

ANNEX 2

REPORT TO CABINET: 20 OCTOBER 2009

TITLE OF REPORT: HITCHIN TOWN HALL: MUSEUM FEASIBILITY STUDY OUTCOME

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER SERVICES
PORTFOLIO HOLDER: COUNCILLOR TRICIA COWLEY

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report is to advise members of the outcome of the feasibility study commissioned to consider the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall into a new museum.
- 1.2 The report also seeks to provide additional information to assist Cabinet when considering their recommendation to Council.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 The report contains a recommendation on a key decision which was notified in the Forward Plan in May 2008.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 A Fundamental Service Review of the Museums Service was undertaken during 2005. The results were reported to the 28th July 2005 meeting of the Performance, Audit, & Review Committee of NHDC (PARC) and then the proposed plans were agreed by Cabinet at its August 2005 meeting. These were summarised as follows:

The review group believes that there is an opportunity to make significant changes and reinvest in a Heritage and Culture service. These changes would be to improve the overall quality of service to our community, working in partnership with the other not for profit organisations to deliver a district wide heritage and cultural service. These changes would also address the issues such as the ageing and inadequate buildings, and high annual revenue costs of the existing service.

By using the services resources differently; moving the focus away from just the delivery of a direct service, and investing in empowering and enabling the active voluntary not for profit sector to jointly promote the district's heritage and culture, we can retain a local focus and achieve a significantly enhanced service.

The review group therefore recommends that the three ageing museum buildings (Burymead; Hitchin Museum; and Letchworth Museum) should be closed; to be replaced by one purpose built district wide museum, gallery and community venue located in a town centre. In addition, a new storage, resource and research centre, (probably out of town) should be established.

- 3.2 Subsequent to this a Project Board was established for the development of a business case for the Capital Works projects identified within the improvement plan. The work on developing a business case for a new collections centre was initially prioritised. However, at its meeting on 27th January 2009, Cabinet considered a report of the Heads of Community Development & Cultural Services and Financial Services which provided relevant information on a proposal to change the timescale for the closure of a museum, envisaged in the Museums FSR, in order to provide additional potential

efficiencies to help produce a balanced budget for 2009/10. This report also outlined the work undertaken to look at possible alternative sites and how Hitchin Town Hall site was identified as the preferred option for more detailed study.

At that meeting Cabinet resolved:

- (1) *'That Option 2, as outlined in the report, be adopted and the necessary changes in the implementation plan be made;*
- (2) *That, as part of this strategy, plans for closing Letchworth Museum by 31 March 2011 be agreed;*
- (3) *That this be accompanied by a change in the Capital Programme to accommodate the Museum Service, including the construction of a museum in a refurbished Hitchin Town Hall;*
- (4) *That, in view of the short time available in considering this matter, the Scrutiny Committee be offered the opportunity to scrutinise this decision prior to implementation'.*

Option 2, more fully described in the report referred to here in Background Paper 4. proposed the development of Hitchin Town Hall as a museum for North Herts and the deferral of the completion of a smaller collection centre than originally envisaged in the Service Improvement Plan.

3.3 Following Cabinet's decision, an initial feasibility study was commissioned from Cragg Management Services to establish 'proof of concept' and this paper was subsequently prepared for submission to the Council's Asset Management Group as a necessary stage in securing approval for capital expenditure and to help frame the terms of reference for a comprehensive feasibility study.

3.4 In considering the 'proof of concept' study Scrutiny at its meeting of 18th May recommended to Cabinet:

- (1) *That the Scrutiny Committee recognises the need to improve the Museums Service;*
- (2) *That the Scrutiny Committee expresses concern at the lack of consultation;*
- (3) *That the Museum Collection Service be separated from the public Museum Service and progressed separately;*
- (4) *That future provision for current users of Hitchin Town Hall be addressed;*
- (5) *That all external grant funding opportunities be pursued;*
- (6) *That the need to address the problems of Museums, Hitchin Town Hall and a Museums Collections Service is acknowledged and further feasibility work is undertaken on all of these;*
- (7) *That dialogue with all relevant bodies regarding museums is continued.*

3.5 Following this Cabinet at its meeting of the 19th May resolved:

- (1) That a full feasibility study be commissioned in order to ascertain the suitability or otherwise of the future use of Hitchin Town Hall as a North Hertfordshire Museum;*
- (2) That the recommendations and views of the Scrutiny Committee and the public speakers at the meeting be taken into account as part of the work on the feasibility study.*

3.6 Consideration of the Future Management arrangements for Hitchin Town Hall have been discussed by Cabinet at its meeting on three occasions in 2006, on three occasions in 2007 and two occasions in 2008. The last of these was on 24th June 2008.

Resolved:

- (1) That it be noted that the application to the Community Assets Fund for the Future Management Arrangements for Hitchin Town Hall has been unsuccessful;*
- (2) That further discussions about asset transfer and the longer term future of the Hitchin Town Hall be explored, in collaboration with the Development Trusts Association;*
- (3) That it be noted that, in the event of a further round of asset transfer funding or equivalent being made available, applications will be considered in accordance with notified criteria and timescales;*
- (4) That it be confirmed that, in the event of a successful funding application, the decision on the transfer arrangements for the Hitchin Town Hall be delegated to the Portfolio Holders for Finance and Community Engagement & Rural Affairs;*
- (5) That it be noted that other options for the longer term viability of Hitchin Town Hall will also be explored;*
- (6) That it be noted that progress on the Trust related issues pertaining to the Town Hall are being progressed and that a further report on the outcomes will be submitted to Cabinet later in 2008;*
- (7) That should there be any significant developments in relation to the Future Management Arrangements for Hitchin Town Hall then a report be submitted to the next available Cabinet meeting.*

4. CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 Following Cabinet's agreement work on this feasibility study in line with European procurement rules, was agreed. The Brief for this work set out the need for professional advice in relation to the following issues; structural feasibility; space utilisation efficiency and functionality; consideration of how to maximise existing (or alternative other) community uses of the Town Hall; environmental performance and sustainability; scheme costs; advice on application to the HLF for grant-aid; construction phase health and safety implications; project completion timescale; local planning issues.

- 4.2 The appointed consultancy team, Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams-Architects (BFAWA), have undertaken numerous museums restorations and redevelopments to improve access and re-display galleries. Their recent experience includes the award winning Stockwood Discovery Centre, Luton completed in 2008, The Rotunda, The William Smith Museum of Geology, Scarborough and the Citheroe Castle Museum in Lancashire completed in 2009. Further detail of these and other projects are available on their web site www.bfaw.co.uk.
- 4.3 A Facilities Working Group of stakeholders was formed to give input to this specific project. Membership of the group is open to all. Three meetings of this Group were held and at the last of these, held on 9th September to consider the Hitchin Town Hall Museums Feasibility Study – Options Appraisal Report – 3rd Sept, produced by BFAWA as an interim report to review a number of options for the introduction of a museum into the Hitchin Town Hall building whilst retaining community use. Feedback from the Facilities Working Group related to the four options identified was noted, and this, along with feedback from the staff of the service, was used to allow a ‘preferred’ option to be identified and further developed and costed.
- 4.4 The revised brief was agreed by the Project Executive in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs, to develop an option E, as the ‘preferred option’. This is based primarily on the Floor Plan of Option D but with the following amendments.
- That the Workman’s Hall area is retained as recreational/ community/ educational/ occasional exhibition space, as per Option C. It could be still used for martial arts and dance, but is too small for other sporting activities.
 - Look at a possible sprung floor in the gymnasium/hall
 - Look to include shower facilities in the toilets next to the gymnasium, which already has good kitchen, Cafe and storage access.
 - Not to progress with Shared Surface at front of Museum but to progress Covered Street entrance only.
 - Foyer Area to be considered for more gallery, and toilets here considered for more office space/storage.
 - Upper floors as per option D, but swap Local Study Centre with Education Suite.
 - Roof Garden to reflect/complement current Physic Garden.
 - Keep as much of the building in situ for re-conversion/reuse in future years.
 - Costing information to allow lower cost options of designs- e.g. one lift (loss of Goods lift) rather than two currently shown, in option D etc.
- 4.5 Following these meetings, a refined brief was provided to BFAWA by the Project Executive in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs, to develop an ‘option E’, as a preferred option for further development in line with the full feasibility work required by the brief.
- 4.6 In addition, a report was taken to all of the September/October Area Committee meetings to ensure all Members of the Council were aware of the work being undertaken as part of the feasibility study and the process by which the outcomes of this work would be considered. Referrals from these committees will also be heard at your meeting.
- 4.7 The feasibility study was commissioned to establish if plans to merge the collections of the two existing NHDC museums into this one site was possible. Whilst also significantly improving access to the collections by overcoming the current museum buildings limitations (no access to first floor and multiple floor levels, limited public

toilets and no dedicated education space on site), whilst also retaining community use on this town centre site.

4.8 The BFAWA report has confirmed that it would be feasible to relocate the Museums at Letchworth and Hitchin into Hitchin Town Hall, whilst at the same time allow continued provision of community use to be incorporated into the site.

4.9 The full report is available at appendix 1. The main findings of this study are summarised below:

- The museums specific space available in the plans are in excess of those already available at both existing Museums sites
- In addition the ancillary space (Storage, toilets, and retail and office space) are significantly increased.
- The area identified for specific community use is significant, allowing the retention of the Lucas Room and the Gymnasium for continued hire, following modernisation and improvement. This can include a sprung timber floor in the Gym, acoustic dampening at high level, the removal of column projections to improve the quality of space available, a small area for showers and changing, a new roof terrace and café.
- A dedicated education room will allow greater numbers of school children to visit the museum.
- The plans introduce a lift to allow first floor access and all of the first floor is brought together on to one floor level.
- All the Museums staff can be accommodated on this site allowing further efficiencies to be achieved in the re-provision of the Museums Service Storage project.
- Conversion of the Hitchin Town Hall can be undertaken with minimum intervention into the existing building overall, and the new structure designed to cause minimum damage to the existing building.
- Significant work and investment is planned on Electrical and Mechanical systems on the site to ensure compliance with regulations relating to energy conservation, and support the required usage of the building.
- Health & safety risk relating to the proposed project have been identified and some suggestions for mitigation have been indicated. Further work in this area will be required as the project progresses.
- Total cost (Excl Vat) of this project is said to be £3.4M, of which £1.03M relates to fit out costs.
- If Council took the decision to progress with the project in December 2009, the earliest the new building could be available would be April 2012.

4.10 The findings of BFAWA also need to be considered alongside the observations raised by Scrutiny and Area Committees and the feedback of the Facilities Working Group relating to this project. These have been consolidated into themes and information related to them provided under the question headings below.

What account would be taken of existing usage of Hitchin Town Hall?

4.11 Whilst there is no wish to displace any groups, it is clear that some displacement would occur if a Museum was created. Although some of the activities could be accommodated and there is a willingness to assist with this process.

4.12 The feasibility study has allowed plans relating to the proposed retention of community use spaces/rooms to be tested. The preferred option retains the Gym and Lucas Room

for Community use and this now allows the impact on these plans on the current regular users of the hall to be better understood and meaningful consultation with users relating to their needs. This provides a valuable opportunity to liaise with these groups to look at refining and informing the more detailed plans at the next stage of this project.

- 4.13 Table 1 below show the regular hirer hours for each of the primary rooms of Hitchin Town Hall, and seeks to set out the impact of the proposal on current users.-

Table 1: Summary Weekly Regular Hired Hours Hitchin Town Hall

	Current usage in hours			Retained usage in hours		
	Main Hall	Lucas Room	Gym	Main Hall (in Gym)	Lucas Room	Gym
Monday	0	2	4.5		2	4.5
Tuesday	3	3	3.5	* 3	3	3.5
Wednesday	4	1	3		1	3
Thursday	4	5	3	*4	5	3
Friday	Monthly Hire ~	3	1.5		3	1.5
Total	11	14	15.5	7	14	15.5

~ Last Friday of every month c.1.5 hours per week not included in total

* Timing of events does not clash with Gym and group sizes suggest groups can be accommodated in that room subject to agreement with the groups.

Note: This data excludes current casual use.

Table 2: Hitchin Town Hall Overall Utilisation Figures

Year	Hire Hours	Overall Average Facility Utilisation	No of Hire Bookings	
			Regular	Event
<u>2007/08</u>	4632.0	26.5%	No figs	No figs
<u>2008/09</u>	3666.4	21.0%	837	116

Of the total weekly regular 40.5 hours of hire, 29.5 hours- 73% can be accommodated in the same spaces (Gym & Lucas Room). A further 7 hours of activity may also be accommodated in the smaller gymnasium space (approximately 2/3 of main hall space) if the groups felt this appropriate, making it possible to retain in the region of 90% of the regular usage.

- 4.14 In January 2008 a Hitchin Town Hall Football Report was produced listing weekly football by hirer for the whole of 2007 to assist with an external funding bid. This provided the following information on usage of Hitchin Town Hall over this period, to help us understand the potential impact on users of this facility.

- Total annual footfall was estimated as 59,387 over the year
- 30 bookings were attended by in excess of 200 people.
- The majority of these were private parties and weddings, which are considered to be commercial hires. The remainder were:
 - A National Child Birth Trust event
 - A Beer Festival
 - A Blood donor session
 - A Spiritualist event
 - A Schools concert
 - Rhythms of the World events

- 4.15 Some hirings use a combination of rooms and the main hall for large scale less frequent events such as the monthly Celiidhs (see table 1), including the cloakroom and bar. The preferred plans for this site do include the provision of café and kitchen facilities to support similar community usage of the Gym albeit with smaller capacity.
- 4.16 There are a number of alternative venues in Hitchin where larger scale events are currently possible. This is referred to in paragraph 4.45 of this report.
- 4.17 The St Johns Ambulance service use a specific room in Hitchin Town Hall for 1.5 hours a week. In the preferred option this space is designated office space but a space equal in size on the floor below has been nominated as an education room and could, subject to agreement, serve both uses.

At what stage would external bodies be consulted?

- 4.18 The Museums Fundamental Service Review was undertaken in 2005, and this work included input from a variety of Stakeholder organisations from external bodies, including a representative of the East of England (Museums, Libraries & Archive Council (MLA) and Hertfordshire County Council.
- 4.19 The work plan arising from this review and the subsequent Arts, Museums and Heritage Strategy have been managed by a Project Board, with the help and support of the Arts, Museum & Heritage Forum who encompass a wide variety of interested external groups. However, when the work plan changed to prioritise the work from a collection Centre to the new Museum, a Facilities Working Group was established with membership and attendance open to any individual or organisation with an interest.
- 4.20 If this project is approved, a major part of the work involved will relate to developing and implementing a specific Communications Plan. This will include plans to consultation amongst others the current users of Hitchin Town Hall, the Museums service, Stakeholders involved in the Arts, Museums and Heritage Forum, interested local organisations, Hitchin residents and members of the public across North Herts.
- 4.21 The opportunity to share sites/services with other bodies in either the new Museum or Collection Centre project has been discussed with interested parties. Several of the voluntary museums have indicated interest in a joint provision of storage, but no interest has been indicated regarding joint provision of a new Museum. The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation have indicated its preference to establish its own Museum for the Town, potentially sited in Letchworth Town Hall.

Whether consideration had been given to future usage of the existing museum building?

- 4.22 Until the buildings are confirmed as surplus to requirements, detailed work relating to their future usage will not be commissioned. However we are aware of a restrictive covenant on Hitchin Museum and that both this and the Letchworth Museums building are important to their local communities.
- 4.23 As both existing Museum buildings are co-located next Libraries, Herts County Council have been formally approached on three occasions to establish if there are any shared imperative or plans for changes at these sites which can come together for the benefit of both services. None have been identified currently.

Whether Lottery Heritage Grants would form part of the funding?

- 4.24 It has always been the intention to look at the possibility of gaining external funding to support the investment plans of NHDC in its Museums Service. It is believed that a funding bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund towards the cost of Fit out may be eligible but building costs would not be unless a much longer development timetable was adopted.

Whether the decisions being referred to Cabinet could be taken at a future time?

- 4.25 The Museums Service FSR in 2005 suggested changes should be made to this service to address important issues such as the ageing and inadequate buildings being used by the service which was seen to be limiting the benefit of the service, and resulted in the relatively high annual revenue costs. Projects to achieve the required service improvements and costs savings were agreed and a Project Board established to implement this.
- 4.26 Subsequent to this, the finances of the Council have come under even greater pressure with the economic downturn and pressure on public spending which means the Council is now faced with some difficult decisions requiring reductions in spending and possible reductions in services, in order to achieve the required balanced budget in future years.
- 4.27 Plans to reduce spending in the Museums have already been agreed with Cabinet resolving to close Letchworth Museum by 31 March 2011. Despite undertaking the feasibility work relating to Hitchin Town Hall's conversion to become the new Museum as quickly as reasonably possible, there is already likely to be a delay in achieving the savings associated with this closure as the new museum would not be available for collection transfer until at the earliest April 2012 and approximately 20 weeks later to follow OJEU (Official Journal of the European Union) procedures.
- 4.28 If Cabinet decided to delay or not recommend this scheme to Council then the length of time when revenue saving identified from this investment cannot be realised will be extended further.
- 4.29 The Museums FSR found that the buildings in which the Museums service operate have already been recognised as not fit for purpose and investment on a single town centre site agreed to limit the need for significant capital expenditure to bring facilities up to acceptable standards.

- 4.30 Hitchin Town Hall also continues to age and to be unsuitable for modern usage, so a delay in decision will block any significant investment in this building too, which cannot be sustained indefinitely.
- 4.31 NHDC has needed to invest considerable sums in keeping Hitchin Town Hall available for public use in recent years, the figures are set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Hitchin Town Hall: Cyclical & Response Maintenance Costs 2003-2009

Year	Capital spend	Repair & Maintenance
2003/4	£50,983.16	Nil
2004/5	£45,554.93	£11,524.19
2005/6	£18,945.68	£11,609.64
2006/7	£11,229.56	£9,883.73
2007/8	Nil	£11,377.05
2008/9	Nil	£15,245.58
Grand Total	£126,713.33	£59,640.19

- 4.32 The decision to consider the transfer of Hitchin Town Hall to a third party operator was made by Council at its meeting on 9th February 2006, with the budget saving described as:

“Transfer of Hitchin Town Hall to third party with no residual (direct) costs to the Council”. in keeping with the Council’s policy that:

“Where appropriate, the Council aspires to move to the voluntary management for all of its community centres, village halls and public halls”.

- 4.33 A number of options to do this have been considered since this date, including market testing. The latest attempt was made in 2007/08, when the Council considered the disposal by long lease to Hitchin Town Hall to a preferred third party operator, Hitchin Town Centre Initiative (HTCI). More specifically, Cabinet at its 29th January 2008 meeting agreed proposals to submit a joint application by the Council and Hitchin Town Centre Initiative for capital funding from the Community Asset Fund (CAF) which was prepared and submitted by the deadline date 15th November 2007. The application progressed from the initial to the detailed assessment stage in January 2008, but unfortunately this was not ultimately successful. The investment identified as necessary at this time in Hitchin Town Hall was £930,000.
- 4.34 Cabinet confirmed that the longer term running of Hitchin Town Hall must be on a sustainable business basis and a detailed Business Plan to enable the HTCI to operate successfully was to be developed. The CAF decision letter explained that, when assessed against the relevant criteria listed in the programme guidance notes, an offer of a grant could not be made because the Big Lottery Fund’s England Committee felt that the evidence provided did not demonstrate the need for the project as well as other applications it had considered.

- 4.35 HTCI interest in possible management of Hitchin Town Hall has been long established. During the autumn of 2005, HTCI was successful in securing a bursary from the Market Towns Asset Development Programme, funded through EEDA (East of England Development Agency), for the purpose of undertaking a feasibility study as to whether it could take on the management of the hall. Subsequently HTCI commissioned an independent consultant to prepare a Business plan on the opportunities presented in taking on the management of the Hitchin Town Hall. Officers also met with HTCI to set out clearly the Council expectations in terms of lease arrangements. No funding from NHDC for the necessary capital works was identified so this approach could not be progressed. But Cabinet agreed to adopt a multi-strand approach to the future planning for Hitchin Town Hall, and expressed its wish for HTCI to retain an interest in the longer term future development of Hitchin Town Hall as part of the wider regeneration of the town centre and its associated activities.
- 4.36 The Service & Financial Planning process (2005/06) approved the saving of the running costs of the Council managing this facility, £58,000 in 2007/08 and thereafter. In light of the report to Cabinet highlighting that a final decision on the application for external funding as part of this joint working not being made until 31st March 2008, provision was made to continue the revenue support for the Town Hall for the full financial year 2008/09 . The Working Budget for covering the cost of operating Hitchin Town Hall in 2009/2010 has increased to £74,760 per annum.

Alternative options do not appear to have been considered?

- 4.37 The Museums FSR identified that a new town centre museum should be established. It was careful not to be too prescriptive as to where and what it should include, as significant investment needs to be informed by a range of factors including NHDC's ability to pay for it. However the lack of compliance with DDA requirements, poor public toilet provision and limited ability to cater for school parties are seen as key limitations on the service, to be rectified when the new museum was established.
- 4.38 This also set a saving target in order that the council's discretionary spend can be brought more in line with authorities of similar size and be sustainable. The target was set at £125,000 reduction in the annual service budget. Officers considered efficiencies in building operating costs and removal of duplication of staffing (two museums sites moving to one) would deliver the majority of this saving. To date £20,000 has been delivered. A table summarising the estimated cost reductions appears at 6.3.
- 4.39 A table top exercise relating to possible town centre buildings locations in Council ownership was undertaken on behalf of the Project Board and Hitchin Town Hall was identified as the favoured option as, in addition to the two ageing Museums buildings, it too had been identified as being high cost and in need of significant investment to modernise it. This information was reported to Cabinet - see paragraph 3.2 of this report - and to Scrutiny at its meeting on 18th May 2009.
- 4.40 If the capital identified for use on Museums investment were to be spent on the Hitchin Town Hall site a further revenue saving of approximately £43,000 per annum would also be possible. It would also negate the need for additional unbudgeted capital spend on the fabric of the Hitchin Town Hall site.
- 4.41 With a time limit set for closure of Letchworth Museum of March 2011, and no funding in place for the operation of Hitchin Town Hall on an on-going basis, the request to Cabinet to consider the feasibility of Hitchin Town Hall site in detail was made, as it was considered as a possible solution. However it is recognised that compromises with

regards to the facilities available at the Town Hall for community use would be required if it was to be used primarily as a Museum.

4.42 To this end a detailed feasibility study, looking at the impact of the Museums Service needs and aspirations against those of the community when looking at the current hall and possible space available, was commissioned to help members with their decision.

4.43 Although several other town centre sites have been promoted by various North Hertfordshire groups, the costs of carrying out detailed feasibility studies on these would not be affordable. By way of illustration, in excess of £30,000 has been spent on consultancy fees for this feasibility study to date in addition to significant officer time.

Any option that removes the main hall from community use should not be supported.

4.44 As part of the investigation into the future use of Hitchin Town Hall, a desk top analysis was undertaken to establish the extent and nature of the community facilities (35 in total) within Hitchin (3000m radius of the Hitchin Town Hall), provided by a variety of private, public and voluntary sector organisations, and to gain a view of usage levels of these facilities, this work was reported to Cabinet at its 26 June 2007 meeting, key findings included:-

- Usage of the Town Hall in core times at between 34%-41% of capacity, with a broad split between 70% community and 30% private/commercial.
- It is likely that some activities currently taking place at Hitchin Town Hall could not be relocated elsewhere.
- The analysis identified a range of different community buildings within Hitchin urban area and that there is surplus capacity at these other venues, i.e. That these also were not operating at full capacity. This suggests that there is an over capacity of general community provision for hire, and that some rationalisation could take place.
- There is strong community expectation and aspirations that the Town Hall should continue to be used for general community purposes, as it is the only building of its type in the town.

4.45 Paragraph 4.15 of this report refers to the January 2008, Hitchin Town Hall Footfall Report which set out some key information relating to the likely frequency and usage of the main hall for the large scale events which are likely to be displaced in the current preferred option plans. This shows that large scale events – those whose bookings indicated attendance by more than 200 people accounted for only 30 such bookings in 2007. The majority of these related to commercial/private bookings for parties and weddings, there were 6 events not falling into this category.

- Rhythms of the World (now relocated to Hitchin Priory)
- National Child Birth Trust event
- Beer Festival
- Blood donor session
- Spiritualist event
- Schools concert

4.46 This current Feasibility Study indicates (as set out in paragraph 4.13 of this report) it will be possible to retain a large majority of the existing groups who use this facility on a regular basis. However, there are no options put forward which allow the required use of the building for a Museum and also allow full retention of the main hall, which,

although it has some regular usage, is predominantly used for events. However, the Preferred Option retains the Gym/Workman's hall roughly 2/3rd of the size of the main one, with café and kitchen facilities. So, dependent upon the specific needs of these events there may be a possibility of some of these being retained. In addition with the significantly enhanced quality of the space available following the proposed investment at Hitchin Town Hall it would be reasonable to assume an increase in interest in using the community space on this site, and potential for suitable events to be also be operated within the areas of the building designated for Museum usage.

- 4.47 Officers are aware of significant community concern typified by the many signatures on the petition relating to the proposals to convert this site, and the suggested "large scale" loss of community use of Hitchin Town Hall. However, as is evidenced by the plans for the Preferred Options put forward as part of the Feasibility Study, this is not in fact the case.

What will the impact be on Letchworth following the closure of the museum

- 4.48 The Feasibility Study has includes an indicative timetable for the proposed works. As a result, Members should be aware that Cabinet's previous decision to close Letchworth museum by 31st March 2011 would bear additional and unbudgeted costs which now need to be quantified in line with the outline programme of works suggested by the Feasibility Study.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Cabinet has responsibility for developing the strategy of the Council for leisure, sports, recreation and the arts. Any strategic decision relating to the museums and halls falls within its jurisdiction.
- 5.2 Cabinet additionally has overall responsibility for implementing Council policy and service delivery to the public so, taken together with its strategic role, it can endorse a decision for early closure of the Letchworth Museum. However, as this decision has budget implications it is necessary for Cabinet to refer this decision for approval by Council (Schedule 4 Functions and Responsibilities Regulations 2000).
- 5.3 Under the terms of the conveyance (which passed the gymnasium within the Hitchin Town Hall to the former Hitchin UDC) it states that any future use of the gymnasium must be for use as a gym *or for other purposes mentioned in s6(3) Museums and Gymnasiums Act 1891* and also for any other (charitable) purpose for the benefit of the North Herts District. The Museums and Gymnasiums Act 1891 has been replaced by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976. Broadly, there are powers in these two Acts for local authorities to provide recreational facilities, museums and art galleries. The trusts relating to Hitchin Town Hall are therefore ideally suited for its use as a museum. The report refers to certain parts of Hitchin Town Hall which includes the Trust property, and in considering the tenants and users of Hitchin Town Hall is also considering the Trust's tenants/users.
- 5.4 The future of any property subject to the Trust outlined in paragraph 5.3 above will be subject to consideration by the Cabinet Sub-Committee (Hitchin Town Hall Trust). The Council is the Trustee, however the Cabinet Sub-Committee has been constituted to act on behalf of the Council to consider all matters in connection with the future use, operation and management of the Trust property. Its role is to act exclusively in the best interests of the Trust. Clear separation of the role of the Sub-Committee to

consider the Trust property and the role of Cabinet to consider the remainder of the property must be maintained.

- 5.5 There is a delineation issue relating to the Trust property boundary within Hitchin Town Hall which needs to be resolved prior to the Trust being registered with the Land Registry and Charity Commission. Resolution of the boundary issue may require the approval of the Charity Commission. The site management of the Property must be segregated between the Trust and the Council, including in terms of income and expenditure. If it is to be used as a single site the consent of the Charity Commission will be required.
- 5.6 The procurement of a contractor to undertake any works arising from this project will need to comply with the Council's Contract Procurement Rules and EU procurement rules. The project cost is estimated to be under but near to the existing European threshold. The thresholds are published bi-annually, the next set will be on 1st January 2010. However the trend in the last 4 years has been a steady reduction in the thresholds, so officers are recommending that additional time to follow OJEU procedures are built into the timetable.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The scheme cost in the capital programme is £3.5m (inclusive of a Resource Centre), included within this is provision for professional fees relating to appraisal, design and tender stages. Approval for these stages is in place for 2009/10, the timetabling of this funding will be reviewed in line with the feasibility report, if Council approval to progress is achieved.
- 6.2 Museums Fundamental Service Review suggested a £125,000 savings target in the annual revenue cost of the service. These proposals will allow this savings to be achieved within this service area. In addition with significant community usage being able to be retained at the Hitchin Town Hall site it is expected that many regular hirers of the Lucas Room and Gym can continue to be accommodated, and income from this and savings from having museums staff on site to administer and operate the building for community use a further cost saving of £43,000 per annum is estimated.
- 6.3 Table 4 sets out a summary of the estimated efficiencies below:

Table 4: Hitchin Town Hall Museum Proposal: Estimated Revenue Efficiencies

Efficiencies	£,000
Museums Efficiencies	
Staffing	£62,330 *
Buildings	£62,730
Town Hall	
Staffing	£31,000
Income retained	£12,000
Total	£168,060

* Included £20,000 savings already achieved.

- 6.4 Hitchin Town Hall has been identified as needing significant investment to modernise and refurbish it in the region of £930,000 when last reviewed in 2007, however no funding to do this has been identified.
- 6.5 As a result of this proposals both the existing Letchworth Museums, Hitchin Museums Buildings will be declared surplus to requirement. Covenants exist on both buildings which will restrict opportunities for their reuse.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Currently there are no immediate Human Resources implications arising from this planning stage. If these proposals are progressed, detailed discussions relating to the impact of these plans on staff will be required to take place at the earliest opportunity.
- 7.2 The Museum FSR Service Improvement Plan was specifically designed to improve accessibility to Museum facilities and in particular to achieve compliance with the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act. Upper floors of Hitchin Museums, Letchworth Museums and Hitchin Town Hall are all inaccessible to those unable to negotiate stairs, whether due to a disability or their circumstances, such as families with young children.

8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 8.1 Scrutiny Committee have expressed an interest in this work and so a draft of this report was considered at their meeting on 13th October 2009 meeting.
- 8.2 Consultation has taken place with the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs.
- 8.3 A Facilities Working Group, which is open to members of the public and representatives of local groups, has been established to help inform the development of this Feasibility Study. This group has met on three occasions, with the most recent meeting being used to consider the Options Appraisal report here shown at Background Paper 1, and to feed in comments to allow Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams Architects (who are undertaking the works on behalf of the Council) to refine the possibilities for the building design ahead of more detailed works required by the Feasibility Study. Notes providing a summary of the topics discussed at these meetings are produced and published on the website at http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/index/leisure_and_culture/art_museums_and_heritage/art_museums_and_heritage_forum.htm
- 8.4 Opponents of the proposals to convert Hitchin Town Hall into a new museum have collected a petition. Interest groups in the town, including Hitchin Society, Hitchin Forum and Keep Hitchin Special, have promoted this cause and collected supporting signatures. However, Members are reminded of the suggestion made by petitioners that a 'large scale' of community use would be lost as detailed in paragraph 4.48. A public meeting promoted by these groups for October 15th has now been postponed.
- 8.5 Speculation about continued community interest in operating the Hitchin Town Hall building as a community managed venue has been followed up by a formal letter requesting additional information from Hitchin Initiative who are said to be the interested party. Officers have met with HTCI and confirmed that they currently have no

new plans relating to their management of Hitchin Town Hall to put forward the Council. However they have indicated a continued interest in seeing Hitchin Town Hall retained as a community venue.

- 8.6 HCC Library Service have also been formally approached on three occasions about the impact of the proposed changes to the NHDC Museum service on these other important community facilities. Feedback suggests that in their opinion their libraries are undersized, but given the current economic climate, any capital bids for expansion are probably unlikely to be considered.
- 8.7 The Hertfordshire Museums Development Officer and the East of England Museums, Libraries and Archives Council were consulted as part of the North Herts Museums and Galleries Fundamental service review in 2005, from which recommendations relating to large scale service change and investment were made and accepted by this authority. Their professional views will once again be sort to inform the development of more detailed plans.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the findings set out in the Feasibility Study and this report be considered by Cabinet.
- 9.2 That Cabinet consider whether it wishes to recommend to Council that the financial and other resources necessary to progress this project are put in place.
- 9.3 That subject this the financial impact of delaying the closure of Letchworth Museum to coincide with the plans to open the new museum be quantified.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To ensure Members receive and understand the professional advise 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.
- 10.2 To ensure that consideration is given to the broader consequences of the decisions relating to this project.
- 10.3 In order that this project can be managed efficiently, in line with agreed project management methodologies to ensure wide community involvement in the detailed plans for this new public facility, and provide good value for money from the Councils' investment.
- 10.4 Until this is resolve the future operation of Hitchin Town Hall by NHDC or other parties cannot be finalised.

11. CONTACT OFFICERS

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12. APPENDICES

- 12.1 Annex 1 - Hitchin Town Hall Museums Feasibility Study - October 2009 (previously circulated)

13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 Hitchin Town Hall Museums Feasibility - Options Appraisal Report, 3rd September 2009
- 13.2 Report to Cabinet 23rd August 2005 on the Findings of the Review of the North Herts Museums Services.
- 13.3 Draft Collections Centre Business Case submitted to the Museums Project Board, 5th March 2008.
- 13.4 Report to Cabinet 27th January 2009 on the Future of Museums Services.
- 13.5 Cragg Management Services report on the possible relocation of North Hertfordshire Museums to Hitchin Town Hall- Annex 2, Cabinet 19th May 2009