



Arts, Museums & Heritage Forum Newsletter

23 June 2011

North Herts. Museum and Community Facility

On 8 June a meeting of the Arts, Museums & Heritage Forum was held in the Lucas Room at Hitchin Town Hall, attended by around twenty people. This newsletter summarises that meeting, and gives an update on progress since then.

John Robinson, Strategic Director of Customer Services, welcomed everyone to the meeting. He explained that since confirmation of the grant/loan award from the Community Builders Fund (now known as Futurebuilders England Ltd ("FBE")) on 10th February 2011 significant progress has been made. The main issues covered were:

- **The Development Agreement:** Final clarification of the grant/loan conditions with FBE is required to ensure these are incorporated in to the overall Development Agreement; the binding agreement containing the principal features of construction and payment arrangements, management arrangements and leases/agreements from NHDC and the Trust to Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. Work on this complex agreement is progressing.
- **Company and governance structure of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd:** David Leal-Bennett, Finance Director of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. explained that this is still being decided, but that there are already three community directors (Ken Chapman, Rosemary Read and Brent Smith). There will probably be four professional directors, all chosen for their relevant professional skills - not only for the benefit of the people of Hitchin but also to ensure that the business is sufficiently solvent to repay its £850K liabilities. Currently there are two professional directors, David Leal-Bennett and Stephen Pike. It is likely that a voting mechanism for the community directors will be agreed in due course, but in essence the people of Hitchin will agree who serves as Community Directors, probably at the AGM. This accords with the Council's expectations to ensure that the long-term interests of local people are represented by a 'substantial minority'.
- **Procurement of the 'Supervising Architect'** We had hoped that this would be completed by the end of May, but following extensive research and external legal advice, it has been concluded that the procurement work will have to be advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU). This will add a minimum of 160 days to the overall project timetable. A detailed report will be presented to Cabinet on 26th July and then to Council on 8th September 2011.
- **VAT.** The grant/loan conditions and Development Agreement create a complex VAT environment. The Council is aiming to minimise VAT liability for both itself and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd., and is in discussions with HMRC over this. Specialist VAT advice has been commissioned and is being used to provide feedback on the Development Agreement.

Following the presentation, there were various questions, which fell into the following main areas:



- **Closure of the Town Hall.**

Q. When will the Town Hall close, and how will you inform users?

A. It will now close in July 2012, at the end of the summer term. This will allow termly hirers to schedule their classes more easily. The Council does not want to close the Town Hall earlier than necessary, but needs to be ready for contractors to come on site as soon as possible.

Q. Will there be information about the closure dates at the museums?

A. Yes there will. Staff on the reception desks at the museum have a Q & A sheet to help them answer any questions from members of the public.

- Since the meeting Town Hall users have all been sent letters giving a provisional closure date of 23 July 2012.

- **Closure of the museums**

Q. Will closure of the museums also be delayed?

A. Yes; we would like to keep the museums open as long as possible, but we recognise that there is a huge amount of behind-the-scenes work involved in moving out of two old museums buildings into one new one. Much of this work cannot be done while the museums are open to the public, for logistical and security reasons.

- Since the meeting it has been decided that Letchworth Museum will provisionally close to the public on 30 June 2012. Hitchin Museum will probably close to the public the following summer.

- **Appointment of the architect**

Q. How will the architect be chosen; just on price?

A. No, there will be a 50/50 weighting between price and quality. It is important that the Council appoints the best firm for the job rather than just the cheapest.

Q. Why is NHDC employing one architect to oversee the whole project, and sub-contract the different specialists (e.g. electrical and mechanical engineers, structural surveyors), rather than appoint these directly?

A. The Council has found from experience that with complex building projects of this kind, there is less risk in employing one main firm. If there are problems with any sub-contracted specialist, it is up to the lead consulting architect, rather than NHDC, to sort things out.

- Since then the architectural work has been advertised via the OJEU process, and firms are already expressing an interest. A Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) has been developed and the answers given to the questionnaire will enable the Council to short-list five to ten architectural firms, who will be invited in mid-August to tender for the work.

- **Fund-raising**

Q. Would NHDC be supportive of fund-raising by Hitchin Town Hall Ltd.?

A. Certainly; the Council would be extremely supportive of all fund-raising. Directors of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. reminded the meeting of all the pro-bono work done so far on this project, estimated at between £80,000 and £100,000, and pointed out that no Director takes any salary or expenses from Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. They suggested that the initial fund-raising be on a relatively small-scale, perhaps by encouraging people to become members of Hitchin Initiative in the first instance.

If you have any questions regarding this newsletter, please contact Ros Allwood, Cultural Services Manager on 01462 435197 or ros.allwood@north-herts.gov.uk