

Hitchin Delivery Office, Hermitage Road, Hitchin, Hertfordshire

Development Brief Scoping Paper: November 2011

Background

1. The Royal Mail's Delivery Office on Hermitage Road, Hitchin, is to close. The Royal Mail has placed the property on the market. North Hertfordshire District Council, as the local planning authority, wishes to see a development brief produced to guide any future redevelopment of the site. This development brief would need to be prepared as a partnership between the Council and the prospective developer and would be subject to public consultation.
2. This document summarises the relevant aspects of the policy documents already in force which would need to be taken into account in preparing the development brief (and subsequent development proposals).

Policy background

3. A number of planning policies apply to the site, contained in several documents. Of particular relevance are:
 - [The saved policies from North Hertfordshire District Local Plan No.2 with Alterations](#) (April 1996, saved September 2007);
 - [River Hiz Development Guidelines](#) (March 1995);
 - [Hitchin Town Centre Strategy](#) (November 2004);
 - [Churchgate Area Planning Brief](#) (2005);
 - [Hitchin Conservation Area Character Statement](#) (2011); and
 - [Design Supplementary Planning Document](#) (2011).

Local Plan (April 1996)

4. The Local Plan as originally adopted contained the following reference to this site:

"HTC1/3: Sorting Office and Portmill Lane Car Park: In consultation with the Post Office, the Council will examine opportunities for alternative uses on the site, should the

present operation, or parts of it, cease. Such uses may include Post Office county facilities and retail uses on the northern side of the site, with car parking to the rear. Other town centre uses may be appropriate, subject to increased parking for town centre users still being available and the scale of development being appropriate for the site. The Council will be particularly concerned to ensure that high quality pedestrian links between car parking and the shopping areas are provided and that landscaped open space is introduced into the area where appropriate."

5. Although this part of the local plan was not explicitly saved by the 2007 saving direction, it remains informative as to the Council's long-standing approach towards this site.

River Hiz Development Guidelines (March 1995)

6. The stretch of the River Hiz between Portmill Lane and Hermitage Road is labelled as 'Area 5' in this document. It is described thus:

"This particular section of the river has an important pedestrian link between Portmill Lane and Hermitage Road. It is widely used by people who park close to the town centre and visit shops and is also a short cut for those people coming from further afield. An existing sorting office building turns its back on the river and includes a high, uninteresting, blank wall and a wire mesh fence. Similarly, the level of the river is considerably below that of the footpath and the high wall, on the eastern side, is unattractive. Should the Portmill Lane sorting office site become available for redevelopment any scheme should not turn its back on the river but face it and provide an attractive environment for people to walk with, perhaps, shops or a café. Considerable intermediate improvements could be made in this area with the use of planting and street furniture. The roadway between 70 and 71 Hermitage Road could be enhanced to provide more attractive pedestrian links and an improved ramp arrangement.

Hitchin Town Centre Strategy (November 2004)

7. The Hitchin Town Centre Strategy identifies the Post Office as one of five key development sites in the town centre (paragraph 3.2.23). Specifically, it says:

"At the Post Office site the Council would expect retail at ground floor with leisure, commercial and/or residential at upper levels. Included in the design would be a pedestrian link

between Hermitage Road and Portmill Lane in addition to the link along the River Hiz walkway. (paragraph 3.2.28)

8. Policy 22 of the Town Centre Strategy says that:

"The Council, working together with potential developers and landowners, will prepare Planning Briefs for the following key development sites...[including] The Post Office site..."

9. The Town Centre Strategy also refers to the fact that development at the Post Office site may allow greater access to the River Hiz, including level footpaths, visually attractive areas of open space, seating, planting and complementary land uses such as cafes and restaurants (paragraph 3.1.9a).

Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief (November 2005)

10. The Churchgate Area Planning Brief covers the strip of walkway along the River Hiz to the east of the site, identifying it as an enhancement area. The Council is working with a preferred development partner on proposals for this area.

Hitchin Conservation Area Statement (July 2011)

11. The Hitchin Conservation Area Statement notes that the current Post Office makes a negative contribution to the Conservation Area. In particular, the 1960s buildings facing Hermitage Road and the rear elevation of the Post Office site facing Portmill Lane are both mentioned as negative features, with the whole Post Office site listed as an opportunity for enhancement. By contrast, the buildings on Hermitage Road, both on the north side and the south-east corner of the street are mentioned as positive characteristics.

Policy summary

12. Given the local importance and prominence of the site, the Council expects a development brief to be prepared, and has committed to producing such a brief, working together with landowners or developers. This brief would need to be subject to public consultation prior to adoption by the Council.
13. Improvements to the existing walkway along the River Hiz need to be incorporated into the scheme, with active frontages facing the river. At ground floor level the Hermitage Road frontage would expect to see retail type uses. The side of the development facing the river should also have active frontages at ground floor level, perhaps a café. The Portmill Lane

frontage has no particular guidance in policy as to use, although we suggest given the central location of the site that residential at the ground floor is unlikely to be acceptable. On the upper floors, leisure, commercial or residential are all acceptable possibilities.

14. An additional pedestrian access from Hermitage Road to Portmill Lane is also encouraged.
15. This brief needs to take into account, complement and not inhibit the Churchgate Development Brief and any development proposals that come forward for land identified within the brief.

Other considerations

16. Vehicular access should be from Portmill Lane.
17. The Hermitage Road frontage should respond to the rhythm and symmetry of the north side of the road. The Portmill Lane frontage should take its cues from the domestic scale of 7-8 Portmill Lane.
18. Heights will require careful consideration – the prevailing character is of two and three storey buildings.
19. Opportunities to incorporate the building at 71-81 Hermitage Road into the scheme should be explored – including whether the relationship between that building’s service access and this site and the River Hiz walkway could be improved.
20. The buildings at 7-8 Portmill Lane are grade II listed.
21. The Town Centre is all an archaeological area – with particular suspicion that there may be the remains of the medieval *burh* ditch on the site. Port Mill stood in the south-east corner of the site until the 19th century. Apart from Port Mill, the rest of the site was occupied by The Grange and its gardens. The Grange was a large house which stood to the south-west corner of the site adjoining 7-8 Portmill Lane. Prior to the construction of Hermitage Road in the 1870s, Portmill Lane was the main route from the town to the north-east.
22. Planning obligations will be required in accordance with the Planning Obligations SPD or as negotiated.

Matters to be covered by the Development Brief

- Urban design;
- Context;

- Servicing / access;
- Residential / commercial;
- River Hiz;
- Height, mass, scale;
- Character;
- Continuity and enclosure;
- Quality of the public realm;
- Permeability;
- Pedestrian routes;
- Legibility;
- Adaptability;
- Diversity;
- Quality of private space;
- Sustainability;
- Streetscene; and
- Listed buildings