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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON COMMUNITY

**MEETING HELD AS A VIRTUAL MEETING
ON MONDAY, 8TH NOVEMBER, 2021 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Judi Billing (Chair), Daniel Allen, Ruth Brown, Sarah Dingley, Jean Green, Tony Hunter and Mandi Tandi*

In Attendance: *Steve Crowley (Service Director - Commercial), Chloe Gray (Commercial Officer) and James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting Councillors Ian Albert and Claire Strong, and approximately 5 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

10 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sam Collins and Kay Tart.

11 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. The Chair welcomed those present at the meeting, especially those who had attended to give a presentation and join in the discussion. The focus of the meeting would be on how the Council might support towns and villages in the district with their recovery from Covid.
2. The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded as well as filmed. The audio recording would be available on the NHDC website and the film recording via the NHDC YouTube channel.
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

12 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business notified.

13 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chair welcomed Paul Ward and Claire Graham from Knebworth Parish Council to give a presentation on the response to and impact of Covid in the parish, which included:

- Had been a garden village for around 130 years and much of the development over the years had centred around the station.
- The pavements in the village were already wide and social distancing requirements caused further issues with space on High Street and was having a negative impact on footfall in town.
- The Parish Council lobbied to have the imposed barriers removed from the High Street, as car parking was required to encourage people into the businesses.
- There had been changes in commuting patterns by residents in the village and this had a subsequent impact on the requirements for hospitality and personal services in the village.
- The Parish Council had worked to ensure the pub in Knebworth was saved and protected throughout the pandemic.

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- Businesses altered their models and practices, which included embracing social media/online communications.
- Concerns that any reduction in parking and increase of change of use of sites could have a negative impact on village centre.
- A Neighbourhood Plan had been developed alongside NHDC to focus on how the village can cope and maximise the potential of development and expansion.
- Attempt to understand what the future changes will mean to Knebworth and its infrastructure.
- Possibilities of investments which develop and complement the existing village.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Mandi Tandi

In response to questions, Paul Ward advised:

- There was a good diversity of businesses in the village, ranging from small industrial to family owned shops.
- Businesses reported that additional broadband capacity would be helpful.
- Knebworth, with 2500 houses and population of over 4000, was becoming an oversized village and understanding the challenges of these developments was challenging. However, there was not a desire to see this develop into a town.
- The sites highlighted in the presentation for development were likely to go ahead and therefore it would be expected that some sensible decisions and investments would be made into the village from these.
- Where people can see positive outputs of developments, from Section 106 funds, they will be more accepting of these changes.

The Chair welcomed Graham Lee from Ashwell Parish Council to give a presentation on the response to and impact of Covid in the Parish, which included:

- Ashwell had a higher than regional average proportion of elderly residents, but there was a significant proportion of families with school aged children and working parents.
- Pre-Covid working aged residents generally commuted by train or car to work.
- There were 4 retailers, 3 pubs and several other services in the village and these saw only 25% of their turnover came from local households.
- During the pandemic there were issues with accessing NHS services, with face-to-face appointments suspended, and communication between the surgery and residents was poor.
- The pharmacy was able to offer flu jabs but could not offer the Covid vaccine due to stricter criteria.
- Working parents were having to juggle working from home and childcare – the reopening of schools for key workers helped with this.
- Elderly people in the village were left isolated and while some attempt at Zoom events was made, it was not suitable for all residents.
- All pubs in the village suffered, but they were supported by furlough scheme and lockdown grants and were now opening and back to seemingly normal levels.
- Sports activities for children and adults were cancelled, which had an impact on both the user and the provider, with loss in rental income.
- Local shops did benefit at the initial outbreak of the pandemic, with local residents remaining local and developing their offer and opening times to reflect this. However, as retail opened more widely there was a return to bigger national chains.
- The pharmacy worked tirelessly throughout pandemic, offering advice and medical deliveries for vulnerable residents.

- Footpaths and byways in the village were used significantly during lockdown, which did see some negatives (e.g. litter).
- There was a return to the 'new normal', with more residents working from home and retailers going back to usual opening hours.
- The community had generally been accepting of behavioural changes from Covid, e.g. mask wearing, social distancing, etc.
- There was little evidence of sustained changes in business models.
- A full time Post Office in the village would be beneficial, as the existing one was currently part time.
- Broadband improvements would be helpful.

14 INFORMATION NOTE AND GROUP DISCUSSION

The Chair invited BID representatives to comment on their experiences in recovery in the Town Centres from the impact of Covid.

Tom Hardy, Hitchin BID Manager, advised:

- Ongoing discussions regarding the discretionary funding from government and how Hitchin could use these funds, but which would also have a positive impact on surrounding villages.
- Looking at which short- and long-term projects could be developed.
- Alongside NHDC, working on a tourism strategy within Hitchin, but this could be developed wider across North Herts with focus on villages such as Knebworth and Ashwell.
- North Herts has a good offer across the towns and parishes and footfall should not be a competition between each, but rather work together to develop offer across the board.

Alice Johnson, Letchworth BID Manager, advised:

- Looking at long term strategies to maintain existing visitors, as well as developing offers for new visitors.
- There was a need to continue to work with other town BIDs and develop the relationship between these.
- A booklet highlighting the tourist attractions and activities in the district would be beneficial and could be a key project to develop working alongside other BIDs.

Cath Boughton, Royston First Manager, advised:

- They had been engaging with businesses in the town.
- Work on positive communications to encourage people back into town and this has helped to see footfall begin to increase.
- Small, low-key events had been developed to help encourage people back to town.

15 MEMBERS' DISCUSSION

The Chair led a discussion on ways in which the Council could help to support villages and towns in the district with their recovery from the impact of Covid.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Ian Albert

Points raised included:

- There was a need to work together more across towns, specifically with sharing experiences and knowledge.
- Café culture in Letchworth had increased and this had been replicated across Hitchin and Royston, with businesses embracing the outdoor seating and takeaway service.
- Walkers and cyclists had increased in southern North Herts during the lockdown periods, which helped to support the local pubs and cafes in this area.
- Communities came together throughout the pandemic to support local businesses.
- Discussions had been held around holding a survey of local businesses and what support NHDC could give them, this could be done with the support of parish councils and BIDs.

16 ACTIONS ARISING AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Commercial Manager summarised the discussions which took place during the meeting and outlined:

- It would be useful to have a networking group of local leaders from towns and villages across the district.
- This group would share knowledge and experience, but also work on projects outside of town/parish boundaries.
- Can promote the positive activities being down in the towns and villages across the district.
- Would look to develop this group and collate ideas on how this could function going forward.

Councillor Judi Billing requested that the group be more practical in focus and noted that similar schemes had been set up during the pandemic looking at food and arts provision.

Tom Hardy suggested that there were issues with finding time to look for grant schemes and apply for these. These funds would be required to fund the projects discussed at any networking group and support with accessing these would be helpful.

The Service Director – Commercial requested that Members make suggestions for the Cabinet Panel meeting in January.

Councillor Sarah Dingley suggested that events could be a possible topic at future meetings. As 2022 was a jubilee year, there would be events taking place across the towns and villages. With not having held events in nearly two years, it may be a good time for those present to share ideas.

Councillor Judi Billing agreed and requested that the next meeting look at Community Events. There had been a request made to Community Engagement Team that a calendar of events should be put together, highlighting everything going across the district.

Councillor Ruth Brown highlighted that Royston First had discussions surrounding what should be done about larger Christmas events, with increase in Covid cases, and a networking group discussing these events would help to understand what others were doing.

Cath Boughton agreed that knowing what others were doing would give BIDs confidence to run events.

RESOLVED: That the Service Director – Commercial be requested to update the Work Programme with the following action points arising from the meetings discussions:

- To consider ways of collaborating with the BID and Parish representatives that could have positive impacts on recovery efforts.

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- To consider a clear theme and direction for the next meeting due to be held on 31 January 2022.

The meeting closed at 8.41 pm

Chair

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