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ROYSTON CROSS DEVELOPMENT BRIEF

1.0 Introduction

This Brief sets out North Hertfordshire District Council's planning requirements for the Royston Cross area of Royston, Hertfordshire.

The Royston Town Centre Strategy Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) was adopted in June 2008 and provides guidance on how development enhancement proposals should be carried out in Royston Town Centre as well as forming a creative vision for its future. It specifically identifies Opportunity Sites for future development, of which the Royston Cross is identified as one such area.

This development brief, presents guidance and potential approaches for the future development of the Cross area setting specific requirements to ensure development that enhances the area.

1.1 The Site

Royston Cross is located at the junction of Baldock Street / Melbourn Street, Kneesworth Street, Lower Kings Street and between Upper Kings Street and the High Street as can be seen in Figure 1 below. This also identifies the two areas of open space either side of Baldock Street / Melbourn Street.

Fig 1: Location of Royston Cross



Source: NHDC

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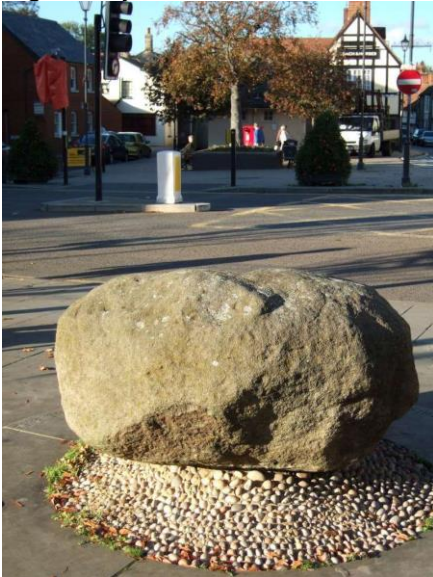
1.2 Site History and Background

Historically, the Cross lies at the intersection of Ermine Street and Icknield Way, which are both Roman Roads. These roads date back over 2000 years, with Ermine Street providing a link between London, Lincoln and York. As a result it was viewed as one of the most important roads in the country. Icknield Way was also of great importance creating a link from Salisbury Plain to East Anglia along the chalk hills.

The name Royston originates from the Cross area as a result of its historical “Wayside Cross”. These structures were often placed at crossroads of major roads to mark the way for travellers. Royston’s wayside cross can be traced to Norman times, a Lady Roysia, was responsible for its creation at the crossroads. It was subsequently named “Roysia's Stone”, which became anglicised to the “Royse Stone” and hence Royston.

Evidence of the wayside cross remains as the large stone, brought to the area in an ice age, and which was used as the base of the cross, remains mounted close to the crossroads south of Baldock Street. However, the cross that once sat on top has not survived and has perished over time.

Fig 2: Royston Stone



Source: NHDC

When “Royston” is typed into Google maps it identifies Royston Cross as what one would assume to be the town centre. However, this is not the case and although the area is centrally located and historically it would appear to be central to the towns origins, it is an area very much dominated by the car rather than pedestrians and therefore could certainly not be classified as the town centre.

This is one of a number of issues in the Cross area. Interestingly many issues relate to the fact that the area has, and continues to be a busy junction where a number of roads converge and where rat-running and parking add to car dominance. Past improvements to the area have increased pedestrian importance and attempted to make the east - west route of Melbourn Street / Baldock Street less of a barrier. However, to really improve north / south pedestrian movements greater priority needs to be afforded to pedestrians.

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1.3 Purpose of the brief

This brief provides guidance for the future enhancement of Royston Cross.

Depending on which option is chosen, the brief will either form a guide for the potential enhancement of the area or will provide guidance for built development on the northern Royston Cross area. It could of course provide guidance for both options, or neither, if a do nothing approach is chosen.

Should the “development” option be chosen, this brief will guide potential developers and the subsequent planning applications to ensure that what is developed on the Royston Cross is appropriate.

The brief also illustrates the Council’s intension to enhance the district’s town centres.

1.4 Site Issues and constraints

i) Car dominance

As detailed above the area has a number of issues concerning parking and the movement of vehicles. Parking presents challenges across the whole of the site and on the majority of roads leading to and from the cross area. Key points include:

- General dominance of the car in the area
- Rat-running around the Morrison’s roundabout, which heads up Lower Kings Street to the Station
- Royston Cave is proximate, there is a tendency for people to park on top of it, raising concerns about its protection
- The bus route used to pass along Kneesworth Street, however it had to be redirected down Green Drift as a result of parking issues
- There is a narrow path on the eastern side of Kneesworth Street, creating safety issues as cars pass close to the path
- Parking on Kneesworth Street, north of the Cross, creates difficulties for other vehicles
- There is no pedestrian crossing across Lower Kings Street and cars aren’t controlled by road signals turning from Baldock Street meaning this area is dangerous to cross

ii) Barrier to pedestrian movement

Pedestrian movement is part of any healthy, sustainable community, however Baldock Street / Melbourn Street is a barrier to pedestrians heading north from the town centre and south from the station. There are also generally poor pedestrian links with Morrison’s located to the west.

iii) Unrelated Open Space

The barrier of Melbourn Street / Baldock Street means that the two areas of open space either side do not really relate to each other. The street furniture, particularly on the southern side, is also numerous and although the area includes open space, it does not feel very functional, it feels quite cluttered as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Fig 3: View of Southern area of open space

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Source: Google (2010)

iv) Through Route

Melbourn Street / Baldock Street is considered a through route for the “abnormal loads route¹” (relating to height). This passes through the Cross area and will need to be maintained. Also if the bypass was to close for any reason, this route would become a major through route for traffic, delaying traffic too much could block the town completely, causing gridlock.

v) Historic environment

The area and surrounding buildings have great historic value. The Conservation Area Review for Royston identifies the Cross as an *improvement opportunity*. Although the buildings flanking this site and which form corner buildings to Kneesworth Street and Lower King Street are not listed or Buildings of Local Interest. Lloyds Bank and nos.1-5 Baldock Street are mentioned specifically in the adopted Royston Conservation Area Townscape Analysis (paras 3.69 and 3.75 respectively). In addition, to the east and north stand nos.2 and 14 Kneesworth Street (both Grade II listed), the latter being The Coach and Horses Inn. Royston Cave is also located to the east of the Cross area. In short the site needs to be handled with utmost care and any development will need to be sensitive to these issues.

¹ As defined by Hertfordshire Highways

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Fig 4: Historic Built Environment in and around the Cross



Source: NHDC Royston Conservation Area Review (2007)

vi) Other onsite constraints

There are currently public conveniences on the northern Cross area, therefore any development will either have to incorporate them or provision will have to be made elsewhere.

1.5 Site Opportunities

i) Improvement of Public Realm

Trees

There are only a small number of trees in Royston Town Centre and Royston Cross provides a large proportion of them. The trees provide a noticeable difference driving along Baldock Street / Melbourn Street as they change the streetscene from one of terraced buildings fronting onto the street to one that provides greenery and shade, something that is not a common occurrence in the rest of the town centre.

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Improvement of the open space

The Cross contains two areas of urban open space. Although they are open they are underused and so there is much potential for improvement. Whether it be through improvement of the open space or formal development onsite, encouraging people to use the space more will enhance the whole area. The site's historical origins should be more widely appreciated and the area should be an attraction in its own right drawing people to it. Currently it appears underused.

ii) Extension of town centre

The site is located to the north of the town centre and provides a key opportunity to extend the retail area and create better north - south pedestrian linkages. There are shops north of the Cross, however they are cut off from the main town centre area by the road. Reducing the barrier and making this area more accessible will bring the area closer to the town centre.

iii) Bringing the town centre closer to the station

Reducing the barrier of Baldock / Melbourn Street will not only increase the attractiveness of the area north of the road it will also increase links to and from the station to the town centre, potentially increasing the footfall and the overall attractiveness of the town. This could bring about a more vibrant town centre as commuters and passengers will view the town centre as not being so far away and could be more likely to pop into the town centre.

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2.0 Policy Assessment

2.1 National Policy

The Government's approach to planning is set out in PPS1: *Delivering Sustainable Development*. This seeks to ensure a better quality of life for everyone now and in the future. Planning for the historic built environment is contained in the recently published PPS5: *Planning for the Historic Environment*, which seeks to protect the historic built environment and utilise it to create sustainable places.

Policy on planning for town centres is contained in PPS4: *Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth*. This identifies a town centre first approach for main town centre uses and seeks to encourage development that is accessible by sustainable methods of transport.

Planning for Open Space is currently contained in PPG17 (although this was under a process of review under the previous Labour Government) which states that well maintained open spaces can help create environments that are attractive, clean and safe.

2.2 North Hertfordshire District Council Local Plan (1996)

Policy 21 of the Saved Local Plan seeks to protect private and public open space in the district's towns and seeks to ensure that any future development is acceptable by retaining the character, form and layout. The policy also encourages small-scale environmental improvements, where the pattern of open space is reinforced.

Royston Cross is also located within the town centre boundary and within Royston Conservation Area. Primary Shopping Frontage is located to the south along the High Street as detailed in Policy 43 of the Saved Local Plan.

2.3 North Hertfordshire Core Strategy and Development Policies (in preparation)

Core Policy M of the Core Strategy sets out the district's retail hierarchy for centres. Royston is identified as a town centre together with Hitchin, Letchworth GC and Royston.

Development Policy 5 sets requirements for design, safety and sustainability. These requirements seek to guide development and include issues such as responding positively to local context, enhance public realm...etc.

2.4 Royston Town Centre Strategy SPD (2008)

As detailed in the introduction, the area is identified in the Royston Town Centre Strategy as an "opportunity area" (RTC2). It identifies the possibility for improvement of the area as it is an important gateway to the town centre from the north.

The possibility for development on the Cross area is recognised, although the need to fit with the surrounding character is a key consideration. Extension of the public realm and pathways in the area are recognised as creating a more pedestrian and cycle-friendly environment encouraging visitors and increasing pedestrian priority.

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2.5 Royston Urban Transport Plan (UTP)

The Royston Urban Transport Plan (UTP) Stage 2 Report² was published in April 2010. The Plan seeks to promote more sustainable modes of transport in accordance with the Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan³. There is much cross over between the Royston UTP and the Town Centre Strategy and there are many common objectives seeking to improve pedestrian access and movement in the Town, as well as improving the pedestrian importance at the Cross.

The UTP identified a particular scheme (Scheme Reference A4) specifically for the Cross in which it proposed changes, the majority of which are being taken forward in this brief. These points include:

- Improving walking links
- The need to pedestrianise the Cross
- Widening the path and narrow road at Kneesworth Street heading south to the Cross
- Formalised/zebra crossings at Baldock Street, turning left into King Street (most dangerous place in Royston);□

Elsewhere in the draft plan other potential projects that may affect this area include:

- The bus route being redirected down Kneesworth Street instead of Green Drift (Scheme C1)
- Improvement of pedestrian crossing near Morrison's (Scheme A2)
- Relocation of crossing along Melbourn Street near police station (Scheme A1)
- Relocation of taxi rank from Upper Kings Street to Lower King Street (Scheme C2)

2.6 North Hertfordshire District Council Sustainable Community Strategy

The Council's Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) was published in 2009. This sets out 10 particular themes on a number of different priorities in North Hertfordshire. These relate to the environment, community safety, health, economic prosperity...etc. It also places an emphasis on town centres, specifically seeking "sensitive and appropriate regeneration". It also seeks to improve the economic performance of the district's towns, which this brief will also contribute towards through an enhanced environment.

The Council's Corporate plan has also been recently reviewed and identifies three priorities, they are:

- Town Centres
- Sustainable Development
- Green spaces

² Royston Urban Transport Plan (2010) Available from:
<http://www.hertsdirect.org/envroads/roadstrans/transplan/tcatp08/tcatp/roystonutp/>

³ Hertfordshire Urban Transport Plan 2006/7 – 2010/11 Available from:
<http://www.hertsdirect.org/envroads/roadstrans/transplan/tcatp08/>

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This Brief is seeking to enhance and improve Royston through enhancement of the town centre area and enabling greater pedestrian importance. It can therefore be viewed as in accordance with what the Council is seeking to achieve corporately. The district's town centres represent key drivers for development and change in the district and therefore, this type of project will be viewed as extremely important. There are also a number of other projects taking place in the districts town centres and particularly Royston that this project will contribute to and work in combination with.

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3.0 Site Strategy

3.1 Aim

Through enhancement of Royston Cross we will make the area safer, more pedestrian friendly, creating a more pleasant environment.

3.2 Objectives

We will do this through:

- improving the link and priority for pedestrians between the northern Cross area to the High Street area to the south
- improving the usage and linkage of the open spaces
- standardising the street furniture and reducing street clutter

3.3 Potential Development Options

Using the ideas from the Royston Town Centre Strategy (SPD) and the UTP and through consideration of the major issues onsite, there would appear to be two different approaches that could form options for the development of the Royston Cross site in addition to a “do nothing” approach. Simply put the options are:

- 1) Formal development onsite
- 2) Environmental / public realm / pedestrian enhancements
- 3) Do nothing

Environmental improvements to the areas of open space and the need to improve pedestrian priority could form part of the formal development option as they are not considered mutually exclusive.

Although the area of open space to the south of Melbourn Street/ Baldock Street is larger, there is a highway that passes through it meaning that it is the northern area of open space that could possibly accommodate a new building. This evidently presents certain challenges due to its small size as it is only (approx) 465m² in area.

Requirements from the North Hertfordshire Conservation Team have identified the need to ensure that the façade of the public house (The Coach and Horses) in the area of open space area to the north is maintained, meaning that any building will have to be free-standing.

3.4 Option 1 – *Development of a Building on Land to the North of the Cross. (Potentially Including Improvement of Open Space, Pedestrian Importance)*

Proposals listed below in Options 2a,b,c may still apply to this option, however the Key Features of this particular Option include:

- i) A two storey free standing building on northern cross area

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i) Two storey free standing building on Northern Cross area

The area of open space north of Baldock Road is roughly 465m², therefore any building would have to fit within this area but still allow the site to operate as open space and enable freedom of movement. The building may also have to include the toilets that are currently onsite unless they could be relocated somewhere proximate.

The open feel of the area would have to be maintained, which understandably may be difficult as the building is likely to rationalise the building line. The likelihood is that any development would have to be two storeys high to enable a scheme to be viable and to fit with surrounding building heights. The aspiration would be to include an “A” class use on the ground floor, possibly a café i.e. something that encourages footfall and interacts with the open space. Residential development is likely to be developed on the first floor as this would contribute to the viability of the scheme.

Any development would have to respect the character of the historic built environment, which would be a key determining factor. The building has to be freestanding, meaning that all four sides of it would be visible from the surrounding routes.

The design of the building will be extremely important. Because of the location and freestanding nature it is very likely that the building would have to be a “landmark building”, respecting the character but something that stands out. The development at the ground floor level will need to be interactive providing a use that engages with the open space. It will need to create a draw to bring people from the High Street to the south and the station from the north. The sides fronting onto roads are likely to be active. To the rear fronting the pub could provide access or location for a kitchen.

3.5 Option 2a- Improvement of Open Space and Pedestrian Importance.

This option seeks to improve the general environment of the Cross including various different methods and features that will be implemented in combination. The specifics of this option involve:

- i) Raise the Cross area in carriageway
- ii) Widen pathway on Kneesworth Street but retain two lane turning at junction
- iii) Move stop line on Baldock Street west to behind Lower King Street
- iv) Expand width of pedestrian crossing areas.
- v) Rationalise street furniture and make environmental improvements

i) Raise Cross Area in carriageway

Creating an obvious visual difference between the approaching routes and the Cross area should give further priority to pedestrians. This should make drivers slow down as they will understand that they are entering an area where they are more likely to encounter pedestrians.

The raised effects will occur at all approaches to the junction, although it must be relatively gradual to allow HCVs and low loaders the appropriate gradient to pass over without damage. But at the same time it must provide enough of a change to make vehicles slow down.

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The modified paving should also incorporate both areas of open space to give a feeling of continuity. The materials for the raised block paving / pavement will need to show a clear differentiation from the materials which are currently in place in the Cross area. At the same time they must be sensitive to the historic built environment in terms of character, colour, age...etc. Consultation with North Hertfordshire District Council Conservation Team will be required to ensure that these requirements are met and that the historic feel of the area is not compromised.

ii) Widen pathway on Kneesworth Street but retain two lane turning at junction

As detailed in the draft Royston UTP the footpath along Kneesworth Street is very narrow. Increasing the width to a minimum of 2m will afford greater pedestrian safety. The width of the road can be maintained by extending the road into the hatched parking area within the northern area of open space. This will evidently reduce the area of open space available, which may further hinder Option 1.

This approach may present issues for loading as the loading bay will essentially become part of the road. Loading restrictions may need to be implemented to prevent either of the lanes becoming blocked.

iii) Move stop line on Baldock Street West to behind Lower King Street

This feature is not proposed in the UTP but preventing the left turn along Lower King Street other than when the traffic lights are green may prevent rat running to the Station and could make this junction much safer. Applying this approach will essentially enable crossing in any direction at any time if all traffic lights are on red. This will really afford priority to pedestrians, which has not been the case in the past. It could also remedy the issue with rat-running that takes place down Lower King Street as currently there is no formal, signalled junction here.

This element of the scheme may require some additional modelling along Baldock Street, as it may impact on the roundabout near Morrisons. Also some investigation of whether by preventing traffic turning left would simply divert the problem along Green Drift instead would need investigation.

iv) Expand Width of Pedestrian Crossing areas

The UTP proposed to extend the size of the main crossing area between Kneesworth Street and Lower King Street, however if number iii) above is implemented the crossing area will be substantially bigger than it is now, allowing pedestrians the freedom to cross in any direction they wish.

v) Rationalise Street Furniture and make environmental improvements

Currently the street furniture includes bins, signs, trees, benches, railings, bushes, lampposts, security cameras, bollards and also the Royston Stone. These features all contribute toward reducing the openness of the area (especially to the south where the stone is located). The area should be freed from clutter and the stone should be made more visible.

The type of street furniture used should ideally be regularised in this area. The trees, signage, seats, bins...etc should match the standard form in Royston and should be simplified and where possible combined to reduce clutter. The green features should also be rationalised to enable a greater degree of movement. The furniture in general should be organised paying close attention to desire lines.

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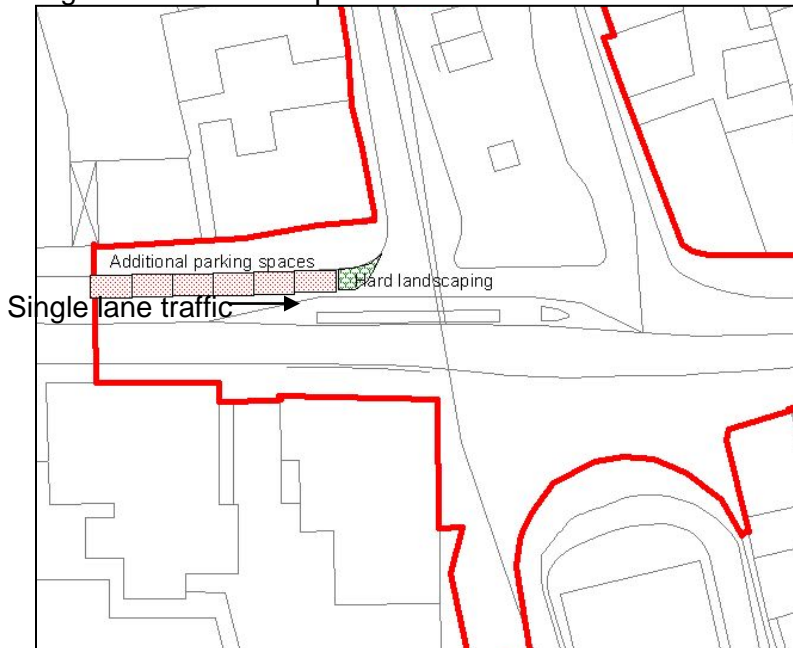
3.6 Option 2b – *As option 2a, except no movement of Stop Line on Baldock Street*

This option is the same for all parts of Option 2a apart from part iii). For this option the stop line would remain when it is now or moved slightly west to increase crossing size but would continue to allow vehicles to turn left into Lower King Street. This would not allow freedom for pedestrians anywhere across the Cross area and would not help reduce the rat-running that takes place around the Morrison's roundabout to the Station.

3.7 Option 2c – *Parking along Baldock Street reducing left turning along Lower Kings Street*

A less drastic option to part iii) in Option 2a to reduce the left hand turning along Lower Kings Street from Baldock Street, would be to allocate some parking on the northern side of Baldock Street. This would mean that there would not be a constant stream of vehicles turning left into Lower Kings Street and there would be some additional delay as it would restrict road width. It would not mean that the stop line is moved behind the junction. Again as with Option 2b this would not allow freedom for pedestrians anywhere across the Cross area, but it would reduce the amount of traffic turning left into Lower Kings Street.

Fig 6: Illustration of Option 2c



3.8 Option 3 – *Do nothing*

There is of course the option to do nothing on the site. This would mean that none of the issues identified in Section 1.4 above would be rectified and the road would continue to be a pedestrian barrier.

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4.0 Next Steps / Delivery

Depending on which option is chosen will ultimately determine how this project will be delivered.

Built development (option 1)

Should the option to build on the northern area of the Cross be chosen, this brief will guide the development process whereby tenders will be sought to undertake the work. Ultimately this process will lead to the submission of a planning application for the work.

Enhancement works (options 2a,b,c)

There are a number of mechanisms through which the enhancement works could be delivered. They could occur through pooling together of Section 106 monies. This could be through contributions to open space.

They could also occur through implementation of Scheme A4 in the UTP. There is considerable overlap between this project and what is contained in the UTP, therefore if funding was available it would be sensible to implement the schemes together, however, this is dependent on Hertfordshire Highway budgets and priorities.

As the brief affects large amounts of Highways land, Hertfordshire Highways are likely to be involved in both the detailed design and the implementation of the scheme. Royston First (Royston's bid company) will also be involved in both the detailed design and the implementation of the project as they provide representation of businesses in the town and ensures consultation with businesses affected.

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