



## **Rickmansworth Chamber of Commerce (30047) Issue 3 Written Statement**

30 September 2013

Caveat – we feel we are only qualified to comment on the SALDD in relation to the Rickmansworth, Mill End & Maple Cross areas.

Issue 3:

Q3.1 There is definitely not enough land identified in the Principal Town of Rickmansworth to achieve the intentions of the Core Strategy PPS1 or the over arching policy CP6.

Extract from PPS1

*c) Maintain the overall amount of existing employment floorspace in the town, including the general supply of office accommodation in the town centre*

*d) Maintain the retail core in the town centre and where appropriate enhance it through a modest increase in retail floorspace in accordance with the Retail Capacity Study*

In fact since the core strategy was adopted in October 2011 we have seen 7 separate employment sites (none of which were identified in the SALDD) on the High Street of the Principal Town converted to residential accommodation. These employment sites have predominantly been office accommodation. The most recent (a printing house opened by Tony Blair when he was PM) is, as we write, being converted to residential under the new Permitted Planning Development rules. The other 6 sites range from multiple office sites employing many people to small retail outlets.

This strategy of conversion of employment space also appears to go against the advice of Roger Tym & Partners, Planners and Development Economists who were commissioned to complete an Employment Space Study for South West Hertfordshire in January 2005 – this reads:

*Any release of office floorspace in Rickmansworth town centre should be treated cautiously. Office accommodation should only be released to other uses where it is no longer suitable for employment uses and its redevelopment for such uses would not be commercially viable.*

There has been no attempt to identify or plan for expansion of retail space in the Principal Town in line with the Core Strategy, or replace the employment space that has been lost in the last few years. In fact, the identification of 5 further commercial sites in the town centre to be converted to residential accommodation would have a hugely detrimental effect on sustainability of employment and retail commerce.

Whilst there is additional employment space identified in Maple Cross, this only replaces the employment land that has already been redeveloped into residential accommodation in the same area. It is worth noting also that if the planned hotel and retail site goes ahead in the Maple Cross site identified in the SALDD – this would be the final imbalance that would result in the decline in our

High Street and the loss of our well used and historic hotel in the town centre, which we have so far avoided.

Rickmansworth has recently been identified as the High Street with the least number of vacant units in the UK – we can only account for this as we have a large amount of office accommodation which uses the High Street during the day. Most residents in the town centre commute to work out of the town in London, and do not use the High Street during the week. We have also worked hard with the HMRC to keep NNDR at a manageable level for the tenants. We have seen a complete change in the landscape of the High Street to reflect how it is being used which includes a doubling in the number of coffee shops and charity shops.

Recent figures did show that Rickmansworth had a high rate of office vacancy but this figure is inflated by the loss of Comet from the town centre – there is approx 37,000sqft of prime office space vacant – and has been for nearly a year. Other office accommodation identified in the SALDD is in fact almost full, and extant businesses in these offices would have no alternative but to leave the town if the offices were demolished as there is no other suitable office accommodation left in the town.

There is now little room for expansion of commercial activity in the town centre owing to the conversion of so much office accommodation in the last 5/6 years.

Q3.2 As far as we are aware the quality of the land identified in the principal town is not known, but we are aware that there is some contamination on the site known as Froghall Farm and Adjoining Land as it was investigated as a potential site for a new school. We have been unable to identify the location of the old West Hyde Asbestos factory which is rumoured to have been located on or near this site.

Q3.3 There have been no sites identified to our knowledge, in the Rickmansworth area as mixed use sites.

Q3.4 Please refer to our answer to question Q3.1 which we feel answers this question.

Q3.5 In our opinion the SALDD does not reflect the intentions of the Core Strategy to maintain and enhance accessible shopping in existing centres, with particular regard to Rickmansworth for the reasons given in Q3.1

Q3.6 In our opinion the Green Infrastructure net gain, will not be met by these policies. Although without benchmarking for either demographic/wealth information of residents or for economic prosperity it would be difficult to measure whether the SALDD would be effective in delivering any of the objectives as laid out in the Core Strategy.

One small point to mention is that the recommendation by Roger Tym & Partners was that public transport to one of the biggest employment sites in the Rickmansworth area on Tolpits Lane, was put in place. This has not happened and is now quite urgently needed as the new Free School is temporarily situated on this road and has no public transport links from Rickmansworth.

Prepared by Nina Hosking, Chairman, Rickmansworth Chamber of Commerce