

**Keep Hitchin Special**  
(Caring for our Historic Market Town)  
***NB. Address redacted.***

1. Issues that arose with Partners during the Project

a) The Council and its Architect Neal Charlton of Buttress failed to observe the fact that the Mountford Hall was of a significant architectural merit that it proposed to develop it into a museum with a mezzanine floor etc. without adequate consultation. An Options Appraisal dated 4<sup>th</sup> September 2009 refers. Because of deep concern Keep Hitchin Special had no option but to submit an application to English Heritage on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2009 requesting it be listed. This was confirmed by EH on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009 and agreed as a Grade II on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2010. Time and unnecessary expenditure was incurred by the Council. A detailed report by Scott Wilson completing an assessment of a Hall Retained and Gym Retained scheme was presented in October 2010 only then was the Mountford Hall together with the Lucas Room retained.

b) Instruction was given by the council to protect the Mountford Hall floor and its adjusting mechanism. During the period of reconstruction by Borrás. When all directors of HTHL were banned from site, a fork lift truck carrying composite concrete blocks and cement was driven onto the floor subsequently damaging the mechanism for the sprung floor adjustment. These blocks were used to divide the stage, another controversial decision which was contrary to that contracted. Authorised access was given to me to witness this incident.

c) The Council obtained planning approval and built on land it did not own. Re: 14 & 15 Brand Street.

d) An established right of way was removed during the redevelopment.

e) A company called Light Brigade Media Corporation Ltd contracted to work on the museum went into administration in March 2016 part way through this work creating a lot of disruption. This might not have happened had proper credit checking been done on this company before offering a contract. This seemed to be a problem with previous contractors and something the council should be more aware of.

f) Work was being completed without listed building consent. This consent was being requested retrospectively ref. 14/01633/1LB. Changes to the original plans were being made without consultation with HTHL and subsequently the local community groups. The council takes a very dim view on retrospective planning applications and we were surprised that it was ok for them to do it themselves.

g) Project reports by the Strategic Director Customer Services were made without a written report, this happened at Hitchin Committee where these were hand written (back of a fag packet) during the Hitchin Town Talk and then presented at Hitchin Committee. This did not give Councillors a fair opportunity to make comment.

h) The public were concerned about the expenditure as the project proceeded particularly the amount of 106 monies allocated to other projects which were diverted

to pay for extra expenditure on the District Museum. Maybe this was in Part II papers but not something that should have been hidden from public view.

j) The quality of workmanship when refurbishing the Mountford Hall was very poor and this can be seen now that paint is flaking off the walls carpets lifting etc. As a listed building this deserved a little more care and consideration than was awarded it. There was a public outcry at the loss of the back of the stage and changing rooms which prevents use for pantomimes and quality stage productions. This we understand is still not used for museum storage because of problems with damp.

k) This particular project was managed by the Strategic Director of Customer Services who appeared to find it difficult to communicate effectively with local community groups preferring to work independently ignoring any constructive comment from individuals or groups to the detriment of the project. This is a real pity because projects working in partnership with the council recently have been productive and a pleasure to deal with

2 How did the Council and its Partners seek to resolve these issues?

We would appreciate comment on this.

3 How effective were these approaches?

Several of these concerns were raised at various Council Committees in Public Participation where there is no feedback.

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

Be very careful what is contained within any development agreements. "Partner beware"

That recently communication has improved and it has been a pleasure to deal with the councils officers when working on a joint project e.g. leasing and refurbishment of Walsworth Community Centre etc.

Chris Parker  
Chairman

13<sup>th</sup> June 2019

***NB. Telephone Number has been redacted.***