

NHDC Local Plan Examination : Hearing : 6 February 2018: 2pm

STATEMENT from Robin Dartington (representing Keep Hitchin Special - KHS)

Matter: Hitchin Housing Allocations: Issues:

- (1) 10.7** Are all the **proposed housing allocations justified and appropriate** in terms of the likely impacts of the development?
- (2) 10.8** Are proposed allocations the **most appropriate option** given the **reasonable alternatives?**

A. Site HT11 Churchgate Area

Draft submission Policy HT11 allocates the Churchgate Centre and Surrounding Area for redevelopment with 4,000 sq m of retail with residential above.

Policy to redevelop the Churchgate Centre and Surrounding Area is UNSOUND for reasons:

The **deliverability** of a comprehensive development was challenged on behalf of KHS at an earlier hearing on grounds:

- a) various schemes have been published over the last 10 years all of which have not proceeded due to lack of viability – no evidence has been provided of any likelihood of sufficient change in circumstances within the Plan period ;
- b) in particular, the whilst the council own the freehold across the site (bar minor strips), the lease on the Churchgate Shopping Centre is currently held by Hammersmatch Ltd who have never agreed with NHDC to make the lease available for a comprehensive re-development of the area. (It is understood that a possible sale of that lease is currently under negotiation with no certainty of a successful completion, with intention to refurbish the Centre and develop flats above. It is understood that previous investigation of the structure found that adding flats above was not practical. The sale may therefore be abandoned, leaving Hammersmatch still the owners).

The alternative to redevelopment is refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre, with perhaps modest extension onto the Hitchin Market site to the east. But substantial refurbishment is only likely to be viable if flats are added at roof level which would be unsound for the reasons:

1. Developing flats over a re-furbished Churchgate Centre would only contribute windfall housing gain and is not needed to meet the Plan target for additional housing.
2. Footprint of Churchgate Centre is c 12,000 m2. Allowing 100m2 per flat including access, total flats could number up to 120.
3. Parking for residents cars – adjacent town centre car parks on are for visitors to town centre shops and facilities,- already over-full. Blocking by additional 120 resident cars would damage the convenience of visiting the town centre for shopping and leisure.
4. Private homes need quiet – quietness is incompatible with town centre activities, including the evening economy. Introduction of up to 120 additional households would be likely to lead to pressure to reduce activities, lowering the town centre vitality.
5. NLP Retail Study Update calls for 11,100 sqm of additional retail space in Hitchin. Allocation for extra retail in the Plan is only 3,000m2 of HT12 Paynes Park and 4,000m2 on HT11 Churchgate if redeveloped (which won't happen within the Plan period) or say only 500m2 if refurbished with modest extension. Shortfall of 11,100-3,500= 7,600m2 , ie 68% of needed. Extra residential would increase pressure for additional retail space where already there is this serious shortfall . To mitigate shortfall, residential provision in Hitchin should be reduced, not increased, or NPPL (para 23) will not be met.

Alternative uses.

There is no site allocation in the Plan for 'Other Town Centre Uses' eg cultural leisure/cultural, eg arts centre. (There is no existing theatre, no cinema, no gallery, no workshops).

Any redevelopment or any refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre should include creation/conversion of upper level space for leisure.

Note: Letchworth Heritage Foundation runs an arts centre above shops in the arcade off Station Road, including cafe and gallery.

Suggested Revised Policy HT11: Churchgate and its surrounding area

- Refurbish the existing Churchgate Centre for retail only, with possible modest extension into Hitchin Market site.
- Develop or convert upper level space for leisure including an art gallery and exhibition space as needed by community groups.
- Confirm long-term location of Hitchin Market in its existing position with possible modest contraction, to ensure its sustainable future and investment, if modest extension of the Churchgate Centre makes this necessary or if it is in the best interests of Hitchin Market.
- Ensure at least the existing number of car parking spaces to serve town centre shops is retained at all times, one or off the site, together with spaces in Biggin Lane car park to serve Hitchin Market traders. Develop a multi-storey car park on Portmill Lane to provide additional town centre parking as and when this would be viable and affordable.
- Protect the extent and quality of the public realm including strengthened pedestrian links between Market Place, Queen Street, Portmill Lane, Bancroft and Briske Street . Include extending the river walkway from Hermitage Road to Bridge Street in planning briefs for any developments affecting completion of that route.
- Preserve and enhance heritage assets including Hitchin Conservation Area and listed buildings, including:
 - a) Protection of key views of Grade I listed St Mary's Church, in particular from Hollow Lane;
 - b) Consideration and sensitive treatment of listed buildings and their settings including the Sun Hotel, the Biggin and various buildings in Market Place;
 - c) Retention and enhancement of terracing to River Hiz, including creating a level bypass past the stairs down from St Mary's carpark for disabled persons using the River Hiz Walkway;
 - d) Requirement for any refurbishment of buildings or their extensions to:
 - (i) respect and restore as possible the historic building frontage lines from Sun Street to the Rose & Crown in Market Place (currently over-sailed by the upper floors of the Churchgate Centre and ground-level

arcade);

(ii) provide architectural variation to reflect rhythm of historic building plots.

- Archaeological survey to be completed prior to any development.

Re: Site HT10 Former B& Q Store, Nightingale Rd, Hitchin

STATEMENT from Robin Dartington, representing Keep Hitchin Special

1. Spatial Vision

Local Plan (page 28) Spatial Vision includes: *'North Herts will have a range of **community, leisure, cultural & recreational facilities** that are **available to the local population** creating cohesive communities that recognise the **needs of the older population** and enhance **opportunities for children and young people**'.*

2. Site allocation for 'Other Town Centre Uses'.

NLP Retail Study Update: Section 4: Requirement for Other Town Centre Uses identifies in para 4.10 a current under-supply of **251 cinema seats** in the District, rising to **449 seats by 2031**.

3. NPPL.

NLP Retail Study Update para 5.1 quotes: *The NPPL indicates in para 23 that local plans should allocate a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of retail, leisure and other developments needed in town centres. Need for development should be met in full and not compromised by limited site supply. In order to accommodate growth, local planning authorities should assess the need to expand town centres to ensure a sufficient supply of suitable sites'.*

The draft Local Plan does not allocate or reserve any site for a small cinema.

The Plan is unsound therefore if it does not allocate a site for leisure expansion, in particular for a small cinema.

4. **Site HT10.** Present use of HT10 site is for a retail store – now closed pending redevelopment for housing to generate profit, not for any particular need for housing in that location indicated in the SA. Draft Policy HT10 allocates site for 60 homes.

5. Special feature of HT10: Accessibility:

A 'town centre' reasonably be expected to lie at the centre of a town – but Hitchin town centre lies on the extreme south west edge of Hitchin, inaccessible on foot to the half of Hitchin north of the railway line. (See NHDC map overleaf).

HT10 lies **central** to all Hitchin, next to A505 railway underpass used by most of Hitchin north of the railway. HT10 is highly accessible to Hitchin railway station the over side of A505. HT10 is **within walking distance of the whole of Hitchin** north of A602 Priory Bypass.

6. Edge of Town Centre

A suitable location for a cinema is 'edge of town centre'.

HT10 lies just north of Hitchin town centre at the northern tip of 'the Triangle Area', bounded by Verulam road to the south, Nightingale Road to the west and A505 Walsworth Road to the east.

The Triangle includes Nightingale Road Neighbourhood Centre at the south-west corner, consisting of four food shops, and then along Nightingale Road:

- a veterinary surgery
- a car repair garage and car sales
- a musical instruments shop
- a petrol station
- a McDonald's fast food outlet
- a pub

entry to HT10 retail store;

and along Walsworth Road:

- entry to HT10 service area
- a Tesco Express
- a Kwik-Fit garage
- a stone mason
- a furniture shop
- a cafe
- a Bicycle shop
- a S&K convenience store
- a gastro-pub.

Clearly , these types of shops serve more than a local area and are

evidence that the restricted area of the town centre has led historically to northwards spread of town centre uses. HT10 is therefore suitable for allocation for a small cinema at some time.

HT10 is the sole surviving substantial site central to Hitchin that could be reserved for future change to such uses as leisure and entertainment. If HT10 is lost to housing, there will be no future possibility of say a cinema in any appropriate 'edge of town centre' location.

Continued Retail Use

When HT10 was used as a B&Q store, it provided a facility not replaced by any other single store elsewhere in Hitchin. When then used for a Poundland store, it provided convenience for Hitchin residents north of the railway line, half the distance to the town centre.

7. Public parking

The current station carpark is overfull, leading to 60+ cars being parked in St Michael's Road all day. This problem has been growing over time and the obvious answer is to open an entry to a station car-park from St Michael's Road - but no progress appears to have been made.

Interim use of HT!) for public parking would alleviate the problem.

8. SUGGESTED CHANGE TO LOCAL PLAN POLICY HT10 TO MAKE THE PLAN SOUND

Delete HT10 from Local Housing Allocations – on grounds that housing use on that site should have less priority than continues retail use with longer term allocation for leisure including a small cinema, for which there is no other suitable site in Hitchin as required by the NPPL.

Add: Continue previous retail use or change use to low density development for **mixed-use retail, community, leisure, cultural or recreational facilities.**

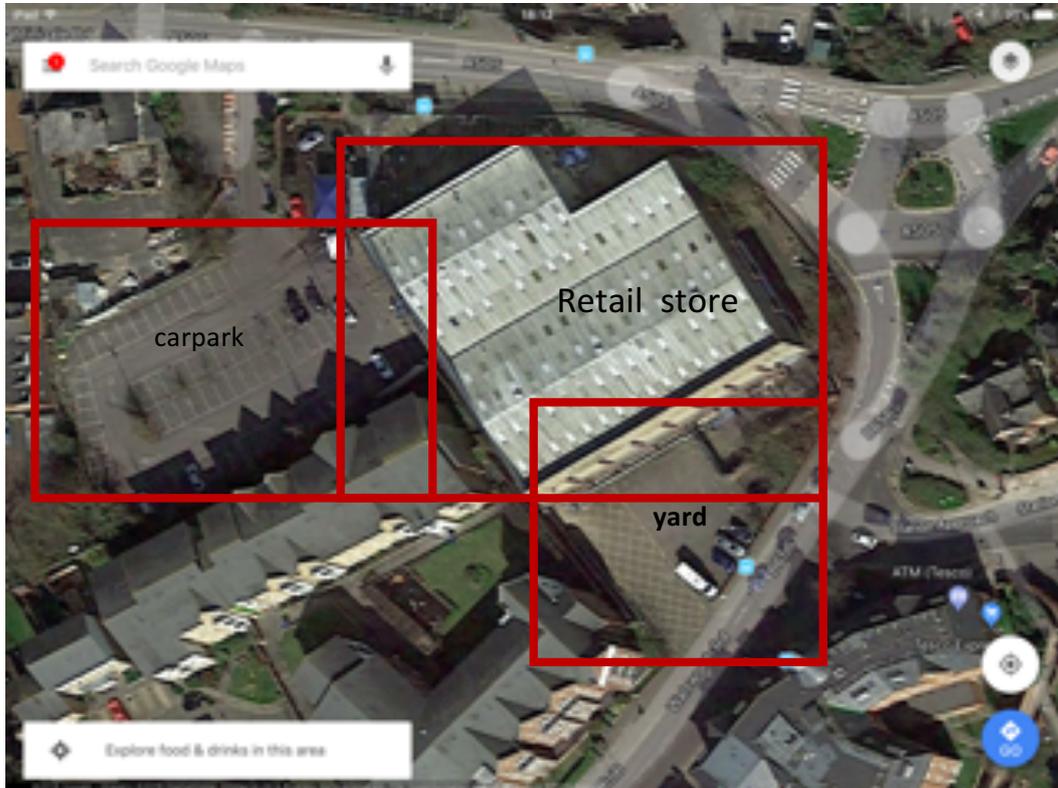
Attachments:

1. NHDC map : Draft Emerging Allocations July 2016 – Hitchin, Ickleford, St Ippolyts, Gosmore
This map could not be copied –copies will be presented at the Hearing
2. Comparative Google maps of Broadway Cinema and HT10 site at same scale

Google map extracts: HT10 compared with Broadway Cinema at same scale



Broadway Cinema (middle bottom right)



HT10 with retail store, car park and service yard