

CHURCHGATE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT
MEETING OF CHURCHGATE LIAISON FORUM

Wednesday 24th November 2010 6.30pm
Church House, Churchyard, Hitchin

Notes (DRAFT)

Present: Martin Stears-Handscomb John Urwin (JU) – Hitchin Forum
(MSH) Independent Chairperson

Charles Vyvyan (CV)- Simons Keith Montague (KM)– Hitchin
Developments Ltd Society
Cllr Deepak Sangha - Local David Howlett– Hitchin Historical
Hitchin Councillor Society
Cllr Allison Ashley - Local Brent Smith (BS)– Hitchin
Hitchin Councillor Initiative/Bid
Cllr Paul Clark – Local Hitchin John Haykin (JH) – Hitchin Markets
Councillor
Cllr Tricia Cowley – Southern
Rural Councillor

Apologies: Alan Doggett (AD) – Hitchin
Chamber of Commerce

NHDC Officers in attendance and not part of the CLF:

Andrew Cavanagh (AC) NHDC Simon Ellis (SE) – NHDC
Louise Symes (LS) - NHDC
Christine Phillipps (CP) – NHDC

Ref:	Item	Action
	PRE-DISCUSSION WITH WIDER PUBLIC	
	<p>The Chairperson, Martin Stears-Handscomb, welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologies from Alan Doggett from Chamber of Commerce and his substitute. • Welcomed John Urwin as the new representative for Hitchin Forum. • Read out update on Landlord consent and Licences as requested at CLF meeting of 29 Sept 2010.. • Correction to item 6 of R Worbey to Brian Worbey on previous CLF meeting notes of 29 Sept 2010. • 20 copies of agenda and previous minutes have been provided at this meeting. The chairperson reiterated that where possible that the agenda and minutes should be obtained from the NHDC website or Hitchin library. 	

The following topics were discussed:

1. Witney visit – Hitchin Forum

12 members of Hitchin Forum recently visited Witney to see the quality of build and affects on Witney. Photo's were taken and permission sort to circulate these around the meeting – agreed. Photo's were circulated around the audience and forum members present.

2. Aim for Churchgate Centre

Was the aim to pull down the existing whole of Churchgate centre as we know it?

CV responded that the proposal is to demolish the existing Churchgate centre and to move the street to between the Nationwide and Rose & Crown pub. This will enable larger retail units to be created. Simons would work with existing retailers to relocate them elsewhere within the town centre.

If redevelopment goes ahead, why are Council continuing with Licences and why do you have to demolish?

CV advised that to achieve the objectives set out and stop leakage of trade to other towns, Hitchin needs a more comprehensive redevelopment than just refurbishment. Proposals would improve the area.

Why more retail, when we have so many empty shops?

CV advised that this would be discussed in the formal part of the meeting. There are reasons why vacant shops such as Woolworths have not been let.

Can the retailers be named for the new development?

CV advised that it is difficult to name potential retailers as these are aspirational at the moment until such time as they can be secured. CV advised that Simons are looking to attract retailers particularly for younger generations, as the town does not currently cater for this range e.g. mother and daughter could shop in same town together. CV referred to Witney used as example – which has 2 anchor stores of which one is Debenhams and the other M&S, and advised that these are the sort of retailers looking at Hitchin.

CV advised that the proposed anchor store is approx 35 000sqft, Woolworths store is approx 38 000sqft in total for comparison purposes, although confirmed less than half this is retail sales area.

Why not redevelop Woolworths?

CV advised that this site is not in brief for Simons and is not in Council ownership.

3. St Mary's Church

St Mary's Church is to become a Minster next year.

Views of the Church and openness around Church are all very important, do not destroy this view.

CV noted that while views from the Church are important, at present the view is dominated by a surface car parks. He advised that he had met with the Church representatives on 23rd Nov and that the Church is to produce a list of events to assist with car parking requirements.

	<p>CV advised that the proposed undercroft parking is on the same level as the Church.</p> <p>General comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was stated that people would rather have car parking than high rise flats, and that Simons should rather enhance the surface car park with trees etc. • Concern that national retailers such as Next, Monsoon would move to new larger units and leave empty shops elsewhere in town. CV advised that this could provide an opportunity to bring other new retailers into town. • The historical value of the town is important and things do age and is it possible to choose materials that stand the test of time?. CV advised that Simons will discuss the materials with the CLF as they consider it important to get materials right. • Churchgate Association representative advised that Churchgate retailers want refurbishment of Churchgate and only one wanted redevelopment. • Request was made for a 3D model to be displayed in library to show actual levels and scale of buildings. CV advised that this will be commissioned at the time when Simons have more firm proposals, and they could also show fly throughs as well to demonstrate views from street level. • The Simons proposal shows one entrance to the car park. The draft Hitchin UTP refers to shutting off streets. CV advised that a Transport Assessment will be submitted as part of the planning application. This will look at buses, car parking, cycling etc... • There are currently 15 trees in the car parks will all of these be removed? There is a report that refers to greening squares and places. While consider most aspects need to be viable why not only demolish a small part of Hitchin. • Request to have more than 45 minutes for public session. This would be considered as part of formal meeting. <p>The pre-discussion ended at 7.20pm and attended by approx 70 people. Members of the public were invited to stay for the formal meeting. It was noted that approx 45 people stayed.</p>	
	<p>FORMAL PART OF CLF MEETING</p>	
<p>1.</p>	<p>Chairperson advised that item 6 will be brought forward ahead of item 4 and 5 on agenda</p> <p>Notes from CLF meeting on 29th September 2010</p> <p><u>Under Item 1 - Notes from CLF meeting – 28th July 2010</u></p> <p>The two paragraphs in the Hitchin Churchgate Feedback Report of 26th July 2010 had now been amended by Local Dialogue to reflect the concerns raised previously by HTCI.</p> <p><u>Under AOB</u></p>	<p>Noted</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Change of wording referred to in Outlook was read out by the chairperson. 2. Simons have prepared and circulated a summary note for this agenda. 3. CV met with the Church on 23rd Nov and invited them to join the CLF. The Church have yet to decide to join. Church are a key stakeholder in the process. 4. Posters were displayed at various points around the town last week together with articles in Outlook and the Comet newspaper. Notes and agenda for the meeting were on NHDC website and at Hitchin Library. 	Noted
2.	<p>Matters arising from Pre-discussion</p> <p>Most of items raised would form part of this meeting.</p>	Agreed
3.	<p>Update on Simons Progress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CV advised that the key issue is finding the right location for the market. Once this is established, then Simons can look at other issues. • CV highlighted that while Simons were investigating various options they would be coming into a quiet period for reporting. 	Noted
4.	<p>Need for more Retail Space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CV advised that retail studies commissioned by the Council and Simons show that a certain amount of the catchment of Hitchin does not shop in Hitchin. A town such as Hitchin should be retaining 14% of its catchment area, and currently it only retains 7%. • This could be achieved by improving retail space and increasing expenditure, by getting more people into town, which would be better for all shoppers, retailers and the market. • Suggestion that Hitchin is becoming a commuter town. Has a primary and secondary catchment. A generation of catchment is not catered for in Hitchin, which retailers have latched onto. • BS advised that shop vacancy rates in Hitchin are lowest in region, currently 6.8%, whereas Letchworth is 19% and Cambridge is 11.9% • BS advised that HTCI are keeping an open mind, but at present are concerned that Hitchin does not need this amount of retail. To increase retail by 25%, increase trade by 50%, half of which will be in the new centre and the rest in the town, does not stack up! • Reference was made to the Harlequin centre in Watford and the negative impact this has had on the High Street and that times are changing for retail. • The forum members are interested in the evidence base that supports Simons proposals. • It was agreed that more information is needed and the evidence base needs to refer to similar towns as Hitchin. • CV advised that Simons have offered to meet with HTCI to discuss the retail figures. • DH requested as part of providing their evidence base could Simons 	CV CV/HTCI

	<p>provide an assessment of what was going to happen for Witney and what did happen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cllr Ashley raised the issue of the impact of internet trading and if this has been considered. CV advised that Internet shopping is not to be underestimated, however it has largely replaced what was previously catalogue shopping trade and changed certain sectors of retailing e.g. books, music etc. • JU stated that it is important to look at what we know. Hitchin is successful and has low vacancy rates. We don't know what impact the new development will have on Hitchin, this is seen as a high risk development. Why not wait for the Royal Mail site to come forward to reduce the need to build on the surface car parks. CV advised that the Royal Mail site would be considered secondary and if Hitchin could not let the prime Woolworths unit it would be difficult to see how the Royal Mail site could attract a major retailer in isolation. • HTCI consider risk management to be an important issue for this project and given that this process could take a number of years they are concerned about retail blight, already seen this with the Clemet Jocelyn site. HTCI would prefer to see incremental growth. 	<p>CV</p> <p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p>
<p>5.</p>	<p>Views of St Mary's Church</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CV agreed that views of St Mary's Church are key. CV advised that Simons are still proposing to build on St Mary's car park, but the space between the buildings is significantly bigger, approx 15 car parking spaces wide. Buildings either side would frame the Church. The space would be wider than Hollow Lane. • CV advised that the quality of public realm is important and with the new development there is the opportunity for people to be able to sit and admire the views of the Church. He requested that the CLF and people of Hitchin approach this with an open mind as it is not a done deal. • Currently the views of the Church along Queen Street will be lost, but the all important view in front of the Church will be retained. Development will create new views without cars, buses etc with quality public realm in front but will lose some views from Queen Street concentrating on key views from in front of the Church and from Hollow Lane. CV advised that the intention is to bring forward some visuals in time to demonstrate the quality of the space and how it relates to the setting and views of the Church. • Some of the CLF members stated that there should be no building on St Mary's car park, it should be enhanced instead. • JU stated that Hitchin residents want to see change, but not to this scale. CV responded that Simons are listening to people and trying to find a viable scheme and looking at other options but building on St Marys was a key part of our proposals. • JU stated that what is currently on the table is not acceptable. Want Churchgate improved either refurbished or redeveloped. He reiterated the point about could we not wait for the Post office site to become available before public land is built on. 	

<p>6.</p>	<p>Car Parking Reference was made to the update note from Simons regarding parking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CV advised that the proposal for 380 spaces has been redesigned and could be up to 420 spaces. 150 in the undercroft part of the car park which is at the same level as the Church, which will be well lit and maintained. 80 spaces on the existing layer of St Mary's. CV advised that if Simons did not build the St Mary's car park building then we could only provide 140 spaces on St Mary's and 150 undercroft spaces which would be a slightly less spaces than at present. KM noted that NHDC website advises 339 spaces, but these have been counted as 355 with 16 on street spaces, total 375. This represents 5% increase with a 30% increase in retail space. Critical that Hitchin has increased car parking spaces. CV agreed that the number of existing spaces would be checked. CV advised that the people Simons are trying to attract back into Hitchin are locals and people from the surrounding local area. If we attract more people into town, then more car parking may be required but many could use sustainable transport options reducing overall car parking requirements. Concern by some CLF members that car parking will be private with high charges. If charges are too high, people will not shop in town. Car parking in general for Hitchin needs to be looked at for the benefit of the town. CV advised that not all car parks within town are currently used to capacity and that car parking would form part of the Transport Assessment to be submitted with their planning application. 	<p>CV</p>
	<p>AOB</p> <p>JU and KM proposed that as not much progress has been made so far and given that Simons are coming into a quiet reporting period for the project, that the next meeting of the CLF on 26 January 2011 be cancelled and reconvene for the meeting on 23 March 2011, when Simons have had more time to find a market location and look at other issues raised during the consultation.</p> <p>Request for a longer public session, possibly from 6.30pm to 7.45pm and then formal meeting 8pm till 9pm, or run the public session after the formal meeting starting at 7:30 or 7:45pm.</p> <p>KM advised that the 3 local community and civic groups had met prior to this meeting and put forward the following:</p> <p><i>The Community and civic groups believe that the following key principles should be followed in any redevelopment scheme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The market to be retained as a single site in an appropriate location that meets the requirements of the market traders 	<p>Agreed</p> <p>Noted/MSH</p> <p>Noted</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St Mary's Square to be retained as an open space for enhancement only – i.e. no building above the existing level of St Mary's Square anywhere on St Mary's Square • Any building on the part of the existing market adjacent to The Biggin to respect the scale and special character of The Biggin. The taller the proposed building, the greater the separation distance needs to be. • As with the existing, buildings on Churchyard Walk flanking St Mary's to be no higher than two storeys • The scheme to respect the scale and grain of Hitchin town centre. • We further believe that any increase to the retail mass of Hitchin town centre should be through incremental growth and not by a massive step-change. The current proposals represent an unacceptable risk to the vitality and success of the town centre. 	
	<p>Date of next meeting</p> <p>Wednesday 23rd March 2011 Church House, Churchyard, Hitchin</p>	

The meeting ended at 9.00pm