

The Property People

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Assessment of Development Opportunity Site in

Saffron Walden

For Uttlesford District Council

December 2012

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Introduction

The Council are seeking an assessment of a proposed Development Opportunity Site in Saffron Walden following the consultation on Proposals for a draft Local Plan in June/July 2012.

Saffron Walden is an attractive market town with an interesting variety of small traders and is probably underrepresented in terms of national retailers as compared to comparable towns. To some this is part of its attractiveness. There is generally a fairly low level of vacant retail units and when a unit becomes available it is usually taken up fairly quickly. There is perhaps a shortage of larger units which might attract more national retailers to the town.

The Saffron Walden Town Council website has the following description:

This very attractive town is one of the finest preserved examples of a medieval market town and is quintessentially English. Within its outstanding Conservation Area you can find examples of every style of architecture from the 12th to the 21st century. The town is close to, but largely undisturbed by, Stansted airport and has excellent links to Cambridge, just 15 miles away.

The prime area for retailers is King Street and while rental levels for retail units have reduced since their peak they are still high enough to justify development in appropriate locations.

Location and description

The site is shown hatched on the council's plan attached in and extends to 0.196 hectares (0.485 acres). It is located on the western side of the High Street and adjoining Park Lane, the principal pedestrian link between the town centre and the main car park in Swan Meadow.

The site comprises the former Post Office at 37 High Street and the adjoining retail unit trading as Costcutter which now has the Post Office franchise and includes the large car park at the rear. The Post Office building is still used by the Post Office as a sorting office in conjunction with the rear yard. The Post Office building has a return frontage to Park Lane and the car park at the rear has access from both Park Lane and Abbey Lane. Abbey Lane is the main access but is a one way Street with access from the High Street and an exit via Gibson Close and Margaret Way. Park Lane is approached from Bridge Street at the northern end of the High Street via the Swan Meadow car park. Neither Access is convenient for large vehicles.

The eastern side of the High Street is predominantly retail and King Street which leads off the High Street opposite the Post Office Building is the prime retail pitch in Saffron Walden once the street widens some 50m further east. On the western side of the High Street the street frontage is more fragmented; the Post Office Building is dead frontage with residential premises on the north side of Park Lane before further retail units though there are retail premises to the south up to the junction with Abbey Lane. Park Lane itself is residential but has a good pedestrian flow from the Swan Meadow car park. Abbey Lane has a hairdresser adjacent to the estate agent occupying the premises on the corner but is otherwise residential in nature.

Listed Buildings

There are two buildings fronting the High Street and No. 37 which was built as a house in the late 18th or early 19th century before being converted to a Post Office is a Listed Building (Grade 2). The other is more recent but both are within the Saffron Walden Conservation Area.

The building immediately south of the site, no. 47, is also listed as is Abbey House on the corner of the High Street and Abbey Lane.

Listed Building consents for any major works on site are unlikely to be straightforward.

Potential

The site is 'L' shaped and amounts to approximately 0.196 hectares (0.485 acres) of which some 50% is the yard at the rear. The Valuation office website shows three rating assessments, one for the Post Office building of £28,500 and two for the adjoining building; a shop at £29,750 with the offices over at £27,750 and a total floor area of 1,530m² implying a site density of 78%.

The Costcutter unit appears to provide a satisfactory retail unit but the Post Office building is 'dead' frontage and adds nothing to the retail scene. Demolition would enable replacement with a modern retail unit but the existing building could be used for some A1/A2 or A3 uses which would attract a better pedestrian flow. The main building would seem to offer little opportunity for creating additional retail units on the return frontage to Park Street except within the more recent single storey ground floor extension at the rear. The Costcutter building could be demolished but while a replacement might be better in architectural terms, it is unlikely to provide any additional retail space so that the development will not be economic whilst the premises have an existing tenant willing to pay a rent.

The Post Office counter in the Costcutter premises will draw pedestrian flows to this part of Saffron Walden and help the viability of this part of the High Street.

The rear yard is large enough for some development but would have no presence and would only be appropriate for an extension to the existing retail units, not for new retail units.

The larger site comprising the whole frontage to the High Street between Park Lane and Abbey Lane would be large enough to carry out a significant new development but with three listed buildings within a conservation area this seems unlikely.

Possible redevelopment

We have not inspected the property so are not aware of the internal layout but should the Post Office use cease, the building would be appropriate for an A1, A2 or A3 use, but is more likely to appeal to retailers not requiring a traditional shop front. The property would have an existing A1 use from its previous use as the Post Office and we assume that a change of use would only be required for an A2 or A3 use.

The building may be too large at nearly 500m² on the ground floor for most retailers, particularly as the frontage is within the old building, but the single storey rear extension could provide some small retail units fronting Park Lane. The pedestrian

flow from the Swan Meadow car park will ensure that they will attract some interest and the creation of the units is unlikely to damage the original listed building. However this will not make any significant contribution to the retail needs of Saffron Walden. A further small unit may also be possible in the yard whilst still maintaining access to the rear of the units from the Abbey Lane access for deliveries and parking.

Viability

A minor refurbishment as described above would be viable but a more extensive redevelopment incorporating the listed building would not.

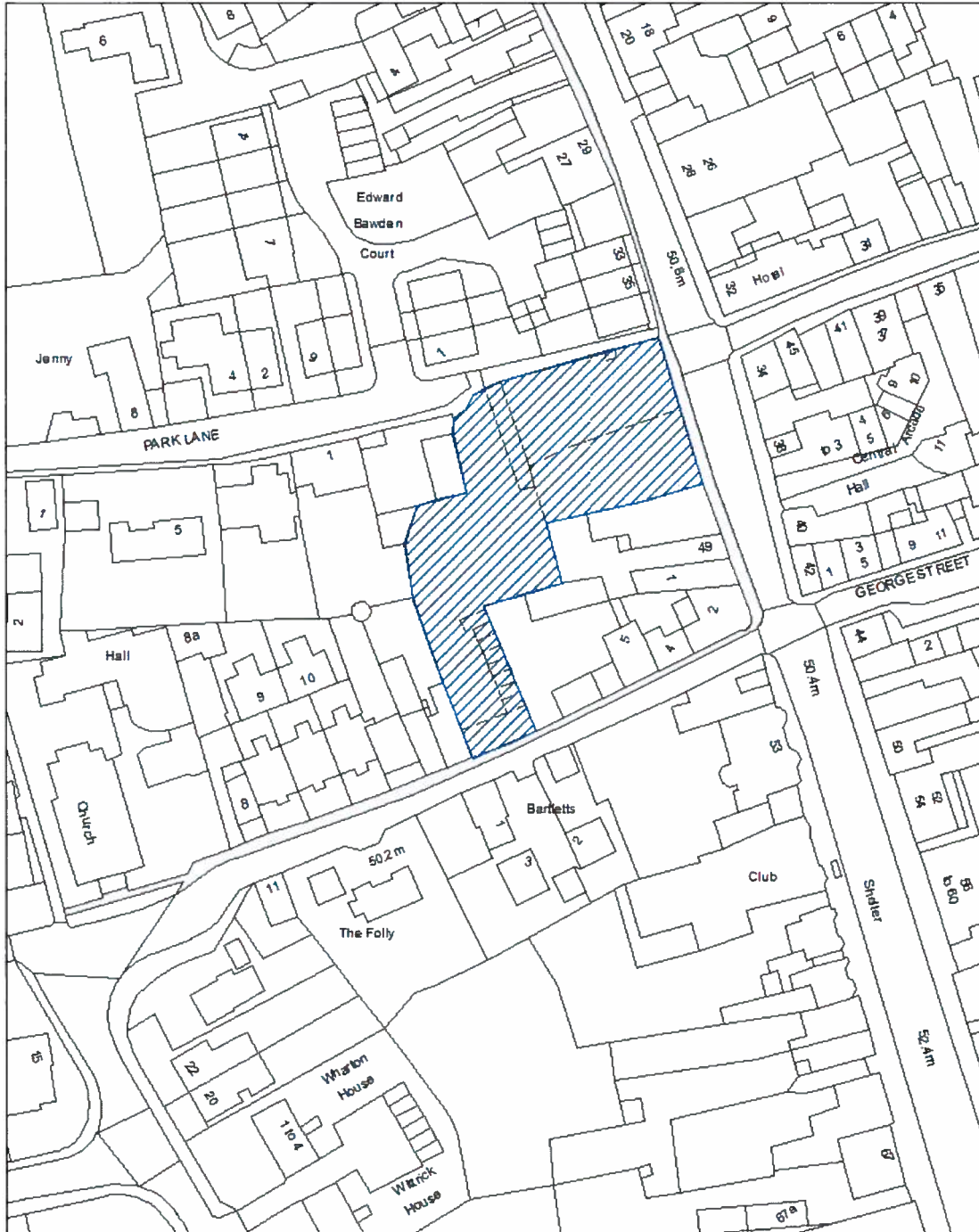
CONCLUSION

The site does not appear to offer an opportunity for an allocation which can make a positive contribution to retailing in Saffron Walden. Should the existing use by the Post Office of the listed building and rear yard cease, there will be an opportunity for some minor redevelopment/refurbishment which any owner would expect to discuss with the Planning Authority.



Carter Jonas
16 December 2012

Site Plan



Uttlesford District Council
Saffron Walden Development Opportunity Area

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PHOTOGRAPHS





Abbey Lane entrance



Park Lane entrance