

## Packed meeting launches campaign



Photo: Jovan Manic-Smetarjuki

Nearly 300 people packed into the Town Hall Assembly Room for the "It's Our City" public launch on September 15th. They overflowed into the Council Chamber ... and more had to be turned away!

With hardly a dissenting voice the message to Herefordshire Council and the ESG Company was loud and clear: "Think again, before it's too late!"

Cllr Mark Hubbard (Central Ward) chaired the meeting and captured the mood, declaring: "We are going to stop the Retail on the Cattle Market and the Link Road."

Experts from the retail world, Jon Turner and Adrian Horsburgh, explained that it would be many years, if ever, before the proposed retail park would attract enough viable business. Meanwhile the historic core of the city would continue to decline.

Garry Thomas (Hereford Civic Society) illustrated how "one size fits all" developers have destroyed other city centres.

When Andrew Sanders detailed the nightmare that the threat of compulsory purchase and relocation are causing

existing businesses it struck a chord with many other threatened enterprises.

People came because their businesses are threatened by the crazy Link Road and Cattle Market demolition.

They came because they fear even worse traffic congestion than Hereford already suffers.

They came because the whole thing is a white elephant with an ever increasing price tag.

They came because they want some ownership of a genuine regeneration of the existing city centre. They want affordable housing. They want a new Library. They want modern leisure facilities. They want a University. But it is more and more obvious as each day goes by that these will not be delivered by the ESG Company.

We're off to a fantastic start. Public support is overwhelming. Plans are already in place to escalate the Campaign until the "powers that be" understand the message. "IT'S OUR CITY!"

### It's Our Opinion

Launched on 15 September, It's Our City's volunteers had collected a staggering 2000 signatures in the city centre on official petition forms in only five days. Herefordshire people are clearly 100% behind this campaign.

We are not Luddites or NIMBYs and we are certainly not being negative. We question the wisdom of transferring the city's established Livestock Market to a hugely expensive new location; and we fail to understand the logic of building a £6-million road which will wipe out hundreds of businesses and jobs. But we believe passionately that our existing city centre needs to be enhanced not stultified. Other more challenging and socially-beneficial community uses should be earmarked by Herefordshire Council for the ESG site: affordable housing, state-of-the-art entertainment facilities for young people, a true city park, a new library, a university campus. These are just a few of the It's Our City campaign's positive aspirations. Why not add yours on line at [www.itsourcity.org](http://www.itsourcity.org)

### ESG scheme will mean massive job losses

WITH one in six British households now without an adult wage earner, the current economic climate is certainly the worst possible time to launch any major project which further threatens employment prospects. But some Hereford employers, with businesses which have so far managed to weather the recession, are predicting that the ESG scheme will put as many as 3,500 local jobs at risk.

Nearly 200 businesses, with a combined turnover of over £140-million, are being threatened with the disruption of relocation if work on the ESG development ever gets underway. Specialist companies affected include Jewsons, National Autogas, Reprodex, Rockfield DIY and RSS Refrigeration. Andrew Sanders of the Edgar Street Association says: "There is an increasing worry that hundreds of jobs and many viable businesses are going to be wiped out to make way for an ill-conceived road and a large car park."

#### DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

■ Monday, October 19th—7.00 pm

**PUBLIC MEETING.** THE COURTYARD THEATRE, EDGAR STREET, HEREFORD. (Free tickets from Campaign HQ)

■ Friday, 13th November—9.30am.

**HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL MEETING—MASS LOBBY.** Petition, Questions, Debate. SHIREHALL, HEREFORD.

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## Odeon’s relocation could create true Transport Hub

LIKE the fleapit in the 1957 Peter Sellars comedy *The Smallest Show on Earth*, Hereford’s Odeon struggles on against the odds. It has the dubious distinction of being the smallest of all the mighty cinema chain’s venues and the only one still without air-conditioning. And as any parent who has planned to take the family to a popular blockbuster will know, an un-numbered pre-booked ticket to the Hereford Odeon merely confers the privilege to queue on the pavement until the doors open!

ESG / Stanhope publicity has airily talked about a multiplex cinema coming to the Grid site, but as with so much else about this £multi-million pipe dream it’s just talk. The IOC campaign believes that the urgent relocation of the Odeon into a new purpose-designed twin- or triple-screened cinema on a site on Lower Widemarsh Street would free up the cinema’s present Commercial Road site for redevelopment into a true Transport Hub.

With a block of new buildings fronting the main road containing restaurants, bars and cafes, the back land could become a proper covered bus station with toilets, information and ticketing desks. This would replace the present muddled and uncoordinated trio of bus assembly points at St Peters Square, Hereford Station and Commercial Road. A high-level weather-protected travelator (like those at Manchester Airport and the NEC) might even provide an umbilical link for travellers changing from train to bus.

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## New Livestock Market will be costly white elephant

MANY local farmers and several Herefordshire councillors are convinced that building the new Livestock Market on Roman Road, for which planning permission was given in July, will prove to be a huge and costly mistake.

Legal experts now confirm that the county’s Royal Charter to hold a weekly market was granted as a right and not a legal obligation. Many Herefordshire councillors argue that if the city-based weekly market was to close, the nearby markets of Ross, Leominster and Brecon would adequately fill the void.

Three years ago, after an extensive trawl of the rural area north-west of the city, Herefordshire Council purchased a 48-acre green field site on Roman Road. The formal purchase of the site took the council’s legal department over a year to complete when it was discovered that with the arable land came a restrictive covenant (placed by the Church Commissioners) against building!

Designs for a new timber-clad building complex were eventually commissioned from a member of the Amey group and a

complex flood alleviation scheme, involving the 1.4km diversion of the Yazor Brook, also had to be put in hand, funded by regional government.

So with land purchase, legal complications, design, construction and landscaping costs, the total bill—for a market which will operate only 52 days a year—is likely to be in excess of £10 million. Many are saying this could prove to be an expensive white elephant.

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## No hope of new city library in next decade

WHILE Birmingham has started work on its new £200-million city library, and Brighton has planned, built and picked up international design awards for its Jubilee Library, Herefordshire Council continues to talk about the need to build a new city library. In its present Broad Street building there are no public toilets, no air-conditioning, poor disabled access and cramped computer suites. But what can you expect from a building that’s 135 years old?

For nearly a decade the council has been talking about giving the county a modern library to be proud of. Like Norwich or Winchester, both of whom set off on the same quest at the same time; both of them now have internationally-acclaimed state-of-the-art libraries in use.

Herefordshire Council’s programme of procrastination began back at the turn of the century. After short-listing four potential sites for a new city library, it ducked its head back into the sand for a couple of years. Then, with the first hints of the Livestock Market project came a new promise: a library would form part of a new Civic Centre. Selected developer Stanhope’s masterplan even spoke of a ‘cultural quarter’, to follow closely after the first-phase Retail Sector, with the promised civic centre now re-branded as the Herefordshire Centre.

Then in early-2009 the council announced that it was about to purchase the freehold of the former Bulmers HQ in Plough Lane, which it had been occupying as tenant for more than two years. Hello Civic Ivory Tower, goodbye City Library. And not a squeak from the all-seeing Scrutiny Committee.

So book-lovers, it’s back to Square One. And given the Department for Culture, Media and Sports’ £100-million funding ‘black hole’, it won’t be this side of 2119 that anyone on the council will need to worry about building a new library in Hereford. Phew!

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## £6M Link Road promises chaos

IF the British public sector sponsored a Municipal Bunglers League, Herefordshire Council would surely be undisputed league champions.

Consider the evidence. When every authority

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# A tale of two town centres

I HAD been meaning to visit Wrexham ever since I heard that its new shopping centre, which opened 12 months ago, was a very similar development to that proposed for Hereford’s Edgar Street Grid site. Having made the effort to travel to north Wales and study the town’s new Eagles Meadow centre at first hand, it has brought home to me why we should think again about the ESG retail quarter.

Wrexham is easy to get to, with a multitude of dual carriageways and main roads running close to the town centre. We parked in the multi-storey car park above the People’s Market hall. Like Hereford’s Butter Market, the People’s Market still operates in the town centre, selling all sorts of products. I chatted to some stallholders who said that the new centre hadn’t greatly affected their trade. They’re offering different sorts of things to us.” said one. “Anyway, I never go up there, it’s too expensive.”

Walking along Wrexham’s Regent Street, the effect of the credit crunch is clearly visible: Woolworths, Zawie, Priceless Shoes—now marked by empty stores. But it soon becomes apparent that a large number of the town’s most successful retailers—Marks & Spencer, Dorothy Perkins, Boots, Topshop, Next, JD Sports, River Island—had all moved. “WE ARE MOVING TO EAGLES MEADOW” scream the signs in their empty shop windows. It would seem all the ‘big birds’ had migrated east!

About 200 metres away, an elegantly-designed pedestrian bridge leads you across a ring road into the heart of the town’s new retail paradise. It is clear that no expense has been spared. A series of landscaped courtyard spaces draws the eye towards the scheme’s central ‘anchor unit’: a glitzy Debenhams store. Close by there’s an eight-screen Odeon cinema, ten pin bowling and an ice rink.

Standing in the heart of Eagles Meadow you realise that you could be anywhere in Britain. All the big ‘must have’ multiples are here; but not one independent or locally-owned business is to be seen. And what was really curious was how empty everywhere looked. The historic town centre I had just left was bustling with life; Eagles Meadow felt deserted by comparison. Despite the plethora of empty premises (and no big brands any longer) Wrexham town remains busy. This appears to be against all of the received wisdom that is peddled by the proponents of big redevelopment schemes.

Eagles Meadow was planned and executed while the world was awash with cheap credit and a seemingly unending appetite to invest in retail. What Wrexham has got is two town centres: a traditional one with all the little locally-owned shops; and a brand new one, where all the multinationals have clubbed together to create a giant retail experience. It appears to me that they are in direct competition with each other, with one sucking the trade from the other.

Hereford has one thing that has now become increasingly rare in the 21st century: an intact city centre with no out-of-town shopping rival, where its big name traders are presently integrated with all those important little shops that go to make a rich and visually-interesting ‘retail patchwork’. Unquestionably, our city needs some investment and an expansion in our retail offer, but to hand over a single site and allow multinationals to abandon our historic centre would, I believe, be a recipe for disaster. *Mark Hubbard*



Big shops joined the Meadow and left Wrexham City centre

in the land is focussed on the Green Agenda, Herefordshire wants to build a £130-million bypass and new road bridge. After the ignominy of having its grant applications for the Rotherwas Relief Road turned down on no less than three occasions by the Department for Transport, the council opted to go it alone—choosing an alternative route to the line recommended by its own highways consultants. Can it get any dafter? It can.

Based on extensive knowledge of highway engineering, the council’s ESG property company plans to drive an 800m-long Link

Road from the north end of Commercial Road to Edgar Street. But this £6-million super-highway will be just one lane wide in each direction, with the smooth flowing of traffic interrupted by no fewer than four sets of traffic lights and assorted pedestrian-controlled crossings. And since the Link Road has to make a major T-junction when it reaches Edgar Street, this will further exacerbate north-south traffic movement along the A49. Which should really please the Highways Agency!

Originally conceived as a ‘relief road’

replacing Newmarket and Blueschool Streets, the Link Road will also be expected to carry the high volume of bus traffic entering and leaving the pick-up points in front of Hereford Station, as well as the large numbers of car-bourne shoppers who use the Morrisons supermarket. Surely a recipe for chaos.

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## City jewel needs a polish

THE High Town Butter Market opened in 1857, 17 years before its near-neighbour in Broad Street, the City Library & Museum. Over decades, both have been shamefully ignored in terms of routine maintenance and improvements. It would be no exaggeration to say that, if a film company was making a movie set in the mid-19th century, it would need to make precious few changes to the interiors of either city landmarks in order to create an air of Victorian authenticity.

Over 600 covered retail and specialist markets still exist in Britain today, the majority municipally owned and run. Abergavenny and Cardiff are two local examples which remain vibrant and profitable.

The present system of stalls and aisles in Hereford’s covered market date from 1925 and virtually the only ‘modernisations’ which have taken place since then are the insertion of the ugly barrel-vaulted ceilings (which obscure a very fine iron and glass roof structure) and some automatic doors. In 1966 there were 16 greengrocers trading inside the market hall, today there is just one.

The landlords obviously consider efficient winter heating arrangements, air-conditioning to cope with summer heatwaves and public toilets as unnecessary luxuries. Which makes Herefordshire Council’s claim, when launching its recent ‘consultation exercise’, that the High Town Butter Market is the ‘jewel’ in the city’s crown’ ring somewhat hollow.

While the market’s local customer base remains remarkably loyal, steadfastly ignoring the comfort and convenience of the city’s air-conditioned emporiums, many of the Butter Market’s 35 traders believe that this fragile balance—and their livelihoods—would be shattered if big name attractions were to beckon from the ESG retail quarter. A more prudent use of public funds, some argue, would be to carry out a comprehensive refurbishment of the city’s Butter Market, rather than waste it on a new Livestock Market complex.

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## Yazor diversion: flood ‘savings’ seem questionable

HOT on the heels of the July planning meeting which approved the designs for the new Roman Road Livestock Market, came a joint ESG-Council announcement of a major civil engineering scheme to the north-west of the city. This is the diversion of flood waters in the Yazor Brook, which is to be

re-routed via a 1.4km-long underground pipe into the River Wye.

Planning approval still has to be given and regional funding for the £3.5-million operation is being sought. The scheme’s promoters are confident that it will virtually eliminate any risk of the Livestock Market’s site flooding, as well as providing protection for the ESG site to the south.

Most surprising is the very precise figure, included in the Press announcement, of £2.76-million which the engineers put on the ‘savings’ from flood damage to houses in the Edgar Street area. This contradicts a figure given by ESG Chief Executive Jonathan Bretherton to the Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce journal, where he boasts of “a saving of over £5-million in after-flood clear-up costs”. To amend the famous observation of Benjamin Disraeli: There are lies, damned lies and ESG statistics’.

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## Railway Station improvements could miss Paralympics deadline

LAST year Network Rail gave Herefordshire rail travellers a pleasant surprise with its announcement that new disabled access lifts and footbridge was planned for Hereford Station, replacing the antique footbridge which links platforms. The city’s Grade II station—perched at the northernmost part of the ESG site—is unusual in that it is owned by NR but operated by Arriva Trains.

But once again, lack of forward thinking on the part of ESG means that two golden opportunities to capitalise on this valuable asset have been missed. Next year, hundreds of blind and partially-sighted visitors are due to descend on Hereford, as participants or spectators in the World Blind Football Championships. And in 2012, the Royal College for the Blind is due to play host to at least one of the international teams participating in the 2012 Paralympics. It is still unclear whether the new structure will be completed in time for the athletes’ arrival.

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## Phoney Transport Hub: a bus stand and some bushes

BACK in February, members of the public were treated to two sessions of a special Transport Workshop’, organised by ESG to unveil what was billed as the city’s new Transport Hub. Participants quickly realised that what independent transportation specialists and ESG executives understand by the word ‘Hub’ are two very different things. At least one distinguished guest walked out, branding the event a ‘sham’. Speakers outlined a scheme to concentrate many bus arrivals and departures in front of Hereford Station, to improve car parking and provide safe cycle storage. But the **Continued on back page**

## Empty shop census: what the figures foretell

DESPITE depressing numbers of retail units standing empty throughout the city centre, council cabinet members and their ESG counterparts seem totally unconcerned by the stark evidence that Hereford is already oversupplied with retail space.

The Its Our City campaign maintains that there is sufficient space inside the existing city centre to create a vibrant 'retail quarter'. A census of the centre, carried out in the week before the August Bank Holiday, revealed a total of 59 shops standing empty, nearly one in six (16.5%) of all retail space, which far exceeds the British Property Federation's national average town centre figure of 11.5%. Hereford now has no fewer than 23 charity shops, plus 11 £-saver units. One of the city's leading estate agents currently has 38,000sq ft of vacant retail space on its books and two of the city's

largest empty stores—the former Chadds department store and Woolworths Eign Gate unit—together total around 24,000sq ft sq of unoccupied retail space, equivalent to more than 6% of all the new shopping units envisaged by ESG for its much-vaunted retail sector north of the Inner Ring Road. At the beginning of September, Herefordshire Council's register of vacant commercial premises totalled a staggering 100,000sq ft.

### City Centre Census

Shops trading	374
Empty shops	59
Charity shops	23
£-saver shops	11

### Empty: Trading ratios

UK	11.5%
Hereford	16.5%

### Continued from page 3

appearance of the station forecourt would be little changed, save for the addition of a weather canopied bus stand directly in front of the station building and some token landscaping and benches. Most surprisingly, there was to be no physical segregation of vehicles and pedestrians. More of a cosmetic makeover, as one disappointed visitor put it.

Clitheroe, Corby, Manchester Piccadilly, Stratford East in London, Walsall: transport interchanges up and down the country which should have been used by ESG's designers as templates for how all forms of transport can be integrated to provide passengers with convenient and comfortable ways of moving from one mode of travel to another. Sadly, it seems Hereford won't be joining that list of national exemplars.

### Experts' opinion: thumbs down from leading property magazine

FOR over a century Estates Gazette has been the British estate agent's bible. So when the EG gives a commercial scheme the thumbs up, everything on the high street is sweetness and light; conversely, when the mag trashes your plans, join the Job Centre queue.

This summer the magazine paid a surprise visit to Hereford to check out the viability of the ESG scheme in the current economic climate, to talk to the city's commercial property experts and to look around the existing city centre. Under the

banner headline "Shopping Centre or Car Park?" it painted a less-than-rosy picture of the council-inspired scheme.

It reports that due to the recession, Stanhope had to rethink the project's shopping content, which would now be in two phases each of 191,000sq ft, the first with a revised opening date of 2012. Overall cash injection would have to be in the order of £100-million and the new retail sector's first phase would need to be at least 50% pre-let to encourage institutional investors.

But local commercial property specialist Jon Turner felt that pre-letting almost 100,000sq ft in Hereford was wildly optimistic. "When the market was booming, demand for this space was plainly apparent, but there isn't the demand for it now." Contrasting with this sober realism, Estates Gazette found ESG's Chief Executive Jonathan Bretherton singularly bullish. He said that he was confident that Stanhope would secure funding, dismissing the argument that the city already had more than the national average of vacant shops, since these were "all too small and poorly configured to satisfy market requirements".

### Inner Ring Road will prove to be ESG's Achilles Heel

WHEN Herefordshire Council first commissioned Cardiff-based planning consultants DTZ to find the best way to integrate the existing city centre with its

planned redevelopment of the site now administered by ESG, it was told that the Inner Ring Road was a physical barrier that needed to be eliminated.

Six years on and Newmarket Street and Blueschool Street remain the big stumbling blocks and could yet prove to be the Achilles Heel of the entire scheme.

An early plan created a seamless join between the two zones by building over the unloved dual carriageway, with east-west traffic movement being handled by a new Link Road. This was to be a brand new £6-million urban highway, carved through the redundant railway sidings and industrial wastelands to the west of Hereford Station, marked by major roundabouts at the bottom of Aylestone Hill and at the north end of Edgar Street.

But a council traffic census soon put paid to this idea when it was revealed that the city's traffic growth couldn't be handled by the new Link Road alone. So Newmarket Street and Blueschool Street were reprieved, but were to be 'downgraded' for use only by emergency services, buses and taxis. How such restricted access could be policed wasn't discussed.

Meanwhile, land acquisition and funding problems have forced ESG's strategists to radically amend the path, length, width and time scale of the planned urban highway's route. Scheduled to take three years to build, it is now to be an 800m-long road, reduced to just one lane in each direction (except at junctions), with no dedicated bus lane or protected cycle lanes, interrupted by no less than four sets of traffic lights and pedestrian-controlled crossings. Bizarrely, ESG's highways experts have saved one last surprise for the frustrated drivers travelling from east to west: at the junction with the A49 (Edgar Street), vehicles will be banned from turning right in the direction of Leominster and Ludlow!

The IOC campaign also understands that the Royal Mail Sorting Office's car park will only be given up if alternative parking for its 200+ Post Office vans can be provided by ESG. A pretty tall order.

## IT'S *Our* CITY!

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