Stevenage Borough Council

Masterplan for Stevenage Town Centre

An evidence document for the Town Centre Area Action Plan

January 2010
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the masterplan for?

It is to help influence the way Stevenage town centre might change over the next ten to twenty years to meet this challenge. It is a document that will help developers and the Council agree on the most appropriate form of development; what it could look like and how it might protect and improve the local environment.

The masterplan will help the Council to prepare their statutory plan for the Borough looking forward to 2021 and beyond. It will provide an evidence base for an ‘Area Action Plan’ that will set out planning policies for development in the town centre.

What is the challenge?

Stevenage has a town centre that has a poor image, cannot provide modern retailers with the flexibility they need, does not contain a thriving evening economy, offers only a limited range of uses and seems detached from its community and a significant employment area on its doorstep. It is surrounded by other towns that offer a similar range of shops and services in a higher quality environment. Stevenage has to extend what it offers its residents and its visitors and improve its environment if it is to regenerate. It needs to do this in a planned and co-ordinated way.

What is included in it?

The document includes:

- an analysis and evaluation of the issues facing Stevenage town centre
- a description of the constraints and opportunities for development to address
- an assessment of development opportunities within the town centre
- a framework to influence development control during the lifetime of the Council’s Development Plan
- design guidance that the Council could use as a development control tool
- recommendations to the Council on implementation

How can the town centre change?

Planning policy for the town centre strongly supports transformational regeneration, recognising its important strategic location for employment and housing growth. It also sets the principles that should guide that transformation – encouraging a strong shift to sustainable forms of development and means of transport and promoting the highest environmental quality.

What is the masterplan proposing?

The masterplan is aimed at achieving balanced regeneration across the whole town centre. The recommended approach is for:

- arrest decline and begin the process of raising environmental quality through maximising existing development opportunities alongside a co-ordinated programme of environmental improvements including some ‘quick wins’
- allow the town centre to grow in an integrated way to meet the needs of an expanding population
- secure a sound basis for expansion, then raise the position of the town centre in the regional hierarchy
- consolidate and adapt to long term change

It proposes a realistic physical framework for growth, a strategy for movement of people, cycles, public transport and vehicles and a strategy for how land uses might be distributed across the town centre.

How will this happen?

The masterplan recommends prioritising three main areas:

Creating a more accessible town

- create the scope for better connections to the town for its existing community and daytime workforce, breaking the severing impact of the ring road and the railway
- building on the strengths of the existing cycle network, providing better routes through the town centre and focusing on provision of cycle parking at key destinations
- build on the current strengths of the town centre core, retaining the layout of the original precincts and extending them to connect to new areas of retail, community, leisure and residential uses
- create an easily understood and easy to use series of new streets focused on comfortable and safe pedestrian and cycle movement
- explore the potential for restricted vehicle access within the ring road to foster the evening economy and improve security by introducing natural surveillance at night from through traffic
- provide a better means of interchange between buses and trains in Luton Way
- allow for the scope for bus priority measures and new set down and pick up points around and within the ring road to get passengers closer to where they want to go

Creating an environment of the highest quality

- a quality public realm and visitor experience should lead the image transformation of the town by creating a first class series of attractive new streets and public open spaces connected to upgraded existing ones
- once a framework for movement is established, enclose the public realm with a series of quality new buildings that support a vibrant mix of uses, are flexible, adaptable and sustainable and support the legibility, permeability, safety and security of the town
- at key approaches and arrival points, provide buildings and structures that will produce tomorrow’s landmarks – visible and memorable objects that will become positively associated with a new look for Stevenage
- incorporate the solutions to environmental constraints like drainage and flooding into a town centre-wide strategy of landscaping that results in a unique and characterful series of public open spaces, bringing the greenness of the wider town into the town centre

Establishing a vibrant mix of uses

- anchor the town’s retail function with a range of new shops, connected to the existing retail area in a series of circuits that allow easy access for pedestrians
- at key points in the retail circuits, encourage retail ‘anchors’ – major attractions that draw people through streets and spread footfall and custom evenly throughout the centre
- complement comparison retail shopping with food and drink outlets at key locations on the circuit and in new public squares that extend the attraction of the centre and potentially form the basis of a new evening economy
- increase the customer base of the town centre by developing more housing, providing support for commercial and community uses and the evening economy
- relocate uses that could more efficiently be clustered together to form the basis of town centre districts for leisure and culture and community and public service delivery
- ensure throughout that the network of streets and public spaces connect and facilitate interaction between uses

The diagram on the opposite page summarises what could happen in the development areas the masterplan has identified.
1 Western Central
A gateway site and retail – led opportunity area providing the defining western edge of the town centre retail core and completing a retail circuit connecting Town Square and the Forum. Potential to provide a variety of shopping experiences; pedestrian precincts with retail at ground floor and upper levels being used to create public car parking and office floorspace. New active connections to Lytton Way and the potential for a vehicle loop providing access to car parking. A shared space shopping street format. There is limited potential for residential development here on upper floors.

2 Northern Central
A retail – led mixed-use area providing the defining northern edge of the town centre and linking to Old Town and residential neighbourhoods to the north. New retail ground and first floor, with upper levels being used to create public car parking, residential and office floorspace around high level amenity spaces. Connected to the town centre by pedestrian precincts, part of the main retail circuit. Extending the line of Queensway north and protecting the line of the Great North Road across Fairlands Way, potentially with greened routes and a mini park. A retail focused, mixed-use area with residential development and offices at upper levels. Connected to the town centre by a mix of pedestrianised existing streets, internal malls or arcades. Will provide up to three new multi level car parks with a more attractive and active frontage to the ring road in order to create a 'boulevard' environment.

3 Eastern Central
A retail – led mixed-use area providing the defining northern edge of the town centre and linking to Old Town and residential development. Providing the opportunity for station improvements and development adjacent to and above the railway. Will provide the destination for a new bus interchange area, more pedestrian friendly access across and around the ring road and better routes and parking for cyclists.

4 Southern Central – Southgate
A mixed-use area with a concentration of new public buildings clustered around a public square, connected to the town centre by shared space streets with a ‘home zone’ character. Will provide a home to existing and new residents who will enjoy access to private amenity areas and a new linear mini park running along an improved cycleway.

5 Leisure Park
A mixed-use business district and cultural urban quarter with a concentration of buildings clustered around new public squares and routes, connected to the town centre by the existing link across the railway and upper levels being used to create public car parking, residential and office floorspace around high level amenity spaces. Connected to the town centre by pedestrian precincts, part of the main retail circuit. Extending the line of Queensway north and protecting the line of the Great North Road across Fairlands Way, potentially with greened routes and a mini park. A retail focused, mixed-use area with residential development and offices at upper levels. Connected to the town centre by a mix of pedestrianised existing streets, internal malls or arcades. Will provide up to three new multi level car parks with a more attractive and active frontage to the ring road in order to create a 'boulevard' environment.

6 Movement Zone
A first class transport interchange that will provide the opportunity for station improvements and development adjacent to and above the railway. Will provide the destination for a new bus interchange area, more pedestrian friendly access across and around the ring road and better routes and parking for cyclists.
During these years the Stevenage Development Corporation was responsible for planning and building the New Town of Stevenage.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

Stevenage has a town centre that cannot provide modern retailers with the flexibility they need, does not contain a thriving evening economy, offers only a limited range of uses and seems detached from its community and a significant employment area on its doorstep. It is surrounded by other towns that offer a similar range of shops and services in a higher quality environment. Stevenage has to extend its offer in a high quality environment if it is to improve its position in the region; consolidate and improve as a local centre first, then re-establish itself as a major town centre. It needs to do this in a planned and co-ordinated way.

1.1 The Context for the Masterplan

The town centre was planned and developed as the first of a wave of this country’s post war, Government promoted ‘New Towns’ in a climate of optimism that followed the Second World War – a sense that places where people lived would be cleaner, healthier and modern.

The guiding principles of its design lie around providing a central, pedestrianised precinct, segregating uses, separating out traffic to the edges of the centre to a series of servicing areas and car parks served by a ring road that also allows traffic to bypass the town centre. This was a bold approach that was heralded at the time as a model for new urban living - a stark contrast to the perception of traditional towns as crowded, polluted and unkempt.

This year is the sixtieth anniversary of the official opening of the town centre by the Queen. We have since re-evaluated what constitutes a good place. What we expect from our towns is to provide us with a blend of living space, employment, shopping and entertainment and the most successful places are the ones that provide this blend in a high quality environment.

Our lifestyles have also changed. Shopping is increasingly an all-day experience and a major leisure activity. We are more mobile and are capable of making choices between competing town centres. In some cases, shopping and entertainment can be provided in alternatives to the traditional town centre – leisure and retail parks. Our loyalty to our home town is tested by the availability of choice elsewhere.

Also competing for our attention is an electronic, home-based, virtual world that means we needn’t leave the home to shop, entertain ourselves and stay in contact with friends. In short, town centres have become no longer necessary to live a modern lifestyle – we need a reason to go there beyond loyalty and habit.

The Town Centre Area Action Plan Key Issues and Alternative Options (July 2007) recognises this:

“... centres such as Luton, Bedford and Hemel Hempstead all have development planned or already underway. There is therefore a real danger that if Stevenage does not provide a better town centre then [the public] will shop elsewhere and the town centre could go into further decline ...”

If Stevenage fails to address its weaknesses (poor public perceptions, range of shops and quality of the environment) it will continue to lose out to other shopping centres. A radical change is needed and it is the role of this plan to guide and facilitate that change.

1.2 Purpose of the Masterplan

A lot of work has already been done to plan for the transformation of the town centre. The purpose of this document is to review that work and bring it together in a deliverable three dimensional form that will help the Council to prepare their statutory plan for the Borough looking forward to 2021 and beyond. It will provide an evidence base for the emerging Area Action Plan for the town centre. The masterplan will:

- Analyse and evaluate issues facing the town
- Set out the constraints for development to address
- Identify the development opportunities within the town centre
- Provide a framework to influence development control during the lifetime of the Plan
- Suggest design guidance that the Council could use as a development control tool
- Comment on the timing and phasing of development and the barriers to progress in order to inform investment decisions

The Masterplan will seek to achieve the vision of a successful town centre contained in the emerging Area Action Plan:

“By 2021 Stevenage town centre will be regenerated and vibrant. It will play an important role in the region and fully meet the needs of existing and future users through the development of new shops, together with community and leisure uses, offices and new homes. The environment will be of the highest quality, combining distinctive buildings with attractive public spaces, and enhancing the best of the original New Town. The town centre will be easily accessible by a modern and efficient public transport network.” The Town Centre Area Action Plan Key Issues and Alternative Options (July 2007)

Although the masterplan will illustrate a form of development which could be acceptable to the Council, this is not intended to provide a template or be overly prescriptive. It will contain guidance that it is suggested forms the basis for further site specific guidance contained within detailed design briefs, site masterplans and design coding.

1.3 Study Area

The town centre area that is the subject of this study covers around 49 hectares (122 acres, see figure 1.3).

The area can be divided into:

- The area within the ring road – 27 hectares. Within the area, there are over 200 shops, equivalent to 67,000 m² of retail floorspace. It also includes the original pedestrianised precinct area constructed in the 1950s, part of which is a Conservation Area. Around 100 households live within the area.
  - Leisure Park to the west of the railway – 7.5 hectares. A site currently occupied by large leisure buildings comprising a cinema, ten pin bowling, gym, nightclub and restaurants.
  - Peripheral areas - 5 hectares. Areas at the ring road edge to the east and west of the original town centre, currently occupied by the rail station and car parks, police headquarters, Town Gardens, church, hotel and a collection of civic uses and leisure facilities.
Top left: Stevenage is 30 kilometres to the north of London. It is an accessible town with good links to the national road network, is situated on the east coast main rail line and is part of a cluster of small to medium sized towns within a 20 – 30 minute travel time.

Above left: The central area of the town showing the segregation of major land uses and their location.

Right: The study area for the Town Centre Masterplan (edged in red)
1.4 Approach

This masterplan is a collaborative document. Stevenage Borough Council and their consultants, tp bennett, have drawn together key stakeholders in the town centre; landowners, developers and local and statutory authorities to find a way forward.

tp bennett has carried out interviews with key stakeholders in order to produce the masterplan document. A wider consultation is planned as part of the Local Development Framework process.

The research base that has been drawn on to inform this masterplan is set out in more detail in Appendix 1. An extensive library of planning policy documents, studies, best practice reviews and historic records has been compiled, analysed, evaluated and distilled in order to understand the issues facing the town and to prepare an intelligent, planned response to them. Sitting alongside the extensive range of research already undertaken on the town, a thorough urban design analysis, movement appraisal and retail capacity study, this masterplan represents a viable, deliverable future for the town centre.

1.5 Structure of this Document

This document is comprised of 3 parts:

- The Challenge
- A Framework for Change
- Masterplan

The Challenge – contains a summary of the historic influences on the form and function of the town. A literature review of exiting and past studies of the town centre has informed a summary of the baseline position and an evaluation of the planning policy framework provides a strategic direction for how the town could change.

A Framework for Change – contains an urban design analysis of the study area, led by a movement appraisal. Identifies and evaluates the urban design challenges presented by the existing town centre and recommends a development framework for tackling them.

Masterplan – contains a co-ordinated development strategy, movement strategy and public realm strategy for the town centre looking forward to 2021 and beyond, identifying the principal constraints and opportunities for implementation and phasing including some ‘quick wins’. Contains general design guidance for the key development opportunity zones and recommends further action on detailed guidance moving forward.
2.0 THE CHALLENGE

This part of the Masterplan document attempts to set out what the Council and stakeholders see as the key issues facing the town centre. In developing an understanding of the challenge, the Council’s consultants have carried out research, interviewed stakeholders and studied the town in some detail to be able to evaluate the scale of the task and suggest a way forward. Starting with a review of historic change, it sets out the conditions in the town centre at present and the planning policy context that has influenced the masterplan.

2.1 Historic Efforts to Plan the Town Centre

The history of Stevenage did not start with the New Town. People have settled in this area since Roman times. But with the exception of Stevenage Old Town, Shephall and the remnants of a handful of hamlets across the New Town Area, the built environment of the town is no older than 60 or so years. It has a planned town centre either wholly or in part the product of contemporary thinking on planning and architecture in the 1950s. The pre-New Town context is important because the town was planned partly in response to it. The decisions taken through the series of phases evident in the historic planned development of the town have long lasting social, economic, political and physical implications for the future planning of the town.

2.1.1 Stevenage before the New Town

Historic sources suggest evidence of settlement around Stevenage and a Roman Road on the path of the Great North Road. A Saxon village clustered around the church of St Nicholas was entered in The Domesday Book as ‘Sithenaece’.

The development of the area now known as the Old Town of Stevenage focused around its market and then evolved over centuries, most importantly, adapting to advances in transportation. The coming of the ‘tumpiled’ Great North Road and later Great Northern Railway in the 1850s, established the town as first a stopover for coaches then as a town within easy commuting distance of London. It had grown from a population never much more than 1,000 people to gain Urban District status in 1894. By 1940 it was home to a community of about 6,000 people.

2.1.2 Original New Town Concept

Before the end of the Second World War, the Government had been planning for peace. War had demonstrated that a single purpose could unite the country. It meant enormous personal sacrifice from a generation that had also lived through a great depression. In return, the nation expected things to be better in peace than they had been before the war. Leadership from a collaborative, coalition Government that had efficiently assumed control of the means of production for the war effort demonstrated a new way of planning on a national basis. This thinking transferred to the peace through important movements to nationalise key industries and utilities, to provide a system of state education and health care and a national system of town planning.

It was in this positive climate for state-directed planning that Sir Patrick Abercrombie prepared a plan for Greater London in 1944. It set out a new vision for the reconstruction of a war damaged city, part of which would include the dispersal of some of its population to new ‘satellite’ towns. These would be self-contained, balanced communities of around 60,000 people. The 1946 New Towns Act created the powers to build them. The first to be designated was Stevenage.

A Development Corporation was formed to assemble land and produce plans for the creation of the New Town. But it did not enjoy an easy birth. Tensions were evident from an early stage, with vocal objections from local residents, farmers and landowners at public meetings. This fundamentally influenced the planning of the new town.

The first masterplan for the town was produced in 1949 by Gordon Stephenson, Chief Architect and Planner. The concept was for six residential neighbourhoods around a wholly new town centre, separate from the existing town. Employment uses were to be contained within a separate area to the west of the town, away from residential areas and the Old Town. The self-contained new neighbourhoods would each have their own schools, health facilities, shops, community centres and church and were designed to house 10,000 - 12,000 people.

The natural landscape around here was gently undulating countryside, heavily wooded, but cleared in places to farm arable crops and for market gardening and grazing. Some of the historic field boundaries and country lanes are preserved and protected within the town today. Many open spaces within the town are remnants of woodland and the 100 or so farms that made up this former rural part of Hertfordshire. Little natural landscape survives in the town centre. A few mature trees survived on the edges of the town to the south and west. Some of these were incorporated into the original Town Centre plan as were six burial mounds (the Six Hills), thought to be from Roman times.

From the outset, the movement strategy for the town was influenced by new thinking on the segregation of cars and vehicles from pedestrians. Ideas from the USA in new suburban settlements like Radburn and pre-war modernist concepts, though not comfortably and comprehensively embraced in Britain, were powerful influences. References cite a visit to the first pedestrianised precinct in Europe, Lijnbaan, Rotterdam as important in securing the same approach in Stevenage. The legacy today is a network of traffic free areas, principally the pedestrianised precinct in the centre and the extensive network of cycleways and footpaths.

Three iterations of the masterplan for Stevenage are illustrated in figures 2.2 – 2.4 opposite.

1949 – The town centre is located nearer to existing roads and the railway. The six neighbourhoods are clearly defined, but the town centre is not surrounded by them. This gives the settlement a slightly unbalanced look and means the outer neighbourhoods are quite remote from it. The pedestrian precinct is in an area to the east. A park, Town Gardens, is shown within the ring road also on the east side. A proposed station is shown quite close to the town centre, but this wouldn’t arrive until 1973.

1955 – The town centre is reduced in size by 5 acres and the eastern section of the ring road is moved west of Town Gardens. The station is shown near the town centre. A new 'satellite' town, Shephall, is shown west of the ring road.

1966 – The ring roads were upgraded to dual carriageways and a new section Lytton Way was proposed to take traffic in a bypass around the Old Town and relocate the service access on the line of the Old Great North Road to the west between the town centre and the proposed site for the station. New high level walkways and subways would now connect the New Town with the Old Town and the station with the Town Centre. The system of footpaths and cycleways was upgraded to cross new larger roundabouts.

Right: The original town centre precinct (Queensway) under construction in 1959. The elegant simplicity of the design is clearly evident.
2.1.3 Progress Pre-1980

Circumstances around the birth of the New Towns were not conducive to rapid growth. Restrictions on the availability of construction materials and early difficulties in securing the infrastructure to facilitate building meant that the projected 60,000 population would not be reached until well into the 1970s, by which time the target figure had been revised to 80,000 people. The New Towns were, however, a commercial success with the system of Development Corporations investing and then generating surpluses for the Government.

In the Town Centre, the pedestrianised precinct was proving to be a success, with retailers vying for units to the point where hasty revisions were needed to detailed plans bringing forward more and larger retail units under the 1966 masterplan.

The growth in car ownership put pressure on the now popular shopping centre to increase the amount of car parking provided by constructing a multi storey car park in Market Place, a measure envisaged in the earlier masterplans for all surface level car parking areas.

The adoption of 'urban motorways' as a means of getting people to and from the centre was a reflection of the extent to which the car was beginning to dominate the design and layout of urban areas to the exclusion of other factors. The effect was to force people closer to their cars and foster a dependence on them.

Stevenage was a model, modern, attractive and healthy town. It was closely studied and the urban design and architecture much copied, with many British towns in the 1960s constructing pedestrian only precincts, ring roads, subways, multi storey car parks.

Far left: the original 1949 masterplan showing the original Old Town and New Town areas separated and the layout concept for the settlement very close to how is today

Near left: the 1955 masterplan. The eastern edge of the town centre is marked by the ring road planned, to be on the route of what is now Silam Road, meaning Town Gardens was originally intended to be within the ring road.

Above: An extract from the 1966 masterplan showing the planned extension of the original precinct area (in blue) and the location of the western arm of the ring road (Lytton Way). Planned multi level car parks are shown edged red. Only one (Market Place) was ever built.
2.1.4 Planning after the Development Corporation

The New Towns were always regarded as a bold social experiment on a grand scale. Their futures were more conventional in that they would merge into a system of local government once the job of their construction was completed. Successive parliamentary debate and study into the New Towns has pointed to a lack of follow-through from successive Governments – that having started the experiment, it should be appropriately supported and invested in. A particular issue was that the Corporations, run on public sources of funding, made a financial return through the sale of land and rents and re-invested in their communities.

A different emphasis was placed on the process for winding up the Corporations in 1980. The Government then had different priorities – to reduce the public sector borrowing requirement, down-size government and let the private sector lead the development process, with the emphasis on job creation and market freedom. The Commission for the New Towns assumed the responsibilities of the old Development Corporations and was charged with disposing of their assets to the private sector at best price.

Post 1980, the development of Stevenage has been closer to the market driven, opportunity based model of development. This came at a time when the nature of the retail market was changing and the economy was in recession. The scale of newer outlets was increasing making it difficult for traditional town centres to accommodate them. Larger retail corporations were taking bigger market shares and the traditional High Street was home to more and more ‘multiples’.

A new form of retail was emerging – the out of town retail park. These relatively inexpensive to build, cash generating uses were allowed to flourish under relaxed planning restrictions. They needed a bigger stock range, larger sites and depended almost exclusively on attracting customers to travel by car. They provided employment and value - conscious customers liked the convenience and the choice.

The challenge for Stevenage was to keep its share of this changing market, but protect the town centre. The area now known as the Roaring Meg became the focus for out of town retail outlets in Stevenage, fragmenting its retail offer. Demand for new retail in the town centre fell away. Local planning authorities were often powerless to resist under relaxed planning regulations.

In the 1990s, Government realised the drastic impact that out of town retail centres (like Lakeside in Essex) were having, drawing customers from across their regions and sucking the life out of existing town centres. With a change in planning restrictions back to requiring retail to be located in town centres if sites were available, the emphasis in Stevenage switched to trying to accommodate new style retail outlets in the town centre. Consequently, retail in the town centre constructed from the 1990s onwards had the characteristics of out of town retail parks – Tesco, the Forum and the site now occupied by Matalan being good examples. The trend was not restricted to retail development. Leisure too adopted similar patterns of development and the Stevenage Leisure Park took on the same, car focused, retail park layout and style.

Retail park style of developments usually comprise single storey buildings with large floorplans that offer a very limited active retail front, need a large amount of storage and servicing to hold stock or space hungry leisure uses and are served by their own surface level car parks outside a town-wide system of co-ordinated charging. Generally, they do not mix with other uses like residential and offices. In appearance, they are markedly different from the original town centre, being a hybrid of styles, often traditionally inspired with brick, tile and uPVC plastic detailing or warehouse like with coloured metal cladding clothing a steel framed skeleton. Around this time, the Leisure Centre and Gordon Craig theatre building was clad in a similar style.

This resulted in the town centre taking on the look of an out of town retail park, losing the integrity of proportion and layout of the original concept for the town and introducing an uncoordinated series of buildings finished in a multitude of different elevational treatments and materials.

Top left: The Leisure Park contains a series of bulky, single use buildings with adjoining surface level car parking in front. They do not promote pedestrian activity and are more suited to out of town locations.

Top right: The Plaza was an attempt to develop a nighttime destination in the town centre. The lack of active frontage onto Danestrete gives very little to the town.

Middle right: The Forum redevelopment is a more successful hybrid of larger retail units with stronger store fronts.

Bottom right: Comparison with the B&Q on the edge of town illustrates how the character of the town centre has merged with a retail park style.
2.2 Baseline – A Snapshot of the Town Centre Today

A number of sources have been researched in order to understand how the town centre works currently and what its key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are. These sources are listed in Appendix 1. The main findings are summarised below.

Stevenage is a compact town with all the elements for comfortable urban living. Its original core is distinctly different from the towns surrounding it, being a unique example of post-war town planning, and contains model forms of housing, shopping and transportation for the time. It contrasts in appearance with its nearest neighbours – the garden cities of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City, also planned towns but earlier iterations. Compared with traditional historic towns in Hertfordshire, Stevenage feels radically different.

Stevenage has some outstanding assets:

- Being about 30 miles north of London off the A1(M), on the east coast mainline between London, Cambridge and Edinburgh and only 7 ½ miles (12 km) from Luton international airport and 18 miles (29.4 km) from London Stansted international airport, the town is highly accessible.
- A commercially viable bus network operates in the town with regular service intervals extending into the evening. Most homes in Stevenage are less than 5 minutes walk from a bus stop.
- The town has over 40 kilometres of cycleways connecting neighbourhoods with the town centre and employment areas.
- The successful industrial areas in Gunnels Wood Road and Pin Green are home to businesses that employ 24,000 people. Amongst the businesses are leading hi tech international companies including the European research base of Glaxo SmithKline and the national HQs of MBDA and EADS Astrium.
- The town is now home to approximately 80,000 people living in self contained residential areas that are clustered around ten neighbourhood centres providing local shopping and community facilities. Residents are rarely more than 10 minutes walk from their nearest shops and services.
- Around half the town’s area is covered by the 550 hectares of open spaces and play areas giving the town a green and leafy feel.
- The town is in a Government promoted growth area. Expansion of the town on land to the west and north of the town will see Stevenage increase its current population from 80,000 to 104,000 by 2021. Employment growth is expected to accompany this with up to 20,000 new jobs by 2026.
- Despite some quality in its townscape, the town centre too often presents the visitor with the backs of buildings, with service yards and with blank walls with little visual interest. When people are surveyed, they often refer to the lack of character in the town, some referring to it as ugly and unkempt. A survey of attitudes to quality housing in Stevenage revealed that 76% of respondents would allow the image of Stevenage to influence their decision about living in the town. An encouraging 61% however, felt that a better town centre might positively influence their decision.

2.2.1 The Town’s Image

Despite these considerable advantages potentially contributing to a good quality of life for residents, the town’s perceived image is poor. A number of surveys point to a general negative perception of the town, in particular sighting the environmental quality of the town centre as a major influence. The town is perceived to be home to a large concentration of Hertfordshire’s urban poor, a ‘haven’ for young single mothers on benefits and associated with anti-social behaviour.

Despite some quality in its townscape, the town centre too often presents the visitor with the backs of buildings, with service yards and with blank walls with little visual interest. When people are surveyed, they often refer to the lack of character in the town, some referring to it as ugly and unkempt. A survey of attitudes to quality housing in Stevenage revealed that 76% of respondents would allow the image of Stevenage to influence their decision about living in the town. An encouraging 61% however, felt that a better town centre might positively influence their decision.

The views of visitors to the town centre, surveyed on an annual basis, do not wholly support this negative perceived image. On average, the vast majority feel the town centre is well maintained, over 50% of them think the town centre is clean and well presented, 66% of them usually or always feel safe there and 64% rate the range of shops as either adequate or good. Over half of people asked feel the town has improved in the last 5 years.
2.2.2 Built Form

The layout of the town reflects the common post war new town approach of restricting uses to locate within segregated zones. Specifically, employment uses were to be kept apart from residential areas.

Figure 2.13 shows the distribution of the principal non-residential uses across the town. Apart from the neighbourhood centres (see figure 2.14), there is very little in the way of mixed uses outside the central areas.

The retail areas and employment areas are located to the west of the town giving it a slight imbalance. Currently, the A1(M) acts as the town’s western boundary. The projected growth in housing to the west of the town may redress this to an extent.

Open space is a large component of the town’s area (around 50%) and green areas extend into the central areas. This also means that the average density of population is low and distances between the town centre and the nearest residential districts are quite large (800m or 10 minutes walk).

The town centre, though denser than surrounding residential areas, still contains large open areas, characterised by wide roads and open car parks (see figure 2.12). Around 26% of the study area is land for car parking. A further 9% is occupied by a perimeter ring road (Lytton Way and St. Georges Way).
As a consequence, the town contains few complete, traditional streets lined by buildings on both sides. The townscape breaks down outside of the main shopping areas into a fragmented collection of various uses and building types loosely arranged around public space. This public space is dominated by open car parks, service areas and access roads.

2.2.3 Land Uses and Activity

The town centre provides 214 shops, equivalent to 67,000 m$^2$ of retail floorspace. This breaks down into convenience goods (bought on a regular basis such as food and household goods), comparison goods (bought on an occasional basis, such as clothing and household appliances) and food and drink outlets and services (such as banks and building societies). The town centre has 14,800 m$^2$ of convenience goods stores, this provision concentrated in the Tesco store on the north western edge of the town, and 38,900 m$^2$ of comparison goods stores. Around 5,500 people are employed in the retail sector.

There is around 129,000 sq. metres of employment floorspace, principally in offices built above shops and around the edge of the town. They provide employment for about 5,700 people.

In the current economic circumstances, it is not surprising that there are a number of vacancies within the town centre, noticeably those shop units vacated by Littlewoods and Woolworths. But there are some areas failing as a whole and footfall counts over recent years show a marked fall in pedestrian numbers outside of the core retail area of Queensway, the Forum, the Westgate Centre and Town Square and away from direct routes to public car parks.
2.2.4 Transport

The key advantage of the town’s compactness is that it forms the basis for sustainable movement patterns. Although the dominant form of transport remains the car, there are viable alternatives to it. Around 20% of Stevenage households do not have access to a car. Figure 2.19 shows that the vast majority of Stevenage residents are within a 10 minute walk (800 metres) of a neighbourhood centre or the Town Centre. Cycling is straightforward too with a mix of dedicated traffic free cycleways and quiet residential roads meaning that a large proportion of the town is within a 2 kilometre cycle ride (5 – 7 minutes) of the town centre.

The 2001 census records that 8.5% of the Stevenage population walks to work, a slightly lower proportion than the Hertfordshire average (8.8%). The key walking destinations are the town centre, Gunnels Wood south and Pin Green Industrial Area. Surveys of visitors to the Town Centre indicate that over 20% walked and a consistent 4% cycled.

The preferred mode of transport to the town centre is the car. Over 70% of people arrive in the central area by car, though this proportion has been falling overall according to surveys of town centre visitors over the past 5 years. According to a survey of employees in the Gunnels Wood area, 85% of respondents travel to work in their own car. This may be a function of the proximity to the motorway, the high proportion of employees from outside the area and the relatively sparse bus services in the area.

Drive times to neighbouring towns and the M25 vary according to the time of day and prevailing road conditions, but are short in distance and via roads that are for the most part, dual carriageways. Letchworth, Hitchin and Stevenage are within a 10 minute drive. The M25 is 24 kilometres from Junction 7 of the A1(M) – about 15 minutes. On occasions, when the A1(M) is blocked between junctions 7 and 8, the roads through Stevenage act as a diversionary route causing major disruption to the town centre and employment area of Gunnels Wood. Though high in capacity, the road network is prone to congestion at peak times. The traffic hotspots are shown in figure 2.20.

Stevenage has a higher level of bus usage than any other Hertfordshire town. It benefits from a comprehensive local bus network, with service frequencies on several routes not often found outside major metropolitan centres (up to 5 or 6 buses per hour).

Residential neighbourhoods in Stevenage are within comfortable walking distances from the bus network, with the exception of a small area centred on Rectory Lane in the north part of the town, and a small area in Broadwater.

Surveys of visitors to the town indicate that 30% of them came by bus. Services also continue operating late into the evening. National Express Coach services through Stevenage run from Birmingham to Stansted Airport via Luton, Luton Airport, Milton Keynes and Coventry.

The train station is one of the few stops on the East Coast Mainline from London, Kings Cross to the north of England and Scotland. Stevenage station has the 8th highest patronage of stations on the East Coast Main Line, with 3.72 million passengers journeys per annum using the 223 trains operating on average each weekday. It is a major generator of trips to and from the central area, provides an important physical link between different parts of the central area and is a major gateway into the town centre itself.
2.2.5 Summary of Infrastructure constraints to growth

The Stevenage Transport and Utilities Capacity Study Phase 1 Report, commissioned by the Council, and interviews with stakeholders point to capacity constraints that will impact on the ability of the town centre to grow.

The Road Network

"In the longer term, 2021, it is estimated that traffic movements to the Central Area of Stevenage as defined in the report, could grow by over 50% compared to today's levels. Although Stevenage has a high capacity urban road network, an integrated transport approach to addressing future travel demand will therefore be required. This will aim to increase the use of non-car modes through parking policies, bus priority and improved public transport services and cycling and pedestrian facilities."  

Steinenge Transport and Utilities Capacity Study Phase 1 Report (January 2006)

The town is served by high capacity roads that link to the motorway network via the A1(M). These experience congestion, particularly in the weekday morning peak hours. Congestion around the key junctions is identified as the critical blockage.

In the peak hour, approximately 55% of traffic movements associated with Stevenage occur locally within the town. These trips are principally between retail and employment zones located within the central zone and residential areas to the east of town. The remaining proportion of traffic movements is to and from areas outside of Stevenage.

Highway capacity will be critical for approach routes to the Central Area, from Junctions 7 and 8 of the A1(M). The motorway junctions are also congested at peak times. Both junctions of the A1(M) have a system of part-time signals. The motorway is operating at capacity currently. At present the widening of the A1(M) is not included in the Highways Agency's Targeted Programme of Improvements. A legal agreement attached to planning permission for expansion of the Glaxo Smith Kline site could require improvements to be made to the circulation at Junction 7 and approaches to it.

The Council's preferred option is to seek to provide high quality road and rail transport at the same time as new homes and jobs. This includes lobbying the Department for Transport to fund A1(M) widening and working with the Highway authority, Herts County Council, to improve the capacity of the A505, A602, other east-west links and the urban road network in particular a new connection from new neighbourhoods onto the A1(M) via the A602 Wymondley bypass through the Stevenage and North Hertfordshire Action Plan.

Car parking

There are around 2,000 public car parking spaces within the ring road area. Studies indicate that there is little or no spare capacity in these car parks at peak times. Over 1,100 are provided in the Leisure Park, but use of these is restricted to businesses there. The distribution of the spaces is widespread with an imbalance in popularly located pedestrian car parks. There is no co-ordinated pricing mechanism covering all town centre car parks, with the Tesco owned, free car park appearing to be the most popular. The highest capacity car park, Market Place, has tail off in usage due to the closure of Woolworth, where there was a cut through to Town Square. The building has a limited lifespan and major capital repairs are overdue.

Bus Network

There is no detailed study of the usage of the bus station nor its future role. It has been predicted that bus patronage will rise by 20% as a result of development in and around the Stevenage area. Notwithstanding its convenient location, problems accessing the bus station and issues with its internal operation are cited by the major bus operator as the most significant causes of delay to bus operations in Stevenage. The existing bus station has a circulation area which becomes heavily congested at busy times. Buses leaving the existing bus station also suffer delays entering the roundabout junction of Lytton Way / Six Hills Way at the south end of Danestrete. At peak times, buses queue back from this junction along the full length of Danestrete. A short left turn lane has recently been introduced at the Danestrete entry to the roundabout, which has helped, but not solved the problem.

There are no significant bus priority measures in Stevenage at present.

Train Station

There are a range of problems associated with the existing Stevenage train station. These include difficulties of interchange with buses, crowding resulting from the narrow width of the platforms and the pedestrian concourse/overbridge and the lack of staff presence. Crowding on the platforms is exacerbated by the short extent of the platform canopy, which results in passengers congregating at the foot of the stairs from the overbridge. This delays train loading in peak periods.

The Council’s preferred option is to work with relevant rail bodies to improve the capacity of the East Coast Main Line. These are long term objectives and no detailed plans are available to be able to make an assessment of the situation at present.

Cycleways and Footways

The 2001 census records that 2.9% of the Stevenage population cycles to work. This percentage is significantly higher than the Hertfordshire average (around 1.8%), but is much lower than might be expected given the level of infrastructure provision. The cycling strategy for the Borough cites usage of the network during the 1970s as the heyday for the network, where 4,000 bikes a day were regularly used for commuting and travel between the central area and residential neighbourhoods.

Environmental and Utilities Capacity

English Nature and the Environment Agency warn that growth in housing and employment should take account of environmental considerations and avoid negative impacts by avoiding flood risk; remediating previously developed land; considering established habitats in redenvelopment schemes, respecting watercourses and using sustainable drainage systems. Mitigation should be applied where impacts are unavoidable or compensated for as a last resort.

Flood risk assessments indicate highest risk in the south eastern corner of the town centre where the Stevenage Brook (an Environment Agency designated Main River) runs south, joining the Fairlands Valley Stream, Knexthorpe Park Stream and Aston End Brook. Integrating land uses in the town centre could potentially have an adverse impact on settlements more prone to flooding further downstream. General principles for flood risk management are contained within the Thames Catchment Flood Management Plan (CFMP) and any development within the masterplan area will be expected to comply with relevant policies within the Local Development Framework and East of England Plan.

The East of England Regional Assembly, East of England Development Agency and a number of studies commissioned by the local authority identify that substantial development in Stevenage will put additional pressure on sewage treatment capacity and water supply infrastructure. The existing sewage capacity will cope with a little over one third of the proposed growth without major increase in infrastructure between Stevenage and Rye Meadows sewage treatment works (some 30km away). It may be possible for a shorter connection to be made to Anglian Water’s network. Water conservation measures will need to be incorporated within any development proposals and it is probable that a significant investment in water supply infrastructure will be required within the lifespan of this masterplan.

With local connections and additional localised infrastructure, electricity and gas is available for supply. Emphasis will need to be placed on minimising energy consumption within new development. Energy conservation measures and renewable sources will need to be explored by any development proposal within the masterplan area.

Car parking

There are around 2,000 public car parking spaces within the ring road area. Studies indicate that there is little or no spare capacity in these car parks at peak times. Over 1,100 are provided in the Leisure Park, but use of these is restricted to businesses there. The distribution of the spaces is widespread with an imbalance in popularly located pedestrian car parks. There is no co-ordinated pricing mechanism covering all town centre car parks, with the Tesco owned, free car park appearing to be the most popular. The highest capacity car park, Market Place, has tail off in usage due to the closure of Woolworth, where there was a cut through to Town Square. The building has a limited lifespan and major capital repairs are overdue.

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There are no significant bus priority measures in Stevenage at present.
2.3 Future Role of the Town Centre – The Policy Impetus for Change

Town centres play an important role in underpinning the national economy. They play an essential role in providing a focus for regeneration and investment, enabling sustainable growth and the means of supporting successful communities. Policy from Central Government through to Regional and local government reflects this. The key strategic policies and initiatives influencing the content of this Masterplan are summarised here.

2.3.1 The National Perspective

Broad national planning policies as contained in Planning Policy Statements (PPS) set the framework here. They range from general requirements for sound local planning policies, policy on the location of new development, advice on the form of development to guidance on achieving design quality.

Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1) Delivering Sustainable Development, specifies that planning authorities should promote sustainable economic development by:

- Recognising that economic development can deliver environmental and social benefits;
- Recognising the wider benefits of economic development and considering these alongside local impacts;
- Ensuring that sustainable locations are available for developments;
- Providing for improved productivity choices and competition;
- Recognising that all local communities are subject to change;
- Actively promoting good quality development;
- Ensuring the provision of sufficient, good quality homes;
- Ensuring that infrastructure and services are provided;
- Ensuring that plans take account of regional strategies;
- Identifying opportunities for future investment.

It urges Local Planning Authorities to seek, through development plan making, to promote or encourage:

- Urban regeneration in mixed use developments, improved linkages and new opportunities;
- Clear and comprehensive access, breaking down unnecessary barriers and exclusions in a manner that benefits everyone;
- Developments that attract people to town centres to boost their vitality and viability;
- Accessible public transport provision;
- The enhancement of the natural and historic built environments.

The main points of PPS6 in relation to retail development are:

- Development should be focused in existing centres
- Development plans should assess the need for development and allocate town centre sites accordingly
- Higher density, mixed-use schemes are encouraged
- Local authorities should be proactive in making plans, planning policies, and by exercising site assembly powers
- Local authorities should undertake regular review of their town centre’s vitality and viability

Town centres should follow high quality and inclusive design principles, which include having high quality public and open space, preserving historic heritage, having a place-identity, acting as a focus for the community, and being an attractive, safe and accessible place for businesses, shoppers and residents.

PPS6 is under review. New policy is expected to alter the parameters of the test for locating retail in town centres or edge of centre sites, but remain supportive of growth directed towards existing town centres. The consultation paper for Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning for Prosperous Economies seeks views on combining all national planning policy on economic development in urban and rural areas and town centres into one consolidated and streamlined Planning Policy Statement (PPS). It anticipates the challenge for towns like Stevenage very accurately:

We can now expect more local authority-led opportunities appearing for town centre and edge-of-centre development, particularly in medium sized and smaller centres. However, some of these may be aspirational rather than realistic, because values in small centres are sometimes too low to make new development viable. A further obstacle could be the cost of creating good linkages or breaching barriers to pedestrian movement, to enable a site to function as edge-of-centre. The way forward will be higher density mixed uses – where design or heritage constraints permit. Meanwhile, the largest centres will continue organic growth and consolidation, even if some major schemes there are curtailed following plan-led reviews of the retail hierarchy.

The primary objectives of the guidance contained in PPG13 are to promote sustainable transport choices; to promote accessibility to jobs, shopping, leisure and services by walking, cycling and public transport; and to reduce the need to travel, especially by car, for reasons of social inclusion.

It encourages:

- The active management of urban growth to make the fullest use of public transport, give priority to people over ease of traffic movement and plan to provide more road space to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport in town centres;
- Fuller consideration of the needs of disabled people in the design, layout, physical conditions and interrelationship of uses;
- Reducing the amount of parking in new development (and in the expansion and change of use in existing development) as part of a package of planning and transport measures, to promote sustainable travel choices;
- Local authorities to promote sustainable travel choices by ensuring that there is quick, easy and safe interchange between different modes of transport (walking, cycling and public transport).

Flood risk must be taken into account to avoid inappropriate development and to deliver new development whilst not increasing, and hopefully reducing, flood risk overall (PPS25 Development and Flood Risk).

2.3.2 The Growth Agenda

The Government’s Sustainable Communities Plan (2003) and series of regional policies that preceded it (RPGs) identified targets for housing and employment growth in a series of growth areas within a national regeneration framework covering all the regions of England.

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 strengthened the role and importance of regional planning, introducing Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), making them the top tier of the statutory Development Plan. The system of Regional Spatial Strategies replaces County Structure Plans and are promoted as the vehicles for delivering the Government’s growth agenda. Stevenage is identified within the London-Stansted-Cambridge growth area.
2.3.3 The Regional Perspective

The Regional Spatial Strategy for the area is the East of England Plan. This contains planning, transport and environmental policies but also specific policies in reference to Stevenage and its town centre. It was adopted in May 2008 and is effective until 2021. At the time of writing it is undergoing a review process that will see its coverage extended to 2031.

It states that Stevenage should be a growth area for 16,000 new homes of which 6,400 should be in Stevenage and up to 9,600 in new neighbourhoods in North Hertfordshire. It also recommends a Green Belt review, improved transport infrastructure and job growth of 68,000 across the East of England area (Policy E1).

Policy SV1 (‘Stevenage Key Centre for Development and Change’) of the East of England Plan states that Stevenage should make provision for employment growth by improving its ‘competitive position and capitalising on its position between London and Cambridge’. One of the ways of achieving this, the plan states, is through the promotion of a ‘regenerated, expanded and more vital town centre’ supporting ‘substantial improvement to the image and quality of the town’s built fabric and public realm’.

Stevenage is earmarked as a major town centre (policy E5) and a priority area for regeneration due to levels of deprivation (policy SS5).

Policy SS6 (‘City and Town Centres’) requires the Council to:

- define the role of the town centre and include a strategy to manage change
- promote a healthy mix of uses
- build upon positive elements of its distinctive character
- support the development and consolidation of the local cultural heritage; and
- ensure that land is allocated or can be made available to meet the full range of the town centre’s identified needs

The East of England Plan and Regional Transport Strategy identify Stevenage as a regional transport node. Emphasis is placed on improving public transport and stabilising traffic levels. The use of restrictive parking standards are encouraged in order to influence travel behaviour. The Plan seeks to improve capacity on the East Coast Main Line, the A1(M), A505 and A602. It refers to the need for further study of these routes in response to transport pressure and traffic growth.

Key objectives are to design taking into account the environment and climate change, including reducing the need to travel and moving away from car use; facilitating economic development; improving the quality of life for people in the region; and promoting social cohesion through accessibility to services and facilities.

Though pre-dating the Plan, A Sustainable Framework for the East of England (2001) prioritises:

- reducing traffic growth, and making local transport a priority including strengthening regional public transport links;
- protecting and enhancing the historic and built environment to create an urban form that supports town centres that can be served by public transport;
- encouraging ‘well-designed mixed-use developments in the heart of towns and cities, create viable and attractive town centres that have vitality and life, and discourage out-of-town developments’ (paragraph 4.14);
- its character and heritage.


- Supports economic participation delivering opportunity for all and a sustainable economy based on 4 priorities including ‘battling barriers to employment in the poorest 20 percent of communities’ (which includes lack of access to transport); and ‘increasing economic demand in areas with low economic activity rates’.
- Promotes a transport system that fully supports sustainable economic growth based on priorities including ‘investing in transport to maximise economic growth’ and ‘reducing the environmental impact of moving goods and people’ (enabling greater use of alternatives to car and lorry travel).
2.3.4 The Local Perspective

Saved policies from the Local Plan and the emerging Local Development Framework documents form the basis of relevant local policies. In broad terms, these are in line with the aspirations set out in the East of England Plan.

The key relevant policies from the Core Strategy (September 2007) are SO5 (Town Centre and Shopping), SO7 (Built Environment), CS1 (Sustainability and Quality of Life), CS2 (Balance and Self-Containment), CS9 (Town Centre and Shopping), CS10 (Natural Environment), CS15 (Built Environment), CS20 (Buses, Trains, Walking and Cycling), CS21 (Road and Rail Transport).

The SPD underlined the need for a comprehensive strategy for development, rather than a series of piecemeal developments. The Gunnels Wood Area Action Plan Preferred Options Report (2008; expected to be adopted March 2011) is of relevance as it seeks a transformation of the employment area to the west of the study area. It seeks to realise a vision for the area:

- Create a sense of place and positively contribute to the surroundings
- Respect the scale, character and function of existing buildings
- Protect the historic character of the original areas of the town
- Protect the best examples of New Town architecture and design
- Ensure efficient use of land
- Design out crime
- Provide high quality open spaces and public art
- Demonstrate a design led approach to car parking and safe cycle storage
- Be accessible by people of all ages and physical abilities
- Be well connected to roads, bus routes and the cycle and pedestrian network
- Be well connected to community facilities and open spaces

Policies concerning planning for movement seek a co-ordinated approach, encouraging more sustainable forms of travel and providing high quality public transport, walking and cycling opportunities at the same time as new homes and jobs. This includes:

- locating new development in accessible locations
- promoting less polluting forms of transport
- reducing the need to travel and the length of journeys
- ensuring developments are well connected to public transport and the cycle and pedestrian network
- delivering a new public transport interchange through the Town Centre Area Action Plan
- addressing gaps in the cycle and pedestrian network
- the use parking standards to control the generation of vehicle traffic
- considering the merits of a wholly new rapid mass public transport system such as guided buses and trams.

The most recent Town Centre specific supplementary planning guidance is contained in the Stevenage Town Centre SPD (adopted 2005). This was rescinded in January 2009, but does provide some insights into the issues facing the town centre.
2.3.5 Evaluation

The planning policy context for the masterplan is strongly supportive of transformational regeneration within the town centre area, recognising its important strategic location for employment and housing growth. It also sets the principles that should guide that transformation – encourage a strong shift to sustainable forms of development and means of transportation and should be of the highest environmental quality.

There are significant constraints to infrastructure capacity that the Council has already identified and that the masterplan will have to take into account. This needs to be tackled in a co-ordinated way.

- The movement strategy for the masterplan will need to reflect a policy shift towards more sustainable forms of transport provision and make walking, cycling and public transport more attractive in order to overcome or minimise the constraints of highway capacity and car parking provision. As the majority of traffic movements occur locally, there seems to be scope for altering the balance between vehicle travel and other modes. The quality of pedestrian and cyclist experience will be a key determinant in a growth in these areas.
- New development will need to conform to the highest sustainable construction standards in order to comply with existing and emerging policy targets and in order to overcome local constraints on the supply of water, disposal of waste, recycling of grey water, drainage and surface water run-off. The role of the public realm in addressing town scale environmental challenges will be need to be closely examined.
- Cycling is an underused form of travel in the town and the existing capacity of the cycle network would suggest that it can cope with a significant increase in usage.

A summary of the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the town centre is listed overleaf. These will be examined in more detail by a movement appraisal and urban design analysis in Part 2 of the document, in order to establish a framework for tackling the weaknesses and threats, building on the strengths and maximising the opportunities that present themselves.
2.4 The Challenge – Summary of Key Issues

Strengths

• The town’s proximity to London and its location within a growth corridor with Peterborough and Cambridge
• Stevenage is a strategically important location for employment, the focus for which is located a short distance from the town centre, employing 24,000 people
• Movement infrastructure in the wider town for pedestrians and cyclists is outstanding in some aspects and would be the envy of any ‘eco’ town. Levels of commuting by bike and on foot are higher than other Hertfordshire towns
• The town centre is easily accessed by a choice of other transport modes, rail, bus and cars on a high capacity road network
• The retail core of the town centre is arranged around a distinctive pedestrian environment that is attractive and memorable
• The town centre contains a range of retail and leisure uses that appeal to all age groups
• The town possesses attractive residential neighbourhoods connected by the network of cycleways and footways and containing neighbourhood centres that are generally within a comfortable walk of people’s doorsteps
• Around half the town’s area is covered by the 550 hectares of open spaces and play areas giving the town a green and leafy feel
• The support for growth and regeneration from all levels of Government is strong. There is evidence from previous public consultation on planning policy for town centre regeneration that the community also recognises the need for change

Weaknesses

• The town is fragmented into separate areas of commerce that do not fully complement each other – town centre, Old Town, Gunnels Wood and Roaring Meg do not interact to each other’s benefit
• The focus on ease of movement for the car has disadvantaged other users of the town centre and the reliance on segregated means of movement re-enforces this
• There are significant barriers to pedestrian and cycle movement that stand in the way of wider use of these modes of transport and prevent streets becoming active, vibrant places
• The balance of the town’s residential community is to the east – the local catchment for the town centre is in a 180 degree arc, remote from the centre and separated by physical barriers to movement
• The Town Centre currently offers only a limited range and variety in shopping, not sufficiently distinct and different from its out of town centre retail areas
• Neighbourhood self containment and independence, the proximity of the Old Town and Stevenage Leisure Park and a lack of a sizeable resident community within the ring road mean that there is very little evening economy within the ring road area

• The poor image of the town. The townscapes within the central area is dominated by car parking, service areas and the backs of buildings. Most of the main approaches to the town centre are badly defined by poor quality architecture and landscape design. The original buildings within the town centre are becoming tired and are in need of repair and renovation. The public realm experience in the centre is confusing and doesn’t connect key destinations with attractive, safe, secure and comfortable streets and open spaces

Opportunities

• Much land within the town centre is underused and is capable of more efficient development
• Council and other public land ownership in the centre is extensive and offers the scope to make a valuable contribution to accommodating growth
• The movement infrastructure in the wider town for pedestrians and cyclists provides a strong basis for sustainable options for movement
• Growth Area status potentially gains access to public funding for infrastructure improvements to facilitate regeneration
• Connections to neighbouring towns by bus and train and the town centre’s proximity to the station means that the town centre is a viable commute to and from a range of regional destinations
• Potential new communities on the outskirts of the town will extend the potential customer base for the town centre
• The scope for creating and reshaping a bold new look for the town. The New Town typology of rectilinear urban blocks, simple but elegant forms and the combination of height at key locations provides a potentially flexible framework for some exciting, denser new forms of development in a memorable context, with few comparators elsewhere in the County

Threats

• Other centres in the region, who have more advanced plans to regenerate and offer a better experience for the visitor currently, and mean serious competition for consumer spending
• Movement infrastructure is under stress currently and significant investment is required to overcome capacity constraints
• The current image and environmental quality of the town centre is a potential disincentive to investment and a major obstacle to inward migration of higher income households
• Failure to connect new residents in neighbourhoods to the west and north more directly with Stevenage town centre could see them choosing alternative town centres as their preferred retail destination
• Private land ownership is fragmented. Integrated development on a larger scale, sufficient to overcome key infrastructure constraints will be difficult to achieve
• Development values generated are unlikely, on their own, to be sufficient to pay for the significant infrastructure requirements required to bring about a ‘sea change’ in the town centre’s image