

Scutiny Review: Hitchin Town Hall/ North Hertfordshire Museum Project

Witness Statement: Hitchin Initiative

Background

Hitchin Initiative (formerly Hitchin Town Centre Initiative) has worked in partnership with North Hertfordshire District Council on a huge variety of projects both large and small for the past 25 years. One of our main roles as a Town Centre Partnership is be the effective conduit between the private and public sectors. Our joint partnership working has been across all portfolio areas, officer engagement at all levels including regular meetings with the Chief Executive and members of the Senior Management Team. Engagement with Elected Members of all parties has been through individual collaboration and more formally through the Area Committee, Cabinet and Full Council structures. Engagement of one form or another with officers or elected members is weekly if not daily. Due to the longevity and regularity of engagement between the two organisations it is natural to have experienced everything from truly positive, successful project outcomes to protracted, combative negotiations that end in failure. It is this diversity of direct partnership experience that helps provide measure and balance to this submission. We remain NHDC's 'critical friend'.

Hitchin Initiative (HI) Specific Project Involvement.

From 2006 to the inception of the charity Hitchin Town Hall Ltd (HTH Ltd) in 2012 Hitchin Initiative was the anchor organisation that worked with the community and civic organisations to oppose NHDC's proposals to let Hitchin Town Hall on a commercial lease to a 3rd party operator, bought forward the vision plan to bring in 14/15 Brand Street to create The Town Hall and District Museum and led on the funding application to the then Community Builders Fund which successfully bought in circa £1m to the project. Once HTH Ltd was formed HI was no longer required to play a lead role. As the project developed and serious issues arose HI continued behind the scenes to assist.

1. What were the issues that arose with partners during the Project?

Difference in interpretation of definition of Partnership working

Variations to Build Contract of a substantial nature without partnership discussion or consent that impacted business plan and ability to deliver on it.

'Them and Us' culture

Interpretation of Local Government rules and regulations

Personality clashes that resulted in distrust and had major negative impact over months/years.

Lack of acceptance of the professional skills and experience of the HI/HTH Ltd team which has resulted in further public money needing to be spent on the building to make it fit for purpose.

Discussions with HTH Ltd bankers without consent resulted in complete breakdown of the project relationships.

2. How did the Council and its partners seek to resolve the issues ?

Combination of individual meetings, Project Board discussions, emails trails and forms of mediation.

3. How effective were those approaches?

Became considerably less effective over the lifetime of the project as relationships and trust broke down.

Project Board ineffective as a forum to resolve differences.

4. What lessons can be learnt to improve future working relationships with partners.

There needs to be an understanding from both private and public sectors of the very real differences between the two. The Chair of Community Builders Fund flagged the issue at the first joint meeting and this should have been taken more seriously.

Genuine, consistent and effective Senior Officer involvement in community engagement may help with this understanding.

Issues such as a personality clash must be confronted swiftly to avoid project impact.

HI holds files relating to this project that extend to paperwork 14” tall and over 2,000 emails. Contained within these emails and files is significant evidence to back the points made above. It is impossible to include all relevant information within the set 2 x A4 sides limit. We welcome this Independent Scrutiny Review and happily volunteer to make these files available on a strictly confidential basis if it would assist. In addition we would welcome the opportunity to answer questions at the Panel hearing.

Morag Norgan

Chairman Hitchin Initiative

Nb. Email address and telephone number has been redacted.