Erith Western Gateway

Renaissance Strategy

Adopted 19 January 2004
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Introduction

The Regeneration of Erith Town Centre and Riverside

Changes in the structure of industry and transport within Bexley Thames-side throughout the second half of the last century have left a legacy of traffic and environmental problems. Nowhere is this transition and its associated problems more obvious than in Erith town centre where the decline in commercial activity in the area as a whole has been reflected in the level and quality of local service provision.

The decline of Erith as a local service centre has been exacerbated by a poor quality shopping environment. The comprehensive redevelopment of the town in the late 1960s resulted in a poorly designed precinct centre and high density housing development which effectively severed the centre’s connections with the river and created a bland and characterless townscape.

For over a decade the Council has been working with the local community to regenerate Erith town centre and its riverside. This commenced, in the late 1980s, with the re-designation of industrial land in the West Street area of Erith for housing. Resulting development within this area has secured the decontamination of industrial land and the provision of riverside housing and open space. Access to the river has also been improved with the provision of the Thames Cycle and Pedestrian Route which runs through the area.

The improvement of the environment in West Street has been aided by the completion, in 1997, of Bronze Age Way. This extension to the South Thames Development Route diverted industrial traffic away from West Street and has enabled the carrying out of a range of traffic calming measures and other environmental improvements.
Vacant industrial land to the east of the town has also been developed in recent years to improve the retail offer of the centre and provide further riverside housing. The Morrisons supermarket development on the former Erith Deep Wharf site has proven a great success, significantly increasing visits to the town and opening up a large stretch of the riverside for recreation and leisure use. Environmental improvements were also secured within the established retail area of the town but the benefits for the precinct centre anticipated as a result of the Morrisons development have never materialised.

Between the recent residential development to the west of the town, the supermarket and housing development to the east and the precinct at the centre is an area of riverside land which incorporates a mix of existing uses and vacant sites. This area is centred on Erith High Street and encompasses the Erith Riverside Conservation Area.

Lying as it does at the junction of these regeneration areas it is considered a key link between them and offers the opportunity to create flows and interactions which will effectively knit the river, the town and its hinterland together. The importance of this area is further enhanced by its historic connection with the development of Erith, the existence of important townscape buildings and the leisure and recreational opportunities offered by its proximity to the river.

Vacancy levels within Erith Precinct have risen in recent years while its appearance and general environment have continued to decline. However, the Council granted planning permission for the renovation and extension of Erith Precinct in October 2002 which incorporated the creation of two large retail units, the conversion of the existing multi-storey car park into flats and the complete re-cladding of the existing structures. Construction work on this scheme commenced in October 2003 with an anticipated completion in the Spring of 2005.

MORRISONS SUPERMARKET, JAMES WATT WAY

ERITH RIVERSIDE HAS IMPORTANT VIEWS OF THE RIVER THAMES
The Erith Western Gateway

Within the western half of this riverside area a number of adjacent sites have recently become available for development. Given the importance of this riverside area in the further regeneration of Erith the Council engaged Urbed, the urban and economic development group, to produce a Regeneration Strategy and Planning Brief.

The development of land in this area of Erith is considered to present one of the best opportunities to secure the sustainable regeneration of Erith’s historic riverside. The following Regeneration Strategy sets out the results of a comprehensive urban design study of these sites which collectively are described as the Erith Western Gateway. This strategy informs and underpins the associated Planning Brief which seeks to guide the development of the sites set out below.

1. Former Walnut Tree Depot
2. The LEB Site
3. The Riverside Baths
4. The Running Horses Pub (land to side and rear)
5. Playground Site
6. Riverside Gardens
7. Lay-by Site

Appendix 1 on page 26 shows the location and extent of these sites.

The Regeneration Strategy seeks to set out the context of the site, including the historical development of Erith and the existing planning and regeneration framework. It then examines the characteristics of the brief area itself including existing constraints and the opportunities and threats presented.

From this analysis is drawn a number of key issues and considerations which are combined with the results of public consultation to provide a vision for Erith Riverside and a strategy for its renaissance. The following executive summary sets out the main recommendations of the Renaissance Strategy.

Executive Summary

Constraints

Research and consultations with regard to the Planning Brief area identified a number of constraints including:

Land ownership: Bexley Council owns the freehold interest in the Walnut Tree Depot, Riverside Baths, Playground and Lay-by Sites. The Council also holds an unregistered title to a significant part of the Riverside Gardens and intends, in due course, to seek a registered title to the whole open space area. Barrett Homes has an option on developing the LEB site whilst the Unique Pub Company owns the Running Horses.

Infrastructure: Considerations in this regard include an electricity sub station, the flood defences, a pumping station and main sewer.

Land contamination: sites within the Brief area are likely to have suffered contamination as a result of previous uses and site investigations will be required.

Proposed strategy

A programme of research and consultation carried out by URBED with support from property surveyors King Sturge concluded that:

Development needs to address the issues of under-utilisation of key sites, and the need to create a quality design with some innovative uses to change the area’s image. The design of the scheme should have regard to the Conservation Area and Grade II Listed Library building, preserving and enhancing their character and appearance.
The vision should be to create a ‘Riverside village for the 21st Century’ aimed at developing a ‘pride of place’ connected to a thriving town centre.

The development may benefit from phasing as follows:

**Phase 1:** The Walnut Tree Depot site, the LEB site, and initial improvements to the Riverside Gardens and Playground Sites.

**Phase 2:** The Swimming Pool Site, Running Horses Site and further improvements to the Riverside Gardens.

**Phase 3:** The Lay-by Site.

Any development will be expected to meet the current Unitary Development Plan (UDP) requirements with regard to parking unless a lower provision can be shown to be justified. The resulting parking spaces should be provided on street, to the rear of the Running Horses and in underground parking for the hotel and housing.

Funding for the proposed improvements to local facilities and the public realm will be sought from developers. Requirements in this regard are set out in more detail in the Planning Brief.

**Benefits**

Any development of the Brief area should seek to produce a number of benefits:

- **Regeneration benefits for the people of Erith.**
- **A landmark development for Bexley, sustainably creating a livelier waterfront and enhancing the environmental, social and economic state of the area.**
- **A stimulus to the development of the Woolwich/Bevedere/Erith Zone of Change within Thames Gateway.**
- **Improved community and cultural facilities for the benefit of local residents.**

The type of uses sought are:

- A hotel of approximately 90 rooms on the Walnut Tree site with possibly a linked café, restaurant and gymnasium.
- Over 200 housing units, including 35% affordable homes in accordance with UDP policies, which would be spread throughout the site.
- A multi-functional community facility and café as part of the housing.
- New community/cultural facilities within and around the riverside open space.
- Modestly sized retail and other commercial units on the ground floor of the housing blocks.

There is the opportunity of providing accommodation for community groups and local sports clubs to develop an active leisure community on the edge of the riverside open space. Uses could include pubs, cafes, and facilities for children and youths, accommodation for Erith Rowing Club and Erith Museum.
A Renaissance Project for Erith

1.01 Context: Erith's riverside is an important regeneration opportunity for Bexley, as it offers the chance of not only regenerating an area that has suffered from industrial decline, but also of creating an exemplary scheme within the wider Thames Gateway area. Hence it can serve as a flagship project for the principles of sustainable development and urban renaissance.

1.02 Historic riverside village: Erith’s written history dates back to 695AD, and Erith market to 1316. Its name means muddy haven and it has an ancient history as a place for fitting out boats. It enjoyed a brief period as a fashionable Victorian ‘watering place’ following the development of the pier and pleasure gardens in 1842.

It developed, however, as an industrial centre based on its good rail connections to London. The Handbook to the Environs of London said in 1876: ‘the town consists of the most part of a long narrow street of small houses ‘ and a major feature was the digging of sand for ship's ballast and iron castings.

1.03 Post war redevelopment: In the early 1960s a grand scheme for redeveloping the town centre was promoted. However only a fraction of the proposed works were ever completed. The resulting Precinct Centre has never fulfilled its full potential. It has an inherently limited catchment area as it is on the river and cut off from the surrounding population by roads and the railway. At the same time new blocks of Council flats were built and an area that was once seen as a village became an island, cut off from its surrounding area by roads, railway lines and open space.

1.04 Riverside renaissance: In the last five years, the riverside has seen an upsurge of development and investment. The environment has been improved with extensive landscaping funded through a range of regeneration initiatives. A new Morrisons Superstore has been developed and Bronze Age Way has taken through traffic out of West Street while improving accessibility to the M25 to the east and industrial areas to the west.
This has led to a minor housing boom with over 14% of all new housing in Bexley since the late 1980s being built in Erith, largely on former industrial sites. This has included a significant amount of private housing such as Wimpey’s Chandlers Wharf scheme which is achieving much higher values than have previously been achieved in this part of London. New housing aimed at those whose children have left home is also proving popular. The riverside has been opened up, Erith pier restored, and an attractive promenade created. A planning application has also been approved for the complete renovation and extension of the shopping centre which will transform the centre’s image.

1.05 While the old wharves have been developed as high-density housing and the pier and gardens (which are built partly on reclaimed land) have been restored, traces of old Erith can still be seen. These include the High Street, now a Conservation Area, the Grade II Listed library, town hall and several substantial pubs. Erith’s rich history is interpreted in a museum run by volunteers. However most of Erith’s historic character has been lost. Recent developments, such as the Morrisons supermarket and new riverside housing have begun to instil character and a sense of place. The challenge is how to use the remaining undeveloped sites including the Walnut Tree Road Depot, Swimming Baths and adjacent open land to build on the area’s renaissance.
1.06 Need for a comprehensive scheme:
The riverside in Erith is one of the best opportunities to access the water between Greenwich and Gravesend and one of the few places in London where the railway station is next to the river. There is therefore a real opportunity to use the Walnut Tree Road sites to exploit the potential of the river and to put Erith back on the map as it was in Victorian times. This will only happen if the sites are treated in a comprehensive and coordinated manner and developed to the highest standards.

1.07 The Council as land owner of part of the Brief area and planning authority is ideally placed to do this. The aim should be to create a scheme that is an exemplar within the Thames Gateway by applying the principles of urban renaissance and creating a place where people want to live out of choice not necessity. This is also an opportunity to apply the principles of the London Plan, which encourages higher density developments that secure a compatible mix of uses in areas within walking distance of a railway station.

1.08 Nature conservation: There is a need to maintain and enhance the nature conservation value of the river and adjacent land, since the River Thames corridor is one of London’s most important natural features, being designated a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation. Biodiversity should be central to the character of this reach with the aim of creating new areas of inter-tidal and riverside habitat. Any new landscaping should be appropriate to the location and not be limited to the traditional.

The protection of open spaces should include the network of watercourses which form important wildlife corridors and create linkages between open spaces. These wildlife corridors (which in this instance is the Thames) can provide access to the natural environment in otherwise deprived areas and create functional linkages between open spaces, however these uses must not be at a cost to biodiversity.

2. Planning and Regeneration Framework

2.01 The development of the Western Gateway is affected by a number of previous plans and policies.

- **National and Regional Policy.** Relevant advice is contained within a range of government planning policy guidance (PPG) documents including PPG3 Housing, PPG6 Town Centres and Retail Development, PPG9 Nature Conservation, PPG13 Transport, PPG15 Planning and the Historic Environment and PPG25 Development and Flood Risk. The guidance highlights the importance of the efficient use of land to meet existing housing need. Development should be sustainable, utilizing previously developed land where possible, in areas with good accessibility to local services and public transport. Development within shopping centres should maintain and enhance the viability and vitality of the town, while proposals should aim to effectively conserve wildlife and natural features and take account of the risk of flooding.

- **Regional Planning Guidance (RPG)** is set out in RPG9 Regional Planning Guidance for the South East, RPG9A The Thames Gateway Planning Framework, RPG3 Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities and RPG3B/9B Strategic Planning Guidance for the River Thames. The importance of the Thames Gateway as a regeneration area is highlighted, providing opportunities for new employment and housing development on brownfield sites, effectively linked by improved transport facilities.
London Plan (2004): The London Plan calls for the development of areas around stations and towns centres to higher densities to address the need to build many more homes to house a growing population. A series of policies in URBED’s research report A City of Villages have been incorporated to help make London’s suburbs more sustainable. Erith’s Western Gateway offers a good opportunity for putting the plan’s policies into effect. The London Plan states that UDP policies should set a target for the amount of affordable housing provision over the plan period, which can include a variety of forms of tenure. Erith, along with the neighbouring industrial area of Belvedere, is also identified as an Opportunity Area within the plan. Minimum levels for employment generation and housing development are identified and the establishment of development frameworks are encouraged. The maximisation of plot ratios and mixed-use development are encouraged and development is expected to give rise to substantial planning obligations. The draft plan also calls for biodiversity to be protected and enhanced particularly in the Blue Ribbon Network in and around London’s water features.

Bexley Unitary Development Plan (UDP) (2004): The adopted Unitary Development Plan contains a range of policies which aim to secure development that is compatible with the viability and vitality of the Town Centre, (G11, SH02 SH06, SH018A) and that will contribute to the regeneration of the wider area (G10) while at the same time safeguarding visual and residential amenity (ENV39) and ensuring a safe and efficient highway network (T3, T14). The plan also includes a policy to promote the appropriate development of the Walnut Tree Depot site [SHO(ER1)3] and a series of Design and Development Control guidelines which provide additional detail.

Erith Riverside Masterplan (1987/9): The original studies by DY Davies Associates and Traves Morgan sought to create a stronger community by redeveloping industrial sites and building a new spine road that bypassed the town centre. However it did not resolve the issue of what should be done to improve the fringes of the town centre.

Urban Design and Public Realm Framework (1997): Extensive proposals for upgrading the public realm were produced by Auketts and have led to an improved environment within the town centre. However many of the improvements are cosmetic and do not address the fundamental problems resulting from the loss of urban form.

Walnut Tree Planning Brief (1999): A brief, which was published as Supplementary Planning Guidance, sought a development that would contribute significantly to the regeneration of Erith. It set out high standards of distinctive architectural design to add value to the location. It secured initial interest from one hotel developer but nothing materialised.

Erith Town Centre Strategy and Action Plan (2000): This document, produced in consultation with the Erith Town Forum, identifies a range of action points including the improvement of the riverside, better public transport, health and education facilities and the promotion of community safety.
3. Objectives

3.01 While a new development should not be expected to address all of the area’s issues, the Council’s land ownership and the strong development market means that there should be four demanding objectives or sets of benefits against which any proposals should be judged:

- **Regeneration**: The proposed development should knit together the Conservation Area, the station, the new housing along West Street and the Morrison’s Supermarket development and contribute to the revitalisation of the town centre. The comprehensive redevelopment of the whole Planning Brief area is, therefore, sought.

- **Design**: All development within the Brief area should be of high quality with elements of an award winning standard which will hence help boost civic pride. Quality design will be expected to encompass hard and soft landscaping as well as buildings. Opportunities for the provision of public art should also be pursued wherever possible including the retention or replacement of the existing swimming pool mural.

**Development should help knit together existing uses in the town to aid its regeneration.**
Community: Some of the proceeds from development should be ploughed back into supporting voluntary community and leisure activities, for example, by providing better facilities for young people or developing new community facilities.

Sustainability: The scheme should be a model for sustainable development, making the most of being next to the railway station and within walking distance of shops and leisure facilities. Residential blocks should be built to a relatively high density, benefiting from the added attraction of river views while at the same time ensuring that the amenity of existing residents and the existing character of the area is not adversely affected. Opportunities to promote local biodiversity through habitat features should also be examined.
4. Constraints

4.01 Though the Council has significant land holdings in Erith there are a number of constraints that impact on the development of the site:

4.02 **Ownership:** The Council owns the freehold interest in the Walnut Tree Depot, the Swimming Pool, the Playground and Lay-by sites. The Council also holds an unregistered title to a significant part of the Riverside Gardens and intends, in due course, to seek a registered title to the whole open space area. Barrett Homes have an option on the LEB substation site and the Unique Pub Company owns the Running Horses.

4.03 **Infrastructure:** The sites form part of a narrow strip of land between the river, the railway line and Bronze Age Way. Walnut Tree Road slopes down through the site to the waterfront. Bronze Age Way is above the level of the site and there are unwelcoming tunnels on the route to the station and under the roundabout junction with Walnut Tree Road.

4.04 The LEB sub-station is an important fixture. The transformer is a significant development constraint as it has to be accessed at all times, and cannot be viably moved. This facility has significant underground plant associated with it and this, together with other services in and around the Brief area, should be considered as part of any scheme.

4.05 There are 43 car parking spaces for general use on the Depot Site (site 1) which need to be retained or replaced. There is also a main sewer running through the Depot Site and along Stonewood Road. The existing area adjacent to the River Thames should be enhanced for nature conservation, the existing cycle way and footpath along the river should also be protected and, where possible, enhanced.

4.06 **Land contamination:** There was formerly a small power station next to the tram depot and an oil and gas depot nearby which is likely to have caused significant contamination. A comprehensive site investigation of all parts of the Brief area will therefore be required prior to the commencement of detailed planning including provisions to assess groundwater quality.
4.07 Community expectations: The Erith Town Forum, which brings together many of the local interests, has been concerned to develop the community and leisure role of the area. Their ‘wish list’ for the site includes a conference centre and performance venue with a good quality restaurant which they believe would put Erith on the map. There are also aspirations for a craft centre and art gallery, a second restaurant that might be used by Bexley College’s Catering Department and better premises for the Erith Museum which currently lacks space to display all its collection and has no disabled access. Additional facilities for young people are also considered important. The need for community facilities is to be evaluated through a community facility audit and this study will inform future provision in the Erith area.

4.08 Topography and levels: The natural ground level of the site slopes steeply towards the river. The tower blocks are built on a small promontory with the natural land level falling away towards Walnut Tree Road. However both the tram depot and the power station were cut into the hillside so that Walnut Tree Road has been left on a ridge. These dramatic level changes make the sites more difficult to develop but do create the opportunity for basement parking.

4.09 Conservation: The character of the area includes remnants of the old Erith High Street, important later buildings such as the Running Horses public house, and the Riverside Gardens which are all incorporated within the Erith Riverside Conservation Area. This area includes some important views of the river and used to be an important riverside street.

4.10 The redevelopment of the Swimming Pool and Lay-by Sites is considered an opportunity to re-establish some of the original character of the western area of the High Street. The urban form has become fragmented over time and contrasts with the more traditional built form to the east. Any scheme will be expected to create a high quality street scape with well defined public and private space and interesting facades of benefit to the character and appearance of the area.

4.11 There are also a number of trees along Walnut Tree Road which are of amenity value and should be retained where possible as part of any development. To the south of the Brief area is the Erith Town Hall building and the Grade II Listed Library. The Council has developed a Library Strategy which will see the relocation of this facility. The existing library building will be retained and alternative appropriate uses sought. However, this building is not within the defined Brief area and therefore lies outside the remit of this strategy.

4.12 Flood Defences and Groundwater. The river wall, with tie anchors, running along the northern boundary of the Brief area, forms a part of the Thames flood defences and must not be adversely affected by development. The Environment Agency has also indicated a number of groundwater constraints which will need to be addressed.
5. Opportunities and Threats

5.01 URBED’s initial analysis of the surrounding area identified a number of opportunities but also some threats:

5.02 Highly accessible location: Traditionally Erith, as a riverside location, has suffered from poor accessibility. There is no access from the areas across the river to the north and the area is cut off to the south by the railway. However this is changing with the completion of the M25, the upgrading of the A2 and the recent completion of Bronze Age Way. Rail access has also improved greatly with the introduction of new trains on the North Kent line and links to the Docklands Light Railway, while the possible extension of the Crossrail scheme to Ebbsfleet will impact positively on Erith. These developments have greatly improved the attraction of Erith as a place to live for people working in central London. Erith also benefits from proximity to the metropolitan shopping centres of Bexleyheath and Bluewater.
5.03 **Mixed character:** The High Street lacks the character that it once had and compares poorly to riverside locations such as Hammersmith, Isleworth or even Rotherhithe. These areas have retained more of their historic character and have used the river positively to attract leisure uses. Erith does retain the attractive Riverside Gardens and the promenade has been extended through the new Chandlers Wharf housing and onto the renovated Erith pier. The new housing both at Chandlers Wharf and next to the new Morrisons store has also started to recreate a riverside character. However while the Urban Design Framework produced by Auketts has helped produce some cosmetic improvements, it has not yet created a memorable sense of place.

5.04 **Expanding population:** The Thames Gateway area is seen in the London Plan as a major growth area for the new housing that London needs. In the past Erith has been perceived by some to be the ‘poor relation’ of the rest of Bexley, but its population is changing. A large proportion of the new housing being built in the borough is located in and around Erith. Many of the new residents are young families taking advantage of affordable prices and the short train ride to London. Others are elderly who have more time but less money to spend.

5.05 **Leisure Potential:** Erith, as part of Thames Gateway, could enjoy an urban renaissance as ‘a place where people live out of choice not necessity’. However local people are concerned to avoid Erith becoming a dormitory and its success depends on it becoming a harmonious community and valued neighbourhood, with a thriving centre rather than a series of housing estates. With a range of jobs within easy reach, the key challenge is to retain and attract leisure, recreational and community uses that reinforce the area’s social life. This means making the most of the river views and the existing facilities in the High Street such as the Library, the Theatre, and Rowing Club. It also means improving the linkages with Erith Sports Centre which, in the future, will also incorporate a new swimming pool. There is also a need to put Erith ‘on the map’ and create a pride of place. One way is to attract many people to visit the riverside and the large public houses and areas of open space along the Thames.

Another is to create a landmark community, recreational and leisure area which would appeal to all sections of the community.
5.06 Mixed and balanced communities: Where rapid development takes place, as it previously did in Thamesmead, there can be conflicts between newcomers and more established residents, and between young people and the more elderly. On the whole house prices are relatively low compared to London generally and the area is taking on a new role with significant amounts of housing designed for a variety of occupants. Care must however be taken to integrate these newcomers with the existing residents and to design buildings so as to reduce crime and the fear of crime.

5.07 Erith precinct centre: Though Erith has benefited from a facelift as a result of the Single Regeneration Budget and other regeneration initiatives its shopping centre is in need of renewal. This is due, in part, to its physical appearance which should be greatly improved as a result of its ongoing renovation and extension.

6. Potential Uses

6.01 Having reviewed potential demand, there are a number of uses, which would provide the economic base for a quality scheme:

6.02 Hotel: There is an interest from operators at present to develop a 90 bed hotel, and the most likely market is in the budget category. The main reason for this interest is the proximity of the M25 and the train service to London Bridge. The preferred site would be the Walnut Tree depot as it is close to the station and would be visible from Bronze Age Way. There is also a longer-term possibility of attracting the kind of hotel that would appeal to people coming from abroad and driving up the A2, who would use it as a base for visiting London, as well as to business people wanting to be close to the M25 etc., but at this stage Erith lacks the right image.

6.03 Health and fitness: The research undertaken as part of this study has cast doubt on whether there is a large enough catchment area for health and fitness facilities; particularly given the existing and proposed facilities at the Erith Sports Centre.

The shopping proposals do not envisage much in the way of leisure and so there is potential to use the old High Street to provide complementary attractions.

However budget hotels are being developed with health and fitness operations on the ground floor and this may be combined with bar/restaurants as all three uses feed off each other. Alternatively accommodation for local sports clubs and/or other leisure facilities could be sited on the ground floor of residential blocks catering for local needs and the expanding population.
**6.04 Eating and drinking:** Erith has lost its traditional High Street and the kinds of secondary shops that become restaurants, bars and cafes. The real regeneration challenge is to create a leisure quarter that makes the most of the theatre and the pubs, including the Running Horses which is sought to be retained. This could include an area for eating and drinking overlooking the river. It may also include the reinstatement of commercial development with housing above along the High Street to create a sense of enclosure, thus making it feel safer and more attractive. Establishing a ‘leisure circuit’ will be difficult as there is not the critical mass of the right economic social profile within the residential population to generate demand. The best way forward is, therefore, to use the Running Horses and the Riverside Gardens as a magnet for visitors.

**6.05 Housing:** Given the acute shortages of housing in London and the desirable waterside location offered by the Brief area housing is likely to be of greatest interest to developers. Indeed a large number of house builders have indicated an interest in the area. The Council recognises the importance of the Brief area in meeting local housing need. It will require that 35% of the units are given over to affordable housing on developments of 15 dwellings or more in accordance with UDP policy. The real challenge is creating buildings with more character particularly along the river.

**6.06 Community uses:** There is a local demand to create community facilities, catering for a range of interests. As well as the ideas that have been put forward already, such as sites for a new museum (which perhaps could form part of a small arts centre), there are concerns to cater for young people, and this means the very different needs of families with young children, and teenagers. The masterplan therefore needs to ensure that existing facilities are maintained and enhanced and new facilities are provided where appropriate, while reconciling the potentially conflicting demands of housing and leisure. The Erith Rowing Club could be located within a pavilion building while community uses, could be provided on the ground floor of one of the residential blocks or in other appropriate locations. The results of a forthcoming community facility audit will inform this approach.
6.07 Retail uses: It will be important to create active frontages within the development and encourage flows of movement into and through the area. Modest retail outlets including one or more units adjacent to the proposed hotel site will enhance the complementary mix of uses and increase the viability and vitality of the riverside area and the town centre as a whole.

7. The Development Approach

7.01 Initial discussions in the light of research into demand, and an urban design audit, suggested the need for a Development Strategy with five elements. Though these may change they should guide further work on the masterplan:

7.02 Wider focus: To achieve all the objectives within the considerable constraints the Masterplan needs to include an area currently given over to public open space with the proviso that this would be used for purposes that meet community needs and that the remaining open land benefits from improvements in landscaping and facilities.

7.03 Phased development: The site is likely to be too large to be developed in one phase. Development could, therefore, be phased to build up momentum and to create an environment that can attract the right developers. It is suggested that the initial stages be the residential development of the LEB site, the residential, retail and hotel development of the Walnut Tree Depot site and initial improvements to the Riverside Gardens and Playground sites. The redevelopment of the swimming pool, proposals for the Running Horses, and further improvements to the Riverside Gardens could follow as a second phase with the Lay-by site following as a last phase.

7.04 Public private partnership: Rather than selling the sites off directly, it may be better to work with a single developer or a consortium on a partnership basis, particularly if the scheme needs to be phased to secure best value. It is possible that a builder developer would be interested in both the housing and commercial sides.

7.05 Proactive management: Any form of partnership would need both proactive planning and ongoing management. This will apply to all stages, from marketing the site and choosing partners, to managing a mixed-use area, with the demands this places for higher standards of maintenance. Developers will be expected to contribute to the expense of such maintenance.

7.06 Community engagement: The community will be concerned to secure some benefits, and to be consulted on the scheme. Prospective developers will be expected to progress plans with the full participation of stakeholders including exhibitions and, possibly, design competitions. There may also be the potential to enable various existing community initiatives to obtain a property interest, perhaps through a development trust, so that if the area continues to become more desirable, community uses will not be squeezed out.
8. Key Issues

8.01 Urban quality: The first challenge is incorporating a compatible mix of uses so that the scheme contributes to the regeneration of the town centre and secures local community support. It also needs to overcome the problems of insecurity, due to spaces which are not overlooked, and which are aggravated by tunnels, which are often badly vandalised.

8.02 Regeneration benefits: The second challenge is how to put the pride back into Erith, and help put it on the map again. This means securing uses that will draw people in, and also generate enough funds to pay for some of the ‘wish list ’ of community benefits.

8.03 Implementation: The third challenge is how to maintain the momentum, and ensure that adjacent owners collaborate in securing a comprehensive and quality development.

9. Consultations

9.01 Consultations with the main landowners and also members of the community shows a degree of consensus on the importance of a high quality mixed-use scheme.

9.02 Landowners: All relevant landowners recognise the value of a Planning Brief for the area and are supportive of the general principles of the scheme as outlined above. All however are operating to different timescales and have varying priorities. This Strategy and associated Planning Brief tries to balance these competing demands to ensure the best approach to the regeneration of the area.

9.03 Erith Town Forum: The Erith Town Forum emphasised the importance of retaining the Running Horses and of not building tall buildings that would overshadow the neighbouring blocks. There was also concern about traffic movement, improving the waterfront and providing a range of leisure and community facilities.
9.04 Local stakeholders: Over 70 people, drawn from local residents, businesses, developers, and others with an interest, attended a roundtable workshop at the Running Horses in September 2002. This succeeded in generating a number of good ideas and some basic principles to guide the development. In particular there was agreement on the potential for developing more housing, but a concern that it should not damage the visual or residential amenity of the area including river views and that it should incorporate a mix of tenures. The workshop was also supportive of a hotel, restaurants, places for young people and families to gather, and improved public transport (including river buses). Further public consultation was undertaken at the draft Planning Brief stage and included:

- a public exhibition
- a postal questionnaire
- a public meeting
- information on the Council’s website

This Renaissance Strategy and the Planning Brief were modified in response to these consultations.

10. High Density Development

10.01 It is clear from consultation with local stakeholders that there is some concern with regard to high density, mixed use development. It is considered to lead to poor design, overcrowding, disturbance and social problems. However, high density, mixed use development is an essential element of the approach taken within the Erith Western Gateway and this section seeks to clarify the reasons for this approach and its advantages.

10.02 Well-designed high density development is required to accommodate London’s growing population. Much of this growth is to be directed to the Thames Gateway where large areas of former industrial land are available for development. Town centres within the Thames Gateway will play a key role in development since they are the locations of existing service provision and public transport nodes. It is important, therefore, that we can accommodate both our existing and future needs and help to create sustainable communities. Carefully planned high density development incorporating housing, commercial and leisure uses with good landscaping schemes can ensure that we preserve London’s open spaces, improve the urban environment and, overall, enhance the town dwellers’ quality of life. Mixed use developments are also energy efficient, reducing the need to travel.

10.03 High density living does not have to mean that we have to cram our town with high rise, unsympathetic and unattractive development.

The problems of the post war housing estates, where poor design led to high crime figures, poor environments and numerous social problems, are well documented. This contrasts markedly from earlier solutions to compact urban living which was achieved by building well designed, high quality structures around a square or open space. This perimeter block approach, which dates back to
mediaeval times, results in a safe, sheltered private area, which is neither visible, or accessible from public areas. High density perimeter blocks now form some of our most desirable residential areas and examples can be seen today in exclusive areas of London, Bath, Edinburgh and Dublin.

10.04 We need to ensure that we learn from the best of the past and the present to ensure a scheme for the Erith Western Gateway, which will sustain and strengthen our local community. Acceptable designs should respect the local environment, natural features and Erith’s historical, industrial and maritime heritage. Imaginative designs can produce great buildings and provide the opportunity to create an outstanding landmark for the area.

10.05 The following design elements are present in the most successful high density developments:

- variations in building heights and roof styles which helps reduce the apparent mass of the building and adds interest to the sky line.
- interesting façades with balconies, bay windows, columns, coining detail, different types of brickwork and variations in material which add interest to the street scene and enhance the townscape.
■ Using the natural topography to produce buildings which step down towards the river. This may protect views as well as actively drawing the eye towards the river with the creation of new walkways and vistas,

■ Good quality landscaping which can soften and frame buildings and provide screening between sites.
11. Vision for Erith Riverside

11.01 The aim is to create a dense and intricate place that will be a pleasure to visit, and that will transform Erith’s image to both its residents and the wider world. This will have three aspects:

11.02 Riverside village for the 21st century: Inspired by both Erith’s past and the example of Greenwich Millennium Village, the development should be forward looking in its architectural style while creating an urban form that re-establishes the old pattern of connected streets.

11.03 Opportunities for urban renaissance: Quality designers are needed to turn the masterplan into a place that will be a pleasure to live in and secure wider recognition. Standard designs must be avoided, and something unique created along the waterfront.

11.04 A place to be proud of: The principle of engaging the community in the process needs to be followed up, with projects that tap into local resources and needs, and involve groups like children or the elderly who can easily feel excluded, and provide them with facilities they will value.

12. Strategy for Urban Renaissance

12.01 The urban design analysis has lead to a scheme that recreates a street pattern, and that maximises views. There are three main types of use in the proposed scheme:

12.02 Business hotel: The interest in building a hotel near the station should be taken up, and space reserved for expansion and upgrading that can be used for car parking for the station in the short term. The right operator is needed that will be committed to helping to promote Erith Riverside as an up and coming place.

12.03 Mix of housing: The development of new housing should start with the LEB site and the lower parts of the Walnut Tree Depot site. The Swimming Pool site could be developed as a later phase while the Running Horses also offers the opportunity for additional housing through sympathetic part conversion and/or extension.

12.04 Active waterfront: The key to developing the waterfront as a lively place is a compatible series of uses that generate activity and attracts visitors, while at the same time maintaining and enhancing the river’s importance for nature conservation. On the foreshore these uses could include boat restoration and moorings for visiting boats. Commercial uses could include a restaurant, bars, cafes and modestly sized retail units. Community uses which could be run by a community owned development trust with a volunteer not-for-profit organisation, could include the museum/art gallery (using wall space), a community hall and meeting rooms, youth and child play facilities. The concentration of visitor car parking along the High Street will also generate activity, with people coming and going. The restoration of an old boat could act as a job creation and training exercise, as well as an opportunity to generate interest. A new pier and storage for the boat club, under a new pavilion building, could help to ensure that local people share in the benefits, and also open up views of the water.
You may wish to refer to the associated document for the Erith Western Gateway Planning Brief which provides a design framework with guidelines for any development schemes to follow. If you wish to receive a copy or have any questions please contact

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