

15 Retail and Town Centres

15.1 Introduction

- 15.1.1 East Herts' town centres play a vital role in providing for the every day needs of residents, providing not only a varied retail offer, but also for banking and administrative needs, leisure and social opportunities. The market towns of East Herts have a rich heritage which has influenced their current form and limiting road networks, character and architectural interest. However, this historic character can also act as a constraint, prohibiting larger retailers from investing .
- 15.1.2 In recent years there have been many financial pressures on town centres, with competition from larger centres including from out of town shopping centres, rising proportions of internet shopping, rising business rates and rents, restricted bank lending and a challenging economic climate. Despite this, East Herts' towns have been reasonably resilient suffering comparatively few closures.
- 15.1.3 The Town and Country (General Permitted Development) (Amendment) (England) Order 2013 came into force on 30 May 2013. The new rules allow high street premises to be used for new types of businesses without planning permission. Certain new retail businesses and other services will be able to open for up to two years in buildings classified as A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, B1, D1 or D2 (shops, financial services, restaurants, pubs, hot food takeaways, business, non-residential institutions, leisure and assembly). Whilst acknowledging these changes, the District Plan must plan for the whole plan period and consider the longer term needs of the district's high streets.

The East Herts Retail and Town Centres Study Update Report 2013 can be viewed and downloaded at: www.eastherts.gov.uk/retailstudy2013

15.2 Retail Development

15.2.1 In order to secure the vitality and viability of the district's retail centres, it is important for planning policy to seek to retain a high proportion of units for retail uses, but to also acknowledge the changing role town centres have in providing social and cultural experiences, both now and in the future. A mixture of uses in the right locations can encourage activity throughout the day and into the evening, providing for social as well as retail needs, thus enhancing the role of town centres.

Therefore, where planning permission is required, the Council will seek to retain a high proportion of shop uses in the town centre.

15.2.2 The following hierarchy of town centres will apply:

1. Principal Town Centre: Bishop's Stortford
2. Secondary Town Centre: Hertford
3. Minor Town Centres: Buntingford, Sawbridgeworth and Ware
4. District Centre: The Thorley Centre, Bishop's Stortford

15.2.3 The NPPF states that where a proposal is over a proportionate, locally set floorspace threshold, local planning authorities should require an impact assessment to be submitted. It is not considered appropriate to apply the default threshold of 2,500 sq.m gross across the district as this scale of development would represent a significant proportion of the overall retail projections for East Herts through the Plan period. Given the high proportion of small retail units and businesses in the district's town centres, developments over 500 sq.m gross will be of a greater significance and therefore should be subject to some form of impact assessment.

15.2.4 The Council supports the use of upper floors in town centre locations for residential and office purposes where there is potential to provide a reasonable standard of accommodation, has its own access, has arrangements for car parking and/or access to, and availability of passenger transport, and has

suitable refuse storage facilities. The conversion of dwellings into commercial uses outside town centre locations will be resisted.

Policy RTC1 Retail Development

I. Within the town centre boundaries as defined on the Policies Map, the following uses will be supported in principle, where they contribute to maintaining the role and function, viability and vitality of the market town:

- A1 (shops)
- A2 (financial and professional services)
- A3 (restaurants and cafes)
- A4 (drinking establishments)
- A5 (hot food takeaways)
- B1a (offices)
- C1 (hotels)
- D1 (non-residential institutions)
- D2 (assembly and leisure)

II. Proposals will be assessed in line with the sequential approach. The main town centre uses as listed should be located in the town centre, then in edge of centre locations and only if suitable sites are not available should out of centre locations be considered. When considering edge of centre and out of centre proposals, preference will be given to accessible sites that are well connected to the town centre. The Council and the applicant will demonstrate flexibility on issues such as format and scale.

III. Proposals for retail, leisure and office developments are required to provide an impact assessment indicating the impact of the proposal on existing, committed and planned public and private investment in the town centre and in the catchment area of the proposal. The assessment should also consider the impact of the proposal on vitality and viability, including local consumer choice and trade in the town centre and the

wider area, for up to ten years from the application. The following thresholds will be applied:

- Over 1,500 sq.m gross within the settlement boundary of Bishop's Stortford
- Over 1,000 sq.m gross within the settlement boundary of Hertford
- Over 500 sq.m gross elsewhere

IV. Where a proposal fails to satisfy the sequential approach or is likely to have an adverse impact it will be refused.

15.3 Primary Shopping Area

- 15.3.1 Primary Shopping Areas are where retail activity is concentrated, often underpinned by larger anchor stores and popular chains. Primary Shopping Areas contain both primary and secondary frontages. Primary Shopping Frontages are normally the retail 'core' of a centre where the majority of footfall and activity occurs. They are likely to include a high proportion of retail uses which may include food, drinks, clothing and household goods. Secondary Shopping Frontages provide a greater diversity of uses such as restaurants, commercial services and leisure facilities, which provide a supporting role for the centre as a whole.
- 15.3.2 In order to maintain the viability of the Primary Shopping Area and to locate retail uses where there are good passenger transport networks, it is important to prevent the dilution of the Primary Shopping Frontage within the Primary Shopping Area. Given the size, diversity and function of the town centres of Bishop's Stortford, Hertford and Ware, it is necessary to designate a Primary Shopping Area within the town centres, which contain both Primary and Secondary Shopping Frontages.

Policy RTC2 Primary Shopping Area

I. Within the Town Centre boundaries as defined on the Policies Map, Primary Shopping Areas are designated for the Town Centres of Bishop's Stortford, Hertford and Ware, within which retail and other town centre uses, as listed in Policy RTC1 (Retail Development), should be located.

II. The Primary Shopping Areas will contain both Primary and Secondary Shopping Frontages. Proposals for development within Primary Shopping Frontages will be considered in accordance with Policy RTC3 (Primary Shopping Frontages). Proposals for development within Secondary Shopping Frontages will be considered in accordance with Policy RTC4 (Secondary Shopping Frontages).

15.4 Primary Shopping Frontages

15.4.1 Recognising temporary changes in permitted development, it is not appropriate to take a laissez faire approach to development within East Herts' town centres, nor is it appropriate to ban changes of use from A1 (Shop) uses to other uses, as to do so could prevent diversity and stifle investment, resulting in vacant uses. However, it is appropriate to seek to maintain a high proportion of A1 (Shop) uses in order to ensure the vitality and viability of the town centres, so that they are able to perform their function as retail and leisure destinations.

Policy RTC3 Primary Shopping Frontages

In order to protect the vitality and viability of the Primary Shopping Areas, within the Primary Shopping Frontages in Bishop's Stortford, Hertford and Ware, as defined on the Policies Map, proposals for Use Classes A1, A2, A3, A4 and A5 will be supported in principle provided they have an active frontage ~~the loss of A1 (Shop) uses will be resisted where this would result in more than 30% of units in a continuous frontage in Non-A1 Use.~~

15.5 Secondary Shopping Frontages

- 15.5.1 Within the Primary Shopping Areas of Bishop's Stortford, Hertford and Ware, Secondary Shopping Frontages provide an opportunity for the types of uses that support a town centre's function as a destination for leisure as well as for retail purposes, such as restaurants, coffee shops, financial and commercial services.
- 15.5.2 The Town Centres of Buntingford and Sawbridgeworth are minor town centres with a high number of independent stores and a low number of national retailers. Given their role as service centres for their immediate population and rural hinterland, the town centre boundary is tightly drawn around the existing high street and there is no primary shopping area designated. There are no obvious areas within these town centres where there is a predominance of Class A1 (Shop) uses. It is therefore appropriate to define the frontages within the two towns as Secondary Shopping Frontages, where a flexible approach to changes of use will be applied where this does not lead to a disproportionate and potentially detrimental number of non-retail uses.

Policy RTC4 Secondary Shopping Frontages

Within the Secondary Shopping Frontages in Bishop's Stortford, Buntingford, Hertford Sawbridgeworth and Ware, as defined on the Policies Map, proposals for development or changes of use to those listed in Policy RTC1 (Retail Development) will be supported in principle, ~~where this does not lead to more than 50% of units in Non-A1 Use in a continuous frontage, and does not prejudice the viability of existing A1 Uses.~~

15.6 District Centres, Local Parades and Individual Shops

- 15.6.1 District centres, neighbourhood centres and local parades support day-to-day needs of communities, providing opportunities for top-up shopping and access to services and social interactions. Quite often they are essential for those less able to travel to town centres or larger retail centres. It is

therefore important that these local centres provide the type and range of retail and commercial uses necessary to serve and support the local community.

15.6.2 District centres generally comprise a group of shops, separate from the town centre, with at least one supermarket or superstore, together with a range of non-retail services and public facilities. In order to reflect the importance role played by the Thorley Centre in Bishop's Stortford in terms of the local provision of food shopping and services, the centre is identified as a District Centre:

1. Bishop's Stortford: The Thorley Centre - District Centre

15.6.3 The Bishop's Park Centre in Bishop's Stortford is similar to the Thorley Centre, in terms of the local provision of food shopping and services. However, as the supermarket is smaller, there is only one other retail unit and a community centre on the site, its role is more limited. As such, the Bishop's Park Centre is identified as a Neighbourhood Centre:

1. Bishop's Stortford: Bishop's Park - Neighbourhood Centre

15.6.4 Local parades provide a range of small shops of a local nature for a small catchment. These include parades of shops and services both in urban areas and in village locations. The following are categorised as Local Parades:

1. Bishop's Stortford:

- a. Hockerill
- b. Havers Parade
- c. Snowley Parade

2. Hertford:

- a. Fleming Crescent, Sele Farm
- b. The Avenue, Bengo

3. Ware:

a. The Green, Kingshill

b. Cromwell Road

c. King George Road

4. Villages:

a. Puckeridge

b. Stanstead Abbots and St. Margarets

c. Watton-at-Stone

15.6.5 Individual shops are distributed throughout the towns and villages in the district and provide valuable facilities for local people in addition to the town centre offer.

Policy RTC5 District Centres, Neighbourhood Centres, Local Parades and Individual Shops

I. Within District Centres, Neighbourhood Centres and Local Parades, development or change of use to the use classes listed in Policy RTC1 (Retail Development) above will be supported in principle, where this does not lead to more than 50% of units in Non-A1 Use in a continuous frontage they maintain an appropriate mix to secure the vitality and viability of the district or neighbourhood centre or local parade and does not conflict with other policies within this Plan.

II. Within urban and rural centres, proposals that result in the loss of individual shops will be considered in accordance with Policy CFLR7 (Community Facilities).