

## **LAND SOUTH OF THE HIGH STREET – TASK AND FINISH GROUP, REPORT BACK AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEE AND TOWN COUNCIL**

1.1 An informal Working Group was established in late 2020, consisting of Cllrs Morris (Chair), Harvey, Owen, Palmer and Spurr reflecting a more general feeling of frustration among Town Councillors at the apparent lack of progress on the Land South of the High Street Project since the adoption of the initial Development Brief by Central Bedfordshire Council in 2012. The aim of the Group, assisted by both Central Bedfordshire and Leighton-Linslade Town Council officers, was to seek to help and speed the development process by the provision of local knowledge. Essential components in this were: understanding the processes being adopted by Central Bedfordshire Council, reviewing the ownership of the site and refining ideas of community needs and wishes.

1.2 Consideration was given to the work of the Informal Group by the Partnership Committee at its meeting on 10 December 2020. It was agreed to formalise the Group as a Task and Finish Group, “to work with the relevant CBC Officers to drive forward the South Side development by interchange of views and further research particularly the Community Facility and report back to the Partnership Committee.” The Task and Finish Group, consisting of Cllrs Harvey, Hemmings, Morris, Owen, Palmer (Chair) and Spurr has held five meetings – 11 January, 15 February, 22 March, 6 May and 26 July 2021. These meetings have sought to develop thoughts and ideas on the two main strands, of the contribution the South Side site could make to meeting apparent Community wishes and needs, and providing an informed input on the shape of the overall development, in an effort to help maximise the benefits to the Town Centre and Leighton-Linslade residents as a whole from this important strategic land development, while not losing sight of commercial and financial realities.

1.3 The thanks of the Group go to Central Bedfordshire officers (Stephen Mooring and Sam Caldbeck), the various organisations who have responded to our requests for information (including Chippenham and Flitwick Town Councils and Leighton Buzzard Library), local residents who have input their informed views especially on the needs and possibilities for Community Facilities on the South Side site, and, of course, our own Town Council officers for their support.

### **Stage Reached**

2.1 At its last meeting, the Task and Finish Group had a presentation on the latest reports to Central Bedfordshire by their advisors (including a property consultancy) on the immediate prospects for the South Side development. It was reported to the Group that, in the current economic climate and with the impact of Covid, the prospects for a comprehensive commercially-led development of South Side in the immediate future were considered non-existent. However, market recovery

would occur and development prospects materially improve but the time scale for this is guesswork at present (a very loose figure of five years was suggested to the Group by way of example). Final decisions on the Day Care facility location/relocation and timings, will also be necessary to give greater clarity on the wider timescale for South Side. However, in the meantime, the Group considered that there were initiatives which could profitably be followed to begin and energise the development of the site to the benefit of the Town, the Town Centre and, most importantly of all, our residents. The Group's conclusions and recommendations are set out below.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

3.1 The Task and Finish Group would seek the Partnership Committee's endorsement of the following conclusions and recommendations where these relate to the Committee's interests. Matters covered below and relating solely to the Town Council at this stage will be similarly presented to the relevant Town Council Committee for consideration and endorsement:

### ***General***

1. While it is clear that a commercially-led comprehensive development of South Side will not take place under current conditions, it is considered essential that awareness raising and marketing of the site for appropriate development continues to pro-actively take place. We would also hope that Central Bedfordshire will continue to consider opportunities to acquire land on South Side where this will increase development potential and/or improve site access with the Town Centre.
2. The Group believes that, given current conditions, a phased approach to development is appropriate, concentrating first on those aspects of the development which may be more "easily" progressed in present economic conditions (perhaps in the public realm) but maintaining a clear concept of the need for the site as a whole to be deliverable in the longer term and avoid a piecemeal approach without a view to the wider whole of an integrated, mixed use development of the site.
3. The Group was pleased to note that Central Bedfordshire continue to regard the site as a regeneration project and, within that, residential use would be a partial component. The Group considered that the proportion of the space devoted to residential use should be a minority of the total available and that developer contributions should be first considered for use on the site to the public benefit and the Town Council be actively consulted on such matters as they arise.
4. The Group noted that the recently adopted Central Bedfordshire Local Plan commented that "The Development Brief for Land South of the High Street will be updated and will act as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the Local Plan". The Group considers that this should be given some priority in the light of the South Side's strategic importance to the Town and that the Town Council be involved in it.
5. The Group noted the possibility of the Town Council relocating its premises to South Side and that, if practicable, this might act as a catalyst and confidence boost to wider development. This is further considered under Public/Community Space below.

## *Overall Site*

4.1 During its discussions, the Group identified the following potential candidate uses for Land South of the High Street:

1. Retail – although the idea of a retail led and dominated development is now clearly outdated, there remains scope for a presence on South Side to complement the Town Centre offering, including click and collect and more small specialist undertakings. This will need to be kept under review though it will clearly ultimately be a matter for commercial decision.
2. Residential – as noted earlier
3. Hospitality – Coffee shops, restaurant, cafes, bars etc. Perhaps a candidate for earlier rather than later inclusion?
4. Hotel – there remains an interest in such a development, though an earlier application has been withdrawn, for which South Side should be ideal and from which the Town would benefit
5. Public/Community Use Buildings – this has been identified as an eagerly sought element and, if a suitable project can be developed could be a catalyst to the wider development of South Side (**see following section**)
6. Essential and Social Services – these might include Children’s/Adult/Day Care facilities and clearly rely on Central Bedfordshire’s future plans for the Town in these areas
7. Business and Office Space – hot desking, incubator and start up units (for which there is a demand in the Town), plus “ordinary” office space
8. Health – Health Hub
9. Education – additional local youth/adult/college/continuing education facilities (including green skills?) as the town grows
10. Children’s/Youth Facilities – could include play area (indoors/outdoors), bowling alley, cinema and related facilities. There is an identified need for such facilities.
11. Indoor Craft Oriented Market (perhaps with “repair café”)
12. Car Parking – an essential component for the development and the Town Centre more generally. Ideally in space/capacity/revenue terms multi-storey
13. Public Outside Space and Public Art – garden and/or seating areas with heritage display reflecting the Town’s history (sand and narrow gauge railway, Vimy bomber, Q Central etc as possibilities)
14. Conference Centre – perhaps ideally part of a hotel offering?

4.2 Arising from the above, the Group makes the following recommendations for Partnership Committee endorsement:

- a. Active consideration continues to be given in the further work on South Side by Central Bedfordshire to any opportunity to further the overall vision and individual components outlined above

- b. The issue of providing adequate car parking for the Town Centre and South Side should continue to be at the forefront of Central Bedfordshire's considerations as the development of South Side is taken forward.
- c. Further consideration be given by the Town Council and Central Bedfordshire to the possible location and nature of public open space and display material, together with any practicable improvements to the surrounding alleyways from the town centre to improve accessibility and attractiveness

4.3 In addition, as a matter of ***Town Council*** concern, in view of the Town's position as the largest settlement in the District, its significant predicted future growth, its clear lack of adequate health facilities, uncertainty over a future health hub site, and the growing public frustration at the slow progress on the provision of a health hub relevant to Leighton-Linslade's needs, the Group is suggesting that the Town Council again consider drawing to the attention of the relevant bodies, including the Clinical Commissioning Group, the Land South of the High Street site as a possibility for the location of a Health Hub in a central location to meet residents' aspirations and needs, and request that this be actively, urgently and seriously considered and evaluated.

### ***Public/Community Space***

5.1 As noted earlier, this is one element of the overall development where it is felt that further work and investigation could usefully continue with the intention of practicable elements being established as soon as possible which will help galvanise further interest and activity on South Side.

Several possible components have been identified in the Group's discussions:

1. A partitionable performance space, including rehearsal space, dressing rooms, office, bar, café with adequate audience capacity for live shows. Multi-functionality would be preferable with scope for other meeting activities and retractable seating.
2. Meeting rooms – a lack of facilities in the town for very large gatherings, as well as potential for more small/medium sized dedicated meeting room capacity has been identified. Multi-functional spaces to allow workshop/craft and other activities could be considered.
3. Museum/Tourist/Heritage Centre allowing for exhibitions and school parties (a matter frequently raised by residents). The town is bereft of such facilities which many smaller settlements possess.
4. New Town Council accommodation, incorporating an information hub, Central Bedfordshire offices and any other facilities deemed appropriate.

5.2 Arising from the above, the Group makes the following recommendations, principally for consideration and endorsement by the Town Council:

- a. The significant performing arts and cultural community in the Town which has made many representations over the need for 1. above, and has involved both CBC and non-CBC

landowners on the South Side site, including doing some preliminary financial and design work, be encouraged to continue with the support of the Town Council (for whom, through the Culture and Economic Committee, the realisation of a cultural/community facility in the Town is an agreed aim) and Central Bedfordshire. A first suggested step would be to meet the Charity/Community interest group from Potton who are themselves developing a Community Hall project there to understand their experience and methodology with this being followed up with South Side landowners as appropriate.

- b. Leighton-Linslade Town Council consider commencing work on the possible relocation of their offices to South Side, and discuss the possibility with Central Bedfordshire Council of a shared facility. It would also be for consideration whether meeting/function facilities, a heritage component, and the relocation of the Tactic Centre would be appropriate to such a development. Some of this would partly depend on a. above while points 2, 3, and 4 are also relevant under this heading. It is understood that there may be s.106 money allocated for Town Centre purposes which could be available and that consideration should, therefore, be given to whether this could usefully be used for a relevant feasibility study/business case assessment.
- c. Consideration be given through Leighton-Linslade Town Council to drawing formally to the Chief Constable and PCC's attention, in view of the Town's position as the largest settlement in the District, its significant predicted future growth, its clear lack of adequate policing facilities, and public frustration at the absence of a 24/7 police presence and response facility in the town against demonstrated need, that South Side (perhaps in relation to a. or b. above) could provide a centrally located, stand alone or shared facility to remedy this deficit in the medium to longer term and should be give the most serious consideration.

### ***Task and Finish Group Future***

6.1 The Group has now existed for over the "normal" six month period and has come to a seminal point with the findings of Central Bedfordshire's Consultants having been considered. Against that background, a number of recommendations and further actions are set out above. It is unclear whether the Task and Finish Group would, at this stage, make a useful contribution to the further actions which primarily involve other organisations, bodies and individuals. It will, of course, be essential for Members of the Town Council and Central Bedfordshire Council to closely monitor progress and provide further advice and direction as appropriate. Partnership may wish to decide:

- Whether this can satisfactorily be achieved via a full update on South Side progress being delivered at each Partnership Committee meeting, and/or
- The Task and Finish Group remain/ be reconstituted to monitor ongoing progress and provide representation as well as acting as a conduit for information, and considering issues arising from South Side as appropriate, reporting back to the Partnership Committee.

2 August 2021