

# Briefing Note



## Tamworth Local Plan EiP

### HD22 Response: Further Statement on Gungate Retail Redevelopment Scheme

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1. This note response to further material submitted, at the Inspector's request, to the EiP in relation to the Gungate Retail Redevelopment Scheme. A statement has jointly been prepared by Tamworth Borough Council (TBC) and WYG to address the Inspector's specific questions.
2. The Inspector asked for a response on three specific matters in relation to the Gungate scheme:
  - i. An expression of intent and any indication of scheme deliverability;
  - ii. Real or perceived barriers to implementation and how these will be overcome; and
  - iii. A timeline indicating principal milestones for project delivery.
3. In responding to these matters, WYG make the following main points:
  - Henry Boot has struggled to secure interest from prospective tenants in a depressed market, including two years of negotiations to secure an anchor tenant, who ultimately pulled out for their own business reasons;
  - Ventura Retail Park absorbed any retailer interest during this period, as it offered the 'large floorplate' units that retailers were seeking;
  - The market has improved considerably since the recession; and
  - Henry Boot is working on an aggressive marketing campaign to secure interest and that they have ambitious plans to start work on site in Q4 2016.
4. Essentially, Henry Boot blames the recession and Ventura Retail Park (and other out of centre developments) for their inability to deliver the Gungate scheme to date. However, there clearly has been retailer interest in Tamworth, as WYG state, as the Retail Parks have continued to respond to market conditions during this time.
5. It is also relevant to note that the original planning application supporting the Gungate scheme (ref:0557/2008), it was proposed that the 20,660sqm retail floorspace would be distributed across 15 units. Table 1 of the WYG Planning Statement supporting the application provides a floorspace accommodation schedule. It shows that only 6 of the 15 units (40%) would

be above 929sqm (10,000sqft) or provide 'large floorplate' units. This is a very small overlap and underlines the difference between the Retail Parks and the town centre.

6. In our view, and as demonstrated in the shopper survey (document HD12a and b), the reality is that shoppers see the town centre and the Retail Parks as two different locations. As questions 11 and 12 show, the Retail Parks compete directly with Birmingham and with online shopping, not with Tamworth town centre.
7. Henry Boot consider that the market conditions have changed in more recent times and the WYG submission sets out an ambitious timeframe for the delivery of the scheme.
8. In this regard, WYG anticipate:
  - Exchange of contracts with new tenants will be achieved within 6 months of the launch of the marketing campaign;
  - Submission and determination of a fresh planning application will happen within 3 months. Presumably a fresh application is required because in Appendix A, WYG confirm that Henry Boot will consider any interest expressed for alternative uses, in addition to those approved, for the site in their response to (ii). This timeframe is challenging considering the time lapsed between the submission of the original application and signing of the S106 agreement was over 18 months;
  - In entirety, Henry Boot expect to be able to finalise scheme design, secure tenants, gain fresh planning permission, satisfy planning conditions, award contracts and start work on site within a period of around 15 months, when they have been unable to do so since taking control of the site some 9 years ago.
9. We wish Henry Boot Development Ltd the best of luck. We have been told many times that Gungate will be delivered and it is difficult not to be cynical. If, as we suspect, the timeframe quickly begins to slip, it would be a poor planning strategy for the Council to continue to seek to delay the delivery of other retail floorspace and investment which can meet identified retail needs in the short term in the hope that Gungate may be delivered in the longer term.
10. In their response to (ii) in Appendix A, WYG state that Henry Boot are considering alternative uses at the site (in addition to retail), '*in order to ensure a viable scheme is delivered at the site at the earliest opportunity*'. We welcome this flexibility. However, despite their assurances, this statement raises further uncertainty over the scheme. Firstly, it suggests that

the approved scheme is not viable, and secondly it raises questions over what the scheme will ultimately be comprised, including how much retail floorspace will ultimately be delivered. Although assurance is given that it will be in line with what has been approved, other uses such as leisure, hotel and other A3 uses are also likely to require ground floor floorspace. There is, therefore, no guarantee that the quantum of retail floorspace will be close to that currently approved.

11. We are also aware of the very pressing demand for further residential development in Tamworth. As such, we assume that residential use will also be considered within the mix of uses. We consider that residential development of the site will have significant strategic benefits in helping to meet housing demand in the Borough and supporting the health of the town centre.
12. In their part of the joint response, TBC state that there is '*no reason to doubt that the scheme is deliverable*'. The very significant delays to the delivery of any form of redevelopment on this site (currently around 9 years) are, in our view, clear reason to doubt the deliverability of the approved scheme.
13. Indeed, at Appendix A, WYG identify what they perceive to be the barriers to implementation. WYG do not mention issues associated with: archaeology in the town centre; flooding and surface water drainage; the impact of such large development on the townscape and nearby heritage assets; and traffic, servicing and car parking. Addressing these practical issues is much more likely to challenge the delivery of the scheme than what happens at the Retail Parks. These are genuine issues that will need to be addressed at the detailed design stage.
14. Finally, in Appendix A, WYG state that retailer demand in Tamworth has been met out of town, and this was 'to the detriment of the town centre, and in particular, the Gungate site.
15. There are two points to address here. Firstly, there is no evidence that retailers chose the Retail Parks in preference to Gungate. In our view, like the public, retailers see the two markets as serving different functions and not directly competing. Secondly, as was discussed at the EiP, there is no evidence that the town centre has been adversely affected by the Retail parks. The town centre remains vital and viable (see WYG's statement in document HD17).
16. In summary, the response provided by TBC and WYG seeks to provide the Inspector with assurances that the Gungate scheme will be delivered in the short term. We do not consider that there is sufficient evidence to confirm

that the scheme will be delivered in the short term. In our view it is much more likely that it will be many years before a viable scheme is delivered in the town centre. In the meantime, we have identified a significant outstanding need for new comparison goods floorspace in Tamworth now and in the short term that needs to be accommodated. As we have stated in our previous representations to the EiP, a planning strategy that fails to recognise and deliver retail needs in full is not one which accords with the NPPF.

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