

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE CHRISTCHURCH, BEDFORD ROAD, HITCHIN
ON TUESDAY, 11TH OCTOBER, 2022 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Ian Albert (Chair), Councillor Clare Billing (Vice-Chair), Judi Billing, Val Bryant, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Keith Hoskins, Chris Lucas, Nigel Mason and Richard Thake*

In Attendance: *Danny Pearson (Assistant Community Engagement Officer) and Abigail Hamilton*

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

78 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received by Councillor Raj Bhakar, Kay Tart and Sam Collins

Councillor James Denselow was absent

79 MINUTES - 28 JUNE 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 28 June 2022 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

80 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business notified.

81 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.

82 HITCHIN BID MANAGER

Audio recording –

Tuesday, 11th October, 2022

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:

- Some businesses are seeing a 300% increase in their utility bills. We are doing a workshop with businesses on how to look up cost saving initiatives. We are working with an organisation to deliver that
- I am working with the Association of Town and City Managers on a national campaign to lobby to government to lower the VAT rate by 215% for a period of time similar to what they did in the pandemic and other European countries. Also lobbying for a business rates review that we were promised in 2019. We need to level the playing field between all businesses and bricks and mortar high street businesses
- We are doing a lot of work with other towns. We have 200 bids signed up to this and I am attending regular meetings for this
- I held a Churchgate business meeting where all the businesses in Churchgate were invited. 7 of them replied saying they would come and 23 ended up turning up. I am on the project board representing businesses so I wanted to get a good idea of how they felt about building, short and long term aspirations, and understand issues.
- I will be working with Councillor Hoskins on a questionnaire that we will get out to businesses. We want to understand what the priorities are and how to take this to the next project board meeting.
- As for updates in the town, we are changing all our summer planting to winter planting.
- The Christmas lights will be going up on the 24th October for testing. These won't be turned on until after Remembrance.
- The Christmas tree is due to be installed around a week before the Christmas lights will be turned on, this will be Saturday 19th November. This will be from 12pm-8pm this year. We have the kids carols in the daytime and the lights will be turned on at 6pm.
- We have put up 42 lamp post banners around the town and there are print and postcards in the information centre as they were quite popular on social media
- We have come up with a new brand for Hitchin, it is a H with two lines coming off it. This will start to be shown around the town. Many people don't know what it is so we are trying to come up with a public facing brand so people recognise this as Hitchin brand.
- We are using this to move into a new website which should be launched in the next couple months called Visit Hitchin. This will work alongside Hitchin hub. Visit Hitchin will be for residents, public and visitors and Hitchin hub will be for business related things.
- We have the French market arriving Thursday-Sunday. We have the Halloween trail arriving at the end of the month.
- We are not going ahead with the Christmas market this year. We had mixed feedback, we had 15 market stalls which was good but the public expected more and this wouldn't work for businesses. We have decided to go back to what we did originally and fill weekends up with activities that complement the businesses in the town.
- We have the Christmas light switch on on the 19th November, rotary food and wine on the 26th November, the art hub on 2nd December. We have the Hitchin market taking over the market place on the 10th and 11th December. We are holding a big event on the 17th and 18th which will be thing such as a snow globe, reindeer petting, etc. We will have the grotto in the cabby hut which will be run by the Garden Hospice.
- We also have a tractor trail coming through the town. 200 tractors on the 17th December at 7:30.

- There will also be a snowman trail. Around 12 snowmen around 6ft high will be around the town. They are based on the film 'Snowman'. This will be from the 14th December until the end of January.
- For businesses, there will be a winning windows competition, a Christmas video promoting all businesses, a Christmas lights parade during the Christmas lights switch on, and we are putting out a H town newspaper which will be a Christmas edition with a gift guide containing various gifts you can buy in the town
- I have had a lot of businesses come to me with various issues with parking. I have attended various parking meetings with the District Council and the thing that seems to come up frequently is the ability to pay on exit. A lot of car parks now do it, it is very cheap on technology. A lot of people come into the information centre asking for directions and many say they don't have time on their ticket. I think if they had pay on exit it would create more dwell time. People would go to coffee shops and retailers. Retailers are really feeling it as many people that come to shops have to rush back to their car. I'm keen to work with the District Council to do a trail of this.
- The next business breakfast is on the 19th October. This will be at the Elite café at 7:30am and breakfast will be served at 8. The Hitchin BID AGM is being held at the same day but at 6pm at the Sun Hotel.
- Next year we will be starting the renewal ballot again in February,. We are due to go to ballot in November next year so we will be starting the process. The ballot will happen in 4 weeks, so the month of November. If we are successful the new BID term will start in April 2024.
- I am working with officers on an economic development survey which includes a feasibility study for a potential BID in the industrial centre.
- We are looking at events for next year and what worked and what didn't this year. If Members have any ideas then let us know.
- The Kings coronation will be held on the 6th May. We have a big screen booked for that.
- We are looking at potentially having another carnival on the 7th May.
- I have some monthly newsletters and the annual report for 2021/22 that I will leave for Members to take.

Councillor Albert highlighted that they are keen to look at whether having a BID in the industrial centre would be positive and it links to the LCWIP and discussions that were had at the town talk before the meeting.

The following Members asked questions:

- Nigel Mason

In response to questions, Tom Hardy advised:

- No, we won't have football on the big screen. Football events have to have a safety advisor group, higher security than other events and this becomes very costly. There are lots of pubs around town that will show this. We also don't want to take business away from local pubs

Councillor Bryant mentioned that she was happy to hear the proposal for pay on exit car parks and agrees that this will help retailers and people staying longer.

Tuesday, 11th October, 2022

Danny Pearson informed Members that the two grant applicants for this evening have both cancelled yesterday, in summary:

- The Letchworth Centre for Healthy Living approached the Letchworth committee two weeks ago and were advised to get a third quote. They were hoping they would get a new quote but they haven't so they have pulled out this evening until they hear back from the Letchworth committee and they may defer to December or the new year.
- NCT were successful in a Tesco blue chip grant and they want to come back in December.

Councillor Ian Albert informed Members that James Willis from Hitchin Creatives was also meant to be in attendance but will hopefully come to the December meeting instead. He also reminded Members the exhibition will be open in the museum on Friday.

Councillor Ian Albert gave a statement in support of the Plastic Free Initiative which read:

North Hertfordshire Council fully supports the work Plastic Free Hitchin and other groups are doing in our local community. Over the past year both officers and councillors have supported Plastic Free Hitchin. This includes:

- Publicising and sharing of activities online and in council newsletters.
- Providing a venue for the recent Pre-loved Uniform Pop-up Shop in Bancroft Gardens.
- Collecting the waste gathered during July's litter pick on Windmill Hill
- A regular call between key councillors and officers and all waste reduction initiatives in the district, to facilitate collaboration across towns.

The council is regularly participating in communication campaigns to educate residents around the issues around waste and plastic in particular. Furthermore the council is currently reviewing its waste collection regime to encourage residents further to reduce their waste.

North Hertfordshire Council is looking forward to continuing its work with Plastic Free Hitchin in future.

The Chair invited Ann Sander, Plastic Free Hitchin, to give a verbal presentation which included:

- We got accredited and we have been working towards the plastic free community framework. It is a mature framework that towns, cities and neighbourhoods can enter to get accredited. We got the certificate in July so we can advertise as a plastic free community. We worked towards 5 objectives to achieve this.
- 5th objective was a steering group
 - The idea is to have bigger ideas and look at the real issues around waste and single use plastic around the town and how we can solve this
 - The key things that came up in the meeting were a deposit scheme for coffee cups and takeaway containers
 - We will meet 4 times a year
- 4th objective was to run a certain amount of events
 - We exceeded this and going forward to be considered an active plastic free community you have to run 3 events a year. We have done 10 so far and we are planning to do 12 over the next couple months.
 - We did a uniform pop up which as one of our biggest and most well known event. Over 1000 garments were reused and we raised over £1400 for local

schools which got distributed. We want to allow more schools to participate and there has been some interest from secondary schools.

- The next event will be the Halloween costume swap in the market square.
- We want to do a similar thing with Christmas jumpers.
- Eco day was really successful in the summer and we are hoping to do it next year
- Another really successful event was the repair café. We have hosted 3 of these this year. The most restrictive factor right now is volunteers and we are looking for more repairers. We are hoping to increase numbers to run 4 or 5 events if we can find enough volunteers. The last event was booked up within 3 days and we repaired over 100 items in the last year.
- 3rd objective was community allies
 - This is any organisation, group or hub that isn't a business.
 - We have to work with 30 allies across the town which included the library, swimming pool, brownie and guide groups and all secondary schools signed up
 - All allies have to sign a pledge that they support the cause and to look at their own use of single use plastic and to educate and participate in events
 - Some allies are more active than others
- 2nd objective was businesses
 - We had to get 12 to sign up. Currently we have 15 signed up and lots were interested
 - There are 3 that are going through the accreditation process themselves. It is harder for allies to do it. They have to prove they are reducing single use plastic. Once they prove this they are awarded the plastic free champion status.
 - They have recently introduced a tier system of bronze, silver and gold.
 - We are working with businesses to get accredited to a high standard. We plan to engage with at least 6 but a lot are keen to do it
- 1st objective was working with the Council
 - Plastic free Letchworth led the way and the Council passed a motion to support the plastic free framework
 - We have bi-annual meetings with Councillors and officers to talk about different plastic free initiatives and other waste initiatives across the district and where the Council can support our work
 - This is going really well and North Herts is one of the more active Councils
- If the Councillors could fill in the survey and provide some feedback it would be appreciated.

Councillor Judi Billing highlighted that we have been engaging more with schools about local democracy. We have found primary schools are very enthusiastic but secondary schools need longer to engage fully.

Councillor Val Bryant mentioned that herself and Councillor Dennis-Harburg are part of the plastic free initiative. She attended the repair café and it was really positive and how you can repair things yourself and continue to use them. Hopefully we can increase engagement

The Chair thanked Ann Sander for her presentation.

84 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chair invited Haziq Patel, Hitchin Mosque to give a verbal presentation which included:

- A mosque is more than a place of worship. It is a hub for social gatherings, a place for education, a place people can meet and gather and look after their wellbeing.
- The original mosque in Saudi Arabia had what we now would see as a charity. It held events, had a homeless shelter, held other faith groups and cultural fairs, distributed wealth and food and funeral rights.
- Hitchin has a well established Muslim population and the mosque was established in 1984 in a terrace residential property. It is a registered charity and the maintenance and repairs are managed from the donations and goodwill of the congregation
- The Hitchin Mosque has a broad demographic and ethnically diverse representation and endeavours to support key deprived areas our community
- The mosque remains a valuable community lifeline for the elderly and vital support to those with disabilities and their carers
- The Muslim population has continued to group and has subsequently outgrown the current building and we are now in desperate need for a larger premises.
- The mosque must remain accessible as Muslims are encouraged to pray 5 times a day. The current location has allowed generation families to settle around Hitchin Walsworth and Hitchin Bearton areas
- There is also parking, as Ramadan in particular has high levels of traffic in the evenings, as well as the Friday Community Congregational prayer at midday. The lack of dedicated parking or suitable off-road parking means that it becomes difficult for members or visitors to arrive by their own transport
- The mosque has a growing demand to deliver after school and weekend educational classes to Muslim children. There is also occasional demand for the mosque to be visited by local schools as part of RE studies. These have to be limited in size at present
- The Islamic Society of Hitchin participated in inter-faith meetings and has quarterly open sessions in Hitchin town with a stall. Due to lack of space we are unable to hold public sessions. We would like to offer additional services as well, such as funeral and marriage services
- We would like to ask your help in identifying a new suitable location that can accommodate the needs and growing Muslim community and to allow us to offer more extensive services. It needs to have dedicated or suitable off-road parking, ideally with a central location, but could also be in a mixed use area to minimise congestion.

The Chair thanked Haziq Patel for his presentation.

The following members asked questions:

- Judi Billing
- Nigel mason
- Keith Hoskins
- Ian Albert
- Chris Lucas
- Richard Thake

In response to questions, Haziq Patel advised:

- A mosque has certain connotations. Ideally a mosque is an open space, similar to the Church we are in tonight. It doesn't have to be anything specific that other religious buildings may need. The two wards are well represented and well recognised as the core community. They are there naturally because the mosque is there. The mosque

comes first, and the people move in around it. The mixed-use area would be a good location as it is not as far and is still accessible. We are happy to consider any land or buildings that are not in use that are suitable we could use that. We are open to anything.

- A lot of the events happen around prayer times. So having a facility within the mosque would be needed and very helpful. The Minority Ethnic Forum have been very helpful and have been looking at solutions such as having Eid in the park or other festivities at other locations.
- There isn't any size necessarily. We need a lot of floor space to allow for the carpets and for people to stand. It needs to be facing a south east direction. Washing facilities are also very important. We also would like facilities for those with disabilities for example. There are other mosques in other areas that have adjacent community facilities that can be rented out and this would also be a helpful thing to look at
- We are in the early stages of scoping

85 CONSULTATION ON NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT LOCAL CYCLING AND WALKING INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN

Edward Leigh gave introduced the LCWIP consultation for Members which included:

- This plan is out for consultation at the moment.
- It is for walking and cycling, looking at wider pavements, safer junctions, protected cycle lanes where we can find space, other traffic measures, etc
- The modal filters are what make streets more safer and attractive for people walking or cycling. This can include bollards on a road to stop through traffic, a one way system, reducing lanes, etc. These are often more controversial things as it may change the way people drive.
- This is the first iteration and it focuses on towns in North Herts, Knebworth and the route from Hitchin to Stevenage.
- We have identified routes in rural areas that are high priority but there are limited resources of mapping out the district so we are starting in towns and building outwards
- We will review the plan in 2 years with Herts County Council and provided we have funding we will do a second iteration.
- The consultation is online and runs until Monday 7th November. This involves maps of all towns
- We encourage residents, local businesses and groups to go online and make comments, suggestions or criticisms.
- We want to get a plan that is the best it can possibly be with the things that people want
- The slides that have been sent to the Councillors introduce the website. There is a map of Hitchin and as you scroll down it shows you in more detail the proposed changes. The "have your say" button is where you can add your comments.
- All comments are reviewed and then published anonymously so everyone can see them
- Hitchin has a good level of engagement already.
- There is also a more general survey that can be completed
- Active Travel England have funding and we can also use funding from developers

The following Members asked questions:

- Clare Billing

In response to questions, Edward Leigh advised:

- The transport plan is starting a sustainable spine to link Hitchin, Letchworth and Baldock. If we could create safer cycling routes this would create a large difference in road traffic. There is a major focus on how we can join towns together. There are alternative routes but many aren't easy to do
- Not sure if the Hitchin hoop is completely continuous. In Letchworth there was a goal to create a continuous loop and there is an aspiration to do this in Royston too. The LCWIP is more focused on utility routes, e.g. commuting. If there are elements of this that we can help we should be including those. To create a leisure route this would maybe be more of a community initiative

Councillor Nigel Mason agreed it was difficult to cycle from one side of Hitchin to the other.

Councillor Ian Albert suggested that it was up to the committee on how they wanted to respond to this. The Councillors could send in the responses and we can send a collective response as a Hitchin Area Committee.

Councillor Richard Thake commented on two of the traffic calming areas. Some of the things in the plan are aspirational and others are being done. He also mentioned his work with some Parish Councils.

Councillor Ian Albert also thanked Edward for the town talk.

It was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Committee note the report
- (2) That Members are encouraged to respond to the North Herts District LCWIP consultation draft and encourage residents and local organisations to do so.

86 INFORMATION NOTE - CHURCHGATE SHOPPING CENTRE UPDATE

Councillor Ian Albert updated Members on the recent acquisition of the Churchgate Shopping Centre which included:

- This will be included in the next town talk and we can explore its possibilities
- There is a meeting next week about if we can do a more formal public consultation before Christmas
- We have had some comments. For example a child asked when the cinema was coming. This shows that there is interest from both young and old residents about what is in our town

Councillor Keith Hoskins also added that by the next meeting we should have a public consultation schedule

87 CHARNWOOD HOUSE UPDATE

Councillor Keith Hoskins provided an update for Members on Charnwood House which included:

- The asbestos removal has gone ahead and should have been completed today
- There was a meeting convened with all the interested parties that came to the open day. This was attended by about 30
- The Charnwood community management association now has some new trustees which we will hopefully meet at the end of this week and can put together a proper proposal for it to be a community interest and fulfil our interest of it being retained as a community building

Councillor Ian Albert informed Members that they will keep the committee informed and will have regular updates about this.

88 GRANTS & COMMUNITY UPDATE

Danny Pearson, Community Engagement Officer, presented the report gave a verbal presentation, which included:

- We have been processing grants to utilise the Health Protection board funding to assist communities recovering after the pandemic.
- The PoetsIn grant from last meeting received over £15,022 from the Health Protection Board Fund and will be rolling out their programme for young and old
- We have been running surgeries in North Herts and we will be in Churchgate if it is raining but in the town square if it is sunny.
- We have various network groups going on. Youth action, food provision and the westmill group as well. We are partnered with the North Herts Strategy Partnership group now which is helpful. We have been engaging with youth and the groups that work with them, the arts and culture group was also very good.
- We gave a presentation for North Herts CVS that had their AGM at the town hall. Before that it was a Ukrainian refugee webinar which was well attended and available to watch on YouTube. We gave information on the work North Herts is doing for all refugees, and Hitchin is leading the way
- Next year it will be 50 years since Bob Marley played at the town hall. We want to put on a concert with a tribute act. At the very least we want to do a temporary plaque to mark the occasion.
- We are continuing to share information through a mailing list and we are in touch with the community on social media
- There has been a spike in anti-social behaviour in Letchworth and Hitchin. Some of the Councillors are working closely with the police and we are working closely with the market team and BID team on this
- Local Democracy week is spanned over many weeks before and after the October half term. It was a slow uptake but now we have loads and Hitchin and Letchworth schools have been very receptive. We want to continue doing this throughout the year
- We are gathering speakers for a community cabinet panel. We are doing this one on the cost of living.
- The BID were unable to show the Queens funeral and North Herts Council couldn't hire the screen. We contacted many places in Hitchin and venues stepped in to show it for those who were vulnerable etc
- The snowman trail, which was in London and Birmingham, has been funded but they needed our local knowledge. We have picked out 12 locations and selected a school to have a workshop. We have also suggested a charity and local artist. The museum and library will also do workshops. The Hitchin band will do a live theatrical show.
- There is an update of home is where the heart is. The exhibition was a massive success and has extended its run. A lot of people opened up and talked about issues

within the community. We will have the same exhibition at Holy Saviour Church in November.

Councillor Judi Billing commented that she was glad the exhibition is extending. In addition to the school visits Councillor Tom Plater introduced a theatre company that wanted to do some workshops on democracy. They will be doing on in Holwell school and Whitehill school.

Councillor Ian Albert informed Members there was a meeting tomorrow about the Willow tree. The Council will be funding a replacement tree. There is a question about whether it should be a memorial for the Queen or something more formal at the tree planting but this will be discussed with the Church tomorrow. He also mentioned the oil in the river and that the environmental agency is involved.

Following a vote, it was:

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

REASON FOR DECISION:

- (1) To ensure the Members are kept informed of the work of the Community Engagement Team
- (2) This report 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 the 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.

89 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

Members gave updates on the following Ward Matters and Outside Organisations:

Councillor Ian Albert reminded Members that the consultation around closing the high street is still open

90 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

The Chair advised that the following items were due to be included at the next meeting

- Churchgate
- Charnwood house
- Air quality

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

Tuesday, 11th October, 2022

The Chair also reminded Members that the next meeting is on Thursday 8th December 2022

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

Chair