

Chelmsford town centre Area Action Plan – preferred options consultation
Response to representations

TOPIC PAPER I

Removal of High Bridge Road and new access road from the east.

The Council's objective is to achieve the regeneration of derelict and underused land east of the town centre. This requires workable access from the existing road network with additional links and junctions. Development of land on the former gas works and peninsula will require a new spine road within the peninsula for access to new land uses, the question is how that road links into the road, bus and cycle network.

The High Bridge Road flyover is a visual barrier dividing the shopping centre from Chelmer waterside. Paths and rivers run beneath the road enabling pedestrian movement. Buildings could be arranged on either side of High Bridge Road but the structure would compromise building uses and interrupt the perceived continuity of town centre development. For the optimum benefit to the town centre, development should be as connected and seamless as possible. Options for development therefore need to be explored with and without High Bridge Road.

In relation to layout of routes and buildings, terms it is preferable to remove the bridge and enable a logical extension of development from the existing shopping centre along the rivers, retaining the southern part of High Bridge Road providing service access.

The Council commissioned Essex County Council/Mouchel Parkman to test alternative road access options in order to compare the traffic movement implications of new road access from the east with the current situation based on High Bridge Road.

The findings indicate that new road access from the east based on one of the broad options would be workable, taking into account traffic flows around the town currently using High Bridge Road and bus service implications. This would mean that northbound traffic formerly using High Bridge Road would in future use the Army and Navy junction and Chelmer Road. Traffic for town centre shopping and residential development within the peninsula would also gain access from Chelmer Road. However new housing in north Chelmsford would not significantly affect this part of the town centre because through-traffic would use trunk roads around the town.

Existing bus services would be displaced and would have to be rerouted in a manner acceptable to the bus operator. The suggestions for a bus loop are positive in this respect and a new bus link from Baddow Road into the peninsula over the river appear to make a one way bus route realistic.

Ultimately the overall sustainability case depends on the economic and environmental advantages to the town and borough of bringing centrally located brown-field land into use, the efficiency of development that can be achieved with or without the existing road, accessibility by bus and foot, the costs of necessary infrastructure and the environmental impacts. If High Bridge Road remains, the space underneath would provide a compromised principal pedestrian access to the riverside and new development on the gas works. Space beneath could form part of a public square or contain development of shops and kiosks under the bridge. Many previous attempts to humanise the space under flyovers have had limited success.

The environmental impact to be considered relates to locating a new road junction in the water meadows landscape in the setting of historic mill buildings and bridge and the resource cost of removing a relatively recent major structure. In itself, this can reasonably be seen as wasteful but needs to be part of a wider analysis. As options are explored and developed into proposals, transport assessments and environmental impact assessments will still need to justify the strategy.

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TOPIC PAPER 2

Traffic management at Army and Navy junction

This addresses several representations about increased traffic pressures on the Army and Navy junction and eastern Parkway. It addresses comments on possible physical traffic management changes.

The junction forms the confluence of several strategic routes into and out of the town centre and is of key importance to traffic movement for the town, for buses and cyclists.

Essex County Council as the Local Highway Authority have been researching and modelling options for redesigning the junction and improving traffic flows. These proposals are reflected in the AAP. A redesigned junction would be part of the traffic modelling necessary to test a possible new access road into Chelmer Waterside.

Short term improvement proposals entail an on-carriageway slip road from Parkway into Chelmer Road. In the medium term, land for junction improvements will come from development of opportunity sites on the north and south sides of Parkway at the Army and Navy pub, Gards, Jewsons and Nigel Grogan. In the longer term, the emerging development strategy for Chelmer Waterside will be accompanied by implementation of major changes. The long term options envisage land for a left-turn slip road into Chelmer Road and a two-way fly-over. The modelling of options for possible access arrangements for Chelmer Waterside are based on a 2-way flyover at the Army & Navy.

The existing junction has a subway used by pedestrians and cyclists. The junction impedes pedestrian and cycle movement from Great Baddow to the town centre and it is accepted that junction changes should include improved convenience and safety for pedestrians and cyclists, though the network continuity also depends on development sites.

The Highways Agency (trunk road authority) is investigating options to replace the existing Chelmer Road viaduct, which is structurally poor.

The Borough and County Councils are mindful of the need to directly address air quality at the Army and Navy which is a designated Air Quality Management Area. Improved free flowing movement and less stopping and starting would contribute significantly to air quality.

The Odeon roundabout would stay to give access for Meadows servicing and car parks. This leaves open other possible access changes to Baddow Road car park.

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TOPIC PAPER 3

Arts / cultural venue

For clarification, the proposal is not a *concert hall*, nor a theatre that is limited to single staged events, rather a performance venue whose function is flexible and adaptable to several different kinds of arts event. The intention is to achieve an arts multiplex that is capable of staging a range of events and activities and exhibitions as well as conferences and seminars that would see the building used during the daytime. Ideally, it should also house a performing arts company and include rehearsal and studio spaces to enable all day activities to take place.

ACT Consultants acting for the Council undertook feasibility studies into the location and type of arts venue.

There are a number of reasons why Fairfield Road car park is considered to be the most workable option for the siting of an arts multiplex. These are –

- the land is in Council ownership
- it is in close proximity to the transport interchange
- the site could accommodate the footprint of an arts complex

However, there are three potential challenges to developing the site –

- the need for adequate adjacent car parking to serve the needs of the new arts facilities and other development on the site. This would be also be affected by the possible closure of West End surface car parks and replacement of these on the Fairfield Road site.
- the need for large pantechicon lorries to gain access and space to unload to the backstage area.
- The need to create an acceptable access to and from Parkway to serve the site.

A town centre site would clearly be preferable because of high footfall and the ability to attract passing trade. The provision of a public square adjacent to the redeveloped bus station and linked through to the central park of the proposed ARU site development would provide a substantial and attractive public open space in front of the proposed arts multiplex. A further issue is noise from the adjacent railway track. However, this can be overcome through building design. There are no reasons why the location of a performance venue near the rail station should adversely affect funding.

The point made by respondents that a centre is not going to be totally funded by developers is accepted. Whilst there are good examples, such as the Arts depot development at North Finchley where developers contributed a substantial proportion of the cost of the development of the centre, considerable public finance in one form or another would also be required. Some commercial entertainment management companies may contribute towards the capital costs of developing new theatres that they then run on behalf of local authorities, but this is not currently the norm in the business.

The following sites were considered –

Out-of-town centre sites – rejected since it is considered essential that an arts complex is located in the town centre for access reasons and because of the powerful influence the arts can have towards revitalising a town centre.

Anglia Ruskin University (Victoria Road South) site – Whilst it is in an excellent town centre location the site would be restrictive in terms of the footprint that would be required for a major arts complex. The site is not owned by the Council and would require a much greater s106 contribution from the developers than the current agreement.

High Chelmer/Chancellor Hall site – whilst it is in an ideal central location, the site is too small to accommodate a major arts multiplex without restricting the commercial redevelopment of the site.

Riverside Ice & Leisure site – restrictions caused by a main sewer crossing the site it and it is slightly outside the shopping area and more reliant on the car than pedestrian access.

Existing theatre site –it is not large enough and is effectively embedded in Civic Centre.

Waterside (peninsula end) site – whilst this section of the site is in Council ownership the size of the available area of land for development is too small to accommodate an arts complex. It is difficult in respect of the vehicular servicing requiring access for pantechnicons, public traffic and coaches for an arts facility of scale.

Waterside (gasworks site) – this is large enough to accommodate an arts complex and clearly would provide some synergy between that and the adjacent Essex Records Office. It is a high profile, visible site which could be attractively developed along with the waterways. However, such a centre would clearly increase pressure on local access routes and the relevant junctions. The site is not in Council ownership and the current owners want to realise a commercial value.

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TOPIC PAPER 4

Food store

The retail study indicated the need for additional food shopping in the town centre. Experience has shown that locations in the heart of the shopping centre don't work for retailers (Sainsbury's in High Chelmer, Waitrose in Meadows) A convenience store location will have to serve town centre resident and working population, on a site accessible by foot and car, large enough for the required floorspace, that is available.

There are no suitable and deliverable sites in the existing primary retail area and very few at the edge of the shopping area. Sites considered are Riverside Ice and Leisure, land west of the Essex Records Office and land near Moulsham Mill.

Tesco is an existing well-placed and successful store which could be allowed to increase in size. There are now and will be other smaller convenience stores within the town such as Iceland, Coop, Tesco Express by the bus station.

Land at the former Jewsons site and adjoining Moulsham Mill uses a vacant and available site well-related to walking routes to and from the main shopping area and public car parking at Baddow Road. Road access from Parkway is practicable. The relationship of a food store to a busy junction is suitable. However the site area is restricted and parking areas would have to weave around the listed buildings at Moulsham Mill. It is accepted that the site area and setting will limit the size of a store and car park.

The impact of traffic from a store at Moulsham Mill on an improved Army and Navy interchange is not considered to be detrimental. Traffic impact would be assessed in detail in relation to actual proposals.

The impact of a new store on listed buildings and water meadow landscape would depend on the flexibility of the retail operator and the sensitivity of the scheme layout and architecture. The success of a scheme would therefore depend on design – the layout and landscape design of access routes, car parking and service yard and the siting and architecture of the building.

A pedestrian access from Baddow Road would be necessary and a cycle path from Army and Navy to the riverside open space would have to be designed into the layout.

The plan therefore places limits on the floorspace of a store in relation to the requirement for food retail in the town centre and in relation to site constraints.

In the longer term, further opportunities for food retail are anticipated to arise in the town centre.

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TOPIC PAPER 5

The retail market

The market under High Chelmer multi-storey car park is owned and managed by the Council – essential for maintaining market rents and market traditions. The stall-holders cover food and non-food sellers. The stall-holders are represented by a market traders association.

The poor perception of the market comes largely from the ugliness of the car park. The market in itself does have advantages - the current location enables shelter from weather, permanent stall set-up, saving time setting up and taking down, low rents, and an advantageous relationship to the car park and a direct relationship to the shopping centre.

The key threats to the market come from supermarkets and occasional competing town markets.

The nature of markets in the town is changing like other types of retail and it is to the advantage of the town centre that different kinds of indoor and outdoor markets are possible. The Council would like the retail market to remain a strong attraction in the town centre but to adapt to changes. The plan allows for relocation if this enabled radical improvement of High Chelmer shopping centre, the car park and bus bay. An alternative location would have to be within the primary shopping area and could combine indoor and outdoor elements.

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TOPIC PAPER 6

Retail masterplanning approaches

In consideration of options for the future shape of an expanded shopping area, representations on master planning approaches have been considered relating to four areas:

- High Chelmer shopping centre
- Meadows and gas works
- The gas works and the peninsula
- Debenhams, east of High Street, Tesco and gas works

The Council's considerations were set out in a committee report dated 18 October 2005 prior to the publication of the preferred options document. As a result of representations received, the master planning concepts have been assessed for their advantages and disadvantages and certain principles reflected in the opportunity site proposals, such as the extent of the site, walking route links, relationship to adjoining spaces and links to existing development.

In terms of master plan concepts the key considerations are

- Integration with the whole shopping centre,
- Positive improvement of the retail circuit,
- Scope for net additional floorspace after relocations and replacements,
- Suitable location of anchor stores,
- Enhancement of surrounding hard and soft spaces,
- Logical locations for eating and drinking,
- Practicable access,
- Workable car parking,
- Strengthening of urban form and image,
- Practicality and deliverability.

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TOPIC PAPER 7

Cathedral School

Several representations expressed concern about the effects of a new road along Waterloo Lane to Victoria Road and the redevelopment of Riverside Ice and Leisure car park on the safety of school children and the convenience of dropping off and picking up children. In response the AAP needs to address both the safety issues of children crossing Victoria Road and Waterloo Lane and accommodating the drop-off and pick-up needs of the school.

It is accepted that the school entrance would be safer without Waterloo Road being reopened to through traffic. However, opening Waterloo Lane for buses and essential service traffic enables better public transport access, essential for the town centre, which in turn enables restrictions on car traffic movement within the town centre.

The Cathedral School have about 270 pupils. The year intake is increasing, as from 2004, from 39 to 45. This will increase the school population to 310.

The school intends to stay on site, having no plans to relocate elsewhere and is commencing improvements to upgrade facilities. The school is over-subscribed and other schools in the area are undersubscribed so the Education Authority would not wish to see the school expand further. Nor could the existing facilities cope with additional numbers beyond 310 without major redevelopment.

52.2% of children are brought to school by car, largely making other than local journeys. The school's travel plan aims to reduce this to 47.2% by January 2007. This is still high due to the school having no catchment area like other schools and pupils travelling from a wide area. 47.2% of 310 represents 146 children being dropped off and picked up by car.

Taking into account that some will be siblings being picked up by one parent, there are still likely to be 100 plus cars dropping off or picking up children twice per day.

The school had an informal arrangement with the Riverside leisure whereby parents could park in the Riverside car park for free for 10 minutes at the beginning and end of the school day. Parents are now finding themselves being issued with parking tickets. The current arrangement therefore needs to be checked and reinstated. If the Riverside car park is redeveloped and not available for the school's drop off and pick up, 100 plus cars will drop children off and pick them up in the area this vicinity. Parking for this purpose can take place in some locations along Victoria Road and New Street with a longer walk to the school. A future arrangement with the school should be incorporated in any new development at Riverside. The brief for Riverside should incorporate a school drop off and pick up arrangement for approx 100 cars.

Opening Waterloo Lane to traffic would mean that children would have to cross Waterloo Lane from the car park if the parking situation remains the same (plus those who live to the east and walk or cycle from that direction), requiring a safe crossing point and zig-zag yellow lines. Measures to

improve the safety and quality of space around the school entrance are therefore included in the AAP.

The school should monitor its travel plan and continue to encourage other ways of travelling to school.