

**NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**HITCHIN COMMITTEE**

**Meeting held at Church House, Church Yard, Hitchin,  
on 26 July 2007 at 7.30p.m.**

**MINUTES**

**PRESENT:** *Councillors: Judi Billing (Chairman), Deepak Sangha (Vice Chairman), Mrs A.G. Ashley, David Billing, Bernard Lovewell, Alan Millard, Lawrence Oliver, Martin Stears and R.A.C. Thake.*

**IN ATTENDANCE:** *Councillor Ian Knighton – Portfolio Holder for Leisure and e Government (part-time),  
Barrie Jones – Head of Financial Services,  
Margaret Bracey - Community Development Officer,  
Nigel Schofield – Committee Administrator.*

**25. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting including the NHDC Portfolio Holder for Leisure and e Government.

The Chairman thanked everyone who attended the Hitchin Town Talk.

The Chairman welcomed those making a presentation to the Committee.

The Chairman was pleased to advise the details of the venues for the next two meetings of the Hitchin Committee, both preceded by Town Talk from 6.15 p.m. to 7.15 p.m.

Tuesday 25 September 2007 – 7.30 p.m. at the Gurdwara, Wilbury Way, Hitchin.

Tuesday 20 November 2007- 7.30 p.m. at Westmill Community Centre, Hitchin.

**26. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors: Clare Body, Paul Clark, Joan Kirby and Ray Shakespeare-Smith.

**27. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS**

No items were raised for discussion.

**28. MINUTES – 17 MAY 2007, 12 JUNE 2007 AND 25 JUNE 2007**

**RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meetings held on 17 May, 12 June and 25 June 2007 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chairman.

**29. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of interest.

**30. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – HITCHIN BOWLS CLUB**

The representative from Hitchin Bowls Club thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. He advised the Committee that incursions into and onto the bowling green had increased dramatically and that the vandalism to the bowling green area and seating was unacceptable. Entry was gained via scaling the outer fence and then through gaps in the inner fence (evidence by colour photographs). If the outer fence was repaired so that it could not be scaled then this would be a sufficient deterrent which was supported by the local crime prevention team. Should this outer fence be made vandal proof then the inner fence could be maintained as a small hedge, current damage to this inner fence/hedge was an impediment to users of the bowling green perimeter path.

Unfortunately the damage from vandals had become a deterrent to visiting bowling clubs and on one occasion youths had been aggressive towards users of the bowling green. The representative advised that officers in the Parks and Countryside

Department confirmed there were no funds currently available for a new fence or repairs to the current fence and that any funding would have to be placed as a special growth item in the Service and Financial Planning process for 2008 -2009.

The Committee agreed that this problem should be addressed as soon as possible and that the Community Development Officer should arrange a meeting with officers and the Bowls Club to prepare a cost estimate for remedial works to the outer fence between the bowling greens and Sainsburys car park.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the representative of Hitchin Bowls Club be thanked for the presentation;
- (2) That the Community Development Officer and the Parks and Countryside Development Manager be requested to enter into discussions with representatives of Hitchin Bowls Club in order to ascertain the best solution for a replacement fence;
- (3) That the Head of Financial Services be requested to ensure that the costs of an appropriate secure replacement fence at Hitchin Bowls Club be included as a special growth item in the Service and Financial Planning Process for 2008-2009.

**REASON FOR DECISION**

To ensure the continued support of the Hitchin Committee for local sports organisations.

**31. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – HITCHIN COUNSELLING SERVICE**

The representative of Hitchin Counselling Service thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee.

The representative provided a brief background to the formation of the Hitchin Counselling Service which had been in existence for 17 years. This service was unique in that it provided long term counselling with no cut off and access to all without charge. There was a waiting list to be seen by one of the voluntary therapists. Over 650 individual sessions were provided each year and the average length of consultation was in the order of 35 weeks. Financial support was voluntary and/or in kind e.g. provision of consulting rooms and though costs were not excessive the provision of professional insurance was a significant item each year. The local PCT had confirmed the cessation of rent free offices and if funding was not found within the next six months the Counselling Service would close.

The Committee applauded the work of the Hitchin Counselling Service and would be pleased to receive a grant application for consideration at the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 25 September 2007.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the representative of Hitchin Counselling Service be thanked for the presentation;
- (2) That the work of the Hitchin Counselling Service had the unanimous support of the Hitchin Committee;
- (3) That the Community Development Officer be requested to meet with the representative from the Hitchin Counselling Service in order to facilitate a grant application to the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 25 September 2007.

**REASON FOR DECISION**

To ensure the continued support of the Hitchin Committee for local voluntary organisations.

**32. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – ‘KEEP HITCHIN SPECIAL’**

The representative of ‘Keep Hitchin Special’ thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee.

This presentation was about the statistical results of a questionnaire undertaken of attendees at the Great Hitchin Debate held on 23 April 2007. Although the number of people interviewed was relatively small (50 to 52 individuals responded to seven questions) there was an overwhelming majority at each question e.g. Hitchin Town Hall should be retained by NHDC, Hitchin Museum should be improved at its current location, Hitchin Museum should be retained as a town museum, Hitchin Market should be financially supported by NHDC, Hitchin Town Centre Public Conveniences should be retained, NHDC should take enforcement action as to the condition of Churchgate and that there should be a public meeting to discuss the merits or otherwise of a Hitchin Town Council.

**RESOLVED:** That the representative of ‘Keep Hitchin Special’ be thanked for the presentation;

**33. PRESENTATION BY THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR LEISURE AND E GOVERNMENT**

The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and e Government – Councillor Ian Knighton (Baldock Town Ward) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Hitchin Committee.

The Portfolio Holder provided a summary of his responsibilities concerning Leisure and e Government where a strategic and organisational approach to services had been made and that this approach should attract funding and consequently allow more development within NHDC. Emphasis would also be placed on this authority to be a facilitator of services, not just a provider and a good example of this was the contracting out of leisure facilities at Letchworth, Hitchin and Royston, but NHDC would still ‘own’ the leisure centres. In addition, the future of traditional markets in North Hertfordshire might be best served through outside contractors taking over from the local authority. The Portfolio holder accepted that Hitchin Markets was a very emotive issue and that tenders received for the management of Hitchin and Royston Markets were currently under technical evaluation. Comment was also made on the Allotment Strategy, Oughtonhead Nature Reserve, King George V playing fields and the partnership working/management with local football leagues in Hitchin for sports pavilions.

E government was linked to access 2 services and the Customer Service Centre at Letchworth where NHDC remained the facilitator for the ‘one stop shop’ presentation to residents. There had been a major improvement of e – procedures: sports course reservations on-line, payment of council tax and invoices on-line, planning applications now viewed on line all of which allowed the professional staff more time in which to undertake their work.

In response to questions the Portfolio Holder anticipated that there would be a new market operator appointed to commence in January/February 2008, that the use of the Town Centre Initiative office for access to services and general council information deserved closer examination, negotiations would start soon on new leisure centre contracts and that the Hitchin Chairman would continue to be invited to the meetings between Market Traders and NHDC officers. The Portfolio Holder acknowledged that improvement to the NHDC web site was underway and a new web site was under trial.

**RESOLVED:** That the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and e Government be thanked for the very informative presentation;

#### **34. HITCHIN TOWN HALL - CONSULTATION**

The Head of Financial Services (HFS) presented his report to the Committee and confirmed that a report on the background to the change in management arrangements for Hitchin Town Hall had been presented to Cabinet at the meeting held on 26 June 2007 (Minutes 14 and 16 refer).

The HFS reminded the Committee of the NHDC Contract Procurement Rules where no property or land owned or leased by the Council could be disposed until a detailed report had been prepared by the Strategic Director of Finance and Regulatory Services. The Committee noted that any such transfer under a long lease would be regarded as a disposal under the procurement rules (NHDC would remain as the freeholder) and the HFS confirmed that negotiations were underway with the preferred bidder for a forty year lease.

The HFS referred the Committee to Appendix A which included details of an inspection report of Hitchin Town Hall by the NHDC Senior Estates Surveyor which would be used to define any items that would affect the property or land's value or development potential. Of particular note in the officer's report was confirmation of access for people with disabilities to the main hall and gymnasium and a disabled toilet at ground level. However, the NHDC Estates Surveyor recorded in his report that the building did not comply fully with the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995.

The Committee noted the NHDC Asset disposal strategy concerning a site that might be surplus to requirements as listed at Paragraph 4.4 to the report and the HFS confirmed that Cabinet at its meeting held on 26 June (Minute 16 refers) had resolved to delegate to the Portfolio Holder for Finance in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement the decision on the disposal of Hitchin Town Hall by means of a long lease together with any recommendations from the Strategic Director of Finance and Regulatory Services. The HFS advised the Committee that the proposed procurement procedure was to grant a fully repairing and insuring lease of up to 40 years to the preferred supplier at an agreed rent, with rent reviews agreed at the lease negotiation stage.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Financial Services for his report and the invitation to the Hitchin Committee to comment on the proposed procedure for the disposal of Hitchin Town Hall by a long lease.

The Committee discussed the information provided by the HFS, but it was still the view of the majority of those present that following meetings of the Hitchin Committee held on 12 June and 25 June 2007 (Minutes 11 and 24 refer respectively) that the current plans for the future management and use of Hitchin Town Hall would still not meet the expectations of the local population or the needs of a community asset.

Particular concern remained about the immediate transfer from a 'market testing exercise' to a tender exercise and the lack of consultation with Hitchin Councillors. Concern was also raised as to the use of the Quirk Review which set out parameters and guidance for the disposal of community assets but had not been used in the lead up to the assignment of a long lease for Hitchin Town Hall.

The HFS provided additional information on the valuation placed on Hitchin Town Hall and that assets were valued for different purposes and in this particular case the town hall had been valued for lease purposes which were dictated by the expected rental income. Unfortunately, there were no other similar buildings in the locality and NHDC were reliant on the bids presented to see if financial expectations could be met. The HFS also clarified that in Paragraphs 8.1 and 8.2 're-development' should be changed to 'management'.

Discussion also took place on the recognition of the NHDC Vision, Mission and Strategic Objectives when considering management proposals for the town hall and it was agreed that every effort should be made by Officers and Cabinet to meet the Strategic Objectives.

### **RECOMMENDED TO CABINET**

- (1) That the tender process currently underway for the disposal by long lease of Hitchin Town Hall be cancelled with immediate effect;
- (2) That as a matter of urgency Cabinet should establish a Community Forum of Hitchin Councillors, representatives of local community, voluntary and commercial groups and NHDC officers which would meet as soon as possible in order to prepare a plan for the improvement and future management of Hitchin Town Hall;
- (3) That Cabinet be requested to ensure that any development and future management of Hitchin Town Hall should reflect the vision, mission and strategic objectives of North Hertfordshire District Council.

### **REASON FOR DECISIONS**

To allow the Hitchin Committee participate and contribute as much as possible in the promotion and management of Hitchin Town Hall as a Community Asset.

### **35. WESTMILL COMMUNITY YOUTH PROJECT – ACTION PLAN**

The Groundwork Youth Development Officer (YDO) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee.

The YDO advised the Committee that the Youth Work Action Plan was designed by the newly formed young people steering group and that the Action plan was based on the central theme of 'a journey' with young people joining and leaving the project throughout the year. The YDO and young people from Westmill Estate summarised the work done by the young people to date and that the main activities were music, leisure and sport and the Action Plan from August 2007 to July 2008 indicated the proposed activities and linkage to North Herts Homes. The Committee noted the intention to participate in Rhythms of the World 2008 and the proposal to identify other community projects similar to The Crescent.

The Young People also identified some of the issues that they faced on a daily basis: young people with disabilities, overcome fear of authority, health and diet, personal well being, drugs education, bullying, the avoidance of ASBOs, school behaviour and attendance and the management of money.

The YDO advised the Committee that consultation was a key factor for the development of the Action Plan. Consultation had taken place with residents on Westmill Estate, there will be a questionnaire survey at Priory School, visits to other Youth Centres and consultation with the parents of young people.

The YDO concluded the presentation with reference to the Action Plan which proposed short, mid and long term goal for young people, the development of personal skills and engagement with the wider community.

### **RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the Groundwork Youth Development Officer be thanked for the presentation and the details within the Action Plan;
- (2) That the Hitchin committee wished every success to the Westmill Community Youth Project with the development and implementation of the Action plan.

### **REASON FOR DECISION**

To allow the Hitchin Committee continue its support for the Westmill Community Youth Project.

**36. CADWELL LANE – ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

Councillor Deepak Sangha, Chairman of the newly formed Task and Finish Group thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee.

There had been three meetings to date of the Task and Finish Group with different tasks assigned and it was the intention to invite the Police and Highways Authority to the next meeting of the Task and Finish Group to be held on 15 August 2007. The proposed widening of the Woolgrove Road, Grove Road, Wilbury Way and Cadwell Lane cross roads would not take place due to confirmation that road safety engineering for the scheme would be far too large at this road junction.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport advised the Committee that funding for the proposed works at the road junction could be diverted to a feasibility study of the industrial area relief link road.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health wished to propose a vote of thanks, which was agreed, to the Head of Housing and Environmental Health for the successful delivery of an NHDC objection letter to the latest planning application against a very tight deadline.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the information provided be noted;
- (2) That Councillor Deepak Sangha be requested at the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 25 September 2007 to advise the Committee of the recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group in order to alleviate the environmental issues in Cadwell Lane;
- (3) That a vote of thanks and appreciation be made in respect of the valiant efforts undertaken by the Head of Housing and Environmental Health when he delivered the NHDC objection (Environment Agency, Brampton, Huntingdon) to the latest planning application by the owners of the scrap metal yard and processing plant in Cadwell Lane.

**REASON FOR DECISIONS**

To provide support to the residents of Cadwell Lane, Woolgrove Road, Cambridge Road and St. Michaels Road, Hitchin seeking to improve their quality of life and meet the Vision and key objectives of North Hertfordshire District Council i.e. A sustainable community, a safer community, a healthier community, an equal community, and a prosperous and satisfied community.

**37. CHAMPION NEWS**

The Community Development Officer (CDO) presented her report to the meeting and gave details *inter alia* on: Triangle Festival, Hardy Close/Chaucer Way Residents' Association, The Unique Youth Project, Windmill Hill, Recycling Roadshows, Allotments, Fairtrade signs, Bancroft project, Hitchin Pavilions, Westmill – John Barker Place and Cadwell Lane Residents' Association. The CDO referred the Committee to Appendix A which included notes to the Town Talk held on 12 June and updating comments as appropriate.

With regard to Fairtrade signs at Hitchin Gateways the CDO advised the Committee that she would be contacting the Hitchin Town Centre Manager to source possible funding for the Fairtrade signage.

The CDO advised the Committee that funds had been pre-allocated to Hitchin Sports Pavilions and it was agreed that this grant should be approved.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the information provided by the Community Development Officer on activities since the last meeting of the Hitchin Committee held on 12 June 2007 be noted;
- (2) That the Community Development Officer be requested to make the necessary arrangements to facilitate the £4000 grant pre-allocated to the Hitchin Sunday Football League to continue with maintenance of four sports pavilions in Hitchin as per Paragraph 3.9 to the report.

**REASON FOR DECISIONS:**

To ensure that the Hitchin Committee are kept informed of the work of the Community Development Officer.

**38. ANNUAL GRANTS, DEVELOPMENT, DISCRETIONARY AND VISIONING BUDGET 2007-2008**

The Committee considered the current expenditure and balance of the Annual Grants, Development, Discretionary and Visioning budget for 2007 – 2008.

The CDO advised the Committee that Ward Councillors provided details of pre-allocated funds that could be cancelled and brought forward into the available budgets for 2007-2008.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the expenditure, allocations, and balance of the current 2007-2008 Development Budget, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be noted;
- (2) That the Community Development Officer be requested to enter into discussions with Hitchin Councillors concerning the allocation of additional funds from Ward budgets for an increased grant to Hitchin Town Centre Initiative;
- (3) The Committee agreed that the Chairman would following discussions with the Community Development Officer be authorised to allocate additional funding to Hitchin Town Centre Initiative.

**REASON FOR DECISIONS:**

To advise the Hitchin Committee of funds remaining for disbursement in the year 2007-2008.

**39. GRANT APPLICATION**

No grant applications were presented for determination.

**40. HITCHIN TOWN CENTRE MANAGER**

The Hitchin Town Centre Manager (HTCM) provided a comprehensive update on recent activities in Hitchin.

The HTCM confirmed the willingness of the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative to provide its office in Church Yard as an NHDC service information point.

The Committee noted that the 2007 Hitchin Festival had been a success and that ROTW had once again proved a big draw for visitors to Hitchin and that no contravention of licence was made, that the clearance of litter on both days had been excellent and with the least number of complaints raised either in the local media or to the HTCM.

The HTCM advised that 2008 Hitchin Festival would be from 28 June to 27 July.

In conclusion the HTCM made comment as to the current phase of tendering for the future management of Hitchin Town Hall. Although the HTCI were very disappointed at not being in the final short list of three he commented that EEDA had announced a further tranche of funds totalling £750,000 which could possibly provide vital funds to allow HTCI to submit a revised management team bid for this important community asset, subject to the outcome of the meeting of Cabinet to be held on 15 August 2007, and whether the whole process could be re-visited as per the wishes of the Hitchin Committee (Minute 34 above refers). The HTCM confirmed that the previous business plan would require some 'fine tuning' but the Town Centre Partnership would with the appropriate support be prepared to submit a revised management bid.

**RESOLVED:** That the information provided be noted.

The meeting closed at 9.30 p.m.

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Chairman