

Submission for Scrutiny review of the Hitchin Town Hall/North Hertfordshire District Museum

Submission from Mrs Patricia Cowley, ex Portfolio holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs. Portfolio Holder responsible for the project from the in 2011 until May 2013 when I was elected Vice Chairman, and for continuity remained on the Project Board for the Project until I left the Council in May 2015.

1 What were the issues which arose with partners during the project?

The Council had already started to progress plans and financing for the project when a Community group, which later evolved as Hitchin Town Hall Ltd (HTHL) approached the council to be involved and to bring funding to the project, This proposal was agreed by Full Council.

From that point on, although the Council had appointed an architect who had produced plans which had been agreed and passed and a budget approved for the project, to combine the Town Hall with a new Museum for the District, HTHL asked for changes on a regular basis irrespective of the additional costs and possible delays to the project, seemingly ignoring the provisions in the Development Agreement which they had signed up to.

When, through discussions between the Council officers, myself and HTHL representatives were unable to resolve the issues surrounding these requests/demands, mainly due to budgetary implications, HTHL leaders would resort to declaring that if their requests/demands were not included it was a "deal breaker".

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

The Council sought to resolve the issues through first of all discussion and reasoning and then referring HTHL to the Development Agreement which had been negotiated with them and signed by them. There were clear procedures set out in the Development Agreement to resolve any issues arising.

HTHL appeared to ignore the procedures laid out in the Development Agreement and on several occasions issued statements to the local press detailing in a critical manner that their demands were not being met by the Council.

The Development Agreement clearly stated that statements to the press throughout the project would be agreed by both parties before being released. This did not happen.

3 How effective were those approaches?

On the whole approaches made by the Council to achieve agreement, mainly on variations requested by HTHL were not successful and the actions of HTHL proved very difficult for the Council to counter and progress.

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



Although it was clearly set out in the Development Agreement at the start of the partnership what the working relationship would be, this maybe needs to be more emphasised and focussed upon at the beginning.

It would also be advisable that a newly-elected Member of the Council should not be involved in leading the Community Group. Council policies and procedures are not always familiar to anyone who has not worked in the public sector before and this was quite apparent when negotiating with a group essentially made up of local business people. Any Member of the Council principally involved with a Community Group working with the Council could at sometime during the project find themselves with a conflict of interest.



NB: Signature has been redacted