

Scrutiny Review: Hitchin Town Hall / North Herts Museum Project

Initial Evidence from: Hitchin Forum & The Hitchin Society 14.6.19

Our main concerns throughout this project had to do with NHDC's lack of transparency and their habit of taking fundamental decisions about Hitchin Town Hall and Hitchin Museum before consulting the public, thus making their 'consultations' essentially worthless.

1. **Hitchin Museum:** From the beginning we attended the meetings of the Council's *Arts, Museums & Heritage Forum* (established in January 2006) and their *Arts, Museums & Heritage Strategy Working Party* (started in October 2006). The TOR for the latter were to set out a common vision for Arts, Museums & Heritage services and a comprehensive strategy for service delivery, including specific priorities and actions. We went into these meetings, optimistic that we could influence the future of Hitchin Museum. However, it appeared that the Council was obfuscating; these meetings were about the context to decisions, not the decisions themselves.

1.2 It soon became clear that there was no future for Hitchin Museum. **The fundamental decision to close Hitchin Museum had already been taken by the Council in 2005**, following a Fundamental Museums Service Review in 2004.

1.3 In May 2006 community groups did a joint presentation to NHDC's Performance, Audit & Review Committee pointing out that we were strong supporters of the museum service and understood the need to plan for the future, but adding that what the Council was proposing for its Museum services was deeply flawed. We asked that all reasonable options be considered, including retaining, refurbishing and extending Hitchin Museum, and we presented a high quality option for doing so. We pointed out that the museum service review **must have public support to succeed** and that we were the Council's partners as well as constituents. (A copy of this presentation is available on request.)

1.4 This was to no avail and NHDC ploughed on relentlessly.

2. **Hitchin Town Hall (HTH):** In February 2006 NHDC took a budget decision to transfer HTH to a third party operator without considering the far-reaching implications involved in such a fundamental step change in the provision of a very significant, indeed, unique public facility. Background to this was a project to use HTH as a community engagement centre which did not proceed because NHDC was unable to come forward with the necessary capital monies and so EEDA funding of £200K obtained by Hitchin Town Centre Initiative (HTCI) was lost.

2.1 In June 2007 a special meeting of the Hitchin Committee recommended to Cabinet that a decision to award a lease for the management of HTH must be deferred and Hitchin Committee must be consulted on any future award of a lease. In July the Committee recommended the tender process for disposal by long lease of HTH be cancelled with immediate effect and as a matter of urgency Cabinet should establish a Community Forum to prepare a plan for the improvement and future management of HTH. This was ignored by Cabinet who approved their own preferred and reserve operators for the future management of HTH. In July it took a member of the public to highlight serious irregularities and risks of the shortlisted operators, using merely Google and Companies House public information.

2.2 In July the Scrutiny Committee 'called in' the Cabinet decision and, as well as many other groups, Hitchin Forum wrote to Scrutiny members saying the Council was deciding without regard to the facts or the public (letter available on request). The Scrutiny verdict was that public consultation was insufficient, the business expertise of other potential interested organisations was ignored and Hitchin Committee was not kept informed throughout the process.

2.3 In October 2007 Cabinet terminated negotiations with the bidders for management of HTH and said an alternative approach for a management partnership with HTCI should be explored, including an application to the Community Assets Fund for refurbishment funding.

2.4 In January 2009 a budget gap was identified and Cabinet agreed that they could deal with two problems at once: install the new North Herts Museum in the Mountford Hall of the refurbished HTH, thereby closing both Hitchin and Letchworth museums. The report says that *the short time available . . . means consultation with stakeholders and a very detailed operational and financial analysis have not been carried out.*

2.5 Again, a very far-reaching decision was taken without proper consideration of its implications for the community which NHDC should have been serving. Throughout 2009 this decision was opposed by Hitchin community groups, its business community, the Hitchin and Letchworth Committees and the Scrutiny Committee. In December 2009 a presentation to Full Council by Hitchin community, business and arts groups (copy available on request) asked for a pause, saying HTH was an essential community facility for a town the size of Hitchin and proposing a community partnership to run it. Council agreed and in February 2010 commissioned a full feasibility study.

2.6 In October 2010 English Heritage listed Hitchin Town Hall, again at the instigation of a member of the community. In November 2010 Council agreed to take forward the scheme outlined by Hitchin Initiative (successor to HTCI), incorporating 14 Brand Street, the Workman's Hall and the Gymnasium as the North Herts Museum and the Mountford Hall as the Community Facility.

2.7 Hitchin Forum and The Hitchin Society supported Hitchin Initiative and its successor in the project, Hitchin Town Hall Ltd (HTH Ltd), in their efforts to create a fantastic community facility for Hitchin and district. HTH Ltd and HI worked diligently and professionally despite what we understand to have been serious difficulties with NHDC. These are for Hitchin Initiative and HTH Ltd to raise with the review.

2.8 On balance, it is very regrettable that what was potentially a fantastic community/council partnership has gone so awry, but it is clear to us that the really far-reaching decisions were never properly discussed or agreement obtained with the community prior to Council adoption. This seems to us a democratic deficit that needs to be addressed.

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