

## Matter 11—Concerns of Residents about 'Druitt Hall'

The Core Strategy Vision is the KEY aspirational statement of this Core Planning Policy which will shape our area for the next 15 years. The proposed amendment would delete the statement in this section “Provision of a new community facility in Christchurch town centre will be supported,” as ‘the Council does not have an aspiration for this.’

This abruptly breaks the continuity of over 10 years of local planning consultation and policy.

The sentence in question refers to a long standing aspiration to encourage a community facility in the Town Centre-- in no way does it commit the Council to funding or running such a facility.. If the intention of the amendment were simply to make it clear that the Council would not FUND such a facility, a clause to that effect could have been inserted after the word supported ('although the council in current financial circumstances would not fund such a facility.') The debate on this issue in the Council Meeting of 26 February demonstrates the unease many councillors felt over the proposed amendment. An amendment which would have returned the wording to its original meaning was defeated by only 3 votes-- (9 votes For and 12 votes Against). The ratification of the Core Strategy for submission to the Secretary of State was supported by only 15, with 8 Abstentions.

The significance of the deletion of this KEY final sentence of the Vision cannot be over-estimated.

There is currently a town centre facility which the Council has chosen not to support—it is the Druitt Hall. The Vision sentence in question does not refer to a specific facility. I merely use the example of the current Druitt Hall to demonstrate the Planning Policy arguments in favour of retaining this sentence.

The amendment fails the 4 tests of soundness. It goes counter to paragraphs 7, 23, 69 and 70 of the NPPF It goes counter to the spirit of the Localism Act which welcomes bids to take over valued local community assets.

In January a Nomination of the current Druitt Hall as an Asset of Community Value was submitted by an unincorporated Community Group. This was an acknowledgment of the importance of a Town Centre Community Hall to the people of Christchurch. One of the reasons given by the Council for rejecting this was that the current hall, though meeting the definition of community value in the past and present could not do so in the future as the Council intended to close and demolish it. Shortly before this decision the Planning Control Committee had refused the Council's application to demolish the current hall.

This amendment goes counter to the spirit of the Localism Act which supports pro-active encouragement of local voluntary organisations which need an affordable place to meet. New current acute needs for meeting space are increasing with development in the town centre. (Appendix 1-- In 2011 A survey of Christchurch Community halls concluded that more meeting space was needed in the Town Centre) and now accommodation in existing and busy local facilities is set to be drastically reduced. (Priory Hall, Priory House). The Mayor's Parlour, cited in one council document as evidence of the 'good provision' of meeting space, is a listed building on the High Street without disabled access, used mainly for formal occasions and requiring an attendant for security.

Core Strategies must be aspirational not just detailed factual plans. This is referred to in the paragraph preceding the Vision. Aspiring to the provision of a Community Hall is just such a balance between realism and aspiration. It does not infer a financial commitment to fund or run such a hall but the aspiration that such a facility will be provided.

Lack of transparency about the procedure by which this amendment was proposed has aroused great concern in local residents as it is in opposition to the widely expressed public wish for continuity of a town centre community hall. (Involvement of local people in planning policy and decisions)

This suddenly proposed amendment appears to be inconsistent with a considered planning strategy emerging after consultation with other Councillors and the public. The sentence in question is congruent within the Core Strategy. CH1 Christchurch Town Centre Vision (Christchurch will continue to act as the key town centre in the Borough) recognises the importance of Christchurch Town Centre for the whole of the Borough. It follows that a community facility here would be of significance beyond the neighbourhood level. Although deletion of the sentence does not PRECLUDE someone building a hall, retaining the aspiration recognises its importance and means Council would give support in spirit. Other Christchurch neighbourhoods all have their own local halls the importance of which is taken for granted. A modern community facility in the Town Centre would serve all of Christchurch, therefore it needs to be specifically mentioned in the Vision.

The sentence is also consistent with Objectives 2, (Vibrant Local Centres), 6 (Sustainable Transport) and 7 (Communities to thrive and people to support each other), Policies LN6, (Community Facilities and Services) and KS1 (Settlement Hierarchy)

It supports 'Equalities.' Removal of this aspiration would disproportionately disadvantage the less well-off (the town centre hall is accessible by public transport, a short walk from bus stops, possible with rollator or wheelchair).

Finally, this key sentence fits with the reasoning behind the Mary Portas Review and Pilots. A community hall in close proximity to the High Street works synergistically with other facilities—the Regent Centre, the Library, the Gardens, and local High Street businesses, increasing footfall in the High Street. A mix of retail and community benefits all. (Appendix 2-- Benefits of Community Halls) As Portas says:

“The most vibrant town centres offer a wide range of locally responsive services that create a comprehensive retail, cultural and community hub. This is crucial for the future of the High Street ...” She envisions “ multifunctional and social places which offer a clear and compelling purpose and experience that’s not available elsewhere, and which meets the interests and needs of the local people... Future Government policy must acknowledge this, not treating retail in isolation, but empowering councils to integrate the shopping offer effectively alongside other cultural and community services.”

**The Core Strategy aspiration of support for the provision of a Christchurch town centre facility will enhance moves to increase the vibrancy of the High Street. The example of Druitt Hall is relevant. Its history as a town centre meeting place and social centre, its unique location-- set back from the High Street but only a few metres walk for those with mobility issues-- and its accessibility by numerous bus routes, makes it the perfect Mary Portas community asset.**

**Elliot Marx**