

NHDC Scrutiny Review: North Herts Museum Project Statement of John Robinson, former Strategic Director Customer Services & Project Executive for NHDC

I was employed by NHDC between 2000 and 2016 initially as Head of Community Planning and subsequently as Director of Corporate Services and Strategic Director Customer Services from 2002. At that time I assumed responsibility for both Hitchin Town Hall and NHDC Museum Service and 'Project Executive' for the Museum & Town Hall project. This statement covers my experience until my departure in September 2016. Prior to joining NHDC I was employed since 1977 in a variety of roles in Local Government specialising in sports, recreation and community development, most latterly as Head of Community Development and Advice Services for Peterborough City Council.

Background, Project Management & Partnership Working - The Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum project was one of the most ambitious and complex projects undertaken by NHDC in recent years. In addition to the complexities of the construction project in a Grade 2 listed building, it was acknowledged from the outset that the decision to consolidate two museums into one and create a sustainable future for Hitchin Town Hall was likely to be contentious.

The project and the associated Council decision making process is extensively documented, as are the processes for 'partner' engagement and much of this can be viewed at <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/museums/hitchin-town-hall-museum-proposals> As far as is possible the key stages in the project are illustrated in the timeline detailed in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Key Stages & Assessment of Partnership Performance

	Aug 2005	Nov 2010	Dec 2010	Jan 2011	Dec 2012 Apr 2013	Dec 2013 to March 2015	Jan 2016 Sept 2016
RIBA Stage	0 A	1 B	2 C	3 D	4 E, F, G	5 K	7 L
	Strategic Definition	Preparation & Brief	Concept Design	Developed Design	Technical Design	Construction	Handover & Close Out
Development Agreement (DA)	Community management of Town Hall explored		Detailed development of community management model	First DA signed Oct 2012		Second DA Signed September 2013	
Key Stages	Cabinet agreed Museum Fundamental Service Review (FSR)	Cabinet agreed to the construction of the Museum in Mountford Hall Jan 2009	Council approves first Community Group proposal Feb 2010	Council agrees alternative Community Group proposal Nov 2011		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hitchin Town Hall Ltd's (HTH Ltd) funders withdraw HTH Ltd claim breach by Council – Feb 14 Council claim breach by HTH Ltd – Jul 14 	HTH Finance Ltd obtained control of 14/15 Brand Street
Partnership Performance	Community Organisations		Community Group represented by Hitchin Initiative		Hitchin Town Hall Ltd March 2012		HTH Finance Ltd

Green Good
Amber
Red Poor

The project was managed using the standard PRINCE methodology which was successfully utilised by the Council for major projects of this scale. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRINCE2> Key political, community and technical interests were comprehensively involved in formal and informal process, so far as was practicable, from the outset, for example:

- NHDC Museum FSR from 2004 until 2005: A statutory service review under the terms of the Local Government Act 1999 directly involved partners from Hertfordshire County Council and the East of England Museums, Libraries & Archives Council. The review also established the NH Arts, Museum and Heritage (AMH) Forum and consulted via the Council's Citizens Panel to directly involve partners and the community at large in the development of an AMH Strategy for the district, including the proposed new Museum.
- The development of capacity and collaborative working with the 'Community Alliance' facilitated by Hitchin Initiative to develop a business case for a community managed facility and NHDC managed museum at the Hitchin Town Hall site.
- The direct and detailed involvement of HTH Ltd, the Council's political leadership and funders in the Town Hall and Museum project Board and associated technical groups to agree and implement the complex Development Agreement (DA) between it and the Council from 2012.

The project engaged a wide range of partners many with vehemently held views however, the principal partnership with HTH Ltd is examined in two key aspects. The 'partnership environment' was particularly complex and widespread use of social and other media made this even more so. This is illustrated at <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/files/partnershipspdf>

Partnership & Trust - As the project developed from agreeing a strategic direction through to a contractual relationship to finance, construct and manage a direct public service the nature of partnership working also changed. At the outset relations with partners were good and characterised by a strong common purpose and resolve, but as the initial 'Community Alliance' transferred responsibility to a limited company/registered charity and entered into a contractual DA, the competing pressures to control costs, ensure financial sustainability and satisfy community aspirations caused the principle relationship with HTH Ltd to become increasingly commercial in nature and fraught.

Having entered in to a formal DA in October 2012, HTH Ltd immediately and unilaterally decided to abandon this in favour of a more ambitious development. Failure to accept this would have entailed HTH Ltd deserting the project accruing significant additional costs to the Council. In agreeing the revised development level of financial and other risks to the Council increased substantially.

As negotiations to finalise the second DA proceeded HTH Ltd sought a number of changes to the scheme but seemed unable to adopt robust organisational arrangements to meet its obligations or engage constructively with local groups.

Increasingly HTH Ltd sought to influence public and political opinion to its favour in a contractual dispute whilst the Council, mindful it's financial and exposure and legal obligations sought to progress resolution as envisaged in the DA. In the end neither approach was successful as HTH Ltd's funders withdrew finance because of breaches in its funding agreement and HTH Ltd refused to engage with NHDC in the formal DA resolution provisions.

Future working relationships with partners should therefore ensure that attempts to influence public/political opinion to the financial benefit of those partners (for example through lease terms) are precluded more effectively.

Although the DA foresaw the need to ensure HTH Ltd embedded public accountability and involvement in its governance, HTH Ltd refused to provide evidence this was achieved. Consideration should therefore be given to whether alternative and enforceable arrangements could be used to ensure the public benefit of similar projects is not jeopardised.

Councillors- Councillors roles as both elected representatives and partners, was reflected in their detailed involvement in the project from the outset; through Full Council, Cabinet and Hitchin Area Committee in particular. These roles appeared to be made difficult as a result of the inclusion of a HTH Ltd Director in the (then) ruling Conservative group as a prospective candidate and latterly as a Councillor. Difficulties in managing apparent and real conflicts of interest were frequently presented to officers involved in the project and senior officers were subjected to a series of threats and complaints in an apparent attempt to intimidate and benefit HTH Ltd's commercial interests.

The potential for conflicts of interest for Councillors acting as Trustees or Directors etc for local groups needs to be managed carefully. Existing processes appear unwieldy and inadequate in preventing individuals exerting influence or behaving inappropriately.

Councillors more generally were frequently lobbied by community activists often based on misleading media and other statements by HTH Ltd. This appeared to be a purposeful attempt to influence the Council's decision making to the benefit of HTH Ltd. As a result regular written reports, briefings and MIS notes were produced to keep Councillors fully informed. This approach appears to have been partly successful if resource draining.

NB: Address, Email address and telephone number had been redacted.