

Town Talk Notes– Tuesday 22nd September 2009 – 6.15 pm – 7.15pm @ Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place, Hitchin.

The Chair, Councillor Judi Billing, welcomed everybody to the Town Talk. She also welcomed Nicholas Moss, Chief Inspector Geoff Camp, Inspector Simon Tabert, Councillor Tricia Cowley, John Robinson, Strategic Director of Customer Services NHDC and Leigh Allen, Town Ranger. The next Town Talk, before a Hitchin Area Committee meeting, will be on Tuesday 17th November, 2009 at Benslow Music Trust, Benslow Lane, Hitchin.

Issues raised by members of the public present

Local Justice – Nicholas Moss
Tree Trimming
Town Hall/Museum
Museum
Police
Difficulties of cyclist on roads
Lorries on Ickleford Road/Bearton Road

Local Justice

Nicholas Moss gave a presentation about the role of the local magistracy. He explained that this was part of a national initiative to promote public confidence in the criminal justice system. The purpose of his presentation was to:

- explain to members of the public how the justice system operates;
- listen to their concerns about the effects of crime;
- encourage them to become involved by, for example, applying to become magistrates or being willing to attend court as witnesses, when necessary.
- encourage them to suggest possible sites for compulsory unpaid work for offenders (Community Payback).

It was explained that being a magistrate was a voluntary role which required court attendance for a minimum of 26 sittings in court per year. Those in paid employment were entitled by law to time off for court duties. Those in certain jobs could not become magistrates. They included police officers and traffic wardens. Once confirmed as a magistrate you are subject to 3 yearly appraisals and undergo continual training. The minimum age of entry is 18 years, with retirement at 70. There are 90-plus magistrates in North Hertfordshire.

Magistrates are there to dispense justice according to the judicial oath, which included the phrase "To do right by all manner of people". They deal with varied matters, such a theft, violence, motoring offences, family matters, and collection of fines. Stevenage Magistrates' Court alone deals with approximately 20,000 cases per year. The figure country wide is almost 2 million.

He said that magistrates dealt with around 95 per cent of the case that came before courts, with only the most serious ones going to the Crown Court.

Her answered questions, but reminded the audience that, except for youth and family cases, courts were open to the public and they could see for themselves how they worked. They could also look up magistrates at www.direct.gov.uk/magistrates.

Museum

A member of the public asked about the future of Hitchin Museum building. John Robinson said that he was not aware of any recent valuation but that he will check with the Council Asset Management and include an update with the notes.

Action – John to check with the Council Asset Management regarding valuing assets in specific the Hitchin Museum.

Action Update - All local authorities, including the District Council, are required to carry out period revaluations of their property assets. The last valuation was done in 2004 and the next is due for this financial year.

Another member of the public said he understood that Hitchin Museum was not fit for purpose in that it was not DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant and also not large enough for the North Herts collection. There is he added a lift in the Library and wondered why the two buildings couldn't share the lift, which was suggested in a presentation to Cabinet in 2007. Also mentioned that Hitchin Museum works closely with The British Schools and could the proposal weaken the link?

It was also mentioned that there was a covenant over the Museum and why has there been no one talking to HCC (Herts County Council) re the Library.

It was said that HCC are represented on the Projects Board and there has been formal application made to HCC on three occasions asking whether they wished to collaborate.

Town Hall

It was stated that there has not been a full public consultation nor a public meeting so four Hitchin organisations, Hitchin Initiative, Keep Hitchin Special, Hitchin Society and Hitchin Forum are holding a public meeting on Thursday 15th October 7pm – 8.30pm at the Town Hall, for the general public to give their views and these to be given to Cabinet on the 20th of October. It will also be the last chance for people to sign the petition.

Two questions were asked a) why was the Council charging?

b) why is the Council not doing this themselves?

Note – The public meeting was cancelled on 5th October, 2009.

John Robinson stated that the timescale had not afforded this but that the Facilities Working Group is open to everybody. It is not advertised as a public meeting as such but the meetings that have been held were open to the public.

It was also stated that in the Consultant's Report, Options discussed were A B C and D but before Hitchin Committee was Option E which is a mismatch (distillation) of all the Options.

The speaker was not certain whether this proposal which has been put forward was made rather hurriedly and it doesn't appear that they have listened very carefully to the Facilities Working Group.

John Robinson said that in 'Option E', decision was based on Options C and D and they have tried to accommodate all the comments made.

The speaker added that is the Council aware of the deep public dislike of the proposal?

It was also mentioned that there was a rumour that Thomas Bellamy House was being negotiated for purchase by Hitchin Christian Centre. John Robinson said that he had no knowledge of this but would check and include and update in the notes.

Update on Thomas Bellamy House

NHDC have not had any discussions with the tenants of Thomas Bellamy House about selling the building. In early 2009 a local community organisation approached NHDC indicating that they would like to buy Thomas Bellamy House. NHDC has not made any decision to sell the building and no formal proposals have been made by the community organisation or anyone else to NHDC.

A speaker said that irrespective of the Museum, closing the Town Hall is appalling and it has been allowed to deteriorate and activities have moved from the Gym to Christchurch because of it's bad state. There is nowhere else for users to go. The public are deeply annoyed by the proposal and it is not good enough that there has been no public meeting. Options could have been explored further at a public meeting. Why not the Town Hall and Museum working together. A terrible mistake to lose the Town Hall. Not all of the Museum needs to be together. There is frustration that there are lots of options that haven't been explored. Advertising of public meetings very poor. Public need meetings.

Hitchin Committee will send views to Scrutiny and Cabinet.

Police

Inspector Simon Tabert said that with regard to cycling on pavements, Officers have been tasked to deal with it in a robust way. If it is a child then it is explained to them why not to do it. If it is an adult then a fixed penalty ticket is given to persistent offenders.

It was also stated that the Town Rangers are also telling people in town to come off their bikes and are keeping a tally.

As regards lorries in Bearton Road he believes that the vehicles sat nav brings them onto Bearton Road. There have been two prosecutions this year. He added that it is very important that the public give clear reports with a record of registration numbers, time and date.

Officers have been out in various areas Hitchin with mobile speed signs and also number plate recognition and there have been cross border rural patrols.

There was a very successful Environmental Action Day in Highbury Ward and a clear up of The Orchard and Anvil site. Additional resources are still required for Friday/Saturday nights with anti social behaviour. He added though all crime was down.

Difficulties of Cyclists on roads

It was stated that with the state of the roads cycling was dangerous. No cycle lanes to talk of or cycle paths.

Councillor David Billing said that, through the Hitchin Transport Plan, the Consultants have fed back the results and 100 priorities have been identified including improving cycle and pedestrian facilities in the Town.

He will insist that these priorities are taken seriously and that a proper plan for pedestrian/cycling be in place and that through an Action Plan will get delivered. An Action Plan is being drafted and will be consulted on by the public after a meeting in November.

It was also mentioned that the timing of the lights in Brand Street appear to have been changed so cyclists and pedestrian have longer to wait. Also at the Bedford Road pedestrian crossing, 20 to 30 vehicles pass before they lights change to red.

Tree Trimming

A questioner raised the issue of tree trimming which had been brought up at the last Town Talk. It was stated that the Action Update was in the Town Talk Notes from that meeting.