

Town Centre 'Opportunity' Sites

Final Decision-Maker	Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee
Lead Director	William Cornall
Lead Officer and Report Author	Rob Jarman
Classification	Public
Wards affected	Bridge, Fant and High Street wards

Executive Summary

On 9th January 2018 the Strategic Planning Transportation & Sustainability Committee approved the commissioning and production of planning guidance documents for the five town centre opportunity sites.

If approved, these will be a material consideration in the determination of any future planning application although they will not constitute supplementary planning guidance.

The project has been led by the Planning Policy team, who produced a brief and then ran a mini-tender to procure a specialist firm of urban designers to produce the planning guidance documents on behalf of the Council. Savills were appointed, and they have produced the documents that are recommended for approval for publication in this report, with their work being informed by the officer brief, two workshops with the various landowners and their agents, as well as two separate member workshops, and further informal ward member briefings.

The purpose of the planning guidance documents is to give a steer to land owners (present and future), as well their agents and advisors, as to what type of development proposals the Council would favour. All the sites have regeneration potential, but realistically over differing timeframes, but it is appropriate for the Council to take a proactive position.

The sites will be challenging to unlock on viability grounds, and so these documents demonstrate the Council's support, and could well be beneficial when it comes to positively influencing potential funding agencies, such as Homes England. Furthermore, if these planning guidance documents are approved by this Committee, officers can then turn their attention to understanding the deliverability constraints of the sites in more detail, and where intervention is required, work with the landowners and their advisors as well as the likes of Homes England to formulate delivery strategies for them. This work will be led by the Economic Development team and will be reported in due course through the Economic Regeneration and Leisure committee.

The production of these documents has been an interesting, complex and at times challenging task, but officers have worked diligently to develop proposals that are appropriate to the various stakeholders. The sites in combination offer the potential for mixed-use but residential led high-density development. Care has been taken to ensure that the proposed development densities are appropriate, and in particular that the parking provision is in accordance with policy, and how it could potentially dovetail with on on-street parking arrangements. Whilst the documents do provide high level design proposals, these are intended to be informative and illustrative, for opening discussions on what may be achievable and appropriate. Ultimately, development densities may well flex up or down as the complexities of the different sites become better understood.

All the landowners and their advisors have welcomed the approach in terms of introducing planning guidance documents for what are key regeneration opportunity sites, and they have all worked willingly with us throughout the exercise and support the notion that the documents be approved by this committee. It is also fair to say, that the landowners are not necessarily in complete agreement with all aspects of the documents either, but on balance consider the documents beneficial.

Furthermore, pre-application advice requests or indeed planning applications can be received at any time, and so it is positive that the Council understands the opportunities and constraints and can now give swift and clear guidance as a basis for such dialogue, rather than be reactive to well developed proposals. Therefore, these planning guidance documents will enhance the credibility of the Council in the local development sector, and potentially stimulate the interest of present and indeed future landowners in delivering the sites in line with Council aspirations. With this in mind, this Committee may in time wish to consider commissioning similar documents for other key opportunity sites in the borough in due course, and this of course would be entirely consistent with the “embracing growth and enabling infrastructure” priority within the Council’s strategic plan.

The planning guidance documents have their genesis in the Housing Development and Regeneration Investment Plan that was approved by the Policy and Resources Committee in July 2017, and in May 19 that Committee also decided to submit the five town centre opportunity sites, along with some others, into the “call for sites” exercise that formed one of the early stages of the Maidstone Local Plan Review. This decision was made on the basis that if this Committee (SPI) decided not to approve for publication any or indeed all of the planning guidance documents, the council’s submissions for those opportunity sites would be withdrawn from the “call for sites” exercise too.

Purpose of Report

Decision

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

That the ‘planning guidelines’ (and associated technical documents) dated July 2019 for the following 5 sites be approved:

a) Maidstone West

- b) Gala Bingo and Granada House
- c) Maidstone Riverside
- d) Len House
- e) Mote Rd

Timetable	
<i>Meeting</i>	<i>Date</i>
Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee	10 September 2019

Town Centre 'Opportunity' Sites

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <p>Accepting the recommendations will materially improve the Council's ability to achieve the Strategic Plan objective of 'embracing growth and enabling infrastructure' in particular. I set out the reasons other choices will be less effective in section 2 [available alternatives].</p>	Rob Jarman
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation is Reduced and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>The report recommendation supports the direct achievement of the cross cutting objectives of heritage and biodiversity by design guidance on respecting heritage buildings and, secondly, landscape and biodiversity measures being integral to good design.</p>	Rob Jarman
Risk Management	Already covered in the risk section	Rob Jarman
Financial	The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.	Paul Holland, Senior Finance Manager (Client)

Staffing	We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing.	Rob Jarman
Legal	It will be important to clearly establish the status of the guidance documents and how they will be used for decision taking for the purposes of transparency.	Cheryl Parks Mid Kent Legal Services (Planning)
Privacy and Data Protection	There is no impact on data protection as part of this decision.	Anna Collier, Policy and Information Manager
Equalities	The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment.	Anna Collier, Policy & Information Manager
Public Health	We recognise the recommendations may have varying impacts on the health of the population or individuals within Maidstone.	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	The recommendation will not have a negative impact on Crime and Disorder.	Rob Jarman
Procurement	Not applicable	Rob Jarman

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 A report entitled 'Housing Development and Regeneration Investment Plan' was agreed by Policy and Resources Committee in July 2017 for a project "focused on key regeneration opportunity areas". The report stated that officers would undertake an initial scoping exercise of the project to refine the sites and the required approach. To achieve this an internal officer working group was established, comprising officers from Planning, Regeneration & Economic Development and Property Services. Promotional material would be underpinned with site-specific guidance capable of being used as a material planning consideration. Initial scoping and outcomes were to be reported to Strategic Planning and Transportation Committee (SPSTC).
- 2.2 In January 2018 SPSTC inter alia agreed that "A future report would be brought to this Committee once the draft planning guidance had been prepared...".
- 2.3 Savills were appointed in April 2018 and commissioned to draft planning guidelines for each of the 5 sites. A plan illustrating the locations of the 5 sites is contained in appendix 1 and appendices 2 to 6 are the planning guidelines documents. These are not supplementary planning documents (they have not been the subject of formal consultation) but their purpose is to encourage, promote and facilitate redevelopment. The process involved two landowner, agent and stakeholder workshops, two all member workshops, a walkabout tour, follow up meetings with landowners

and agents on the content of the draft guidance and round table meetings with councillors. The engagement process and proactivity has been well received by those involved.

- 2.4 The guidelines provide analysis of context in terms of opportunities and constraints, urban design and planning parameters for future development, leading to illustrative scenarios.
- 2.5 If agreed, the guidelines would be publicised and used as material considerations in order to stimulate and shape development.
- 2.6 The sites are the subject of adopted Local Plan policies as follows:-
 - a) The sites fall within the Town Centre Broad Location (Policy H2) which is identified to deliver some 940 new homes by 2031 (only the northern extremity of Maidstone Riverside falls outside). The 5 sites can contribute to the achievement of this figure.
 - b) Mote Rd is subject to policy RMX1(6) which allows for a mix of uses to include "a minimum of 2000 sq m of office floorspace (B1a). Leisure uses (D2) would also be appropriate as part of the mix of uses on this site".
 - c) The Powerhub building and Baltic Wharf, St Peter's St (the northern site forming part of Maidstone Riverside) is the subject of policy RMX1(5) and this states that the site is suitable for a mix of housing, offices (B1a and/or A2), leisure uses (D2), cafes and restaurants (A3) and retail A1.
- 2.7 The guidelines align with these policies and the policies enjoy primacy.
- 2.8 This work on the opportunity sites can also feed into the Local Plan Review and the associated Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

COMMON THEMES:

- 2.9 Based on current market conditions, residential use is the most viable and so the potential development scenarios all include a residential led option. Similarly, all the sites are within the town centre and Local Plan policy DM23 sets a maximum provision of one parking space per unit. Controlled parking is the favoured arrangement and it is recommended that parking areas are not visually dominant at street level. In terms of safety and security, key principles have been employed relating to natural surveillance and ensuring human presence particularly in relation to parking areas and communal/core space.
- 2.10 Green space, soft landscaping including street trees have been incorporated. Where possible, the schemes propose town houses as well as apartments to provide a mix of homes and suggest improved permeability for walkers and cyclists. Throughout, the use of locally sympathetic design and materials, such as Kentish Ragstone, is promoted.

- 2.11 For single sites, namely, Mote Rd and Len House, a degree of phasing may be appropriate if viability is a proven issue. The other guidelines incorporate more than one site so natural phasing is highly likely to take place i.e sites are unlikely to come forward simultaneously.
- 2.12 With the exception of Maidstone West railway station, addressing heritage issues is a key consideration. Certain buildings are listed (e.g Len House and the Powerhub) and/or there are listed buildings in close proximity to sites (e.g listed terrace at Romney Place adjacent to Mote Rd and St Peter's Church close to the Broadway shopping centre) and/or sites are in a conservation area and form prominent buildings with both Granada House and the former Gala Bingo being archetypal examples.
- 2.13 **Appendix 7** provides an at glance read of the key details of each site development scenarios. However, I set out summary of each of the site guidelines below.
- 2.14 **Maidstone West:** this is made up of two sites with differing constraints and opportunities:-
- a) Northern site occupied by the Broadway shopping centre. Redevelopment provides the opportunity for a well designed landmark minimising the visual dominance of the bridges gyratory system with pronounced intervisibility with the river Medway. Secondly, the Bridges Gyratory acts as a physical barrier to connectivity so redevelopment provides the opportunity of improving cycle and pedestrian links.
 - b) The southern site occupied by both Maidstone West railway station and the B & Q retail shed presents, in particular, the opportunity to enhance the public realm and vehicular circulation of Hart Street, Barker Road and Maidstone West railway station.
- 2.15 Granada House and Gala Bingo, both of these separate sites contain buildings of high significance to the character and appearance of that part of the Maidstone Centre conservation area centred on Gabriel's Hill.
- a) **Granada House:** this is perhaps the key building in the Gabriel's Hill street scene due to its width and mass and also its central location. Due to the sensitivity, in particular, the roof scape it is considered that the only acceptable change would be a lightweight penthouse style roof addition of one storey with a pronounced set back from eaves. Therefore, no redevelopment is proposed.
 - b) **Former Gala Bingo:** this is a landmark building being prominent in views down Gabriel's Hill with the alignment of the front façade being critical. Secondly, it is dominant when approaching from Palace Avenue. Leisure uses in this former cinema would be welcomed as they would best fit with the original interior and external design. The quality of the public realm here is relatively poor and needs improving in such a prominent location.
- 2.16 **Mote Road:** specific Local Plan policy applies. The key challenges here are employment floor space delivery, creating high density development which

still allows for landscaped areas and well designed communal and private amenity areas and which also respects the setting of the adjoining listed buildings. Any surface level and/or ground floor car parking on the Mote Road frontage needs to be carefully designed so that it minimises the harshness of Mote Road itself rather than adding to it. There is a need to have 'active' facades addressing Mote Road with the design needing to also mitigate noise and air quality.

2.17 **Maidstone Riverside:** this is a large site (>7 ha) on the western bank of the river Medway. It comprises two areas centred on St Peter's Street:-

- a) Northern area: comprising of the Power Hub / Baltic Wharf (covered by Local Plan policy) to the east of St Peter's Street and to the west retail buildings bounded by Maidstone Barracks railway station.
- b) Southern area: this comprises of retail units either side of St Peter's Street and a Travel Lodge.

Due to the riverside location and proximity of railway stations, this area could become a desirable and distinctive neighbourhood. Key to successful place making will be enhancing the public realm and connectivity with the river Medway together with improving design quality. Similarly, St Peter's Street acts as a 'spine' and again there is the opportunity to improve the public realm and address the road frontages with high quality design. Lastly, due to footfall, there is the potential for leisure and retail uses in addition to residential together with the potential for community uses. Given the size of the site, its multiple ownerships and existing uses, it is likely that it will come forward in phases over an extended period.

2.18 **Len House:** the listed building itself is the key consideration. This is a former car factory with the internal ramp specifically listed. This functional architecture (part of the broad 'Art Deco' genre) means that conversion to business and/or leisure/cultural space is preferential, with use of the external areas for private and/or public car parking. As a second phase, free standing apartment blocks in the existing forecourt which respect the setting of Len House in particular may well be acceptable. The river Len here is canalised and forms a pond giving the front façade a distinctive setting ideal for café and/or restaurant use.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 Do nothing and withdraw the council's submissions of the 5 sites from the Call for Sites: the town centre is one of the broad locations for homes in the adopted Local Plan. At the Public Examination, there was criticism that this Council should have been able to demonstrate how and what development would be brought forward. Secondly, without these guidelines, there will be a continued reliance on the planning application process which is incremental in nature.
- 3.2 Approve a limited number of sites (with or without amendments). The council's submissions to the Call for Sites for the non-approved sites would

be withdrawn: this is an option but will not be comprehensive and potentially results in abortive work.

- 3.3 Approve the 5 planning guideline documents (with or without amendments). The council's submissions to the Call for Sites would continue to go forward for assessment: this is discussed in the section below.
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4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 It is recommended that this Committee approve for publication all 5 planning guidelines documents.
- 4.2 As mentioned above, all 5 sites are within the Maidstone Town Centre Broad Location with the potential to deliver 940 additional homes. The vast majority of delivery thus far has been as a result of office to residential permitted development and these documents provide the opportunity for comprehensive planning and place shaping rather than reacting through the planning application process or letting the market dictate through prior notifications.
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5. RISK

- 5.1 The risks associated with this proposal, including the risks if the Council does not act as recommended, have been considered in line with the Council's Risk Management Framework. We are satisfied that the risks associated are within the Council's risk appetite and will be managed accordingly.
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6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 There has been no formal consultation because the documents are not intended to be supplementary planning documents.
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7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 The documents will be published and will be available for downloading via this Council's web site.
- 7.2 For Economic Development officers to lead on a detailed understanding of the delivery constraints, where intervention is required, and to work with stakeholders in order to formulate delivery strategies which will be reported to the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committee.
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8. REPORT APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Plan of the 5 sites
 - Appendix 2: Maidstone West planning guidelines
 - Appendix 3: Former Gala Bingo and Granada House
 - Appendix 4: Maidstone Riverside
 - Appendix 5: Len House
 - Appendix 6: Mote Rd
 - Appendix 7: Table of indices for each site
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9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Technical Appendices (supporting technical studies for Maidstone Town Centre sites planning guidelines July 2019)