

Hitchin Town Talk Notes – Tuesday 15th November 2011
6.30 pm – 7.15pm at Hitchin Boys School, Grammar School Walk,
Hitchin, SG5 1JB

The Chair, Councillor Judi Billing, welcomed everybody to the Town Talk.

The next Town Talk will take place on Tuesday 10th January, 2012 at Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place, Hitchin, SG 5 2PG - 6.30pm – 7.15pm.

Issues raised

- Existing Hitchin Museum
- Dark Alleys
- Dangerous Wall
- Churchgate
- Post Office Site
- Railings and footpath Smithson Recreation
- Car Park Charing

Car Park Charging

A speaker said that nationally Town Centre footfall is decreasing, although in Hitchin this situation is not quite as bad as nationally, but any increase in car park charging could tip the balance between the number of current visitors and future visitors. Hitchin Bid/Initiative would welcome engagement on car park charging as this has been lacking at present.

Figures are lacking in respect of current level of usage but also clarification is needed as to what increase in car park charging has been proposed in the next budget, including whether Sunday and evening charges will be made.

Hitchin Bid/Initiative would like to investigate a reduction at peak times or some possible charging for on street parking as well as off street parking. Figures are required to enable them to do this.

Another speaker seconded all these comments and mentioned that people do pay for parking one way or another and that he understood it would cost no more to patrol car parks at evenings and weekends. He also added cars will go somewhere else. A free parking period would increase footfall.

A speaker said that if the thinking behind the car parking charges was increasing the money received it wouldn't work as increased charges would just drive people away.

At the end of the detailed discussion it was agreed that a meeting would be arranged with the relevant officers.

Councillor Bernard Lovewell (Housing and Environmental Health Portfolio) stated that car parks are a major asset for the Council and it has to be a fine balancing act between increasing charges or raising money from elsewhere.

It was requested that the figures for how much revenue car parks bring to the Council will be on the Town Talk notes and it was emphasised that car parking was fundamental to the vitality of the Town and engagement is important.

ACTION

Car Parks revenue attached

Existing Hitchin Museum

A Speaker said that the current Hitchin Art Exhibition at the Museum was excellent but the Club have been told that this will be the last time they will be able to exhibit at the Museum. The speaker also understood that both Letchworth and Hitchin Museums will be closed in 2012. He raised concerns that both close at the same time.

John Robinson, Strategic Director of Customer Services, said that work needs to be done to establish ownership and catalogue artefacts and it is planned that both Museums will close following school Summer 2012 to enable this to take place.

A plan of these closures have been devised and will be available on the Council website although John stressed that this was provisional and subject to Council's approval on the Development Agreement with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd.

A speaker asked what were the plans for the Hitchin Museum building and was told that this was part of the Council's asset plan and is actively considered by the Council Asset Management group. There are a range of possibilities being worked through but nothing has been decided.

He was asked if the transfer of the asset to a Community Management group had been thought of he said that yes that was a possibility, although the building is constrained by existing covenants, conservation etc.

He was asked if the Moss family had been contacted regarding a possible disposal and he was assured they have or would be. He was also asked can the public be consulted before any decision is made and not after. It was also mentioned that a Town Talk would be a possible place for such a consultation.

Dark Alley

A speaker mentioned the alley between York Road and Lancaster Avenue and that young children need to use it and as it was dark they were reluctant to. The alley requires lighting. A number of speakers mentioned other alleys with similar lighting issues but also lack of maintenance.

These would be investigated.
York Road – Lancaster Avenue
Coopers Yard – Tilehouse Street
Bearton Green – Bearton Road

ACTION – discussions taking place with Herts Highways

Dangerous Wall

In the car park behind Barclays there is a dangerous wall. Action will be taken to establish ownership and attend to the wall.

ACTION – investigation taking place as to who owns this wall.

Smithson Recreation Ground

A speaker mentioned the new railings at Smithson recreation ground and that as they are not in the same place as the previous ones there is nothing to hang on to especially if the path is slippery.

The Community Development Officer said that there was going to a site meeting at the recreation ground in December and that if the speaker gave her name and contact details she would be invited to take part in this visit.

Churchgate/Post Office

A speaker said that the Update Report before Hitchin Area Committee did not amount to anything. No substantial progress has been made and asked the question is any progress being made? He requested the Councillors to ask the question 'where is the new timetable?'

Questions also raised re the anomalies.

Anthony Roche, Assistant Solicitor at North Herts District Council, replied to the points raised.

Another speaker raised the Post Office site and that it had been identified as a key development site for Hitchin in 2004 but that in the 7 years since no planning brief has been prepared and anybody bidding for the site would have to estimate what the site could be used for. He added there was a case, with the increasing population, for a Town Centre leisure facility or arts centre.

Louise Symes, Projects Manager, said that a Planning Brief will be prepared and that a Scoping document has been prepared and there will be full public consultation. The speaker raised time concerns and asked why the Council appeared to be acting slowly and thought more urgency was needed.

Louise added that Andy Beavan, Local Development Framework Manager, was leading on the planning brief.

She added that the Town Centre Strategy was quite clear in that it states the planning authority will work with the landowner and possible new owner to feed into the process.

A speaker mentioned Hammersmatch project and the Project Manager for the scheme was available to answer the questions raised re the project.

Additional

Content of a letter sent to Colin Dunham by Anthony Roche, NHDC Senior Solicitor on 22nd November 2011, in reply to a letter from Colin requesting clarification re the discussion that took place.

Dear Mr Dunham

CHURCHGATE SUB-CONTRACTORS

Thank you for your letter of 17 November 2011.

At Town Talk on 15 November I was asked about Simons Developments being able to appoint their construction arm to the project. I confirmed under the terms of the Development Agreement that they were, subject to proving the cost was competitive. A further safeguard I referred to was a need for any sub-contracts over the value of £50,000 to be tendered for. As you know I made clear that the £50,000 figure was my recollection and I am happy for the opportunity to confirm the position to you.

Schedule 2 of the Development Agreement, available on the NHDC website or at Hitchin Library, sets out the relevant clauses which I have paraphrased below.

Clause 3.1 sets out that subject to clause 3.4 (explained below) and any contractor appointed prior to 19 March 2010 (the date of the contract) any building contract,

appointment of professional team or sub-contractor where the estimated cost is above £50,000 Simons must demonstrate value for money by either

1. Obtaining 3 tenders; or
2. Any other method to be agreed with the Council.

Clause 3.4 is the clause that allows Simons Developments to appoint Simons Construction. There are provisions built into this clause to protect the Council, which require the contract sum to be competitive and Simons to supply all information the Council reasonably requires to satisfy itself that the sum is competitive.

Essentially what the clauses above mean is the following:-

- Simons Developments are able to appoint Simons Construction but the price must be shown to be competitive
- Other than Simons Construction or anyone appointed during the procurement process (eg the architects tp bennett) any contractors over the value of £50,000 must be tendered
- If there is a good reason why 3 tenders is not possible, for example the work requires a particular specialism or quality which is not widely available, Simons and the Council must agree another method to confirm the price is competitive

I confirm that these safeguards were explained to Members in the reports presented to Full Council on 25 February 2010.