

**STATEMENT OF CONSULTATION
ON BEHALF OF WHITEBARN DEVELOPMENTS
IN CONNECTION WITH THE DRAFT
DEVELOPMENT BRIEF FOR THE FORMER
SORTING OFFICE, HERMITAGE ROAD,
HITCHIN**

Pegasus Planning Group
3 Pioneer Court
Chivers Way
Histon
Cambridge
CB24 9PT

Telephone: 01223 202100 Facsimile: 01223 237202

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CONTENTS:

Page No:

1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	PUBLIC CONSULTATION DETAILS	2
3.	THE EXHIBITION	5
4.	FEEDBACK PROCEDURE	8
5.	CONSULTATION FEEDBACK ANALYSIS	9
6.	CONCLUSIONS AND RESPONSE BY DEVELOPMENT TEAM	20

Appendix 1 – Newspaper articles advertising consultation

Appendix 2 – Hitchin Initiative newsletter

Appendix 3 – Public exhibition leaflet

Appendix 4 – Public exhibition poster

Appendix 5 – Display boards

Appendix 6 – Feedback forms

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The aim of this Statement of Consultation is to detail how Whitebarn Developments (the developer) in conjunction with North Hertfordshire District Council has engaged with the local community and other stakeholders regarding the Draft Development Brief for redevelopment of the former Sorting Office, Hermitage Road, Hitchin. This Statement of Consultation also includes a detailed analysis of the feedback received during the consultation period, as well as a response from the developer to the issues which have arisen, demonstrating how the views of the community and stakeholders have been taken into consideration when finalising the Development Brief prior to its ratification by the Hitchin Committee and North Hertfordshire Cabinet for its adoption.

Draft Development Brief

- 1.2 The former Sorting Office, Hermitage Road, Hitchin was identified within the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy (November 2004) as a key site for development within Hitchin. Policy 22 of the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy requires the production of a development brief. Whitebarn Developments (the developer) have been working in conjunction with North Hertfordshire District Council to produce a Draft Development Brief which establishes the parameters for future development of the site. The Draft Development Brief has been reviewed by the Hitchin Committee and North Hertfordshire District Council Cabinet and both committees agreed that the document could be put forward for public consultation.
- 1.3 The consultation process has been designed to provide the local community with the opportunity to participate in the planning process and to provide feedback on the Draft Development Brief. The details of the consultation also conform to the North Hertfordshire District Council Statement of Community Involvement (2006).

2. PUBLIC CONSULTATION DETAILS

Background

- 2.2 The purpose of the public consultation was to give all local residents, community representatives and other stakeholders the opportunity to view and comment on the Draft Development Brief for the redevelopment of the Former Sorting Office, Hermitage Road, Hitchin. North Hertfordshire District Council and the developer agreed that the most efficient methods would be various displays, a website, and via a well publicised two day exhibition which is accessible to all and attended by the specialist consultancies within the Project Team.
- 2.3 The public consultation ran for the period Monday 13th August to Tuesday 25th September 2012. In addition to the exhibition boards the public could view the full paper copy of the Draft Development Brief and complete questionnaires at the following locations:
- Hitchin Initiative, 27 Churchyard;
 - Hitchin Library, Paynes Park;
 - Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City; and
 - Via the dedicated website
- 2.4 Hitchin Community Office, 27 Hermitage Road was selected as the venue for the manned exhibition days as it is situated directly opposite the development site and is easily accessible. The Community Office has good public transport access and ample parking along Hermitage Road and at the Portmill Lane car park. The Community Office has disabled access and is a location known to the local community.
- 2.5 The manned exhibition days were held on Friday 7th September and Tuesday 18th September, both exhibitions were held from 2pm to 8pm. The times were specifically chosen to allow for people to visit outside of normal working hours and outside school holidays.

Publicity

- 2.6 North Hertfordshire District Council advertised the public consultation on their website 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. This web page provides a link to the dedicated website and lists the locations where the public can view the development brief and where it was possible to

complete questionnaires. The web page also provides links to the Scoping Paper published by NHDC in November 2011 which sets out the Council's aims for the site.

- 2.7 A number of articles were published in the local 'Hitchin Comet' newspaper. All the articles advertised the public consultation and some give specific details of the dedicated website and the dates for the public exhibition. Articles were published online and in the newspaper, see Appendix 1 for copies articles published 2nd, 18th, 22nd, 23rd August and 6th September 2012.
- 2.8 The public consultation was advertised through the use of colour A5 leaflets which were delivered with the Hitchin Initiative newsletter 1st September 2012 (Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). The leaflets advertise the consultation dates, exhibition dates and times, and display location address and telephone number for the Hitchin Initiative. It also provides named contact details for Pegasus Planning Group including a telephone number to contact for further information. The leaflet provides a background to the Draft Development Brief and explains the purpose of the public consultation. The leaflet has a map explaining the position of the development site and the location of the exhibition. The leaflet also provided a link to the dedicated website <http://sorting-office.whitebarn-developments.co.uk/>
- 2.9 Full colour A3 posters were put up at each of the display venues attracting the public's attention to the consultation and the display, see Appendix 3. A number of leaflets were also available for those interested in the consultation to take away and inform others.
- 2.10 The poster provides the dates of the public consultation period, the dates and times of the public exhibition, it lists the venues where the development brief can be viewed, and a link to the dedicated to the exhibition website.



Photograph of the Hitchin Library display.

3. THE EXHIBITION

- 3.1 The exhibition consisted of six A1 boards mounted on display panels designed to give attendees detailed information on the proposals (Appendix 4).
- 3.2 Visitors were welcomed to the exhibition by the project team who explained the purpose of the public consultation. Each person was given a feedback form and encouraged to provide positive and negative feedback on the scheme. Visitors were advised to review the boards and told to ask any member of the project team identified with badges if they had any specific questions.
- 3.3 **Board 1** is entitled 'Introduction' it provides background information to the production of the draft Development Brief, contact information to return responses, and a timeline for the Development Brief's adoption and expected timescales for progress with the planning application.
- 3.4 **Board 2** is entitled 'Site Location' it shows an aerial photograph of the site, a site location plan, and a view of the Portmill Lane side of the site. The photograph was chosen to help visitors who were unfamiliar to the site to clearly identify it.
- 3.5 **Board 3** is entitled 'Opportunity and Constraints' it provides a description of opportunities for the Hermitage Road Frontage, Portmill Lane Frontage, and the River Hiz Walkway. The board also shows the Opportunities and Constraints visually on a plan of the site.
- 3.6 **Board 4** is entitled 'Indicative Masterplan' and features the two proposed land use disposition options for the site. It was considered important that the public have a say on their preferred location of uses within the site.
- 3.7 **Board 5** is entitled 'Building Heights' this shows the proposed maximum building heights at the site and the current building heights of the neighbouring buildings. The board also shows photographs of the existing site and the neighbouring buildings to give the public some indication of scale. This board is particularly important as it was highlighted at the Hitchin Committee held on 17th July as a possible issue.
- 3.8 **Board 6** is entitled 'Development Proposals', this board shows illustrative material of the Hermitage Road Frontage and did not part of the Draft Development Brief. It was included within the public exhibition to give the public some indication of what could be achieved at the site within the parameters of the Draft Development Brief.



The public exhibition at the Community Office, Hitchin.

Feed Back Forms

- 3.9 Feedback forms (Appendix 5) had ten questions about the Draft Development Brief and space for additional comments at question 9. Feedback forms and pens were provided for the public to complete at each of the display venues and a ballot box was provided for them to post their completed feedback forms in.
- 3.10 Feedback forms were available at each of the venues to take away and complete in their own time. The feedback forms had the address for Lydia Voyias at Pegasus Planning Group and a dedicated email address for response Hitchin.db@pegasuspg.co.uk. The feedback forms also had a link the dedicated website <http://sorting-office.whitebarn-developments.co.uk/> where it was possible to submit online feedback forms.
- 3.11 In total 92 people attended the exhibition, 55 people on Friday 7th September and 38 people on Tuesday 18th September. The breakdown of attendance is provided below.

Times	7th September 2012	18th September 2012
2.00-3.00pm	21	10
3.00-4.00pm	15	12
4.00-5.00pm	4	4
5.00-6.00pm	8	4
6.00-7.00pm	3	4
7.00-8.00pm	4	4
Total	55	38

4. FEEDBACK PROCEDURE

- 4.1 During the manned exhibition days members of the public were encouraged to engage with the Project Team before, during and after the public exhibition. A dedicated website address <http://sorting-office.whitebarn-developments.co.uk/> was included in all the leaflets and publicity material. As mentioned above the feedback forms also provided a named contact to address for any postal correspondence as well as a dedicated email address Hitchin.db@pegasuspg.co.uk.
- 4.2 The dedicated website was designed to provide the same information as the exhibition boards with an online feedback form allowing those who could not make the exhibition or displays; or for those who wanted extra time to review the information the flexibility to do so.
- 4.3 The deadline for the completion and receipt of feedback forms via post, email, and through the website was midnight on 25th September 2012.

5. CONSULTATION FEEDBACK ANALYSIS

- 5.1 The feedback form consisted of twelve questions covering topics about the proposed uses at the site, the proposed building heights, focused questions about the proposed River Hiz Walkway improvements, and the residential options. Question 10 is separate to the Draft Development Brief but was included to seek the public's opinion on three illustrative options for the Hermitage Road frontage, two of which comply with the maximum building heights proposed within the Draft Development Brief whilst the final option has stepped building heights with a small section of the building showing 5 storeys.
- 5.2 Seven of the questions were multiple choice with additional space provided for additional comments, whilst the more focused questions provided space for longer answers. Question 9 provided space any further comments the respondents might have, and the information has been dealt with separately at the end of this chapter.
- 5.3 Included in this analysis are the responses received via post and email which were not submitted through the feedback form or followed that format. In total 69 responses were received, 37 paper feedback forms, 23 online feedback forms, 5 letters and 4 emails were received. Analysis of the questions and answers can be found below.

Summary of Responses and Developer Feedback

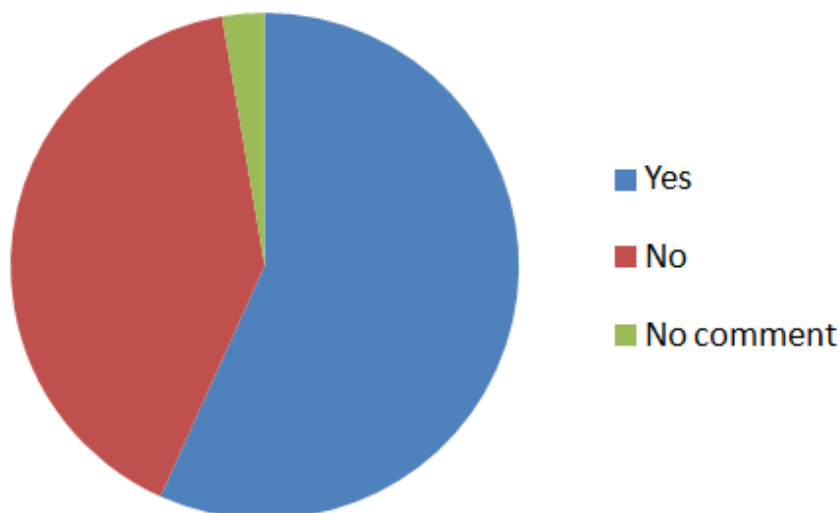
- 5.4 Analysis of responses does not include "tick" responses to questions 1, 2a, 2c, 3, 5, 7 and 8 due to unforeseen difficulties with interpretation of the website feedback forms.

Question 1 - Are you in favour of redevelopment at this site?

- 5.5 All of the respondents except one were in favour of redevelopment at the site. 36 people ticked "yes" on the paper questionnaire whilst the remaining respondents provided additional justification with the majority stating that the site is an "eyesore" and redevelopment is required to rejuvenate Heritage Road and help integrate Hermitage Road with Hitchin's town centre.

Question 2a – Do you think that the proposed mix of uses are appropriate for this site?

- 5.6 21 respondents ticked “yes” on the paper questionnaire whilst 15 respondents ticked “no”, and one respondent made no comment.



Question 2a Analysis

No issue with proposed uses	1
Prefer to have been consulted at an earlier stage	1
Community Facility	4
Hitchin does not need more restaurants/cafes	14
Welcome Hotel	6
Against Hotel	2
Reservations about the proposed scheme	1
More open space	1
Welcome residential	1
Against residential	2
Welcome retail	2

- 5.7 The majority of the respondents were happy with the land uses proposed however there were number of concerns about the possibility of retail use and particularly restaurant and cafe use (14 objections). In the additional space provided people stated that there are a number of empty shops along Hermitage Road and within Hitchin and also mentioned that there are numerous cafes and restaurants along Hermitage Road and within the town. Some respondents questioned the viability of these uses whilst others thought the proposed uses were unimaginative and that they would like to have been consulted at an earlier stage.

- 5.8 6 respondents welcomed the proposal for hotel use at the site, whilst comments about the residential element were quite balanced.

Question 2b – If no please list other suggested uses for the site

- 5.9 18 respondents made no comment to this question. The most common suggestions for alternative uses at the site are listed below:

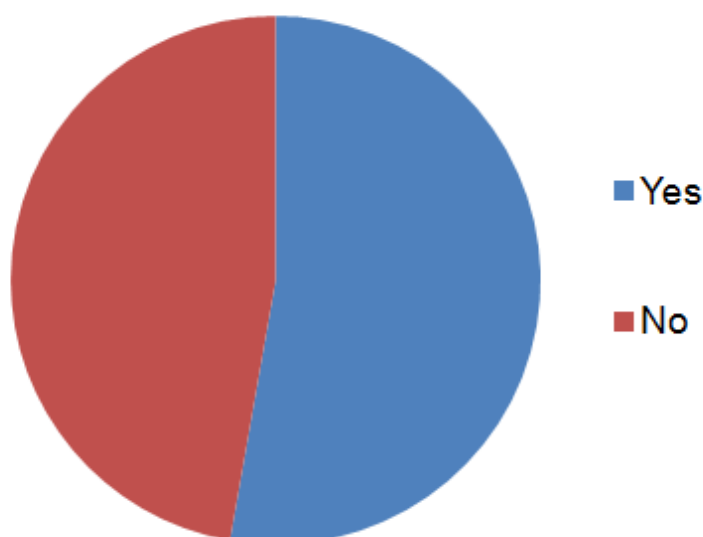
- Cinema (8 respondents)
- Residential (5 respondents)
- Community Hall (5 respondents)
- Hotel should be focus (2 respondents)
- Leisure (2 respondents)

- 5.10 Individual respondents suggested public open space, a bus terminal, a new indoor market and retail. Other individuals stated that they were unsure or needed more detail on the proposals to comment.

- 5.11 The suggestions for a community hall made reference to Bancroft Hall, Hitchin which is due to be demolished following completion of the refurbishment/ redevelopment of Hitchin Town Hall. Prior to the consultation exercise North Hertfordshire District Council confirmed that they had taken the decision that they will not require new developments to incorporate on site community hall/facilities in the near future as it is deemed that there is sufficient community space. In the light of this Whitebarn Developments have confirmed that they will not be providing such a facility.

Question 2c = Do you think that retail (A1) and restaurant/cafe use (A3) fronting Hermitage Road is appropriate?

5.12 19 respondents responded yes to this question whilst 17 respondents answered no to question 2c.



5.13 In the additional space for comments 11 people stated that Hitchin does not need more restaurants or cafes, with 3 people mentioning that there are a number of empty shops along Hermitage Road. Despite this 8 people hoped that more retail and restaurant/cafe uses would revive Hermitage Road. Another respondent welcomed the proposed hotel use and another requested alternative use as a cinema.

Question 2c Analysis

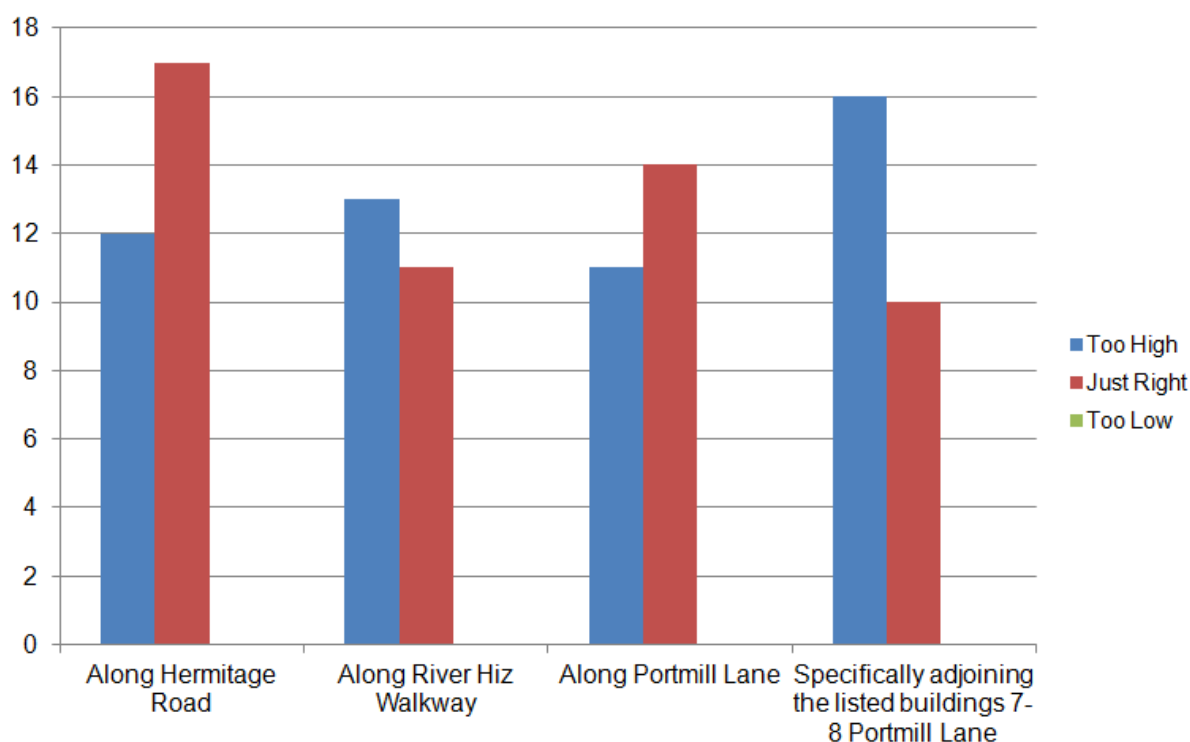
Hitchin does not need more restaurants/cafes	11
Hopefully more A1 than A3 will help revive Hermitage Road	8
There are a number of empty shops along Hermitage Road	3
Hotel would be ideal	1
Hitchin no longer has a cinema or large concert hall, both of which used to be present.	1
Should be entirely for retail use	1

5.14 Whitebarn Developers will pursue with the suggested mix of retail, restaurant, cafe, residential and hotel uses at the site. The floorspace details and number of units will be finalised at the application stages following detailed market assessments. In terms of

viability Whitebarn Developments are currently in discussion with a number of operators and possible future occupiers for the site which will be finalised at the application stage.

Question 3 – What do you think about the proposed maximum building heights across the site?

- 5.15 None of the respondents thought that the proposed building heights were too low.
- 5.16 Along the Hermitage Road frontage 12 respondents considered the proposed maximum building height of up to 4 storeys to be “too high”; whilst 17 respondents thought 4 storeys is “just right”. In the additional comments section some respondents referred to the illustrative Hermitage Road frontage which showed a five storey option, 2 people commented that the skyline should be broken up.



- 5.17 Along the Portmill Lane frontage 11 respondents considered the proposed maximum building height of up to 3 storeys to be “too high”; whilst 14 respondents thought 3 storeys is “just right”. When questioned about the proposed building heights adjoining the listed buildings 7 and 8 Portmill Lane 16 respondents considered 3 storeys to be too high whilst 10 people thought that this is “just right”. In the additional comments respondents highlighted the importance of the Portmill Lane frontage with regard to the Conservation Area and the Listed Buildings.

- 5.18 Along River Hiz Walkway 13 respondents considered the proposed maximum building height of up to 4 storeys to be “too high”; whilst 11 respondents thought 4 storeys is “just right”. In the additional comments section numerous people felt that up to 4 storeys would create a “tunnel” effect when built opposite to the existing four/five storey building and commented that the building height would compromise proposed widening and enhancement.

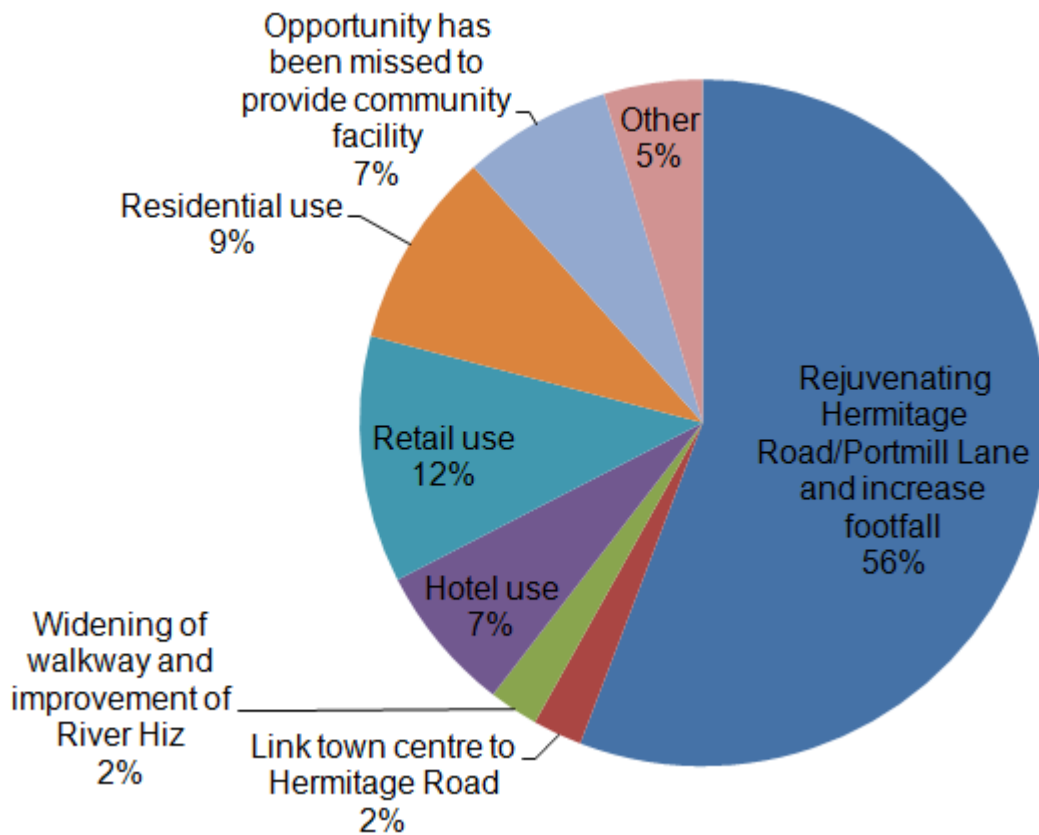
Question 4 – What do you think about the proposed River Hiz Walkway improvements?

- 5.19 The majority of respondents think that it is a good opportunity to improve the River Hiz (45 respondents). . Some respondents requested that the enhancement should allow for some planning of shrubs and requested more details of the proposed enhancement.
- 5.20 Other respondents also recognised that the River Hiz improvements will enhance access from the Portmill Lane car park to hopefully increase footfall during the day and in the evening
- 5.21 A few respondents made reference to the River Hiz itself and asked whether it was possible to raise the water level and removal of rubbish and vermin.

Question 5 – Do you think that the development brief has a positive and flexible approach to development at this site?

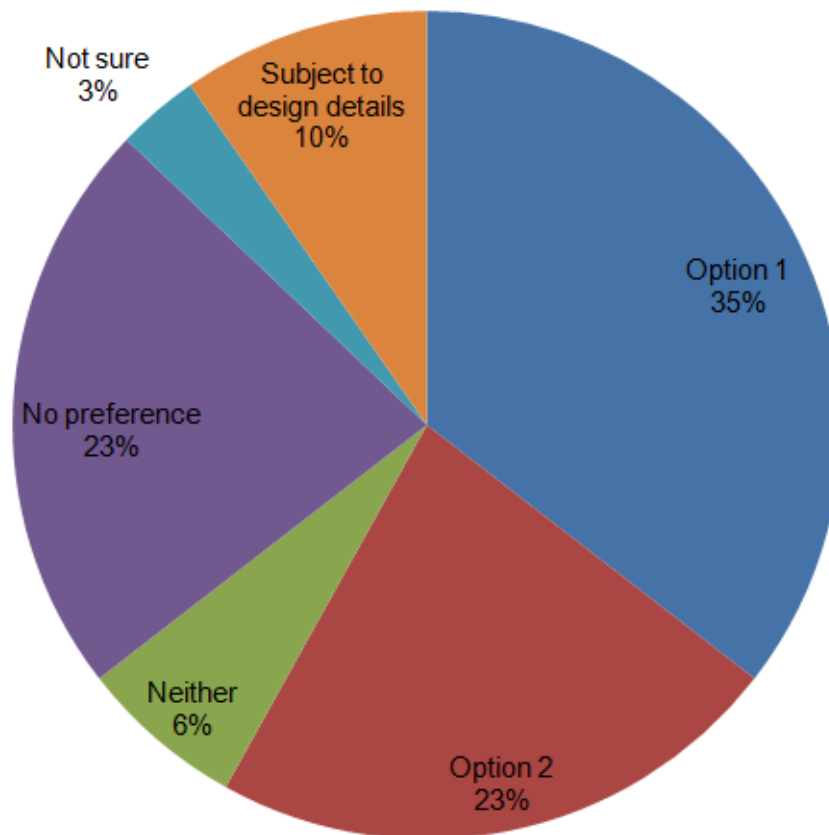
- 5.22 20 respondents answered “yes”, 15 respondents answered “no” and 2 people did not comment. There were various responses to this question:
- Not clear/ too vague/ very broad brush at this stage
 - Not flexible
 - Would have liked to have seen more options
 - Concerns about parking provision
 - There are too many restaurants
 - Depends on the outcome
 - Concern that public views will not be taken into consideration

Question 6: What do you feel is the most important benefit/use to be delivered as part of this site?



Rejuvenating Hermitage Road/ Portmill Lane and increase footfall	24
Residential use	6
Retail use	5
Opportunity has been missed to provide community facility	3
Hotel use	3
Link town centre to Hermitage Road	1
Widening of walkway and improvement of River Hiz	1
Other	2

Question 7: Which Land Use Disposition Option Plan do you prefer?

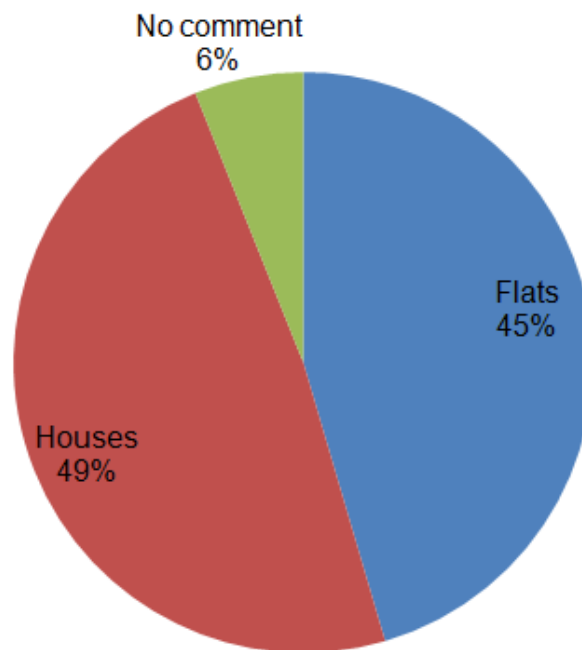


5.23 11 respondents preferred Option 1 and 7 respondents preferred Option 2. In the additional comments section 5 respondents stated that they did not have a preference or stated "either". 2 people stated that they would have preferred more options to choose from.

5.24 Some of the justification people provided for Option 1 are that they would prefer to have flats fronting Portmill Lane and the River Hiz walkway rather than Hermitage Road and the need to maximise footfall on Hermitage Road. The justification for Option 2 is that it is a better location for a hotel and town houses next to the listed buildings would blend in.

Question 8: With regard to the proposed residential element of the development would you prefer flats or houses?

5.25 The response was quite similar with 16 people having a preference for houses whilst 15 people preferred flats. In the additional comments section five people stated that they had no preference whilst two people suggested incorporating both houses and flats within the scheme.



5.26 4 respondents were concerned about densities of the residential development and highlighted that houses would reduce densities, on the other hand 5 people did not consider the site to be a suitable location for houses.

5.27 2 people highlighted that flats allow for different uses at ground level. 3 respondents considered town centre living is more suited to younger people who tend to live in flats. There were numerous requests for flats with balconies to front Portmill Lane.

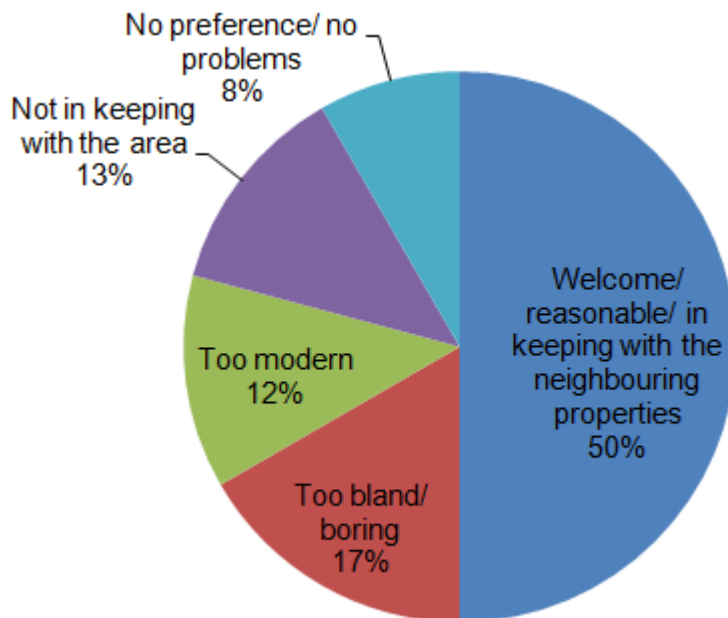
Question 9 – Do you have any other comments to make about the development brief?

Question 9 analysis

Parking concerns	8
Design concerns	6
Should be community centre use	5
Concern about building heights	4
Not flexible enough in terms of uses	3
Should be residential	2
Too many restaurants/ cafe's already	2
Concerns about viability uses proposed/ deliverability	2
Would like more detail on buildings	2
Wish that the development brief could include 75-81 Hermitage Road	2
Portmill Lane boundary wall should remain	2
Potential for archaeological remains	2
Should be post office	1
Should be totally retail use	1
Should be a cinema	1
Welcome hotel	1
Requests further detail for the possibility of widening the River Hiz	1
Boring plan	1
Concern that public's views will not be taken into account	1
Want to be kept informed about progress at the site	1

- 5.28 16 respondents made no additional comments. The majority who did comment had concerns about the proposed uses and detailed matters of car parking and design. It is necessary to highlight that details will need to be explored prior to an application, but the development brief outlines that car parking will need to be in accordance with NHDC policy with some flexibility on the grounds of the sites sustainable location.
- 5.29 Many respondents reiterated the uses they would prefer at the site including a community centre, purely retail use, a post office and a cinema. Two respondents reiterated that there are too many restaurants/ cafes along Hermitage Road and within Hitchin and had concerns for the viability of the proposed uses. 3 respondents felt the brief was not flexible enough in terms of the uses proposed.
- 5.30 2 respondents expressed that it would be good if 75-81 Hermitage Road could have been included in the development brief.

Question 10 – The illustrative elevations displayed as part of the exhibition at the Community Office and on the website are not part of the draft Development Brief but are a suggestion of the type of elevation which might comply with the brief. If you saw these drawings what do you think of them?



Welcome/ reasonable/ in keeping with the neighbouring properties	12
Too bland/ boring	4
Too modern	3
Not in keeping with the area	3
No preference/ no problems	2

5.31 Whitebarn Developments will take these comments into consideration at the more detailed application stages.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RESPONSE BY DEVELOPMENT TEAM

Overall

- 6.1 The developer was pleased with the good turnout at the exhibition and welcomed the opportunity to engage with the local community on a collective, and where possible, a one-to-one basis. In total 69 responses were received and a total of 92 people attended the exhibition.
- 6.2 Google Analytics analysis of the dedicated website showed that the website received a total of 700 visits of which 489 people viewed the proposed development page, 257 viewed the draft Development Brief PDF and 309 people visited the questionnaire page. The main referring websites were north-herts.gov.uk; google.co.uk; thecomet.net; and hitchinforum.co.uk. This demonstrates that a large number of individuals were aware of the exhibition, were able to attend the exhibition and also provide their views.

Post Consultation Changes

- 6.3 Following the exhibition and further to the comments received, the developer has made some changes to the proposed Development Brief which are outlined below.
- The decision has been taken to continue with Land Use Disposition Option 1 rather than Option 2 as it is necessary to provide an active frontage through the possible mixed uses along Hermitage Road and residential development would be better positioned fronting Portmill Lane and the River Hiz. This option also received the most support
 - Variation has also been made to the maximum building heights. It will be necessary to increase the depth of the 4 storey building at the centre of the site to give additional flexibility for the mix of uses proposed to front Hermitage Road. The buildings adjacent to the River Hiz Walkway have been reduced to a maximum of three storeys but there is a possibility for a four storey landmark building on the corner of Portmill Lane and the River Hiz Walkway.
 - In response to concern for the setting of the Listed Buildings 7 and 8 Portmill Lane, there will not be any built development adjacent to the Listed Buildings. This has been visually illustrated on page 25, 30, 33, and 34 of the Development Brief.
 - Additional commentary has been provided to clarify how the parking issues associated with this site are to be addressed.
 - The developer has decided to pursue flats and apartments at the site, therefore all reference to houses has been removed from the Development Brief.

- Minor amendments to spelling/wording throughout the Development Brief.
- Amendments to facilities plan to ensure the information is correct on page 12.
- Removed first bullet point at paragraph 7.31 as this information is too specific for the Development Brief and is not shown in the illustrative master plan for the site.