

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

**Meeting held at Christ Church Hall, Bedford Road, Hitchin,
on 28 July 2009 at 7.30p.m.**

MINUTES

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

ALSO PRESENT: *Councillor Tom Brindley – Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport
County Councillor D. Ashley*

IN ATTENDANCE: *Anthony Roche – Solicitor
Simon Young – Transport Policy Officer
Margaret Bracey - Community Development Officer
Nigel Schofield - Committee Administrator*

Keith Hoskins - Hitchin Town Centre Manager

Note: Councillor R.A.C. Thake left the meeting at 9.03 p.m.

19. APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillors: Joan Kirby, Martin Stears – Handscomb and R. Shakespeare – Smith.

20. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, thanked all those who attended the Town Talk, and those making a presentation at Agenda Item 5.

21. MINUTES – 9 JUNE 2009

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 9 June 2009 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chairman.

22. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairman advised the Committee that with their agreement there would be a discussion on issues raised by Councillors at Hitchin Community Surgeries.

23. 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.

24. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: NORTH HERTS SANCTUARY

The Sanctuary General Manager (SGM) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. The Chairman invited Councillor Allison Ashley (NHDC Chairman 2008-2009) to make a presentation of a cheque raised from donations during her year of office. The SGM thanked Councillor Alison Ashley for the generous donation.

The SGM confirmed that the financial support provided by North Hertfordshire District Council, Hertfordshire County Council, the local business community, individual donations and local charities was vital to the continued success of the Sanctuary.

The day to day management was led by the SGM who provided a maximum of 17 beds each night (14 male and 3 Female) in shared rooms. Breakfast, packed lunch and an evening meal was available to those who used the Sanctuary.

The Committee noted that the Sanctuary was open 365 days a year from 7p.m. to 8.30 p.m. and Drop in Services on 2 days a week. The General Manager advised that there were many reasons for homelessness including: Rent arrears, Mental Health issues, Drug and alcohol dependency, anti social behaviour, criminal activity and preferred choice of lifestyle. The Sanctuary offered to the individuals staying in the Sanctuary: Individual assessment and Support Planning, Key worker system, Individual one to one sessions, advice on accommodation, debt advice, mentoring, referral to statutory agencies, and welfare benefit applications.

The SGM explained that it was the aim of the Sanctuary to expand the existing property or obtain additional properties and develop with the local authority a strategy for ending Rough Sleepers leading to the Sanctuary becoming a Centre of Excellence for the Homeless.

The SGM confirmed that there had not been an increase in applications for the shelter due to the recession but there were more cases related to financial problems. Councillor Lovewell – Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health advised the Committee that the Sanctuary was performing a vital role in the community. A visit to St. Mungo's Trust in London had provided many ideas which might be used in the Sanctuary and that it was anticipated that NHDC would soon make an appointment to the Management Committee.

The Chairman thanked the Sanctuary General Manager for the informative presentation and on behalf of the Committee offered congratulations for the work done for the homeless in Hitchin now and in the future.

RESOLVED: That the information presented be noted and that the Sanctuary be congratulated on the service provided to the homeless in Hitchin.

25. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: SUB ZERO

The Community Development Officer advised the Chairman that representatives from Sub Zero were unable to attend the meeting.

26. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: THE SAMARITANS

The representatives from The Samaritans thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee.

The Hitchin Branch of Samaritans was established in 1971 and was entirely self funded and that the Service Level Agreement from NHDC was withdrawn in 2005. Approximately £16,000 was required each year, all income was raised locally and no grants were received from Central Charity. At this branch there were 93 volunteers who operated 365 days a year – providing nearly 11,000 listening hours a year - but not 24 hours a day. Contact in the main was still by telephone (01462 and 01438 codes) although Hitchin was one of 32 texting branches in the UK. In 2008 there were over 25,000 contacts to the Hitchin Branch comprising: telephone, email, text and face to face.

The representatives clarified the high risk suicide groups: young men under 25, old people, prisoners, mental health (bullying, sexuality, loneliness, depression, physical pain, living alone, hopelessness, guilt, debt, alcohol and drug abuse, relationships, despair)

The Committee noted that funding was critical to the very existence of the Hitchin Branch and the loss of the SLA had added to the yearly problem of raising funds. The Chairman thanked the representatives for the presentation and advised that she had asked the Community Development Officer to investigate the reasons for the removal of the SLA.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the information provided on the work of the Samaritans be noted;
- (2) That the services provided by the Samaritans in Hitchin and surrounding areas be applauded;

27. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: JUMP

The representatives from the Jump North Herts Community Interest Company Ltd (JUMP) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. Mr Wiseman advised the Committee that a feasibility study had been prepared for 'A High Ropes Course for The Dell, Hitchin. JUMP had developed an exciting package of proposals that would transform The Dell into a community asset that would attract different groups of people to a selection of facilities that would be more than just a high ropes course.

JUMP carried out an audit in June and July of the footfall in The Dell which included observation of 71 visits at different times of the day with each visit less than two minutes duration. The audit confirmed that few people visit The Dell and many of these visitors engage in anti – social behaviour and that lots of people never visit this site next to Windmill Hill. There was support from current users such as a juggling group and off road bikers but, 424 out of 461 respondents agreed or strongly agreed to the provision of a high ropes course in The Dell. JUMP considered that The Dell was in a poor state which encouraged abuse and that development would deter anti – social behaviour and limit damage.

Cost estimates totalled £200,000 initial funding and running costs of £135,414 per annum which would be met by sales revenue, additional budget included £25,000 for landscaping and £20,000 for tree remedial work.

JUMP confirmed that there would be no charge to enter The Dell and that the high ropes area would be cordoned off but allowing viewing from vantage points in The Dell. Comment was made as to the proposed entry charge for a set period which might be a deterrent for a family group and how would the £200,000 capital sum be raised. JUMP would carefully review the entry fee and that they would be appointing a financial advisor to source funds such as Access to Nature and Landfill Tax.

The Chairman thanked JUMP for the presentation and the Committee complimented JUMP on the feasibility study and the work undertaken to prepare this comprehensive document.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the information update provided by JUMP be noted;
- (2) That JUMP be complimented on the quality of the Feasibility Study;

28. HITCHIN COMMUNITY SURGERIES

The Chairman referred the Committee to the Memorandum (20 July 2009) sent to all Hitchin Councillors by the Head of Strategy and Customer Services.

This memorandum had raised concern with Members and the Chairman had met with the Head of Strategy and Customer Services and clarified the reasons for enquiries made by Councillors on behalf of constituents. The Chairman confirmed that she had agreed to receive a report ' Hitchin Community Surgery' to clarify process and the 3Cs at the next meeting of the Hitchin Committee to be held on 22 September 2009.

29. CHURCHGATE AND SURROUNDING AREA: PROCUREMENT PROCESS UPDATE – INFORMATION NOTE

The Solicitor 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.

Although the anticipated date for contract award was now November 2009 rather than the August/September previously reported the Solicitor wished to re-assure the Committee that the two bidders were still preparing their proposals. This was very encouraging as elsewhere in the UK town centre developments had been put on hold or even cancelled. The Committee noted that the process would now see contract award expected in November 2009. The Solicitor referred the Committee to Appendix A which detailed activities post contract award in an eight week period

The Solicitor gave a brief update on costs expended to date and that there might have been confusion caused by different time periods being used in a previous report to the Scrutiny Committee and that the current estimate of costs was £780K – with current expenditure totalling £713 (Consultancy support and advice = £464K, Landlord functions = £121K and Planning Authority Functions = £128K) but were exclusive of internal staff resources. In response to a query the Solicitor advised that at least £200K would be recovered from the winning bidder. Several Members expressed their dismay at the escalating level of expenditure and requested that the tendering process be brought to conclusion as soon as possible whilst ensuring that the selected bid was the best scheme for Hitchin and that public consultation was essential. In response to other queries the Solicitor confirmed that the Project Team were controlling costs as much as they could but, if the procurement process took longer than currently anticipated the estimated costs would rise.

The Solicitor acknowledged that Community Involvement and Engagement was of interest to everybody in Hitchin and he confirmed that both bidders wished to hold consultations with members of the public and local interest groups. The Working Party had agreed to a proposal for a Churchgate Liaison Forum to be set up together with a dedicated section on the NHDC Website and public exhibitions. The Committee noted that all of these elements would be publicised at the appropriate time.

In response to a question on the membership of the Churchgate Liaison Forum the Solicitor proposed that there would probably be three more meetings of the Hitchin Town Centre Working Party before that was discussed further. The Solicitor suggested that it might not be possible – purely on numbers – to have every local interest represented and that there may have to be group representation.

In response to another query on the delays incurred and the possibility of further delays the Solicitor agreed that it was in nobody's interest to delay more than was necessary and that the bidders had been written to recently to emphasise this point, including a reminder that there could be closure of dialogue once the Council had identified one solution capable of meeting its needs. The Committee agreed that delay should be mitigated as much as possible and that deliverability must be a key feature of the winning bid.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the information update provided on Churchgate Development be noted;
- (2) That the Solicitor be requested to make every effort to ensure that the dialogue process was completed as soon as possible in order to commence the post dialogue eight week timetable to contract award.

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.

30. NHDC – DRAFT PARKING STRATEGY

The Transport Policy Officer (TP) presented the report of the Strategic Director of Planning, Housing and Enterprise. The TP confirmed that the current Parking Strategy expired in 2009 and he referred the Committee to the draft Parking Strategy at Appendix 1 which was presented to Cabinet on 23 June 2009 (Minute 27 refers). Cabinet had requested that the five NHDC Area Committees should be invited to review this Strategy and provide comments or make suggestions for the TP to report back to Cabinet at the meeting to be held on 8 September 2009.

The TP clarified the main components and 23 Policies of the Draft Parking Strategy 2009 to 2010 as presented at Appendix 1 and how the Strategy met the three strategic priorities of Town Centres, Green Issues and Sustainable Development. The TP described the types of car parking charges in North Hertfordshire i.e. Pay and Display and Controlled Parking Zones both of which generated income for the authority. Unfortunately the pay and display ticket machines had reached their 'sell by date' and the proposal within the draft Strategy was to look at alternatives (Policy 4) such as Pay on Foot which used a barrier entry and exit system including using the payment for parking by telephone as part of Pay and Display. The Committee noted that this change to Pay on Foot would be very expensive and required considerable change in parking management.

With regard to On Street Parking the TP referred the Committee to Policies 16,17,18, and 19 and the provision of Controlled Parking Zones in Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston and that there was potential for CPZs in Baldock and Knebworth.

The TP concluded his report with confirmation that the draft Parking Strategy did not have any reference to taxis (linked to Town Centre Strategies) and that any proposals for a PARK and RIDE scheme would be assessed within the Urban Transport Plans. The TP also confirmed that consultation with Town Centre Managers had been welcomed and valuable but as yet no comment had been received from Hertfordshire County Council.

The Chairman invited the Committee to comment and make suggestions on the draft Parking Strategy and during the discussion the Committee raised the comments and suggestions as listed at (2) below:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the contents of the Draft Parking Strategy be noted;
- (2) That the Transport Policy Officer be requested to include the following comments in his report to the next meeting of Cabinet to be held on 8 September 2009:
 - That every effort be made to introduce a concessionary rate for Residents' permits in Controlled Parking Zones;
 - That every effort should be made to have 'value for money' and drive costs down;
 - That CCTV be placed in multi – storey car parks;
 - Include in the Strategy a review for the provision and review of blue badge holders' parking bays;
 - That reference be made to the inclusion of Section 106 monies to contribute to the costs of car parking schemes in North Hertfordshire;
 - That consideration be given to variable charges for permits in Controlled Parking Zones according to for example carbon emission rates and engine capacity;
 - That the consequences of car parking migration due to increased Traffic Regulation Orders be investigated;
 - Include in the Strategy the arrangements for access by waste collection vehicles to areas with controlled parking and clarify in Policy 20;
 - That the Strategy be reviewed with an emphasis on how the proposals made for the development of parking will be implemented;
 - That the Strategy should be amended to include clarification of how the possible charges for evening and Sunday parking would be implemented and enforced;
 - That there should be increased public consultation on the Parking Strategy;
- (3) That Hitchin Councillors be requested to advise the Transport Policy Officer of any additional comments or suggestions by email no later than 14 August 2009.

REASON FOR DECISION

To contribute to the content of the Draft Parking Strategy and resulting Action Plan.

31. OUTCOME OF NORTH HERTS RETAIL SURVEY - HITCHIN

The Chairman advised the Committee that the Planning Projects Manager was indisposed and unable to attend the meeting.

There followed a brief discussion in which comment was made as to the paucity of information and the Chairman advised the Committee that the business community in Hitchin considered that there were inadequacies in the North Herts Retail Survey.

The Chairman asked the Committee to send any comments or questions that they might have on this report and the North Herts Retail Survey in the first instance to the Transport Policy Officer.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the contents of the Information Note be noted
- (2) That Councillors be requested to pass any comments on this Information Note to the Transport Policy Officer.

REASON FOR DECISION:

For the Hitchin Committee to comment further on the Information Note.

32. HITCHIN TOWN CENTRE MANAGER

The Town Centre Manager (TCM) thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee and confirmed that the 2009 Hitchin Festival had been very successful.

Twenty per cent of tickets were pre-sold for ROTW. There were more than 50 events and the lunchtime events had again proved to be very popular.

The Committee were pleased to note that Hitchin Markets Limited would celebrate 12 months of trading on 1 August 2009 and the TCM invited those present to the birthday celebrations in the afternoon to which all were invited. The TCM advised that the Mayor of Watford at a meeting of Hertfordshire Forward had expressed a wish to view Hitchin Market with the possibility of taking the Watford Indoor Market outdoors.

BIDs was going from strength to strength and a quarterly report would be presented soon and that the introduction of the three Hitchin Rangers had been a great success with many issues addressed much quicker than before. Other sources of funding would be sought from Performance Reward Grant Funding to the Local Strategic Partnership which would go to vibrant Town Centres.

The TCM concluded his report with comments on the delays to Churchgate and Hitchin Town Hall. The Hitchin business community were surprised at the delays to the selection of preferred bidder and the costs incurred to date. The TCM expressed the view that it might be possible to launch a public appeal from the Hitchin Community to manage the Town Hall as a Community Centre where Hitchin Initiative could provide administrative support. With this proposal it was suggested that should the feasibility study of the Town Hall as a site for a museum of North Hertfordshire not be proven then now would be a good time to work up a viable plan in advance and the TCM agreed that this could only move forward with the support of all community groups and local interest groups.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the information provided by the Town Centre Manager be noted;
- (2) That the Town Centre Manager be congratulated on the excellent 2009 Hitchin Festival;
- (3) That the Town Centre Manager be requested to pass on best wishes to Hitchin Market Limited on the occasion of the first birthday of operation on 1 August 2009;
- (4) That the success of the Hitchin Rangers introduced by BIDs be noted and that the Hitchin Rangers be invited to all future sessions of Hitchin Town Talk;

REASON FOR DECISION:

To continue the support of the Hitchin Committee for the well being of Hitchin and its residents.

33. CHAMPION NEWS AND FINANCE REPORT

The Community Development Officer (CDO) took the Committee through her report with specific reference to: Rhythms of the World; Community Choice; Triangle Planning Project; Cadwell Lane; Westmill Community Radio; Respect Agenda; Voice of Hitchin Youth; Highways Work Programme and Summer in North Herts;

The CDO advised the Committee that Westmill Community Radio had invited Councillor David Billing to be interviewed and that at the TASTE event held on 12 September 2009 an invitation would be offered to young peoples group to bid for funding with presentation to the Hitchin Committee in early 2010.

With respect to the carried forward and unallocated visioning budget a Highbury Ward Member requested that remedial works to gates and perimeter fencing at Hitchin Cemetery in St. John's Road be allocated as a potential use of these funds and added to the Hitchin Committee Work Programme.

The Highbury Ward Member also requested that the recent flooding in Bridge Street should be investigated by Hertfordshire Highways and that blockage by leaves and detritus was not the main cause of flooding with the likely problem thought to be a malfunctioning pump.

The CDO confirmed that there were no grant applications before the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the actions taken by the Community Development Officer to promote greater community capacity and well being since the last meeting be noted;
- (2) That the budgetary expenditure and balances within the Visioning, Development and Ward budgets be noted;
- (3) That the Community Development Officer be requested to add the following highways scheme to Appendix C ' Highways Work Programme' and notify the Area Service Manager at Hertfordshire Highways: 'Repeated flooding in Bridge Street, Hitchin';
- (4) That the Community Development Officer be requested to add to the Hitchin Committee Work Programme at Appendix E ' Cemetery Gates and Railings in St.John's Road, Hitchin;
- (5) That the Community Development Officer be requested to investigate the possibility of financing the scheme at (4) above from carried forward funds in the Visioning Budget.

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 9.13 p.m.

.....
Chairman

