The front façade of the Royal Victoria Hall and Southborough Town Council’s offices
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Ridgewaye Playing fields and the former Ridgewaye School buildings
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The brief

Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners was commissioned by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, working in partnership with Southborough Town Council and Kent County Council, to prepare a series of development options for the Southborough Hub site.

The site is the subject of a specific allocation in the emerging Tunbridge Wells Site Allocation Document, and this options study provides an opportunity to review and test the viability and deliverability of this allocation.

The commission encompasses the following work stages:

• Initially liaise directly with an agreed list of key local stakeholders who have a direct interest in the site;
• Develop design options for the entire Southborough Hub site in the context of an emerging planning policy position;
• Test the options with local stakeholders and the wider local community through engagement; and
• Work in partnership with commercial property advisors Knight Frank to test the options at a high level in terms of their development viability.

1.2 The opportunity

The Southborough Hub site presents a unique opportunity to provide new community facilities, homes and improved parking. Southborough Town Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council are committed to working together to provide the best possible facilities for local people in the heart of Southborough. The development could potentially provide:

• New public space at the heart of Southborough;
• A range of flexible community spaces;
• A new library;
• A fit-for-purpose performance space;
• Improved changing rooms and other facilities for sports clubs;
• A mix of new homes;
• Small town centre retail units;
• Better car parking and traffic circulation around the site; and
• A pedestrian route between London Road and The Ridgeway.

The purpose of the options study is to test how new development could be accommodated on the Southborough Hub site. As such, all of the options are indicative and intended to demonstrate what could be achieved in the context of the site’s constraints, rather than to present finalised proposals. Any final proposals would result from further refinement of the designs and consultation with stakeholders and members of the public, prior to the submission of a planning application.
Aerial view of the Southborough site, showing the Policy AL/SO 2 boundary.

Image © 2013 Getmapping plc
1.3 Policy context

The principle of the site’s development, as well as the mix and quantum of appropriate uses, are set out in local planning policy, in particular emerging Site Allocations Policy AL/SO 2. Other local and national planning policies, including the National Planning Policy Framework are also relevant.

Local Plan

Policy CR6 designates the site for a mix of uses including a 1,400-2,000 sq m (gross) supermarket, new homes, a primary school, a community building, a multi-use all-weather surface area, a children’s play space and a public car park.

Policy CR6 is extant, but in the process of being superseded by the adopted Core Strategy and the emerging Site Allocations Development Plan Document (DPD). Moreover, the need for additional comparison retail floorspace in Southborough, as most recently assessed in the Council’s 2011 Retail and Leisure Study, has been met elsewhere in the locality through other developments.

Some small areas of the Southborough Hub site are protected as areas of landscape importance (Policy EN22), as is a substantial part of the Southborough Library site. However, other than this, the currently open areas of the Southborough Hub site are not protected through any Local Plan designations. Policy TP22 requires the retention of the Yew Tree Road car park, unless a suitable alternative is identified.

Core Strategy

Policy 10 provides strategic guidance for development in the Borough, including targets for additional dwellings and comparison floorspace, and a requirement for the provision of affordable housing on sites capable of accommodating 10 or more residential units.

The same policy also provides the basis for a mixed-use town centre development in Southborough, comprising retail, commercial and community facilities.

Site Allocations

Policy AL/SO 2 proposes a mixed-use allocation for the Southborough Hub site, including:

- Approximately 25 residential units
- 1,000 sq m (gross) for community uses
- 1,000 sq m (gross) for comparison retail uses
- 1,500 sq m (gross) for assembly and leisure uses
- Approximately 66 public car parking spaces

The policy sets a number of requirements for new development, including pedestrian and green infrastructure links across the site, as positive interaction with the area of designated open space immediately adjoining the site to the north and active frontages onto London Road for retail development. It also requires that Tunbridge Wells Borough Council works with stakeholders to produce a masterplan for the site.

The options set out in this report seek to build on Policy AL/SO 2 through a detailed consideration of site capacity and potential development layout.

Policy AL/SO 1 allocates the Southborough Library site for the development of approximately 10 dwellings, on the key condition that the Library service is relocated to another convenient town centre site.

The Site Allocations DPD is yet to be adopted, but the process of its preparation is well advanced and it has been the subject of formal public consultation. The
The Royal Victoria Hall before its original front facade was replaced in the 1970s
Image courtesy Southborough Society
purpose of this study is to refine the requirements of Policy AL/SO 2 prior to adoption, through the testing of development scenarios for the Southborough Hub site.

Supplementary Planning Documents

The Council has a number of adopted Supplementary Planning Documents. Those dealing with Affordable Housing, Recreation Open Space and Renewable Energy are particularly relevant.

Evidence base

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council’s planning policy evidence base is also relevant. In particular, it should be noted that an update to the Retail and Leisure Study was commissioned in September 2013. The outcome of this update could have an impact on how much space is allocated for retail and assembly and leisure uses through Site Allocations Policy AL/SO 2.

1.4 Site history

The Southborough Hub site has a long history of hosting community uses that stretches back to the Victorian era.

The Royal Victoria Hall was the first municipal theatre built in England, opening in 1900 to commemorate Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. The majority of the funds required to build the Hall were donated by local landowner Sir David Lionel Salomons, with the intention of making affordable theatre available to the community.

The Royal Victoria Hall has been adapted and has evolved over time, most notably, with the addition of a modern extension at its rear and major changes to its front façade in the 1970s. It is also notable that it has been utilised as a flexible space in the past, such as during the First World War, when it was used as accommodation for convalescents.

Elsewhere the site was previously home to the Ridgewaye School. The school was closed in the early 1990s, and, whilst two of the former school buildings remain in situ, much of this site was redeveloped for housing.

Following the closure of the school there have been proposals for the redevelopment of the Southborough Hub site; most recently Tesco was promoting a large supermarket. This option was found to be unsuitable and since this time work has been carried out to find a development option that will deliver a range of benefits to the community.
2. SITE-WIDE ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

2.1 Land ownership

The Southborough Hub site’s ownership is currently split between a number of public and private sector organisations. These are:

- Southborough Town Council, which owns the Royal Victoria Hall and most of the playing fields;
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, which owns the Town Council’s offices, land around the Hall, the public conveniences and the Yew Tree Road car park;
- Kent County Council, which owns the former school buildings, access to the site and surrounding land;
- Tesco, which retains ownership over a small parcel of land to the front of the site; and
- Lloyds Bank, which owns the garden area behind its London Road branch.

The plan opposite shows ownership boundaries across the site.

2.2 Existing uses

The Royal Victoria Hall continues to be used as a venue for a wide variety of theatre and dance events, including pantomimes. It currently has a total seating capacity of just over 350, as well as ancillary facilities such as a bar and dressing rooms. Removable seating in the auditorium means that it can be used for a range of activities.

The land around the Royal Victoria Hall, including the adjoining building, acts as Southborough Town Council’s offices, storage facility and works depot.

The remaining former school buildings are currently used by local community groups, as headquarters and changing facilities for a large youth and ladies football club and classrooms and workshops for a community interest company that provides vocational training to young adults with learning disabilities.

The playing fields that were previously associated with the school are enjoyed by many, including a number of local football clubs.

2.3 Site specific issues and opportunities

The site has a number of clear constraints owing to its character, shape, size and position in the heart of Southborough town centre, as well as other neighbouring sites. An analysis of these constraints has helped to establish a series of clear opportunities for development.
A - Important trees
There are a number of important trees located on the Southborough Hub site. These have an important environmental and amenity value and a number are subject to TPOs.

B - Pedestrian route
The pedestrian route from London Road to the Ridgewaye playing fields is currently poor. The main route is along an alley besides the public conveniences. This route could be strengthened and made more legible, with improved lighting, boundary treatment and signage.

C - Vehicular route
There is scope for a vehicular route through the site that would link The Ridgewaye, which is currently a cul-de-sac, and Yew Tree Road, via the existing car park site. There is potential for various highway management measures that would control how vehicles use this route.

D - London Road Frontage
The site has a short frontage with London Road, which is in the heart of the town centre and an appropriate location for commercial, community and leisure uses. The Royal Victoria Hall currently takes up a section of this frontage, but the other part of it is currently unoccupied.

E - Ridgewaye playing fields
A large part of the rear of the site fronts onto the Ridgewaye playing fields. Any development that takes place in this location should address the playing fields and celebrate attractive views to the north. Residential development would be suitable in this location.

F - Fronts and backs
The houses on the north side of Credon Park have established fronts and backs, with the rear of these properties facing onto the existing green, open space. Any new development should respect this existing site layout; if housing is built on the green, open space the backs of new properties should address the backs of properties on Credon Park.

G - Appropriate uses
The nature of the site means that its different sections are particularly suitable for certain uses. The top north west corner is best suited to community and leisure uses, due to its presence on London Road and ability to accommodate larger buildings. Commercial uses would also be best located on London Road. The rest of the site is more suitable for housing, being relatively constrained, located away from the town centre’s main frontage and adjacent to green, open space and other residential uses.

H - Car parking
The site’s existing public car park is located close to Yew Tree Road. There is potential for more efficient use of the site to be made through the relocation of public car parking spaces alongside the Ridgewaye playing fields.

I - Wider context
The site is located on London Road, which is Southborough’s retail spine. The west side of London Road has a strong retail frontage, whilst the east side is a series of discrete events, including the Royal Victoria Hall.

One of Southborough’s most significant issues is the traffic congestion that is focused on the junction of London Road with Yew Tree Road.
3. DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS

Three development options were prepared for the Southborough Hub site. Each of these sought to present a design solution to the site specific issues and opportunities that would address the requirements of emerging Site Allocations Policy AL/SO 2. The main difference between the three options is how the future of the Royal Victoria Hall’s physical fabric is resolved:

- Option A would retain and refurbish the entire Hall and include some new, linked community facilities;
- Option B would retain and refurbish the main part of the Hall, including the auditorium, but the remainder of the Hall would be demolished and redeveloped to include improved front and back of house accommodation and some new, linked community facilities;
- Option C would demolish and redevelop the entire Hall to build a new community hub with some new, linked community facilities.

In each option the Southborough Library is integrated within the Community Hub building. The existing Library site would then be free for alternative development pursuant to Policy AL/SO 1.

3.1 Design evolution

The design of the options has taken into account the context of the site and carefully considered how the planned new development would integrate with its surroundings.

The starting point for designing the layout of the site was deciding where the community hub should be located. The Royal Victoria Hall is currently located in the north west corner of the site. This location has a frontage with London Road and a building here would be prominent and not interfere with vehicular or pedestrian circulation around the site. As such, as well as being the current location of the Royal Victoria Hall, it is considered an ideal location for a new community hub or any additional community facilities.

The site’s short frontage with London Road is also the best location for any retail or other commercial uses, whilst other parts of the site are more appropriate for housing, given their shape, orientation and proximity to existing residential development and green, open space.

Sketches 1 and 2 show community facilities in the north west corner of the site, with adjacent public space and new pavilion buildings. Both sketches also show commercial space along the site’s western edge, fronting London Road and housing elsewhere.

Sketch 3 is a more evolved version of the same design. It still shows community facilities in the north west corner, but clusters additional accommodation around the current location of the Royal Victoria Hall, instead of a pavilion building. This is a more efficient use of the site, which also allows a more relaxed curve in the vehicular route linking Yew Tree Road and The Ridgewaye. Sketch 3 forms the basis for the options.

The preparation of development options effectively tested the requirements outlined in Policy AL/SO 2 and as design work progressed it became clear that these could benefit from review. In particular, it was found that the site would be able to accommodate more residential units and less retail floorspace than required by the Policy.
3.2 Option A - repair and renewal

This option explores how the Hall could be retained and improved in its current form, with funding for these improvements coming from new residential development on other parts of the site.

Key components of this option include:
- Retained and improved Royal Victoria Hall building - to provide expanded and more flexible accommodation
- New public library facility along London Road frontage
- New community facilities linked with use and maintenance of open space
- Refurbished Town Council offices
- Adjacent retail uses with flats above
- Family housing with views of open space
- Mix of smaller houses and cottages across tighter parts of the site
- Replacement public parking along new edge to Ridgewaye Fields

Option A (repair and renewal):
- 51 houses and flats
- c. 300 sq m retail
- c. 500 sq m office
- c. 1,200 sq m community
- c. 1,600 sq m assembly and leisure
3.3 Option B - part refurbish, part redevelop

This option explores how the main part of the Hall could be retained and refurbished with the remainder of the Hall being redeveloped. Funding for these improvements would come from new residential development on other parts of the site.

Key components of this option include:
- Retained main hall of the Royal Victoria Hall but new front and back of house accommodation
- New public library facility along London Road frontage
- New community facilities linked with use and maintenance of open space
- New Town Council offices
- Adjacent retail uses with flats above
- Family housing with views of open space
- Mix of smaller houses and cottages across tighter parts of the site
- Replacement public parking along new edge to Ridgeway Fields

Option B (part refurbish, part redevelop):
- 52 houses and flats
- c. 300 sq m retail
- c. 1,100 sq m office
- c. 1,500 sq m community
- c. 2,600 sq m assembly and leisure
3.4 Option C - new community hub

This option explores how a completely new community hub facility – situated in a similar location to the existing Royal Victoria Hall site, as this seems to be the best location for these uses – could anchor the Southborough Hub development. Again, funding for this major investment would come from new residential development on other parts of the site.

Key components of this option include:
- New community hub building providing a variety of flexible and modern spaces for a wide variety of uses and users
- New public library facility along London Road frontage
- New community facilities linked with use and maintenance of open space
- New Town Council offices
- Adjacent retail uses with flats above
- Family housing with views of open space
- Mix of smaller houses and cottages across tighter parts of the site
- Replacement public parking along new edge to Ridgeway Fields

Option C (new community hub):
- 52 houses and flats
- c. 300 sq m retail
- c. 1,100 sq m office
- c. 1,500 sq m community
- c. 2,800 sq m assembly and leisure
4. CONSULTATION REVIEW

The preparation of development options for the Southborough Hub site has been undertaken in consultation with local residents, businesses and other stakeholders. The first stage of consultation constituted interviews with key stakeholder groups and the second was a public exhibition.

4.1 Stakeholder interviews

Individuals and organisations that have a direct stake in the land and existing buildings, including tenants and hirers, as well as local amenity and interest groups, were offered interviews.

Interviews were undertaken with:
- Ridgewaye FC;
- Upz and Downz Community Interest Company;
- Southborough School of Dance;
- Wicked Productions / Captiv8 Productions;
- Local Amateur Musical Players;
- Southborough Town Forum;
- Friends of the Royal Victoria Hall (supported by The Theatres Trust);
- Southborough Environmental Action Movement; and
- Southborough Access Group.

The following were offered interviews but chose not to attend:
- Southborough FC;
- High Brooms FC; and
- Catherine Bellinger School of Dance.

The Southborough Society were interviewed over the telephone. Separate contact was made with Tesco and Lloyds Bank.

All interviews took place on 15 October 2013 at Southborough Town Council’s offices. Each group was able to attend a session with the project team lasting one hour and were asked to answer the following questions:
- What is your organisation’s interest / stake in the Southborough Hub site?
- Why are the uses / facilities across the site important / valuable to your organisation?
- What is it about the uses / facilities across the Hub site that you feel works particularly well for Southborough and its residents?
- Are there any aspects of the uses / facilities across the Hub site that do not work well?
- What key message would you like to emphasise as we prepare a series of options to explore a viable future for the site?
A banner advertising the public exhibition
4.2 Public exhibition

An exhibition displaying the three development options was open to the public between 2.30 pm and 7.00 pm on Wednesday 13 November 2013 at the Royal Victoria Hall. To raise awareness of this event:

- Around 5,000 leaflets were distributed to nearby homes;
- 30 small posters were handed out for display by local businesses;
- Two large posters were displayed to the front of Southborough Town Council’s offices, facing London Road; and
- A banner was erected on the front facade of the Royal Victoria Hall.

It is estimated that approximately 350 people attended this event to view and discuss the options with members of the project team. Members of the public and other stakeholders were invited to comment on the options using a response form.

The exhibition was displayed at Southborough Library following 13 November for a two week period. It was also available for download, with the response form, for the same period.

Key messages

Most of the stakeholders were reasonably pragmatic in terms of their willingness to make adjustments to facilitate moves to improved, shared accommodation as part of a new community hub. This included Ridgewaye FC, who said that they would consider relocating the existing under-9 football pitches, which are within the Southborough Hub site boundary, if this meant that they would gain better facilities.

Those that currently use the Royal Victoria Hall said that, although they feel that it could be better managed, they would like to see a number of physical improvements to the building, including better dressing rooms and technical infrastructure. Generally the stakeholders with an interest in the Hall were keen to see it refurbished, but appreciated that there would be some merit in a redevelopment. Increasing the flexibility of the Hall was supported in principle, though it was stressed by a number of stakeholders that any flexible-space should be carefully designed to allow it to operate effectively as a theatre.

Local amenity and interest groups tended to have a more conservative viewpoint with regard to the future of the site and opposed its development and any redevelopment of the Royal Victoria Hall. All three of the groups interviewed favoured the refurbishment of the Hall, with the Southborough Access Group insisting that, in particular, every effort is taken to make the existing building accessible for all. They were also keen to see management reforms alongside refurbishment.

Notwithstanding a clear opposition to its redevelopment, the Southborough Environmental Action Group supported the conversion of the Royal Victoria Hall to a flexible facility.
Respondents as a proportion of an estimated total of 350 public exhibition attendees

- 40% Total respondents
- 60% Other attendees
Overall response

Approximately 140 response forms, letters and emails were received, giving a range of feedback to the key principles and three options presented. This represents around 40% of the total number of people that are estimated to have attended the public exhibition, as shown opposite. Given that it is generally recognised that most people who are in opposition to a proposal would respond when consulted, it is considered that those who did not respond are most likely to have neutral views.

Most of the respondents identified themselves as Southborough or High Brooms residents. Indeed, responses to the consultation came overwhelmingly from people whose postcode began with TN4 0, with around two thirds stating that they lived in this area. The second most cited postcode was TN4 9.

Although the vast majority of other respondents also lived within the local area, a small number stated that they were interested visitors to Southborough and some that had other connections, such as through Ridgewaye FC or Southborough School of Dance.

Thirteen of those that responded to the consultation owned or ran a business in Southborough or High Brooms.

Question 1: key principles

Question 1 asked whether people agreed with the key principles that underpin the options. Responses to this question in relation to the individual key principles can be seen over the page.

Most of those that responded to the consultation were positive about the prospect of an improved pedestrian link between London Road and the Ridgewaye playing fields and investment in a multi-use, flexible community facility, with 51% and 59% of people, respectively, either agreeing or strongly agreeing with these principles.

Opinion was fairly evenly split over whether there should be new commercial and community space directly addressing London Road, though slightly more people agreed than disagreed with this principle (48% compared to 33%). Taking into account other comments received, it is probably reasonable to conclude that most people who opposed this principle did so on the basis that they did not want to see additional commercial space (i.e. shops) in Southborough.
A - Creating an improved pedestrian link between London Road and the Ridgewaye playing fields?

B - Creating a new vehicular route through the site connecting Yew Tree Road with The Ridgewaye

C - Creating new commercial and community space that directly address London Road?

D - Investing in a new Southborough Hub centred on a multi-use, flexible and efficient community facility?

E - Providing family housing that directly addresses the playing fields and a mix of smaller dwellings on the remainder of the site?

F - Relocating the public parking to a location within the Southborough Hub site closer to the community and retail uses it will serve?
The creation of a new vehicular route connecting Yew Tree Road, provision of family housing and smaller dwellings, and relocation of public parking were all largely opposed, with 54%, 44% and 38% strongly disagreeing with these ideas, respectively (these figures represent 20%, 16% and 14% respectively when taken as a proportion of estimated 350 people that attended the public exhibition).

Again, taking into account other comments received it is clear that this opposition is rooted in concerns relating to the impact that new development would have on vehicular traffic and car parking in the area, and the desire for the playing fields to remain undeveloped. In particular, there seems to be a desire that any development should provide improvements to the road network and increased levels of car parking. Despite the options proposing only around 5% of the Ridgewaye playing fields for development, it is clear that respondents also want to retain more green open space.

In addition, there was an opportunity to provide comment on the key principles. A number of those that responded to this question were keen that the principles included the requirement that new development has a positive impact on vehicular traffic in the local area. Other suggestions were that there should be requirements for:

- Any new development to serve the local community;
- The existing High Street to be regenerated; and
- A new pedestrianised public space.

Question 2: development options

Question 2 asked people to respond to the development options and consider whether they would deliver on the key principles. Responses to this question can be seen over the page.

Overwhelmingly the responses to this question focused in on concerns related to traffic, air quality and car parking impacts arising from any new development, as well as the principle of building on the green, open space. Concerns about the principle of the development cannot be addressed through this process. Indeed, the principle, as set out in Policy AL/SO 2, has long been settled, with the old Local Plan setting the site aside for a broadly similar set of land uses.

With regard to detailed matters, whilst the options are intended to illustrate what could be achieved on the site, more detailed design work to establish how impacts can be mitigated would be undertaken at a later date. Issues concerning traffic, air quality and car parking are considerations for the detailed design stages and planning application process.

Some of the other concerns raised, such as impact on local infrastructure and neighbouring amenity, and
What are your views on the three Southborough Hub development options?

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<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
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<tr>
<td>The designs should consider any impact on local infrastructure carefully</td>
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<tr>
<td>Car parking provision should be kept as it is / improved</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open / green / recreational land should not be built on in principle</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Royal Victoria Hall should be retained / restored</td>
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<td>A new library is not needed</td>
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<td>New shops are not needed</td>
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<td>Option B is best</td>
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<td>The general principle of development is acceptable</td>
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<td>There should be a new / improved community facility</td>
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<td>Option C is best</td>
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<td>All of the options are unsuitable</td>
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<td>Option A is best</td>
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<td>There should be new shops</td>
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<td>New housing is acceptable / needed</td>
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<td>The designs should consider any impact on local infrastructure carefully</td>
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<td>There should be no / less new housing</td>
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<td>The general principle of development is unacceptable</td>
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<td>Replacing the Royal Victoria Hall is acceptable</td>
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<td>Less open / green / recreational land should be used for development</td>
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<td>New public space is needed</td>
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<td>Any new community space should include a theatre</td>
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<td>There should be a new / improved theatre</td>
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<td>Better disabled access is required</td>
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<td>Concerns about impact on neighbouring amenity</td>
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<td>New Council offices are unnecessary</td>
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<td>The library should be combined with the Hub</td>
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<td>There should be a good cafe</td>
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<td>There should be a supermarket</td>
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<td>Parking alongside the playing fields would be an improvement</td>
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<td>Interim accommodation needed for football clubs</td>
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<td>The public conveniences should be retained</td>
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<td>There should be a good public house</td>
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<td>Development should not adversely impact existing shops</td>
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<tr>
<td>There should not be a supermarket</td>
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<td>Some of the community space should be used as a church</td>
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<td>Vehicular access should be provided to the rear of houses on the north side of Credon Park</td>
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<td>The library site should be used to improve traffic flow</td>
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<td>Option C is unacceptable</td>
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<td>Option A is unacceptable</td>
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the creation of better disabled access, would also be
addressed through more detailed design work.

Leaving these comments to one side it is worth noting
that there were a good number of people that were
outspoken in their support for the principle of new
development on the site - in fact, many more people
explicitly supported the principle that explicitly
opposed it - and many made constructive comments
about the designs.

In terms of support for particular options, it can be
seen that option B, which includes part refurbishment,
part redevelopment of the Royal Victoria Hall, was
the most popular. Options A, B an C received 11, 16 and 14 votes in favour each, whilst options A and
C both had one person explicitly say that they were
unacceptable. Twelve people said that all three of the
options were unacceptable.

Option B strikes a balance between retaining the core
section of the Royal Victoria Hall and redeveloping the
more peripheral sections of the building to improve its
overall function. The relative popularity of this option
is consistent with other elements of the response to this
question. Indeed, although five people were clear
in saying that it would be acceptable to replace the
Royal Victoria Hall, a much larger number felt that it
should be retained or restored.

The proposal for a new or improved community facility
was fairly well supported. With regard to some of
the other individual elements of the scheme, such as
housing, shops and a new library, opinion was fairly
divided. For example, sixteen people said that there
should be no new shops and ten said that new shops
would be a positive addition to the town centre; ten
said that new housing was needed and seven said
that there should be no new housing.

Although this would not be the case with all of the
responses, it is considered likely that many of the
negative comments about individual elements of the
scheme are rooted in other broader concerns. It is
noted that some were worried about the health of the
existing town centre and so did not favour more shops,
and that there were some concerns about the impact
of the new homes on local roads and infrastructure,
and the loss of green, open space. Again, these
concerns could be addressed through the detailed
design process and preparation of a planning
application, where they do not relate to the principle
of the development.

A few of the respondents made suggestions for how
the designs could be improved or evolved. There
was a suggestion regarding the use of part or all of
the library site land to improve the local road network
and another suggestion for new vehicular access to
the rear of houses on the north side of Credon Park,
for example. The next stages of the process would
provide an opportunity to consider these, and other,
ideas.
Members of the public viewing the exhibition in the Royal Victoria Hall
Key messages

In terms of the key messages emerging from the consultation process, there are concerns related to the eventual impact of the development on its immediate surroundings, most notably in relation to vehicular traffic and car parking. These are valid concerns and will be dealt with during the next stage of design work, which will refine the options and set out more detailed plans. Indeed, it is clear that there are issues surrounding vehicular traffic and car parking. Further design work will allow an opportunity to consider the optimal layout of car parking on the site, and whether more spaces would be required overall, and the details of how the site should integrate with the existing road network.

Ultimately it will be for the development management process to determine the appropriateness of the proposal in relation to its environmental and traffic impacts. Kent County Council, as highway authority, would play an active role in assessing any application for development.

In terms of the development options, it was clear that option B was the most favoured. Indeed, this option, which would allow extensive modernisation of the Royal Victoria Hall whilst retaining its main space, would help to satisfy many of those that think the Hall should not be demolished and then redeveloped.

The prospect of a new or improved community facility was generally welcomed, with many keen to see Royal Victoria Hall refurbished or replaced to provide a more flexible space. Indeed, when considering the key principles underpinning the options this was most popular.

In respect of other individual elements of the scheme, there were mixed responses. However, many of these concerns were rooted in wider worries about issues such as the health of the town centre and pressure on local infrastructure, which could be mitigated by measures that would be determined as more detailed work on the design is progressed.

It is clear that there is some opposition to the principle of the development, including the principle of any building on the Ridgeway playing fields. However, it should be noted that this consultation did not seek to deal with the principle of the development, which has already been established.
Looking west from the Ridgewaye playing fields towards the public conveniences and London Road.
5. DEVELOPMENT VIABILITY ADVICE

All three of the development options were appraised in terms of their financial viability following their display during the public exhibition period.

Knight Frank’s 12 December 2013 Southborough Hub Viability Assessment document is attached as an appendix to this report.

A summary of the conclusion is as follows:

- The base appraisals, with affordable housing, show the options to be significantly unviable.
- Sensitivities were run for each option based upon 100% private market sales and no allowance for Section 106 and / or CIL, which demonstrate that option A is financially viable and achieves /exceeds an adequate developer’s return and therefore potentially generates surplus profit to be shared between the landowners including, importantly, the third party owners.
- Options B (100% private sales) and A, (with affordable housing), though technically “viable”, do not yet produce an adequate developer’s return.
- As the community facilities increase in scale through the options, the associated costs increase which has a negative impact on the appraisal results.
- Reducing the amount of residential development across the site as a whole will have a negative impact on the viability of the initiative.

The conclusion also sets out a series of recommendations, which align with this report.

In addition to the three options set out within this report, an additional option was appraised in Knight Frank’s Assessment document, to help explore parameters for the community and assembly and leisure uses. This assumed a new build theatre (as in Option C, but of the same size as the existing Royal Victoria Hall), and reduced office, community and library floorspace (as in Option A).

The results of this scenario in terms of viability are encouraging, but it does not currently generate an adequate developer’s return. Further reductions in the levels of community and assembly and leisure uses could impact significantly on viability and it is considered that this may be acceptable in light of the view that the existing level of provision is generous, given the Southborough’s size and catchment area.
6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

6.1 Design recommendations

The consultation highlighted a number of issues which could give rise to potential revisions to the design options. These are summarised as follows:

Reducing the amount of residential development
Concerns were raised during the consultation about the proposals for residential development across the site. The numbers of residential units shown exceed the numbers outlined in the emerging site allocation. The design options and subsequent development appraisals demonstrate the critical role played by residential development in cross funding the delivery of the Southborough Hub concept. The options also demonstrate how, in taking a townscape-led approach, the site can successfully accommodate the number of residential units shown to create a new and positive addition to Southborough. Whilst reducing the number of residential units would help allay local concerns about the impact of the development, such a change could have significant implications on the deliverability of the project as a whole. We therefore recommend that the housing numbers shown in the options should be endorsed as a good representation of the residential capacity of the site.

Increasing the amount of public parking
Concerns were raised about the need for additional public parking spaces in the development options. The emerging site allocation stipulates 66 spaces are required. This ensures the spaces currently provided in the Yew Tree Road car park are reproduced in any redevelopment. The policy makes no explicit requirement for dedicated operational parking associated with the community or other uses on the site. Given that the Royal Victoria Hall site currently benefits from approximately 20 on-site spaces, we recommend future design development of the site should seek to accommodate approximately 90 parking spaces. It should be noted that further work will be required on how the spaces could be provided on the site and that this increase could result in a reduction of development capacity.

Traffic management measures
Considerable local opposition was expressed about the creation of a new through road through the site as shown in all development options. These views are underpinned by concerns regarding prevailing local traffic issues. The layouts of the development options provide a flexible framework which could accommodate a wide range of traffic management measures. We therefore recommend that the principle of creating a route through the site is sound and that traffic management measures are employed to address local issues as required.

It is also worth noting that Tunbridge Wells Borough Council recently consulted on a Draft Borough Transport Strategy. This included a proposal to undertake a feasibility study, which would explore the potential to convert the signalised junctions at London Road’s intersections with Yew Tree Road and Speldhurst Road to mini roundabouts. We recommend that further work is undertaken to explore whether the development of the Southborough Hub site could contribute towards highways improvements in the wider area.
6.2 Next steps

The study has played a very important role in exploring options for the redevelopment of the Southborough Hub site designed to support the delivery of a high quality community hub facility for Southborough. Direct stakeholder engagement has informed the preparation of the options and wider community consultation has again raised the profile of the project.

It is clear that local and long held concerns regarding the initiative will prevail. The consultation revealed some deep rooted and in-principle objections to the initiative as a whole. However, whilst valid concerns, the principle of the development has already been established and this study is only intended to test the requirements of emerging Site Allocations Policy AL/SO 2.

This options report marks an important, if early, milestone for this important and exciting initiative. However, much work remains to be done and key next steps are outlined as follows:

1. **Refine and define the brief for the Southborough Hub facility**
   This brief should define what the Hub facility would be required to deliver. In doing so, a view will need to be taken on what is essential and what is desirable in defining the brief for the facility. The brief should define the functions and specification of the spaces required, how the building and spaces will be managed and should confirm the role of key partners.

2. **Commission Southborough Hub feasibility study**
   With a brief defined, a feasibility study is required for the Hub facility which would test a series of scenarios for the facility. This study should focus on the hub facility alone. This study should explore aspects relating to the business plan for the facility, with assumptions being made about the revenue streams that might be achieved. The study would establish a more detailed understanding of costs and benefits associated with refurbishment versus redevelopment of the Royal Victoria Hall. Additional information on the condition of the Hall building and its suitability for refurbishment and extension is likely to be required as part of this study.

3. **Consider impact on the Yew Tree Road junction**
   As highway authority, Kent County Council, working alongside Tunbridge Well Borough Council, should undertake a study exploring options for improving conditions for all road users at the Yew Tree Road junction. This study would explore what, if any, junction improvements should be provided, consider the associated land take requirements and the extent to which they relate to this development or prevailing existing conditions.

4. **Resolve planning policy position**
   The emerging site allocation policy has effectively been tested during the preparation of this options study. Consideration should now therefore be given to reviewing and amending this policy in the following ways:
   a. Increase residential thresholds in line with those shown to be achievable in this options study;
   b. In tandem with this, consider a more flexible stance on retail floorspace provision;
   c. Increase parking requirement to approximately 90 spaces overall in view of the spaces currently available at the Royal Victoria Hall and required to support any improved community facilities; and
Looking west across the Ridgewaye playing fields
d. In view of the findings of the development appraisals, consider whether additional flexibility will be needed regarding affordable housing policy. This would be in view of the overall regenerative benefits of the initiative and the impact affordable housing provision would have on the overall viability of the scheme.

5. Agree land equalisation and route to delivery

In the longer term, further detailed discussions will be required between the Council partners relating to approaches to delivery and equalisation of land values.

6.3 SPD / Development Brief

Southborough Town Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council will next work with stakeholders and members of the public to prepare either a Masterplan Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), as set out in Policy AL/SO 2, or a Development Brief for the Southborough Hub site.

The SPD / Development Brief will set out further guidance for the development of the Southborough Hub site, in addition to that contained within Policy AL/SO 2, and will refine the options in line with feedback from stakeholders and members of the public.

There will be further opportunities for stakeholders and members of the public to engage in the planning of the site through the SPD / Development Brief, both of which would have material weight in the planning process, following adoption by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.

6.4 Planning application

Prior to any development taking place, a planning application would have to be submitted seeking consent from Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. The Council would consider the application in relation to its policy framework, and take a decision as to whether consent should be granted. The planning application process will require formal consultation to be undertaken.

As part of the application process the developer of the Southborough Hub site would need to submit information demonstrating that all undue impacts relating to the development of the site would be adequately mitigated. The submitted information would have to address impacts on:

- Local infrastructure (including affordable housing and schools);
- Air quality;
- Noise;
- Open space;
- Parking (including car parking);
- The town centre;
- Transport (including roads); and
- Environment.
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