

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR REGENERATION

Decision Made: 13 April 2010

MAIDSTONE TOWN CENTRE: POLICY DIRECTIONS FOR THE CORE STRATEGY

Issue for Decision

To consider key issues for the basis of the Core Strategy policy for the town centre.

Decision Made

That the following matters be agreed as the basis of the Core Strategy policy for the Town Centre;

- a. The town centre boundary as show on the plan in Appendix 3 of the report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy
- b. The Vision for Maidstone Town Centre as set out at paragraph 1.3.18 of the report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy
- c. The town centre quarters shown on the plan in Appendix 4 of the report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy with the extension of the 'urban enterprise' quarter to include Albion Place and the Haynes site.
- d. The policy directions set out in the report and summarised in Appendix 5 of the report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy

Reasons for Decision

Local Development Document Advisory Group ("LDDAG") Consideration

LDDAG considered the matters covered by the report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy at its meeting on 24th February. The further report of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy responds to the Group's recommendations and suggestions.

Introduction

The Core Strategy will contain a policy setting out the strategic approach for future planning and change in Maidstone Town Centre. To inform this policy, and the content of the subsequent Town Centre Area Action Plan Development Plan Document, the Council commissioned Urban Practitioners to prepare a Town Centre Study (TCS). An initial Members' workshop was held in July 2009 and the consultants liaised with key land interests as the Study progressed. Members attended a presentation on the findings of the Study on 10th December 2009 and the study itself is now being finalised. The implications of the emerging findings for future policy, along with planning guidance and other relevant evidence is considered further below. Members were asked to consider and agree key policy direction points to assist officers in developing the Core Strategy. The role of the town centre in the overall Borough-wide distribution of development will be returned to as the formal plan making stages progress.

Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth defines the main town centre uses as retail, leisure/entertainment, offices and culture/tourism. Additionally, PPS3: Housing recognises that options for accommodating new housing growth include providing residential units as part of mixed use schemes on town centre sites.

PPS4 and accompanying guidance confirms that LPAs should set out a vision and strategy for the management and growth of their centres over the plan period, setting flexible policies that can respond to changing economic circumstances. The growth of the main town centre uses should be directed in existing centres through the application of the sequential approach, starting with locations within existing centres, followed by edge of centre locations particularly those well connected to the centre and finally out of centre sites served by a choice of transport modes with a higher likelihood of town centre links.

Policy SP2 of the South East Plan identifies Maidstone as a regional hub and gives emphasis to high quality transport interchange facilities and measures to increase accessibility by sustainable modes. The town centre is also identified as a Primary Regional Centre (Policy TC1). Policy AOSR7 is the specific Maidstone hub policy and seeks new employment provision with an emphasis on high quality jobs to enhance the county town role. The policy promotes retail, leisure and services uses within the town centre and identifies the town's role as a focus for the expansion of further and higher education facilities.

The Economic Development Strategy identifies the town centre as a first priority. One of the strategy's key objectives is to 'strengthen the town centre – create a higher quality retail and leisure offer to attract and retain more expenditure in the borough.'

National and regional guidance and local strategy are therefore all directing a 'town centre first' approach.

Town Centre Boundary

In line with PPS4 the Core Strategy policy will need to define the extent of the town centre to confirm the spatial area to which the Core Strategy and AAP town centre policies will apply.

The definition of the boundary results from a combined assessment of;

- use: the boundary should define the area which is, and will be, the main focus of town centre uses (retail, office, leisure, culture and tourism), recognising that some such uses will be still present in areas outside the town centre.
- the character and form of existing development
- visual and physical relationship to the rest of the town centre
- future potential: the boundary should have regard to appropriate development opportunities for town centre uses

The definition of the boundary must also strike the correct balance between ensuring that future policy focuses town centre uses to a limited geographical area and providing adequate space to accommodate future growth in those uses to 2026.

The proposed boundary encompasses the retail heart of the town centre focused on Week Street, High Street, King Street and Gabriel's Hill. To the south Lower Stone Street with its concentration of office uses coupled with some shops and A3 and A5 uses and relative good visual and physical connectivity to the retail core is also included. The Archbishop's Palace and All Saints church are important historical cultural and tourism assets for inclusion in the boundary as are the leisure uses of the Lockmeadow complex and the potential longer term opportunities of the industrial uses of the Barker Road area with their close proximity to the Maidstone West station. The boundary follows the alignment of the railway line here.

St Peters Street is an existing focus for enterprise and large scale retailing and, along with the leisure centre area to the north of the railway line, is included. Moving north the Springfield area is included in the boundary as it represents a major opportunity for redevelopment over the lifetime of the Core Strategy close to the heart of the centre and the key transport interchange of Maidstone East railway station. Landownership is such that there is the opportunity to plan the area, or significant parts of it, in a comprehensive manner.

To the east the boundary is aligned to include the entirety of the prison site, the walls of which are listed, the concentrations of commercial uses to the east of Week Street/north of King Street and to exclude the primarily residential areas further east. Watt Tyler Way provides a strong 'edge' to the south east of the centre.

The boundary as proposed does not reflect the limits of where there may be positive opportunities for regeneration and development. Areas beyond the town centre that function as key gateways to the town centre may still be considered for inclusion in the geographical area to be covered by the Town Centre Area Action Plan.

LDDAG members suggested a number of additions to the boundary. These are shown on the plan in Appendix 1 of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy and considered in the table at Appendix 2 of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy.

It was recommended that I agree the proposed town centre boundary as shown on in Appendix 3 of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy.

Vision for the town centre

The Core Strategy will need to set out an overall Vision to guide the strategy for the town centre. Through the progression of the TCS, a proposed Vision has emerged.

At the LDDAG meeting it was proposed that 'tourism' be added as one of the attractions in the Vision and that the penultimate bullet point in the Vision be amended to refer to 'enhancing' the retail offer.

"By 2026, a regenerated and sustainable Maidstone Town Centre will be a first class traditional town centre at the heart of the 21st century County Town which has maintained its place as one of the premier town centres in the region by creating a distinctive, safe and high quality place which has:

- retained its best environmental features, including the riverside, and the enhanced public realm
- provided a variety of well integrated attractions for all ages, including new shopping, service sector-based businesses, leisure, tourism, education and cultural facilities; and
- improved access for all.

Key components in realising this Vision are

- Creating a highly sustainable location which is resilient to future climate change;
- Establishing the town centre as an attractive hub for businesses – building on the town centre's assets and environment as an alternative to isolated business parks;
- Enhancing the diversity of the retail offer, supporting a continued balance between independent and multiple retailers ; and
- Creating a stronger mix and balance of uses within the centre to support long term viability."
- This Vision is considered to accord with Policy AOSR7 of the South East Plan which, in particular, identifies Maidstone's role as a county

town and seeks the concentration of commercial uses at its core to allow the integration of employment, housing and public transport.

I was asked to approve this amended Vision as a future component of the Core Strategy.

Town Centre Quarters

It is possible to identify distinct 'quarters' within the town centre, drawing on an analysis of different localities' character and function as well as an assessment of their potential future role. The definition of quarters can be used as a basis for the future spatial distribution of uses in the town centre. The 6 identified quarters are shown on the plan in Appendix 2 of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy and are described as follows;

- a. *The Heart*: this area centres on the main retail core of the town centre along the axes of Week Street, High Street, King Street and Gabriel's Hill. It also supports substantial office development and marks the historic core of the town. Through development there is the opportunity to support and enhance these functions in a manner consistent with its Conservation area status.
- b. *Campus Quarter*: this quarter includes the Springfield area. It represents a significant opportunity for development-led change and would be particularly suited to a business park form of development and/or an educational campus. These uses would benefit from good proximity to Maidstone East station and onwards to the facilities of 'the Heart'.
- c. *Gateway Quarter*: this area centres on Maidstone East railway station. Through development, there is potential to re-invigorate this key entry point to the town centre core.
- d. *Riverside Quarter*: as outlined previously, there is an overarching opportunity for better utilisation of the riverside. The riverside quarter includes the historic All Saints area with its cultural attractions and the Lockmeadow leisure complex. Some of the retail warehouse units on St Peters Street may reach the end of their operational lifespan within the timeframe of the Core Strategy and present opportunities in relation to additional development and enhancing the riverside.
- e. *Urban Enterprise Quarter*: offices are particularly concentrated in the Lower Stone Street/Wat Tyler Way area. Some of this stock is outmoded and there may be the opportunity to rationalise the overall supply of offices and to secure public realm improvements.
- f. *Neighbourhood Quarter*: this area includes Maidstone West station and the area at the eastern end of London Road and Tonbridge Road. Much of the area is beyond the town centre boundary as proposed. In overall terms there is an opportunity to provide additional housing in this area with space for smaller businesses, particularly offices. This area largely sits outside the proposed town centre boundary.

LDDAG identified a further 'village quarter' focused on areas E1, E2 and E3 shown on the plan in Appendix 1. These areas are diverse in character and land uses. Much of E1 (area north of King Street) is residential and falls within the Holy Trinity Conservation Area. E2 (Albion Place) is an

established area of offices with the large number of landowners meaning that comprehensive redevelopment is unlikely. The form of development is of a much lower density within E3 (Haynes garage) and the site may be a longer term development opportunity. The cohesiveness of the area is severed by transport barriers and linear blocks of urban form (E2) at the centre. It is considered that the whole area does not have a sufficiently cohesive character or uniform development potential to merit their definition as a single quarter, indeed, different planning approaches are likely to be appropriate for each of the areas. For these reasons, there is no merit in a comprehensive designation as a 'village quarter' in spatial planning terms.

I was asked to approve the quarters as shown in Appendix 4 of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy with the 'urban enterprise' quarter extended to include Albion Place and the Haynes site as a consequence of their recommended inclusion in the town centre boundary.

Environmental Quality in the Town Centre

Maidstone town centre has a number of key environmental assets, particularly its historic fabric, recognised through listings and conservation area designations, its rivers and green spaces. These features give the town centre its unique identity but they could be better utilised and enhanced. Importantly there is a link between the quality of the public realm and commercial investment decisions for office and retail uses.

Policy direction 1: In accommodating new development, ensure the conservation and enhancement of the town centre's historic fabric and public realm.

Future development should make better use of its riverside setting enabling wider public appreciation and enjoyment of this unique asset. This could be by ensuring development orientates toward the river, creates active frontages to the river and enables improved connections to, including reducing the severance created by roads, and along the riverside.

De-culverting and naturalising the River Len, which could be part of a longer term strategy, fits within this overall approach.

It was suggested at LDDAG that this policy objective should also include reference to flood storage. Flood management has been identified as an aim of the emerging draft policy CS15: Green and Blue Infrastructure, and is a matter which has a wider spatial application than to the town centre alone. On this basis it is suggested that it is unnecessary to duplicate the reference in the town centre policy.

Policy direction 2: future development on land adjoining the River Medway and River Len should make a positive contribution to their setting, accessibility, biodiversity and amenity value.

The rivers have a key role to play in providing the 'spine' for a network of green routes and spaces. Linked squares and public spaces was an

aspiration of the informal Town Centre Plan prepared as part of the Town Centre Management initiative in March 2008. A 'greening' of the town centre could increase resilience to climate change and improve the quality of the town centre overall. Watman Park and Mote Park are within walking distance of the town centre and connections to them can be further improved, linking with access improvements to the rivers.

It was suggested at the LDDAG meeting that this policy direction also make reference to maximising opportunities to achieve adaptability to climate change. This is an aspect which is highlighted in the proposed Vision and merits inclusion in the policy direction.

A further suggestion was made that reference should also be made to the use of living roofs and walls. These are specific examples of sustainable construction which is a matter which will have dedicated policy coverage in Core Strategy Policy CS8. On this basis it is considered that this additional reference is not needed in this policy direction.

Policy direction 3: change in the town centre should maximise the opportunities to enhance existing green spaces, and access to them, and to further 'green' the town centre and its streets including by the creation of new spaces, to form a network and through adaptations for climate change.

Transport & Movement

Congestion impacts on the town centre's attractiveness as a destination and on the demand for office space in particular. Major routes such as Fairmeadow tend to sever the 'core' of the town centre, inhibiting easy pedestrian access and providing a significant challenge for cyclists.

Decisions about movement through and to the town centre need to be integrated with the wider transport strategy for the town, and the borough, that is being progressed for the Core Strategy.

In broad terms the future transport strategy must balance the need to maintain the function of the key routes through the town, manage unnecessary circulation of traffic through the town and facilitate alternatives to the private car.

Points for further testing through the Transport Strategy include:-

- a. Maintaining a network of primary, secondary routes and streets whilst exploring the scope to re-prioritise space for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists
- b. Enhance existing cycling and pedestrian routes and seek to complete gaps in the network of routes
- c. Improving existing bus operations and the functioning of public transport interchanges (bus and train stations)
- d. Manage the overall supply and distribution of car parking towards key entry points into the town centre to, in conjunction with Park & Ride, reduce the amount of traffic circulating through the centre

It was suggested at LDDAG that this policy direction be amended to also include reference to reduce vehicle dominance to improve the pedestrian environment, including safety. The paragraph above confirms that options for increasing road space for pedestrians is amongst a range of points for further exploration and it is considered that the approach is encompassed within the broad reference to sustainable transport modes in the policy direction as drafted. However, the policy direction as drafted does not allow for increased sustainable transport within the centre and it is proposed that the direction be amended accordingly.

Policy direction 4: In accommodating new development, increase accessibility to and within the town centre by sustainable modes of transport.

I was asked to approve the policy directions which are summarised in Appendix 5 of the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

It is essential to provide an early steer on key aspects of the Core Strategy's town centre policy before it is prepared.

Background Papers

None

Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call in form signed by any two Non-Executive Members to the Head of Change and Scrutiny by: 20 April 2010
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