

Initial Request and Expression of Interest pursuant to the NHDC Community Asset Transfer Policy.

Applicant- Hitchin Bridge Club – a Charitable Community Organisation (charity number 1140362)

Founded in 2000. In 2011 the club was recognised as a charity in a key decision by the Charities Commission and became the first mind sports organisation ever to achieve this status.

The charity's objects are: -

For the public benefit

(a) the advancement of amateur sport by promoting the game of bridge for the benefit of the residents of Hitchin and the surrounding area.

(b) the provision of facilities for the learning, teaching, and playing of bridge for the benefit of the residents of Hitchin and the surrounding area with the object of improving conditions of life.

The club currently has 260 members from a wide range of backgrounds and drawn from the whole of North Herts, Bedfordshire, and adjoining towns and districts. The latest accounts and annual statement are available on the Charities Commission website. These clearly show prudent and competent management. There are 7 trustees involved in running the club with dozens of other member volunteers. One of the trustees has particular responsibility for keeping in touch with members especially if they are unwell, in hospital, newly bereaved or in need.

Proposal

The club is looking for a suitable site on which to construct a permanent home. The building would be single storey and would primarily comprise a large well-lit and well ventilated open area, usual toilet and kitchen facilities and a small office. It would be intended to incorporate as many energy saving features as possible including solar panels, ground source heating, integral window blinds etc. The club would include broadband, internet, and interactive teaching aids.

There would be the opportunity for other community groups to hire the facilities. These groups could include activities for which the layout of the building would be particularly suited – chess, backgammon, scrabble and other board games, charity bridge drives, meetings, lectures and courses, tutoring and book clubs but these are not intended to be exhaustive and all enquiries would be considered.

The government encourages local authorities to reassess the use of all their assets and it is also the policy of NHDC to engage in a constructive way with community organisations for the benefit of all parties. This proposed project fulfils these objectives.

Funding.

It has been the policy of the club for several years to retain profits for the express purpose of building or leasing a suitable base for its activities. The club currently has £100000 in reserves. The additional cost required would be obtained from grant applications, donations, and loans from members.

Transfer terms

It is appreciated that NHDC would wish to retain the freehold ownership of any suitable land. The club would be happy to agree a long lease at a nominal ground rent.

In a recent conversation with a Council officer the idea was floated that given the low interest rates of borrowed money available to the Council an alternative would be for the Council itself to construct a building on land owned by them and then lease it to the club on a medium term lease at a community rate. That would be acceptable to the club if the Council preferred it.

Community Support.

Obviously all 260 club members are in favour as are the national body of the sport, the English Bridge Union, and its charitable arm EBed (English Bridge Education and Development)

The project also has the support in principle of Martin Stears-Handscomb the leader of NHDC and other Councillors if a suitable site can be located.

Benefits of Playing Bridge

Alleviating Social Isolation and Loneliness.

50% of people over 75 live alone, 1/3 of people over 65 live alone, my generation will spend 1/3 of their lives retired.

Retirement for some is a happy time, to travel, indulge in hobbies, see more of the grandchildren BUT for many others it is anything but happy. It can be a bit like a mini bereavement especially if they already live alone or have limited retirement income. People lose the structure of the working day, the friendship and camaraderie of colleagues (difficult to maintain after retiring), they feel unwanted and worthless. Yet they have much to offer to the community and their potential contributions are often lost.

The Government accepts that social isolation and loneliness is a real and growing problem. It costs the health and social care services a great deal of money and there are clearly considerable financial benefits in reducing its impact. People who lead fulfilling lives in retirement, who have lots of social contacts and engage in meaningful activities are happier, fitter, and healthier.

One way to reduce social isolation and loneliness is to provide facilities where people can meet and make friendships and when this is combined with learning a new skill which keeps you mentally alert and improves concentration so much the better.

The club runs classes for complete beginners and players returning to the game after a long absence whilst concentrating on family and career. It attracts many people at the verge of retirement helping to ease that sometimes difficult change of life.

Mental Stimulation as an aid to preventing or deferring dementia and cognitive decline.

Many studies have shown that stimulating the mind helps reduce the risk of dementia in the older population, aids concentration, memory, logic, and reasoning skills.

People now playing or learning to play whatever their age will be reducing their risk of developing dementia in the future by keeping their minds active, their senses alert and their concentration high every time they play. Bridge is a lifelong learning experience and one that continually stretches and stimulates.

Encouraging players to improve their playing ability, teaching the ethics of the game, partnership co-operation, tolerance, courtesy, and best behaviour at the bridge table are all part of the game. These skills benefit everyone who acquires them, increasing confidence, fostering friendships, and improving interpersonal relationships.

Whilst many other activities offer similar benefits bridge has the edge over sudoku, chess, crosswords, and the like in that it is a partnership game necessitating interaction with others. It can be played at many different levels from purely social and relaxed to the highly competitive.

Providing a sense of community and belonging.

Bridge clubs offer an opportunity for people to make new, often lifelong, supportive friends and create a sense of belonging and identity.

Bridge is a cheap activity. It costs £3 for a player to enjoy company and a stimulating experience lasting over 3 hours. The club has a policy of reducing that to one half for players in full time education or in receipt of any means tested benefit.

Bridge is accessible to disabled players as wheelchairs can easily be accommodated at a bridge table, stationary positions provided for the less mobile member and additional lighting for those with failing eyesight.

Improving mathematical and behavioural skills in the young.

Studies with schoolchildren have shown that playing bridge improves their mathematical skills in numeracy, problem solving, probability, logical reasoning and decision making. It helps children cope with success and defeat and learn that mistakes are a part of life. It also improves their behaviour and interpersonal skills in speaking, listening, rule following, team building, partnership working, tolerance and courtesy.

Pre Covid 19 the club was teaching bridge to primary school children in 2 Hitchin schools. This proved extremely popular with the children and in 2018 a group of year 6 students from Highover School were taken to play a game of bridge at the House of Lords. It is however difficult to introduce bridge to all local primary schools due to the number of volunteers required but with a dedicated building the club could and would intend to run an after school bridge club enabling us to reach and teach children from all parts of the town and surrounding area and to keep the interest of children who have moved onto secondary education.

Benefits of a bridge club to Hitchin.

Members and visitors come from all over the district and from many surrounding towns and villages. We have members who live in East Herts, Bedfordshire, Luton, Cambridgeshire, Three Rivers, Dacorum and Broxbourne.

Open competitions run by the club have in addition attracted players from Northampton, London, Oxford, Essex, and Suffolk and on one occasion Hawaii.

Many of these visitors have discovered Hitchin for the first time by playing at the club, like what they find here and return. Many arrive early, potter round the shops and market, visit coffee shops, eat in local cafes or restaurants or pop into a pub for a post-mortem at the end of the competition.

A secure base for the game will also increase membership. Stamford Bridge Club completed a remarkably similar project (with the support of the Town Council and South Kesteven DC) a few years ago. Before the building was started, they had a membership of 200, it is now over 500 and they are the third best attended clubs in England bringing many welcome visitors to the town.

