

REPORT OF AN INFORMAL WORKING GROUP ON THE LEIGHTON-LINSLADE LAND SOUTH OF THE HIGH STREET DEVELOPMENT.

An informal working party consisting of Cllrs Morris (acting as Chair), Harvey, Owen, Palmer and Spurr with advice from CBC officers Stephen Mooring and Sam Caldbeck, has met on several occasions over recent weeks in an attempt to confirm the present position and possible future pathways for realisation of the South Side Development.

CONTEXT

There was a general feeling among all councillors concerned, of frustration at the length of time being taken for the development to get underway, for whatever reason, and a wish that, despite the obvious uncertainties introduced by the Covid Pandemic, that it be now progressed as a high priority both for the town and Central Bedfordshire. It was also strongly felt that the development should continue to be considered as an integral whole and not subject to piecemeal approvals where these did not clearly accord with the overall current development plan.

ISSUES

Two main areas of discussion were developed over the period of the informal working party.

1. Overall Route Map

It was felt essential that priority needed to be given to the realisation of a clear, time-specified route map to the achievement of the South Side Development. It was noted that officers are currently working on a four stage approach consisting of an internal service need review; a commercial market review; other landowner and developer consultation; and an options report. It was suggested that this could be completed in a six month time period. This was considered an essential step to energise concrete progress in achieving the development, together with a complementary time scale for achievement with indicative/target dates for defined stages.

2. Community Facility

This is obviously a matter into which the Town Council (and residents) should have a major input and the results of the public engagement session in February 2020 were noted. Various possibilities for such a facility on South Side were discussed especially an Arts/Heritage Centre allowing performances, rehearsal space but with other break out and public meeting areas; and a multi-functional facility combining museum/heritage/information, business office space, public meeting rooms etc. Various examples elsewhere were briefly considered or raised – the Rufus

Centre, Leicester/Norwich/Stockton Arts Centres, the Apex Centre (Bury), Wavendon Stables, and others. Progress here will depend on capital and running costs, funding possibilities and overall viability taking into account other facilities available in the town and the potential impact of any new facilities on them (eg the library theatre which it was felt should continue to function as now), perceived remaining deficits (eg adequate meeting space for large community groups), as well as how and by whom any centre would be run (public, private or public-private partnership). In turn, this will depend on the precise nature of the wider development which is to take place (eg a hotel might provide conference or other meeting facilities) and further public consultation when ideas are refined.

NEXT STEPS

In line with the work continuing in Central Bedfordshire, to which the councillors on the informal working group attach the highest priority, it is suggested that the Partnership Committee consider formalising the Working Group as a Task and Finish Group which would work with the relevant CBC officers to help drive forward the South Side development by interchange of views and further research, especially on the Community Facility, reporting back to the Partnership Committee. The informal group felt an early priority for further work would be briefing by a commercial development planner/consultant to better understand the environment against which the South Side development would now be taking place and, therefore, realistic possibilities.