

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

Meeting held at Benslow Music Trust, Benslow Lane, Hitchin,
on 9 June 2009 at 7.30p.m.

MINUTES

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

IN ATTENDANCE: *John Robinson – Strategic Director of Customer Services
Anthony Roche – Assistant Solicitor
Mary Caldwell – Planning and Conservation Manager
Margaret Bracey - Community Development Officer
Nigel Schofield - Committee Administrator*

Keith Hoskins - Hitchin Town Centre Manager

4. APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor R.A.C. Thake.

5. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, thanked all those who attended the Town Talk, those making a presentation to the Committee and to the Leader of the Council, Councillor F.J. Smith who would address the Committee about the proposed development to the east of Luton within North Hertfordshire.

The Chairman also thanked all those officers who had been involved with the Hertfordshire County Council and European Parliamentary Elections on 4 June and offered her congratulations to the newly elected and re-elected County Councillors for the Hitchin Rural, North and South Wards.

6. MINUTES – 10 MARCH 2009 AND 30 APRIL 2009

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meetings held on 10 March 2009 and 30 April 2009 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chairman.

7. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairman advised the Committee that there would be one additional speaker at Agenda Item 5 – Public Participation i.e. Councillor F.J. Smith and that North Herts Sanctuary had tendered their apologies.

8. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Chairman read out the following:

Members are reminded that any declarations of interest in respect of any business set out in the agenda, should be declared as either prejudicial or personal interest and are required to notify the Chairman of the nature of any interest declared at the commencement of the item on the agenda. Members declaring a prejudicial interest should leave the room and not seek to influence the decision during that particular item.

9. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT TO THE EAST OF LUTON WITHIN NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE

The Leader of the Council, Councillor F.J. Smith thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. Councillor Smith sought the support of the Hitchin Committee to oppose the threat of housing development and highway construction to the east of Luton (or should that be west of Hitchin?) into North Herts and development within the metropolitan Green Belt should be resisted as strongly as

possible. Councillor Smith confirmed that this part of North Herts was an area of great beauty and the metropolitan green belt should always be inviolate, the increased traffic flows on local roads and the A602 and A505 would not be acceptable to local residents, residents in Hitchin nor the local authority. There had already been considerable protest from local residents and protest meetings in the area under threat, with considerable support in the local media. Councillor Smith urged the Committee to support opposition to this development and that people could still register their opposition by postcard or online.

Prior to any discussion on this matter and following advice from the Assistant Solicitor the current Members of the Planning Control Committee and substitutes (Councillors: Paul Clark, Ray Shakespeare –Smith, David Billing, Alan Millard, Clare Body, Deepak Sangha and Martin Stears - Handscomb) who were present declared that they would not participate in the discussion or vote in order to confirm that they did not in any way make a pre- determination on any future planning application placed before North Hertfordshire District Council.

The remainder of the Committee confirmed their opposition in principle to housing development East of Luton within North Hertfordshire and the expected highway construction in this beautiful metropolitan green belt part of North Herts. This also was an unnecessary incursion into the metropolitan green belt which was there precisely to prevent this type of incursion.

RESOLVED: That housing development in the metropolitan green belt to the east of Luton be resisted as strongly as possible and that individuals should be encouraged to register their opposition immediately.

10. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: HERTS YOUNG HOMELESS GROUP

The representatives from Herts Young Homeless Group thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee and based in Hatfield the group covered all of Hertfordshire attending to the needs of young people in the 16 to 25 years age range who were homeless or with unresolved issues.

The Group provided short stay accommodation to provide a 'crash pad' with a maximum of a few weeks, with guidance and assistance provided through documentation and transport costs. These costs were met from the groups' own resources and were very grateful to the support given by Councillor Ashley during her tenure as NHDC Chairman in 2008 – 2009 as The Group was one of her chosen charities.

The Chairman thanked the representatives for the presentation and invited Councillor Ashley to present the cheque.

11. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: CHILD UK

Mr John Manitaro thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee and confirmed that he was a founder member of Child UK whose stated aim was to keep young children: 'healthy, active and out of trouble'. Child UK was still very much a hands on organisation and had recently been active in Hitchin via the North Herts Day Night project. Many of the young people who congregated on Windmill Hill had been encouraged to move to Bancroft Gardens and Bancroft Youth Centre and take part in activities known to be useful and attractive to young people. Advice was given on sexual health, how to overcome drug problems and anti social behaviour, of particular note was the development of youth leaders from within the peer groups and that there had been a 15 per cent reduction in Hitchin and a 50 per cent reduction in Baldock of anti social behaviour. The Committee noted that Child UK proposed to extend the programme to Letchworth Garden City following the excellent results in Hitchin and Baldock and recognised the strong partnership working especially on health and shelter issues. A Member confirmed that he had seen the work of Child UK in Hitchin and that young people would readily accept offers of activities and meeting points.

With regard to funding Mr Manitaro confirmed that a grant of £5,000 had been given by North Hertfordshire Homes and that funds were good at the moment.

The Chairman thanked Mr Manitaro for the presentation and the Committee urged Mr Manitaro and Child UK to keep up their good work.

RESOLVED: That the work of Child UK in Hitchin and Baldock be applauded.

12. CHURCHGATE AND SURROUNDING AREA – PROCUREMENT PROCESS UPDATE

The Assistant Solicitor (AS) offered the apologies of the Strategic Director of Finance and Regulatory Services and reminded the Committee on the continued need for confidentiality under the requirements of competitive dialogue and that this was reflected in the amount of detail that could be disclosed in the Information Note placed before the Committee and in the public domain. The AS confirmed that there would be a regular review of the information that might be placed in the public domain and that the Office of Government Commerce's FOI (Civil Procurement) Policy and Guidance 2008 supported NHDC in the current status of disclosure.

The AS confirmed that dialogue continued with the two bidders who were very positive in their approach to the Churchgate Development and that the target date for contract award remained at August 2009. On completion of the dialogue process each bidder will have produced a schematic development proposal at the tender stage. The proposals would then be available for a very wide consultation prior to the submission of a planning application subject to the timescale proposed by each bidder with a programme for community involvement prepared after contract award.

The Committee noted that the names and addresses of the eight companies invited to tender completed the release of this type of information and that the next meeting of the Hitchin Town Centre Working Party was scheduled for Tuesday 7 July 2009 at 7p.m. and requested that at the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 28 July 2009 an up to date and accurate timetable for the completion of this tender process, contract award and consultation.

In response to an enquiry the AS confirmed that it had not been possible to extend an invitation to Hammersmatch to address the Working Party as the procurement rules remained very restrictive. The Committee considered that there should be a wide ranging public consultation which was well thought out as it had taken many years to reach this stage and all local parties and stakeholders should be consulted.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the information update provided on Churchgate Development be noted;
- (2) That the Assistant Solicitor be requested to present an up to date and accurate timetable for the completion of this tender process, contract award and consultation at the meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 28 July 2009.

REASON FOR DECISION

To confirm the support of the Hitchin Committee for the re-development of Churchgate and Surrounding Area that would be best for the residents of Hitchin.

13. NHDC MUSEUMS SERVICE – REVISED SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Strategic Director for Customer Services (SDCS) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. By way of a Power Point presentation the SDCS provide a brief introduction to the background of the current museums service for North Hertfordshire, the Museums Fundamental Service Review, the Arts, Museums and Heritage Forum and proof of concept for Hitchin Town Hall as a possible location for a North Herts Museum. The SDCS confirmed that the Feasibility Study agreed at the meeting of Cabinet on 19 May 2009 (Minute 5 refers) would be for Hitchin Town Hall only and clarified the development of the Arts Museums and Heritage Strategy. The Committee noted the 'proof of concept' report on Hitchin Town Hall which covered *inter alia* a consideration of the shortcomings and aspirations of the existing museums service, the limited storage for the joint collections at Letchworth and Hitchin, the suitability of Hitchin Town Hall as a possible site for a North Herts Museum, consider whether existing sites could continue and finally how the re - development of the Town Hall could be costed and a timetable prepared.

The Chairman thanked the SDCS for the presentation and invited questions and or comments from the Committee. Throughout the debate reference was made as to the need for consultation at all stages with interested parties and local stakeholders e.g. Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society. Members also questioned whether the programme detailed in the presentation appeared to be in advance of the agreed feasibility study.

Members also expressed the concern and representation made by local organisations businesses and residents as to their objection to the proposals for the Town Hall and the loss of a large community space should the Town Hall be converted to a Museum for North Herts. Members also considered that Hitchin Town Hall should not be the only location under consideration and that all other opportunities should be examined during the feasibility study. The SDCS confirmed that a Facilities Working Group would include consultation with local groups and the public.

The Chairman thanked the Committee for their comments and proposals and it was unanimously agreed that the views and wishes of the Committee should be made known to Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the information provided by the Strategic Director for Customer Services be noted;
- (2) That every effort should be made by NHDC to expand and continue the use of Hitchin Town Hall as a Community Facility during the feasibility study;
- (3) That discussions should take place during the feasibility study on all other options as an alternative to the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall to a central Museum for North Herts;
- (4) That the considerable objection raised by local stakeholders, Hitchin Initiative, local businesses and members of the public to the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall to a central museum for North Hertfordshire be noted;
- (5) That discussions with other statutory bodies such as Herts County Council on the provision of an Arts and Museums Service for North Hertfordshire should take place at the same time as the feasibility study.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That Cabinet be requested to note the considerable objection raised by the Hitchin Committee, local stakeholders, Hitchin Initiative, local businesses and members of the public to the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall to a central museum for North Hertfordshire;

- (2) That Cabinet be requested to make every effort to expand and continue the use of Hitchin Town Hall as a Community Facility during the feasibility study;
- (3) That Cabinet be requested to ensure that discussions with all interested parties should take place during the feasibility study on all other options as an alternative to the conversion of Hitchin Town to a central Museum for North Herts;
- (4) That in order to ensure that the final proposal gives good value for money and no better option is missed, Cabinet be requested to ensure that sufficient discussions and investigations should take place in parallel with the feasibility study on other options for a Central Museum, including ascertaining the views of Hertfordshire County Council on the future of the current Hitchin Library and Hitchin Museum site at Paynes Park.

REASON FOR DECISION

To provide the opportunity for a wide ranging consultation on the proposed conversion of Hitchin Town Hall and allow a thorough investigation of other options at the same time as the feasibility study.

14. RESTRICTION ON SUNDAY PARKING IN MARKET PLACE, HITCHIN

The Chairman advised the Committee that the Projects Manager – Planning Services had the day previously given to her an update on the progress towards a revised or completely new Traffic Regulation Order to restrict parking of vehicles in Hitchin Market Place on a Sunday.

The Committee noted that the End of public notice period and deadline for the receipt of objections had been extended to 6 July 2009 and that an analysis of the objections and Decision to proceed had been brought forward to 10 July 2009. The Chairman confirmed that the previous expectation to amend the existing TRO would be discontinued and that a new TRO would be prepared to meet the request for restricted parking on a Sunday. Subject to no objections been made to the High Court implementation of the TRO was scheduled for 21 September 2009.

The Chairman advised the Committee that at Agenda Item 12 a decision would be needed to confirm the award of £4000 from the 2009-2010 Discretionary Budget.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the update by the Chairman be noted;
- (2) That the Projects Manager – Planning Services be requested to ensure that the revised timetable to implementation be maintained.

REASON FOR DECISION:

To allow Hitchin Market Place be a safe place for pedestrians on a Sunday.

15. HITCHIN COMMITTEE WORK PLAN FOR 2009 - 2010

The Chairman advised the Committee that she considered it was now appropriate to have a standard Committee Agenda Item that would allow discussion of projects, highway schemes and items of local interest such as parking restrictions, remedial works to cobbled surfaces and youth issues.

The Committee agreed that this was an excellent suggestion and the following proposals were made:

1. Invite Hertfordshire Highways to Hitchin Committee meetings;
2. Invite NHDC Cabinet Members/Portfolio Holders to Hitchin Committee meetings;
3. That Hitchin Councillors appointed to outside bodies be invited to advise the Committee of their activities and the value of representation of NHDC on outside bodies;
4. Information on the planning associated with utilities works and highway disruption in Hitchin;
5. Green Flag status for Bancroft Parks and Gardens;
6. Youth activities e.g. Sub Zero, Child UK;
7. Hitchin Urban Transport Plan Review;
8. Invitation to youth and local interest and voluntary groups to present to Hitchin Committee with a view to grant funding;
9. Remedial works to Hitchin Cemetery Gates and approach, St. John's Road, Hitchin.

It was proposed and agreed that the Community Development Officer (CDO) should tabulate the above proposals and include milestone and target completion dates and place before the Committee at the next meeting to be held on 28 July 2009.

Discussion took place on how to improve and accelerate engagement with young people and the Hitchin Committee and it was agreed that the CDO and the Acting Head of Community Development and Cultural Services be requested to draw up a scheme that would assist in this objective.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the proposal by the Chairman to introduce a standing item 'Hitchin Committee Work Plan' for all subsequent meetings of be agreed;
- (2) That the Community Development Officer be requested to tabulate the proposals made by the Committee and present at the next and all future meetings of the Hitchin Committee;
- (3) That the Community Development Officer and the Acting Head of Community Development and Cultural Services be requested to draw up a scheme that would enhance community engagement with young people in Hitchin and other areas if appropriate.

REASON FOR DECISION:

To allow the Hitchin Committee continue its commitment to Hitchin and local interest groups.

16. SECTION 106 CONTRIBUTIONS AND UNILATERAL UNDERTAKINGS

The Planning Control and Conservation Manager (PCM) presented the report of the Head of Planning and Building Control and advised the Committee that this was an update on the comprehensive details of the current Section 106 agreements and Unilateral Undertakings in Hitchin.

The PCM referred the Committee to Appendices A,B,C, and D which detailed:

- A - Contributions received/allocated and/or spent by each ward in Hitchin;
- B - Contributions received/allocated and /or spent relating to specific planning permissions within Hitchin

The PCM advised that the utilisation of monies received by the Hertfordshire County Council were included in Appendices C and D:

- C - Herts County Council data until 31 December 2008 (included within each of the relevant applications - Appendix B);
- D - HCC and NHDC sustainable transport spreadsheet presented to Joint Member Panel on 30 April 2009.

The PCM also advised the Committee that the Appendices include non – financial contributions and that Appendix E presented a chart which set out the procedure from the agreement the Section 106 until the delivery of a specific scheme.

The Committee were unanimous in their support for the revised layout and the clarity of the information presented and of particular interest to the Committee was the arrangement for Member involvement in the allocation of Section 106 monies to specific schemes and projects in Hitchin e.g. Monies that might be directed to schemes identified within the Hitchin Urban Transportation Plan. The PCM advised that allocation of monies would be part of strategies approved by Cabinet and that feedback could be arranged via the Community Development Manager and that Section 106 monies could not be used to provide a bus service but could be used to facilitate such bus services e.g. Hitchin Rail Station forecourt refurbishment under Sustainable Transport Contributions. The PCM clarified the expenditure of £78,824 on schemes in Kershaws Hill, Hitchin Station Forecourt and Grange Pavilion from a total of £313,337 received in 2008-2009.

The Committee considered that a lot more involvement with the allocation of monies from local ward Members was very important and with this objective in mind it was proposed and agreed that a working party of one Member from each political group should be convened. The working party would discuss with the Planning Control and Conservation Manager on a regular basis their preferred disbursement of Section 106 monies to specific schemes in Hitchin.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Planning Control and Conservation Manager be thanked for the excellent presentation of the Section 106 Agreements and Unilateral Undertakings;
- (2) That the information provided on the allocation of monies to specific schemes and projects at Appendices A,B,C and D be noted;
- (3) That a Working Party (consisting of one Labour, one Conservative and one Liberal Democrat) be set up to monitor the allocation and to consider making recommendations on eventual disbursement of monies within Hitchin and to meet on a regular basis with the Planning Control and Conservation Manager;
- (4) That the Planning Control and Conservation Manager be requested to present on an annual basis an updating report (via Champion News) on Section 106 Agreements and Unilateral Undertakings to the Hitchin Committee with the next at the June 2010 meeting.

REASON FOR DECISION

To ensure a robust system for the negotiation and management of Section 106 Agreements and Unilateral Undertakings and that the system is kept under constant review and that the risk is managed properly.

17. HITCHIN TOWN CENTRE MANAGER

The Hitchin Town Centre Manager (HCM) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. The Committee noted that there were offers on properties in Hitchin Town Centre including Market Place and that the Heads of Agreement had been signed for the Woolworths site in the High Street. The HCM advised the Committee that the Town Centre Initiative remained sceptical of development in the Churchgate Area and that the proposals by the two bidders were eagerly awaited by the business community.

The HCM was pleased to advise the Committee that Hitchin Markets went from strength to strength with in excess of £40,000 investment and there was a waiting list for stalls, and the Craft Market was attracting traders and customers in increasing numbers. With effect from 15 June there would be three Street Rangers assisting local businesses and visitors to Hitchin and this was an outcome from Hitchin BIDs

The Committee noted that Hitchin Town Initiative and the local community were opposed to the loss of the Community Centre at Hitchin Town Hall and that Hitchin BIDS would be investigating how the local business community could once again attempt to take over the Town Hall as a Community Engagement Centre.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Hitchin Town Centre Manager be thanked for the information;
- (2) That the opposition to the re – development of Hitchin Town Hall as a Museum for North Hertfordshire be noted and the willingness of the local business community to be involved in alternative developments be welcomed.

18. CHAMPION NEWS AND FINANCE REPORT

The Community Development Officer (CDO) advised the Committee that from this meeting onwards the previous two reports (Champion News and Discretionary Budget) would be combined into one report.

The CDO confirmed that there were no grant applications before the Committee other than the allocation of £4,000 towards the cost of the TRO in Market Place (Minute 14 above refers) and with the proposal made by the Chairman this grant was approved.

The CDO took the Committee through her report with specific reference to: Councillor School Surgeries; Voice of Hitchin Youth (Taste event on 12 September 2009); Play Rangers Service; Triangle Planning Project, where the design statement was ready for consultation launched on 8 June lasting for three weeks closing at the Community Garden open Day on 28 June; Cadwell Lane Residents/Hitchin Residents Alliance; JUMP – proposed high ropes course in the Dell; Town Talk as detailed at Appendix D; Community Radio Station in Westmill to which Members were invited to participate; Hitchin South and Villages Childrens' Centre and Hitchin Family Health Awareness day on Saturday 6 June.

Of particular notice was the Committee Work Plan Template presented at Appendix C which was agreed and the Chairman asked the Committee to send to the CDO any suggestions cum proposals for highways as soon as possible for forwarding to the Joint Member Panel.

The Committee reviewed the budget sheets for 2009-2010 as presented at Appendix A and the listing of the grants awarded in 2008-2009. At Appendix F the Committee were pleased to see an assessment of how Visioning Money might be allocated to other projects and it was proposed and agreed to *vire* monies held for work at the foot of Windmill hill to be re-allocated to cover the cost of remedial works to cobbles in Hitchin Market Place which in turn would be boosted by contributions from the discretionary budget held by the County Councillors for Hitchin North and Hitchin South.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Community Development officer be thanked for the Community Activities undertaken since the last meeting;
- (2) That the award of £4000 towards the costs associated with a new Traffic Regulation Order for the Market place be agreed;
- (3) That the award of monies from the Hitchin Visioning Budget on a *vire* principle to cover the cost of remedial works to cobble setts in Market place;
- (4) That the budget expenditure and balances carried forward into 2009-2010 from the Visioning and Discretionary Ward budgets be noted and agreed.

REASON FOR DECISIONS

To ensure that the committee are kept informed of the work of the Community Development officer and continue the use of discretionary spending to further the aims and Strategic Objectives of the Council.

The meeting closed at 9.33 p.m.

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Chairman