



## A Day Trip to Ashford

Much has been written about Ashford's ring road and its redesign - but it can't be fully understood without a visit. So on a cold, damp day in early December I found myself on a coach to Ashford accompanied by a mixed (or multi-disciplinary) bag of engineers, planners and the odd landscape architect, regeneration and heritage expert. We were drawn from various Gloucestershire councils and Solihull MBC.

My own interest, apart from professional curiosity, was to establish whether Ashford's solution could be applied to Cheltenham's notorious ring road, which is due to be redesigned as part of the town's regeneration project. There are striking similarities between Ashford's former ring road and Cheltenham's own -

- a collar which constrains walking and cycling to and from the town centre;
- a one-way circuit of between 2 and 4 lanes which attracts "boy-racers";
- 10,000 vehicles per day; and
- excessive speeds (in Ashford's case averaging over 40mph; Cheltenham's can reach 60 mph).

The trip was informative. We were welcomed by Kent County Council and Ashford Futures and given an outline of the project's history, design process, successes and failures, followed by a tour.

Ashford is a growth point, located on the high speed Channel Tunnel rail link and its International Station. A masterplan identified the ring road as a significant constraint to the success and growth of the town and its centre. So the project was commissioned with three objectives:

- reduce the dominance of traffic;
- choose quality; and
- cut the noose (the mantra for the project)

and three main philosophies

- integrate art and environment;
- shared space; and
- reduce clutter.

With government and local funding totalling £15m, the scheme was developed using an integrated design team - engineers, transport planners, urban designers, landscape architects and public artists. An extensive consultation process was accompanied by a more intensive series of workshops on affected residential streets, where residents were helped to establish the framework for more localised designs.

The approach has been to abandon the one-way system and introduce two-way working throughout using a range of treatments including shared



West Street before  
four lanes, one direction, no sense of place



West Street after - with central space on right of picture

space; medians; and narrowing. A considered palette of materials is used, with the emphasis on quality and the whole scheme is supported by a cohesive public art and landscape strategy.

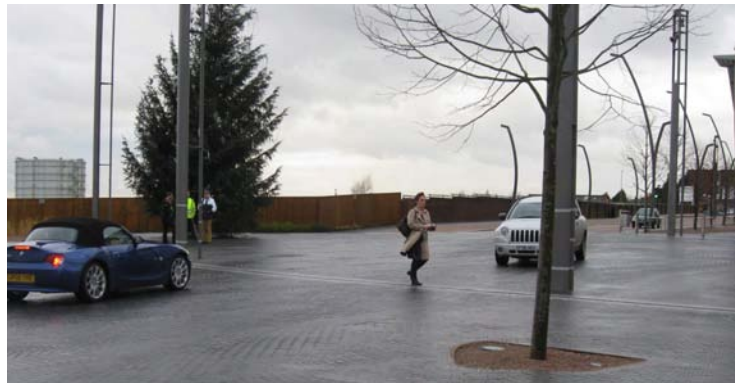
In West Street a four-lane one-way highway has been replaced by a single carriageway in each direction separated by a broad central planting area with footpath, seating and a SUDS scheme. It is a successful, linear space, with its avenue of trees, bespoke lighting and seating and mix of clay pavers and gravel surfaces. As an area to pass through or even stop and sit in, it works well. Our group had no problems accessing the central space or stopping in the road to take photos as traffic moved through the area calmly.

The SUDS scheme made an impressive visual impact. The linear series of catchment cells runs down the street containing highway run-off. Each cell is heavily planted and its position on the road edge adds to the calming of traffic speeds.



West Street - SUDS

Perhaps the most recognisable piece in the scheme is Elwick Square - a large shared space sitting between the town centre and the International Station. It is a block paved space, with no carriageway definition, containing occasional trees, lighting columns and a landscaped garden which doubles as a SUDS. Elwick Square will eventually be surrounded on four sides by sizeable retail and commercial buildings - which will give it enclosure and generate footfall.



Stopping the traffic in Elwick Square

So far only one of these (a Debenhams store) has been built, so the square looked a little forlorn during our wet, windy visit. However, if it can't yet be described busy with pedestrians, there is a constant flow from the town centre to the International Station and the residential areas beyond - and it's easy to see how the finished product will succeed. The drivers behave themselves and most pedestrians confidently take the direct route across the centre of the space, despite the existence of less "exposed" routes around its edges.

Kent CC and Ashford Futures are keen that their scheme should be used as a learning resource for others. MVA is carrying out monitoring which will be published on the DfT website - but much of the research is on-going and there are no figures yet for walking and cycling numbers. However, Kent CC summarised initial successes and lessons to be learned as follows:

#### Successes

- Speed averages 21.5 mph (down from well over 40mph)
- Congestion reduced through better use of space
- No personal injury accidents in 12 months; compared to 3 (1 serious) in the previous year.
- Air quality improved
- Noise reduced
- Anti-social behaviour and litter appear to be reduced

#### Lessons to be learned

- Maintenance is not resolved and is a matter of discussion between Kent County Council and Ashford Borough

- Access groups are concerned at lack of kerbs in some areas, despite tactile guidance paths
- Parking “isn’t working” and there are on-going issues between the Borough and DfT regarding signage
- The use of one puffin crossing (on the insistence of a Councillor) is giving a mixed message in one area and a localised increase in speeds.

On the whole, the client team consider Ashford’s ‘new’ ring road a success and on the evidence of this visit - even on a cold, damp and windy day - it is hard to disagree. The project is impressive - streets are civilised; traffic is calmed; pedestrians move at their ease; materials, planting and public art add interest and finish the scheme well. It has been a bold move to reshape a whole ring road in one fell swoop, but the Ashford team can feel proud of their achievement. Everyone on the trip came away with a strong impression of the contrast between Ashford and a conventional ring road. You have to experience it at first hand.

As for Cheltenham’s ring road? Well we haven’t got Ashford’s funding but if it comes to it, I’d like to think we have their ambition and courage.

Watch this space...

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The opinions in this article are those of the author and do not represent those of Cheltenham Borough Council



The Flume by Simeon Nelson and lighting by Nayan Kulkarni