

**NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
SOUTHERN RURAL COMMITTEE
(Cadwell, Chesfield, Codicote, Hitchwood, Offa & Hoo, Kimpton
and Knebworth Wards)**

**Minutes of the meeting held at Knebworth Village Hall, Knebworth
on Thursday 1 October 2009 at 7.30 p.m.**

MINUTES

PRESENT: Councillors Alan Bardett (Vice-Chairman), John Bishop, Tom Brindley, Jane Gray, Sal Jarvis, and Mrs C.P.A. Strong.

IN ATTENDANCE: John Robinson (Strategic Director of Customer Services), Andrew Mills (Service Manager – Grounds Maintenance), Wendy Tooke (Policy Officer), Garry Gover (Community Development Officer), Hilary Dineen (Committee and Member Services Officer).

ALSO PRESENT: County Councillor Richard Thake (Hertfordshire County Council Executive Member for Education and Skills), Councillor Tricia Cowley (Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs), Margaret Bracey (Community Development Officer) and 6 members of the public

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D.J. Barnard, Lee Downie and David Miller.

30. MINUTES – 30 JULY 2009

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 July 2009 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chairman.

31. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was discussed at the meeting.

32. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

- (1) The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting;
- (2) The Chairman announced that the next meeting of the Southern Rural Committee would be held at District Council Offices on 26 November 2009;
- (3) The Chairman reminded the Members that any declarations of interest in respect of any business set out in the agenda should be declared as either a prejudicial or personal 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 prejudicial interest should leave the room and not seek to influence the decision during that particular item.

33. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – BARLEYFIELDS CHILDRENS CENTRE

Sue Smith, Manager of Barleyfields Children's Centre thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. She advised that the Barleyfields Children's Centre was a new centre which covered Knebworth and Woolmer Green. It had been open for approximately 1 year and had received official designation on 27 September 2009. The Centre was based in Woolmer Green, however provided the following services around the Community:

- Support to local families;
- One stop shop for families with children up to the age of 5 years;
- Parenting programmes;
- Outreach programmes;

- Work with Childminders;
- Partnership working with Job Centres;
- Partnership working with antenatal services;
- Needs led services.

Members asked several questions including whether the Centre had forged links with NHDC and what facilities were available at the Centre Base.

Ms Smith informed Members that links with NHDC had so far been in respect of funding opportunities, however she remained in close contact with NHDC Community Development Officers and that although the Centre has based at Woolmer Green Village Hall, most work would be on an outreach basis with families able to access services from any one of the Children's Centres in the area.

The Chairman thanked Ms Smith for her informative presentation and congratulated the Barleyfields Children's Centre on the progress made to date and the work being undertaken.

34. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – HITCHIN TOWN HALL MUSEUM FEASIBILITY STUDY

Mr Brian Foreman thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. He informed Members that he had been a resident of Hitchin for 45 years and advised that, in his opinion, the feasibility study which had been undertaken to ascertain whether Hitchin Town Hall would be suitable for a Museum had made residents feel threatened and furious and that these feelings had been about the potential loss of a community space for up to 200 people in the main hall and a further 50 people in the committee room. He expressed concern about the continuation of existing community activities which took place in the Town Hall including badminton, aerobics, lunch clubs and Parish Meetings. He advised that Hitchin Town Hall was a vital part of community life with large scale events such as festivals, dances, weddings and smaller regular bookings by clubs and societies being under threat. He stated that he believed that community use of the Town Hall could be increased and expressed concern at the options detailed in the Feasibility Study, which he felt would also damage the architectural integrity of the building.

35. INTERIM GREEN SPACE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE

The Service Manager – Grounds Maintenance presented the report of the Head of Leisure and Environmental Services regarding the Interim Green Space Management Strategy for North Hertfordshire. He informed Members that this strategy drew together a number of existing strategies into one document, which would enable a more cohesive approach to green space management. He stated that this Strategy was a global approach which considered the infrastructure, future commitments and opportunities to offer proactive management of green spaces. He drew attention to Paragraph 4.4 of the report which detailed the 7 Action Plans which had been produced to support the delivery of the Management Objectives and gave a brief overview as follows:

- Cemeteries and Closed Churchyards Action Plan
A new document which detailed issues to be addressed;
- Biodiversity Action Plan
An ongoing approach to address issues across the District;
- Tree Strategy
Considers the proactive maintenance of trees, mainly in Highways locations, to ensure their safety for future generations;
- Green Space Action Plan
Considers large spaces such as Howard Gardens as well as small spaces which are used informally;
- Outdoor Play Facilities Action Plan
Includes 50 playgrounds and considering ongoing maintenance, costs and play experience;

- Outdoor Sport Facilities Action Plan
Includes cricket, rugby, football, bowls and also looks at supporting facilities such as pavilions
- Allotments Action Plan
Looks at options available to deal with the surge in demand as there is currently a waiting list for allotments.

Members debated the report including whether green spaces which cross or are immediately across the District Boundary should be included on any maps produced; what was the current position regarding the proposed relocation of the Countryside Management Service to Great Ashby and that recognition was needed of the work undertaken by Parish Councils regarding rural green spaces.

The Service Manager – Grounds Maintenance informed Members that consideration would be given to including green spaces which cross or were close to the district boundary on future maps and that Officers were liaising with the Countryside Management Service regarding any relocation plans.

Members drew attention to the following facilities which should be included in future maps and amendments required:

- New cemetery in Ickleford was not indicated on the map provided;
- The population of Great Ashby as detailed in Appendix C would appear to be incorrect.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Interim Green Space Management Strategy and Associated Action Plans be supported;
- (2) That consideration be given to including green spaces which either cross or are near the district boundary on all maps produced;
- (3) That the following be addressed:
 - (i) The new Cemetery at Ickleford be included on any maps associated with the Interim Green Space Management Strategy;
 - (ii) The population figures relating to Great Ashby as detailed in Appendix C of the report be reassessed and corrected.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable Southern Rural Committee to comment on the Interim Green Space Management Strategy for North Hertfordshire prior to implementation.

36. HITCHIN TOWN HALL - MUSEUM FEASIBILITY STUDY - UPDATE ON PROGRESS

Prior to the commencement of this item Councillor Strong stated that she was in the process of becoming a trustee of the Gymnasium Trust, but that she would take part in the debate and vote.

The Strategic Director for Customer Services presented the report of the Head of Community and Cultural Services regarding Hitchin Town Hall – Museum Feasibility Study – Update on Progress. He advised that the report outlined the feasibility study, which had been undertaken following previous work which had recognised the need to address the costs of operating the current Museum Service and to improve customer experience of and access to the service; that other buildings had been considered in the early stages but Option 2 (Hitchin Town Hall) had been identified by Cabinet as the option which would provide the necessary savings within the required timescales; that the feasibility study had demonstrated that Hitchin Town Hall could be used as a museum whilst retaining community use and that the preferred Option E would retain the gym for community use.

Members debated the report including that Hitchin Town Hall would remain available for community use even if it were converted to include museum use; that the building would be much improved with architects endeavouring to retain architectural features; what data had been collected regarding current community use; what sort of events represented the 20 percent loss in community use; whether there would be another feasibility study which would test the usage of the Town Hall and clarification as to details of Option E They also considered whether combination of the separate issues relating to Hitchin Town Hall and the Museum Service was premature; whether the community should be offered another opportunity to take on the Town Hall as a Community Hall; that the museum service was not a statutory service, however a wealth of information and items were available at the current museums and what would be the consequence of not using Hitchin Town Hall as museum for both the Town Hall and the Museum Service. Members also requested that further information be gathered and included in the final report due to be presented to Scrutiny and Cabinet.

The Strategic Director of Customer Services advised Members that data regarding current use was available; that it was expected that approximately 80 percent of current regular community use could be retained; that it was likely that very large events would be the only events unable to be accommodated, although the proposed refurbishment and reconfiguration could increase usage; that an outline of Option E had been given at Paragraph 4.6 of the report. He reminded Members that this was a feasibility study rather than a detailed design proposal and that as such the accuracy of figures would be difficult due to the capacities and options for various rooms.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the progress of the work to produce the feasibility study, in line with the published brief, be noted;
- (2) That the process by which the full feasibility study findings will be reported and considered be noted:
- (3) That the process for consideration and agreement of any actions arising from the conclusion of the study by the Council's various Committees be noted;
- (4) That the Strategic Director of Customer Services be requested to include the following details in the final report to be presented to Scrutiny and Cabinet:
 - (i) Figures regarding present and proposed capacity for seated and dance events;
 - (ii) An indication of what type of events would be able to be held post conversion;
 - (iii) An indication of what type of events would no longer be able to be held post conversion;
 - (iv) An indication of other venues available for the events that would no longer be able to be accommodated post conversion;
 - (v) An indication to the increase of use that could be expected post conversion (particularly relating to the upper rooms should a lift be installed)
 - (vi) An indication as to the expected use of the proposed café;
 - (vii) An indication as to how the Fundamental Service Review on Museums was being met by the conversion.

REASON FOR DECISIONS:

To enable the Southern Rural Committee to comment on the Draft Feasibility Study on Museums prior to consideration by Cabinet on 20 October 2009.

37. ANNUAL PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS (P&TC) CONFERENCE – REVIEW

The Policy Officer presented the report of the Head of Policy, Partnerships and Community Development regarding Annual Parish and Town Councils (P&TC) Conference – Review. She informed Members that the report addressed the 3 main enquiries raised by the Southern Rural Committee at the meeting held on 30 July 2009. She advised that 40 people, including representatives from 10 Parish and Town Councils had attended the Conference; that it had been difficult to ascertain why some invitees had not attended, although one reason may have been that the Conference was held on the same date as the Village of the Year presentations and that it was proposed to include consultation on the Rural Strategy at the Conference in 2010. The Policy Officer advised that all Parish and Town Councils had been asked for suggestions for agenda items, which had resulted in a wide range of subjects being submitted of which not all could be included.

Members debated the report including whether a questionnaire could be sent to those who do not attend to try to ascertain why; that Parishes should lead on some of the items; that consultation on the Rural Strategy could be undertaken on a round table basis; whether feedback had been received regarding the 2009 conference and whether Parish and Town Councils would have sufficient opportunities to input into how Local Strategic Partnership reward monies would be spent;

The Chairman invited Councillor Anthony Titmarsh of Knebworth Parish Council to comment on the report.

Councillor Titmarsh stated that the agenda may not have appealed to many Parish and Town Councils; that there had been no feedback on the suggestions which had not been included on the agenda; that the Conference should not take place on a date when a Parish or Town Council meeting was taking place and that the spending of Section 106 monies were of considerable interest and concern to Parish and Town Councils

The Policy Officer informed Members that 8 feedback forms had been received regarding the 2009 Conference with most questions receiving an excellent feedback; that additional comments from the feedback forms included that group discussions had been too short and that a 20 minute open forum session would be useful. She also advised that the Chief Executive and Head of Policy, Partnerships and Community Development had agreed at their recent meeting with LSP Town and Parish representatives that there would be a meeting arranged by NHDC, but resourced only by the Town and Parish Councils themselves, in early 2010 to encourage Parish and Town Councils to take a more active part in the Conference. It has been agreed that all comments and suggestions would be fed back to the Head of Policy, Partnerships and Community Development for consideration and inclusion in future conferences.

RESOLVED: That the review of the 2009 Conference and the steps being taken to improve the format and content of the 2010 Conference be noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To consider feedback on the 2009 Parish and Town Councils Conference and improve methods of communication in order to set the agenda for 2010.

38. CHAMPION NEWS AND FINANCE REPORT

The Community Development Officer (CDO) presented the report of the Acting Head of Community Development and Cultural Services and drew Members attention to the following:

Rural Grants Fund (RGF)

The CDO advised Members that the Rural Grants Fund incorporated Parish Challenge, Playground Challenge, Parish Enhancement & Cleansing Fund & Parish Amenity Capital Improvement Fund (PACIF). He stated that the 2009/10 round closed on 30 September 2009 having received 5 applications for PACIF, 3 Applications for Community buildings, 3 applications for Playgrounds and 13 applications for capital funding with applications being considered by the Parish Challenge Board on 14 December 2009.

2010 Village of the Competition

The CDO advised that the proposed timetable for the 2010 Village of the year was as follows:

1 February 2010	Entry Packs sent out
22 April 2010	Poster Competition deadline
26 April 2010	Poster Competition judging
10 May 2010	Preliminary assessment meeting
7 – 18 June 2010	Judging visits
1 July 2010	Awards evening
24 July 2010	Presentation ceremonies

Community Website “About my area SG4 SG5”

The CDO informed Members that this was an excellent opportunity to advertise community news and events, as well as publicising Open Forums and meetings.

Members expressed concern that it was difficult to find your Councillor using the NHDC website and that the headings used such as “Council and Democracy” were difficult for the public to understand what this area contained.

IDeA Equalities Peer Review

The CDO informed Members that NHDC Officers had taken part in the IDeA Peer Review which had resulted in NHDC achieving level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the budgetary expenditure, balances and carry forwards from the Ward Development Budgets and the allocated Visioning Budgets be noted;
- (2) That the actions taken by the Community Development Officer to promote greater community capacity and well being for rural communities be endorsed;
- (3) That the Democratic Services Manager be requested to consider the wording of the headings used to access Councillor details on the NHDC website and the position of these details in the sitemap.

Councillor John Bishop informed the Committee that he was concerned about the criteria by which Children were allocated places at Secondary Schools. He stated that the "proximity" rule, which allocated places purely on location, resulted in parents choosing to move to live near a school of their choice and that this had a long term effect on the population of villages.

County Councillor Richard Thake (Executive Member for Education and Skills) outlined the position regarding current placements into Secondary Schools and actions which were being taken by Hertfordshire County Council as follows:

- That approximately 97 percent of people achieve one of their states preferences for their child;
- That there are in the region of some 189 admissions authorities within Hertfordshire;
- That rural children have the most difficulty in securing their choice of school, but attempts to improve this situation were being made;
- That families appear to be moving close to their choice of school at year 5, which caused issues for rural Junior Schools;
- That a Whole County Review had been authorised for which the outturns would be referred to District Councillors;
- That there had been an increase in births;
- That wide ranging changes may result.

Members debated the issues including that spare capacity should be funded within schools; that the forms regarding choosing schools for children were difficult; that the current system was open to abuse, for instance where people have 2 houses; that a quota system which allocated Secondary School places to Junior Schools may be a fairer system and that representation should be made regarding the current admission criteria, which disadvantaged rural communities.

Councillor Thake advised Members that there would be a need for more places at both Junior and Secondary levels; that each school had a limited number of places; that consultation regarding admission criteria would start in December 2009 and end in February 2010 and that the preferred admission criteria would be published following the consultation.

RESOLVED: That the relevant Officer, in consultation with the Vice Chairman of this Committee, be requested to write to Hertfordshire County Council on behalf of the Southern Rural Committee to explain how the current admission criteria disadvantages rural communities and ask what was being proposed to redress the inequality.

40. NEXT MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE

The next meeting of the Southern Rural Committee will be held on Thursday 26 November 2009 at District Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City.

The meeting closed at 9.35 p.m.

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Chairman