parking in the Square should be reviewed. Since the Back Lane car park is only a short walk away, parking in the Square could be confined to taxis and the disabled, and the Square effectively pedestrianised.</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cars queuing for short stay parking in the Market Square back up into South Street and are a hazard to other motorists and pedestrians. The old objective of the 1973 Town Centre Plan of pedestrianising West Street and the Market Square may have proved unattainable, but this situation could be improved by denying Market Square to its junction with Back Lane to all but disabled drivers.</li> <li>• The Market Square is the only area of civic open space in the Conservation Area. The market is a constraint on how this is treated and used, but there could be scope here for public art, or a war memorial similar to the one at the end of Weir Pond Road.</li> <li>• The Market Square is identified as an area where an improved pedestrian environment is recommended.</li> </ul>
<p>Rochford Area Action Plan Issues and Options (2009)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Market Square is currently being used as a car park, servicing adjacent retail premises. Consultation has identified that this car park is also used by people who are using convenience retail on the way to and from work or school, particularly as the car park is free. This, it may be argued, represents a misuse of what should be taking place in Rochford's town square and that parking would be better placed elsewhere in the town centre, such as by providing equivalent parking at Old Ship Lane car park. The space in the Market Square could be a place of recreation and of civic focus, as well as servicing retail uses. Additional cycle racks could also be incorporated into the Square. The removal of parking could occur in conjunction with a re-provision or even increase of short-term parking spaces in the Back Lane car park.</li> </ul>

**Previous community involvement: what has already been said about Rochford Market Square**

There was community involvement in production of the Rochford Area Action Plan at a number of stages, where various options for the town centre were looked at and appraised. The following summarises comments made at these various stages that relate specifically to Rochford Market Square.

### **Initial Community Involvement (2008)**

- There were varying views on whether or not the Market Square should be pedestrianised. Those against felt it would negatively affect retail and encourage antisocial behaviour. Those in favour felt that it would create a better atmosphere and safer environment.
- There was a suggestion for a war memorial/other kind of memorial in the Market Square.
- It was stated that there should be crossings near to Market Square to make pedestrian movement easier.
- There were many comments about keeping the historic character of Rochford intact.

### **Issues and Options Consultation (2009)**

- Mixed views on pedestrianisation of Market Square.
- Parking in the Square is vital to the shops economy (Hawkwell Parish Council).
- The entrance and exit should be reversed (Hawkwell Parish Council).
- Reduce the number of taxis in the Square to three places (Hawkwell Parish Council).
- Pedestrianisation of the Square will encourage antisocial behaviour as experienced in Southend - rowdy youths on skateboards and skates. Café culture is not appropriate in such a small town, people living over the shops will experience noise (Hawkwell Parish Council).
- Relocation of the pump and trough from the centre of the Square will remove two features that were returned to the Square only a few years ago (Hawkwell Parish Council).
- The bus must be retained through West Street as it is convenient for shoppers with heavy loads particularly with many elderly residents (Hawkwell Parish Council).
- Restriction of vehicular use in the Square will not automatically create a pedestrian space. It could become merely empty unless some attraction or facility makes pedestrians want to use the Square (Essex County Council).
- The routing of buses through West Street should be carefully considered because buses have caused damage to listed and other buildings and create traffic congestion Essex County Council).

- The full or part pedestrianisation of the Market Square would need to consider the potential for extensive urban archaeological deposits surviving within the area and the impacts development will have upon this resource (Essex County Council).
- Rochford Chamber of Trade opposes pedestrianisation of the Square. Pedestrianisation would kill the traders in the Square. Market days are very poor trading days for most traders. Some do well (Rochford Chamber of Trade).
- To remove buses from West Street/Square would also be very detrimental. A great deal of people travel by bus especially on Market days (Rochford Chamber of Trade).
- The new arrangement for cars entering the Square does not work and we should revert to the old system of entry and exit for vehicles (Rochford Chamber of Trade).
- Taxi drivers should have less space allocated to them in the Square. Most are hailed by telephone, few are engaged from the Square. It is just free parking for them. There are other sites for them to park. Perhaps provide a telephone. It was felt their presence whilst waiting for fares does not create a good impression to visitors (Rochford Chamber of Trade).
- If the Market Square is pedestrianised, alternative free parking nearby should take place.
- If the Market Square is pedestrianised, the surface should be replaced with cobblestones.
- Parking in Market Square interferes with traffic flow through centre.
- Alternative free parking elsewhere would make popping into shops in the Market Square less attractive.
- Semi-closure of West Street to cars suggested, with access for servicing (the shops) and disabled drivers.
- Traffic entry into the Square should be reversed so that it is as previous – this worked well before.

### **Pre-Submission Consultation (2013)**

- Hawkwell Parish Council commented that both proposals for pedestrianisation (Figures 11 and 12) or modest improvements should be resisted. They will have a detrimental impact on trade. Widening the pavements around the Square will be of no benefit and would impact on the Market layout. Traffic issues could be resolved by reversing the traffic flow as it used to be with cars entering at the bottom of square and exiting at the top by the Spar building.
- Rochford Chamber of Trade stated the pavements should not be widened; parking supports businesses. Pay and display should not be introduced. The town supports short shopping trips which is why parking in the Square for convenience is important.
- Rochford Chamber of Trade suggest the number of taxi spaces should be reduced.
- Rochford Chamber of Trade and Hawkwell Parish Council both suggest entrance and exit for the Square should be reversed.
- Hawkwell Parish Council commented that both proposals for pedestrianisation (Figures 11 and 12) or modest improvements should be resisted. They will have a detrimental impact on trade. Widening the pavements around the Square will be of no benefit and would impact on the Market layout.
- It was suggested that if any parking is lost in the town square all car parks in Rochford should have an initial 'free period' of up to 30 minutes.
- Widening pavements would make it difficult on market day.
- Changes could improve traffic flow (particularly at the eastern end of West Street), improve the bus service and aid those with mobility problems.
- Two disabled parking bays should be provided.

### **Core Strategy and Rochford Market Square**

The Rochford Area Action Plan is guided by policies already adopted in the Rochford District Core Strategy (2011).

The key Core Strategy policy in relation to the AAP is Policy RTC5. This states that Rochford District Council, with partner organisations and landowners, will produce an AAP for Rochford's town centre, which delivers the following:

- A safe and high quality environment for residents;
- A market square area that encourages visitors;
- An enhanced retail offer for Rochford;

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- A range of evening leisure activities;
- Improved accessibility to and within the town centre; and
- The promotion of youth community facilities.

### Rochford Area Action Plan and Rochford Market Square

The Rochford Area Action Plan submitted to the Government for examination includes the key principles for the Market Square.

Policy 6.4 of the Rochford Area Action Plan states the following:

- Public realm enhancements should be focused on the creation of an improved Market Square and include the rationalisation and reduction in the number of car parking spaces and the potential relocation of the taxi rank to an appropriately central and accessible location.

Key principles underpinning improvements to Rochford Market Square include the following:

- Greater priority should be given to pedestrian space. This could be achieved by reducing the number of public parking spaces. There is scope to retain at least 50% of the spaces and transform the space into a high quality square for people. In addition, the removal of public parking spaces will act as a disincentive to visitors to try and park in this most central of locations and will therefore provide some relief to traffic congestion in the area.
- Consider the benefits of rationalisation of the taxi provision – it is currently on both sides of the 'central island' and could be rationalised. It may be necessary to allocate spaces in an alternative location, with Back Lane car park and Roche Close potentially providing viable alternatives.
- The introduction of parking charges in Market Square will bring the space in line with the town-wide parking management regime in Rochford. The availability of free spaces in this location is a significant factor in the Square attracting traffic and this only compounds the traffic and movement problems in the area. However, it is recognised that the business plan for the introduction of charges will need to be tested carefully. There may be the potential to allow free short-stay parking in the Old Ship Lane car park, which currently appears to be underutilised.
- The space could be managed so as to ensure existing commercial/business serving arrangements are maintained, with nearby loading bays on North Street maintained.

**Options for Consultation**

**Option 1**

**Figure 11** – A modest improvement scheme that would give greater priority to pedestrians with much wider pavement areas in the Market Square and would help better link the south side of West Street with the Market Square with new informal crossings created. The plan shows 15 parking bays and space for three taxis. The bus stop is retained.

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Constraints</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved pedestrian environment – widened pavements and raised crossings across West Street.</li> <li>• Continue to provide free car parking in this central location.</li> <li>• Potential opportunity to provide free parking elsewhere in proximity to the Square, for example Old Ship Lane car park.</li> <li>• Rationalised taxi waiting spaces – potential relocation of some spaces to Back Lane car park or Roche Close.</li> <li>• Retention of bus stop.</li> <li>• Enable freer flow of traffic along West Street if a bus is stationary at the bus stop.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three fewer car parking spaces on the western side of the Square.</li> <li>• Free parking in the Square likely to continue to encourage queuing and congestion.</li> <li>• Fewer taxi waiting spaces in this central location.</li> </ul>





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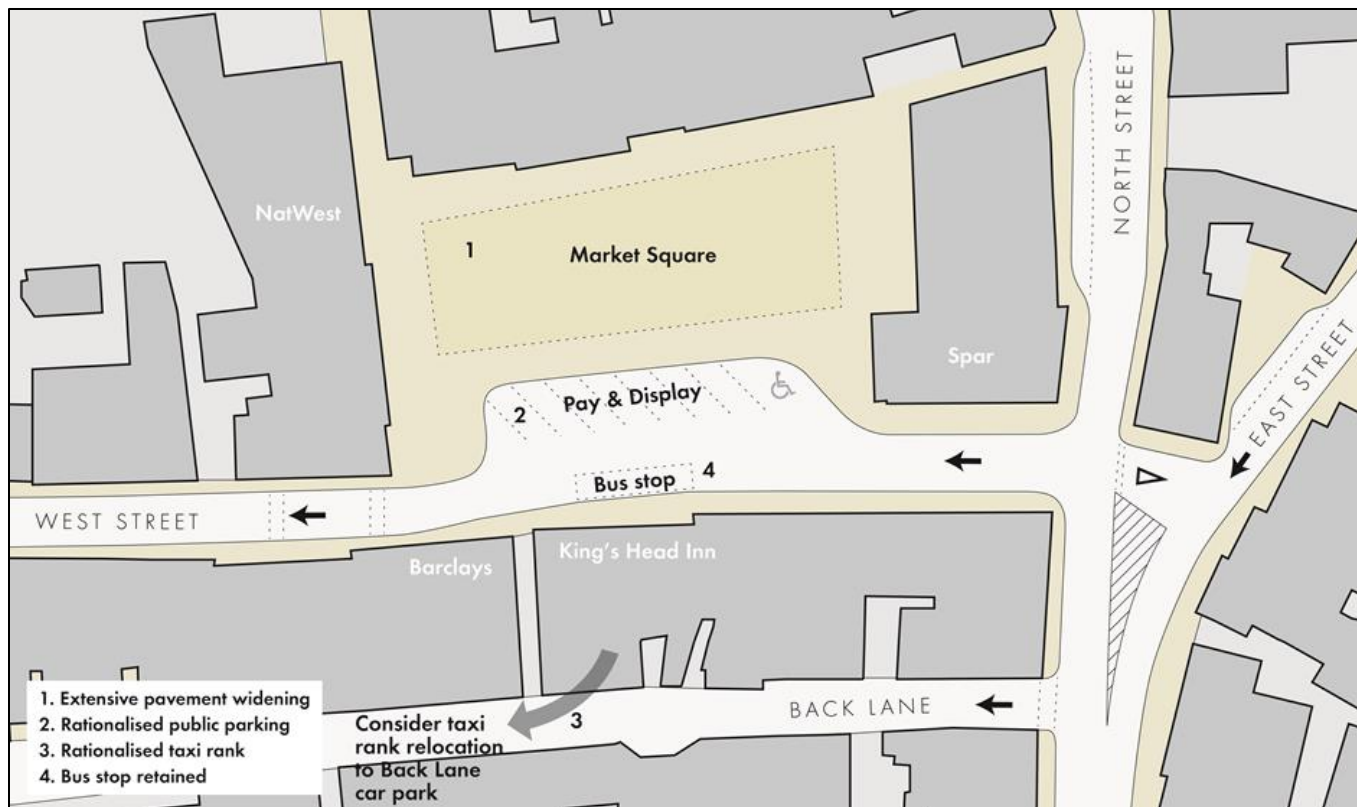
**Option 2**

**Figure 12** – A more significant intervention could see the pedestrianisation of the Square whilst retaining capacity for up to 10 public parking spaces and the bus stop. The taxi rank however would need to be relocated

Benefits	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retain some parking in this central location.</li> <li>• Pay and display could discourage congestion and ensure a freer flow of traffic along West Street.</li> <li>• Part-pedestrianisation of the Square.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relocation of the taxi rank entirely to either Back Lane car park or Roche Close.</li> <li>• Few car parking spaces in this central location.</li> <li>• Loss of free car parking could discourage short, convenience shopping trips.</li> </ul>

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- Potential opportunity to provide free parking elsewhere in proximity to Square, for example Old Ship Lane car park.
- Retention of bus stop.



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### Which option for the Market Square do you prefer? Is there an alternative the Council should consider?

Please let us know which option you prefer, or whether there are alternatives you think the Council should consider.