

**HITCHIN COMMITTEE  
16 NOVEMBER 2010**

**\*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

**AGENDA ITEM No.**

**TITLE OF REPORT: PROGRESS ON HALLS AND COMMUNITY CENTRES STRATEGY**

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL SERVICES

**1. SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise Members of the Area Committee that a Centres and Halls Strategy is currently being developed for North Hertfordshire District Council, and to advise Members on the progress achieved to date.

**2. FORWARD PLAN**

- 2.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and has not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 It is widely accepted that Community Centres and Community Halls play a valuable role in the communities that they serve. However the provision of halls, their ownership and management throughout North Hertfordshire varies greatly. Their usage, condition and viability is also variable so in developing a Strategy for the Halls and Community Centres of North Hertfordshire Officers have sort to identify, map, and survey the multi use community halls that exist currently in order that gaps, overlaps and needs for enhancements can be recognised.
- 3.2 The need for a Centres and Halls Strategy was identified in April 2009 by the Strategic Director of Planning, Housing and Enterprise. This requirement was at that time in specific relation to support the Council's Supplementary Planning Guidance in the need to provide evidence of need for any Section 106 payment that may be pursued by the Council in relation to future housing developments in the district.
- 3.3 However it's development, in the current economic climate, has lead to an appreciation of the need for the strategy to encompass the wider perspective of the Council's views on its own role in the current and future operational, needs and support of it's own Managed Halls and Urban Community Centres.
- 3.4 There has also been a recognition of the need to define the Council's position in terms of support of the Village and other Community Halls located in the district, particularly in the light of the recent £1.25m investment in the Parish Amenity Capital Improvement Scheme (PACIF) which is now in its final year.

- 3.5 Work undertaken to date has involved various surveys of the community facilities in the district to establish their current physical condition, their utilisation levels, the nature and scope of their attendance and the nature and extent of community services provided. This work has also taken into account other facilities to those mentioned above e.g. church halls, scout huts and other facilities operated by the community & voluntary sector in the urban areas.
- 3.6 Details of the community facilities surveyed, indicating the estimated extent of capital works required upon each to bring them up to current operating and legislative standards, are shown as APPENDICES 1.1 and 1.2.
- 3.7 A list of the urban facilities operated and surveyed in the Hitchin area is shown as APPENDIX 2.
- 3.8 Analysis of the costs and income associated with the Council's directly Managed Halls has been undertaken, as has the establishment, where possible, of the financial position of Community Centres, from published accounts in order assist in the clarification of options for future leasing arrangements with the Management Associations currently operating those facilities when leases come up for renewal.
- 3.9 APPENDIX 3 gives details of the NHDC operating costs for the districts Urban Community Centres, and the three Managed Halls, for the last three years.
- 3.10 The current financial operating positions of the Community Centres is currently being established from their last published accounts.
- 3.11 A mapping exercise has been undertaken to establish the location of all Managed Halls, Community Centres and Village Halls in the district in relation to their local population density. This is to develop a 'Quantative Standard' of current community facility provision per 1000 head of population, which will assist the Council in defining future community facility needs in respect of any housing development that may be proposed. This information will also be used in respect of defining whether Section 106 payments may be appropriate from developers in respect of any proposed new housing developments. The locations map resulting from this exercise is shown as APPENDIX 4.
- 3.12 From surveys, it has been established that people would be prepared to walk for up to twenty minutes to their local Centre or Hall. The mapping exercise also indicates that distance in relation to all facilities in the district 800m – 1200m based on an assumed average walking speed of 3 miles/hour. This information will be used in the locational assessment for any future proposed Community Centres that may be required as part of future housing developments.
- 3.13 The ideal design and configuration of any future proposed Community Centre is to be addressed in the Strategy. Using a standard developed for the proposed regeneration of Ivel Court an 'Employers Specification' has been established for any new builds. Information has also been obtained by researching other authorities approach to the design of new Centres, in respect of multi use. This is to create a design rationale for new builds as being true 'Community Venues' incorporating perhaps the traditional use of the building with the provision of leisure services, local policing, healthcare etc, thus removing the notion of the building being just a ' hall for hire', and allowing greater opportunities for sustainable funding

## **4. ISSUES**

- 4.1 The three Managed Halls operated directly by the Council run at a considerable cost to the local taxpayer. As can be seen from APPENDIX 3 the cost of providing the service far outweighs the income received. In addition as shown in APPENDIX 5 the utilisation of the three halls is relatively low.
- 4.2 The Urban Community Centres owned by the Council and operated by local voluntary organisation are aging and, despite certain repairs being provided by Council under the terms of their respective leases, all are now in need of considerable investment to allow their sustainability. Many of the original leases are now coming up for renewal and this gives the Council an opportunity to reassess how it can determine future support in the operation of these facilities.
- 4.3 As can be seen from APPENDIX 1.2 the condition survey undertaken on the district's Village Halls has also shown a considerable amount of investment is required in these buildings if they are to continue to support the local populations they serve.
- 4.4 The Council has no obligations to support these facilities, but has made match funding available by means of the Parish Amenity Capital Improvement Fund (PACIF). This fund has allocated £1.25 m to rural capital projects over the last six years, predominantly to Village Halls for refurbishments and improvements.
- 4.5 With no funding beyond 2010/11 available in the Council Capital Programme the Council will need to consider what role it can play in ensuring the sustainability of these facilities in the future.

## **5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 No input from Legal Department

## **6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 Funding of £7,500.00 for the condition survey of halls was secured via the NHDC Strategic Priority Fund in 2009-10.
- 6.2 Other work associated with the development of the Halls & Community Centres Strategy has been contained within existing work plans and resources.
- 6.3 No input from Risk Management

## **7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 There are no direct Human Resource implications arising from this report.
- 7.2 Halls and Community Centres are traditionally seen to be more important to rural residents where alternative facilities are less likely to be on hand. They are also considered to be of most important to younger and older residents who rely more heavily on very local facilities. The impact on any proposed changes on these particular population groups will be addressed within the Strategy itself.

## 8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

8.1 A cross party Member Steering Group has been established to guide officers in respect of the format and content of the strategy to ensure that it addresses the salient issues in the best interests of the Council and members of the Community.

8.2 Members on this group are:-

- Councillor Levett
- Councillor Cowley
- Councillor Lovewell
- Councillor Courts
- Councillor Kirby

8.3 A Member briefing event was held on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2010 to provide Members with a background to the need for a Centres and Halls Strategy, provide information on progress on the document, and to gather the views and comments from Members in relation to the matters to be addressed in its development.

8.4 Significant points that came from Members in respect of the establishment of the Centres and Halls Strategy were:-

- Village and Urban Halls should be treated differently
- The level of spend on Hitchin Town Hall is inequitable
- Council needs to 'put its own house in order' in respect of its Managed Halls, which should be run on commercial lines.
- Council should look to transfer its Managed Halls to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sector and that they show a breakeven investment after three years.
- Community Centres rents and rate relief should be based on their respective bank balances, with ability to pay determined from published accounts.
- Community Centres should be encouraged to develop sinking funds to remove Council obligations for repairs under new leases.
- Means of support to Centres and Halls, offering advice on best practice, and making maintenance and operating support possible via a collective approach offering economies of scale is needed.
- There has been a renaissance in Village Hall usage over recent years, with the demise of village shops and pubs, and they should continue to be supported.
- It should be recognised that a considerable amount of other 3<sup>rd</sup> sector community facility capacity also exists outside of that provided directly or indirectly by the Council.
- Could more use be made of the parish precept ?

8.5 Recognising the valuable role played by these facilities and to gauge the need for support for the sustainability of Community Centres and Village Halls, in addition to the surveys discussed above, all of these facilities in the district have been contacted for their views on how the Council might provide (non financial) support to their operations going forward. This enquiry and offer of support has been very well received by those that have responded thus far.

- 8.6 The Community Facilities Manager has had meetings with officers on Portsmouth City Council, which has similar Community Centre stock to that of NHDC, and which has also identified a need for a similar strategy document. A meeting has also been held with the Community Development Agency (CDA) for North Hertfordshire, Village Halls Advisor, to obtain his views on the nature of support that could be provided by NHDC to these facilities in the future.
- 8.7 A inaugural meeting of Hitchin Community Centre Managers and has been held to discuss operating issues and problems, to help assist the Council to seek information on and support for a more collective approach, co-ordinated by NHDC in terms of facility operation in the future. This was very much welcomed by those present with many ideas developed. It is planned to hold a follow up meeting in the new year with Managers from other urban Centres invited to attend. It is hoped that these meetings will now form the platform for regular meetings during the year.
- 8.8 In respect of Village Halls. The Council held a series of rural events on an approximate six monthly basis for Village Halls Managers / volunteers etc in 2004/05. These gave operational advice and support and proved to be popular but were discontinued when attendance started to drop. It is hoped to resurrect a similar scenario in the future perhaps using the annual Rural Conference as a platform for that dialogue to resume.

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 That Members note the need for a Centres and Halls Strategy, and to give their support in its development and implementation.
- 9.2 That Members note the extent of those facilities surveyed in 2007/08 in Hitchin as shown in APPENDIX 2 and make comment if this is felt it no longer represents the extent of the provision currently being provided.

## **10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 10.1 To enable the establishment of a strategic position to provide best value for those facilities operated directly by NHDC, and those owned by NHDC but operated by the local community, and those who operate entirely independently to serve the North Hertfordshire population.
- 10.2 To ensure the mapping of facilities is as accurate as possible to ensure overlaps, and gaps in provision can be recorded and address appropriately.

## **11. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 11.1 The alternative to developing a Centres and Halls Strategy would be for the Council to be unable to quantify the level and extent of service provision required by the Authority from its Managed Halls and Community Centres. It would also mean that the Council was unable to specify the level and nature of support it can provide to the Village Hall community, and be unable to appropriately justify for Community facility funding from prospective developers in relation to existing service provision or that to be provided in the future, and that there would be no co-ordination or planning for the future..

## **12. APPENDICES**

- Appendix 1 Centres and Halls condition survey summaries (two pages)
- Appendix 2 Community & Voluntary sector community facilities in Baldock
- Appendix 3 Operating Costs for the Urban Community Centres and the NHDC Managed Halls
- Appendix 4 Centres and Halls location map
- Appendix 5 Managed Halls utilisation figures

## **13. CONTACT OFFICERS**

- 13.1 Peter Underwood, Community Facilities Manager, Tel 01462 474669
- 13.2 Lynn Saville, Head of Community & Cultural Services, Tel 01462 474530
- 13.3 David Scholes, Strategic Director of Planning, Housing and Enterprise, Tel 01462 474836

## **14. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None