



How can we make the High Street better and bring the history and heritage back to life?

Initial findings and recommendations from Community Consultation Workshops

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The following is a summary of discussions and recommendations from the continued consultation work by GJG Consultancy looking to advise and develop a community engagement framework for the Medway High Street Heritage Action Zone.

GJG Consultancy, supported by evaluation and research specialists Ruth Melville Research (RMR), are working with Medway Council to develop community engagement in the High Street Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) scheme running from Sun Pier to Star Hill. This scheme is backed by Historic England funding, and aims to help with the recovery of local high streets, from regenerating historic buildings to helping to engage local communities through art and cultural projects.

### What is the High Street Heritage Action Zone?

The HSHAZ programme is using investment, in physical improvements and cultural activities in historic High Streets, as a tool for improving the social, cultural, and economic outcomes of the area and to regenerate struggling High Streets. It is the opinion of Historic England that a successful, vibrant high street acts as the focus of, not only local commerce, but also the local community.

They are one of the few places where people from all backgrounds can meet and engage with each other.

However, we know from both news reports, and the evidence of our own eyes, that high streets were facing many challenges prior to Covid-19 and that these have only be exacerbated by lockdowns and social distancing laws. Without intervention to adapt to these challenges High Streets will continue to decline. The HSHAZ programme has three investment objectives that shape all activities to be carried out as part of the programme:

- Changing perceptions of heritage and high streets.
- Supporting sustainable economic and cultural growth on and around high streets.
- Restoring and enhancing local historic character.

Further information on the HSHAZ programme can be found on the Historic England website <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/heritage-action-zones/regenerating-historic-high-streets/faqs>

## Open space

On the 24th October 2020 GJG hosted an Open Space conversation with some of the community directly impacted by the HSHAZ.

Forced to be online due to the restrictions in place for Covid-19, almost 60 people turned up to take part in the online Open Space workshop. The overarching question for the morning was “How can we make the High Street better and bring the history and heritage back to life?”<sup>1</sup>

The online Open Space session was hosted on Zoom as an opportunity for early engagement in the HSHAZ. The session was designed for wider and less formally linked parts of the community, including more engaged members of the public, to engage in the theme setting for the HSHAZ and to explore the themes where greater community engagement might be needed. The workshop used Open Space Technology (OST)<sup>2</sup>.

GJG Consultancy used the notes and conversations from the October Open Space to help develop a “hierarchy of needs” that can both be addressed through the HSHAZ steering group and inform future community consultation. The Open Space also created rich material to inform the setting up of a new Cultural Consortium and helped define the themes for a cultural programme. This has already been demonstrated in the selection criteria for a series of micro-grants selected by the consortium on behalf of Medway Council being drawn from key areas of concern raised in the Open Space conversations.

In addition to the cultural consortium, the Open Space event identified a series of other themes where further consultation can inform and develop the project.

GJG set up working groups for these themes.

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<sup>1</sup> Full report available: [https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/5505/hshaz\\_open\\_space\\_report\\_13](https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/5505/hshaz_open_space_report_13)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/about-open-space-technology>

## Working Groups

Phase 2 of the community engagement has involved the development of a series of working groups, exploring those ideas raised at the Open Space, understanding how it might feed into and develop the HSHAZ action plan and where appropriate exploring what a future life could be for continued engagement with the group.

The group themes were identified both as areas of concern or possible contention for the community as well as those areas that could best be covered by the HSHAZ work-plan and could beneficially support the develop of this work.

The key areas identified for further consultation were the naming of the project, the character of the area, access issues for the area and the development of spaces and usage of spaces on the High Street.

Four groups were set up with the following main areas for discussion. Due to covid restrictions all groups were held online. Although online consultation can have some positive impact on increasing and broadening engagement opportunities it also restricts and denies access to others. All future consultation should look to provide opportunities both face to face and retaining the genuine accessibility benefits created through online consultation.

Group 1: Naming the project Thursday 21 January 9:30am

Naming of the project, and wider conversation around branding for the High Street area.

Group 2: Spaces Monday 25 January 14:00

What spaces do we need for culture, community, learning, making and more?

Group 3: Keeping the character Tuesday 26 January 09:30am

How do we develop regeneration without negative impacts of gentrification? What are the characteristics we need to protect?

Group 4: Access and transport Tuesday 2 February 10:00am

Looking at the river, roads and cycling as well as public transport and parking. What do we need?

A fifth meeting was set up for the evening of 11 February for those unable to attend the other meetings and to feed into the ongoing consultation.

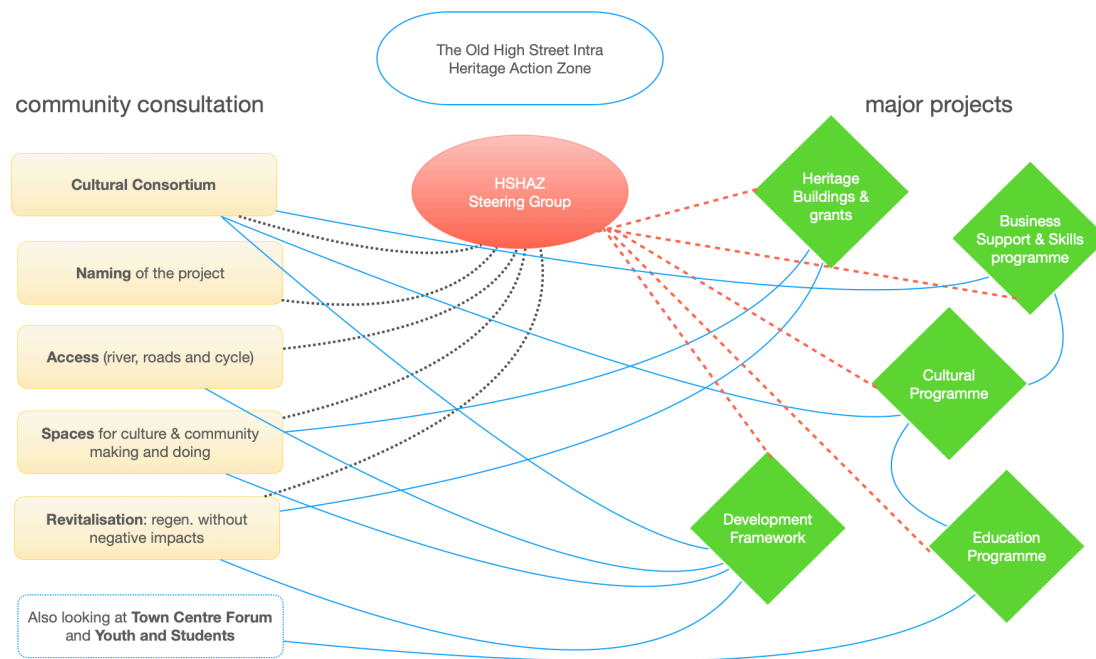


Figure 1: Diagram showing community consultation groups and their possible relationship with the HSHAZ steering group and major project streams identified in the HSHAZ work plan.

## Town Centre Forum

A number of issues around day-to-day management of the area, including the cleaning of streets and refuse collection, were grouped together post the Open Space under the desire from business owners and residents to create a Town Centre Forum specifically for this area. Medway Council have explored this idea and currently feel there is insufficient resource available to support such a forum with a Forum for both Rochester and Chatham already in existence to discuss some of these issues.

## Naming Workshop

The naming workshop<sup>3</sup> looked to explore the clear anxiety that arose in the open space around the following concerns: that there had already been projects in Intra and this would just be another with a 'fancy' name and no legacy; that a name was to be imposed onto the area; that any name given would not reflect the history of the area; and a sense that how the area becomes known would be up to those who came and what they found.

The workshop agreed to focus on looking to advise the HSHAZ steering group on naming the project whilst addressing those concerns.

The workshop format after a short context briefing looked at questions in small groups in advance of sharing thoughts to the wider group. The workshop looked at how the area is known currently - the many names known to participants. It then looked at how participants would describe the area now and then what their aspirations were for the area.

The area has many names. Some depict the area's history including: Eastgate Without, The Old Lanes, Old Town Area, Sun Pier to Star Hill Conservation Area. Others look at the area's geography such as: The road in-between, the bit between Chatham and Rochester, Chatham High Street, Rochester High Street Lower Road near New Road, Intra Riverside. Alternatively, names looked at the character or feel of the area: Curry Canyon, The Red Light Area, The Gay Centre, and Crackhead High Street.

The workshops discussed how they would describe the area now. The summary of this discussion was the area had: wasted potential, was a drive through (something that is picked up in the access workshop), that there are strong independent businesses, a diverse community, but that the area can be seen as dark and unattractive.

In contrast, when looking at the aspirations for the area, the summary of the discussion: sees the place as a location for food & drink and a strong night life; with independent business, alongside a strong creative and arts scene, the area has a

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<sup>3</sup> Unedited workshop notes can be found on the online whiteboard [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_lXr7dXI=](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_lXr7dXI=/)

village, with hidden treasures, all of which make the area a destination and different to other offers in Rochester or Chatham.

The workshop examined potential audiences for the project, these included: residents, local visitors, visitors from outside Medway, local businesses, and future generations. It was agreed that we were looking for a name for the project not the area as a whole.

The workshop looked at all the names and ideas developed in the workshop. Chatham Intra, Chatham High Street, Rochester High Street had strong negative responses from the workshop attendees. Names such as The Link, Intra Village, Waterside Village and Intra Riverside were seen as good names to describe parts of the area but did not substantially cover the character of all of the HSHAZ project area. The chosen name was a merging of two ideas.

The group felt strongly the project should be called - **The Old High Street Intra** Heritage Action Zone.

The advised next steps are that the HSHAZ steering group agree and adopt project name The Old High Street Intra Heritage Action Zone and work to develop branding and promotion for the project using this name.

## Access Workshop

The access workshop<sup>4</sup> looks to pick up on a number of concerns raised both in the Cultural Consortium and in the Open Space meeting around public access to area. The workshop explored the physical access concerns around footpaths, cycleways, access to and from the river, as well as issues of parking and the road.

The workshop began looking at current uses of the High Street and the hSHAZ area. These included the area as a through route either in terms of walking through, the 145 bus route, or cycling or driving through. Some sail past on the river, though it is not ideal for small craft mooring. It is now the only access to the river from a public pier. There is some fishing activity. The area was also used for leisure activities including dog walking, outside gym, a running route, or going for a stroll/wander around. This had increased during the pandemic. Others used the area for bespoke shopping, access to religious buildings, access to health care such as the dentist, as well as access to arts events. Finally, the street was used for purchasing food, office staff at lunch alongside evening food and drink offers.

The workshop explored what was perceived as the current challenges for access on the High Street. These included:

- Access route Rochester to Chatham (and back): rat run, heavy traffic very narrow road, feels unsafe to walk and cycle, narrow pavements
- Anti-social parking: blocks access, increases congestion, large vehicles are dangerous
- Sun Pier only non-private pier on river - can lead to congestion
- Public realm does not look nice
- No dedicated parking, specific challenges for business to load/unload
- Need for access for taxis and cars for vulnerable and other service users
- Parking on roadside for residents leads to no parking for visitors

The workshops then looked to discuss the potential opportunities that could be included as plans for the High Street Heritage Action Zone to develop.

In summary the discussion included: looking to widen pavements for safety of pedestrians and the possible calming of traffic; to explore the potential of making the

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High Street a one way street(or one way at certain times of day or night); investigating cycle lanes and/or other traffic calming measures; to look at a greener feel to the area and more safe feeling, clearly highlighting road crossings, improving lighting throughout and better signage, particularly to highlight access to the river. The workshop also discussed the need to increase access to river, the possibility of the new coastal path in supporting this, alongside secure cycle storage. The group discussed the potential for increasing dedicated parking areas and making certain areas short stay only. It was agreed that overall there was a need to develop long term strategy with the neighbourhood plan to include environmental impact as well.

The next steps identified to continue the discuss around access were as follows:

- For the HSHAZ steering group to identify which of these challenges and opportunities can be covered by the programme, specifically looking at the cultural programme and the development framework work.
- For officers from Medway Council to identify any plans or schemes that can help develop opportunities through highways, river access, piers etc.
- To map and identify existing challenges & opportunities for future work.
- To look locally for small, short term and possible temporary improvements and to overall investigate the possibilities of a neighbourhood plan for the area.

## Spaces workshop

During the Open Space consultation<sup>5</sup> a number of individuals wished to discuss the absence of specific types of spaces on the High Street and the possibilities that the HSHAZ programme might offer in addressing these gaps.

The workshop began by discussing the wide context of desired spaces within the HSHAZ project area. The summary of this discussion highlighted a number of different types of spaces required that the workshop attendees did not feel were currently available:

- spaces that access the river (Sun Pier is now the only public access to boats on the Medway in the Chatham and Rochester area.)
- spaces for community groups to meet
- large indoor spaces
- learning spaces
- meeting / bump into people / communal spaces
- outdoor spaces for markets / events / festivals (could be the road)
- arts and craft spaces
- co-working spaces
- creative workspaces

The workshop continued with a discussion around the perceived challenges for the spaces required. The discussion looked at the need for spaces: to feel inclusive and be seen to encourage a diverse usage; that buildings needed to look and be perceived as good quality (the area and buildings must look good); that the spaces need to have environmental sustainability; and equally important that they be financially sustainable

The identified next steps for this community consultation are as follows.

Group is to meet again to support the appointed architects on an options appraisal for the potential uses of 351 High Street, Rochester. The group will also be available to support an options appraisal for the Waterworks/Mortuary to be carried out later this year. The group is an open group and it is suggested that the opportunity to engage in these consultations be spread more widely than the group, but the group can provide a core of interested parties.

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<sup>5</sup> Unedited workshop notes can be found on the online whiteboard [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_lXr7dXI=/](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_lXr7dXI=/)

The HSHAZ Steering group should look to identify where the HSHAZ project can pilot / support ideas e.g. cultural programs to support pop-ups and festival/art events as well as identify needs within new development framework. The membership of this group will be passed to the HSHAZ project officer for continued consultation on this theme throughout the programme of work.

## Character Workshop - Revitalisation / Gentrification

One of the key concerns that emerged from the Open Space was anxiety that regeneration or redevelopment of the HSHAZ area could lead to a loss of character for the area through generic redevelopment that was not specific to the history or past of the area. There was also concern around gentrification making the area unaffordable for current communities and businesses. To support the articulation of these concerns and to help inform the development framework strand of the HSHAZ project a workshop<sup>6</sup> was held to identify the current understanding of the character of the area and desired enhancements.

The workshop looked at, if the HSHAZ project is a success, what does the High Street feel like. The aspiration, what was hoped it might feel like, was discussed and can be summarised as being: a village feel or a sense of community; it should be in touch with its heritage and its unique industrial past (heritage but not the same as the Rochester heritage); and if the project had succeeded, where possible buildings would be repurposed and not new built. The street would be an attraction for unique businesses and not chain pubs and restaurants and access to the river would be increased and opened up, specifically as it is currently the only place to get on the river. There would be a vibrant nightlife.

The area would be seen as:

welcoming, thriving, active, walkable, tidy, safe, artistic, occupied, alternative

To understand, and explore priorities, the workshop looked at the top five things that should be retained in the HSHAZ area. The top five selected were:

1. historic buildings
2. communities that currently live/work there
3. sense of creative culture
4. independent shops, cafes and other businesses
5. warehouses and alleyways - the “modest historical architecture”

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The workshop also looked to identify the top five things that should be added to the area that would enhance and enrich the existing character. The top five things selected were

1. re-use of the existing first, with any new build to be sympathetic in scale and architecture and celebrate or highlight the past
2. more green spaces
3. increase access to the river
4. make the road a useable space for not just cars (see note from access workshop)
5. become a destination (clusters of similar things increased the draw e.g. independent shops, night life etc.)

The next steps for this consultation will be for the findings from this first consultation to feed into the early work emerging around the development framework. The group could continue to meet to act as a, or one of the, focus group(s) for consultation through the development framework work.

Medway officers should consider the ideas from the group to feed into planning for other areas of the HSHAZ project including (training, education and cultural programme).

The development of a local plan would be a useful output for some of the thinking from this workshop.

Follow up meetings and next steps:

A social value approach.

The High Street, along with many others, has been adversely impacted both socially and economically by the pandemic. As The High Street recovers it could do so in a way that directly addresses these social and economic challenges. A continued community consultation and social value approach could ensure that Intra residents are placed at the heart of the recovery and that building back is better for residents and local business owners rather than reverting to business as usual. Social value is a way of describing the benefits to society from the delivery of goods and services, it includes environmental, economic, or social benefits which, when experienced by people, can create added well-being and a better quality of life.

The HSHAZ programme is by its nature limited in scope, timeframe and budget to address all the concerns arising from the initial community consultation. The HSHAZ can address or begin to address a number of issues as discussed in the workshop write-ups above and suggested in this report. However, a longer timeframe in which to contextualise the HSHAZ work could be considered as valuable. Seeing the HSHAZ not as a discreet programme in itself but rather as one of the mechanisms at the disposal of Medway Council and the community to develop the area over an ongoing timeframe.

As there is currently no capacity for a town centre forum group it might be valuable to explore a local neighbourhood plan<sup>7</sup> as the longterm mechanism to contextualise the work of the HSHAZ and provide a framework for the legacy. A neighbourhood forum needed to develop a local neighbourhood plan might best be started through amalgamating the spaces and access workshop participants, with representation from identified missing community groups.

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<sup>7</sup> A neighbourhood plan is a community led framework for guiding future development, regeneration and conservation of an area. This step of planning policy was introduced in the Localism Act in 2011.

Finally, there was a considerable amount of energy and ambition identified within the consultation workshop, both from local community groups and residents alongside local business. Such community enthusiasm could be facilitated by the HSHAZ programme of work to test and try small pilots and experiments that are locally and informally driven. Ideas have included: micro gardens, yarn bombing, Park In Bay Day. A small grant programme as demonstrated by the cultural consortium might enable these ideas to be tested at low risk.