

TITLE OF REPORT: HITCHIN POST OFFICE DEVELOPMENT BRIEF

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEVELOPMENT AND BUILDING CONTROL

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report presents a draft development brief for the Royal Mail Hitchin Delivery Office site at 90 Hermitage Road, Hitchin. A copy of the draft development brief is included as Appendix A to this report.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on 1 July 2012.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Royal Mail announced in November 2010 that it intended to cease its operations currently based at the Hitchin Post Office site during 2012, transferring them to other Royal Mail premises elsewhere, notably Stevenage. Subsequently the site was put on the market for sale in September 2011.
- 3.2 The Hitchin Town Centre Strategy (November 2004) identified the Post Office site as one of five key development sites across the town centre. Policy 22 of the Town Centre Strategy identifies that the Council would work together with potential developers and landowners to prepare a planning brief for the site.
- 3.3 When the Post Office site was put on the market, officers put together a development brief scoping paper, setting out the existing policy context for the site and drawing attention to the requirement to prepare a development brief. This scoping paper was circulated to any interested parties who contacted the Council with respect to the likely prospects for redevelopment of the site.
- 3.4 Whitebarn Developments (Hitchin) Ltd was the successful bidder for the site. Since March 2012, officers have been working with planning consultants working for Whitebarn Developments to prepare a draft development brief for the site.
- 3.5 The draft brief for the site is included as Appendix A to this report. If approval to consult is given, consultation will take place across the summer. Following the consultation the intention is that amendments will be made in light of the public's comments and the brief brought back to Hitchin Committee in November and Cabinet in December to formally adopt.

4. ISSUES

4.1 The main issues for the brief to address can be summarised as follows:

- Proposed land uses; and
- Amount of development on the site.

Proposed land uses

4.2 The site was identified as Site HTC1/3 in Part 5 of the District Local Plan No.2 with Alterations (1996). That specified retail use for the northern part of the site (the Hermitage Road frontage), with car parking or other town centre uses on the remainder of the site. It also sought high quality pedestrian links across the site from the shopping area to the car parking area.

4.3 The Hitchin Town Centre Strategy also considered the potential uses for the site, seeking retail use at ground floor, with leisure, commercial and / or residential uses at upper floors. The Town Centre Strategy also stressed the need for improved pedestrian links across the site, specifically suggesting a link between Hermitage Road and Portmill Lane in addition to the existing River Hiz walkway.

4.4 The draft development brief considers what uses to promote for the site (notably at Section 5). It concludes that the site should accommodate a mixed use development, with retail and / or restaurant type uses on the ground floor facing Hermitage Road, a hotel and some dwellings. The brief suggests two possible layouts which may work with respect to where the hotel and dwellings are located. The precise mix of dwelling types is not specified, although the brief does suggest that the site could accommodate a range of types from town houses to flats. The brief also recognises the close proximity of the Churchgate site and identifies the need to keep “up to date with the proposals for the Churchgate area to ensure that the Royal Mail Delivery Office site can be redeveloped in an appropriate and flexible manner that will take into account, complement and not inhibit the Churchgate Development Brief and any development proposals that come forward for land identified within the brief.” (paragraph 3.20)

4.5 In addition to these land uses, the brief proposes widening that part of the River Hiz walkway through the site, to improve the pedestrian access between Hermitage Road and Portmill Lane.

Amount of development

4.6 The draft development brief does not give specific quantities of floorspace or numbers of dwellings that the site could accommodate. However, it does identify some of the constraints which limit the site's capacity to be developed, such as its relationship with the adjoining listed buildings at 7-8 Portmill Lane.

4.7 The main constraint on the capacity of the site is the issue of building heights. The surrounding area is predominantly two and three storey buildings, with some notable four storey buildings immediately adjoining the site (NatWest House and Portmill House).

4.8 The draft brief includes a heights plan (Section 7.21), showing areas in which certain heights might be acceptable. This identifies that much of the site should not exceed three storeys, whilst immediately adjoining NatWest House and Portmill House there may be scope for some four storey elements.

- 4.9 Officers have an outstanding concern that the heights plan suggests that four storey development all along the River Hiz walkway frontage could undermine the benefit achieved through widening the passage. The developer is keen to stress that the plan is only showing maximum heights. Therefore at detailed design stage there would be scope for a less tall scheme within those areas. The public consultation may also indicate that a reduced height should be shown along the Hiz walkway (perhaps allowing only for four storey on the corner with Portmill Lane rather than the length of the walkway). It is therefore suggested that the plan be consulted upon as it stands, but with the consultation explicitly seeking views regarding heights along the Hiz walkway. The issue can then be assessed prior to adoption in light of public comment.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The terms of reference for the Hitchin Committee confirm that it has power to act as a forum for discussion on matters of local interest and to provide input into centrally determined specifications for all services.
- 5.2 Part 2 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended by the Planning Act 2008) allows the local planning authority to produce Supplementary Planning Documents, which can include development briefs, to provide more detail on the interpretation of existing policy. The process for the preparation of Supplementary Planning Documents is set out in Part 5 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning)(England) Regulations 2012.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The public consultation exercise is to be run by the developer at their own expense. The cost of the Council's input in terms of officer time liaising with the developer is covered within existing budgets and work programmes.
- 6.2 Failure to deliver a development brief for the site will reduce the public's ability to influence the form of development on the site.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The officer time involved in preparing the brief is identified as part of the Council's service plan for the Strategic Planning and Enterprise.

8. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of its functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 8.2 All efforts will be made to meet the Council's equalities plan and Statement of Community Involvement when consulting the local community on the draft brief.

9. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 9.1 Members of Hitchin Committee have been consulted on emerging options for the brief.
- 9.2 The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transport and Enterprise has been made aware of the preparation of the brief.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 That the Hitchin Committee notes the draft Hitchin Post Office Development Brief which will be presented to Cabinet on 31 July 2012 to seek authorisation for public consultation.

11. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 11.1 To raise awareness of the forthcoming consultation on the development brief within the town of Hitchin, should Cabinet authorise the consultation.

12. APPENDICES

- 12.1 Appendix A: Draft Hitchin Post Office Development Brief

13. CONTACT OFFICERS

- 13.1 Ian Fullstone, Head of Development and Building Control
01462 474480 ian.fullstone@north-herts.gov.uk
- 13.2 Richard Kelly, Senior Planning Officer
01462 474847 richard.kelly@north-herts.gov.uk
- 13.3 Helen Leitch, Landscape & Urban Designer
01462 474513 helen.leitch@north-herts.gov.uk
- 13.4 Elizabeth Marten, Principal Conservation Officer
01462 474411 liz.marten@north-herts.gov.uk
- 13.5 Gavin Ramtohal, Solicitor
01462 474578 gavin.ramtohal@north-herts.gov.uk
- 13.6 Jodie Penfold, Group Accountant
01462 474332 jodie.penfold@north-herts.gov.uk
- 13.7 Kerry Shorrocks, Corporate Human Resources Manager
01462 474224 kerry.shorrocks@north-herts.gov.uk

14. BACKGROUND PAPERS

14.1 Hitchin Town Centre Strategy

http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/index/environment_and_planning/planning/planning_policy_and_projects-2/town_centre_strategies-2/hitchin_town_centre_strategy.htm

14.2 Hitchin Post Office Development Brief Scoping Paper

http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/index/environment_and_planning/planning/planning_policy_and_projects-2/site-specific_briefs_and_projects/hitchin_post_office-2.htm

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