

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE CHRISTCHURCH, BEDFORD ROAD, HITCHIN, SG5 1HF
ON TUESDAY, 28TH JUNE, 2022 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Ian Albert (Chair), Councillor Clare Billing (Vice-Chair), Raj Bhakar, Val Bryant, Sam Collins, James Denselow, Keith Hoskins, Nigel Mason and Richard Thake*

In Attendance: *Danny Pearson (Assistant Community Engagement Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) and Abigail Hamilton (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)*

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

61 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Judi Billing, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg and Kay Tart.

Councillor Chris Lucas was absent.

62 MINUTES - 1 MARCH 2022, 26 MAY 2022

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 1 March 2022 and 26 May 2022 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

63 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business notified.

64 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

- (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.

65 HITCHIN BID MANAGER

The Chair advised that the Hitchin BID Manager, Tom Hardy, was unavailable for this meeting.

Councillor Keith Hoskins provided a brief update for Members, including:

- Requested the Committee put on record its thanks and congratulations to the BID staff and Mr Hardy for the work they did in organising events over the Jubilee weekend.
- The Hitchin Festival programme listed all events run by Hitchin BID during the festival itself and there was a further list of all BID run events through until Christmas included on the back.
- It was hoped the beach would be returning to Market Square following the Festival.
- There were plans being drawn up to run a survey of businesses on the industrial area. This would be to identify who is located there, what issues are faced and how the BID can help support.

66 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chair advised that Anni Sander from Plastic Free Hitchin was unable to attend this meeting and would be invited to a future meeting.

The Chair invited Lisa King, Treasurer at Hitchin Fun Club, to give a verbal presentation for Members in support of their grant application. They advised:

- The Club was run in the Highbury area of Hitchin after school, but they also ran a day care club during the school holidays.
- There were 35 child places available each day and most of these places were filled with students from Highbury School.
- The club offered a safe, caring environment for the children, with well-trained and experienced staff on site.
- The summer club was run for ages 4 to 12.
- It was a not for profit scheme, purely for the benefit of the children, and costs were kept low to remain accessible to all.
- Income from fees over the last couple of years had been down, due to Covid, while costs have continued to rise.
- Repeat bookings for the holiday clubs were high.
- The money requested would be to fund additional equipment and supplies to cover the entire programme of events throughout the year. It would also include outdoor play equipment, materials and supplies for craft activities and party supplies and games. Some of the funds would also be put towards prizes for team games and end of term parties.
- The larger pieces of equipment need to be maintained to ensure they remain suitable for children to use.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Richard Thake
- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions Ms King advised:

- They do charge for attendance at the Club and summer scheme, but they cannot make ends meet with the current fees, which are kept deliberately low to maintain affordability.
- The club have reviewed their current supplies and have identified what needs to be replaced and this is what the grant funding would cover. The club have put some monies toward this themselves.
- They had previously received funds from the Herts County Locality Budgets to fund larger items and projects.

67 GRANT APPLICATION - HITCHIN FUN CLUB

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee allocated £1,100 to Hitchin Fun Club towards funding to help cover the cost of their annual Holiday Clubs as outlined in 8.1.2 of the officer's report.

68 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chair invited Adam Howard from Back2Schoolival CIC to give a verbal presentation for Members in support of their grant application and advised:

- They had spoken with a few Members regarding this event, but never in person, and thanked the committee for the opportunity.
- The event has a general focus on rugby and netball, but uses sport as a whole.
- The North Herts Netball and Rugby festival last year attracted 500 people playing sport, with a further 1500 in attendance.
- They identified that there was a lack of volunteering opportunities in the local area within the Arts and this was the basis for the scheme in the grant application, which would look at offering opportunities in journalism, photography and social media.
- This would help people develop their skills and offer experience of putting their knowledge into action.
- Those involved would receive support before, during and after the event.
- This offers young people in the area real-life experience at a large scale event, with professional support.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Richard Thake
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Clare Billing
- Councillor James Denselow

In response to questions Mr Howard advised:

- One of the key aspects for this project was understanding both the benefit of the scheme to the company, but also the benefit this offers young people.
- Mr Howard has good connections with sports clubs in the area and would work to find follow up opportunities for those involved in the scheme where possible.
- There was currently no budget to pay people involved on the scheme, but can offer credit if their work is used and possible future prospects.
- At this stage, the scheme is being run as a pilot to test whether its suitable and successful, but there is potential to grow not just at this event but other sports events across the area. They would be happy to liaise with Members regarding future plans to offer payment for work if used.
- The scheme would aim to show those involved how to make a career as a freelancer and can support people to build longer term freelance roles.
- The scheme is for 16 to 21-year olds and therefore is open to both college and university students. There was no requirement to be specifically studying journalism, but could be used as part of coursework where participants were.
- There would be 30 participants on the workshop element of the scheme, with a rota schedule for the day of the event for around 5-6 participants at any one time.

- The scheme would run on Friday 12 August, as well as the main event on Saturday 13 August 2022.
- Scheme participants were expected from Hitchin College, Knights Templar School, Baldock, as well as Colts and Academy teams from around the district.
- The funding would cover two days per professional, which would include time to design and present the workshop, as well as the support and mentoring across the weekend.
- Safeguarding requirements had been confirmed upon submission of this application for funding.
- Following consultation with students, the videography element initially proposed was replaced with social media skills, as these were deemed more valuable.

In response to a question from Cllr Collins, the Chair advised that Members could put conditions on the allocation of grant funds, should they feel appropriate. Councillor Hoskins then noted that as this was a prototype event it was best to run voluntarily the first year and can build on that for future events. This view was supported by the Assistant Community Engagement Officer.

69 GRANT APPLICATION - BACK2SCHOOLIVAL CIC

Councillor Richard Thake proposed and Councillor Clare Billing seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee allocate £1,035 to Back2Schoolival CIC towards a project that will support the creation of volunteering/work experiences for local students in the North Hertfordshire area as outlined in paragraph 8.1.1 of the officer's report.

70 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chair invited Paul Chambers, co-founder of PoetsIN charity, to give a verbal presentation for Members in support of their grant application and advised:

- He co-founded the charity and this came from his own diagnosis with mental health illness as an adult, but having had to deal with the issues throughout his life, often through self-medication.
- The charity aims to offer a creative means to manage wellbeing, through writing poetry, fiction and letters.
- Staff involved all have lived experience of mental health illness, from core staff to volunteers and programme leads.
- It has been running for 15 years with experience across various sectors, including the NHS, prisons and schools.
- The scheme was very successful, with 99% of having reported a decline in symptoms following their attendance and 100% reported benefits within 5 years.
- Since the lockdowns there had been a focus on schools, offering mentoring, 1 to 1 support and a 6 week programme.
- There had been an increase in self-referrals to the service from under 18s, which can reach up to 10 per day, whereas previously referrals had come from outside organisations.
- The charity also offer a buddy service, which offers whole round care with access to this 24/7 via phone, messaging and online.
- The funding applied for would be to fund 10 1-hour long workshops in schools, with 30 students able to attend each workshop. These workshops would be a light-touch approach, offering fast paced and fun activities which provide attendees with ways to cope with issues, anxiety and stress and create happiness. It will also promote the free tools to available to use following the session.
- Some users who require further support will feel motivated and encouraged to speak up about their issues at the sessions due to it being a safe environment.

- Had spoken with an MP on the issue recently and attended parliament to provide evidence of their work.
- The benefit of the scheme was not only to the users themselves, but they then feel motivated to pass on skills and knowledge to friends, family and their peers.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Richard Thake
- Councillor James Denselow
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Clare Billing

In response to questions Mr Chambers advised:

- While 300 people may not seem like enough, this offers a start and will then allow for further collaborative funding applications. Grants have become increasingly difficult to get, but the charity were looking a large levels of funding from elsewhere.
- If more funding was available the charity has the capacity to run more events than proposed.
- Schools were initially sceptical of the free offering being proposed, but the charity has worked with local organisations to build its reputation which has seen an increase in desire for schools to offer the scheme.
- The people running the workshops all have lived experience and therefore they have never found an issue with encouraging participation from students when this has been run in schools before.
- The session can be delivered as an assembly, virtually, after-school and, as has happened in the past, school staff can allocate certain students to the session.
- There was not an issue of competition between services such as this, but rather offers support to all, even when they may have previously been turned away from larger organisations.
- Sometimes workshops can be more engaging and positive for younger people than a traditional counsellor session.
- There are more provisions for adults dealing with mental health issues.

Councillor Richard Thake offered to provide further funding from his Locality Budget as Herts County Councillor, on the condition that Hitchin Boys School take up the offer of the workshops due to the attendance of students from across his division at the school.

Following advice from another Councillor, Councillor Thake revised his offer to allocated further funding from the Locality Budget, if any Hitchin schools took up the workshop offer, for the same reason as previously given.

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer noted that this scheme was a good, different addition to the support available already and the charity have worked hard to network with local community groups. The scheme will appeal to certain individuals who do not feel a traditional approach to support is for them and should appeal to Hitchin schools.

Councillor Ian Albert advised that while increasing funding for this application was possible, he was reluctant to given the work Officers had put into this.

71 GRANT APPLICATION - POETSIN

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Nigel Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee allocate £1,000 to The Creative Mental Health Charity PoetsIN towards delivering ten of their One Hour Wellbeing Workshops to Hitchin-based schools as outlined in 8.1.3 of the officer's report.

72 INFORMATION NOTE - AIR QUALITY IN HITCHIN

The Chair presented the Information Note entitled 'Air Quality in Hitchin' and led a discussion with Members and proposed the following:

- The Air Quality Monitoring Areas at Stevenage Road and Payne's Park should continue to be monitored.
- The Committee would like to receive further detailed information from Officers regarding the EcoStars scheme referred to in the Information Note.

The following Members took part in the discussion:

- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Richard Thake
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Clare Billing

Points raised in the discussion included:

- The EcoStars scheme had not previously been communicated well.
- The suggestion to base decisions on air quality monitoring on 2020/21 data is not suitable, as traffic levels were still significantly lower than usual. Even this year parking rates in Hitchin are not back to their usual levels. A better proposal would be to use data from 2022 and 2023 to make monitoring decisions.
- There were some detailed questions which would need to be put to Officers to respond.
- There was a demonstrable dip in 2020/21, but if this is not shown in the data then it could be that the equipment is faulty. There was a slight decrease shown, but would have expected this to be bigger given the reduction in traffic movements.
- It was important not to stop monitoring too early and until traffic returns to pre-pandemic levels the monitoring should continue.
- The concrete works proposed in Langley would have a further impact on air quality in Hitchin.
- Suggested that 2019 should be used as the base data for any comparisons, as this was the last full year of data.

Following the discussion, the Chair advised Members that the relevant Officers would be made aware that the Committee does not agree with proposals at 4.1 to stop monitoring at Payne's Park or Stevenage Road and this should continue until at least 2023.

The Chair also advised that he would request an Officer attends a future meeting so that detailed questions can be asked by Members and further detail on the EcoStars scheme can be provided.

73 CHARNWOOD HOUSE UPDATE

The Chair provided Members with an update on the work being done at Charnwood House, including:

- The public engagement exercise had taken place, with 19 interested parties following the expression of interest period. Of the 19, five had returned the documents completed within the deadline.

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- Of those five groups, three wanted to work alongside North Herts Council on transforming Charnwood House into a community hub. The other two expressed an interest in using part of the transformed building.
- There had been exemption for business rates secured for Charnwood House, which could save the Council just under £16,900 per annum, if unoccupied.
- Plans over the next 2 to 3 months included commissioning an asbestos survey and consulting on further expressions of interest in investing in a community hub.
- Over the next 6 months, it was hoped that, following the aforementioned actions taking place, a presentation could be made to Council to seek a decision as to how to proceed.
- Further public engagement can still be made outside of the public engagement exercise timeframe.

Councillor Keith Hoskins noted it was good to see the building finally empty and the rates relief applied. There were some hopes that, following the outcome of the asbestos survey, some part of the building could be used temporarily until further development works begin.

Councillor Sam Collins advised that it was possible to section the building and parts could be used, while other parts still have the rates relief applied.

The Chair invited Bernard Eddlestone, Chair of the Charnwood House Association, to provide Members with an update, including:

- The progress to date had been slow going and there was a need to get on. It was 20 months since the Association submitted a detailed report to Council and it has not moved forward, with no funding, either external or Council, allocated at the moment.
- If a charity group ran the building then the rates would not apply.
- The Association would be interested to hear the views and opinions of the groups who have made submissions to find ground where they could work together.
- Capital funding would be required to put the building into a reasonable shape.

The following Members took part in the discussion:

- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Richard Thake

Points raised in the discussion included:

- The detailed survey commissioned by the Association had found there were one or two areas where asbestos may be and that £10,000 should be reserved to deal with the issue.
- The building had signage advising of asbestos, so it was definitely present, but needed to understand where it was and how much of it.
- The plan remains to reset the building so it can be brought back into use and while it may seem little progress is being made, some delay is normal and there is a lot going on behind the scenes.
- The refurbishment is set to be to such a substantial degree that it would be impossible not to disturb any asbestos.
- Some issues faced regarding Charnwood House are the same as those with the work at The Dell. It's important to understand how to work with outside organisations and put governance in place to oversee this.
- Council would need to identify funding, but it would not be able to afford to do this along, and third parties would need to be sought to make up financial deficits.
- As a short term action, the notice boards around the building could be used to display what is being done to the building as this area benefits from high footfall. This space could be used to advertise for the Charnwood House Association AGM on the 19 July.

74 TOWN TWINNING

The Chair provided Members with an update on the work being done regarding a potential new Twinned Town for Hitchin and advised Members:

- Following the discussion of this at the previous meeting, the referral was discussed at Cabinet, at which it was highlighted the benefit of twinning across the district.
- All groups were struggling for members and organisers and this only added further emphasis to the new twinning opportunity proposed for Hitchin.
- Further meetings have been held and discussions are set to begin with the leaders of the village Ayensuako in Ghana.
- There was a need to find out what further needs to be done to formalise the agreement and further updates would be provided to Members ahead of seeking formal approval of the agreement.

Councillor Nigel Mason questioned whether, post-Brexit, there would be a swell of interest from people wanting to re-establish connections through Twinning Associations.

Councillor Sam Collins gave suggestions for link ups between the twinned towns, such as a classic car rally and a sports cup competition. He noted that this Committee should engage better with both the Twinning Association and twinned towns.

Councillor Ian Albert advised Members that a small group would be coming from Bingen am Rhein in September and he would provide further details of this when available.

75 GRANTS & COMMUNITY UPDATE

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer provided Members with an update of the funds remaining, following the grant decisions at this meeting, and regarding the work being carried out by the Community Engagement Team, including:

- Two projects funded through grant funds from this Committee had been signed off as complete. These were Radavassa Kitchen and the Peace Garden Unity sculpture.
- The next Ukrainian refugee day will be more focussed than previously, with invites offered to support organisations, such as Citizens Advice.
- There was ongoing liaison work with local schools to see what could be offered for the Youth Democracy week.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Richard Thake
- Councillor James Denselow

In response to questions the Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised:

- He could provide Members with an update to the grant funds available prior to the applicants making their presentations at future meetings.
- It was possible that Members may have to decide between applicants at a meeting, where funds were not available to support all requests.

Councillor Keith Hoskins requested that it be made easier for community groups to put events on, at both County and District level. Some events over the Jubilee weekend could not happen due to the level of paperwork required.

Councillor Ian Albert advised this could be explored and the process simplified where possible, whilst also recognising the need for Council Officers to attain relevant information.

The Chair moved to a vote and it was:

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

REASONS FOR DECISION:

- (1) To ensure the Members are kept informed of the work of the Community Engagement Team.
- (2) This report is intended to inform Members of the financial resources available. It draws attention to the current budgetary situation by assisting in the effective financial management of budgets. 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.

76 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

The Chair led a discussion on ward matters and outside organisations. The following issues were discussed:

Plastic Free Hitchin

Councillor Val Bryant advised:

- The first Hitchin Eco Day ran well and was scheduled for 1 July 2023, with plans being put in place at the moment to look at what can be run for Plastic Free Month.
- There was a school uniform swap at the pavilion in Bancroft at the end of term.
- There was a Pick and Nick event scheduled for 31 July, which would involve a picnic and litter pick, on Windmill Hill.

The Dell

Councillor Ian Albert advised that photos had circulated on social media of The Dell in a mess, following the site clearance last year. Suggestions had been made, including installing more bins, but ultimately there needed to be clarity over the future of the site.

Councillor Sam Collins noted that previous "Don't be a tosser" signs had reduced littering. He suggested that the Committee could look to launch a voluntary scheme to ask takeaway businesses in Hitchin to pay to increase litter picking and rubbish collections in the town. Those who do not take part and their rubbish is found could be named.

Councillor Richard Thake suggested the BID would be the most suitable place to develop Cllr Collin's suggestion and the BID Manager could liaise with the Executive Member for Recycling and Waste Management.

Councillor Clare Billing noted that the broken glass on site could be a fire risk, especially with the trees surrounding.

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Councillor Keith Hoskins noted that the task to clear the site last year was huge prior to any public attendance.

77 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

The Chair notified Members that the following items would be included on the next agenda; Car Parking Charges review and a public presentation from Plastic Free Hitchin.

The Chair also raised the possibility of a discussion at the next meeting regarding the future of Hitchin Town Talks, given the decline in attendance at these at recent meetings.

The meeting closed at 9.38 pm

Chair