

**North Herts Council
HITCHIN AREA FORUM**

**Meeting held at Christchurch, Bedford Rd, Hitchin SG5 1HF.
On Tuesday 5 September 2023 at 7.30pm**

NOTES

Present:

In Attendance:

Danny Pearson (Community and Partnerships Officer), Cllr Ian Albert (Chair), Cllr Clare Billing (Vice Chair), Cllr Daniel Wright-Mason, Cllr Nigel Mason, Cllr Richard Thake, Cllr Val Bryant, Cllr Dave Winstanley, Cllr Elizabeth Dennis

Also present:

At the commencement of the meeting there were 15 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 Keith Hoskins

• **Presentation**

PRESENTATION – Accessibility through Hitchin Town Centre.

Presentation from Bill Sellicks – Hitchin Forum Lead followed by Q&A.

Bill Sellicks gave the attending public and the Cllrs a presentation about Accessibility through Hitchin Town Centre. He explained about the informal report that he had done on the behalf of a local wheelchair user and their partner. The report was titled '***A Bumpy Ride – a summary of hazards encountered by wheelchair users during a journey to Hitchin town centre***'. The report was given to the Cllrs before the Area Forum for them to read. The report can also be made available upon request – Community@north-herts.gov.uk

Bill also described a joint meeting that happened a few weeks before the Hitchin Area Forum meeting. Danny Pearson – NHC Community & Partnerships Officer, Cllr Hoskins and Officers from County Hall went on an arranged walk-round to see the problems highlighted in the informal report. Bill went on to say that it was a very useful walk-round and opened Officer's eyes to the problems highlighted in the report. HCC Officers were going to investigate to see what can be done.

The main hazards included loose or broken paving slabs, loose drain coverings, sloping pavements, signs, and outdoor street furniture. During the walk it was clear that anyone in a wheelchair, pushing a buggy or pram, or anyone who was visually impaired would also have difficulty navigating through town.

The Hitchin recovery fund was mentioned as a possible source of funding to fix some of the street/ pavement problems.

• **Open Discussion**

Vilawan and Cathryn – Home Manager and carer – Elmside Residential & Dementia Care Home. They sent an email to the relatives of their residents asking about their experiences with accessibility through Hitchin Town Centre. Both Vilawan and Cathryn shared a few experiences with everyone. The cobblestones and lack of drop kerbs were the biggest problems they faced. They also mentioned the lack of public toilet facilities in town.

Cllr Albert – Asked if Vilawan wouldn't mind forwarding on the emails from the resident's relatives so they could build up a case study of the area. Vilawan was happy to do so.

Another member of the public highlighted the overgrown vegetation at the bottom of Windmill Hill that obscures the footpath. Also highlighted were the number of roads which had a drop kerb on one side but not the other.

We also received comments from a resident, Sam, at No1 Lavender Fields, which is a home for young adults with physical disabilities. Sam was not able to attend but provided this feedback:

- *Loads of the shops in Hitchin don't have a level access so wheelchair users can't get in there and are missing out.*
- *We need more drop curbs around town to be able to access areas safely.*
- *Hitchin has got a lot of narrow pavements which makes it very difficult and unsafe for wheelchair users. Can also make areas inaccessible.*
- *People with disabilities should be able to access all the spaces that people without disabilities do.*

Cllr Bryant – Asked what the public thought about the crossings with lights. In her experience she thought they were good.

Bill disagreed about the crossing at Bancroft being good and felt it was a bit dangerous.

The Area Forum then discussed Market Place and the problem with the decorative cobbles used on most of the area. All in attendance agreed it was not great for accessibility. Especially now as Market Place is now used for lots of events and public gatherings. Any future plans by NHDC, HCC, Hitchin Bid must be more mindful.

Cllr Mason – Echoed that the squares usage has shifted since it was refurbished with cobblestones. That things had moved on and different needs must be met.

Cllr Bryant – Also mentioned the pedestrian entrance at Hitchin Sainsburys and outside Marks and Spencer's were also particularly bad areas for people with mobility issues.

Cllr Dennis – Brought the conversation back to the lack of public toilets in the town. Suggested looking at what Royston council have in place. *The Community Toilet Scheme* allows the Council to work in partnership with local businesses to improve the provision of toilet facilities for the public. It provides cleaner, safer, and more accessible toilets in Royston Town Centre.

Cllr Thake – Echoed the problems with the lack of public toilets and asked can the Hitchin Market toilets be open everyday (not just on market days).

Bill – Additional note. Wanted to see if he could find free parking anywhere for the British School Museum volunteers.

ACTIONS:

- Cllr Albert suggested more meetings are needed with HCC. A future meeting was planned about the Hitchin street closures and this could be brought up as a topic to discuss.
- Cllrs suggested that Hitchin Bid be contacted about a Community Toilet Scheme. This is something NHDC may be able to help with.
- Vilawan – Home Manager – Elmside Residential & Dementia Care Home will forward on the emails from the resident's relatives to Cllr Albert and Danny Pearson.
- Danny to forward Bill information about parking for the British School Museum volunteers.

Cllr Ian Albert thanked everyone for their input and acknowledged the hard work that Hitchin Forum do.

• Presentation

PRESENTATION – Citizens Advice

Presentation from the Citizens Advice team, Cath, and Christie, followed by Q&A.

The team from Citizens Advice were able to update the Cllrs in attendance, along with the public and Officer present, on what Citizens Advice are working on. These included,

- The workshop they hold at St Mary's Church House. Every Tuesday 9:30am - 12

noon.

- The outreach work they do with the local community.
- A brand new website for Citizens Advice.
- Work they had been doing with people with regards the cost-of-living crisis.
- Work they had been doing with people with regards scams.

They wanted to make people aware that the team are available for outreach workshops.

Vilawan and Cathryn - Home Manager and carer – Elmside Residential & Dementia Care Home said they would like Citizens Advice to run a workshop at their venue for their staff and possibly their residents.

ACTION: Citizens Advice to arrange a workshop for Elmside Residential & Dementia Care Home.

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

• **Public Participation – Grant**

North Hertfordshire Minority Ethnic Forum – Danny Pearson presented as Mohammed was unable to attend.

North Hertfordshire Minority Ethnic Forum would like funding towards a multicultural event to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the North Hertfordshire Minority Ethnic Forum and the Black History Month'. This is due to take place at Westmill Community Centre, Hitchin, on October 26th, 2023.

Cllr Ian Albert noted that he had no problem recommending the funding but did stress that North Hertfordshire Minority Ethnic Forum can, and should, also apply to other Area Forums, Letchworth for example, as the team at North Hertfordshire Minority Ethnic Forum do operate across the whole of North Herts.

This was noted by the Officer, Danny, and the message will be passed on.

Proposed by Cllr and seconded Cllr Ian Albert.

Unanimous, vote in favour of providing £2,000 to North Hertfordshire Minority Ethnic Forum.

The Sadie Centre – Steve Gibbs presented.

The Sadie Centre would like funding towards the cost of a defibrillator and a cabinet, to be fitted on the external wall of their classroom building. Half of the money was being requested at the Hitchin Area Forum. The other would be requested at the Letchworth Area Forum.

Cllr Winstanley wanted to know where the cabinet would exactly be located. Steve said that he would bow to the professionals who would suggest where best to place the cabinet but stressed it would be available to all who needed it.

Proposed by Cllr and seconded Cllr Ian Albert.

Majority vote (seven out of eight) in favour of providing £850 to The Sadie Centre.

Strathmore Fun Club – Lisa King presented.

The Strathmore Fun Club would like funding to help cover the cost of purchasing additional toys, equipment, and materials to cover the cost of a programme of events and activities they have designed to keep the children engaged, fit, healthy and happy whilst attending Strathmore Fun Club.

Proposed by Cllr and seconded Cllr Ian Albert.

Unanimous, vote in favour of providing £1,100 to The Strathmore Fun Club.

COMMUNITY UPDATE

Update from the NHDC Community & Partnerships Officer, Danny Pearson.

- The Policy & Strategy team have drafted the criteria for the Community Investment Fund with support from the Community Partnerships team. Looking to launch the fund at the beginning of September.
- The first meeting of the Wellbeing networking group was held on July 19th.
- Commencing planning of the North Herts Heroes awards, which will be launched in November.
- Coordinating voluntary support response to Asylum Seekers based in North Herts.
- Co-ordinating various local and district wide Network Groups including Youth Action, Food Provision, Arts and Culture and Green and Growing Group.
- 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.
- 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.

- New Community Partnership Officer covering Baldock started 10th July.
- Working in partnership with Rotary Club of Hitchin Tilehouse on the Youth Showcase event which will be held on 30 September.
- Attending JAG meetings and feeding in information from local residents.
- Supporting the Samaritans/ Samarivans charity art project.
- Working with the Rhythms of the World Legacy team on a project to celebrate ROTW.
- The World of Peter Rabbit™ Storytime Trail at North Herts Museum
- Facilitated NHDC stall at Hitchin Eco Day.
- Following conversations from Eco Day - Working on ways to increase awareness of the HOOP (Hitchin's Outer Orbital Path).
- Working with Hitchin Bid to identify possible locations, and artists, for more potential street art projects.
- 25th Anniversary of North Herts Minority Forum event Westmill Community Centre – Oct.
- Chair's charity wrestling event at Hitchin Town Hall - Sat 9 Sep. 5PM - 9PM.

WARD MEMBERS ACTIVITIES

Cllr Ian Albert provided the Cllrs and public with updates on a few local projects:

Churchgate:

The current task being undertaken by our consultants is 'Stage 1 – Baseline Review' and includes the following tasks:

- 'The Review of Ownership'
- 'Planning policy overview'.
- 'Market overview'

Brown and Lee continue to attend to essential works involving Health & Safety and Compliance issues. At present, the Council is firming up final details with Brown & Lee for the improvement and remedial works planned for the common parts.

The team have also commenced work on 'Stage 2 – Stakeholder Engagement' and are on track to complete this stage by mid-October. Their current work programme with the consultants takes up until December 2023 (subject to change based on progress) and will support us in the preparation for appointment of a development partner.

There is currently no set date for the next Advisory Group meeting however this is likely to be in the Autumn. We are hoping that a representative from the consultants will also be present in that meeting to update the members.

ACTION: Churchgate to be the next Area Forum Topic. *To be investigated.*

Biggin Lane Car Park:

Officer Louise Symes and her team are undertaking a big review of all TRO's in the area that require updating and Biggin Lane is part of that. Officer Chloe Gray has been working with Mark Hindmarch in Louise's team on the Biggin Lane specific updates.

Charnwood House:

The Expressions of Interest exercise is well underway, and it closes over the next month. There has been interest from several organisations. Two more viewings have taken place on the 5th Sept. The firm aim remains to make Charnwood a community hub. We will report the outcome to a future Forum meeting.

River Walk:

Residents of Jill Grey Place need to engage in relation to re-instatement of the path's route. They will be chased further, as progress is slow.

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. Has asked Danny to investigate prices for signage, stickers, update leaflets and the next steps needed. Potential funding could come from local HCC Cllrs and the Hitchin Area Forum.

ACTION: DP to investigate. Has already spoken with NHC Green Space team and Countryside Management. Feedback from the public at the recent Eco Day event was extremely positive. Meeting to be arranged with North Herts Ramblers and Hitchin Forum. Will keep everyone updated on progress.

• **Topics for future Hitchin Area Forums**

Churchgate - This is scheduled to be a virtual meeting but may need to be held face to face. Cllr Albert to investigate.

MEETING TO CLOSED AT 9:25pm