

Heritage Impact Assessment: Town Centre, November 2015

Introduction

As part of the evidence base to inform our emerging Local Plan, we have assessed a number of potential development sites within the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA). The SLAA identifies sites that are suitable, available and achievable for development, in simplistic terms, without taking into account other policy considerations. Parts of the town centre area are assessed in the SLAA for residential use.

The regeneration of the town centre is one of the highest priorities of the Borough Council. It is seeking to attract major public and private sector investment.

The area being considered for redevelopment is defined as Stevenage Central. A Framework was recently produced¹ to provide a high-level, strategic regeneration plan for this area. This identifies six Major Opportunity Areas in which mixed use development will be encouraged. The Framework aims to deliver a significant number of new high-density flatted schemes, as well as new office accommodation, retail floorspace, an extended and regenerated train station and new leisure, cultural and civic uses, alongside parking and public realm improvements.

Part of the town centre is designated as a conservation area. As such, we need to ensure that any site allocations in the Local Plan follow the principles of sustainable development and are acceptable and appropriate in terms of their impact on the heritage assets.

Government Guidance² places great importance on the preservation and enhancement of heritage assets. It requires local authorities to 'set out a positive and clear strategy for the conservation, enjoyment and enhancement of the historic environment, in which the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets should be considered' (Para.126). The associated statutory duties regarding the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area and of preserving the setting of listed buildings must also be considered in this regard (Sections 66 and 72, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).

Both national policy, and best practice guidance published by Historic England³, emphasise the importance of using an up-to-date evidence base to assess the significance of heritage assets, the contribution they make to the environment and the impact of any proposed development on these assets. Development proposals should seek to 'avoid or minimise conflict between any heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal' (NPPF, para.129).

This Assessment aims to fulfil these requirements and to determine whether the potential development sites are appropriate, and what might be done to minimise the impacts of development on the heritage assets. Any residual harm to heritage assets would need to be balanced against the public benefits of the proposed development.

¹ Stevenage Central Town Centre Framework, 2015, DLA

² The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2012).

³ Historic England Advice Note. The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans (Consultation Draft, June 2015); The Historic Environment in Local Plans. Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning 1 (Historic England, March 2015)

The emerging advice note from Historic England⁴ recognises that a positive strategy for the historic environment in Local Plans can ensure that site allocations avoid harming the significance of heritage assets, which includes effects on their setting. At the same time, it also recognises the allocation of sites for development may present opportunities for the historic environment.

The advice note includes guidance specifically relating to site allocations for Local Plans. It sets out a methodology that local authorities can follow in order to ensure the historic environment is taken into account during the site selection process.

Five steps are identified, as follows:

STEP 1: Identify which heritage assets are affected by the potential site allocation

STEP 2: Understand what contribution the site (in its current form) makes to the significance of the heritage asset(s)

STEP 3: Identify what impact the allocation might have on that significance

STEP 4: Consider maximising enhancements and avoiding harm

STEP 5: Determine whether the proposed site allocation is appropriate in light of the NPPF's tests of soundness

This methodology has been used as the basis for this assessment. It is important to note that, at present, the Framework provides a broad, high-level vision of what is likely to be delivered in the town centre, it does not provide a specific scheme which can be assessed. Therefore, this assesses the general principle of development in this area.

STEP 1: Heritage assets affected

The Stevenage Central area encompasses the Town Square Conservation Area, as shown in Map 1.

Map 1: Conservation area boundary and the potential development area



⁴ Historic England Advice Note: The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans (Consultation Draft, June 2015)

A number of evidence studies relating to the Town Square Conservation Area already exist, and are in use by the Borough Council. The majority of these were produced by BEAMS, a specialist consultancy offering expertise in the historic environment across Hertfordshire in particular. This includes:

- A Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas, November 2005, BEAMS
- Town Square Conservation Area Appraisal, 2010, BEAMS
- Town Square Conservation Area Management Plan Supplementary Planning Document, 2012

The Borough Council chose to formally adopt the latter as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in 2012, making its guidance a material consideration when assessing planning applications.

Additional studies of relevance include:

The Stevenage Central Town Centre Framework, June 2015, DLA

These studies and reviews have formed the basis for this assessment, and should be referred to for further information on these heritage assets.

The Town Square Conservation Area was first designated in 1988. As the UK's first New Town, Stevenage holds an important place in planning history. The town centre is said to contain the first fully pedestrianised shopping centre in the UK. The town centre was planned as part of the product of contemporary thinking on planning and architecture in the 1950s. The designation of the conservation area was the first step in recognising this value.

The boundary was amended following the recommendations of the Conservation Area Review produced by BEAMS in 2010, to include the southern section of Queensway and the full extent of Market Place, as some of the first areas of the pedestrianised town centre to be constructed. The conservation area was reduced to the north, to exclude areas which were actually developed at a later date.

The principal features of the Town Square Conservation Area are:

- Town Square;
- Central Queensway, linking to the entrances of Park Place and Market Place;
- The Grade II listed structures of the Joyride sculpture and the commemorative clock tower;
- Views looking south along Queensway towards The Towers, and east along Market Place towards the Church of St George and St Andrew;
- Buildings which are three storeys high, flat roofed, with metal framed windows, primary coloured panels and flat roofed above ground floor level canopies;
- Pedestrianised precincts of a consistent width, which are enclosed by three storey high buildings on both sides of the street;
- Subtle public art features and street furniture; and
- Overall unique New Town design and architecture.

Significant/Listed Buildings

The conservation area contains two listed structures: the commemorative clock tower and surrounding raised pool, and the Joyride sculpture, which stands on the raised platform of the Town Square.

Open spaces

There are no open spaces within the town centre, in the 'green' sense; however, there are a number of important openings of space in the central pedestrianised area. These open spaces are enclosed by overlooking buildings, and include informal planting and seating areas, providing an opportunity for meeting and gathering. These spaces can be defined as:

- Town Square (as shown in the image below);
- Queensway / Market Place Square; and
- Queensway / Park Place Square

Key views and vistas

Within the Town Square Conservation Area are several important views or vistas which relate to the originally planned masterplan and New Town construction of the pedestrianised central shopping precincts. These include:

- Views looking south along Queensway towards the focal point of residential block The Towers;
- Views looking east along Market Place towards the focal point of The Church of St George and St Andrew;
- Views looking north along Queensway;
- Views from the bus station and Danestrete (including Daneshill House) across Town Square;
- Views of the clock tower located in Town Square; and
- Views of the Joyride sculpture located on a raised platform in Town Square.

Public art

The central pedestrianised area of the town centre also contains some important examples of public art which are subtly placed as interesting features, not always acknowledged by the pedestrian. These are in addition to the two listed structures of the clock tower and Joyride. Notably these are:

- Peter Lyon's wall sculpture on 21 Town Square (McDonalds facade facing onto the bus station);
- Bajio's wall ceramic on 8 Town Square (Primark facade facing onto Town Square);

Map 2: Town Square Conservation Area – key features



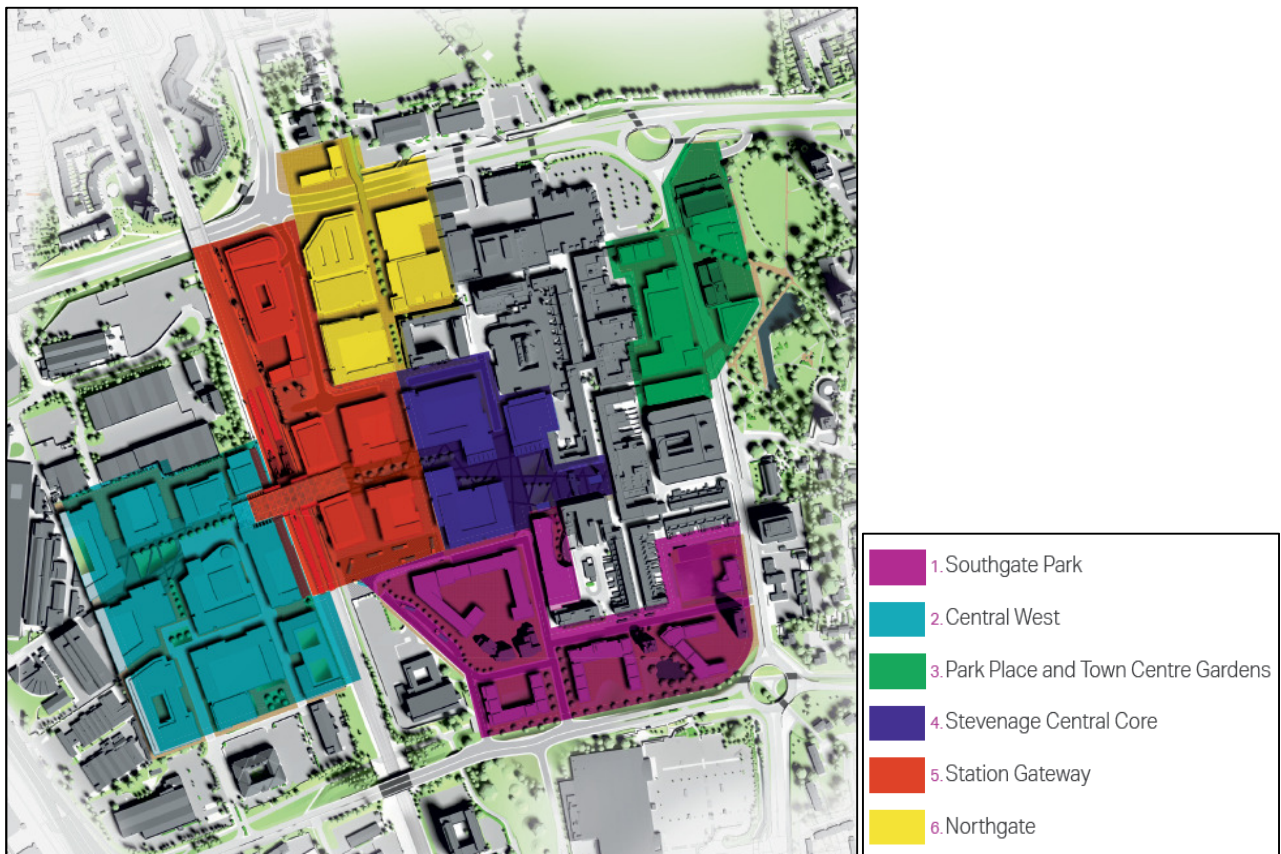
STEP 2: The contribution of the site (in its current form) to the significance of the heritage asset(s)

The Stevenage Central Framework identifies six Major Opportunity Areas, within which development is expected to take place.

The potential development sites mainly form the setting of the conservation area. Major Opportunity Areas 1, 3 and 4, lie directly adjacent to the conservation area boundary and affect its setting. Part of Area 4 also encroaches into the conservation area, incorporating Town Square (including the two listed structures).

It is also important to realise that, even though they are not directly adjacent, the remaining opportunity areas could also impact upon the setting of the conservation area, as the whole of the area inside the ring road was a part of the original New Town design. However, the existing character of these areas is such that they do not share many of the same features experienced within the main retail core. Opportunity Area 2 is likely to have minimal impact, if any at all.

Map 3: Major Opportunity Areas



Town Square

The Town Square is one of the most important features of the conservation area and was always the planned focal space of the town centre. The clock tower and its pool provides a centre-piece (which is taller than the roofs of the surrounding buildings) with its commemorative panels, and the raised platform on which 'Joyride' stands helps to enclose the square. These are both listed structures.

Original buildings enclose the Town Square on three sides. The use of space, along with the dimensions and buildings which enclose it are typical features of early post-war New Town planning.

The Town Square is visually one of the most distinctive assets of the town centre, with significant views into this area recognised within our previous heritage assessments. It also fulfils another original purpose, for it to be used as an informal meeting place. The inclusion of street furniture encourages this.

Mature trees form a key feature on the south side of Town Square, providing it with some important summer shade and a fully developed landscaped setting. These trees pre-date the new town centre and have been left in their original positions, some incorporated within a raised planting bed.

Today, the Town Square remains the focal point of life in the town centre. It provides a place both for informal meetings and street watching, as well as more formal events including; market stalls, fairs, fund raising, civic events and the Christmas lights switch-on.

Conservation area setting

The “setting” for the conservation area is in fact contiguous with what is currently within the conservation area i.e. it is the continuing arms of Queensway and Park Place, where the architectural style and key features of the conservation area are effectively reflected. The Church of St George, The Towers and the Town Centre Gardens beyond this, also add to the setting of the conservation area, as planned landmarks at the end of key vistas. The importance of particular views looking into and out of the conservation area is recognised within all of our previous conservation area appraisals and studies.

Our evidence recognises that the majority of the town centre (within the ring road) is an important historic asset, as it forms an original part of the design of the New Town. The majority of construction work within this area was completed by the late 1960s, and presents a continual retail frontage of low rise, three storey buildings arranged in a block form of rectilinear plots, with no vehicular access. Today, the central retailing area of the town centre has seen little change, other than small public realm improvements along with changes to shop fronts and signage. However, it is also recognised that some of the more recent development does not reflect this original style.

The western boundary of the Town Square and thus, a direct part of the conservation area setting, comprises the bus station, Danestrete and the buildings there. The Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas, carried out by BEAMS in 2005, recognises that the bus station does not contribute well to the setting of the conservation area. ‘It is a difficult approach for pedestrians and therefore, a poor link between the town centre and railway / leisure centre. It is also a poor visual link with obstructed views past / through’.

Our previous work also identifies the Plaza, to the south west of Town Square, as having a negative impact on the setting of the conservation area. Apart from its height, which is consistent with existing buildings within Town Square, The Plaza ignores the original principles which underpin the vision of the town centre. In particular, its curving form, lack of stylistic consistency and busy facade treatment stand in stark contrast to the linear forms and plain facades of Town Square and Queensway. The omission of a canopy along the frontage also marks it out as following a different aesthetic.

STEP 3: The impact the proposed allocation might have on that significance

Understanding the likely scope of the proposed development will enable us to come to an informed view on its potential impact on the conservation area.

The Framework identifies six Major Opportunity Areas, within which future investments are likely to be focused. There is no prescribed development programme. However, an indicative sequence of development is put forward which is based on the current understanding of market interest, land availability and the complexity of practical development issues.

The redevelopment will be residential led, accommodating around 3,000 new homes within the Stevenage Central area (including some schemes which are already under construction / have planning permission i.e. Brickdale House, Matalan and Southgate House). New office and retail floorspace will also be provided, alongside leisure and cultural facilities (either new or reprovided). The Arts and Leisure Centre will be removed, with new sports facilities provided alongside the swimming pool, and a new theatre taking a prominent place within the town centre. A new civic hub will be provided within the centre of the town centre, existing Southgate properties accommodating these uses will be freed up for residential development.

Some of the major changes will come from the reconfiguration of the transport network, particularly the relocation of the bus station to enable an increased area of public open space leading on from Town Square, and the removal of Lytton Way as a through route for general town centre traffic, freeing up land around the train station for redevelopment and removing Lytton Way as a barrier to the area currently separated off as the Leisure Park.

Detailed schemes, including design and layout details, are yet to be determined.

The amount of change and new development proposed is significant, and will extend across the timespan of the emerging Local Plan.

At such an early stage, and without the identification of specific schemes, it is difficult to determine the specific impact of development on the heritage assets. Instead, this assessment considers the general principle of development, and how its impacts might be mitigated against.

Our evidence recognises that the pressure for development, alongside unsympathetic changes to the existing environment, could lead to the erosion of the special local features. Careful management will be required to strike a balance between development and conservation.

Opportunity Area 4 includes a site within the conservation area, the Town Square. The Framework recognises the importance of this area as a heritage asset. It seeks to protect and enhance this part of the conservation area, and to improve its function as a public meeting place, by expanding the public square to include a new area of open space enabled by the relocation of the bus station.

The remaining Opportunity Areas are likely to impact upon the setting of the conservation area, some more than others due to their location and separating features. In order to implement the type of changes required to renew and modernise the town centre, and to reinvigorate it as the town's central core, schemes will be encouraged to incorporate taller, higher-density buildings, with innovative, modern design. Our evidence recognises that the town centre is in need of investment, and there is a need to keep up with market demands if it is to survive. Retaining the town centre exactly as it is now, and limiting opportunities for change is likely to result in the erosion of the heritage assets in the long term, as the lack of investment will limit its economic function and reduce its importance as a retail area.

It is considered that a balance can be successfully struck between ensuring the heritage assets are protected, and their features and key principles reflected in new development, and the modern, high density development that will ensure the future viability and vitality of the town centre. In principle, development within the Major Opportunity Areas could be accommodated without having a significant adverse impact on the conservation area. Schemes would need to be carefully designed and their impact fully considered.

STEP 4: Maximising enhancements and avoiding harm

Since the start of the Local Plan process, through the SLAA, we have investigated all of the potential sites we had submitted to us and all of those that we identified ourselves. The results of the most recent SLAA provide us with a final list of suitable, available and achievable sites which could be allocated for housing within the Local Plan. Taking other evidence and policy requirements into account, such as the need for employment and retail provision, and the results of the SHMA and the Green Belt Review, it is clear that we will be heavily reliant on a few large sites if we are to meet our housing needs. One of which is the redevelopment of the town centre. This is particularly important as the largest previously developed site available.

In accordance with the findings of stages 1 to 3 of this assessment, it is considered that development within the Major Opportunity Areas could be delivered without significant negative impact to the Town Square Conservation Area, the listed buildings or their settings.

Opportunity Area 4 includes a site within the conservation area, the Town Square. The Framework recognises the importance of this area as a heritage asset. It seeks to protect and enhance this part of the conservation area, and to improve its function as a public meeting place, by expanding the public square to include a new area of open space enabled by the relocation of the bus station.

The Framework includes a Heritage Delivery Plan, which considers development within all of the opportunity areas. Key features that provide the setting of the conservation area will be protected.

A transition between old and new will be required, and this will need to be carefully managed in order to ensure the proposals are appropriate.

The Conservation Area Management Plan recognises that the replication of existing style is not necessarily appropriate and guidance on architectural style should not confine opportunities for innovative design. It states our plan should seek to protect and enhance the conservation area whilst recognising that carefully managed change can make a positive contribution to the built environment of the town centre.

As well as ensuring heritage assets are protected, Historic England also acknowledges that the allocation of sites for development may present opportunities for the historic environment.

One of the key problems that the town centre faces has in fact emerged because of its heritage and the way in which it was developed. Its low-rise, low density buildings, although celebrated in terms of their historic significance, mean the town centre is lacking in landmark buildings and structures to aid legibility.

The separation of the heritage assets from the remainder of the town to the west, due to the location of the bus station, is also cited as a weakness of the conservation area at present⁵.

Large-scale regeneration provides the opportunity to resolve some of these issues, and to improve and enhance the function of the existing heritage assets. The relocation the bus station, and carefully alignment of future development, will enable easier access to and from Town Square, and new landmark buildings in key locations will not only aid legibility, but will also reflect and emphasise the historic significance importance of views being provided at the end of key vistas.

⁵ Town Square Conservation Area Management Plan SPD, 2012, SBC.

The regeneration and modernisation of the town centre, whilst still retaining its original character, is essential if the town centre is to retain its character as a retail area. Our evidence⁶ recognises that the economic decline of local businesses is a key threat to the conservation area. Delays to redevelopment will further the spiral of decline, as landowners remain uncertain about the future, and are reluctant to invest in their properties. Vacant units also have a negative impact on the character of the overall area.

In more general terms, previous work identifies that the conservation area is in a fair condition, but has not dated well. It has been neglected over the years, suffering from a lack of investment and general repair. The redevelopment of the town centre provides an opportunity to ensure the preservation and enhancement of its historic core by supporting coordinated public realm improvements. Development provides us with opportunities to gain developer contributions, which could be used to enhance existing features of the conservation area.

In terms of minimising the impacts of new development, the following general principles should ensure minimal impact on the heritage assets. These have been taken from the Conservation Area Management Plan and the Stevenage Central Framework:

- The Town Square should be retained as a public space. Any development within this area should enhance its function as such, and should not have a negative impact on the visual appearance of this square and its assets. Development within the conservation area should be limited to three storeys in height.
- Retention / re-provision of all buildings within the conservation area.
- Existing features, such as the original conservation area windows, canopies and shop frontages should be retained and improved, where possible.
- All original public art should be retained, as this reflects the distinctive character of the town centre.
- Landmark buildings at the end of vistas within the conservation area should be retained. Significant views towards The Church of Saint Andrew and Saint George and The Towers were an original part of the New Town design.
- The symmetry and linear layout of the original New Town should be echoed by establishing a sequence of public spaces and buildings, which guide visitors towards key destinations, both old and new.
- Any new development to the west of the Town Square should face onto the square and reflect the New Town design, matched with the best of contemporary architecture.
- Development directly adjacent to the conservation area should be mindful of its setting and should not dominate the Town Square, Queensway or Market Place in its massing.
- New landmark buildings, at gateway locations should be encouraged, to improve sense of place and legibility around the town centre.
- New development should be configured to define key spaces and create new vistas incorporating views of existing and new landmarks.
- New development should be responsive to existing architecture and should draw upon the neutral colour palette of existing buildings, unless the proposal provides something of exemplar design and will become a landmark feature of the town centre.

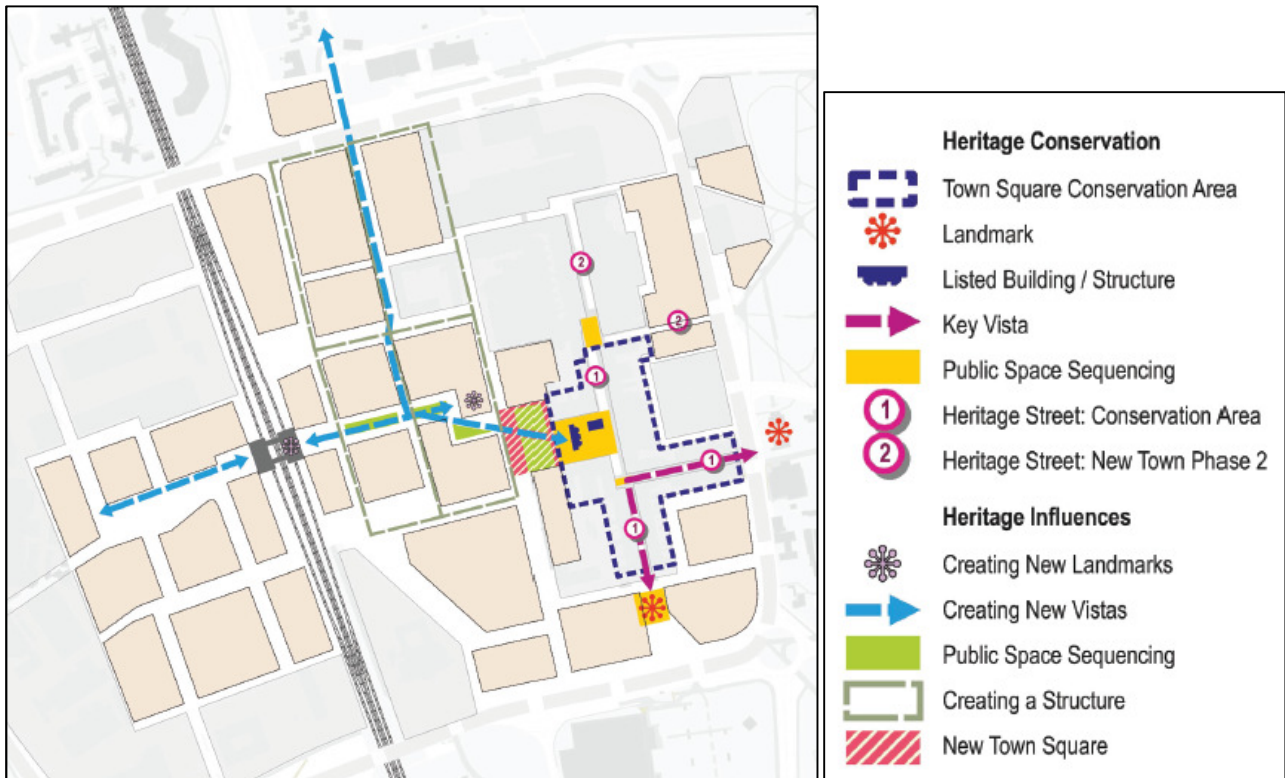
The majority of these general principles are reflected in the Heritage Plan of the Framework. In the 'Heritage Street 1' areas, a programme of repair and renewal is recommended, which could be aided through the use of developer contributions. In the 'Heritage Street 2' areas, new development should be influenced by important New Town features. Beyond this, the general development principles

⁶ Town Square Conservation Area Management Plan SPD, 2012, SBC.

above should be incorporated, where possible, and the impact on the conservation area should be considered throughout the development process.

The production of a more detailed Heritage Design Guide for the town centre is recommended by the Framework, to inform the wider regeneration plans.

Image 1: Stevenage Central Framework Heritage Plan



The draft Historic England advice note states that ‘site allocation policies are a positive feature of a Local Plan as they can highlight the specific criteria against which a development needs to be judged and thereby speed up the implementation process, providing clarity for a wide range of audiences’. The Local Plan should contain specific policies relating to the town centre, which set out the mitigation measures that will be required alongside any other site specific considerations.

STEP 5: Conclusion

This assessment recognises the importance of the Town Square Conservation Area as a significant heritage asset within the Borough. Redevelopment within the town centre is likely to occur outside of the conservation area, in the main, with development only potentially encroaching into it towards the western edge of Town Square.

The conservation area was originally designated as such to mark the significance of this area as the UK’s first pedestrianised town centre, and its significance in planning and architectural history.

Taking into account all of the evidence, it is considered that development within the Major Opportunity Areas, as identified by the Framework, could help to enhance the conservation area, whilst also retaining its key features and reflecting its unique architectural and historic attributes.

The redevelopment of this central area provides the only large-scale opportunity to make use of previously developed land to help meet our objectively assessed housing needs, thus providing the most sustainable location for residential growth. Alongside this it is essential to enhancing the economic and social status of the town, whilst also seeking to conserve the historic environment.

The assessment highlights the need for the redevelopment of the town centre in order to resolve the existing weaknesses of the conservation area (i.e. its separation caused by the bus station, lack of investment and repair over the years and lack of legibility), and in order to minimise potential threats (i.e. economic decline leading to further erosion of the assets and the loss of the retail function causing significant change to the area's character).

Improvement to the town centre, of this scale, would have huge positive impacts on the area as a whole, and would certainly have positive impacts on the conservation area.

However, it will be important to ensure that the historic assets are protected, and the character of the conservation area, and its setting, is not lost. The Framework recognises this in its Heritage Plan, and realises the need for further heritage assessment and design work to be completed prior to any specific development scheme being approved.

In order to further minimise any impact of such a scheme, the recommendations of this assessment will be reflected within the Local Plan.