

**North Herts Council
HITCHIN AREA FORUM**

**Meeting held at St John's Community Centre
On Tuesday 4 JULY 2023 at 7.30pm**

NOTES

Present:

In Attendance:

Danny Pearson (Community and Partnerships Officer), Cllr Chris Lucas, Cllr Clare Billing, Cllr Daniel Wright-Mason, Cllr Ian Albert (Chair), Cllr Keith Hoskins, Cllr Nigel Mason, Cllr Richard Thake, Cllr Val Bryant

Also present:

At the commencement of the meeting there were 4 members of the public, including registered speakers.

Meeting Started at **7:30pm**

• **Chair's Announcements**

Cllr Albert welcomed everyone in attendance.

- Highlighted that it's an informal, inclusive meeting to share ideas.
- Members were reminded they are making recommendations and not decisions for grant applications.

Apologies for absence. Cllr's Sam Collins, Dave Winstanley, Elizabeth Dennis, James Denslow, Raj Bhakar

• **Presentation**

PRESENTATION – VANDALISM IN OPEN SPACES AND ALLOTMENTS

Presentation from North Herts Council's Community Safety Team Leader, John Marshall, followed by Q&A.

The North Herts Council's Community Safety team consists of John Marshall and two other officers. They work closely with other organisations to help reduce crime and disorder in North Herts.

Stressed that the police should always be the first port of call if anyone wanted to report a crime, suspicious and antisocial behaviour. Every time.

Highlighted that North Herts is one of the only areas in England where Anti-social behaviour is declining.

The officer spoke about different CCTV set ups they currently have across North Herts and the potential plans to have additional cameras in the near future. The police and

Council work together when deciding what areas should be covered.

It was highlighted that some areas for cameras are not suitable. One example given was Hitchin Market due to the roofs covering the stalls. Cameras would be unable to pick up activity underneath the roofing and any cameras placed at low levels would likely be damaged.

A lot of the current antisocial behaviour problems are being committed by under 16-year-olds which makes things very difficult. Another area which is affecting North Herts is fly tipping.

Cllr Albert – We know of many reoccurring issues at the Hitchin Rugby Club and Hitchin allotments. What things can we do there?

JM – Extra CCTV is planned, but the people causing the offenses are usually wearing hoods and have covered their faces.

Paul Dee – The project leader for the NHC Community Allotment and leader of the Hitchin Allotment Association - What has been done this year? Are you able to share details. Is there anything we can do to help overcome any obstacles?

JM – We must manage expectations. Access has been prevented at one problem spot on an allotment.

PD – We can see the culprits. They are wearing the school uniform of a local school. The headteacher of that school has said they would act if they were shown photos/stills of the culprits.

Cllrs then discussed if we as a council were legally allowed to share such images.

JM – We are unable to share any images. We would be breaking the law.

Ideas were then discussed between Cllrs, the Officer, and the members of public about how under 16-year-old could be reported and disciplined. These included letters directly to parents and guardians and potential injections that need support from Herts County Council.

Cllr Lucas – Asked if ASB is indeed going down in North Herts then how do we think this is happening. What are we doing right? He has also received complaints about the increase in dog fouling and Nitrous Oxide cannisters.

Cllr Thake – Pointed that the reports didn't seem quite right. What were the figures going down from? Is it that less people are reporting incidents of ASB in our area rather than ASB going down.

JM – We are noted for how well our Joint Action Group operates and other areas are starting to emulate what NHDC do. Here we work closely with other organisations to help reduce crime and disorder in North Herts. Recent good examples are the work done at Howard Park Gardens and the Letchworth and Hitchin multi-story car parks.

Tom Hardy – Hitchin Bid Manager – We have experienced fly postering problems from the circus who have not had permissions to post on certain buildings.

JM – The circus is allowed to post in certain areas. HCC need to be notified if any have been put up illegal.

Cllr Albert – Perhaps this is something NHDC can look at when before granting permissions to use NHDC land.

Bill Sellicks – Hitchin Forum Lead – I've experienced a noise level increase. Possibly from motorbikes along the A600 and the Ickleford Road Roundabout. Also has seen cars that have been cruising round, possible drug/ county lines activity. E scooters are also problem.

JM – Activity needs to be reported to the police. The noise could be dealt with under Section 50.

PD – Listed out the ASB problems the allotment has experienced. These included racial abuse to one of its members, long knives slashing Polytunnels. Scaring older users. Drink and drug related activity in Polytunnels, shed and greenhouses. Greenhouses and sheds being smashed. All these incidents have been reported to the police and some local Cllrs. Since February only one action has been taken. Members of the Hitchin Allotment Association have withdrawn because of this ASB and lack of action. We need to think creatively about how to tackle this.

ACTION: Cllrs suggested that Paul Dee, and the Hitchin allotment association, approach them for Grant money to potentially help fund a special camera for the allotment which is experiencing the current anti-social behaviour problems.

• **Public Participation – Grant**

Hitchin Bid – Tom Hardy

Hitchin BID would like funding towards the cost of replacement Christmas lights infrastructure in the town centre that failed testing. With industry standard infrastructure in the town centre Christmas lights display in Hitchin town centre will be possible, and ensure the infrastructure is safe for many years to come.

The lights are enjoyed by 1000s of visitors each year and play a vital role in encouraging shoppers and sustaining footfall.

Cllr Hoskins asked is every grant applicant made to work on such a detailed Safeguarding Policy. It could potentially put some groups off applying.

DP - Yes. Every Grant application needs to have a detailed safeguarding policy which is checked by the NHDC policy team. Thanked the Hitchin Bid team for their work in getting the safeguarding policy together.

Proposed by Cllr Keith Hoskins and seconded Cllr Ian Albert.

Unanimous, vote in favour of providing £2,000 to Hitchin Bid.

Cllr Ian Albert invited Hitchin Bid to apply for all three local HCC Cllr Locality Budgets

• **Presentation**

PRESENTATION – HITCHIN TOWN CENTRE

Presentation from Tom Hardy, Hitchin Bid Manager, followed by Q&A.

Tom Hardy was able to update the Cllrs in attendance, along with the public and officers present, on what Hitchin Bid are working on. These included,

- Rangers have experienced an increase in thefts taking place during the daytime. Calling 101 can be frustrating as they are often waiting 45 minutes plus for a response. Rangers are working closely with the police to tackle this emerging problem.

- A brand new website for Visit Hitchin.

- Action Hitchin has been set up. This is a charitable group. This will give the Bid more options when seeking funds and raising money for projects that will elevate Hitchin.

- The Information Centre has been given a new paint job and signage to reflect the new Visit Hitchin brand.

- Hitchin Market is due to have new signs and a mural.

- New businesses are due to move into some of the empty shops.

- Vacancy rate is currently at 1.9%.

ACTION: DP to add new Visit Hitchin Link to NHDC Website.

Cllr Ian Albert thanked Tom for the presentation and acknowledged the hard work they were doing.

Cllr Hoskins urged all Cllrs to back the Bid as they approach their renewal vote.

• **Proposed Car Parking Tariffs 2023**

Louise Symes, Strategic Planning & Operations Manager for North Herts Council gave a presentation on the proposed Off-street, Car Parking Charges across North Herts, highlighting the areas of the report relevant for the area forum.

Concerns, questions, and comments raised by Councillors and members of the public:

Cllr Ian Albert – Proposed the idea of freezing prices post 3pm. Rather than put prices

up. This would apply to all car parks across North Herts.

Cllr Val Bryant – Spoke about how notorious Hitchin car parking is. That car parks across the town were varied and it is not always easy to pay. One example given was that a user was given too short a window to be able to purchase the parking ticket. A fine was given because they weren't quick enough when trying to purchase their ticket.

Cllr Ian Albert – Also proposed that season tickets should not increase. This would apply to all car parks across North Herts.

Cllr Keith Hoskins - When would this all be proposed to start? (Answer - November 2023). Cllr Keith Hoskins also said that there needs to be easier ways for people to pay. A tap in, tap out scheme works well in other areas.

Cllr Nigel Mason – Would increase parking fees by 10p make a huge difference? What would be the impact?

All recommendations and questions will be taken away from this meeting to look at.

Cllr Ian Albert thanked Louise for the presentation.

• **Information Note: Grants & Community Update**

Danny Pearson, Community and Partnerships Officer gave presentation on the Community Update.

- Co-ordinating various local and district wide Network Groups such as Youth Action, Food Provision, Arts and Culture and Green and Growing Group.
- A Wellbeing networking group has been established – first meeting July 19th.
- Coordinating a project for the Cooperative Council's Innovation Network (CCIN) around how Arts & Culture can improve community cohesion and encourage vibrant town centres.
- Continuing to facilitate NHC Councillors' Community Surgeries.
- Sharing and disseminating information on social media and to mailing lists, keeping in touch with the community, voluntary, statutory, and non-statutory agencies.
- Coordinating voluntary support response to Asylum Seekers based in North Herts.
- Working in partnership with the ground maintenance contractor John O'Conner, we're aiming for 'bee friendly' status for Letchworth, and if successful will roll out to other towns in the district - 'Bee' part of it!.
- New Community Partnership Officer covering Baldock starting 10th July.
- Facilitating a partnership project between Waste Not, Want Not and Keystage Housing to provide a community garden at the Lord Lister Hotel in Hitchin.
- Hitchin Festival – July
- Hitchin Creative Day at Market Place – July 1st
- The first day of the Hitchin Art Trail – July 1st
- Chalking Churchgate at the Churchgate Shopping centre – July 1st
- The World of Peter Rabbit™ Storytime Trail at North Herts Museum
- Hitchin Eco Day – July 15th
- Youth Showcase 2023 - September 30th

- Afro-Carib Culture Fest – Oct 7th
- The Samaritans art project which will raise money for the Hitchin and Stevenage Samaritans group.
- 25th Anniversary of North Herts Minority Forum event Westmill Community Centre – Oct.

The officer reminded all of the Cllrs that the team were again available to help out on any school visits if any Cllrs wish to have any. The visits don't just have to focus on Local democracy week.

The Hitchin Councillors present unanimously supported the work that the Community and Parentships team were doing.

- **Open Discussion**

Cllr Val Bryant – On the subject of school visits would we be able to talk more about misogyny in school settings?

ACTION: DP to investigate what, if anything, is already delivered to local schools. Services For Young People may already work with schools to deliver education on this subject.

Cllr Ian Albert – Picking up on a recent post about the current state of the Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP). Would like to see it given a refresh. Rejuvenating this path would attract visitors, boost health and wellbeing, and highlight attractive areas of Hitchin.

ACTION: DP will start to get ideas in on what is needed to give the Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP) a refresh. Will reach out to the public and local groups such as Hitchin Bid, Hitchin Forum the Ramblers, Countryside Management, John O'Conner's, and members of the public. Will liaise with the NHDC Green Space and The Healthy Hub team.

Cllr Nigel Mason – Wanted an updated about the potential job losses at LV at the Priory.

Cllr Keith Hoskins – Suggested an update from Officer Andrew Figgis.

- **Topics for future Hitchin Area Forums**

Accessibility in Hitchin Town. How can things be improved for wheelchair users, people with mobility issues and people with buggies. It has been suggested that there is a lack of disabled toilets.

Cllr Keith Hoskins also wanted to talk about unitary authority. This follows on from Herts County Council workers being relocated from the head office at Hertford.

Noted that Churchgate will always be on the agenda and updates will be given on its progress.

It was highlighted that face-to-face meetings are preferred over online only meetings.

Meeting closed 9.30pm