

2.6 OPPORTUNITIES

The growth strategy in the Greater Ashford Development Framework provides the opportunity for the town centre to draw in many more people and greatly improve its overall attractiveness and competitive position in the region. It is a great opportunity that is planned for at strategic and local levels and is politically supported. There are many opportunities for the growth and expansion of retail, commercial, leisure and residential provision in the town centre.

Available development land

The diagram opposite indicates a number of potential development sites in the town centre. They have been identified as either local plan allocation sites or potential development opportunity sites. Taken together they account for nearly 100 hectares of land. Many towns have their vacant and under-used sites and buildings, but in Ashford their location and extensive and often contiguous area presents a massive, perhaps unique, opportunity to expand and re-structure the town centre. Through sensitive and high quality mixed-use development, the town can achieve fundamental transformation from a small local market town to a thriving and vibrant town with a strong retail offer, office sector and evening economy. Some sites are already being brought forward for development, including the County Square extension incorporating Debenhams, and the re-modelled Stour Centre. Both are scheduled for completion in 2007, creating a momentum for development in the Town.

The opportunity to create great streets

The ring road in its current form is a major constraint to town centre expansion, but many of the best development opportunities lie on or adjacent to it. Downgrading the ring road to a two-way 'urban street' will create an improved street frontage for new and existing development and will knit the road into the town centre street pattern in a more natural way. This will lead to the reduction of traffic speeds and encourage walking and cycling. The introduction of planting and street trees and high quality pavements will improve the environment and public realm and create an overall more attractive pedestrian environment. These environmental improvements have the potential to transform the ring road to an urban street, which will change the overall perception of the road, create the right conditions for quality new adjacent development and raise values.

The river valley

The river valley is an enormous asset and offers opportunities to bring the natural environment into the town centre. The spaces where the floodplain restricts building can operate as green seams to provide public spaces, recreation areas and wildlife habitats. The floodplain should act as a green foil, a leafy backdrop to what will become a highly urbanised town centre. It will also provide the space to create safe and attractive pedestrian and cycle routes between the quarters of the town centre and its urban hinterland.

The historic environment

The well preserved historic form and a wealth of historic buildings provides Ashford with a strong image upon which to build a thriving town centre. The High Street and the area around St Mary's Churchyard provide a unique and beautiful record of where the town began. Much can also be learnt from the successful buildings and spaces that were created, and the grain and scale of the historic core provides a valuable guide to inform future development. Many of the basic principles of good urban design – enclosure, scale, grain (the size and proximity of plots and frontages), density, legibility (how easy and obvious it is to navigate around), permeability (whether all parts of the centre can be easily reached) – can all be found in the historic core of the town, whilst they are noticeably absent in much of the later 20th Century development that now constrains the historic core. Comparable examples from across Europe such as Aix-en-Provence in France, or Malmo, Sweden, demonstrate the importance of celebrating and learning from the historic form in the process of growth and change.