

**North Herts Council
ROYSTON COMMUNITY FORUM**

**Meeting held at Royston Town Hall, Melbourn Street, Royston, SG8 7DA
On Wednesday, 4 December 2024 at 7.30pm**

NOTES

Present: Councillor Ruth Brown (RB) (Chair), Councillor Bryony May (BM) (Vice-Chair), Councillor Matt Barnes (MB), Councillor Ruth Clifton (RC), Councillor Martin Prescott (MP), Tim Johnson (TJ), Cathy Brownjohn (CB)

In Attendance: Becca Edwards (BE) (Community and Partnerships Officer), Cllr Mick Debenham (MD)

Also present: At the commencement of the meeting there were 5 members of the public.

Meeting started at **7.30pm**

1. Apologies for absence

Cllr Daniel Allen

2. Chair's Announcements

Cllr Brown welcomed everyone in attendance.

- Highlighted that the Forum is an informal, inclusive meeting to share ideas.

3. Public Participation – Grant Applications

Received presentations in support of grant applications by the following:

Claire Hallett (CH) presented the Carers in Hertfordshire application.

Members and members of the public enquired and received satisfactory answers about:

- If the grant is specifically for Royston
- Level of need (currently rising by 10% / year)
- How long the hub has been in place
- Funding from other organisations
- Number of volunteers involved in the hubs
- Partnerships with other organisations

County Councillor Fiona Hill and Town Councillor Stephen Lockett voiced their support.

Advised to approach Royston Town Council for funding.

Harriet Mace (HM) presented the Caudwell Youth application.

Members and members of the public enquired and received satisfactory answers about:

- How long the organization has been operating, and specifically in Royston
- Partnership working
- Duplication of services
- If the funding requested is specifically for Royston
- How often mentors meet with young people
- Police input with the organization
- Amount of people helped
- What area they are working to improve - CoL

TJ asked to talk with **CH** outside the meeting.

BE informed those present that there is £3,427 available in the Royston grant budget. If all grants are recommended and subsequently approved, there will be £234 remaining in the budget for the remainder of the financial year.

RB explained that there is one meeting left in the Civic year. If both grants are approved as requested, there would not be enough left in the budget for another grant. **RB** is aware of groups that have stated their intent to apply.

RB asked if the organisations received less funding would the project still go ahead.

Caudwell – *yes, but funding would have to be found elsewhere.*

Carers in Herts – *yes, but funding would have to be found elsewhere.*

RB asked for member suggestions / proposals.

MP proposed that each organisation be granted £1,000.

MB seconded.

TJ made an amended proposal that each organisation be granted £1,000, with any underspend at the end of the financial year to be granted to these two organisations equally up to a maximum of the total requested in their application.

RC seconded the amendment.

Vote

Unanimous vote in favour of recommending Carers in Hertfordshire receive £1,000 towards running costs of their support hub in Royston, and Caudwell Youth receive £1,000 towards support for young people, with any underspend of the Royston community grant budget at the end of the financial year to be granted to these two organisations equally up to a maximum of the total requested in their application.

4. Presentation – Leisure

Cllr Mick Debenham (Executive Member for Environment, Leisure and Green Spaces) presented.

MD discussed EA taking over the leisure centre contract from SLL. Expressed that there was some issues with comms when the new contract started but things were soon cleared up.

Outdoor pools got a lot of complaints about having morning and afternoon sessions but have reached 17k more visitors.

Royston Leisure Centre – new group cycling studio, pool view drowning detection systems, gym changing room refurbs, upgraded gym, decorated throughout.

EA have gone out into the community a lot – buggy workouts, senior badminton sessions, pickleball, outdoor fitness sessions, walking netball, Dr Bike events.

Discussed public sector decarbonisation scheme. This has been achieved through a grant bid from the Government. All three leisure centres will hit approx. 66% reduction. With this there will be disruption, need to hit comms right with this after the previous disaster. Why it's happening, and that it is happening. Replacing old boilers with heat pumps etc.

Now at detailed contract stage, penciled in date for start of works is 24 March, shutdown for 21 weeks, pool for 5, gym for 2. Shutdowns will be staggered across the district, so that at least one pool is open, one gym is open etc. As part of this, it was envisaged to extend the gym and put in a learner pool while the builders were in. £7.7mill decarb. ¼ mil gym extension. Learner pool cost came in at half a mil over budget. Told by EA that the loss per year on a learner pool would be £100k pa.

Overview and Scrutiny Board agreed that this was the correct route to go, with the caveat the Council continue to look for additional funding. At present, the Grant Officer has not found anything that can be applied to. Grants are mainly being given out to keep swimming pools open, rather than to build. Sport England recommend asking for £180k S106 monies towards capital leisure.

NHDC have spoken to RTC, but are waiting for a response.

Other grant streams could pop up.

MP asked for confirmation from Cllr Barnes that the Overview Board recommendation was to keep £1.1m in the budget and look for additional sources of funding, and that the money is still in the budget at present.

MP there is an enormous strength of feeling about the learner pool. Noted that at a school visit a teacher explained they and their families are struggling with the cost of swimming lessons from schools.

There is £7.7m for decarbonisation from Central Government. If we have to do this work eventually anyway, surely the money can be found for a learner pool.

RB aware Royston pool is largely working at capacity for swimming due to other

local closures. Interested in business sponsorship and funding via the Town Council. There is a funding gap, and the gap is bigger than we first thought.

MD has been talking to EA about a raised pool. Come back as pretty much the same price. What MB said is crucial, to keep the original amount that was put aside and to keep searching for further funding.

RB are you committed to keeping the money in the budget?

MD I'm not committed to taking it out.

County Cllr Fiona Hill S106 is mainly capital. Raised the point that school visits raised a major concern about how much schools are being charged for swimming lessons.

RB one of the schools I visited said next year they would not be able to take their students swimming.

MoP1 Cricket team use of leisure centre sports hall £80ph, going to price clubs out. Interested to hear a strategy, understand it will be an issue – budget constraint etc. Charging more than twice what schools charge for a hall, however school hall hire can have other issues. The council wants to make people healthier, but people are being priced out. Thinks the Council should take a broader view.

RB to sum up, there is an issue with community and schools' sports provision. Please take this back to Council. We don't want to be in a position where schools can't use the pools and clubs can't make payments.

TJ I have been a member of the leisure centre for years and have kids. Not a fan of EA, think they're quite draconian. Cleared waiting lists for gymnastics, then told everyone to just apply. My daughter missed out on a spot but got a space because I complained. This is not the way it should be.

Swimming lessons on a Saturday morning, class size has increased approx. by 50%. I had a meeting with the leisure centre manager, he used the word 'chaotic'. Manager had a discussion with his bosses that he could shave off about a quarter of the price, however EA will not allow the centre to not operate at a profit.

I have spoken to Exec Member for Finance about this. I also don't feel that the whole Cabinet is in agreement about the learner pool, based on a discussion I had with the Leader of the Council.

TJ when canvassing, the learner pool featured heavily, and people were 'up in arms'.

MoP2 I have a son who had a near drowning. Two other children saved him. Please reconsider a learner pool. Lessons through school helped rebuild his confidence. These lessons are literally lifesaving. Family has had mental health issues from his near drowning. I fully support the sports clubs, as mental health is a key issue and the clubs help support that.

MD I hear you, will share the thoughts of the Royston people with the Council.

MP substantially cheaper to do the learner pool now while the builders are in, however too late for this to happen. If the pool is built above ground it costs more to heat. BK3 is happening, what has happened to that S106 money?
Pressed the point that this is not about making money, but saving lives.

MoP3 as someone who uses the pool. Compared to 2 years ago, 40% higher charges. Can no longer get a book of tickets, but can buy a month's swim, but can't visit often enough in a month to make it worth while. Currently not 'poor' enough to get benefits, but not earning enough to be able to afford a month's swimming.

MB £100k deficit / year didn't include Melbourn closing. Learner pool would be about subsidizing.

TJ I would like Cllr Albert, Cllr Debenham, myself and someone senior at EA to meet about the potential savings mentioned to me by the manager of the leisure centre.

County Cllr Fiona Hill want to make a point of the councils not working in silos. Should be working together. It is all tax payers money.

5. Presentation – Car Parking Tariff Consultation

Cllr Ruth Brown presented, stated that it is not her proposal, she is not part of the administration.

MP why was the Free After 3 introduced / continued?

RB in 2010 the BID decided they wanted to incentivise people to come into town later. The BID, County and District Councils worked together to subsidise and make Free After 3.

MP if a charge is introduced, it is likely that the amount of business will decrease. Strongly disagrees with introducing a charge after 3pm, thinks there will be repercussions for businesses.

County Cllr Fiona Hill County and District used to fund Free After 3 via grants, but it was decided that this isn't how grant funding should be used so the scheme is no longer supported.

RB Royston is the only place where there is Free After 3.

New parking machines will be introduced in January – tap in, tap out, with a cash option. It was going to be cashless, however the current administration have reversed that.

MoP1 if you use your phone app you are charged more, it is not advertised. Should be advertised if this is the case.

MoP2 the cost is going up from nothing to something. A lot of people still park on the pavement to grab a takeaway. This situation could become a lot worse due to no being required to pay in the car parks. Also, is there someone going to be enforcing this after 5/6pm? Will people just ignore it?

RB parking enforcement is carried out 7 days per week on a rotational basis. Cllrs should be using the portals to report issues they see. There are 11 fulltime enforcement staff across the district, but they can't be everywhere at once.

MoP3 could there be half an hour / 15mins free before a charge starts?

MoP2 as a business owner there are a lot of people who come in from the villages. If this charge after three is added, some are likely to go elsewhere.

RB I believe the Administration's proposal is to harmonise what is happening across the district.

MoP2 just because they are trying to harmonise, doesn't mean this is right for Royston. There needs to be a reason to come to Royston and not go somewhere else.

MP the resident satisfaction survey came out, Royston came out way higher on dissatisfaction with Council services. It might have something to do with the parking!

TJ can't compare Hitchin and Letchworth with Royston. They are shopping centres. Could compare Royston to Baldock.

RB Looked into evidence for Free After 3. NHDC commissioned consultants, who found that car parking is never full in Royston, for example the Warren always has space.
The BID did a qualitative survey. Don't recall everything, but headline is that 40% didn't choose to come because of the Free after 3 parking.

TJ it is rammed in the town centre after 3pm. Dubious about the enforcement. Don't see an enforcement officer in Royston after 4pm. There's a stretch that can't be parked on Market Hill until after 6pm, but people park there a lot. Blue badge holders are entitled to park there.

MB has there been an impact assessment? Does the charge need to apply to all the car parks? We want to free up the town centre car parks. Encourage walking and biking. What about free parking at the Warren etc.

CB surely the survey is going to take into consideration the localisation aspect. Tough one because we need to encourage sustainable travel.

RB Sustainable Travel Town group are working towards some of those things. Lots of proposals around making it a better place to cycle / walk etc. There are things coming down, just not very quickly.

County Cllr Fiona Hill fought really hard 20 years ago to get variable parking charges. For example the one near the health centre is cheaper because people shouldn't be charged to go to health visits. I'm assuming that The BID can't pay what the new estimate is.

RB not aware if the BIDs have been spoken to yet. Heritage Foundation run car parks at a cheaper cost in Letchworth.

MoP3 Letchworth has the Morrisons car park, Baldock Tesco, which are free.

6. Community Update

Becca Edwards, Community and Partnerships Officer, presented the [Community Update](#).

RB shared info about RTC's Green Award.

7. [Hertfordshire County Council \(HCC\)](#)

County Councillor Fiona Hill introduced herself and shared information about the following:

- Strategic issues
 - Going through the integrated plan process – final plan in January
 - Herts Lynx will continue
 - Improvements to buses generally will be taking place
 - Additional funding in SEND is starting to make a difference.
 - HAPpy programme is doing really well, taking place over Christmas.
 - Housing issues
 - Armed Forces Covenant are judging the Christmas card competition in the next few weeks
 - Highways lots of schemes – [HCC website](#) for details.
 - Salt bins currently being filled, salt free for residents.
 - Working together on street cleaning.
 - Junior Park Run needs more volunteers.
 - Libraries winter reading challenge running until January.
 - School democracy visits have been going really well in the town.

8. Open Discussion

MoP3 raised an issue about the Old North Road Roundabout at York Way. The roundabout is in an appalling condition. Why hasn't it been resurfaced?

County Cllr Fiona Hill some roads are done before others so they don't get in a really bad condition. Some may look in a good condition, but may not be. Regarding this particular roundabout, some patching was done but some is quite shallow (**shaling (sp?)**) which isn't a major concern. Please keep reporting!

MoP2 thank you to Cllr Hill. Lighting at parking on The Mews has been an issue. NHDC has not been helpful. Cllr Hill has provided an update.

RB I have an update for you about that issue.

County Cllr Fiona Hill it was not the fault of NHDC, the owner of the car park had told the District the work was done, but it wasn't.

MEETING CLOSE 21:35