

Hitchin Town Talk

Tuesday 2 March 2021 6pm

Present:

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| IA | Cllr Ian Albert |
| CB | Cllr Clare Billing |
| JB | Cllr Judi Billing |
| SC | Cllr Sam Collins |
| KH | Cllr Keith Hoskins |
| PC | Cllr Paul Clark |
| VB | Cllr Val Bryant |
| SH | Cllr Simon Harwood |
| MH | Cllr Mike Hughson |
| RT | Cllr Richard Thake |
| DA | Cllr Derrick Ashley |
| EDH | Cllr Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg |
| MSH | Cllr Martin Stears-Handscomb |
| DB | Cllr David Barnard |

Apologies:

Cllr Kay Tart

Cllr IA welcomed everyone into the meeting. He asked residents if there were any topics they would like to raise.

Topics:

- 1) Mike Mckenzie- Repairs to High Street
- 2) Jackie McDonald- More benches in public areas, especially Westmill
- 3) Judy Howlett- Removal of unused garden bins
- 4) Alison Smith- Anti-social behaviour on Westmill (Rivermead/Westmill Road)
- 5) Margaret Eddleston- increase in frequency of Area Committee meetings
- 6) Anon- Granting alcohol licenses (*this query was sent in prior to the meeting and not discussed as is ongoing*)

Repairs to High Street

- Cllr Ashley reported that since the first proposals for improvements to the High Street Government regulations had changed on the remit for sharing space. He hopes work will start soon.

- There is an issue re the resurfacing of the road due to the weight of heavy good vehicles entering the town centre for deliveries.
- Cllr Ashley will share the current design.

Street Benches

- It was highlighted by Jackie McDonald (JM) that as more people are walking since the start of the pandemic some well placed 'resting spots' would be very welcome.
- Cllr Stears-Handscomb agreed this was an excellent question and perhaps new seating could be incorporated as part of the town centre enhancement?
- JM commented that there are more people walking from Sainsbury's down to Bearton Road and along Westmill Road.
- Gordon said that additional seating in the Market Square would be of benefit.
- Alison Smith (AS) added that many bus stops are short of seats.

Removal of Unused Garden Waste (brown) Bins

- Judy Howlett (JH) asked when the spare bins that people have discarded would be collected.
- Cllr Dennis-Harburg explained that these bins are not currently being collected due to pandemic restrictions.
- She added that a positive outcome of this is that some residents have decided to start using them again to recycle their garden waste.

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) on Westmill

- Alison Smith shared her concerns about littering, fly-tipping and illegal substance use in the area of Rivermead Road to Westmill Road and asked if CCTV could be installed.
- Cllr Stears-Handscomb said there was currently a review underway of the CCTV on Westmill. He acknowledged the additional concerns on Ransoms Rec.
- **ACTION-** *Community Engagement Team to make sure Community Safety Team are aware.*

Increase in Frequency of Area Committee meetings

- Margaret Eddleston asked if the number of Area Committee meetings would increase.
- Cllr Albert said it was more likely there would be specific meetings on particular topics.
- Cllr Stears-Handscomb agreed and added that Cllrs would like to engage in more and varied ways with local people. In particular, ideas around tackling the Climate Emergency.
- Cllr Judi Billing mentioned that one of the positive outcomes of the pandemic was the increased ability to connect with people online. It enabled more people to be involved and had a greater reach. Going forward a hybrid of physical and virtual meetings could be ideal.

Use of King George V Recreation ground

- Cllr Judi Billing informed the meeting that she hoped all the facilities would be available to use again soon.

Granting alcohol licenses

- Question was asked about: *How the council assesses the appropriateness and impact of granting licenses to serve alcohol on the Town - there had been a large increase in the number of bars in town which has resulted in an increase in crime, and also the balance between retail, restaurants and bars is now far too skewed to bars. Does the council tend to*

err on the side of granting licenses to generate income rather than considering the broader implications of their licensing decisions on residents and the look and feel of the town?

This query was sent via email prior to the Town Talk. Members discussed it with Officers beforehand and we are awaiting a response from the Licensing Team.

Cllr Hoskins speaking from knowledge when in his previous role of Town Centre Manager, since had this response: *“Our anonymous correspondent highlights the increasing conflicts between the various sectors of the town centre; our inboxes burgeon with complaints on graffiti, parking and anti-social behaviour.*

Demand for retail space has declined nationally as is reported on an almost daily basis and the government has relaxed planning laws to facilitate change of use in an effort to revitalise many town centres; unfortunately on a one-size fits all basis, it doesn't always suit our traditional market towns.

Hitchin has remained fairly robust throughout the downturn and the pandemic with a vacancy rate of around 6% which is half the national average. However, as has been noted, much of this has involved a considerable expansion in hospitality and leisure. A good example is to compare how many places you can now buy a cup of coffee compared with 20 years ago! And the same now seems to be true of serving alcoholic refreshment - exacerbated by the recent govt directive that shops can open for longer hours. Worth mentioning that the Council is obliged to grant consent at the moment unless there are compelling circumstances not to - there is no financial advantage to NHDC as business rates as such go to the government.

As town centres readjust to peoples new ways of living, part of the answer must be to readjust our policing and enforcement - if there are more issues in the town post the traditional 5.30pm then that's when our resources should be more evident and I know that this is being flagged up by senior Councillors with both police and parking enforcement. Nationally our MP could do no better than raise these issues so that local councils are given wider authority to deal with problems specific to their communities.”

NB. This comment was not made at the meeting itself but added afterwards for the purpose of sharing information.

Further questions:

- Gordon asked if there had been any progress on opening up the pedestrian access alongside the Hiz between Bridge Street and Market Street? Hopefully soon.
- Has there been any progress on The Dell project? Cllr Hoskins reported that there had been a lot of offers of support from local creative groups and there was due to be another meeting about it.
- AS asked if fees charged for bulky waste collection covered the costs of removing fly tipping. Cllr Dennis-Harburg said no, it only covers the cost of the actual bulky item collection.
- Cllr Judi Billing highlighted that fly tipping had become a huge problem nationally- there were discussions about setting up a fund to help land owners deal with the issue. She went on to advise that anyone contacted or offering to take waste should be checked as to their legitimacy.
- Graffiti: With respect to graffiti on green boxes, residents can report graffiti on the NHDC website using this link: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/transport-and-streets/street-cleaning/graffiti> Unfortunately we are not responsible for green boxes, so we advise residents to contact the company who owns the green box. There is a list of these on our

website, also on the link above. NHDC deal with instances of graffiti if they are on Council owned and managed property. Cllr Harwood said he had some useful contacts he could share. **ACTION- Cllr Simon Harwood**

- Cllr Collins confirmed that there would be more tree planting (a plan for 10,000 trees) but the sites had yet to be agreed. Suggestions welcome.
- Paul Cooper asked about grounds maintenance allowing stinging nettles and brambles to grow along some garden fences and boundaries to act as a security barrier/deterrent. Cllr Judi Billing advised Paul to contact her directly.

Cllr Ian Albert noted that Hitchin Councillors' surgery was taking place on Saturday 6 March and encouraged members of the public to watch Hitchin Committee via YouTube at 7:30pm.

Cllr Ian Albert closed the meeting at 6:55pm.

The next Hitchin Town Talk will take place on Tuesday 15 June 2021.

It is yet to be decided if this will be virtually or physically. If the Town Talk is virtual it will take place at 6pm. If it takes place physically at a Hitchin location it will run from 6.30pm to 7.15pm.

The Town Talk will be followed by Hitchin Committee at 7:30pm.