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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

HITCHIN COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE CHRISTCHURCH, BEDFORD ROAD, HITCHIN
ON TUESDAY, 1ST MARCH, 2022 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Ian Albert (Chair), Judi Billing, Val Bryant, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Simon Harwood, Keith Hoskins and Nigel Mason*

In Attendance:

Danny Pearson (Assistant Community Engagement Officer) and Louis Mutter (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)

Also Present:

At the commencement of the meeting approximately 10 members of the public, including registered speakers.

35 WELCOME

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

36 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mike Hughson, Kay Tart, Clare Billing and Richard Thake.

37 MINUTES - 30 NOVEMBER 2021

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 30 November 2021 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

38 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business notified.

39 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.

40 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:

- A chewing gum deep clean of the town centre took place;
- Plans for the platinum jubilee include floral displays and events taking place in the town centre on the 2, 3, 4 and 5 of June;
- There was a new BID Events and Marketing Coordinator;
- There had been lots of enquiries about events in the marketplace, so a new 2022 events guide will be published and circulated;
- Rangers are running a new spring clean-up project, including the painting of bollards;
- The vacancy rate is 1.8% as of today, compared to the national average of 14.5%. 23 businesses are on a waiting list for a unit. There has been a new Vietnamese restaurant opened in the town, as well as Fabio's.
- 12,500 H-Town Pounds have been sold – a voucher that can be used in Hitchin stores.

Mr Tom Hardy handed out an infographic of the new BID staff structure to Members.

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

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Keith Hoskins
- Councillor Simon Harwood

In response to questions, Mr Tom Hardy advised:

- Poundland had been vacated, and that it is up for rent at the moment.
- There are 600 businesses in the town, with 11 vacancies without offers.

41 HERTFORDSHIRE CONSTABULARY

Sergeant Guy Westwood, Hertfordshire Constabulary, provided Members of the Committee with an update on crime and police matters in the Hitchin area. This included:

- The team has a new staff structure. There is now 3 teams, freeing some staff members up to do things behind the scenes;
- In the last few weeks the team has reached full capacity;
- The priorities set in January are: Burglary, Anti-social behaviour in open spaces and Vehicle related nuisances;
- Priorities are now set after six months instead of three;
- A survey was sent to OWL members in setting priorities;
- Crime figures were expected to increase due to COVID lockdowns the year before. All crimes in the County had increased by 4.2%;
- Last year the County had had 65209 crimes compared to this year's 67981;
- North Herts has seen a 1.5% decrease in crime. Hitchin has seen a 2% increase;
- Burglary was picked as a priority as it was expected to increase due to time of year; more people going back to work meaning more empty dwellings;
- Hertfordshire as a whole saw a decrease in residential burglaries, while North Herts saw an increase from 156 to 172 and Hitchin saw an increase of 51 to 62.
- Increasing the number of patrols and crime prevention advice as a result of the increase;
- Burglaries of businesses and communities saw a decrease from 34 to 23 due to increased patrols on empty business areas;
- Criminal damage crimes saw a county-wide increase, but Hitchin decreased;

- Drug possession, robbery, shoplifting, motor vehicle theft and theft of a motor vehicle have all seen a decrease in the Hitchin area;
- Online crime and fraud have not been included in these figures due to where the crime is reported isn't necessarily where it is being committed – international fraud;
- Anti-social behaviour has seen an increase in North Herts from 96 to 110;
- Hate crimes have seen an increase in Herts from 1554 to 1647, in North Herts from 96 to 110. Increase was all hate crimes related to sexual orientation. The team has encouraged people to report more.

Councillor Ian Albert thanked Sergeant Guy Westwood for the presentation.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Val Bryant

In response to questions, Sergeant Guy Westwood advised:

- Hertfordshire Constabulary will continue to work with Members and members of the public to determine the crime priorities in the area.
- Noisy car exhausts fall under anti-social behaviour; any exhaust should be muffled. Please report to the team if you have information.

42 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - FEED UP, WARM UP & HITCHIN PANTRY

A verbal presentation was given by Shane Cole on the work of Feed up Warm up, and by Liz Willis of Hitchin Pantry, points included:

- Feed up Warm up has changed the way it has operated since it was last present at a Hitchin Committee. The organisation has gone to a strength based approach with service users rather than a generic 25 question form;
- Have now started funding people's private mental health counselling;
- Mental health plays a big part in homelessness, whether it was the cause or a subsequent problem;
- The public have donated specifically for the new private counselling approach;
- Feed up Warm up is now partnered with Hitchin Pantry;
- Stepped up on the approach in how individuals get reported to the organisation; New website now helps to support this report;
- Running in partnership with Stevenage Football Club.

- Hitchin Pantry is a new initiative from October. It is a social supermarket model which is membership based;
- The Organisation allows people that are suffering from food poverty to sustainable feed their families. It is not a foodbank or free, members choose their own food;
- Fresh meat and dairy is provided along with fresh fruit and vegetables;
- It is a franchise model from Your Local Pantry;
- The shop is a community hub, with frequent musicians and chatters;
- Hertfordshire Health Hub cooking courses have shown interest;
- Since the end of October the shop has had 714 visits;
- The shop is open two days a week for two hours, on Friday and Saturday;
- 74 members are families, the rest are older individuals; 51% live in private rented accommodation, 4 are homeless and 59 live in social housing.

Councillor Ian Albert thanked Shane Cole and Liz Willis for their verbal presentations.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions the two members of public advised:

- Hitchin Pantry has managed to receive food from Marks and Spencer's in Stevenage 2 nights a week.
- Feed up Warm up has already seen an improvement of communication with certain homeless individuals since the new approach.
- Visits from Members to both centres were welcome.

43 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - NORTH HERTS PRIDE

A verbal presentation was given by Niamh Skinner and Kerrie Portman on the work and events of North Herts Pride and included:

- The organisation has just registered for a CIC;
- It started with newsletters – handwritten photocopies. Eventually branched out to events;
- They have a picnic planned for the 26th March, and a screening of Pride on the 6th April;
- Sell bags, mugs and stickers to fundraise at events;
- They are present on social media and plan to post for World Book Day and International Women's Day;
- They have social media posts defining key terms.

The Chair thanked Niamh and Kerrie for their presentation.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Simon Harwood
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions, Niamh and Kerrie advised:

- They post on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter as North Herts Pride;
- They are planning a summer event on the 17th September in Hitchin town square;
- The founder of NH Pride was on the committee for Hitchin Pride but wanted to create something for the whole community.

44 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Community Engagement Assistant explained to the Committee that Bethan Trezise was unable to attend the Committee, and read out a written statement on behalf of Goslings Playgroup in respect of their grant application. Points in the statement included:

- Goslings is a preschool playgroup for Children of 2 years to 4 years of age;
- Founded in 1991;
- Goslings are OFSTED registered and are able to accept 26 children at the playgroup at any one time;
- Goslings has been making an operational loss for the last few years;
- Currently working with a media trust volunteer to create a new user friendly reactive website to clearly communicate what the playgroup can offer;
- Fundraising has been tough due to COVID, the group have been unable to run usual in person events;
- Would like to purchase a wooden playhouse that would be used by children who wish to be outside in a quiet environment.

45 GRANT APPLICATION - GOSLINGS PLAYGROUP

Councillor Judi Billing proposed and Councillor Nigel Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £2000 be awarded to Goslings Playgroup for improving their outside play area as outlined in paragraph 8.1.1 of the officer's report.

46 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Community Engagement Assistant explained to the Committee that Hannah Reynolds was unable to attend the Committee, and read out a written statement on behalf of Imagination Dance in respect of their grant application. Points in the statement included:

- Imagination Dance is a dance company that specialises in providing dance and movement opportunities for those who are rarely offered them. This includes those with long-term conditions such as Dementia; older people; those with disabilities and children with SEN and additional needs;
- Run classes in Hitchin at the Westmill Community Centre;
- Classes are tailored to the needs of participants, and ask for the input of the local community to meet the demand for what is needed in the area;
- Looking to use the grant to support these classes financially; it has been difficult to increase the numbers since returning from lockdowns;
- The grant would allow the organisation to continue to run the classes and promote the branch to increase numbers.

47 GRANT APPLICATION - IMAGINATION DANCE

Councillor Nigel Mason proposed and Councillor Simon Harwood seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £1115 be awarded to Imagination Dance for supporting their classes for children and young people with additional needs as outlined in paragraph 8.1.2 of the officer's report.

48 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

A verbal presentation was given by Mandeep Kaur Nijjer on the organisation of a visual and audio exhibition in respect of Red Media Love's grant application. Points included:

- Mandeep's parents migrated from South Asia in the 1960s;
- There are around 5,000 South Asian families across North Herts;
- Plan to host an art exhibition at the museum to coincide with South Asian History Month;
- The Museum has done a good job documenting first generation migrants; however it is felt that there is a gap for children of immigrants, which can lead to identity issues;
- Would like to highlight some of the stories from children of immigrants.

Councillor Judi Billing commented that Hertfordshire County Council Councillors may be able to provide funding from their budgets.

49 GRANT APPLICATION - RED MEDIA LOVE

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Val Bryant seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £2480 be awarded to Red Media Love for supporting the organising of a visual and audio exhibition around the second generation of South Asians who grew up in Hitchin and Letchworth as outlined in paragraph 8.1.3 of the officer's report.

50 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

A verbal presentation was received from Garry Brandon, Chair of the Hitchin Scouts, on the grant application. Points included:

- Garry Brandon is the Chair of the Hitchin Scouts;
- They plan to buy new kitchen shelves to provide support in cooking classes;
- The Scouts have 58 Cubs and Scouts and 35 Beavers;
- Majority of the children come from Hitchin and the club is one of the biggest in Hitchin.

51 GRANT APPLICATION - THIRD HITCHIN SCOUTS

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Simon Harwood seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £580 be awarded to Third Hitchin Scouts for the purchase of six kitchen tents used to prepare meals by the young people at camps and day activities as outlined in paragraph 8.1.5 of the officer's report.

52 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Community Engagement Assistant explained to the Committee that Lisa King was unable to attend the Committee, and read out a written statement on behalf of Strathmore Fun Club in respect of their grant application. Points in the statement included:

- Strathmore Fun Club is an after school childcare facility based at Strathmore School;
- Has been supported by local families for 24 years;
- The club employs local staff, many of which have been with the club for years;
- SFC have 40 child places available each day;
- Provides a safe, caring environment for children to play, explore, learn and engage in many different activities;
- After a difficult period during the pandemic, the Club is operating as normal and child places are starting to increase;
- The Club would like £1100 to help cover the cost of purchasing new toys, equipment and materials;
- Toys/equipment to be purchased includes a selection of outdoor toys, in particular, new 'wobble cars', trikes and scooters.

53 GRANT APPLICATION - STRATHMORE FUN CLUB

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg proposed and Councillor Val Bryant seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That grant funding of £1,100 be awarded to Strathmore Fun Club for purchasing additional toys, equipment, and materials to cover the cost of a programme of events and activities as outlined in paragraph 8.1.4 of the officer's report.

54 POTENTIAL NEW TOWN TWINNING - AYENSUAKO, GHANA

A verbal presentation was given by Joanne Wearne of Humanitas and Tommy Eaton of Bambuu Brush on a new potential town twinning opportunity with Ayensuako, Ghana and drew attention to the following points:

- Humanitas' office is in Hitchin.
- Humanitas is a charity which has been operating for 21 years, it exists to give access to the world's most vulnerable and impoverished children healthcare.
- Have a strong relationship with The Comet;
- Majority of funding comes from loyal local communities;
- The charity runs projects in Romania and Ghana;
- Humanitas operates 2 schools in the town of Aseyuako, Ghana; a primary school and high school with 280 students.

The Chair thanked the two members of public for their presentation.

In response to a question from Councillor Keith Hoskins, Joanne Wearne advised that the school had only closed for three weeks during the pandemic. The school did not have access to hand washing facilities however.

The Chair invited David Leal-Bennett, Hitchin Town Twinning Association, to give a verbal presentation. In his presentation the following points were made:

- Post-war town-twinning was very popular; twinning with towns in France and Germany has worked very well, facilitating exchanges between the areas;
- Over the past 15-20 years the demographic has changed; very few youngsters coming into the town twinning association;
- Will need to discuss with patrons and progress discussions through the Association.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Simon Harwood
- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg
- Councillor Val Bryant

In response to questions from Members, David Leal-Bennett and Joanne Wearne advised:

- Humanitas want to be part of reenergising the Town Twinning Association;
- All Humanitas fundraising is done in the UK. 88p of every £1 goes to the projects;

In response to a question from Councillor Judi Billing, the Chair advised that: Formally speaking it is for the Council and relevant committees to decide about twinning arrangements. If the Twinning Association was against the idea it could lead to two separate associations, however the Council and the Town Twinning Association want to proceed together.

It was:

RESOLVED: That the Hitchin Committee notes and welcomes the presentation on establishing a new Twinning arrangement with the community of Ayensuako in Ghana.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET: To authorise further work to be done involving Members, Officers, the local community and the Hitchin Town Twinning Association.

RESOLVED: That the Hitchin Committee agrees to discuss the outcome of this work and any formal proposal for the adoption of a new twinning at its first meeting of the civic year in June.

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

- The team are continuing to engage with local community groups; including support a Youth Action group;
- North Herts Culture Group and the Hitchin sub-group is doing well;
- Helping to organise a Westmill road safety event;
- In November Helen was invited to the Committee to talk about Hitchin Fairtrade, Arts group and the BID team got a map together and have started signing up businesses to the scheme;
- Hitchin Fairtrade will be continuing to share information on social media, mailing lists and network groups;
- Beginning to hold Community Surgeries in the marketplace again;
- The World Book Day event will be sharing the marketplace;
- Dispersing vouchers for the Covid recovery fund;
- Currently in talks on how to organise the Hitchin Eco Day, the District Council have not booked a stall yet;
- Helping to organise the Queen Jubilee weekend event as well as National Democracy and Parliament Week later on in the year;

In response to a question from Councillor Simon Harwood, the Assistant Community Engagement Officer advised that he would look into producing an infographic or leaflet to keep members of public up to date with all the events happening.

Councillor Ian Albert, as chair, proposed and Councillor Judi Billing seconded and, following a vote, it was:

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

56 WARD MATTERS AND OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS - MEMBERS' REPORTS

Councillor Simon Harwood informed the Committee that the Hitchin Boys Year 10 Rugby Team had reached the semi-finals of the Natwest Cup and wished to congratulate them and wish them luck.

The Chair thanked Councillor Simon Harwood and Councillor Mike Hughson for their work on the Committee and informed the Committee that this was their final Hitchin Area Meeting.

The Assistant Community Engagement Officer informed the Committee that following from grant applications the grant budget balance was £775, which would be carried over to the following civic year.

57 POSSIBLE AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

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

The meeting closed at 9:40 pm

Chair