

LAND AT SWALE WAY, EAST HALL FARM, SITTINGBOURNE, KENT

STATEMENT RE: SHOP USE AT EAST HALL FARM (GREAT EASTHALL)

COMMERCIAL SHOP USE

Marketing for a commercial shop (or shops)

A Marketing Statement has been submitted with the application which notes that the application site was previously owned by a specialist neighbourhood centre developer who were pursuing proposals for a neighbourhood centre on the site (including shops), who prepared detailed designs for this use, and submitted a reserved matters application, which was approved. As part of this scheme they would have pursued potential retail operators for units on the site. Unfortunately this did not come to anything, after about 9 to 10 years of trying, and the developers went into liquidation when their bank stepped in.

More recently, in 2015, before the site was acquired, it was advertised for sale and was marketed very widely at a national and local level for sale at auction. The advertisements and marketing material made it clear that the site benefitted from a lapsed planning permission for a supermarket, 9 retail units, flats, and a public house. Retailers would have been fully aware of the site and none came forward to buy the site.

Viability assessment for a commercial shop (or shops)

A Viability Assessment has been carried out by Alsop Verrill, which is submitted with the application, which concludes that it is most unlikely that anyone would invest in or operate a neighbourhood centre or a commercial retail shop in this location. This conclusion has subsequently been confirmed by a major national retailer. The main reasons given for this view are the insufficient catchment area, and a compromised location at the end of a cul-de-sac with limited passing trade.

Officers have offered no response, or counter arguments, to the validity of the conclusions set out in this assessment.

Conclusion

It has been concluded that a commercial shop would not be viable in this location, and that there is no market interest from retailers in pursuing a shop in this location. A commercial shop would therefore be very unlikely to be realised in the foreseeable future.

In reaching this conclusion it is noted that the retail world has changed out of all recognition since the original outline permission was given for a mixed use development, including retail use, in 2004. There is also much less certainty now over the future of the Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road, and when, or if, it will ever be built, which has a significant effect on the catchment area and the amount of passing trade a shop would have.

COMMUNITY SHOP

Following this conclusion discussions have taken place between officers and Trenport and consideration has been given to what options there might be for providing a retail facility at East Hall Farm and what assistance Trenport might be able to give towards such a facility.

It has been concluded that the only realistic way of providing a neighbourhood retail facility for residents of East Hall Farm would be for a community shop and for this to be located next to the new Community Centre, which is under construction. In this location it would complement the Community Centre and be able to share car parking facilities (and vice versa). The two uses (Community Centre and shop) would also help to create a stronger community focus for the area.

In consultation with officers, a possible location has been identified for a free standing building adjacent to the Community Centre which could potentially accommodate a community shop, although further consideration would need to be given to whether the shop could /should be attached to the Community Centre or should be a free standing building.

Trenport's offer of assistance

Trenport is supportive of the idea and has offered to assist with providing the community shop, which would have a full time manager but would be mainly run by the community on a voluntary basis.

Trenport has offered to fund the community shop, with a contribution of £180,000, which would be sufficient for:

- Construction and fitting out of a building of 600sqft, including backroom / storage area / staff area (including related professional fees)
- Funding for a full time manger's salary for 2 years (depending on salary)
- Providing 4 additional car parking spaces, which could be shared with the community hall (and vice versa)

The payment is included in the draft Section 106 obligation, and allows, if necessary, for up to £30,000 of this money to be diverted to an improvement to the community centre, in the event that the shop does not proceed. It also allows for the building (or extension), once it is built, to revert to the Borough Council (or management organisation) for use for community uses associated with the community centre, in the event that a community shop does not succeed.

CONCLUSION

A commercial shop would be not be viable in this location, which is confirmed by the lack of retail interest in providing a shop here, including confirmation from a major national retailer. In the circumstances Trenport has agreed to assist with providing a community shop next to the new Community Hall, by providing the funding for a purpose built building and additional car parking, fitting out, and providing a full time a manager for circa two years. Hopefully, the community will support the shop and it will prove to be a viable and successful enterprise and will continue beyond this period.