

Letter from Robin Dartington to NHDC

April 27th 2018

Dear Anthony Roche and Churchgate team

I attach my views on regeneration or re-development of the Churchgate Shopping Centre, in reply to the press release that the Council would like to hear views from the public.

The proposal approved by Full Council raises very many issues for Hitchin that are not dealt with in your Report, which presented Shearer's proposal as a simple commercial regeneration of a small run-down shopping centre, for new tenants paying higher rents. In fact, the Churchgate shops form only a small part of all the town centre shops and it is the town centre as a whole that attracts shoppers - Churchgate can never be a destination by itself. So the whole town centre - shops, the Market and the public realm - needs to be considered in any plan for improving Churchgate.

The brutal appearance of the existing building certainly spoils the character of Hitchin's centre with its wealth of historic buildings. Private ownership has blocked earlier attempts to redevelop so it is certainly correct for the Council to take the opportunity to acquire the lease as an investment. What improvements should then be made - and when - is a far more complicated matter.

The proposal from Shearer makes commercial sense for Shearer - buy to take control / upgrade standards and tenants / sell to take a profit / leave. But Hitchin has a long history of organic growth to meet local needs, which has made it a special place - and using Hitchin just for an external developer to make money is not acceptable.

So it is important that ideas do not harden before studies have established what the town centre now offers - and what is missing - and that is set out in a Brief. It may be that another smart restaurant should be included, but the need needs to be proved. So a crucial omission from your Report was any mention of Public Consultation, carried out in accordance with the Council's Consultation Strategy, 2016-2020. That says clearly that consultation should be held when there is a preferred option but still time to change. A critical mistake with the Simons scheme was to go into contract before any public consultation, which could have steered Simons off a plan that the public would not support - and then to set up a Liaison Forum in a form that appeared to be merely theatre and so failed to engage minds in real debate. At present, we seem to be heading down the exact same path. Improvements to Churchgate and the Market, plus simple related improvements to the public realm (River Hiz walk), does seem a much more realistic approach than a huge scheme covering all of the Churchgate Area in one go. But a scheme that relies for viability only on raising shop rents must be treated cautiously at a time when shop turn-over is generally decreasing and more shops are closing than new ones opening. The uncertainties on the future of town centres may mean that the approach is right but the time is not yet right. However, the chance to acquire the Churchgate lease will only be available for a limited time. So in my view a further urgent look should be made of a redevelopment with substantial residential uses above shops, which would give two sources on income, the residential rents possibly

increasing over time to match a possible long-term decline in retail rents. Lastly, having spent my working life on building design / supervision / project management and project direction, I am deeply concerned at the lack of qualifications and experience in the Council's team. This is an observation, not a criticism, as officers have not had chance to acquire experience. But after all the misjudgements over Simons and then the Town Hall, if the Council proceeds yet again before bringing sufficient expertise into the team, there will be fierce criticism. Just relying on consultants will not do - consultants are businesses that work in their own interests, not those of the client.

You will not like this, but I ask you to think - if you went to a bank with the present team for a £5m unsecured loan to set up a new commercial property venture, would any bank risk funding you? If not, you are relying on a softer loan from PWLB, but is that wise?

Should you expect council tax payers to sit idly by while the Council once again risks over-spending on under-performance, after blocking out contribution of local information and experience, as has happened on Simons and the Town Hall?

I hope you will carefully read the full explanation of local views attached - and set up proper public consultation at once. How to consult needs thought - the Council has withdrawn from Hitchin into its bunker down a side-street in Letchworth, with no presence in Hitchin and with Hitchin Committee undemocratically neutered into an 'information only' organisation that meets just four times a year. So nothing to build on!

I will be happy to assist personally in any way I can - or am allowed to!

Regards

Robin Dartington

emerging **Local Plan policies for Hitchin** and the District.

Para 5.5. **The Council should note a ‘community concept’ for regeneration of the Churchgate Centre, Market and public realm**

6. Environmental benefits 12

Para 6.5. The current **facade of Churchgate** does not match the architectural scale and character of Market Place in three ways:
(1) form; (2) presentation; (3) detailing.

Para 6.6. To fully cure the damage to Market Place, the entire facade plus the first structural bay of Churchgate should be demolished and re-built.

Para 6.7. The walkway through Churchgate should be regenerated or redeveloped to match the human character of the Arcade to West Alley.

Para 6.8. A clear space between shops and the Market should be created by relocating the permanent vegetable stall.

Para 6.9. **Study should be made of the advantages and viability of demolishing the shops flanking the Walkway, and developing new attractive modern shops accessed from a covered public space.**
Re-building the structure would **create the opportunity to develop residential uses and community space** above.

Para 6.11. The Council should interview local architects before finalising any appointments for this project.

Para 6.12. An **additional building** should be built on the site of the proposed ‘patio’, half with shops facing into a new north-south arcade and the other half facing and being part of the Market.

Para 6.13. The financial viability of **a larger shopping centre, with residential units above, should be investigated.**

Para 6.15 An architectural sketch scheme should be drawn urgently, to show whether the redevelopment option should be considered in depth against the regeneration option before any decision is made.

7. Social benefits 19

Para 7.6. **New tenants should NOT be chosen just to pay high rents – but to complement the retail offer in the rest of the town centre.**

Para 7.7. The Council should not rely on national data-bases that may not apply to the special character of Hitchin.

Para 7.8. A better survey will be needed of how shoppers use the existing shops and what is needed to improve the overall retail offer.

Para 7.9. The Council should address housing for **single people**, in particular **young people who cannot afford to establish their own life-styles.**

Para 7.11 **Availability in Hitchin of accommodation for various economic groups should be investigated.**

Para 7.13. The Council should not consider selling Churchgate in future but how to adapt the building to the changing needs of the community.

Para 7.15 The floor space for new shops should be planned flexibly, with possible future conversion to community needs in mind.

8. Economic benefits 21

Para 8.1 The Council should take the opportunity to buy in the Churchgate lease as it is a one-off opportunity.

Para 8.2. **The Council should invite successful businesses in Churchgate**

to make their future needs known if they are to survive and return to Churchgate after a minimum of one year's break.

Para 8.4. A 'study group' should visit other Markets that have recent investment, and with whom Hitchin competes to attract day traders.

Para 8.7 The difficult management problem on how to regenerate the Market on the same site, without losing permanent stall holders due to a break, must be faced.

Para 8.9 The Council must work to either develop a final scheme as quickly as possible, to minimise blighting the Market, Churchgate retailers and the town centre generally.

Para 8.10. The relocation and investment in the Market should be planned and carried out with Hitchin Market Ltd who know the traders and understand what draws shoppers to the Market.

Para 8.11. Costs of temporarily re-housing existing shops that should be encouraged to return should be included in the project budget.

9. Completing the riverside walk – Hermitage Rd to Bridge St **22**

Para 9.2. Completing the River Walk from Hermitage Rd to Bridge St would have economic value and should be included in the Regeneration.

10. Economic & social/entertainment potential of the river terraces **24**

Para 10.2 Whilst the priority use of river terraces should be for **special markets**, the terraces could be used for **entertainment** on non-market days.

Para 10.3. Removing the central staircase would materially enlarge the open space by making one large space from three sections.

Para 10.4 To enhance the iconic view to St Mary's, spectacular, 'dancing' fountains should be installed in the 'lake'.

Para 10.5 Refreshment stalls should be allowed, with seating. An entertainment license could cover the operating costs of the fountains.

11. Project funding **25**

Para 11.3. The Council should be cautious about over-investment in commercial-only property.

Para 11.4 The Council should investigate developing 60 affordable bed-sitters above shops in a redevelopment of Churchgate, using the £3m remaining for developing affordable housing,

Para 11.5. For the overall regeneration to be secure, the income from new shops, regenerated Market and public realm and residential units should be planned to cover the costs of the whole project

12. Planning Permission and other constraints **26**

Para 12.3. Regeneration will leave Hitchin with a shortfall in allocation for future retail space. Adding an additional building to Churchgate should be granted planning permission.

13. Governance and Expert Advice **27**

Para 13.4. Cabinet should respect the recommendations on management of major projects from the Scrutiny Committee, as amended.

Para 13.5. **The best way for the council to resource this project would be to bring in an experienced officer on secondment from another authority to act as the 'project champion', ie an experienced Project Director with authority to act, who keeps close personal**

contact with all the parties who are involved (the Council, the project managers and professional team, the contractors, all the stakeholders, the public) and is on the job all the time, and is passionate about achieving success.

Para 13.6. The Project Director should: ensure that all parts of the team are doing their jobs and are communicating; ensure there are no ‘elephants in the room’ (inconvenient truths that are ignored as too difficult) – but which eventually bring a project down.

Para 13.8. The ‘elephants’ that are already starting to appear , include:

- a) Hitchin is not a place where developers can just be allowed to make money on publicly-owned land;
- b) the Council’s team has no understanding of what drives Hitchin;
- c) As Hitchin has no Town Council, Hitchin Committee is the only channel for expression of public opinion – but the Council has emasculated HitCom;
- d) the Council is not following its own adopted procedures, such as the Local Plan and the Consultation Strategy, 2016-2010.
- e) the regeneration proposal is only a reaction to an external developer – it has NOT come out of the Local Plan or Town Centre Strategy. Regeneration now may be premature, an expensive waste of money.

FOOTNOTE

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Issues urgently needing to be debated in public include:

- What does it mean to be a market town in the 21C?
- What is needed/missing in order for the town centre to function?
- If shops, what form of shops?
- how can a renewed Churchgate Centre aim for the architectural quality that will justify listing later?

**The over-riding issue is whether the Council is aiming high enough?
Is simply a facelift the best that can be done to repair the damage to this special historic market town from insensitive modern development?
Should a revised Town Centre Strategy/Master Plan come first?**

Appendix A: Report to Full Council, 8 February 2018

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Appendix B: NHDC Consultation Strategy, 2016-2020

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Appendix C: Hitchin Churchgate Survey, March 2018

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Please reply to: rdartington@gmail.com

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

1. NHDC Invitation to express views

1.1 NHDC website posted on 20 March 2018:

'If you live or work in North Herts, or visit the District and have a view on North Hertfordshire District Council's (NHDC) proposal to improve Hitchin's Churchgate Centre and historic market, then we would like to hear it.'

The proposal is explained in a Report from the Deputy Chief Executive to Full Council² on 8 February, attached as Appendix A for the convenience of the reader as the Council has not provided the public with a convenient link.

Report to Cabinet on 27 March included:

5.4. The Council will shortly be launching an online survey on people's use of the current shopping centre and market, what types of operators they would like to see if the regeneration goes ahead and whether they support the principle of regeneration.

*At this early stage, **the Council is seeking the views of people who live and/or work in North Hertfordshire on the broad principles of the proposals in order to inform our thinking.***

There will be further opportunity for the public to comment on any scheme proposed in the future as things progress

1.2 The on-line survey addresses broad principles – and some detail. But it does NOT address the issues raised by the proposal.

These notes presents **initial views and opinions** from a resident who loves Hitchin and has some experience of development³, on the proposal described in the Report to Full Council on 8 February.

The Minute 72 of Full Council of 8 February 2018 includes the replies to questions, and records approval to the principle of a regeneration project. That is all the information available to the public at this time – but the Report makes clear that the proposal has already reached a level of detail equivalent to RIBA Stage C: Outline Proposals.

1.3 These personal views on Churchgate Regeneration are informed by the extensive earlier studies of the character of Hitchin and the potential for improvement. The Council should make at least **the following available for public reference** in Hitchin Library and Hitchin Initiative office in Churchyard:

- **Hitchin Conservation Area: Character Statement 26 July 2011**⁴ - 60pp
Excellent comprehensive, well illustrated, review of the historic assets in the town centre is worth a good read by everyone interested in their town. It provides a context for current proposals on the Churchgate Area.
- **Hitchin Urban Design Assessment, 2007**⁵ - 85pp
Prepared for assessing planning applications.

² <http://web.north-herts.gov.uk/aksnherts/users/public/admin/kab12.pl?cmte=COU&meet=111&arc=71> , Minute 72

³ Robin Dartington, former MA Cantab, MICE, AMBIM, FRSA – principal of Dartington Management Services/Dartington Project Services & former NHDC councillor.

⁴ https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/hitchin_conservation_area_character_statement_26_07_11_low_res_-2.pdf

⁵ https://northherts-cms.cms-dev.firmstep.com/sites/northherts-cms/files/files/hitchin_urban_design_assessment_sep_2007.pdf

- **Hitchin Town Centre Strategy, 2004⁶** - 55pp.
A very readable sympathetic strategy for improving Hitchin. Due to be reviewed every 3 to 5 years as sites are developed and priorities change – but never has been in last 14 years.
- **Churchgate Development Area Final Report, 2005⁷** – 59pp
This report is more generally informative than the subsequent adopted Planning Brief .
- **Development Brief⁸**: known as **SPG River Hiz Development Guidelines, 2005** - 18pp
The first recognition of the potential of a river walk to enhance Hitchin.

2. Public Consultation

2.1 The Report to Full Council makes clear that Shearer have presented a firm proposal and only need an appointment as Project Managers before implementing what to them is a simple commercial revamp of a run-down, out dated, smallish collection of shops.

2.2 Para 8.16 of the Report to Full Council lists the work to be carried out before Full Council are asked to approve an Agreement with Shearer. The list includes:

- Negotiating **final** terms for a joint venture with Shearer;
- Ensuring sufficient tenant demand;
- Ensuring **final** proposals meet statutory requirements.

With the current decline in town centre shopping, slack in tenant demand may be the crucial factor that delays implementing the regeneration until shopping habits stabilise. Retailers in the town have best understanding of what still sells to Hitchin shoppers. But there is no mention of Public Consultation before signing with Shearer.

The Council should not repeat a basic mistake with the Simons project, of entering into contract BEFORE the public could inject local information and opinion on Hitchin’s priorities through Public Consultation.

2.3 The Council should remember that proper consultation is important as the 2013 District Wide Survey found that *‘32% of people disagree that NHDC makes an effort to find out what local people want and 28% disagreed that NHDC fully involves/consults residents on important issues’*.

2.4 The Council should follow its own Consultation Strategy 2016-2020⁹ which includes:

- *‘Even where there is no express duty to consult, the courts may imply a duty to consult as part of a public authority’s general duty to act fairly’*
- *‘Authorities must consult representatives of council tax payers, those who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority, and those appearing to have an interest in an area within which the authority carries out its functions. Authorities should include local voluntary and community businesses in such consultation;*
- ***‘The consultation must be at a time when proposals are at a formative stage. If consultation is to be meaningful, it needs to be undertaken at a point when the mind of the decision-maker is still open to change. However, it must also be carried out when there is adequate information on the proposals for consultees to be able to offer an informed response.***

⁶ https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/files/hitchin_town_centre_strategy_nov_2004.pdf

⁷ https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/files/final_report_hitchin_1_.pdf

⁸ https://north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/files/spg_river_hiz_dev_guidelines_mar_1995-2.pdf

⁹ <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/Consultation%20Strategy%202016-2020.pdf>

- *It is acceptable for the decision maker to have a preferred option before commencing the consultation process, however there must be genuine potential for the preference to change as a result of the consultation, within the agreed policy framework’.*

It is clear that the Churchgate proposals ARE at a formative stage but that there is already a preferred option. **So NOW is the time for meaningful Public Consultation.**

The Consultation Strategy is attached in full at Appendix B for the reader’s convenience, as it shows the practices the Council should be following at this time – but is not. The Council is characteristically strong on producing documents but weak on implementation!

2.5 The on-line survey is copied at Appendix C for analysis, as the on-line version can only be opened once. A fundamental fault is to present Churchgate as a shopping destination, but it is luckily too small – or it could suck the life out of the High Street as the Arndale Centre has in Luton. It is **the whole town centre that is the destination**, with all the shops working together to provide a wide range of offers. Churchgate must be humble enough to join in.

The on-line survey should NOT be counted as Public Consultation as it does not:

- Provide sufficient information;
- Identify the issues that would concern the public;
- Enable the development of reasoned responses through debate in public meetings and workshops.

An on-line survey could be appropriate at a later stage, to check acceptability of the final proposal. The priority now is to enlarge the information base and elicit ideas.

2.6 It is therefore appropriate for any ‘views’ offered in letters/emails from residents - and other stakeholders - to be considered by the Council. The Council should release more information on constraints and opportunities, and launch full Public Consultation on the viable options for either regeneration or redevelopment.

2.7 These personal views are being circulated to stimulate the ‘stakeholders’ to consider **what issues concern them and how they may wish to express their own views to influence the development of the final proposals.**

3. Background

3.1. The Council was first approached by Shearer Property Group on 5 April 2016 to ‘explain its aspirations for the Churchgate Centre’ on which it had secured a binding option for purchase of the leasehold from Hammersmatch Ltd. A year later, Shearer reported that commercially-funded regeneration was not viable - but that funding by the Council through a low cost loan from the Public Works Loan Board could be.

3.2 The Council has kept discussions with Shearer secret for almost two years. All councillors were only briefed on 31 January, 7 days before Full Council was asked to approve the regeneration proposal in principle.

3.3 The Report to Full Council was reproduced to Hitchin Committee on 6 March ‘for information only’. When asked at Town Talk what residents should do to express opinions as the Council had no plans for formal consultation, some Hitchin councillors denied there was any proposal. Other councillors recommended writing to the Council.

Minutes of discussion at the 6 March Committee are not expected to be published before 30 March.

3.4 The Consultation Strategy 2016-2020 includes:

- 5.1. *‘Critically Councillors are elected to represent the views and opinions of their constituents and*

do this through the formal decision making process, where they have the ability to scrutinise Council decisions and policies’.

Hitchin councillors should therefore listen and represent residents’ views and opinions and should NOT consent to receiving Reports ‘for information only’.

3.5 The Council should publish a firm **timetable**. The Report states that work could start on site about 12 months after Full Council has approved the final terms now being negotiated with Shearer, which seems optimistic.

The Council should realise that the work to either develop a final scheme – or to abort the project – must proceed as quickly as possible, within an agreed timetable, in order to minimise blighting the Market, Churchgate retailers and the town centre generally.

3.6 After so many failed attempts, the Council should recognise that town centre renewal is never an easy game – and proceed steadily, not missing out any steps such as Public Consultation, and with caution.

It is easy to underestimate the practical difficulties of relocating a Market consisting of both permanent and day traders without losing the confidence of traders who can move elsewhere.

4. The Project Objectives

4.1 In September 2017, Cabinet approved recommendations from Scrutiny Committee, with amendments, including:

Recommendation 6 - The Council needs to have clear, documented objectives before it embarks on projects.

4.2 The Report to Full Council did not clearly document the Council’s objectives from adopting Shearer’s proposal. Shearer’s aims are clear – to buy commercial leasehold, raise the quality of the property to attract new ‘high-end’ tenants, sell and depart having made a profit. As this financial plan would not work with commercial funding, they have proposed the Council both funds and invests using a low-cost loan from the Public Works Loan Board and Shearer take a share of profits for project management. Environmental improvements will be added only to the extent needed by the new tenants - Hitchin just provides the commercial opportunity.

4.3 What is unusual in this commercially-planned project is that the Council is the land-owner and would also be the funder - and so would take all the financial risks, both short-term and long term. But the Council is not a profit-making organisation, its objectives should be to act in the best interests of Hitchin, in regard to: **the environment; the social needs of the community; the economic welfare of the community**. So there is a mis-match in the objectives of the partners in the proposed joint venture. However, as land-owner, funder and investor, the Council would retain overall responsibility for decisions – and that must be clear in any Agreement with Shearer.

4.4 The last two major projects in Hitchin have been unsuccessful, some would say because the objectives were not correctly set to meet local needs. There is now little public confidence in the Council’s ability to manage a major project.

4.5 This new attempt to regenerate Churchgate is largely a local matter, although of district-wide significance since Hitchin is the largest and most historic town if the objectives are wrong yet again, then even if the project achieves its aims, that will not be counted a success in Hitchin.

4.6 The Project Objectives should include:

- To complete the regeneration of the historic Market Place begun in 1992 with removal of car parking and re-paving with granite - by developing a new facade to the shopping centre, set behind the historic building line, that accords with the architecture of the other buildings that enclose the square;
- To redevelop the walkway through the shopping centre as an attractive arcade or, more generally, an attractive public space:
- To create a sympathetic transition from the shopping centre into Hitchin Market by adding a new building between the shops and the Market, whose western half would face an Arcade running north to Churchyard Walk and so would be part of the shopping centre, and whose eastern half would face the Market be part of the Market containing perhaps the Market Cafe, community facilities such as children's play space and the Market Toilets. (Such new building would hide the brutalist east facade of Churchgate if that is retained).
- To regenerate Hitchin Market within its existing site in accordance with a new 'vision' for the Market that has been agreed by consultations with existing traders, Hitchin Market Ltd, Hitchin Initiative, other concerned Hitchin organisations and regular visitors to the Market.
- To complete a riverside walk from Hermitage Road to Bridge Street in accordance with the River Hiz Development Guidelines, 1995.
- To re-landscape the 1923 'river terraces' facing St Mary's as a social amenity and entertainment space, and for special Markets linked to the new permanent Hitchin Market.

4.7 The Council should launch a number of studies to enlarge the information base, including:

- What shops sell what in Hitchin – what are the gaps in the overall retail offer?
- How are shopping habits changing – what sort of 'shopping experience is now wanted beyond simple buying of goods? What do recent successful shopping development look like, eg Kings Cross and St Pancras station forecourts?
- What sectors of the population are adequately cared for in the current housing stock? Is there a lack of housing for low income adults of all ages, in particular young adults?
- How are open-air Markets responding to change? What form of Market would best suit Hitchin in the future?

If even a handful of residents are interested, a new community study group could be formed, A4H (Action for Hitchin).

5. Concept framework for 'Churchgate and the surrounding area'

5.1 The development of Churchgate needs to fit within the emerging **Local Plan policies for Hitchin** and the District. The Council's retail consultants have advised that sites be allocated for adding an additional 11,100 sq m of retail space in Hitchin town centre by 2031, ie within 13 years from now. The consultants recommended in the Retail Study 2009 that 4,000 sq m be developed on Churchgate and 3,000 sq m on Paynes Park – and the shortfall be developed in Letchworth instead (!).

5.2 The draft Local Plan 2011-2031, as put to Examination in Public, contained Policy HT11: Churchgate and its Surrounding Area, for developing Churchgate Area with 4,000 sq m. This was challenged in the Town Centres Hearing and a modification was re-challenged at the reopened Hearing on grounds that:

- History had shown that **comprehensive development** of the Churchgate Area was not viable;
- The Full Council had approved the principle of regenerating the Churchgate Centre – not redevelopment - which would reduce the potential for additional retail space to 2,350 sq m, not 4,000 sq m. But Policy HT11 should include the **regeneration option** to face reality.

We must wait to see the Inspector's Report.

5.3 Before further modification, Policy HT11 proposes simply:

- **'Redevelopment** to provide up to 4,000 sq m additional main town centre uses on ground floor level floor space; with main town centre uses and / or residential on upper floor'.
- **Preparation of a 'concept framework' / masterplan to enable:**
 - Identification of suitable, long-term location(s) for Hitchin Market;
 - Ensure an appropriate level of car parking is retained and / or provided across the town centre as a whole;
 - Provision of high quality public realm including strengthened pedestrian links between Market Place, Queen Street, Portmill Lane, Bancroft and along the River Hiz;
 - Preservation and enhancement of heritage assets including Hitchin Conservation Area and listed buildings, including:
 - Protection of key views of Grade I listed St Mary's Church, including from Hollow Lane;
 - Consideration and sensitive treatment of key listed buildings and their settings including the Sun Hotel, the Biggin and various buildings in Market Place;
 - Retention and enhancement of terracing to River Hiz;
 - Any replacement buildings required to:
respect existing building frontage lines on Sun Street and Market Place; and provide architectural variation to reflect rhythm of historic building plots.
 - Archaeological survey to be completed prior to development .

Preparing a 'concept framework' seven years after the start date of the Local Plan period seems somewhat desperate – but clearly the Council is in difficulty on how it can practically meet the consultant's advice to provide 11,100 sq m of additional shop space in Hitchin by 2031.

5.4 The proposed scope of the Council's Concept Framework / Master Plan is given in Para 13.136 of ED117¹⁰, without a timetable. It will (eventually) address the Churchgate Area from a district-wide

¹⁰ <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/files/ed117-matter-14-councils-response-inspectors-queries-re-reatil-issuespdf>

planning viewpoint. The following 'community concept', covering just the parts of the whole Area that can realistically be improved at this time, concerns what is important from a Hitchin viewpoint.

5.5. The Council should note the 'community concept' for regeneration of the Churchgate Centre, Market and public realm, which is overlaid on Shearer's Site Plan dated May 2016.



- A. New Churchgate facade to Market Place, behind the historic building line – to match the scale and rhythm of the historic buildings enclosing Market Place.**
- B. Churchgate Walkway redeveloped as an attractive Arcade or 'public space' – that links with the Market through a new building (C).**
- C. New building to effect transition between shops and Market – half retail area with shops facing a new north-south Arcade (D) - half containing Market Food Hall, children's play space and Market toilets.**
- D. Entrance to new north-south Arcade off Churchyard Walk to attract footfall from the car parks to pass through the shopping centre before reaching Market Place.**
- E. Redeveloped shops with provision for future change of use over the next 125 years – plus residential units above for letting to single adults on low income.**
- F. New pitched glass roof over permanent Hitchin Market – stalls layout to be agreed between traders, Hitchin Market Ltd, Hitchin Initiative, Hitchin BID and community groups – with day Markets on the river terraces.**
- G. Central stairs from St Mary's Square Car Park down to the river terraces removed to enhance the river terraces for Day Markets and as an entertainment space.**
- H. Completion of river-walk from Hermitage Road to Bridge St, including the existing private River Walk through Jill Grey Place.**

6. Environmental benefits

Historic character of Market Place

6.1 In *England's Thousand Best Churches*, Simon Jenkins writes: *'The centre of Hitchin is spoilt by poor quality development, but at its heart is a battered pile of brick, stone and glass, the largest and jolliest church in Hertfordshire'*. That is a well-respected expert opinion – that poor quality development beside Hitchin's chief glory spoils the town centre.



Wedding at St Mary's Church, as painted by Leslie Dargert¹¹

6.2 The Churchgate Centre is in fact a good example of brutalist retail development of the 1970's – but is just not right for its location. Spurr's department store (which it replaced) was also no beauty although it did at least keep behind the historic building line from Sun Street to the Rose & Crown. The Churchgate Centre must have seemed an improvement at the time – but is now recognised as damaging to the character of the town centre.



Spurr's department store in Hitchin Market Place c1965; (c) the Frith Collection

¹¹ A Walk Around Hitchin in words and pictures, 1993,155pp.

6.3 Regeneration of Market Place in 1992 removed the car parking to Jackson's Yard and renovated the surface and roadways with granite. Market Place is now a well-loved and well used community space. Many Hitchin residents share the Council's wish to complete the upgrade by redeveloping the facade of the shopping centre to fit better with the facades of the historic buildings around the much-loved square.



Carnival float in Market Place before regeneration with granite cobbles - as painted by Leslie Dargert



Panorama looking west today



Panorama looking east

6.4 Four ranges of buildings enclose Market Place today - showing a variety of styles that respect the same architectural principles – except for Churchgate on the east side

South



West



North



East



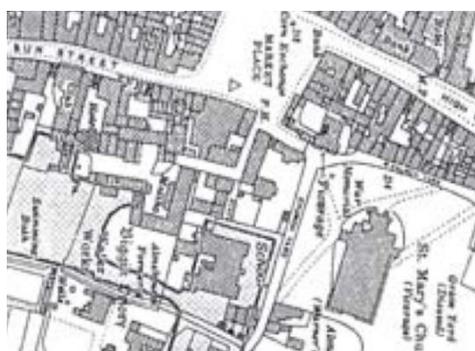
Healing Market Place

6.5 The current **facade of Churchgate** does not match the architectural scale and character of Market Place in three ways:

(1) form; (2) presentation; (3) detailing.



- (1) **Form.** Churchgate sprawls 'horizontally', ie much wider than tall, occupying almost the whole of the eastern side, so blocking out variation. With the exception of Starbucks, the other sides are filled with 'vertical' facades, ie taller than wide, or 'square', ie equal height and width, so that no one building dominates, allowing a pleasing variety.
- (2) **Presentation.** Although the newcomer, Churchgate brashly asserts greater height and width, thrusting greedily forward from the historic building line linking Sun Street to the Rose & Crown, and so over-shadowing the pub that dates from 1727. Churchgate Centre treats Market Place as its forecourt, rather than forming part of the architectural ensemble that encloses the public open space.



1923 Hitchin map

The historic curved building line across the east side of Market Place flowed smoothly from Sun Street to the historic Rose & Crown.

The forward thrust of Churchgate, past the historic building line in Sun Street, results in a really awful view from Sun Street into Market Place.



View from Sun Street into Market Place.

Churchgate thrusts forward in two stages - and then further by box windows.

In contrast, the 'well-mannered' design of the Corn Exchange presents only an elegant modest 'vertical' entry building (topped with an elegant cupola) in the middle of the west side of Market Place, which opens out to the greater volume behind. And the entry to the Arcade beside West Alley hardly impinges on Market Place at all.



- (3) Detailing.** The mechanical detailing of Churchgate shows no craftsmanship in the unfriendly mosaic-covered square columns and the boxy projecting upper windows. The brick is also too dark. Worst, the big plate-glass shop windows are too blatant, even though they are 'hidden' at the back of the projecting 'arcade'.



A sufficient style-change would NOT be effected merely by, say, rendering the brickwork, fitting flat windows and clipping tubular casings around the columns!

6.6 The Council has not explained what is meant by the proposal: 'the frontage onto Market Place would be completely redesigned and reworked'¹². To fully cure the damage to Market Place, the entire facade plus the first structural bay of Churchgate should be demolished and replaced by three or four separate facades to suit the architectural rhythm around Market Place:

- **The square facade next to the Rose&Crown must respect the height of the pub that dates back to 1727;**
- **The next square facade should contain the 'entry' to the larger volume of the 'arcade' behind – so echoing the entry to the Corn Exchange opposite .**

¹² Report to Full Council, Para 8.1

- A double-square facade – or two separate square facades – should fill the gap up to Sun Street.

Each facade must genuinely appear to front a separate building, even if that is joined behind to the shops facing the inner walkway/arcade of the Churchgate Centre.

It is essential that all those facades lie along the historic curved building line from Sun St to the Rose & Crown. Only then will the smooth entry from Sun St into Market Place be restored.

If this sounds like building a film set, it is. It is the space WITHIN Market Place that matters, enclosed by just the facades. The Nash terraces around Regent's Park were built as facades that were filled out behind in different ways to suit purchasers.

Churchgate Walkway / Arcade

6.7 The brutalist Walkway through Churchgate is quite simply ugly! Lumpy and graceless! Removing the metal canopies, fitting new shop-fronts and floating a pitched glass roof would help. The walkway should be regenerated or redeveloped to match the human character of the Arcade beside West Alley, at the north-west of the square.



Churchgate Walkway, looking west.



The Arcade beside West Alley

Improving the transition from shops to Market



Eastern face of Churchgate adjoining the Market

6.8 The shops along the eastern face of Churchgate are degraded by the over-close proximity of the Market. A clear space the width of the inner walkway should be created by relocating the permanent vegetable stall. A new position would need to be found within the Market).

The metal canopies are ugly and should at least be replaced with glass.

Creating a clear space the size of Shearer's 'patio'¹³ is not justified – and would weaken the link between the Market and Market Place, also used for day stalls.

The better & bolder concept – total re-development of the Walkway shops.

6.9 Bearing in mind the need to demolish the facade to Market Place and the first structural bay – and to glass over the Walkway and refit the shop fronts – and that incorporating the existing structural columns will constrain re-configuration of the shops – **urgent investigation should be made of the advantages and viability of demolishing the shops flanking the Walkway, and developing with new attractive modern shops leading off from a covered public space.**

Re-building the structure would **create social and economic opportunity to develop residential uses and community space** above, in accordance with Local Plan Policy HT11.

6.10 The Churchgate Development Area Final Report called for a mix of retail, food and beverage, leisure and residential space on the Churchgate Area – not only shops¹⁴. Residential units are now highly priced in Hitchin. It is believed that Shearer found that it was not possible to add flats above the shops using the EXISTING structure/foundations – but **there has been no mention of investigating a mixed-use development on new structure/foundations, funded by a cheap loan to the Council.**

6.11 The potential for developing 42 flats over new shops was investigated in outline in 2013 by 'bbr architects', the Hitchin-based firm who carried out Coopers Yard on the far side of Market Place. The advantages of employing a local firm are their ready contactability throughout the project, their local knowledge, their pride in contributing to an important part of Hitchin's heritage. At the least, the Council should interview local architects before finalising any appointments for this project¹⁵.

6.12 Assuming that a new layout for Hitchin Market will fit a reduced site, an **additional building** should be built on the site of the proposed 'patio', with the space between creating a new north-south arcade.

This second arcade could provide an attractive entrance off Churchyard Walk, capturing the footfall up Churchyard Walk from St Mary's car park.

Angled mirrors at the right-angle junction of the two arcades could provide a 'view round the corner', avoiding security risks in 'off-peak' times.

Only half the shops in the new building could face into the second arcade – the other half would be in the Market and should contain: the Market Cafe enlarged into a Market Food Hall (a range of food stalls around a common seating area); the Market Office ; a children's play space and the Market toilets. There would then be no need for the proposed buffer zone ('patio') between the posh shops and the Market.

The Market must maintain as close a relationship as possible with Market Place. This could mean incorporating an arched entrance through the new building.

¹³ For 'patio', see Shearer's Site Plan at <http://web.north-herts.gov.uk/aksnherts/images/att13390.pdf>

¹⁴ Churchgate Area Planning Brief: 'An entirely retail development scheme of the Churchgate centre may prove unviable at the prevailing rental levels. However if a mixed-use, retail and residential scheme was to come forward the higher value residential uses could cross subsidise the retail element of the scheme. Spin off benefits include creating a more sustainable development and boosting the evening economy'.

¹⁵ Robin Dartington has no commercial involvement with bbr architects. There has been casual social contact ever since Stephen Boddey (principal of bbr) and Robin were District Councillors at the same time, elected in Hitchin.

6.13 Bearing in mind **no additional land purchase would be required, a new larger shopping centre, with residential units above, may well be viable.**

6.14 The final investment value of a new structure would be higher than the present 50-year old poor quality building due to lower future maintenance costs.

6.15 An architectural sketch scheme should be drawn up urgently, to show whether the redevelopment option should be considered in depth against the regeneration option before any decision is made.

7. Social benefits

New shops

7.1 Hitchin is fortunate in having so large a historic centre of great charm that acts as a centre for community life as well as for local shopping.

7.2 The town centre shops are successful, with a vacancy rate of only 7%, half that of Letchworth.

7.3 But use of town centres is changing as the growth of online shopping cuts into shop sales¹⁶. The small shops in historic buildings are suited to growth of personal services such as hairdressing – and even to charity shops that display a wide range of low-cost used items. So Hitchin continues to be attractive to visitors.

7.4 However, the advice of retail consultants is to build large stores for multiples - the draft Local Plan still proposes to add 11,100 sq m of retail space by 2031. It may well be true that some new **retailers** would come to Hitchin if new shops met their needs – and the current Survey will give some evidence on whether **shoppers** would want to visit such new shops. But Hitchin is not large enough to compete with large retail parks for serious comparison shopping – that is not what people come to Hitchin for¹⁷.

7.5 Whether Churchgate is regenerated or redeveloped, relying on higher shop rents from shops selling more expensive goods may well be an expensive mistake. It may be that only ‘interesting’ shops will continue to attract when online shopping has gained an even bigger share of comparison shopping. But the demand for town centre flats seems likely to be sustained.

7.6 The serious basic flaw in Shearer’s proposal is that it treats Churchgate shops as an entity to be considered on their own, ie sales/rents would be higher in pushed-up the shops. In practice, all the shops in the town centre act as ‘one shopping centre’ – Churchgate is too small to become a destination on its own. So **new tenants should NOT be chosen just on ability to pay high rents – but to complement the retail offer in the rest of the town centre.** A survey is needed to discover what is already on offer in the town centre and what is missing – a pet shop? a toy shop? - rather than say another high-end restaurant simply because it could pay higher rents.

7.7 The on-line survey of the shopping habits of existing visitors to Hitchin town centre may collect some local views but the structure of the questionnaire will not produce a full marketing survey as post-codes will not be collected. This will prevent the views being sent in to be correlated with socio-economic groups, and so the likely total numbers agreeing with particular views cannot be

¹⁶ <https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/press-releases/retailers-closing-15-stores-a-day.html>

¹⁷ The Visitor Survey 2004 found: 67% of visits were non-food; 61% of visits were to the Market; 56% were food shopping.

calculated. But the Council should not rely on national data-bases that may not apply to the special character of Hitchin.

7.8 The Council has claimed the on-line survey will be well advertised to produce a large response.

In fact, apart from mention in The Comet (not seen by all residents) there has been no promotion – no stall in Market Place, no billboards within the Market, no public meeting to answer questions. A better survey will be needed of how shoppers use the existing shops and what is needed to improve the overall retail offer.

New 'student-type' accommodation for single people on low incomes

7.9 Almost any new residential unit seems to sell quickly in Hitchin. That can make developers not bother to provide for all sectors of need. However, a publicly funded project should not only be concerned with profit - but with meeting needs. The Council should address housing for **single people**, in particular **young people who cannot afford to leave home and establish their own lifestyles**. The circumstances at that time in life can change quickly – a new job, a new relationship. So trouble-free renting is better than ownership to avoid the costs and delays of buying and selling and maintaining property.

7.10 Re-development and enlargement of Churchgate might produce 50 to 100 'bed-sitters' and small 1-bed flats for letting at affordable levels to residents on low incomes, above the shops and maybe in garrets. Single people living there would be likely to use town centre facilities, but there should be some managed communal space or 'club room', as provided in university student accommodation.

7.11 The availability in Hitchin of accommodation for various groups, including provision for single adults on a range of incomes (in particular for young adults on minimum wages) should be investigated.

Flexibility for future conversion of Churchgate shops to community and leisure uses

7.12 As said, town centre use is changing rapidly. The fabric of a regenerated or redeveloped Churchgate should last 80 to 125 years – but who knows how much change the town centre might see in that time?

7.13 A commercial owner will be less concerned with future change than the Council. When a building becomes unfashionable, they sell – Hammerson PLC, a national property company running 37 centres and retail parks, are reported to be unloading secondary shopping centres and investing only in super-centres. The Council should not consider selling Churchgate in future but rather how to adapt the building to the changing needs of the community.

7.14 Shops may well prove be a poor long-term bet, as shopping depends only on convenience, not sentiment. In contrast the essential function of a town centre is to express the needs of residents to do things together, to feel part of a community – in the case of Hitchin, a community stretching back 1,000 years. Here **sentiment plays a large part**.

7.15 So the floor space for new shops should be planned flexibly, with possible future conversion to community needs in mind. This should affect the planning of services outlets in particular (dividing walls are easily altered, but changing services outlets can be disruptive and expensive, so there should be over-provision at the start, to suit future alternative layouts.

A commercial advisor will be concerned only with the initial lettings and not plan for flexibility.

7.16 Community uses – such as art galleries, craft workshops, children’s indoor play, clubs, workshops for physical and mental health, doctors’ surgeries – will not equal shop rents.

Planned repayment of debt should cover the possibility of lower commercial rents over time, but of increased residential rents. Hedge the bet!

7.17 The Hitchin Town Centre Strategy, and the draft Local Plan, are strong on rhetoric about supporting a vibrant community – but weak or silent on any provision!

8. Economic benefits

Churchgate shops

8.1 Whether or not regeneration/redevelopment proceeds at this time, the Council should take the opportunity to buy in the Churchgate lease as it is a one-off opportunity that might not re-occur for another 125 years if a new lease was granted to some other new owner.

8.2 The proposals imply that all retailers in Churchgate will shortly be evicted without compensation, using a development clause in the leases. Those businesses are now effectively blighted. The costs of temporarily re-housing those existing shops that should be encouraged to return should be included in the project budget.

8.3 Shops that fall empty will be virtually un-lettable unless the new tenants are indemnified for losses from fitting out for only temporary use. It has been pointed out to the agents, Brown & Lee, that their letting details for No. 6 Churchgate (now empty) did not warn of the proposed regeneration. Brown & Lee referred that to their current clients, Hammersmatch Ltd.

8.4 Although Churchgate is unattractive, some existing shops sell goods not available elsewhere in Hitchin, eg Etcetera gift shop, Tim’s Art, Lifestyles Hitchin bric-a-brac – so are an essential part of the overall retail offer. **It would be both unkind, and poor planning, to lose businesses known to be successful just to bring in unknowns** – but the Report does not mention including the costs and compensation for transferring existing tenants to temporary accommodation for the works period. **The Council should invite successful businesses in Churchgate to make their future needs known if they are to survive and return to Churchgate after a minimum of one year’s break.**

Hitchin Market

8.5 Improving Hitchin Market should be a separate project that is in fact of more importance to Hitchin in terms of drawing visitors into the town. Hitchin Market extends the range of retail offer in the town centre – and the different style of retailing in an open market draws in different sorts of visitors.

8.6 There is currently a wide variety of opinion within Hitchin on what form of Market, comprising both permanent and day stalls, will work best in future. Hitchin Market Ltd should lead on this – but there is need to survey opinion amongst shoppers, permanent stall holders (who have been – and still are - are fully committed to Hitchin) and day traders (who can and do move around). A ‘study group’ should visit other Markets, particularly ones that have recent investment, and those with whom Hitchin competes to attract day traders¹⁸.

¹⁸ Some ‘day traders’ at Hitchin also rotate weekly around Saffron Walden, Bury St. Edmunds and Royston.

8.7 A study should consider the effects of pushing the Market further from Market Place – its natural home but which it has out-grown. If the move is inevitable, how can the effects be mitigated?

Signboards? A trail of stalls down the Arcade?

8.8 No firm timetable has been published, but the Report states that work could start on site about 12 months after Full Council has approved the final terms now being negotiated with Shearer – and will take about 12 months to complete. The site work must start with relocation of the Market, which must be carefully planned and not rushed. That means funding for the new Market will be required before work can start on the Churchgate shops.

8.9 The difficult management problem on how to regenerate the Market on the same site, without losing traders due to a break, must be faced. The Council has earlier promised that the Market will not move twice. This will mean that the Market should be eased towards Queens St, piece by piece, with no overall break in trading. Uncertainty on practicality must create uncertainty for the traders, especially those who have invested in lock-ups. Day traders can simply divert to other Markets and not return, in which case Hitchin Market will dwindle.

8.10 The Council must realise that the work to either develop a final scheme – or to abort the project – must proceed as quickly as possible, within an agreed timetable, in order to minimise blighting the Market, Churchgate retailers and the town centre generally.

8.11 The Council has considered taking back management of the Market when the current agreement with Hitchin Market Ltd runs out in July – but then backed off when the complexities came clear. Last time the Council ran the Market, it lost money – Hitchin Market Ltd pay a net c£34,000 pa to the Council. The relocation and investment in the Market should be planned and carried out in close collaboration with Hitchin Market Ltd who know the traders and understand what draws shoppers to the Market.

9. Completing the riverside walk from Hermitage Road to Bridge Street

9.1 The shopping streets in Hitchin form a ‘U’ comprised of Sun Street + Market Place + High Street + Bancroft running south-north, and Hermitage Road and Bridge Street running east-west at the ends. It was recognised in 1994 that a River Walk along the river would join the ends of the shopping streets and create a ‘circular walk’ around the town centre for visitors¹⁹. The River Hiz Development Guidelines, 1995, specified a Walk 3m wide, shared between pedestrians and cyclists.

9.2 That Walk would have economic value as it could funnel visitors through the Market and up Churchyard Walk towards Market Place. A new attractive entrance off Churchyard Walk into the shopping centre could then divert that footfall through the new arcades. So **completing the River Walk should be included in the Churchgate and Hitchin Market Regeneration**. Just as the shops need a smartened Market nearby, so the Market needs the economic benefits of a smartened River Walk.

9.3 The River Walk through the Churchgate Area has three sections: (1) Hermitage Road to Portmill Lane; (2) Portmill Lane to Biggin Lane; (3) Biggin Lane to Bridge Street.

Section 1: Hermitage Road to Portmill Lane:

This section was almost completed by the Post Office Site Development – but the entry from Hermitage Road was not included, so fails to ‘introduce’ an attractive walk. The entry

¹⁹ River Hiz Development Guidelines, Supplementary Planning Guidance, 1995

section, past the flats and service yard, should be improved as a shared road. The Walk should be clearly signed with a wall-mounted map.

Section 2: Portmill Lane to Biggin Lane:

The middle section from Portmill Lane to the Market is the most important. At present there is no continuation through Portmill East car park as the footway along the river is too narrow. That footway should be widened to 3m by shifting the front line of cars away from the river (losing only two parking spaces).



**River Walk reduced to narrow footway past Portmill Car Park.
Parking needs to be moved back – with loss of only two spaces behind.**

The River Walk needs to be clearly signed as it crosses the river terraces facing St Mary's, requiring a way to by-pass the central stairs down from St Mary's Square car park. **It would be better to remove those stairs completely.** The stairways at each end of the car park would be fully sufficient.



Removing the central stairs would link the north and south terraces to form one large un-interrupted public space for day markets – and entertainment.

The plaque on the stairs would need to be re-positioned.

There should be a clear route for the River Walk through the Market, heading straight for an uninterrupted view of The Biggin. The Walk should be marked by studs in the paving.

Section 3: Biggin Lane to Bridge Street.

A narrow River Walk has been created along the river edge within Jill Grey Place which links to a River Walk through the new housing up to Bridge St - but is blocked by panel fencing at the join. It seems that the Jill Grey Planning Permission required the Walk but not public access, which should now be negotiated at least for pedestrians even if a path shared with cyclists is no longer possible.

To reach the Walk along Jill Grey Place, a simple bridge will be needed from Biggin Lane, positioned close to The Biggin, similar to the bridge within the Bridge St housing.

To make the Walk attractive, rubbish must be cleared from the river edge.



River Walk through Jill Grey Place blocked by fence panel. Rubbish in river opposite Jill Grey Place

10. Economic and social/entertainment potential of the river terraces

10.1 Adding an additional dual-use building to Churchgate will effect the transition from shops to open Market without need for the 'patio'. But improving public open space would enliven the Market.

10.2 The areas around St Mary's churchyard are currently of low amenity value, being used only for surface parking. But the river terraces have huge potential as public open space , at present wasted.

Whilst the priority use of river terraces should be for **special markets** which benefit the town by increasing visitors, the terraces could also be used for **entertainment**..

10.3 The terraces, the canalised river, the lawn opposite and the west front of St Mary's provide the finest urban landscape in the town. Removing the central staircase would materially enlarge the open space by making one large space from three sections.

10.4 To enhance the already iconic view across the river to St Mary's, spectacular, ever-changing, 'dancing' fountains should be installed in the 'lake' – perhaps funded by the community.

10.5 When people lingered to enjoy the view – and the fountain display - refreshment stalls should be allowed, with seating. An entertainment license could cover the operating costs of the fountains.

10.6 The edge to the river should be marked with floral beds which are now a very attractive and welcome feature in the town centre.

10.7 Hitchin needs more interest within its public realm, to attract visitors on non-market days – and people will pay. The terraces are a golden opportunity to sit, enjoy the view and fountains, just meet and mix with a quiet drink.

10.8 In winter, a skating rink might be laid down, as at the Natural History Museum, if there was demand.



Fountains in lake at Kew

11. Project Funding

11.1 Shearer have proposed that the Council funds the regeneration to Churchgate through a loan from PWLB – which means the council would take all financial risk. Borrowing 100% for a property development is always risky as income from rents can vary, and (according to Shilcock's) retail rents in some parts of Hitchin have dropped 20% in recent years. Recent Press reports say 16 shops closed every day in 2017 and only 11 opened – the retail sector is shrinking.

11.2 If rents drop then also will capital value, so that if the council needed to sell off at some, the selling price might not cover an initial 100% loan. The risk of a failing investment should be faced full-on.

11.3 The availability of a 100% PWLB loan at low interest is a temptation that many councils have fallen for. However, the Council should be cautious about over-investment in commercial-only property²⁰.

11.4 Although the Council has allocated almost all its capital reserves²¹, £3m remains allocated for developing affordable housing through a subsidiary trading company controlled through a Cabinet Sub-Committee²².

²⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/84892c56-1a17-11e7-bcac-6d03d067f81f>

²¹ Report to Full Council , 8 February 2018, para 8.7

²² Report to Cabinet Sub-committee (Local Authority trading companies shareholder), 15 March 2018, para 7.2

Assuming a unit building cost of £50,000, the Council should develop 60 affordable bed-sitters above shops in a redevelopment of Churchgate, without increasing the PWLB loan.

11.5 Shearer have made clear that the upgraded shops will not secure tenants without upgrading of the local environment²³. The Report states that the Council proposes to fund supporting improvements to the Market and the public realm through a grant from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). However, the likelihood of a grant must be low as the '£12.5m open call was for economic development projects within the county that will deliver housing, employment, business development or skills outputs' -not enhance open-air Markets - and there were nineteen other bids. The Report does not identify a Plan B. **So for the overall regeneration to be secure, the income from new shops, regenerated Market and public realm and residential units should be planned to cover the costs of the whole project.**

Leaving out regenerating the Market, on grounds that funds could not be found, will not be acceptable.

12. Planning Permission and other constraints

12.1 The draft Local Plan, 2011 to 2031, Policy HT11, allocates the Churchgate Area is for redevelopment to provide 4,000 sq m of additional retail space.

12.2 The policy was challenged at the Examination in Public on grounds that Full Council had just approved a proposal in principle to regenerate the shops which, according to the retail consultants, would reduce the potential for adding retail space in the Churchgate Area to 2,350 sq m. At the Hearing, the Council was asked to include regeneration as an alternative to redevelopment to clear the way for this new initiative if regeneration does prove the preferable option. An amended policy will be put to consultation following publication of the Inspector's report.

12.3 Regeneration will however leave Hitchin with a shortfall in allocation for future retail space. Adding an additional building to Churchgate, whether the shops are regenerated or redeveloped, will reduce that shortfall and should be granted planning permission.

12.4 At the Hearing, the Council claimed that regenerating Churchgate shops would make the remainder of the Churchgate Area more attractive for development but did not explain how. The only frontage of the entire Area onto the primary shopping streets is the frontage of Churchgate Centre onto Market Place - plus the narrow pedestrian path beside M&S. Plug the link onto Market Place with an inadequate commercial building and for all practical purposes, commercial development of the car parks behind will never happen.

No mention was made of where it would be possible to relocate the car parks on the rest of the site, on which the town centre shops rely.

12.5 Churchgate Shopping Centre impinges on the privately-owned historic building that houses Nationwide Building Society, and on Churchyard Walk which is owned by the Church. Agreement to the works will be needed from those owners.

12.6 The Report to Full Council asserts that the works could start about 12 months after approval of a deal with Shearer seems overly optimistic – a timeline for completing detailed design , obtaining planning permission, terminating shop leases and tendering should be published.

²³ Report para 8.4: *'one of the key challenges in attracting retailers is ensuring the surrounding environment is attractive and a vibrant space which supports the investment being made in the shopping centre'*.

13. Governance and Expert Advice

13.1 Needless to say, project planning and management – whether of regeneration of redevelopment - will require a team that contains adequate expertise and experience. The council has neither councillors nor staff experienced with property development – that is an **observation**, not a **criticism** as, if the council did hold such expensive officers, they would have been under-employed.

13.2 Shearer have offered to input expertise for a minority share in the increased rental value²⁴. Such a deal would be unsuitable on two counts: (1) Shearer’s motivation would be only to get the largest possible rental, not a quality result for Hitchin; (2) Shearer cannot advise objectively on their own appointment.

13.3 Why the Council is negotiating with Shearer to buy the lease on the shopping centre through the option they hold is not clear –simplest would be for the council to buy back the Churchgate lease direct from Hammersmatch, by agreement.

There are many companies who could then provide project management, including Shearer.

13.4 When setting up the project organisation, perhaps with a Project Board, Cabinet should respect the recommendations on management of major projects from the Scrutiny Committee, as amended and approved by Cabinet last September, in particular:

- *Recommendation 7 - Large scale projects should have a champion to drive them forwards*
- *Recommendation 6 - The Council needs to have clear, documented objectives before it embarks on projects;*
- *Recommendation 5 – (as amended by Cabinet) - “Projects are constrained by the resources that the Council has available. The Council should ensure that large projects are properly resourced. **If adequate resources are not available, the project should not begin until they are.**”*

13.5 Based on experience²⁵, the best way for the council to resource this project would be to bring in an experienced officer on secondment from another authority to act as the ‘project champion’, ie an experienced Project Director with authority to act, who keeps close personal contact with all the parties who are involved (the Council, the project managers and professional team, the contractors, all the stakeholders, the public) and is on the job all the time, and is passionate about achieving success.

That officer should be salaried, not profit driven.

13.6 The Project Director should have two main responsibilities:

- To ensure that all parts of the team are doing their jobs – and are communicating;
- To ensure there are no ‘elephants in the room’ (inconvenient truths that are ignored as too difficult) – but which eventually bring a project down.

13.7 Unfortunately, the Council has shown itself to be particularly weak in facing up to ‘elephants’ on major projects, examples being on Simons scheme:

²⁴ Report para 8.7: ‘... the Council would receive the lion’s share of the revenue generated and SPG a much smaller share...’

²⁵ Robin was seconded to the Royal Opera House as Project Director, from the National Building Agency, which was a not-for-profit quango set up to advise local authorities on their building programmes but which no longer exists.

- not accepting that when three of the four developers walked away from Competitive Dialogue, the Brief was undeliverable at that time;
- when Simons were allowed to proceed contrary to the Brief, the public would not accept the scheme;
- when no agreement could be reached with Hammersmatch to bring in the Churchgate Centre, no comprehensive scheme could be locked onto the primary shopping area – so would fail to secure investment funding.

13.8 The Council should recognise the ‘elephants’ that are already starting to appear , including:

- The special character of Hitchin town centre is all important to the town centre’s retailing success and to the town’s success as a place to live– it is not a place where developers can just be allowed to make money on publicly-owned land;
- Being based down a side street in Letchworth, with no contact and no base in Hitchin, the Council’s team has no understanding of what drives Hitchin. The Council has shown no sign of setting up a project base in Hitchin, say in an empty Churchgate shop;
- As Hitchin has no Town Council, Hitchin Committee is the only channel for expression of public opinion – but the Council has emasculated HitCom to only meeting four times a year to receive reports ‘for information only’, so democratic channels are in effect dead, and resistance to damaging schemes has to turn to other ways ;
- The Council in Letchworth feels that all that matters is that it has all the power – so automatically, anything it does is by definition ‘right’ and can be imposed – ‘we can do whatever we like, all by ourselves’ - and any criticism is invalid. So the Council is not even following its own adopted procedures, such as the Local Plan and the Consultation Strategy.
- Approval in principle to the regeneration proposal was only a knee-jerk reaction to an external prod by a developer who has spotted an opportunity to ply his trade – it has NOT come out of the Local Plan or Town Centre Strategy. Its timing is simply opportune. It will freeze Churchgate Centre at its present size. But if the retail consultants are right, once the extra 17,000 houses/extra 50,000 residents in the district have started to show, pressure for more space in town centres will become extreme. As all the former employment sites in Hitchin town centre have been allowed to go to housing, only Churchgate Area and Paynes Park remain as development opportunities. At that time, a much larger re-development of the Churchgate Centre may become viable – and inevitable. In which case, any regeneration now may prove to be premature, an expensive waste of money.

It all depends on whether the Council believes its own Local Plan – or is that just a waste of time and money?

An experienced and effective Project Director would find solutions/make changes to the project planning, so that the project proceeded smoothly to a successful completion – or was aborted before too much money had been spent - if that was the right decision.

FOOTNOTE

These views from a resident have taken as the starting point that Full Council has already supported regeneration of Churchgate Shopping Centre as shops. But is that the right starting point for public consultation? Shopping habits are changing, and use of Hitchin town centre is adapting. Will freezing a renewed Churchgate as a small conventional 'shopping centre' condemn it to slow decline – a problem once again for the next generation?

Churchgate is the most significant building/development site in the town centre, after St Mary's. Its use as well as its form needs to be settled in debate within the town, not by an external developer.

Hitchin has over 200 buildings listed Grade I or II* - numerous Grade II – a further 95 on the register of Buildings of Local Interest. In Hitchin, the character and design of significant buildings matters.

Issues urgently needing to be debated in public include:

- What does it mean to be a market town in the 21C?
- What is needed/missing in order for the town centre to function?
- What role should a redeveloped Churchgate Centre play within the town centre overall? A centre for a modern experience of town centre uses (shops / galleries / play space) – or merely additional traditional shops?
- If shops, what form of shops? A row of separate shops conventionally facing onto an arcade – or is that dated? What 'shopping experience' are visitors now after? Museums have learnt that visitors also want a visit to a cafe as part of the 'cultural experience' they get from visiting an exhibition, and that the cafe receipts are significant – should visiting a cafe be part of the 'shopping experience' within Churchgate? Should a cafe/meeting space be the central feature around which the shops are grouped – as is happening in London where old market buildings are being revitalised as 'food halls' whose seating is surrounded by many small kitchens offering a range of cuisines? Museums offer separate galleries within one building – should the shops in Churchgate be shuttered off from a public space, which become part of that space when the shutters are lifted, with no formal shop front – as in the new St Pancras shops.
- Once uses have been settled in debate, how can a renewed Churchgate Centre aim for the architectural quality that will justify listing later? By short-listing architects by reference to their philosophy and approach to a site – and final selection by design competition?

The over-riding issue for Hitchin is whether the Council is aiming high enough when proposing to merely regenerate some shops using cheap money? Is simply a facelift the best that can be done to repair the damage to this special historic market town from insensitive modern development? Is this the right time – or should a revised Town Centre Strategy/Master Plan come first?

Finally..... I will be happy to answer any questions on these views and engage in debate myself as an informed resident – and to put time into study/research groups on the various aspects of this project that need illuminating.

I am interested in the Council's response to these views, and in receiving further information on the project. I will participate fully in the needed consultation with stakeholders.

Contact/reply to: Robin Dartington, Mob: 07729 020 706; email: rdartington@gmail.com

COUNCIL

8 FEBRUARY 2018

*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT	AGENDA ITEM No. 6
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TITLE OF REPORT: REGENERATION OF CHURCHGATE SHOPPING CENTRE

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND IT

COUNCIL PRIORITY: ATTRACTIVE AND THRIVING / PROSPER AND PROTECT

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of the report is to inform Full Council of a potential joint venture opportunity with Shearer Property Group (SPG) for the regeneration of the Churchgate Centre in Hitchin and to seek approval to progress negotiations further to establish whether agreement can be reached on the terms of any potential investment by the Council.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That Full Council support the principle of a joint venture regeneration of the Churchgate Centre with the Council as funder of the regeneration.

2.2 That Full Council authorise the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer, the Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Finance and IT, to progress negotiations with Shearer Property Group on the terms of a potential joint venture regeneration of the Churchgate Centre, subject to Full Council's final approval of the terms of any proposal.

2.3 That Full Council notes the proposal to allow the contract for the management of Hitchin Market to expire and for the market to be managed in-house, subject to Cabinet's approval.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Council has been seeking to regenerate the Churchgate Centre for a number of years and a number of different proposals have been considered during that time, with none of those proposals progressing to a successful conclusion. The proposal currently being considered finds a solution to a number of the problems faced by previous proposals and would appear to be achievable in the short term. The proposals would also see significant investment in Hitchin Market and the public realm. The Council's potential investment in this regeneration opportunity is also expected to provide a reasonable financial return.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 Full Council has received a number of reports on the subject of Churchgate historically (see Background section below) and those reports explored a number of different alternative options for the site. At the current time the alternative options can best be summarised as any combination of the following:-
- i) do nothing; and/or
 - ii) await Local Plan adoption and subsequent town centre strategy work; and/or
 - iii) allow SPG option to purchase to expire and seek to acquire on the open market; and/or
 - iv) extend/ re-let the contract for the management of Hitchin Market in the short term, pending further consideration of the operation of the market.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1 The Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Finance and IT have been kept informed of the discussions with SPG and consulted as appropriate. The Chair of Hitchin Committee was briefed on the proposal on 9 January 2018 and an all-Member briefing was held on 31 January 2018. The Council has submitted a bid for funding for the market and public realm proposals to the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (see section 8 below).
- 5.2 Officers met with Hitchin Market Ltd on 25 January 2018 and informed them of the proposals for the market and its management, as outlined in this report.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and therefore there is no requirement that it be referred to in the Forward Plan. Nonetheless it was added to the Forward Plan on 19 January 2018 for reasons of transparency.

7. BACKGROUND

History of the Council's aspirations and recent decisions

- 7.1 The Council has been seeking to regenerate this area of Hitchin town centre for a number of years. It was first identified as an area for development in the Council's Local Plan No.2 adopted on 20 July 1993, and again identified for development in the

Local Plan No.2 with alterations adopted on 23 April 1996 and the draft (unadopted) Local Plan No.3 in December 1999. A Hitchin Town Centre Strategy adopted in November 2004 and a Churchgate Area Planning Brief adopted in November 2005 formed the basis of seeking a suitable development partner. The site identified included the Churchgate Centre, the market area and four adjacent car parks. An OJEU procurement process led to Simons Developments having a contract between 2010 and 2013 for the redevelopment opportunity, but they were unable to make sufficient progress towards a viable scheme that was acceptable in design terms and the Council ended the contract in March 2013. Subsequent discussions with the existing leaseholder as to whether a joint approach to redevelopment might achieve a viable scheme ended in February 2016 after the leaseholder accepted their proposals for their Churchgate Extension Scheme were not viable.

7.2 A number of challenges have defeated previous attempts to produce a viable scheme for a regeneration, including:–

- the cost of buying, knocking down and rebuilding the existing shopping centre as part of a wider regeneration;
- the cost of replacing car parking that would be lost with a wider regeneration;
- the scale and massing of development required to achieve a viable wider regeneration scheme, in particular with reference to the historic buildings nearby;
- finding a suitable alternative provision for the market;
- the public response to a wider regeneration;
- the limitations of the configuration of the land available;
- achieving viability in a challenging economic market where tenants are not committing to schemes and commercial lending rates remain challenging.

7.3 Since 2008 the Council has had contact with eight different developers, all of whom have been unable to propose a viable regeneration of the wider site. It should be noted that none of these schemes failed for reasons of lack of demand from potential tenants. Hitchin remains an attractive location for retailers and advice provided by lettings agents as part of the investigations of the current proposals shows strong demand, provided the right environment is created. Additionally the previous unsuccessful attempts at regeneration followed the traditional model of being developer led, with the Council not taking a proactive role after developing the planning policy and procuring a developer to lead a scheme. It is clear a different approach is required.

7.4 A fuller history of the project can be found in the reports to NHDC Full Council on 31 January 2013 and 11 February 2016 (links below)

<http://web.north-herts.gov.uk/aksnherts/users/public/admin/kab12.pl?cmte=COU&meet=30&arc=71>
<http://web.north-herts.gov.uk/aksnherts/users/public/admin/kab12.pl?cmte=COU&meet=93&arc=71>

The decisions in the last three years most relevant to the matters in this report are set out below at paragraphs 7.5 and 7.6.

7.5 On 27 November 2014 Full Council:-

“RESOLVED:

- (1) *That the legal advice set out at Appendix A to the report be noted;*
- (2) *That, having considered its aspirations for the future of the Churchgate site and its surrounding area, the Council discontinues the current approach based on the*

Churchgate Planning Brief and considers alternative approaches for a smaller scheme in the short term; and

(3) That Officers be instructed to investigate the Council's preferred approach, as agreed in (2) above, and report back to Council setting out the options and points for consideration to progress the project.

REASON FOR DECISION: *To allow the Council to clearly state its current aspirations for the Churchgate area of Hitchin in the light of the history of the project to date and provide clarity on its preferred approach going forward."*

7.6 Full Council's most recent decision in respect of Churchgate was on 11 February 2016 where it was:-

"RESOLVED:

(1) That work on the Churchgate Project cease; and

(2) That the possibility of acquiring the Churchgate Centre be explored, subject to further consideration of the commercial case for so doing at a future meeting of the Council.

REASON FOR DECISION: *To review the Council's strategic approach to the site, in an endeavour to find a viable and acceptable solution for the Churchgate Centre and surrounding area."*

Involvement of Shearer Property Group

7.7 On 5 April 2016 the Council was approached by Shearer Property Group (SPG) (see <http://www.spglondon.com/>) who explained that they had agreed a binding option to purchase the Churchgate Centre from the existing owner, Hammersmatch. SPG requested to meet with the Council in order to explain its aspirations for the Churchgate Centre. Since an initial meeting on 13 April 2016, a number of different options have been put forward by SPG and discussed with the Council, including developer led regeneration and joint venture opportunities with the Council. Throughout those discussions SPG have stressed the importance of investment by the Council in the public realm and market in order to complement a regenerated shopping centre.

7.8 After working on possible solutions for twelve months SPG concluded that a developer led regeneration of the shopping centre was not financially viable at that time. This was due to the rates that they could borrow at and the returns that they would require from an investment. However, SPG put forward that a regeneration funded by the Council could still be viable. This would be due to the wider regeneration benefits of the investment and the ability to access cheaper funding. Due to the budgetary pressures on the Council and the need to identify new investment opportunities, officers and the Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Finance and IT felt that further work should be undertaken in order to establish whether there was a sufficiently attractive proposition for the Council to invest in, that both provided much needed regeneration of the shopping centre and also provided an acceptable financial return to the Council. The outcome of those further discussions with SPG is being presented to Full Council to seek agreement in principle to the proposals, before then undertaking the further detailed work that would be needed in order to finalise and formalise a joint venture arrangement. If Council is unable to support the principle of the proposals then it would not be an effective use of Council resources to undertake that more detailed work.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

Proposals for Churchgate Centre

- 8.1 The proposal being investigated is a regeneration of the Churchgate Centre on its existing footprint. In broad terms a new frontage would replace the existing and the centre re-roofed, with some re-configuration of the existing units as required in order to make them suitable for the targeted tenants. In particular the frontage onto Market Place would be completely redesigned and reworked. This transformative “face-lift” of the Centre is intended to create a step change in the quality of the units available, thereby making them more attractive to retailers. The significant advantage of the approach being proposed is that it addresses all of the issues listed in paragraph 7.2 which have affected previous attempts to regenerate the site.
- 8.2 With regard to potential tenants, a mix of food and beverage operators and aspirational/lifestyle retailers would be targeted, with some smaller units currently remaining earmarked for existing tenants. On the proposals currently being investigated there would not be any one single large operator anchoring the centre. Feedback received from agents to SPG is that there is good demand from operators for the right type of units in Hitchin. This has also been confirmed by the Council’s consultant. As with any shopping centre key elements in reaching agreement with potential tenants are the incentives they would demand as part of any lease negotiations (for example rent free periods, or contributions to fit out costs) and ensuring an attractive environment from which they operate.

Proposals for Hitchin Market and the Public Realm

- 8.3 Hitchin is an historic market town. The market rights are owned by the Council and it is currently managed by Hitchin Markets Limited, with the contract expiring on 31 July 2018. This arrangement started in 2008 and the management contract includes a break clause that allows the Council to terminate the arrangement (with no liability for costs) for reason of development of the Churchgate Shopping Centre, provided at least three months prior written notice is provided.
- 8.4 As stated at 8.2 above one of the key challenges in attracting retailers is ensuring the surrounding environment is attractive and a vibrant space which supports the investment being made in the shopping centre. The market has been without significant investment for a number of years and there now exists an opportunity to invest in it in order to re-invigorate it and ensure it continues to meet the needs of the community going forward. The proposals being considered include investment in the market and surrounding public realm, with a new public space being created adjacent to the shopping centre and the market broadly in its current location, but with the core of it being at the Queen Street end of the current space. The proposal would include a mix of new stalls, both permanent and demountable, which could spread across the terrace below the St Mary’s car park towards Portmill Lane, and could include a covered area over the permanent stalls. Please note the indicative plan at Appendix A shows a potential layout for stalls, but should not be taken as any indication of the potential number of stalls.
- 8.5 In order to most efficiently and effectively facilitate and manage the investment in the market the current thinking is that the contract for the management of the market would be allowed to expire, with the Council managing in-house the operation of the market in the short term both before and after the regeneration of it. Consideration will be

given to the future management of the market as part of the ongoing assessment of the proposals and any in-house management would not preclude an outsourced arrangement, or other alternative arrangement, at any time in the future. In-house management of the market would of course mean that any direct surplus generated would be retained by the Council. Any surplus would provide a contribution towards the management and regeneration of the market. If Full Council agrees to the principle of the regeneration investment a separate report will be taken to the March meeting of Cabinet for a decision on the Hitchin Market contract.

- 8.6 With regard to the public realm, resurfacing of the 'mall' down the middle of the Churchgate Centre, the new public space, the market area and terrace and steps in front of St Mary's car park would transform the look and feel of the area. Removal of the walls between the current market and the Church would open up the space and provide enhanced views of the Church from the new public space. Additionally consideration can be given to relocation of the electricity sub-station and refurbishment of the toilet block. The level of investment in the public realm and market is dependent on the cost and funding available.

Funding

- 8.7 As stated at paragraph 7.7, the proposal being put forward is that the Council fund the regeneration, with SPG providing specialist expertise and knowledge. In return the Council would receive the lion's share of the revenue generated and SPG a much smaller share, subject to agreement on that split. In light of the proposed capital programme (see elsewhere on agenda), which has allocated substantially all of the Council's current and forecast capital reserves, officers have been working on the prudent basis that the Council would need to borrow from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) all sums required for the regeneration of the Churchgate Centre. Local authorities are able to borrow provided that it is in accordance with the Prudential Code, as published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). Meeting these requirements needs to be confirmed by the Council's Chief Finance Officer. The Council's Chief Finance Officer is satisfied that the principle of borrowing to fund the regeneration of the shopping centre would meet the requirements of the Prudential Code.
- 8.8 The interest rates charged by PWLB are published twice daily and are not fixed until you draw down the loan. Additionally the rates vary according to the length of loan taken out. Where the Council borrows money to fund capital investment it is a requirement of local government finance rules to make provision for the repayment of the lump sum at the end of the loan period. This is known as the Minimum Revenue Payment (MRP). Based on the current financial projections, a potential investment in regenerating the shopping centre would cover the revenue cost of borrowing (both interest and MRP) and provide the Council with a reasonable return on its investment over and above the income currently generated from the ground rent paid by the current leaseholder to the Council.
- 8.9 The Council has also submitted a bid to the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) for grant funding to cover the cost of the investment in the market and public realm. On 13 November 2017 the LEP launched an open call for applications from economic development projects in Hertfordshire with £12.5m of capital grant funding available. Bids were required to be submitted by Monday 18 December 2017. Due to the timing of the LEP bidding process it was necessary to submit this bid before

seeking approval from Full Council for the principles of the regeneration. Within the LEP bid it was made clear that Full Council's approval had still to be obtained, but that it was being sought. It is believed that the Council's bid meets all the LEP's requirements; however it is known that there are eighteen other bids that have been submitted. Outcomes of this bidding process will be known by the end of March 2018. If this application to the LEP is successful, the level of investment in the public realm and market requested would be transformative creating a vibrant space and would support the delivery of the shopping centre regeneration. If the bid is unsuccessful, or only partially successful, further work would need to be undertaken to consider potential alternative approaches.

Potential Community Benefits

- 8.10 As Members will be aware the Council has long held aspirations for improvement of the Churchgate Shopping Centre. A brief history is provided in paragraph 7.1 above, however the starting point for those aspirations was even earlier. On 17 November 1986 the Economic Development Sub-Committee received a report titled North Herts Town Centres and their role in the Economy. The report stated "The Churchgate shopping mall is showing its age in many respects and its bland characterless form combines with a need for refurbishment that results in it being considerably less attractive than it could or, indeed, should be." This is therefore an issue that is still not resolved more than thirty years later.
- 8.11 The proposals being explored, if able to be successfully delivered, would finally bring a resolution to the issue of the Churchgate Centre. Additionally the surrounding public realm would be transformed, a new public space created and much needed investment made in Hitchin Market. This investment in the town centre would increase the current offer within the town centre and should provide an economic benefit to the rest of the town.
- 8.12 As noted above in paragraph 8.10, previous reports on the Churchgate Centre have found the existing building to be of a poor quality, to be of bland design and which has not aged well. The existing building does not contribute to and is at odds with the overall character of Hitchin town centre. The regeneration of the Churchgate Centre together with the proposed works to the market and the public realm would provide a welcome opportunity to significantly enhance and improve upon the character and appearance of this part of Hitchin Town Centre and which would also be to the benefit of the wider Hitchin Conservation Area.
- 8.13 In addition to the potential benefits set out above, this proposal also provides a commercial investment opportunity for the Council, which is anticipated to provide a reasonable return on investment. This increased revenue stream, which would have potential to increase over time as rents increase (as the interest costs remain fixed over the lifetime of the loan), would therefore help to support the provision of Council services generally.

The Future of Hitchin Town Centre

- 8.14 The Council's emerging Local Plan (currently at Examination in Public stage) identifies the potential for regeneration of the Churchgate area and the need for additional retail floorspace (paragraphs 13.130 to 13.135 refers – see <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/files/lp1-proposed-submission-local-planpdf>). The wider site is allocated for mixed use, retail led, schemes as site HT11. The supporting retail studies which underpin that element of the proposed Local Plan (see <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/files/e2-retail-and-town-centres-background-paperpdf>) show a need for retail space in Hitchin, which supports the information provided by lettings agents that there remains strong interest in Hitchin from potential operators. The proposed regeneration of the existing Churchgate shopping centre does not create much additional floorspace (approximately 3,350 sq ft), however there will be a step change in the quality of retail and food and beverage operators who are tenants.
- 8.15 As noted above the amount of additional floor space proposed does not meet the requirements in the emerging Local Plan (and nor is it intended to). It is important to stress that the proposals currently being explored only relate to the Churchgate Centre and market area and does not include any of the wider area identified in the Local Plan. However the proposed regeneration of the Churchgate Centre, Hitchin Market and the public realm would not preclude other incremental development in the future and would in the meantime provide solutions to issues that have previously posed problematic in unlocking the development potential of the wider site.

Key Challenges to Overcome

- 8.16 As stressed throughout this report Full Council is being asked whether or not it supports the principle of these proposals, prior to more detailed work being undertaken. Whilst a lot of work has been undertaken to inform the proposals there are still a number of issues that require more work prior to seeking a formal final decision from Council, including (but not limited to):-
- Negotiating and agreeing the final terms of any potential joint venture between the Council and SPG
 - Identifying the most appropriate ownership structure, with particular reference to the most tax efficient way for the Council to invest and receive its return
 - Further work on the financial viability appraisal to ensure that it reflects any changes to the design proposals and changing market conditions for both costs and potential income
 - Reviewing the financial and non-financial risks including the potential ways that they can be managed
 - Ensuring sufficient tenant demand
 - Obtaining high quality CGI images of the proposed regeneration, to support formal approaches to retailers
 - Investigating the ways in which financing costs can be minimised
 - The outcome of the LEP bid (see paragraph 8.9) and any adjustments to proposals required as a result
 - Ensuring final proposals comply with all statutory requirements
 - Consideration of appropriate exit strategies and 'Plan B' options if the Centre is purchased but the regeneration does not proceed
- 8.17 In the event that the above challenges are overcome and Full Council decides to enter into an agreement for the delivery of the regeneration it is anticipated that it would then take, from that point of final decision, approximately twelve months to conclude all

issues prior to getting on site (including planning, procurement etc) and a further approximately twelve months of on site construction works.

Management of the Project

- 8.18 As stated in paragraph 8.16 above the ownership/investment structure is yet to be determined. From the point of view of the Council's future governance arrangements this means that it could in future be the responsibility of the Cabinet Sub-Committee (Local Authority Trading Companies' Shareholder) or Cabinet or Council itself to deliver. Therefore it is proposed to provide further detail on the future project management arrangements in the next report, once that proposed responsibility is known. In the interim it is therefore recommended that the Deputy Chief Executive be authorised (in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer, the Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Finance and IT) to continue to progress negotiations with SPG, subject to Full Council's final approval of the terms of any proposal.

Conclusions

- 8.19 The proposals being considered would, on the basis of the information currently available, seem to provide the best opportunity the Council has had for finding a solution to the Churchgate issue. In addition, investment in Hitchin Market and the public realm would create opportunities to transform and reinvigorate the area. This investment, if successful, would create jobs and improve this part of Hitchin town centre, whilst providing a reasonable financial return to the Council. The Council's consultant has confirmed that, in his view, *"The initial work carried out on both the value and cost side of the equation point towards a regeneration that has sufficient financial viability and benefits to the town as a whole to progress to the next level of detail"*. It is therefore recommended to Full Council that this proposal be supported in principle and that further work be undertaken on the details needed in order to report back to Full Council for a final decision on whether to proceed or not.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Full Council's terms of reference include at 4.4.1(v) "to authorise the acquisition of land or buildings where the purchase price, premium or initial rent (after the expiry of any rent free period) exceeds £2,500,000" and at 4.4.1(b) "approving or adopting the budget", which includes the capital programme. The responsibility for the decision on the arrangements for the management of Hitchin Market lies with Cabinet. On 8 April 2008 Cabinet made the decision to outsource the market operations, subject to negotiating suitable agreements with interested operators. The report to Cabinet will need to include the TUPE implications of the proposed change of approach to the management of the market.
- 9.2 If the Council agrees to support the principle of the proposals being delivered via a joint venture, the legal implications will need to be considered in the light of the specific proposals. The legal implications would likely include procurement, contract, governance and property considerations. If required specific external legal advice will be obtained.
- 9.3 In accordance with previous reports to Full Council, Members are advised that taking part in Council decisions on the strategy to adopt for the Churchgate Area was unlikely to create a valid perception of predetermination in relation to a Member of the Planning Committee who takes part in the decision relating to any future planning application.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 A budget of £52,500 previously allocated by Full Council for investigating alternative proposals for the Churchgate Centre has been carried forward from previous years. Up to £15,000 of this has been allocated for development consultancy support for the current proposals and it is proposed that the remainder be used for any further specialist advice required, for example legal or tax advice. At the moment, therefore, no additional budget is being sought to progress these proposals. Any underspend on this budget in 2017/18 will need to be carried forward to 2018/19. This will be reported to Cabinet in due course as part of the regular budget monitoring process.

10.2 The Council is able to fund capital projects from the follow sources:

- Capital reserves
- Grants and other contributions
- Revenue funding
- Prudential borrowing

The funding received from the housing stock transfer in 2003 has meant that for a number of years the Council has funded its capital programme from capital reserves, and any grants and contributions that have been available. The proposed capital programme (see elsewhere on agenda) shows that to fund the current capital programme there will be a need to top up capital reserves from the sale of surplus land and buildings. If taken forward it is expected that the majority of the potential investment in the Churchgate Centre will need to be funded by borrowing.

10.3 When borrowing for capital expenditure, the Prudential Code (published by CIPFA) determines that the Council must consider whether it is Affordable and Prudent. The consideration of affordability relates to whether the Council can meet the revenue costs of the borrowing, which will be made up of interest and Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP). The expectation is that these will be more than covered by the income from the investment, although they may need to be partly covered from the General Fund during the first few years (i.e. during construction and the early years of operation). Prudence relates to an assessment of the risk, both individually and in the context of the wider treasury position of the Council. As the Council only has a small amount of historic borrowing, this is not a significant factor. The risks in relation to this project will be assessed during the next phase (subject to agreement from Full Council to continue) and will consider variability and sustainability of returns, as well as the security and liquidity of the underlying asset.

10.4 When the Council borrows money to fund a capital investment, it is required to set aside an annual provision for the repayment of the debt. This is known as a Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) and is a cost to the general fund. There is some discretion as to the phasing of when this is set aside, but it should be linked to the life of the asset it is funding and the benefits that accrue from that asset. This will be determined as part of the next phase of the project (if agreed) and will be reflected in the financial appraisal.

10.5 The returns from this investment are expected to be through a Joint Venture company. They will therefore be subject to Corporation Tax before they are received by the Council. Advice will be obtained on legitimate ways in which the tax liability can be minimised.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Some of the key risks to the progress of these proposals are set out in paragraph 8.16 above. As part of the LEP bidding process an initial risk log has been created, which identifies 22 potential risks, their consequences and mitigating action required. This risk log will be developed as formal project management arrangements are considered. If the proposals move forward then the project is likely to be proposed as a Top Risk which is then monitored and updated regularly as part of the Council's risk management procedures.
- 11.2 The Council's Risk and Opportunities Management Strategy refers to Contractors and Partners as follows: *"Contractors and Partners are included in the Risk & Opportunities Management Strategy for NHDC. The risk appetite for both contractors and partners should be considered prior to engaging into contracts or partnerships. Ideally a joint Risk Register should be in place for significant contracts and partnerships. In order to achieve the Council's objectives, Client Officers/relationship managers should implement an ongoing review of risks jointly with appropriate contractors and partners."*
- 11.3 In accordance with this Strategy the Churchgate Development Project with Simons Developments between 2010 and 2013 had its own Risk Register. Such a document would also be considered should the Council decide to proceed with the joint venture regeneration.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their 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.
- 12.2 Any regeneration proposals for the site will need to consider proposals for thoroughfares, access, surface treatments etc and the needs of the users of the resulting development. These will be considered and recorded under separate equality analysis at the relevant time.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 The Social Value Act and "go local" policy do not apply to this report due to the nature of the decisions Full Council is being asked to make.
- 13.2 However, any decision Council may make in the future with regard to the regeneration of Churchgate which could, either in whole or part, constitute a public service contract would need to report on the social value implications of each/any option at the time of consideration. This would, in brief, consider how every £1 spent could best be spent to benefit the local community, which may include award of some aspects of redevelopment or management of the centre etc. by local social enterprises, a contractor offering an apprentice scheme or similar.

14. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

14.1 The current work undertaken to this point has been met from existing resources, with additional external development consultancy expertise sought to support internal skills and knowledge. An internal team of officers including financial, legal, planning and technical expertise has been identified to support the Deputy Chief Executive. The ongoing resourcing requirements will be considered as part of the next phase of work, if Council supports the principle of the proposals, and can be factored into service plans for 2018/19. Additionally the internal resourcing will be considered in the light of any changing responsibilities as a result of the senior management restructure.

15. APPENDICES

15.1 Appendix A – Indicative Site Plan.

16. CONTACT OFFICERS

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17. BACKGROUND PAPERS

17.1 Reports on previous Churchgate proposals to Full Council dated 31 January 2013 and 11 February 2016.

17.2 Draft Local Plan.

Appendix B: NHDC Consultation Strategy 2016-2020

1. INTRODUCTION

Consultation and opinion research are valuable tools for the Council to use to gain feedback and opinion from residents, businesses and other stakeholders in the district, to help elected Councillors make decisions. The Council is committed to engaging with its stakeholders to help shape the direction of future policies and to ascertain if current approaches to service delivery are meeting the needs of residents.

Consultation is critical to inform policy development and performance data and gives valuable insight into perceptions of the Council and its services and policies.

Meanwhile, evidence from the 2013 District Wide Survey found that 32% of people disagree that NHDC makes an effort to find out what local people want and 28% disagreed that NHDC fully involves / consults residents on important issues. This has the potential to have a serious impact on our reputation and on resident satisfaction with services and therefore needs addressing. This does not necessarily mean we need to increase the volume of consultation that we undertake, but we may need to consider consulting earlier in the process, existing opportunities may need to be publicised more widely or made more accessible using a range of methodology. It could also mean that we need to publicise how we have utilised the feedback from consultations, including any elements which are not adopted, so that residents better understand how they have played a role in the process.

2. REVIEW OF LAST STRATEGY PERIOD 2010-2015

Since the Council's last Consultation Strategy was adopted in 2010, the external environment has dramatically altered, meaning our consultation priorities also need to adapt.

Firstly, the challenging financial climate means the Council has to make difficult decisions, which may not always be popular with residents. While it is important that residents and businesses can have the opportunity to express their views on potential decisions where appropriate, we also need to be explicit about when and where consultation and engagement opportunities are available, whether this be by means of formal consultation or informally through elected Councillors, and mindful of the need to carry out consultation in a cost-effective and proportionate manner.

Secondly, technology has also moved forward, providing us with an opportunity to reach new audiences and carry out more online consultations. Thirdly, since the last Strategy was written, central Government have scrapped the previously mandatory Place Survey and so our consultation activity has been adapted accordingly.

3. CONSULTATION OBLIGATIONS AND TYPES OF CONSULTATION

3.1 The Duty to Consult In some areas, legislation (or statutory guidance) expressly imposes a duty on a public authority to engage in some form of consultation before taking a particular decision or exercising a particular function. Even where there is no express duty to consult, the courts may imply a duty to consult as part of a public authority's general duty to act fairly, for example if nature and impact of the decision may mean that fairness requires it. The more serious the impact of a decision is on affected individuals, the more important it is that the right decision is reached and that those affected feel that their concerns have been considered by the decision-maker. Broadly, therefore, the more serious the impact, the more likely it is that fairness requires the involvement of affected individuals in the decision-making process by some form of consultation. In March 2015, the Government introduced Best Value Statutory Guidance. Local authorities are under a general 'Duty of Best Value' to "make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness." The Guidance refers to the 'Duty to Consult' representatives of a wide range of local persons when considering how to fulfil the Best Value Duty. This relates to the principle that local authorities should exercise fairness in the exercise of their functions.

Authorities must consult representatives of council tax payers, those who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority, and those appearing to have an interest in an area within which the authority carries out its functions. Authorities should include local voluntary and community businesses in such consultation.

In non-statutory consultations it is up to the Authority to decide whether there is a duty to consult anyone and if so what 'fair consultation' entails in the circumstances. The Cabinet Office Consultation Principles document states that "The governing principle is proportionality of the type and scale of consultation to the potential impacts of the proposal or decision being taken and thought should be given to achieving real engagement rather than merely following bureaucratic process." (Cabinet Office Consultation Principles 2013).

In some circumstances there will be no requirement to consult and this will depend on the issues, the nature and impact of the decision and whether interested groups have already been engaged in the policy-making process. However, if the proposals could have a significant or serious impact on those affected then it is likely that consultation should take place before a decision is taken.

3.2 Statutory Consultations

There are certain instances where the Council has a statutory duty to consult. For example, when adopting or modifying the Council's Homelessness Strategy or the Licensing Act Policy and the Gambling Act Policy. We also have a duty to prepare a Statement of Community Involvement which sets out how we will consult during the process of preparing a Local Plan. Where the duty to consult is imposed by statute, the procedure to be adopted is also likely to be prescribed by legislation.

3.3 Service specific tailored consultation

The Council also carries out service specific consultation activity from time to time, with methods varying according to the scale and nature of the project. For example, we have carried out informal on-site consultations with local people when considering the types of play equipment to install in play areas due for refurbishment. We have also surveyed users of taxis on their experiences.

3.3 Opinion research surveys

The Council uses opinion research surveys as a tool to gauge public opinion and benchmark satisfaction with the Council on a range of services. This type of consultation varies from seeking high levels views on to carrying out surveys to gain insight into a particular topic to inform future service delivery e.g. recent topics in Citizens Panels include food waste, the proposed crematorium and the Careline service.

4. CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES

Consultation and engagement with the community has a key role to play in helping the Council deliver its objectives and as well as our statutory obligations. At a meeting of Council on 3 September 2015 a new corporate plan was agreed for the period 2016-2021. The corporate plan contains three new objectives. The three objectives are:

- To work with our partners to provide an attractive and safe environment for our residents, where diversity is welcomed and the disadvantaged are supported
- To promote sustainable growth within our district to ensure economic and social opportunities exist for our communities, whilst remaining mindful of our cultural and physical heritage.
- To ensure that the Council delivers cost effective and necessary services to our residents that are responsive to developing need and financial constraints

The key starting point for the Consultation Strategy is ensuring that consultation forms part of the process for delivering on our core objectives. Service areas should therefore consider when consultation activity is appropriate when devising their service plans and performance indicators. Consultation objectives:

- Supporting elected councillors to exercise their democratic role in the decision- making process.
- Provide opportunities for residents and stakeholders to 'have their say' on issues that are important to them and their local community.
- Use feedback from consultations to make council services more relevant to residents needs
- Improve the quality and cost effectiveness of consultation activity in the Council.
- Improve our consultation with residents so that the Council is perceived as a Council that listens and is responsive to residents needs.
- Ensure there are a range of communications channels available and that services understand the benefits of each one.
- Demonstrate where and how consultation and engagement influences decision making.

5. HOW WE CONSULT

Consultation and engagement happens on a day to day basis across the Council in an informal sense, through day to day contact with customers and listening to feedback provided through the 3Cs process. The Council uses a variety of formal consultation methods to ensure that a cross-section of residents and other stakeholders can influence the development of policies and help inform service delivery. For non-statutory consultations, the most appropriate and cost-effective mechanism for consultations have to be considered.

5.1 Elected Councillors

Elected Councillors play a crucial role in the Council's consultative process through their roles as community leaders and in scrutinising the work of the Council. In particular, Councillors form a link between the community and the Council both through initiatives such as Councillor Surgeries and Town Talks (In Baldock and Hitchin) and by being 'the face' of the Council –providing residents with an opportunity for personal contact, whether that is by email, phone, post or in person. Critically Councillors are elected to represent the views and opinions of their constituents and do this through the formal decision making process, where they have the ability to scrutinise Council decisions and policies.

5.2 District Wide Survey

The Council carries out a District Wide Survey every two years, to gain high level feedback and opinion on Council services. The question set remains largely the same each time to enable benchmarking of satisfaction levels. It is a useful barometer of opinion among residents. Since the last consultation strategy, the methodology for the survey has been changed from face to face to telephone as this generated significant cost-savings without compromising the quality of the data. The next District Wide Survey is being carried out in Autumn / Winter 2015, followed by one in 2017.

5.3 Citizens Panel

Residents who take part in the District Wide Survey are invited to join the Council's Citizens Panel. This is a panel of people (currently about 1,500 members) who indicate that they are willing to be contacted on a regular basis on a variety of topics related to Council business.

As part of this process, a postal survey of the panel is carried out every two years, in the alternate year to the District Wide Survey.

There is scope to use the Citizens Panel more frequently, for example previously Members of the panel were contacted to participate in focus groups on waste communications and on workshops on Council budgeting. There is also the potential to carry out more frequent online surveys with this group as a significant proportion have now provided their email address. However, as the Council no longer has a dedicated Consultation officer, resource to carry out additional surveys could need to be considered.

5.4 Online surveys (Survey Monkey)

The Council has a paid for subscription to Survey Monkey which is an online survey tool.

The tool is very easy to use and users can easily design simple surveys and generate results with minimal assistance needed from the communications team, aside from advice on wording and minor technical support. It has become a valuable and cost effective tool for a range of internal and external surveys. For example the Council's biennial Staff Survey is now carried out on Survey Monkey, as was a recent consultation on proposals for a splash park at Bancroft Recreation Ground and Priory Memorial Gardens. Some services also now use Survey Monkey, to survey customers on satisfaction levels with the service provided.

There are limitations to its use as it is an online only tool, however given the financial constraints we are operating under and the move by much of the population to carrying out their everyday business online, it does provide a very useful opportunity for potential growth of consultation activity.

5.5 Face to face surveys

In certain circumstances it can be effective to carry out face to face consultations. For example in recent years, Groundwork has carried out face to face consultations on our behalf with local residents when considering potential designs for play areas. Capturing 'users' on-site can be a very effective way of gaining valuable insight. There are also opportunities for less formal consultation by attending local community and voluntary groups, especially where any proposals could affect minority communities. On a larger scale however, face to face methodology can prove to be very resource intensive and expensive.

5.6 Social media

The use of social media as a formal consultation channel is still in its infancy, as in many consultations we require the name and address of the respondent to validate their response. However social media can provide a useful informal barometer on the type of issues people are concerned about, which can be fed back to the relevant service areas. Social media is also a useful channel for communicating about consultations and signposting people to the relevant information that allows them to have their say.

6. ASSESSING THE APPROACH TO CONSULTATION

6.1 Carrying out a Fair Consultation (The Gunning Principles)

When there is a duty to consult, the duty is to engage in a lawful and fair consultation, and any consultation (whether there is a Duty to Consult or not) should be both adequate and fair. To establish if proposed consultation is fair, services should be guided by a set of principles set out in case law (R v London Borough of Brent, ex p Gunning [1985] LGR 168), otherwise known as the Gunning Principles:

- The consultation must be at a time when proposals are at a formative stage. If consultation is to be meaningful, it needs to be undertaken at a point when the mind of the decision-maker is still open to change. However, it must also be carried out when there is adequate information on the proposals for consultees to be able to offer an informed response. It is acceptable for the decision maker to have a preferred option before commencing the consultation process, however there must be genuine potential for the preference to change as a result of the consultation, within the agreed policy framework.
- The proposer must give sufficient reasons for any proposal to permit intelligent consideration and response. This refers to consultees having an understanding of why the proposals have been put forward and what the important factors are that will be decisive in the decision making process. When putting forward a potential proposal, it must be clear what the proposal entails and the reasons for putting it forward.
- Adequate time must be given for consideration and response. This depends on a number of factors including the size of the group being consulted, the complexity and scale of the issues being consulted on, the method of consultation and the urgency involved.
- The product of consultation must be conscientiously taken into account in finalising statutory consultations. This is a critical stage in that service areas must be able to demonstrate how consultation responses have been taken into account during the decision making process.

6.2 Practical Considerations

6.2.1 Sample Size

It should be noted that it is not always necessary to capture a 'representative sample' of the target population in consultation, however if the sample is not representative it does mean that caution needs to be exercised in how the results are utilised. Service areas also need to make it explicitly clear when reporting the results of consultation whether they are using a representative sample. It is often advisable to carry out more than one method of consultation, for example combining face to face research with an online survey can be useful to capture a broader sample, however this may not always be cost-effective.

6.2.2 Timings for Consultation

Consideration should be given to timing – both in allowing enough time for meaningful responses (as per the Gunning principles) and if, for example there are public or school holidays during the period, it may be prudent to allow for a longer consultation period than normal. The time period allowed will depend on the nature, complexity and impact of the proposal – but as a general rule they might vary from between 2 to 12 weeks in length.

Consultation exercises should not generally be held during pre-election periods. Time also needs to be built in to analyse the results effectively.

6.2.3 Constitutional requirements

The Council's Member /Officer Protocol on Working Arrangements states that wherever the Council undertakes any form of consultative exercise on a local issue, the Area Committee/Ward Members should be notified at the outset of the exercise.

6.3 Process for determining consultation approach

It is at the discretion of each service area in conjunction with their Executive Member to determine the appropriate methods of consultation, as this will vary according to individual requirements. A simple model that services should follow is below:

- Stage One: When considering a potential change to service or policy, the Head of Service, in conjunction with the relevant Executive Member, should consider whether the Duty to Consult applies and should agree a proportionate approach to consultation. The Head of Service should carefully consider the Gunning Principles when designing any consultation activity.
- Stage Two: Service area to consider the issues to be addressed as part of a consultation and identify the key stakeholders to be consulted at an early stage. These key stakeholder groups could be agreed in conjunction with the relevant Executive Member. Consideration should be given to how to include and engage any minority or disadvantaged groups in the consultation.
- Stage Three: If appropriate, hold an initial key stakeholder consultation to consult on overarching themes and principles.
- Stage Four: After considering responses from key stakeholders, draw up a more specific and targeted public consultation using appropriate methodology. Consideration should be given to how to include and engage any minority or disadvantaged groups in the consultation. Advice can be sought from the communications team on methodology and survey wording.
- Stage Five: Publicise consultation responses where appropriate and publicly demonstrate how consultation responses will be used in the next steps of the project. Adopt a 'You Said, We Did' approach to giving feedback. Keep people who have participated in the consultation informed about the progress of the project.

7. COST OF CONSULTATION

The opinion research surveys (District Wide Survey and Citizens Panel) will be carried out within existing budgets. As we gather a more comprehensive database of email addresses from our Citizens Panel there may be an opportunity to make greater use of cheaper electronic surveys to supplement the biennial postal Citizens Panel survey, however the resource implications of this would need to be carefully considered.

Any service specific consultations will need to be funded by the relevant service area.

8. CONTACT

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Appendix C: Hitchin Churchgate Survey, March 2018

At a meeting of Full Council on 8 February Councillors agreed to support the principle of a joint venture regeneration of the Churchgate Centre in Hitchin, with the Council as funder of the regeneration. The potential joint venture between the Council and Shearer Property Group would see a 'face-lift' of the existing shopping centre, improving the quality of the units available and in turn make them more attractive to retailers. The scheme would also see improved public open space and investment in Hitchin's historic market. There is still a lot more work to do to understand whether it will be possible to deliver the proposed regeneration, prior to a final decision being taken.

At this early stage, the Council is seeking the views of people who live and/or work in North Hertfordshire on the broad principles of the proposals in order to inform our thinking. There will be further opportunity to comment on any scheme proposed in the future as things progress.

This consultation is open until midnight on 29 April 2018. Your views will be used by the Council to help shape the proposals further.

1. Which age group are you in?

- Under 16
- 16-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75+

2. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

3. Where do you live?

- Hitchin
- Letchworth
- Royston
- Baldock
- Village / rural area of North Herts
- Outside North Herts

4. How frequently do you visit Hitchin town centre?

- Daily
- Once or twice a week
- Fortnightly
- Monthly
- Occasionally (i.e. less than once a month)
- Never

5. What do you visit Hitchin Town Centre for? (please tick all that apply)

- Shopping
- Eating out
- To work
- To visit family – friends
- Leisure e.g. parks, gym
- Other (please specify)

6. When visiting Hitchin, do you currently shop in the Churchgate Centre?

- Yes
- No

7. How frequently do you shop in the Churchgate Centre?

- Daily
- Once or twice a week
- Fortnightly
- Monthly
- Occasionally (i.e. less than once a month)

8. What would make you more likely to visit the Churchgate Shopping Centre or visit more regularly? (please tick all that apply)

- Better quality shops
- Different types of shops
- More attractive environment
- More attractive buildings/ shop fronts
- Food and drink outlets
- Leisure facilities
- Nothing would make me more likely to visit
- Other (please specify)

9. Please add any comments on why you would not be likely to visit the Churchgate Centre

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10. Do you support the idea of regenerating the existing Churchgate Centre to provide improved shop units i.e. updating the existing buildings?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

11. What type of food and drink outlets would you like to see in a regenerated Churchgate centre? (please tick all that apply)

- Italian
- French
- Indian
- Chinese
- Gastropub
- Thai
- Family
- Other (please specify)

12. What sort of retailers would you like to see in a regenerated Churchgate Centre? (please tick all that apply)

- Clothing
- Jewellery
- Cosmetics
- Gift shops
- Electronics
- Food retailers
- Bookshops
- Homewares
- Leisure providers
- Other (please specify)

13. Are there any specific brands / retailers you would like to see in the Churchgate Centre?

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14. Do you support the principle of regenerating the public space to the rear of the Churchgate Centre, including opening up the views of the Church from the market?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

15. Do you currently shop at Hitchin Market?

- Yes
- No

16. How frequently do you visit the market?

- A few times a week
- Weekly
- Fortnightly
- Monthly
- Other (please specify)

17. What would make you more likely to visit Hitchin market or visit more frequently? (please tick all that apply)

- More attractive environment
- Better quality traders
- Different types of traders
- More attractive stalls
- Food and drink outlets
- Different opening times / days
- Nothing would make me more likely to visit
- Other (please specify)

18. Please add any comments on why you would not be likely to visit Hitchin Market

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19. Do you support the principle of investing in Hitchin's market to ensure it is fit for the 21st century?

- Yes

- No
- Don't know

20. What types of regular stalls would you like to see in an improved market? (Please tick all that apply)

- Clothing
- Jewellery
- Cosmetics
- Street food e.g. tapas, caribbean
- Gifts
- Discount goods
- Food and drink i.e. food consumed at home - baker, fish-monger, fruit and veg stalls etc
- Books
- Antiques
- Homewares
- Other (please specify)

21. Do you support the idea of holding regular specialist markets as well as the general market?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

22. What types of speciality markets would you like to see in Hitchin? Please tick all that apply

- Farmers markets
- Craft markets
- Italian / French / German markets
- Other (please specify)