

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE HITCHIN TOWN HALL, BRAND STREET, HITCHIN, SG5 1JE
ON THURSDAY, 8TH DECEMBER, 2022 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Ian Albert (Chair), Councillor Clare Billing (Vice-Chair), James Denselow, Keith Hoskins, Chris Lucas, Nigel Mason and Richard Thake*

In Attendance: *Danny Pearson (Assistant Community Engagement Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Frank Harrison (Environmental Health Manager)*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 8 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

91 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 17 seconds

Before the meeting proceeded, Councillor Ian Albert requested that, following the death of Councillor Judi Billing MBE on the 24 November 2022, Members and public join in a minute silence in remembrance. Following the silence, the Chair allowed Members to provide a brief tribute and the following Members provided comments:

- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Richard Thake

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Val Bryant, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Kay Tart and Raj Bhakar.

Councillor Sam Collins was absent.

92 MINUTES - 11 OCTOBER 2022

Audio Recording – 7 minutes 32 seconds

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

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 11 October 2022 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

93 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 8 minutes 05 seconds

There was no other business notified.

94 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 8 minutes 07 seconds

- (1) The Chair welcomed those present at the meeting, especially those who had attended the Town Talk and those in attendance 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 the Churchgate consultation was now live and encouraged attendees to complete the questionnaire.

95 HITCHIN BID MANAGER

Audio recording – 8 minutes 58 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 and drew attention to the following:

- The BID would be happy to support any plans by the family of Councillor Judi Billing to commemorate her memory in Hitchin.
- The Christmas lights had been changed and added to from last year. The icicles on Sun Street are particularly effective and they will explore installing these in other parts of town.
- There had been good feedback received regarding the 'Welcome to Hitchin' motif.
- The Christmas tree was in place, with lights provided by Councillor Ian Albert and the baubles provided by the community.
- The Christmas light switch on event had been well attended.
- There were lots of family friendly activities planned on the weekend of 17th and 18th December.
- The Snowman trail was running through to the 20th January, and had so far been extremely popular and even featured in The Guardian newspaper.
- A Christmas edition of the H-Town newspaper was available, with a gift guide included to promote local shopping.
- Instagram promotions had taken place detailing the safety measures in place in town to keep people safe.
- There had been around £27k of H-Town Pounds sold to date, with lots being returned by businesses and the BID will monitor and track where the H-Town Pounds are being spent. There were around 84 shops and eateries signed up to the scheme.
- In 2023 the aim was to be more business focussed and look to run events outside of the main town centre.
- The BID wanted to support others to put on events in the town, by assisting with paperwork and practicalities.
- There was a new Front of House Manager, who was responsible for dealing with the Information Centre shop.
- The new website, www.visithitchin.com, was in the final stages of development.
- A camera was to be installed on the roof of Osinsky's providing an online live-stream of the Market Square.
- Events were being planned to celebrate the King's Coronation, with a big screen planned, but this was awaiting details from Buckingham Palace before being confirmed.
- There was an ongoing campaign to encourage bus and tour operators to visit the town and the BID was working with companies to include the Town Centre as part of their excursions.

- The BID had provided workshops and 1 to 1 support to business, to help support these through the cost of living crisis by finding ways to save money.
- The vacancies in Hitchin stood at around 2%, but it was unsure how this would be impacted in 2023.
- There was lots of promotion ongoing to encourage businesses and customers to shop local this Christmas.
- The renewal ballot for the new 5-year term of the BID was due in April 2024 and consultation on this process would begin in February 2023.
- The BID would support the Council to introduce pay-on-exit schemes in car parks, to encourage people to spend more time in the town.

In response to a point raised by Mr Hardy regarding pay-on-exit car parking, Councillor Keith Hoskins noted a trial of pay-on-exit parking was due to take place at Woodside Car Park in early 2023. The Executive Member for Planning and Transport was also a keen supporter of pay-on-exit schemes.

The Chair thanked Mr Hardy for his update to the Committee.

96 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 21 minutes 00 seconds

The Chair invited the Assistant Community Engagement Officer to provide Members with an overview of grant funds remaining.

The Chair invited Ms Hannah Lane to provide a presentation on behalf of the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) in support of their grant application and advised of the following:

- NCT was best known for providing antenatal support courses across the country, with an aim to ensure that no parent is left feeling isolated and to support parents through the first 1000 days.
- There was a wide network of NCT branches with around 5000 volunteers who provide the support through groups and events.
- This branch covered the Hitchin, Baldock and Letchworth areas.
- It was volunteer led and free of charge for users.
- An application had been made to the Letchworth Area Committee in September 2022 and this was successful.
- Whilst the aim of the support groups are to help parents with feeding issues, it also offers an important social side for new parents, and helps people feel less isolated during what can be a difficult time.
- There had been approximately 80-100 attendees to the course since the sessions resumed following lockdown, with an average of 8-10 attendees at each session.
- The groups had been running for around 6 years, with classes taking place virtually during lockdown.
- The costs of the group are covered by donations and fundraising, but due to the lockdowns the reserves of the group had become depleted.
- Any fundraising is for NCT as a whole and is split 30% to the local branch and 70% to the national NCT body. However, any grant funding received can be ringfenced by local branches to be spent on schemes in the area.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor James Denselow
- Councillor Chris Lucas

In response to questions, Ms Lane advised that:

- This application was to support the breast-feeding support sessions, bot antenatal classes.
- There was an NHS offer for breast-feeding support, but this was limited to one 30 minute online session, the support offered by NCT was in addition to this.
- There were some support services run by Children's Centre, but she was unaware exactly what was offered.
- NCT was a charity service to provide support to all. The scheme was supported by donations only and it was kept this was to ensure the service was financially accessible to all.
- Since drop-in session began again following lockdown there had been around 16-20 people attending monthly, across two sessions per month. These people may be the same each time or some may be different.

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Nigel Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee allocated £920 to NCT (National Childbirth Trust) North Herts towards funding for their breastfeeding and postnatal support group as outlined in 8.1.1-8.1.8 of the officer's report.

The Chair invited Ms Kava Johnson to provide a presentation on behalf of the North Herts African and Caribbean Community in support of their grant application and advised of the following:

- The group worked to draw together community associations, groups and individuals who were servicing the particular cultural needs.
- It aimed to provide information, advice and guidance, through a programme of events, fundraising, history lessons and cultural experiences.
- Worked with partners to support the African and Caribbean community in North Herts, but also to spread this across the wider community to celebrate incorporation and togetherness.
- The long term aim was to have a central location to bring together relevant cultural schemes and groups.
- Some of the previous schemes run included conversations around racial discrimination, crime and crime prevention awareness and the 'Mind Your Black' poetry writing scheme. It was hoped these sessions could be developed further and incorporated into future programmes.
- The group brought together the public and professionals, to hear directly from black people.
- Talks were run online during the pandemic and were uploaded to YouTube.
- The group had run a Windrush themed arts and craft week and had run ad-hoc workshops at St Mary's Church bringing together young people and older people to learn about the Windrush generation.
- There were lots of people coming forward who also wanted to share their experiences and stories.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Chris Lucas

In response to questions, Ms Johnson advised that:

- The workshops would usually take place during the school holidays, so children were able to attend. The last workshop took place in the October half term.

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- They had explored whether the events could be held in July at the start of the school holidays.
- The £1424 was applied to from both Letchworth and Hitchin Area Committees.
- They group had not yet worked or offered outreach sessions to nearby schools and colleges.

Councillor Hoskins noted that if the workshops took place in July, they could be included as part of the Hitchin Festival programme.

Councillor Chris Lucas offered support to the group in speaking to and arranging sessions at colleges.

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Chris Lucas seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee allocated £1,424 to The North Herts African and Caribbean Community towards funding to provide a year of free and some subsidised events and activities for the whole community to attend and learn about African and Caribbean History and Culture as outlined in 8.1.9-8.1.15 of the officer's report.

The Chair invited Ms Dani Lister and Ms Kate Adams to provide a presentation on behalf of the Samaritans of North Herts and Stevenage in support of their grant application and advised of the following:

- This application was to help support fundraising for the National Walk 2023.
- The Samaritans national listening service was run 24/7, 365 days a year and calls would be answered centrally, with the call being passed onto whichever volunteer was free to take the call.
- Each branch of Samaritans is run individually. The Hitchin branch had recently celebrated its 50 year anniversary, but had been impacted by Covid.
- There were around 100 volunteers in the local area, and there were always 2 people on shift at one time.
- The branches were self-funded.
- There was a hope that the chat services offered currently 3 days per week could be expanded.
- Samaritans was a listening services and was there for anyone who needed someone to listen, not just for those considering suicide. The service had seen an increase in demand since Covid.
- The Samaritans offer did not overlap with other support groups or organisations, as it was only a listening service, with volunteers not trained to offer advice but to signpost people to organisations would could offer more specific support.
- The service frequently saw high demand, with often up to 100 people waiting on phone lines.
- The branch had not been able to conduct community outreach during the pandemic, but this had been restarted in 2022, including events across Hitchin and the north Herts area. There had also been specific support offered at Hitchin and Stevenage train stations.
- The events held at train stations were more about talking and engaging with people, rather than fundraising.
- The branch had previously engaged with schools, but this had stopped during the pandemic and there was a focus to re-start this engagement again.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor James Denselow
- Councillor Chris Lucas

In response to questions, Ms Lister and Ms Adams advised that:

- The planning for the National Walk was currently in the early days, as the north Herts branch had inherited the organisation of the event from another branch.
- It was expected there would be a maximum of 200 volunteers doing different length walks and it would be a paid entry fee event. There would be fundraising ongoing alongside this to support the event.
- The start and finish points, as well as arrangements for water and refreshments needed to be confirmed.
- The funds raised would go to the national organisation and then be reinvested into the local branches, but it was also important to highlight the local branch.
- The organisers would look to engage with other partners to help support the National Walk event.
- The group hoped to be able to engage better with young people and noted that the national organisation attended festivals to encourage young people in attendance to talk about issues.
- It was not always appropriate for young people to talk on the phone about issues, and often they find it difficult talking to friends and family. The new online chat offered was used more by younger people seeking support.

Councillor Keith Hoskins noted that this event could be included as part of the Hitchin Festival programme and that groups in the area with experience of running similar events would be able to offer support.

Councillor Richard Thake noted that he was a governor at Hitchin Boys School and would be happy to facilitate a visit. There had been clear immense pressure put on young people over the last couple of years and it was important that appropriate support was offered and Samaritans was an established and respected organisation offering support.

Councillor Nigel Mason noted that the issues faced were only likely to increase given the economic climate.

Councillor Richard Thake proposed and Councillor Nigel Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee allocated £1,200 to Samaritans of North Herts and Stevenage towards funding for their Samaritans National Walk 2023 as outlined in 8.1.16-8.1.20 of the officer's report.

REASON FOR DECISIONS: 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.

97 AIR QUALITY UPDATE

Audio recording – 56 minutes 40 seconds

A verbal update was provided by the Environmental Health Manager regarding Air Quality in Hitchin, which included the following:

- Due to the Covid pandemic, and staffing issues within the department, it had been 3 years since a representative was able to address the Committee.
- The draft report circulated to Members had now been confirmed as final by DEFRA.
- Air quality is not necessarily a local issue, it can depend on the wind flow and North Herts will be impacted by the emissions of other areas, as well as North Herts affecting other areas.

- Members had previously raised concerns that the air quality monitoring would be stopped in the area, but this was not the case and there was a legal requirement on the Council to monitor.
- If after a number of years where the monitored emissions amount is less than the guidelines, then the guidance from DEFRA is that the location no longer qualifies to be required for monitoring.
- The Air Quality Monitoring is a separate requirement under the Environment Act and monitoring of these sites will continue.
- There were two ways in which the Council monitored air quality. Firstly, through Automated Plants, but these were coming to the end of their expected life and there would be additional costs if monitoring was still required at these sites.
- Secondly, was via Passive Diffusion Tubes, which were stuck on lampposts around the district and were changed manually by Officers. These will continue until legislation changes and these are no longer required. The location of these are reviewed frequently and there is a review ongoing now by Environmental Health Officers.
- No other areas in the district had ever breached the threshold for air quality pollution.
- If Members had a specific area they wanted to be monitored, they could inform the Environmental Health team and this could be explored, though not all sites would be suitable.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Richard Thake
- Councillor Clare Billing
- Councillor James Denselow
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions, the Environmental Health Manager advised:

- The requirement to monitor, but the lack of capacity to insist on changes, had not changed, other than where there was a specific local cause of the problem.
- The district Council has the requirement to monitor, but County were responsible for the Highways and there were link roads running outside of the area.
- As part of the recently adopted Local Plan there were considerations and requirements placed on developers to require them to monitor air quality, before during and after construction.
- Where the district Council had the ability to control road traffic, it was usually in places where there was insufficient traffic for the Council to make an influential difference.
- With planning applications where there is a foreseeable air quality issue, the Environmental Health team are consulted and will provide a response.
- It was not possible for the district Council to impose conditions around schools to prevent car idling, as the Highways were a County issue. The district Council can make representations to County to encourage this.
- Where schools in adopt the campaign they encourage students to remind parents of the dangers, and this is something that could be supported by the district Council, but it could not be imposed.
- He was unsure of the cost of a single air quality monitoring station.
- When previous equipment was installed there was not a repair contract included with these. This would be included for future contract procurement, so that expenditure would be planned, rather than one off payments.
- The EcoStars scheme was developed by another Local Authority and North Herts pay a small royalty to be part of the scheme. TRL had been sourced to liaise with businesses and commercial enterprises which have a vehicle fleet, which are generally diesel van fleets. The scheme will then present policies which can be adopted to reduce costs for the business, as well as reducing emissions, through training and development.

- All relevant contracts that North Herts hold have been approached and more are joining the scheme.
- The scheme itself was a star based system, with 1 being lowest and 5 being highest. One company had reached 5 star status, with many others regularly performing at 4 star level.
- He was not personally aware of any key locations for air quality monitoring, but could provide Members with some background information, on top of that included within the most recent report. The air pollution across the district was relatively low compared to neighbouring authorities.
- The A1 rarely caused pollution issues, but the A1 roundabout outside Letchworth may be a good monitoring site, due to traffic build up in this area, as would the roads out of Hitchin towards Letchworth.
- Due to Covid the EcoStars scheme did not start until 2022 and was due to run through to February 2023. There was a quarter 4 report due soon from TLR and specific information could be requested by Members to included in this.
- Future attendance would depend on staffing issues within the department, but it was hoped a regular update could be provided at future meetings with relevant notice.

98 INFORMATION NOTE - CHURCHGATE SHOPPING CENTRE UPDATE

Audio recording – 75 minutes 38 seconds

The Chair led an update on Churchgate Shopping Centre and the ongoing consultation which was the subject of the Town Talk which preceded the meeting.

Councillor Keith Hoskins noted that the response to the consultation so far had been positive, with over 560 responses received in 3 days of the consultation being live.

The Chair noted that some issues had been raised by tenants at the Town Talk regarding Brown and Lee, as well as some wider concerns about the proposed developments. The aim was to have a regular report provided as part of the Hitchin Committee, with the next report to have more detail provided on the outcome of the consultation.

99 GRANTS AND COMMUNITY UPDATE

Audio recording – 77 minutes 22 seconds

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer presented the report entitled 'Grants and Community Update' and advised Members of the following:

- There had been events taking place to support Local Democracy Week and Parliament Week, with some Councillors attending these, which included Q&As and school assemblies.
- There were plans underway to expand these sessions for next year with a view to make them more regular events.
- Recent surgeries had taken place as usual, but had been located under the Churchgate arch to promote the ongoing consultation work.
- The Community Engagement Team were planning the Holocaust Memorial Day event on 27 January 2023.
- There was support being shared on Council platforms regarding the cost of living crisis and following attendance at the Churches Together event, it was advised that at least one building would be open every day for people requiring somewhere to stay warm.
- There would be an infographic produced to highlight support and services available.
- The Snowman Trail had proved popular and demonstrated the role art can play in Hitchin, bringing together young and old people, and helping with attracting tourists to the town. There would be a photograph competition in January, to extend the Trail into the new year.

- The Chair's Volunteer Awards had changed to the Herts Hero Awards, with the same five categories for nominations. The team would be promoting this over coming weeks and the final would take place in the Council Chamber.
- They had provided support for the Hitchin Christmas tree festival and were working closely with Councillors to support the Farmers on Christmas Lights Tour event.
- Updates had been received from previous successful grant applicants, including the Hitchin Allotments and 'Home is Where the Hert Is'.

The Chair noted that the sessions which took place in schools and the Holocaust Memorial Day event were two further legacies of Councillor Judi Billing at North Herts.

Councillor Richard Thake noted that Mr Paul Dee, who had previously come to the Hitchin Area Committee for grant funding for an allotment scheme, was now looking to extend these sessions across the district and had applied for HCC Locality Budget funding to support this.

Councillor Keith Hoskins commented that the increase in community cohesion since the pandemic had been astonishing and this was attributable to the work of the Officer.

In response to questions from Councillor Hoskins and Councillor Nigel Mason, the Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised that the grant funds remaining after the last meeting of the civic year could be rolled over into next year. He noted that he was in talks with a couple of exciting projects for the new year and was aware of the funds available for the group to allocate.

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

RESOLVED: That the Committee endorsed 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 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 Grants Policy as agreed by Cabinet in July 2021.

100 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

Audio recording – 86 minutes 45 seconds

There were no updates from Members on Ward Matter or Outside Organisations.

101 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Audio recording – 88 minutes 28 seconds

The Chair suggested that an update on Charnwood House would be provided at the next meeting of the Committee.

The Chair requested that any further suggested items for future meetings be made to the Committee Services Team.

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The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

Chair