

East Herts Council Report

Executive

Date of Meeting: 21 January 2020

Report by: Cllr Haysey, Leader of the Council

Report title: Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy Update

Reports: Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019, and Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019

Ward(s) affected: All Hertford: Bengo, Castle, Kingsmead, Sele

Summary

- To enable Members to consider the findings of the Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy Update reports: Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019, and Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE: to recommend to Council

- (a) That the findings of the Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy Update reports: Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019, and Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019, be noted; and**
- (b) The Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy Update reports: Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019, and Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019, be**

agreed as material considerations in respect of informing Development Management decisions taken regarding Bircherley Green, or other Hertford Town Centre sites, as appropriate; and,

- (c) The Council continues to liaise with Hertford Town Council and Hertfordshire County Council, through the HUDS Steering Group, initially, to identify mechanisms to support the improvement of economic/retail performance and environmental conditions within Hertford Town Centre.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise the Executive and Council of the completion of the focussed Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check and Bircherley Green Property Market Report, which are both intended to provide an updated understanding of current market conditions in Hertford.
- 1.2 The results may serve, in terms of retail and economic issues, to influence both the emerging development proposals for the Bircherley Green site and any other site proposals that may come forward for consideration involving Hertford town centre sites and initiatives in the future.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Members will be aware that the Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy (HUDS) was completed in 2016. This had the aim of identifying Hertford's future role as a successful market town and made recommendations for proposals that would improve the town centre for both economic and aesthetic purposes, to maximise its attractiveness to users and visitors alike.
- 2.2 When published, the main report contained the key findings, but was in turn supported by a number of

evidence strands. Two elements of the overall evidence base were concerned with economic issues and comprised 'Retail Needs and Opportunities in Hertford Town Centre' (The Retail Group) August 2015, and 'Viability Report Hertford Town Centre' (AspinalVerdi) August 2015. These reports established that the concepts within the overall HUDS work for both the town centre generally, and Bircherley Green specifically, were both viable and likely to engender a healthy economic outcome going forward.

- 2.3 Since the completion of the HUDS work, applications were received by the Council for two separate development proposals for the Bircherley Green site, one of which was approved (subject to S.106) and the other was withdrawn prior to determination.
- 2.4 Subsequent to that withdrawal (for which the then developers, Wrenbridge, cited economic viability issues as the reason), the site was sold to new owners, Chase New Homes.
- 2.5 Since that time, the Council has been proactively engaging all three layers of local government, traders, representatives of the local community and the new site owners, and a Steering Group has been set up with these representatives to discuss emerging proposals and issues regarding the Bircherley Green site.
- 2.6 Prior to setting up the Steering Group, given the changes in retail that have occurred since the HUDS work was completed, both nationally and locally, it was considered prudent to seek a refresh of the underpinning economic evidence in order to inform the Council's position as any new proposals for the Bircherley Green site came forward, or for any other applicable sites.
- 2.7 The update work has now been completed and the two reports (Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019, and Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019)

are attached at Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. It should be noted that, while several key initiatives and works have been carried out in the town centre through the auspices of the HUDS Steering Group, which involves all three layers of local government working together in partnership, this report concerns two focussed elements of updated evidence solely related to economic matters (that supported the HUDS work) and does not extend to wider issues within the overarching strategy.

3.0 Considerations

- 3.1 In respect of the Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019, report, this has reached a number of overall conclusions around the functioning of the town's retail environment. It is noted that the study has included the most comprehensive survey of town centre businesses ever taken in Hertford.
- 3.2 1. The first key finding is that, after probing performance in a variety of ways, many of the town centre businesses in Hertford are currently struggling and the future is likely to be challenging. The closure of Bircherley Green and its car park are cited as part of this situation.
- 3.3 2. The vacant Bircherley Green Shopping Centre was viewed as broadcasting a very visible and major sign of decline and stagnation, causing negative PR for the town. If no large or anchor status shops and/or food and beverage (F&B) operators are reinstated in a replacement scheme (or elsewhere in the town centre) Hertford's role and reputation as a place to visit and shop will permanently reduce going forward.
- 3.4 3. While the lack of perceived action and mitigating actions from the district and town councils to help the town centre thrive was documented, suggestions were also made regarding how both councils can help improve the retail experience, environment and footfall through

better working together, clearer focus and additional resource. An interim town centre manager role was suggested with a given focus on proactive business development, footfall generation and positive PR creation.

- 3.5 4. Despite negative current performance, there are considered to be many positive indicators in respect of the town centre's future prospects and success going forward. In addition to presenting a retail environment rich in history and heritage, with the quality of many well preserved and maintained shop fascias and building fronts, the town centre is also considered to have improved in many ways since the previous study was completed 4 years ago.
- 3.6 Excluding Bircherley Green, across the town centre as a whole, vacancies are lower than the national average. Several new independent stores have opened, and four units were being actively refurbished in the town centre at the time of the survey.
- 3.7 The report therefore considers that the town has many strengths to build on going forward, and Hertford will be in a strong position to when the economy improves.
- 3.8 5. The report also indicates that in the immediate short term Hertford needs visible, proactive and targeted support and intervention, via an action plan that clearly identifies appropriate and deliverable actions to quickly and visibly improve the town centre. This will need the support and participation of a number of stakeholders, including the district and town councils, retailers / operators and other local stakeholders such as commerce and tourism.
- 3.9 The plan will need to focus on actions that can be delivered immediately/in the short term (next 3 –6 months) as well as medium term (6 –24 months).
- 3.10 6. In respect of Bircherley Green specifically, the report

suggests that any new scheme will require flexibility in its units to future-proof the town centre, so that when target retailers (several suggested in the study) are in a position to expand, Hertford will be ideally placed to take advantage. In addition to suggesting potential retailers, who are considered likely to trade well in the town, given the consultants' research understanding of the Hertford customer profile, recommendations are made regarding size and numbers of retail units.

- 3.11 The Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019, considered the market for both commercial and residential property in relation to the Bircherley Green site. Through analysis of supply and demand, it looked to identify viable opportunities for redevelopment of the site.
- 3.12 While analysis showed there to be some demand for commercial property at the site, with interest from a handful of potential occupiers, responses were generally cautious. This is particularly relevant in the retail sectors, which the market review indicated are undergoing difficulties.
- 3.13 The, then, political uncertainty was identified as contributing to subdued market sentiments, particularly in the comparison and convenience retail sectors. Likewise, with Brexit unresolved, the ambiguous relationship with the EU has created a new set of longer-term challenges. Thus, occupier hesitance is not necessarily attributed to the Bircherley Green site in particular, but a generic and seemingly nationwide caution.
- 3.14 The recommendation from almost all of the commercial sectors was for flexibility. This referred to both the physical flexibility of units to be able to accommodate various types of units and the potential for operators/occupiers to be transient in the short-term whilst the perception of Bircherley Green is re-

established. Further, lease/term flexibility was also encouraged.

- 3.15 Hoteliers have also expressed an interest in the site and such a use would also prove encouraging for both leisure and retail operators who could benefit from a transient tourist trade on the site.
- 3.16 In terms of office space, there was found to be unlikely to be sufficient demand to support the provision of a large amount of office floorspace in the Bircherley Green development.
- 3.17 Conversely, the analysis shows that there is likely to be a significant opportunity for residential development at Bircherley Green, with demand for flatted accommodation in the town centre, which is likely to be viable.
- 3.18 Also, residential development was considered likely to reduce the concerns and risks expressed by some commercial operators and thus encourage such uses back to the site. The residential element could also deliver retirement living as part of a scheme, with positive responses from a number of operators willing to consider development in this location.

Submission of Planning Application

- 3.19 It should be noted that an application (3/19/2614/FUL) for:

Mixed use re-development comprising partial demolition of existing buildings and replacement with upto 3479.40 square metres of commercial floorspace (Use Classes A1-A4, B1, D1 & D2), an 86-bed hotel (Use Class C1), upto 100 residential apartments (use class C3), alterations to an existing car park, new bus station facilities and associated works and improvements at Bircherley Green Shopping Centre, Hertford

was received by the Council on 23rd December.

- 3.20 While (at the time of writing) the application had yet to be validated, the submission does demonstrate the intention of the site owners (Chase New Homes) to bring forward development containing commercial uses in this key town centre location.

Conclusions

- 3.21 It is the view of Officers that the Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019, and Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019 reports provide detailed updated information which refresh the studies carried out in 2016. As such, they are a useful resource to inform the consideration of future planning applications at Bircherley Green or elsewhere in the town centre, where appropriate.
- 3.22 Therefore, it is recommended that both reports should be agreed as material considerations for Development Management purposes¹.
- 3.23 Likewise, the reports make suggestions for consideration by the Council, along with Hertford Town Council, regarding initiatives seeking to improve the economic/retail performance and environmental conditions of the town.
- 3.24 It is therefore recommended that the Council should also continue to work with both Hertford Town Council and Hertfordshire County Council, through the HUDS Steering Group, initially, to identify mechanisms to support the improvement of economic/retail performance and environmental conditions within Hertford Town Centre. This should likewise serve to inform considerations in the context of the wider remit of the overarching HUDS work.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 The only other option open to the Council would be to choose not to agree the reports as material considerations for Development Management purposes.

However, that approach would lessen the weight that could be given to them.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 The risk of not having carried out the refresh of the studies is that the Council would have been less informed in terms of the operating market in its consideration of any schemes for Hertford Town Centre (and Bircherley Green in particular) at Development Management Committee.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

- 6.1 The consultants carried out a directed consultation with Hertford town centre traders as part of the research behind the Update reports.

Community Safety

Not applicable

Data Protection

Not applicable

Equalities

Not applicable

Environmental Sustainability

Not applicable

Financial

None currently specifically identified, but may emerge through any initiatives identified via the HUDS Steering Group in due course

Health and Safety

Not applicable

Human Resources

None currently specifically identified, but may emerge through any initiatives identified via the HUDS Steering Group in due course

Human Rights

Not applicable

Legal

Not applicable

Specific Wards

Hertford: Bengo, Castle, Kingsmead, Sele

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

- 7.1 East Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy, February 2016 District Planning Executive Panel – 25 February 2016:
<http://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/documents/g2839/Public%20reports%20pack%2025th-Feb-2016%2019.00%20District%20Planning%20Executive%20Panel.pdf?T=10&J=6>
- 7.2 Appendix A: Hertford Town Centre Retail Health Check (The Retail Group), October 2019
- 7.3 Appendix B: Bircherley Green Property Market Report, (AspinalVerdi), October 2019

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¹ A material consideration is a matter that should be taken into account in deciding a planning application or on an appeal against a planning decision.