

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

**MEETING HELD THIS WILL BE A VIRTUAL MEETING
ON TUESDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER, 2020 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Ian Albert (Chair), Clare Billing (Vice-Chair), Judi Billing, Val Bryant, Paul Clark, Sam Collins, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Simon Harwood, Keith Hoskins, Mike Hughson and Martin Stears-Handscomb*

In Attendance: *Katie Staddon (Assistant Community Engagement Officer), William Edwards (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) and Matthew Hepburn (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 3 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

15 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Audio recording – 7 seconds

The Chair welcomed everyone to this virtual Hitchin Committee meeting that was being conducted with Members and Officers at various locations, communicating via audio/video and online and advised that there was the opportunity for the public and press to listen and view proceedings.

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer gave advice regarding the following:

- Attendance;
- Live Streaming;
- Noise interference;
- Voting.

The Chair, Councillor Ian Albert, started the meeting proper.

16 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 5 minutes 20 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Kay Tart and Richard Thake.

17 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 35 seconds

There was no other business notified.

18 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 45 seconds

- (1) The Chair welcomed those present at the meeting, especially those who had attended to give a presentation;
- (2) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting was audio and video recorded. The audio recording would be available on Mod.Gov and the video recording via the NHDC YouTube channel.
- (3) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.
- (4) The Chair advised that the Hitchin BID Manager would be heard prior to Public Participation and the report regarding Grants and Community Update would be considered immediately following Public Participation.

19 HITCHIN BID MANAGER

Audio recording – 6 minutes 41 seconds

Mr Tom Hardy, Hitchin BID Manager, thanked the Chair for the opportunity to address the Committee and gave a verbal presentation regarding the issues and activities in Hitchin Town Centre. He drew attention to the following:

- Hitchin BID's regular business support was ongoing.
- The introduction of al fresco eating options had been successful.
- Buskers and performers had returned to the BID area indicating increased footfall.
- PPE bought in bulk by the BID had been sold at cost to Hitchin businesses.
- Outdoor hand sanitiser stations installed had seen regular use.
- Social distancing signage had been installed.
- The day-to-day activities of BID had resumed, including the floral displays and rangers on the street.
- Mr Hardy had joined the Hitchin Markets Board to secure links between that body and the BID.
- Plans were being made for a socially distanced Christmas Market open to Hitchin businesses to ease the impact of social distancing on commerce over the period.
- Councillor Albert had supported Mr Hardy to select the town Christmas tree.
- Christmas lights would be installed and tested around late October.
- A community bauble painting project was also planned to decorate the Christmas tree.
- Two new hairdressers, a bakery, a Korean restaurant, a Mediterranean restaurant and Signing Rooms had opened.
- Businesses were doing better than anticipated, possibly due to commuter retention.

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

- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Paul Clark
- Councillor Mike Hughson
- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Simon Harwood
- Councillor Ian Albert

Comments made by Councillors included that:

- It appeared that businesses in small market towns such as Hitchin were performing better than expected.
- It seemed that open air markets and areas with space between shops were preferable to enclosed shopping malls during the current pandemic.
- Vehicles were clustered around the takeaway shops and supermarkets on Nightingale Road.
- Anecdotal reports from residents suggested there is public support for the pedestrianisation of the high street.
- Town centre parking issues would not be dealt with without a comprehensive review.
- European Regional Development Fund funding could be available to provide signage and other benefits to the town and there would be benefit in seeking advice on how to make applications.

In response to questions Mr Hardy advised:

- As a result of the lockdown measures and people working from home there was an increase in people using Hitchin town centre.
- Satellite towns such as Hitchin were doing well. People were more conscious of buying locally.
- Nightingale Road and the businesses there were not part of the BID area.
- Herts County Council had been asked to run a survey on the high street road closure.
- The high street was busy before 10am with businesses deliveries.
- It had been helpful to have Rangers dealing with the road closure to allow access at important times on a discretionary basis.
- The COVID-19 Safety Fund did not offer retrospective funding and so could not be used to recoup costs of PPE purchases etc.
- The BID would work with the Council to identify other funding schemes or applications to be made.

Mr Hardy thanked NHDC for the support given.

The Chair thanked Mr Hardy for his presentation.

20 PUBLISH PARTICIPATION - HITCHIN FUN CLUB

Audio recording – 28 minutes

Councillors Judi Billing declared an interest in that her grandchildren had attended Hitchin Fun Club in the past and therefore benefited from the club. She advised that as there was no Disclosable Pecuniary Interest or declarable Interest that she would take part in the debate and vote.

Ms Lisa King, Hitchin Fun Club, thanked the Chair for the opportunity to address the Committee in support of their grant application as follows:

- Hitchin Fun Club was an afterschool childcare facility providing health, well-being and educational activities to children outside of school hours and during holiday periods.
- Hitchin Fun Club was run on a not-for-profit basis and had accessibility at its heart.
- The club had been impacted significantly by COVID-19.
- The club held staff retention as a key commitment and had been able to use emergency savings to top up wages over the lockdown/furlough period to allow them to keep their experienced team.
- The Council had provided funding from the discretionary fund to allow Hitchin Fun Club to recoup some of the money from their emergency savings used for that purpose.

- The club had re-opened now that schools had returned but child places and therefore fees were down compared to pre-pandemic levels.
- Since social distancing became a concern different equipment for outdoor play and activities had become a necessity for the club.
- Sanitisation materials had also become a significant additional cost.

The following Members asked questions and participated in the debate:

- Councillor Judi Billing;
- Councillor Simon Harwood.

The points raised included:

- The Fun Club(s) could also consider applying to Herts County Council for funding to cover COVID related shortfalls.
- Hitchin Fun Club had received prior funding from the Council and Committee and there had previously been policy restrictions that would prevent a grant in these circumstances.

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised the Committee that the Community Grants Policy had been changed in 2020. Therefore there were no restrictions to prevent this grant application from being approved as it had met the criteria.

The Chair thanked Ms King for her presentation.

21 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - STRATHMORE FUN CLUB

Audio recording – 36 minutes

Councillor Simon Harwood declared an interest in that his children had attended Strathmore Fun Club in the past and therefore benefited from the club. He advised that, as there was no Disclosable Pecuniary Interest or declarable Interest, he would take part in the debate and vote.

Ms Lisa King, Strathmore Fun Club, thanked the Chair for the opportunity to address the Committee in support of their grant application as follows:

- Strathmore Fun Club provided substantially the same service as the Hitchin Fun Club outlined above.
- Strathmore Fun Club had requested funds in order to improve outdoor equipment and sports facilities.
- The club wanted to broaden its focus on the fitness and wellbeing of the children it looks after.
- Cleaning and sanitisation materials had become a significant cost to the club.

The Chair thanked Ms King for her presentation.

22 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - NORTH HERTS AFRICAN CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY

Audio recording – 46 minutes

Mr Tony Williams, North Herts African-Caribbean Community (NHACC), thanked the Chair for inviting him to address the Committee regarding the activities of the NHACC and informed the Committee that:

- The NHACC had developed as a new organisation in the wake of events in the US surrounding the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement.
- The organisation had initially intended to look at promoting events for Black History Month.
- The NHACC had since then grown rapidly into a wider and longer term community group that aimed to promote community cohesion and equality.
- Events that had to be postponed in the wake of pandemic restrictions included: cinema nights, an exhibition at North Herts museum, and hair workshops.
- Creative writing workshops had been moved online to launch in October.
- An online showcase evening had been planned featuring local spoken word artists and musicians. Stuart Lawrence, brother of the late Stephen Lawrence was also due to speak at the event.
- The NHACC had plans to work with the Young Black Futures Project to promote a Dragon's Den style business mentoring scheme.
- Proposals for a Black Britons Trail through Hitchin town centre had also been made.
- The NHACC had long term aspirations for a safe space community centre for the Black and Afro-Caribbean community in North Herts.
- NHACC had not yet gone live with its website, however, residents could retrieve more information by visiting 'Hitchin Diversity and Culture' Facebook page or by emailing blackhistorymonthnorthherts@gmail.com

Councillor Keith Hoskins asked whether the NHACC had liaised with the Hitchin BID Manager to co-ordinate on the Black Britons Trail proposal.

Mr Williams advised that they had worked primarily with Christchurch on the delivery of the trail and that boards and posters had already been produced to diversify their content but that an expanded presence in the town centre would be desirable.

The Chair thanked Mr Williams for his presentation.

23 GRANTS AND COMMUNITY UPDATE

Audio recording – 1 hour 41 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.

The section of this report relating to Appendix 1 was presented earlier in the meeting before the grant applications.

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

She updated the Committee on the status of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund and advised that:

- The fund had been successful and the team were pleased to support a wide range of organisations in the District.
- The fund had a budget of approximately £150,000
- Approximately £73,700 had been utilised so far, with a further £4000 in pending grant applications.
- Organisations specific to Hitchin which had received funding included Tilehouse Counselling, Phase, Built on Faith Church (food provision) and the Hitchin Food Provision Team.

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

REASONS FOR DECISION:

- (1) To ensure the Committee is kept informed of the work of the Community Engagement Team.
- (2) This report is intended to inform Members of the financial resources available to the Committee. It draws attention to the current budgetary situation by assisting in the effective financial management of the Area Committee's budget. This ensures that all actions are performed in line with the Authority's Financial Regulations, the Council's Constitution, and the guidance of the existing Grants policy as agreed by Cabinet in January 2020.
- (3) The awarding of financial assistance to voluntary organisations and the use of discretionary spending allows the Committee to further the aims of the Council Plan.

24 GRANT APPLICATION - HITCHIN FUN CLUB

Audio recording – 44 minutes

Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb proposed, Councillor Paul Clark seconded and it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £900 be awarded to Hitchin Fun Club to assist with the cost of art, sport and cleaning equipment.

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

25 GRANT APPLICATION - STRATHMORE FUN CLUB

Audio recording – 44 minutes

N.B Both grant applications were moved together as a single vote.

Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb proposed, Councillor Paul Clark seconded and it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £1000 be awarded to Strathmore Fun Club to assist with the cost of new sports and outdoor equipment.

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

26 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

Audio recording – 1 hour 8 minutes 30 seconds

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer updated the committee on arrangements for Remembrance Sunday in Hitchin.

The Chair led a discussion regarding ward issues and outside organisations.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Simon Harwood

- Councillor Mike Hughson
- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn
- Councillor Sam Collins

Issues raised include:

- Vandalism of picnic benches in King George V Playing Fields had been reported. A Section 106 Request was being considered to part-fund the replacement of the picnic benches in the playing fields.
- Hitchin Festival which would have taken place in the Dell had been postponed and discussion regarding its future would likely feature at the next Town Talk.
- Community Centres in the area had been struggling since COVID-19, in particular with respect to frequent changes in regulations.
- The Town Hall had faced similar issues.
- Traffic surveys had been carried out with much effort since 2016 resulting in changes to speed limits in certain areas. The County Council's current speed management strategy had made progress on identifying new areas and adjustments to existing limitations slow.
- A vocal community group and petition had arisen highlighting speed management issues in the region which had been helpful for facilitating meetings between County Council officers and other stakeholders.
- The future of Priory Fields in Hitchin had come in to question and avenues for protecting them in future should be explored.
- A potential developer involved in HS2-related construction had opened an online consultation on their proposed development.

RESOLVED: That the Assistant Community Engagement Officer be requested to circulate COVID guidance to all Community Centres and to all Members the Hitchin Committee.

REASON FOR DECISION: To help facilitate skill sharing meetings.

27 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Audio recording – 1 hour 40 minutes.

The Chair requested that, should any Members have any suggestions for agenda items for future meetings, they advise himself, officers or the Committee Clerk.

RESOLVED: That the following items be discussed at future meetings of this committee:

- Protecting Priory Field
- Air Quality Update
- Hitchin Station Access
- Fair Trade Town status
- Churchgate Centre

REASON FOR DECISION: To keep the Hitchin Committee apprised of issues affecting the Hitchin area.

The meeting closed at 9.15 pm

Chair