

**North Herts Council
HITCHIN COMMUNITY FORUM**

**Meeting held at Hitchin Town Hall
On Monday 9 September 2024 at 7.30pm**

NOTES

Present: Cllr Ian Albert (Chair) IA, Cllr Clare Billing (Vice Chair) CB, Cllr Keith Hoskins KH, Cllr David Winstanley DW, Cllr Elizabeth Dennis ED, Cllr Val Bryant VB, Nigel Mason NM, Cllr Daniel Wright-Mason DWM, Cllr John Claydon JC, Cllr Donna Wright DW and Cllr Chris Lucas CL

In attendance:

Becca Edwards (Community and Partnerships Officer) BE, Chloe Grey (Enterprise Manager) CG, Steve Crowley (Director of Enterprise) SC, Cllr Tamsin Thomas (Executive Member for Enterprise and Arts) TT, Steve Norris (Lambert Smith Hampton) SN, Sean Prigmore (Lambert Smith Hampton) SP and David Leonard (David Leonard Design) DL

Also present:

At the commencement of the meeting there were around 30 members of the public (MOP), including registered speakers.

Meeting Started at **19:30**

Cllr Albert welcomed everyone in attendance.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Sam Collins and Aimee Flack.

2. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Community Governance Review

The Council resolved to commence a Community Governance Review for the whole district which focuses on parish level arrangements.

The first stage of the review is to consult, and the council is inviting residents, parish councils and any interested parties to have their say on current arrangements as well as suggestions for future arrangements via a survey which is open until **7 October**.

There is a dedicated webpage on the Council's website titled 'Community Governance Review' which includes a link to the survey.

Please can I encourage you to complete the survey. If anyone has any queries regarding the Consultation, please email CommunityGovReview@north-herts.gov.uk

3. TOWN TALK - CHURCHGATE

Cllr Albert - keen to make this interactive.

Cllr Tamsin Thomas

Gave an introduction to the opening up of the next phase of the Churchgate project:

- have consulted before but asking for much more detail this time.
- TT has been travelling round the country finding out about different consultations and how these have progressed.
- aim is to do things with our residents, rather than to our residents.
- emphasized this is a multigenerational project.
- Keen for precise information to help us get this right through the town's collective knowledge.
- welcome to contact - tamsin.thomas@north-herts.gov.uk

Steve Crowley

- Explained there will be breakout groups with a team to help facilitate.
- Want people to look forward, not back.
- Will be doing lots of engagement, tonight is the first of many. Want as many people's views as possible.

Chloe Grey

- Explained **The Hitchin Hub** – where the public can come in, meet the team and Lambert Smith Hampton.
- Located Unit 16 / 17 in Churchgate (next door to Etcetera) which will be open market days 10am-6pm.
- The boards at the back of the hall will be featured at the Hub.
- This will be launched on 17 Sep via social media.
- Survey closes 20 October, following that there will be detailed analysis, with results fed back end of November. Any immediate Qs?

Introduction to Lambert Smith Hampton representatives, who are the consultants and David Leonard Architects who are working with them.

Split into three breakout groups at 19:50

Group 1

- Felt strongly that the area should be green – trees, grass sustainability.
- Market needs to be revitalized – indoor and outdoor options discussed.
- Opportunities for coffee.
- Wondered about a smaller market – maybe sit outside and remain dry.
- Looking at synergy between what traders provided and public require.

- Relocating market closer to the Town Square.
- Performance space.
- Fewer steps near river. And car park lowered, with possible residences on top.
- Repair café, cinema and a flexible community space – meet needs of young children in morning, older people afternoons, young adults in evening.

Group 2

- Similar ideas to group 1.
- Sustainable buildings in a landscaped setting.
- Green setting at Queen Street parking. Over at Portmill two levels of parking.
- Community, arts space and somewhere for young people to gather.
- Open up the river – improve that environment, money follows the environment.
- If we accept Churchgate buildings are not suitable for purpose, then increasing the density there could increase possibility for lower cost housing above.
- Multi-use market area – food, stalls, other.
- Market could be catered closer to town square.
- Public transport links could be improved, parking always an issue.

Group 3

- Box park – community space with food type seating.
- Maybe make an underground carpark or multistorey at Biggin Lane.
- Ice rink or market theatre, arts complex with cinema. Want more leisure in town.
- Important to keep sightline of St Mary's Church the same.
- Rejuvenate the market.
- Revamp Churchgate which is looking tired.
- Bring market into the town.
- Market need to be more integral.
- Open up the waterway, make the river look more attractive.
- More hotels

Opened up to whether anyone agreed / disagreed strongly with anything.

DA there needs to be residential as well. To keep this in mind, otherwise this cannot be funded.

MOP suggested have triple glazing, otherwise there will be obvious potential conflicts.

MOP expanded – there seems to be anecdotal evidence, people off coach tours come in the market but they're not buying the things we have to sell. Think we need to dig into that. Not just the market, but the people in Churchgate as well. Investigation needs to be into who frequents market and Churchgate, what

market traders do we have, what do they want?

Lambert Smith Hampton – highlighted the market is front and centre in all three groups.

MOP show of hands how many people use the market on a regular basis.

Approx. 50%

Lambert Smith Hampton – opened up a conversation around ideas of a cinema.

MOP open to the idea of a cinema but understand there is one three miles away which is running at a loss. But can we support one?

MOP2 there is another model for cinemas – club cinemas, some dining, cabaret style, book to see in advance.

MOP3 bring the library into that complex, bringing people into the town.

MOP a better bus system for the villages would be great.

MOP opening up the riverside walk from Bridge Street through and deculverting through there would be great.

MOP we need to consider protecting the existing businesses in the complex.

MOP the market could maybe being romanticized. Market has gone downhill since there is other provision in Stevenage. Need to look at the market days. Really need to analyse it and the people they serve.

MOP I've taken a unit in Churchgate. If you take away the parking it's a tiny footprint. Only way it will work is if you're extremely focused on what you want in there. Run the risk of pricing out the Independents because the costs go up. Love all the community stuff but need to be realistic.

---- 10min break ----

MOP reduced to 16 (inc presenters and BID)

4. HITCHIN BID TOWN CENTRE UPDATE

Tom Hardy, BID Manager presented

- Cookbook – each business has put in a recipe, location of business. Was launched at the Food Fest on Saturday. Available to buy at the Information Centre and Waitrose. Money raised would go towards BID.
- Upcoming Events – Hermitage Road Day, Arcade Day, Halloween Trails & Christmas.
- Looking ahead to next year and what can be done. Trying to engage the businesses that can't / aren't currently getting involved.
- Business Breakfast at the Priory on 7 October, MP Alastair Strathern will be there.
- New Operations Coordinator recruited – Danny Pearson
- Continuing with H-Town Pounds, 80 businesses are on board. In July, £3.5k worth was sold.
- Running H-Town business awards again. Handing out awards at Christmas lights switch on 16 November.
- Launched H Cam on Friday (above Osinskys).
- Went to Association of Town Centre Celebration – Gavin, Town Ranger, won Best

- Town Ranger award.
- Christmas opportunities – newsletters, doing bauble again, anyone want to join in the parade, winning windows, lots of social media promotions, working alongside Hitchin Festival on their winter fest.
 - New businesses – vacancy rate of 1.8%

VB can something be done about the frontage of M&Co

TH have spoken to the Council about the jet wash. Looking to highlight that as an area to deal with. Also got an application in for a grant to have a deep clean. Then looking at ways to work with the landlord.

IA Congratulations to Gavin the Ranger.

5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN RELATION TO GRANT APPLICATION

Community Partnerships Officer gave an update on the current available Community Grant budget.

5.1 Steve Gibbs on behalf of **The Sadie Centre** presented an application for a community grant application.

VB really fits in with Healthy Hub initiative. Think it's a good thing.

DWM do you know where the venues are?

SG unfortunately no

DW your ultimate aim is to have it as a preventative service?

SG once we have the trainers trained. Look to keep it low cost but self-funding. May also look to franchise it.

KH very supportive of the project.

SG noted it's the 40th year Celebration. Cllrs are very welcome to attend. Saturday 14 September, 2-5pm.

Proposed **KH**

Seconded **VB**

All voted in favour to recommend the application for **£1,500**.

5.2 Leise Cooper on behalf of **Angels Support Group Hitchin** presented an application for a community grant application.

CB very supportive.

NM supportive. The gaps in the service are very well documented. Clearly you're filling a gap.

DW very supportive too. How many staff do you have to run the groups?
LC two running the group. Online needs two so one can do the logistical checking rules etc. and the other to lead discussion. Could be two staff, one staff and a facilitator (not on staff).

Proposed **CB**
Seconded **NM**

All voted in favour to recommend the application for **£1,940**.

5.3 Gareth Chalmers on behalf of **Groundwork East** presented an application for a community grant application.

DW how will it be advertised and how are participants selected.
GC strong social media presence.

CL with recruitment of beneficiaries, is it first come first served? How is the cooking done in Oughton Family Centre? What time of year is it done with the gardening element? Do participants pay any costs?
GC sessions are free. Not sure if it's means tested, or first come first served. They show how to grow something to participants, then buy in the food so it can be prepared. This can be done all year round.

Proposed **DWM**
Second **DW**

All voted in favour to recommend the application for **£2,367**.

6. COMMUNITY UPDATE

BE highlighted that updates are in the report and the team are working on assessing the applications received for the North Herts Prosperity Fund.

7. WARD MATTERS & OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

MOP what is happening to Thomas Bellamy House and an update on Charnwood.
IA Thomas Bellamy – North Herts Council is looking at doing refurb to let out.
MOP seems to have been empty for two years.
IA new Estates officer is taking that piece of work forward.
IA Charnwood – there is an organisation who is interested in taking it on as a Community Hub. This would be really exciting for the community. Not a formal Council decision on that. Getting close to a successful conclusion. If successful believe the public will be very pleased. Council have £400k set aside for refurbishment.

Discussed a question emailed prior to this meeting from MOP – “Will NHC take the initiative in starting talks with HCC and our MP to investigate solutions to the continued problem of heavy lorries travelling through residential areas to the recycling plants in the industrial area.”

IA yes, NHC will. MP Alastair Strathern and IA have had discussions with Fire & Rescue service regarding recent fire. Seen reports – investigation officer was not able to fully determine the cause. Lorries have been an issue for many, many years. Lorries parked with engines idling. Not a formal weight limit on those roads. One solution is looking at an alternative route out of industrial estate. **AS** has spoken to HCC about convening a meeting of officers, environment agency and NHC to explore solutions. Any lorry ban on Grove Road remains problematic to the employment area on the industrial estate.

Will formally reply to MOP regarding this.

MOP what plans are in place to reach out to the youth of Hitchin / North Herts regarding Churchgate.

KH Chloe has already reached out to the schools to come to the Hub.

IA possibly do some in schools as well.

8. TOPICS FOR FUTURE FORUMS

NM suggested transport within the town, include Highways / HCC. Believe transport is not very integrated. Recent proposals regarding bus lanes haven't been received well.

CL Police report.

21.35 FINISH