



The Property People

6-8 Hills Road
Cambridge
CB2 1NH

Assessment of Development Opportunity Sites

Saffron Walden
Great Dunmow
Stansted Mountfitchet

For Uttlesford District Council

November 2012

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Carter Jonas LLP is a limited liability partnership
registered in England and Wales no. OC304417.
Reg office 127 Mount Street, London W1K 3NT

Introduction

The Council are seeking an assessment of the proposed Development Opportunity Sites in Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow and Stansted Mountfitchet identified in their Report of Representations on Employment and Retail following the consultation on Proposals for a draft Local Plan in June/July 2012. The extracts from the report and the plans are attached in Appendix 1.

SAFFRON WALDEN

Saffron Walden is an attractive market town with an interesting variety of small traders and is probably underrepresented in terms of national retailers as compared to comparable towns. To some this is part of its attractiveness. There is generally a fairly low level of vacant retail units and when a unit becomes available it is usually taken up fairly quickly. There is perhaps a shortage of larger units which might attract more national retailers to the town.

The Saffron Walden Town Council website has the following description:

This very attractive town is one of the finest preserved examples of a medieval market town and is quintessentially English. Within its outstanding Conservation Area you can find examples of every style of architecture from the 12th to the 21st century. The town is close to, but largely undisturbed by, Stansted airport and has excellent links to Cambridge, just 15 miles away.

The prime area for retailers is King Street and while rental levels for retail units have reduced since their peak they are still high enough to justify development in appropriate locations.

Fire Station & Laundry Site Hill Street, Saffron Walden

Location

Hill Street is the principle route through Saffron Walden from west to east and provides secondary retail premises trading primarily on the northern side from which there is good access to King Street and the prime retail pitch via Cross Street. The road is known as George Street from the High Street to Gold Street before becoming Hill Street. The proposed site is on the southern side of Hill Street adjacent to the Jubilee Gardens and just past the entrance to Gold Street. The site is 'L' shaped with a secondary frontage to Gold Street.

There is a small secondary retail parade on the south side of George Street west of Gold Street, and Gold Hill House, on the corner of Gold Street and Hill Street, provides four shops between the site and Gold Street itself with two further units on Gold Street with offices above. At the eastern end of Hill Street there are further units alongside the Waitrose supermarket. The supermarket draws people to the Town Centre particularly as it has a public car park attached providing, in conjunction with the common, the closest parking to the town centre. People using the car parks, or the other town centre car park at Swann Meadow, are not drawn naturally to the western end of Hill Street and George Street.

Gold Hill House comprises a fairly modern two storey building providing ground floor retail units with offices above. Adjacent on the Gold Street frontage is the Old English Gentleman public house. Gold Street itself is primarily a residential street with the exception of the laundry.

Potential

The site, shown edged red on the attached ordnance survey plan, is approximately 0.25 hectares (0.62 acres) and is currently in use as the Fire Station fronting Hill Street with the Saffron Walden Laundry behind on Gold Street.

We are not aware of the position regarding the intentions of the Fire Service or the Laundry regarding their occupation of this site. While the site may not be an ideal location for the Fire Station unless there is need to relocate for other reasons the cost of relocation may need to be picked up in whole or in part by the proposed redevelopment which will affect viability. The laundry will include a lot of plant which is expensive to move, so unless the equipment is nearing the end of its economic life and is largely redundant, the cost of relocating the laundry could again be expensive.

Nevertheless both occupiers are not ideal town centre uses and could be beneficially relocated elsewhere in the town.

Possible redevelopment

The site could provide one large or two smaller retail units fronting Hill Street serviced from Gold Street with other town centre uses, possibly within a D1 Use Class, on the rear. Residential accommodation on the upper floors might help provide additional value to increase the site value which could encourage both occupiers to move. Such a development could provide a contribution of 500 m² (5,400 sq ft) or more to the floor space requirements and with a vacant site would be economically viable. Such units could be attractive to major retailers unable to find suitable sized premises in Gold Street despite being slightly 'off pitch'.

Alternatively the whole site is capable of accommodating as much as 1,875 m² (20,000 sq ft) of ground floor retail space through provision of a small 'mall' but this would produce a larger number of small units and while it could have an exit onto Gold Street there would be no draw to create through pedestrian traffic. Such a scheme would do little to meet the needs of major retailers and the nature of the units provided would make attracting tenants difficult so that achieving a viable scheme is unlikely to be achieved.

Waitrose have consent to extend their store and a small mall might become viable if linked to an extended Waitrose store. Any link would need to avoid damaging Jubilee Gardens.

The site might attract a discount retailer but is smaller than their preferred site size and their use is unlikely to generate sufficient value to interest the existing users in moving.

Viability

A mixed use development providing ground floor retail with an alternative town centre use at the rear with upper floor residential accommodation will be viable, though would require careful design to protect the amenity of any residential units. No scheme is likely to come forward until such time as the Fire Service and/or laundry have a need to relocate to new premises.

Emson Close/Rose & Crown Walk

Location

Emson Close is located to the east of the town centre with vehicular access from Common Hill and pedestrian access from the Market Square and provides a second pedestrian link between the Market Square and the Common. The Close comprises a terrace of secondary retail units along the northern side with offices above and the remainder of the site provides private car parking used by businesses located in the town centre.

Rose & Crown Walk is a small retail mall at the rear of Boots providing a number of small retail units but forms the principal pedestrian link from the Market Place to the public car park on the Common. The land immediately to the south of Rose & Crown Walk comprises a car park, partly for use by the public and in part serving the commercial premises on Market Street. The Common car park is the main car park on the east of the town and closest to the Town Centre. Shops in the Walk rely on the pedestrian flow from the Common to attract customers as visibility from Market Street is poor though some are now establishing a reputation.

Potential

From the Valuation Office Agency website the shops and offices in Emson Close have an area of 485m² and a rateable value of £67,600 and the offices in Rowe House which forms the end of the terrace an area of 470m² and a rateable value of £44,700. The buildings are fully occupied and if they generate an income equivalent to their rateable value will probably have a value in excess of £1m. It would take a particularly valuable scheme to justify redevelopment.

The car park element of the site could accommodate a large retail unit but it would be tucked away and invisible to a large proportion of the shopping public and therefore the viability is questionable. The trees on the site might prevent a coherent development and there are potentially rights of way to the rear of the Market Place properties. It might provide a suitable site for a discount food retailer but the lack of directly associated car parking will detract from its attractiveness and it will not make a significant contribution towards the more general floor space requirement for the town.

Rose & Crown Walk, again from the Valuation Office Agency website, has a retail area of 340 m², a fitness centre of 113m² and offices of 136m². Total rateable value is £108,850 implying that Rose & Crown Walk is the more attractive pitch for retailers and is as expected given the greater footfall on a significant pedestrian link and despite the poor approach from the Market Place. The scheme was built as part of the redevelopment of the old Rose & Crown Hotel when the Boots retail unit on Market Place was created.

The car parks adjacent to Rose & Crown Walk might also be attractive to a discount retailer particularly if some parking can be directly associated with it but are otherwise too isolated from the town centre to be attractive for retail development other than as part of an improved Rose & Crown Walk.

Possible redevelopment

The Council granted consent in July 2011 for 9 flats and three retail units in Emson Close providing a further 555 m² of retail space through an additional floor to the existing offices and a new building on the car park. This was the renewal of a previous consent won on appeal in 2008 but never implemented. The residential element of such a scheme would be expected to improve viability of the scheme to some extent so the fact that the planning consent has not been implemented does imply that development in this relatively off centre site is problematic.

In order for any retail development to succeed a scheme needs to be in a suitable established location or large enough to create adequate pedestrian flows. For Emson Close and Rose & Crown Walk this might be possible if pedestrian links can be created with attractive public spaces and retail units on both sides from the Market Place/Emson Close entrance through to Rose & Crown Walk. Ideally this should include new retail units on the car park areas and if a third link to Market Street was achievable this should substantially improve pedestrian flows and the viability of any scheme. A scheme of this nature would make a significant contribution to the floor space requirements of the town and provide a suitable range of retail units to attract new retailers and create a viable development. Some residential units on the upper floors might be included to help the viability if an appropriate environment can be achieved for them.

Different ownerships and Listed Building/Conservation issues are likely to be a consideration in bringing such a scheme together. Retaining some private car parking may be necessary to gain the co-operation of some owners/tenants with Market Street and Market Place premises and any loss of public car parking will also be an issue for the public using Saffron Walden.

CONCLUSIONS

Both allocations have potential to deliver new retail development and other town centre uses in Saffron Walden where there are limited opportunities for development. Neither is straightforward to bring forward but the allocation should ensure that the sites are available and enable a developer to seek a comprehensive solution for each site with improved prospects for viability.

GREAT DUNMOW

Great Dunmow is a small market town of some 9,000 inhabitants situated midway between Braintree and Bishops Stortford. The retail centre of the town comprises the High Street and Market Place together with White Street where the Cooperative Store and main car park are situated. There is a mixed retail offer but this is provided almost exclusively by private traders or small local multiples with the exception of the main Banks who are represented. The centre serves the needs of the immediate community and tourists but otherwise shoppers will visit the Tesco store on the western side of the town for food shopping or the adjoining centres.

Rental levels in the centre are insufficient to provide an economic return on the development costs and retail space will generally only be provided as part of a more profitable residential development.

Location

Two sites are identified in the draft allocations policy; the car park to the rear of the Post Office at the southern end of the High Street comprising some 680 sq metres (0.17 acres) and the Council Depot and car park to the rear comprising some 2,950 sq metres (0.73 acres) with access off New Street as shown on the plan. Access to the Council depot site via New Street is poor.

The prime retail area in Dunmow is slightly to the north and close to the pedestrian link to the Cooperative store and main car park.

Potential

Since the retail study in 2011 the Council's old offices on the corner of High Street and New Street have been sold and the conversion to houses and flats with two small office suites is nearing completion. The work has included the development of part of the former public car park behind so that there is no longer a pedestrian link between the remaining small car park and the Council depot site and the High Street other than via New Street.

Without a link to the High Street the Council Depot site is not appropriate for retail uses but could be suitable for some alternative town centre uses within B1 or D1 use classes. A link to Haslers Place adjoining the southern boundary of the depot site is a possibility and Haslers Place is in B1 use, including an Arts Centre, though the site is in private ownership without a public highway to the depot boundary.

The land at the rear of the Post Office has more potential for retail use but would need to include one of the buildings on the frontage in order to create a presence on the High Street. At only 680 sq metres the site is too small to attract a discount retailer who in addition to a building would require some parking adjacent to or very close to the store.

Possible redevelopment

Speculative development on either site would only be viable for residential purposes but an ancillary town centre use looking for suitable premises, possibly within Use Class D1, could find either site attractive for a design and build solution. Such a user could struggle to find appropriate premises within the existing stock and be prepared to build their own premises designed for the use either as a owner occupier or be prepared to take a lease and pay a rent to justify development by others. The depot site might also provide additional town Centre Car parking if it enabled land to be released elsewhere to support High Street development but new links to the High Street would probably be required.

Viability

Speculative development on the Council depot site for most uses will not be viable and will only occur once an occupier has been identified for part of any proposed scheme. Development on the land at the rear of the Post Office will again not be viable on a speculative basis but if one of the premises on the frontage were part of any scheme development will potentially become viable.

STANSTED MOUNTFITCHET

The Village has two commercial centres, one close to the railway station providing a more traditional village centre and a second on Cambridge Road, originally the A11 and the main trunk road between London and Norwich. The two are some 450m apart and linked by Chapel Hill. Cambridge Road is a busy thoroughfare particularly in mornings and early evening.

Location

The identified site comprises some 1.09 hectares (2.7 acres) with two access points onto Cambridge Road and a more significant access from Chapel Hill. The site has a number of existing uses, including land for used car sales with access from Cambridge Road, a public car park with access from Chapel Hill with some community buildings, including the public library and Parish Council offices. At the northern end of the site are the former Sworders sale rooms with the second access to Cambridge Road alongside the Tesco Express store.

Potential

The site as a whole and the buildings at the rear of the Tesco Express in particular are appropriate for redevelopment. A planning application for the redevelopment of the land behind Tesco known as 10 Cambridge Road for residential development UTT/1193/12/FUL for the “*Demolition of existing buildings and erection of 14 No. dwellings, retail and office unit, and associated garages, car parking, landscaping and footpath*” was refused on 26 July 2012. The application was similar to an earlier application UTT/0215/12/FUL which was also refused and both applications were recommended for approval by the officers but refused by committee. The grounds for refusal were:

“The proposed development would be unsuitable on land which could otherwise be used for employment purposes. The proposed scheme would lead to an overdevelopment of the site contrary to the general character of the area. The proposed is therefore contrary to Policies GEN2, GEN4 and E2 of the Uttlesford Local Plan 2005”

The Officer’s report highlights the occupancy difficulties in the properties in the vicinity which have a high vacancy rate supported by a report from Mullucks Wells. The opening of the Tesco Express has probably increased the visitors to Cambridge Road but also exacerbated the traffic issues on Cambridge Road from short term parking on the public highway. The public car park at the rear is probably not deemed ‘convenient’ for very brief visits and there is no direct access through to Cambridge Road, though the proposed development would have provided links from the existing car park at the rear. Rental levels and demand in Stansted would not support speculative development for either retail or office use so that the prospects of the provision of new development is limited without an identified occupier. The provision of new retail development on Cambridge Road is therefore only likely as part of a larger scheme, probably including some residential to improve viability.

The site would be capable of development for B1 commercial space but demand would tend to be for the industrial end of the spectrum with single storey units with an office element. Such a development would seem inappropriate for this central

location and more appropriate to an 'out of town' location where the traffic movements from commercial vehicles would be less intrusive.

Possible redevelopment

An allocation for town centre uses across the whole site is unlikely to find developers interested in resolving any ownership issues and promoting any schemes for the site. This could leave the northern part of the site derelict whilst the southern part of the site would continue with its existing uses. In time there will be occupiers looking for space in the centre and it is important for the future of Stansted that space for them is retained but this would not require a site of this size.

However the allocation does provide an opportunity for the preparation of a comprehensive plan for the redevelopment of the site which can properly address the needs of the village as a whole, providing new retail units on Cambridge Road with proper links to adequate car parking, space for new town centre related development and could also include some residential development on part of the site which would support some of the less commercially viable town centre uses. Any such proposals would also need to consider the existing community services on the site and how these are to be maintained. We would recommend that the site be extended to include the vacant former 'You're Furnished' unit which was part of the recent planning application. This could provide an entrance into the new development and improve traffic flows on Cambridge Road and is shown shaded yellow on the Council's allocation plan attached.

Viability

Speculative commercial development on the site is unlikely and development will only occur in response to an identified need. A comprehensive scheme would be viable if it includes an element of residential and could create new retail units on Cambridge Road, improved access to relieve congestion on Cambridge Road, and identify sites ready for other town centre uses when the occupiers are identified

Conclusion

The allocation of this site should provide an opportunity for this important part of the Village to be considered as a whole. Development may well include some residential use but piecemeal development is unlikely to secure the benefits that this part of the Village urgently requires.

Carter Jonas
8 November 2012

Plans and policies

Retail Site Allocation Policies

Saffron Walden Policy - Development Opportunity Sites

The Council will support development and redevelopment opportunities for town centre uses in the following town centre locations.

- The Fire Station/ Saffron Walden Laundry
- Emson Close/ Rose and Crown Walk and car parks to rear of Boots and Saffron Building Society

Development should form part of a comprehensive development or not prevent the development of any other part of the site. Development will need to be implemented in accordance with design guidance approved by the Council and other Development Management policies. Implementation of the proposals will be regulated by legal obligation in association with the grant of planning permissions.

Great Dunmow Policy - Development Opportunity Sites

The Council will support development and redevelopment opportunities for town centre uses in the following town centre locations.

- Council Depot, off New Street
- Post Office Yard

Development should form part of a comprehensive development or not prevent the development of any other part of the site. Development will need to be implemented in accordance with design guidance approved by the Council and other Development Management policies. Implementation of the proposals will be regulated by legal obligation in association with the grant of planning permissions.

Stansted Mountfitchet Policy –Development Opportunity Site

The Council will support development and redevelopment opportunities for town centre uses in the following town centre locations.

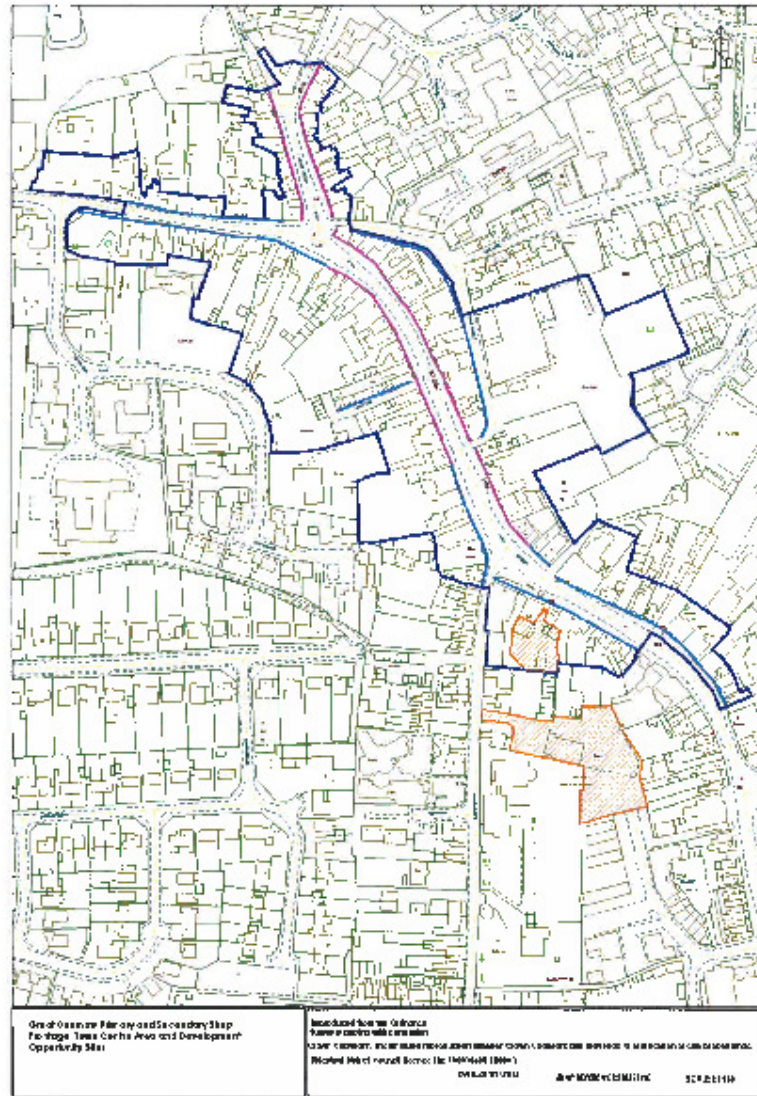
- East of Cambridge Road/Crafton Green

Development should form part of a comprehensive development or not prevent the development of any other part of the site. Development will need to be implemented in accordance with design guidance approved by the Council and other Development Management policies. Implementation of the proposals will be regulated by legal obligation in association with the grant of planning permissions.

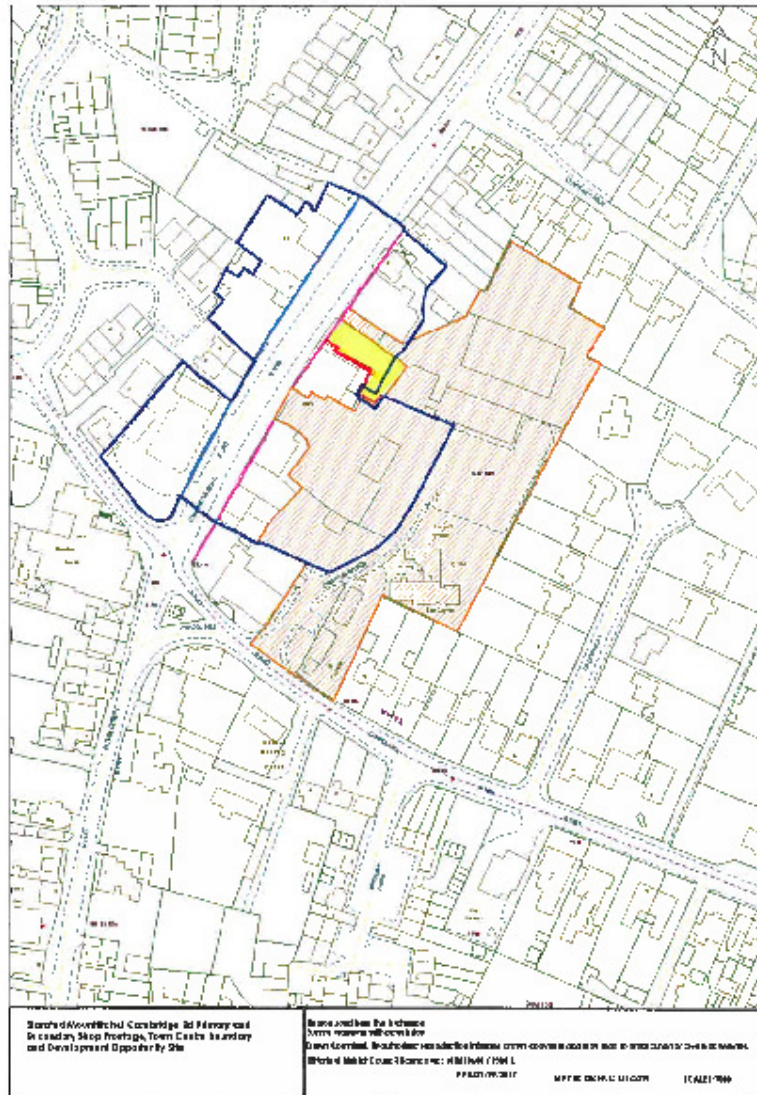
Stansted Mountfitchet Policy – Lower Street

Land at 2 Lower Street is allocated for a development comprising retail, medical services and 14 residential units. Development will need to be implemented in accordance with design guidance approved by the Council and other Development Management policies. Implementation of the proposals will be regulated by legal obligation in association with the grant of planning permissions.

Great Dunmow Town Centre showing primary and secondary street frontages and Development Opportunity Site



Stansted Mountfitchet Local Centre (Cambridge Road) showing primary and secondary street frontages Development Opportunity Area.



PHOTOGRAPHS

SAFFRON WALDEN



Fire Station



Laundry



Emson Close



Car Park at rear of Boots



4 Rose & Crown Walk

GREAT DUNMOW



The Post Office



Council Depot from Haslers Place

STANSTED MOUNTFITCHET



Congestion on Cambridge Road



Car Sales site on Cambridge Road



Car Park & Community Centre



Rear of former Sworders premises