

A VISION FOR BEAR FLAT CENTRE



**The Bear Flat
Association**

for those living and working in Bear Flat, Bath



Foreword

by Councillor Winston Duguid

I am delighted that the Bear Flat Association has taken the initiative in writing this vision paper for Bear Flat. Recent national publicity has highlighted how lucky we are to be living in this part of a world heritage city.

The BFA vision will change what is a pleasant neighbourhood into an even better community. Improvements in the physical environment and the public realm, for example through emphasis on pedestrians and cycling, will make Bear Flat more attractive and safer for our residents, visitors, businesses, shops and cafes.

With more agile working becoming the norm, many people also have the time to visit the green spaces of Alexandra Park and Bloomfield Green as well as the shops and cafes.

The BFA's vision, and its campaigns to bring back the Post Office, to take retailers needs into consideration as evidenced by its recent survey, and its successful opposition to plans for purpose-built student accommodation will safeguard and enhance the future of a great and highly desirable part of Bath.



*Winston planting a tree
on Bloomfield Green*

1 Introduction

Bear Flat is great area. It is one of the best places to live in the UK according to The Sunday Times (2020): 'This villagey plateau is heaven for young families'. It has a 'tightly-knit community' added the newspaper and 'boasts a range of impressive, independent shops'.

But Bear Flat as a centre could and should be better.

Traffic is the dominant feature, not a 'village' centre. It could be a much more attractive and agreeable place to shop and visit – and a stronger focus for the community.



This paper aims to put forward a vision as to how Bear Flat Centre could be improved over the next five years. The intention is to stimulate debate and spark more ideas – and to get everyone working together to make a better centre.

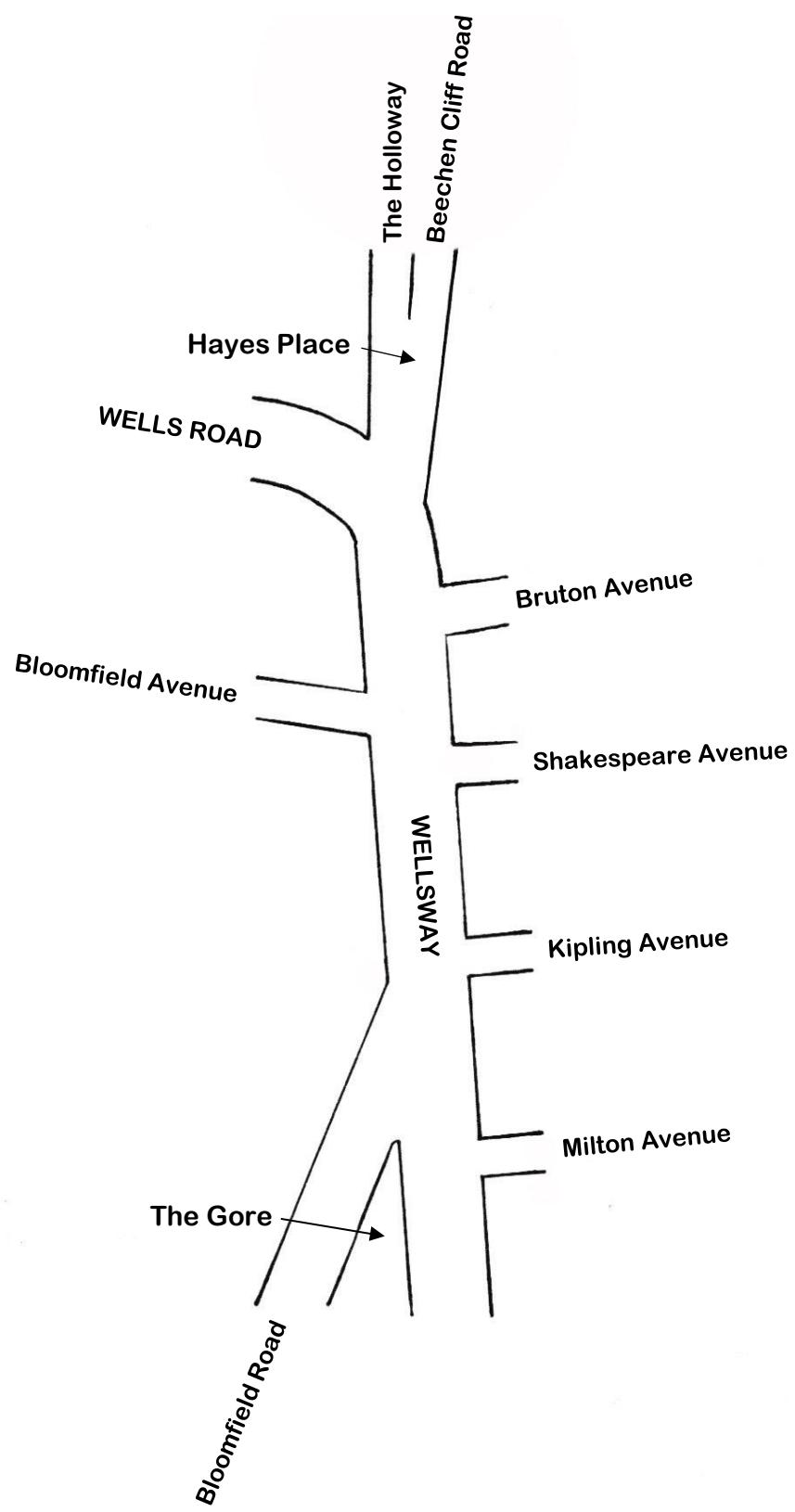
It has been prepared by the Bear Flat Association. The BFA was formed in 2012 to protect and improve the area and foster a stronger community. It has a Planning and Transport Group that has led the work on this document.

This vision is community-led. The BFA is a community group that has involved residents and traders through consultation before finally publishing the paper. We wish to thank the many who sent in comments and suggestions. Some are quoted throughout this paper.

The paper addresses Bear Flat Centre: from the top of Wells Road to the fork of Wellsway and Bloomfield Road – see map below. This is the local shopping area.

But it is more than shops. The offer ranges from hair and beauty to a gym, from accountants to solicitors, from estate agents to a church and church hall. The Centre has The Bear public house and hotel with its prominent polar bear and no fewer than five more places to eat or take away. It meets local needs (e.g. the Co-op) but draws custom from further afield (e.g. Menu Gordon Jones, Julia Davey).





Bear Flat Local Centre

2 Bear Flat Centre in Context

Retailing and commerce

Bear Flat is designated as a Local Centre by Bath & North East Somerset Council. Council Policy expects retail development, office, leisure and entertainment, markets, community facilities, arts, leisure and tourism to be located primarily within, or where appropriate adjoining, such centres. Uses which contribute 'to maintaining the vitality, viability and diversity of centres' will be encouraged. B&NES thus aims to protect, and where possible enhance, Bear Flat Centre.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, decline in the retail sector led to the closure of shops on Bear Flat, notably a general store with its post office, and an antique store. However, the pandemic has emphasised the importance of local shops to the Bear Flat community, especially those selling food and essential items. Covid is changing our lifestyles and there may be more potential in the future for local centres as more people work from home or use their cars less. Some shoppers are visiting the City centre less and local centres more.

Heritage

Bear Flat is in the Bath Conservation Area. This part of the Area has recently been the subject of a character appraisal (led by BFA). The appraisal highlights the historic and architectural assets of the area, including the Gore with its listed Drinking Fountain and listed buildings at Elm Place close to the shops. The appraisal also identifies the need for improvements to the Centre to protect and enhance its character and appearance, to provide better accessibility for pedestrians and cyclists, with new landscaping and green infrastructure.

Bear Flat is in the UNESCO Bath World Heritage Site that requires improvements to the physical environment and public realm.

Environmental Sustainability

Improving Bear Flat Centre should contribute to a more sustainable environment in line with the Council's aims to promote cycling and walking, reduce air pollution and foster liveable neighbourhoods.

Bear Flat is already a sustainable place to live – it offers a range of facilities and amenities within walking distance of many peoples' homes, so reducing car dependency and car trips. The Centre needs to be enhanced to make Bear Flat an even more sustainable neighbourhood.

Note: These B&NES documents have informed the vision:

Core Strategy, 2014; Placemaking Plan, 2017; Bath's Clean Air Zone (various) 2019-20; Climate and nature emergency action plan, (various) 2019-20; Draft Bear Flat and Oldfield Park Character Appraisal, 2020

3 Reducing the Impact of Traffic

Much of the Centre is on an arterial road, Wellsway and Wells Road, carrying heavy traffic with consequent danger, disturbance and pollution. There is no prospect of re-routing this flow. The focus therefore must be on reducing the impact of the traffic.

The impact could be reduced – and the local environment enhanced – by such measures as:

Re-allocating space: Wellsway through the Centre effectively has four lanes of traffic. This could be reduced to three, or even two, releasing space for walking, cycling and landscaping

Lower speed: Introducing a 20-mph limit from Wellsway (Hayesfield Park junction) to Wellsway (Milton Avenue junction) would make the Centre safer and pleasanter

Safer walking: Pedestrian priority, e.g. continuous pavements across junctions, should be provided to make for safer walking in the Centre and getting to it

Safer cycling: Cycling should be encouraged, though not at the expense of walking within the Centre

New crossing: a pedestrian/cycle crossing is urgently needed on Bloomfield Road near The Gore

Redesigning junctions: layouts should be modified to make turning safer and to slow traffic in places e.g. turning into Bloomfield Road

Also, the two schemes put forward later in this document, for Hayes Place and The Gore, bookending the Centre, would bring relief from traffic in those two places.



Road space disproportionately favours vehicles

'It's a very poor layout for traffic. There is plenty of scope for reducing the vehicle lane widths and widening the pavements'

'Car drivers don't get any cues that they are entering a neighbourhood'

'Because the road is so wide it gives the impression this is somewhere to travel through rather than spend time'

Bear Flat Residents

Bear Flat lends itself to both walking and cycling. Walking is the way most people already get to the Centre since so many live within walking distance. And a feature of the area is the network of paths and lanes away from traffic. Cycling is becoming more common and the Centre is a short pedal from the famous 'two tunnels' route on the National Cycle Network. Sustrans has already looked at cycleways along Wellsway and Bloomfield Road as part of a strategic network.

'More signs showing walking routes - there are several of them, but you have to be in the know to find them'

Bear Flat Resident

The Centre has frequent bus services into town and any changes at Bear Flat should facilitate their use. A plus for many residents is that the railway stations, Bath Spa and Oldfield Park, are within walkable range. Given this favourable setting for public transport, it is reasonable to ask people to travel to the Centre on foot, by cycle, by bus or train/walk. Beechen Cliff School is introducing a Travel Plan to encourage sustainable means of getting to School – the ideas in this paper would make for safer and easier active travel routes to the School through the Centre.

Parking is less of an issue since the creation of a Residents Parking Zone (RPZ) in 2019. There is adequate short-stay space for visitors, allowing one hour (e.g. Hayes Place), two hours (e.g. parts of Bruton Avenue) and three hours (e.g. parts of Shakespeare Avenue and Bloomfield Avenue).

The one drawback of the RPZ is that it was not designed for a local shopping centre with a range of commercial and community facilities. There are permits for residents and some allocations to others but none for staff who work at Bear Flat, some working unsocial hours or with journeys that do not lend themselves to public transport. The RPZ should have a system for permits to be allocated to businesses and others with staff.

4 Brightening and Greening the Centre

The Centre presents a fairly uninviting face to visitors. The following ideas are aimed at brightening up the Centre and making it more welcoming.

Two places, at either end of Bear Flat Centre, warrant enhancement schemes:

The Gore

A renewal of this area is important, especially for those approaching the Centre from the south. BFA is preparing a scheme to reorganise and upgrade this land. This includes a greening of the space, with new planting and seating; reducing the visual impact of the utilities' boxes; linking in with improved crossing points of Wellsway and Bloomfield Road.

Bear Flat Environment CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) is being established as the project arm of Bear Flat Association to allow grant-supported and crowd-funded improvement work to go ahead.

The fountain on the Gore built to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, now a listed building, grade II

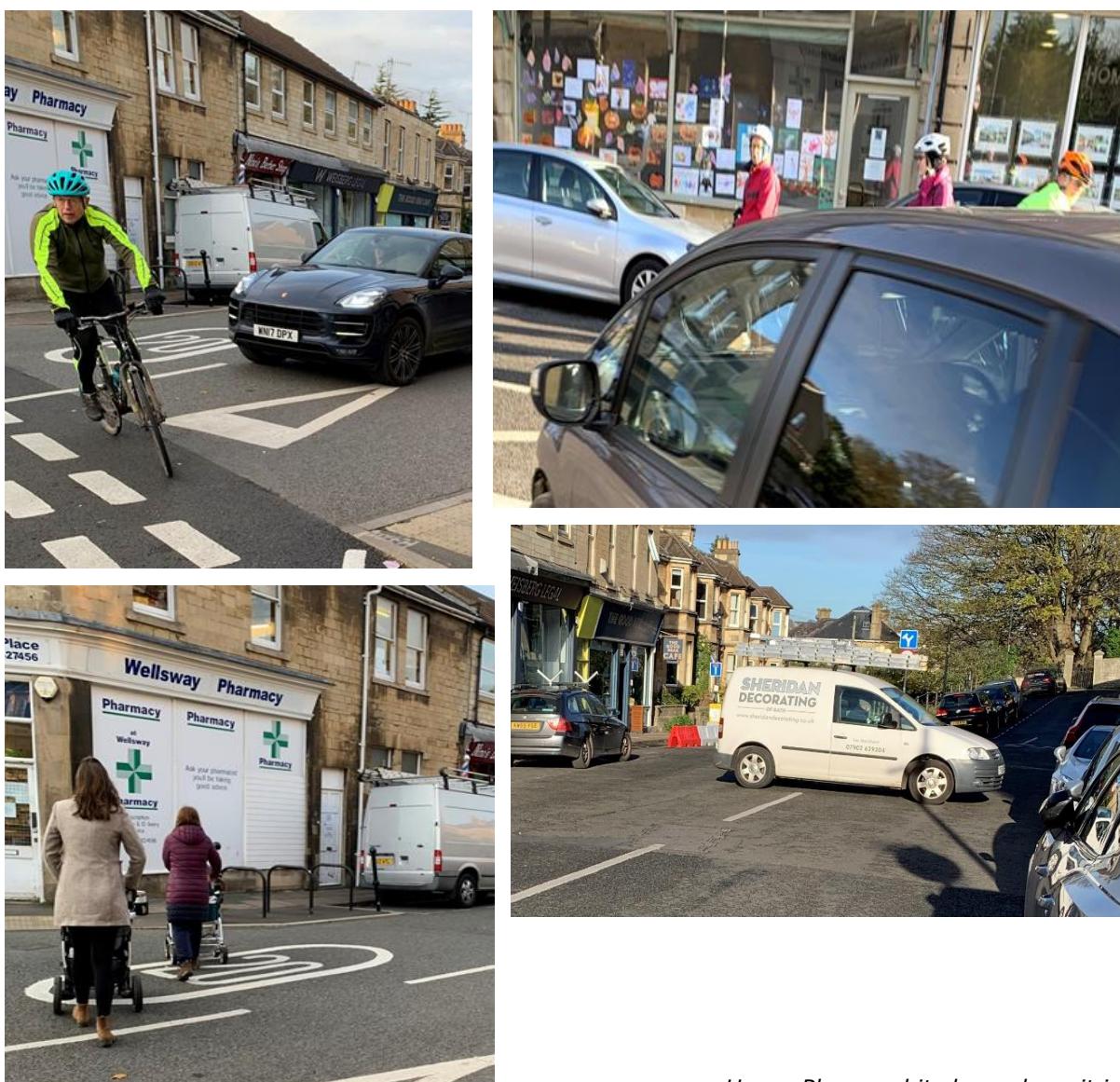


The Gore from Wellsway

Hayes Place

This large space is currently dominated by road space and cars. Instead, it should become a focal point for the Centre. The opportunity is there to radically change its character and appearance, by reducing the amount of space given over to highway uses.

Pedestrians should take priority. Vehicle access needs to be retained to serve Holloway, Beechen Cliff Road and for businesses and residents there. Any parking in the immediate area should be limited to short-term spaces, for those visiting businesses in the Centre. Land can be released for wider pavements, incorporating planting and seating. These areas could be used in part by the café and fish and chip shop.



Hayes Place and its hazards as it is

Greening the Centre

The Centre lacks greenery, with few, fairly insignificant street trees and no other outdoor planting. More trees would absorb pollutants and make for a pleasant street, not a highway.

There should be tree planting through the Centre along Wellsway, particularly where there is, or will be, wider pavements.

The Gore and Hayes Place (see above) present opportunities for planting and there are other places too such as the side and front of The Bear, where there is room for more vegetation as well as seating for customers.

Where appropriate, planting could be in the form of raised wooden boxes, incorporating trees and shrubs and other colourful planting, with seating, supplemented by sculptures and other artwork.

'We lack any floral or green presence, which could really make the place look more welcoming'

Bear Flat Resident



Bear Flat (northern part) street trees in 1900: three

2020: none

Other measures:

- Form a mini park on Wellsway with seating and planting
- Encourage traders to provide planting areas in front of their properties, including raised beds, hanging baskets, lighting and Christmas trees along their frontages.
- Brighten up flank elevations such as with murals by local artists, notably the side wall on Bruton Avenue.
- Replace the ugly crossing railings on Wellsway at the Gore.
- Rationalise the road traffic signage that has proliferated along the Bear Flat Centre roadside

'When I've been ill provision of benches has made the difference between going out and having to stay in'

Bear Flat Resident

For everyone

All improvements to the fabric and facilities on Bear Flat Centre should cater for all users, all ages, the fit and mobile, the less fit and less mobile, those with disabilities. This applies particularly to such as benches and better seating at the bus stops.



Mini parks offer greenery, relaxation and a meeting place (Kingsmead Square)

5 Developing and Promoting a Vibrant Local Centre

For all the recent and current economic travails, Bear Flat Centre is still popular and well used. But more needs to be done to sustain it and add to its offer.

Support and Promotion

The existing businesses need to be more strongly supported by residents and visitors giving the shops and facilities their custom. Bear Flat should have its own 'I love local' campaign as recently launched in Widcombe with flags, signs and banners. BFA will work with B&NES to give Bear Flat its own campaign.

The BFA has helped with information and promotion. In particular, the Welcome to Bear Flat leaflet in 2019 was a boost, and the use of empty units for a pop-up shop the same year was also positive. BFA plans to do more to promote the Centre, especially as at present there is no arrangement for traders to meet and collaborate.

'The main problem with Bear Flat Centre is I didn't know we had one so more advertising would be great'

Bear Flat Trader



LEFT Is this is the only sign there is to our Centre? Unfortunately, it is on the ground and gets muddy (Linear Park near Bloomfield Green)

RIGHT People are encouraged to go up to the Park leftward, but not to our Centre rightward (cliff path off Beechen Cliff Road)

Promoting Bear Flat as a local centre should embrace better signage. Those entering the Centre get no indication of its identity (other than the bear at The Bear). There are few signs for pedestrians or motorists on nearby streets and paths pointing to 'local shops' - other centres such as Moorland Road and Widcombe enjoy better signage. A welcome sign for those arriving at Bear Flat from the south is envisaged as part of the Gore project.



LEFT This sign is within sight of our Centre, so what does it point to?

RIGHT Not to Bear Flat!

(Wells Road near Oldfield Road)

A coming initiative for digital walking maps is likely to cover Bear Flat and this will aid marking out and getting to the Centre.

It is important to develop a clear identity for the Centre, perhaps sparked by the white polar bear that is the Centre's most distinctive visual feature.

Investment

There needs to be a virtuous circle of investment leading to more vitality and vibrancy, that in turn attracts more investment. That investment in environmental improvement in an area boosts its economy is well accepted.

It is encouraging that the Coop has chosen to make substantial improvements to its store and property (recently renamed 'Bear Flat's Coop') though it was disappointing that they resisted BFA's suggestion to incorporate a Post Office – BFA continues to seek a place for the return of a PO on Bear Flat.

Also, a scheme to enlarge the corner block at the top of Wellsway (though controversial) shows that even in these challenging times there are investors

looking at Bear Flat. A smaller but imaginative example is the recent 'greened' fascia at Menu Gordon Jones.

One investment opportunity that BFA has identified is the site at the corner of Wellsway and Bloomfield Avenue. It is under-used, with a car park interrupting the otherwise continuous frontage. It offers considerable potential to make a positive contribution to the street-scene. And the seemingly unused garages on Bruton Avenue immediately behind Mercy in Action look ripe for redevelopment.

'This all looks great, nice to see there is an initiative to improve the area'

'I feel excited over the plans and am happy to contribute to any artwork plans or greenery where I can'

Bear Flat Traders



Hopeful sign: a new tree has just been put in, close to (though not on) the shopping street (Shakespeare Avenue)

6 Our Vision

Bear Flat Centre now:

- **Noise, pollution and danger from traffic**
- **No clear heart or meeting place**
- **Hard to sit, linger or chat**
- **Few trees, little greenery**
- **Dearth of signs to Bear Flat Centre**
- **Little promotion of what the Centre offers**

Bear Flat Centre as it could be:

- **Traffic impact reduced; walking and cycling encouraged**
- **A heart where people will meet**
- **More places to sit, linger or chat**
- **Landscaping to lift the environment**
- **Signs to the Centre**
- **Promotion of what the Centre offers**

7 BFA's Eight-Point Plan

- 1. Reconfigure the Wellsway carriageway to yield more space for walking and cycling**
- 2. Redesign Hayes Place as a real place for people**
- 3. Undertake improvements to the Gore**
- 4. Put in a pedestrian/cycle crossing on Bloomfield Road**
- 5. Provide more landscaping to green the Centre**
- 6. Explore possibilities for public artworks, perhaps a mural**
- 7. Encourage residents and visitors to come and use the Centre such as an 'I love local' campaign**
- 8. Give better signage so more people are aware of the Centre**



Hopeful sign: the Council has taken a chunk of highway to make space for tables on the pavement. The red-and-white barrier is temporary; it is due to be replaced by planters (Hayes Place)

7 Next Steps

Bear Flat Centre is an important focus and facility for people living in and around the area, but this paper points to how it could still benefit from comprehensive improvement.

BFA wants this vision document to lead to a coherent approach and programme of action to improve and promote the Centre, boost footfall and encourage new businesses and community facilities.

BFA can offer a lead but an effective strategy will require the support of the local community, both residents and existing traders and operators, so that everyone is working together for a better centre.

BFA will itself mount schemes, as at The Gore. There could be further community initiatives.

The main way the vision can become reality, though, is through B&NES and the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). We want this Vision, supported by residents and local businesses alike, to be accepted by B&NES and WECA as a springboard to action and to get the plan embedded in the wider sustainable liveable neighbourhoods plan that B&NES is currently working towards.

Bear Flat Association

December 2020