

1. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

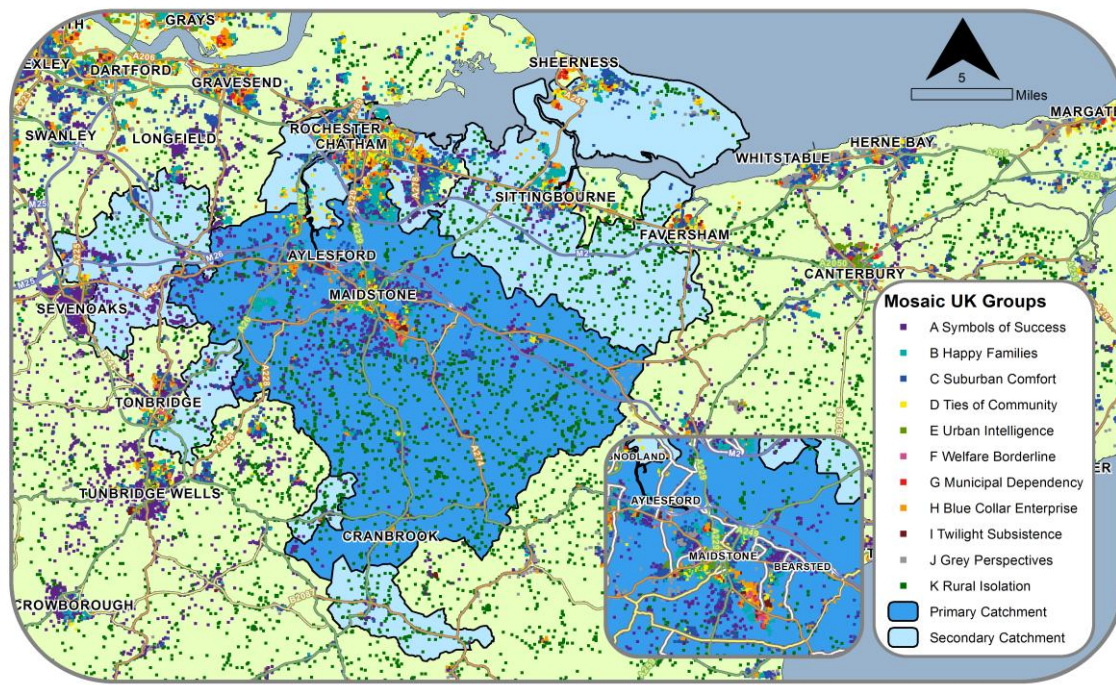
The report's findings and recommendations have been made in terms of the five key local factors: catchment, competition, choice, convenience and character that determine the role and performance of a town centre and the actions that are appropriate to enable it to compete more effectively (originally identified in the BCSC *Smaller Towns Report*, 2004). The majority of our recommendations, particularly for new facilities, have come from Maidstone's own residents, managers and operators through our surveys and consultation. Others reflect best practice from our knowledge and research in other town centres in the UK and overseas.

In each section the key issues are outlined and our recommendations are shown in a shaded box.

1.1 Catchment and Competition

The social and economic position of the geographical area the town serves, the extent of competition from other centres and the ability of the centre to attract public and private investment.

Figure 1.1 Experian Mosaic catchment analysis (see section 3.3.6 for full page version)



- Experian's Where Britain Shops Survey indicates Maidstone has a primary shopping catchment (50% of all shoppers) as shown in dark blue and a secondary catchment (75% of all shoppers) as shown in light blue. Maidstone has a wide, affluent, family oriented shopping catchment (see section 3.3.6) that is not particularly well served by the current night time economy offer. Focus groups discussions with professionals over 40 showed the majority chose to pursue evening entertainment in locations other than Maidstone (see section 3.2.1), while parents characterised the town's restaurants as not catering to families (see section 4.2.1).
- Maidstone town centre's night time businesses turnover over more than £75,000,000 and directly provide 1,500 jobs (see section 3.3.2).
- Despite closure of a number of bars and restaurants, business confidence in Maidstone's night time economy appears to be high. A significant number of refurbishments are in progress, or planned, and one major new planning application has been approved.
- Maidstone's night time economy faces competition from:
 - Bluewater – 25minutes away by car, providing cinemas and late night shopping until 10.00pm every evening, with free parking.
 - Tunbridge Wells and Canterbury – large theatres, specialist retail and non-chain restaurants
 - Rural villages West Malling, Bearstead and Staplehurst – pubs with restaurants.
 - London's West End – shopping, theatre and clubs.
- In contrast the town punches well above its weight as the 'nightclubbing capital of Kent' (see section 3.3.6) attracting people from Chatham, Medway, Orpington, Dartford and Bexley who might also go to London, Brighton or even further afield.

Recommendations / Action Points

1. Overall the night time economy offer in Maidstone needs to be expanded to appeal to its older, more affluent and family oriented catchment without destroying its current USP (unique selling proposition) as the nightclubbing capital of Kent. How this can be achieved is detailed below under the headings of choice, convenience and character.
2. Experian have identified a number of wealthy sub regional towns and cities that are the 'best match' to Maidstone (see section 3.3.6). Five of these: Ipswich, Chelmsford, Lincoln, Peterborough and Gloucester are a particularly close match demographically. They are likely to experience similar problems to Maidstone and may have found transferable solutions. It would be beneficial to forge links and even set up a network with these towns to share information, good practice and experiences.
3. Similarly, the town should look to build links and possibly set up a network with other places with significant nightclub circuits like London, Portsmouth, Bournemouth and Bristol.

1.2 Choice

The reasons people use the town centre, the range and quality of the retail, entertainment, residential, educational, cultural and tourism facilities available in the town centre.

1.2.1 Maidstone's night time economy businesses

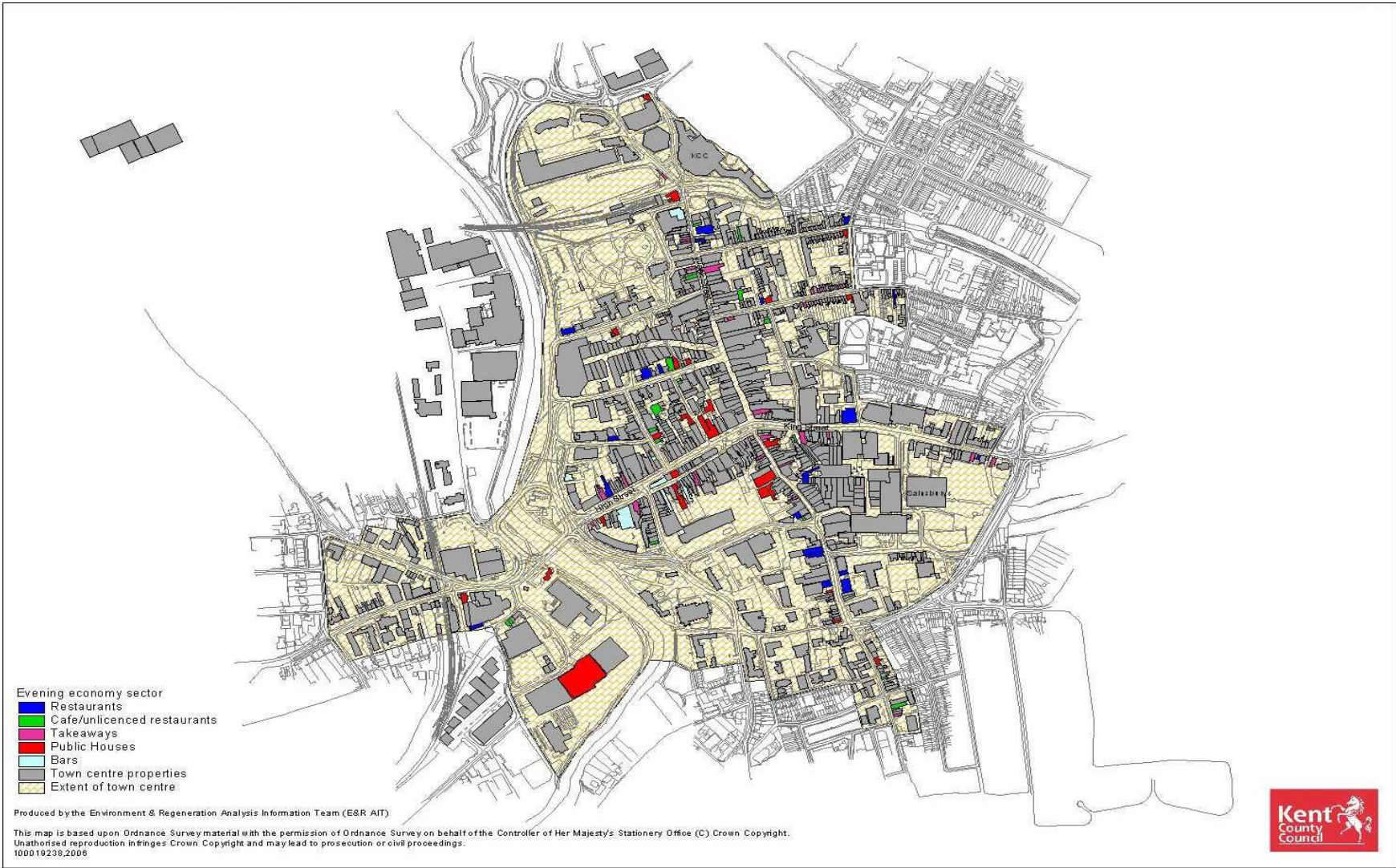
Maidstone's night time economy businesses can be broadly categorised as:

- **Night clubs** - Maidstone has three true nightclubs providing large venues for late night drinking and dancing: The Loft, Strawberry Moons and Ikon. There are a number of other clubs that charge entry and /or provide music and DJs including the River Bar, Jumpin' Jaks, Chicago Rock Café and Roadhouse.
- **Bars** - there are wine bars and specialist bars like The Ashes (a sports bar) and a number of bars that blur the boundaries with clubs like ME1, Ethos and Mu Mu's.
- **Pubs** - these divide into traditional town centre pubs, some of which provide live music, and large format pubs like The Society Rooms and The Muggleton (both owned by JD Wetherspoon) that trade particularly on price.
- **Restaurants** - there has been a significant growth in restaurants over the past four years particularly in Earl Street. There are now 28 restaurants, about half of these are national chains like Pizza Hut and Zizzi.
- **Takeaways** - there are a large number of takeaways ranging from international chains like KFC and McDonalds to very small establishments on the periphery of the town centre.
- **Theatre** - there is one small theatre the Hazlitt (capacity 350) and an associated venue the Exchange that can be used as a flat floor or with tiered seating. The theatre is subsidised by the Council and puts on a mixed but safe selection of amateur and professional shows.
- **Museum and Art Gallery** - this currently closes at 5.30pm but facilities are being upgraded so the Brenchley Rooms can be used for events (including night time use).
- **Cinema** - there is an eight screen multiplex in the Lockmeadow complex.

Beyond these there is a well-attended bowling alley and a successful bingo club in the old cinema. A comedy club in Union Street has not been successful and is currently up for sale. There are only two small hotels in the town centre

Kent County Council has mapped the night time economy of Maidstone as part of the county-wide Health Check as follows.

Figure 1.2 Maidstone town centre evening economy sector



There are four basic strategy options open to Maidstone to further develop the town's night time economy (discussed in more detail in section 2 strategies and implementation). In order (lowest first) of risk and ease of delivery these are:

1. Market penetration - expanding the existing night time economy.
2. Market segmentation and extension - attracting new users to the existing town centre at night.
3. Product development - developing alternatives to the pub and club venues for the young people that currently dominate the town centre at night.
4. Diversification - developing a new product for a new market, catering to a wider consumer base and completely new uses.

1.2.2 Expanding the existing night time economy facilities

Concentration of pubs and night clubs

- Currently pubs and nightclubs are concentrated in Bank Street, Lockmeadow, Gabriel's Hill and Market Buildings / Rose Yard (see section 1.2.1).
- This means police resources can be targeted on these areas and other areas can be developed to appeal to different customers, like restaurants in Earl Street (see section 3.2.3).

Recommendations / Action Points

4. When drafting the next licensing policy in 2007 the question of whether Maidstone has reached saturation on MVVD (mass volume vertical drinking) establishments will need to be addressed. While this study has identified that the evening economy is well supplied in Maidstone saturation has not been reached.
5. It may be preferable for Planning to identify specific areas, like Earl Street, where development of MVVD establishments would not be permitted.

Pubs and Bars

- Focus groups identified Maidstone as offering primarily down-market bars over-filled with young drinkers (see section 4.2.1).
- Focus groups also raised concerns about the general hygiene in venues, particularly the toilets (see section 3.2.1).

Recommendations / Action Points

6. Operators should be made aware of these concerns and the opportunity to develop alternative venues that are less frenetic where people can socialise with friends.
7. There is an opportunity to adopt multi-agency visits to venues to ensure they are well managed and for the Licensing department to introduce an accreditation scheme for pubs, bars and clubs similar to the 'Best Bar None' scheme to raise standards (see section 4.4.2).

Nightclubs

- There is a feeling, picked up amongst the younger focus groups, that the night clubs in Maidstone have not moved on, they offer large venues with one type of music when clubs elsewhere have diversified into providing a number of different rooms offering different music and atmospheres (see section 4.2.3).

Recommendations / Action Points

8. Ikon and Chicago Rock Café are having refits this year that should enable them to regain lost ground. Other operators could be made aware of this criticism.

1.2.3 Attracting new users to the town centre at night**Quality restaurants**

- Most of the restaurants in the town centre are chains. Although Maidstone is reasonably well supplied with ethnic restaurants (Indian / Chinese / Mexican) it lacks more formal and up market 'white table linen' dining. 41% of questionnaire respondents identified that they wanted to see better quality restaurants, one of the highest ranked wishes (see section 3.3.6).
- Participants in focus groups (of all ages), town centre businesses and other stakeholders also put forward the view that the town needs more restaurants and cafes to provide sufficient variety for people to use the town centre regularly (see section 4.2). This view was backed up by 34% of questionnaire respondents wanting a wider range of restaurants (see section 3.3.6).

Recommendations / Action Points

9. Analysis by Experian (see section 3.3.6) has identified higher quality chain restaurants like Bombay Brasserie and Café Rouge that closely match Maidstone's catchment and are found in benchmark towns comparable to Maidstone. Economic Development should take a proactive approach contacting these chains to see if they would consider opening an outlet in the town – this is how shopping centre owners would use the same information.
10. Beyond this the council could work to promote the opportunities for independent restaurants. Extending the remit of the Art at the Centre project to work with Economic Development is probably the best vehicle for this.

Developing the twilight economy - shopping and markets

- The number of voids, charity shops and discount (pound) shops and low levels of stock intensity indicate that the town is currently in a period of transition, reflecting the sudden expansion of retail space as a result of Fremlin Walk opening in 2005. A separate retail capacity study is in production.¹
- This under trading is compounded by the fact that late night shopping (Thursday to 8.00pm) is a non-event. The shops in Fremlin Walk open but late opening in the rest of the town is patchy (see section 3.3.1). Focus group participants were not even certain the town centre shops opened late (see section 4.2.3).



Late night shopping in Fremlin Walk – three people shopping

¹ See Maidstone Retail Capacity Study Sept 2007

- Focus groups identified shopping in Maidstone as not on par with nearby towns, singling out the Chequers Centre as depressing and run-down (see section 4.2.3). They suggested the lack of interesting independent shops and the opportunity to wander and window shop was a limitation of the night time economy.
- The household questionnaire identified interest in designer / craft shops that would make the centre more interesting to visit (see section 4.3.3).
- Maidstone lacks a town centre market which could add to the evening economy e.g. on late night shopping days.

Recommendations / Action Points

11. All retailers throughout the town centre need to be encouraged to open late and a package of promotions and events is needed to support participation. Refurbishment of the Chequers Centre might provide the opportunity to make late night opening a requirement of leases.
12. The Borough could consider fostering an afternoon / evening market as an innovative development not found in neighbouring towns.
13. The Art at the Centre project is currently concentrating on creating and artists' network and organising events and publications. It is also working with representatives from retailers in Market Buildings, Earl Street, Pudding Lane and Rose Yard. This provides the best mechanism to understand the needs of independent retailers in Maidstone and how the sector can be supported and encouraged.

1.2.4 Developing alternatives to the pub and club venues for young (and older) people

Cafés

- Cafés currently close in the early evening (see section 3.3.1). Such places serve the needs of a range of ages who want somewhere to meet or relax without having to go to a pub or youth dominated bar.
- The household questionnaire identified significant interest in seeing more non-alcoholic meeting places like evening coffee bars (see section 3.3.1).
- The Maidstone Youth Forum have identified a clear need for a teenage activity centre and a funding proposal has been made to establish an innovative 'youth café'. If this is not successful then it may be possible for the council to work with the private sector to deliver this facility (see section 4.4.2).

Recommendations / Action Points

14. Cafés and other relevant operators should be made aware of this currently unmet demand. Such places could serve alcohol but the need is for a continental style of premise where alcohol is a supplementary rather than a dominant characteristic.

1.2.5 Developing new facilities and attractions to diversify the night time economy and cater to a wider consumer base

Theatre / Concert Hall / Music venue

- There was a strong wish to see a concert hall and a larger theatre in the town centre, cited by 50% and 47% of questionnaire respondents respectively. Scoring the highest of any facility (see section 3.2.1).
- Plans to create a studio space in the Corn Exchange may allow the theatre to put on more adventurous productions but the requirement is for a much bigger venue that can compete with Tunbridge Wells, Canterbury, Dartford and Bromley.
- The council has identified a large development site on the west bank of the river that could accommodate a concert hall and conference facilities.

Recommendations / Action Points

15. In order to appeal better to its catchment Maidstone needs to accomplish a step change in the calibre of attractions the town centre provides. It will be difficult to develop a 'me too' theatre venue that can compete in this already crowded marketplace. In contrast Kent does not have a concert hall / live music venue. Providing a concert hall / music venue would raise the cultural profile of Maidstone, draw in people from a wider catchment and attract a more varied clientele to the town centre at night, breaking down the perception that it is only for young people and drinking. It could enable re-branding of the town in the same way that the Sage has in Gateshead/ Tyneside, albeit on a larger scale.

The River Medway

- There was a consensus in focus groups that the river represents a wasted opportunity for Maidstone and the council is blamed for failing to make the most of the town's riverside setting (see section 3.2.1).
- This was endorsed in the household survey where 46% of respondents said better use of the riverside would encourage them to visit the town centre more often (see section 4.3.1).
- The Council is setting up a steering group Making the Most of the Medway to take forward the Recreation and Community Services Overview Scrutiny Report on opportunities to enhance the riverside and encourage greater use of the river.²
- Light elements, an interactive lighting installation on St Peter's and Maidstone Bridges, is part of the Walk of Art project. It adds interest and a sense of fun but does not improve ambient light levels on the bridges and their surrounds that were persistently described as unsafe in focus groups (see section 3.2.1).

² Making the Most of the River, April 2007

Recommendations / Action Points

16. The Council should examine how to create a riverside outdoor eating area with tables close to the core of the town preferably as part of a wider strategy for making better use of the river. The triangle site on the river adjacent to St Peter's Bridge and the surroundings of Lockmeadow (discussed later) represent the best remaining opportunities to capitalise on the River Medway. The triangle site is likely to be developed as a restaurant, piazza and retail. The Council should ensure that this development provides much desired riverfront facilities for Maidstone.
17. Lighting levels along the riverside should be looked into.

Hotel

- Focus groups and the questionnaire identified the need for a large hotel in the town centre with a bar, entertainment and dining that could provide a different atmosphere (see section 3.2.1). A 4 star quality hotel can attract a mature affluent clientele as day visitors in addition to paying guests.

Recommendations / Action Points

18. The Council have identified that Medway Street car park is needed despite Fremlin Walk opening, but this site could be developed for a hotel provided the parking is retained.

Casino

- Perhaps understandably, a number of operators were in favour of a casino, suggesting that it would bring in a different clientele. However, this was not identified as desirable by many in the household survey (2.5%).
- Maidstone Borough Council recently applied for a small casino but was not successful in the early stages of the selection process.

Health / community centre

- A facility which can improve the vitality of secondary centres is a civic/ community centre providing health and other services. Although fully operational during the day such a centre can remain open into the evening, meeting a wide range of needs. A centre of this type recently developed in Wealdstone, Harrow has been a success and increased footfall in the High Street. That building included a library, healthy living centre, primary care trust health services, youth centre and meeting rooms.
- 21% of respondents to the household survey identified a GP/ health centre as a facility they would like to see in the town centre.

Recommendations / Action Points

19. The Council could explore the possibility of developing a health/ community facility that provides a range of services under one roof, possibly including the youth café discussed earlier.
20. In the short term the Council should review library opening hours and consider late closing for several evenings a week (see also recommendation 46 for museum).

Sports and recreation facilities

- Government Advice Note PPS6 makes specific reference to the contribution such facilities can make to town centre vitality and they generate strong evening demand. Maidstone town centre appears to lack much of a sports/ recreation offer which would appeal to the after work market. Although the town centre does have two private gyms (currently under-subscribed) it lacks a major sports/leisure attraction like a swimming pool.

Recommendations / Action Points

21. As suggested above with regard to sports and recreation facilities the Borough should consider the possibility of attracting or developing a larger scale sports / recreation facility in the town centre to complement the existing health / fitness centres. Finding a site would be difficult and The effect on Mote Park facilities would need to be considered.

Residential development

- Town centre living is increasing with about 850 new apartments and accommodation above shops planned, under construction or recently completed. These new residents are likely to create new demand for the night time economy.
- However, in the household survey 39% of respondents stated they had suffered disturbance by noise from the night time economy, 8% had experienced vandalism and damage and 17% had experienced public urination and vomiting.

Recommendations / Action Points

22. If residents being disturbed by noise and antisocial behaviour from the night time economy becomes a significant issue the Council might consider introducing the internet based Community Alert Scheme developed by UCL CASA that allows householders to record on line where and when problems such as petty crime and antisocial behaviour occur, enabling the police and other managers to develop an accurate picture of the problem and allocate resources accordingly.

23. Planning policy guidelines for new town centre residential development should ensure the layout of the development is designed to prevent people being over-looked, minimise disturbance from deliveries and provide adequate soundproofing. While developers of mixed-use schemes should be encouraged to use leases to control, for example, waste collections, how bottles are dealt with and general noise levels.

Education

- The lack of a substantial student population was identified by businesses as a limitation on further growth of the night time economy. This was both because students provide a significant element of the night time economy spend, increasing viability by contributing to a more even patronage during the week (venues reported sales in Maidstone are significantly higher during holidays than in term time) and because they provide the majority of the part-time labour employed in the night time economy.
- Maidstone has Higher Education Institutes and UCCA will have University status in 2008.

Recommendations / Action Points

24. Developing the university and expanding the student population a University is a long-term goal commensurate with the town's ambitions as the regional capital.

Events

- Focus groups consistently identified the street entertainments seen in Covent Garden as a major draw (see section 3.2.3).
- Public events/ family / street entertainment were the fifth most sought after attraction in the questionnaire and the third most sought after by the mid aged group (30-39) who have most children (see section 3.2.1).
- The River Festival gives rise to mixed responses from 'the best thing to happen in Maidstone' to 'a major source of trouble' (see section 3.2.3. The police view is that problems associated with the festival are historic and they are now scaling back their presence at the event.

Recommendations / Action Points

25. There is an opportunity to licence street entertainers, particularly in the evening (see section 4.4.2).
26. While problems previously associated with the River Festival have been resolved there remains work to be done to convince people that it has changed and everyone can feel safe.
27. The Tour de France is an opportunity to attract new people to the town centre and change any negative perceptions.

1.3 Convenience

The price people have to pay in terms of time, money and hassle to use the town centre's services and facilities.

1.3.1 Parking

- The lack of free, safe, on-street parking and the cost and inconvenient opening hours of the multi-storey car parks was identified in focus groups (see section 3.2.1) and by businesses (see section 3.2.2) as a major deterrent to using the town centre at night.
- Fremlin Walk car park closes at 11.30pm, presenting problems for some dining in Earl Street. The Chequers Centre closes at 7.30pm. While Lockmeadow is free from 6.30pm to 8.00am, and other short stay car parks charge £1.00 for parking between these times, it is inconvenient, and unsafe, for anyone who has drunk a lot the previous night to have to move their car by that time (see section 3.2.4). The focus groups relayed stories about wardens being overly eager just before 6.30 pm and after 8.00am.
- The household questionnaire indicates that 66% of respondents travelled to town by car at night, illustrating how significant this issue is (see section 3.2.1).
- A lack of coach parking was identified by operators (see section 3.2.2).

Recommendations / Action Points

28. The Council needs to reconcile parking revenue with the desire to support the night time economy. This is particularly significant in relation to parking fines that bring with them the distinct possibility that ticketed drivers will decide to avoid Maidstone at night.

The Council should introduce a parking policy to support the night time economy:

- all parking to be free after 6:00 pm, and convenient for overnight use, i.e. for retrieving vehicles in the morning
- street parking permitted within the pedestrianised framework
- off-street parking spaces allocated for coaches

Whilst it is appreciated that car mode does not always sit well with environmental sustainability there is currently no viable public transport alternative and it is preferable to encourage the borough's residents to drive into the town centre at night rather than travel further afield.

1.3.2 Public transport

- Although five evening bus services operate they are very infrequent (see section 3.3.5) and the buses observed in the town centre during the evening were largely empty. Less than 5% of household survey respondents said they came into the town centre at night by bus. While buses may offer some residents a realistic method of getting into the town, they are not generally satisfactory for returning home at the end of the night. Parents discussed

the difficulty of using buses with prams, while young women were reluctant to travel on late buses unaccompanied.

- Taxi provision may have been assessed as adequate but people wait up to an hour for a taxi at night (see section 3.3.5). Queuing for taxis at night is a problem, identified by focus groups, and graphically illustrated by the correlation between crime and taxi ranks/pick up points (see section 3.3.3). Although Licensing Department report that the police no longer consider this a major flash point since the licensing law changed.

Recommendations / Action Points

29. Maidstone needs to develop an innovative approach to getting people home at the end of the night. With a limited population a mixed approach to town centre transport at night is appropriate, responding to different requirements at different times. For the early and mid evening periods buses should be encouraged, while accepting that a night bus service cannot be run commercially, so people will travel by car or taxi in the late evening.

Estimates produced in 2004 indicated that providing an hourly service to five areas from 11.00pm to 3.00am would cost £62,400 annually (see section 3.3.5). Offering a free night bus service for 2-3 days a week (removing the need to handle money late at night) is worth considering. The cost could be split between the 90 or so night time economy businesses in the town centre and would equate to a contribution of c. £14 per business per week, although it would be fairer to allocate costs by rateable value. This could be seen as quid pro quo for the council relinquishing night time parking revenue.

Alternatively, the Council could look at introducing 'taxibuses' where taxis run as registered bus services, either commercially or on contract (see section 3.3.5). Such a service could operate at a premium to conventional bus fares, perhaps with some financial assistance, at least in the inception phase.

30. Taxi rank queues and fights caused by people stealing other's pre-booked taxis needs to be actively policed as part of a wider reassurance exercise discussed below.

1.3.3 Safety and Policing

- Maidstone town centre is not particularly dangerous at night (see sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.3). Violent crime is low but at weekends, after 10.30pm, it is dominated by drunken young people. However, public perception, borne out by the Fear of Crime Survey (see section 3.3.3) and focus groups (see section 4.2.2), is that Maidstone is not a safe place to be at night.
- Although the householder survey indicated actual experience of robbery / violent crime and vehicle theft were low, at 3% and 4% respectively, rowdiness and youths hanging about and fear of crime were identified a major deterrents from visiting the town centre at night (see section 4.3.3).
- Maidstone Youth Forum raised specific concerns about how young people in the town centre feel both harassed and neglected by the police (see section 4.2.6).
- The police, CCTV Operations and Nitenet work together as a proactive partnership identifying and dealing with problems before they become more

serious (see section 3.3.3). However, the public are unaware of how these teams work together and how good the town centre CCTV coverage is. The two improvements householders identified would be most likely to encourage more use of the town centre at night were visible police (63%) and CCTV (48%) (see section 4.3.2).

- There are suggestions that policing can be a bit 'macho', implying they expect trouble, which tends to reinforce the perception that the town is unsafe at night (see sections 3.2.2 and 4.2.6).
- There are crime concentrations in Maidstone in Gabriel's Hill, the bottom of the High Street, Lockmeadow and Week Street but it is probably better to concentrate bars and clubs in these areas so that police resources can also be focused there and other areas can be developed to appeal to different age groups (see section 3.2.3).
- Initiatives are under consideration to introduce voluntary Street Pastors and a medical first response team in the town centre at night and during weekends (see section 3.2.3).
- Focus groups identified, and even joked about, the fact that under age drinking does occur, although this was denied by operators (see section 4.2.2).

Recommendations / Action Points

Changing public perception of safety at night in Maidstone will be a long-term project but the following initiatives are recommended:

31. Introducing reassurance policing in addition to the night time tactical team
 - At least four officers from the policing family walking the streets at night (to 1.00pm Thursday, Friday and Saturday night) dealing particularly with antisocial behaviour (urination, litter etc.), policing taxi ranks and providing a calming presence.
 - Establishing a night time police booth (like the pavilion at Piccadilly Circus illustrated below) to provide an accessible police presence and refuge point. This could involve remodelling the entrance of the Town Hall Information Centre or positioning the Police caravan at the top of the High Street on Friday and Saturday. Although far cheaper and immediately available the latter option would be less approachable and could imply there is a problem. This could be combined with night time cleaning services and first response medical services (see below) to provide a multi-agency centre.
 - The introduction of Street Pastors, currently under consideration, would provide extra eyes on the street and a calming influence, but Street Wardens would be preferable.
 - The need for a first response medical team in the town centre is unclear given that violent crime is rare. It may be better to delay making a decision until information on admissions to A&E relating to the night time economy are available in the summer.
 - A senior police officer should attend the Maidstone Youth Forum in order to understand how their policing concerns can be resolved.
 - Experience elsewhere suggests that serving Fixed Penalty Notices on bar staff who serve under age drinkers is the best way to tackle this problem (see 4.4.2) and Licensing are already implementing this.

32. A PR campaign to redress negative coverage and to get the message out that the town is well managed and that systems are in place to ensure that if people cause trouble they will be caught. This could be achieved through:
- A press launch of the new CCTV centre when it becomes operational, supported with an information pack detailing the success of the Maidsafe / NightNet partnership approach and the low levels of violent crime experienced in Maidstone.
 - An 'Our town centre' education programme targeted at school children (age 7-11) taking them into the new CCTV control centre and showing them how the Police/CCTV/ Maidsafe/ NightNet work together. This is likely to have a 'Blue Peter' effect getting this information out to the wider community.



Police pavilion at Piccadilly Circus



Entrance to the Town Hall

1.3.4 Cleanliness

Urination

- Male public urination is the norm in the town centre and by the end of the night alleyways, phone boxes and shop fronts are awash. While the temporary urinal provides an alternative at weekends it is a somewhat anonymous lump of grey plastic that does not appear to be much used (75 litres are collected per weekend).
- A decision was made not to proceed with gating alleyways due to the excessive cost involved.

Recommendations / Action Points

33. The urinal needs signage to highlight that it is there and what it is and more urinals may need to be provided. Clubs, pubs and bars should also be encouraged to stay open to allow people to use toilets before leaving.
34. Best practice elsewhere (see section 4.4.2) indicates gating alleyways can have a positive effect on town centre image so perhaps the decision not to proceed with gating could be revisited.

Fundamentally this is a cultural issue and the only thing that is likely to alter this behaviour is the presence of disapproving people on the street. Proposals to increase 'eyes on the street' are discussed elsewhere in this report.



Public urination



Litter

- The night time accumulation of litter was the worst the University of Westminster have seen during night time economy observations. Whilst it is cleared away by the next morning the presence of take away food and packaging and bottles on the street contributes to the feeling that the town centre is unsafe.
- Take away outlets are not prepared to clean up until after they have closed for staff safety reasons and because they are needed to serve customers.



The corner of Week Street at 3.00 am and the same view at 10.00 am.

Recommendations / Action Points

35. There are two possible solutions to this problem:
- Either, Street Litter Control Notices should be enforced to require takeaways to clean up during the night so that litter does not accumulate. They could also be required to print the name of their store on all packaging. This has been proposed elsewhere (see Appendix 4.4.2).
 - Or, a continuous cleaning operation is needed at weekends to prevent the build up of rubbish and provide further presence on the street to discourage urination.

1.4 Character

The physical urban environment, the historic and cultural heritage and how the town is perceived both by local people and outsiders.

1.4.1 Perceptions of Maidstone town centre at night

- Feelings about the character of Maidstone were mixed with comments ranging from 'improving' to 'chavy' to 'a no go area for older people at night' (see sections 4.2 and 4.3)
- It is clear that quite a lot of people feel the town centre is only for young people at night.
- Operators felt the town wasn't being promoted properly and there was a need to promote late night shopping in particular (see section 3.2.2)

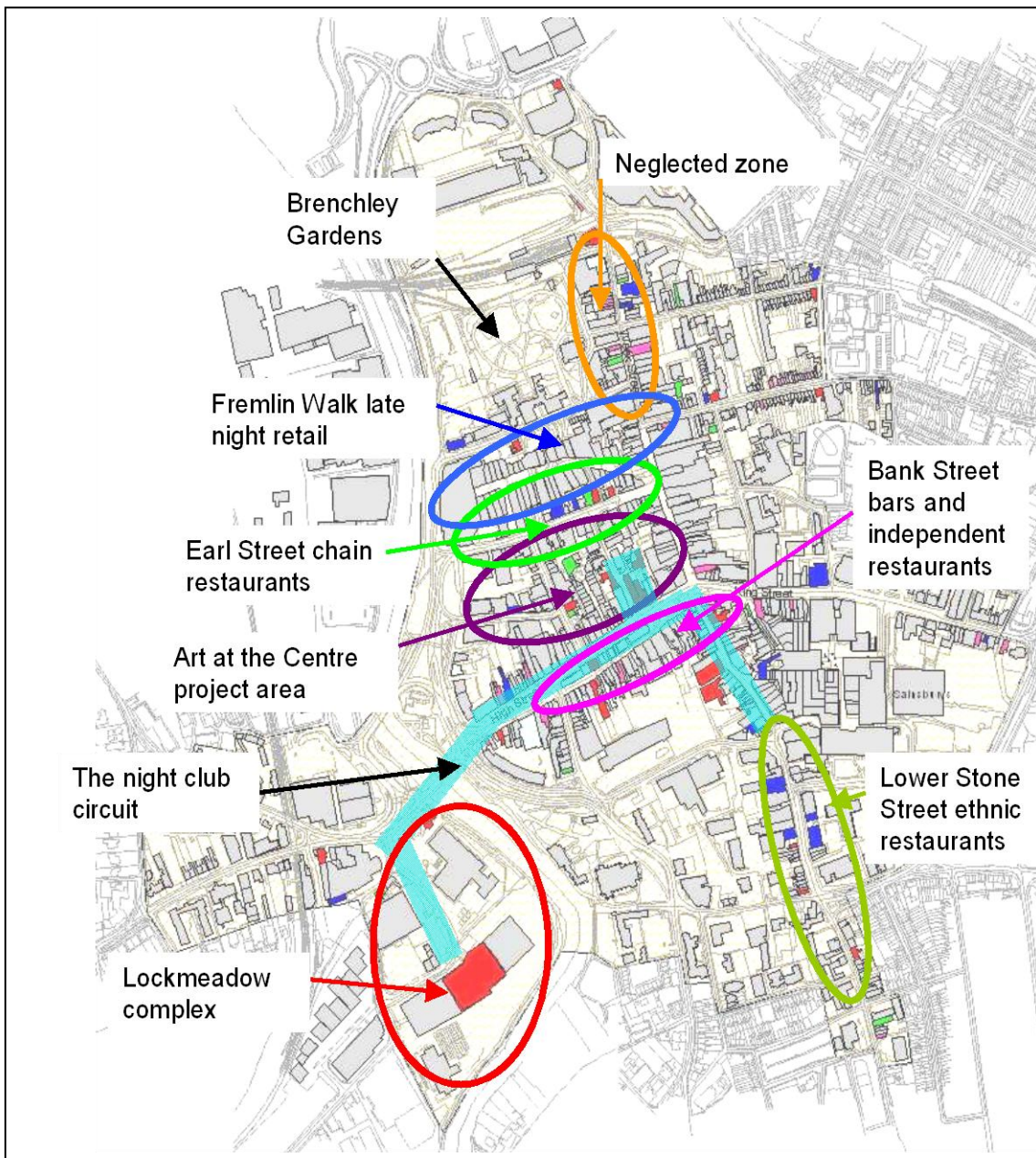
Recommendations / Action Points

36. Developing a clear vision of where Maidstone town centre is going will allow marketing activities to be channelled to address negative perceptions. A co-ordinated marketing programme of events is required.
37. Interest expressed in businesses coming together to jointly fund an advertising campaign to promote the town centre at night should be investigated.

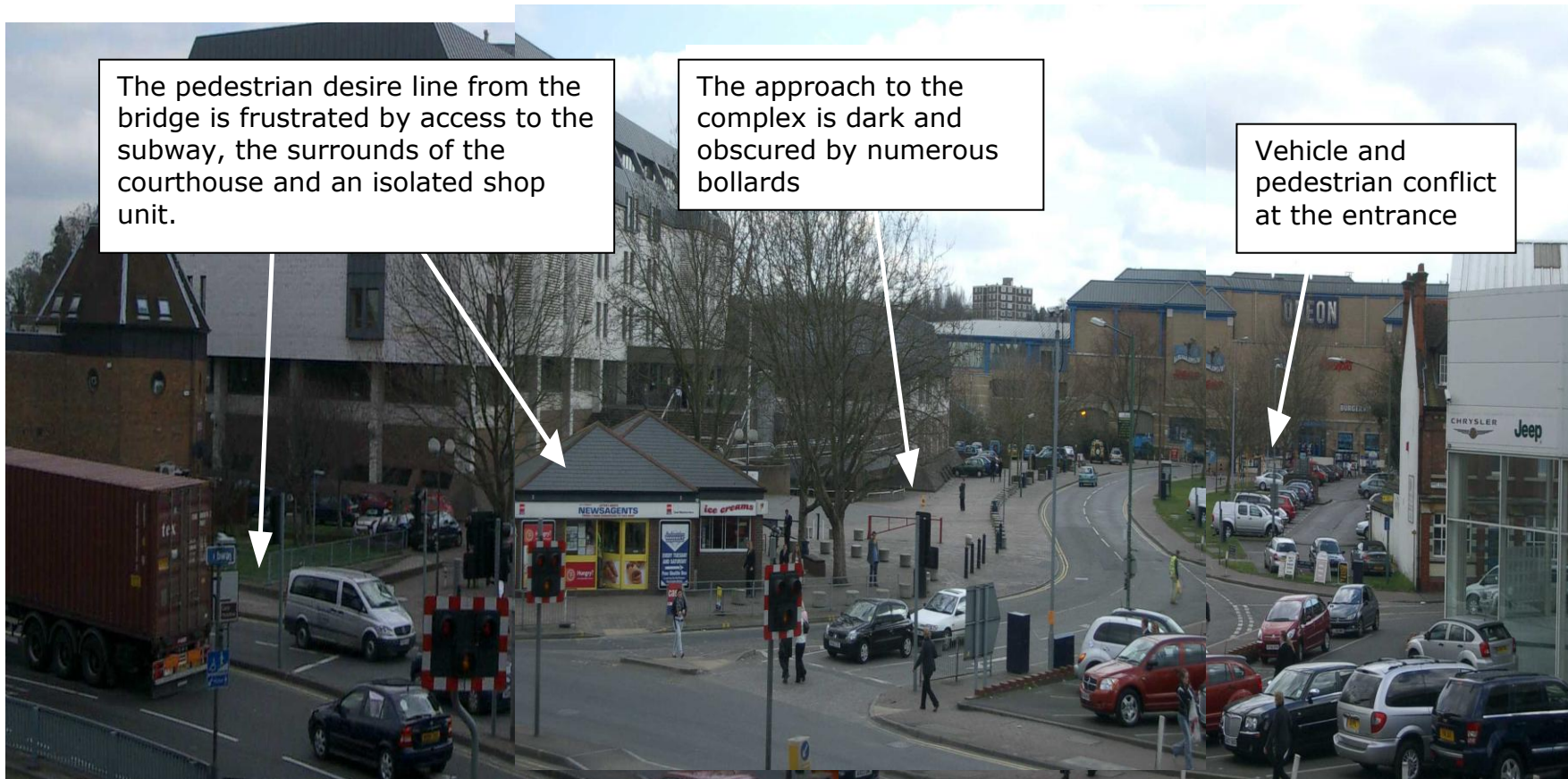
1.4.2 Night time character areas in Maidstone town centre

- Maidstone has a clearly identified 'nightclub circuit' running from Gabriel's Hill through the High Street and across the river to Lockmeadow. This is where the majority of the night time economy businesses are located, where most people circulate at night and where most trouble occurs.
- Best practice in managing the night time economy elsewhere suggests identifying and developing policies for micro-districts within the town centre (see section 4.4.2). Through observation and analysis the following night time character areas have been identified within Maidstone.
 1. Lockmeadow complex
 2. Art at the Centre Project Area (Pudding Lane, Market Buildings, Rose Yard)
 3. Earl Street – chain restaurants
 4. Fremlin Walk – late night retail
 5. Brenchley Gardens – public park
 6. Week Street – neglected zone
 7. Bank Street/ Gabriel's Hill – bars, clubs and independent restaurants
 8. High Street / King Street – night club circuit
 9. Lower Stone Street - ethnic restaurants

Figure 1.3 Night time character areas in Maidstone



Lockmeadow Complex



- There is a vehicle-pedestrian conflict in Barker Road at night arising from the flows of cars and people trying to use the same space. This is exacerbated by poor lighting and provides a sub-standard access to the leisure complex. The pedestrian desire line from the bridge is frustrated by access to the subway, the surrounds of the courthouse, an isolated shop unit and numerous bollards.
- It is a crime concentration point (see section 3.3.3). Comments from the focus groups suggest that a rape and murder that occurred there some time ago has taken on 'urban myth' status and the area is perceived as very dark and dangerous (see section 3.2.1).
- The complex makes remarkably little use of its superb riverside setting. Surface car parking occupies the best views of the Archbishop's Palace, while the building itself offers no views out to the river.



Car park occupying the best view in Maidstone



Pedestrian route from the bridge

- Inside the Lockmeadow complex there is a culture clash at night between the people queuing to get into the bars upstairs (Hot Shots and Jumpin' Jaks), some of whom are already drunk, and the families and older age groups using the cinema and restaurants (see sections 2.3.1 and 4.2.1). This is particularly serious on the monthly under 18 nights (Wednesdays) and Friday and Saturday nights when there can be queues for the bars down the escalators. It is likely that this enforced meeting of such different groups reinforces perceptions that Maidstone is unsafe and youth-dominated.

Recommendations / Action Points

There is an opportunity for a major reappraisal of the Lockmeadow site, externally, internally and in relation to the river.

38. Access could be redesigned, re-directing traffic down Hart Street (which may need to be widened) and reconfiguring Barker Road to provide a boulevard approach to the complex, improve lighting and create a taxi rank. This could involve loss of the Barker Road Council car park, but nearby Lockmeadow is lightly used and extensive other parking in the vicinity might also be used.
39. The incompatible mingling problem could be mitigated by remodelling the building internally to provide separate entrances for the bars and the cinema and provide seating within the mall area. Ikon/ Jumpin' Jaks / Hots Shots are scheduled for refurbishment this year and these changes may be feasible. The Council should seek to input into the remodelling process.
40. The riverside setting could be enhanced by reducing surface car parking, improving access, lighting and landscaping. It should be possible to develop a riverside café/restaurant within the complex either in front of the Millennium Bridge or as an extension of the internal walkway.

Art at the Centre project area

Market Buildings

- This area contains the Hazlitt Theatre and the Exchange together with a good selection of independent retailers.
- It is the focus of the Art in the Centre project to create an Artists' Quarter in Maidstone and promote independent retailing (see section 3.2.3).
- There are vacant underused premises with scope for accommodating new service / retail outlets.
- Operators have identified the provision of loading bays as inadequate.



Market Buildings

Recommendations / Action Points

41. As part of the Art at the Centre project an inventory should be prepared to identify potential premises for independent retailing, restaurants, artists' studios and workshops. This should also identify the typical rental costs, lease terms, other commercial issues and development opportunities in the area.
42. Provision of loading bays needs to be reviewed

Earl Street - chain restaurants

- This street is being styled as Maidstone's restaurant quarter and pavements on one side of the street have been widened to accommodate chairs and tables in the summer. Pavement trading is licensed by KCC (see section 3.2.3). It was identified in focus groups as a place parents could take their children (see 4.2.1).
- In response to the smoking ban coming into effect on 1st July 2007 restaurants and pubs in Earl Street want to be able to provide year round outdoor seating and shelter for smokers. This has implications for pedestrian movement (see section 3.2.2).
- The Earl Street taxi rank is not used and provision of loading bays is identified by businesses as inadequate (see section 3.2.2).

Recommendations / Action Points

43. In response to the smoking ban the Planning Department needs to develop a policy on the provision of year-round awnings with sides in Maidstone town centre.
44. The Earl Street taxi rank needs to be put into full time use or removed.
45. It may be preferable to remove all pavements in this street and create a shared access roadway with additional loading bays rather than fully pedestrianise the street.

Fremlins Walk / St Faith Street – late night retail

- The new shopping centre contributes to the urban realm because it is not a covered mall that is closed and impenetrable at night. However, there is no activity in the centre at night and the opportunity to create a mixed-use development with residential units above has been missed.
- Plans to improve catering facilities and toilets at the museum will allow the Brenchley Rooms to be used for social gatherings and will encourage night time use of the museum.



Underused space in front of the museum

Recommendations / Action Points

46. There is an opportunity to animate the space within the centre, particularly during Thursday's late night shopping, with stalls and events.
47. There may also be an opportunity to develop a focal point for the town centre, the modern equivalent of a market cross, at the junction with Week Street.
48. There is an attractive, underused space in front of the museum that could be used for evening events associated with the museum.

Brenchley Gardens

- This is described in focus groups and by the Youth Forum as a public park where people who are too young to drink legally go to hang about. It is also identified as where homeless people and drug users congregate (see sections 3.2.3 and 4.2.2).
- CCTV coverage is inadequate, as is adult supervision (see section 4.2.6).

Recommendations / Action Points

49. More CCTV cameras should be installed in the gardens to cover the area behind the bandstand and the police should be patrol regularly on foot during the night time.

Week Street – neglected zone*Pound shops and an abrupt end to the Fremlins Walk pedestrianisation scheme*

- The street contains some very attractive buildings but the top part of the street has been decimated by the Fremlin Walk development with a high proportion of voids, charity shops and low cost 'pound' stores. This provides a very poor gateway to the town from Maidstone East station, although there have been attempts to address this with tree planters and public realm improvements.
- Redevelopment of the former Army and Navy store and redevelopment of the station car park represent opportunities to turn the street around and the refurbishment of Mu Mu's implies some business confidence in this part of town.
- The pedestrianisation scheme ends just above Fremlins Walk which effectively says to shoppers 'nothing of interest beyond this point' and businesses at this end of town feel they have been abandoned by the council.
- The street is the main pedestrian access to the town centre at night but it gets clogged up in the evening with cars coming to KFC, McDonalds and Blockbuster. In focus groups parents said they wanted to park near the KFC etc. in the evening, allowing this might encourage them to stay longer and do other things.

Recommendations / Action Points

50. The abrupt end of the pedestrianisation scheme, parking and access difficulties could be resolved by introducing a shared access roadway with a similar surface treatment to the pedestrianised section. This should be a priority in order to breathe new life into this neglected area.

Bank Street/ Gabriel's Hill – bars, clubs and independent restaurants



Bank Street



Gabriel's Hill

- Bank Street is pedestrianised and has many attractive older buildings that are suitable for bar, restaurant and independent retail use. Currently the top of the street is quite dark because there are a number of void shop fronts.
- Gabriel's Hill contains a large number of older buildings occupied mainly by independent retailers, bars, cafes and takeaways. It accommodates some attractive specialist outlets, but it is also a crime concentration point owing to the large numbers of people who mill about in the street late at night eating takeaways after leaving the clubs and bars. The street becomes quite scruffy at the bottom and the former cinema, now a Gala Bingo hall has been identified for redevelopment.
- This area is firmly on the rowdy night time youth circuit route from Gabriel's Hill to Lockmeadow.

Recommendations / Action Points

51. This area has the potential to emerge as an alternative to Earl Street's chain restaurants and bars providing quality independent restaurants.
52. Lighting improvements are needed in Bank Street but these should be in keeping with the character of the street.
53. Redevelopment of the Bingo Hall site could transform the bottom of Gabriel's Hill and improve linkages to the restaurants in Lower Stone Street.

High Street / King Street – the night club circuit



High Street

- At night the street is the main route between the pubs and bars in the town centre and the Lockmeadow complex. Crime is concentrated in the lower part of the High Street below Bank Street relating to the pre-booked taxi pick up point and a cluster of takeaways (see section 3.3.3).
- This is a street that has lost its function as the town's main thoroughfare.
- The Chequers, a 'value' shopping centre, was identified as tired, run down and depressing in focus groups (see section 4.2.3).
- Access to riverside across A229 from the town centre is dangerous. There are subways but people tend to cross at road level where there are pelican crossings and they will always be tempted to jaywalk, particularly when drunk.
- Operators identified lighting as poor in the High Street with damaged lights (see section 3.2.1).

Recommendations / Action Points

54. The value of restricting access to just buses and taxis is questionable, particularly since access to the Chequers car park is so difficult. Allowing vehicle access at night could help to break up the youth monoculture and provide extra 'eyes on the street'.
55. The Council should try to obtain agreement with the Highways agency to introduce speed tables (areas of raised roadway, like large scale sleeping policemen, designed to reduce traffic speeds) on the A229 as it approaches the High Street. This would be a small step in civilising the abominable severance of the heart of the town and the river created by the A229's routing. Preferably this should be part of a wider A229 severance reduction strategy involving lane reductions along the route – stretches of which have 5 and 6 lanes.
56. The Chequers Centre urgently needs refurbishment and lighting needs to be improved.

Lower Stone Street- ethnic restaurants

- On the periphery of the town centre this street has some attractive old buildings and some brutal infill development.
- It contains the town centre's only cluster of ethnic restaurants – Chinese, Indian and Mexican.
- This is a route home at the end of the night and lighting and cleaning needs to be improved.

Recommendations / Action Points

57. This area is somewhat isolated from the rest of the town centre and signage and linkages could be improved, as could lighting and cleaning.