

## **Garden City Meeting**

We asked attendees to submit questions in advance of the meeting, on the understanding that time would not allow all questions to be answered on the day. We committed to answering all questions submitted online, and you can read our responses here. Further questions were taken from attendees at the meeting. You can read these in the [Notes from the Garden City Meeting](#)

**Q: Has the heritage ever considered a nearly carless town centre. Making the town centre virtually free of cars will improve the air quality, it will reduce the dirt that clings to the buildings. It fits with sustainability discussions that are happening, it also fits the 'A great place to grow up' theme. The town centre will be safer, cleaner and more family oriented.**

**Have a look at Pontevedra a town that went virtually car free a number of years ago and see the benefits that the town has experienced**

**See <https://citychangers.org/pontevedra-the-little-utopian-city-that-drove-out-cars/> for a good overview.**

*Ian Allott*

A: We do not have the power to do anything about it as we do not cover roads, this falls under the responsibility of NHC and HCC. There is an important opportunity as a Spatial Plan being worked on which may give an opportunity for further pedestrianisation, however, we can have an input but won't be able to control or deliver this. Many retailers in town lack in support of this so there would need to be a balance.

**Q: How can we strike a good balance between housing expansion and available services including traffic and congestion?**

*Daria Bonanno*

A: Public consultation carried out as part of the LG1 development site shows that transport and services, particularly health services, are a key area of concern. As part of the master planning process, which has been developed with input by NHC and HCC, broader issues have been raised which can be reviewed as part of a constantly evolving process. There is a concern that traffic around the Grange estate will increase, which we recognise, but this is one of the costs of the development of new housing. It is hoped that footfall within the town centre will increase with the new residents visiting their local shops.

**Q: The grass verges are in a terrible state although been cut not a professional job, making our garden city look shabby and not loved and almost embarrassing to other visitors...**

*Helen Collins*

A: The vast majority of verges are maintained by NHC. To help support nature and enhance biodiversity, like us they did adopt 'no mow' May leaving the grasses to grow out. It does take a while for the areas to settle down.

**Q: We've got some fantastic buildings in this town that I can see going to rack and ruin. On Broadway, the Grammar School is laying half empty, I believe and Plinston Hall that we used to have. Can we bring these alive again and use as homeless shelters or youth centres to reignite some interest to bringing people into the town.**

*Helen Collins*

The grammar school is being fitted out and will be used by an organisation called Emil Dale Arts School who are moving to Letchworth from Hitchin. This will see 600 students coming into the town and we hope that the building will be in use for the longer term. Plinston Hall is now being marketed for sale and a range of uses for the building are being reviewed. It is hoped that a re-use of the building can be announced by the end of this year. The Church on Broadway is not owned by the Heritage Foundation but by St Albans Diocese. We have been working together since the church closed. We believe it is under offer to another faith group. We will continue to try to preserve the building as it is.

**Q: Ebenezer Howard designed Letchworth as a new cutting-edge town and surely he would have wanted it to remain so. We now find ourselves in a cost of living and climate crisis yet LGCHF policies have not adapted. I'm focused on the design principle that prevents people like me having solar panels on the front roof elevation of properties in heritage areas. Solar panels that would save my family money and provide green energy for us and the wider Letchworth. Surely your design standards could be updated to allow these temporary additions subject to them been of an acceptable design, making Letchworth a greener town leading the way in installing solar in heritage areas.**

*Glyn Holt*

A: The Heritage Foundation have pledged to review our Heritage Design guidance in terms of looking at sustainability and heritage and hope that thoughts and feedback from this evening tell us what change is acceptable. Liaison with North Herts Council will be necessary for any changes, especially in Conservation Areas and any planning implications need to be thought about. Some people within the town feel that the addition of PV panels on the front of a historically significant building is unacceptable. We need to listen to both sides of the debate and decide how we can suitably move forward.

**Q: What consideration is being given to utilise the first and upper floors over Letchworth shops for residential or other purposes?**

*Arthur Jarman*

A: We own and manage 57 (102 bedrooms) (rent: £831 average monthly rent) flats above our shops in the town centre, and there are many others in our ground lease estate.

Consideration is given to residential uses however, there are currently significant economic barriers to this.

- Design of residential conversions has correctly become much tighter following the introduction of the Building Safety Act,
- Lender requirements have become more restrictive,
- Construction costs have increased significantly

- ongoing statutory compliance and management of mixed uses building have become much more onerous driving up annual service charge costs.
- The underlying value of flats above flats has declined
- Parking land available for parking provision is not available.

We operate some other uses such as Office and our our own Broadway Studio and Gallery. Our offices in the Colonnade stand empty. The Broadway Studio and Gallery is a charitable service of the Foundation and its property cost are funded by the Foundation. The cost of refurbishing and bring back into use 'storage' area above shops does not yield a positive return.

I am pleased to say there is some positive movement in the Town Centre. The upper floors 2-4 Leys Avenue is in the process of being converted to flats by the long leaseholder. The Owner of HSBC is in the process of seeking planning consent to convert the upper parts of the former HSBC unit to flats. The owner of The Garden Square Shopping Centre is working with NHC on plans for the continued redevelopment of the Garden Square to introduce more residential units to the scheme.

**Q: Are there plans to provide public lavatories in the town centre? Currently, people are directed to those in Morrison's, including by the public library staff who act as a de facto tourist information centre.**

*Philippa Parker*

A: We agree that this is a major consideration for the town, however, this is not something that the Heritage Foundation has direct responsibility for, and we would need to work in partnership with North Hertfordshire Council. To use an empty shop would take away an income generating building and would have a cost to fit it out. Management can be complex, the Council has faced issues with repeated vandalism at Howard Park. The BID have been working to encourage café and pub owners to make public toilets available to the public without being a customer. This works well elsewhere as it is a model that is more manageable and is much less susceptible to vandalism and anti-social behaviour. We can have a conversation with the Council, there are toilets available at Garden Square Shopping Centre which is not managed by us.

We have to be mindful that significant revenue costs would be incurred which would take away from funding away from charitable things.

There is a campaign for public infrastructure who are working with local authorities across the UK trying to find solutions to this. There is no requirement in law for public toilets to be provided by Councils. More information can be found at <https://cfpi.org.uk>

**Q: When walking into Letchworth, there appears to be more and more hairdressers and nail bars. There also seem to be a lot of cafes. Because we seem to have such a small range of shops, does this encourage future investors to take on retail outlets as there is no diversification of other types of shops which would encourage more people into the town to shop.**

*Robin Ghisi*

A: A supply and demand driven model is used and are not alone in our town in seeing such demand. Hitchin has over 80 places to purchase coffee. Retail properties are on the market, but it is difficult to find retailers and when they do come along they can find it hard to sustain their business due to online shopping. Not every shop and bank is owned by the Heritage Foundation and other landlords are also struggling to find tenants for empty properties. This problem is not Letchworth specific; behaviours of people have changed and has an impact on

the shops that we do have. We do try to limit the amount of cafes and hairdressers, we do not allow vape shops but sometimes, we need to bring in rents to allow charitable activity.

**Why is planning and retrospective planning so expensive and how do the heritage have so much authority on what people can do to their homes even if house is freehold.**

*Dianne Garbas*

Planning consent is the jurisdiction of NHC council. The Foundation operate a Scheme of Management. Very brief history, all houses in the Garden City were sold leasehold. The lease included restrictions to ensure the standards of amenity and appearance of houses and land across the Estate are preserved and do not deteriorate.

In 1967 a law was passed giving residential lease holder owners the right to buy the freehold. As part of this change in law the Landlord (Estate Manager) was given the opportunity to apply to the court to put in place a Scheme of Management, this provides them with a mechanism to continue to apply the provisions that were contained in the original lease to provide a mechanism to continue to ensure the standards of amenity and appearance houses and land across the Estate are preserved and do not deteriorate.

**Q: I would like to know what is going on with the Hide [at Standalone Farm by the reservoir] which has been boarded up for many years, rightly so because of it's dangerous and dilapidated state. Are there any plans to renovate it? I would hope so because it holds many pleasant memories for my children and myself. Why has it been allowed to deteriorate in this way?**

*Janet Edmett*

A: We will shortly be undertaking work to create a new wetland feature, allowing greater access to and visibility over the area and its incredible wildlife. It won't include a replacement bird hyde, but will give children, families and wildlife enthusiasts a much better experience.

**Q: The Local Plan, Sustainability SPD identifies 3 levels of building standard, Bronze, Silver and Gold. The Gold standard aligns with Passivhaus and LETI standards which typically require minimal heating – around only 3 kilowatts so that neither gas boiler nor heat pumps are required. Why isn't the HF going to specify to the contractors what proportion of the homes in LG1 will be to these 3 standards?**

Gold standard homes are allegedly more expensive to build, but if the contractors could be persuaded to combine to commission a pop up SIP factory, the build costs could be less. Will the HF explore this possibility?

**Will the HF ban mains gas from LG1? Will the HF ban facing bricks from LG1? (Bricks are not good insulators, not water tight, nor air tight and have a hi Co2 content etc.)**

*Roger Lovegrove*

We are presently working on the Development Brief for LG1 which will be used to support the process of appointing a partner to bring forward the development. This will include sustainability requirements and a no gas

and zero carbon ready approach. Part of the process of finding a partner will be how they respond to the challenge of creating a sustainable development, which will be part of the scoring process.

This will be one of a number of criteria, such as a modern interpretation of Garden City design and the financial return that will be available to create long term income streams for community reinvestment.

The adopted vision for the development also includes an innovation component that will be an opportunity for showcasing innovative housing solutions, including self-build and community housing, where we would expect high levels of energy efficiency to be exhibited, which will be of wider interest.

**Q: I would like to see frequent DIRECT bus services from Letchworth to the nearby places such as Stevenage, Hitchin, Welwyn Garden City, Bedford and Milton Keynes. I would also like to see frequent DIRECT bus services from the outskirts of Letchworth to feed into that system. If it were possible, could the Broadway between the station as far as the fountains near the start of West and South Views be used as a roundabout hub? A greater use of request stops could be made.**

*Unity Harvey*

Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation does not operate the bus services in town and has no jurisdiction over the bus services that operate; nor is it in our gift to be able to repurpose any part of Broadway as this is in the control of North Herts Council.

**Q: Our town centre remains a scruffy mess, with much of it desperately in need of a coat of paint. As the custodian of the town on behalf of its residents when will the Foundation do something to smarten the place up, meeting its obligations to us (and when appropriate ensuring its tenants meet their obligations to it where it is their responsibility to keep buildings looking good)?**

*David Walker*

A: I can assure you we are working hard to re-invest and catch up. Most notably we have undertaken works to the Lyall Chambers, Broadway; Old Bank Chamber/NatWest, Station Place; 1 Arena Parade. More hidden from sight we have completed works within several retail units to bring them back into lettable condition 47 Station Road, 19 Eastcheap, 36 Leys Avenue, 59 Leys Avenue to name a few.

We will be embarking on an extensive external refurbishment work at the Colonnade, Station Place & 1-5 Eastcheap later this year, a £600,000 re-investment.

We do seek to hold our tenants to account, this usually falls to some form of legal action which we are unable to elaborate upon in a public forum.

It needs to be recognised that our town centre asset are only one component part of the Garden City Estate, we have to balance our investment funds across our whole portfolio.

**Q: On the same tack, there's been a lot on social media about excessive rent increases forcing out town centre retail businesses. Have they? How do our rents compare with other towns? How do our retail unit vacancies compare? How will you bring back vibrancy to the town centre?**

*David Walker*

Rents are marginally increasing either on reletting or following the 3/5 year rent review/lease renewal pattern. On average our rents have increased 5% in the 5 year cycle. Inflation (CPI) in the same period is 26%. The bigger impact is caused by increased service charge costs, which is due to multiple factors – cost inflation, statutory compliance, professional fees.

By way of comparison of our rents I can confirm the following indicators (£/ square foot):

### **Letchworth**

Prime – Zone A – £35.00

(Eastcheap & west end of Leys Avenue)

### **Hitchin**

Prime – Zone A - £75.00-£85.00

(High Street & Bancroft)

### **Baldock**

Zone A - £27.00 - £37.00

(Whitehorse Street/High Street)

### **Royston**

Prime – Zone A - £32.50-£37.50

(High Street)

### **Stevenage**

Town Centre - Zone A - £50.00-£55.00

Stevenage Old Town – Zone A - £45.00-£55.00

Vibrancy in the town centre isn't all about us – we need everyone to bring it. We collaborate with the BID, the Council, the Garden Square the retailers to do the best we can to bring vibrancy to the town. But what the town needs is you all! To visit to spend your money, to give feedback to the hard-working business, and to promote the town to all your friend and families.

Vibrancy was in abundance in the town on the 16<sup>th</sup> June during Glas-Wynd-Bury – can we take a moment to celebrate the fantastic place the passionate business owners in the Wynd have created; such a credit to the town.

**Q: Are you planning to 'proactively' help leasehold owners buy the Freehold of their home, by simplifying the current process?**

**The current process demands that the Leaseholder takes substantial upfront cost, before the price of purchase is offered. I have had a number of telephone conversations with Letchworth Heritage, and you refuse to give any guideline of a price expectation. This on top of the difficulty of finding surveyors etc. Must deter a lot of people to even attempt to buy their freehold.**

*Robert Chambers*

We follow a statutory process implied by the Leasehold Reform Act 1967. We strive to make this as easy and non-confrontational as possible. We provide guidance and signpost the community to resources including Chartered Surveyors. However, conveyance of property is complex and is usually unique to a specific circumstance, sometimes including more than two parties.

Enfranchisement is a transaction between a buyer and seller with the consideration being arrived at through a process of negotiation. The Foundation is the seller; we cannot be the advisor to the buyer.

We employ external valuers to represent us during this process, therefore we incur professional fees to obtain a valuation of specific property.

New legislation was passed by government in April 2024. When the provisions of this legislation comes into force (the timeframe has not been set) this will change the methodology of valuations, liability for costs and the qualifying criteria. All changes are designed to be more favourable for leaseholders. We have and will continue to update the guidance published on our website to alert leaseholder to the changes in the legislation.

**Q: How has the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation developed it's relationship with the local black community leadership organisations to encourage and or place members of the black community within leadership roles within it's organisation?**

*Black Voice Letchworth*

We have become a member of the North Herts Interfaith Forum, where we have explored how information can be shared and inclusive events be created. Some of which has already begun at some of our venues.

Our All About Us programme has connected with local groups, such as North Herts

We have also received funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund to engage new audiences from global majority communities. As such we have recruited two new members of staff who have connections with the Sikh and African and Caribbean community and are working with members of the community.