

## Aylesbury town centre

- 4.191 Aylesbury is the county town of Buckinghamshire and has long been the focus of new development in the district and will continue to be the main location for growth in its role as a Garden Town. Investment and development both inside and beyond the town centre boundary will be necessary to meet the needs of the growing population of the Garden Town. Part of the vision for Aylesbury Garden Town is that by 2033, Aylesbury will have a thriving and revitalised town centre. It will have an enhanced environment, with shops, leisure facilities, open space, homes, businesses and services, built and designed to high standards, bringing renewal to the town and enhancing the attraction of the historic core.
- 4.192 Aylesbury is fortunate in having successfully retained its historic centre whilst accommodating significant modern developments. A major part of its attraction is the proximity of the "Old Town", centred around St. Mary's Church, to the main shopping area. Within the shopping area a number of historic buildings and frontages add to its distinctiveness and character.
- 4.193 Recent years have seen significant local authority investment in the town with the development of Aylesbury Waterside Theatre, Waitrose, Travelodge, a university campus and new parking. Further regeneration is planned as part of The Exchange scheme. The town is reasonably well represented by national retailers and has a major department store. The owners of the two shopping centres continue to invest in improving the interior environment and Friars Square, the larger centre has been particularly successful in attracting new brands and strengthening the town's fashion offer. However, in order to compete successfully within the sub-region, Aylesbury needs to overcome the current challenges it faces.

## The challenges

- 4.194 Increase in economic and political uncertainty – Nationally consumers have proved remarkably resilient since the Brexit vote and, despite the unprecedented backdrop, consumer spending has generally remained robust. However, with the prospect of rising inflation, the increasing reliance on consumer debt to support spending, and the lack of detail about the impact of Brexit, there is concern about consumer confidence and how this will affect spending patterns.

The outlook for retailers is also challenging. With rising costs, but consumer confidence uncertain, retailers are having to consider how much they can pass on to consumers. Retailers are likely to hold back on capital expenditure and employment particularly in towns of Aylesbury's size which are still working to establish themselves as a destination in their own right. This inevitably means that future aspirations for the town centre need to recognise that phased development within a vision framework will be the favoured approach.

- 4.195 Attractiveness and identity – like all town centres, there are areas of Aylesbury which haven't been improved for some time and consequently reflect negatively on the town. This affects both visitors' perception and those of potential new investors. The Aylesbury Town Centre Plan makes clear that future plans need to pay equal attention to these areas as well as the opportunities for new development.
- 4.196 A growing population – with Aylesbury remaining the main focus and a significant area for housing and employment growth in the district, further infrastructure including outer link roads to help reduce town centre congestion, as well as retail within and beyond the town centre, will need to continue to develop, simply to meet the needs of a growing and working population. However, timescales for new infrastructure can be long and Aylesbury will need to work hard to retain its consumer base.
- 4.197 Protecting existing investment – the success of existing assets and investments, whether private or public, depend on the whole visitor experience. Plans to deliver new shops, catering outlets and public realm improvements to support, for example, Aylesbury Waterside Theatre, have not

come forward as quickly as originally anticipated, largely due to the economic downturn and developers holding back on capital expenditure.

- 4.198 Competition and changing expectations – as well as people's changing expectations of their town centres, other growing trends are posing a threat to the traditional high street:
- 4.199 Out of town retailing – key retailers moving out of Aylesbury's town centre when their leases come up for renewal to capitalise on more modern units tailored to their requirements, and often cheaper rents and business rates, could have a major impact.
- 4.200 Competition from major supermarkets – that have made themselves more appealing to people with busy lifestyles by broadening their non-food retail offer and raising their game in sectors such as fashion by using leading designers.
- 4.201 Omnichannel shopping – this continues to be the single biggest impact on the shape of town centre retailing. The speed at which retailing has shifted online is putting strain on traditional business models, many of which are no longer fit for purpose. Many retailers are responding by rationalising their portfolio but also by developing a seamless omnichannel offer which includes a convenient click and collect offer for the consumer, and an opportunity for the retailer to capture secondary purchases through the collect visit.
- 4.202 Consumers making fewer, shorter trips to towns – preferring to make longer trips, less frequently, to bigger regional centres which offer the total day experience. Here shopping can be combined with a variety of leisure activities, whether dining or visiting the cinema. A two-hour drive is not considered unreasonable by today's consumers. The exception to this is food shopping, where the main shop trip size is getting smaller and the top-up trip size is getting bigger. This change is a result of the competition and people wanting to shop around from the big four supermarkets and the increase in the number of small convenience stores.
- 4.203 Leisure time is becoming more important – to people leading busy lives and as people make use of digital technology to make their purchases. This has resulted in a notable shift in consumerism towards the pursuit of experience over material goods. Shopping will no longer be the primary reason to visit a town centre. The opportunity to socialise in Aylesbury town centre will be key to its future success.
- 4.204 The proposed East-West Rail route – could attract visitors from the villages in between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. However, it will also make it easier and more attractive for them to go to MK from Winslow (a new station is due to open in the early 2020s) if Aylesbury does not succeed in improving its offer.
- 4.205 The rising popularity and enhancement – of other competing centres such as High Wycombe and Bicester town.

#### **Failure to capitalise on our catchment**

- 4.206 Aylesbury has a large potential catchment of 259,000 people within a 25 minute drive time<sup>23</sup>. Three-quarters of this catchment – well above the national average have a high quality lifestyle profile and are in the top three Acorn groups - affluent achievers, rising prosperity, and comfortable communities. The majority of Aylesbury's catchment are consumers with good levels of disposable income seeking good quality products and good quality shopping/leisure experiences. It's also a high spending catchment over-indexing vs GB average on almost all categories. Yet the town is failing to capitalise fully on its catchment profile because, while some are visiting the town centre for employment reasons or to use services such as banks, they

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<sup>23</sup> Aylesbury Town Centre Retail Capacity Update, December 2016

are not necessarily visiting in the numbers that could be achieved in terms of retail and other activities. Of those who are visiting, an insufficient number are spending their money in the town. So, unless Aylesbury improves its offer to give its catchment market what it is increasingly looking for, current leakage to neighbouring towns will continue.

### **Guiding principles and strategic aims for future development**

4.207 In seeking to enhance Aylesbury's role as county town and sub-regional shopping centre, the Council has developed and approved the Aylesbury Town Centre Plan (2014) which was prepared working closely with Aylesbury Town Council, Buckinghamshire County Council and other key stakeholders ranging from local community organisations to owners of the shopping centres and independent operators. The Town Centre Plan sets out seven guiding principles for the future development of Aylesbury town centre:

**Principle 1:** Positioning the town centre correctly by providing a complementary, credible experience to nearby centres such as Milton Keynes and Watford and being a 'best in class' sub-regional centre.

**Principle 2:** Being different, rather than a clone, but basing the town's unique selling point on reality. Aylesbury needs to distinguish itself from other town centres in the area, but in a way that is credible.

**Principle 3:** Offering what the 'market' is looking for to capitalise on our enviable catchment. Whilst there has been significant investment in the town centre in recent years by both the public and private sector, Aylesbury's retail offer is currently weighted towards the lower/mass market consumer, with a limited choice in terms of product categories, ranges and brands for the mid/upper market, discerning consumer.

When asked what would make people visit Aylesbury Town Centre more often, 'better quality shops' was the most common answer, followed by 'more independents, better department stores and more high street brands'<sup>24</sup>. An independent food and beverage assessment carried out by Coverpoint in 2014 also concludes that the town centre food and beverage sector needs more choice across all categories, but particularly in the family dining and mid-higher quality categories. This research was used to inform phase one of The Exchange scheme. However, with the continued growth in the food and beverage market, coupled with the housing growth planned for the Aylesbury area and the development of a residential community in the heart of the town itself, there is still significant unmet demand.

**Principle 4:** Encouraging social interaction. Whilst the retail experience is changing largely as a result of omnichannel retailing, visitors will still value a physical town centre outlet, particularly if it offers them opportunities to browse and spend time in an attractive environment and meet their friends and family. They will see the town centre as a place not just for shopping or business, but for social interaction in its widest sense and as a place in which to meet, relax and spend their leisure time. New improvement schemes need to recognise this by delivering, integrated mixed uses including housing and quality public space throughout the town to help connect the different areas.

**Principle 5:** Build community spirit. Social interaction is about inclusiveness and using space and facilities to help build a sense of togetherness as one community. We should aim to create a town which shows its community spirit through welcoming events and activities.

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<sup>24</sup> Postcode Plus Survey. July 2016

**Principle 6:** Take a connected, 'whole town' approach. The success of one area of the town should not be compromised by development in another and we must take a strategic approach to work such as green infrastructure and signage.

**Principle 7:** Appeal to all our different town centre users. We must make sure we're appealing to the whole of our potential catchment including families, young professionals, students, college and university leavers who are looking for their first jobs, empty nesters and older people.

4.208 The following strategic aims flow from the guiding principles, our vision for Aylesbury and the studies and strategies which arose from the recommendations from the previous Aylesbury Town Centre Masterplan work carried out by ARUP. They are cross-cutting, which means they have implications for the whole of the town, but the action plans in the Town Centre Plan show how they will apply to specific areas.

4.209 The strategic aims are grouped under two main headings, economic regeneration and physical regeneration:

### **Economic regeneration**

4.210 Provide a more balanced and attractive leisure, retail and food and beverage offer and circuit, which:

- helps transform the day, evening and weekend economy in Aylesbury and puts it on the map as a destination of choice
- matches the needs of all ages and communities and brings them together
- matches the needs of consumers from within our catchment (and beyond), business investors and operators, and
- builds on the legacy of London 2012.

### **Physical regeneration**

4.211 Create a high quality, connected and sustainable built, natural and transport environment which appeals to, and matches the needs of, all consumers and business investors within our catchment market and supports our leisure, retail and housing aspirations.

The vision

4.212 To enable Aylesbury to compete and succeed in the future we need to continue our work to reinvigorate the town centre. The Aylesbury Town Centre Plan contains the following vision for the town:

- To be a high profile, sub-regional centre for entertainment and the arts, which has added a distinctive edge to its market town heritage
- To be a distinctive, 'best in class', modern market town, which is attractive, safe, sustainable and accessible
- To provide a quality, day and evening environment in terms of leisure, retail and food and drink, which attracts and brings together people of all ages and communities from within its enviable catchment  
(Aylesbury Town Centre Plan, 2014)

4.213 There are a number of uses and activities that should be accommodated in the town centre including shopping, leisure, entertainment, employment, housing, worship and tourism. It is an objective of this Plan to accommodate these sometimes competing uses in a way which most benefits the whole of the town centre.

4.214 The Aylesbury Town Centre Plan reflects the advice in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) regarding town centres, which states that policies should support their viability and vitality and promote competitive town centres that provide customer choice and a diverse retail offer.

4.215 Action plans for areas in the Town Centre Plan are summarised below:

| <b>Area</b>   | <b>Action Plan main aim</b>  | <b>How VALP will help achieve</b>   |
|---|--|---|
| Market Square, Walton Street and Friars Square      | Make more of the area's presence as a key retail, catering and leisure hub   | Town centre policies to support proposals for retail and other main town centre uses, provided they are in accordance with the vision and aims for the town centre            |
| Kingsbury (including George Street and Pebble Lane) | Create a more attractive environment for residents, visitors and businesses and improve it as the gateway to the Old Town  | Town centre policies to support public realm improvements and improving the quality of the town centre  |
| Aylesbury Old Town (the historic quarter)           | Preserve and enhance this residential area as a key part of the town's heritage and culture offer and improve its links with the rest of the town centre, in keeping with its conservation area status   | Heritage assets policy to ensure these are properly considered when assessing development proposals   |
| Gateway South (railway and bus stations)            | Improve the railway and bus stations as key arrival points and improve their connection with the rest of the town centre   | Allocation of area for comprehensive redevelopment (as shown on the policies map) including co-locating the bus and railway stations to create a public transport interchange |
| Upper and middle High street                        | Create a more attractive retail environment (especially in middle High Street), improve connections between upper High Street and Exchange Street, ensure both upper and middle High Street are part of the retail circuit and flow with the rest of the town centre               | Town centre policies to support public realm improvements and improving the quality of the town centre, including improvements for pedestrian access                          |
| Cambridge Street, Buckingham Street and New Street  | Cambridge Street:<br>Improve the quality and attractiveness of the whole area, the continuity of active frontages along Cambridge Street and the appeal of Cambridge Street to independent shops.<br>Buckingham Street and New Street:<br>Improve the physical environment, reduce | Town centre policies to support proposals for retail, public realm improvements and improving the quality of the town centre, including improvements for pedestrian access    |

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|---|---|---|
|   | dominance of the car and integrate the area more fully into the rest of the town centre and the retail circuit  |   |
| Vale Park and the Grand Union canal (to Circus Fields)  | Capitalise on two of the town's key assets and connect them with the rest of the town centre and the wider countryside.   | One of the key elements of the Aylesbury Garden Town vision is that the town will have an accessible, sustainable and well managed green infrastructure network including improved linkages from the town to new communities and to the surrounding countryside |
| Waterside South (from Walton Street junction to Upper Hundreds including Exchange Street and lower High Street) | Break down the concrete barrier of the inner ring road and improve links and accessibility from the rest of the town centre to Aylesbury Waterside Theatre, Aqua Vale Leisure Centre, Vale Park and the retail parks          | Part of the site has already been redeveloped. The plan allocates an increased area for mixed-use redevelopment on a site between the Exchange Street car park and the Royal Mail sorting office  |
| Waterside North   | Develop the site in phases to enhance the retail, food and beverage and housing offer in the town centre, strengthen links and help rejuvenate neighbouring areas such as Market Square, Walton Street and middle High Street | Development underway. General policies to support appropriate development in the town centre  |

### **A place to shop**

4.216 In accordance with the NPPF, the principles of the settlement hierarchy, and recognising Aylesbury's role as a Garden Town, new shopping development should be concentrated at Aylesbury, and this development should be concentrated within or at the edge of the town centre. Aylesbury's town centre embraces a multitude of uses and activities including shops, homes, jobs, pubs and clubs, restaurants, leisure, sports and community facilities. The town centre is defined on the Policies Map and includes the area within the inner relief road, along with areas to the south which include Morrison's and the railway station, to the south-east including Aylesbury Waterside Theatre, Waitrose, and Vale Park and Aqua Vale Swimming and Fitness Centre to the east, and to the north-east including Aylesbury Shopping Park, B&Q and the Royal Mail sorting office. The town centre boundary is as identified in the Aylesbury Vale Retail Study 2015 Annex F and is shown on the Policies Map. Proposals for development within this area will be considered having regard to their town centre location.

### **New floor space requirements**

#### Comparison goods

4.217 As the population grows with the expansion of the town and within the wider district, there is a need for the town's shopping facilities to expand and improve in order to maintain Aylesbury's role as the main retail focus in Aylesbury Vale and as a sub-regional centre in the county. The Aylesbury Town Centre Retail Capacity Update was carried out in 2016. This concludes that

22,587sqm of comparison floor space<sup>25</sup> will be required by 2024, increasing to 29,289sqm by 2033.

- 4.218 New comparison retailing will be focused at Aylesbury as the main focus for shopping in the district, recognising its role as a Garden Town. This figure is not seen as a prescriptive target, but rather as an indicative guide to the amount of floor space that will be required in the Plan period.
- 4.219 It is essential to locate comparison shopping in such a way as to extend range and choice. The first priority is therefore to accommodate the additional floor space within the retail core of the town centre. The additional floor space will primarily be delivered by allocating a new site within the town centre for a mixed-use redevelopment.
- 4.220 Waterside North, a town centre site adjacent to Exchange Street, has been identified for a number of years as the location for the next phases of development and is currently under construction. The Phase one scheme will see the construction on part of the site, of up to four restaurants, with 47 apartments on three floors above and a new public square. It is due to be completed in 2018.
- 4.221 The provision of the additional retail floor space is expected to be included in future phases of development which will extend the site beyond Waterside North to the Royal Mail sorting office. This area is shown on the policies map. In addition to retail, these development phases should provide a mix of main town centre uses (and an element of residential) and fulfil the vision and strategic aims for the town centre as set out above. This should include an element of car parking to redress any shortfall from the loss of existing car parks as a result the next phase of town centre regeneration.
- 4.222 An Aylesbury parking strategy, due to be commissioned shortly, will set out the Council's aims regarding parking in the town, identify the amount the town centre needs and conclude where this should be located and in what form.
- 4.223 Within the town centre, the Council will view positively proposals for retail and other main town centre uses provided they contribute positively to improving the quality of the town centre and delivering the vision and aims set out above. The 2015 Retail Study concludes that qualitative improvements and investment will be needed to retain Aylesbury's credibility as a sub-regional centre and ensure that it can increasingly be seen as a place for social interaction. In particular, the development or redevelopment of smaller sites can lead to qualitative improvements in shopping facilities and can readily be accommodated within and enhance the town centre. Other proposals for town centre comparison goods shopping will be assessed against policy D6.

#### Convenience stores

- 4.224 Aylesbury is well served by convenience stores<sup>26</sup>, and the Retail Capacity Study Update 2016 concludes that convenience floorspace capacity in the short term (up to and beyond 2019) is sufficient to accommodate the known pipeline commitments plus some headroom. By 2024 the capacity floorspace moves to 2,970sqm rising to 5,260sqm by 2029 and 6,980sqm by 2033. Within the town centre, a scheme for external enhancements and an extension to the existing Sainsbury's store fronting Buckingham Street has been approved subject to a Section 106 planning obligation agreement. This is linked to the development of the larger, new Sainsbury's store which is proposed at Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury.

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<sup>25</sup> Comparison goods are defined in full in the glossary, but include items such as clothing and electrical items

<sup>26</sup> Convenience stores are defined in full in the glossary but include items such as food, beverages and newspapers



## Aylesbury transport hub

- 4.225 As part of the overall vision for the town and to ensure that the town remains accessible, an area known as the Aylesbury transport hub is allocated for comprehensive mixed use redevelopment, including co-locating the bus and railway stations to create a new public transport interchange. New residential units will be provided, along with public realm improvements, connectivity improvements to the rest of the town, new open space and other main town centre uses including a hotel.

### **D7 Town centre redevelopment**

The starting point for identifying sites in the town centre is the Aylesbury Town Centre Plan (2014). The Policies Map identifies a site between the Exchange Street car park and the Royal Mail sorting office (including Hampden House and Upper Hundreds car park) for mixed-use redevelopment based principally on retail uses with an element of residential and other town centre uses at an appropriate scale and location. The redevelopment scheme(s) must make adequate provision for car parking in accordance with the Council's car parking strategy. Development proposals must contribute positively to meeting the vision and strategic aims for the town centre. Details of retail floorspace provision are set out in Policy D6.

Aylesbury town centre and the primary shopping frontages are defined on the Policies Map (see Policy E2). Informed by the aims and objectives of the Aylesbury Town Centre Plan, and the evidence in the retail studies identifying a continuing need to improve and invest in Aylesbury town centre, qualitative redevelopment in the town centre will be supported and encouraged.

The policies map also identifies an area for the Aylesbury transport hub. This area is allocated for comprehensive mixed use redevelopment including co-locating the bus and railway stations to create a new public transport interchange, provision of new residential units, public realm improvements, connectivity improvements to the rest of the town, new open space and other main town centre uses including a new hotel and the relocation of the superstore. Friarage Road may need to be rerouted to accommodate the new development.

### **D8 Aylesbury town centre**

Elsewhere in the town centre, proposals for retail and other main town centre uses will be supported to reflect Aylesbury's status as Garden Town and the opportunities this will bring. Proposals should contribute positively to improving the quality of the town centre and delivering the vision and strategic aims for the town centre set out above and in accordance with the latest published town centre plan. Proposals should have particular regard to enhancements to the built environment, improvements for pedestrian access and environmental enhancements to the public realm.

### **A place to live**

- 4.226 Residential uses in Aylesbury town centre are mainly concentrated in the 'Old Town' area around St. Mary's Church, extending along Church Street and Parsons Fee to Castle Street and Rickfords Hill and north from the church along Nelson Terrace, Granville Street and Ripon Street, and to the south-west of the town in the Friarscroft area.
- 4.227 It is important to ensure that the residential role of the town centre is not lost to ensure that Aylesbury continues and enhances its role as a vibrant and thriving town providing opportunities for social interaction. Providing more housing within and close to the town centre will help meet this aim. More housing in the town centre is sustainable; it will provide greater choice, a better balance of uses, accommodation for those who wish to be less reliant on the car, and increased activity outside peak periods. It will help provide a more attractive and safer



town centre environment and add positively to the quality of the centre's urban fabric. A number of sites within Aylesbury town centre are identified as being suitable or part-suitable for housing development in the Housing and Economic Development Land Availability Assessment, and three of these are to be allocated for housing. These sites are identified on the Policies Map. Two further sites in the town centre are identified as part-suitable for housing (Royal Mail sorting office and Hampden House). These form part of the site for town centre redevelopment identified above and are covered by policy D7.

4.228 Due to the change in permitted development rights, the Council has seen an increase in the number of offices that have been converted to flats. It is anticipated that the recent increase in residential development in Aylesbury town centre will continue, not only by the conversion of employment to residential, but also the use of the upper floors above shops, which can be particularly suitable for conversion to flats.

### **D9 Housing in Aylesbury town centre**

The Council will support proposals for residential development in Aylesbury town centre that are consistent with the above vision and aims, in the following locations:

- a. use of upper floors above shops
- b. conversion of vacant or underused employment buildings
- c. as subsidiary parts of (re)development and other mixed use developments provided that this is of an appropriate scale and is in accordance with other policies in this Plan

### **A place of leisure and entertainment**

4.229 Aylesbury town centre (which includes Vale Park, the canal basin and Aqua Vale Swimming and Fitness Centre) provides the focus for much of the town's leisure needs, and also serves a much wider catchment. The town centre also provides entertainment facilities such as the Waterside Theatre, a cinema complex, parks, restaurants, bars and nightclubs. The Council recognises the essential role of such facilities in the town centre and will resist proposals that would result in the erosion of community facilities and services as set out in policy I3.

