

Solihull Town Centre Strategy

Direction Paper No. 6

Urban Design Analysis

June 2006

Prepared by GVA Grimley LLP and Tibbalds

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Direction Paper 6:

Urban Design Analysis



May 2006 REV 1

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town centre analysis

introduction

This Directions Paper draws together the key findings from a review of baseline documents and focuses on urban design analysis and initial opportunities in Solihull.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section looks at a baseline analysis of the town in terms of land use, building heights, movement, open space and public realm and positive and negative features of the Town Centre. The second section considers some of the emerging opportunities that can be established from the baseline analysis.

This Directions Paper is one of six papers that form a robust evidence base for the Solihull Town Centre Study. The other papers are:

- 1. Development and Property
- 2. Retail Policy Considerations;
- 3. Town Centre Health Check
- 4. Public Sector Assets;
- 5. Movement and Accessibility;

Introduction to the analysis work

The current character, form and identity of the town centre can best be described and understood from a review of its historic development. The Solihull Conservation Area Statement outlines the basic history of Solihull town centre.

The figures opposite show the town centre's development from the late 1890's to the present day. The key features may be summarised as follows:

Solihull 1890 (fig. 1):

- The railway line was built in 1852 and the subsequent growth of the town can be linked to the better transport links to London and more locally to Birmingham.
- Development focused around the High Street and Warwick Road.
- St. Alphege Church and its surroundings define the eastern end of the High Street.
- Mill Lane and Drury Lane exist as small connecting streets between the two main roads.

Solihull 1955 (fig. 2):

- The basic structure of the town remains but the outer areas have been developed from fields to suburbs with large pavilion style houses.
- St. Alphege still a major landmark.
- Within 6 years of this plan the terraces and cottages of Mill Lane and Drury Lane were cleared and the Mell Square shopping development was built. The High Street remained

intact and the town was still centred around the two main roads.

Solihull today (fig. 3):

- The High Street is still the main collecting space for the town centre, and St. Alphege Church and the Square remain a prominent positive feature of the town. The historic core of Solihull is still evident.
- Touchwood shopping centre has expanded the town centre southwards and provides a high quality shopping experience.
- A significant office development has been built to the south of the town centre.

Solihull town centre therefore has a number of positive elements and once you are in the town, feels a busy and welcoming place. However, the extensive redevelopment and clearance since the early 1960's has largely shaped the current form and identity of the Town Centre. It has caused a number of the perceived issues and problems experienced by the area. These may be summarised as follows:

- A town that is dominated by cars and the through movement of traffic as a result of the introduction of an external distributor road system comprising Warwick Road/Princes Way/Church Hall Road/New Road.
- Where's the heart? – Although the High Street remains largely intact and is a positive area of the town, the historic focus of the Town centre on the High Street and Warwick Road has shifted as a result of the expansion southwards of the town.
- The widening of Warwick Road results in a major barrier to north south movement and any expansion northwards of the town centre.
- The exposure of back frontages and service areas to public view as a result of the introduction of the external distributor road system.
- The introduction of a number of larger scale, isolated and poorly integrated urban blocks to the north and south of the High Street.

The result:

- A fragmented and disconnected urban form.
- The introduction of a number of poor quality buildings in prominent locations that are largely vacant or under occupied.
- Poor quality and poorly defined built 'edges'.
- A lack of integration and loss of permeability from surrounding areas into the 'High Street'.

The following diagrams detail the baseline analysis work undertaken as the first stage of the preparation of a series of options for the improvement of the Town Centre.

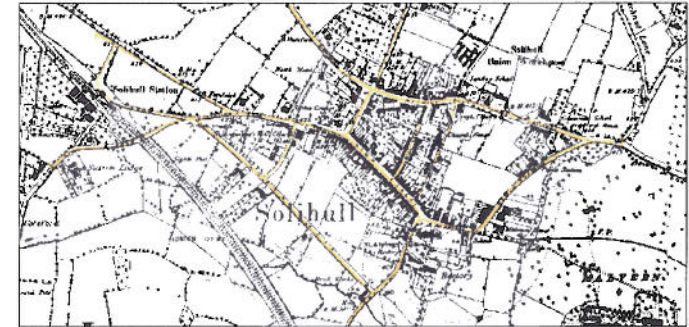


Fig. 1: Plan of Solihull town centre – 1890

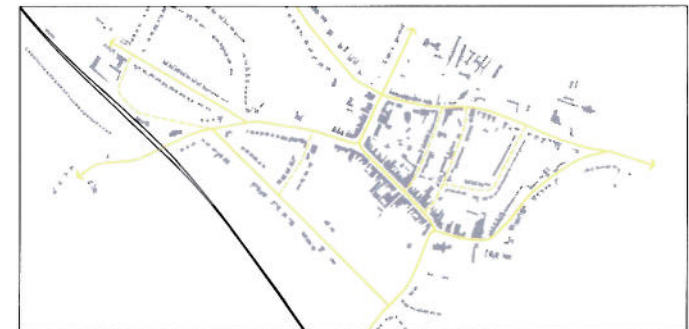


Fig. 2: Figure ground of Solihull town centre showing the key road layout – 1955



Fig. 3: Figure ground of Solihull town centre showing the key road layout – 2006

land use

Solihull Town Centre accommodates a wide range of retail, office, community and civic uses. Retail uses are particularly well represented, and have been recently strengthened by the Touchwood shopping centre to the south of the main High Street, built on the site of a surface car park. The different uses are mapped on the land use plan overleaf (Fig 4).

General land uses within the town centre:

- The centre of the town is dominated by 2 large retail 'malls'. Touchwood, to the south of the High Street, was completed in 2002, and is a covered enclosed centre that shuts at night. Mell Square is a 1960's centre that has predominantly 3 storey buildings with shops at the ground floor and open pedestrianised streets, arranged around a large central square.
- The High Street has a number of smaller retail units, banks and food and drink units.
- There is a large office quarter to the south of the town centre with pavilion style offices set back from the roads, with large surface parking areas. There is another smaller scale office area to the north of Warwick Road.
- There is a cluster of civic buildings to the south of the High Street on Homer Road, including the main Council offices, the police station and the Magistrates Court.
- The town library and theatre are integrated into the rear of the Touchwood shopping centre.
- There are 3 large hotels in Solihull. 2 are within the town centre boundary.
- There are a 5 large multi storey car parks within the town centre.

General patterns of land use within the town centre:

- Uses within the town centre are generally clustered into two main quarters - shopping and offices.
- There are very few residential areas within the town centre. There are some units over shops to the west of the High Street and within Mell Square, and there are a number of small terraces and flats in the east of the town centre on New road.



Retail within Solihull town centre



Retail within Solihull town centre



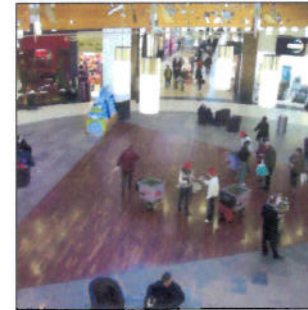
Retail within Solihull town centre



Retail within Solihull town centre



Retail within Solihull town centre



Retail within Solihull town centre



Solihull library



The hotel on Princess Way



Retail over shops on Station Road



Large office buildings on Warwick Road



Retail office on Princess Way



Offices on Princess Way

land use



Fig. 4: Existing Land Use

built form/massing

Development within the town centre comprises a large variety of building types and styles. Heights range from 1 to 7 storeys with office towers and car parks as the tallest buildings. Building heights are generally lowest around the High Street and Mell Square and increase to the north and south. The town centre building heights are mapped on the plan overleaf (Fig 5).

- The High Street forms the historic core with buildings ranging from 1800 to 1990's and 1 to 3 storeys high. The number of small buildings and their variety creates a rich backdrop. However the modernist three storey building at the western end of the High Street breaks the vertical rhythm with its strong horizontal design. For this reason it looks slightly out of place and not within the high street character.
- A number of larger and taller buildings are integrated within development blocks, but have little negative impact on the townscape. One example is Touchwood and the associated multiplex cinema. Although out of scale with the rest of the town centre it is incorporated in a sensible way and building heights are lowered to two or maximum three storeys along its edges. Due to its sensible integration its bulk is little recognisable.

The town centre is surrounded in the east and west by predominately two storey residential development of semi detached houses. To the north building heights are inconsistent and create an fragmented edge.

Solihull Town Centre falls within a series of 'protected surfaces' that radiate out from Birmingham Airport. These restrict the heights of buildings, especially in the northern part of the town centre. For example heights around Mell Square are restricted to 145 meters AOD. Taking existing ground levels into consideration maximum building heights are restricted to approximately 23 meters, including antenna, roof structures and masts.

Landmarks and Views

St. Alphege's Church located at the eastern end of the High Street is the most important landmark within the town centre. Despite many higher buildings the church remains highly visible throughout the centre, from passing trains and long distances. Other landmarks are:

- Beatties facade along Warwick Road integrates a landmark element. Though it is not of high quality it is highly visible and the only sign of town centre uses along this street.
- The tall building, that currently houses the Local Authority is highly visible from the south, but is of poor quality and marks views in a negative way.
- A number of small local focal points aid legibility within the town centre.
- The existing church on Station Approach and the modernist building at Station Road provide landmarks that are not very strong at the moment.



Buildings step down in height and adjust building footprint to topography



Well designed houses along Hermit Road



Corner creates a weak landmark at station Road



Mell square surrounded by 2-3 storey buildings



Other buildings



Tall building of poor quality forms negative landmark



Local Authority building



Other residential development on Warwick Road



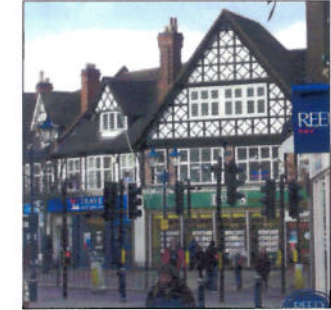
High street with pedestrian walk building of 2 storeys, but a variety of styles



Existing buildings around St. Alphege's



View to St. Alphege's is led down by poor development in front



High quality, smooth Tudor building forms local landmark at western end of High Street

built form/massing

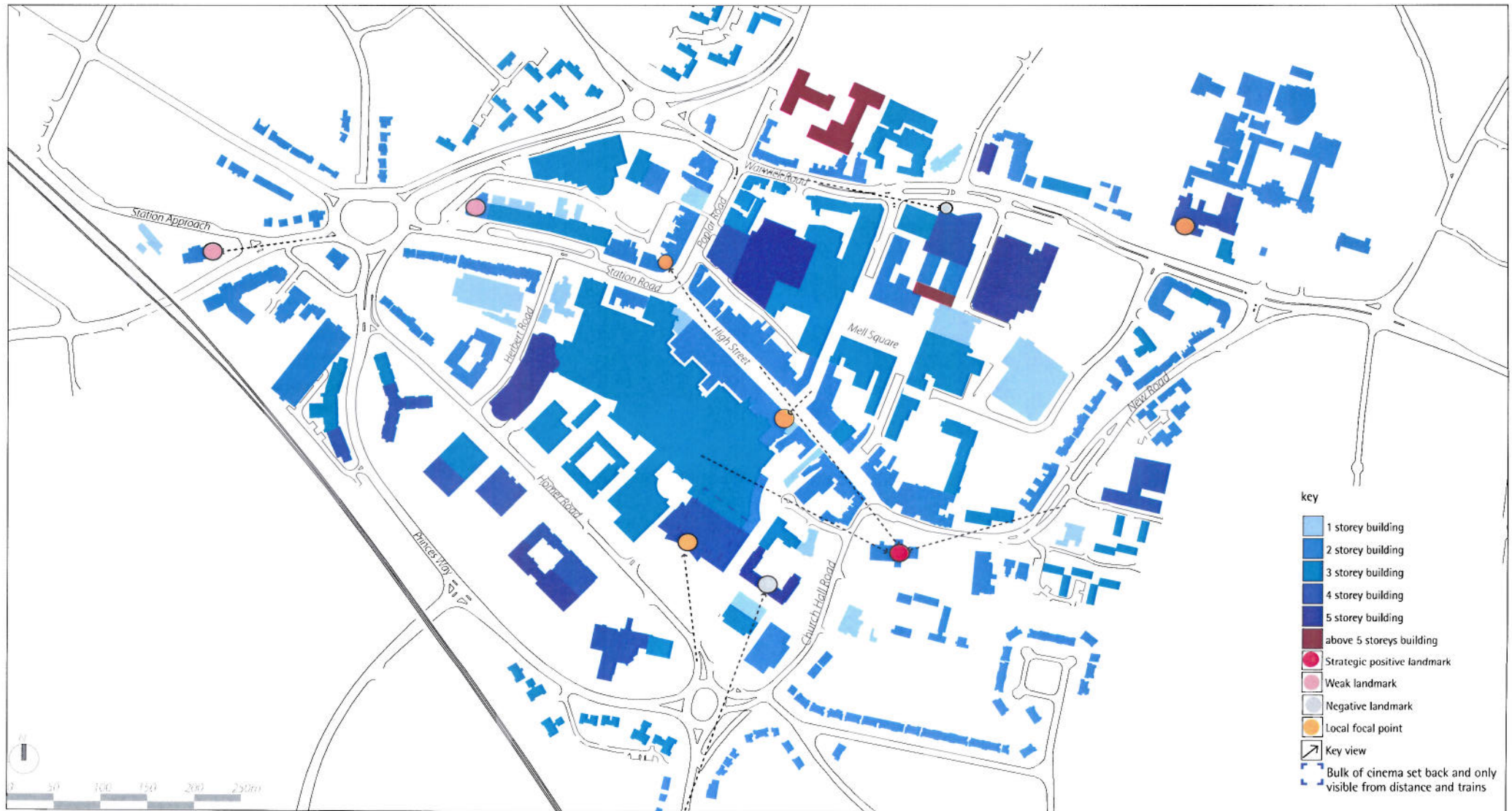


Fig. 5: Massing/Building heights

character areas

The town centre has a number of overlapping character areas that range from the historic High Street to the new pavilion office area to the south of the town. The diagram overleaf (fig. 6) identifies the areas.

High Street

The Historic High Street still lies at the heart of the town. It is characterised by a number of historic and listed buildings, and is predominantly 2/3 storey. The High Street is now fully pedestrianised and acts as a major collecting and public space.

Mell Square

Mell Square is characterised by the large 1960's shopping centre that was built on the historic residential centre of Solihull. It is generally 2 storey, with a tall office tower on Drury Lane. There is a large central space with a pavilion coffee shop.

Touchwood

Touchwood is a new large shopping centre with a series of smaller manufactured character covered 'streets'. The development of Touchwood has significantly extended the shopping area of Solihull to the south of the High Street.

Civic Quarter

More a character area in terms of a cluster of uses rather than the appearance of the buildings. The Council offices, town library and theatre, police station and magistrates court all sit to the north of Homer Road on a series of self contained sites.

Office Quarter

A collection of low rise pavilion style offices that sits between Homer Road and Princes Way.

Edge of Town Centre

The western end of the High Street contains a number of smaller scale shops and town house style offices.

Warwick Road

The road dominates the northern edge of the town. There is a disparate collection of historic terraces, modern office developments and Solihull School fronting onto the road. Generally a traffic dominated environment.

Morrisons Supermarket

Characterised by a large collection of car parks and low rise large single use buildings. No integration with any of the surrounding areas.

Residential Edge

A small number of red brick Victorian and new residential terraces and flats sit at the eastern end of the town centre.



High Street



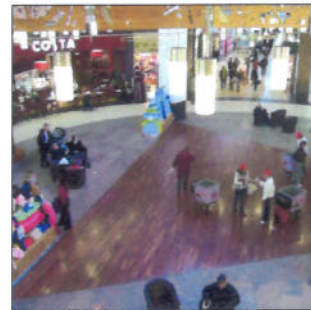
High Street



Mell Square



Mell Square



Touchwood



Touchwood



Civic and Office quarter



Civic and Office quarter



Warwick Road



Morrisons Supermarket



Residential edge



town centre western edge

character areas

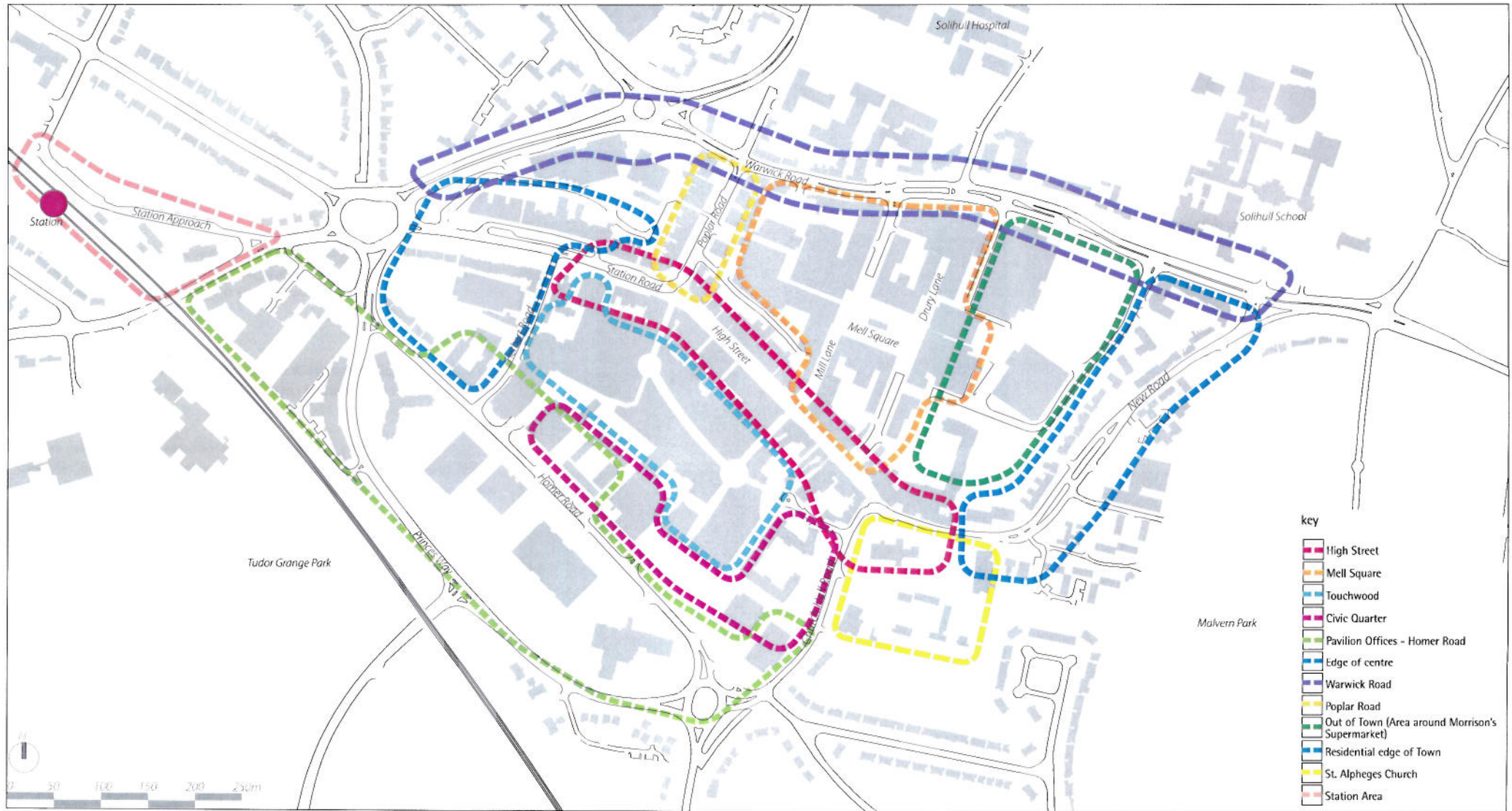


Fig. 6: Character Areas

open space and landscape

Directly within the town centre a number of hard standing urban spaces provide for a variety of activities as shown on the plan overleaf (fig. 7). These areas can be split into three distinct character areas:

- Mell Square is the largest open space within the town centre. Its is surrounded by shops and entrances to three department stores are located on it. Tree planting, flower beds and a pavilion break down its size and soften its strong 60's character.
- The High Street is pedestrianised and creates the main spine for Solihull Town Centre. Access to Touchwood and Mell Square come off it and it provides a large variety of shops and services. The public realm, in spite of being slightly dated, is in good condition and the arrangement of tree planting and flower beds creates areas for sitting without obstructing the pedestrian flow.
- During opening hours Touchwood provides space that is sheltered from the weather and of high quality. Its area is well used and the flexible seating arrangement invites a variety of people and groups to meet or relax informally.

There is little soft landscape within the town centre but trees are integrated into all major spaces. The following open spaces can be identified at the edges of the town centre or within easy reach of it;

- Malvern Park lies to the east of the town centre and is a large historic park that comprises children's play facilities and tennis courts;
- Tudor Grange Park is located just south of the railway line and is linked to the town centre by two pedestrian routes. It includes children's play facilities, a skate park and a lake. Leisure centre including a swimming pool are situated at its edge;
- Golden Jubilee Gardens on Homer Road is of very high quality. Its design and southern orientation provides a well liked outdoor area particular during lunchtime in summer months;
- Open Space associated with St. Alphege Church provides a good visual focus and large mature trees add to the general streetscape;
- The Library Square is a lost opportunity and it is dominated by blank walls. Trees and a water feature do little to animate the space, which main function is to provide access to the library, theatre and Solihull Connect;
- A small landscaped area is located north west of the town centre at the junction of Warwick Road. This spaces is surrounded by major roads on all sides and provides little benefit.



Library Square



Golden Jubilee Gardens



Incidental spaces



Cafe in Touchwood



Surface car park south of train tracks



Golden Jubilee gardens and entrance to Touchwood



Good public realm around St. Alphege's



Places to sit in Touchwood



Tudor Grange Park



Malvern Park

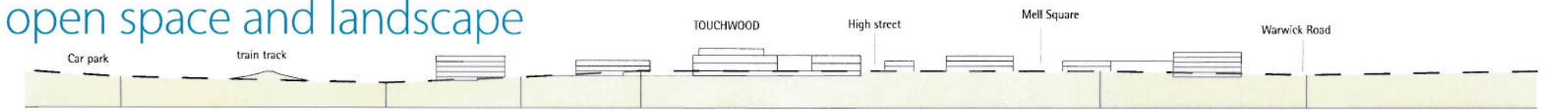


Space separated from centre by Warwick Road



High Street

open space and landscape



Section A-A

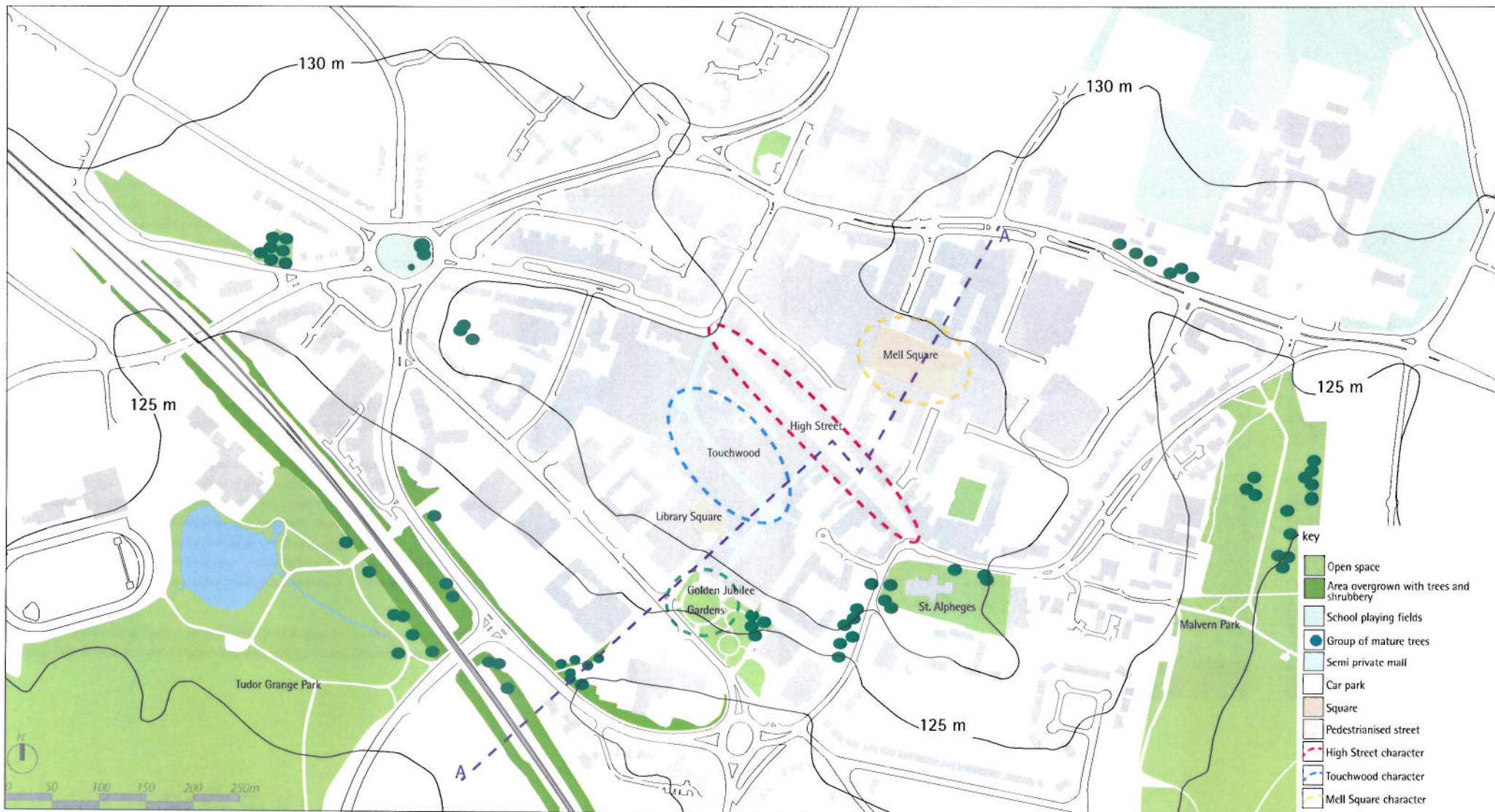


Fig. 7. Open Space and Landscape

routes and linkages

pedestrian and cycle movement

Pedestrian Linkage

Solihull Town Centre is linked by a number of strategic pedestrian and cycle routes to the surrounding residential areas (see fig. 8 overleaf). It is a very 'walkable' town centre with almost the whole of the area within the ring road within 5 minutes walk (400m) of the centre of the High Street. Large areas of pedestrianised streets create a pedestrian friendly environment that allows for a variety of activities, shopping, sitting and markets. The pedestrian/cycle link towards the east forms a natural continuation from the High Street. The pedestrian crossing is well designed and provides a pedestrian and cycle friendly environment. However there are a number of issues:

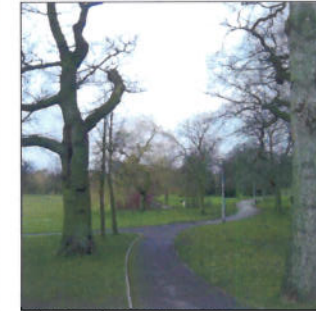
- The pedestrian routes to the town centre tend to stop short at the outer edges and the routes are severed either by one of the major roads or by poor development and associated public realm (i.e. car parks and service areas).
- During opening hours Touchwood provides high quality routes that are sheltered from the weather and well integrated into the overall network.
- The two routes from the south are severed by the railway and lead under bridges and subways. To add to that office developments south of Touchwood and associated car parks provide little animation and overlooking. In spite of their low quality the pedestrian path are well used, particular the one that leads from Touchwood entertainment wing towards the long stay surface car park south of the railway, on Monks path Hall Road.
- There is no clear pedestrian connection between Morrisons and Mell Square. People either have to go through a car park, service road or through BHS department store.
- A route between Mell Square and Poplar Road leads through a small shopping arcade.
- The pedestrian route from the station/bus interchange to the town centre is perceived as indirect and unclear.



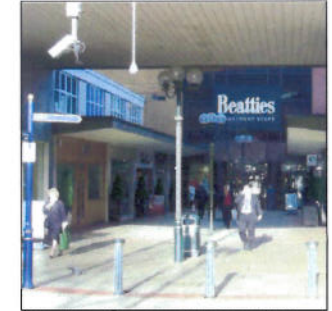
Station Approach is dominated by buses



Poor pedestrian link between Morris and Mell Square



Leisure and recreation routes



Entrance to facilities is hidden and not very prominent



Well frequented pedestrian link that is unimproved



Key pedestrian and cycle link passes under rail and Homer Road



Touchwood provides good bridges during day time



Busy Warwick Road provides barrier for pedestrian movement



Poor pedestrian environment along Warwick Road



Mell Square



Pedestrian link between Local Authority buildings and High Street



High Street provides good pedestrian area

pedestrian and cycle movement



Fig. 8: Pedestrian and cycle movement

routes and linkages

vehicular movement

Vehicular Access

Solihull Town Centre is laid out to cater predominately for people arriving by car. Over 6000 car parking spaces are dotted around the periphery of the main shopping area. (See fig. 9 overleaf). Dual carriageways surround most of the town centre and provide easy access to numerous car parks. Due to the residential areas surrounding the town centre these major roads are reduced in width as soon as they have passed the town centre. At peak hours some of these are congested, which adds to their unfriendly environment. Car parks are generally located at the outer edges of the town centre and accessible via unattractive service roads and back yards.

Public Transport

- Solihull station is outside the town centre, approximately 10 minutes walk from the edge of the town centre.
- The main bus station is located outside the station and provides access to the town centre and the wider area. 24 bus routes are accessible from town centre.
- There is a bus lay-over area on the corner of Poplar Road/Station Road. There is some pedestrian/vehicular conflict in this area in spite of the fact that Poplar Road is a 20 mph zone.



Bus station



Multi storey car park within town centre



Entrance to underground car park



Service and access route for shops and multi-storey car park



The Cross Way



Outdoor car park south of town centre



The edges of the centre are dominated by car parking (surface and multi-storey)



Busy dual carriageway, Warwick Road



Fomer Road



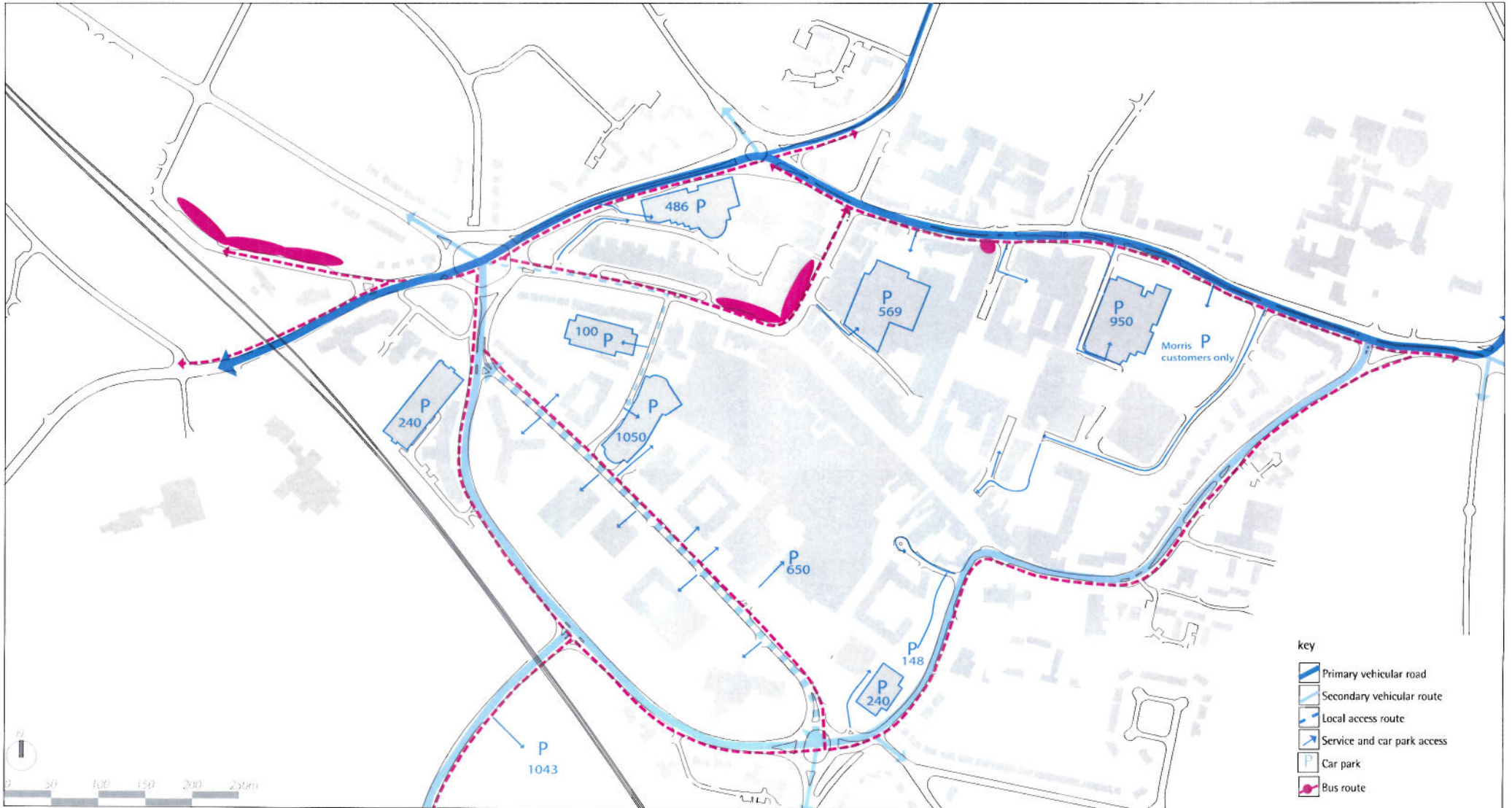
On-street car parking provides opportunity for jackknives



Surface treatment slows cars down and creates a more pedestrian friendly environment



vehicular movement



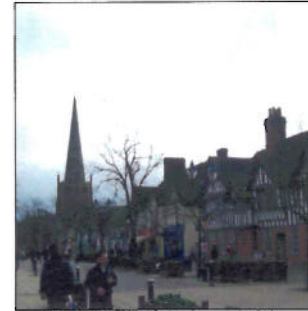
positive features of the town centre

Solihull town centre has a number of existing positive aspects of its form and townscape. These features generally, but not solely, relate to the historic centre of Solihull. (See fig. 10 overleaf).

- The central High Street area is within the Solihull Conservation area.
- There are a number of listed and locally listed buildings within the town centre. In particular the church spire of St. Alphege Church at the eastern end of the High Street provides a town wide landmark and view point. The cluster of listed buildings surrounding the church add to the positive character, affected only by the busy traffic that flows through the space.
- There are a number of open and covered public spaces within the town centre, linked by pedestrian routes. Although of varying quality and role, the linked spaces provide the opportunity to sit and relax within the bustle of the centre, and there is potential to improve on the way the spaces work. In particular the pedestrianised High Street plays an important role in terms of providing a space for meeting, sitting etc.
- Solihull is playing an increasingly important role as a shopping centre. There is currently a good range and selection of different types of shops, and they are distributed around the town centre rather than clustered in one place, therefore drawing shoppers around the town. 3 major shops overlook Mell Square.
- The library and theatre complex provides an important resource for the Town. There are opportunities to improve the environment and scale of the complex.
- There are two large parks within 5 minutes walk of the Town centre.
- The residential areas to the south and west of the town are relatively close to the town centre.



The new Touchwood centre integrates into the existing High Street



St. Alphege's Church at the end of the High Street



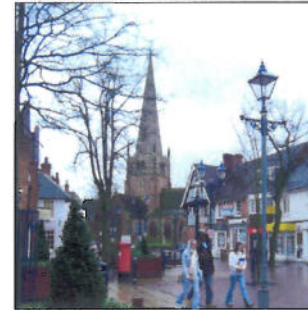
The High Street is an important public space



The library and theatre complex provides an important use for the town



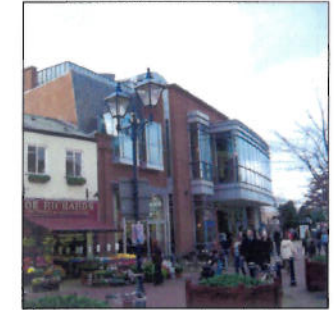
Existing buildings around the church



St. Alphege's Church at the end of the High Street



Place to sit in Touchwood



The new John Lewis at the end of the High Street



Tudor Orange Park



Mellwell Park



Attractive buildings at the eastern end of the town on Station Road/Poole Road



Solihull School is a key landmark for the town

positive features of the town centre

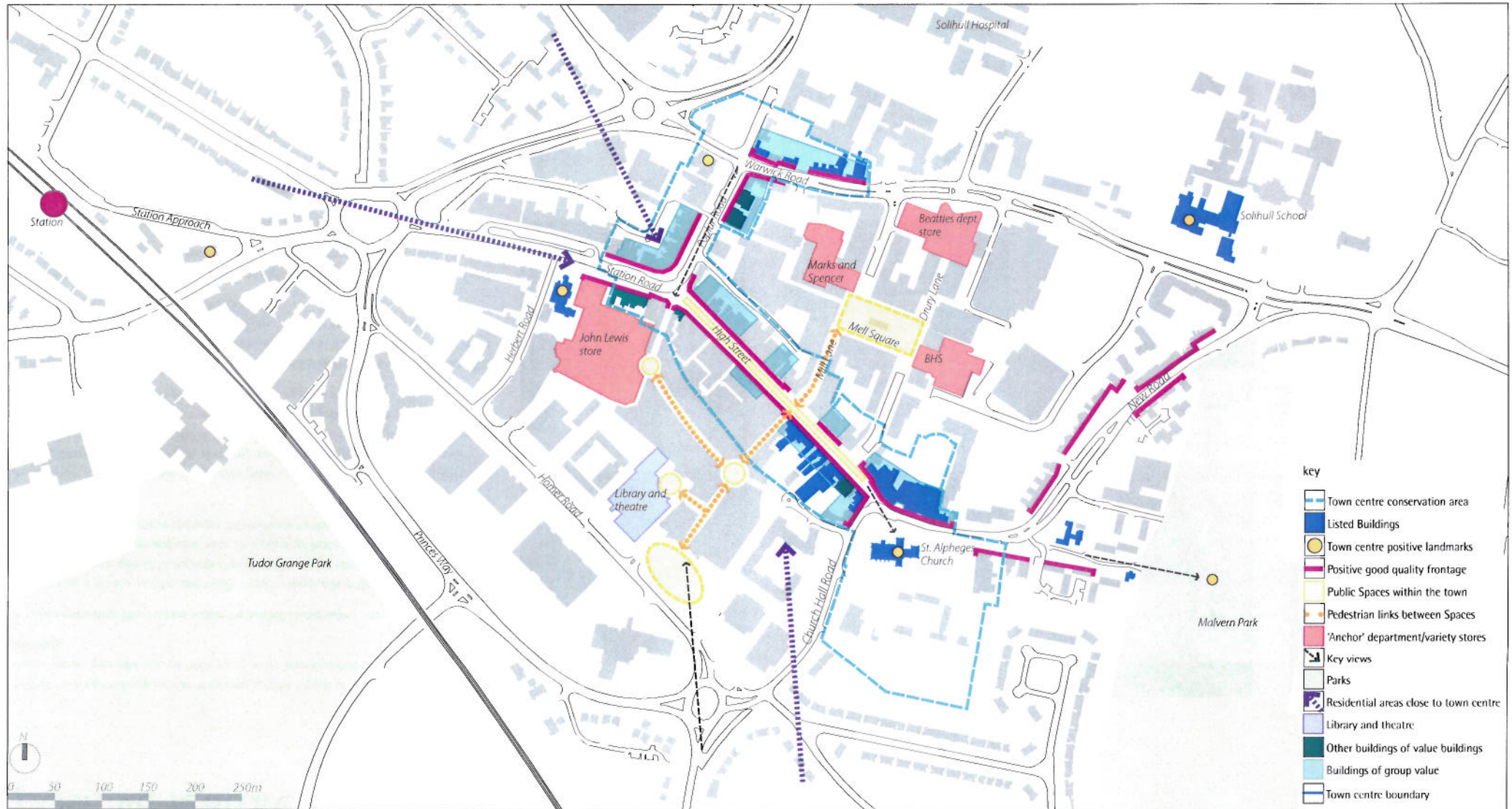


Fig 10: Positive Elements of the Town

negative features of the town centre

We have identified a number of built and spatial elements within the town centre that have a negative impact on the town. The negative features tend to be concentrated around the edge of the centre. (See fig. 11 overleaf).

- All of the main approaches into the Town Centre from the ring road are weak and traffic dominated. They are mostly large traffic junctions and there are only limited views into the heart of the town.
- The towns ring road constrains the town centre to the north, and appears to accommodate and encourage a large numbers of cars to drive around the town centre
- There are a number large multi storey car parks that sit on the edge of the town centre and do not provide a positive image of the town.
- Warwick Road in particular has a number of blank and open frontages.
- The pavilion offices on Homer Road/Princes Way have large areas of surface car parking and do not properly address the street.
- There are 2 key pedestrian routes that connect the town centre to the area south of the High Street, and beyond to Tudor Grange Park. Whilst these routes are strategically important they are not well overlooked and do not feel safe.
- Mell Square and the buildings along Station Road are outdated and potentially do not exploit their central location within the town centre. In particular the buildings that comprise Mell Square appear in poor condition and provide a limited retail environment that could be threatened by the quality of Touchwood.
- The station is located only a 10 minute walk from the centre of the Town centre, however the immediate surroundings are suburban and the route to the town centre is not clear. The bus lay-over areas along both Station Approach and Station Road/Poplar Road are visually intrusive and not pedestrian friendly.



Large roundabouts dominate the major approaches to the town



Office developments and wide dual-carriageways on Warwick Road



The view of the Holiday Inn from the entrance to Touchwood car park



Service Yards and car parks on Warwick Road



Narrow, overgrown and overgrown pedestrian routes



Informal car parks and back of shops at the eastern Touchwood entrance



Mell Square is starting to look tired and outdated



And the upper floors are not exploited



Pedestrian route to the town centre under the railway and Princes Way from Tudor Grange park



The new 'indy' square does not feel well used or active



There is a large surface car park to the south of the railway line in Tudor Grange park



The Multi Storey car park and service road behind the shops on Station Road

negative features of the town centre

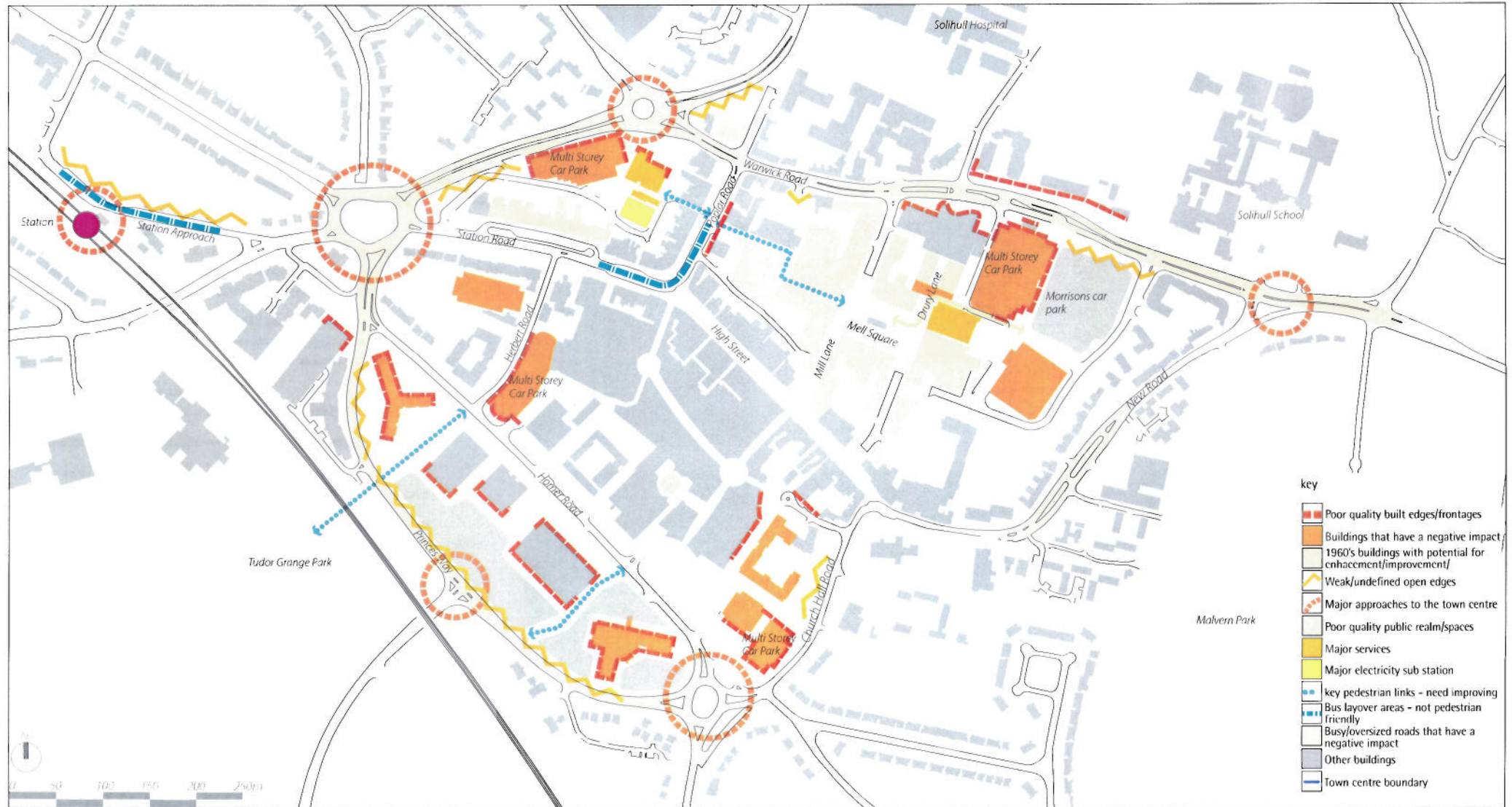


Fig. 11: Negative Elements of the Town

town centre opportunities

The following pages illustrate some of the initial opportunities that follow from the urban design baseline analysis in terms of changes of patterns of land use, opportunities for taller buildings, opportunities to enhance character areas, the potential to improve public space and landscape within the town centre, to address movement issues, and finally some key opportunity sites that we will investigate further in the next stage.

land use

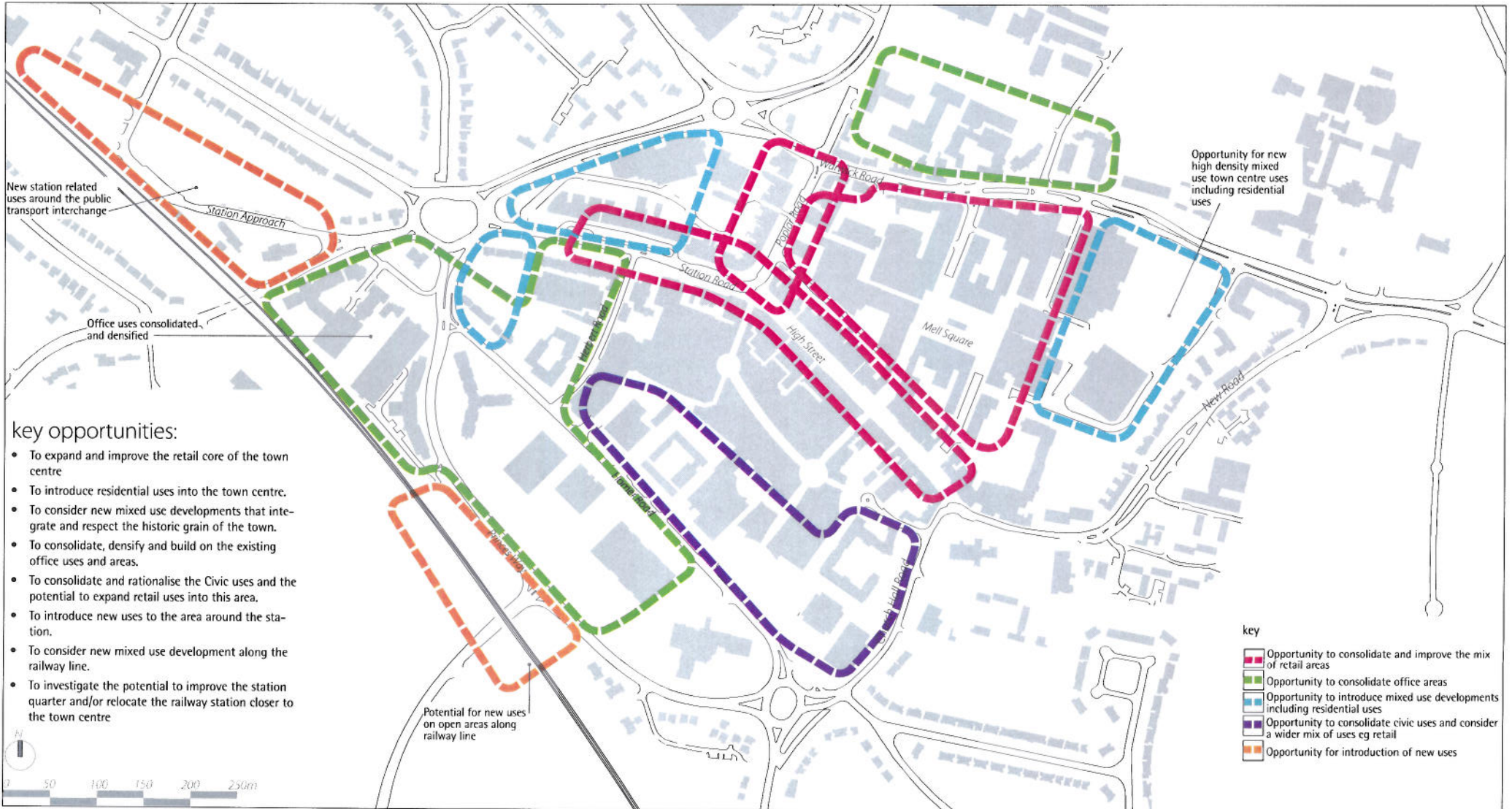


Fig. 12: Land Use opportunities

building heights

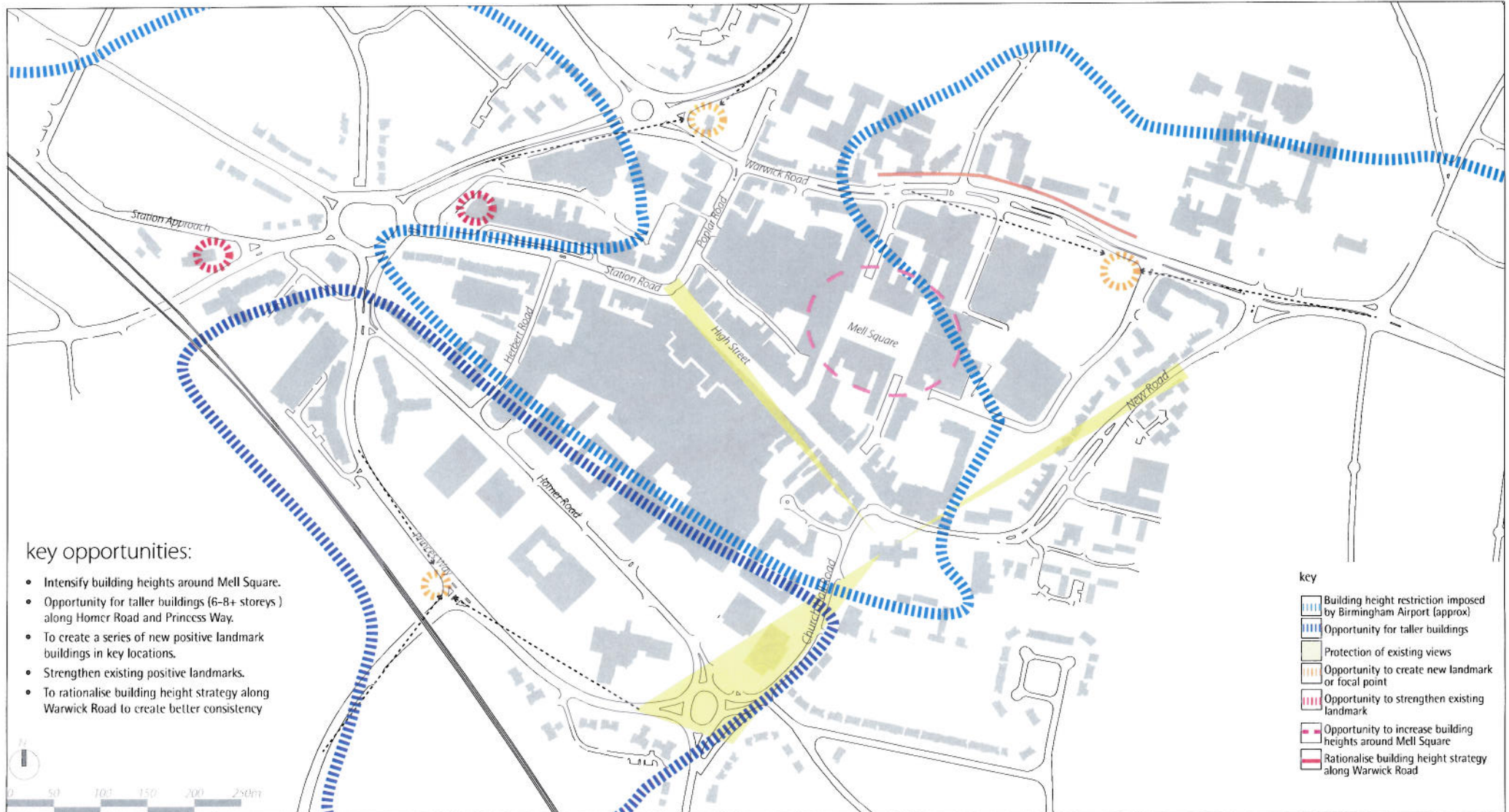


Fig. 13: Building height opportunities

character areas

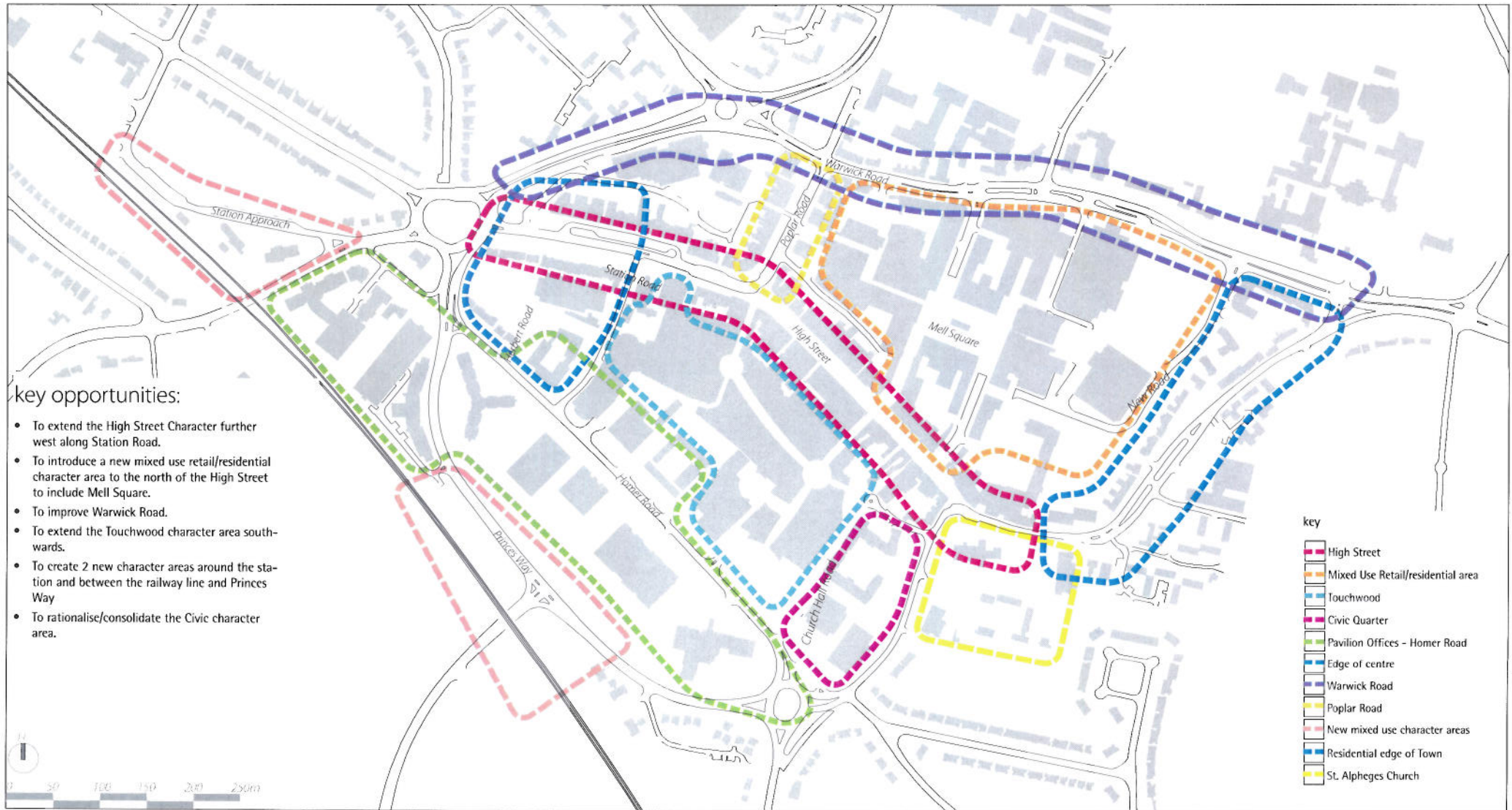


Fig. 14: Character area improvement opportunities

open space and public realm

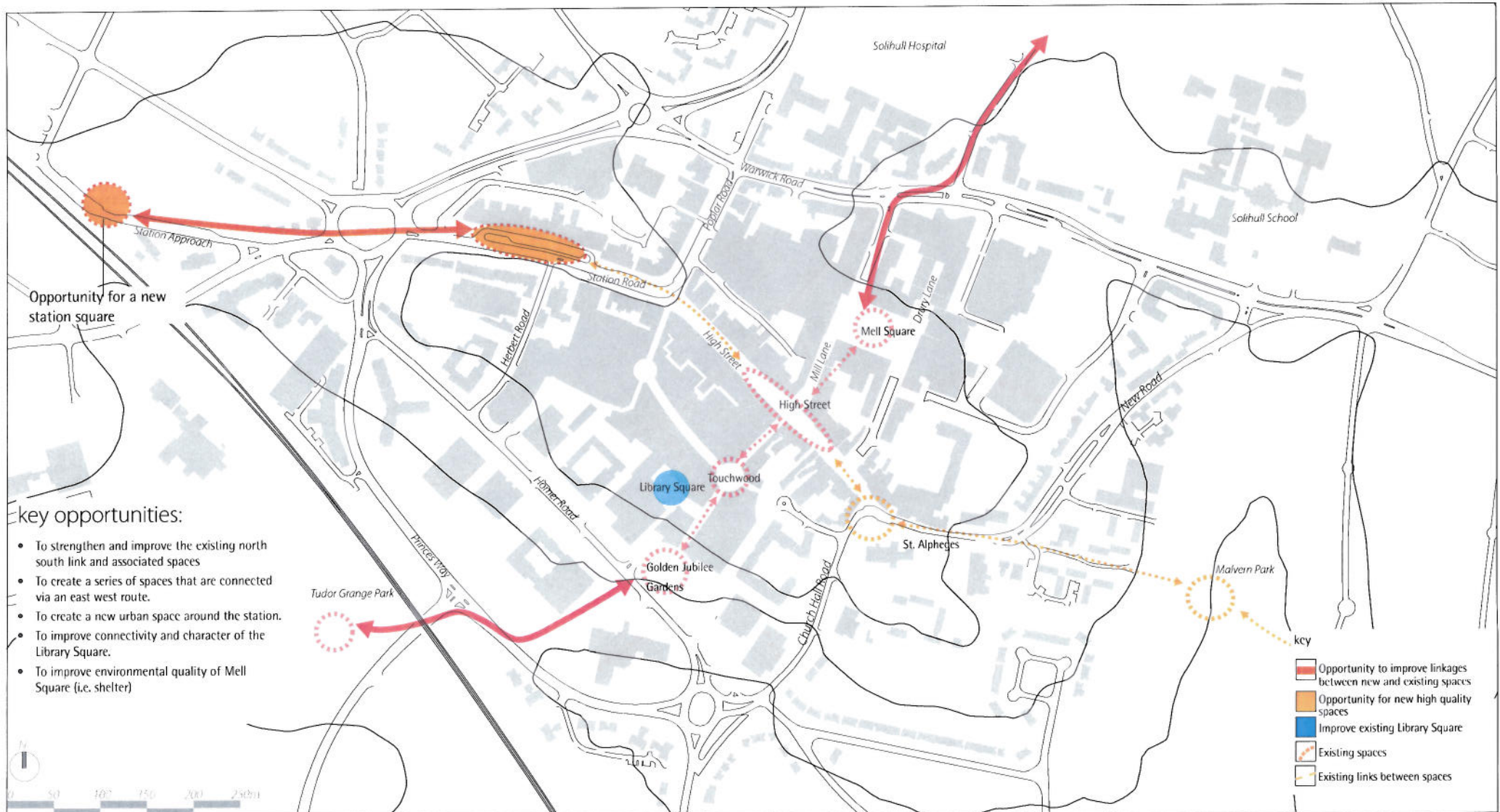


Fig. 15: Open space and public realm opportunities

pedestrian routes

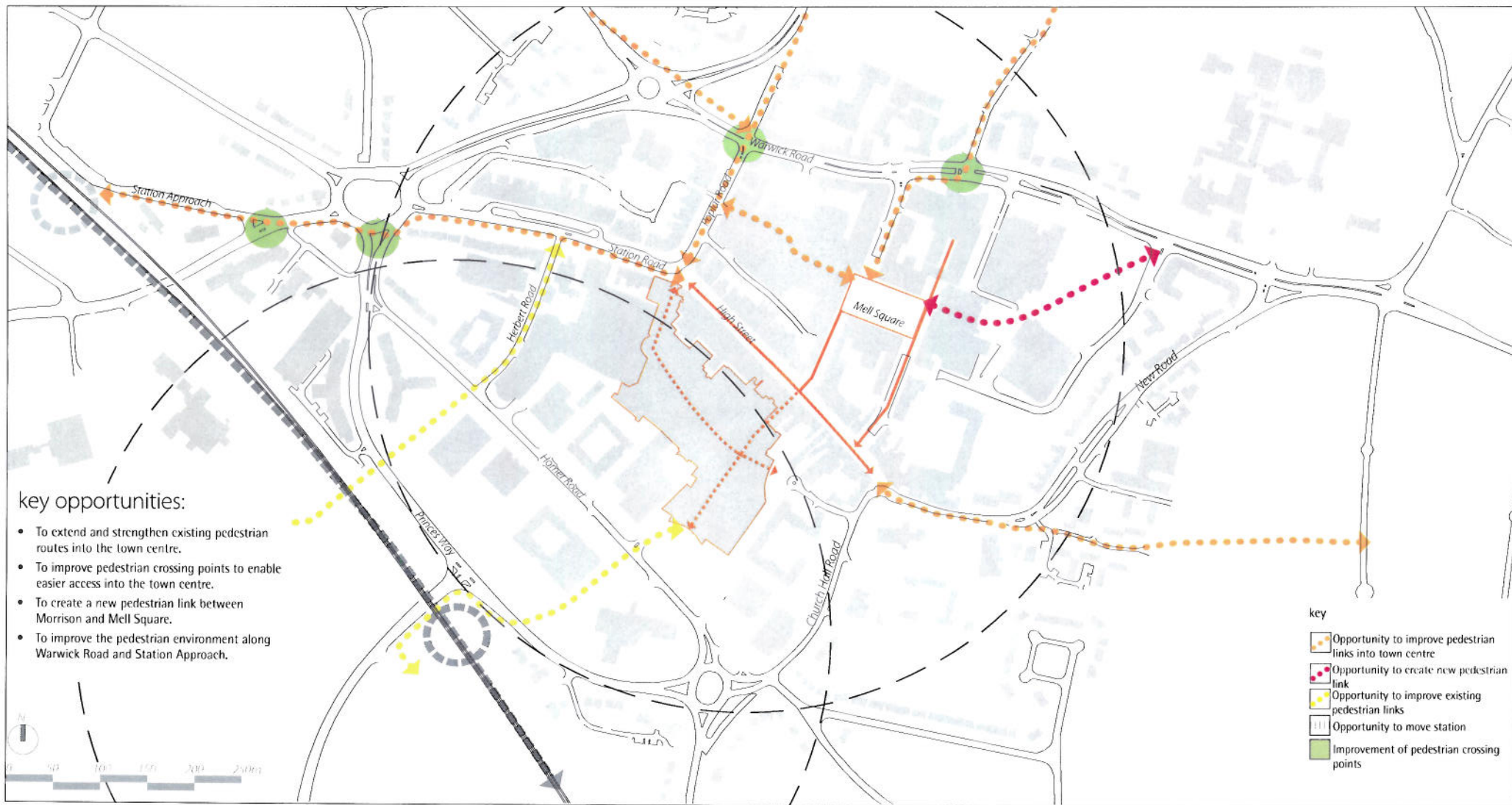


Fig. 16: Pedestrian environment: improvement opportunities

vehicular routes

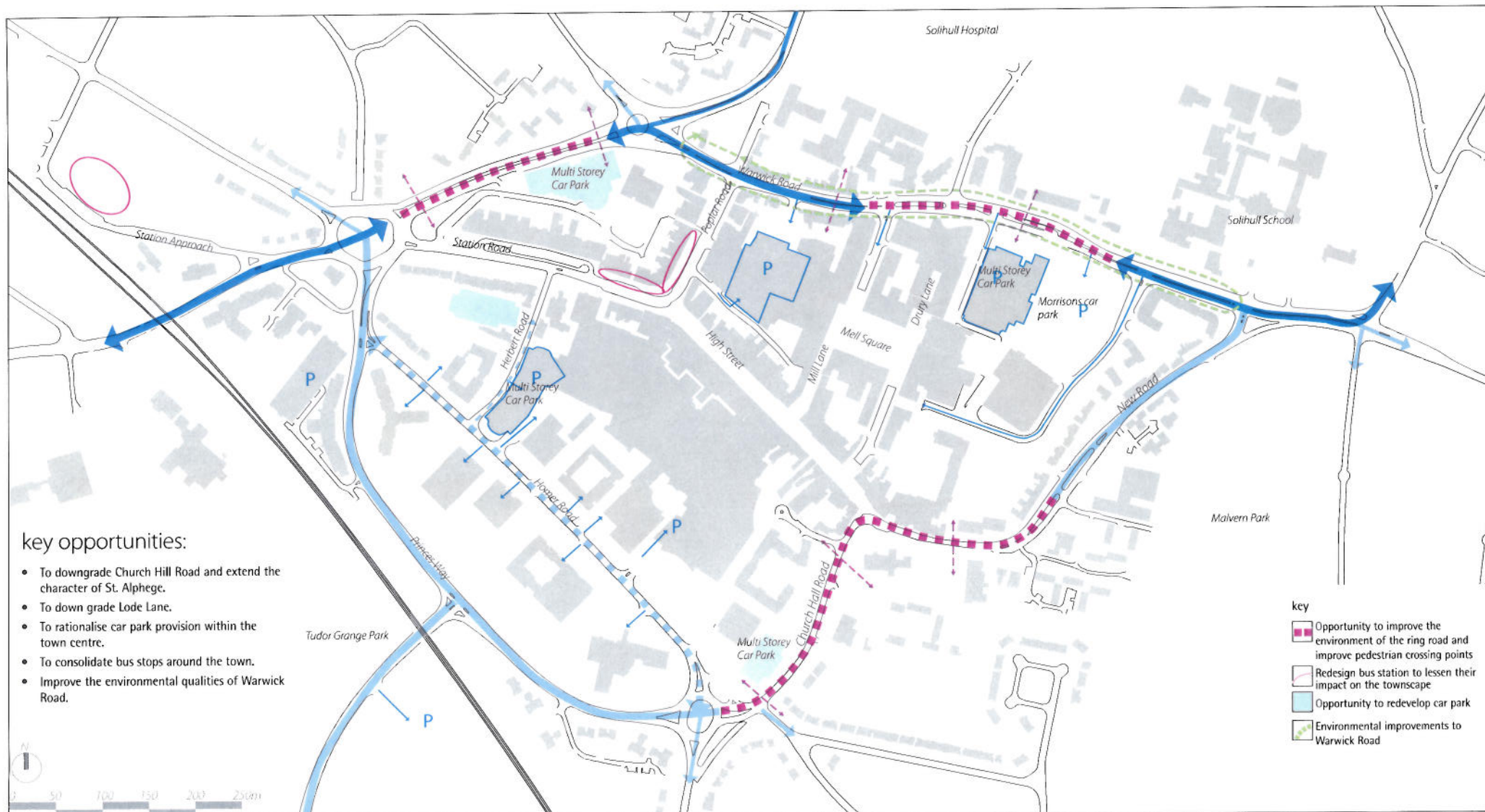


Fig. 17: Vehicular improvement opportunities

key opportunity sites

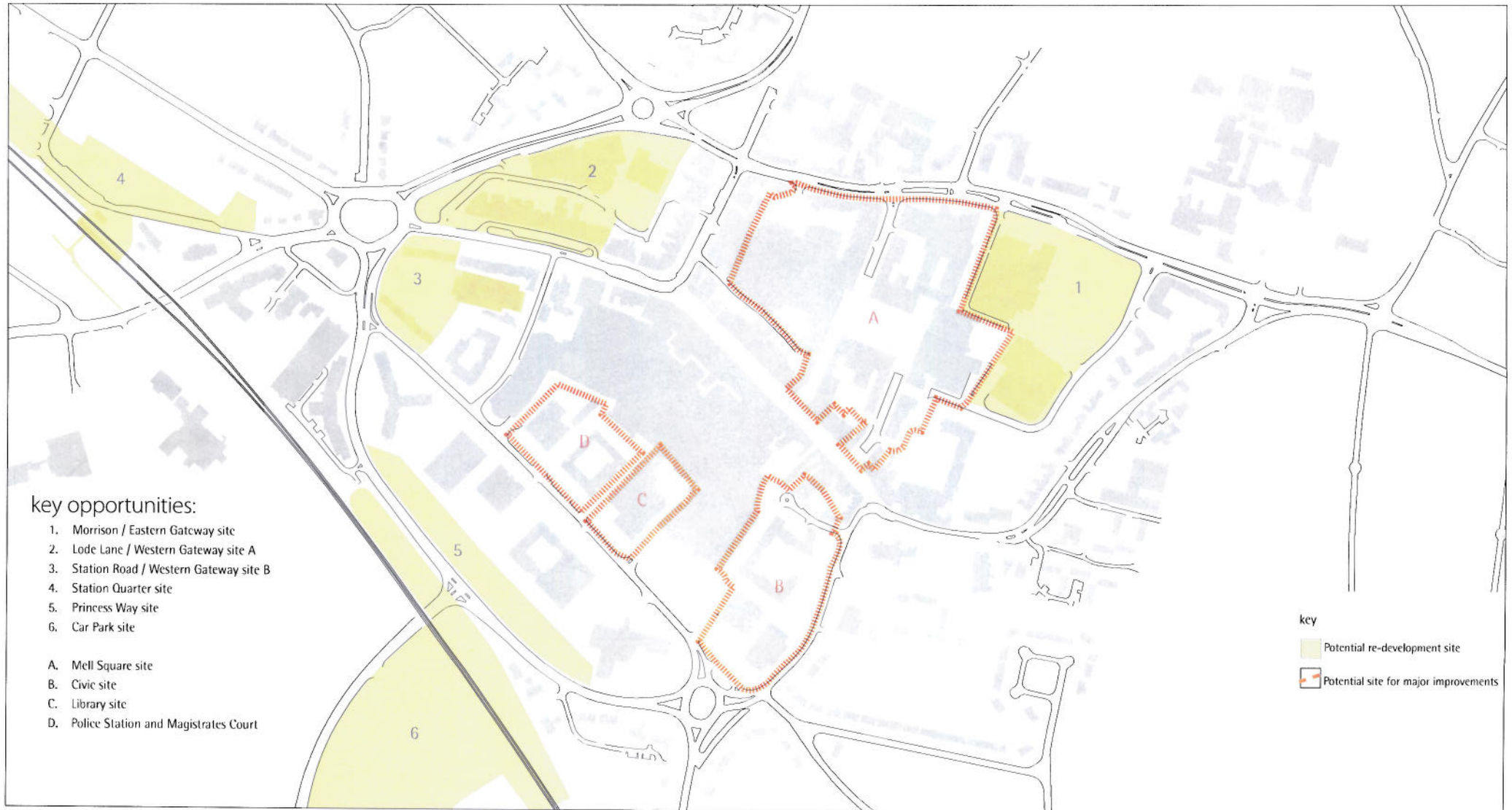




Fig. 18: Opportunity sites for further investigation



For more information, please contact Stephen Hollowood
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