

**North Herts Council
LETCWORTH AREA FORUM**

**Meeting held at HOWARD GARDEN SOCIAL CENTRE - NORTON WAY S,
LETCWORTH GARDEN CITY SG6 1SU**

On Wednesday 20 September 2023 at 7.30pm

NOTES

Present:

In Attendance:

*Danny Pearson (DP) (Community and Partnerships Team Officer)
Cllr Daniel Allen, Cllr Amy Allen, Cllr Mick Debenham, Cllr Sean Nolan, Cllr Sean Prendergast (Chair), Cllr Ian Mantle, Cllr Terry Hone, Cllr Dan Marsh arrived later due to work commitments.*

Also present:

At the commencement of the meeting there were 6 members of the public, including registered speakers.

Meeting Started at **7:33pm**

1. Chair's Announcements

Cllr Sean Prendergast 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 Tamsin Thomas, Cllr Simon Bloxham, Cllr Tom Plater, Cllr David Levett, Cllr Phil Weeder.*

2. Public Participation – Grants

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 Letchworth Area Forum. The other had been successfully requested at the Hitchin Area Forum.

The question of where the cabinet would be positioned was again raised and 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 Sean Prendergast

Unanimous vote in favour of providing £850 to The Sadie Centre.

Cllr Sean Prendergast thanked Steve Gibbs for the presentation.

3. Information Note: Grants & Community Update

Danny Pearson, Community and Partnerships Team Officer, gave presentation on the Community Update. Most of which can be seen in the report. These included:

Districtwide Community Updates

- 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. NOW LIVE > [Community Investment Fund | North Herts Council \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/community-investment-fund)
- The first meeting of the Wellbeing networking group was held on July 19th. Held at the Sadie Centre.
- 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 ['Bee' part of it! | North Herts Council \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/bee-part-of-it)
- 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.

- Supporting the [Samarivans](#) charity art project.
- The World of Peter Rabbit™ Storytime Trail at North Herts Museum. New Samuel Lucas exhibition now on.

Area Community Updates

- Facilitated NHDC stall at Hitchin Eco Day – Looking at NHC attending again in 2024 and hopefully the Letchworth Eco Festival too.
- Working with Letchworth Bid and Garden Square Shopping Centre to identify possible locations, and artists, for potential street art projects.
- Attending JAG meetings and passing on information from residents.
- Facilitated meeting with residents and NHDC Green Space team at Baldock Park, Letchworth.
- Facilitating ‘All About Us’ workshop at Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation for North Herts CVS.

Cllr Sean Prendergast thanked the Officer for the presentation and acknowledged the hard work the Community and Partnerships team were doing.

4. Presentations

PRESENTATION – Clare Pullen – Hertfordshire Health Walks

Presentation from Clare Pullen – Hertfordshire Health Walks followed by Q&A.

This was a late addition to the meeting but was very much welcomed by the attendees. Claire was able to share information about Hertfordshire Health Walks and the work they do across North Hertfordshire. Clare was then able to explain more about what they have been doing in Letchworth and the local residents they have recently been working with.

She welcomed all of the attendees to go to their website to find out more details about the walks that they currently provide: [Hertfordshire Health Walks | Hertfordshire County Council](#)

Clare also welcomed people to contact her if they wished to know more or would like to get involved. She was interested in the presentations that were to follow and expressed an interest to work closer with Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and the team at Letchworth Bid. She wanted to see if some of their town centre walks could be promoted to more people. She believed that the walks could bring extra trade into town.

There were various questions from a member of the public. Clare was able to give extra information about the potential for dogs to be at these walks. Measures were already in place to facilitate this option. The walks were as inclusive as possible and could cater for all abilities. There were also weekend walks available. Recently talked with *Settle* and would love to also work with them going forward.

Cllr Sean Prendergast thanked Clare for the presentation and acknowledged the hard work that Hertfordshire Health Walks were doing.

PRESENTATION – Graham Fisher, Chief Executive of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and, **Richard Harbon**, Letchworth BID Manager.

They gave a joint presentation about the work that Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and the Letchworth BID are doing with regards the Town Centre Strategy.

Highlighted that there is a steering group set up already and members included people from NHDC, the BID and Garden Square Shopping Centre. Graham Chairs the group who meet every few months for updates and progress checks.

Graham highlighted the impacts of covid and the other general challenges the town centre faced as well as the shifts in the retail sector and the way people now use the town centre.

Since the end of covid lockdowns there have been positive strides forward.

Footfall overall is still down from 2019 numbers (pre-pandemic). Using footfall measuring tools they estimate that footfall is 20 – 25% below 2019 figures. Hybrid working has impacted the town as less people are using the town centre in general.

One of the biggest problems they are facing is the big retail units that are not occupied. Wilkinson was mentioned as an example as this had very recently been closed and would add to the large empty retail spaces in the town centre.

There were however 'green shoots'. There has been an upturn in unit enquires. New businesses are starting to appear.

Graham highlighted that the members of the strategy group were working together to see what can be done and a recovery plan created looks at how things can be improved in town. Better signage, transport links, cultural offers and events all help to lift the town centre and make it a more attractive place to visit and spend time, and money, in.

They are pushing the Letchworth Centre brand with the help of the BID, NHDC, and Hilary Kemp. It's believed that we can all have a better impact if we all work

together pushing the same message. Working collaboratively to become 'Town centre Ambassadors'.

The night-time economy has suffered the most and the cinema has had to cut the hours it is open. Saying that, they did have an excellent July due to the bad weather and the releases of *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*.

Hitchin and Baldock had seem to bounce back quicker with regards their nighttime economies.

Cllr Daniel Allen asked about the Letchworth town Centre Rebranding and when the public could expect that.

Graham was pleased to say he should be able to share more in October with a plan to launch it to the public on November 25th to coincide with the Christmas light switch on event. With the help of the BID and NHDC.

Richard Harbon explained that NHC were working in partnership with Letchworth BID to relocate the Christmas Tree from Broadway Gardens to a Town Centre location. The benefits of the relocation are that the BID can include the tree into the Town Centre Christmas lights display and switch on event.

The tree is subject to vandalism in the current location and people remove the lights. It's also a bit lost in the middle of such a large open space. Richard Harbon also wanted to mention that the Christmas tree would be in Leys Square and that the tree had been locally sourced. 20ft tree which NHDC had supplied.

Richard was keen to make sure the collaborative effort was highlighted and celebrated so the public could see the work done to get the tree up each year.

The Letchworth Councillors present supported the relocation of the Letchworth Christmas Tree from Broadway Gardens to a Town Centre location and looked forward to seeing it.

ACTION: NHDC Comms to work with LGCHF and the BID.

Question from the Public: The youth of Letchworth don't have much money to spend, and wintertime is fast approaching. Where is there for the youth to hang out? Where can they be safe?

Graham highlighted the work they had been doing with regards the Youth Survey. The survey would give results from the youth of Letchworth which they would be able to work with.

Cllr Daniel Allen: Heard that kids are trying to charge their phones in areas but are quickly moved off.

Cllr Amy Allen: People perceive that the kids are up to something and that they have no money. The young people should be able to exist in an area for free. How about the Arcade?

Richard Harbon: There are a number of 'can do' people who may be able to help and he knows that the police are working directly with the youth to find an appropriate area for them to hang out. Will come back with the results.

Cllr Daniel Allen: The Old Town Hall could also be another option as a space to old youth clubs.

Question from the Public: Can Letchworth be the town for charging when it came to electric cars? People would then spend a couple of hours in town whilst their cars were on charge.

Cllr Daniel Allen: Not sure this is practical. Letchworth currently does not have enough power. We would need another substation for this to work.

Graham Fisher: It would go against our sustainable town strategy. Would prefer if people walked and cycled in the town centre. Currently 50% of people get to the town centre by foot.

Cllr Sean Prendergast: Going back to the slump with regards the night-time economy. Overall, we are all poorer, which is a factor. This may be why the night-time economy has been hit so hard.

Graham: Yes. For example, our cinema stats show that a lot of cinema goers are now not buying extras such as popcorn, sweets, and drinks at the cinema. We have also lost some of our elderly users as they haven't come back after the last set of lockdowns in fear of being in an enclosed area. The film strikes in America are also going to have a long-lasting impact as this will affect the films that are supposed to be coming out next year.

We have found that the town centre is quieter after 9pm. We are working on the town centre recovery plan to address this.

It needs to be noted that Richard Harbon was adding to the discussion and presentation as it progressed. Richard was also able to give everyone in attendance a few extra updates from The Bid.

Cllr Daniel Allen: Any chance of a community piano that the BID could wheel out for the public to play on. Similar to what Hitchin Bid have?

Richard: We have one and are looking into doing just that.

Cllr Daniel Allen: Expressed an interest in helping with this.

Richard: It is worth noting that we have had a survey done with regards the night-

time economy which has given them a lot of information to work from. *People & Places* are working with them.

Cllr Amy Allen: Was there any chance of a community noticeboard to be put up in the town centre?

Richard: It's possible. We need a joined-up approach and hopefully NHDC can be involved.

Richard also highlighted that the BID renewal will be voted upon soon and hopes that they will be able to continue the work they are doing for another four years.

It was also noted that all needed to shout out about the successes made and the collaborative work that was going on. 'Teamwork Makes the Dream Work'.

ACTION: Richard to give Clare Pullen the details of the Three Magnets Manager with regards the walks they provide.

Cllr Sean Prendergast acknowledged that the presentations were extremely interesting and helpful. He thanked Graham and Richard for their presentations and acknowledged the hard work that Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and Letchworth BID were doing.

PRESENTATION – Edward Leigh, North Herts Council, Senior Transport Policy Officer.

Edward talked about the local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans in Letchworth and transport in general.

He was able to provide everyone with a very detailed presentation. In the presentation he was able to talk about the following,

The Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) which sets out changes to existing rights of way (roads, pavements, footpaths, etc) and junctions that would make walking and cycling safer and more attractive for a wider range of people. North Herts LCWIP covers Letchworth, Baldock, Hitchin, Royston, Knebworth, Stevenage-to-Hitchin via Little Wymondley, Ashwell, Pirton and Great Ashby

Following in-depth consultation in 2022/23, a number of additions and changes were made, including in Letchworth.

It was formally adopted at the County Council Cabinet meeting on Monday 18 September.

Also, topics discussed were,

- North Herts LCWIP – next steps
- Projects in the pipeline
and public bicycle maintenance stands.

The presentation is available on slides and will be circulated amongst the Cllrs and also past to Graham and Richard - *Public reports pack 20092023 1930 Letchworth Area Forum*. The slides are available upon request:

Community@north-herts.gov.uk

Cllr Sean Prendergast thanked Edward for the presentation and acknowledged the hard work that he was doing.

5. Open Discussion

Cllr Daniel Allen: Following the sad news about the potential closure of Club 85 is there any way we could create a live music destination here in Letchworth?

Cllr Amy Allen: How about the Spirella building as a music venue?

Graham Fisher: We are restricted with the use of that building due to the tenants. It is also not very accessible and is not best suited for potential music events due to the layout of the building. Plinston Hall may be a better option, although that needs a lot of work. Made it clear that this was not something LGCHF would want to work on. It would best sit with a proper commercial operator with music venue experience and expertise.

Cllr Daniel Allen: How about trialling a one-off event?

Graham Fisher: We would not want to attempt to run a music venue. It would be best to leave it to a commercial operator.

WARD MEMBERS UPDATES

Cllr Amy Allen used the opportunity to highlight the Wilbury Community Café.

Currently they offer a hot drink and cake, arts and crafts, good quality pre-loved school uniforms. They offer free food released by supermarkets for community distribution. It takes place every second Saturday of every month, 10am - 12:30pm Wilbury Hall, Bedford Road, Letchworth.

Cllr Daniel Allen: Highlighted the North Herts Heroes awards and the Chairs formal event which will be combined so they occur on the same night. This will take place at Hitchin Town Hall. More details to follow.

Cllr Sean Nolan: Wanted to highlight the recent Settle event that occurred at Jackmans estate. It was a very useful event and allowed him to meet people from the community, as well as the Settle team. Urged other Cllrs to go along to the next settle community events. Also highlighted that the wards walks had been very effective.

6. Topics for future Letchworth Area Forums

The Cllrs will discuss and send ideas to the Chair. The Chair will then bring these to the Community & Partnerships team ASAP.

Meeting closed 9.25pm