

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

**MEETING HELD AS THIS WILL BE A VIRTUAL MEETING
ON TUESDAY, 1ST DECEMBER, 2020 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

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

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

Also Present: *1 member of the public, including registered speakers, joined the meeting at 7:45 PM.*

28 WELCOME AND REMOTE/PARTLY REMOTE MEETINGS PROTOCOL SUMMARY

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.

29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2 minutes 47 seconds.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Kay Tart.

Apologies for absence were also received from Tom Hardy – Hitchin BID Manager.

30 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 47 seconds.

There was no other business notified.

31 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 47 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 would be audio recorded;
- (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 Tom Hardy – Hitchin BID Manager had sent his apologies and therefore there would be no update as per Item 6 on the Agenda.
- (5) Members were reminded that it had been agreed that in view of the ongoing Local Plan Examination Hearings there would be no discussion of matters connected to Priory Fields.

32 HITCHIN BID MANAGER

Audio recording – 4 minutes.

Mr Tom Hardy, Hitchin BID Manager, had sent his apologies and was not in attendance.

The Chair noted that grants available to local businesses from NHDC had gone live and were now taking applications and details were available on the NHDC website.

33 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 14 minutes.

N.B: Christine Kell joined the meeting around 19:45 and this presentation was given after consideration of the two Information Notes of the Interim Property Consultant.

Christine Kell, Hitchin Quaker Meeting, thanked the Chair for the opportunity to address the Committee in support of their grant application including:

- Christine was speaking on behalf of Peace Garden committee of the Hitchin Quakers;
- The location of the Peace Garden was a prime site in Hitchin in front of the Friends' Meeting House situated in Payne's Park;
- Earlier development of the peace garden involved transforming the burial ground underneath their pillared building in to a peace garden as a contribution to commemorations of World War I;
- The peace garden included a dove pond, benches, picnic table, sun dial, peace pole, and mosaic;
- The final main attraction would be to install a sculpture;
- The peace garden was open to everybody and not a religious endeavour; they intended the grounds to be open to the people of Hitchin and visitors of any faith or none;
- They had asked the students of a nearby school for designs that would be fitting for a peace garden; 3 were put forward and 1 chosen which was called 'Unity,' consisting of two intertwined stainless steel loops, with plaque noting importance of unity in times of division;

- The sculpture was the one feature of the garden that needed professional work costing about £10,000;
- They had first approached the Arts Council but at present no support was available due to overwhelming demand in pandemic conditions;
- They had been saving funds for a while to update their toilet facilities and make them accessible which had left no money in their reserves to fund this project.

The following Members asked questions or contributed to the discussion:

- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Dr Simon Harwood
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb
- Councillor Richard Thake

In response to questions, Ms Christine Kell noted:

- The Peace Garden committee took the view that while the garden did not answer the same kind of material need as a food bank or similar that it did still have value for the people of Hitchin;
- If the Committee were minded to grant the application it would represent the start of their fundraising effort and hopefully attract future donations;
- Applications had been made or were being made to organisations including: Hitchin Rotary Club(s), Herts Community Foundation, the Herts Community Innovation Fund, and via a crowdfunding platform;
- The Peace Garden committee would also get in contact with County Councillors in the Hitchin area for support.

The Chair thanked Christine Kell for her presentation.

34 GRANT APPLICATION - HITCHIN QUAKER MEETING

Audio Recording – 27 minutes 14 seconds.

The Chair led a debate on the award of grant funding as per the application submitted by the Hitchin Quaker Meeting.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Dr Simon Harwood
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb
- Councillor Paul Clark

- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Judi Billing

Issues raised included:

- The project was of merit and the importance of promoting the arts, culture, and mental and social wellbeing was noted;
- £2000 was however a large amount of money in terms of grant allocation from this Committee;
- Residents might have questions about the allocation of that amount in this time of particular need;
- There was not a long queue of other applications for money from the Hitchin Committee;
- A number of other funds existed to support COVID-based projects and associated needs;
- The Committee had not granted funding for arts and culture-based projects recently;
- Granting this application could demonstrate the Committee's commitment to holistic wellbeing;
- The total funds necessary were more likely to be raised if the Committee granted this application;
- Moneys awarded in one budgetary year are usually allowed to be carried forward for spending in future years and granting this application now would not impact a future budget allocation if the fundraising reaches completion in a few years' time;
- The disbursement of funds and grants was a large part of Council business and a lot of that work in recent months focussed on COVID response projects; this application represents a glimpse of a return to normality.

In response to questions the Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised that as in the report there was an understanding that full funding for the project had not yet been sought and that NHDC would retain any offered contribution until the full amount had been secured. The Hitchin Quaker Meeting would have 1 year to secure full funding which was the usual time scale for projects of this sort and if the funds were not spent within that time the Committee would have to reconsider the allocation.

Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb proposed and Councillor Paul Clark seconded and upon the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £2000 be awarded to Hitchin Quaker Meeting to assist with the cost of installing a sculpture in the Hitchin Peace Garden.

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

35 INFORMATION NOTE - CHARNWOOD HOUSE

Audio Recording – 5 minutes 43 seconds.

The Chair drew Members attention to the content of the Information Note of the Interim Property Consultant entitled "Information Note – Charnwood House,"

The Chair invited Councillor Keith Hoskins to provide a verbal update.

Councillor Keith Hoskins updated the Committee including:

- He was keen to see the site retained for community use;
- The site would be the subject of a discussion in Cabinet next month;
- He would be happy to report back to this committee in future on the outcome of those discussions;
- Along with Councillor Simon Harwood he would arrange a meeting with Charnwood Trust, a community organisation keen to take on the running of the establishment.

The Chair advised that he would be keen to have a more detailed discussion on this item at a future meeting. He noted that wider consultation with residents in Hitchin around these proposals was important and emphasised the role of this committee in that process.

Councillor Simon Harwood advised he had been at the AGM of the Charnwood Trust and had raised initial discussions with Councillor Hoskins about potential lottery funding and would appreciate any guidance from Members who have had experience with these processes.

It was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the content of the Information Note of the Interim Property Consultant entitled "Information Note - Charnwood House"

REASON: That the Committee be kept informed of matters of interest to residents of Hitchin.

36 INFORMATION NOTE - RIVERSIDE WALK

Audio Recording – 10 minutes.

The Chair drew Members' attention to the content of the information note of the Interim Property Consultant entitled "Information Note – Riverside Walk."

The Chair invited Councillor Hoskins to provide a verbal update.

Councillor Keith Hoskins updated the Committee including:

- The final steps of the process were underway and were in the hands of the Council's legal department;

The following Members asked questions and contributed to the discussion:

- Councillor Dr Simon Harwood
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn;

In response to questions Councillor Hoskins advised:

- The transfer of land on the Sun Street side of the river was currently under negotiation;
- There had been ongoing difficulties with other parties which had prevented previous transfers.

It was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the content of the Information Note of the Interim Property Consultant entitled “Information Note – Riverside Walk.”

REASON: That the Committee be kept informed of matters of interest to residents of Hitchin.

37 GRANTS & COMMUNITY UPDATE

Audio Recording – 38 minutes 30 seconds.

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer presented the report entitled “Grants & Community Update” along with the following appendix:

- Appendix 1 – 2020/21 Financial year budget sheet

The officer drew Members’ attention to section 8.2 of the report which detailed the work of the community engagement team including the following:

- The first special Arts & Culture themed Town Talk on 19th October had been a success and Members had discussion with key providers in Hitchin, leading to the formation of a follow-up subcommittee meeting on 9th December which would discuss how to celebrate Hitchin culture in 2021 and how arts providers could work collaboratively with the Council;
- A second wider meeting of the town talk was planned for January;
- Events for the commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day on 27th January had been arranged along a theme of ‘Be the light in the darkness,’ and the digital order of service was being finalised;
- Rabbi Alan Garber from the Shenley United Synagogue would be leading the service this year and presentations would be made by other contributors including members of the North Herts Interfaith Forum;
- A presentations would also be given by Yanky Fachler whose family moved to Letchworth around the time of the Second World War and video testimonial is to be shown from Ivor Pearl, a survivor of the Holocaust;
- Nominations for the Chair’s Volunteer Achievement Awards were now open and being promoted; there were 4 categories this year with an expanded ‘caring,’ award to include COVID-support;
- The nomination deadline was Friday 18th December and further information was available on the Council’s website;

The officer updated Members on the Coronavirus Community Support Fund and advised:

- £77,700 of the fund of the rough budget of £150,000 had been spent with £3,500 worth of grants pending for Kings Community Church, North Herts and Stevenage Samaritans, which if approved would put sending at £81,200.

The officer updated Members on the work of the Food Provision Network and advised:

- Officers had allocated a DEFRA grant in the form of supermarket vouchers to smaller scale foodbanks in rural areas who had received little or no prior grant funding from NHDC in the past;
- The team was in the process of putting together a roundup of food provision options over the festive period.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Community Engagement Officer for their report and their work in the Food Provision Network.

It was:

RESOLVED: To endorse the actions taken by the Community Engagement Team to promote greater community capacity and well-being for Hitchin.

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

38 AIR QUALITY STATUS REPORT

Audio Recording – 47 minutes 44 seconds.

The Chair led a discussion on the Air Quality Status Report.

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

- Councillor Dr Simon Harwood
- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Clare Billing
- Councillor Richard Thake
- Councillor Martin Stears-Handscomb
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg
- Councillor Paul Clark
- Councillor Ian Albert

Issues raised during the discussion included:

- The report made use of industry and scientific technical language and was difficult for Members to understand without an Officer's report or presentation;

- The Air Quality Monitoring Area on the Three Moorhens roundabout in Hitchin should not be closed;
- There was not enough air quality monitoring in Hitchin;
- The goal of having 5% electric vehicle charging facility in car parking spaces across the District was inadequate in view of the number of EV charging points the UK would require in the near future;
- The report read as if improvements in air quality were as a result of Council work where in fact changes in the automotive industry are the main source of improvement;
- Ongoing inquests in to deaths purportedly caused by air pollution meant that air quality is an essential issue for councillors to consider;
- The issue of air quality should be considered by the Cabinet Panel on the Environment;
- Issues of noise pollution were also important.

It was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Environmental Protection & Housing Manager be requested to arrange attendance at a future meeting of the Hitchin Committee to discuss some of the issues contained in the 2020 Air Quality Status Report.
- (2) That the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer be requested to convey the views of the Hitchin Committee and to refer the 2020 Air Quality Status Report to the joint Chairs of the Cabinet Panel on the Environment as a possible item for debate at a future meeting.

REASON FOR DECISION:

- (1) That the Committee be apprised of issues affecting the Hitchin area.
- (2) To further the Council objective of responding to challenges to the environment.

39 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

Audio recording – 1 hour 7 minutes and 8 seconds.

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

Members gave updates including:

Hitchin Station Access

Councillor Paul Clark advised that work on Station Access is continuing; concerns about the loss of Section 106 funding had been allayed; the next meeting of the working group had been pushed back in order to identify case studies and future funding options.

The Chair noted that there were some long term issues about the moving of the aggregate site balanced with the current needs for pedestrian and cyclist access.

North Herts College Development

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg advised that Section 106 funding which had been allocated for station access from the North Herts College development had been rescued as a result of pressure from local Members and officers. This was particularly beneficial in view of the increased number of residents making use of the station because of the proposed housing development. She further noted that the low level of social housing allocation within the development had been seen as a trade-off for the other benefits to infrastructure and sporting facilities included in the scheme.

Councillor Val Bryant advised she had been on the Planning Committee which approved the application and explained her reservations around the concept of an enabling development, the level of social housing, and the proposed building materials.

Councillor Mike Hughson advised that decisions of the Planning Control Committee were constrained by planning law. He noted that Members should not be angry at North Herts College itself but consider examining why the College was in need of financial relief.

Hitchin Initiative

Councillor Keith Hoskins provided an update on the relaunch of the Hitchin Initiative with a new structure and a refocussed direction. The initiative was still in its early stages but there were promising signs of collaboration between private enterprise and local government and the Initiative would dovetail with the work of this Committee and other existing panels.

Hitchin Town Hall

Councillor Paul Clark raised the issue of the sprung floor in the Town Hall with a missing metal key and requested whether the Committee could undertake work to locate or replace a key.

Councillor Keith Hoskins advised that the Town Hall fell under his remit and he would take the issue on.

Councillor Judi Billing advised that Members consider settling issues like this between themselves rather than bringing them as items for the Hitchin Committee.

North Hertfordshire Museum

Councillor Paul Clark advised that residents had asked to see a greater prominence of Fair Trade products at the Museum and that he would take this issue up with his ward colleague Councillor Keith Hoskins.

Councillor Keith Hoskins advised that it had been made clear with a displayed sticker that the Museum (and indeed the Council as a whole) stocked fair trade products.

Hitchin Band

Councillor Dr Simon Harwood updated the Committee on the status of the Hitchin Band which was looking to move in to permanent premises and alerted colleagues to the commercial opportunity this represented.

Councillor Keith Hoskins advised that this was part of his portfolio and that himself and officers were dealing with various applicants including the Hitchin Band looking for premises within the town centre.

40 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Audio recording – 1 hour 25 minutes and 10 seconds.

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

Councillor Mike Hughson requested that a report on Arts & Culture in Hitchin be consider as an item for a future meeting.

Councillor Judi Billing gave her apologies for behaviour earlier in the meeting.

Councillor Judi Billing requested that the Committee discuss how Members make the best use of the Hitchin Committee to respond to complicated issues which engage a range of areas including Planning, Licensing, Environmental Health etc.

Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn requested that a report on the recovery of Hitchin businesses in future.

Councillor Dr Simon Harwood supported Councillor Judi Billing's request for a discussion on maximising Committee effectiveness and highlighted the issue of engagement with the County Council.

Councillor Judi Billing advised that County Councillors for Hitchin had always been invited to attend meetings of the Hitchin Committee with full speaking and debating rights. She noted that engaging County Council officers in County issues that impacted District Council members was a continued difficulty.

Councillor Mike Hughson noted that the advice of County Council highways officers at planning control meetings had been useful.

Councillor Mike Hughson gave his thanks to Councillor Ian Albert for his contribution of the lights on the Hitchin Christmas tree.

RESOLVED: The following would be discussed at a future meeting of the Committee:

- The Food Provision Network
- Arts & Culture in Hitchin
- Managing complex Council issues and maximising effectiveness as a Committee
- Mental health provision in the area
- Air Quality

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

Audio Recording of Meeting

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm

Tuesday, 1st December, 2020

Chair