

# NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

## MINUTES

**Meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City on Thursday, 11 February 2010 at 7.00pm**

**PRESENT:** *Councillors David Miller (Chairman), David Levett (Vice-Chairman), Mrs A.G. Ashley, A. Bardett, D.J. Barnard, Liz Beardwell, David Billing, Judi Billing, John Bishop, Clare Body, John Booth, Tom Brindley, Paul Clark, Tricia Cowley, J.M. Cunningham, Jane Gray, Fiona Hill, T.W. Hone, A.F. Hunter, R.E. Inwood, David Kearns, Lorna Kercher, Joan Kirby, Marilyn Kirkland, I.J. Knighton, Paul Marment, H.M. Marshall, Alan Millard, M.R.M. Muir, Elliot Needham, Mrs L.A. Needham, Lawrence Oliver, Michael Paterson, Deepak Sangha, R.L. Shakespeare-Smith, F.J. Smith, Martin Stears-Handscomb, Mrs C.P.A. Strong, R.A.C. Thake, M.E. Weeks and A.D. Young.*

**IN ATTENDANCE:** *Chief Executive, Strategic Director of Customer Services, Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance, Head of Community and Cultural Services, Cultural Services Manager, Acting Corporate Legal Manager, Democratic Services Manager and Senior Committee and Member Services Officer.*

**ALSO PRESENT:** *Approximately 40 members of the public.*

### 69. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P.C.W. Burt, Lee Downie, Gary Grindal, Sal Jarvis, S.K. Jarvis and Bernard Lovewell.

### 70. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

No additional business was presented for consideration by the Council.

### 71. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### (1) Long Service Award

The Chairman announced that John Ironside had worked at North Hertfordshire District Council since 1985 in a variety of roles.

The Chairman advised that, from 1985 to 2001, John was the Planning Control Manager, handling planning applications across North Hertfordshire. In 2001, John took the role of WA1(M) Manager, where he had responsibility for leading the Council's approach to the proposed west of the A1(M) development. John presented evidence to the Public Inquiry that lasted from January 2004 to October 2004, which involved the most eminent barristers in the Country.

The Chairman stated that, since 2004, John had led the Council's response to housing growth - with the East of England Plan review and major proposals around Luton. John was currently Strategic Planning and Enterprise Manager, responsible for:

- The Local Development Framework;
- Major development sites;
- Town Centres;
- Projects;
- Transport Policy.

The Chairman advised Members that John had been unable to attend this Council meeting, but he understood that he would be presented with his award at the Cabinet meeting to be held on 30 March 2010.

The Chairman conveyed congratulations to John on his achievements over the last 25 years at NHDC and wished him all the best for the future.

It was moved by the Chairman, seconded by Councillor F.J. Smith, and

**RESOLVED:** That the Council places on record its sincere thanks to John Ironside for his long and valuable service to local government in North Hertfordshire.

**(2) Declarations of Interest**

The Chairman reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.

**72. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

[Prior to the consideration of public participation, the following interests were declared by members in respect of Item 5: Hitchin Town Hall/ Museum – Community Group Proposal:

- (a) Councillors I.J. Knighton and Mrs C.P.A. Strong - declared that they were Members of the Cabinet Sub-Committee (Hitchin Town Hall Trust) and that they would be considering the matter with an open mind;
- (b) Councillor Martin Stears-Handscorn – a personal interest, due to his role with the Black Squirrel Credit Union, who were mentioned in the report;
- (c) Councillor R.L. Shakespeare-Smith - a personal interest, due to his role on the Management Board of the Black Squirrel Credit Union, who were mentioned in the report;
- (d) Councillor Paul Clark – a personal interest, due to his roles with the Caldicott Centre and Hitchin Rugby Club, both of whom were mentioned in the report;
- (e) Councillor Judi Billing – a personal interest, in view of her role as Chairman of the Hitchin Committee, appointed as the Council's representative to the Hitchin Initiative Steering Committee;
- (f) Councillors L.W. Oliver and R.A.C. Thake – personal interests, due their roles on the Management Board of Hitchin Rugby Club, who were mentioned in the report.]
- (i) Mr Chris Parker – “Keep Hitchin Special”

Mr Parker advised that he would be speaking on behalf of “Keep Hitchin Special” and all those who had been supportive over the last a 6 years in fighting to retain Hitchin Town Hall for community use. Hopefully, gone were the “Save Our Town Hall” banners, television cameras, radio and press interviews and demonstrations.

Mr Parker stated that the hope was that the whole of the Town Hall could have been retained for community use, with an improved and extended Hitchin Museum at a cost of less than £2M on its present site, leaving over £1.5M to be spent on other projects, but regrettably this did not seem possible. “Keep Hitchin Special” also had no idea as to the future of the current museum site.

Mr Parker considered that, at long last, there was a compromise solution presented by the Hitchin Initiative which appeared to be acceptable to the Council officers, District Councillors, community groups and organisations locally, which would see the historic architecture of the main hall with its sprung dance floor, stage, balcony etc and the Lucas Room preserved and retained for future generations, together with an updated District Museum occupying the original Gymnasium and Workmen's Hall.

Mr Parker commented that this was not a scheme that had happened overnight - it was one where many hours, including those by volunteers, had been spent in working up the revised proposals before the Council. There would unfortunately be some people and groups that may be disappointed because it had not been possible to accommodate them all, but it would provide a scheme to ensure it met the needs of the majority of the local community, provided a museum which was DDA compliant, fit

for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, was within the Council's budget and was able to provide the revenue savings that the District Council was looking for to protect its taxpayers.

Mr Parker hoped that the Council would support the enhanced scheme that was proposed by the Hitchin Initiative, developed through discussion with Cabinet Members and officers, and which was supported by a large number of community and business organisations locally.

Mr Parker also hoped that the goodwill that had been developed by effective communication between the Council and the Hitchin Initiative would continue on other projects being proposed in Hitchin.

Mr Parker hoped for a positive vote, taking into consideration the proposed amendment from Councillor Tricia Cowley that had been circulated at the meeting.

The Chairman thanked Mr Parker for his presentation.

(ii) Mr Brian Foreman – Hitchin resident

Mr Foreman was speaking as a resident of Hitchin for over 45 years, and that during that time had enjoyed many events in the Museum and Town Hall, as indeed had many others. Whatever changes were made needed to be for the better, within the financial constraints of a recession. It had become a matter of what was possible and what was acceptable.

Mr Foreman advised that the Museum was still a marvellous place to visit, even though it had been declared as not fit for purpose. It was an attractive historic building with a well maintained interior, bringing in a considerable number of visitors. The location next to the library was beneficial and it could be extended to advantage at a reasonable cost. Whilst this was possible, it may not be acceptable as it would not create a new museum if this was considered to be a high priority. The original community concept was in favour of retaining a museum and town hall complex on separate sites.

Mr Foreman considered that the Town Hall had always been a feasible location for a museum as most buildings could be adapted for alternative use. However, it did require a feasibility study and also, at some stage, a business plan. This option remained possible, but was not considered acceptable to the 5,080 residents who had signed the petition objecting to this proposal. Neither did it receive support from the Hitchin and Letchworth Area Committees.

Mr Foreman considered that the proposal in the Feasibility Study would seriously compromise the architectural integrity of the building, hence the recent application to English Heritage to gain a national listing. Mr Foreman provided some further examples as to the history attached to the Hitchin Town Hall.

Mr Foreman stated that the events which used the Main Hall were public meetings (including Council meetings), shows, festivals, dances, weddings, etc. There was provision for 480 standing or 458 seated in the Main Hall, should the 88 in the gallery be included. A decision to use this hall for a museum would be extremely unpopular with local residents.

Mr Foreman referred to the alternative scheme to use the gymnasium instead of the Main Hall for a museum, spearheaded by Hitchin Initiative on behalf of the community, which could well be both a possible and acceptable compromise. If this proposal was not considered feasible, then Mr Foreman asked that consideration be given to a further proposal to extend the museum on its present site.

The Chairman thanked Mr foreman for his presentation.

(iii) Mr John Creswell – Development Trust Association

Mr Creswell advised that he was a representative of the Development Trust Association, who had supported the Hitchin Initiative in bringing forward the Community Group's alternative proposal for Hitchin Town Hall. The Development

Trust Association was a national organisation which had extensive experience in helping many organisations in the operation of community buildings.

Mr Creswell stated that, should it be agreed that the Community Group's proposal be progressed to feasibility stage, then the Trust Association would continue its support to Hitchin Initiative throughout this process. The Trust would also assist in the application to the Community Builders Fund for the necessary finance, and would further assist in the formulation of a business plan for the proposal.

The Chairman thanked Mr Creswell for his presentation.

(iv) Mr Keith Hoskins – Hitchin Initiative

Mr Hoskins referred to Annex A on page 13 of the report, which set out the enhanced scheme proposal submitted by the Community Group. He re-iterated:

- (1) The Group's support for NHDC's vision to create a much improved museum;
- (2) The Group's wish to provide better access and facilities than the original (gymnasium) scheme; and
- (3) The Group's wish to retain the main hall – the Mountford Hall - for community use.

Mr Hoskins advised that there had been huge community support to the alternative proposal, and he thanked the community groups for their unprecedented leap of faith in the Hitchin Initiative's ability to produce a scheme without being fully able to engage with them until the last minute.

Mr Hoskins extending his thanks to Members, Officers and Neal Charlton (the Council's consultant) for their assistance towards developing the plans.

Mr Hoskins also thanked the Development Trust Association (DTA) for their support in making the proposal and their promised ongoing support should this proposal be approved, particularly to John Creswell for invaluable advice and expertise. He advised that continued consultancy for the Community groups would be funded by the DTA and the groups themselves in working up the scheme feasibility study and the business plan necessary to make an application to the Community Builders Fund, which would be the immediate next step.

The Chairman thanked Mr Hoskins for his presentation.

(v) Mr David Rice – Hitchin Art Club

Mr Rice explained that the Hitchin Art Club had used Hitchin Museum and Art Gallery for their exhibitions for almost 70 years. The relatively recent and most significant decision by Council to transfer the Hitchin and District Museum into the Town Hall had, not surprisingly, generated great public outcry. The measure of this was reflected by a gigantic petition of over 5,000 signatures.

Mr Rice believed that the Museum and Library were ideally located on their island site at the end natural flow-path through Hitchin town centre. This path started at the British Schools Museum, continued through the Market, alongside St. Mary's Church up through Market Place and the Arcade and so on. The co-existence of Museum and Library (and incidentally the Physic Garden) was very obvious. They fed from one another, as well as feeding the town's needs. Separation would not only damage all parties, but more so that of the Museum attendance - and thereby significantly impair education.

Mr Rice advised that the existing Museum and Library were joined by a flat roof area which could be regarded as unused exhibition space. His proposal to build on this feature with a Super Gallery not only united the building aesthetically, but with some rear extending gained Museum floor-space from around 300 sq.metres to a massive 800 sq.metres.

Mr Rice stated that the estimated cost of the scheme would be £1.8 million (as per the breakdown tabled at the meeting), which was around half of that ring-fenced by the Council for its aspirations. He commented that this proposal was obviously the

Art Club's preferred option as, in matters of art, it would be best for them and the town. However, whilst it remained the Art Group's preference, the latest scheme proposed by Community Groups to safeguard the Town Hall had certain attractive features and in the main was infinitely superior to anything seemingly to be imposed by the Council.

The Chairman thanked Mr Rice for his presentation.

### **73. HITCHIN TOWN HALL / MUSEUM – COMMUNITY GROUP PROPOSAL**

The Chairman invited Mr Neal Charlton (the Council's consultant) to explain the major differences between the original scheme and the scheme proposed by the Community Group.

Mr Charlton advised that both schemes were feasible, although varied in build costs (£3.4 million for the original scheme and £3.9 million for the Community Group scheme). If approved, the original scheme could result in a new facility being open by July 2012, but should the Community Group scheme be progressed then this date would be likely to slip back due to the additional work required, such as the application for funding from the Community Builders Fund and the acquisition of 14 Brand Street.

Mr Charlton stated that the major difference between the schemes was that, in opposite to the original scheme, the Community Group proposal sought to retain the Main Hall for community use and use the gymnasium as museum space. He commented that both schemes had an entrance feature on Brand Street, although this would be a more prominent element in the Community Group proposal. Even though the Community Group proposal accommodated less museum floor space than the original proposal, the space was better proportioned and would provide a similar amount of exhibition space.

Mr Charlton commented that the original scheme met the Council's brief, was within estimated timescales and, in planning terms, was relatively straightforward. Against this was the potential loss of community space by virtue of conversion of the main Hall to Museum exhibition space, and the potential listing of the building (although this in itself did not preclude alterations to the building).

Mr Charlton advised that the Community group scheme provided a better frontage to the building and would be able to accommodate a larger number of people for functions in the retained Main Hall. However, this was reliant on the acquisition of 14 Brand Street and the finance from the Community Builders Fund. A robust feasibility study and business plan for this option would also need to be developed.

After Mr Charlton had responded to a number of Member questions, the Chairman thanked him for his presentation.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs (Councillor Tricia Cowley) introduced the report of the Strategic Director of Customer Services. She summarised the major elements of the report, and advised that significantly increased capital expenditure would be required for the Community Group proposal to purchase and demolish the shop to the east of the Town Hall in Brand Street (No. 14). The cost of acquisition has been estimated by the Community Group which, added to the cost of the construction of additional museum accommodation on the cleared site together with other miscellaneous expenditure, would give a total estimated additional capital spend of £800,000, which would be borne by the Group. In revenue income/expenditure terms, most costs were broadly comparable between the two schemes, with the exception of the significantly increased income required in the Community Group scheme to enable repayment of the anticipated loan from the Community Builders Fund.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs commented that, as stated in the report, direct comparison between both schemes was not fully possible unless the Community Group proposal was worked up in greater detail and a full feasibility study undertaken. The broad conclusion of the report was, however, that at their different stages of developments both schemes appeared capable of meeting the Council's policy and financial objectives.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs stated that, should Members wish to proceed with the Community Group option it should be recognised that this would represent an increased risk in terms of the delivery of the project with regard to cost, time and long-term sustainability, although the detailed Feasibility would attempt to quantify and mitigate these factors. Equally, other options were available. Members may wish to proceed with the scheme originally proposed in December 2009, and although this carried a lower level of risk, this would be borne entirely by the Council. Alternatively, Members may wish to instruct officers to report on other alternatives or a fundamental change in the approach and report these at a future meeting.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs considered that it would be appropriate for the Community group proposal to be worked up into a full feasibility study, to enable both schemes to be compared on a level basis.

Accordingly, an amended motion was moved by Councillor Tricia Cowley, and seconded by Councillor Mrs A.G. Ashley, that all of the words in Recommendation 11.1 after "Council is asked to consider this report and" be deleted and replaced with "explore further the Community Group proposal, as detailed in this report, by commissioning a full feasibility study as indicated in Para 6.2, in order to enable a full comparison to the current preferred option and also allow the Community Group to prepare a business plan for the facility and present firm funding proposals. The above to be brought back to Council, via Cabinet, at the first available opportunity after completion of the feasibility study, which is estimated to be 4 months".

During the debate upon the amended motion, a number of Members spoke in support of commissioning a full feasibility study of the Community Group scheme. Members also considered that, when the matter was reported back to Cabinet/Council, both proposals should be fully costed, and should be accompanied by business plans for the facility.

At the conclusion of the debate, and upon the amended motion being put to the vote, it was

**RESOLVED:** That the Community Group proposal, as detailed in the report, be explored further by commissioning a full feasibility study as indicated in Para 6.2, in order to enable a full comparison to the current preferred option and also allow the Community Group to prepare a business plan for the facility and present firm funding proposals. The above to be brought back to Council, via Cabinet, at the first available opportunity after completion of the feasibility study, which is estimated to be 4 months.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To ensure Members receive and understand the professional advice about the suitability of Hitchin Town Hall to be a new Museum, whilst also being able to continue to provide community use facilities in Hitchin town centre.

The meeting closed at 8.40pm.

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Chairman