

## Event Update

February 2016

# Houghton Regis Community Planning Weekend

### A vision for a landmark independent living scheme for Houghton Regis

Central Bedfordshire Council plans to redevelop the former Co-op store town centre site and existing site of Red House Court residential home with a new independent living scheme, providing homes for older residents as well as community and retail space. The Houghton Regis community planning weekend was held at Bedford Square Community Centre on Friday 27 and Saturday 28 November 2015 to give local people the chance to find out more about the proposed development and to shape the future plans.

Over 200 people viewed a background exhibition and town model and participated in workshops, walkabouts and hands-on planning groups to discuss current issues and future opportunities.

Key outcomes included:

- wide support for the proposed independent living development, including for facilities open to the wider community, encouraging integration and activity including shops fronting the High Street
- support for converting the Red House for community uses with ideas including a heritage centre, educational resource (Victorian school room), art gallery or café/tea room
- concern about the traffic dominated centre, lack of parking in certain areas and the safety of crossing the High Street
- a desire to create a more vibrant centre with a better range of facilities and shops, including investment in Bedford Square
- a desire by many to continue to participate in making Houghton Regis a better place, perhaps by setting up a Town Team.

### Background

The council's plan to regenerate the Co-op site and existing Red House Court residential home in the town centre is part of its ambition to enhance the look and feel of the town as well as promote long, healthy lives and independent living. The landmark independent living development fronting both the High Street and The Green opens up the potential for some 170 new apartments for older people, as well as new community amenities and retail units to serve the whole community.

The council is committed to working with the local community to create a vision for the new development and its relationship with the town centre. Consultants JTP were appointed to organise the community planning weekend on behalf of the council. Meetings were also held with residents living close to the site in Whitehouse Close and Clarkes Way.

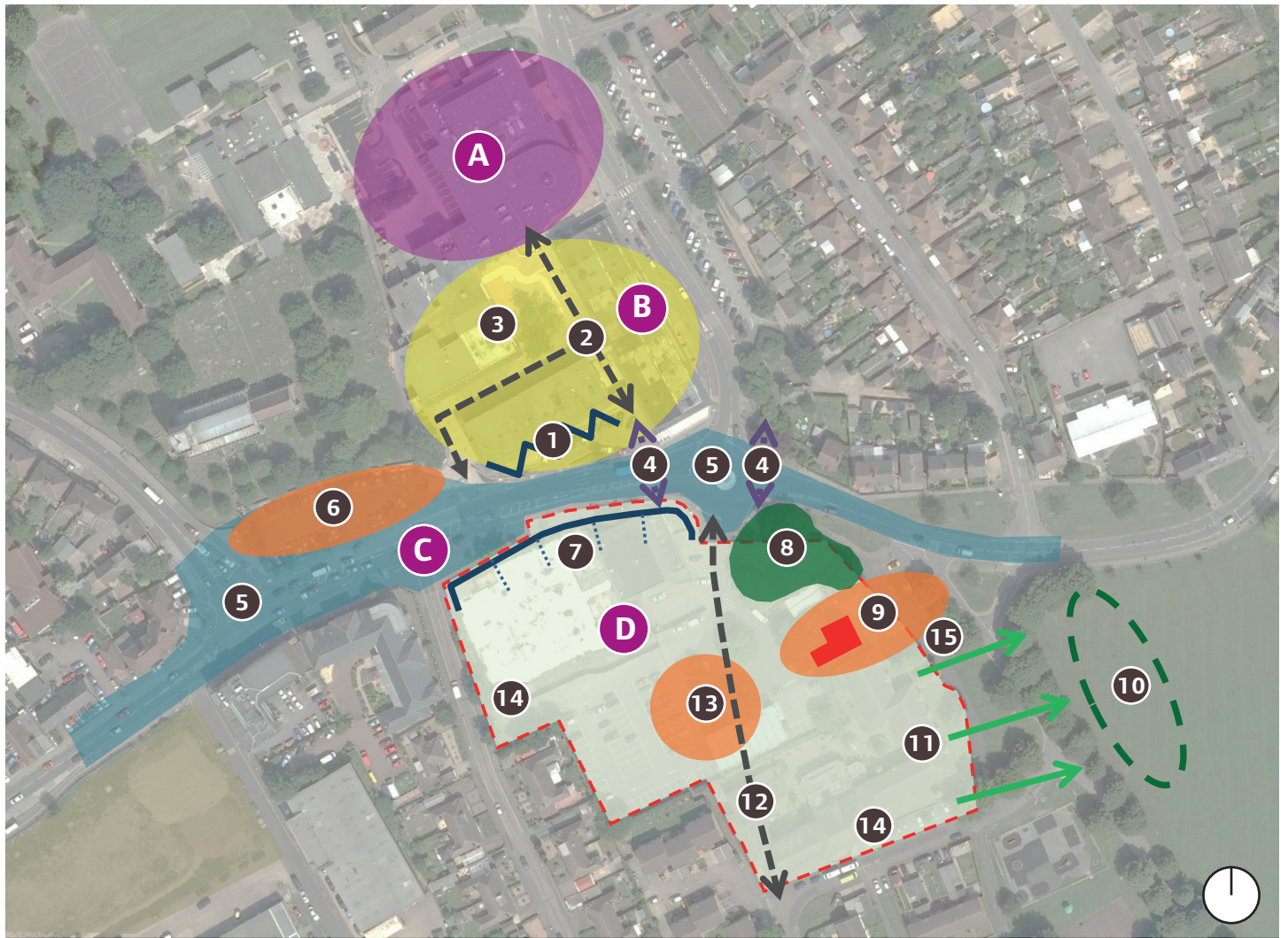
### What next?

Now that we've got feedback from people in Houghton Regis and have drawn up concept plans, we'll present new proposals at an event in March. We'll advertise the details of where and when as soon as we know.

Following the next event, the designs will be worked on more and a planning application will be submitted to the Council later in the year.

For more information, please get in touch with us by:  
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**Phone:** 0300 300 8302  
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# Ideas for implementation



## A. Bedford Square Community Centre

- Make the building look more attractive
- Encourage innovative use of the facilities
- Encourage use by all age groups

## B. Improvements to Bedford Square

- 1 Improve frontage to High Street
- 2 Better activation of central space
- 3 Enliven blank wall onto square

## C. Improve high street environment

- 4 Desire lines for pedestrians
- 5 Improve junction safety for pedestrians and cyclists
- 6 Potential to use church car park as public space e.g. farmers' market

## D. Independent living development

- 7 Shops facing the High Street
- 8 Keep and enhance group of trees
- 9 Refurbish and reuse Red House with positive connection to The Green
- 10 Area for possible new features on The Green including pond
- 11 Building design to respond to views over The Green
- 12 Pedestrian route through site
- 13 'Community hub' uses
- 14 Lower building heights
- 15 Environmental improvements including planting and removal of slip road



# Key themes



We have used all of your feedback and conversations from the planning weekend to come up with some key themes. All quotes are from people who came along to the event unless otherwise stated.

## A growing community

Houghton Regis is projected to double in size by 2030 to become a town of around 36,000 people. The increased population will need more shops and facilities and now is the time to decide which of these should go within Houghton Regis town centre and which should go in nearby towns or local centres. People wanted use the opportunity provided by increasing the size of the town to make the town centre a livelier and more interesting place.

“ *Is it a town? Is it a village?* ”

## Quality and character

Houghton Regis has many attractive historic buildings and green spaces including the conservation area near The Green and Houghton Hall. However, some buildings give a bad impression of the town including Bedford Square because it backs onto the High Street which means rubbish bins and service areas are the first things people see when they enter Houghton Regis. The road design and heavy traffic also make the High Street unattractive to pedestrians and difficult to cross. Bedford Square does not help create a good High Street. There is now an opportunity to improve the area around the new independent living scheme and to make the High Street more attractive. Improvements that make it nicer to walk around the town centre should attract more people to come and use the shops and other facilities.

“ *I would like to come back in ten years and find beautiful buildings that enhance the Green and create a strong physical presence on the High Street – a real town centre feel.* ”

Many people welcomed the independent living scheme and were looking forward to seeing the old Co-op site re-used. There was some concern about how residents will be affected during construction and people living nearby also wanted to see the building heights stepping down close to their homes to avoid overshadowing and overlooking. As well as the apartments for older people, participants wanted facilities within the development that would be open to the wider community. Many people said it would be a good thing to include uses for different age groups to avoid the older residents feeling cut off from the community as a whole. They suggested new community facilities to complement existing ones in the town centre including a multi-purpose space available for rent, a restaurant, space for a police desk, internet access and a drop-in centre. In addition, there was support for retail units fronting the High Street as part of the development.

“ *My dream is that I will see lots of older people confidently moving around, smiling, feeling safe, happy in their good quality 'forever homes' they have helped co-produce.* ”

## Refurbishing and re-using the Red House

The Red House is an important historical building that is owned by the council. It has been used for council housing but needs major refurbishment to make it usable again. There was strong support for the idea of converting the Red House for community uses and ideas included a café/tea room, a heritage centre, refurbishing it as a Victorian school room for educational history visits and art gallery. People also wanted to see the Red House front garden improved, and they encouraged uses to make The Green a more active lively place.

“ *I want a modern vibrant town centre with a heritage feel around the Village Green.* ”

# Key themes

## Town centre commercial offer

People valued the existing shops in Bedford Square but wanted more choice including cafés, restaurants, a market and a bank. Both younger and older people said anti-social behaviour put them off going out after dark. There was concern that new shopping centres and facilities within the new neighbourhoods planned at the edge Houghton Regis would draw customers away from the old centre. This makes it particularly important that the High Street is improved soon. It was agreed that new shops facing the High Street as part of the independent living development would be a good first step.

“ *Rebuild the centre with shops facing the High Street, a busy open air market and refurbished church grounds.* ”

## Traffic and parking

Houghton Regis centre is dominated by cars and lorries passing through which makes life difficult and dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists. People also said there was not enough parking now and feared this would get worse as the town's population increased. The Woodside link road, set to open soon, will reduce through-traffic which provides an opportunity to introduce better traffic calming and make it easier for pedestrians and cyclists to move around.

“ *We need to solve the road problem. We owe it to the residents.* ”  
(Local Councillor)

## Investing in the community

Thriving town centres play an important role in creating happy and healthy communities. Some participants regretted the loss of the social club above the Co-op. People said that Houghton Regis has too few community facilities but also noted that Bedford Square Community Centre is underused and uninviting from the outside. The independent living scheme is an opportunity to increase the range of community facilities in the town centre and to bring new and existing residents together. People wanted Bedford Square Community Centre to be improved to attract people of all ages.

“ *There's not enough for young people to do in Houghton Regis. Bring young and old together – it's good for both groups!* ”

## Healthy Houghton

Participants recognised that the form and quality of buildings and open spaces can encourage people to keep active and healthy. Improving The Green and making the High Street attractive and welcoming would make people more likely to walk, linger and interact socially. They suggested that the independent living scheme should



provide informal and organised activities for all age groups to keep people fit and active including walking and cycling groups around the town, keep fit classes and gardening groups.

“ *Be innovative because the built environment is so important for ageing better.* ”

## Continuing community participation

People were enthusiastic about staying involved to make Houghton Regis a better place to live. They supported setting up a Town Team to continue the process and including many more people from around the town. One aspect of this could be setting up a group to look at the branding and promotion of the town, as has happened successfully in places like Tideswell and Stamford. It was agreed that the independent living scheme provides a natural focus for driving this process forward.

“ *Involving residents in the design process is very important so people take ownership.* ”

## What next?

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