

RSB/JC

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Dear Mr Evans

Shropshire Site Allocations & Management of Development Plan

Thank you for inviting Ignis Asset Management and Shearer Property Group, on behalf of UKCPT, to comment on the Shropshire Site Allocations & Management of Development (SAMDev) Plan for Shrewsbury.

The Site Allocations and Development Management (SAMDev) Plan sets out proposals for the use of land and policies to guide future development in order to help to deliver the Vision and Objectives of the Core Strategy for the period up to 2026. It covers the whole of the administrative area of Shropshire Council (it excludes Telford & Wrekin).

Following Shropshire Council's consultation on the soundness of the Pre-Submission Draft version of the SAMDev Plan, it is now moving towards an Examination to be held later this year.

The adopted Core Strategy and the NPPF seek to direct large scale retail development to the town centres. Regeneration of the Riverside area of Shrewsbury is specifically referenced as a development priority within the adopted and emerging development plan documents.

We understand that the Council has received a representation from the owner of Meole Brace Retail Park, seeking to challenge the likelihood of New Riverside coming forward and the need for an alternative solution to meet the retail needs of the district up until 2026. Meole Brace Retail Park lies 1.3 miles away from the town centre and comprises 25,084 sq m of comparison and convenience retail in approx. 16 units, including a number of town centre retailers such as Next (who have recently doubled the size of their representation on the park), Boots and TK Maxx (who relocated from the Darwin Centre).

Policy Position

The amount of development in Shropshire up to 2026 is already established by the Core Strategy. The aim of the SAMDev Plan is to set out further detailed policies for the management of new development across Shropshire to complement the policies already adopted in the Shropshire Core Strategy, and to provide a greater level of detail on a number of planning issues.

On this basis, the suggestion that Meole Brace should be allocated as an alternative location for major retail development in this document would be a major departure from the Core Strategy. An Inspector will test the soundness of the SAMDev Plan at Examination later this year. In order to be sound, the Plan should be justified, effective and consistent with national policy. The promotion of any alternative retail spatial strategy at this stage would seriously undermine the soundness of the SAMDev Plan in terms of its effectiveness.

We would strongly urge the Council to maintain its position on town centre first strategy and, if necessary, prepare a Retail Topic Paper to update previous retail work to ensure the evidence base is robust. If any changes are made to policy at this stage, all of the retail assumptions and strategy which underpin the existing and emerging local plans in Shrewsbury will be critically undermined. Any review of this spatial strategy in advance of a full plan review would be premature.

Retail Capacity

There are already a number of extant retail planning permissions in the pipeline or recently delivered (White Young Green (WYG) Study update 2012). WYG suggest there is no requirement to plan for additional convenience floorspace through the allocation of additional out of town sites. In terms of comparison floorspace, WYG confirm that there is no requirement for additional floorspace until after 2021. This does not include the extant planning permission for New Riverside which constitutes committed development. This represents an opportunity to make a step change in the retail offer in Shrewsbury town centre, enhance the viability and vitality of the town centre and claw back leaking expenditure to Telford. This leakage will only increase with the extension of Telford Shopping Centre, which is likely to take place in the next five years.

On this basis, any policy support for Meole Brace or other retail parks in the context of limited capacity for comparison and convenience floorspace over the next 10 years would directly impact on the interest of any potential tenants for New Riverside. This loss in turn has adverse implications for the vitality and viability of the town centre.

New Riverside Opportunity

New Riverside represents the key medium to long term opportunity to provide modern retail accommodation catering for major high street multiple retailers in Shrewsbury town centre. This addresses an important element in protecting the future health of the town centre. The delivery of a successful scheme is therefore vital in safeguarding the vitality of the centre. As evidenced in the supporting information for the New Riverside planning application, the scheme is in the unique position to complement rather than compete with the existing independent retailers.

However, delivery of town centre schemes takes time and substantial financial commitment. That need for certainty cannot be undermined by weakening the policy position to allow alternative out of town retail to expand which will threaten not only the scheme but the vitality and viability of the wider Shrewsbury town centre.

Significant progress is being made towards the delivery of New Riverside. Achieving planning permission in 2012 represented a significant milestone and commitment of private and public sector resources. The parties are working to find a solution to deliver New Riverside. The economy has been through a difficult time but is now improving, and, in particular, the retail market is improving. As a result, retailer interest is increasing.

Our pre-let to Debenhams remains in place and we are moving towards a programme that would see New Riverside opening in the next 5 yrs. In the meantime, we are undertaking the refurbishment of the Pride Hill Centre and are planning a comprehensive refurbishment and reconfiguration of the Charles Darwin Centre which represents significant capital expenditure. We have secured a number of new lettings in both centres, including HMV, Hotter Shoes, Rymans, Roman Originals, Blue Inc. Poundworld and negotiations continue with a number of other retailers.

The objective of the scheme is to deliver the regeneration of a key part of Shrewsbury town centre through retail led regeneration to secure and enhance Shrewsbury as a vital and viable town centre. Whilst retail development at Meole Brace and other out of centre locations in the district will assist in stemming leakage to other centres like Telford, it is significantly detrimental to the draw of the town centre and the ability for consumers to undertake linked trips in a location highly accessible to public transport, services and of course comparison retail.

Meole Brace does not provide the opportunity for linked trips with the town centre, operating completely separately. It is also close to the A5 and A5112, thereby encouraging car borne traffic. It is clear that the objectives of New Riverside to revitalise and enhance Shrewsbury town centre will be seriously undermined by elevating the position of out of centre retailing and this would be a significant impact on the planned investment in the centre and, importantly, local consumer choice and trade.

Summary

Ignis, on behalf of UK CPT and Shearer Property Group are committed to the regeneration of New Riverside. The scheme offers the opportunity for a major 'step-change' to the quality of facilities in Shrewsbury and will provide a major contribution to the future vitality and viability of the town centre. Significantly therefore, the scheme will help to protect the future prosperity of this key county town in the West Midlands.

The scheme also represents a key aspiration of Shropshire Council. It is the largest planned scheme for Shrewsbury and has the potential to regenerate and revitalise the town centre which has experienced problems in the last decade in significant part due to competition from out of centre retail developments.

Any relaxation of the planning rules will completely undermine the prospects of delivery of New Riverside. It will mean that the project is no longer viable and the major benefits that it would have brought for the vitality and viability of Shrewsbury will be lost for the next decade at least. The national planning system caters well for addressing retail proposals at Meole Brace. In order to protect the town centre, planning policy for out of town retail should not be strengthened at a local level in any way.

Yours sincerely

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c.c. Keith Barrow, Shropshire Council Leader
Daniel Kawczynski MP
Alan Mosley, Shrewsbury Town Council Leader