

South Woodham Ferrers Character Area Study

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i. Introduction

This Character Area Study has been undertaken to support the development of the South Woodham Ferrers Neighbourhood Plan.

This study identifies the distinctive areas of character within South Woodham Ferrers and draws out the characteristic features of each. The study forms part of the evidence base to the Neighbourhood Plan, informing policies which seek to shape development in such a way that it positively responds to and enhances local character.

This study begins with looking at the historic development of the area as a New Town, studying how the original masterplan shaped development within South Woodham Ferrers.

The study then looks in detail at the character areas. Four character areas are identified:

1. Original Village Area

2. New Town Residential

3. Town Centre

4. Employment Areas

For each character area a set of “positive character features” has been identified. These are the features which should inform and guide development so as to enhance these attributes.

The study also identifies the risks to character in each of the areas and discerns opportunities to enhance the character. Development should respond to risks and opportunities in order to improve general character within its immediate context.

The study also considers the street hierarchy and typology of streets in South Woodham Ferrers. Built as stated in the original masterplan, the streets and movement networks are a key characteristic of the town and affect the ways in which people move around South Woodham Ferrers.

ii. Historic Development

In 1889, a new railway station opened in South Woodham Ferrers around which housing development, in the form of plotlands, took place. The first period of major growth in South Woodham Ferrers took place in the 1960s and early 1970s, focussed along the north-south spine of the Hullbridge Road. At this point the population of South Woodham Ferrers was approximately 4,500 people.

As a part of the New Town movement, Essex County Council led the large scale, comprehensive expansion of South Woodham Ferrers, planning this to be a 'new country town on the River Crouch.'

The first major stage of development resulting from the new town programme took place to the north of the town, with later development from the mid 1980s onwards taking place to the south of the railway line. The pace of development has been more limited since the turn of the century.

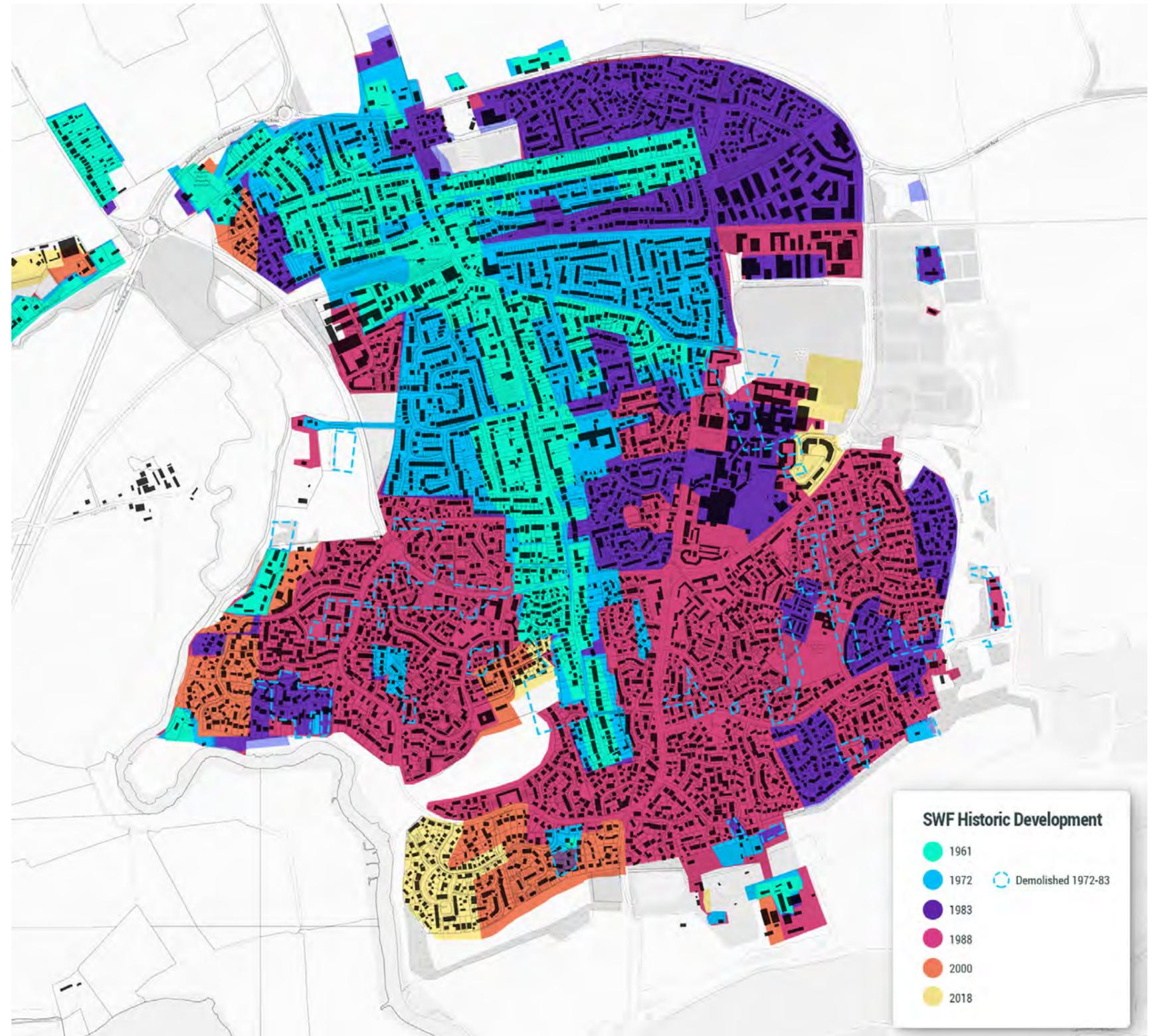


Fig ii.1: Historic development of South Woodham Ferrers.

South Woodham Ferrers: New Town

South Woodham Ferrers was designated for development in 1971 as a consequence of the 1970 Burns Report approving medium scale growth for Essex County. South Woodham Ferrers was developed as a 'new town' outside the formal legislation of the New Towns Act. Essex County Council led the development of South Woodham Ferrers, taking a proactive approach to land ownership by borrowing money to make land available for private housebuilding. Asda (Associated Dairies Ltd) played a central role in developing the central area.

The town was seen as an appropriate location for development as a result of its proximity to the local employment centres of Chelmsford, Basildon and Southend, in addition to convenience of the train link to London and the leisure potential of the town given its location on the River Crouch. A masterplan produced by Essex County Council proposed that South Woodham Ferrers expand to a population of 18,000, with building completed in a number of stages.

The development of South Woodham Ferrers is strongly related to the ground-breaking Essex Design Guide (ECC, 1973). This contained guidance that sought to provide traffic free public spaces, ensuring urban 'privacy by design', how architectural forms, landscaping and materials should respond to the local vernacular, and designing for winding street patterns to create intimate neighbourhoods with green courtyards and pathways to serve small scale housing. These principles are reflected in the urban morphology of South Woodham Ferrers as witnessed today.

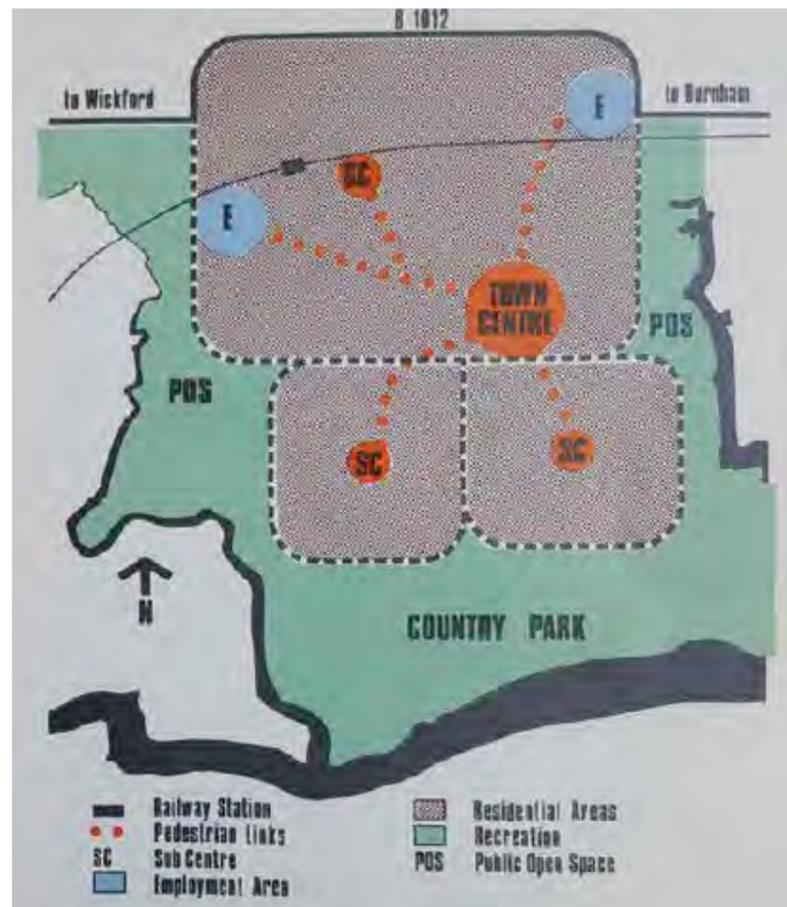


Fig ii.2: Original concept plan (South Woodham Ferrers New Town Masterplan, 1973)



Fig ii.3: Essex Design Guide (1973)

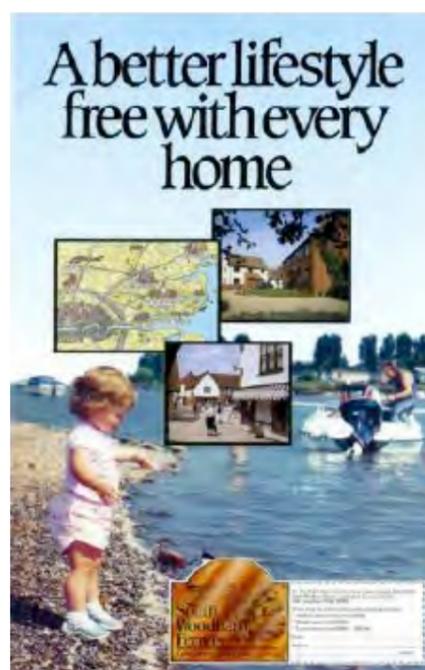


Fig ii.4: South Woodham Ferrers New Town advertisement, emphasising the lifestyle potential of the River Crouch

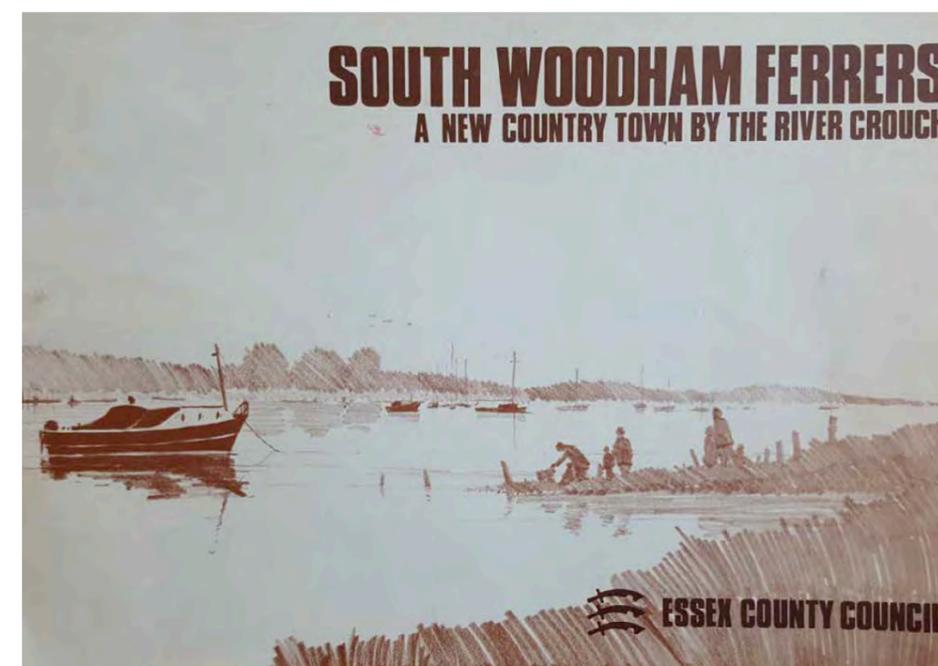


Fig ii.5: Original South Woodham Ferrers New Town Masterplan (1973)

The original Masterplan for South Woodham Ferrers defined eight objectives for the development of the New Town (shown in fig ii.5 to the right). Many of these remain relevant for good place making today. For example: providing the highest standards of design and layout, leading to the integration of the residential areas and the schools, public open space and other facilities; providing all the necessary public services to enable the project to go ahead; ensuring that existing development and the new housing areas will be integrated; and encouraging the right type of industrial development. Principles such as these could be integrated into aspirations for the South Woodham Ferrers Neighbourhood Plan.

The ubiquitous town wide character of South Woodham Ferrers stems from the aim in the original Masterplan to 'foster a more cohesive approach to the creation of urban form and the sense of place.' This town wide character was reinforced with the Restrictive Covenants that applied to household modifications in South Woodham Ferrers to ensure that the town cohered with its original design. The Restrictive Covenants required residents to seek approval from Essex County Council when making alterations to properties, such as installing roof lights, erecting chimneys and converting garages to living accommodation. The restrictive covenants were relaxed in 2003. The result is that South Woodham Ferrers retains a feeling of uniformity, which is perhaps the defining feature of the town.

Objectives

From the outset the aims of the County Council in developing this project have been clearly defined, and are as follows:-

- i) To make land available, quickly, for private residential development, in accordance with the wishes of the Government.
- ii) To provide a comprehensive planned development within the area, programmed and controlled by the local authorities.
- iii) To assemble the multiplicity of ownerships, both known and unknown within the area, to enable the commencement and continuation of development.
- iv) To provide the highest standard of design and layout, having regard to the economic use of land and the level of investment required, leading to the integration of the residential areas and the schools, public open space and other facilities.
- v) To meet the needs of all sections of the house building industry including the larger developers, local builders and those requiring single plots.
- vi) to provide all the necessary public services to enable the project to go ahead.
- vii) To ensure that the existing development and the new housing areas will be integrated and enjoy all the advantages of a small country town.
- viii) To encourage the right type of industrial development, and provide for the relocation of small industries displaced from other parts of the surrounding areas.

Fig ii.6: Objectives for the development of South Woodham Ferrers (South Woodham Ferrers New Town Masterplan, 1973)

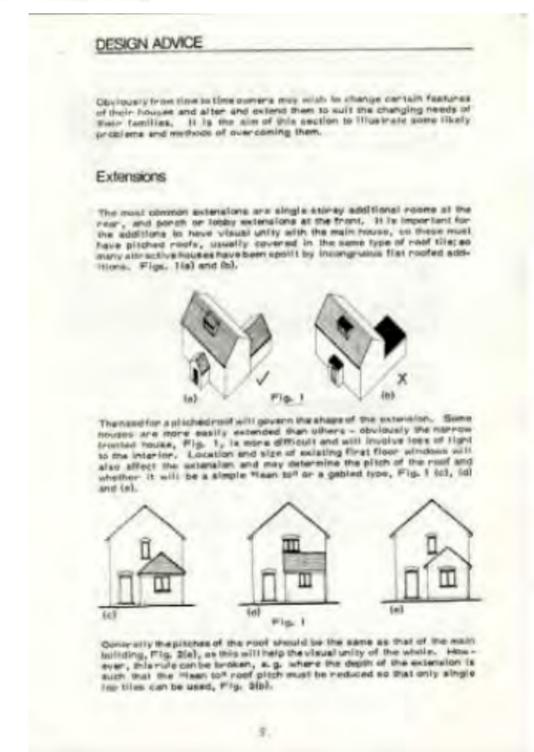
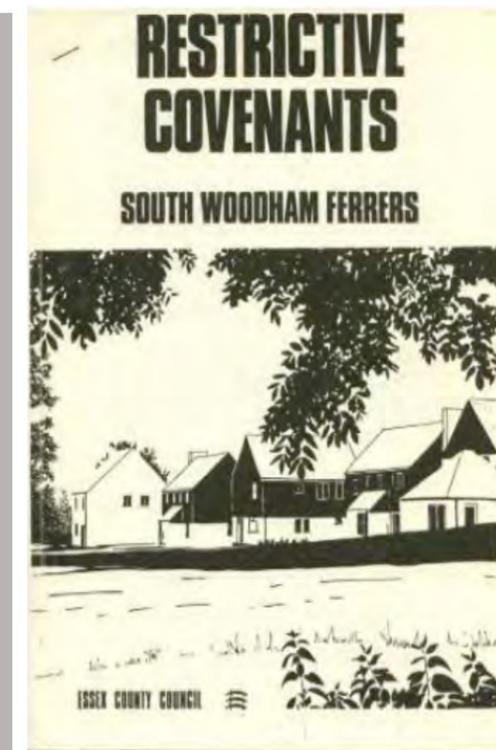


Fig ii.7: Restrictive Covenants for South Woodham Ferrers, ECC

The original concept for South Woodham Ferrers utilised culs-de-sac as the dominant street typology in residential development. This has resulted in a series of disconnected cells of development surrounded by the principle loop road network (Fig ii.8).

It is interesting to see how the masterplan for the neighbourhood concept (Fig. ii.9) has been reflected in the built form of the town: development cells are shown in grey and access points are shown with arrows.

The intention in the original masterplan was to have a centre with a school, a shop and a pub. In reality, the town centre provides the majority of facilities for the neighbourhoods.

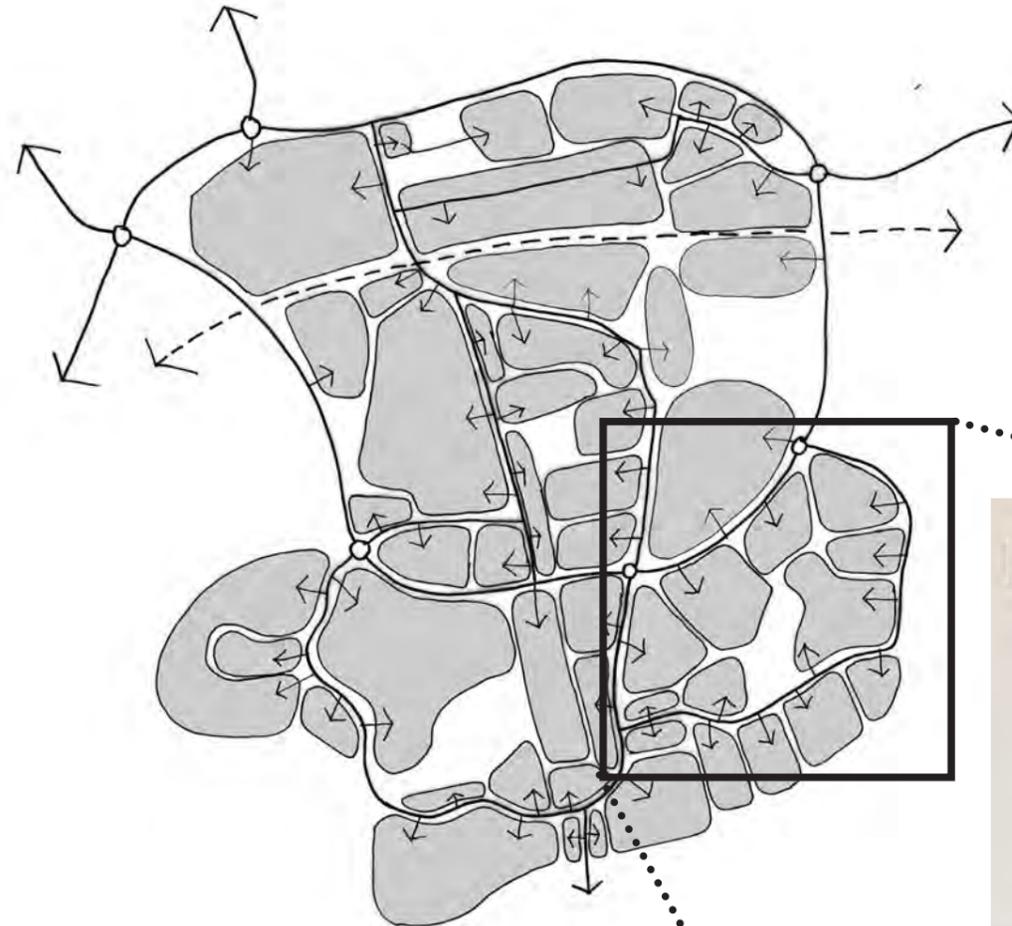


Fig ii.8: South Woodham Ferrers in 2019 reflects the original masterplan for the town.

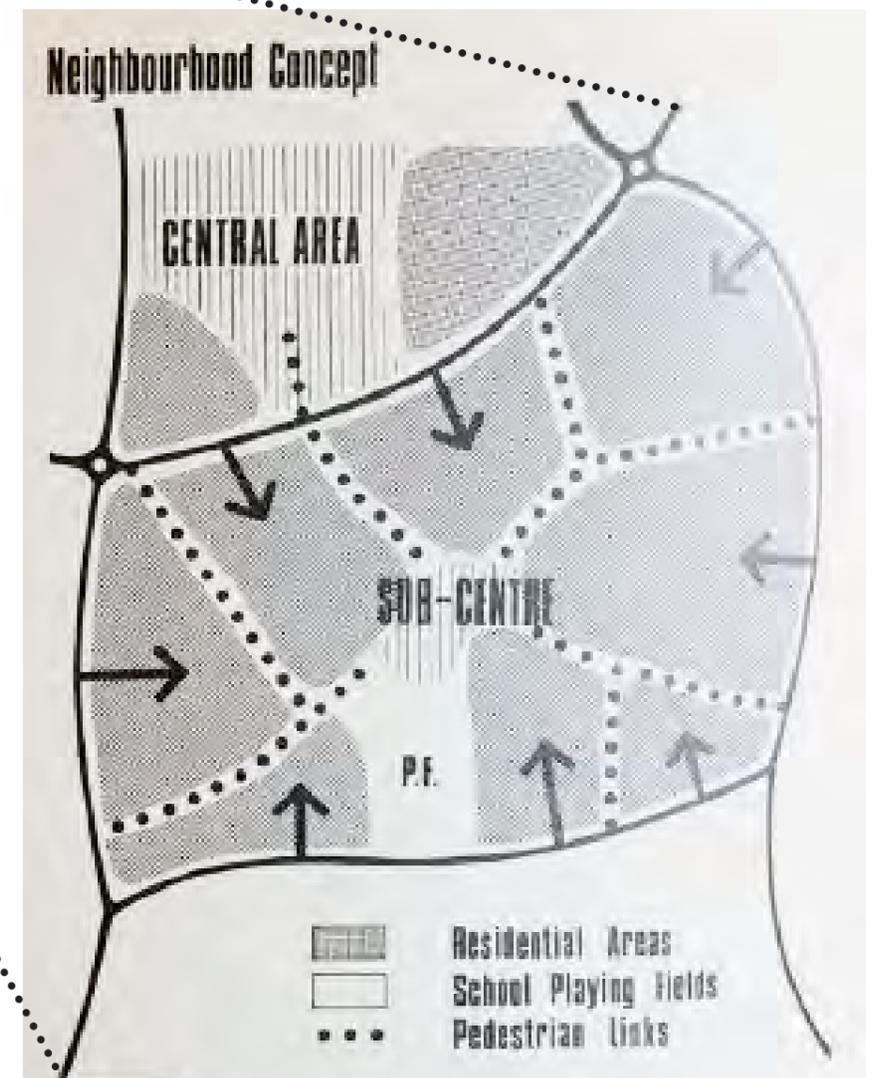


Fig ii.9: Original masterplan for the town, showing development cells and access points.

South Woodham Ferrers Town Centre was delivered alongside residential development between 1977 and 1978. An area of 6 ha was identified for the provision of commercial uses, car parks, a school, playing fields and some higher-density residential development.

Asda played a key role in the development of the town centre, occupying the large supermarket store in the town centre. They also built a furniture store and a number of other shop units in the town centre.

Although the Essex Design Guide stipulated guidance solely for residential areas, it was also applied to the town centre. In conformity with the guide, the Asda superstore utilises low-pitched roofs and materials such as hand-made clay roof tiles, Essex red stock facing brick, rendering and boarding. As noted by Bettley and Pevsner (2007) this superstore was the first of the many barn-style supermarkets across the UK.

Particularly visually dominant in the town centre is the weatherboarded clock tower, which overlooks the bandstand in the Queen Elizabeth II square. The buildings are built in the traditional Essex vernacular utilising brick, plaster and weather boarding.

Built in conformity to the original masterplan, the town centre is a mixed use development, with a school, library, church and retail provision.



Fig ii.10: Adaptation of Essex Design Guide principles in the town centre



Fig ii.11: Prominence of the clock tower

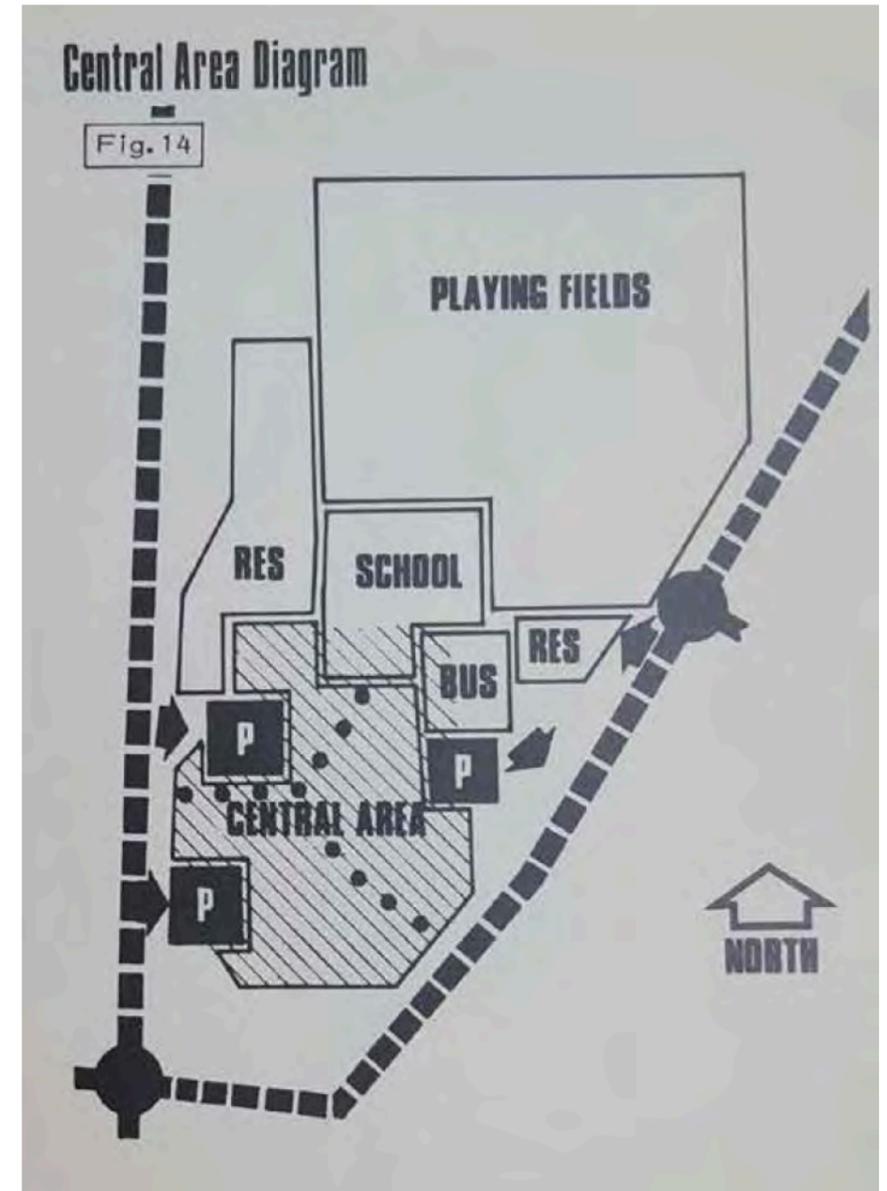


Fig ii.12: Original concept plan for the town centre



Fig ii.13: Barn style supermarket adapts the residential guidance in the Essex Design Guide to commercial development



iii. Character Areas

The historic development of South Woodham Ferrers has resulted in 4 areas of distinct character within the town:

1. Original Village Area (1960s- 70s)
2. New Town Residential (1970s- 2010s)
3. Town Centre
4. Employment Areas

The following sections will detail the key characteristics of each of the above character areas.

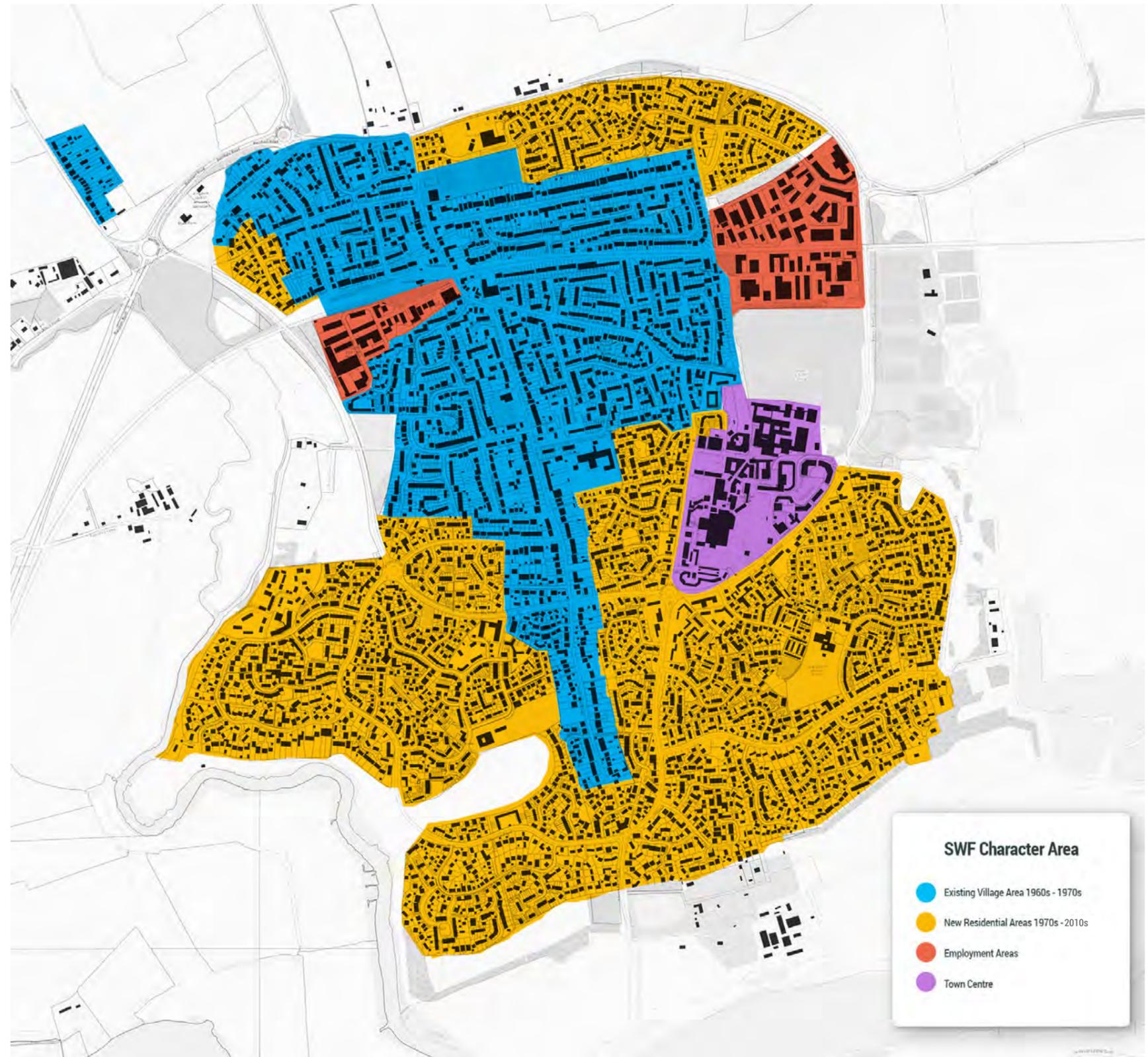


Fig iii.1: Character Areas South Woodham Ferrers

Character Area 1: Original Village Area

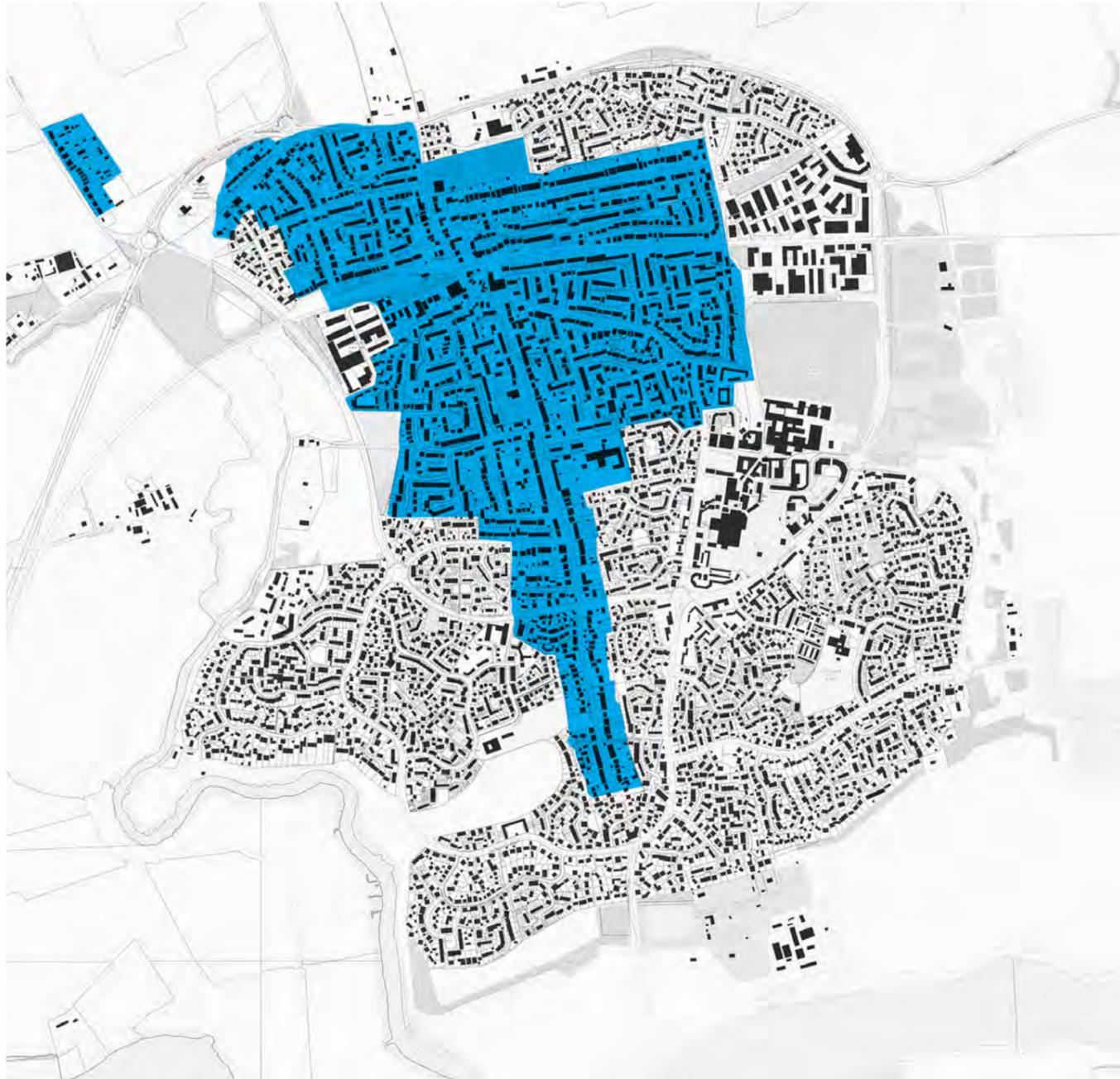


Fig 1.1: Original Village Character Area



Fig 1.2: Image showing the 1960s village hall in the original village area as shown in the South Woodham Ferrers Masterplan.



Fig 1.3: Image showing the village hall today.



Fig 1.4: Image showing the 1960s shops in the original village area as shown in the South Woodham Ferrers Masterplan.



Fig 1.5: Image showing the shopping area today.



Fig 1.6: The Railway Pub dating from 1889 contextualises the area in terms of the growth of the railway.



Fig 1.7: Original Essex plotlands development.



Fig 1.8: Housing dating from the 1960 & 70s is common in this area.



Fig 1.9: Housing like the above is characteristic of this area.



Fig 1.10: Aerial view illustrating the interconnected street network.

Positive Character Features

The interconnected streets make this area more pedestrian and cycling friendly than other parts of the town.

The presence of a number of older properties, such as The Railway Pub dating from 1889, gives a sense of the historic development of this area.

There are a small number of original plotlands development still evident in the area, which further contextualises this original village area.

Unifying character features of the built form include the colour palate, building materials and gabled roofs.

The area is generally well maintained.

Issues

The newer housing development to the west that separates this area from the town centre prevents direct pedestrian and bicycle access to the town centre.

Alleyway connections are not overlooked and as such do not feel safe.

There has been some paving over of front gardens to provide off street parking areas; this reduces the overall verdancy of the streetscene.

There is a lack of public open space.

Opportunities

The reintroduction of permeable surfaces into the area would help to maintain a verdant, suburban character.

The safety of the alleyway connections could be improved with better lighting and reciting housing to face or overlook the passageways.

Connecting the interspersed cycle paths would help to improve their utility.

Character Area 2: New Town Residential



Fig 2.1: New Town Residential Character Area



Fig 2.2: Model of the new town residential development in the original masterplan for South Woodham Ferrers.



Fig 2.3: This streetscene is characteristic of the new town development: short setbacks from the road, a cul-de-sac road, dominance of impermeable surfaces.



Fig 2.4: Views of the countryside beyond the town frame the suburban context. Residential areas also have access to high quality open spaces (looking west from Inchbonnie Road).



Fig 2.5: Paving over of front gardens reduces suburban verdancy.



Fig 2.6: The materials found in this streetview (Collingwood Road) are representative of the building materials used town wide.



Fig 2.7: Aerial view showing the network of cul-de-sac street network that is characteristic of the new residential development. Cul-de-sacs lack interconnections, which prevents walking and cycling.

Positive Character Features

Views towards the countryside, the River Crouch and Fenn Creek beyond the area frame the suburban context.

Residential areas are adjacent to high quality open spaces.

Unifying characteristics of the built form include orange, red and brindle brick, white render and different shades of weather boarding.

Houses tend to be set in smaller plots and have short or no setbacks from the road, particularly within cul-de-sacs; this distinguishes the area from the older, existing village area.

The area is generally well maintained.

Issues

The network of cul-de-sacs does not promote walking and cycling, as roads lack interconnections.

Some front gardens have been paved over with hard, impermeable surfaces. This reduces suburban verdancy.

Fast traffic and a lack of pedestrian crossings along Ferrers Road act as a barrier to movement from the residential developments to the open spaces.

The lack of an interconnected network of streets reduces connections from the residential areas to the open spaces and Town Centre.

Opportunities

The area is surrounded by high-quality open space, however the pedestrian and cycle connections to these areas could be improved.

Improvement of the disjointed cycle routes could strengthen connections to the town centre and open spaces.

Measures to slow down road speeds would improve residential character and improve pedestrian and cycling opportunities.

Increasing the verdancy of some of the areas, through "de-paving" and tree planting along roads, would strengthen the suburban character of the area.

Character Area 3: Town Centre



Fig 3.1: Town Centre Character Area



Fig 3.2: Aerial View of Town Centre Character Area



Fig 3.3: The Town Centre today.



Fig 3.4: The clock tower and bandstand are significant landmarks in the Town Centre. There are some views of the clock tower throughout the area.



Fig 3.5: The town centre has an intricate network of streets; the lack of long views reduces the navigability of the Town Centre as a whole.



Fig 3.6: The town centre lacks a sense of arrival as arrival points are dominated by car parking.



Fig 3.7: The Town Centre's distinctive built form: red roof tiles, white and coloured render, brick and medieval style octagonal roof corners.



Fig 3.8: This public space is dominated by a hard landscape. It lacks an obvious identity which affects its utility.



Fig 3.9: This green space lacks a specific role and function, often being used as overflow car parking. This space has the opportunity to enhance character.

Positive Character Features

The Town Centre has a distinctive built form that clearly distinguishes it from residential areas.

The Town Centre is very different to other town centres planned at a similar time in terms of its built form.

The Band Stand and Clock Tower are distinctive features and lend a local identity to the Town Centre.

There are a number of versatile 'market square' areas.

Inchbonnie Road is lined with grass. This improves the pedestrian walking environment.

Issues

There is a lack of a sense of arrival surrounding the Town Centre. This is in part due to the large car park outside Asda, and that there are no long views into the town centre from residential areas.

Key entry points to the town centre are dominated by car parks.

Car parking dominates a large proportion of the Town Centre, affecting overall walkability.

The intricate network of narrow streets is illegible, and affects the overall navigability of the Town Centre.

There are a lack of direct pedestrian and cycle connections to the Town Centre from residential areas.

There are a series of 'market squares' and open paved spaces. These spaces are competing and many lack a specific role or function.

The Town Centre lacks vibrancy as a result of the lack of diversity of uses.

The area lacks verdancy which accentuates the impact of traffic.

The Town Centre is in poor repair, including the hard and soft landscaped areas, surfaces and signage and street furniture.

Opportunities

Pedestrian and cycle connections through residential development should be improved to reduce the car-centric character of the Town Centre.

A sense of arrival at the Town Centre could be improved by reducing the dominance of car parking.

Long views into the Town Centre would help to signal the importance of the area.

Connections to the market squares within the Town Centre could be improved; this would help to define the role and function of the squares. This could be achieved by 'signalling' main routes within the area, such as with tree planting and more explicit signage.

Introducing residential and other uses in the town centre may increase vibrancy.

Increasing the offering within the town centre for all age groups may help to increase vitality.

The utility of the grassy open space to the west of the Town Centre along Inchbonnie Road could be improved.

Character Area 4: Employment Areas



Fig 4.1: Employment Character Areas



Fig 4.2: Image showing a visualisation of the street layout for the employment area as illustrated in the original masterplan.

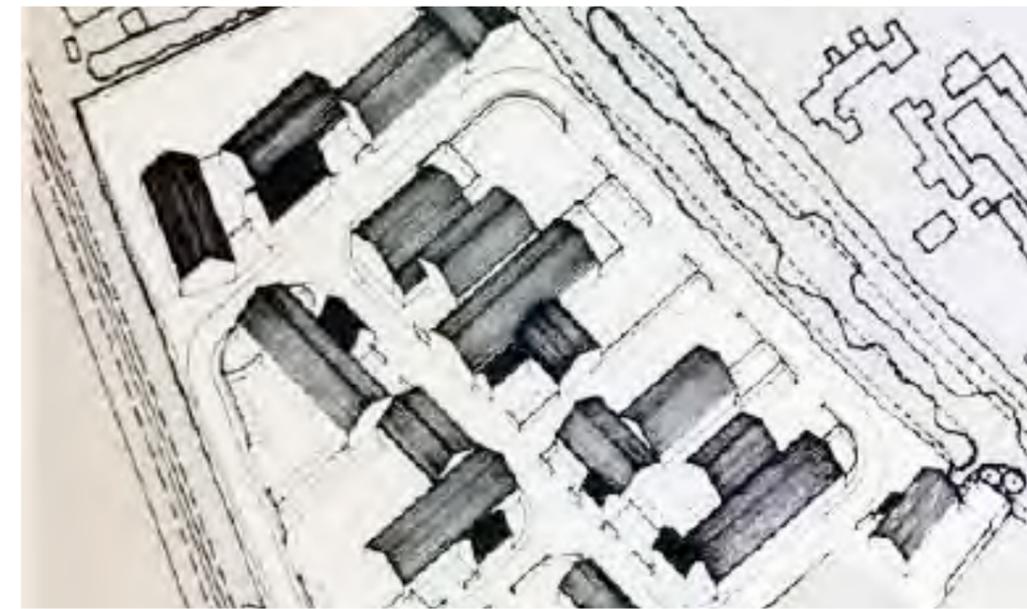


Fig 4.3: Image showing the suggested layout and typologies for the employment area as illustrated in the original masterplan.



Fig 4.4: Medium size barn style units utilising weatherboarding and brick characterise the employment area.



Fig 4.5: The car dominated nature of the employment area is not conducive to a walkable environment.



Fig 4.6: Blank frontages that do not overlook streets do not contribute to the street environment.



Fig 4.7: The Tap Room brewery is an active use in the area.



Fig 4.8: Large hard surface areas provide access to employment areas.



Fig 4.9: Hard landscapes dominate. Introducing some greening would help to soften the landscape.

Positive Character Features

The built form and materials cohere with adjacent residential areas.

The industries located in the employment areas have a minimal impact on residential amenity. This is partly as a result of the road network, which directly connects with main routes, reducing through traffic through residential streets.

The Tap Room bar attached to the brewery creates a connection with the adjacent residential areas.

Issues

The dominant barn style typology has blank walls that do not overlook streets.

The car dominated nature of the employment area is not conducive to a walkable environment.

There is a lack of car parking provision, which results in many cars being parked on the street.

Impermeable surfaces dominate in this area.

There is a lack of street greening.

Opportunities

Some active frontages, similar to the Tap Room, along the edges of the employment areas could introduce connections between residential and commercial areas.

Verdancy could be introduced along roads to improve the walking environment for pedestrians.

Walking and cycling connections to the other parts of the town may help to reduce the dominance of vehicles in this area.

Installing windows that overlook streets may help to improve the street environment, especially in regards to walking.

iv. Street Typologies

The street network, which closely follows the masterplan for the town, shapes the fabric of the town and the way that people move around.

The primary street network in South Woodham Ferrers comprises the “ring road” formed by Ferrers Road, and to the north of the town. These form the main vehicular routes in and out of the town and connect with a series of “main estate roads” which provide access to residential areas. Many of the streets in the residential areas take the form of culs-de-sac, particularly in the development from the 1970s onwards.

The culs-de-sac are clearly distinguishable from the more linear street patterns that define the original village area.

There is an extensive network of footpaths in South Woodham Ferrers, which link the culs-de-sac. The footpaths are supplemented by a number of Public Rights of Way, providing routes for walking within the surrounding green spaces. However, there are limited connections between the Public Rights of Way and the footpath network.

The character of the different street types are discussed further overleaf.

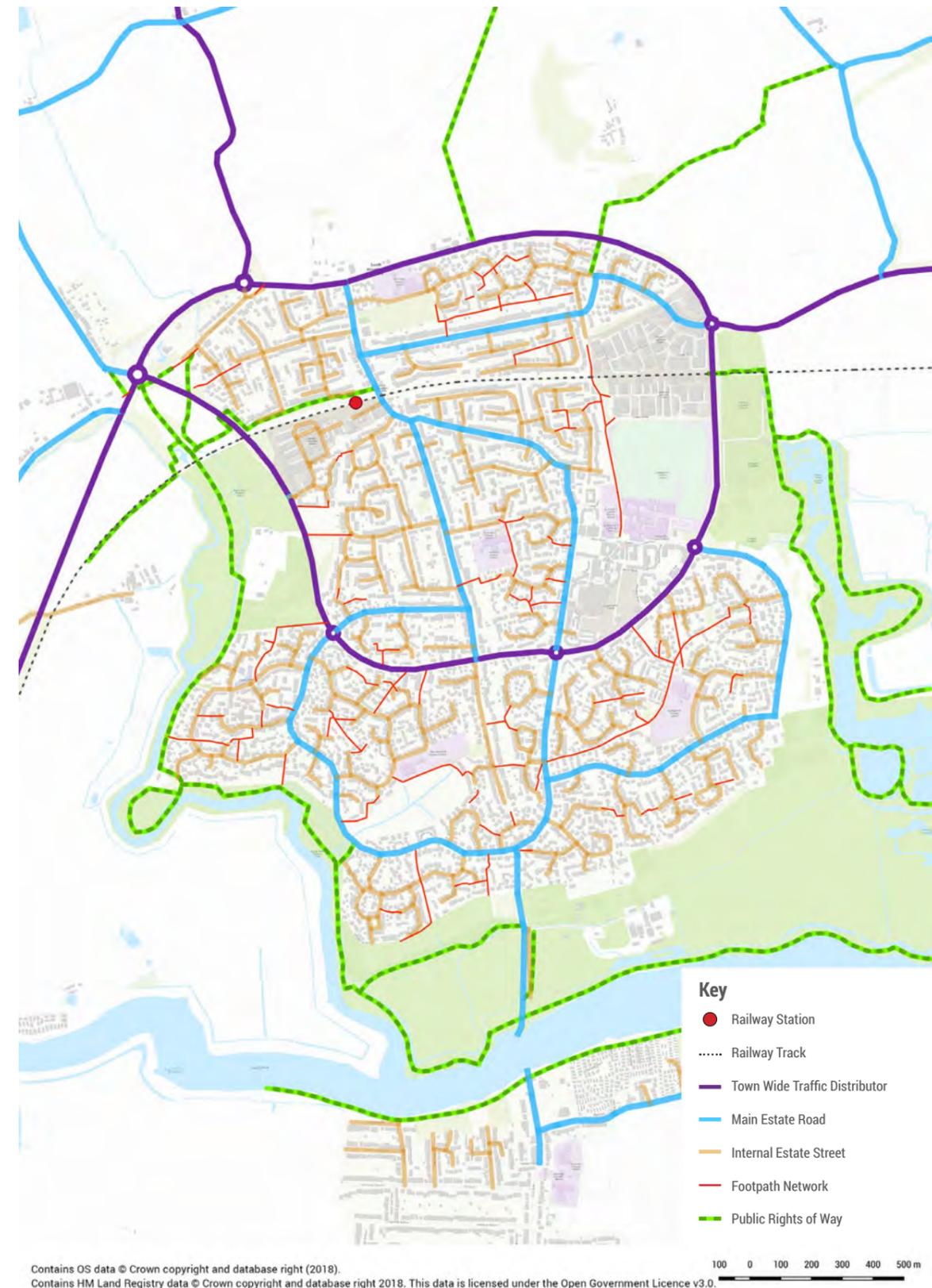


Fig iv.1: Street network of South Woodham Ferrers

a) Town wide traffic distributor



Fig a.1: There is a lack of frontages overlooking the road.



Fig a.2: Verdant hedgerows along Ferrers Road reinforce suburban character.



Fig a.3: Wide street width encourages fast moving traffic



Fig a.4: There is a lack of pedestrian crossing points, which makes walking and cycling difficult.

b) Main estate road



Fig b.1: Greenery is integrated into the street.



Fig b.2: Frontages overlook the road.



Fig b.3: Wide pavements are conducive to walking and cycling.



Fig b.4: High road speeds are a result of the wide, unobstructed road design.

Positive Character Features

Facilitates easy access by car into and out of the town.

Verdant roadside hedgerows along Burnham Road and the eastern and western sides of Ferrers Road reinforce suburban character.

Issues

The street width encourages fast moving traffic which creates a barrier to movement and is a safety risk.

A lack of street frontages reinforces the perception that the streets are for vehicles, not people.

Lack of pedestrian crossing points.

Lack of continuous cycle paths.

Narrow pavements discourage walking.

Opportunities

Introduce greening along the southern part of Ferrers Road through planting and landscaping.

Slow traffic through speed limits and through the design of streets.

Create new frontages that look onto the road.

Create new crossing points.

Explore the opportunity for installing cycle paths.

Positive Character Features

The presence of greenery enhances suburban character.

Frontages overlook roads creating a sense of place.

Pavements are wide, which is conducive to walking and cycling.

The open nature of the street, including integration of green space, gives a sense of place.

Issues

Some roads lack greenery, which undermines the suburban character.

High road speeds associated with road design undermines walking and cycling conditions.

Lack of pedestrian crossing points.

Lack of continuous cycle paths.

Opportunities

Integrate cycle provision.

A similar road arrangement should be encouraged in the new growth area.

c) Internal estate street



Fig c.1: Hard landscapes predominate; there is a lack of greenery.



Fig c.2: Short setbacks enclose the street, creating a sense of place.



Fig c.3: Cul-de-sac culminate in dead ends and as such lack through connectivity.



Fig c.4: On-street parking increases street clutter and affects walkability.

d) Pedestrian routes

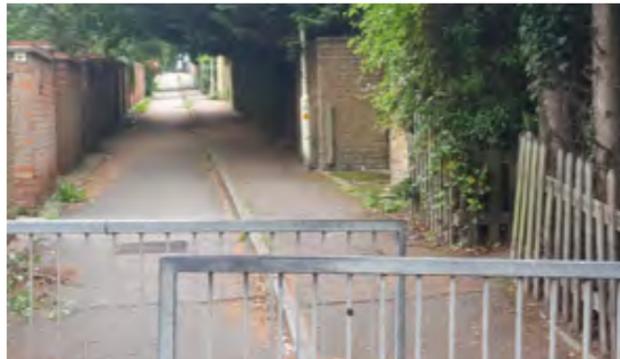


Fig d.1: Footpaths are not overlooked.



Fig d.2: Footpaths are often not lit, affecting their safety and use at night.



Fig d.3: Some footpaths are poorly maintained.



Fig d.4: Graffiti on alleyway wall.

Positive Character Features

The cul-de-sac street arrangement was designed in the original masterplan to try and create intimate spaces and interesting arrangements of homes.

Short setbacks from the street edge enclose the street, creating a sense of place.

Issues

Limited greenery detracts from suburban character.

On-street parking increases clutter dominating the street environment and impacting on the walkability of the area.

Lack of through connectivity discourages walking and cycling.

Limited places for children to play.

Opportunities

Introduce greenery through 'Homezone' style concept.

Define areas of parking.

Explore options that make streets safer for children to play in.

Positive Character Features

Footpaths allow quicker and more convenient pedestrian connections between residential areas, schools and the Town Centre.

Issues

Footpaths are not overlooked and many are indirect, leading to concerns about personal safety.

Lack of lighting compromises the use of the alleyways at night.

Graffiti is present on some of the walls.

Opportunities

Open up routes with frontages wherever possible.

Install better lighting to increase safety.

Explore potential for the use of other, more direct routes.

Re-use "redundant" routes for other activities, such as community gardens.

v. Conclusion

This chapter brings the study together, summarising the positive features that should be used to influence future development, issues that detract from the character and should be avoided, and the opportunities that exist for potential intervention to enhance character.

Positive Character Features

The development of South Woodham Ferrers has been strongly defined by the legacy of the Essex Design Guide. This has resulted in the creation of the distinctive built form character, which is unique to South Woodham Ferrers.

This distinctive built form extends to the Town Centre. The clock tower and band stand lend a local identity to the Town Centre.

The Town Centre suffers from a lack of vitality, potentially due to the lack of a mix of retail uses. However, the centre has schools, some retail and residential development, and as such it has the potential to thrive if issues are addressed.

The small nature of the South Woodham Ferrers and the extensive network of footpaths makes walking and cycling a realistic option for movement around the town.

The area has a number of high quality green spaces that are easily accessible to residents. These spaces are intrinsic to the suburban character of South Woodham Ferrers.

Issues

The Town Centre lacks the mix of uses which would help in introducing vitality into the Town Centre at different times of the day.

Movement throughout the town is also made difficult by the network of culs-de-sac in residential areas, which lack interconnections. Where interconnections exist, they are often indirect or lack a sense of safety. The lack of interconnections has a particularly problematic influence on the Town Centre.

Vehicles are prioritised over pedestrians and cyclists, which makes these modes of travel unattractive to many. High speed limits and large volumes of traffic affect the safety of crossing roads and, as a result, the access to open space.

Hard landscapes dominate, however South Woodham Ferrers was originally planned as a 'riverside country town'. Throughout South Woodham Ferrers there is no real sense of the proximity to the high quality blue space.

Opportunities

Changes that occur in the future should respond to the unique built form character of South Woodham Ferrers and aim to emphasise the South Woodham Ferrers vernacular. Development should integrate the positive features of this, as outlined in this study.

The town has a number of quality green spaces and is in close proximity to the River Crouch. Proximity to such features is a real strength of the town and should be a key feature in any development moving forward. Linkages to such features would help in integrating green and blue space into the town in a more coherent way.

Walking and cycling could be promoted through restructuring the traffic hierarchy to prioritise active travel over vehicular traffic. Measures to slow traffic, introduce greening and introduce frontages may help to achieve the re-prioritising of pedestrians. Linkages between streets should be integrated into any future development.

