

**North Herts Council
HITCHIN AREA FORUM**

**Meeting held at Hitchin Town Hall
On Tuesday 5 March 2024 at 7.30pm**

NOTES

Present: *Cllr Ian Albert (Chair) IA, Cllr Clare Billing (Vice Chair) CB, Cllr Keith Hoskins KH, Cllr Richard Thake RT, Cllr David Winstanley DW, Cllr Elizabeth Dennis ED, Cllr Val Bryant VB, Nigel Mason NM, Cllr Daniel Wright-Mason DWM, Cllr Chris Lucas CL, Cllr James Denselow JD*

In attendance: *Aimee Flack (Community and Partnerships Officer) AF, Claire Morgan (Community and Partnerships Team Leader) CM, Police Sergeant Taranvir Gill TG, Tom Hardy (Hitchin Bid Manager) TH*

Also present: *At the commencement of the meeting there were around 15 members of the public (MOP), including registered speakers.*

Meeting Started at **19:30**

Cllr Albert welcomed everyone in attendance and highlighted that it's an informal, inclusive meeting to share ideas.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies received for this meeting.

2. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Members were reminded they are making recommendations and not decisions for grant applications.

Highlighted that it's the last meeting of the Civic year and therefore it is the last meeting for two Councillors who are not standing again:

Cllr Albert thanked Cllr James Denslow for all his work as a Councillor.

Cllr Albert thanked Cllr Richard Thake for his contribution during his many years as a Councillor.

Cllr Thake responded that he was grateful to have been able to give back to the town.

3. HITCHIN BID TOWN CENTRE UPDATE

The Hitchin BID Manager, Tom Hardy, shared updates on the BID's work in the town:

- Well under way with events planning – including started to plan the Christmas lights scheme.
- Focusing on business support.
- Social media promotion –. For example, the bagel shop on Sun Street, since the BID supported with promotion, they now have a lot more customers.
- If any businesses you know of that need a boost, the team are happy to go in and visit them and do a reel.
- Future posterity fund – been in meetings with Letchworth and Royston BID Managers to discuss joint projects.
- Going through process of creating a new charity – Action Hitchin – for residents to support things such as Christmas lights. Look at being a grant funding arm as well. Idea is to maintain and increase prosperity of the town. Next 6 months hoping to have it set up.
- 1.8 percent vacancy at the moment. Mainly hospitality and services. Really difficult out there to compete with online retailers.
- Well underway with creating a Hitchin cookbook It will be a 170-page hardback cookbook to sell for Christmas.
- Focus on replacing cobbles where they've used tarmac, EV charging, water supply for refills. Working closely with county council.
- Plans for police/rangers to work closely together. Shoplifting has increased in last three months. Looking to improve CCTV, and access funding for this.

Q&A

JL – asked if they have had any luck with pay on exit car park proposal.

TH – believes a trial is going to happen but doesn't know where. Something needs to happen as it is really needed and will increase dwell time in the town.

KH – it is on the agenda for this year.

KH – Hitchin festival is in July - anyone who wants to put on an event to let BID know.

MOP – pay on exit – asked that if this is brought in, will mean fewer parking notices and would this mean a loss of revenue for the council and whether that's a disincentive to bring it in.

IA – advised it wasn't.

KH – confirmed that the Council don't budget for it.

CL – ask if there was a reason for spike in shoplifting? Does it tally with other towns?

TH – mix of reasons but the main one is cost of living. People are stealing as they can't afford to buy it. Huge amount of underreporting as businesses find it hard to follow up with the police.

MOP – cobble stones in the marketplace look nice but can be dangerous.

TH – repairs are like for like in small areas, taking into account disabled access.

VB – highlighted that KH has been working with residents who use wheelchairs into the town and is ongoing.

IA – inside of square hasn't been looked at for many years and there are issues that are being picked up by County Council and TH etc in meetings. Making sure it is disability friendly and easily accessible.

VB – Congratulated TH and team on the success of social media campaigns. When VB was travelling on train last year, overheard that people were coming from London to Hitchin on the train to come shopping.

MOP – expressed concern for shoppers trying to access town during the Christmas Tractor Tour. Anything that could be done that could help this coming Christmas so that it's less disrupted for others?

KH – this has been brought up in Safety Advisory Group meetings and have asked organisers to review this.

4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN RELATION TO GRANT APPLICATION (19:45)

Aimee Flack, the Community and Partnership Officer, updated Members of community grant budgets.

Received a presentation in support of a grant application by the following:

Liz Le Coze presented the Home-Start Herts application.

IA – know they do fantastic work across the district.

ED – thanked them for their work. This application is for one family – is there funding for the other two families in Hitchin?

LLC – Have a comprehensive and strict funding plan. Working to build on corporate stream.

Don't get anything from Herts County council.

DW – what happens after the 9 months?

LLC - after 9 months – once families feel confident and feel supported, they can attend group support.

IA proposed.

CB seconded.

Unanimous vote in favour of recommending Home-Start Herts application for £2,058.

Melissa Caneppele presented the North Herts College application.

NM – sounds a fantastic event, one observation – normally we fund small community groups, feels slightly out of what we normally do.

RT – event is for the community therefore a different cohort to their existing students.

MC – opportunity for families who can't afford to go to a paid event. Puts it on their radar what's at the college and a good eye opener for them.

VB – suggested contacting Plastic Free Hitchin for recycled materials.

IA proposed.

CB seconded.

Majority voted in favour of recommending North Herts College's application for £1,050.

8 – in favour of recommending

KH didn't vote due to conflict of interest (already provided funding to this project through Herts County Council Locality Budget)

CL didn't vote due to conflict of interest (works at North Herts College)

RT wasn't present at time of vote.

The Forum's recommendations will be presented in a Delegated Decision report to the Executive Member in consultation with the Service Director for Legal and Community for final decision.

5. PRESENTATION – Police Update

Verbal presentation from Police Sergeant Taranvir Gill from the North Herts Safer Neighbourhood Team.

Q&A

MOP – asked for clarification on some of the figures which TG clarified.

In the presentation TG advised that there are low numbers of shoplifting in Hitchin. Questions were raised about the difference in findings around shoplifting with the BID Manager's earlier.

TG advised that it could be for various reasons, such as crime figures and crime prosecutions could be the difference. Advised that there are various ways that business owners can report a crime.

Prior to the meeting, two councillors asked questions:

- Cllr Billing's Question - How many American XL bullys have been registered? Have any been registered in Hitchin?

TG - 55,000 registered in England and Wales, 1,000 in Hertfordshire. Couldn't get stats for Hitchin specifically.

- Cllr Mason's question – What action is being taken, or can be taken, to improve road safety on the Westmill Estate, and in particular to moderate road traffic speeds?

TG - in summary, over the last 5 years there has been one collision that involved speed. Therefore, this is not on their register as an issue with speed. There is also responsibility on Herts County Council to carry out measures and assessments.

NM – advised that when asking anyone who lives there, there is an issue and has seen it himself.

MOP – also advised that they live in Westmill and witnessed dangerous driving.

ED – is there any further data around offence against persons such as offence against women and girls. This would be good for the council to know so they can be more aware of how to support.

TG – has taken this on board, doesn't have figures to hand and will be difficult to obtain. Will endeavor to get it but may take time.

6. TOWN TALK - Churchgate

Cllr Hoskins presented:

Churchgate Briefing Note for Hitchin Area Forum 5th March 2024

REGENERATION UPDATE

We have created a detailed work program, alongside our consultants Lambert Smith Hampton, to guide us through the early stages of the Churchgate Regeneration Project. Phase 1 of that work program has recently been completed and focuses on the due diligence work surrounding the Churchgate shopping centre and wider area (inclusive of Biggin Lane, Portmill Lane and St. Mary's car parks). This phase included a review of ownership, planning policy overview and a market overview in relation to residential, leisure, investment, and retail. This information has provided a good foundation of due diligence, enabling the project team to move forward in the regeneration project and onto 'Phase 2' of the program that will focus on the 'Masterplan & Investment Framework'. Phase 2 is underway and will conclude at the end of May 2024.

The Framework will include the following key elements:

- **Stakeholder & Engagement Strategy**

Key stakeholders have been identified, and we are in the process of planning a series of workshops and meetings that will enable us to understand the priorities and thoughts/ feelings towards the project and its future. Naturally, the stakeholder and public engagement of this project is vital, and we are keen to involve the public at the earliest opportunity. Please look out for future public consultation on this from June 2024 onwards. However, there are other ways you can get involved – look out for the opportunity to sign up to our digital hub, whereby we are using an online engagement platform to keep our community in the loop. The Hub is currently being refreshed and will be launched in the coming weeks via our social media platforms!

- **Setting an agreed vision for the project**, that is inclusive, representative, and collaborative alongside our community. We will take the findings from Phase 1 and think about what themes could be included in the prospectus - subject to public consultation later in the process. The vision is very much a 'live' theme and will evolve as we gain more intelligence and engagement from our key stakeholders and the wider community post May.
- **Defining a top-level plan** which will set out place-making ideas and design options that can eventually be developed to guide new regeneration and investment. This will make up the investment prospectus. So, taking what we have learnt from the Phase 1 due diligence work, and working with the master planners and transport consultants, to set out some top-level ideas/zones about what could be possible on the sites we have available. This plan can be adapted as the project progresses; however, it is purely to show potential developers/ joint partners what *could be* possible on our sites.
- **Testing the financial and planning viability** of different development options for the centre and surrounding areas.

This phase of work will continue to be delivered by our Council Project Team, alongside Lambert Smith Hampton and a selected, experienced Master planning company. The purpose of Phase 2 is to enable the team to prepare an **Investment Prospectus** that will act as a brochure to showcase the Churchgate opportunity at an event in May 2024, known as 'UKREiiF' (UK Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum held from 21st until 23rd May 2024). UKREiiF is a three-day event attended by the public sector, investors, funders, developers, housebuilders and more. The event attracts authorities, local councils, and Government departments – as well as the largest developers and investors from across the UK and internationally. This event highlights investment and development opportunities, whilst connecting and facilitating new relationships to drive economic growth through development and regeneration.

This event will give us a good indication of the appetite for investing in the future Churchgate. The project team will be clearer on the direction of the project and will begin to review its next steps in the programme. The community will be kept updated on all key aspects of this project, including the outcomes of UKREiiF and next steps.

Additional note from Steve Norris at Lambert Smith Hampton:

“The Investment Prospectus should be viewed as more of a marketing document for the shopping centre, town and wider borough area – it will be very high level, and will put forward the vision, ideas and some (tested) options for the potential redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre. These options will be consulted on and tested in more detail during the masterplan application stage – to arrive at the preferred option, with buy-in from the public and all stakeholders (as far as possible), whilst ensuring the preferred development option is deliverable, aligned with the Council’s policy and sustainability/social value/economic objectives for the site, as well as to the benefit of the wider town centre and North Herts as a whole”.

MAINTAINANCE UPDATE

- Various works have been ongoing within Churchgate to ensure compliance for Fire Safety, Health & Safety and Asbestos materials.
- A detailed investigation into the existence of RAAC is also underway.
- Furthermore, essential roof repairs have also been carried out where they have been deemed necessary.
- Street cleansing has been carried out to common walkways in November.
- Electrical testing has been extensively carried out.
- Negotiations have been precipitated with HCC to explore the possibility of NHC being transferred the lighting beneath the overhanging canopies. At present, NHC have no jurisdiction over this feature. A meeting takes place later this month with HCC representatives, to develop that project.
- Furthermore, the meeting will explore the possibility of NHC taking a Transfer of the common walkways too.
- If the above two initiatives are successful, the Council will gain control to upgrade the lighting and at the same time, refurbish/redecorate the canopies for a crisper finish. If the Transfer of walkways can be secured too, some enhancement of those areas can be mobilised too.
- As part of the planned works, the signage above the entrance from Market Place is to be freshened up.
- Tenants will be reassured to note that due to lower expenditure on common parts of the centre over the past couple of years, some credits are being made to their

service charge accounts. This will demonstrate that they are not paying for works which have not been carried out.

Q&A

MOP – who has been appointed as master planner? What is the redline boundary you are working to and how will it be integrated to a wider town plan?

KH – The Master planner has been selected and is subject to final signature. Very impressed with them, one of the team is a nearby local resident and aware of needs of town.

Focus is on Churchgate area but needs to integrate with a town centre strategy.

IA – keen to get the master planner to a future Area Forum meeting. The togetherness across the town is important.

DW – asked how the June consultation will differ to the consultation last year?

KH – will have a better idea of what interest and ideas are coming forward by then and therefore able to get more detailed.

MOP – is North Herts Council going to have a presence at UKREiiF?

KH – yes will be there we are on the Hertfordshire County stand.

IA – do get in touch with Councilors if you have ideas and they will pass onto the team. Will be reaching out to Hitchin Forum.

MOP – expressed concern that the aim shouldn't be about making money but reflect the essence of the town and community.

IA – any scheme needs to be affordable and fundable. Social value is really important, and they are looking to make sure it's vibrant for the future. They are looking at what they can do around market, arts and culture and there is a range of different things that aren't there now but valuable to have in the future.

KH – main reason council bought is so that it understood that it's not looking to make a profit that a private company would have.

The Master Planner fully understands what we are trying to achieve. UKREiiF will give us that understanding.

7. INFORMATION NOTE: GRANTS & COMMUNITY UPDATE

Aimee Flack, Community and Partnerships Team Officer, gave a Community Update. Most can be read in the report, additional notes of interest to the community:

Bancroft Players are looking for new Members at Queen Mother Theatre, their next New Members Opening Evening is on 25th March at 7.30pm.

Herts Health Walks have a new First Steps walk at Westmill, Mondays from 1.30pm, meeting at Westmill Community Centre and is on until April. [Hertfordshire Health Walks | Hertfordshire County Council](#)

8. WARD MATTERS & OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

IA – There has been a petition around King Georges Skate Park – there was a delay because the Council are having to re-run the procurement process. It is still going ahead.

IA – 20 mph zones – Much prefer to see a wider scheme in Hitchin than being proposed for it. Not to fill in pieces of a jigsaw.

9. FUTURE AREA FORUMS

IA – suggested an arts and culture theme for the next one and invite some local organisations.

ED – first or second meeting of next Civic year – to look at Hitchin station access and improving transport across the town.

Meeting closed at 21:40.