

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

**MEETING HELD IN THE THIS WILL BE A VIRTUAL MEETING
ON TUESDAY, 30TH JUNE, 2020 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Ian Albert, Clare Billing, Judi Billing, Val Bryant, Paul Clark, Sam Collins, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Simon Harwood, Keith Hoskins, Mike Hughson, Martin Stears-Handscorn, Kay Tart and Richard Thake*

In Attendance: *Bim Afolami (MP), Tom Hardy (Hitchin BID Manager). Simon Ellis (Development and Conservation Manager), Katie Staddon (Assistant Community Engagement Officer) and Hilary Dineen (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager).*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting County Councillor Derrick Ashley and 2 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

1 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Audio Recording – 24 seconds

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager welcomed everyone to this virtual Hitchin Committee that was being conducted with Members and Officers at various locations, communicating via audio/video and online.

She then gave guidance as follows:

Attendance

A roll call was undertaken to ensure that all Members and Officers could hear and be heard.

Live Streaming

The meeting was being streamed live on the Council's You Tube channel. If live streaming failed the meeting would adjourn. If the live stream could not be restored within a reasonable period then the remaining business would be considered at a later date.

If for any reason the meeting was not quorate an Officer would notify attendees by interjecting the meeting. The meeting would adjourn immediately. Once the meeting was quorate the meeting would resume. If connection could not be restored within a reasonable period, then the remaining business would be considered at a later date.

Only Members present for the entire debate and consideration of an item were entitled to vote.

If technology failed for a Member during the debate and they rejoined the meeting, they would not be able to vote on that item.

Noise interference

Electronic devices should be muted and all present should have the mute button on their tablet or computer activated when not speaking.

Rules of Debate

The raise hand button (located under participants) should be used to alert the Chair that you wish to speak. Please wait for the Chair to invite you to speak before doing so.

Voting

Voting would be undertaken using the Green tick for “Yes”, Red Cross for “No” and Blue Raise Hand for “abstain”, located in the participants section at the bottom of the screen. To enable the votes to be counted, votes should not be cleared until requested to do so.

Details of how Members voted will not be kept or minuted unless a Recorded Vote was requested or an individual requests that their vote be recorded, and it will not be heard or seen on the audio and YouTube recordings of the meeting.

2 ELECTION OF A CHAIR FOR THE CIVIC YEAR 2020/21

Audio Recording – 5 minutes 24 seconds

The Committee, Members and Scrutiny Manager called for nominations for Chair of the Hitchin Committee for the Civic Year 2020/21.

Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn proposed, Councillor Judi Billing seconded and there being no further nominations it was:

RESOLVED: That Councillor Ian Albert be appointed Chair of the Hitchin Committee for the Civic Year 2020/21.

Councillor Ian Albert took the chair.

3 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio Recording – 6 minutes 13 seconds

County Councillor David Barnard apologised that he would be unable to attend this meeting.

4 ELECTION OF A VICE-CHAIR FOR THE CIVIC YEAR 2020/21

Audio Recording – 6 minutes 35 seconds

The Chair called for nominations for the Vice-Chair of Hitchin Committee for the Civic Year 2020/21.

Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn proposed, Councillor Judi Billing seconded and there being no further nominations it was:

RESOLVED: That Councillor Clare Billing be appointed Vice-Chair of Hitchin Committee for the Civic Year 2020/21.

5 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio Recording – 7 minutes 24 seconds

There was no other business notified.

6 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio Recording – 7 minutes 36 seconds

- (1) The Chair thanked those who had attended Town Talk and welcomed those who were speaking at Public Participation.
- (2) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council policy, this meeting was being audio recorded and live streamed on the Council's YouTube channel.
- (3) Members were reminded to make declarations of interest before an item, the longer reminder about this and speaking rights was set out under Chairman's Announcements on the agenda.

7 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - PHASE

Audio Recording – 9 minutes 10 seconds

Mr Kieran Murphy, Phase, thanked the Chair for the opportunity to address the Committee in support of their grant application as follows:

- Phase existed to see the wellbeing of children thrive and believe that children and young people should have access to the tolls to do that;
- Phase had developed a programme to promote and support the wellbeing of children and young people to with mental health issues;
- Their vision was to engage with children and young people at an early stage;
- They were asking for grant funding to support virtual counselling to 34 young people.
- A significant increase in funding was required for organisations such as Phase that support young people's mental health;
- Young people were struggling with anxiety about missing being at school due the Covid-19 situation and were also anxious at returning;
- Phase supported young people in respect of issues such as the breakdown of relationships and loss of confidence as well as school refusers and young carers.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Simon Harwood;
- Councillor Richard Thake.

In response to questions Mr Murphy advised:

- The funding requested would provide a 121 service;
- Referrals were received from schools, parents or the young people themselves;
- They were already providing YouTube content;
- They had introduced a YouTube programme aimed at those transferring from year 6 to year 7;
- They supported schools with current programmes;
- They were also working on how to support parents as it was important that the adult population was healthy and well.

The Chair thanked Mr Murphy for his presentation.

8 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - BIM AFOLAMI MP

Audio Recording – 25 minutes 34 seconds

The Chair advised that he had met Mr Afolami some weeks ago to discuss business grant scheme and that approximately £25 million had been paid to businesses across Hertfordshire to more than 2,000 businesses.

There were, at that point, however some businesses that did not meet the criteria.

Subsequently the Government had authorised £1.3 million to allocate to 200 businesses that had previously not qualified for funding.

This was a great example of partnership working.

A number of Members were therefore disappointed to have read a number of open letters from Mr Afolmai in the press regarding free parking.

Mr Bim Afolami MP thanked the Chair for inviting him to attend the meeting. He advised that;

- in his opinion, free parking was important for the recovery of Hitchin town centre;
- It had been already been really tough for retail business, but would be even harder now;
- The Council had limited resources, but this was one thing that could be done quickly;
- It would give a signal to the public to come into Hitchin and free parking could increase footfall;
- He acknowledged the criticism of the idea including that people may return to the town centre without this initiative and that it would cost a lot of money;
- If this increased footfall by 10 percent it could mean more businesses surviving;
- The costs associated with a short period of a support scheme would be more sustainable in the long term;
- Reserves were for a rainy day and this is it;
- There would be a support package from Government, but Council's would need to draw on reserves.

The following Members asked questions and took part in the debate:

- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb;
- Councillor Paul Clark;
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg;
- Councillor Simon Harwood;
- Councillor Kay Tart;
- Councillor Richard Thake;
- Councillor Judi Billing;
- Councillor Keith Hoskins;
- Councillor Ian Albert.

Comments made by Councillors included:

- Councillors had been working to open town centres following Government advice to give as much support as possible;
- The Council finances were already £2 million short;
- The Council would lose £200,000 per month if it provided free car parking across the District which would result in other services being cut;
- Town centres were not yet fully open therefore it was too early to look at free parking;
- What evidence was there that paid parking was reducing footfall;
- We should be encouraging walking and cycling rather than car use;

- Hitchin car parks have historically been at capacity;
- Any initiative would have to be District wide;
- What evidence was there that free parking would bolster the economy;
- A range of ideas were needed to support town centres;
- The BID was of the opinion that free car parks would be full of commuters rather than shoppers;
- Although wanted to encourage business, had to be mindful of safety and the need for social distancing;
- Targeted free parking could be considered, although a firm proposal was needed.
- There was no evidence that this was what the people of Hitchin wanted.

In response to questions and comments Mr Afolami advised:

- He could not confirm that Government funding would be available for free parking schemes;
- The arguments put forward were a good reason to introduce the scheme, but maybe at a later date when more shops were open;
- This could be a key part of the Town Centre recovery;
- The Chancellor was committed to reform in respect of Business Rates;
- People in North Herts relied on cars and it was better to bring business into the town centre than for delivery drivers to travel long distances to deliver to your door;
- Discussions were taking place regarding a discretionary fund for businesses that were not previously covered;
- A lot of places were providing free car parking;
- There was no evidence statistically regarding this at present.
- The numbers of people commuting by train was still low;
- Town centre safety was being well managed in Hitchin;
- He would draw up a proposal and present it in writing to the Council.

The Chair thanked Mr Afolami for attending the Committee meeting.

9 HITCHIN BID MANAGER

Audio Recording – 1 hour 16 minutes 25 seconds

Mr Tom Hardy, Hitchin BID Manager, thanked the Chair for the opportunity to address the Committee regarding the events and issues in the Hitchin BID Area as follows:

- At the start of the Covid-19 lockdown the BID were supporting businesses by providing updates;
- They then moved to supporting businesses to access financial support;
- The discretionary grants had been well received;
- They had now moved to supporting businesses with advice on safe reopening;
- They had made bulk purchases of PPE;
- Barriers had been installed for social distancing;
- The High Street would be shut to traffic from 10am to 5pm and Bucklersbury would be for pedestrians only;
- A lot of businesses had been selling online;
- A new website had been set up call Hitchin Basket.com which advises where things could be bought. This site had received 7,000 visits in the first week;
- Pubs were not allowed to serve alcohol on the pavements;
- The BID staff were now back at work;
- The floral displays had been installed;

- The Christmas tree had been chosen, although it was unknown what the Christmas Lights Switch On would look like;
- They were reminding people what is being done outside and what the shops were doing inside to keep people safe including stickers and one way systems;
- A Shop Safe Campaign was needed;
- Collection rates for the levy had not been as high this year, due to many shops not being open;
- The Bid was grateful for the support from the Council and the capital grant would be spent on refurbishing the offices.
- There had been several new openings including a furniture shop, hairdressers and Chicken George;
- They were looking at accessing the opening the highstreets funding;
- In respect of free parking, he felt that this would be used by businesses and commuters rather than able to be used by shoppers. He felt that pay on exit schemes would be more beneficial than free parking

The following Members asked questions and took part in the debate:

- Councillor Judi Billing;
- Councillor Sam Collins;
- Councillor Paul Clark;
- Councillor Mike Hughson;
- Councillor Kay Tart;
- Councillor Keith Hoskins;
- Councillor Simon Harwood;
- Councillor Claire Billing;

In response to questions Mr Hardy advised:

- A few businesses chose to refund parking charges, but this would not generally be well received;
- Hitchin Basket can be useful for those who have been shielding;
- Need a District Wide shop safe campaign to guide businesses on how to help and support customers with different needs.

Mr Hardy thanked NHDC for the support given.

The Chair thanked Mr Hardy for his presentation.

NB: The Chair adjourned the meeting at 21.20 for a comfort break.

The meeting reconvened at 21.28.

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager undertook a roll call of Members and Officers to ensure that they could hear and be heard.

10 ANNUAL UPDATE ON S106 OBLIGATIONS FOR HITCHIN COMMITTEE

Audio Recording – 1 hour 55 minutes 27 seconds

The Development and Conservation Manager presented the report entitled Annual Update on S106 Obligations for Hitchin Committee together with the following appendix:

- Appendix 1 - Table 4 - Current held funds for Hitchin.

He drew attention to the following:

- It had been hoped that there would be more to report, this was due to the examination of the Local Plan having been cancelled due to the Covid.19 Pandemic.
- New dates for these hearings had not yet been set and this had an impact on the presentation of the SPDs.
- The Developer Contributions SPD would be presented to Cabinet in July;
- A regarding whether the Council would adopt CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) would be considered by Cabinet in December;
- Paragraph 4.2 detailed a new requirement to administer and report to central Government being an audit of all Section 106 activity;
- Paragraph 8.4.5 detailed the funds Section 106 discretionary funds remaining.

The following Members asked questions and took part in the debate:

- Councillor Paul Clark;
- Councillor Simon Harwood;
- Councillor Ian Albert.

In response to questions the Development and Conservation Manager advised:

- That monies allocated for Public Realm had to be spent on permanent infrastructure;
- That he was mindful of the balance required enabling Councillors to remain neutral on the outcome of planning applications, whilst at the same time assisting officers to identify local projects that may benefit for S106 funding.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the content of the report entitled Annual Update on S106 Obligations for Hitchin Committee be noted;
- (2) That a report shall continue to be presented on an annual basis to the Hitchin Committee, which sets out full records of all Section 106 activity for the preceding financial year and which reflects changes in legislation and practice;
- (3) That, other than where a contribution has been negotiated for a specific purpose or project, Ward Members of the area where the Section 106 Obligation or Unilateral Undertaking funding is generated and the Area Committee be consulted prior to funding being allocated away from that area. Members must note that the discretionary funds are rapidly diminishing and will not be replaced under current legislation and practice, for reasons that are set out in this report.

REASONS FOR DECISIONS:

- (1) To ensure that there is a robust system for negotiating and managing Section 106 Obligations and Unilateral Undertakings, that records activity for each financial year and is placed in the public domain.
- (2) To ensure that the process is kept under constant review and Member scrutiny and that the risk associated with this activity is managed in an appropriate manner.

11 GRANTS & COMMUNITY UPDATE

Audio Recording – 2 hours 6 minutes 56 seconds

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer presented the report entitled Grants and Community Update together with the following appendix:

- Appendix 1 - 2020/21 financial year budget sheet.

She drew attention to Section 8 of the report which detailed the work undertaken by the Community Engagement Team.

The following Members asked questions and took part in the debate:

- Councillor Simon Harwood;
- Councillor Judi Billing;
- Councillor Keith Hoskins;
- Councillor Sam Collins;
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn;
- Councillor Richard Thake.

Member comments focussed on activities for Armed Forces Day.

RESOLVED: That the actions taken by the Community Engagement team to promote greater community capacity and well-being for Hitchin be endorsed.

REASON FOR DECISIONS: To ensure the Committee is kept informed of the work of the Community Engagement Team.

12 GRANT APPLICATION - PHASE

Audio Recording – 23 minutes 20 seconds

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised that the Team worked closely with Phase.

Councillor Paul Clark proposed, Councillor Mike Hughson seconded and it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £1,925 be awarded to Phase (Providing Help and Support on Education) to assist with the cost of providing mentoring sessions for young people as outlined in Paragraph 8.1.1 of the report.

REASON FOR DECISION: To improve services provided by local organisations and groups which are accessed by the community.

13 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

Audio recording – 2 hours 18 minutes 14 seconds

The Chair led a discussion regarding ward issues including Councillor surgeries.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Simon Harwood;
- Councillor Richard Thake;
- Councillor Val Bryant;

- Councillor Ian Albert;
- Councillor Judi Billing;
- Councillor Sam Collins;
- Councillor Kay Tart;
- Councillor Paul Clark;
- Councillor Keith Hoskins;
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb

Issues raised included:

- The play park off Swinburne Avenue had started to be built;
- Parking remained an issue in Bearton Ward;
- There would be a meeting with Bim Afolami MP to discuss access to Hitchin Railway Station;
- That attendance at meetings and other events had been better whilst held on Zoom and should be considered that meetings continue in this manner;
- There had been a number of issues at Windmill Hill, the Police had been called and had used Section 35 dispersal orders;
- More/larger bins were required on Windmill Hill;
- Work was being undertaken on new anti litter signage;
- The alleyway between Walsworth Common and Common Rise which was privately owned was causing some issues as it was not being looked after;
- New benches had been installed on Walsworth Common;
- Issues with pigeons and need to find a way forward with settle.

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised that Zoom surgery and Town Talks were going well and drew in a different group of people. Consideration should be given to retaining some Zoom surgeries after lockdown is over.

14 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

No discussion took place regarding possible agenda items for future meetings.

The meeting closed at 10.13 pm

Chair