
LAND NORTH OF THE MARKET SQUARE, ROCHFORD (Min 39/98)

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks Members endorsement, in principle, for possible future land-uses on the land north of the Market Square, Rochford in order to enable the landowners to take forward negotiations with prospective developers.
- 1.2 Land-use allocation is a statutory function for the authority through the Rochford District Local Plan.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Land North of the Market Square (Appendix One – site A) is allocated in the adopted Rochford District local Plan for the provision of a retail foodstore. The site is part in the ownership of the County Council and Wimpey Homes.
- 2.2 Since the adoption of the Local Plan in 1995, as Members are aware, a further area of land has become available for development with the closure of the elderly persons home commonly referred to as the 'bungalow site' This site is in the ownership of the County Council. (Appendix One – site B).
- 2.3 Whilst a planning brief has been prepared for Site A outlining how the site could be developed for retail development, there is clearly scope with the integration of Site B for a larger and in planning design terms, more exciting development which could underpin Rochford Town Centre. Expressions of interest have been received and those concerned have been advised to speak to the respective owners. However, in the light of recent correspondence, it is clear that the County Council is seeking some reassurance regarding the development potential of their site in the context of progressing any possible scheme.
- 2.4 It is now considered important for there to be an 'in principle' confirmation from the District of uses that might be acceptable on the site. This would provide the site owners, and specifically the County Council, with some comfort to progress the market testing process to determine there is potential for a retail foodstore and associated development on the site.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Town Centre Working Group has met on a number of occasions and was able to commission a firm of consultants to report on the

retail situation in the town and to consider the market potential for a retail foodstore operator to be attracted to the land north of the Market Square.

- 3.2 The retail consultants reported in October 1999 and concluded that, given the size of the town, the catchment area and location, there was the potential for the provision of a retail foodstore of up to 1,872 sq. metres (20,000 sq. feet).
- 3.3 The consultants indicated that the next steps in the process would normally be the preparation of a design brief accompanied by market testing to ascertain the level of developer interest in the site. However, as outlined above, a planning brief already exists for Site A in respect of retail development, but not Site B.
- 3.4 Following the presentation by the retail consultants, the Working Group met again earlier in the year and considered further the implications of the report. Generally, the members of the group were in favour of pursuing the provision of a retail foodstore on the site, but felt that perhaps a further round of consultation in the town, to confirm that residents and existing businesses supported the principle, would be the best way forward.
- 3.5 It was felt that this could perhaps be best dealt with once development interest had been identified and a better idea of the type of scheme envisaged had been obtained; otherwise public expectation and/or concerns might be unduly raised. In addition, there has been some related consultation associated with the STAR project which has identified a lack of retailing opportunity in Rochford Town Centre as an issue.

4 PLANNING POLICY ISSUES

- 4.1 Appendix one to this report shows the extent of the site. Site A (0.5 hectares) is allocated for the provision of a retail foodstore, whilst Site B (0.8 hectares) comprises the now redundant elderly persons accommodation.
- 4.2 Both sites are within the town centre and in land-use terms a range of uses, including retail, business and residential would, in principle, be acceptable. The main issues to be taken into account in respect of any development proposal are access arrangements, the quality and design of new buildings, and the impact of any development on surrounding existing properties.

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- 4.3 Site A has been the subject of intensive investigation to assess its suitability for the provision of a retail foodstore and a design brief was prepared for the site as part of a Government urban design initiative.

5 WAY FORWARD

- 5.1 It is considered that the owners of the land are in a difficult position in respect of their ability to actively explore the market potential for a retail foodstore scheme on the site, given the unclear land-use planning situation. Whilst Site A is allocated for a retail foodstore, the enlarged site offers considerably more scope in terms of layout and design, as well as potential for the incorporation of other uses that might be beneficially linked to such a development. For example, it is known that a new site will be required for Rochford Library in due course, and clearly this may be a way of securing provision.
- 5.2 The Local Plan is the vehicle for the allocation of land within the district for particular uses. However, work on the preparation of the next Local Plan is still at a relatively early stage and in order to enable investigations on the potential of the enlarged site, it is considered that the Council could give a clear indication at this stage of the uses that might be acceptable and that would subsequently be built into the next Local Plan.
- 5.3 With associated car parking, a retail foodstore of up to 1,800 sq. metres could be accommodated on the site and still allow scope for further supporting development. It is proposed that the Council provide a clear indication of support to the landowners for detailed investigations and market testing to ascertain whether a suitable scheme might be forthcoming for the land.
- 5.4 Any scheme incorporating a retail foodstore would need to reflect the principles established through the work on the design brief in relation to Site A (see appendix two to this report).
- 5.5 Whilst it proposed that the landowners be given support and encouragement to investigate the development potential of the land for the provision of a retail foodstore and other related uses, it should be made clear that this does not provide an open book on the future development of the site. Any proposals for the site would need to be fully investigated and the key at this stage is to assess the viability of the site with a retail foodstore as the main use.

6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The land north of the Market Square is within the Rochford Conservation Area and the principles of any proposed development would need to be carefully considered. The site is bounded by

residential properties and the impact on residential amenity would also be a key consideration.

7 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 This site offers a major development opportunity within Rochford and has the potential to make a significant positive contribution to the vitality and viability of the town centre.

8 RECOMMENDATION

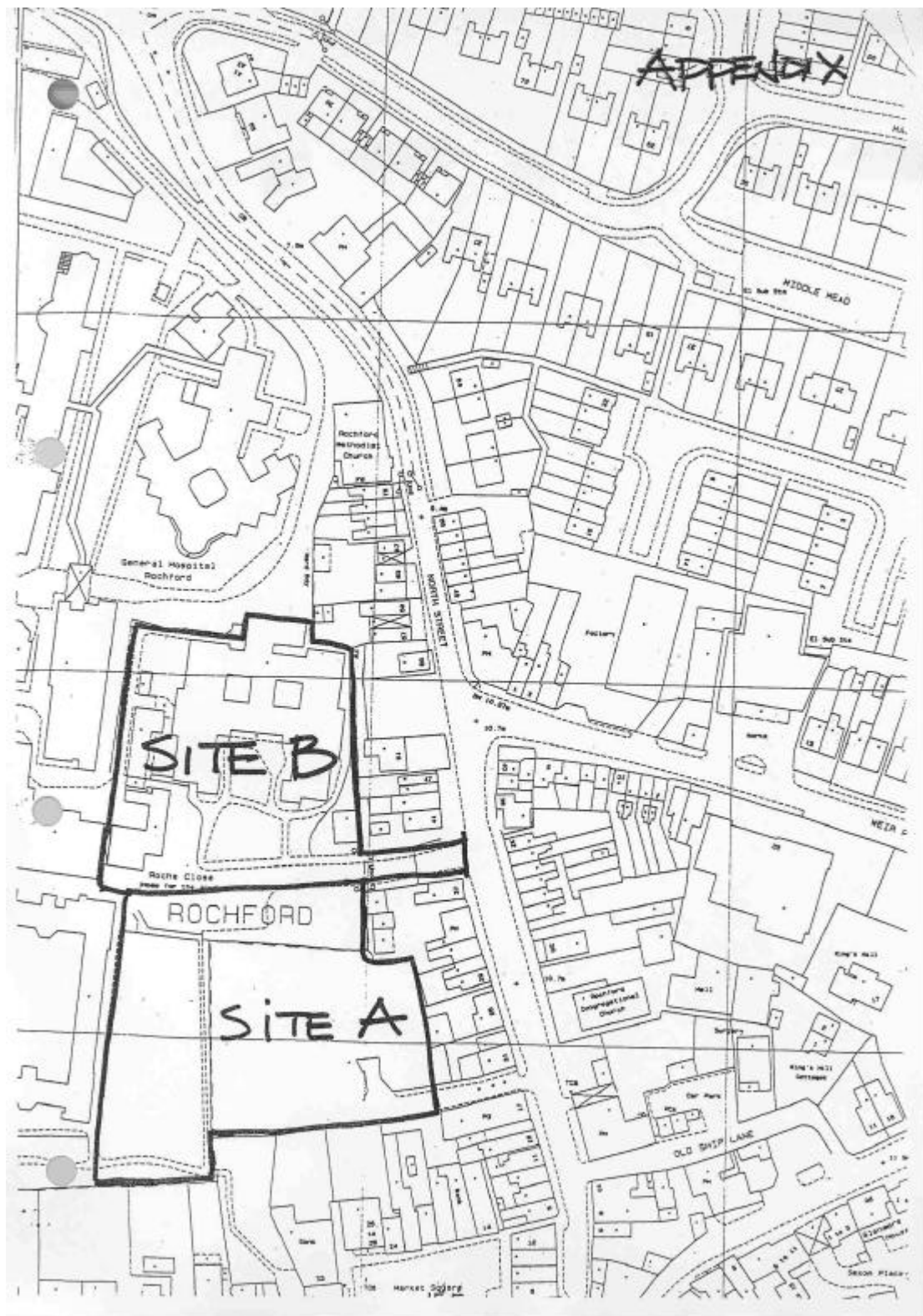
It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

- (1) To inform the landowners of the land north of the Market Square, Rochford that the Council supports in principle the provision of a retail foodstore and associated development on the land as outlined in the report;
- (2) That the landowners be encouraged to fully explore the potential for such a development, including market testing; and
- (3) That the results of the investigations be reported back to the Council for consideration. (HCPI)

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*Brentford TCWG
File*

Prospects for Development

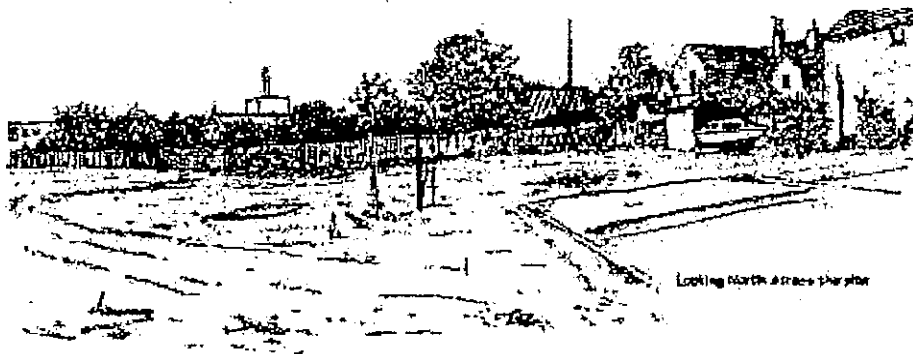
- The Local Planning Authority is confident a suitable scheme for the provision of a food store can be achieved.
- Essex County Council owns part of the site and is in the process of carrying out a district-wide property review.
- Wimpey Homes have the benefit of a planning consent for the construction of an elderly persons home. However, the company has indicated their willingness to explore the potential for the provision of a food store on the site.
- The remaining owner Wentworth Development Ltd is content to support the proposed scheme.
- No clear indication can be given at this early stage as to when a scheme might commence, but it is hoped that rapid progress can be achieved once a Design Brief has been prepared.

Constraints to Development

- Sensitive site within a Conservation Area.
- Important to achieve a high standard of design and finish to the scheme.
- No other planning constraints to development are envisaged.
- Ownership is mentioned in the previous section. It is hoped that the landowners will maintain positive support for the food store scheme.

Other Development Proposals

- Wimpey Homes, as mentioned above, have an outstanding consent for the provision of aged persons accommodation on the site, and indeed a material start has been made on the development.
- There are no other development proposals in respect of the site or the surrounding land likely to effect the food store scheme.



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Location

0.57 hectare site in the heart of Rochford.

Current Use and Condition of the Site

- Disused town centre site, cleared of buildings.
- Part of the site is grassed and there are a few trees and shrubs around the perimeter and along the main ownership boundaries.

Description of Local Area

- Rochford - historic market town.
- Designated Conservation Area with a high percentage of Listed Buildings.
- Character - buildings representative of traditional Essex architecture, including a mixture of two-storey timber framed, weather boarded buildings or brick buildings in Essex red and yellow stock bricks with handmade plain tile roofs.
- High environmental quality.
- Surrounding land-uses - Hospital, shop and business premises, and residential accommodation.



Local Authority Plans for the Site

- Site allocated in Rochford District Local Plan First Review (adopted April 1995) for the provision of a retail food store.
- Local Plan policy requires:
 - a high standard of design and use of materials to complement a sensitive historic area;
 - pedestrian access to the Market Square as an integral part of the scheme; and
 - close attention to be paid to hard and soft landscaping.

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Proposal

1. Statement of Aims

Rochford is a small market town with shops and businesses catering primarily for the day-to-day convenience needs of local residents. For many years it has been considered there is a need for a larger food store in the town centre, and this view was reinforced by the results of a recent shopping study commissioned by the Authority, which estimated the level of outflow of expenditure from the town to be more than 90% of total expenditure generated from the local population.

There is then ample scope for the provision of a food store based on current levels of local expenditure, and the Authority considers that a new retail food store in the size range 1000 to 1400m² would adequately fulfil the needs of the town's population.

The historic constraints imposed by the Medieval street pattern mean that finding a suitable site for a food store of even this size is not a simple matter. Furthermore, in making a judgement about the suitability of any particular site it was important to consider the impact on existing businesses within the town centre. A site too far from the town centre would have a damaging impact on trading levels, whilst a site within the town centre has the potential to enhance the vitality and viability of the town, revitalise existing businesses and attract new businesses.

The proposed site is currently part grassed, part derelict and makes little contribution to the character and appearance of the town centre. A high quality redevelopment scheme comprising a retail foodstore with associated car parking will have the effect of enhancing the appearance of the Conservation Area, and provide a much needed boost to the local economy.

The type of development envisaged comprises a retail food store of some 1000 to 1400m² gross floorspace with associated car parking provision. An integral part of the scheme will be the development of a pedestrian link to the Market Square via the existing gap between the Library and the National Westminster Bank. The pedestrian link will have the effect of tying the food store development to the town centre, offering not just an enhancement to the shopping offer, but the potential for increased levels of trade in existing town centre businesses.

It is hoped that the development brief process will provide a public showcase that will stimulate interest from retail food store owners to come forward with an exciting proposal for the development of this important site in the centre of historic Rochford. The Council is in the process of drawing up a Vision Statement for the future of the town in partnership with local groups, the Parish Council and Chamber of Trade, and this site and the preparation of a development brief offers an opportunity to expand and further develop public and trader support in the town.

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Proposal - 2

2. Description of Approach/Process

Rochford Council has always taken to view that wide public consultation is an essential prerequisite of any major scheme proposed for the District. Therefore, it is intended that an extensive public consultation exercise will be carried out in the town to elicit comments about the way the scheme should be designed. In particular the views of the Parish Council, Chamber of Trade and the Rochford Hundred Amenities Society (local amenities organisation) will be sought.

It is intended to launch the development brief process with a public meeting at which the concept will be outlined. Separate presentations will then be made to each of the key local organisations mentioned above, together with the relevant utility companies, and the County Highways Department. A public display will be mounted in the Council Offices and the Library. The current owners of the site will be kept informed of progress at all stages of the process.

The comments, suggestions and criticisms will then be analysed and the content of the development brief finalised. In the unlikely event that a suitable developer has not been attracted during the preparation process, it is intended that the brief will be used as the focus for discussions with the retail food store operators.

3. Funding

- Commission consultant to prepare a scheme for the site £3000.
- Printing of development brief and preparation of display material £2000.
- Public consultation including printing of publicity information £3,000.

All other funding, including staffing costs will be provided by Rochford Council.

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Summary

Rochford...

- Historic market town
- Bulk of convenience goods shopping needs catered for by out-of-town food stores
- Slow deterioration in town centre shops and businesses
- Unacceptable number of vacant shop premises
- Growing public demands for improved services

Proposed scheme...

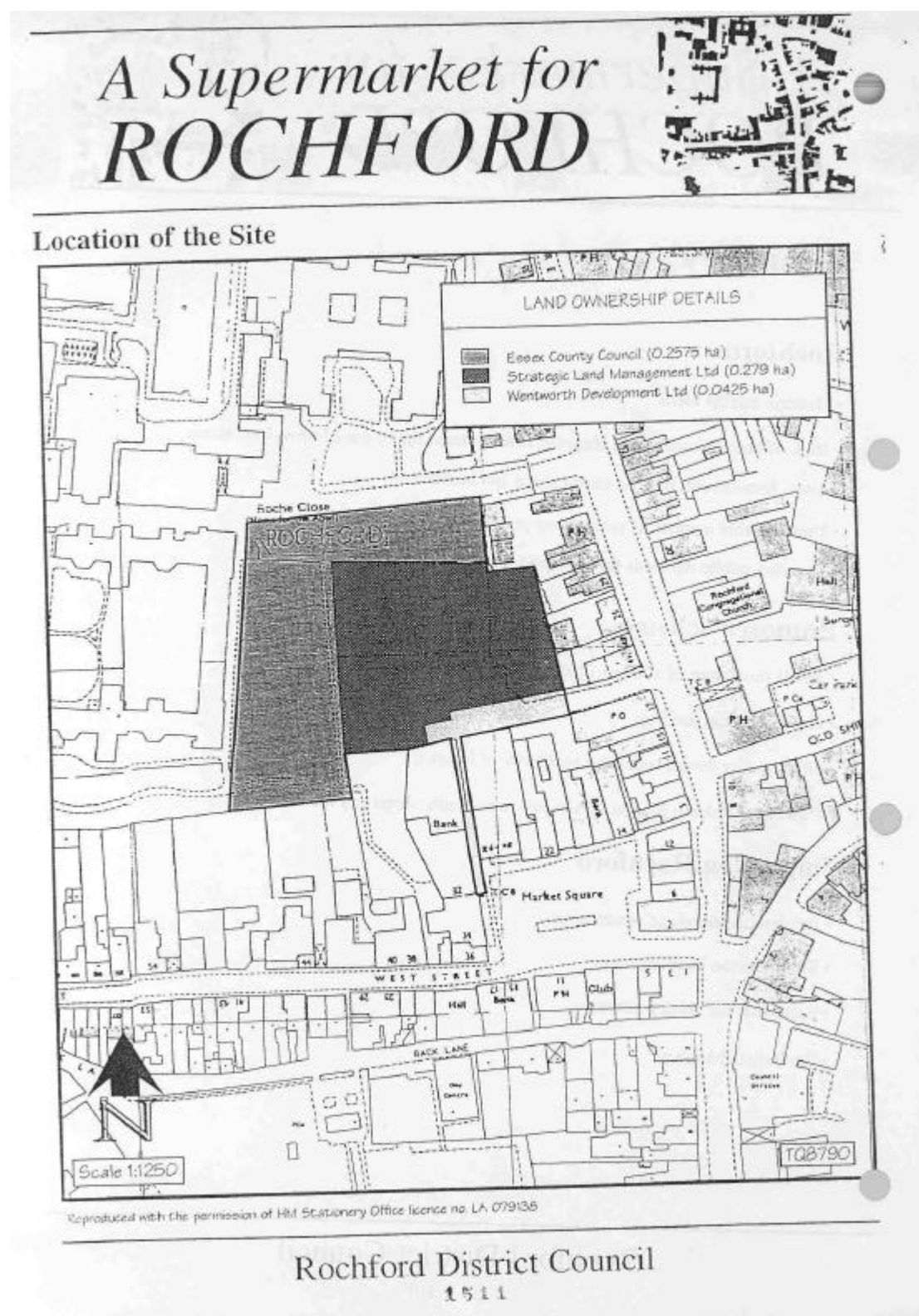
- Retail food store of 1000 to 1400m² gross floor area
- Associated car parking
- High quality design reflecting sensitivity of location
- Pedestrian links to Market Square and town centre shops and facilities

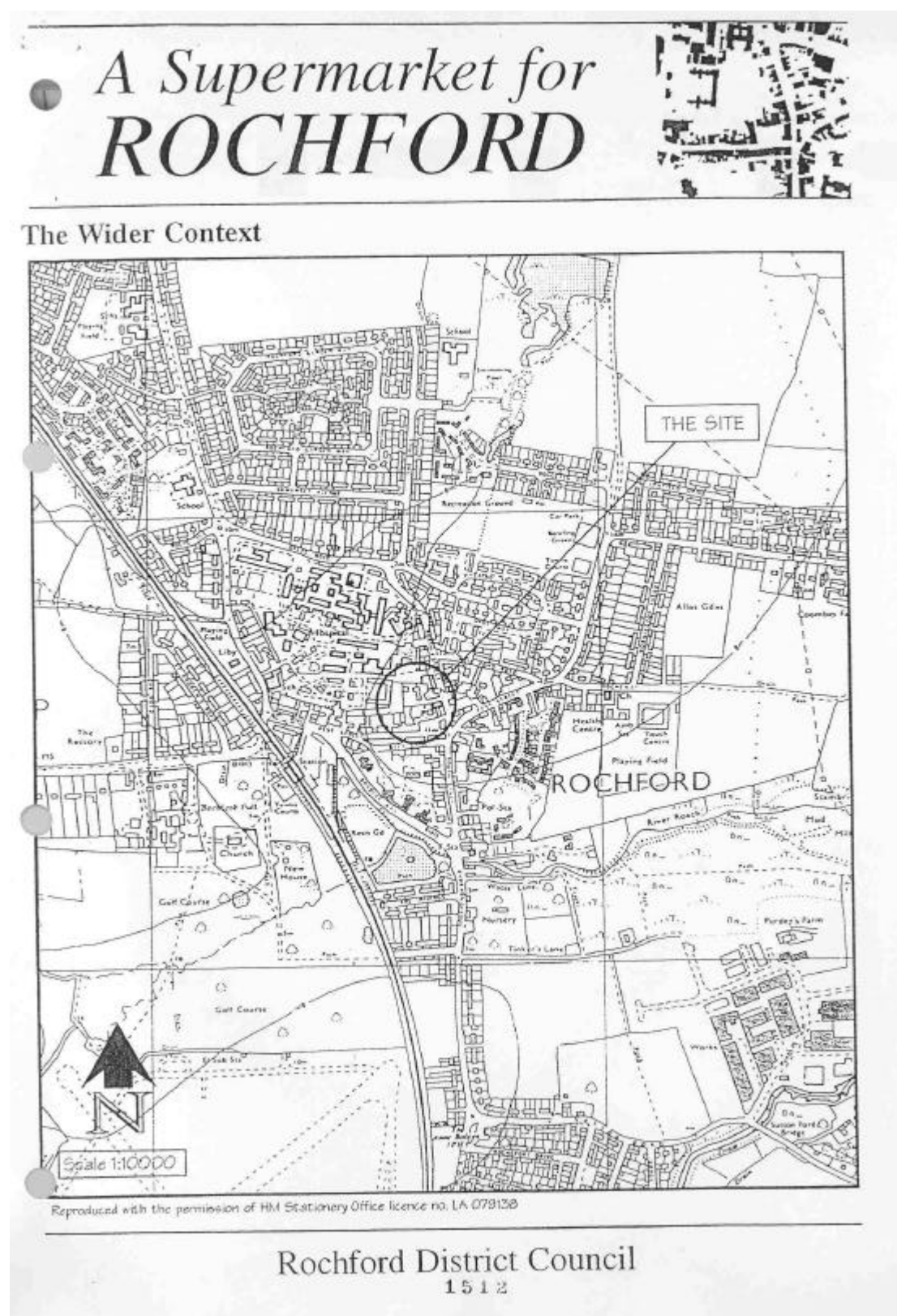
Impact on Rochford

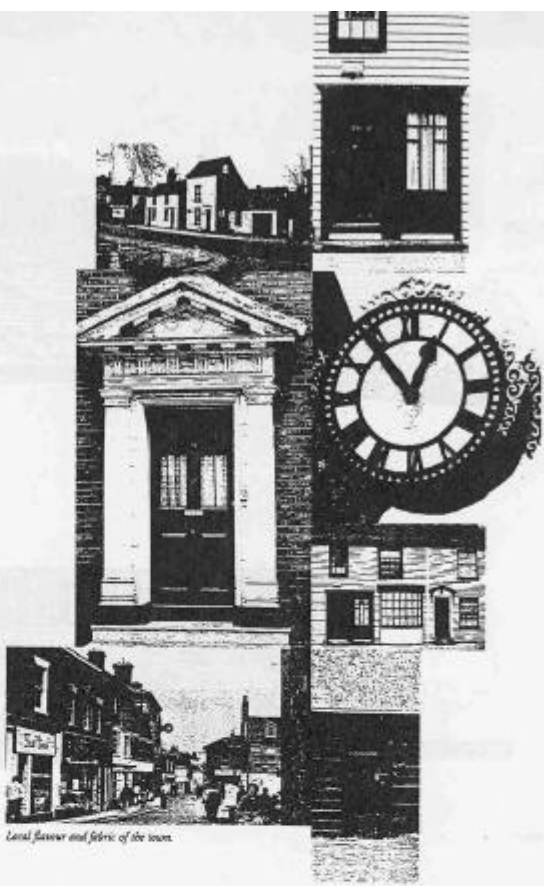
- Reverse the trends of recent years
- Stimulate the local economy
- Reinforce the retail function
- Revitalise the town

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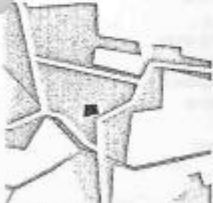
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Local flavour and fabric of the town.



Rochford, Essex
A supermarket for Rochford
Integrating modern day retailing into the fabric of an historic town.
0.67 hectare

Key participants
Rochford Parish Council
Rochford Chamber of Trade
Essex County Council
Wimpey Homes plc
David Ruttle Architects

Rochford is a mediaeval town with buildings clustering around a market square. A disused site in the heart of the town has been identified as the ideal location for a new food store. The development of the site offers an exciting opportunity to integrate new development into the historic fabric of the town and at the same time provide a much needed shopping facility.

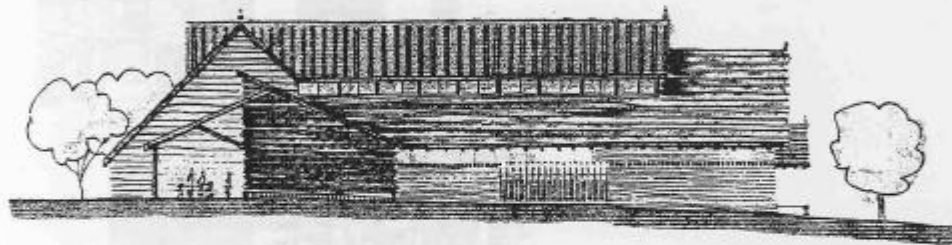
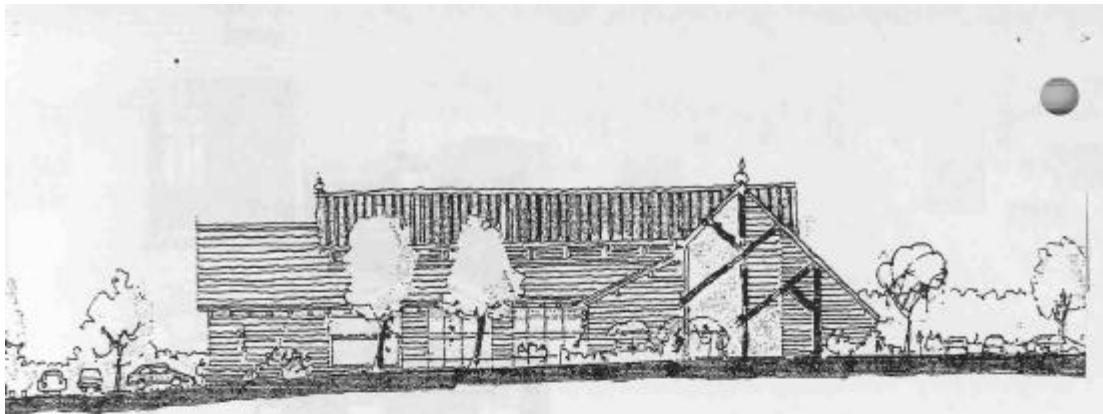
A 'project panel' comprising representatives from the District and Parish Councils, the Chamber of Trade and the landowners was established at the outset to guide the project and to provide an interface with the public. The panel appointed an architect to carry out a detailed analysis of the town and to prepare three design options for the development of the site based on two key principles:

- the need to have proper regard to the character of the historic town, and the need to enhance the character of the conservation area in which the supermarket will be located; and
- the development of strong linkages between the site and the town centre.

In seeking an appropriate design solution, each option examined a range of issues including the use of materials, relationship of the building to surrounding properties, car parking, service yard arrangements and, crucially, the links between the building and the market square. One of the options also included an element of housing.

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Supermarket design

The design options, displayed in a town centre shop window, were the subject of much interest amongst local people, who indicated by returning questionnaires overwhelming support for the design and building materials proposed in the second option. This schema involved a pitched roof tile-hung building with open car parking areas to its eastern and northern elevations and a pedestrian open space to the south. The pedestrian open space would lead into a pedestrian link with the town's market square. There were some reservations regarding pedestrian movement through the site, security and traffic speed controls. These issues have been incorporated in the final design.

The final design moves the store slightly further south towards the market square to allow more car parking spaces and a slightly enlarged store. This does mean, however, that the proposed open space is reduced in size together with tree planting on the southern boundary. Security features have also been introduced.

Whilst the public consultation approach to the preparation of the brief has had the effect of validating much of the initial design work for the site, it has also raised awareness of the proposal and provided detailed information to help guide the character of the final design.

The Council intends to use the results of the exercise as a focus for discussions with food store retailers. Interest has already been shown by one retailer and it is hoped others will come forward so that the scheme can soon be implemented.