

## **Community Asset Transfer Request by Hitchin Bridge Club**

### **Location – Cadwell Lane Public Open Space**

#### **Why is Greenspace Important?**

Greenspace is important component to create a balance between the urban and rural environments found in North Hertfordshire and has been recognised as having an essential role for the “quality of life” found in the District which is through

1. Promoting healthier communities and reducing health inequalities
2. Enabling children and young people to develop social skills, test their boundaries, explore and learn about nature and wildlife
3. Improving the life chances of people living the more deprived areas
4. Creating safer and stronger communities
5. Improving the image of and pride in the different settlements
6. Creating cleaner and greener communities
7. Enhancing biodiversity
8. Mitigating and adapting to climate change
9. Recognising the value of the historic environment
10. Avoiding, managing and reducing flood risk.

For centuries public parks and open spaces have played an important part in the social and civic life of communities. From pocket parks in local neighbourhoods, country parks on the periphery of towns, to large civic parks at the heart of city centres, public parks are deeply rooted in the physical fabric, spirit and identity of thousands of places across the UK.

#### **Central to Family Life**

Some of our earliest childhood memories include visits to local parks. Socially, parks offer opportunities to rest and meet friends, for children and young people to play, to hold events, to pass through on the way to work, to exercise and take time out from the pressures of everyday life. Other reports also acknowledge the importance of parks to children. Making Britain Great for Children and Families – a manifesto launched by 4Children, the national charity working towards a more integrated approach to children’s services – includes better provision of parks in its list of ways to create good places for children to grow up in.

#### **Supporting Health and Happiness**

Parks have a positive effect on people’s wellbeing and the health of their neighbourhoods. Evidence from the University of Exeter’s European Centre for Environment and Human Health, published by the Association for Psychological Science<sup>7</sup>, reveals that people who live in greener urban areas report greater wellbeing and lower levels of mental stress than city dwellers without nearby parks and gardens. An increase in visitor numbers, particularly in urban parks, was recorded by Natural England in their annual Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) surveys. In 2012–13 there were fewer visits to the countryside and a significant increase in visits to green spaces in towns and cities. This points to the growing importance of parks as the only place some people encounter nature. The State of the Nation’s Waistline report, published by the National Obesity Forum, states that over 25% of adults in England are considered obese. By 2050 the figure is expected to rise to 50%. Parks provide vital health resources that help to support healthy populations. Their value to

public health is emphasised in Public Health and Landscape, a recent position statement by the Landscape Institute, which demonstrates parks are a key ingredient in creating healthy places.

### **Improving Social Cohesion**

Recent research highlights that “there is good evidence suggesting that the natural environment contributes to social cohesion. This appears to be particularly the case for well-maintained green spaces”. An example from Chicago suggests that parks can actively promote “inter-community relations in a way which is almost unique in urban life”. A Joseph Rowntree report notes that, as communities across the UK become increasingly mixed and diverse, local social amenities will become more and more important. Public parks offer one of the most important social spaces in a neighbourhood, but, as interviews in the research highlight, their condition is a key issue, as poor-quality parks can have a detrimental effect on cohesion.

### **Promoting Local Economic Development**

Public parks have been used throughout history to promote investment and growth. Developers frequently use the proximity of parks to attract investors. A study on improving the competitiveness of England's core cities notes that “soft location factors are an increasingly important part of economic decision-making”. Good-quality parks and public spaces contribute to these factors, which help to attract and retain skilled workers and their families. Forward-looking cities with a good environment and easy access to natural amenities are working at preserving and improving them. They know that for skilled employees “the quality of life for themselves and their families is an increasingly important factor” of location. Recent research from Natural England draws together a growing evidence base on ways the natural environment, including parks, can enhance the economic competitiveness of a particular region and increase employee productivity. Good parks also boost the tourist economy. Visit Britain has found that, of the 31 million tourists visiting Britain, over a third enjoy visiting a park or garden, making it one of the most popular activities (ranking above visiting a museum, castle, historic house or art gallery). Clissold Park, a local neighbourhood park in the London Borough of Hackney, receives the same number of annual visitors as London's National Portrait Gallery, and more than St Paul's Cathedral (2.1 million, 2.1 million and 1.8 million visitors respectively). Investing in parks is a recognised way of helping to regenerate and revitalise an area. There are economic indicators to show this works, and strong evidence of the impact of parks in protecting and enhancing land and property values. The presence of a well maintained park has been shown through research by CABI Space to add on average a 5% to 7% premium on house prices. Equally, a declining park has the opposite effect.

At a local level we need only look at the increased visitor numbers to Letchworth Garden City following the refurbishment work to Howard Park & Gardens.

### **Delivering Environmental Services**

Parks are a key component of the ‘green infrastructure’ of towns and cities, complementing the heavily engineered and costly ‘grey infrastructure’ of roads, utilities and sewerage systems. Properly planned, attractive green networks of parks, green spaces and river corridors provide natural systems and ecological services that collect and clean water, improve air quality and reduce peak summer temperatures. There is increasing interest in parks’ ability

to improve the resilience of neighbourhoods to the impacts of climate change. The Forestry Commission shows that trees in towns can help reduce the urban heat island effect by up to 7°C. As trees and plants grow, they take in carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Parks also provide biodiversity hotspots. The qualities of an ecologically rich functional landscape were built into London's Olympic Park at the outset. As the UK's newest large public park, it not only provided an attractive and dramatic setting for the London 2012 Games but also continues to reduce flood risk, store surface water, and accommodate a rich diversity of plant and animal species.

### **History of the open space**

Cadwell Lane Public Open Space (POS) lies on the edge of the Wilbury Way Industrial Est on the edge of Hitchin. The open space is bordered on two sides by residential dwellings consisting of a block of flats and 1930's style semidetached housing. On one side is an industrial unit with car parking to the front currently being used as a mechanics workshop and on the other is an embankment leading down to the River Hiz.

This site is also known to have been a former land fill site in the past.

The POS also contains a single adult football pitch that has been historically used by the Hitchin Sunday Football League.

The site of the community asset transfer is focused on an area that formally a football pavilion was located upon.

This pavilion was constructed out of prefabricated concrete sections with a single door in and out of the structure with a pebble dash textured exterior finish and few windows which were small at a high level and due to vandalism the glass has been replaced with reinforced polycarbonate sheeting which had turned opaque over time. The structure was of low quality and had become a focus for graffiti and anti-social behaviour.

At the time the pavilion was demolished the Hitchin Sunday League vigorously contested the decision which was eventually upheld by the Local Government Ombudsman. The decision to demolish the Cadwell pavilion was part of a District Wide strategic approach to rationalise the provision of football facilities throughout North Herts. The strategic aim was to acknowledge the demand for football pavilions but under the context of budget constraints it was no longer possible to continue investing in a poorly constructed building that only supported a single football pitch. The intention is to use proposed S106 funding from future developments to construct a purpose-built pavilion at Walsworth Common, Hitchin – less than half a mile from Cadwell Lane POS – on a site with 4 pitches with a brand-new building. As such this would reduce the burden on the existing out of date, poor quality pavilions leading up to the pre-emptive demolition of Cadwell Lane pavilion.

The POS is located adjacent the River Hiz and due to its location forms part of the string of Local Nature Reserves and habitat locations known locally as the Purwell Valley. This linear biodiversity corridor consists of Purwell Ninesprings (Owned by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust), Purwell Meadows, Walsworth Common, Cadwell Lane POS and Burymead Springs. Except for Purwell Ninesprings all are owned and managed by North Herts District Council.

Historically the maintenance of the Cadwell Lane POS has focused upon the single football pitch. However, since the demolition of the pavilion and with the emerging Purwell Valley concept attention has focused towards the adjacent River Hiz and the enhancement of biodiversity this POS can support. The Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) provides greater detail and can be found on the NHDC web site at

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/parks-and-open-spaces/green-space-management-strategy-and-action-plans>

Research into the topography, diversity and habitats found at Cadwell Lane POS for the GAP found that the site is adjacent a chalk stream (River Hiz) and is a significant corridor for wildlife connecting adjacent Local Nature Reserves at Burymead Springs and Purwell Meadows via Walsworth Common. External grant funding and resourcing from North Herts District Council enabled the implementation of the action plans within the GAP. This work included the improvement of access of footpaths from the POS to the river with resurfacing, introduction of signage and interpretation, thinning of tree canopies to allow more light to the river, planting of a hedge and implementing alterations to the management of the grassland headlands around the football pitch. The Cadwell Lane POS is now within the second-generation GAP which builds upon the works completed to date and is now focusing upon the strengthening of links within its neighbouring sites of environmental importance.

It's also worth noting that the location of the former pavilion is also a known location for Japanese Knotweed that requires regular treatment to contain it.

### **Hitchin Bridge Club - Greenspace Perspective**

Historically Hitchin Bridge Club used the pavilion within Bancroft Recreation Ground, Hitchin as their base for meetings etc. The renovation project of Bancroft Recreation Ground included the demolition of the Community Hall and conversion of the area into greenspace within the site. This was not received positively by the Hitchin Bridge Club who vigorously objected to the proposal despite the existing pavilion been in a very poor condition and not fit for purpose. At the time it was identified that there was an excess of community space for hire within Hitchin and that it would be possible for the Hitchin Bridge Club to easily relocate and use more appropriate facilities in the future. In addition, this situation would be further enhanced with the development and opening of Hitchin Town Hall.

It is understood that the Hitchin Bridge Club wish to secure a specific venue dedicated to their activities and have focused upon the locations vacated by the demolition of former football pavilions including Walsworth Common and St John's Recreation Ground also both in Hitchin.

The pavilion at St John's Recreation Ground was located immediately adjacent a community centre and it has been suggested that Hitchin Bridge Club may want to approach the community centre with the view to hiring the venue as appropriate. It appears that this option has been discounted by the Hitchin Bridge Club in favour of their proposals at Cadwell Lane.

### **Community Asset Transfer Request by Hitchin Bridge Club – Community engagement team view**

Hitchin Bridge Club were based at Bancroft Hall which was demolished in 2016.

Since then they moved to the Church Hall, Our Lady's and St Andrew Church, 16 Nightingale Road.

Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic they advertised sessions at lunch time and evening on Monday's and Wednesday's and Thursday and Friday evenings.

#### ***Meeting times:***

*Monday and Wednesday afternoons at 1.30 p.m. every week.*

*Monday, Wednesday and Thursdays evenings at 7.30pm. every week*

*Teams of 4 on 2nd Friday of each month.*

*Hitchin Bridge Club (a registered charity) promotes and encourages the playing of duplicate bridge in the town. It offers courses for complete beginners and support for improvers.*

*All sessions apart from Thursday are suitable for all abilities. Thursday's evenings are intended for improvers and inexperienced players. (only simple systems permitted).*

*Supervised play sessions are also held on Monday afternoons separately from the main playing sessions.*

*A host is usually available on Monday evening, Wednesday afternoon and Thursday evening so players can attend those sessions without a partner.*

*The club also offers a series of workshops for players wishing to improve their bridge skills.*

**Ref: Herts County Council website**

The Hitchin Bridge Club is registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)

They state in their annual accounts 2019 that they have 250 members and this number has remained stable for quite a few years.

It is my understanding that the club have been looking for alternative premises for many years as they would like to have sole use of a building.

There are many other venues around the town, Community Centres, Scout Huts, Church Halls.

The community centres are owned but not operated by North Hertfordshire District Council.

These include: Walsworth Community Centre, St Michael's Mount Community Centre, St John's Community Centre and Westmill Community Centre.

In addition, there is the Hitchin Town Hall that has a large hall plus smaller meeting room for hire.

These venues have been suggested to the club, but these were rejected as they would not be able to have sole use.

Officers are unclear why sole use is required as they currently don't use their current location 100% of the time. However, as it seems that this is their desire then it should not be the responsibility of the local authority to provide a venue for this single use.

### **Alternative Options**

The strategic direction of football provision has always focused upon developing Walsworth Common as the focus for the sport. This would then enable the contraction of satellite facilities from around Hitchin to be withdrawn. This in turn would be supported by S106 contributions to build a purpose-built facility at Walsworth Common to replace the lost pavilion provision. It has also been proposed that this new build could be a community building that could serve a wider community audience.

The Hitchin Bridge Club used a former Community Hall at Bancroft Recreation Ground, and it is not known if they have approached other existing Community Halls to relocate their activities to. There, is already, an established Community Centre at Walsworth and another at St Michael's, not to mention the previously noted facility at St John's Recreation Ground all within Hitchin.

If the development of a new pavilion progresses at Walsworth Common using S106 funding this would lead to the demolition of two existing buildings at Swinburne Recreation Ground and Ransoms Recreation Ground. Once vacated one of these buildings could be acquired by the Hitchin Bridge Club to convert to their needs – therefore negating the need and expense of building a specific building and also losing valuable greenspace from public access. The potential of repurposing the pavilion at Ransoms Rec has also been realised by the Triangle Garden Association at Ransoms who already occupy half the existing pavilion. Therefore, there is a potential option for a joint venture between the Hitchin Bridge Club and the Triangle Garden regarding the area currently used as a football pavilion should Walsworth be developed.

As previously highlighted above the Hitchin Bridge Club used the Community Hall in Bancroft Recreation Ground for their activities before the building was removed. The Bancroft Bowls Pavilion remains and is used by the bowlers throughout the summer. Again, it is not known if the Hitchin Bridge Club have approached the bowlers to explore a joint venture to share the building for both groups in the future.

### **Future Options**

- 1 Grant the community asset transfer and lose the greenspace at Cadwell Lane and incur the negative impacts as detailed above both locally and further afield.
- 2 Refuse the community asset transfer but offer alternatives
  - a. Assist the Hitchin Bridge Club to approach existing Community Groups to make enquiries about sharing facilities
  - b. Delay a decision until Swinburn Rec and Ransoms Rec Pavilions are vacated
  - c. Assist Hitchin Bridge Club to approach the bowlers at Bancroft Recreation Ground
  - d. Assist Hitchin Bridge Club to identify alternative venues in Hitchin that they could hire
- 3 Refuse the community asset transfer and close the proposal.