

2.5 CONSTRAINTS

There are a number of constraints that will influence the growth and expansion of the town centre. The three most obvious physical constraints are the ring road, the river and its flood plain, and the railway lines. There are however other constraints that need to be considered, notably land ownership and the historic environment.

Ring road

The ring road in its current configuration and one-way movement pattern is a major constraint on the town centre. Its design is devoted to the movement of high volumes of motor vehicles, sacrificing other modal movements. It creates a collar that restricts the growth of the town centre, hinders pedestrian and cyclists, discourages movement along its perimeter and blocks natural and direct routes. Width, traffic flow and speed even discourage the use of designated crossing points. Air quality is poor, noise levels are high and the public realm is unattractive. The ring road creates a negative image for the town due its 'barrier' effect by discouraging interface with the attractive town centre core. Its impact in severing the station from the town centre is particularly serious. It is essential that traffic movement is reorganised, that pedestrians and cyclists are given equal status with motor vehicles and that that future development achieves a high quality townscape and properly addresses the street.

Flood plain

The flood plain creates severance between communities throughout the greater Ashford area. The adjacent diagram indicates the areas of undefended and defended floodplain areas near the town centre. Development is discouraged on both designated areas of the floodplain and will therefore influence the type, scale and position of development on the opportunity sites that lie within these zones. The Environment Agency are carrying out further modelling to establish a revised flood plain boundary based on climate change predictions. This will be taken into account in the work on the Victoria Way corridor.

Rail lines

The rail lines separate the town centre core from the opportunity sites and residential areas to the south. The construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link has increased the width of the rail line corridor. Beaver Bridge Road provides the only primary vehicular connection across within the town centre. Pedestrian connections are provided under the lines along the river and over at the Bank Street footbridge connecting to Victoria Park. Other connections are well outside the town centre. The severance created by the rail lines highlights the importance of improving the International Arrivals area and its linkages with the town centre, and also the need for improving the access to the land to the south of the railway, for example through the Learning Link Bridge, which is dealt with later in the Framework.

Land ownership

Land ownership is potentially a constraint on town centre expansion. Achieving the scale of infrastructure and land use planning envisaged in the Framework will require the assembly of land into comprehensive parcels. There are numbers of vacant and under-used sites in key locations which act as a constraint on growth. Vacant sites and buildings in and around the town centre contribute to the poor quality environment, create gaps in building frontage and urban fabric, and can potentially reduce the attractiveness of the town for potential investors. If major sites in the town centre lie vacant or under-utilised this suggests a lack of interest and confidence in the property market, the council and the community to improve the town. This syndrome drives down values and reduces the chances of inward investment. On the other hand, the sheer number of vacant sites near the town centre can equally be regarded as a major opportunity. One of the tasks of this Development Framework, and subsequent work, including public sector investment decisions, is to alter the perception of Ashford and drive up investment confidence in the town. Whilst the Development Framework will guide private sector development decisions on individual sites, many of the larger areas beyond the ring road will require land assembly led by the public sector. Further studies on land assembly strategies are currently underway as this document is prepared.

The historic environment

Whilst the development plan does not identify any of the town centre as being an area of archaeological importance, the archaeology of the town may constrain development in the town centre on specific sites. Sites closest to the High Street, North Street and around St. Mary's Churchyard are likely to be the most archeologically significant areas although there may be may others. Vicarage Lane car park has been identified as being potentially archaeologically sensitive. Archeological surveys may be required on a number of sites as and when they come forward for development.

The town centre has a number of listed buildings and contains a conservation area. The integrity, character, appearance and setting of both the listed buildings and the conservation area will have to be taken into account in any future development and infrastructure schemes and where proposals arise for the re-use of larger listed structures.