

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

INFORMAL MEETING OF THE HITCHIN COMMITTEE

**Hitchin Boys School, Grammar School Walk Hitchin,
Monday 13 October 2014 at 7.30 p.m.**

NOTES

PRESENT: *Councillors: David Leal – Bennett (Chairman), Deborah Segalini (Vice – Chairman), Allison Ashley, Judi Billing, Paul Clark, Simon Harwood, Joan Kirby, Bernard Lovewell, Alan Millard, Frank Radcliffe Ray Shakespeare – Smith and Adrian Smith.*

Councillor Julian Cunningham – Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport

IN ATTENDANCE: *Nigel Schofield - Committee and Member Services Officer*

*Note: Councillor Adrian Smith joined the meeting at 7.48 p.m.
Councillor Julian Cunningham left the meeting at 8.32 p.m.*

At commencement 28 members of the public.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Richard Thake.

2. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There were no items of other business raised at the commencement of the meeting.

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to this Informal Meeting of the Hitchin Committee which was convened to discuss the proposals by North Hertfordshire District Council to increase car parking charges in Hitchin at Short Stay Car Parks in the evening after 6p.m. and overnight as well as all day on Sundays. The Chairman advised that this was an informal meeting of the Hitchin Committee as there had not been enough time to call a scheduled meeting. The Chairman also wished to place on record his thanks to Democratic Services at NHDC for their assistance in arranging this meeting and to the Business Manager at Hitchin Boys School for providing this venue at short notice.

The Chairman read out the advice to Councillors regarding any declarations of interest:

Members are reminded that any declarations of interest in respect of any business set out in the agenda should be declared as either a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest or Declarable Interest and are required to notify the Chairman of the nature of any interest declared at the commencement of the relevant item on the agenda. Members declaring a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest must withdraw from the meeting for the duration of the item. Members declaring a Declarable Interest which requires they leave the room under Paragraph 7.4 of the Code of Conduct, can speak on the item, but must leave the room before the debate and vote.

The Chairman sought permission and received no objection from those present to a sound recording of the proceedings. The Chairman requested that all speakers should announce their name and speak clearly into the microphones.

The Chairman advised that another reason for holding this informal Meeting was the lack of a full consultation with local businesses and community groups since the proposals for increased car parking charges in North Herts were agreed by Council at the meeting held on 13 February 2014 (Minute 87 refers).

4. SETTING THE SCENE – COUNCILLOR JULIAN CUNNINGHAM – PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR POLICY AND TRANSPORT

Councillor Julian Cunningham the NHDC Executive Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the informal meeting of the Hitchin Committee. Councillor Cunningham advised that he would take questions based on fact only as the Consultation period had been extended to Friday 17 October 2014 and that he would not want to prejudice any aspect of the consultation process and give false premise and that he would leave the meeting after his presentation.

The Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport made the following comments:

1. Initially there had been a very short consultation period which on representation had been extended and that with hindsight it would have been appropriate to make the consultation period much longer;
2. This consultation period was exactly that and no final decisions on a new tariff had been made;
3. Councillor Cunningham advised that he would listen to all suggestions which would be tested against base criteria;
4. The proposals to increase car parking tariffs had been agreed at Council on 13 February 2014 in line with the Councils' Parking Strategy;
5. There had been no increase in car parking tariffs since 2010;
6. The increase in inflation totalled 13.45 per cent since April 2010;
7. There was acceptance that any increase in car parking charges would be resisted by current users;
8. High Street Shopping statistics showed a turn down in footfall which had an effect on car park charges income;
9. The proposed increase of 16.6 per cent was the total figure but officers had investigated every individual car park in North Herts which was considered to be reasonable across the four main towns and the District as a whole;
10. Consequently a proposed solution was to increase long term parking tariffs and that the one hour parking or less sector was the most used at 48 per cent;
11. The long term car parks tariffs could be increased by 30 per cent;
12. An increase to the time of each parking sector was considered;
13. The income from long term car parks was a significant part of the car parking income;
14. No car parking tariffs were being raised at the 16.6 per cent inflation rate;
15. Councillor Cunningham stated that on balance the proposed changes to car parking tariffs were the most appropriate to meet the needs of increased income as part of the Corporate Business Planning – Budget for 2014-2015;
16. There would be a 'price freeze' on the 1 hour parking charge at all car parks in North Herts;
17. It was proposed to introduce parking charges in Hitchin Town Centre Short Stay Car parks between 18.00 and 0800 from Monday to Saturday and all day on Sunday until 0800 on a Monday morning;
18. All of the car parking proposals were to be for the benefit of the residents of North Herts;
19. This increase would be for a trial period only and comparison had been made with other local authorities;
20. The proposed new charge of £1 after 6p.m. and overnight and on a Sunday were made to offset the no increase for one hour's parking for £1;
21. It was accepted that there might be a dip in the users of all car parks with the introduction of new charges but from experience the user level increased back to normal after 6 to 8 weeks.
22. Councillor Cunningham hoped that the Council had made these proposals in the correct format that would meet the budget requirements;
23. The evening economy was based to a large extent in Hitchin;
24. Councillor Cunningham sought to allay the perception that these proposals were targeted against Hitchin and that this was not the case;
25. Hitchin car parks were utilised heavily by the evening economy that was most prevalent in this town and much more than the other three towns in North Herts;
26. Woodside Long Stay Car Park was not included in the proposals;
27. If the trial period was a success in Hitchin then the proposals would be applied in Letchworth, Baldock and Royston;
28. If the total package of the increase in car park charges was implemented in full it

- would not necessarily meet the set income targets;
29. The short stay car parks in Hitchin were the most used in North Hertfordshire;
 30. All car parks in North Hertfordshire had set maintenance costs that had to be covered by car park charges;
 31. All users of the car parks should contribute to the running costs of the NHDC car parks;
 32. There would only need to be one car parking ticket at £1 purchased for the period from 18.00 on a Saturday to 0800 on a Monday morning;

The Chairman thanked Councillor Cunningham for the clarification of the proposed increases in car parking charges in Hitchin and North Hertfordshire and invited questions and or comments from Members.

Councillor Cunningham made the following responses:

Q. Why will you leave the meeting after your presentation?

A. This is a consultation with Hitchin Initiative and Hitchin Committee only and that it was an open consultation and he would not ignore any comments made by other groups or individuals outside this meeting, it was essential that this remained so at this meeting and that there should be no influence from interested parties at this meeting.

Q. Commuters to London and elsewhere are now using Hitchin long stay car park due to price differences.;

A. There were many users of Hitchin car parks who live outside of the town and work in Hitchin and the Council was aware of this problem.

Q. What actions have other Councils taken to increase income from car parking charges;

A. Other schemes were considered and that the 'free after three' parking in Royston was in fact supported financially by the Royston and District Area Committee.

Q. What would be done about the inevitable down turn in ticket sales following the increases?

A. If the scheme was approved by Cabinet in November there would be no changes until January 2015. Traffic Regulation Orders need to be advertised and implemented, the ticket machines have to be altered, public notices have to be placed in the local media with more advertisement that would be seen by the public.

Q. What would be the length of the trial period?

A. The original proposal was from October 2014 to April 2015 and an assessment of the public reaction to the increases would affect the income stream but it must be noted that it was very important to meet the 16.6 per cent income target.

Q. Had the effect of these price increases on local businesses been assessed? Why are there no local businesses in the consultation process? What about town centre residents as there will be much more pressure on local residential streets by commuters? Has the car parking income increased since the last price rise in 2010?

A. The effect on businesses had not been disregarded and all businesses are affected to a greater or lesser extent; The potential impact of the price increase was assessed and that any change would have an impact; It was not the intention to force users out of Hitchin town centre car park. The parking in residential streets was an ongoing issue and the implementation of Controlled Parking Zones required consultation, TROs had to be published and such parking zones had to be reviewed in totality of the NHDC car parking arrangements and strategy; The income from car parking charges included the fines paid under Fixed Penalty Notices and had increased marginally over the District.

Q. Why was Hitchin chosen for a trial period of the new parking charges and not say Letchworth Garden City?

A. Officers had reviewed evening car parking patterns throughout North Hertfordshire and Hitchin had by far the most evening usage which confirmed the vibrant and hopefully sustainable evening economy in Hitchin.

From a member of the public:

Q. What are the plans for and costs of enforcement over an extended period if the £1 charge was introduced?

A. There is an enforcement scheme in the evenings and a new enforcement plan in preparation the details of which he was unable to disclose and it had only been in the last few months that there had been a full complement of Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) to make evening patrols. There would of course be an incremental effect on costs but officers would be on flexible contracts of employment and Councillor Cunningham confirmed that there were no financial incentives or targets for CEOs on Penalty Charge Notices.

From a Hitchin BID Director:

Q. What are (if any) the Performance Indicators – apart from income- to assess the trial period and what are the plans (if any) to introduce entry and exit barriers with timed tickets at the NHDC Car parks?

A. The Primary Performance Indicator is income and there will be full review of the parking operations in the financial year 2015-2016 and the issue of barriers with ticketing and pay on exit would be assessed and reported at the appropriate time should the budget be available.

From a Christchurch Representative:

Q. Was Councillor Cunningham aware that the land occupied by the short stay car park was let to the Council and that within the lease it stated that there was to be no charge for parking on this land on a Sunday?

A. Councillor Cunningham was aware of this issue and it was expected that there would be a solution that met the objectives and needs of Christchurch and that the consultation period was still ongoing.

From a member of the public:

Q. The enforcement of parking at the Lairage would be difficult and questioned whether the current facility could be used safely.

A. There are objections from local residents to the use of the Lairage beyond its current opening times and the car park was closed at 7 p.m. on safety grounds.

Q. Should the proposed increase in car parking charges be agreed by Cabinet what was the forecast income in a 12 month period.

A. In a full year the projected additional income from all car parks was £240,000 and that Hitchin was expected to contribute £160,000 of this total based on current usage.

Q. Are there parking times for 30 minutes in the short stay car parks?

A. Parking for less than one hour can be found at on –street parking and no decision had been made on any specific changes to car parking times.

Councillor Cunningham stated that should there be any alternative suggestions for the car parking in Hitchin or North Herts made by interested parties the proposals should be supported by fact and accurate data. As Portfolio Holder he had been tasked by Cabinet to attain recovery of the 16.6 per cent inflation since the last price increase in 2010. The Council had to raise revenue from various services or cut services to meet the year on year reductions in grant from central government and car parking charges were one way to achieve this. Finally Councillor Cunningham advised those present that his published letter on car parking in the Comet dated 9 October was his alone but he was not responsible for the headline.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Cunningham once more for the presentation and for answering the questions raised by Councillors, Members of the Public and local interested parties and on a personal observation confirmed that St Mary's short stay car park was always full on a Sunday.

AGREED: That Councillor Julian Cunningham be thanked for the clarification of the reasons for the proposed increases in car parking charges in Hitchin and North Hertfordshire.

6. PRESENTATION – HITCHIN FORUM

Mr Mike Clarke of Hitchin Forum thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee and thanked Councillor Cunningham for attending the meeting and providing more detail behind the current proposals for increasing car parking charges in North Herts.

Mr Clarke advised that he had organised the on-line petition ‘ **NHDC should not introduce evening and Sunday parking charges in Hitchin until they have fully consulted local residents and businesses**’ that at the date of this meeting had secured more than 2,300 signatures in support of the petition.

Mr Clarke opined that the two weeks consultation period was insufficient to take into account the economic needs of local businesses and the heavy demand for parking spaces on a Sunday. Price increases could well become a deterrent for local residents and visitors to Hitchin. Mr Clarke considered that there were many local community groups, worshippers at St Mary’s Church, shoppers and visitors to Hitchin – especially those from local villages - who would be affected by the proposed evening and Sunday charges. Also, the charging could have an effect on charitable organisations who held fund raising events in the Market Square.

Mr Clarke restated that the two week consultation was far too short and that a trial period should be considered to be a pilot and how would the impact of increased prices and new prices (evenings and Sundays) be measured? Mr Clarke was pleased to acknowledge the extension of the consultation period to Friday 17th October.

The Chairman thanked Mr Clarke for the presentation and on the success of the online petition and also stated that the extension to the consultation period was necessary and important to ensure that as much involvement could take place between residents, local businesses and NHDC.

AGREED:

- (1) That Mr Mike Clarke of Hitchin Forum be thanked for the presentation;
- (2) That the comments made by Mr Clarke concerning the effect of increased car parking charges in Hitchin be noted;

7. PRESENTATION – ST. MARYS CHURCH

The Chairman invited Mr E. Kisby as a representative of St Mary’s Church to address the meeting.

Mr Kisby thanked the Chairman and stated that he and St Mary’s Church were very concerned at the proposal to charge for car parking on a Sunday in the town centre. The location of St Mary’s Church at the heart of Hitchin was itself perhaps a misfortune for the mixed congregation, old, infirm, young children who would now have to pay for parking on a Sunday. Also, there was regular use of the Church during the week for choir practice (Tuesdays and Fridays) and Church House in Churchyard was used for youth and church activities and there would be insufficient time to just ‘drop off’ and payment of the proposed £1 would have to be made. If Woodside Long Stay car park was used then this would be a ten minute walk each way which could only be regarded as a deterrent to the many users of the Church and Church House.

Mr Kisby advised the Committee that HMRC granted exemption to charitable organisations and questioned as to why the Local Authority could not do the same for such bodies in North Hertfordshire. Mr Kisby urged the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport to enter into discussions with local charitable organisations to enquire about the possibility of providing a discount or even a dispensation that would allow current users of the short term car parks to continue with worship or recreational activities.

The Chairman thanked Mr Kisby for his comments and that the potential problems that would come with charging in the evening and on a Sunday, especially for charitable organisations and younger persons activities such as Brownies, should be highlighted in the consultation period.

AGREED: That Mr Kisby be thanked for identifying potential problems for short stay car park users in the town centre in the evenings and on a Sunday following the implementation of the £1 charge.

8. PRESENTATION – HITCHIN INITIATIVE

Declarations of Interest:

Councillor Judi Billing: Director of Hitchin Initiative

Councillor David Leal – Bennett – NHDC Representative to Hitchin Initiative
Councillor Bernard Lovewell – Member of Hitchin Initiative on a personal basis.
Each Councillor did not consider that their declared interest required departure from the room.

Morag Norgan thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. She was speaking as a Director of Hitchin Initiative. Ms Norgan confirmed that the Initiative did not wish to challenge the proposal to increase car parking fees in line with inflation since 2010 but did object in the most strongest terms to the proposal to introduce new parking tariffs that would make charges applicable on an evening after 6 p.m. and all day on a Sunday and the pilot which would only apply to Hitchin. Ms Norgan distributed to the Hitchin councillors present a spread sheet analysis of the Initiative proposals as an alternative to the NHDC figures and new parking charges for evenings and on a Sunday. Ms Norgan thanked the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport for the extension to Friday 17 October of the consultation period and a personal meeting to discuss the car parking proposals.

The Initiative accepted that at the moment the Hitchin Evening Economy was vibrant but in effect was a showcase for the daytime economy and that the evening £1 charge would although in itself modest would certainly impinge on marginal businesses and a few might fail. Ms Norgan opined that this small charge could eventually have a large impact on the town. Particular concern had been expressed by those outlets with lower prices such as £5 for fast food and £3 for a gym visit and this could mean a loss of ten per cent of turnover which might represent the profit.

The Initiative considered that any increase in charges should reflect costs and not just an income generation stream for the Council and the Initiative were concerned that the lack of information on car parking staff deployment and a cost analysis of the proposals meant that the consultation period was purely about revenue which the Initiative did not think reflected the true picture. Ms Norgan stated that the recent charging by Stevenage Borough Council of £1.60 in the evening had a marked effect on the evening economy and that car park users had migrated to Old Town in Stevenage, The Leisure Park and even to Hitchin.

It was the view of the Initiative that charging for car parking on a Sunday was very unrealistic as Hitchin was invariably very busy on a Sunday and charging would be a deterrent for users in their leisure time. Sunday car boot sales in Hitchin were very popular and Hitchin Markets Ltd could seek exemption for the free marking available on Market days for traders and Ms Norgan cited Bedford Borough Council who had ceased charging on a Sunday and introduced free parking for two hours on a Saturday.

Despite the progress made during the public consultation so far and success of the on line petition Ms Norgan put forward a request for an extension to the consultation period up to Friday 24 October which would allow more public opinion by way of social media and survey monkey and that the petitioners, residents and civic and community groups would have to make a choice of increased day time parking charges or evening and Sundays. Ms Norgan referred the Hitchin Members present to the Initiative spreadsheet of the projected £150K income without the need to introduce car parking charges in the evening on a Sunday and consequently there was no need for a trial or pilot. However, in line with the Initiative proposal for increased charges during other parking timed periods the freezing of the £1 charge for one hour parking had the support of the Initiative.

As there was a requirement of the Portfolio Holder to raise income from car parking charges the Initiative wished to put forward a proposal that the use of the Lairage Multi storey should be increased to 24/7 following promotion, signage and some physical improvements and above all competitive charging. Additional security would be provided by the use of BID night rangers. Contrary to this the Woodside Car was being used more by commuters and this was to the detriment of Hitchin Town Centre visitors and therefore the charging periods should be adjusted to deter this commuter parking.

Ms Norgan requested that the car parking charges proposals should be re-visited bearing in mind the Initiative proposals which was an alternative approach as well as the requested additional week of consultation up to 24 October 2014.

AGREED:

- (1) That Morag Norgan of Hitchin Initiative be thanked for the presentation;
- (2) That the Hitchin Initiative alternative proposals for car parking charges in Hitchin had the support of the Hitchin Councillors present at this Informal Meeting;
- (3) That the proposal to increase the opening hours of the Lairage Multi Storey Car Park be noted;
- (4) That the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport be requested to recognise the support of the Hitchin Councillors present for the proposals put forward by Hitchin Initiative.
- (5) That the consultation period be extended to 24 October 2014 which would provide Hitchin Initiative with sufficient time to complete their own consultation and subsequently make the full report available to the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport.

9. MEMBERS' DISCUSSION - NHDC PROPOSED CAR PARKING CHARGES

The Chairman advised the Committee that Councillor Richard Thake (tendered apologies) had stated his opinion in an email that the day time economy should not subsidise the evening economy when using Hitchin Car Parks. Another Councillor advised that the evening economy visitors were in the main the same as the daytime economy i.e. from the same family unit.

Following a short discussion the Chairman proposed that the meeting should move forward to preparing recommendations for consideration by the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR POLICY AND TRANSPORT

The Chairman thanked all who had made a presentation to the Committee including the discussions with the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport, Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Initiative, Hitchin BID, St Marys' Church and Christ Church which had been very helpful.

Following a short discussion Members stated that they supported the proposals made by Hitchin Initiative including the request for an extension of the consultation period to Friday 24 October 2014. Members supported the proposed increase in charges made by Hitchin Initiative to the current tariffs for Hitchin Car Parks above the £1 for one hour charge (which would be unchanged) and to retain no charging on a Sunday or after 6 p.m. Monday to Saturday. A Member considered that the Hitchin Initiative proposal was a good opportunity to promote a community based car parking scheme for Hitchin. Another Member stated that Hitchin Initiative were very experienced in the management of Hitchin Town Centre and that Councillor Cunningham was very sincere and that he would be open to all suggestions and ideas concerning the need to raise revenue from the increase in car parking charges. With regard to the proposal by Hitchin Initiative to open the Lairage Multi Storey Car Park for increased hours – up to a 24 hours per day basis a Member suggested that the installation of CCTV cameras would be necessary to improve security.

The Chairman proposed and the Members present agreed unanimously that the following issues be forwarded to the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport for his consideration.

AGREED:

That the Members of the Hitchin Committee present requested that the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport be advised of the following issues agreed in the debate:

1. The Committee did not support a Pilot Study on the current proposed car parking charges for Hitchin;
2. That the proposal to extend the Consultation Period by another week to Friday 24 October 2014 be agreed;
3. That the Committee supported the draft proposals for car parking charges made by Hitchin Initiative (as tabled at the meeting);
4. That the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport be advised that Hitchin Initiative did not seek to hold a trial of their proposals;
5. That the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Transport be requested to take forward the agreed items above in the report of the Strategic Director of Planning, Transport and Enterprise to the meeting of Cabinet on 24 November 2014.

11. FURTHER ACTION

It was agreed that the next step would be to await the outcomes of the meeting of Cabinet scheduled for Monday 24 November 2014.

The Informal Meeting of the Hitchin Committee closed at 9.18 p.m.

Chairman