

## Bircherley Green – Summary

The future of Hertford depends on the urgent revival of Bircherley Green. Its facilities and character will determine whether or not people come into the town. The viability of Hertford is on hold while decisions are made.

Future developments should consider:

- Commercial attractions – retail outlets, eating and drinking, and entertainment, a covered market.
- Community Focus (Public Goods) – NHS doctors' surgery will be needed as Hertford grows to meet the housing allocations in the District Plan. Spaces for entrepreneurial start-ups will be essential to support: self-employment and small businesses, and space for social enterprises
- Accessibility – Provision for car parking and bus services for people who must be able to travel to and from Bircherley Green.
- Housing – local need for family and social housing must be considered, not the commuter market.
- Sense of place – Good design, proportion to the surroundings, attractive to local residents and visitors. A reason for people to visit the town by making good use of the river front. Hertford's most important asset.

### Commercial Uses

Improved retail services was the key issue for most respondents.

**The importance of bigger stores:** identified by some members but not as a dominant shopping service. One said: "(We) need to tempt and secure a couple of national players to benefit the smaller shops and act as an "attraction". However, the emphasis for many was on "high-quality food store(s), ideally supporting local producers to reduce 'food-miles'." Also, "smaller shops for more specialised trading" were needed. One member said: "I believe the priority should be to attract more small retailers and hold on to those we have got."

**Lack of any shoe shops:** Many respondents were concerned about the lack of any shoe shops, men's clothing retailers, low-priced medicine/cosmetic shops and upmarket retailers such as delicatessens, organic food shops, butchers, and general specialty shops.

**Covered Market** Part of the retail problem is addressed in responses to the question of a market, possibly indoors or covered. This would encourage traders to reconnect with

the town, with low overheads and sharing of pitches. This move could keep Salisbury Square clear for the cafes, pubs and general leisure activities.

## **Community Focus (Public Goods)**

**Office spaces of all kinds for local people** Suggestions included the retention of the proposed office space for the Housing Association and a study of the demand for professional offices. One member pointed to “space needed to encourage entrepreneurial start-ups.” Another said: “Temporary hot desking/meeting spaces [were needed] as more people work from home.” Space was also needed for social enterprises of direct benefit to the local community (e.g. Mudlarks).

**Urgent Doctor’s Surgery** Many members said the medical centre – proposed in the now defunct plans – should be retained as part of the plan. Typical comments were: “We need a doctor’s surgery - desperately!” and “We could do with a general medical practitioners’ centre.”

**Medical Support Services** There were suggestions to expand provision to include facilities for medical support professions – physiotherapists, chiropodists, etc., making sure it is easily reached from the carpark. Several said it should bring services such as Ware Road Doctors Surgery and Wallace House under one roof, in conjunction with a large prescribing chemist such as Boots. Again, the suggestion was for refurbishment of existing buildings rather than new build. An ideal location in the view of some members was the former Waitrose building.

**Medical Centre** Some members went further suggesting “consultation with the NHS to design a future-proof Health Centre, reducing travel to the QEII and Lister.” “A GPs’ mega-surgery or health centre will undoubtedly be needed, said one member, “as the housing allocations for the town in the District Plan are built out.”

Various suggestions on a way forward included the council taking responsibility for creating a “shell” centre and negotiating with the NHS Commissioning Group to take the space.

## **Accessibility**

### **Retention of Bircherley Green car park**

Support for the retention of Bircherley Green car park was overwhelming. Typical comments were: “retention or replacement of the existing multi-storey is essential” and “whatever is built and installed on the site must be underpinned by realistic and suitable parking facilities nearby”. Whatever the reason – meeting the needs of local people, attracting visitors/tourists, providing access for the elderly and disabled or everyday access to shops and services, the carpark was seen as critical.

### **Parking is now a Hertford Problem**

One member said parking “has never been so problematical in the 35 years we have lived here as it is now.” Another said: “With the closure of the Bircherley multi-storey and Bull Plain, we are effectively left with Gascoyne Way, Hartham Common and St Andrews Street.”

On the question of how to manage car parking, respondents wanted radical reform of the charging system, with suggestions ranging from “pay on exit parking to encourage people to remain in the town centre for as long as they need,” to giving the council control of the carpark, hence recognising that this is a “public amenity”.

### **The bus station must stay**

Location of the bus station drew as strong a response as the car-parking question. As one respondent echoing the majority said: “The bus station must stay – this is for social rather than economic reasons.” It is a necessity for elderly people, families who do not have constant access to a car and, in terms of the environment, to reduce traffic congestion and pollution.

One member pointed out that the whole context, with more emphasis on public transport was “expected to change rapidly looking to the future (ref: Government’s “Future of Urban Mobility: Urban Strategy” March 2019).”

Civic Society members also stressed the need to improve the appearance of the bus station, re-opening of the waiting room and toilets etc.

### **Creative and imaginative approach for Housing**

All members who commented on the question of housing wanted to see a far more creative and imaginative approach, with emphasis on small family houses, social housing and generally homes to rent rather than a predominance of flats. One member commented: “Hertford ... really needs more 2-up-2-down cottages to encourage social and community development for the future.” Another commented: “there should be no assumption that tall or dense development should be permitted.”

There were calls to encourage occupancy for “low car usage”, homes for the elderly, development of riverfront houses – with public towpath – opposite Folly Island and “residential accommodation of some sort to get people to live in the centre of town – work / living units, perhaps flats.”

### **Home-working and flexible employment patterns**

There were several suggestions of ways to support this, while reducing the emphasis on needing the car for work. One said: “Live/work units could also be included rather than just standard residential flats. Creating live / work accommodation within the development would generate foot traffic through the week.”

### **People need something to do in Hertford and not go elsewhere**

There were wider benefits from an increase in the number of town centre homes. As one respondent said: “New homes would bring people into the town centre to support the facilities that are already there, cafes, bars, dentists, doctors, the theatre, both train stations, shopping centres, swimming pool and Hartham Park are all within walking distance. Simon Balle all-through school is also within walking distance.”

## **Sense of Place**

### **No one will come to Hertford if it does not have a Sense of Place**

“We need urgent action to give life back to the centre otherwise there is a danger it will be fatally wounded,” was a concern of many respondents, but not at the expense of good design and environmental considerations.

## **Sustainability**

The issue of “sustainability” was raised and members questioned the logic of demolishing buildings after just 40 years or so. “Some could be retained and refurbished, rather than demolished...” and “upper storeys, which seemed to be unused, could be converted into flats.” Such use was seen as a “greener solution, as redevelopment wastes the ‘embedded carbon’ in a building less than 50 years old”.

## **Refurbishment**

There was a strong emphasis on refurbishment over demolition from the majority responding to this issue. Another commented: “Make best use of existing buildings, by encouraging adaptations and good sensitive design.” There was also support for the “use, as much as possible, of environmentally friendly features including - grey water recycling, solar panels, good insulation of buildings and similar.”

## **Glass All-Weather Covers**

Several members mentioned options such as having a “cover” over existing areas, to make them a weather-friendly facility all year. Another idea was to modify the service yard, archway and steps beyond WH Smith and limiting service traffic to evening and night to improve the utility of the river front. With limited demolition, such as the former Starbucks, “existing [buildings] could be adapted to provide a Tesco Express-type of small convenient supermarket which people arriving by bus would welcome the use of.”

There was much emphasis on keeping “as many existing retail units as possible, revamping as necessary”, providing a toilet, café and waiting room (for the bus station) and for “shops to be made available as pop up units with low rental and no council rates.”

## **The Water Front**

The main criticisms of the existing structures focused on the river front, such as the “large brick wall that was Waitrose should go as it hides the view of the river.” One comment that summed up views of many was: “Replace any buildings unsuitable for reuse as necessary with a view to providing space for activities such as rehearsal and community events.”

The river front should be opened up and made as attractive as possible by using “plenty of green planting on and around the building” with provision for ongoing maintenance.