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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE SCHOOL HALL, TILEHOUSE STREET BAPTIST CHURCH
ON TUESDAY, 30TH NOVEMBER, 2021 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Ian Albert (Chair), Councillor Clare Billing (Vice-Chair), Val Bryant, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Simon Harwood, Mike Hughson, Nigel Mason and Richard Thake*

In Attendance: *Danny Pearson (Assistant Community Engagement Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) and Louis Mutter (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 10 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

23 WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Members, Officers and members of the public to the Hitchin Area Committee meeting.

24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Judi Billing, Paul Clark, Sam Collins, Keith Hoskins and Kay Tart.

25 MINUTES - 12 OCTOBER 2021

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 12 October 2021 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

26 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business notified.

27 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.

- (4) The Chair advised that due to illness Shane Cole and Liz Wills would be unable to give updates to the Committee at this meeting. They would be invited to present at a future meeting.

28 HITCHIN BID MANAGER

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 Christmas Lights Switch On took place on the 20 November and was a huge success with lots of people in attendance.
- This year saw the parade led by a 60-piece marching band and new lights were installed at Churchgate and the Wilko building. Further additions to the lights are expected for next years event.
- The H-Town Business Awards took place with the winners presented at the Christmas Lights Switch On.
- The Christmas market was due to take place from 8 to 15 December, with 11 of the 15 stalls being local businesses and the grotto run by Garden House Hospice.
- The Platinum Jubilee in 2022 will see events across the four day weekend, with different activities on each of the days (big screens, carnivals, street parties, etc.).
- As a business led organisation, events run by the BID need to support businesses in the town, but also appeal to the public. Therefore there is an intention to work with other organisations and groups across the town to support events where business is not the main focus.
- Were beginning to think of a tourism strategy for Hitchin, understanding the journey into town, experience there and returning home – this tourism work is being supported by students at the University of Hertfordshire.
- There had been over £8000 worth of H-Town Pounds sold so far, this is expected to support local businesses in January when business is traditionally slower.
- The BID had rebranded to Visit Hitchin as its public facing arm and Hitchin Hub for businesses.
- The Christmas tree had been installed and was up and running.
- Updated on cardboard and used coffee grounds collections, which included a new compactor being installed.
- There were 37 new businesses, which meant there was now a vacancy rate of just 3% which represented a quarter of the national average. There was a higher demand for smaller premises.
- In liaison with Herts County Council and North Herts Council, the High Street closures had been moved from temporary to experimental and would look at ways of increasing pedestrianisation of the High Street without negatively affecting businesses there.
- Conversations had been held with the tenants at Churchgate, who were worried and concerned at recent developments over the lease. They had requested that the Council made some communication to explain the situation and development and all unnecessary panic.
- Four new floating platforms had been installed in the river to prevent the moorhens nesting on the fountains.

Councillor Ian Albert thanked Tom Hardy for this update and wished to express his thanks to the Town Centre Rangers who were leaving, for all the work they had done.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Mike Hughson

Councillor Richard Thake commented that he would like to see Churchgate redeveloped, however no certainty can be given at this stage. It was important for the Council to understand the proposals before communicating with tenants.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg confirmed that the Commercial Property transaction had not been completed yet and until this is completed there was little concrete information to pass onto tenants.

In response to questions, Mr Tom Hardy advised:

- There was a prospective tenant for the old bathroom store, but this could not yet be confirmed.
- The low shop vacancy rate in Hitchin compared to national average was due to a number of factors including the benefit of having a central market square for events and the proximity of the town to London. The BID also worked with new businesses and local landlords to match people to an appropriate property.

29 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - SAVE HITCHIN GREEN BELT

A verbal presentation was given by Phil Davis on the work of the Save Hitchin Green Belt group and included:

- The group were disappointed to hear that the petition was not formally accepted by the Council, as more than 5000 people had signed, and this was more support than any previous local petition.
- There were concerns regarding how the sites for development were selected, with little consideration given to the ecological or environmental impact.
- The areas selected provided vital wildlife corridors surrounding Hitchin and the removal of this would have an impact on the food chain. The surrounding fields managed by farmers did not offer the same level of wildlife.
- There are bats located within the sites and the large hedging provide a food source to sustain the bats – these plans would remove the hedging and therefore the food source for the bats.
- The development of these sites would lead to further pollution and would cause further congestion, especially on Upper Tilehouse Street where traffic was already bad.
- The Local Plan under consideration is 10 years old already and times have changed, and plans included in this are not suitable.
- There were a number of urban developments progressing in the town which were not included within the Local Plan.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg commented that the invitation to speak at this area committee and Council was so Members could hear the concerns of the group and the petition signatories. As the Local Plan was still being considered by the Inspectorate there was limited ability for Members to comment on the plans. Councillor Dennis-Harburg advised that she would speak with Planning Officers to understand how the sites on the Local Plan had been selected.

Councillor Richard Thake noted that no unilateral decisions can be made now, and the report would come back with recommendations. It would then be for Members to accept these or reject them and start again.

Councillor Dennis-Harburg advised that there was a possibility that Members could review the existing plan once returned.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Simon Harwood

- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions, Phil Davis advised:

- The group did not support relocating the planned developments to another site and were flatly against further housing developments, as there would still be an environmental impact.
- These developments would not offer affordable housing and would further force younger people out of the town.
- The housing mix was not appropriate.
- There had previously been a traffic monitoring device placed on Upper Tilehouse Street, but this was during the pandemic when many people were working from home, so this would not give an accurate reflection of congestion on said road.

30 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - HITCHIN FAIR TRADE TOWN

A verbal presentation was given by Helen Richardson to update the Committee on Hitchin as a Fairtrade Town and included:

- Reviewed the history of Hitchin as a Fairtrade Town, which began in 2005 as the Fairtrade Town Steering Group.
- The process and award were managed by the Fairtrade Foundation, the same organisation who oversee the logo on Fairtrade goods.
- In order to maintain the status, the group was required to speak with businesses in the town to see what measures were in place and goods were sold in line with the requirements of the Fairtrade Foundation. This was initially done with the support of Priory School.
- The process had to be repeated every few years, in order to confirm Fairtrade practices and products were still in place. Was due to happen in 2020 but postponed due to pandemic.
- There was previously a more active Fairtrade community which would often see Fairtrade events take place, such as fashion shows, stalls and a Fairtrade Fortnight.
- The group had produced brochures to show which businesses in the town supported Fairtrade and made slips to leave at businesses not currently involved to encourage their participation.
- The emphasis has now moved away from events and more about the number of premises and publicity.
- Schools have become less engaged in the process, as teachers and students have moved on. This is similar with the Steering Group, which has seen membership drop.
- The questionnaire to businesses this year was conducted by the Town Rangers.

Councillor Ian Albert suggested that this is something that the Community Engagement Team at NHDC could support.

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer, Danny Pearson, advised that he would liaise with Helen to see what support they could offer.

Councillor Simon Harwood suggested that the group could be added to the Outside Bodies so they could receive Council support.

Councillor Harwood commented that a website may be better than a brochure at keeping information up to date, as this could be edited and revised throughout the year.

Councillor Richard Thake suggested that the Hitchin BID were best placed to support and deal with the groundwork and discussions with businesses. He also encouraged the group to write to the Council to gather further support.

It was:

RECOMMENDED TO THE SERVICE DIRECTOR – LEGAL & COMMUNITY: That options for an appointment to Fair Trade Town Hitchin as an ‘outside body,’ be considered.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION: To establish and maintain relations with an outside body benefiting the Hitchin community.

31 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

A verbal presentation was given by Lewis Reynolds and Glyn Doggett on the proposed works to revitalise The Dell and surrounding woodland. The presentation included:

- These plans were developed with the support of Councillor Keith Hoskins, who was unable to attend this meeting, and stemmed from the success of the Hitchin Festival events at The Dell.
- Reviewed the location of the site, in relation to the other facilities and provisions in the town.
- The process has involved looking at the issues that need to be dealt with, but also the benefits already existing on the site. While the focus was on The Dell as a theatre space, there was a desire to see this become an open space for wider use by the public.
- Commented on the history of the site.
- The site would require enhancement schemes to improve the landscape character, maximise potential for recreation, environmental statement and biodiversity.
- Plans included a restoration of the stage, informal seating, a new disabled area with suitable ramps and repairs to steps, new entrances to the site and vegetation management to create new sightlines to deter anti-social behaviour.
- There would need to be discussions around what lighting could be installed for the stage.
- The following vision statement was prepared to focus plans: ‘The Dell will be a welcoming, diverse and highly cherished woodland open space for the use and enjoyment of all residents and visitors in Hitchin. The Dell and Woodside will become a haven for exploration and discovery. The ecological value of the Site will be sensitively managed to ensure that visitors understand the delicate balance that exists between protecting and enjoying our natural assets. Their fascinating landscape character will stand alongside Hitchin’s spectacular open spaces, where the unique blend of nature, heritage and theatre will elevate the status of The Dell within the hierarchy of recreational facilities that serve the local community.’

Councillor Richard Thake advised that he was family friends with the former site owners, but at this stage it was not a declarable interest. He commented that the plans for development would be beneficial to the site.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Simon Harwood
- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor Clare Billing
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions, Lewis Reynolds and Glyn Doggett advised:

- They had been working with Councillor Keith Hoskins to look at possible funding for the plans, from Councils, Town Centre grants, etc.
- There were two phases of the plans – the first would look at redeveloping The Dell theatre site and the second would look at the surrounding woodland and making it more usable and accessible.
- Confirmed that plans had not yet been discussed with Council Officers, but there was a hope this would come in later stages.
- There were some high-level costs which had been considered which could be passed onto Members, but nothing decided or detailed at this stage.
- There was a hope that by altering the site lines created by the vegetation, this would reduce the anti-social behaviour which had become a norm on the site.
- The landscape of 'Phase 2' was large, but mainly consisted of hilly woodland.
- There was a hope that by engaging and involving young people in the project, it would further reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour causing damage to the redeveloped site.
- The site was owned by NHDC, but there were covenants on the use of the site.

Councillor Ian Albert commented that if a future Hitchin Arts Centre was developed, this site would help support this and the future of Arts in Hitchin.

The Chair of the Committee agreed that he would write to Council officers and relevant Executive Members concerning the points raised.

32 GRANT APPLICATIONS AND COMMUNITY UPDATE

Danny Pearson, Assistant Community Engagement Officer, presented the report entitled 'Grants and Community Update' and gave a verbal presentation, which included:

- Confirmed that no grant applications had been brought to this Committee meeting.
- Updated Members the outstanding grant funds available.
- Advised on possible grant applications for future meetings.
- Had been communicating with networking and community groups in the town (e.g. food provision and youth networks).
- Had spoken with a resident who wanted to run a South East Asian heritage event, in line with Black History and Pride month events.
- Westmill Networking Group had reported that a lot of anti-social behaviour issues had occurred in the area.
- Community Surgeries were taking place, with "Welcome Back, Shop Locally" being a key focus.
- The hybrid Town Talk made a positive start prior to the Committee meeting and the Assistant Community Engagement Officer, alongside the Chair of the Committee, would look to build upon this idea and make future Town Talks more accessible.
- Chair's Volunteer Award was now live and information was available on North Herts website.
- Confirmed that a Holocaust Memorial Day had been planned for January and would take place in Council Chamber at District Council Offices.
- Gave Members written updates from North Herts African Caribbean Group, the Community Kitchen and Peace Garden Sculpture organisers regarding their recent grant funds from the Committee.

Following the presentation, Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee endorse 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) To inform Members of the financial resources available by drawing attention to the current budgetary situation and ensure 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.

33 INFORMATION NOTE AND GROUP DISCUSSION

The Committee received the information note of the Service Director – Regulatory entitled “Unemployment, Furlough, Vacancies and Town Centre Activity in Hitchin”.

Councillor Ian Albert noted that the Committee had already received a similar update in the earlier item from the Hitchin BID Manager, but this paper provided further evidence of this. The paper demonstrated that Hitchin is showing good resilience to the Covid lockdowns, compared both within North Herts and Hertfordshire.

Councillor Nigel Mason questioned whether following a Guardian article exploring the possible takeover of LV, which was a major employer within the town, the Council could look to receive confirmation of the plans for jobs at LV in Hitchin.

Councillor Ian Albert advised that he would contact LV and look at what information can be given regarding future plans in Hitchin following any potential takeover. He would seek to understand what the impact of job losses or gains would be and how the Council could offer support.

Councillor Simon Harwood noted that LV used to have more of an active presence in the town, but recently this had decreased and agreed that it would be helpful to understand the facts around LV in Hitchin.

RESOLVED: That the Information Note of the Service Director – Regulatory entitled “Unemployment, Furlough, Vacancies and Town Centre Activity in Hitchin,” along with its appendices be noted.

34 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

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

- Charnwood House
- Churchgate Lease
- Hertfordshire Constabulary
- Events in Hitchin (pride, platinum jubilee)

Councillor Simon Harwood suggested that an update on plans at King George V Playing Fields be included.

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.

The meeting closed at 9.17 pm

Chair

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