

EPSOM & EWELL BOROUGH COUNCIL

**PLAN E – EPSOM TOWN CENTRE AREA ACTION PLAN
EXAMINATION**

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

**BY PLANNING POTENTIAL ON BEHALF OF
COUNTRY AND METROPOLITAN HOMES**

MAIN MATTER 2 – POLICY MATTERS (ITEMS 4, 9 & 13)

MAIN MATTER 3 – SITE ALLOCATIONS (ITEM 4)

Representation Reference No: 45

08 September 2010

INTRODUCTION

Planning Potential act on behalf of Country and Metropolitan Homes (the trading name for the southern division of the Gladedale Group). Country and Metropolitan Homes are the owners of the Former Magistrates and County Court site on The Parade/Ashley Road, which is identified as an Opportunity Site in the Plan E Submission Document.

Planning permission (reference: 10/00071/FUL) for a mixed-used development was recently refused by Epsom Borough Council on 15 July 2010, on the grounds that the development would not provide an appropriate number of car parking spaces. This is currently subject to an Appeal Decision.

Representations to the various Plan E consultation documents, including the Submission Document, have been submitted on behalf of Country and Metropolitan Homes, who object to elements of the Plan.

This written submission reiterates and expands further on these matters and provides comments on other relevant items included on the Hearing agenda. Traffic and parking within the town centre is a wider concern. It is our view that these matters should be an integral part of the Area Action Plan, rather than being dealt with in separate documents and guidance, as currently advocated throughout the Submission Document.

MAIN MATTER 2 – POLICY MATTERS (ITEM 4)

How has the Council arrived at the figures for housing provision on the key opportunity sites? Will the other town centre sites be capable of providing the remainder? What are the implications of building height restrictions on housing figures?

Whilst the Council's 2008/2009 Annual Monitoring Report indicates that the Council has a five year housing land supply, we have concerns that the restriction on building heights could have implications for the delivery of housing within the town centre and potentially the Borough as a whole. Policy offers no flexibility to address potential site constraints and scheme viability, which is particularly important in the current climate. Further, some allocated sites may not come forward, requiring housing targets to be met through smaller windfall sites.

MAIN MATTER 2 – POLICY MATTERS (ITEM 9)

Policy E7 - whether this policy is overly prescriptive and whether it complies with national policy. The areas are not finely drawn. What implications would that have for development control and the clarity of the plan? Why have the boundaries been drawn in the way they have since the 'up to 16m' areas do not follow any property boundaries on the ground. What is the reasoning for the boundaries? Is the roof height and angle justified? What are the implications of building height restrictions on housing density and floorspace provision figures? Reference has been made to another Inspector's views about a similar policy in Ashford. What implications does that have for my consideration? On what sites has there been pressure for taller buildings? What are the implications of paragraphs 4.41 on redevelopment proposals?

Policy E7 seeks to control the heights of buildings within the town centre. The policy prohibits buildings over 16 metres (four storeys) throughout the entire town centre. Whilst some areas are identified as being appropriate for four storey development shown on the proposals map, the policy restricts the majority of the town centre to a maximum of 12 metres (3 storeys) in height. Above these maximum heights, the roofs of new buildings cannot exceed 4 metres and the maximum roof pitch will be 45 degrees.

Effective and Justified?

Although we support policies that seek to provide general guidance on building design in specific areas of the town centre, we consider Policy E7 is far too rigid and prescriptive. The policy offers no flexibility and therefore cannot deal with changing circumstances. Indeed, large windfall sites may come forward in the future where taller buildings over the height limits stipulated would normally be appropriate, and design approaches are constantly being developed. Further, such restrictions are likely to deter innovative design solutions in the town centre.

Planning Potential was recently involved in Examination into the Ashford Town Centre Area Action. In his report, the Inspector found the Council's approach to building heights to be unsound because it was "too prescriptive", and it was considered that "a general limitation on building height and form had not been

properly justified and would be inflexible in practice” (see relevant extracts of the Inspector’s report at Appendix 1).

Ashford Borough Council’s policy on building heights in the Submission Document (see relevant extracts at Appendix 1) was far less restrictive than Policy E7 of Plan E, in that a range of much higher building heights were considered appropriate on the main streets (4-6 storeys). Policy TC1 (Guiding Principles) of the Submission Document stated:

“The following key planning objectives will apply to all development proposals within the Town Centre. These objectives complement the more general objectives of the Core Strategy.

F) Create attractive and vibrant main streets by achieving a building form of 4-6 storeys fronting these streets, with active ground floor frontages and uses that respond to the agreed hierarchy of streets and open spaces.”

Removal of the reference to specific building heights in Ashford was considered necessary for soundness. The Inspector therefore made the following changes to the policy:

*“F) Create attractive and vibrant main streets by achieving **appropriate building forms** fronting these streets, with active ground floor frontages and uses that respond to the agreed hierarchy of streets and open spaces.”*

It is also unclear how Epsom and Ewell Borough Council have arrived at the specific building height zones shown on Map 9. The table entitled ‘Town Centre Building Heights’ which forms part of the Council’s evidence base, contains a list of buildings and their heights. Importantly we note that the table does not contain all roads/buildings within the identified town centre boundary where the building height boundaries are drawn, and therefore does not appear to be a comprehensive database. For example, Ashley Road and The Parade, on which the former Magistrates and County Court site (Opportunity Site (d)) is located, are not included in the table.

Although 3 storey development appears to be the predominant building height, but with a number of 4 storey buildings, there are examples of 5 and 6 storey buildings, and even 7 storeys, throughout the town centre. It is not considered that this information, or the Conservation Character Appraisal, which identifies predominant building heights, necessitates the need for a blanket building height policy for the entire town centre, which restricts the height of all new buildings in the centre to be 3 and 4 storeys. Good design is not about mimicking what already exists; rather it is about encouraging high quality and innovative design which respects the existing building form.

The difficulties with this blanket policy is clear when having regard to the Epsom Station Site, which is identified as a strategic opportunity site in the Submission Document. The site is located directly opposite a substantial 5, 6 and 7 storey development, yet Policy E7 restricts development on this important site to just 4 storeys. The blanket restriction therefore presents difficulties with developing this site because the existing context clearly suggests that development over 4 storeys is likely to be appropriate. We note that Planning Permission (reference: 09/00824/FUL) was granted on the site for a 5 and 6 storey development earlier in the year. We also note from the Committee Report that this emerging Policy caused difficulties with the application as strictly speaking the development conflicted with the Policy. This example also highlights the fact that when considering large developments, the average height of the buildings and the treatment of elevations and roofs within a scheme is often more important than the height of individual buildings.

The way in which the zones have been drawn must also be questioned as they do not follow any property boundaries. Indeed in many instances, the line of the height zones runs through existing buildings/sites.

For the reasons stated above, it is considered that Policy E7 is inflexible and thus not effective, nor is it justified. The policy therefore fails the tests of soundness in this regard.

Consistent with national policy?

Planning Policy Statement 1 encourages high density, mixed use development on previously developed land. Town centres are considered to be appropriate locations for high density development involving tall buildings. It is our view that Policy E7, which will prohibit town centre development above 4 storeys and restrict new buildings to just three storeys within the majority of the town centre (which is extremely low in a town centre context), would undermine the Government's policies in this regard.

For these reasons it is considered that Policy E7 is not compliant with national policy and is therefore unsound in this regard.

It is considered that a blanket policy on building heights within the town centre is inappropriate. It is important that a site specific approach is adopted and that each application is decided upon its own merits when considering appropriate building heights/roof design for new buildings, as with all other aspects of building design, to ensure that the design philosophy adopted responds to the specific context of the site.

To ensure that the Policy is sound, it is suggested that the overly prescriptive criteria in the first part of Policy E7 is deleted and the second part of the Policy, which provides general design criteria, is used:

“Proposals must respect:

- The character and context of the surrounding locality, particularly in relation to existing building heights and roofscapes;
- The impact on the streetscene and views
- The Conservation Area (where appropriate)
- Listed buildings and the setting of Listed Buildings
- Topography.”

It also follows, that the building heights stipulated for the other opportunity sites in Policy E17 which are based on the proposed building height zoning, is also removed. The proposals map will need to be amended accordingly.

MAIN MATTER 2 – POLICY MATTERS (ITEM 13)

Policy E11. Will it always be possible to provide rear servicing in new developments?

Due to the configuration of some sites, it will not always be possible to provide rear servicing in new developments. Other approaches to servicing can be designed into schemes that ensure minimal obstruction to the public highway. The Policy as currently worded is not considered to directly relate to the aims of the Policy and as such will cause unnecessary constraints on development proposals. The Policy is therefore considered to be inflexible and therefore unsound.

To make the Policy sound, the wording of the Policy should be changed as follows:

“New developments will provide servicing arrangements that ensure that delivery vehicles visiting the site do not cause an obstruction to the Town Centre highway network.”

MAIN MATTER 3 – SITE ALLOCATIONS (ITEM 4)

Policy E17 – Opportunity Sites. Are the boundaries as defined on the proposals map correct? What parking standards will be used in calculating provision on these sites? Is there an indication that any of these schemes will go ahead? Should residential uses include student housing or institutional uses?

Boundaries of Opportunity Site (d)

We can confirm that the site boundaries of Opportunity Site (d) – The former Magistrates and Country Court site, The Parade/Ashley Road are correct. However, having regard to the location of the site in relation to the town centre and shopping boundaries identified on the Proposals Map, we object to the site being described as an 'edge of centre site'. It is considered that this is misleading given that the site is identified for office, healthcare and residential uses, and is clearly shown to be located within the identified town centre boundary.

Appendix B of PPS4 uses the term 'edge of centre' to define retail uses in locations that are well connected to and within easy walking distance (i.e. up to 300 metres) of the primary shopping area. Therefore when concerned with retail uses, a site can be regarded as 'edge-of-centre' even though it is located within the town centre boundary. However, for all other main town centre uses, which include offices, 'edge of centre' sites are generally regarded to be within 300 metres of a town centre boundary (i.e. up to 300 metres outside of the centre boundary).

The site is identified for office use and the policy specifically precludes retail development on this site. The site is therefore a Town Centre Site in PPS4 terms. In its current form, therefore, this part of Policy E17 conflicts with national policy and is therefore unsound.

To ensure that this part of the Submission Document is sound and to avoid confusion, it is requested that the site is described as a Town Centre Site to reflect its location on the Proposals Map.

Building Heights

As discussed in detail, under Main Matter 2 – Item 9, it is considered that the building heights identified for the opportunity sites, as defined by the building height zones on the proposals map, is unsound. To ensure that this part of Policy E17 is sound, the restrictions on building heights should be removed.

APPENDIX 1



Report to Ashford Borough Council

**by Patrick T Whitehead DipTP
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**an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State
for Communities and Local Government**

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Date: 8th February 2010

PLANNING AND COMPULSORY PURCHASE ACT 2004

SECTION 20

**REPORT ON THE EXAMINATION INTO THE ASHFORD TOWN CENTRE
AREA ACTION PLAN**

DEVELOPMENT PLAN DOCUMENT

Document submitted for examination on 13 July 2009

Examination hearings held between 27 October and 6 November 2009

File Ref: PINS/E2205/429/6

1 Introduction and Overall Conclusion

- 1.1 Under the terms of Section 20(5) of the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, the purpose of the independent examination of a development plan document (DPD) is to determine:
- (a) whether it satisfies the requirements of s19 and s24(1) of the 2004 Act, the regulations under s17(7), and any regulations under s36 relating to the preparation of the document
 - (b) whether it is sound.

- 1.2 This report contains my assessment of the Ashford Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP) DPD in terms of the above matters, along with my recommendations and the reasons for them, as required by s20(7) of the 2004 Act. The starting point for my examination has been the published Plan, including the Council's Schedule of Proposed Amendments.

- 1.3 I am satisfied that the DPD meets the requirements of the Act and Regulations. My role is also to consider the soundness of the submitted Ashford Town Centre Area Action Plan against the advice set out in paragraphs 4.51-4.52 of Planning Policy Statement 12 (PPS12). In line with national policy, the starting point for the examination is the assumption that the local authority has submitted what it considers to be a sound plan. The changes I have specified in this binding report are made only where there is a clear need to amend the document in the light of the legal requirements and/or to make the document sound in accordance with PPS12. None of these changes should materially alter the substance of the overall plan and its policies, or undermine the sustainability appraisal and participatory processes already undertaken.

- 1.4 My report firstly considers the legal requirements, and then deals with the relevant matters and issues considered during the Examination in terms of justification, effectiveness and consistency with national policy. My overall conclusion is that the Ashford Town Centre Area Action Plan is sound, provided it is changed in the ways specified. The principal changes which are required are, in summary:

- a) Revision of the retail/leisure floorspace and housing provision*
- b) Revisions to the Southern Expansion Quarter (SEQ) chapter*
- c) Deletion of the Shopping Frontages Policy*
- d) Amendments to the Proposals Map*

The report sets out all the detailed changes required, including those suggested by the Council, to ensure that the plan meets the legal requirements and the three tests of soundness.

2 Legal Requirements

- 2.1 The Ashford Town Centre Area Action Plan DPD is contained within the Council's Local Development Scheme (LDS), the original version

being approved in March 2005 and reviewed in July 2008. It is shown as having a submission date of July 2009 and the content of the TCAAP is as anticipated in the LDS.

- 2.2 The Council's Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) has been found sound by the Secretary of State and was formally adopted by the Council before the examination hearings were taking place. It is evident from the documents submitted by the Council, including the Regulation 30 (1) (d) and 30 (1) (e) Statements and its Self Assessment Paper, that the Council has met the requirements as set out in the Act and Regulations.
- 2.3 Alongside the preparation of the DPD it is evident that the Council has carried out a parallel process of sustainability appraisal.
- 2.4 In accordance with the Habitats Directive, I am satisfied that an Appropriate Assessment has been undertaken and that there would be no significant harm to the conservation of any European sites as a result of the policies and proposals within this DPD.
- 2.5 Subject to my findings and recommendation in respect of the Shopping Frontage Policy, considered under Matter 2, I am satisfied that the DPD is consistent with national policy.
- 2.6 The South East England Regional Assembly has indicated that the DPD is in general conformity with the approved Regional Spatial Strategy and I am satisfied that it is in general conformity.
- 2.7 I am satisfied that the DPD has had regard to the sustainable community strategy for the area.
- 2.8 I am satisfied that the DPD complies with the specific requirements of the 2004 Regulations (as amended) including the requirements in relation to publication of the prescribed documents; availability of them for Inspection and local advertisement; notification of DPD bodies and provision of a list of superseded saved policies.
- 2.9 Accordingly, I am satisfied that the legal requirements have all been satisfied.

3 Justified, Effective and Consistent with National Policy

MATTER 1 – WHOLE PLAN

Reasoning

- 3.1 Ashford is identified as a regional Growth Area by Policy EKA1 (Core Strategy) in The South East Plan. It indicates that Ashford should develop "*..as an office, research and business node, providing market growth for the sub-region as a whole, and opportunity for*

large investments..". The town centre is highlighted in para 18.16 as requiring improvement to facilitate sustainable growth –"..it will be necessary to improve the physical fabric of the area, reduce severance caused by the town centre road network and create a high quality public realm and network of open spaces".

- 3.2 The future role of the Town Centre was considered a "*..focus of substantial and concentrated mixed use development..*" and a key to delivering the overall growth model (paras 3.2/3) within the Council's Core Strategy (ED5) which quantifies a requirement for 8,000 new jobs through the provision of 94,000sqm of new retail/leisure floorspace and 76,200sqm of new office development by 2021. It also identifies the need for 2,500 new dwellings in the Town Centre (Policy CS3).
- 3.3 The AAP provides a Vision for the Town Centre and clearly articulates its role as a crucial aspect of the 'compact' model for the wider growth area described in the Core Strategy. The *Issues and Opportunities in the Town Centre* underpins *The Way Forward* and, together, these provide a basis for a *Design Agenda* leading to the identification of Guiding Principles in Policy TC1.
- 3.4 The Plan looks at the Town Centre as a series of 'quarters' and sets out a policy approach for each, including indicative targets for new development and site specific proposals. The Southern Expansion Quarter, which is separated from the historic core by the domestic and International railway lines, is the main focus for delivering growth. It is the most controversial proposal and drew a significant amount of representation, dealt with largely under Matter 5.
- 3.5 I am satisfied that the Vision and Objectives reflect those of the Core Strategy, and specifically Policy CS3. The present economic climate inevitably casts doubt on the feasibility of achieving the vision within the timescale, certainly in terms of the amount of commercial floorspace, and consequent number of jobs. The Council accepts this and I concur with its belief that the scale and breadth of allocations provides a sustainable template for growth that can respond to market conditions. I also consider that there is sufficient flexibility built into the Plan to enable the market to respond in a confident and sustained manner.
- 3.6 Other than the issues dealt with in detail under Matters 2 – 9, below, there are two issues under Matter 1 that I consider should be addressed. The first is concerned with the Design Aims for the Town Centre, where advice is provided concerning the height and form of buildings, and this advice is followed through into Policy TC1, guiding principle F. The advice and the guiding principle stipulate a building form of 4-6 storeys which may be appropriate when considering individual streets and locations, but in the wider context I consider to be too prescriptive. A general limitation on building height and form has not been properly justified and would

be inflexible in practice. Amendments are also necessary to paragraphs 1.44 and 1.46 for similar reasons.

- 3.7 The second issue concerns Policy TC25 – Commuted Parking where the Council has accepted that additional explanation is necessary to ensure that commuted payments may also be used in respect of the proposed SMARTLINK bus service. It has suggested additional text to be inserted following paragraph 3.52 to clarify the matter.
- 3.8 There is a suggestion for a further guiding principle to be inserted in Policy TC1, together with explanatory text regarding the importance of taking account of climate change in development. It is not necessary to include these suggestions to achieve soundness since Policy CS10 in the Core Strategy deals adequately with the matter and development within the Town Centre introduces no new issues.

Conclusions in terms of soundness

- 3.9 So far as the remainder of the Plan is concerned, apart from matters dealt with in detail under Matters 2 – 9, below, I consider it necessary for soundness to amend both the design advice regarding building height and form, and guiding principle F of Policy TC1. I also consider it necessary to include the additional paragraph proposed by the Council under 3.52 to provide the additional explanation regarding commuted payments.

The changes needed to make the DPD sound

Policy TC1- Guiding Principles

Amend guiding principle F:

"F) Create attractive and vibrant main streets by achieving appropriate building forms fronting these streets, with active ground floor frontages, proportionate heights, and uses that respond to the agreed hierarchy of streets and open spaces."

Paragraph 1.44

Amend the final sentence: "Along the wider main streets the height of buildings should be proportionate to the width of streets and create a strong sense of place."

Paragraph 1.46

Delete the first sentence and amend the second sentence: "Higher buildings may be justified in urban design terms in certain locations. These will include the Commercial Quarter, and close to the railway stations...."

Policy TC25 – Commuted Parking

Insert additional text following paragraph 3.52:

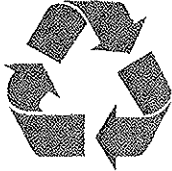
"3.52a Commuted payments received through the application of Policy TC25 may also be used to support the associated bus service which operates from the Park and Ride sites to the town centre, whether this is part of the SMARTLINK network or a bespoke service."

MATTER 2 – RETAIL & OFFICE FLOORSPACE PROVISION AND RELATED ISSUES

Reasoning

- 3.10 The quantities of new retail/leisure and office floorspace required to deliver the 8,000 new jobs within the Town Centre have been revised from those shown in the Core Strategy (para 3.3). The Inspector examining the Core Strategy concluded that "*..the aspirations for growth in the town centre are challenging but not unrealistic..*". However, since his report an Employment Land Review 2008 (ELR) has been undertaken. This indicates a greater focus on the delivery of town centre office development: in the order of 93,000sqm by 2021, an increase of nearly 17,000sqm on the Core Strategy quantity.
- 3.11 The AAP has sought to maintain the overall development level broadly the same so that the quantum of retail/leisure floorspace has been reduced to 77,200sqm (57,000sqm after adjusting for the 19,000sqm already provided through the County Square shopping mall extension) to accommodate the increase in office floorspace. No reasoned justification is given for this reduction except as a 'book balancing' exercise.
- 3.12 A further complication is that para 2.4 in the AAP refers to a net indicative figure of around 57,000sqm new leisure/retail floorspace, whilst the resulting job creation referred to in para 2.5 appears to be calculated on the same quantity as a gross floorspace figure.
- 3.13 Evidence to justify the quanta includes an extrapolated figure for comparison goods to 2021 and additional work by Savills (2008 and 2009) on convenience goods. Nevertheless there appears to be agreement between the Council and representors regarding an adjustment to the overall retail capacity. This refers to the capacity calculations in the Core Strategy being for the Borough as a whole. The result, set out in a Position Statement submitted to the Examination, suggests a rounded total of between 65 – 70,000sqm for the Town Centre by 2021. This higher total remains lower than that sought in the Core Strategy and appears to be a justified and realistic quantum. Nevertheless there is no doubt its achievement in the present economic climate may prove as challenging as the Core Strategy Inspector indicated.
- 3.14 The issue of the proportion of the increased total that should be attributed to the Town Centre Core, and whether any should be attributed to the Southern Expansion Quarter (SEQ) must also be

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The Way Forward in the Town Centre

1.29 Having explained the elements that make up the overall approach to the planning of the future of the town centre, and the main issues and opportunities that arise there, this section of the Plan sets out the strategy needed in response. There are 5 key themes:

- Promoting design excellence
- Promoting Movement
- Promoting a mix of uses
- Dealing with the risk of flooding
- Meeting sustainability targets

Promoting Design Excellence

1.30 Delivering high design quality is essential if the vision for the town centre, and the wider aims of the Core Strategy, are to be met. The Core Strategy sets a clear design agenda – it is the starting point for anyone bringing forward development, especially in the town centre where development will impact on more people and shape the attitudes of the investment market.

1.31 The Core Strategy (policy CS 9) explains how schemes must show a positive response to each of the following design criteria:

- Character, distinctiveness and sense of place
- Permeability and ease of movement
- Legibility
- Mixed use and diversity
- Continuity and enclosure
- Quality of public spaces
- Flexibility, adaptability and liveability
- Richness in detail
- Efficient use of natural resources

1.32 Each of these criteria should be addressed at each stage of the design process – the Design and Access statement (see below) is the key document recording this evolution of ideas into a completed, high quality design.

1.33 Applicants and designers of town centre schemes will need to respond to the over-arching policy on design in the Core Strategy and the more detailed policy of this Plan drawn from:

- this general section on town centre design;
- the guidance given for each 'quarter'; and
- the site specific policies within each quarter

1.34 This 'hierarchy' of design policy and guidance will be completed by a Town Centre Design SPD which will provide further detailed design guidance and advice.

1.35 Design in the town centre is not just to do with buildings and architecture – equally important is the quality of the public realm. Steps to improve the public realm have already begun, most notably through the conversion of Elwick Road, Forge Lane and West Street to a 'shared space'. This radical and innovative project has created a major shift away from the traffic-dominated former ring road and represents the start of the Council's aspirations to deliver a new town centre capable of supporting the major new growth proposed in the Core Strategy.

1.36 The Council and its partners have commissioned a Public Realm Strategy that sets out a framework for the public realm improvements that are needed to enhance the town

centre's environment, as shown on the 'Public Realm Priorities' diagram, under section 6 of this AAP. Subsequently, a Town Centre Design SPD will set out more detailed proposals for public realm improvement schemes to be delivered via a combination of public funding, site development and public realm developer contributions, as referred to in policy CS8 of the Core Strategy.

- 1.37 As part of this overall approach to design quality, the Council considers that there is an important role for public art to play as an integral part of the town centre environment.

Design Aims For The Town Centre

These are:

- 1.38 **A town centre designed around a well defined framework of carefully inter-connected streets and public spaces** – the public realm and, set within it, a series of identifiable 'quarters'
- 1.39 **Quarters which have a recognisable character** that can help guide future development. This character is defined by each quarter's current and proposed function, its existing character and building types, and opportunities for development. Other important influences include links to key transport, shopping, open space and other facilities
- 1.40 **Busy town centre streets** that are the focus for these quarters, or in some cases the transition from one to another. These streets must play a combined role as traffic and pedestrian arteries but (unlike so much of the old ring road) they will be fronted by a range of retail and commercial uses, front entrances and main facades. Wide pavements, active uses at ground level, controlled traffic speeds and building fronts onto the pavement will all contribute to the success of these streets. Increased pedestrian activity will also help to tackle community safety issues.
- 1.41 **Building blocks that help re-create traditional streets** with continuous street frontage, avoiding blank, lifeless facades and set-backs. This can help to 'mend' areas of the town where this pattern has been lost. Careful detailing of entrances, windows and access arrangements will add to this quality.
- 1.42 **Activities and uses that create life at street level** such as shops, restaurants, display frontage, main entrances all help to create stronger, safer streets – especially along the most important routes. Ground floor designs will need to be flexible enough to cater for such uses.
- 1.43 **Scale and height that respects Ashford's context** as a town in transition but essentially a market town of traditional form centred around the prominent St Mary's Church. New development must protect important views of St Mary's Church. It is the most important landmark in the town and a key part of the town's sense of identity and distinctiveness.
- 1.44 The design vision for the town centre is based around the importance of vibrant streets and the scale and sense of proportion needed to enclose these and other areas of public realm. The vision is not based around high landmarks or point blocks. The scale of the traditional parts of the town centre and surrounding residential areas is well established – building heights should step down to this smaller scale and building widths narrow closer to the historic core where narrow frontages tend to predominate. Along the wider main streets a scale of 4-6 storeys is in proportion and gives a strong sense of place to these important streets.
- 1.45 At this point it is important to explain in more detail the advice given in the Plan on building heights. This is expressed in terms of storey height but this needs explaining



Introduction

as different uses need different heights (for example, offices and shops have taller storeys than residential accommodation). As an approximate guide the following heights relate to different storey levels - from ground level (facade heights excluding any roof pitch):

- * Flexible ground floor with residential above - 4 storeys 13m; 6 storeys 19m
 - * Flexible ground floor with offices above - 4 storeys 15m; 6 storeys 22m
- 1.46** In one part of the town centre only, higher buildings could be appropriate in urban design terms. In the Commercial Quarter, and close to the railway stations, some taller buildings may be justified to help 'signal' this key public transport hub and major business district. Site policies set out more details of the approach. However, tall buildings are not needed per se to deliver the quantum of development required in the town centre and it is not envisaged that towers significantly in excess of the current scale set by International House will be acceptable.
- 1.47** **Design for the whole environment**, working with stakeholders and local people and bringing the key design disciplines together to create an attractive and well co-ordinated series of places. This is an essential part of this AAP's strategy to make the town centre a special place and a magnet for investors, residents, shoppers and workers. Well designed spaces and public art in all its guises will make a crucial contribution to the environmental quality required in Ashford Town Centre

Delivering the Design Agenda

- 1.48** The ambition for the town centre set in this AAP and the delivery of design quality depends on a strong design process. The Design and Access Statement is central to this. Applicants will need to show how their scheme has evolved in response to a series of key influences:
- * **The need for the involvement of stakeholders and local people** in helping to shape the design, typically through design workshops, public surgeries and exhibitions. The approach to be adopted will need to be agreed with the Borough Council – on large or complex sites a tailored design workshop is likely to be required to help generate quality design solutions.
 - * **The need for an integrated design approach** that brings together the various design disciplines involved in creating well designed buildings, set alongside high quality public spaces. Proposed developments will need to show how this relationship is achieved and will need to make available the funding necessary to deliver public realm to meet the quality standards set in the Council's emerging Public Realm Strategy.
 - * **The need to include proposals for public art** with artists being a key part of integrated design teams - all allocated sites will be required to come forward with specific proposals, helping to contribute to the Council's emerging Public Art Strategy.
 - * **The need for agreed site masterplans on complex sites** – especially where here are multiple ownerships. These are needed to show how development can come forward in part or on a phased basis, taking account of the wider design context and without prejudicing overall quality or deliverability. The need for such an approach is set out in site policies in this AAP – although, exceptionally, masterplans may also be needed for other sites should circumstances dictate.
 - * **The need to respond to advice received from an independent Design review Panel.** - All major schemes will be referred to the Panel at key stages in the design process. Applicants will be expected to prepare suitable material for such reviews and will need to show how the scheme has been re-evaluated, and where necessary amended, to take account of comments the Panel makes.
 - * **The need to deliver sustainable design and building construction.** Whilst several policies in the Core Strategy will have a bearing on design issues, this is

especially true of the Council's sustainable energy and materials objectives (Core Strategy policy CS10). Further guidance on meeting this policy will be provided in the Sustainable Design & Construction SPD.

- » **The need to respond to national quality standards, such as 'Building for Life', that are used by the Borough Council.** To help meet the design objectives set in this AAP the Council may use nationally developed standards. Tools of this sort will help in the evaluation of proposals. Furthermore, detailed guidance on all the above issues will be included in a forthcoming Town Centre Design SPD.

Promoting Movement

- 1.49** Planning Policy Statement 6 ⁽¹¹⁾ sets out that a critical component in achieving a successful, sustainable and viable town centre, is the need to increase its overall accessibility, particular for pedestrians. The quality of associated public realm improvements, overall quantum of development and mix of uses, are all important factors in stimulating greater footfall movement within a town centre.
- 1.50** Development will need to generate an accessible, safe and attractive sense of place, through the promotion of high quality design, attractive public realm and interesting streetscape. A safer and attractive environment encourages greater pedestrian movement patterns.
- 1.51** Development on sites which front the former ring road will need to create a positive, pedestrian friendly streetscape which encourages ease of movement. New development around the domestic and international stations in particular should help to provide a more positive sense of arrival into the town. Sites adjoining the key routes and spaces identified in the 'Public Realm Strategy Movement and Crossing Hierarchy' diagram, shown under section 6 of this Plan, will need to deliver improvements here, as will sites where there should be improved links between the town centre and the river corridors and other open spaces.
- 1.52** As a general principle, this Plan promotes the incorporation of 'active' ground floor uses throughout the town centre area but especially along the major streets. These will be uses that can encourage a higher degree of pedestrian movement along the main routes through the town centre. On major streets, this ground floor should be designed to 4 metres minimum ceiling height, as this provides flexibility for future changes of uses.

Promoting a Mix of Uses

- 1.53** Successfully delivering a high quality mixed use environment within the town centre will encourage visitors and shoppers into the town throughout the day and evening. This will help to create jobs and will raise the overall profile of Ashford as a place to visit and enjoy, which in turn will encourage further investment. Many sites allocated in this plan propose a mix of uses drawn from those below. The precise balance on any one site will be determined by detailed design issues and to some extent by market interest.
- 1.54** The town centre needs a strong and varied retail offer, both to serve the needs of the rapidly growing population, but also to raise the centre's current position in the retail hierarchy in Kent. ⁽¹²⁾ The recent retail extension of County Square will play a key role, but additional retail investment is needed given the level of growth envisaged in the town. Work will be needed to counter the impacts of too strong a shift of retail activity to the south with the dangers this poses for decline elsewhere. More shopping floorspace will encourage more variety in the town's offer and the opportunity to encourage more 'speciality' shopping areas. A similar wider view is also needed for food retailing – it

11 Planning Policy Statement 6, 'Planning for Town Centres', 2005

12 Ashford Retail Study, 2003



needs to be distributed in locations and in format sizes that best help to meet the overall objectives for the town centre.

- 1.55** Generating a substantial leisure offer to serve a much larger town is also important. Leisure uses help attract a greater number of people into a town centre, at differing times of the day, complementing other town centre uses.⁽¹³⁾ The recent Stour Centre development provides a significant increase in the quality and quantity of leisure facilities provided in the town centre and is an important first step.
- 1.56** Providing substantial new office development is seen as a key component in helping to stimulate a significant new employment base for the town centre allowing it to deliver its strategic role set by the Core Strategy.⁽¹⁴⁾ The area north of the domestic station – the Commercial Quarter – will be the main focus of this development as a new business district for the town. Public ownership of land in this area and the concerted actions of the Ashford's Future partners will help to bring forward comprehensively planned, high quality development here.
- 1.57** A larger residential population will also bring benefits to the town centre. The town centre is an inherently sustainable location for new housing, and an increase in residents will help to support the evening economy. Core Strategy policy CS13 establishes the need to provide a range of dwelling types within the borough, offering people a greater degree of housing choice. A mix of accommodation will provide a variety of options to enjoy high quality town centre living.

Promoting Key Infrastructure

- 1.58** Achieving a successful town centre will require the delivery of a variety of key infrastructure to come forward alongside or in advance of new development.
- 1.59** Parking within a town centre provides people with direct and quick access to the retail, leisure and commercial facilities on offer. However a careful balance is needed, as, over-providing for parking in a town centre can lead to problems of traffic congestion which could ultimately affect its accessibility and viability.⁽¹⁵⁾
- 1.60** The Core Strategy sets out the strategic approach to parking (paragraphs 11.14 -17) and, in particular, how parking that serves the town centre will be provided through a mix of spaces at out-of-centre Park & Ride sites and new multi-storey public car parks in the town centre. It also explains how parking standards should progressively reduce over time as public transport services improve in quality and frequency. Policies in this Plan cover the delivery of the new multi-storey car parks and set out detailed parking standards for new development in the town centre area.
- 1.61** Another critical infrastructure requirement is the delivery of Victoria Way. This will provide an alternative cross-town centre route for traffic, relieving the former ring road. It will also provide access to a multi-storey car park on the edge of the town centre and open up underused vacant land for development in the Southern Expansion Quarter. Developments that subsequently benefit from this new through route and / or have a frontage to it will be required to enhance the public realm along this important street to the design standard set for the completed route.⁽¹⁶⁾
- 1.62** There are wider physical and community infrastructure projects which will, directly or indirectly, benefit the town centre (for example, investment in the SMARTLINK transport system). The Core Strategy (policy CS8) introduces a strategic tariff that will help fund certain strategic infrastructure projects. This applies to residential accommodation in

13 Town Centre Development Framework, 2005

14 Employment Land Review, 2008

15 Parking Strategy, 2006 & Ashford Parking Strategy Technical Note 2009

16 Victoria Way Community Infrastructure Fund Appraisal, 2008

the town centre at a level to be set in the Infrastructure Contributions SPD. Employment and retail uses do not pay strategic tariff but the Core Strategy envisages that contributions to public realm enhancements are likely to be sought from this source.

- 1.63** In this Plan there is an expectation that all allocated sites (and other major development sites that may emerge during the Plan period) will bring forward public realm improvements associated with the site in question, and public art. Where there are specific requirements the site policies identify these – a Town Centre Design SPD will provide more detailed guidance drawing on the Public Realm Strategy. An Infrastructure Contributions SPD is being produced which will set out the details of developer contributions expected from developments in the town centre.

Dealing With The Risk of Flooding

- 1.64** The Core Strategy (policy CS19) sets out the Council's approach to all development coming forward within the identified floodplain. Some of the eastern and southern areas of the Town Centre are located within Flood Zone 3. (See Proposals map)
- 1.65** In principle, development in these areas would normally be resisted but this would potentially run contrary to the overall approach to the town centre's major role in delivering the growth agenda. The approach in the Core Strategy, in relation to the future development of the Town Centre, was supported by extensive flood modelling work carried out by the Environment Agency. In addition, an Integrated Water Management Study and a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment were produced which justified the approach adopted.
- 1.66** The Core Strategy recognises that the flood category issue needs to be balanced with other considerations, such as the need to bring forward key brownfield sites for regeneration where there are no suitable alternative sites in a lower flood risk zone or sustainable development objectives take precedence (para. 15.9 of the Core Strategy). These exceptions do apply in one or two key parts of the town centre, notably in the Southern Expansion Quarter and the International Station Quarter.
- 1.67** It is practical to provide suitable flood mitigation to support development proposals within flood zone 3, without worsening the flood situation on site or elsewhere. ⁽¹⁷⁾ Against this background it is considered that the allocation of sites for development in this AAP is consistent with the Core Strategy. In any event, proposals coming forward in the town centre will still need to accord with policy CS19 of the Core Strategy. Where this is an issue on allocated sites within the AAP, it is reflected within the reasoned justification to those policies.

Meeting Sustainability Targets

- 1.68** New development in the town centre will be subject to the challenging sustainability targets that are set out in policy CS10 of the Core Strategy. Whilst there will be a variety of technical ways to meet these targets, there is also the opportunity to consider strategic alternatives. For example, the 'critical mass' created by a series of sites in complementary uses may make it possible to provide Combined Heat and Power more efficiently and cheaply. In the Southern Expansion Quarter in particular, where large amounts of new development are proposed on a variety of sites, this may be feasible. The Council and its partners will be keen to work with developers and sustainable energy experts to broker the best solutions for all parties.



Guiding Principles

Policy TC1 - Guiding Principles

The following key planning objectives will apply to all development proposals within the Town Centre. These objectives complement the more general objectives in the Core Strategy.

- A) Conserve and enhance the Town Centre's heritage and character, especially the two Conservation Areas and their settings, in particular by respecting the scale and bulk of existing buildings and protecting important views of the town's skyline and St. Mary's Church;
- B) Create a balance and mix of uses within sites and around the town centre as a whole that helps to generate a varied and interesting urban environment that best meets the needs of all its users;
- C) Protect existing residential environments and residents' quality of life and create new living environments of lasting quality;
- D) Deliver an attractive and safe urban environment with a strong sense of place by the high quality design of buildings and public spaces to help attract investors, residents, employees, visitors, shoppers and tourists alike;
- E) Create a network of public spaces in the town centre linked to the agreed hierarchy of streets and open spaces and built to an agreed quality standard;
- F) Create attractive and vibrant main streets by achieving a building form of 4-6 storeys fronting these streets, with active ground floor frontages and uses that respond to the agreed hierarchy of streets and open spaces;
- G) Secure the inclusion of public art as an integral part of development proposals on allocated and other prominent sites;
- H) Protect and enhance the Town Centre's existing green open spaces, and the river corridors and improve routes linking the town centre to these areas;
- I) Where development, on sites within the 100 year undefended floodplain, is otherwise acceptable, ensure that this can be achieved without worsening flood conditions on site or elsewhere.