

UPDATE ON REDEVELOPMENT OF CHURCHGATE AND ITS SURROUNDING AREA: INFORMATION NOTE

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF FINANCE, POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To update Members on the progress regarding the Churchgate redevelopment project.
- 1.2 For the ease of updating Members this Note will be divided into various sub-sections.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Following a detailed procurement process, Full Council agreed at its meeting on 25th February 2010 to award the contract for redevelopment of Churchgate and the surrounding area to Simons Developments Ltd as North Hertfordshire District Council's (NHDC) development partner. The contract was subsequently signed on 19th March 2010.
- 2.2 The proposal that emerged from the competitive dialogue process and formed the tender stage of Simons' bid is a schematic development proposal scheme (equivalent of RIBA design stage B/B+). The preparation of Simons' proposal has been guided by the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy and the Planning Brief for the Churchgate Centre Development Area and surrounding area. The proposal sets out Simons' vision for the redevelopment of the Churchgate area and formed part of the first stage of the public consultation process from 18th May to 5th June 2010.
- 2.3 A summary report of the feedback from this first phase was published towards the end of July and was the subject of discussion at the Churchgate Project Board and the Churchgate Liaison Forum meetings in July and was reported on at the September meeting of the Hitchin Committee. A couple of paragraphs in this report have been amended in light of comments raised by the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative (HTCI) at the CLF meeting in September with regard to the independent view made by Local Dialogue in their report that Simons seem to be dismissing objections which have been raised as normal resistance to change whereas many of them deal with principles of the proposals. The changes to the report were agreed by the CLF at its meeting on 24th November 2010. The updated version of the Summary Report can be viewed on the Councils website.

3. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Next Steps in the Process

- 3.1 Following the feedback from the first phase of the consultation, Simons' have identified a number of issues that will need to be discussed with key stakeholders and at the Churchgate Liaison Forum (CLF) as a means of moving the project forward. This will be an ongoing process while Simons develops a scheme that will be the subject of future public consultation prior to it being offered as a planning application.
- 3.2 Since last September, Simons have met and started an initial dialogue with the HTCI, Hitchin Markets Limited, the Hitchin Chamber of Commerce, the Hitchin Forum (at which representatives from the Hitchin society and Hitchin Historical Society were present), the Churchgate retailers and representatives from St. Mary's Church. Initial meetings have also taken place with the Local Planning Authority, landowners and potential retailers. Outcomes from these meetings and how these have contributed to the evolution of the design will be reported on at the CLF meetings and at Hitchin Committee where they are not commercially sensitive.
- 3.3 Simons at present are working on options for the location of the Hitchin Market and are also looking to address other key concerns raised through the consultation process such as the need for the proposed amount of retail and impacts of their proposed development on views of St. Mary's Church. Simons will continue to liaise with Hitchin Markets Limited, HTCI and Chamber of Commerce on the market location and the amount of retail quantum being proposed.

The Churchgate Liaison Forum (CLF)

- 3.4 The fourth meeting of the CLF took place on 24th November 2010 at Church House, Hitchin. Approximately 70 people attended the pre-discussion session. The notes from the CLF meeting outline the discussion points and are attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.5 The following topics were raised and discussed at the pre-discussion:
 - A report back on 12 members of the Hitchin Forum's visit to Witney and comparing this to Simons vision for Churchgate.
 - Understanding the rationale for the need to redevelop the Churchgate centre rather than refurbishment.
 - The need for more retail when Hitchin has a number of empty shops at present and a concern that national retailers such as Next, Monsoon, etc would move to the proposed new larger units and leave empty shops elsewhere in the town centre. These points were discussed during the formal part of the meeting. See notes attached.
 - There was a request for Simons to name the types of retailers interested in locating in Hitchin. Such information is still premature at present.
 - The need to build on St. Mary's car park and impact this would have on the views of the church. People would rather have an enhanced car park.
 - A request for more detailed drawings and a 3D model when Simons submit a revised proposal. This point was noted by Simons.

3.6 The formal part of the meeting covered:

- Views of St. Mary's Church
- Car Parking
- Need for more Retail Space

The three community and civic groups on the CLF also put forward a list stating some key principles which they believed should be followed in any redevelopment . See notes attached.

3.7 Simons advised at the meeting that they were now entering a quiet reporting period for the project as they needed time to find a location for the Hitchin market, discuss various options with all parties and also look at all the other issues raised through the consultation and as a result would have little to report on in terms of progress at the next CLF meeting in January. It was proposed by the representatives from Hitchin Society and Hitchin Forum that the January CLF meeting be cancelled and that the CLF reconvene for the meeting on 23rd March 2011 when Simons may have more information on the market and other aspects relevant to the scheme for the CLF to discuss. This proposal was agreed by the CLF members.

3.8 A request was also made for a longer public session, possibly to be held later following the formal meeting to enable more residents wishing to attend, who may struggle to make the earlier time of 6.30pm. It has since been agreed with the Chair of the CLF that at the next meeting of the CLF to be held on 23rd March 2011 in Church House Hitchin, will start with the formal part of the meeting at 6:30pm to be followed by the public discussion from 7:45 to 8:45pm and then returning to a formal session to conclude by 9:30pm.

4. REPORTS TO CABINET

4.1 None to Report

5. AVAILABLE INFORMATION

5.1 The Council will continue to proactively publish information about the project in order to assist and inform the public debate. All documents are available to view on the Council's website at www.north-herts.gov.uk and in the Hitchin Library.

5.2 It is to be noted that some of these documents contain redactions for commercial sensitivity reasons.

5.3 As the on-going consultation with Stakeholders continues the Council will update the 'Frequently Asked Questions' section on the website.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 That the Hitchin Committee note the content of this Information Note.

7. APPENDICES

- 7.1 Appendix 1 – CLF Meeting Notes of 24th November 2010

8. CONTACT OFFICERS

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