

Urban design review of the planning application for the Goods Yard, Bishop's Stortford, ref 3/17/2588/OUT

The urban design review of the planning application ref 3/17/2588/OUT has been prepared by Allies and Morrison at the request of East Herts Council. It has been prepared by Steve Walker, Director, and colleagues involved in the preparation of the Bishop's Stortford Town Centre Planning Framework (TCPF).

Steve Walker has provided informal design advice on the development of the scheme on behalf of East Herts Council, liaising with the applicant design team to provide guidance and context based on the principles established in the Planning Framework. Liaison with the design team has been undertaken from the commencement of their commission, ensuring that they were fully briefed on the Council's policy and design approach throughout the masterplan development leading up to the preparation of the planning application.

Executive summary

This is a generally strong scheme with much to commend it. It delivers the key components which are established in the Town Centre Planning Framework, including the north-south spine road, a clear block structure, a new station arrival, a mix of uses and a reduction in the impact of the car parking through the use of podium parking.

The proposed design of the buildings is well handled, with clear reference to local character which should establish a strong sense of place and create an attractive arrival at the station. It is strongly hoped that the qualities of the architectural approach be realised rather than diluted in the delivery.

Arrival

The current arrival at Bishop's Stortford station is extremely poor, being dominated by vehicles and lacking clear safe ongoing connections for pedestrians. The poor quality of the environment also does little to present the qualities of the wider town.

The application scheme succeeds in addressing this challenge in a way which the previous application failed to manage. In delivering the north-south link road as set out in the TCPF and in removing the southern bridge ramp immediately to the north of the station the scheme is able to establish a coherent street environment and a new public space which will provide a much higher quality sense of arrival. The inclusion of modest retail elements at the station to provide amenity for those travelling through as well as new residents is welcomed, as is the inclusion of workspace at the station.

Legible urban form

The scheme delivers an urban block form which reflects the principles expressed in Policy BISH7 and which are further illustrated in the Town Centre Planning Framework particularly figure 33. Notably, the proposal delivers the north-south link road in a clear and legible format, away from the river frontage as envisaged by the TCPF. This represents a major improvement over the previous planning application for the Goods Yard.

The scheme makes some revisions to the block structure envisaged in the TCPF. These changes are regarded as being consistent with the spirit of the document and reflect some of the more detailed constraints and information which the planning application must respond to.

Notable variations include the following elements:

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- In the northern-most block, the inclusion in the TCPF of an east-west lane through the block connects with the approach to the cinema to the west, in the anticipation that this will in turn be remodelled and deliver a further pedestrian connection. The revised block sizes in the application slightly remove this direct alignment. However, this is not considered likely to have any particular impact given that the redevelopment of the health and fitness centre is considered to be a very long term opportunity. Part of the reason for this change is to enable the multi-storey car park to move north, thereby reducing the impact on existing residents.
- The alignment of the connection from the station heading south towards the new bridge and on towards Southmill Road and the Rhodes Centre has been adjusted to follow the desire line much more clearly. This creates a more legible approach to the station and could encourage more people to walk and cycle in from the south and west.
- The application reflects the retention of the existing station buildings and orientates the public space accordingly.
- The block structure of the TCPF had been developed on the assumption that the green space to the south of the buildings on John Dyde Close may be brought into a future development. As this land is not within the control of the applicant, the scheme varies from the original approach, but the overall principle remains the same in terms of creating a legible and safe connection with the riverside.
- The buildings of John Dyde Close present a rear elevation and rear boundary to the site edge, presenting a difficult condition for the scheme to respond to. The inclusion of a lane along the boundary with new frontage development creating an active edge on the eastern side of the lane is regarded as an

acceptable approach to creating a clear network of routes and consistent with the TCPF. The lane is orientated north-south, meaning that it will enjoy good daylight penetration to all properties which overlook it. The facing distance between the buildings is approximately 20m, which is consistent with a normal street condition.

Views

The scheme makes reference to the key views which are identified in the TCPF – particularly those towards the spire of St Michael's Church. It is noted that none of these views originate or pass over the application site and so this has not been of significance in shaping the scheme.

The TCPF does note two local views which are regarded as important and in need of improvement. This includes the view south from the corner of Dane Street and Station Road and the view north from the new pedestrian/cycle bridge. In both cases the scheme delivers a significant improvement in the existing character of place, with clear and legible routes being established and good use of locally distinctive landmarks to aid navigation.

Scale and massing

The development is pre-dominantly mid-rise, dropping down in scale to the southern end. The core area of the detailed application is set at five and six stories stepping down to three and four stories in the southern part of the site covered by the outline application.

This is taller than the three to four-storey recommendation made by the TCPF in response to public consultation. However, the use of locally derived forms which respond to the character of the area and the inclusion of attractive but expensive elements such as undercroft parking are noted as significant positive factors. Taken together with

the overall quality of the scheme these elements help to justify the increase in scale in a way which is appropriate to the urban and policy context.

This scale of development has been generally well handled with upper levels accommodated in roof spaces to reduce the eaves heights. The roofscape has in turn become a strong feature of the scheme, drawing on the local references to malting buildings and historic industrial references to establish a robust character which delivers buildings of scale which respond well to the Bishop's Stortford context.

Priority has been given to the form of the roofs facing the street, with the use of dormers to reduce eaves height. Contrasting with this is the approach within courtyards where flatter roofs have been used and the full height of the buildings expressed. This could mean that the courtyard aspects of the buildings appear to be taller than their street frontages. However, it must be borne in mind that the courtyard elevations of the buildings are reduced in height by a storey due to the presence of the podium car park.

Character areas

The TCPF identifies a series of character areas across the whole of Bishop's Stortford, highlighting the variations between the traditional core of the town and the riverside/railway area which has a strong industrial character, including the distinctive malting towers which are recognisable features of historic buildings along the river.

The application scheme makes good use of this approach and further develops a series of more detailed character zones which have distinctive building forms and use of materials. This is a positive approach which will help to avoid the scheme creating a monolithic impression.

The DAS includes a study of existing local character including both historic and modern buildings with a critique of elements that are regarded as successful or otherwise. This work has been positive in helping the design team to identify local attributes which should inform the design and in understanding recent development mistakes which should not be replicated. A key element of this has been to recognise that the form and detail of the buildings proposed need to be strong and simple rather than fussy and fragmented if they are to properly reflect the industrial heritage.

Building typology

The adoption of historic industrial forms in the development of the scheme is a very positive move. It helps to achieve a sense of place and local character in a sophisticated manner rather than resorting to pastiche domestic forms which would be out of scale on buildings of this nature. The scale and forms such as the roofscape support the delivery of large, simple volumes which enable a relatively dense form of development to be achieved in an appropriate way.

It is regretted that the scheme does not include a more direct visual reference to Bishop's Stortford's malting chimneys within the roofscape. These could be designed as contemporary elements with genuine ventilation functions rather than as applied pastiche elements and could help to provide a further contextual reference.

The use of more modern forms of building for the two offices either side of the railway station is to be applauded. Both have important roles to play as local landmarks, but also play a significant role in establishing the identity of Bishop's Stortford in views from the train for those arriving and passing through.

The design of the car parks as structure with a wrapping of steel panels that echo a former industrial building in silhouette is a

positive idea and an attractive way of dealing with this building form in a contemporary contextual way.

To the northern part of the scheme the architecture gradually shifts towards a more formal town centre character with a clear language of active shop frontages on to the street and well mannered residential development above. To the south the character areas include references to railway vernacular on the eastern edge towards the tracks, setting up a clear distinction with the riverside buildings which respond to smaller mill and wharf typology with brick and timber clad gable ends.

Design integrity

The scheme presented through the application demonstrates a sophisticated and quietly modern contextual approach to the industrial heritage of the riverside and the wider town centre. The designs, including features such as the asymmetric roofs, will require careful detailing and a consistently high quality to deliver successfully. This scheme has the potential to be of award-winning standard provided this clarity of vision is not diluted through poor quality delivery and materials.

Unit mix

The application scheme is focussed predominantly towards smaller units, with two bed and one bed flats forming the large majority of the development. A small number of three bed homes are included, predominantly in the southern part of the site. In the wider Bishop's Stortford context the predominance of smaller units rather than family units in this central location is regarded as an appropriate move, given that there is a substantial existing and developing family housing choice already available in the wider area.

The spread of the unit mix, with larger family units away from the station in lower scale development is considered appropriate in relation to the scale and massing and intensity of use. However, it should be noted that this is likely to skew the delivery of larger units towards later phases of development.

Housing policy HOU8 refers to the inclusion of opportunities for self-build accommodation within larger sites in the district such as this one. This would normally lend itself to individual plots or to small groups which could be developed by a cooperative. This would suggest that, in the event it can be included within the development, it would be best suited to either plot E or G which are the most domestic in scale and offer a series of discreet elements.

Landscaping

The landscaping plans make some interesting and characterful references to the history of the site, with a motif of trackways in the paving evoking the history of the site as railway sidings. The wider strategy creates a series of character areas which are developed to respond to the scale, form and use of the buildings, including the station square which is the focus for public movement.

It has been previously noted that the historic industrial forms of maltings have been developed into the design for the core of the scheme. This building type would originally have been the focus of a relatively hard landscape as a working area, particularly the gable ends with their large door orientated towards the river. Whilst building B1 has an area of hard standing in front of the gable, the other gables, particularly to C3 and C2 are fronted by planting, largely as a privacy measure for the residential development.

Highways

The delivery of the north-south route through the scheme originated with public inputs to the TCPF as a way of relieving traffic pressure on the town centre and providing legible and direct walking and cycling connections. This contrasts with the meandering bus-only link in the previous scheme.

The intention of the TCPF is that this new link road would be introduced as part of wider measures to unpick the town centre gyratory schemes and introduce normal two-way working on most streets. This planning application is not capable of delivering this comprehensive town-wide transformation and could not be expected to. However, it does deliver the relevant elements within its control to facilitate ongoing change.

The nature of the design of the scheme means that it is capable of allowing through traffic or of including a modal filter to limit through traffic but allow buses through. It therefore retains the structure and flexibility which is needed to allow for town-wide traffic management to be developed and adapted over time.

Parking

The use of a significant body of undercroft parking on the three main blocks around the station is welcomed. This plays an important role in reducing the impact of parking on the public realm, and will also improve resident amenity through the delivery of courtyard and terrace space in place of parking. In addition to this, a large proportion of the parking in the southern area of the scheme is delivered away from the public realm.

A key concern for the parking is the amount of parallel parking arranged along both sides of the spine road. This is a major access

route, including to the multi-storey car park, but is also labelled as a cycle route.

Walking and cycling

The structure and form of the proposed development is consistent with the TCPF in that it creates a good network of streets and spaces providing clear and attractive pedestrian connections. The approach from the south-west from the direction of the Rhodes Arts centre and via the new bridge connects with a clear route towards the station, significantly improving accessibility. There is also a welcome inclusion of a direct link from the railway bridge at the junction of London Road and Hallingbury Road which affords a direct pedestrian access to the riverside path for a wide area of existing residents. This offers a significant improvement in accessibility for existing residents to the town centre via the riverside.

The drawings included with the application show areas of cycle storage and cycle routes and identifies that the routes are on street and along the riverside. However, there are no dedicated cycle routes provided. The riverside towpath has the potential to deliver a good route, subject to improvements in width and surface to provide a year-round accessibility, but is not likely to be perceived as a safe option by some users during darkness.

The spine road remains the principle access route, but does not provide any segregation. The access is shared with all other modes of transport and along a route with almost continuous parallel parking on both sides. This would be regarded as acceptable by more experienced cyclists, but is unlikely to encourage those not already pre-disposed to cycling. This approach could be presented as being consistent with the existing wider context of the town centre in which there is little segregated provision for cyclists. However, it does not allow for the fact that improvements are hoped

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for in the wider area and for the potential for this scheme to provide a useful first element of cycle infrastructure delivery in one of the busiest locations.

Appendix 1

Relevant policies from the East Herts District Plan

Policy BISH7: The Goods Yard

- I. The Bishop's Stortford Town Centre Planning Framework will form the basis of a Supplementary Planning Document, which will be used to inform the masterplanning of this site.
- II. In the context of this, the Goods Yard will provide for at least 400 homes between 2017 and 2027, as part of a mixed use development including a significant amount of B1a office floorspace and small-scale retail provision. Development of the site shall include:
 - (a) a range of dwelling type and mix, in accordance with the provisions of Policy HOU1 (Type and Mix of Housing), including residential apartments on the upper floors of commercial uses and 3-4 bed family homes;
 - (b) Affordable Housing in accordance with Policy HOU3 (Affordable Housing);
 - (c) Self-Build Housing in accordance with Policy HOU8 (Self Build Housing);
 - (d) Sustainable transport measures which encourage walking and cycling through the site and beyond, including:
 - the provision of cycleways and footpaths that provide links through the site, connecting the river to the station, the station and the town centre via the Anchor Street Leisure Park and improved Station Road bridge, and to provide opportunities to cross the railway line;

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- the creation of a new station forecourt that provides a safe and attractive public realm which facilitates the movement of people between various modes of transport;
 - enhanced passenger transport services to the town centre and station, including the creation of a sustainable route through the site;
- (e) high quality, vehicle-free public realm along the river frontage, enabling improved access to the town centre along the waterway. The orientation of buildings will retain an open riverside environment, facilitate views of local landmarks and provide a direct route between the Goods Yard footbridge and the station;
- (f) landscaping and tree planting to reduce urban heat island effects, including retention and enhancement of the area of woodland to the south of the site;
- (g) Improvements to the riverside environment in line with the River Stort Catchment Management Programme;
- (h) High quality design which incorporates local material pallets and provides varying character and style across the site, incorporating sustainable design features;
- (i) Residential blocks which have access to private amenity green space, separate from parking areas;
- (j) Multi-storey parking which is appropriately screened and separated from residential buildings, ensuring homes have pleasant outlooks;
- (k) Necessary utilities, including integrated communications infrastructure to facilitate home-working, and upgrades to the localised sewerage network;

- (l) The delivery of all other necessary on-site and appropriate off-site infrastructure;
 - (m) Other policy provisions of the District Plan, Bishop's Stortford Town Council's Neighbourhood Plan for All Saints, Central, South and parts of Thorley Wards and relevant matters, as appropriate.
- III. On-site car parking will need to be sufficient to meet the needs of the uses proposed, without encouraging travel to the town centre in order to avoid worsening traffic congestion and further impact on the Hockerill Air Quality Management Area. Parking will need to be provided to serve the town centre as well as commuters.
- IV. Site promoters must work with Hertfordshire County Council as the Highways and Transport Authority to undertake transport modelling to assess and provide suitable mitigation measures against vehicular congestion in the town centre.

Policy BISH12: Retail, Leisure and Recreation in Bishop's Stortford

- I. New retail and leisure facilities will be focused within the town centre and within the following locations:
 - (a) the Goods Yard, in accordance with Policy BISH7;
 - (b) the Old River Lane site, in accordance with Policy BISH8; and
 - (c) the Mill Site, in accordance with BISH10;
- II. Development proposals in Bishop's Stortford should seek to enhance the public realm and create connections between existing and new retail and leisure facilities, including the Rhodes Centre.

- III. Opportunities to link into and extend the pedestrian circuit will be supported in principle and proposals that jeopardise such connections will be resisted.
- IV. To provide for day-to-day convenience retail and service needs, new Neighbourhood Centres will be designated in the following locations:
 - (a) Bishop's Stortford North, west of Hoggate's Wood, in accordance with Policy BISH3 (I);
 - (b) Bishop's Stortford North, between Hoggate's Wood and Farnham Road, in accordance with Policy BISH3 (II).
 - (c) Bishop's Stortford South, in accordance with Policy BISH5;
- V. Opportunities to provide new indoor and outdoor sports facilities will be supported in principle in accordance with Policy CFLR1
- VI. The Green Wedges in Bishop's Stortford are designated as Local Green Spaces, within which Policy CFLR2 (Local Green Space) applies.

Policy DES3 Design of Development

- I. All development proposals, including extensions to existing buildings, must be of a high standard of design and layout to reflect and promote local distinctiveness. Proposals will be expected to:
 - (a) Make the best possible use of the available land by respecting or improving upon the character of the site and the surrounding area, in terms of its scale, height, massing (volume, shape), orientation, siting, layout, density, building materials (colour, texture), landscaping, environmental assets,

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- and design features, having due regard to the design opportunities and constraints of a site;
- (b) Incorporate homes, buildings and neighbourhoods that are flexible to future adaptation, including the changing needs of occupants and users, and changes in wider employment and social trends;
 - (c) Avoid significant detrimental impacts on the amenity of occupiers of neighbouring properties and land, and ensure that their environments are not harmed by noise and disturbance or by inadequate daylight, privacy or overshadowing;
 - (d) Encourage high quality innovative design, new technologies and construction techniques, including zero or low carbon energy and water efficient, design and sustainable construction methods;
 - (e) Make provision for the storage of bins and ancillary household equipment. Garages and driveways should be capable of accommodating family sized vehicles. Dwelling design and layout should make provision for electric vehicle charging points in safe and accessible locations;
 - (f) All new residential developments should meet the requirements of Policy HOU7, and ensure all internal rooms are of an appropriate size and dimension so that the intended function of each room can be satisfactorily achieved. All dwellings shall be identified by their square metreage.
- II. Proposals must not prejudice the development opportunities of surrounding sites.

- III. Development proposals which create new or have a significant impact on the public realm should:
- (a) Maximise legibility and accessibility of the public realm through the layout of buildings, landmarks, use of colour, landscaping, paving, high quality public art, street furniture and infrastructure including clear and legible signposting, rest places and public toilets, in a way that maintains uncluttered spaces and enables easy navigation and movement through the space;
 - (b) Maximise opportunities for urban greening, for example through planting of trees and other soft landscaping wherever possible;
 - (c) Avoid creating 'left-over' spaces with no clear purpose or function;
 - (d) Ensure that long-term maintenance and management arrangements are in place for the public realm as appropriate.
 - (e) Engage the Hertfordshire Design Review Panel as part of the Pre-application stage and throughout the Development Management process where appropriate.

Policy CFLR9 Health and Wellbeing

- I. All development shall be designed to maximise the impact it can make to promoting healthy communities and reducing health inequalities. In particular, regard shall be had to providing the necessary infrastructure to encourage physical exercise and health, including accessible open space, vegetation and landscaping, sport and recreation facilities, cultural facilities and safe, well promoted, walking and cycling routes.

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- II. Where new health facilities are planned, these should be located where there is a choice of sustainable travel options and should be accessible to all members of the community.
- III. Contributions towards new or enhanced health care facilities will be sought to ensure the health care requirements arising from new developments are met and to prevent a shortfall or worsening of provision.
- IV. Where new facilities for community use, including for the practice of faith, are planned, these should be of a flexible design to enable multiple uses throughout the day and should be located where there is a choice of sustainable travel options.

Appendix 2

Key Themes from the Bishop's Stortford Town Centre Planning Framework

The following extracts from the key themes section of the TCPF are those which are directly relevant to the Goods Yard area of Bishop's Stortford:

Revealing and celebrating the River Stort

- Widen the tow path on the eastern bank

Establish a clear pedestrian and cycle network in the town centre

- The Goods Yard and Station Road: A simplified and attractive station gateway area with a new public space and clear pedestrian route into the town centre. Safer pedestrian routes across the railway line at London Road and at Station Road should be explored. Routes should also be improved between the station and the Rhodes Centre.

Rationalising vehicular movement in the town centre

- Removing the one-way systems on Dane Street, Station Road and Riverside in order to create a more permeable network and reduce the speed of traffic in the town centre. The existing one-way system creates a poor town centre environment and complicates routes in the town centre.
- A significant change to traffic movements in Bishop's Stortford would occur with the creation of a new north-south link road through the Goods Yard site, connecting to Dane Street and B1383 London Road for all vehicles. This new piece of highway has the potential to relieve the Hockerill Cross junction, a focus for congestion and pedestrian/cycle severance. A new

highway connection may also offer scope to reduce traffic movements along Potter Street in the very core of the historic town centre. The design of any new link road will need to be carefully designed to mitigate the effect of through traffic on the new station square.

- A new short-stay multi-storey car park to serve the town centre should be provided at the train station that could be accessed via the new link road from London Road, removing circulating traffic from the town centre.

Protecting and enhancing Bishop's Stortford's historic character

- Maintain local and townwide views to key landmarks such as St Michael's Church and protect and enhance the historic buildings at Hockerill.
- Set parameters for the scale, massing and materiality of new buildings within new townscape guidance areas: Riverside /industrial heritage Material palette - Use of brick or wooden board is encouraged.
- Scale and massing - Explore opportunities for form and massing that reflects the existing maltings and warehouse buildings in the area.
- Generally development should be 3 - 4 storeys, with some opportunities for taller elements in appropriate locations.
- Features - Larger openings are encouraged at the ground floor to help provide activity to the riverside. Pedestrian permeability to the riverside is a priority.

A network of green and urban spaces

- Development at the Goods Yard should provide a Station Square with a new public space that simplifies this area immediately outside the station building.

- Development at the Goods Yard should provide new semi-natural, publicly accessible, spaces on the riverside.
- The existing car parking at the malting buildings at Southmill Road (Millars 1/2/3) should be rationalised and a new space should be created, linking to the terrace at the Rivermill.
- A new public short-stay car park at the station will help to provide car parking for this area of the town centre.
- The towpath along the River Stort should continue to be enhanced as a link outward to country walks and nature reserves. The potential for a shared cycle route should be explored.

A distinctive and quality retail offer

- New restaurants at the cinema and a small amount of retail at a redeveloped station square.

The town centre as a place for business

- New office hubs in the town centre at the Goods Yards adjacent to the train station and on Southmill Road as part of mixed-use redevelopments of these key sites. These sites could provide space for the growth of local businesses and as space to attract new employers.

In addition, the TCPF provides the following site-specific guidance for the Goods Yard:

Goods Yard site guidance

Refer to fig 33 p 97

- Improve the arrival experience and create a legible arrival experience by designing a clear pedestrian route into the town centre.

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- Remodel the Anchor Street Leisure Park and improve the riverside frontage and connection to the station.
- Reduce congestion issues in the wider town centre with a new road link through the site connecting to London Road.
- Improve connections to the east of railway line for vehicles and pedestrians.
- Strengthen pedestrian connections across the river with new and better crossing points, linking to an improved pedestrian environment on South Street.
- Create a cluster of employment uses at the northern end of the site.
- New car parking is needed to serve the town centre as well the train station.