

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

**MEETING HELD AS A VIRTUAL MEETING
ON MONDAY, 7TH JUNE, 2021 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Judi Billing MBE (Join Chair) and Sam Collins (Joint Chair), Daniel Allen, Ruth Brown, Sarah Dingley, Tony Hunter and Ian Albert (In place of Kay Tart)*

In Attendance: *Claire Morgan (Community Engagement Team Leader) and Danny Pearson (Assistant Community Engagement Officer), Hilary Dineen (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Anna Gouveia (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 21 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

1 WELCOME AND REMOTE/PARTLY REMOTE MEETINGS PROTOCOL SUMMARY

Audio recording 14 seconds

The Chair welcomed everyone to this virtual Cabinet Panel on Community Engagement and Co-operative Development meeting that was being conducted with Members, Officers and Arts and Culture Representatives 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 undertook a roll call and referred Members to the Remote/Partly Remote Meetings Protocol Summary included with the agenda and the full version which was available on the Council's website which included information regarding:

- Live Streaming;
- Noise Interference;
- Rules of Debate; and
- Voting.

The Joint-Chair, Councillor Judi Billing, started the meeting proper.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 6 minutes 20 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Kay Tart.

Having given due notice Councillor Ian Albert advised that he would be substituting for Councillor Tart.

3 MINUTES - 21 OCTOBER TO 09 NOVEMBER 2020

Audio recording – 6 minutes 29 seconds

Councillor Judi Billing proposed, Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meetings of the Committee held on 21 October 2021 and 09 November 2021 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

4 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 8 minutes 03 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that the meeting was about Community Engagement with a focus on the Arts. The meeting would take the form of a discussion on how arts providers, and their audiences, planned to recover from the pandemic and how to thrive in the new world;
- (2) The Chair welcomed those present at the meeting, especially those attending from arts and culture organisations from across the district;
- (3) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded as well as filmed. The audio recording would be available on the Council's website and the film recording via the NHDC YouTube channel;
- (4) 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;
- (5) The Chair welcomed Councillor Sam Collins as the new Joint Chair of the Panel, and thanked Councillor Keith Hoskins for all his work as Joint Chair during the previous civic year.

5 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 9 minutes 24 seconds

There was no other business notified.

6 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - INTRODUCTIONS

Audio recording - 9 minutes 28 seconds

Representatives from arts and culture groups across the district briefly introduced themselves and their organisations as follows:

- Sarah Core, Co-ordinator for Digswell Arts Trust. The Trust provides hundreds of hours of arts education and artist studios for emerging artists. They currently have two sites – 'The Fenners' in Letchworth and 'The Forge' in Welwyn;
- Keiron Jones, representing Hitchin Folk Club. The club had been running in Hitchin for around 57 years, previously based at the Sun Hotel, but now had a new home at Hitchin Cricket Club where concerts had been held before lockdown;

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- James Willis, Independent Artist, Exhibiting Artist and Leader of Arts Education, Author, and contributor to Hitchin Festival and various other arts groups in the town. Currently working on a big exhibition next year in Hitchin with Carl Laubin the architectural painter;
- Sascha Gustard-Brown, Supporter Engagement Officer at Hitchin Town Football Club, assisting the club with improving and developing supporter and community engagement;
- Val Lawson, Artist, representing Herts Visual Arts which had been going for over 30 years. Held virtual events during lockdown, about to re-open exhibitions and open studios. Had seen a drop in membership due to the lack of live events and hoped this would reverse this year;
- Hilary Robertson, Local Musician, Writer and Teacher, volunteer at Benslow Music – wanting to help to get the arts going again after lockdown;
- Glyn Doggett, Actor and Producer, representing the Market Theatre in Sun Street, Mostly Comedy (comedy club) which was due to start again in July, Hitchin Festival and The Dell outdoor venue;
- Alison Gentle, representing Baldock Arts and Heritage Centre. They showcase local artists, support local studios, support festivals in the town and are currently seeking more volunteers;
- Christina Armstrong, Artist, representing Open Art Box which runs projects for people living with dementia and their carers. They set up an art box delivery service for home workshops during the pandemic. Looking to continue this as well as face-to-face workshops in the Mrs Howard Memorial Hall;
- Simon Efford, Chairman of Letchworth Garden City Eagles Football Club, which has around 600 players across 45-50 teams, a mix of mens, seniors, ladies, youth, boys and girls, with around 80 volunteers, supporting the local community;
- Rory Reynolds, Artistic Director of the Queen Mother Theatre which had been open for about 38 years. The theatre has a full programme of plays leading up until December and is involved in a new project linking up with locals schools around theatre technician training;
- Peter Hewitt from Benslow Music which had been operating for 90 years or so. The organisation was back up and running now after lockdown with short, residential courses for amateur musicians across the UK, and a concert series including the Hitchin Festival; income had ceased during lockdown;
- Adam Tyler, Writer, Director and Host of Hollowdell Media, an independent film making and podcast production company who had made their first professional short horror movie when lockdown happened at the time of release;
- Richard Clayton, Chairman of Royston Arts Society which had been going for 43 years and had 90 members. The society usually offered 2 painting sessions a month, around 9 professional art demos per year and a couple of exhibitions. During lockdown they had held three online exhibitions at roystonarts.org.uk; they were slowly opening up with socially distanced events;
- Carl Filby, Chair of Creative Royston, a not-for-profit organisation run by volunteers, which stages Royston Arts Festival during the last weekend of September each year;

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- Stuart Sapsford, Director of Communities, Culture and Heritage at the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. The Foundation is responsible for the Broadway Studio and Galleries, Garden City Collection, International Garden City Exhibition, and the museum at One Garden City in Letchworth, as well as a series of community programmes and activities including cultural learning; currently implementing a new operating model for arts, culture and heritage services and looking at driving a Culture Strategy for Letchworth;
- Tom Hardy, Hitchin Town Centre Manager, responsible for the Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID), working with businesses delivering events for the Town Centre with a lot happening from June onwards;
- Rebekah Nicolas, Hitchin Library Manager. Library membership is down due to lockdown and income generation also down. Events are planned for Hitchin Festival and the Summer Reading Challenge, with an artist in residence programme scheduled for the Autumn;
- Lee Simmons, Local Artist; attending as an observer and to offer up any ideas/thoughts;
- Anji Archer, Artist and Co-Director of Open Art Box, based in Stevenage and North Herts; also involved in other community and education partnerships and undertaking a doctorate in Fine Art at the University of Hertfordshire;
- Jim McNally representing Baldock Events Forum. The Forum organised events and also collaborated with and supported other events providers within Baldock.
- Kava Johnson representing North Herts Diversity and Culture Group, also a Fine Artist with a studio. Many events for Black History Month had been deferred or held online. There were a lot of events planned for the future such as exhibitions and workshops.

7 INFORMATION NOTE AND GROUP DISCUSSION

Audio recording – 32 minutes 33 seconds

The Chair led a discussion on how arts providers, and their audiences, planned to recover from the pandemic and how to thrive in the new world.

Comments included:

- Hertfordshire Year of Culture 2020 had not been able to take place as planned due to the Covid-19 pandemic;
- North Herts had a fantastic arts and culture community and the purpose of this meeting was to connect people with the aim of keeping the sector buoyant in spite of the pandemic and to give mutual support to each other to keep the arts thriving;
- Some podcast audiences had decreased during lockdown, but were starting to build up again;
- A short online film festival launched during the first lockdown had a good response;
- The theatre was seeing a tentative return and numbers had to be limited, including cast numbers;
- Many people needed reassurance to return to arts events and this benefitted from a slow approach;
- The Queen Mother Theatre could be used as a venue for the next meeting of this group;
- Some artists had found it hard to be creative during the pandemic and the return to the studios had been managed sensitively and led to a sense of kindness – creativity was fragile and needed to be supported;

- People were desperate to come back to music courses and musicians were thrilled to play to live small audiences again. Live streaming had picked up people from all over the world; a blend of online and physical delivery of music performances/courses at Benslow Music was envisaged in future;
- Royston Arts Festival was keen to return to live performances due to the technical demands of online operation; online concerts commissioned with local artists did not attract as large an attendance as they would have done in person;
- Baldock Events Forum was thinking about moving towards a more collaborative model in terms of running festivals and mixing areas of the arts. This had been successful in Baldock, working with other events organisers and suppliers to provide joint ventures;
- Open Art Box collaborated with the North Herts and Stevenage Museums which had encouraged participants to visit the museum;
- It would be useful to have a network of rentable spaces which arts and culture organisations could use for rehearsals, filming, screening films, exhibitions, etc.;
- One idea which had come out of recent meetings was to establish a district-wide artists and creatives network which would meet once a month, for a breakfast meeting for example; James Willis was gathering names but North Herts District Council could help to organise this; North Herts Museum had offered a space for the first meeting and the Market Theatre had also been offered once social distancing requirements were not required; the network would enable participants to support each other's projects, share facilities, resources, work on joint projects, etc.;
- Hitchin Football Club was keen to incorporate arts and culture its initiatives, particularly with the younger supporters and families, as a way of engaging with the community, with initiatives such as design a kit and design a painted rock. The club was keen to build partnerships and networks and collaborate with other organisations in Hitchin to bring arts and football together; they looking to work with local artists in the new children's zone 'The Aviary', and encouraged interested artists to get in touch;
- One positive of the pandemic was that it had brought community organisations together in some ways and Zoom did facilitate this in terms of attending meetings, particularly from a district-wide perspective;
- A lot of collaboration historically happened in the open studios in September and Herts Visual Arts was actively seeking partners willing to host a small group of artists with art which would be promoted on social media;
- The theme for the Summer Reading Challenge was Wild World Heroes which had potential for collaboration with arts organisations.

8 MEMBERS' DISCUSSION

Audio recording – 1 hour 12 minutes 45 seconds

The Chair led a discussion amongst Members on how the Council could support arts and culture organisations at the present time.

The following Members commented:

- Councillor Sam Collins;
- Councillor Tony Hunter;
- Councillor Daniel Allen;
- Councillor Sarah Dingley;
- Councillor Ruth Brown;
- Councillor Ian Albert.

Comments included:

- Following the recent election, Councillor Sam Collins had been appointed Executive Member of the Cabinet with responsibility for the Arts, and he considered the arts essential and crucial to everything we do;
- It was great to see the willingness of all the organisations to collaborate;
- In terms of collaboration spaces, there were some exciting opportunities which could be explored;
- The idea of a network or register where people could contact each other to discuss venues, collaboration, etc., was enthusiastically supported;
- It would be good to keep the new connections made during the pandemic going, i.e. connections that would not have happened without the pandemic;
- There was already a list of halls and community centres available for hire on the NHDC website;
- The forum was really valuable for networking and collaboration;
- The Council could work with local groups and use some of its resources, e.g. communications, to help publicise events;
- There was value in district meetings and local town meetings as well;
- The Council might be able to support some local groups with further tranches of pandemic grant funding from County Council and Government;
- The Council could support local groups in looking for community spaces, and what could be done to improve community facilities across the district and make better use of existing facilities;
- Thanks to all who attended and gave their ideas, there was some exciting work to take forward, and it had been a really useful discussion.

9 ACTIONS ARISING AND WORK PROGRAMME

Audio recording – 1 hour 19 minutes 30 seconds

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised that the main point to come out of the meeting had been the wish of all parties to continue to network and collaborate and North Herts District Council would undertake to facilitate this through the creation of an email distribution list and take it from there. He thanked all for attending.

The Community Engagement Team Leader advised that everyone would be 'blind copied' into an email to ask if they would like to be part of a distribution list to use as a networking group and then another joint working virtual meeting would be set up, looking at what time of day suited people best. The Council's Community Engagement Team would start this off and once up and running could hand it over to the group.

RESOLVED: That the Community Engagement Team Leader be requested to update the Work Programme with the following action point arising from the evening's discussion:

To create an email distribution list of arts and culture providers to facilitate further networking, with a view to setting up another virtual meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.59 pm

Chair