

**North Herts Council
HITCHIN COMMUNITY FORUM**

**Meeting held at Hitchin Town Hall
On Tuesday 16 September 2025 at 7.00pm**

NOTES

Present: Councillors Ian Albert (Chair) (IA), Clare Billing (Vice-Chair) (CB), Val Bryant (VB), Jon Clayden (JC), Chris Lucas (CL), Elizabeth Dennis (ED), Keith Hoskins MBE (KH), Nigel Mason (NM), Dave Winstanley (DWi), Donna Wright (DWr) and Daniel Wright-Mason (DWM)

In attendance:
Aimee Flack (Community and Partnerships Officer) (AF), Councillor Daniel Allen (Leader of the Council)

Also present:
At the commencement of the meeting there were around 19 members of the public (MOP), including registered speakers.

Meeting Started at **19:02**

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies received.

2. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Cllr Albert welcomed everyone in attendance.

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

[The order of the agenda was amended slightly since publication and the Local Government Organisation item was brought forward to after the Town Talk]

3. TOWN TALK

UPDATE ON THE BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR QUEEN STREET HUB SCHEME

A written update and technical drawing have been published alongside these notes

IA explained that the speaker on this item has had to send their apologies.

CL and IA advised they are in support of this much needed upgrade to the area.

It was opened up to questions and advised that technical questions may need to be taken away for relevant Officers to respond to.

[There were some handouts in the audience of the technical drawing.]

MOP1 – asked if it's just one extra bus stop being added. Also asked if the walkways will be accessible throughout?

IA – Yes and a new crossing point there as well. Yes to it all being accessible.

MOP2 – asked what the rationale is behind removing the crossing outside of Bricklayers Arms pub.

CL – there will now be one closer to retirement homes to allow easier access to cross the road for them.

The answer below was provided by a Herts County Council Officer post meeting:
The signalised crossing currently located outside the Bricklayer's Arms will be removed. In its place, two new pedestrian crossings will be introduced:

- One crossing near the retirement homes, by Biggin Lane and Lyle's Row.
- Another crossing over Queen Street, by the junction with Hollow Lane, which will be signalised.

These changes mean that, rather than a single crossing point directly in front of the Bricklayer's Arms, there will now be two crossings positioned on either side of the pub. Both will be equipped with either Belisha beacons or traffic lights.

For further enquiries on the Queen Street Bus Scheme, please address to bsipbuspriority@hertfordshire.gov.uk

OPEN Q&A SESSION WITH COUNCILLORS

It was opened up to the floor for any questions or issues anyone would like to raise with the Hitchin Community Forum Councillors.

An issue was raised with regards to the number of pigeon nests in Hitchin and the resulting unhygienic problem of the pigeon poo.

IA – Will take this away to look into.

There was a brief discussion on the promotion of bus routes. KH advised that the interlink website is very good.

NM highlighted the need for better signage on Nightingale Road about the 20 mph limit. Suggested there be a big 20 on the road.

IA – has put in a request for improved signage on Nightingale Road.

DA – Local MP Chris Hinchliff is doing a lot of work on local bus routes.

VB – there has been a lot of progress made on long distance buses.

MOP3 – enforcement needed on 20mph

4. PRESENTATION – LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

The PowerPoint presentation has been published alongside these notes

Cllr Daniel Allen Leader of the Council presented - *For details of the presentation see the PowerPoint presentation published with the notes.*

Q&A

MOP4 – will the savings be net of redundancy payments, ICT migration, pension and other transition costs.

DA- at the moment at lot is unknown. Gave the example that with ICT there could be a big potential for saving money by amalgamating and reducing HCC and NHC systems.

Ultimately will be able to share more information as things progress.

MOP5 – raised the concern that staff changes could cause delays and complications with ongoing work

DA – advised there will be a shadow council running for one year for a safe cross over.

Representative from HCC in the audience explained there is a lot of transition planning to make sure services continue to run well.

MOP6 – asked how this will impact boundaries and will it move to a fairer electoral system.

DA – explained it would depend on which unitary model is chosen with regards to how it will impact boundaries.

MOP7 – emphasised that this will impact the voluntary community sector who are delivering vital services.

MOP4 – asked if lessons have been learned after the unification in 1974.

DA – focusing on the now and need to make the best of it, aim is to move forwards.

CL – recognise this is a difficult decision to make. There are a lot of unknowns about projected numbers.

DA – emphasised that everything is still business as usual, such as Churchgate.

5. HITCHIN BID TOWN CENTRE UPDATE

IA expressed thanks to Tom Hardy as he steps down from his role as Hitchin BID Manager, acknowledging the significant and lasting impact he has made on the town.

Danny Pearson the new Hitchin BID Manager shared updates:

- Took on the role on 1st September and currently in handover period.

- Reported the success of events over summer such as the mini beach.
- Summer series – they don't run these but help to facilitate people who come to the town.
- Food festival – went really well, good weather. Biggest hit was the Hitchin Bake Off.
- Soap box derby is coming up, local business have rallied behind this.
- Hermitage Road Day and Halloween Trail coming up.
- Christmas lights going up early but won't be turning them on until 15th November.
- Want to look into the use of the band stand.
- Supportive of Hitchin Community Network idea being explored by the Community Partnerships Officer.

Tom Hardy – closing remarks before he leaves the BID:

- With regards to Local Government Reorganisation, advocated that the Council continues not to charge a collection fee for levy payments received from businesses that are then passed onto the BIDs across the District. It was proposed that every effort be made to ensure this policy continues post-LGR.
- Stressed that the multi-storey car park, needs a sign to say there is a multi-storey car park.
- Churchgate – need to retain these business as they make Hitchin, Hitchin. They have been there years and years and are fantastic!
- Action Hitchin – still currently the CEO. On 23rd September, installing a gym in Bancroft gardens. Working with green spaces team at the Council on this. Official opening 3rd October.

6. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN RELATION TO GRANT APPLICATIONS

AF updated Members of community grant budgets. The current Community Grant budget available is **£19,301**. The total amount of funding requested for this meeting is **£2,748**.

If the applications outlined in Appendices 2 and 3 are recommended and approved, there would be **£16,553** available for Community Grants for the remainder of the 2025-2026 financial year.

And reminded Members to make any declarations of interest.

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

Representative from **Hitchin Belles Football Club** presented an application for **£1,803** towards training and workshops for Wellbeing Volunteers and Coaches.

Councillors expressed support for this.

DW – declared he was a coach in the past at Hitchin Belles so won't vote in case there is any perceived conflict of interest.

AF – explained that the applicant applied for more than the usual recommended amount of £1,500 as during the application process things changed with regards to courses on offer and the price went up.

IA – Proposed
CB – Seconded

10 councillors voted in favour of recommending Hitchin Belles Football Club £1,803 towards training and workshops for Wellbeing Volunteers and Coaches.

Representative from **Green Care at Norton CIC** presented an application for **£945** towards growing materials and equipment to increase capacity to grow fruit and vegetables for Hitchin Pantry

Councillors expressed support for this.

IA – Proposed
CB – Seconded

Unanimous vote in favour of recommending Green Care at Norton CIC £945 towards growing materials and equipment to increase capacity to grow fruit and vegetables for Hitchin Pantry.

7. COMMUNITY UPDATE

The Community & Partnerships Officer provided further detail on the proposed Hitchin Community Network.

The initiative would involve inviting local charities, clubs, community centres, and sports organisations from across Hitchin to join the network. Its primary aim is to foster stronger connections between groups, encouraging collaboration and mutual support. A Hitchin-focused mailing list would also be established to enable quick sharing of relevant information, such as upcoming grant opportunities and local initiatives.

8. WARD MATTERS & OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS (20:35)

The updates below were published with the agenda which IA briefly talked through:

Churchgate Regeneration Project

The team are continuing to work on the next phase of the programme, since gaining approval from Full Council to move forward with a preferred option – that will focus on developing the shopping centre, market, Biggin Lane and both

Portmill car parks.

The team are working with specialists in parking and market revitalisation to work out what is physically and financially possible on the site. All of this intelligence work is building up to a Procurement process that will see us appoint the most appropriate developer to take the project to the next level.

Churchgate Shopping Centre Management

The new managing agents, Praxis Property Management, are now actively onboard with the day-to-day management of the centre. They continue to build good relationships with the tenants with an improved presence at the centre, and ensuring compliance and day to day management aspects are actioned.

The cleaning of the walkway, repair and decoration of the canopies and hanging baskets and planters have made a significant improvement. We are looking at the potential to improve signage and benches in the walkway too.

Praxis are working closely with Visit Hitchin regarding events this year that we can collaborate on.

Riverside Walk

This remains within the Responsible Growth priority of the Council Plan with the aim of delivering the walkway between Bridge Street and Biggin Lane to increase footfall in this part of the town centre. An outline proposal has been prepared by consultant engineers. The riverbanks have been cleared, and this enables us to assess works needed to the retaining walls. Consultation is underway with the Environment Agency to enable the design of the proposed bridge to be finalised and with Herts County Council Highways for linking with existing footpaths. We hope to be able to share further details later this year. There are a number of stages to delivery of this project including outline and detailed design, consultation with key stakeholders, planning and conservation area consents, Highway and Environment Agency consents, tender for the works and delivery. The target is to begin work this financial year.

Charnwood House

The Council remain committed to delivering its ambition to revitalise Charnwood House for the benefit of Hitchin and the wider district. Officers continue to undertake a review of the work done to date and the reports on the building, and will be bringing forward options for Executive Members to confirm the next steps. Whilst Charnwood House is not formally on the market at present pending the outcome of this work, we are maintaining a list of organisations and groups who have expressed an interest and they will be informed of next steps.

IA opened it up to any further updates or issues anyone wants to raise

St Mary's fountain was briefly discussed and that there is a meeting to discuss best solutions to issues with BID and Estates Team on Friday.

Brief discussion around potential future speakers to invite.

IA highlighted that an update on the Oughtonhead Weir Project was circulated by the Green Space Team earlier that day which will be put into the notes. Please see below:

- The project started with a feasibility study looking at different options for how best to deal with the failed weir, essentially looking at how best to manage the drop in gradient between upstream and downstream of the existing structure.
- Initial plan was for weir removal with a re-grading of a long stretch of river upstream, along with enhancing the habitats present. Following some early contractor involvement as part of the detailed design process, the comments from the contractor were that since the upstream habitat had already developed into some good habitat, it would make sense to try and retain this and instead manage the gradient change with a set of five rock 'pre-barrages' at the site of the existing weir. In effect this would create stepped, cascade conditions along this short stretch, with notches included in the 'steps' to assist fish passage. The benefit of this approach is that it is a smaller-scale project which retains the positive upstream habitat whilst having significant cost savings.
- The existing mill stream would be retained as a standing water feature. Included in the designs is the installation of an electric pump which would allow for periodic pumping of water into the mill stream to top up/flush through water as required to avoid it becoming stagnant.
- Following production of the revised designs, they were shared with the Environment Agency (EA), who requested the designs be reviewed by their National Fish Pass Advisory Panel. This is not something we had initially anticipated needing to do, and so following discussions with the designers for the project, they suggested some additional data collection may be required to satisfy this review. We are currently looking to set up a meeting between the EA and the designers to clarify what may be required. This has delayed the submitting of the designs for Ordinary Watercourse Consent and the start of the procurement process.
- In addition to the weir project, a couple of years ago the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust developed a separate project, producing designs for habitat enhancements along the River Oughton more widely. These designs have been through the consenting process, and so are ready to go, however funding hadn't been secured. NHC/CMS have recently been approached by Affinity Water, who are potentially interested in helping progress this project. They are looking for projects to support on the Oughton due to the fact they are about to re-start abstraction from the aquifer. Some initial thoughts are that it would make sense to try and combine the two projects, which would then deliver the greatest benefits for nature, as well as maximise efficiency in procurement/project management etc. We've suggested this to Affinity Water and have sent all the relevant documents, once they've had a chance to review, we'll look to set up a meeting to discuss how best to proceed.

- The detailed designs for the weir project included a 'Buildability Statement' which outlined some options for how best to deliver the project. This suggested a timing of late summer/early autumn, when breeding bird season will have finished, ground conditions should be most favourable and river levels will be at their lowest, all of which would create the most ideal conditions for delivery. Therefore, we would be looking at late summer/early autumn 2026 for delivery of the project, this should also give us plenty of time to confirm designs following conversations with the EA and explore opportunities for delivering the two river projects together.

9. TOPICS FOR FUTURE FORUMS

Topics currently logged as potential themes when the timing is right/availability of speakers:

- Bus Operators
- Churchgate
- Hitchin Train Station Access
- Town Centre Strategy
- Green Space Strategy

DWr – advised the Town Centre Strategy could potentially be December, to discuss further with AF.

ED – suggested a future topic on the impact of the expansion of Luton Airport on the Hitchin road network.

MEETING CLOSED 20:50