

Viability assessment and conclusion that the Kennet Centre is no longer viable.

Issues identified that indicate the conclusion was flawed.

Centre Viability

Economics Officer error

Data used by the economics officer at West Berkshire Council contained fundamentally inaccurate information. This information was presented to the Western Area Planning and District Planning committees. It was used as the reasoning that the kennet centre was no longer viable and so underpinned the developers argument that the kennet centre should be redeveloped.

The officer unfortunately only did some online research. i.e. he never visited the site or walked around the town. He concluded from this online research that a comparable area (Parkway) had little to no lack of occupancy. This was fundamentally untrue.

- He was challenged at a Western Area Planning meeting about this statement by myself
 - I had walked around parkway that day and noted at least 5 units that were unoccupied.
 - I knew of at least 1 unit that has never been and is still not occupied.
- The officer confirmed at the meeting that he had only done online research and that the data used was wrong.
- When then asked if he knew about another recently completed comparable “build to rent” scheme, just opposite the Kennet centre, he also indicated that he had not visited or walked around the area.

The occupancy levels around town, formed the base reason for suggesting that the Kennet Centre was no longer viable.

Given the incomplete and incorrect data used for the viability assertion by the officer, their conclusion is likely flawed.

Developer actions

The developer seems to have taken specific steps that have ensured occupancy has remained low in the kennet centre.

This ranges from advertising only very short term tenancies, through minimal maintenance, and even during festive periods doing the minimum. Whilst the last two might be because of financial constraints the first has hard evidence to support it.

Even current adverts for units at the Kennet centre show leases are only available as very short term. One I found on rightmove, dated January 2025, said leases can only be guaranteed until Jan 2026. So just 6 months at time of writing.

https://media.rightmove.co.uk/128k/127330/153874106/127330_3471LH_DOC_00_00_02.pdf . A second, which is on the Quintons (Local Estate agent) website, also states

that the guaranteed occupancy date is only until Jan 2026.

<https://www.quintons.co.uk/property-search/property-details?id=3199&details=the-kennet-centre-139-bartholomew-street-newbury-berkshire-retail%2Fshops>

- Whilst smaller units might well want shorter leases, any large unit requires long leases in order to justify the investment in setup. Therefore by not offering them an artificial barrier is created.
- Maintenance and Decoration. The Kennet centre at XMAS 2024 was barely decorated. Some small animatronics in one area (which was rolled out from previous years) was the only effort made. This and the largesse used in the maintenance and general decoration of the centre makes an environment pushing potential renters away.
- When these actions, which can only be deliberate choices of the developer are combined, it becomes apparent that any efforts have tended towards making the Kennet Centre unviable.
- Viability underpins the developers case to knock it all down.

Easy Renting and New proposal Viability

Arguments have been put forward as to why the replacement units being offered in the proposed development are as proposed. It is argued, that it is this way for viability of the development.

It is also linked to the developers argument that what they propose must be as large as it is and have no affordable homes as well as inadequate parking.

- 1) The argument has been put forward that because the units would be new and fitted out, that they would rent.
 - a. Evidence from across the road, where another build to rent scheme exists, does not support that. The unit that was fitted out as a gym for a short while, is now empty. It has been for some time. So being fitted out is not an indicator of easy rent. There are units around Newbury that are fitted out, refurbished in prime locations etc. Therefore there is no evidence to support the applicants postulations.
- 2) A second argument was put forward that the offices would also rent out easily.
 - a. There is again no evidence to support this, rather the opposite. Offices without parking have remained empty throughout Newbury. See Offices on the 1st and second floors of Northbrook street for evidence. They have

been empty for years since the parking charges began to rise significantly around 2018. Given parking is a known issue in the proposal, then the developers argument falls towards wishful thinking.

- b. Shadowing. The proposal creates a new street that suffers significantly from shadowing. As someone who owns several offices in Newbury, this is not desirable or conducive to easy renting.
- c. Wind. Again because of the nature and orientation of the new street, it becomes a wind tunnel. This again further reduces the desirability of offices placed there.

Conclusion.

I have sat on various planning committees for around 6 years already and even chaired Western Area planning for a short while. I have several businesses, one of which holds a portfolio of commercial and private buildings.

This experience underpins my statements above.

Therefore, given everything presented, it is clear that the initial viability argument of the kennet centre existing as is, falls short of the officers conclusion that it was no longer viable. If we compare to the process needed for change of use of a country pub , where it must be clearly shown that every effort has been made to run it as a going concern. Then the opposite seems true of the kennet centre.

- 1) No real attempt has been made to fill the kennet centre with business. Rather the opposite appears to be the case and active actions undertaken to ensure the Kennet centre fails.
- 2) What is offered as a replacement stands no more chance of succeeding than what it replaces.

Therefore the development is not about what the town needs, or what people need. It is simply about maximising the profit on a site.