



**BRENTWOOD
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

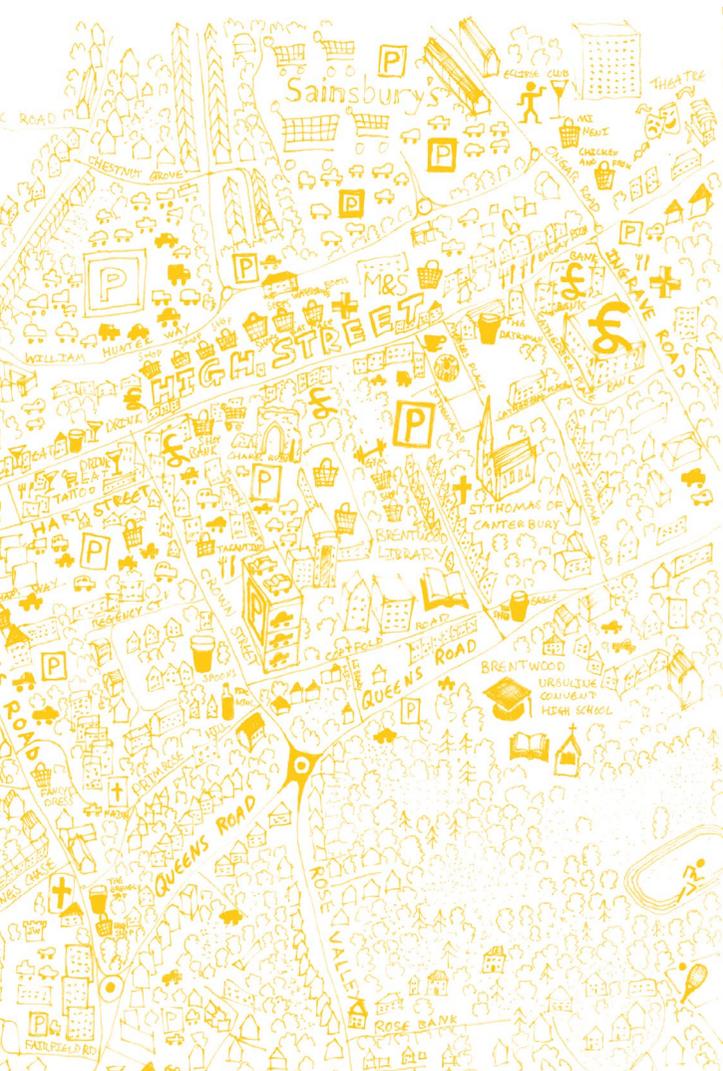
EVENT REPORT



BRENTWOOD TOWN CENTRE DESIGN PLAN

May 2017

Brentwood Town Centre Design Plan



Brentwood Town Centre is a thriving community of shops, homes, businesses and public spaces. However, it is important that as the Town Centre changes over time that communities are provided with the services they need. Understanding the importance of future development opportunities is vital to ensuring that the Town Centre can adapt to change and continue to thrive.

Brentwood Borough Council recognised the need for a focused strategic plan to guide any future Town Centre development. It was considered essential that development at key opportunity sites, including William Hunter Way car park, were not planned in isolation but in a cohesive way contributing to the Town Centre as whole. The Council

identified the importance of design quality and so the concept of developing a “Design Plan” was born.

Work was undertaken to develop a brief that clearly communicated the project aims and gain specialist urban design advice. Highlighting the importance of getting the brief right, we formed a group across Council teams to input into the brief as well as a cross-party member steering group. We also commissioned Design Council Cobe to partner and advise on the process. Following a series of workshops the consultants brief was issued in July 2016, which received a very high standard of response. After a thorough selection process urban designers Levitt Bernstein were appointed, supported by a wider

team of specialists, including GVA (retail and economic viability) and Project Centre (transport and movement). The Council has since been working with Levitt Bernstein on various options to develop a cohesive Design Plan.

Drafting the Design Plan has identified a range of opportunities and interventions that can enhance the vitality and viability of Brentwood Town Centre in the future, and provide a framework to guide the actions of the Council and its partners over the short, medium and long term. In early 2017 the project reached a stage where we wanted to share our ideas so far with local residents and other stakeholders.



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Consultants Brief

July 2016

Supported by



Launch event Town Hall . 16 March 2017



On Thursday 16 March 2017 the Council held an event to launch the project to a range of key stakeholders; including local service providers and authorities, local community groups and schools, local retailers and businesses, design partners, and contacts from the development industry. A presentation was made by the Leader of the Council and the project team to introduce the draft work, including a preview of a promotional video to help explain the work and draft outcomes. Content on display included extracts from the draft document, due to be showcased to the public at our Pop-Up Shop.



Pop-Up Shop

Baytree Centre . 17-18 March 2017



On Friday 17 & Saturday 18 March the Council shared draft Design Plan concepts with local residents and businesses in a 'Pop-Up Shop' at the Baytree Centre in Brentwood Town Centre. The aim of the Pop-Up Shop was to exhibit and communicate our ideas with staff members on hand to answer questions and explain key concepts. In addition to Design Plan content we also shared plans for the Brentwood Town Hall Transformation work. The Town Hall is an important building and site in Brentwood Town Centre. It resonates with people because of its heritage and place in local history. It also forms part of a key gateway into the Town Centre from the south. For this reason proposals to transform the way that the building is used were considered as part of the Design Plan work and relevant to stakeholder engagement undertaken as part of the Pop-Up Shop.

POP-UP SHOP

Copies of the draft Design Plan and consultants brief were available to browse through and large scale display boards were on display in a gallery-style layout. In addition, the six-minute promotional video was played on a loop with seating available for those who wished to view it.

Content on display communicated the Design Plan's primary objective to boost and future-proof Brentwood Town Centre; provide communities with services they need, enhance public spaces and the environment, and maximise development opportunities with high quality design and suitable uses. It showed how the permeability of the Town Centre and connections to the High Street could be enhanced through improvements along north-south routes, and how the town's varied buildings, businesses, residential and

leisure areas, parking and heritage could be encompassed in a holistic approach.

The Town Hall Transformation team were also on hand in the Pop-Up Shop to explain proposals for a more efficient and user friendly Town Hall and public service hub. The display included artist impressions of the remodelled Town Hall and feedback forms available to inform preparation of an eventual planning application.

Content displayed was made available on the Council's website for those who were not able to visit the Pop-Up Shop or who wanted more time to view the information shared. Material for the Brentwood Town Centre Design Plan can be found online at www.brentwood.gov.uk/designplan and more information on the Town Hall Transformation can be found at www.brentwood.gov.uk/townhall.





Responses

TOWN CENTRE DESIGN PLAN

Those who visited the Pop-Up Shop were able to feedback their views about the draft Design Plan. The Council collated this feedback and provided a response to specific questions where relevant. Feedback was mostly positive. Many residents recognised the need for suitable development in the Town Centre and were particularly enthusiastic about the proposals for underground parking and dedicated leisure space at William Hunter Way. The possible lack of adequate parking facilities was a concern, especially in the context of more residential development. The provisions for underground parking reassured many, with the added bonus of visually improving the Town Centre.

Shoppers and pedestrians were generally pleased about plans for improved north-south permeability, and younger generations in particular were excited about the allocated leisure provision, as some felt that there was little for them to do in the Town Centre at the moment. Residents also expressed their desire to see a cinema, market square, and unique individual retailing in the town together with pathways and cycle routes.

There were a number of issues that some residents were concerned about, however. There was scepticism regarding development at William Hunter Way as residents were keenly aware of previous proposals that did not come into fruition. There were also concerns about whether

the existing infrastructure in the Town Centre could support new development. Some wondered why the Design Plan made residential provisions at all, where others thought that trying to improve footfall in the Town Centre by improving access was futile while business rates remained the same.

While there will always be constraints within the Town Centre regarding infrastructure, the Council can ensure financial contributions are received from new development by various means, such as the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). This means that new development can be the enabler to providing improvements and that developers pay their fair share, which is important particularly at a time of reducing



public funds. As people are discovering what Brentwood has to offer and the national housing crisis remains an issue the population is set to increase. The Council is having to make difficult decisions to ensure enough housing provision is made to meet the demand. Rather than ignore the problem it is important that some residential development take place within the Town Centre to reduce demand of development on Green Belt land. Emerging plans focus on the importance of ensuring new development is in sustainable places, consistent with our local character, and contributes to infrastructure improvements. The CIL will help offset potential issues that residential development may bring. While the Council is not currently responsible for setting business rates and rents, and so

cannot change current prices, the Design Plan can still guide development towards positively effecting the retail and business offer in the Town Centre.

The accessibility of material on display at the Pop-Up Shop exhibit was criticised. The language used in the draft Design Plan and on display boards was seen as difficult to understand, with too much jargon obscuring the message. Residents with little access to the internet were also disheartened to find that the Pop-Up Shop was only open for two days, as they felt they did not have time to fully absorb the information in the limited time they had available. The Council has taken these responses on board and will resolve to make future events more accessible.

TOWN HALL TRANSFORMATION

The majority of visitors commenting on the Town Hall Transformation were very supportive of the plans to create a community hub and residential/commercial accommodation. Although there were mixed opinions about the external design proposals presented, most visitors were keen to see something happen with the building that would not only secure its future but also provide income generation for the Council, with savings passed on to local Council Tax payers.

Many visitors to the Pop-Up Shop were keen to ensure that the new Town Hall is made accessible to all. There was also concern about the level of parking as well as preserving as much green space and public frontage as possible.

Going Forward

The Town Centre vision and draft proposals will inform the Council's Local Plan for the Borough, which will set future objectives and policies to guide development. The Design Plan will be adopted by the Council, to be used by Planning Officers when making decisions on development proposals in the Town Centre.

Development briefs will be produced for Council owned sites identified in the Design Plan, starting with William Hunter Way. Development proposals will need to be consistent with the vision and aims set out in the Brentwood Town Centre Design Plan, ensuring new development contributes to the rest of Brentwood.

The Design Plan and associated work will help the Council collaborate with partners and stakeholders on issues concerning the Town Centre, providing a framework for opportunities and expectations.

A Design Code will be created to sit alongside the Design Plan, further informing how development should be planned in the area. This will help us make sure new buildings and spaces achieve a high quality, fitting in with existing built form and best practice.

Progress on this project and more will be communicated on the Council's website at www.brentwood.gov.uk





Frequently Asked Questions

A number of questions were asked by members of the public who attended the Pop-Up Shop. The most common queries are listed below along with a response.

Why do we need a Design Plan?

It is important that we thoroughly prepare for decisions that will affect people for generations to come. Decisions relating to redevelopment of Town Centre sites and how the area functions in future are crucial to get right. The Design Plan is an important first step towards other pieces of work that will contribute to correct decision-taking. As with many things, it can often be frustrating to spend time and money on aspects of preparation because the end result rarely displays this work. Nonetheless, proper

preparation is critical to a quality end result – lack of it will definitely show-up if the end result is poor. The Brentwood Town Centre Design Plan is part of the Council's thorough preparation for decisions on sites and their role ensuring the Town Centre continues to thrive. We need to fully understand the issues and consider options before making decisions. Proper procurement and consideration has gone into every detail of the work representing best value for money and this will need to continue to be the case.

Why not use plain English to explain the work?

The Council is aware that some of the language used in Pop-Up Shop materials

was too technical. The Design Plan is working with technical urban design issues and so effort is made to best articulate this to a specific audience. However, the Council accepts that this should have been presented with better use of Plain English for the purpose of the Pop-Up Shop. We are grateful for feedback on this type of issue and will make efforts to ensure similar events do a better job of communicating information in a clearer way.

What is meant by improving North to South movements?

Improvements to the way that people can move around the Town Centre are mainly focused on opening up routes where redevelopment can enable it. However,

measures to improve this will also need to include better signage and surface materials, among other things. The Council will continue to work with Essex County Council, the local highways authority, on these issues.

How can traffic flows be improved through the Town Centre?

Ultimately traffic flows are high because of car usage/ownership and the difficulty of adapting old road networks to cope. The aim is to ensure that the best is made of the network through engineering solutions, technology and alternative forms of transport to private car use (such as public transport, walking and cycling). Enabling choice is an important way

that traffic congestion can be eased. The Design Plan looks at ways that people can move more easily through the Town Centre to destinations such as the High Street and station. In addition, other work continues to invest in the transport network

where improvements can be made to provide more capacity, such as smaller local schemes but also larger projects like proposals at the Brook Street roundabout and A12 widening.



What is happening at the Brook Street roundabout?

Highways England have recently consulted on three options to provide a new dedicated loop road to allow M25 anti-clockwise traffic to flow onto the A12 eastbound, diverting traffic away from the roundabout. More information can be found on the Highways England website at <https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/he/m25-junction-28/>. Further consultation is expected on a chosen scheme later this year. The Council is supportive of investment at Brook Street roundabout where it relieves congestion and improves safety. However, whilst this development will help to improve traffic flow it does not deal with all the issues that contribute to

congestion at the junction, meaning that more periods of construction disruption are likely once other schemes are agreed in future. Therefore, we have called for a more joined-up approach to improvement schemes including those planned for A12 widening.

Is car parking being reduced?

The level of car parking currently provided in Brentwood Town Centre is being considered as part of work on the Design Plan along with other Council strategies. Concepts displayed in the Draft Design



Plan as presented at the Pop-Up Shop considered several options, but no loss of parking is being proposed. Redevelopment of sites would either replace parking as part of the development or provide additional spaces elsewhere on other redeveloped sites. This remains a priority for the Council as we look to balance a range of future development needs, including car parking. We also need to consider how people will use various transport modes in future – as more evidence becomes available about advances in technology and changes to the choices people make we'll need to adapt to ensure Brentwood Town Centre continues to work.



Are green spaces being lost?

Design Plan work displayed at the Pop-Up Shop was conceptual. Ideas being explored for how sites could be redeveloped to provide for various future needs consider the importance of green spaces. Whilst drawings may show ideas for change there

is no intention to reduce the amount of green space in the Town Centre. Rather they include the need to provide more green space and improved public spaces and materials wherever possible. How and where these spaces can be provided or maintained is part of the work to think about how the area adapts to future needs.

How will redevelopment be funded?

Ultimately, a sufficient return on the investment that goes into a scheme will fund the redevelopment. For sites outside the Council's ownership, redevelopment is funded by private investment. For redevelopment to take place the proposals need to be financially viable, which is a key test required by national policy and guidance. For Council-owned sites redevelopment could be funded by a number of options, which at the moment has yet to be decided. These could include appointing a development partner to part fund the project(s); the Council could fund and take forward redevelopment itself; or land could be sold to another organisation

to redevelop. All options would be subject to Planning, which is the reason that the Design Plan is identifying what types of development may be appropriate – so that a clear vision is set before decisions are made about how it will be funded.

Will affordable housing for families be provided?

Provision of affordable housing is a key priority for the Council. The current Brentwood Local Plan requires 35% of total units to be affordable for schemes above 20 homes within Brentwood Town Centre. The Council's emerging new Local Development Plan proposes to retain this proportion but reduce the threshold to boost the delivery of affordable homes. This means that any

major scheme in the Town Centre will need to provide a proportion of affordable homes. The Council is also keenly aware of the need for new homes to be targeted at those who most need them, such as families, key workers, and those with local connections. This is something that we will look to provide wherever possible, particularly on Council-owned sites. As specific development proposals progress more information will become available, such as the amount of new homes and the proportion of market rate and affordable units.

Why is the Town Centre struggling?

Brentwood Town Centre survived the prolonged period of economic downturn



remarkably well compared with many centres across the country. Retail vacancy rates remained below the national average throughout and still are today. The reality for every town centre is that at the same time as these challenging economic conditions the retail market has been changing fast.

The role of the internet has fundamentally changed the way we shop. This means that our high streets are changing and will continue to, in the same way that things have constantly changed in previous years, albeit at a faster pace now. Reacting to these changing needs and making decisions

about the future of the Town Centre is critical to make sure that Brentwood continues to thrive and remains relevant. The reason people visit the High Street is for an increasing number of reasons, including leisure and entertainment as well as shopping. Achieving a good balance of uses will be important. In addition, the attractiveness of the area has meant high property prices, which has resulted in high business rates. This makes it even more difficult for businesses to survive in a very competitive and challenging business environment. It will be important to provide businesses with quality and choice. The Design Plan is one piece of broader work to help consider our future needs and inform decisions.

Why are business rates so high?

Business rates are worked out based on the rateable value of a property, which is its open market rental value on 1 April 2015. This value is calculated and maintained by the Government (Valuation Office Agency), not the local council. The bill can be reduced if the property is eligible for business rates relief. This money, together with revenue from Council Tax and other sums, is used to pay for local services provided by the Council and other authorities in the area. However, the Council understands that high business rates make it difficult for local business to trade and stay financially viable. One of the negative aspects of how attractive our Borough is to both live and work in is that this makes property values

very high. Increasing the supply of business premises and shops could help to reduce the value of property and thereby rateable values, along with providing other local benefits.

What about previous plans for William Hunter Way?

Planning consent for the previous William Hunter Way car park site has lapsed. Like many development schemes across the country, proposals were made before the Great Recession of 2007 and resulting economic downturn, which meant that original proposals and agreements became difficult to implement. This means that whilst redevelopment of the site is still broadly acceptable in planning terms there

is an opportunity to rethink how best the site can contribute to the rest of the Town Centre, which formed the starting point for this Town Centre Design Plan work. Concepts from the Design Plan show a different vision for William Hunter Way in terms of built form and the way people can move through the site, even though the types of uses on site are similar. Whilst work is still in progress this shows that how new proposals look will be different from the previous scheme.

Could a theatre be provided?

The Design Plan is considering how various uses can be beneficial to the future of Brentwood Town Centre, including leisure and entertainment. Making best use of

existing buildings as well as redevelopment opportunities is vital. It will be important to support existing facilities such as Brentwood Theatre, but also make sure these are in the right places and future-proof. Key buildings in the Town Centre that could be better used, such as the old Post Office or the Town Hall, are considered as part of the work to see how these could benefit the surrounding area. Working with Royal Mail, owners of the old Post Office, is key to ensure the building is best utilised to benefit the High Street, but also with the need to consider functions that continue out of part of the building (sorting office). The Council is working with partners to better utilise the Town Hall as a community hub, provide office space for other community groups, and contribute to the



need for more new homes – as was shared at the Pop-Up Shop. Use of redevelopment sites can provide for a range of uses, such as including leisure as part of the William Hunter Way car park scheme – whether that

be community leisure facilities, a theatre, a cinema, or a combination of these through flexible space. At this stage, many options exist. This work will help the Council to consider the options and inform decisions.



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