

3 Echo Square, Cross Lane East, Gravesend, DA12 1NP.

Proposed change of use of the ground floor shop from Class E(a) to restaurant, Class E (b) with Sui Generis use, hot food takeaway.

Description

The shop forms part of a parade of shops and has a flat to the upper parts. The flat is arranged with a lounge, bathroom and kitchen on the first floor and bedrooms on the second floor. The flat is accessed from the rear via an external staircase.

The shop is a lock up shop with a shop front to Cross Lane East and a rear access to a pathway that leads down the garden to a rear access gate. The bin store for the shop is at the rear of the garden.

The shop is vacant.

Planning

The National Planning Policy Framework was updated in 2021. This is a more recent planning document than Gravesham Borough Council's Local Plan Core Strategy adopted in 2014 and slightly updated in 2019 to reflect the requirement to allocate more land for new housing.

Paragraph 86a of the NPPF says that planning policies should: define a network and hierarchy of town centres and promote their long-term vitality and viability – by allowing them to grow and diversify in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries, allows a suitable mix of uses (including housing) and reflects their distinctive characters;

The parades around the roundabout known as Echo Square comprise a varied mix of retail uses which include a kitchen and bathroom showroom, café, computer shop, florist a recently approved beauty treatment salon, a public house, Chinese Restaurant, barbers, convenience store, fish and chip shop and a former school uniform shop which occupied both the application premises and the shop next door. So there are two vacant shops, one shop that was a wedding attire shop which is vacant but is soon to become a beauty salon and another shop which has been empty for many years. This is a fairly high number of vacant shops for a small parade and can be considered indicative of the very difficult trading conditions for shop owners.

Policy CS07 of the Gravesham Core Strategy 214 supports new employment floorspace. Policy CS08 protects and seeks to enhance existing local centres. The Council will seek to safeguard the retail character and function of existing centres by resisting development that would adversely affect their vitality and viability and will encourage the provision of a mix of units including opportunities for small and independent traders in all centres.

We are hearing almost weekly about retail businesses that are in financial trouble, many being household names that have been unable to adjust to the pressures from the economic downturn, Covid 19 and the change in demand to on-line retailing.

The British Retail Consortium published a document titled "A Vision For The UK Retail Industry-Delivering For Shoppers, Employees And The Whole Economy, in 2017

This report outlines that there are dramatic transformations happening in retail which are centred around new technologies changing the way people shop. It's basically digital shopping which is the future for retail and the market is expected to create £381 billion in spending by next year, 2024.

The report set out a vision for the Government to play it's part in supporting high street retail by reducing the rate burden, reform of the apprenticeship levy, protecting show workers from violent crimes against them.

Some key retail facts were published and some of these are listed below. Since then, we have suffered with Covid, entered a period of higher interest rates than we have experienced for 20 years, online shopping has grown considerably.

Some key retail facts:

Retail is 5% of the economy, pays 10% of all business taxes and 25% of all business rates.

1/3rd of shops have been vacant for at least two years and may never reopen.

125 retail businesses went into administration in 2018.

10.3% of Britain's high streets and neighbourhood shops are sitting empty.

Business rates account for half of the total tax bill of the largest retailers

3,200 net store closures in 2018.

In Q4 2018 retail lost 67,000 jobs compared to Q4 2017, a 2.1%

A report produced by the Office for National Statistics on the Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on retail sales in 2020 released to the Press on 1st February 2021 listed the main impacts, as below:

- In 2020, total retail sales volumes fell by 1.9% compared with 2019, the largest annual fall on record.
- The impact on consumer retail sectors has varied with clothing and fuel volume sales seeing large falls of negative 21.5% and negative 22.2% respectively in 2020 and remain below pre-pandemic levels.
- Overall, online sales rose to a record high of 33.9% as a share of all retail spending.

- Insights from timely card transactions data show that the impact of England's second and third lockdowns on card spending are similar, and significantly less severe than the first lockdown.
- Card transaction data also suggests that during the second and third lockdowns, English online spending increased more in response to the fall in in-store spending than during the first lockdown.
- As a whole, retail sales (in volume terms) in Great Britain have recovered from the large contraction in March and April 2020 but still saw the largest annual fall on record.

The Office for National Statistics report on the state of retail in Britain in June 2023 highlights that the change to online retailing has continued.

Online retail

Table 2: Summary of internet statistics: June 2023
Value, seasonally adjusted, percentage rates, Great Britain

Category	Online sales as a proportion of retail in this sector	Online sales: Most recent month on a year earlier	Online sales: Most recent month on previous month	Index categories and their percentage weights
All retailing Footnote1	26.0	7.1	-0.5	100.0
All food	8.5	4.6	-1.8	14.3
All non-food	22.2	3.7	-0.8	36.1
Department stores	21.9	5.8	1.7	7.0

Textile, clothing and footwear stores	26.5	11.1	-5.9	11.6
Household goods stores	25.4	5.7	5.1	7.6
Other stores	16.6	-7.8	0.1	9.9
Non-store retailing	90.7	10.5	0.1	49.6

Table 2 shows the month-on-month and month-on-year (annual) growth rates for the amount spent online by value, and the proportion of total retail sales value that was made online by sector. The percentage weights show where money is spent online. For example, 7 pence in every pound spent online was spent in department stores in 2022.

- Online spending values fell by 0.5% in June 2023 because of monthly falls in clothing and food stores as they returned to previous levels following increases last month.
- The proportion of online sales fell to 26.0% in June 2023 from 26.5% in May 2023 and has remained broadly consistent at around 26% since May 2022.
- The proportion of retail sales taking place online remains above the pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic levels (19.7% in February 2020).

These reports and figures show that, as we all know, retail is changing to more online purchases and that affects whether purchases are made in a shop and therefore whether people go into a town centre or visit a local parade. The change to online will continue so it's very hard to make local parades attractive to shoppers and for the retailers to survive. One area which may get through the difficult times is the food sectors and in particular takeaway food.

There are three vacant shops in this area around Echo Square currently and so we put forward that this application for a restaurant and takeaway should be supported in order to retain the attractiveness of the parade to shoppers and to other retailers.

Attached and named as Appendix 1 are three pages taken from The Local Shop Report 2021, a report by ACS, The Association of Convenience Stores is a trade association representing local shops across the UK.

The report assess the value to the community of local shops and within the report there is a section about the value or positive impact to the community of various types of shop trade. Fast food and takeaway shops are shown as 10% and restaurants at 9%. The most positive impact uses are convenience stores, pharmacies post offices. Then pubs and bars, banks, coffee shop/café and specialist food shops.

Within the parades at Echo Square there is a convenience store, a café and a pub. There isn't a post office or pharmacy but then we have seen how the post office has closed many of the smaller post offices around the country and there are local pharmacies elsewhere in Valley Drive, Old Road West and Singlewell Road so it's unlikely there is a need for one at Echo Square.

Fast food and restaurant use are seen to make a more positive impact than other non-food uses, betting shops, gyms and sports facilities, charity shops and hairdressers according to this report.

Design

The frontage to the shop will not be altered. In due course the applicant may apply for appropriate shop signage.

To the rear of the property an extraction flue is proposed. This can be painted in a colour to minimise it's visual impact with a mat black being preferred, however, the applicant is able to adjust the colour if there is a particular preference. We note that the extraction flue to the rear of the Chinese restaurant is painted brown to match the painted render to the rear wall and the flue for the Fish and Chip Takeaway is galvanised grey. No other external changes are required to the rear of the shop.

The proposed position of the flue has been chosen to minimise the view towards it from as many vantages as possible. From the car park it will be hidden from view by the first floor pitched roof projecting out from the rear of the building. There are positions when in Sun Lane where the flue is more visible, however, the fence along the rear boundaries, the large mature trees within the rear garden to No 3 Echo Square and the fact that the shop garden are higher than the pavement and road from which there will be a brief view of the flue, all help to reduce the impact.

Internally, the shop will have a seating area to the front and the serving counter set back with the rear room being used for storage.

The use.

There is the existing fish and chip shop use in this parade and the Chinese Restaurant also offers a takeaway service. Other uses here will benefit from customers coming to this area for food, whether to eat in or takeaway.

Bin Store

An area at the end of the garden is proposed as a bin store for the shop. A gate to Sun Lane enables a wheelie bin to be put out for collection. The Fish and Chip shop has a bin store at the rear with the waste being put out for collection in a similar way via the side access. The position of the bin store is shown on the block plan. If a more detailed plan showing the bin area is required this can be readily produced.

Parking

There is a council parking area which can accommodate some 23 parked vehicles and which has a regular turn over of people parking.

There are 10 parking spaces on the road to the front of the shop. These are time limited spaces so this encourages a turn over of people parking here. Further west along Cross Lane East, parking is unrestricted with spaces available throughout the day and evening. The same can be said for the on-road parking spaces in Whitehill Road and Sun Lane although Whitehill Road tends to be more heavily used by the residents parking here.

This parade of shops is very well positioned being within a large residential area and therefore accessible by foot or by bicycle to a large number of residential customers.

Also, there are bus stops in Sun Lane right by this parade, within Old Road West and Parrock Road within a short distance of the parade so transport to the parade by bus is feasible.

A number of people walk along Parrock Road from the train station of town centre on their way home and pass by the parade each day so it's perfectly reasonable to conclude that a large proportion of the shops customers will travel by a means other than by car to the shop. If they do travel by car there is parking available close by as covered above.

An application was approved for a takeaway shop here in 1991 and an appeal against the planning conditions was refused whereby the appellant wanted to alter the opening hours and parking restriction. However, at that time there was yellow lines along Cross Lane East in front of the shop and also a video rental shop adjacent. The inspector referred to customers of the video shop stopping outside on the yellow lines to nip into the shop to hire a video so that was a cause of parking issues at that time. The situation is wholly different now with there being marked parking bays for 10 vehicles outside the parade.

Fumes/Odour

A number of reports submitted with the application show how noise, odours and vibration will be minimised by the installation of the correct flue and odour extraction system, by the use of flexible mounts and by the correct maintenance schedule.

Noise

The shop has been used for a variety of retail uses previously. It's within a busy position where there is a lot of traffic noise, often a short queue of vehicles waiting outside when heading east along Cross Lane East as the junction with the roundabout is very busy at certain times of the day and there are pedestrians walking by and going to the other shops in the parade so the background noise level will be high for the residents of the flat. The layout of the flat assists in mitigating noise from the shop in that the bedroom is on the upper floor, the second floor and not directly over the shop. It's therefore our opinion that noise arising from the proposed use is not likely to give rise to any additional noise to that experienced now and a resident will know that the level of background noise generally will be quite high due to it's location.

Access

The shop is accessed from the pavement at the front. The front access will be used by customers and staff. The rear access is just for putting out the waste and for maintenance, meter reading etc.

As described above this parade is accessible by foot, by bicycle, by bus and also has a good level of parking available within the car park and on street parking in convenient locations close to the shop so we do not consider that there is any reason for a Highway objection with the level of provision of off and on street parking that there is for the restaurant and takeaway customers.

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