

REPORT TITLE: HITCHIN POST OFFICE DEVELOPMENT BRIEF

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEVELOPMENT AND BUILDING CONTROL

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report presents the post-consultation version of the draft development brief for the former Royal Mail Hitchin Delivery Office site at 90 Hermitage Road, Hitchin. A copy of the draft development brief is included as Appendix B 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 As was reported to this Committee in July 2012 (Minute 31 refers), a development brief is being prepared for the former Post Office site. The development brief is being prepared in partnership between the Council and Whitebarn Developments, who were the successful bidders to buy the site from the Royal Mail. Following Cabinet approval on 31 July 2012 for consultation on the draft brief, a public consultation exercise was carried out between 13 August and 25 September 2012. This was a six week consultation rather than the prescribed four week period¹, to allow for the fact it straddled part of August. Details of how the consultation was carried out and its findings are set out in the Statement of Consultation in Appendix A to this report. A total of 69 written responses were made on the draft brief.
- 3.2 The draft brief proposed a comprehensive redevelopment of the site, with retail or restaurant uses at ground floor on the Hermitage Road frontage, widening the existing walkway along the River Hiz and residential and hotel development on the Portmill Lane frontage and on the upper floors of the River Hiz frontage. The draft brief indicated two possible general layouts for how the hotel and residential elements might be arranged. Option 1 had the hotel on the western part of the site, running through from Hermitage Road to Portmill Lane, and residential on the eastern part of the site. Option 2 had residential to the west and the hotel to the east, on the corner of the River Hiz walkway and Portmill Lane.
- 3.3 A revised draft brief has been prepared to address the points raised during consultation. The revised draft brief is attached as Appendix B, whilst a schedule of the changes made between the consultation draft and the revised draft is included as Appendix C.

4. ISSUES

- 4.1 The main issues raised in the consultation can be summarised as follows:

¹ Under Regulation 12(b)(i) of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning)(England) Regulations 2012
HITCHIN (13.11.12)

Principle of development and use

- 4.2 There was a very high level of support for the principle of redeveloping the site, with almost all respondents being in favour of redevelopment. The mix of proposed uses was also supported, but by a smaller majority. The main issue raised about the proposed uses relates to introducing more retail or restaurants on the Hermitage Road frontage of the site. There appears to be some concern that there are already more than enough restaurants and cafes, and too many vacant shops already.
- 4.3 In design terms it is hard to envisage a viable use other than retail or restaurant which would be acceptable on the Hermitage Road ground floor frontage. Moreover, the introduction of the new hotel to part of the site should have the effect of making additional restaurant facilities in this area of town more viable, and increase usage of this part of the town centre more generally.
- 4.4 Of alternative uses suggested, the main ones were a cinema or a community hall.
- 4.5 Whilst the concept of a cinema may be attractive, officers are not aware of any cinema operators looking for a site in Hitchin, nor has the Council published any plans or strategies requiring additional cinema space to be provided. With respect to additional community hall (January 2012). As the Town Hall has recently moved toward that closure, it has also been clearly evident that those seeking alternative community accommodation locally have been able to do so successfully. The evidence collated for and which informed the Community Halls Strategy does not identify a need for additional community space in the town. Were the Council to seek to require a new community hall on the post office site, it would contradict both the adopted Community Halls Strategy and the Council's stance with respect to closing Bancroft Hall following the re-opening of Hitchin Town Hall (see minute 92 of the Cabinet meeting of 24

Building heights

- 4.6 The draft brief proposed four storey development along Hermitage Road and the River Hiz walkway, with three storey development along Portmill Lane. The consultation indicated broad support for four storey along Hermitage Road and three storey along Portmill Lane. Conversely, there was some opposition to four storey development along the River Hiz walkway, and some concern that even three storey development adjoining the listed buildings at 7-8 Portmill Lane was too tall.
- 4.7 With regard to the River Hiz walkway, the potential for creating a tunnel-like feeling with too tall development does need to be avoided. The draft brief has therefore been amended to show three storey development along the River Hiz walkway. Adjoining 7-8 Portmill Lane, there are a number of ways that a scheme could be designed to create visual separation between the higher parts of new development and the listed buildings. The brief needs to be sufficiently flexible to allow for a satisfactory solution to be found here, which may well not emerge until detailed elevations are worked up at the planning application stage. To indicate that, the revised draft brief now shows a buffer area between the listed buildings and the three storey frontage along Portmill Lane. This is not to completely rule out any development adjoining the listed buildings, merely to indicate that full height three storey development right abutting the listed buildings is not what the brief envisages.
- 4.8 Finally on height, the area of four storey development along the Hermitage Road frontage has been extended slightly further back into the site, to allow greater flexibility of design.

Layout

- 4.9 The draft brief proposed two alternative layouts, as discussed in paragraph 3.2 above. Option 1 was preferred in the consultation, and in the interests of simplicity the revised draft brief now only presents Option 1 as the preferred layout for the site.

Other issues

- 4.10 There was no particular strong steer from the public consultation as to whether the residential element should be town houses or flats. The revised draft brief indicates flats, which appear to offer greater flexibility for the design of the scheme. Concerns which have been expressed generally about high numbers of flats in recent years in Hitchin are valid, but in design terms this town centre site is perhaps not best suited to houses.
- 4.11 Parking issues were raised. The revised draft brief now makes clear that parking for the flats will be met on-site, as will disabled parking for the hotel. Other visitors to the hotel will not be catered for on-site, on the basis that peak usage of the hotel is unlikely to coincide with peak usage of the town centre car parks by shoppers.

Indicative elevations

- 4.12 Members may be aware that the consultation material included some indicative elevations for the Hermitage Road frontage of the site. Those elevations do not actually form part of the draft brief, and were explicitly labelled as such. Instead, that was the developers testing public opinion on those aspects of design in parallel with the consultation on the draft brief. The revised draft brief still does not include elevations for the site, as that is a matter of detail to be dealt with at planning application stage rather than in the development brief.

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 was 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.

- 6.3 Business and retail use on the site would generate additional business rates, a percentage of which (from 1st April 2013), will be retained by NHDC. The development of housing provision would attract New Homes Bonus that is payable for six years following completion. Central Government provide New Homes Bonus funding for six years on the basis of the national Band D Council Tax average. Currently this is split 80% to the District Council and 20% to the County Council, with an additional £350 per year to the District for each affordable home. In broad terms this would generate annually approximately £1,200 per dwelling to NHDC at current averages.

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 The consultation has accorded with the Council's compliance under the Equality Duty, existing equalities legislation, and Statement of Community Involvement. The specific uses of areas within the plan, and needs of any users for any resulting development will be considered under separate equality analysis at the time of consideration of any subsequent application for development.

9. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 9.1 The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transport and Enterprise is 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 and Full Council for approval and formal adoption.

11. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 11.1 To raise awareness of the forthcoming decisions required at Cabinet and Full Council on the development brief within the town of Hitchin.

12. APPENDICES

- 12.1 Appendix A: Statement of Consultation.
- 12.2 Appendix B: Revised Draft Hitchin Post Office Development Brief.
- 12.3 Appendix C: Schedule of changes from consultation draft brief.

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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