

## **URBAN PANEL REVIEW PAPER**

### **BISHOP'S STORTFORD & HITCHIN**

1. The Panel's visit to these two beautiful and important historic towns in Hertfordshire was triggered by analogous development proposals. In each case, retail development was proposed and was justified on dual grounds – first, revitalising existing retail by attracting currently absent national players - second, thereby regenerating the economy and other parts of the town. In both cases this proposition deserves testing, not least because of particular characteristics of Hertfordshire.

It was immediately apparent to Panel members that the contiguity of the main towns of Hertfordshire, not only to each other but to other towns across the county border, such as Braintree and Harlow, was a critical consideration. The ten District Councils, each of which naturally promotes its own case, now have no Regional Spatial Strategy within which to mediate those cases, nor does the County Council, which had not supported the RSS, appear to be able to promote a hierarchy. Yet all the towns continue to be subject to development pressures and opportunities many of which turn out to be externally generated, standard retail development schemes. Panel members were clear that simply upgrading the retail offer across all the major towns would have significant physical impact but could not resolve the perceived problems of loss of economic activity to neighbours because every town would be improving in the same way at the same time.

Acknowledging the current political volatility afflicting regional planning, the Panel members nonetheless urged the County Council to support its constituent districts and the Local Economic Partnership in moving towards policies which would allow each place to make its own distinctive contribution to the continuing character of Hertfordshire as a beautiful and dynamic alliance of neighbours.

2. Accordingly, Panel members urged the two communities to which its attention was turned on this occasion to concentrate, above all, on the particularity of the two towns; to seek development which reinforced the character of the place; to press development partners for the highest standards, not only of design, but of forward-looking sustainable propositions for the whole town and to stand firm in resisting formulaic proposals which could just as readily have emerged in any neighbouring town. In doing so this would echo the government's recent definitions of sustainable development.

In both cases Panel members urged authorities, communities and developers to take the fullest possible account of the rapidly changing nature of the retail market. While the retail figures cited in justification of the proposed developments were relatively recent, the impact of internet commerce is increasing and rendering bringing existing business models into question. This is no time to predicate the future of towns on an untested belief in previous patterns of behaviour.

Specifically then, in Bishop's Stortford (BS) the Panel felt that East Herts DC (EHDC) had identified a development partner whose covenant, good will and advisors were impressive and whose stated development objectives were honourable, but that these characteristics nowhere near sufficed. These views arose in part from particular concerns about aspects of the indicative scheme, to which English Heritage had formally raised an objection, but rested also on wider concerns about the relationship between that scheme and the rest of the town.

Panel members were, of course, only able to come to understand the town and the development opportunity it faces because of the quality of the briefing received from EH staff, as well as the time given by Kevin Steptoe and colleagues from EHDC and by Henderson and their advisors Turley Associates. Members were most grateful for all the briefings.

3. BS is a town whose development has retained a distinct character based on and still largely revealing the many phases of development across the centuries. Although the relationship with the castle and motte, always somewhat distanced by the marshland of the Stort, has now been further challenged by the culverting of the river for the creation of the ring road, it is still there and could be reinforced. The market town on the rising ground displays not only the many phases of houses and shops around the market place but also the strong influence of major industries, particularly, but not solely, malting. Together with strong topography this creates a typical, but highly distinctive and very attractive English historic market town character. It was clear to Panel members that this was highly valued and constituted one important reason for the relative economic vigour of the town at present. There was evidence of local concerns about pressures that could change this successful mix.

The contributions of the C20 have been less distinguished. Their economic contribution has largely been office based employment (now somewhat on the decline) and the standard retail development, particularly Jackson Square. It is where Jackson Square, wilfully ignoring the topography, abuts the ring road that buildings of a wholly anomalous scale and undistinguished architectural form most obviously disregards the qualities of the rest of the town. At that point on the ring road the visitor is aware of a degree of economic vitality sadly balanced by a complete absence of sense of place.

Panel members feared that some of the same failings might afflict the Old River Lane development. They, therefore, urged EHDC to take account of a number of issues before making any binding commitments.

4. With regard to the wider town, the Panel noted that there is a level of economic activity at present which would be the envy of many places it has visited. This is a great asset on two grounds. The first is that, in itself, current activity underlines the particular qualities and pleasures of shopping in BS. To be at the junction of High Street and Market Street looking up the infilled market square towards the church and with varied local, rather than national, shops and cafes to choose from is one reason BS is popular and busy.

The second ground for valuing this asset is that it allows the community time and space in which to determine the nature and form of future development. BS does not face the quandary afflicting other towns who experience very little developer interest and are tempted to accept whatever is on offer. EHDC can, therefore, take account of other issues while identifying the quantum and nature of development which the currently available sites should accommodate. In the view of Panel members those issues include:

The future transport planning / movement strategy for the town. BS is of an eminently walkable scale and shape. It has had its major car infrastructure inserted already and there is little scope for more. This can be turned to advantage if part of the new image and essence of the town is one where the car is only used when essential and all other forms of movement are encouraged.

The relationship between the Old River Lane ORL site and the existing town is, of course, critical. Central to that is Jackson Square. Panel members believed that the re-configuration of and reinvestment in that site (which may be available) is an earlier priority than, as well as a necessary pre-condition to, development on ORL.

BS is blessed with other development sites including the Goods Yard between the town and the station and a strategy which encompasses, or at least takes account of the overall potential of them all, is essential. One of the reasons that the ORL indicative scheme includes very substantial blocks (which risk repeating the mistakes of Jackson Square) is that they contain very substantial and inflexible forms of development like the cinema which might be better sited elsewhere.

The existing qualities of the BS Conservation Area must be taken full account of (and the forthcoming CA Appraisal will be a core document) but other qualities must also be noted. There is a strong body of local opinion which values and welcomes the retention of the public space at the north of the site, but less audible public valuing of the existing supermarket car park. However, with its mature trees and outlook to

the motte and to quality buildings on the edge of the town, there are few better. It should be built over only after careful thought.

The motte is now sundered from the town by the ring road. Its visual connection is obscured by trees. And yet it is potentially a town feature of defining quality. The current development offers to improve physical connections to the motte and that must be welcome. The several nettles of tree removal, ruin consolidation, improved accessibility and better interpretation of the motte and its wider setting should all be grasped. Such intervention could provide the town with a rediscovered park set around an object of great interest and pride. The OLR developers could be seen to have given that back to BS and to have provided their development with a strong marker.

Sites of this scale are routinely built out at one time and, whatever the conceit above ground, are in fact one building. Such constructs are very difficult to adapt to any future different purpose. The Panel advises that truly distinct and separate buildings should be constructed, perhaps over an extended timetable, thus allowing for flexible scheme development over time and reusability in the future.

5. Once these and other local issues are fully understood and their potential impact on the ORL site understood, then it will be appropriate to consider the form of the indicative proposal. Here Panel members found that they could not easily recognise the welcome aspiration voiced by Michael Lowndes of Turleys of “a traditional extension of a traditional town”. Specifically, what this development requires is large, stacked use blocks with deep plans.

Where the community is certain that the mix of potential new retailers is exactly what BS needs, this is to some degree unavoidable. However, if the amount of development on the site is minimised by the location of, e.g. cinema and hotel elsewhere, bulk may be reduced. If, at the same time, the need for additional, particularly underground, car parking is obviated (by the movement plan) then the remaining amount of development could be accommodated, by a quality design team, in a way which genuinely increased connectivity with the existing town and provided a new quarter consistent in planning, scale and massing with the grain of the town.

Were all of that to happen there would remain the question of architectural style. Panel members could not find any grounds for welcoming the proposed “Stort style”. Just as maltings, flour mill, station and, for that matter, the castle and motte originally expressed their nature and purpose in clear and strong architectural terms, so do the houses and shops of central BS. But the latter style is in no way suited to the achievement of deep plan blocks needed to accommodate modern retail. The Panel noted that there are a small number of the many retail developments of the past 60 years which have managed to add new buildings and places of quality to towns while meeting modern retail requirements – Princesshay in Exeter and Liverpool One are examples worthy of consideration.

6. The Panel's county wide comments self-evidently apply to Hitchin as well as to BS. Certain other comments above, particularly those about formulaic, locally indistinct, standard development models also apply. However, specific Hitchin matters are quite different.

First, although the same descriptive terms might be applied to both Bishop's Stortford and Hitchin – *important mediaeval and later towns whose strong character and quality derives from the survival of fabric from most centuries disposed in a compatible and harmonious form* – the places naturally differ.

Hitchin's pre-Norman importance is no longer physically visible, but it is undoubted and its archaeological expression must be expected. Both monastic sites exist only as fragments, but each exerts a strong influence on the town and while the Priory is relatively stable, the setting of St. Mary's is a core matter of relevance to current development proposals.

While both towns have infilled market places, the clarity of Hitchin's elongated space with burgage plots intact, many containing early timber framed fabric, is special. The consistent two and three storey scale and relatively narrow streets of the mediaeval core create a strong and attractive character which, unsurprisingly, is animated by thriving local businesses and busy residents. Panel members approached the market place along Bucklersbury and few could recall a place with so much commercial activity without any national chains present. The relative density of these spaces make eventual arrival at the market place followed by the discovery of the churchyard, the river and St. Mary's Square beyond, all the more striking.

The obvious conclusion is that it is on these strengths that Hitchin must build, if none of these highest quality characteristics are to be lost. Nor, any more than BS, does Hitchin need to rush for development. Its historic development has encompassed very significant change while retaining distinct character and vitality. Such must be the ambition for this next phase.

Hermitage Road and the vision for St. Mary's Square, had it been completed, would have constituted a very strong move into the C20, in obvious counterpoint to developments at Letchworth. But they would not have overwhelmed the town and the strikingly modern and different architecture of that phase was confident enough to generate a language which entered a civilised discourse with the existing town.

7. The fact that St. Mary's Square was not completed did leave a significant development opportunity and the community will from time to time want carefully to consider what should go there. However, just as in BS, there is no crisis, no need for a precipitate rush to action and little evident need to reject recent assessments of the nature and potential of the space. Before commenting on the proposal for the site, Panel members hoped that the following observations would be found helpful:

St. Mary's is a nationally important ecclesiastical site, about which understanding is continually deepening. It still dominates its large churchyard despite some encroachment and the great loss of the church house. Its presence on early maps is striking and sets a good precedent for the future. If change is agreed upon, there should be noted to be the potential to create a new, enhanced setting not unlike that of other minster and cathedral closes.

The C20 interventions into that setting differ markedly. The incomplete St. Mary's Square has provided an important C21 asset – a car park that also provides a sense of arrival, although this has not been matched by the setting provided by development in Queen Street. It sits on a plinth overlooking the canalised river Hiz and the east end of the church. Whatever happens here has to enhance the latter, striking assets. The tail end of the Churchgate retail development and the striking market buildings are of a less harmonious form; together, however, they animate the space. Furthermore the shops in the centre are all occupied, and the panel felt that a remodelling of Churchgate, especially on the Market Square frontage might be a more sustainable option that should be considered.

Portmill Lane was historically important to the town and its potential for development is considerable in its own right (particularly if the post office site comes into the picture). It and the other two elements of the site should be considered in their own right and, quite likely, developed at different times in order that the street may be remade.

Stevenage and, to a lesser extent, nearby Luton have their own qualities and characteristics, but they are very distinct from Hitchin. Large stores will look to build on the established critical shopping mass in those towns and shoppers will continue to find more choice there and farther afield. It behoves Hitchin, therefore, to look the gift horse of a major store very carefully in the mouth and examine whether the reinforcement of local specialised retail, product based farmers markets and so on are not more in character with Hitchin and more likely to offer a viable and distinctive future.

Like BS, Hitchin is unlikely to be blessed with major new infrastructure and the nature of its connections to its immediate hinterland is unlikely to change – so car parking will continue to be needed to some degree. However, the mainline station is near the town centre and Hitchin is a compact and walkable town. Pedestrian connections could be encouraged and improved. Existing cycle use, not only within the town but beyond, should be built up.

St. Mary's Square undoubtedly has the potential for development and increased use. There was little wrong with the Bennett and Bidwell concept of buildings around a square. In the C21 context, that might be a square which was used for additional markets and events, whilst the original Market Square continues to function as a civic space. If

(additional) parking was thought essential, it could be provided below the square while the principles of the stepped plinth to the riverside was protected.

8. In the light of all the above, it will surely come as no surprise that Panel members saw little merit in the current proposal emerging at Churchgate. They regretted not being able to meet representatives of NHDC to hear the case for this kind of development being put, but imagined they would have been unlikely to be convinced. The Simons scheme appears to have been generated by a wish to impose on Hitchin a standard and, frankly, alien retail development. The Panel has indicated above the unlikelihood of this succeeding in towns across Hertfordshire and urges that more thought be given to the desiderata set out above (and others voiced more appropriately by the community) before any scheme is finalised.

The Panel saw a summary of the Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief; some members thought that the illustrative scheme associated with it was as meek as the current Simons scheme is overbearing. But they did not question the Design Principles it embodied and could find no justification for their being casually overturned.

In the light of the emerging new planning system, the Panel thought there was much to be said for this site being the subject of a Neighbourhood Plan. Members believe that this new, albeit untested, approach has obvious potential for delivering community endorsed schemes of the highest quality. There is great understanding of the merits of Hitchin today – that understanding is local and vocal, but it may also be readily backed up by professional input. A Neighbourhood Plan could, by the necessary consultation ensure, that the scheme that emerged was representative of the wide interests of those who live in and use Hitchin. Tested by referendum, it could give NHDC and its development partner great certainty and a benign local political context. Finally there is every reason to hope it might provide the framework within which the C21 contribution to the long story of Hitchin might prove as successful as its past.

## **Summary**

### **The Urban Panel:**

- a) admired the complex and close knit qualities of Hertfordshire, a county too often dismissed by outsiders as a dormitory;**
- b) noted the difficulty of mediating and prioritising development pressures between ten district councils and hoped the County would find a way of brokering an understanding;**
- c) were unsurprised that two of the Hertfordshire towns are currently being offered development of a standard format, with little local responsiveness;**

- d) urged both councils to hold their nerve, taking advantage of their current relative economic vibrancy to accept only wholly appropriate development, specifically tailored to their town;**
- e) similarly underlined the need for robust challenge of retail predictions which need to be tested against the rapidly emerging impact of internet commerce;**
- f) hoped that development in BS would take full account of the topography of site, town and motte, enhancing all three:**
- g) proposed that the future viability and connectivity of Jackson Square be resolved before confirmation of the nature and extent of development on ORL;**
- h) felt that in BS questions of infrastructure and the inter-relationship of other available site should equally be resolved before OLR;**
- i) strongly believed that the Hitchin sites hold the key to the future of the town but that the initial consultation proposals do not acknowledge the nature of town or site nor do they allow for a phased development ;**
- j) stressed the importance of the existing qualities of historic Hitchin, its great church and yard and St. Mary's Square and the fact that they must lead proposals for the future; and**
- k) emphasised the potential of a Neighbourhood Plan for central Hitchin as the vehicle for producing a secure and widely endorsed proposal.**

**Chris Smith**

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