

**North Herts Council
ETCHWORTH COMMUNITY FORUM**

**Meeting held at Letchworth Library
On Wednesday 17 December at 7.30pm**

Present: Cllr Sadie Billing (SB) (Chair), Cllr Daniel Allen (DA), Cllr Tina Bhartwas (TB), Cllr Mick Debenham (MD), Cllr Emma Fernandes (EF), Cllr Ian Mantle (IM), Cllr Sean Prendergast (SP), Cllr Sean Nolan (SN) and Cllr Claire Winchester (CW)

In attendance:

Aimee Flack (Community and Partnerships Officer) (AF) and Cllr Donna Wright Executive Member for Place (DW)

Also present:

At the commencement of the meeting there were around 25 members of the public (MOP), including registered speakers

Meeting Started at **19:30**

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Received apologies from Cllr Amy Allen, Cllr David Chalmers and Cllr Tamsin Thomas.

2. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Cllr Billing welcomed everyone in attendance.

Highlighted that the Forum is an informal, inclusive meeting to share ideas and reminded Members to make declarations of interest before an item.

3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN RELATION TO GRANT APPLICATION

The Community and Partnership Officer, updated Members of community grant budgets. The Community Grant budget available is **£14,302**. The total amount of funding requested for this meeting is **£1,470**.

If the application outlined in Appendix 2 is recommended by the Forum and subsequently approved by the Executive Member for Governance, there would be **£12,832** available for Community Grants for the remainder of the 2025-2026 financial year.

Before the grant applicant presented:

- DA declared he won't vote as the recommendation comes to him for final decision as Executive Member for Governance but can ask questions.
- IM declared he won't take part in the discussion or vote as he is on the Committee of Mrs Howard Memorial Hall and the funding would be towards hire of Howard Hall.

A representative from **Home-Start Hertfordshire** presented their grant application for £1,470 towards hall hire and healthy eating refreshments for their Letchworth Family Group sessions, for a 12-month period.

Members enquired and received satisfactory answers about:

- Where referrals come from – health visitors, family centres, GPs and schools. Housing associations can refer but would need permission from the family before they do.

EF Proposed
CW Seconded

7 Councillors voted in favour of recommending Home-Start Hertfordshire £1,470 towards hall hire and healthy eating refreshments for their Letchworth Family Group sessions, for a 12-month period.

4. PRESENTATION – LETCHWORTH BID

The Letchworth BID manager, Richard Harbon, gave a presentation about their work in Letchworth Town Centre

- Gave an overview of the highlights from the year which was supported by wonderful volunteers.
- Christmas lights switch on was a rainy day but the community still came, demonstrating Letchworth's community spirit.
- Having continuing issues with the Christmas lights due to the infrastructure.
- Remembrance Day event was successful and had around 1,000 people come. Thanked the Community Partnerships Team Leader for helping to organise the event.
- Built in planters have been successful, supported by a local gardener and team of volunteers. The ultimate aim is that they want to enter Britain in Bloom.
- Pirate ship has been replaced, it's owned by the Letchworth Heritage Foundation who asked the BID to lead on organising the replacement.
- In October half term they had their first ever pumpkin patch and gave away free pumpkins.
- Letchworth 5k had record number of entries.
- Comic con event was successful in drawing a younger audience.

Community spirit, volunteering, and partnership working sit at the heart of everything they do.

Topics covered in the Q&A:

- Issues with the Christmas Lights – they had a lot of work done to improve electrics last year but a rolling programme of work is still needed.
- Attracting visitors from outside of Letchworth – built a new website and building a reputation on social media. Have started using key performance indicators to guide. The Discover Letchworth brochure.
- MOP's suggested:
 - better bus routes would help attract visitors. Also, a tram from Letchworth town centre to Milton Keynes.
 - having more active activities such as crazy golf, indoor bowling. RH advised they are looking to grow the active offer in Letchworth.
 - Train station needs more than 2 drop off points.

5. PRESENTATION – NORTH HERTS COUNCIL'S DRAFT TOWN CENTRES STRATEGY

Cllr Donna Wright (DW), Executive Member for Place presented:

- Explained that the draft Town Centres Strategy consultation is open until 30th January.
- Gave an overview of the strategy. Full background details available in the information report which was published with the agenda [here](#).
- Part 3 includes specific information about Letchworth.
- Explained ways of accessing the consultation [Town centres strategy | North Herts Council](#)
- A hard copy is also available to view at the Council's Customer Service Centre at the main Council Offices on Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City.
- Explained navigating the document online.

Topics covered in the Q&A:

- Impact of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) - this document will help prepare for it.
- Previous strategies and implementation - it was explained that the previous strategy has informed the current one, with a clear intention for delivery and implementation
- Current issues raised by MOPs to be noted for the consultation:
 - Significant transport concerns, especially ongoing gridlock within the town and difficulties accessing the A1
 - Public transport to Lister Hospital – bus journeys take over an hour
 - Cycling infrastructure - no noticeable improvements for cyclists
 - Hitchin and Letchworth bypass needed

- Disability access – There is a need for additional disabled parking spaces and wider infrastructure improvements. This feedback was acknowledged and will look into accessibility being more explicit in the document. Keen to collaborate with disability charities when it comes to delivery.
- Parking strategy - DW highlighted that a new parking strategy is being developed. The aim is to encourage more active travel but recognise a balance is needed.
- Letchworth Community Forum – MOP suggested to continue to have a forum beyond LGR to collect suggestions/ideas/issues.
- Delivery plan – the Letchworth BID Manager is keen to see more specificity around planned actions, particularly with a focus on securing a clear, deliverable proposal for the town centre.
 - DW explained that the document is high level at this point. The idea is this document can be handed over to the new unitary and will be a way of getting North Herts towns recognised. Still need to have it as an aspiration.
 - DA referenced the Churchgate consultation as an example of where the Council has listened to responses. This strategy is really important.
- Engaging younger people with the strategy – it was explained that local schools have been contacted. It was agreed that it's important to engage with the younger community.
- Would a new town be considered rather than building on existing towns - County Councillor Alistair Willoughby was in the audience and explained that this is an issue to bring to the County Council. The MOP was encouraged to contact their County Councillor about it.

6. PRESENTATION - MARTIN GROUP'S PUBLIC CONSULTATION FOR EMERGING MASTERPLAN FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT OF GARDEN SQUARE SHOPPING CENTRE

For this item, SB explained any Councillors who are likely to be involved in making planning decisions should be mindful of expressing any opinions that could be construed as pre-determination at a later date, but they can of course ask questions.

Mike Martin from Martin Property Group, John Bradley from Studio4Design architects and Duncan Flynn from the Cratus Group presented:

Mike Martin:

- Martin Property Group has owned the Garden Square Shopping Centre (GSSC) since 2021. They are a family-run business with over 50 years of experience, specialising in the regeneration of town centre sites across the country.
- Quality of place and community wellbeing will be central to the development. Successful development should deliver a scheme that

- respects Letchworth's character and heritage, while also supporting local employment.
- Currently at the Masterplan stage where they are listening to ideas before bringing detailed proposals.
- They held an in person consultation in Unit 3 of the shopping centre on 12th and 13th December and had over 200 people engage.
- The intention is to hold further events in the new year, before submitting an application in Spring time.

John Bradley:

- Talked through the published document which can be accessed [here](#)
- Explained they are at the beginning, high level stage.
- Design strategy - reviewing and improving accessibility will be important. Want to make use of routes people use. Also to bring in greenery and biodiversity.
- Talked through the proposed phases.
- Aim is to create a sense of place for the community

Duncan Flynn:

- Cratus Group are a communications consultancy, recently hired to oversee stakeholder involvement.
- Explained experience of other projects they have worked on, such as Windsor Yards regeneration and Broadwalk shopping centre in Bristol.
- The main issues raised at the in-person consultation on 12th and 13th December were design, landscaping, the retail and residential offer, and parking. The team is currently working through the granular details.
- There will be more consultations in the new year.

Topics covered in the Q&A:

- Future consultation dates - dates for the next consultation will be shared in the new year via social media, The Comet, leaflets etc.
- Collaboration with organisations – SB asked which organisations they are looking to collaborate with. For example, the Wildlife Trust. The team advised they are gathering information and are keen to engage with as many organisations as possible.
- Parking – as plans progress they will assess level of car parking required.
- Engagement beyond the town centre - MM advised they are happy to explore running consultations in areas beyond the town centre, including at different times of day.
- Design for younger people - MM advised they are happy to engage with schools and youth organisations to gather input.
- Overall vision and best-practice models - MOP asked about the overall vision for the project, including what successful shopping centres might it be modelled on. MM explained that Letchworth is unique, and the team is currently focused on listening to what the community wants. He noted that GSSC currently closes at 6pm and is mainly used as a through-route, and the aim is to open it up, make it safer, and improve lighting.

- Emil Dale Academy - SP highlighted that it provides an opportunity to attract additional footfall.
- Parking and affordable housing - SP emphasised the need for resident parking spaces and the importance of affordable housing.
- Unit sizes and service areas - MOP asked will the size of the shop units and service areas change. MM advised service areas will be upgraded, and flexibility will be important to accommodate both small and large retailers.
- Opening hours and vibrancy - Letchworth BID Manager commented that this is a really exciting opportunity and opening up 24/7 is needed.
- Alignment with local policies - SN asked how it will align with local policies like urban design principles. MM explained they are regularly in communication with the Council planning team.
- Residential units - MOP highlighted the need for rental units for young people. MM advised there are currently no confirmed figures for the number of residential units.
- Impact on existing businesses - CW raised the importance of protecting existing businesses and ensuring they are fully considered as work is carried out. MM advised that careful phasing will be key to minimising disruption.
- Amenities and accessibility - MOP asked about amenities such as accessible facilities, public toilets, and free Wi-Fi. MM advised that it has been already raised a lot that the public toilets need updating. Will take the suggestion of free Wifi on board.
- Covered areas for shelter - MOP suggested including a covered area to provide a dry space for people to meet. MM explained importance of getting balance of open and closed space right, particularly when thinking about creating green spaces.
- Commuting and parking pressures - MOP raised commuting as an expanding problem, causing issues with parking. Suggested a meeting take place between the Letchworth Heritage Foundation and Council planning department to discuss parking issues. AF advised this suggestion will be shared with planning colleagues.
- Design to support events - The importance of being mindful of a design that would support events such as Comic Con was raised.

7. INFORMATION NOTE ON PROPOSED PARKING TARIFF INCREASES

SB highlighted that an information note was published with the agenda to inform the Community Forum of the proposed parking tariff increases for 2026/27 initial option. And for the Community Forum to provide any views on the initial proposed car parking tariff increases as set out in Appendix A.

DA - highlighted the need to increase cost of parking.
 DW - commented that 2% is a modest increase.

8. COMMUNITY UPDATE

AF explained that there was a press release to help promote the Letchworth Community Grant to groups as there's still £12,832 remaining.

Also highlighted that the North Herts Heroes awards is open to nominations until 4th January [North Herts Heroes 2026: Nominations Now Open | North Herts Council](#).

9. WARD MATTERS & OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

SB opened it up to any questions or updates from members of the public or Councillors.

DA – highlighted that the Wilbury Community Forum is organising the usual Christmas Eve Food Rescue. The community can come and rescue food from 6.45pm onwards at Wilbury Hall, Bedford Road.

MOP raised that they think parking enforcement is needed on Icknield Way. Also that there is a lot of fly posting and large advertisements to lights.

DW – noted that the team is currently short of Civil Enforcement Officers, meaning they must prioritise certain areas, but is a short term issue.

SP – advised with regards to the fly posting that the County Council could look into removing it.

MOP raised there are regular flooding issues around Standalone and Norton Way North. DA explained various ways this is trying to be addressed, including - [Home - ResilienTogether](#)

Representative of Decarbonising Letchworth had some printed questions. This was given to AF after the meeting, who shared it with the relevant officer as part of the Town Centre Strategy consultation.

10. TOPICS FOR FUTURE FORUMS

SB asked if there were any topic suggestions for the next meeting/s and advised that the Police have been invited to present at the March meeting.

SB would like to invite the Peers and Queers initiative to a future meeting

DA expressed an interest in inviting the Integrated Care Board to a future meeting to provide an update on their work locally.

MOP asked if Infinity Water could be invited.

MEETING CLOSED – AT 21.33