



**Rochford District  
Council**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>Town Centre Health Check Topic Paper</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>Director of Place</b>

## **REPORT SUMMARY**

The Town Centre Health Check (TCHC) Topic Paper offers a comprehensive evaluation of the health and wellbeing of Rayleigh, Rochford, and Hockley town centres, employing both quantitative and qualitative assessment methodology. This data-driven analysis has produced a number of policy recommendations, including potential adjustments to town centre boundaries and shopping frontages, revisions to town centre objectives and goals (originally developed for the Area Action Plans), the designation and retention of opportunity areas and other town centre improvement. This technical evidence base will help guide the formulation of the Council's town centre and retail policies in the emerging Local Plan.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1. That the Planning Policy Committee notes the report as part of the evidence base for the emerging Local Plan.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

#### **Introduction & Context**

- 1.1 National planning policy requires local plans to be informed and justified by technical evidence.
- 1.2 Furthermore, national planning policy requires Local Plans to provide an overall strategy for the pattern, scale, and design quality of places, and make sufficient provision for (inter alia): housing (including affordable housing), employment, retail, leisure, and other commercial development.
- 1.3 Town Centre Health Checks (TCHC) are assessments conducted by Local Authorities to analyse and determine the overall health and wellbeing of a town centre. These evaluations typically consider various aspects including economic,

social, environmental, and cultural factors to provide a comprehensive understanding of a town centre's health and functionality. The outcomes of these assessments are used by Local Authorities to support town centre monitoring, guide local development and regeneration initiatives, and inform policy decisions- ensuring town centres remain dynamic, economically sustainable, and attuned to the evolving needs of the community.

- 1.4 In 2023, a comprehensive TCHC assessment was conducted to evaluate the strength and vitality of town centres situated in the district of Rochford to inform the emerging Local Plan. Data was collected in October 2023, via on-site assessment of Rayleigh, Rochford, and Hockley Town Centre.

#### **Data Collection Methodology**

- 1.5 In line with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the National Planning Practice Guidance (PPG), the TCHC assessment involved a systematic survey and analysis, and a qualitative assessment of town centre health indicators to provide a comprehensive understand of the town's overall wellbeing. This included the following:
- A. Retail Audit: an examination of the use, occupancy rates, physical condition, occupier nature and, the spatial distribution of town centre premises;
  - B. Qualitative Scored Assessment: a qualitative assessment of eleven town centre health indicators (these included: the heritage and historic environment, open space and green infrastructure, public realm, pavements and streets, safety and security, pedestrian friendliness, cycling facilities, sustainable transport, parking, local attractions and tourism and, evening economy of town centres;
  - C. Assessment of Town Centre Change: a comparative analysis between the 2023 TCHC for Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley and historic studies to evaluate change in the short and long term.

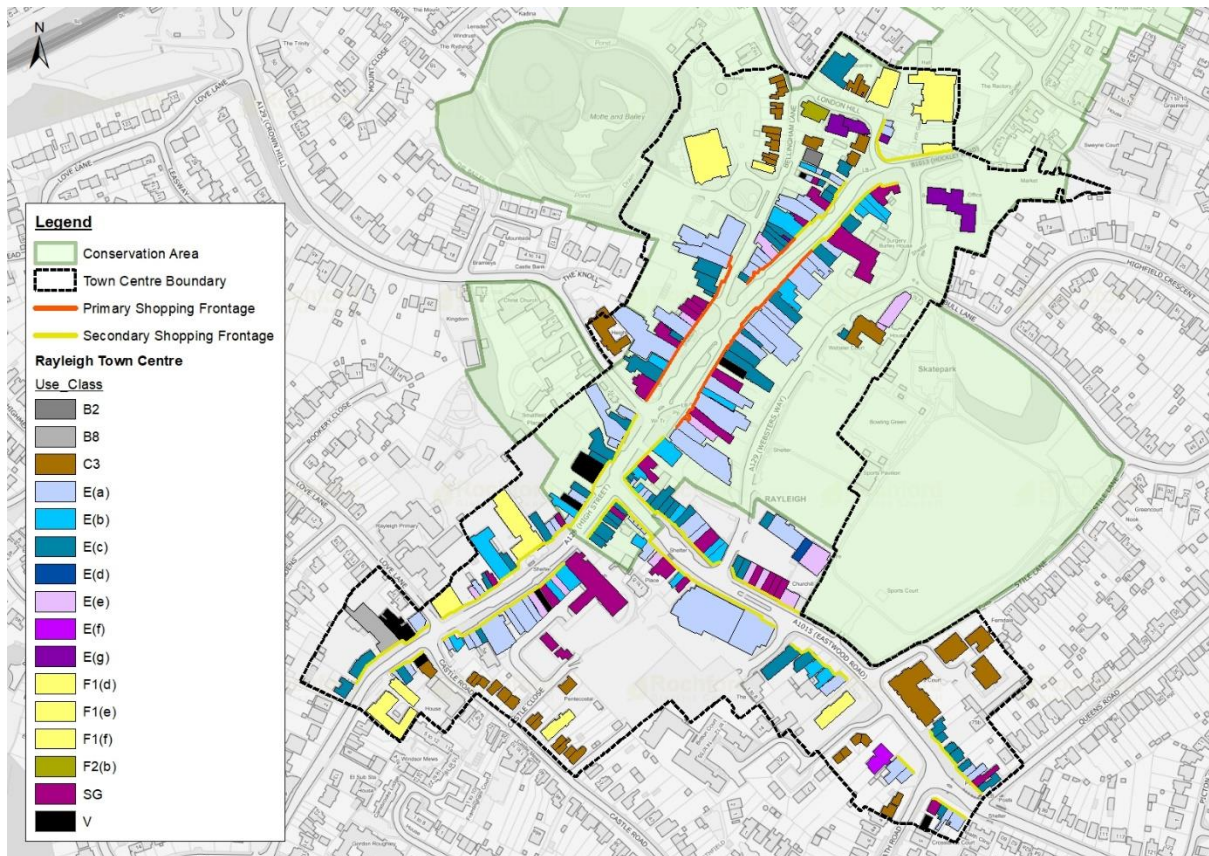
#### **'Headline Findings- Rayleigh Town Centre**

- 1.6 Rayleigh, the principal centre in the district, boasts a large town centre boundary, covering 17.92ha and accommodating 258 premises. 69% of these town centre premises adjoin a Primary Shopping Frontage or Secondary Shopping Frontage. The following sections present a summary of the retail audit, qualitative scores assessment and assessment of town centre change findings for Rayleigh.

##### Retail Audit:

- 1.7 65.11% of the 258 premises surveyed were of Class E (Commercial Business and Service) use, 15.12% of premises were residential dwellings (Class C3), 11.24% of premises were classified of Sui Generis use, 4.65% of premises were of Class F (Local Community and Learning Use) and, 0.78% of premises were of Class B use. Figure 1 (below) provides a visual breakdown of premise use by Use Class Order). In October 2023, Rayleigh had a vacancy rate of 3.65% with eight vacant premises.

*Figure 1: Map illustrating the Use Class Order classification of premises in Rayleigh town centre (October 2023).*



- 1.8 Most premises (54.89%) were in a “Very Good/Good” condition, very few premises (5.95%) were classified as “Poor/ Very Poor”.
- 1.9 In Rayleigh, many occupiers are local and regional (70.16%) with a smaller proportion being national or international (29.84%), and a minimal number of units.

Qualitative Scored Assessment:

1.10 Rayleigh town centre received a qualitative assessment score of 42/55 (76%). Table 1 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the scores assigned to each indicator.

*Table 1: Overview of the scoring distributions in the qualitative scored assessment for Rayleigh (October 2023).*

Indicator	Very Good (5)	Good (4)	Fair (3)	Poor (2)	Very Poor (1)
A. Historic Environment		✓			
B. Open Space & Green Infrastructure	✓				
C. Public Realm		✓			
D. Pavements & Streets		✓			
E. Safety & Security		✓			
F. Cycling Facilities				✓	
G. Pedestrian Friendliness			✓		
H. Sustainable Transport	✓				
I. Parking Provision		✓			
J. Tourism and Local Attractions		✓			
K. Evening Economy			✓		

1.11 The qualitative scored assessment of Rayleigh town centre indicates several strengths and weaknesses across various indicators. Rayleigh earns high scores in relation to its ample open space and green infrastructure provision, general safety and security, extensive sustainable transport network, sufficient parking provision and its vibrant evening economy. However, Rayleigh shows weaknesses in areas, with a limited cycling network and supporting facilities and, constraints to the general pedestrian friendliness of the centre.

Assessment of Town Centre Change

- 1.12 In the short-term, between March 2020 and October 2023, there have been minimal alteration in premise use, notable changes include:
1. A 0.78% decrease in the proportion of retail premises, attributed to the closure of Superdrug on the High Street and a premises within Berry’s Arcade;
  2. A 0.78% increase in restaurants and cafes;
  3. A 1.17% decrease in Sui Generis premises and;
  4. A 1.17% increase in the number of vacant premises.
- 1.13 Similarly, in the long-term (between May 2008 and October 2023) there have been minimal alternations to premise use along the primary and secondary shopping frontages. Table 2 provides a summary of these changes.

*Table 2: Comparison of the primary shopping frontage and secondary shopping frontage use in 2008 and 2023.*

Premise Use	2008	2023	Change in use
Business Use	2.63%	1.67%	-0.96%
Residential Use	0.00%	0.00%	No Change
Commercial and Retail Use	77.37%	79.44%	+2.07%
Sui Generis	12.11%	13.89%	+1.78%
Vacant	5.26%	3.33%	-1.93%
Non-Residential, Community & Leisure	2.63%	1.67%	-0.96%

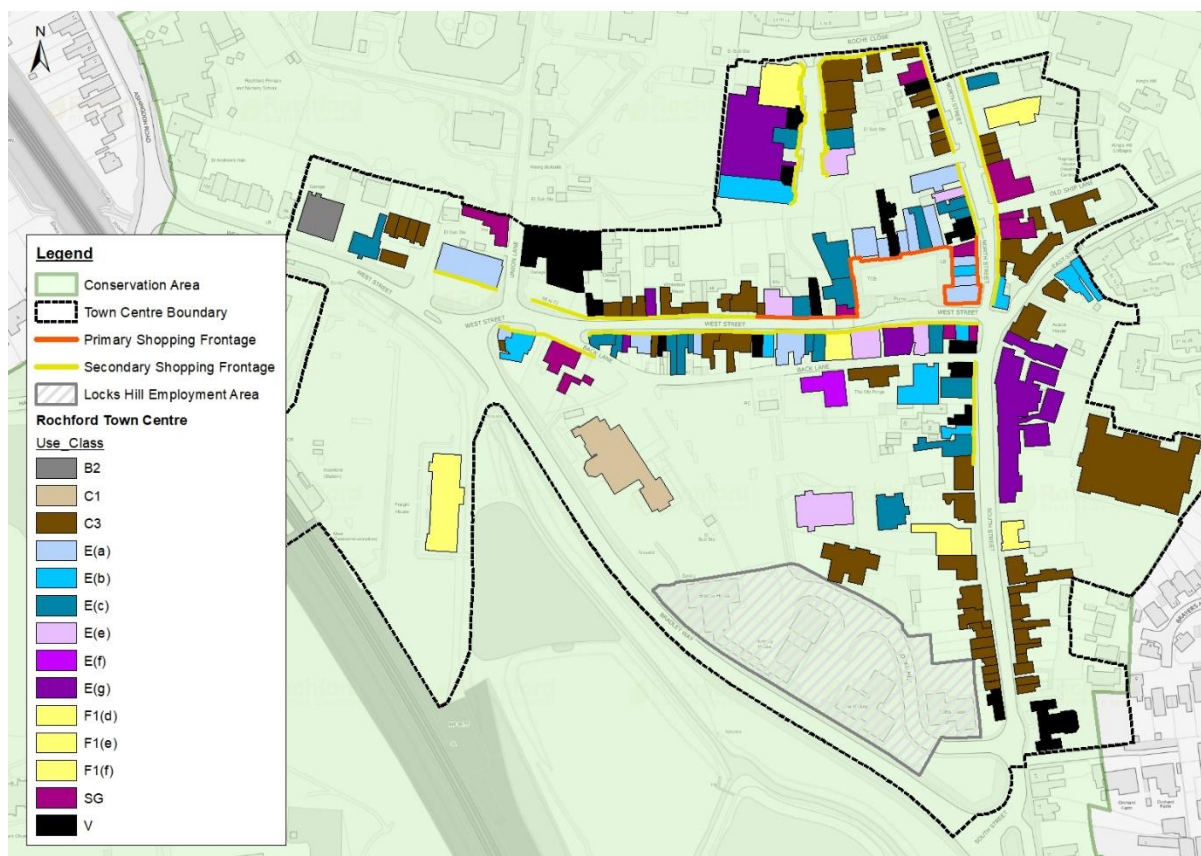
**Headline Findings- Rochford Town Centre**

- 1.14 Rochford town centre stands as the district’s second-largest town centre, covering 9.76 hectares within its town centre boundary and accommodating a total of 157 premises, with approximately 65% of these premises situated alongside either a Primary Shopping Frontage or Secondary Shopping Frontage. The following sections present a summary of the retail audit, qualitative scores assessment and assessment of town centre change findings for Rochford.

Retail Audit

- 1.15 48.41% of premises were residential dwellings (Class C3), 28.66% of premises were of Class E (Commercial Business and Service) use, 7.64% of premises were classified of Sui Generis use, 3.82% of premises were of Class F (Local Community and Learning Use) and, 0.64% of premises were of Class B use. Figure 3 (above) provides a visual breakdown of premise use by Use Class Order). In October 2023, Rochford had a vacancy rate of 17.89%- with the town centre containing 17 vacant premises.

*Figure 2: Map illustrating the Use Class Order classification of premises in Rochford town centre (October 2023).*



1.16 Most premises, accounting for 58.24%, were scored as being in a "Very Good/Good" condition, while a minority (15.38%), were classified as being in "Poor/Very Poor" condition.

1.17 In Rochford, most premises occupiers, totalling 88.73% were local or regional businesses, with a notably smaller proportion (11.27%), being national or international.

Qualitative Scored Assessment:

1.18 Rochford town centre received a qualitative assessment score of 32/55 (58%). Table 3 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the scores assigned to each indicator.

Table 3: Overview of the scoring distribution in the qualitative scored assessment for Rochford (October 2023).

Indicator	Very Good (5)	Good (4)	Fair (3)	Poor (2)	Very Poor (1)
A. Historic Environment		✓			
B. Open Space & Green Infrastructure				✓	

Indicator	Very Good (5)	Good (4)	Fair (3)	Poor (2)	Very Poor (1)
C. Public Realm				✓	
D. Pavements & Streets			✓		
E. Safety & Security		✓			
F. Cycling Facilities				✓	
G. Pedestrian Friendliness				✓	
H. Sustainable Transport		✓			
I. Parking		✓			
J. Tourism and Local Attractions				✓	
K. Evening Economy				✓	

1.19 The qualitative scored assessment highlights several strengths and weaknesses of Rochford town centre. In terms of strengths, the town centre scores highly regarding the historic environment, the sustainable transport network, and the provision of parking. However, low scores in categories highlight a need for improvement in the availability and accessibility of green spaces, the overall condition of public spaces, infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians, the number and quality of local attractions and tourism, and the vibrancy of the evening economy.

Assessment of Town Centre Change:

1.20 In the short term, from March 2020 to October 2023, there has been significant change in town centre premises use. Seven notable adjustments have been identified; these are:

1. A 0.6% increase in business use due to the occupation of a vacant premise in Roche Close;
2. A 0.6% in town centre residential development;
3. A 3.9% decrease in retail premises, with closures across the town centre;
4. A 0.6% decrease in restaurants and cafes following the closure of a restaurant on West Street;

- 5. A 1.3% increase in commercial and professional services;
- 6. A 0.6% decrease in Sui Generis use and;
- 7. A 6.4% increase in the number of vacant premises.

1.21 Significant premise use change has also occurred in the long-term (between May 2008 and October 2023) along Rochford’s primary and secondary shopping frontages. for Rochford, Table 4 provides a summary of these changes.

*Table 4: Comparison of the primary shopping frontage and secondary shopping frontage use in May 2008 and October 2023.*

Premise Use	2008	2023	Change in use
Business Use	3.5%	2.9%	-0.6%
Residential Use	20.0%	26.5%	+6.5%
Commercial and Retail Use	52.9%	39.2%	-13.7%
Sui Generis	11.8%	10.8%	-1.0%
Vacant	7.1%	13.7%	+6.6%
Non-Residential, Community & Leisure	4.7%	6.9%	+2.2%

**Headline Findings- Hockley Town Centre**

1.22 Hockley, with an area spanning 3.40 hectares, stands as the smallest town centre within the district, accommodating a total of 75 premises. 98% of Hockley’s town centre premises adjoin a Primary Shopping Frontage or Secondary Shopping Frontage. The following sections present a summary of the retail audit, qualitative scores assessment and assessment of town centre change findings for Hockley.

Retail Audit:

- 1.23 72.00% of the premises surveyed were of Class E (Commercial Business and Service) use, 16.00% of premises were classified of Sui Generis use, 4.00% of premises were residential dwellings (Class C3), 2.67% of premises were of Class F (Local Community and Learning Use) and, 1.33% of premises were of Class B (employment – warehouse) use. All remaining premises were vacant. Figure 1 (below) provides a visual breakdown of premise use by Use Class Order). In October 2023, Hockley had a vacancy rate of 4.17% with three vacant premises.
- 1.24 Most premises, totalling 53.53%, exhibited a favourable "Very Good/Good" condition, with only a small proportion, approximately 7.04%, rated as "Poor/Very Poor".
- 1.25 Most occupiers in Hockley are local or regional businesses, constituting 79.10% of the total, whereas national or international occupiers make up a smaller percentage at 20.90%.



Figure 3: Map illustrating the Use Class Order classification of premises in Hockley town centre (October 2023).



Qualitative Scored Assessment:

1.26 Hockley town centre received a qualitative assessment score of 32/55 (58%). Table 5 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the scores assigned to each indicator.

Table 5: Overview of the scoring distribution in the qualitative scored assessment for Hockley (October 2023).

Indicator	Very Good (5)	Good (4)	Fair (3)	Poor (2)	Very Poor (1)
A. Historic Environment			✓		
B. Open Space & Green Infrastructure			✓		
C. Public Realm		✓			
D. Pavements & Streets			✓		

Indicator	Very Good (5)	Good (4)	Fair (3)	Poor (2)	Very Poor (1)
E. Safety & Security		✓			
F. Cycling Facilities				✓	
G. Pedestrian Friendliness				✓	
H. Sustainable Transport		✓			
I. Parking			✓		
J. Tourism and Local Attractions					✓
K. Evening Economy				✓	

1.27 The qualitative scored assessment identifies the strengths and weaknesses of Hockley town centre. Regarding strengths, the town features adequate provisions for sustainable transport, a good (albeit limited) public realm, reasonable levels of green infrastructure provision and the centre is reasonably safe and secure. However, Hockley lacks significant local attractions and tourism opportunities with a relatively underdeveloped evening economy. Cycling facilities are also extremely limited, with the centre lacking designated cycle lanes or shared pathways, whilst Hockley lacks pedestrian friendly features with the dominant presence of the B1013 and Spa Roads and limited pedestrian connectivity between the town centre, Hockley Railway Station, Foundry Business Park and Eldon Way.

Assessment of Town Centre Change

- 1.28 Limited change in town centre premise use has occurred in the short term (Between March 2020 and October 2023). There are three noteworthy changes:
1. A 1.3% increase in residential development, attributed to the redevelopment of a previously vacant commercial unit into a new development that encompasses both commercial and residential spaces on Spar Road.
  2. A 1.3% increase in Sui Generis use linked to the occupation of a vacant premises by a hot food takeaway retailer.
  3. A 2.6% decrease in the number of vacant premises.
- 1.29 Significant change has occurred along the primary and secondary shopping frontages in Hockley town centre. Table 6 provides a summary of these changes.

*Table 6: Comparison of the primary shopping frontage and secondary shopping frontage use in May 2008 and October 2023.*

<b>Premise Use</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>Change in use</b>
Business Use	3.0%	4.1%	+1.1%
Residential Use	0.0%	4.1%	+4.1%
Commercial and Retail Use	77.6%	61.7%	-15.9%
Sui Generis	10.4%	16.4%	+6.0%
Non-Residential, Community and Leisure	4.5%	9.6%	+5.1%
Vacant	4.5%	4.1%	-0.4%

### **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

1.30 Following an in-depth analysis of Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley town centres, encompassing both cumulative and individual centre examination, a series of recommendation to guide the Council's updated town centre policies has been developed.

#### General Policy and Strategy Recommendations

- 1.31 **Maintain the relevance and continuity of Area Action Plans:** Emphasizing the importance of Area Action Plans (AAPs) as guiding documents and incorporating their detailed policies and development opportunities where relevant. This includes referencing AAPs alongside designated town centre policies and considering the development of Supplementary Planning Documents to provide updates
- 1.32 **Encourage a town centre-first approach:** Promoting a town centre-first approach in alignment with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This involves directing retail development towards town centres, safeguarding their distinct character and identity, and encouraging diverse retail outlets to enhance economic vitality.
- 1.33 **Maintain and enhance the primary retail and commercial function of town Centres:** Class E floorspace is encouraged to be protected with its loss prevented wherever possible, particularly along the proposed primary and secondary retail and commercial frontages.
- 1.34 **Protect local market and pubs:** Ensure the protection, enhancement, and promotion of markets and local pubs as they contribute to the vibrancy of town centres and serve as places for community gathering.
- 1.35 **Support extensions to town centre activities and offerings:** Encourage the diversification of town centre offerings to include more supporting uses such as

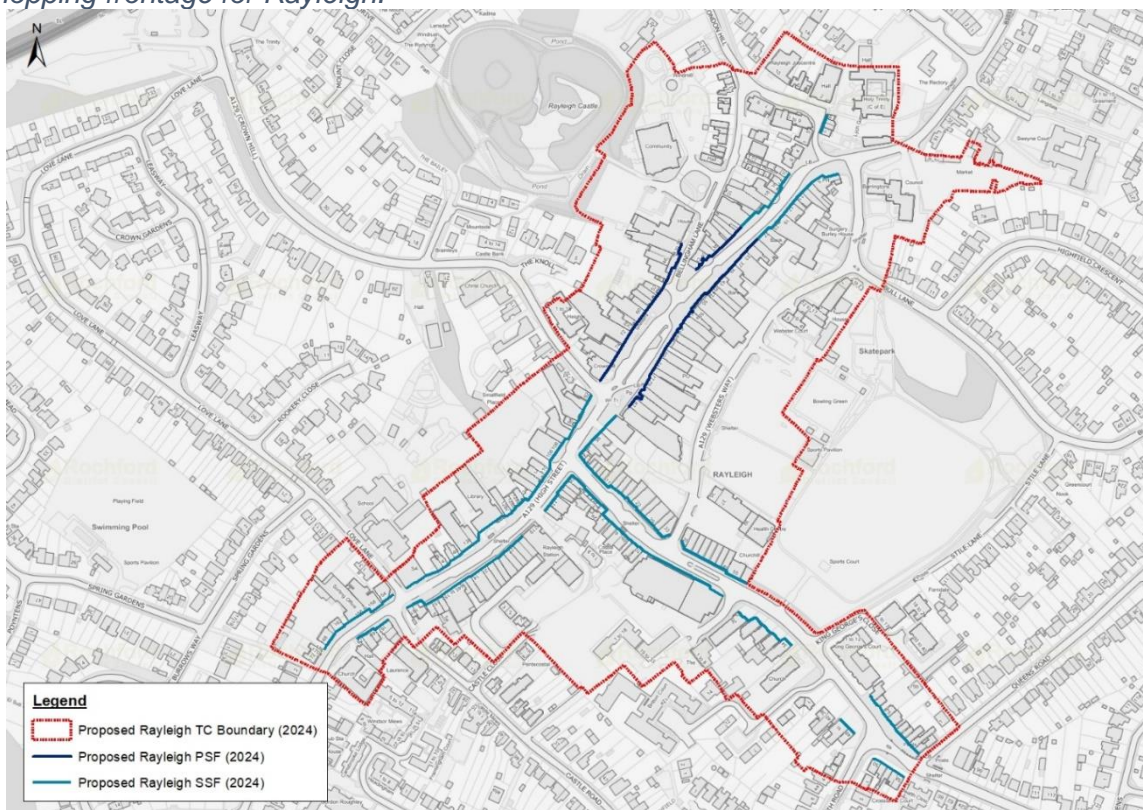
leisure, food, and drink and, extend activity within town centres into the evenings by supporting a broader mix of uses and proposals to enhance the entertainment offer.

- 1.36 **Monitoring and managing permitted development:** Monitoring the effect of permitted development rights on retail hierarchies. It is recommended that a balance of uses across the centres is kept under review through updates to Town Centre Health Checks and through the Authority Monitoring Report. The council should also consider the use of its powers to make Article 4 Directions to require the submission of planning applications for changes of use from Class E to residential in important areas, should monitoring identify an issue.
- 1.37 **Improve accessibility and urban design:** Promote and support enhanced pedestrian and cycle accessibility, inclusive and high-quality public realm proposals, and urban design that captures the unique character and cultural heritage of each town centre.
- 1.38 **Control residential development:** Discourage residential development on the ground floor in town centres (particularly primary and secondary frontages) to maintain commercial vibrancy whilst recognising the role of residential intensification in supporting smaller town centres.

#### Rayleigh Town Centre Recommendations

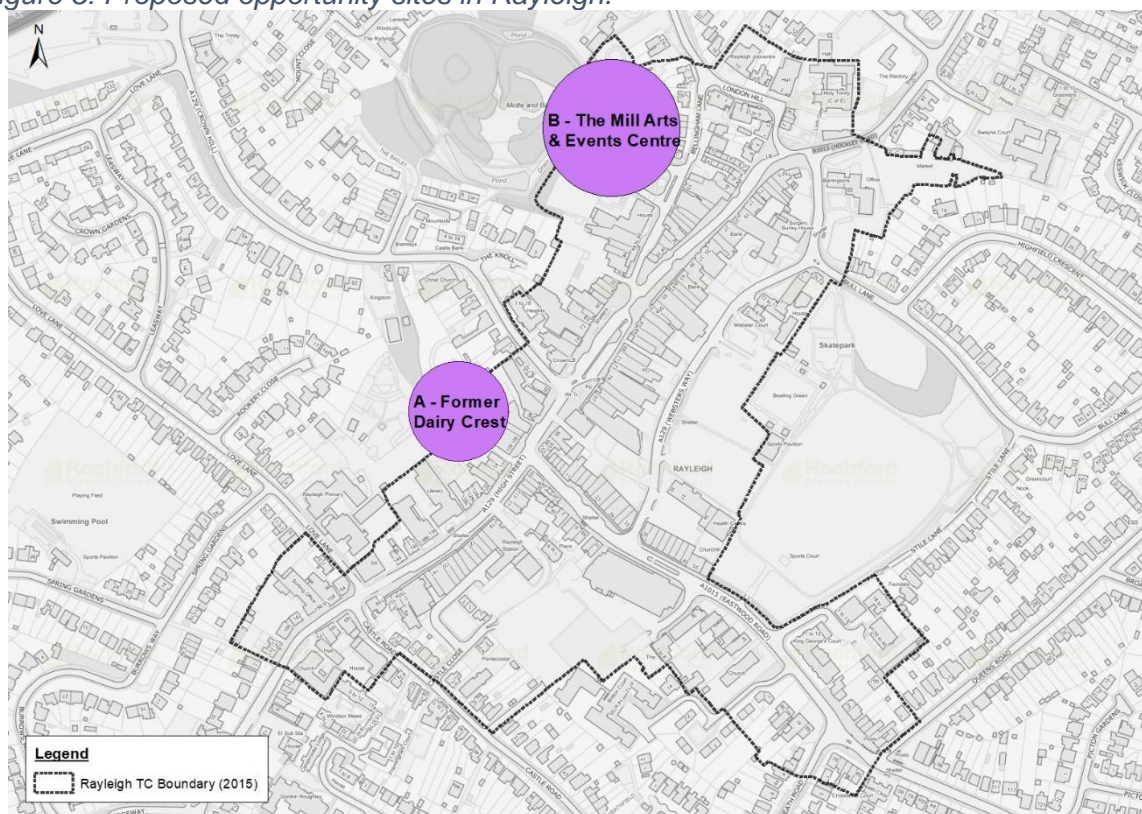
- 1.39 **Amend the Rayleigh town centre boundary and secondary shopping frontage** (see Figure 4 for details. Section 5 of the TCHC report provides further information regarding these amendments).

*Figure 4: Proposed town centre boundary, primary shopping frontage and secondary shopping frontage for Rayleigh.*



- 1.40 **Conserve historic assets and local character:** Development should respect and enhance these assets and their settings, with urban design reflecting the town’s historic character.
- 1.41 **Improve town centre accessibility:** Opportunities should be explored to extend or enhance existing and new cycling and pedestrian routes to connect the centre to surrounding residential and employment areas.
- 1.42 **Support proposals which advance the development of identified opportunity sites in Rayleigh Town Centre** (see, Figure 5) . This includes:
  - A. The Former Dairy Crest site, which presents opportunities for mixed-use redevelopment and;
  - B. The Mill Arts and Events Centre, where the introduction of leisure-based uses will be encouraged and supported.

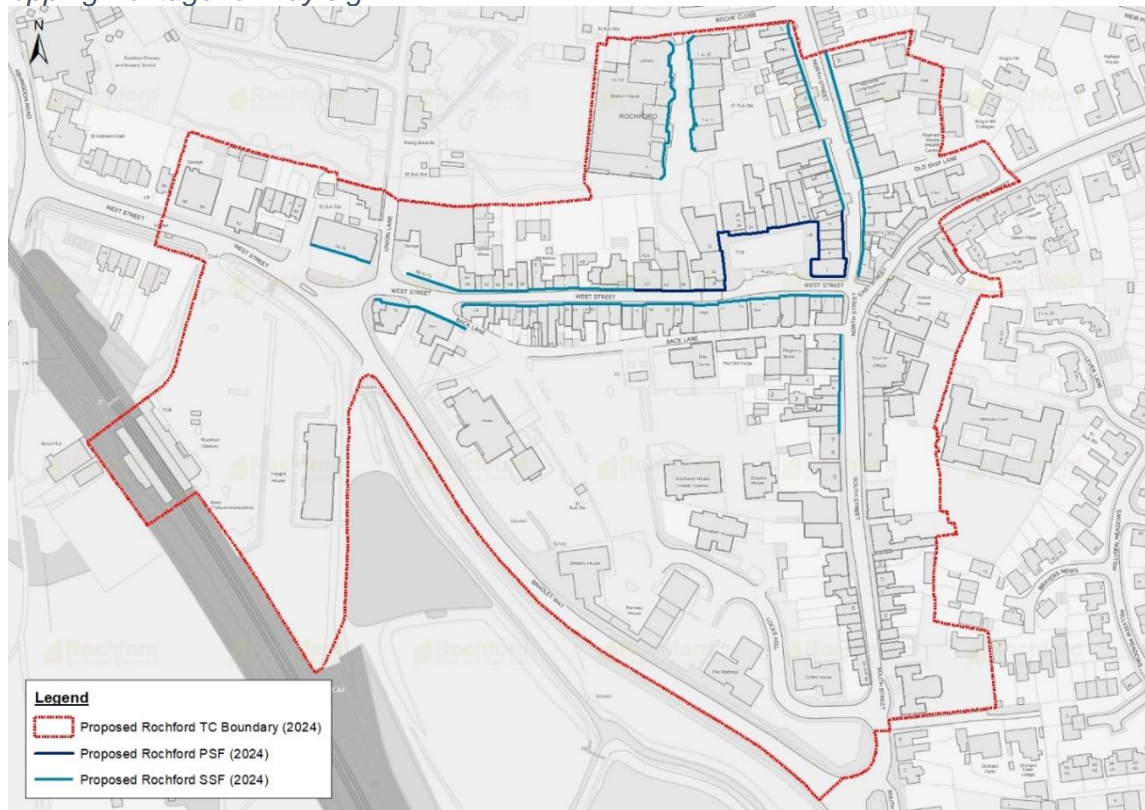
Figure 5: Proposed opportunity sites in Rayleigh.



Rochford Town Centre Recommendations

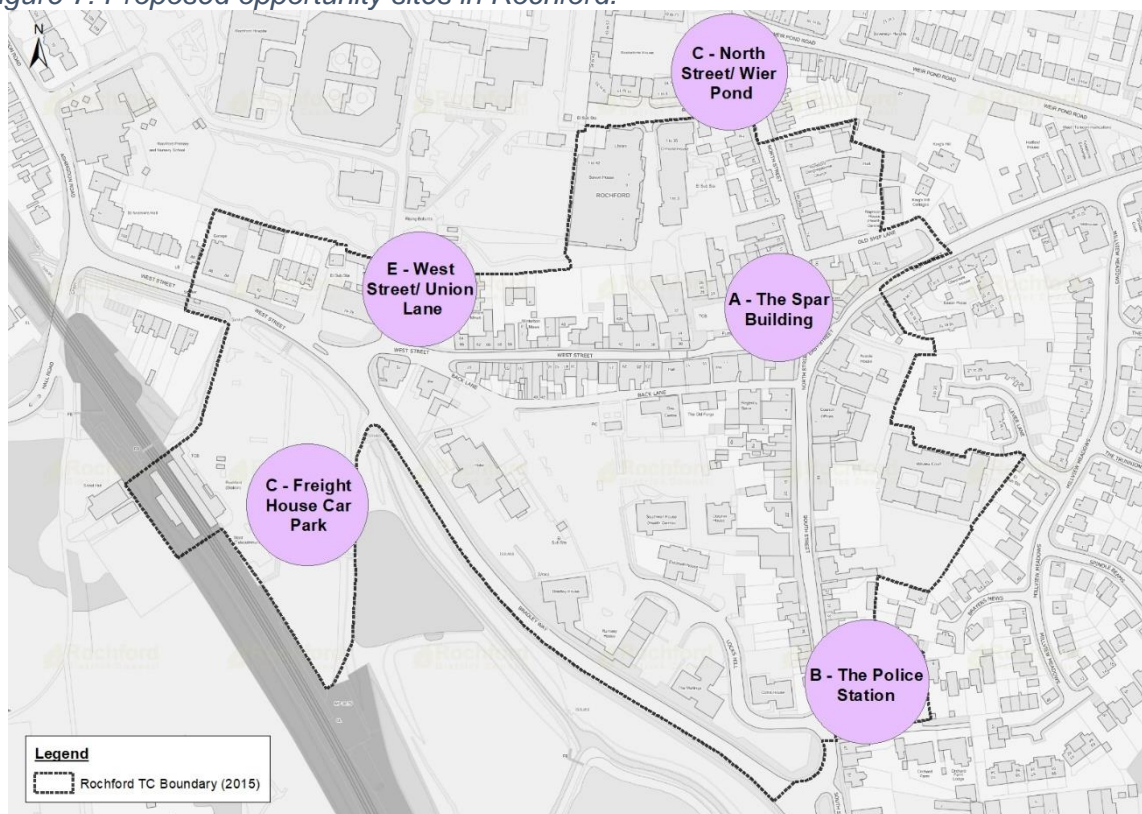
- 1.43 **Amend the Rochford town centre boundary, primary shopping frontage and secondary shopping frontage** (see, Figure 6 for details. Section 5 of the TCHC report provides further information regarding these amendments)

Figure 6: Proposed town centre boundary, primary shopping frontage and secondary shopping frontage for Rayleigh.



- 1.44 **Reduce town centre vacancy.** Prominent vacant premises need to be brought back into use, ideally securing an active commercial frontage at ground floor level.
- 1.45 **Create a more vibrant and attractive Market Square,** with public realm improvements and the encouragement of additional restaurant and café uses.
- 1.46 **Improve public realm** through the addition of safe crossing points, street trees and new planting/greenery and new cycling and pedestrian routes to connect the centre to surrounding residential and employment areas.
- 1.47 **Support proposals which advance the development of identified opportunity sites in Rochford Town Centre** (see, Figure 7). This includes:
  - A. The Spar Building, with potential for a mixed-use occupancy redevelopment including Class E use on the ground floor with offices or residential on upper floors.
  - B. The Former Police station on South Street, where the reuse of conversion of the vacant site for community facilities or residential use would be supported.
  - C. The car park adjacent to the Freight House, where opportunities to explore intensification of use could be explored.
  - D. North Street/ Weir Pond Road Junction, which presents opportunities for commercial development – particularly on a vacant plot.
  - E. West Street/ Union Lane Junction, where mixed-use redevelopment will be supported.

Figure 7: Proposed opportunity sites in Rochford.



#### Hockley Town Centre Recommendations

- 1.48 **Retain the Hockley town centre boundary, primary shopping frontage and secondary shopping frontage.**
- 1.49 **Enhance the public realm alongside junction improvements:** introducing additional safe crossing points and exploring opportunities to enhance the pedestrian friendliness and expand the public realm of the town centre.
- 1.50 **Develop new pedestrian routes** includes the creation and enhance of routes linking Hockley Railway Station, Eldon Way Industrial Estate, Foundry Business Park, and Hockley Town Centre.
- 1.51 **Support proposals which advance the development of identified opportunity sites in Hockley Town Centre** (see, Figure 8). This includes:
  - A. Eldon Way Opportunity Area, which presents medium-long term for mixed-use development, improved public realm and enhanced pedestrian linkages to support additional employment, retail, residential and leisure opportunities.





**6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 The TCHC was completed in-house, within agreed budgets and resources.

**7.0 ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 There are no economic implications arising from this report

**8.0 EQUALITY & HEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no direct equality and health implications arising from this report.

**9.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no direct environmental or climate implications arising from this report.

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**APPENDICES**

Appendix A – Town Centre Health Checks (TCHC) 2023/24

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

**SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

None