

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

Meeting held at Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Wilbury Way, Hitchin,
on 25 September 2007 at 7.30p.m.

MINUTES

PRESENT: *Councillors: Judi Billing (Chairman), Deepak Sangha (Vice Chairman), Mrs A.G. Ashley, Clare Body, Paul Clark, Joan Kirby, Bernard Lovewell, Alan Millard, Lawrence Oliver, R. Shakespeare – Smith, Martin Stears and R.A.C. Thake.*

Note: Councillor Joan Kirby joined the meeting at 7.52 p.m.

IN ATTENDANCE: *David Miley – Democratic Services Manager
Margaret Bracey - Community Development Officer,
Nigel Schofield – Committee Administrator.*

41. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara for their hospitality this evening and providing the venue.

The Chairman thanked everyone who attended the Hitchin Town Talk.

The Chairman welcomed those making a presentation to the Committee and advised that there would be one additional presentation at Agenda Item 5 – Public Participation.

The Chairman was pleased to advise all those present of the venue for the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee which would be preceded by Hitchin Town Talk from 6.15 p.m. to 7.15 p.m.

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

42. APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor David Billing.

43. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Martin Stears advised the Committee that the next Fairtrade Lunch would be held on 20 October 2007 at Christ Church, Bedford Road, Hitchin with sittings at 12.30 p.m. and 1.30 p.m.

44. MINUTES – 26 JULY 2007

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 25 July 2007 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chairman.

45. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no Declarations of Interest.

46. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – CHURCHGATE ASSOCIATION

Mr B. Foreman advised that he was a voluntary advisor to the Churchgate Association and thanked the Chairman and the Committee for the opportunity to address the Committee.

Mr Foreman presented to the Committee the concerns of members of the Churchgate Association concerning prospective development of Churchgate and Surrounding Area and recent publicity in the local media concerning this development. The Association were distressed as to the images shown and were concerned as to who decided which images to print. The press coverage was considered as detrimental publicity and the Churchgate Association sought support from NHDC as follows:

1. Carry out a survey of Churchgate retailers to establish who intended to remain in Hitchin and would require temporary accommodation that should be provided;
2. That such temporary accommodation should be affordable and of a comparable size to that that would be occupied in the new development;
3. That a compensation 'package' should be considered which could include length of tenure, investment in current premises, relocation costs to temporary then permanent accommodation, and any significant trading losses in the 12 months prior to the re-development or in temporary accommodation;
4. That regular information updates be published in the Hitchin Initiative Newsletter and distributed to all retailers in Churchgate.

The Chairman thanked Mr Foreman for making known the concerns of the Churchgate Association.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the voluntary advisor to the Churchgate Association be thanked for the presentation;
- (2) That the comments and concerns of the Churchgate Association concerning the re – development of the Churchgate Centre be noted.

47. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – THE BANCROFT PROJECT FOR THE HOMELESS

The representative of The Bancroft Project thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. Despite the excellent provision of shelter provided at the North Herts Sanctuary there had been an increase in the number of homeless persons in Hitchin who were unable to find a place. The problem manifested itself on a Sunday when places of shelter such as Hitchin Library were closed and affordable refreshment units were also closed. Local residents in Hitchin had set up a small group of volunteers to meet this problem and provide a hot meal, beverage and a listening ear for all who came. Visitors of many nationalities ranged from recently released prisoners, mental health problems and runaway teenagers, with some of the people aged 60 and 70.

At present the Sunday meeting point was the bandstand in Bancroft Gardens, however , with the onset of winter it was desirable to seek an indoor venue for this charitable work to continue and Bancroft Hall would be available. The major obstacle was the lack of finance to pay the appropriate insurance premium. The volunteers received generous food donations and had numerous fund raising events planned, approaches would be made to Rotary, Hitchin Initiative, but could not meet the insurance premium at the moment. Numbers of homeless that received a hot meal had increased weekly to 15 and came from Hitchin and outside, with new faces every week as they moved from district to district.

The Chairman on behalf of the Hitchin Committee congratulated the volunteers on their work for the homeless and thanked them for the presentation.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the representatives of The Bancroft Project for the Homeless be thanked for the presentation;
- (2) That the work of The Bancroft Project for the Homeless had the support of the Hitchin Committee.

REASON FOR DECISIONS

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

48. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – APNI DUNIYA GROUP

The representative of the Apni Duniya Group thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. The Apni Duniya group had provided in Letchworth and Hitchin for more than 20 years play schemes for children in the 5 to 12 age range. Unfortunately funding from BBC Children in Need had closed and despite grants from Letchworth and Hitchin Area Committees there was insufficient income from charges to cover the operational costs. Children from large families, single parent families, parents with low incomes all used the play schemes and some received a discount on charges. Consequently, despite the benefit to many in the local community the escalating costs could have a detrimental effect on the continuation of these play schemes.

The Chairman thanked the Apni Duniya for the presentation and hoped that the play schemes could continue with their good work in Letchworth and Hitchin.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the representative of the Apni Duniya Group be thanked for the presentation;
- (2) That the work of the Apni Duniya Group had the support of the Hitchin Committee.

49. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – HERTFORDSHIRE CONSTABULARY – RHYTHMS OF THE WORLD 2007

Inspector Julie Wheatley thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to make a presentation to the Committee and advised the Committee that the Chief Executive of North Herts District Council had requested that a report prepared by the Hitchin Neighbourhood Team on the impact of the 2007 ROTW Festival on the levels of crime during the weekend of 14 – 15 July 2007 be presented at this meeting of the Hitchin Committee. There had been a 50 percent increase in visitors over the ROTW weekend with a proportionate increase in crime, including possession of Cannabis, wounding, robbery, theft, assault, vehicle crime, burglary and harassment. There were 71 crimes over the ROTW weekend of which 25 were violent crime, an increase of six per cent from the 2006 ROTW and Inspector Wheatley confirmed that arrested offenders had come from towns outside of Hitchin. Of particular note was the 27 anti – social behaviour events of which the most prevalent was rowdy and inconsiderate behaviour and that the peak time for all offences on the Saturday and Sunday was between 1400 to 1800 and between 2200 to midnight with the peak in 2007 some 47.9 per cent higher than 2006.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That Chief Inspector Wheatley be thanked for the very informative and statistical analysis of crime incidents that occurred during ROTW on 14 and 15 July 2007;
- (2) That the types of crime recorded and that perpetrators of such crime in the main came from outside Hitchin be noted.

50. PRESENTATION BY THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

The Portfolio Holder – Councillor Bernard Lovewell (Walsworth Ward) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Hitchin Committee.

The Portfolio Holder advised the Committee that he had a very wide range of activities that covered the whole of North Hertfordshire with nothing at the moment specific to Hitchin. Amongst his responsibilities was pest control and he requested that members of the public should stop feeding wildfowl with bread as rats were attracted to this food source and warm winters had allowed a steady increase in the rat population. He was also responsible for enforcement issues e.g. fixed penalty system – littering, fly tipping, abandoned vehicles and that the costs of prosecution affected all residents in North Hertfordshire.

The Meals on Wheels service which was very popular would move from NHDC to a Social Enterprise with NHDC funding decreasing over the next three years.

Licensing was also part of the Portfolio Holder's responsibility and one particular facet was the granting of public event licences. Previous experience with the Triangle Festival and Walsworth Festival confirmed that organisers had a lot of preparatory work to do and that NHDC needed to engage with all parties to ensure safe events and a meeting would be held later in December 2007 to discuss events in 2008. The Committee noted that all licensing policies were under review at NHDC.

The Portfolio Holder continued his description of responsibilities by reference to: Food Safety and Hygiene, a Supporting People Programme, Homelessness, Sheltered Housing, Careline – which took more than 780,000 calls in 2006-2007 – NHDC acted for many other agencies and local authorities. The NHDC Customer Services Centre was always busy and the introduction of a fortnightly collection of household waste and recyclable materials had generated many contacts and enquiries. Although NHDC no longer had responsibility for a housing stock it continued to administer the housing register and worked closely with more than 20 Housing Associations.

In response to an enquiry about the enforcement of fixed penalty notices the Portfolio holder confirmed that there would be selective targeting of 'hot spots' such as littering. Following further questions and comments the Portfolio Holder agreed to investigate the following: Rats, signage and enforcement, more pro-active role by officers in the organisation of local festivals as volunteers could be easily deterred by 'red tape', refurbishment of empty houses e.g. Titmore cottages, the use of town centre information points e.g. Hitchin Initiative as residents often preferred to meet officers on a one to one basis rather than use telephone or email.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health and requested that he respond to the questions and comments raised by Members as soon as possible.

RESOLVED: That the Portfolio holder for Housing and Environmental Health be thanked for the very informative presentation.

51. CHURCHGATE AND SURROUNDING AREA

The Chairman advised the Committee that following the meeting of the Hitchin Town Centre Working Party and Cabinet held on 26 June 2007 the Head of Financial Services had been requested to provide an updating Information Note to the Committee at this meeting.

The Chairman referred the Committee to the Information Note and in particular Appendix A which presented the Marketing Plan and Project Programme.

The Committee reviewed the Information Note and during the subsequent discussion Members agreed that this Committee should be regularly informed on all aspects of the programme as detailed at Appendix A and were concerned that delays to a major scheme for Churchgate would result in a refurbishment programme only, also that all plans should be presented to the Hitchin Committee for approval which would be preceded by the Hitchin Committee's participation in pre-application presentations. Members were also concerned at the expansion of the Churchgate Development Area and that a re-use of the Post Office Building in Hermitage Road was not included in the plan shown at Appendix B.

The Chairman proposed and it was agreed that the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 20 November should receive a comprehensive report on all aspects of the Churchgate and Surrounding Area with particular reference to planning policy and the first milestone in the Marketing Plan due in mid November 'Receive expressions of interest'. This proposal was made in order for all Hitchin Councillors to make comments and proposals in an informed way to proceed this development to completion whereby all members of the Hitchin Community could be kept apprised of plans regularly.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the details contained in the Information Note be noted;
- (2) That the Head of Planning and Building Control and the Head of Financial Services be requested to present a comprehensive report to the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 20 November 2007 which would:
 1. Provide details of the revised approach as to the development of the extended area for Churchgate and surrounding area (Appendix B);
 2. Provide details and clarification of how this extended area would conform to Planning Policy and the Local Development Plan No. 2 (with alterations);
 3. Provide an update on progress with the Marketing Plan as presented at Appendix A – the first milestone being a review of the expressions of interest in mid November 2007.
- (3) That the Head of Planning and Building Control and the Head of Financial Services be requested to ensure that the Hitchin Committee are consulted and invited to comment on all stages of the Marketing Plan and Project Programme (Appendix A).

REASON FOR DECISIONS

To allow the Hitchin Committee participate and contribute as much as possible to the development of Churchgate and surrounding Area.

52. HITCHIN TOWN CENTRE MANAGER

The Hitchin Town Centre Manager (TCM) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee.

The TCM main point of concern was the current expected shortfall in funding and that if further funds were unavailable this could mean the demise of the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative and the loss of £5000 in grant from North Herts District Council had been a major blow. The TCM promoted the proposal to have a one stop shop at the Initiative office in Churchyard which could attract Council funding and the number of visitors each day only re-emphasised the need for such a drop in centre.

The shortfall in financial support meant that there would be no hanging baskets in Hitchin Town Centre in 2008 and that the funding of the 2007 Christmas Lights was a major expense and every effort would be made to maintain the lights this year.

The Committee noted that the publication of two Hitchin guides had been put on hold with the Initiative Newsletter kept for 2007-2008.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the information provided by the Hitchin Town Centre Manager be noted;
- (2) That concerns expressed by the Hitchin Town Centre Manger in the shortfall of financial resource to support the Hitchin Initiative be noted.

53. CADWELL LANE – ENVIRONMENTAL AND SAFETY ISSUES HITCHIN AREA SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Community Development Officer CDO presented the report of the Head of Community Development and Cultural Services which provided an update on progress made by the Cadwell Lane Task and Finish group since the last meeting of the Hitchin Committee held on 26 July 2007 (Minute 36 refers).

The Committee noted that a meeting of the group had been held on 15 August 2007 followed by a site visit to H. Williams in Cadwell Lane on 5 September 2007. The CDO provided details of work by the Task and Finish Group as follows:

- HCC was the Local Planning Authority for Cadwell Lane scrapyards and railway sidings site at Hitchin Station;
- There were no conditions attached to the planning permission governing vehicle movements or hours of operation;
- H. Williams had applied to the Environment Agency for a revised Waste Management Licence as they were currently processing more waste than was permitted by their current Licence. The Environment Agency had been invited to impose conditions to any revised/new Waste Management Licence for the Cadwell Lane site which would address issues such as pollution and significant harm to the amenity of the local area;
- The Environment Agency had granted an exemption to the need for a Waste Management Licence for the railway sidings site under the Waste Management Regulations 1994 (as amended). However discussions continued between NHDC and EA about this exemption. This exemption meant that H. Williams did not require a Waste Management Licence to operate from the Cadwell Lane site;
- There was no statutory action that the regulating authorities could take to prevent the use of the highway by traffic in this area generally. However, the manner in which that use took place could be considered to ensure it was lawful by, for example, ensuring vehicles were appropriately licensed to carry waste and that waste in vehicles was covered so that it did not fall from vehicles and cause a danger to other highway and footway users. In this regard the Police/EA/NHDC had undertaken monitoring/enforcement activities in respect to vehicles using Cadwell Lane;
- Enquiries were on going by NHDC as to whether a statutory nuisance was arising from the operation of the railway sidings site for processed scrap transfer at Hitchin Station.

The Committee noted the large amount of information and clarification concerning operating licences that had been collected by the Task and Finish Group and looked forward to receiving a concluding report presented by the Chairman Cllr Deepak Sangha at the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 20 November 2007.

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 20 November 2007 to advise the Committee of the recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group.

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.

54. REVIEWS OF POLLING DISTRICTS, POLLING PLACES AND POLLING STATIONS

The Democratic Services Manager (DSM) presented the report of the Returning Officer and advised the Committee that following the revised electoral arrangements that were in place for the all –out elections held on 3 May 2007 it was appropriate to review the location of each of the polling stations within each polling district for the five Hitchin Wards as required by the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

The DSM referred the Committee to Appendices A and B which provided details in a graphic form of the Wards and internal polling districts (Appendix B) and address and description of polling stations, electorate details and proposed residential development (Appendix C)

The Committee raised no specific objections to the location of polling stations and the DSM agreed to consider the following representations:

1. That consideration be given to allow voting to take place at a polling station that was 100 yards from residences (rather than travel 1.5 miles) even though the polling station was in an adjacent ward;
2. Could Whitehill School accommodate another polling station?
3. Residents living on the south side of Blackhorse Lane had to place their ballot in a polling station in St. Ippolyts – could a polling station be provided much closer to their homes?

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the current scheme of polling districts and polling places within the five Hitchin Wards be noted and confirmed;
- (2) That the Returning Officer be requested to consider the following comment made by a member of the Hitchin Committee: Allow electors to vote in a polling place much closer to their residence although such a polling place was not in their electoral ward e.g. Priory to Highbury at Whitehill School

55. CHAMPION NEWS

The Community Development Officer (CDO) presented her report to the meeting and provided details of her community activities including; The Old Hale Way Bee Centre; Hardy Road and Chaucer Way Residents Association; Tilehouse Street Pre – School, Hitchin Allotments; Summer Out 2 Play/Sports Zone; Windmill Hill, Hitchin Museum; fountain in the River Hiz; Westmill – John Barker Place re-development; Town Talk 26 July (Appendix A); The Voice and Westmill Youth Project.

The Committee were pleased to commend the work of the CDO and noted the many activities and progress of voluntary groups in Hitchin since the last meeting.

RESOLVED: That the information provided by the Community Development Officer on activities since the last meeting of the Hitchin Committee held on 26 July 2007 be noted;

REASON FOR DECISIONS:

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

56. 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.

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.

REASON FOR DECISIONS:

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

57. GRANT APPLICATION – THE BANCROFT PROJECT FOR THE HOMELESS

RESOLVED: That the outstanding balance of £700 be awarded to the Bancroft Project for the Homeless as a contribution to the costs of insurance when using Bancroft Hall for the provision of a hot meal and beverages to the homeless each Sunday lunchtime. The sum of £700 to be allocated as a £70 grant from each Councillor's discretionary budget in Priory Ward, Highbury Ward, Walsworth Ward and Oughton Ward.

58. GRANT APPLICATION – HITCHIN COUNSELLING SERVICE

RESOLVED: That the sum of £1000 be awarded to the Hitchin Counselling Service as a contribution to the costs associated with development of the counselling service and provision of a training workshop for the whole service. The sum of £1000 to be allocated as a £100 grant from each Councillor's discretionary budget in Priory Ward, Highbury Ward, Walsworth Ward and Oughton Ward.

59. GRANT APPLICATION – THE BREAKFAST BAR AT WALSWORTH ROAD BAPTIST CHURCH

RESOLVED: That a decision on this grant application be deferred to allow the Community Development Officer undertake further research on the operation of this breakfast facility for young school children and how the project is financed.

The meeting closed at 9.08 p.m.

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Chairman