

PLEASE NOTE

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- You may also report issues to your local ward Councillor (contact details are on the NHDC website)

Present-

- Cllr Gary Grindal (chair)
- Cllr Helen Oliver
- Cllr Terry Hone (also representing Herts County Council and LGCHF Board)
- Cllr Daniel Allen
- Cllr Adem Ruggiero- Cakir
- Cllr David Levett
- Cllr Sue Ngwala
- Claire Morgan (notes) – Community Engagement Team Leader

The Chair, Councillor Gary Grindal, welcomed everybody to the Town Talk and asked the Councillors present to introduce themselves to the audience.

Cllr GG explained that Members wanted to know what the Community wished to see for the future of Letchworth Town Centre. He handed over to Cllr HO who explained the format for the session.

The group took 15 minutes for the audience to write down their ideas on post-it notes and put these on the flip chart sheets at the back of the room. There were 4 suggested headings but people could put any ideas on the sheets.

The headings were:

1. Health and Well-being
2. Green Issues
3. Footfall
4. Small Businesses

(These sheets will have been collated and are currently being analysed to target more specific issues at future meetings)

This session was followed by half an hour Q&A Discussion

Issued raised this session

1. Town Centre Rents - Graham Taylor

GT expressed the opinion that Letchworth didn't need both NHDC and the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (LGCHF). He explained that the LGCHF is the landlord for the business he runs in Eastcheap and he felt that the rent was very high. He explained that he understood that in Welwyn Garden City the Foundation who set up the town (equivalent to the Heritage Foundation) gave all their property to the local authority and he feels this should happen in Letchworth.

Cllr TH responded that the all the profit the LGCHF make on rents is used towards charitable causes and subsidies to local services such as the Theatre/Cinema, Community Transport Scheme, Ernest Gardiner Day Centre, Standalone Farm and the Art Gallery.

Cllr SN, added that she had spoken to many of the local small business owners and many of them struggle with paying rents

Mrs Sweenie Gunasekera also commented that she was alarmed that the shops are closing down in the town centre because they are affected by high rents.

2. Business Rates

Jack Philbin – Garden Square Shopping Centre Manager asked whether NHDC had any influence over setting the level of business rates.

Cllr DL explained that Business Rates are set by Central Government and NHDC have no control over how much the rates are set at. NHDC only get to keep 00.8p on each business.

3. Cllr GG asked Cllr HO if she was able to feed back on some of the comments / themes that had come out of the earlier (post-it note) exercise.

Cllr HO responded that some of the themes emerging were:-

Parking > NHDC are currently looking at Parking Strategies for the Town Centre

Business Rates > NHDC will be feeding back to Central Government on the level of business rates

Plastic Free> support for ethical shopping and making Letchworth an ethical destination for shoppers.

Health> Lots of support for a Health Hub

4. Town Centre Offer - Deborah Leedham

DL explained that she found if she needed to buy clothes or gifts she will visit one of the out of town retail parks. She felt that the Letchworth Shops should have better stock and shop window displays she also suggested a 'shop local' initiative could be implemented.

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18.30 – 19.15 Rm 2 Council Offices

Cllr DL responded that LGC doesn't have the correct demographic to attract the large luxury chains such as M&S, John Lewis / Waitrose

Stacey Orrow pointed out that the Town Centre needed to attract a younger demographic. She explained that, as probably the youngest person in the room she will go to the retail parks for shopping but will use the Town Centre for 'experiences' she will meet up with friends for lunch or coffee and whilst they are waiting or after coffee they will browse the local independent quirky shops. She also mentioned that the Town Centre events provide a draw for people to come into the town centre and bring people together to connect.

Cllr TH asked whether SO thought that the Broadway Cinema and Theatre was a draw.

She responded that she thought there was some really good events taking place and mentioned well known stand up comedians that had performed. However she felt that it needed to be publicised more.

A member of the audience mentioned that the Arcade is not used enough and many of the units are empty. However, the Wynd is now completely full and is a vibrant area. This is thought to be due to the Garden City Brewery (Micro Brewery) which is extremely popular on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings.

Cllr DL explained that he was also an executive director for the Business Improvement District and introduced the Town Centre Manager Chris Wilson (in the audience) He went on to explain that there were people in the room who were taking note of peoples opinions and would be taking these back to those who can have an influence on improving the Town Centre.

Cllr GG commented that there were some areas of the Town Centre that were dead in terms of retail such as the bottom end of Station Road. He suggested that business and retail should be concentrated to the centre of the town and the outer areas of the town centre could provide more residential use.

Hilary Kemp – Chair of Letchworth Festival Committee

HK commented that empty shop units should be made more available for use as alternative community spaces.

The conversation concluded and Cllr Grindal thanked everyone for attending the Town Talk.

Meeting closed at 19.20

Next meeting: Wednesday 16th October 2019 6.30pm