

# ENHANCEMENT WORKS TO CHURCH STREET ATHLONE

## Design Statement

November 2016







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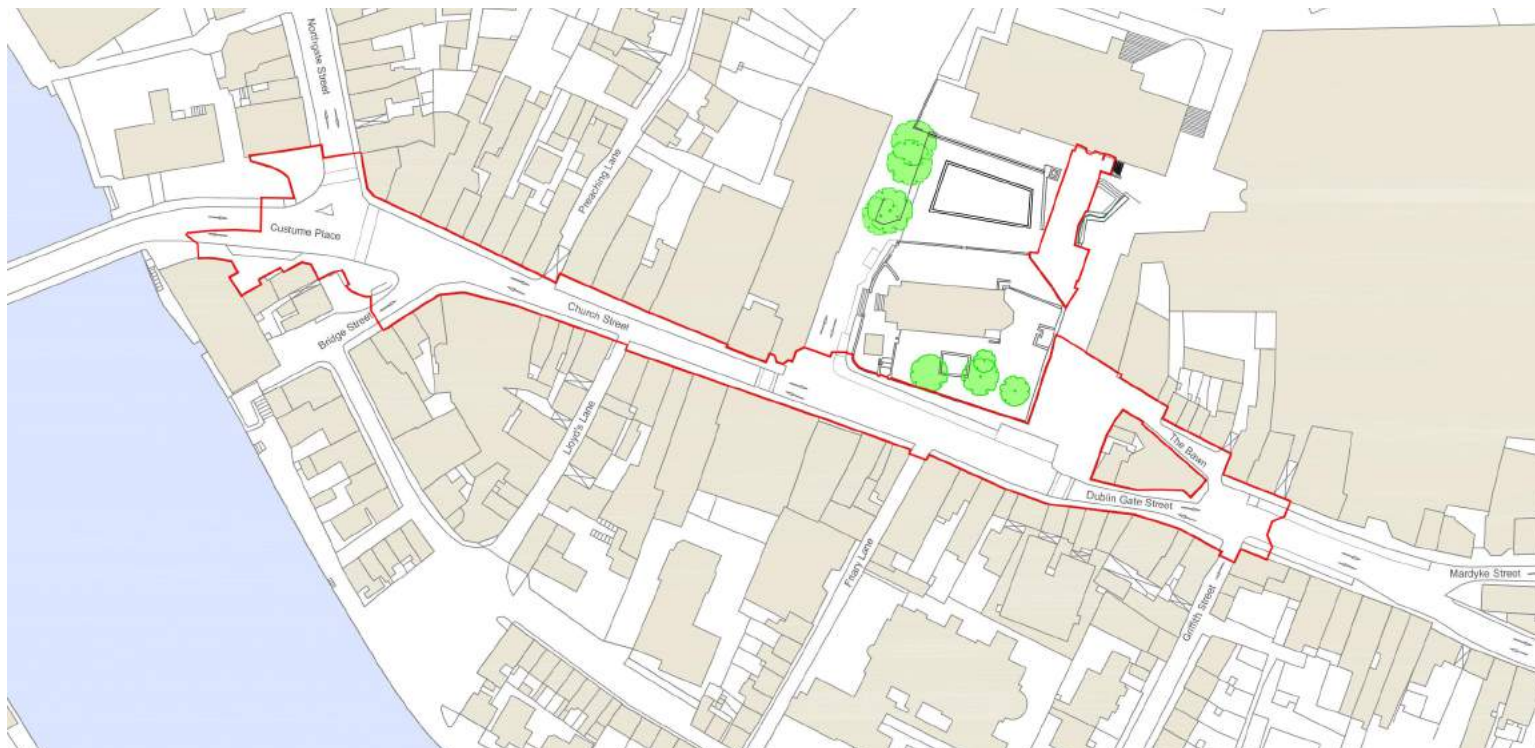




# 1. Background and Context



Historical 6" Map (Church Street 1835)



Project extents

## 1.1 Historical Context

The town of Athlone (in Irish Áth Luain, meaning 'The ford of Lúain') developed as the main crossing point on the Shannon river, connecting the provinces of Connacht and Leinster. It originated as an Anglo-Norman settlement built around a castle for King John in 1210. From the mid-13th century Athlone was an important walled town, comprising numerous defensive structures that included castles, medieval bridges and a motte and bailey.

The town evolved around both sides of the river in a compact urban form, linked by an impressive stone bridge. The medieval urban grain remains largely intact, characterised by narrow streets that radiate from the historical focal points of the town, enclosing vistas of the river and providing a distinctive sense of place. The historic core of Athlone remains one of the best examples of such street patterns and settlement forms in the country.

Church Street comprises the main thoroughfare of the historic core, linking the settlement areas either side of the river and the large scale heritage features such as Custume Barracks, the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, and the Castle. It remains the principal retail street of Athlone and contributes much to the vitality and interest of the town centre.

## 1.2 Existing Situation

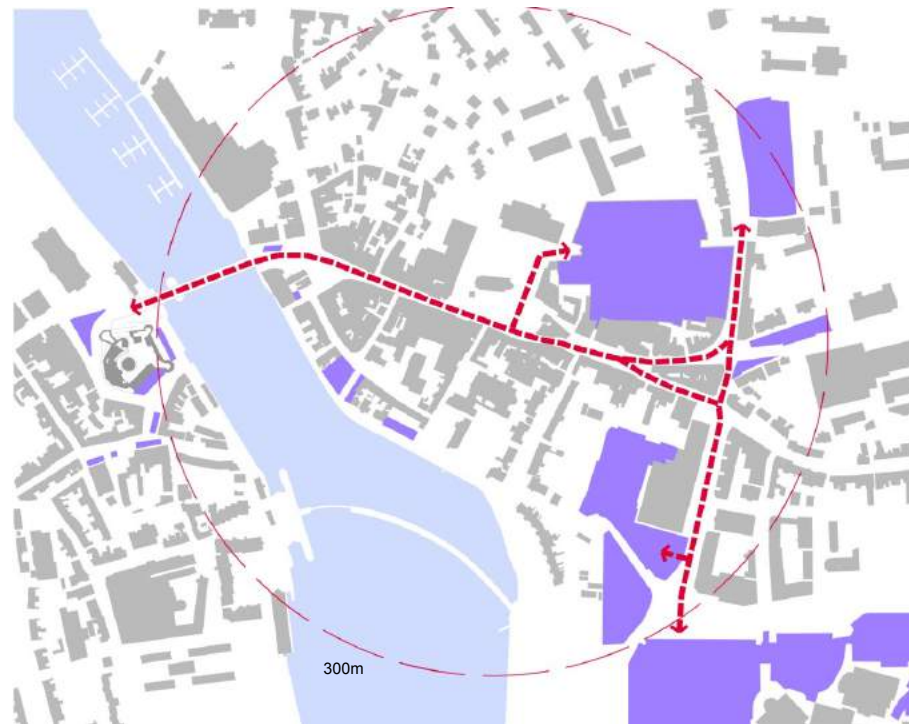
Church Street is currently a narrow two-way thoroughfare, extending from Griffith Street in the east to Custume Place in the west (approximately 250m in length). Although of considerable townscape character, Church Street is a major through route, dominated by vehicular traffic and movements to the detriment of pedestrians and the function of the street generally.

### 1.2.1 Main Strengths

- Busy commercial street with traditional character, linking the two historic parts of the town.
- Convenient links to major town centre car parks (approx. 2,600 spaces), via Gleeson Street and John Broderick Street.
- Well-defined by heritage buildings.
- Several traditional shop fronts bring richness and character to the townscape.
- Mostly independent shops add interest and variety.
- Good selection of cafés and pubs.
- Full range of facilities within 300m of the centre of Church Street.



# 1. Background and Context



Location of Church Street in relation to other town centre facilities

## 1.2.2 Main Weaknesses

- Dominated by high traffic flows during most times.
- Two-way flow increases vehicle priority and detracts from pedestrian experience.
- Poor pedestrian environment – clutter, noise and air pollution
- Few pedestrian crossing opportunities.
- Does not meet current standards for making streets safer and more attractive places for all users.
- Available width between building frontages is insufficient for existing traffic volume.
- Generally narrow footpaths with two very narrow pinch-points.
- Un-safe pedestrian environment, especially for more vulnerable users (including the mobility impaired, the elderly and the young).
- Not conducive for browsing or social interaction.
- Limited space for over-spill activities – e.g. cafés and outdoor displays.
- Relatively high level of vacant properties (18% at time of survey).

## 1.2.3 Rationale for Proposal

It is recognised that a substantial street enhancement scheme is required to address the deficiencies of Church Street in terms of pedestrians, other vulnerable road users, economic regeneration and links from the historic Shannon area to the modern Civic Square and Shopping Centre.

The proposed enhancement works form part of a larger initiative encompassing much of the town centre, of which some sections have already been completed, such as the Civic Square, around the Castle, and in the vicinity of the Athlone Town Centre and Sheraton Hotel.

## Benefits to be gained

Case study evidence suggests that such investment in the public realm can:

- Boost footfall and trading by providing an attractive, more inclusive and safer pedestrian environment.
- Provide a competitive return compared to other transport projects.
- Support existing businesses and promote investor confidence in an area.
- Attract more visitors and increase tourism.
- Enhance people's perceptions of attractiveness of an area, contributing towards their quality of life and influencing where they shop.
- Enhance overall image and community pride.

## 1.3 Planning Context

National Planning Policy, which transcends downwards to Regional and Local Policy, seeks to achieve a hierarchy of towns, linked by efficient transport networks and underpinned by economic activity and investment.

In the context of Athlone, the following policy documents are applicable:

### 1.3.1 National Policy

#### ***Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets, Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport (DMURS) 2013***

This National Guidance document aims to end the practice of designing streets as traffic corridors, and instead focus on the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users. The Manual sets out design guidance and standards for constructing new and reconfiguring existing urban roads and streets in Ireland, incorporating good planning and design practice and focus on the public realm. It also outlines practical design measures to encourage more sustainable travel patterns in urban areas.

#### ***Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future - A new Transport Policy for Ireland 2009-2020***

Smarter Travel sets out how the vision of a sustainable travel and transport system can be achieved. The policy recognises the vital importance of continued investment in transport to ensure an efficient economy and continued social development. The five key goals of this policy are as follows: (i) to reduce overall travel demand, (ii) to maximise the efficiency of the transport network, (iii) to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, (iv) to reduce transport emissions and (v) to improve accessibility to transport.

### 1.3.2 Regional Policy

#### ***Regional Planning Guidelines for the Midlands Region 2010-2022***

The Regional Guidelines identify Athlone as a Gateway Town (forming part of the Midlands Linked Gateway). The Guidelines also state that it is policy “...to promote the identification, regeneration and reuse of appropriate areas in order to encourage the enhancement of the socio-economic status of the region” (Policy EP27 of the RPGs).

### 1.3.3 Local Policy

#### ***Westmeath County Development Plan 2014-2020***

The Development Plan includes an overarching objective for Athlone being a Gateway Town, “...to expand and strengthen the economic base and the Town Centre’s identity and character, in keeping with its status as a linked gateway town”.



Church Street from Custume Place



# 1. Background and Context



Church Street central section



Pedestrian crossing to Civic Square



Dublin Gate Street pinch-point at east end

## Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020

The proposed town centre enhancement scheme is consistent with the strategic aims of the Town Development Plan, which include:

- (i) *To continue to respect the primacy of the Town Centre including prioritising the improvement and enhancement of the public realm.*
- (ii) *To continue to support the consolidation and expansion of retailing in the Town Centre. Aligned to this is the objective to prioritise the improvement and enhancement of the public realm, as a support to the vibrant retail sector.*

Other Aims include:

*P-RET12: To pursue all avenues of funding to secure resources for the continued enhancement, renewal and regeneration of the public realm of the town centre.*

*The Councils aim to achieve the following in relation to Urban Design in the town:*

- *To promote quality of the public realm: public spaces and routes that are attractive, safe, uncluttered and work effectively for all in society, including disabled and elderly people.*
- *To promote ease of movement: accessibility and local permeability; by making places that connect with each other and are easy to move through, putting people before traffic and integrating land uses and transport.*

*P-AC1 : To create an environment in the town centre in which vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians can safely co-exist and share public space.*

*P-AC2: To minimise vehicular traffic volumes in the town centre through traffic management measures.*

## Green Routes Strategy

The Town Council adopted a Green Routes Strategy for Athlone in 2011, the aim of which is to encourage alternative forms of transport within the town and environs, such as walking and cycling, rather than the private car, thereby reducing congestion within the town centre and promoting healthier lifestyles. The goals which form the basis of the strategy are:

- *To promote safe and sustainable alternative modes of travel to the private car within the towns and its environs and reduce reliance on the private car.*
- *To reduce congestion in the Town Centre.*
- *To reduce pressure on the environment thereby improving health and increasing tourism in the town and its environs.*

## 1.3.4 Architectural Conservation Area

The proposed enhancement works lie within the town centre Architectural Conservation Area (ACA). The designation applies to a place, area, group of structures or townscape that is of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest or value, or contributes to the appreciation of protected structures which may be included in a Development Plan where it is considered necessary to preserve its character.

## 1.4 Project Objectives

The overall aim is to help make the core of Athlone town a more attractive destination where people will want to live, work, visit, shop and socialise, supporting a diversity of uses and activities during the day, evening and night, in a safe and inclusive environment.

In relation to Church Street, the objectives that have been adopted to support this aim are:

- To deliver enhancement works that help revitalise and improve the urban environment of the street.
- To achieve a high quality public realm that is attractive, safe, uncluttered and works effectively for all users, including the mobility impaired, the elderly and the young.
- To ensure ease of movement for all users of the street, putting people before traffic while allowing for essential vehicle movements, taxis and service vehicles in a balanced manner.
- To develop suitable proposals that are based on best practice design and guidance, in particular the Design Manual for Urban Roads Streets.
- To promote legibility through the enhancement of recognisable routes, junctions and landmarks that help people access the street and find their way around to other attractions.
- To introduce a coordinated range of high quality surface materials, street furniture, signage and lighting that is robust, attractive, easy to maintain, and complimentary to the ACA designation of the town centre.
- To create places along the street where people can congregate, socialise and pass the time of day.



## 2. Design Proposals



### 2. Design Proposals

The town centre enhancement scheme encompasses proposals to improve Church Street, both aesthetically and also in terms of accessibility with a primary focus on pedestrians over traffic, ensuring the sustained and future growth of the town.

#### 2.1 Traffic Management Overview

It is generally recognised that traffic is currently the major influence on the use and appearance of Church Street. The first stage of the Design Development therefore involved the identification of a number of alternative public realm/traffic management solutions for Church Street and the surrounding town centre network. These options comprised:

- Option A - Retain two-way traffic flow on Church Street
- Option B - Introduce one-way traffic flow, eastbound on Church Street
- Option C - Introduce one-way traffic flow, westbound on Church Street
- Option D - Pedestrianisation of Church Street

In order to assess the local impact of the possible solutions, a review of the existing transport and traffic conditions within the vicinity of Church Street was also undertaken, together with a localised traffic modelling study of the following key junctions:

- Junction 1 - Northgate Street/Church Street/Custume Place
- Junction 2 - Northgate Street/Hospital Exit/Coosan Point Road/Southern Station Road
- Junction 3 - Ballymahon Road/Grace Park Road/Gleeson Street/The Crescent
- Junction 4 - Pump Lane/Irishtown/John Broderick Street/Sean Costello Street

For further details on this proposal refer 'Traffic Assessment Technical Summary', SYSTRA (October 2016).

An appraisal framework was developed which assessed the public realm/traffic management options in order to help identify the preferred enhancement solution for Church Street. The overall findings of the Traffic Assessment are summarised as:

#### **Option A - Retain two-way traffic flow on Church Street**

- No reduction to traffic volume
- Limited improvement to pedestrian areas
- No additional 'staying space'
- Visibility impeded by narrow footways and traffic
- Traffic on Church Street acts as barrier
- Limited provision for mobility impaired

#### **Option B - One-way traffic flow, eastbound on Church Street**

- Significant decrease in traffic volume
- Widened footpaths
- Existing staying opportunities improved
- Improved visibility
- Church Street less of a barrier allowing greater connectivity
- Improved access for mobility impaired

#### **Option C - One-way traffic flow, westbound on Church Street**

- Significant reduction in traffic volume
- Widened footpaths
- Additional and improved staying places
- Improved visibility
- Improved access for mobility impaired

#### **Option D - Pedestrianisation of Church Street**

- Influence of traffic removed
- Greatest benefits for pedestrians
- Improved visibility
- No traffic barrier
- Restricted local access from adjoining streets for private cars and service vehicles

#### 2.2 Traffic Management Design Development

Based on the assessment of public realm/traffic management options, the emerging preferred solution for enhancing Church Street was determined as Option C (one-way traffic flow, westbound). In addition to reducing traffic flows on Church Street, thereby providing considerable opportunities for public realm enhancements, the assessment of Option C showed reduced delays on Town Bridge and Northgate Street during both peak periods, but with some increased queuing on Coosan Point Road and the Crescent junctions.

Following preliminary Council and Key Stakeholder meetings, Option C was the agreed solution for developing the scheme further through the Part 8 process.



## 2. Design Proposals

### 2.3 Design Strategy of Public Realm Area

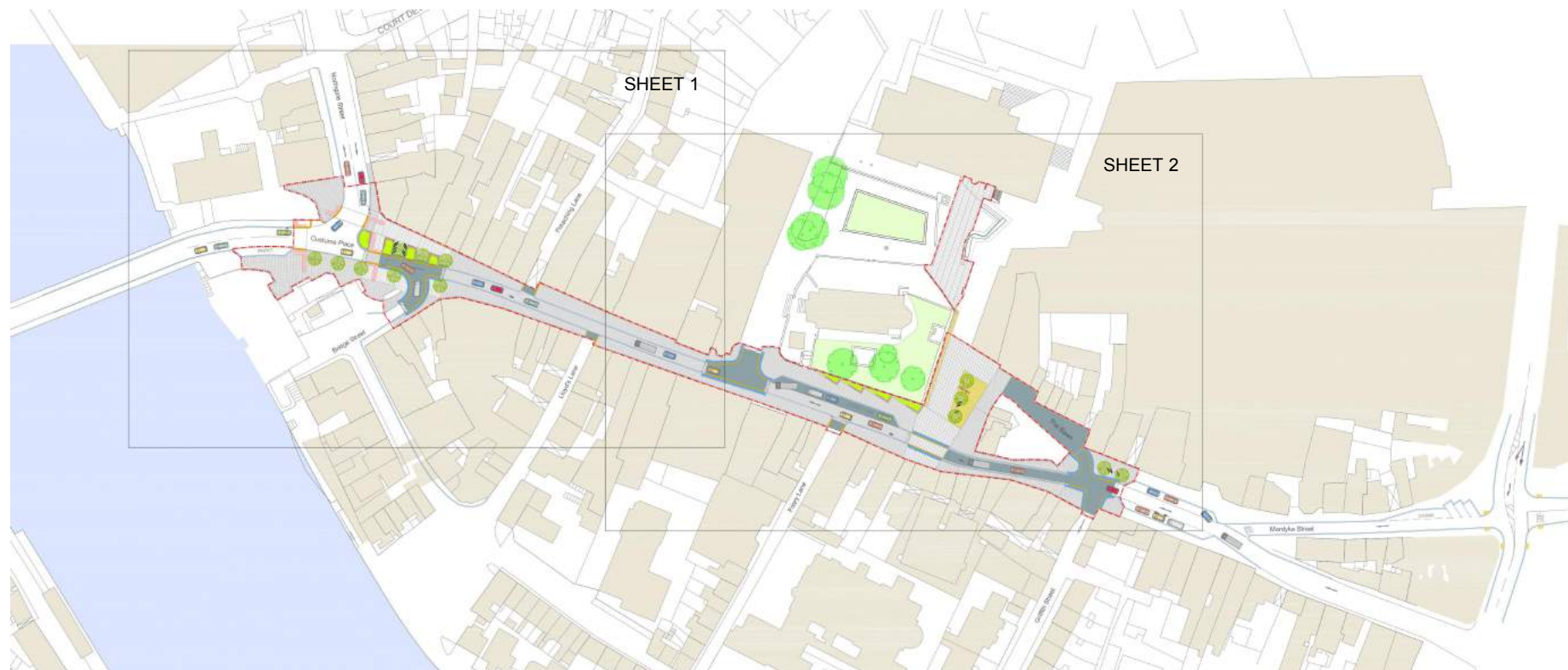
The proposed enhancement of Church Street forms an integral part of the overall strategy to improve the town's urban core. The provision of a revitalised urban environment is intended to reinforce the retail viability of the street, encouraging both visitors and locals to spend longer periods in the area, and thereby contributing to and encouraging economic growth of the town centre. The enhancement of the public realm will provide a distinctive 'sense of place' which in turn contributes to the vitality and viability of the area through a wider range of uses (day-time and night-time). The proposed scheme will provide opportunities for people to gather and interact. The route to The Castle for visitors will be enhanced, while the new public space at Custume Place will provide a greatly improved image of Church Street when approaching from the heritage area of the town.

The scheme proposals include:

- Increased priority for pedestrians through one-way traffic flow (westbound), reductions in roadway widths, raised tables and shared surfaces at intersections with minor lanes, and improved crossing facilities.
- Traffic calming at the Northgate Street/Custume Place/Church Street junction through simplified traffic movements.
- Improved facilities for cyclists in the form of cycle stands at key locations.
- Retention of existing loading bay and taxi rank outside the Church.
- Creation of a substantial new public space at the Custume Place end of Church Street.
- Increased footpath widths, particularly to the front of St. Mary's Church of Ireland and at the pinch-points on Dublin Gate Street and in the vicinity of Centra.
- The re-surfacing of the entire street in high quality paving materials.
- The de-cluttering of existing railings, bollards and superfluous signage.
- The provision of a coordinated range of contemporary street furniture, including new public lighting, seats, bollards and litter bins, and provision for CCTV cameras.
- New soft landscaping in raised planters and with street trees in selected locations.

### 2.4 Compliance with Standards

The completed scheme will be fully accessible, to current design standards and guidelines, including improved facilities for the mobility impaired within a safer, more inclusive environment of reduced traffic dominance.



Proposals Key Plan



Illustrative view of proposed public realm improvements and loading bay/taxi rank outside St. Mary's Church of Ireland

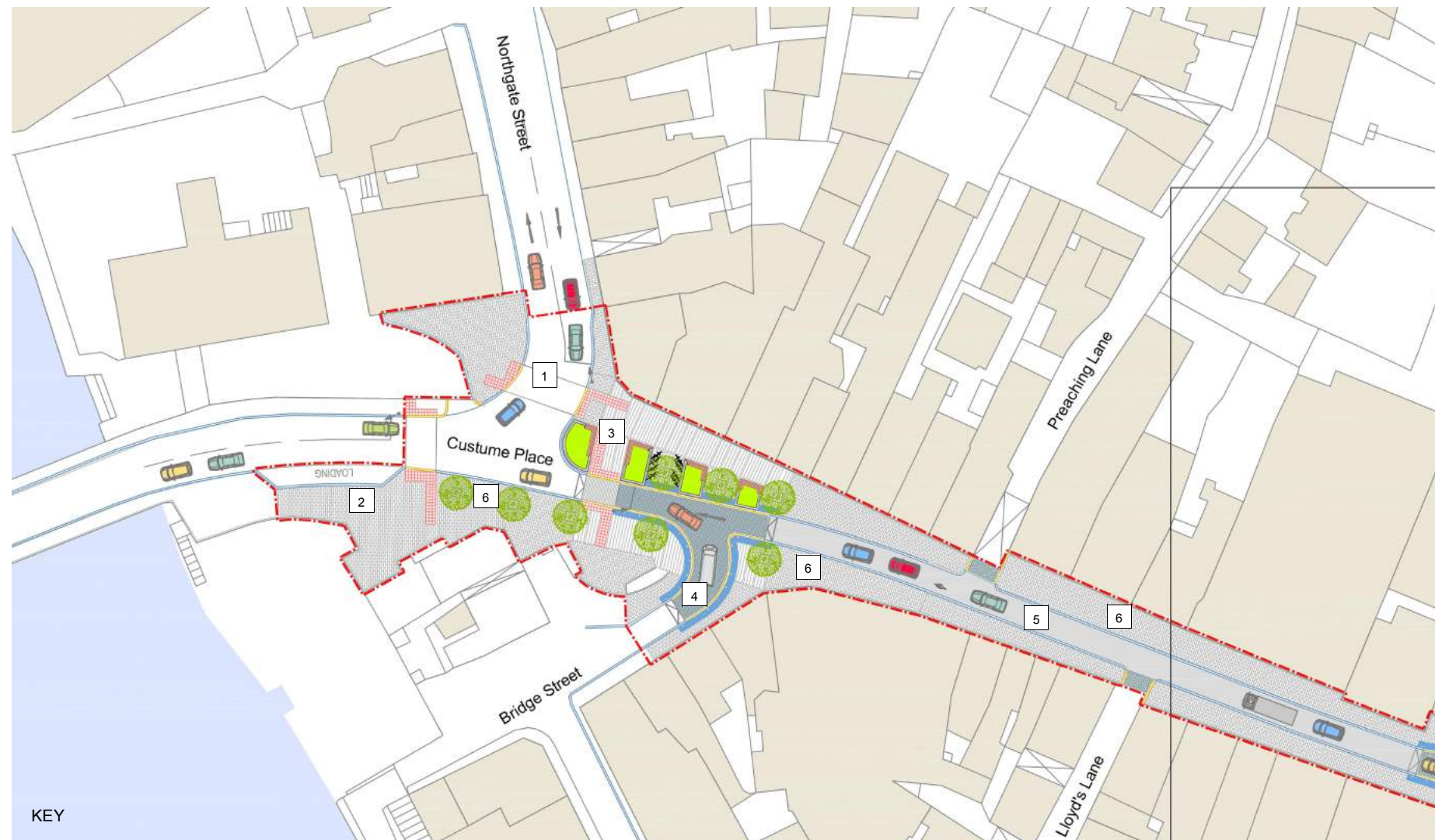


## 2. Design Proposals

### 2.5 Proposals Plan (Sheet 1) - Church Street west end

#### Main features:

1. Custume Place re-modelled Pelican junction, one-way northwards from Town Bridge to Northgate Street; straight on westwards from Church Street and with right turn to Northgate street; increased width pedestrian crossings.
2. Loading Bay retained to south side of Custume Place, with footpath widened and re-surfaced.
3. New public space on widened footpath, with high quality 'special' paving, raised planters and integral seating, cycle parking, street trees and improved street lighting.
4. Raised table/shared surface at junction with Bridge Street; granite setts surface with flush kerbs.
5. Church Street roadway narrowed to one-way westbound; asphalt surface (exposed aggregate) with raised kerbs.
6. Increased width footpaths; grey granite slabs.



KEY

	Extent of public realm works (approx.)
	Pedestrian surface Type 1 - footpaths, granite slabs, silver grey
	Pedestrian surface Type 2 - special paving areas, granite slabs, multi-grey
	Pedestrian surface Type 3 - margin, cropped granite setts
	Existing cobbles retained
	Resin-bonded aggregate, buff
	Vehicular Surface Type 1 - granite setts
	Vehicular surface Type 2 - asphalt (exposed aggregate)
	Tactile slabs, blister, buff
	Tactile slabs, blister, red
	Tactile slabs, corduroy, Irish blue limestone
	Raised kerb, 125mm riser, Irish blue limestone
	Flush kerb, Irish blue limestone
	Ramp up to raised table
	Bollards, stainless steel
	Cycle stands, stainless steel
	Raised planter, granite with seating
	Seats, granite supports, hardwood slats
	Tree with root cell system - Fastigate hornbeam

Church Street west end proposals plan



Custume Place projection as proposed



Illustrative view of Custume Place open space as proposed



## 2. Design Proposals

### 2.6 Proposals Plan (Sheet 2) - Church Street east end

#### Main features:

7. Raised table/shared surface at Church junction; granite setts surface with flush kerbs.
8. Public space outside Church; raised planters and integral seating, new street lighting.
9. Existing loading bay/taxi rank retained; re-surfaced in granite setts with raised kerbs.
10. Increased width footpaths; grey granite slabs.
11. Major pedestrian crossing on raised table; granite slabs with flush kerbs.
12. Plaza area with seating, cycle parking and street trees; resin-bonded aggregate surface (buff).
13. Pre-cast paving to front of Civic Offices replaced with high quality granite slabs to match existing.
14. Dublin Gate Street roadway narrowed to facilitate increased width footpaths both sides; granite setts surface with raised kerbs; granite setts trim to adjacent footway edges.
15. Raised table/shared surface at junction with Griffith Street; granite setts surface with flush kerbs.
16. New public space with street trees and cycle parking.



For Key refer Sheet 1

Church Street east end proposals plan



Illustrative view of central Church Street as proposed



Illustrative view of public space and loading bay/taxi rank outside Church as proposed



Illustrative view of Dublin Gate Street as proposed



## 2. Design Proposals

### 2.7 Material Palettes

The proposed material palettes for the scheme are intended to be contemporary in form while utilising high quality, mostly natural materials that will both compliment and enhance the Architectural Conservation Area designation at this location. The range of suggested finishes would be subject to detailed design and the procurement process at implementation stage. The types and locations of proposed materials are also shown on the drawings accompanying the proposal.

### Surfacing and kerbs



Granite slabs



Typical granite setts detailing



Multi-colour granite setts



Irish blue limestone flush kerb



Irish blue limestone raised kerb

### Planting



Raised planter with groundcover and trees



*Carpinus betulus 'Fastigiata'*



Raised planter with seating



Typical tree planting detail in paving

### Street Furniture



Seating platforms



Litter bin



Bollards and corduroy tactile slabs



Low wall with integral seating



Cycle stands + resin-bound surface



Street light