

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL – 25 FEBRUARY 2016

REPORT BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

HERTFORD TOWN CENTRE URBAN DESIGN STRATEGY,  
FEBRUARY 2016

WARD(S) AFFECTED: All Hertford Wards

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**Purpose/Summary of Report**

- This report presents the Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy.

**RECOMMENDATION FOR DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE  
PANEL: That Council, via the Executive, be advised that:**

<b>(A)</b>	<b>the Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy, February 2016, be approved as part of the evidence base to inform and support the East Herts District Plan; and</b>
<b>(B)</b>	<b>the Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy, February 2016, be approved to inform Development Management decisions.</b>

1.0 Background

1.1 In February 2015 Tibbalds, a leading planning and urban design consultancy, was appointed by East Herts Council, working together with Hertfordshire County Council and Hertford Town Council, to develop a Vision and Urban Design Strategy for Hertford town centre.

1.2 Key elements of the study brief were to consider the future of major sites, the design and management of the street scene and transport issues for the town centre.

1.3 To inform the developing Strategy, Tibbalds' expertise was

supplemented by property, retail, transport, and landscape architectural specialists over the course of the project.

1.4 Following two rounds of public consultation, a finalised Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy (HTCUDS) has been produced and a copy of this is provided at **Essential Reference Paper 'B'**.

1.5 A presentation by Tibbalds to Hertford members of all three (district, town and county) councils and District Planning Executive Panel members has been arranged for Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> February. This will provide the opportunity for a detailed briefing and discussion regarding the HTCUDS proposals for relevant members of all three authorities involved in the project.

## 2.0 Report

2.1 At the beginning of 2015, Hertford faced a number of challenges, which cumulatively acted as a driver for these issues to be addressed. These included:

- a) The need to devise a successful redevelopment scheme for Hertford's main shopping area at Bircherley Green.
- b) The need for a Hertford-specific approach to retail policy, following a 'critical friend' review of the emerging District Plan retail and town centres policies by the Planning Advisory Service.
- c) General concerns about the vitality of certain shopping areas e.g. Maidenhead Street, Market Place, etc.
- d) Deterioration of Public Realm, Quality and Maintenance;
- e) Need to detail ideas for anticipated change of public spaces – Maidenhead Street, Bull Plain, Old Cross, The Wash/Millbridge, and The Riverside; the remaining parts of Fore Street; The Marquee and frontage of Warren Place, and Hertford East Station and its approach.

2.2 A brief was therefore produced, which included the following Key objectives:

- Optimising the value of Hertford's heritage, open spaces and landscape assets, including the river areas;

- Providing a town centre that is safe, attractive and enjoyable as a place people will naturally favour to shop, work and spend their leisure time;
- Enhancing the user experience by creation of a distinctive network of public paths, spaces and opportunities to hold public events;
- Designing a town that focuses on place and character of Hertford's historic environment while balancing the need for movement – managing the conflicts of vehicles and pedestrians, giving priority to accessibility and emphasising sustainable travel modes;
- Revitalising the commercial activity of the town centre and secure, in particular, the long term health of the primary shopping areas of Bircherley Green, Maidenhead Street and The Marquee;
- Developing a coherent, high quality and cost effective approach to the treatment and maintenance of the public highway, footways and other public spaces in the town centre;
- Developing a sensitively designed strategy for car parking provision within and around the town centre.

2.3 Following a competitive process, Tibbalds were appointed by East Herts Council, working together with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and Hertford Town Council (HTC), to carry out the work. A Member Steering Group was formed of three members (Councillors Suzanne Rutland-Barsby, Peter Ruffles, and Andrew Stevenson) who each represented at least two of the councils involved in the project. This was to ensure that the Strategy could be guided, with close officer liaison, through its development by representatives of all three authorities that would be responsible for aspects of future potential implementation. Latterly, since December 2015, Town Councillor Jane Sartin has also joined the Member Steering Group in an advisory capacity.

2.4 The work has also been strongly underpinned by public involvement in the process, which encompassed seeking initial views, in March 2015, on what people who use the town liked, didn't like, and would wish to see in the future for Hertford, before any potential schemes were devised for the Strategy. A second round of consultation followed in September 2015, and this suggested measures that could be included in the Strategy to address the objectives. Conscious of the need to ensure public buy-in for promoted schemes, the results of the second

consultation have resulted in several amendments to some of the originally suggested proposals.

2.5 The final version of the Strategy, the subject of this agenda paper, has its key messages clearly articulated in the opening paragraph:

The purpose of this strategy is to guide future development in Hertford's town centre. It provides a long-term coherent vision for the area, provides design approaches for key areas within the town centre, and aims to guide developers and provide a framework for determining planning applications. The Strategy seeks to engender a sense of community, to provide opportunities to reinforce or improve the sense of place associated with Hertford Town Centre and its environs (in line with the sustainability principles outlined in section 2 of the NPPF (ensuring the vitality of town centres)).

2.6 Throughout the process, Tibbalds (and their associated specialist consultancies) have been keen to point out that Hertford benefits from many existing high quality assets which are important to be retained and enhanced. However, some of these remain undiscovered by those unfamiliar with the town, or would benefit from greater access opportunities being made available.

2.7 In particular, the potential for riverside views and access to be exploited was a key issue, which the public also identified early in the process.

2.8 The full version of the Strategy is available at **Essential Reference Paper 'B'** but, to draw out some of the main headlines, these include but are not limited to:

- Exploiting the potential for riverside views and access;
- Potential for vehicular movement to be restricted in the area to the west of Market Street to remove extraneous vehicles to allow for a safer and improved environment for town centre users and provide opportunities for enhancement and use of Bull Plain;
- Better legibility in the town centre, via information totems and public realm enhancements, to help people best discover the town and its assets;
- The introduction of the Quarters concept, recognising the unique identity of discrete town centre areas;

- Supporting a variety of town centre activities, as appropriate, to add vitality to the town centre;
- Key Sites Strategy for three important sites (Bircherley Green, Maidenhead Street and The Marquee) all of which are intended to raise the profile of the town in retail and economic terms while improving the public realm.
- For Bircherley Green, key principles emergent in the Strategy have already been used to inform discussions with the site promoters;
- For the bus station, following considerable work on evaluating alternative provision involving redistribution of services elsewhere in the town, strong stance taken on retaining a unified bus station at Bircherley Green;
- Proposals for the Hertford East station area tie in with the provisions of both the Hertford and Ware Urban Transport Plan and Mead Lane Urban Design Framework;
- Public realm improvements proposed would ensure coherence across the central core and offer greater opportunity for raising the profile of pedestrians and create linkages via a 'spine' through the heart of the town centre;
- Coherent movement strategy developed for the town centre, including, *inter alia*, improving the pedestrian and cycling environment.

2.9 It is interesting to note that, since the commencement of the Strategy, two of the key buildings identified in the brief, which had been vacant for a considerable period of time, have now been brought forward for occupation. Firstly, the former McDonald's building in Maidenhead Street is now the site of the relocated Post Office, and The Marquee, in Railway Street, has received planning permission for conversion to a gym.

2.10 Whether these developments are as a result of raised prominence through the Strategy process or simply coincidental is unclear, but these changes mean that any of the schemes suggested through the Strategy for these buildings are unlikely to be brought to fruition in the short-term. However, this would not preclude consideration of the proposals in the longer term should opportunities arise.

2.11 It is important to understand that, while the Strategy contains a distinct vision and suggests various schemes, these should be viewed as a starting point in the process. The schemes proposed are heavily caveated to be viewed as 'outline concept drawings illustrating potential schemes which are liable to alteration through

the design process'. This will provide complete flexibility around final designs going forward, but will critically provide a framework to aid negotiation with developers, seeking funding opportunities, etc. Further public consultation on revisions that provide actual detailed designs, finalised materials etc will take place in due course, as appropriate.

- 2.12 Another key point to note is that the Strategy is designed for a twenty year period lifespan, so not all elements will come forward in the short-term. Some aspects will also be reliant on external factors (e.g. the potential full or partial closure of the Parliament Square end of Fore Street to all but buses, cycles and access, would be dependent on HCC, as Highway Authority, being satisfied in respect of traffic implications). However, other aspects could be brought forward in a much quicker timescale. In this respect, it is important to note that a considerable amount of preparatory work has been undertaken by HTC in respect of Maidenhead Street, which could result in the area benefiting from an enhancement scheme being implemented in the short-term.
- 2.13 In summary, the commissioning of the HTCUDS project has provided a unique, once in a generation, opportunity for consultants and all three councils serving Hertford to work together to provide a multi-faceted Strategy that will influence the development and enhancement of its central core for short, medium and long-term time horizons.
- 2.14 Members are therefore invited to support the HTCUDS for both District Plan and Development Management purposes.

### 3.0 Implications/Consultations

- 3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

### Background Papers

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)  
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>)
- Hertford and Ware Urban Design Strategy  
(<http://www.hertsdirect.org/services/transtreets/tranpan/tcatp/handwutp.pdf/>)

- Mead Lane Urban Design Framework  
(<http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=24787>)

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