COUNCIL 24 JULY 2014

*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT	AGENDA ITEM No.
	6

TITLE OF REPORT: UPDATE ON CHURCHGATE AND SURROUNDING AREA, HITCHIN

REPORT OF THE PROJECT EXECUTIVE FOR THE CHURCHGATE PROJECT BOARD

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to:
 - (i) Report on the discussions with, and requests by, interested parties regarding potential development options for Churchgate and its surrounding area.
 - (ii) Make a recommendation on the way forward based on consideration of the report.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That having considered the proposals by the various interested parties, and the risks to delivering the Council's aspirations for the Churchgate area, the Council resolves to:
 - (i) Continue to await the publication of the draft Local Plan, whilst at the same time considering the approach to take (as per recommendation (iv) below) based on the options considered in the 18th July 2013 Full Council report;
 - (ii) Not to enter into any form of exclusive discussions with any interested party until full unchallenged planning permission is gained and a solution for the market and car parking is obtained as part of such planning permission;
 - (iii) Consider the option of a 150 year lease agreement as part of any development agreement on a scheme which has gained full planning permission;
 - (iv) Continue an open dialogue with all interested developers on the Churchgate site in the interim. Any discussion over the design of proposals are to be with the local planning authority only as part of normal pre-application discussion:
 - (v) Commit budget of £10K at this stage to enable procurement advice to be sought on the Council's ability to enter an exclusivity agreement with a developer who has obtained planning permission;
 - (vi) Commit budget for expert advice and support in progressing a development agreement only once a developer has obtained full planning permission and procurement advice has confirmed exclusivity is possible.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 To allow the Council to progress its aspirations for the Churchgate area of Hitchin to protect the medium to longer term vitality and viability of the town, in the light of updated planning policy considerations and prudent use of Council funds.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

See Section 7.1 and 8 of report.

5. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 5.1 The Leader of the Council, the Portfolio Holder for Finance & IT, the Portfolio Holder for Planning & Enterprise and also the former Chair of Hitchin Area Committee (2011/12), now a representative of Hitchin Committee, as members of the Churchgate Project Board, have discussed and noted the options forming the content of this report.
- 5.2 Members are reminded that in accordance with the Terms of Reference of the Churchgate Project Board
 - "1.1 To act on behalf of the Council in respect of all functions required under the Development Agreement and the delivery of the Churchgate project generally." any submission would be presented and discussed with the Members of the Churchgate Project Board, prior to any report being presented to Full Council.

6. FORWARD PLAN

6.1 The report contains a recommendation on a key decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on 22 January 2013.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1 A report was submitted to Full Council on 18th July 2013 which considered that:
 - i) The Council could decide to do nothing with the site for a number of years and await the outcome of the Local Plan.
 - ii) The Local Planning Authority could prepare a new Planning Brief for the site (or update the existing one) in the medium to long term.
 - iii) The Council could undertake a further procurement process at some point in the future, i.e. in the medium to long term, to find an alternative development partner.
 - iv) The Council could consider the Hammersmatch Options including their refurbishment of the existing Churchgate Centre and their extension proposal.
 - v) The Council could consider seeking to acquire the Hammersmatch interest in order to simplify land assembly for any future scheme.
 - vi) The Council could seek to work up a scheme to achieve planning permission which is then sold or procured against.
 - vii) The Council could take more of a joint venture approach through the whole process.
 - viii) The Council could explore selling the land to the highest bidder for development or selling off discrete sections of the site for residential development and using the capital receipt or Section 106/Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to fund more limited improvements to the Churchgate area.

- 7.2 A number of significant issues were considered that informed the options for the way forward for Churchgate and its surrounding area. These included the viability of any deliverable development on the site; the needs and aspirations of the users of the town centre to ensure sufficient public support; the statutory requirement to produce a Local Plan; the Council's current financial position and the existing commitment of resources to deliver the Corporate priorities across the district in the short to medium term. There was also an addendum report which sought to comment on the submission of additional information from Hammersmatch. The addendum report summarised Hammersmatch proposals and clearly outlined the risks associated with the Council entering into any form of exclusive discussions with Hammersmatch at that time.
- 7.3 Following a lengthy and detailed debate it was concluded that the Council progress the work on the Local Plan and then reconsider the above options in light of an adopted Local Plan, whilst continuing to meet with interested developers in the interim. Members were of the opinion that the information presented by Hammersmatch did not provide sufficient clarity on which to make an informed decision, and officers were unable to recommend dealing solely with Hammersmatch at that time, given the early stage their proposals were at and the risk of challenge, based on other parties having continued interest in the site. However it was considered appropriate to continue the on-going dialogue with Hammersmatch or any other interested party in the interim.
- 7.4 The following resolution was agreed:

RESOLVED: That, having considered all the alternative options and risks to deliver the Council's aspirations for the Churchgate area, the Council resolves to:

- (i) await the publication of the draft Local Plan, whilst at the same time considering the approach to take;
- (ii) continue an open dialogue with interested developers on the Churchgate site in the interim; and
- (iii) not enter into any form of exclusive discussions with Hammersmatch, based on the limited information currently provided due to the early stage their proposals are at, and that officers continue dialogue with Hammersmatch in accordance with resolution (ii).

REASON FOR DECISION: To allow the Council to decide its aspirations for the Churchgate area of Hitchin to protect the medium to longer term vitality and viability of the town, in the light of updated planning policy considerations.

8. OTHER THIRD PARTY OPTIONS

Context

8.1 While work is progressing on the Local Plan, and in accordance with the Full Council resolution (ii) and (iii) above, senior managers have been involved in on-going dialogue with Hammersmatch and also with other interested parties. Hammersmatch have also continued their dialogue with the Local Planning Authority through pre-application advice. Officers of the Churchgate Project Team have had initial discussions with two other interested parties who have expressed an interest in developing across the site, i.e. including the surrounding car parks. All these discussions have been on a non-

exclusive basis regarding the interested party's development opportunity from both a land owner and service provider perspective.

- 8.2 In their discussions with both Hammersmatch and the other interested parties, officers have identified four key aspects that the Council as land owner and service provider would expect to be addressed in any developer submission. These are based on the criteria previously included in the procurement process when appointing Simons Developments and have moved on slightly following discussions with other interested parties:
 - Solution for the market
 - Solution for car parking
 - Financial viability of the proposal, and
 - Providing an impact assessment on remaining Council land holdings in the area.
- 8.3 Officers have also made it clear that these aspects are separate to any pre-application advice provided by the Local Planning Authority, who will have other requirements which would need to be addressed as part of submission of a planning application.
- 8.4 These four key aspects seek to address some of the issues that the Council as landowner has raised in its previous reports to Full Council with regard to not being able to make an informed decision on a suitable way forward for Churchgate and the surrounding area due to insufficient information. These are outlined in more detail below:
- 8.4.1 **A solution for the market** is needed which provides an economically sustainable market in terms of location, offer, physical characteristics, cost, operation and meeting stake-holder needs that positively contributes to the vitality of the town centre. Any submission should demonstrate how the proposed location for the market would operate having regard to the following:-
 - Delivers at least the current level of income to the Council as achieved from the
 current contract arrangement, i.e. a market that a Contractor can operate at
 sufficient level of profit to be capable of making a revenue contribution to the
 Council after allowing for the contractor's responsibility for market cleaning,
 waste disposal, provision of toilet facilities on market days, provision of market
 trader parking, setting up and dismantling/operational costs, this being a payment
 to the Council of a minimum sum of £27,000 per annum.
 - Ensures there is a mix of market offer and is of a size and with sufficient flexibility
 of space to respond to economic trends and temporary markets/events such as
 Christmas markets and Farmer's markets.
 - Explains the proposed physical characteristics in terms of stall mix, surface treatments, cover for stalls, utilities and storage arrangements.
 - Provides evidence of transition arrangements during the move, access arrangements for public and traders, proposed arrangements for traders' parking, toilet facilities for traders and public on market days, washing facilities, electricity and lighting for traders and indicates the proposed future management arrangements.
 - Evidences its relationship with the overall retail offer and footfall within the town centre.

8.4.2 A solution for car-parking on the site which:-

 Delivers at least the same number of car parking spaces overall as at present, even after allowing for relocation of the current market. There is a total of 359 car parking spaces across the following four car parks (including disabled parking

- spaces) (Biggin Lane 74 spaces; Portmill Lane West 71 spaces; Portmill Lane East 81 spaces and St. Mary's 133 spaces).
- Indicates how the conflict between parking requirements for market use and cinema use can be accommodated.
- Shows awareness of the potential impact of new development under construction on the old Post Office site on the developer's proposal.
- Ensures an on-going revenue income stream to the Council from the car park provision at least equivalent to the current gross direct income of approx. £450,000 per annum and allows for growth in income in line with inflation.

8.4.3 The financial appraisal needs to provide:-

- Clear evidence of the financial viability of the proposal, recognising no additional funding requirement from the Council.
- Evidence of working with/discussions with the current leaseholder and any potential changes in the investment value of the long leaseholder's interest and how this would reflect the security of rent from current tenants.
- A copy of the full financial viability assessment with any proposal, including the assumptions made.
- Evidence of the market analysis, demand and feasibility of proposed uses on the site in the medium to longer term.
- Evidence that operating issues for proposed land uses and the market in terms of potential parking conflicts have been addressed.

8.4.4 Impact assessment on remaining Council land-holdings in the area

- Any proposal should ensure that future development of the remaining areas A4 and A5 as identified in the 2005 Churchgate Area Planning Brief remains possible.
- 8.5 Both Hammersmatch and one of the other interested parties, who are part of an international construction and property company, have submitted development proposals for the site. Whilst Hammersmatch's proposals are more developed, the other company's submission comprises an initial concept assessment for the possible regeneration of Churchgate and the surrounding area as they seek to define the key aspects of an acceptable bid and establish the site capacity. The third company, who are predominantly residential developers, have advised that they would like to explore partnership options before submitting anything to the Council. Those aspects of the Hammersmatch submission that are legally sensitive and commercially confidential are included in Part 2. Otherwise their current proposals and location options summary on Hitchin Market are attached at Appendix A and B to this report. The international construction and property company have requested that their submission be noted under Part 2 for reasons of commercial confidentiality.

The Proposals

8.6 The Hammersmatch proposal remains similar to what was presented to Full Council in July 2013, i.e. comprising a mixed scheme with refurbishment of the existing centre, a proposed cinema and restaurant block encroaching into the current market area and residential above the existing centre. An additional 80 parking spaces would be provided in the location of the current market. Hammersmatch show a series of iterations for the possible relocation of the market of a similar size. Reference is made to spreading the market over a wider area with more demountable stores, utilising space along the River in front of St. Mary's car park for some permanent stalls. They consider that the majority of the market could be relocated to one of the other car parks i.e. on Portmill Lane West,

Portmill Lane East or St. Mary's car park, with some additional demountable stalls being accommodated within the new open space area near the proposed cinema block. It should be noted that if the market relocates to one of the other car-parks, this will impact on available parking spaces although it may be that the new cinema car park would have a different usage pattern than a day-time shoppers' car park.

- 8.7 It is Hammersmatch's view that the Council should seek expert advice on the relocation, size, number, type and mix of stalls for the Market and undergo the necessary negotiations with the market traders and operators for an improved and relocated market. Hammersmatch would be prepared to commission the preparation of the resulting detailed plans required for a new market. It is unclear if this would include the Council's cost at arriving at a market solution. This option, requiring one key element of the development proposal to be carried out by the Council appears not to provide a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to the regeneration of this important area of Hitchin. The Council would also need to seek alternative resources and funding to carry out the necessary consultation and design work if it were to consider this as a way forward.
- 8.8 The other company's concept, which is in <u>very early stages</u>, has similarities to the suggestions put forward by all the other developers who have looked at this site from a point of view of maximising the return on investment. Further discussion will be required with this company to refine their initial concept.
- 8.9 Both Hammersmatch and the other company's schemes on paper have some positives, however their financial appraisals have a number of gaps that need to be clarified and tested against the current market. If the Council were to consider this as a possible option, external legal, financial, property and procurement advice would need to be sought to proceed with this work.
- 8.10 Both Hammersmatch and the other company make reference to negotiation by private treaty. The Council would need to seek legal advice if it were to consider negotiation on an exclusivity basis with either party. As previously advised, it is considered that any decision to enter into any form of exclusivity discussions would have a high risk of being challenged based on other parties having a continuing interest in the site. Further advice would need to be sought in terms of satisfying any procurement requirements. It is proposed that the Council does not enter into any form of exclusive discussions with any interested party, until full planning permission has been gained by the developer and a solution for the market obtained as part of such planning permission
- 8.11 Neither developer is currently in a position to give any detailed indications of potential income streams to NHDC, although Hammersmatch have proposed further works on potential car park income.
- 8.12 Hammersmatch are also seeking a lease of 150 years for a larger site area than currently occupied by the Churchgate Centre, for which they are suggesting a baseline rent equivalent to the current rent for the smaller area, however based around 10% of net operating rental, and calculated annually. While a 150 year lease appears to be acceptable in the development industry and is what Simons were prepared to negotiate further on as part of their request for an extension of time to the Development Agreement back in January 2013, it is not clear from the Hammersmatch proposal as to who will have control of the rents payable.

- 8.13 In order to move their scheme forward Hammersmatch are asking the Council to:
 - i) consider additional funding to employ consultants to value and negotiate their proposals with them on behalf of the Council;
 - ii) appoint consultants to advise on the sustainable future of the market;
 - iii) consider additional funding to seek external legal advice were the Council to consider it necessary; and to
 - iv) enter into exclusive discussions with them on an open book partnership basis.

9. Concluding Comments

- 9.1 Neither developer is fully seeking to meet the four key aspects set out in the Council's guidance as provided. It is clear that in order to progress any scheme as landowner, be it with Hammersmatch, the international construction and property company or any other interested party, will require further investment by the Council in seeking the necessary expert advice. It will also mean considerable investment if the Council were to progress a solution for the Market as requested by Hammersmatch. A considerable amount of officer time would also be required.
- 9.2 While officers welcome the proposals and recognise the request by both parties to enter into some form of exclusive discussions, as a means of providing some commitment towards the progression of their scheme, the Council would be putting itself at risk of being challenged by other parties and as landowner it must act separately from the Local Planning Authority (LPA). Moreover, the Council would again be in a situation where it is spending money on external advice without any guarantee that a development scheme would eventually come forward. The LPA will have other requirements that must be met before considering whether to grant planning permission or not.
- 9.3 Members are reminded that the Council has not allocated any capital or revenue funding towards the redevelopment of the Churchgate area. If the Council were minded to instruct officers to proceed with the necessary investigatory work required to assess any proposal, officers would require authority to incur the costs associated with the expert advice required, and a Full Council decision to release additional funding would therefore be required.
- 9.4 There are clearly significant potential financial resource implications associated with the above proposals. The Council's resources are already stretched following a number of years of savings and efficiencies and this challenging financial environment is forecast to continue until 2018 at least. Any further investment request will need to demonstrate a realistic prospect of delivery and worthwhile financial return. The current information before the Council from both Hammersmatch and the other company does not provide such certainty.
- 9.5 It is the officers' view that, as agreed by Full Council in July 2013, the Council continues its work on the progression of the Local Plan which will provide the necessary strategic policy framework and guidance for the future of the Churchgate area. Funding has been agreed for the progression of the Local Plan. Given the lack of available funding and the uncertainty around the delivery of a financially viable scheme, it is the officer view that any interested party should be encouraged to seek pre-application advice and full planning permission prior to approaching the Council as landowner to seek to enter into exclusive discussions on their scheme.

9.6 At that point in time the Council could consider entering into exclusive discussions with the potential developer in delivering a viable scheme that would provide a worthwhile financial return for both parties. It is suggested that procurement advice is sought at this stage on the Council's ability to enter into such an exclusivity agreement with a developer. It is also noted that the Council could be seen at this stage to consider a 150 year lease agreement as part of any development agreement on a scheme on the site. As part of seeking planning permission the potential developer would need to satisfy design requirements and amongst other things, be required to demonstrate a viable scheme and to find a suitable solution for the market and for car parking.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Full Council made the original decision to award the contract to Simons on 25 February 2010. The reason Council was asked to make the decision as to whether to award the contract or not was that the likely land values of the Council land being used for the project fell within Council's terms of reference.
- 10.2 Full Council adopted the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy on 18 November 2004 and the Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief on 3 November 2005.
- 10.3 As Full Council has made these previous strategic decisions, Full Council should make the decision as to the future strategy for the Churchgate Area.
- 10.4 If the Council chose not to await the outcome of the Local Plan work, but instead sought to move forward with an alternative strategy in the interim, the legal implications of that strategy would need to be considered. The legal implications would likely include procurement, contract, governance and property considerations.
- 10.5 In accordance with previous reports to Full Council, Members are advised that taking part in Council decisions on the strategy to adopt for the Churchgate Area was unlikely to create a valid perception of predetermination in relation to a Member of the Planning Committee who takes part in the decision relating to any future planning application.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Under Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Council is required to get best consideration reasonably obtainable for all of its assets, and with regard to Churchgate this potentially includes the freehold of the Churchgate Centre, the market and the adjoining car parks (St Mary's; Portmill East & West and Biggin Lane).
- 11.2 In this period of ongoing Government funding reductions the Council's alternative (i.e. non Government) sources of income are particularly important. Gross direct annual income in total from the Churchgate car parks amounts to over £450k, and the Council also receives an annual rental income for the Churchgate Centre which is reviewed every 14 years, as well as income from the market operation. Therefore any proposal that adversely impacts on these income streams would at least need to provide sufficient return to the Council from other sources to compensate fully for this impact.
- 11.3 There are clearly significant potential financial resource implications associated with the developers' proposals. The Council's resources are already stretched following a number of years of savings and efficiencies and this challenging financial environment is forecast to continue until 2018 at least. Any further investment request would need to COUNCIL (24.7.14)

demonstrate a realistic prospect of delivery and worthwhile financial return. The current information from both Hammersmatch and the other company does not provide such certainty.

- 11.4 The Council has incurred external costs of almost £1 million in total over the past ten years in respect of pursuing development opportunities for Churchgate. The Churchgate area does not currently feature in the Council's capital programme for major investment although funding for some works to the car parks and related areas for resurfacing and repairs has been allocated.
- 11.5 The contract previously signed with Simons Developments did not require Council financial resources to be allocated to the development of this scheme. The Council's contribution was to make its land holdings available for the development. Enquiries subsequently made by Simons in 2012 regarding the possibility to vary the terms of the Development Agreement, including whether the Council could consider making further financial contributions to the scheme, were declined.
- 11.6 It is clear that in order to progress any scheme <u>as landowner</u>, be it with Hammersmatch, or any other interested party, will require further investment by the Council in seeking the necessary property, legal and financial advice. It will also mean considerable investment if the Council were to progress a solution for the Market as requested by Hammersmatch
- 11.7 If the Council were minded to instruct officers to proceed with the necessary investigatory work required to assess any proposal, officers would require authority to incur external expert advice, and a Full Council decision to release additional funding would therefore be required.
- 11.8 In order to move their scheme forward Hammersmatch are asking the Council to:
 - consider additional funding to employ consultants to value and negotiate their proposals with them on behalf of the Council;
 - appoint consultants to advise on the sustainable future of the market;
 - consider additional funding to seek external legal advice were the Council to consider it necessary; and to
 - enter into exclusive discussions with them on an open book partnership basis.

At this stage it is suggested that a budget of a maximum of £10k be made available so that procurement advice on the Council's ability to enter into an exclusivity agreement with a developer can be sought and that no further funding will be provided until planning permission is obtained.

11.9 Given the lack of available funding and the uncertainty around the delivery of a financially viable scheme, it is the officer view that any interested party should be encouraged to seek pre-application advice and full planning permission prior to approaching the Council as landowner to seek to enter into exclusive discussions on their scheme.

12. RISK IMPLICATIONS

12.1 The Council has identified Churchgate and Surrounding Area as a Cabinet Risk. This risk is monitored and updated regularly as part of the Council's risk management procedures.

12.2 The Top Risk currently has the following description:

"The risks arising from continuing to work with any interested developers during production of the new Local Plan includes:

- o impact on available resources in continuing a dialogue
- public perception that developers proposals in terms of planning permission are at a more advanced stage than is the case
- o proposals that are developed may not be in adherence to the final Local Plan
- o proposals are developed that fail to make the best use of Council assets
- proposals that are developed might not meet the expectation of all stakeholders
- o possible challenge from other parties"
- 12.3 The Council's Risk and Opportunities Management Strategy refers to Contractors and Partners as follows: "Contractors and Partners are included in the Risk & Opportunities Management Strategy for NHDC. The risk appetite for both contractors and partners should be considered prior to engaging into contracts or partnerships. Ideally a joint Risk Register should be in place for significant contracts and partnerships. In order to achieve the Council's priorities, Client Officers/relationship managers should implement an ongoing review of risks jointly with appropriate contractors/partners. Contractors and Partners should be able to demonstrate that they have resilient business continuity plans in place."
- 12.4 In accordance with this Strategy the Churchgate Development Project with Simons Developments had its own Risk Register. Such a document would be prepared were the Council to consider seeking an alternative development partner at some point in the future.
- 12.5 In addition, throughout this report, various risks have been described. The Council has identified and included the preparation of the Local Plan and Sustainable Development of the District as Top Cabinet Risks. The Local Plan risk identifies a number of risks but one that is key here is failure to recognise long term needs for Town Centres. The Sustainable Development risk identifies both failure to protect the environment for our communities and failure to provide the right mix of residential/commercial development to meet local needs. An adopted Local Plan in place will provide the strategic planning policy objectives for the district to 2031 and will also strengthen the Council's position against hostile planning applications.

13. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 The Equality Act 2010 came into force on the 1st October 2010, a major piece of legislation. The Act also created a new Public Sector Equality Duty, which came into force on the 5th April 2011. There is a General duty, described in the next paragraph, that public bodies must meet, underpinned by more specific duties which are designed to help meet them.
- 13.2 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of its functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

13.3 Depending on what may be considered, any future development proposals for the site, detailed proposals surrounding thoroughfares, access, surface treatments etc. and needs of any users for any resulting development will be considered under separate equality analysis at the time of consideration.

14. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

14.1 The recommendations made in this report do not in themselves constitute a public service contract, subject to the measurement of 'social value' as required by the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, although potential equalities implications and opportunities are identified in the relevant section at paragraphs 13. However, any decision Council may make with regard to Churchgate which could, either in whole or part, constitute a public service contract would need to report on the social value implications at the time of consideration. This would, in brief, consider how every £1 spent could best be spent to benefit the local community, which may include award of some aspects of redevelopment or management of the centre etc. by local social enterprises.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

15.1 In terms of human resource implications the preparation of the Local Plan and the delivery of the other identified corporate priorities and key projects have been factored into work plans. If the Council sought to pursue a strategy for the Churchgate Area in the interim this would impact on the Council's current staff and financial resources and would result in the need to review existing work plans and objectives and/or the need for employing external expertise.

16. APPENDICES

- 16.1 Appendix A Hammersmatch Churchgate Extension Scheme proposal plans and schedule of areas.
- 16.2 Appendix B Hammersmatch: Hitchin Market Location options summary to 2014.

17. CONTACT OFFICERS

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 Full Council Report 31st January 2013 Churchgate and surrounding area redevelopment project, Hitchin
- 18.2 Report to Finance, Audit and Risk Committee 13th June 2013 External costs incurred by NHDC during the Churchgate Report.
- 18.3 Full Council Report 18th July 2013 Options for the future of Churchgate and Surrounding Area, Hitchin
- 18.4 Full Council addendum Report 18th July 2013 Options for the future of Churchgate and Surrounding Area, Hitchin