



Hitchin: Churchgate Feedback: Report – 26 July 2010

Introduction

This report summarises the feedback received to date during the consultation process for Simons' proposed redevelopment of Hitchin town centre. This first stage of the consultation process has been designed to get the views of the local community on Simons initial ideas for the development.

A public exhibition of the proposals was held at St Mary's Church between 19-22 May 2010, following which the exhibition moved (unstaffed) to Hitchin Library, where it was available for the public to view between 24 May and 4 June. Approximately 1500 people visited the exhibition at the church, with a significant number of people taking the opportunity to view the plans at the library.

At both exhibitions, and at various places throughout Hitchin, information leaflets containing more information on the proposals were available. These included a tear-off feedback form with a freepost address, which enabled respondents to give their comments. Approximately 3000 information leaflets and feedback forms were distributed.

In addition, a dedicated web page, hosted by North Hertfordshire District Council, was set up to enable respondents to view the proposals and submit feedback online. Between 1000 and 1500 people viewed the webpage, with 97 submitting feedback online.

All feedback responses submitted will be available for the public to view via a spreadsheet on the Council website, to be released in early August. In addition, anyone wishing to view the original copies of the forms will be able to do so at North Hertfordshire District Council's offices. Data Protection Laws will ensure that all personal details are edited out of any documents available for the public to view.

Analysis

The relocation of the market and changes to views of St Mary's have been the two issues that have attracted the most comments from those who submitted feedback. Other issues raised by a large number of respondents include: traffic; parking; current empty retail units in Hitchin (e.g. Woolworths); architectural design and materials; opening up the River Hiz and the new piazza area; the possibility of including the Royal Mail site and assorted buildings on Queen Street within the development; the type of retail that will be provided; the multistory car park; and whether the development will come forward to the current state of the economy.

The comments from those who ticked 'No' and those who ticked 'Not Sure' are, in many cases, very similar. For these respondents (the majority), the issue is not that of development itself but what form it should take. The majority of those who ticked 'Yes', also share similar concerns and approve of similar parts of the proposals.

The general response and issues raised are largely typical for this stage and the range of concerns expressed would be expected in this early part of the design. This mirrors Simons' recent experiences in Witney and Carmarthen where schemes successfully evolved following the public consultation process. West Oxfordshire District Council recently won a national Community Partnerships Award for its work with Simons on the new Marriotts Walk retail development.

Many of the issues raised by respondents had already been noted by members of the Churchgate Project Team, by Councillors and by other stakeholders such as representatives of the market traders, prior to the public exhibitions. For example, in their assessment of Simons' scheme prior to awarding the contract to the developer, the project team expressed concerns regarding the design and operation of the market (see comments set out in the DTZ Tender Evaluation Report). Councillors also raised concerns about the relocation of the market. Simons recognised from the start that the market would be an important issue for the town and have stated that they were keen to evolve the strategy throughout the consultation process and discussions with market traders.

Similarly, the Churchgate Project Team had also expressed concern about the design and scale of the retail elements of the proposals. However it is recognised that the scheme is at an early stage of development and that the style of architecture shown in the vision is indicative only. It is expected that the scheme will need to evolve further through the comprehensive consultation process, with the aim being that this will ensure the development contributes to the historic character of the town.

Simons and North Hertfordshire District Council have amended the 'Frequently Asked Questions' section of the Council's website in response to a number of the points raised during the feedback process.

Feedback Update

As of 16 July 2010, a total of **885** feedback forms had been received. Forms are still being received online and through the post. The total response rate so far to the question 'Do you agree with the plan to improve Hitchin's Churchgate area' is as follows:

Yes: 173 (19.6%)

No: 510 (57.6%)

Not Sure: 156 (17.6%)

Other: 46 (5.2%)

Market

- The proposed move of the market to the old market place is largely unpopular – many respondents support the retaining of the market place as a civic space for mobile cafes, events, occasional specialist stalls etc.
- In addition, a large number of respondents have raised concerns about parking for market traders, location of storage space, and the lack of permanent stalls, particularly for retailers such as fishmongers and greengrocers.
- Many respondents emphasise Hitchin's role as a 'market town' that attracts shoppers from other nearby towns.

Views of St Mary's Church

- The proposed view of the Church from Queen Street has received a mixed response. The majority of those who ticked the 'No' box have expressed concerns about the scale of buildings proposed on St Mary's Square, and the removal of the wider view of the church.
- The siting of a multi-storey car park on St Mary's Square has attracted particular criticism.
- A large number of respondents have expressed their view that there should be no building at all on St Mary's Square. However, many others have written to comment on the height and the width between the department store and car park on St Mary's Terrace.
- A large number of respondents are concerned that the department store and car park would 'overshadow' the church. Further demonstration of the scale of the buildings and size in relation to the church and other surrounding buildings will be crucial.

Churchgate

- The demolition of the Churchgate centre and replacement with a more sympathetic development is welcomed by the majority of all respondents – including those who ticked 'No' and 'Not Sure' as well as 'Yes'.
- A minority of respondents suggested that the Churchgate centre could simply be 'refurbished' or 'modernised'.

Retail

- The inclusion of a department store has received a mixed response. However, a large number of negative responses relate to the size of the store – a contextual comparison with another local store may be useful to provide context.
- Another major concern on this issue is the perceived high number of empty retail units currently in Hitchin, particularly Woolworths and the vacant former site of Clement Jocelyn.

River Hiz

- The opening up of the River Hiz and proposed piazza areas are broadly welcomed.
- A small number of respondents have expressed concerns over how the river could be widened, who will clean the river/maintain it, health and safety issues.

Architecture/Design/Materials

- Mixed comments have been received in response to the style of design presented in the exhibition materials.
- The bridges, opening of the River Hiz and improvements to the riverside area have been widely praised.
- The new street replacing the Churchgate centre has received largely positive comments.
- The areas that have attracted most criticism/concern for the style presented in the exhibition materials are the department store and car park.

Residential

- A large number of respondents have suggested that Hitchin does not require more flats or townhouses, pointing to the number of empty apartments already in the town.

Delivering the Scheme

- Some respondents have expressed concerns that the development will not come forward due to the current economic difficulties. A small number have questioned Simons' ability to deliver the development – a demonstration of Simons' economic viability and previous examples of schemes they have delivered in difficult economic conditions would be useful.
- Specifically, many respondents are cynical about the prospect of attracting a large 'department store' retailer to the town, due to the proximity of larger towns such as Luton, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.