

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 has been published and can be viewed on the Council's website and in the Hitchin Library.
- 2.4 Following the feedback from the first phase of the consultation, Simons' identified a number of issues to be discussed with key stakeholders and at the Churchgate Liaison Forum (CLF) meetings as a means of moving the project forward. These included:
 - Establishing economic principles
 - Dynamics and location of Hitchin Market
 - Public realm
 - Views of St. Mary's Church
 - Car Parking
 - Need for more Retail Space

Notes of these discussions at the CLF meetings are also available to view on the Council's website and at Hitchin Library.

- 2.5 Over the last thirteen months, 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. Simons are continuing to have ongoing discussions with landowners and potential retailers. Outcomes from these meetings and how these have contributed to the evolution of the design have been and will be reported on at the CLF meetings and at Hitchin Committee where they are not commercially sensitive.
- 2.6 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. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Churchgate Liaison Forum (CLF)

- 3.1 Although the CLF has not met since March 2011 good progress is being made and the meetings Simons are having with landowners, potential retailers and with Hitchin Markets Ltd are moving matters on. Simons are continuing to look at all the other issues that have and continue to be raised by the local community and key stakeholders through the process. Simons have previously advised that they want to provide sufficient levels of detail to show that they have responded to these issues when they present their proposed scheme. This process will take time, and it was agreed at the CLF meeting in March that the next meeting will be when Simons are ready to present their proposed scheme. The date of the next CLF meeting once set will be widely publicised.
- 3.2 In the interim, Simons together with the Chairman from the CLF met with representatives from the three community organisations represented on the CLF, namely, Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society. The meeting took place on 5th October 2011 with a walk around the site followed by a discussion.
- 3.3 The Chairman of the CLF considered the meeting to be very constructive and advised that while the organisations restated their positions in terms of the process, they welcomed the opportunity to put across what they felt were the key issues for the people they were seeking to represent. Charles Vyvyan from Simons was able to answer questions and outline where Simons were trying to amend the scheme to take account of the concerns of people in the town including those represented by the three organisations, the business community and Hitchin Markets Ltd. The Chairman of the CLF also advised that the Organisations were willing to meet again with Charles Vyvyan once there were concrete new proposals to discuss.

Press coverage and FAQs

- 3.4 The Committee will be aware of articles and letters in the Advertiser and the Comet over the last couple of months that continue to refer to the Churchgate Development Agreement (DA), the freehold of the land, whether the Council has considered a Plan B should the Churchgate Project not come to fruition, why the Council is progressing the scheme in the current economic climate, any impact of Simons' restructure on the DA and the role of English Heritage.

These questions have also been sent directly to the Council and have been responded to by officers.

- 3.5 The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section on the Council's website has been updated with the Council's responses to these continued queries. These can be viewed on the Council's website at www.north-herts.gov.uk by searching for 'Churchgate Development Project'. An updated copy is also available in Hitchin Library.

English Heritage Urban Panel Review Paper

- 3.6 Members will be aware that English Heritage published a Review Paper following an Urban Panel visit to Bishop Stortford and Hitchin in May this year. The Council have some concerns about the content of the Urban Panel report, including about factual errors in the document, and senior officers met with representatives from English Heritage in October. The Council is presently in written correspondence with English Heritage and officers will be able to update Members once a response has been received from English Heritage.
- 3.7 It is important to note that English Heritage have been involved at different stages throughout the life of the project and were consulted when the Churchgate Planning Brief was prepared. English Heritage will be a statutory consultee for the planning process and will continue to be consulted as the scheme evolves.

Visit to Schools

- 3.8 Both the Hitchin Boys School and Hitchin Priory have agreed for Simons to engage with their school councils to seek their views on the future growth of Hitchin Town Centre. These meetings will take place over the autumn/winter term and comments will be fed back to the Churchgate Project Board and to Hitchin Committee. A summary of the comments made will also be published on the Council's website in due course.
- 3.9 The Churchgate Project Team have also written to John Henry Newman School in Stevenage and Highfield School in Letchworth Garden City at the request of the Members of Hitchin Committee. Although the Highfield School and possibly Hitchin Girls School are unable to accommodate a visit at this time, we will continue to liaise with the schools as the project develops. Officers are still waiting confirmation from John Henry Newman School, and will update members accordingly.
- 3.10 The Churchgate Project Team in consultation with the Churchgate Project Board will continue to update the FAQs as issues arise during the course of the project.

4. REPORTS TO CABINET

- 4.1 None

5. AVAILABLE INFORMATION

- 5.1 Following a request from a member of the public the Council has recently released, with two sentences redacted for commercially sensitivity reasons, the Officer report on the Churchgate and Surrounding Area - Tender Scoring as submitted under Part 2 to Full Council on 25th February 2010. The Council will continue to proactively publish information about the project in order to assist and inform the public debate. All publicly available documents can be viewed 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.

6. CONCLUSION

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

7. CONTACT OFFICERS

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