

**The Future of Hitchin Town Hall -
Presentation to Full Council Meeting of North Hertfordshire District Council
3 December 2009**

This presentation on the current plans for the future of Hitchin Town Hall is made on behalf of the business and community organisations in Hitchin.

These are the **Hitchin Chamber of Commerce** and **Hitchin Initiative**; the civic organisations **Hitchin Forum**, **Hitchin Society** and **Keep Hitchin Special**, and the arts in the form of the **Arts Council for North Hertfordshire** and **Hitchin Art Club**.



Hitchin Town Hall

We will start by summarising how we have got to where we are now, a process that has extended over some four years. Then move on to what many people believe are the fundamental and intractable problems with the current proposals, followed by our suggestions for a better way forward - both for the community and just as important for the local authority. Finally, we will say clearly what it is that we are asking the Council to do now.

First of all, how did we get to where we are this evening?

The whole museum question goes back to the Fundamental Service Review of Museums held in 2004. This identified the Collections Centre as a very high priority, although this has now effectively disappeared as a result of the high capital cost of implementing the current plans.

Then for the last four years, the Council has been running an Arts, Museums and Heritage Forum involving representatives of community groups throughout the District. A great deal of time and effort was put into this process by community volunteers, but whenever they expressed concern they were assured that the time was not right for such a discussion, and an appropriate opportunity would occur in the future. In short, the views of community representatives throughout this process have been effectively over-ruled.

Then in a sudden and unexpected move in January of this year, the Council announced its decision that Hitchin Town Hall would be converted to a District-wide museum. Community groups requested a meeting to put their point of view and ask for a re-think; when this meeting was eventually held, they were told that their views could be put to a Facilities

Working Group once that was established. However, even when this group was set up, an appropriate time for raising issues of fundamental concern simply never occurred.

No meaningful discussion or consultation has been permitted since then, and we understand that the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall remains the firm intention of the District Council, without any willingness to consider alternative options.

It is noted that this course of action has been strongly challenged by Council committees; the Hitchin Area Committee, the Letchworth Area Committee and the Scrutiny Committee. It is being progressed in the face of a range of well-reasoned arguments from community groups and the wider general public in Hitchin. This is confirmed by the letters to the local press and by a strongly supported petition, with over 5,000 signatures, asking the Council to pause and reconsider its position.

So what is wrong with the present proposals?

Perhaps most fundamentally, we believe that a town of 30,000 people, and still growing fast, needs a high-quality vibrant, successful community centre. This is essential to fostering the spirit of a well-functioning society; without it we are all the poorer and surely no-one would advocate, even in today's straightened circumstances, having any lesser sense of community in our town. In this respect, the Town Hall plays a unique role in the life of Hitchin in being common ground for the whole community; members of Hitchin's minority groups are able to feel at home here, in the same way as do members of the wider community.

That sense of sharing is not something that can simply be achieved by hiring commercial premises or church halls, valuable as these are, for specific events. The Town Hall belongs to Hitchin, and that is how local people feel.

The overwhelming view in Hitchin is that the Town Hall, a fine Italianate art deco building designed by Geoffrey Lucas and E.W. Mountford in the closing years of the nineteenth century, should continue, by one means or another, as the principal community venue for Hitchin, not least because the main hall is the only hall in central Hitchin big enough to accommodate large-scale events.

More specifically, there are too many uncertainties around the current plan. We believe that the planned conversion has simply not been costed, and certainly not costed with the rigour required even for a decision in principle to go ahead. This exposes the Council (and council tax payers) to a level of risk not justified by any possible merits of the scheme.

There is also no robust business plan backing the proposal; indeed there is no business plan at all, again exposing the Council to further financial risk and very uncertain outcomes.

In addition to these concerns, further uncertainty has now arisen around the intentions for Letchworth. We understand that future arrangements for a Letchworth Museum are being actively considered, which could result in Letchworth exhibits, and possibly some District-wide aspects of the collection, being housed in the former Letchworth town hall.

Should such a scheme go ahead, it would effectively undermine the concept of a District-wide museum in Hitchin Town Hall. The small, and locally focused museums in Baldock, Ashwell and Royston, confirm the essentially local nature of local museums, and of course that is as true for Hitchin as elsewhere.

Finally, there is the thorny question of the role of the Trustees of the Gymnasium and Workman's Hall, an integral part of the scheme to accommodate a District-wide museum in Hitchin Town Hall. We are sure the Trustees understand that their primary responsibility lies to the charitable trust and not to a Council or Cabinet to which they might also belong. There

is also an issue concerning the boundaries of the area covered by the charitable trust; this needs to be resolved, and approved by the Charity Commission, before any decision can be made affecting that part of the Town Hall. Any premature decision is not only unnecessary but could be challenged, thereby introducing great uncertainty into the process.

What are we suggesting as a way forward?

First of all, we all recognise the almost unprecedented pressures under which local authorities are operating. Financial constraints are severe, and all too likely to intensify next year. We are under no illusions that better times are around the corner, and recognise that severe constraints will continue into the future.

Against this background we are not saying, and indeed have never suggested, that the District Council can continue to fund community services as may once have been possible. We are not arguing that it is the Council's responsibility to fund a Town Hall for Hitchin any more than it funds village halls throughout the District. Quite the reverse. We believe that if a community wants to have a focal point in the form of a town or village hall, it should find the means of making this possible. However, it is clear from all the testing of opinion over recent months that people in Hitchin, and elsewhere in the District, want Hitchin to have a high quality community venue of a size appropriate to a town of 30,000 people.

We believe that urgent steps should now be taken to find ways of making this possible, ultimately through some form of community ownership. This may involve the Town hall being managed by a Community Trust or a Community Interest Company, in which Hitchin Initiative and other community organisations would play a role.

However, the work of setting up such an arrangement requires people to put time, effort and eventually money into a scheme. Clearly, planning for this cannot start until the Council is willing to indicate unambiguously that this could be a possible way forward, and is prepared to join in discussions to find ways of making this happen.

Finally, what are we asking the Council to do now?

We are asking simply that the Council pauses in its tracks as far as the current plans for Hitchin Town Hall are concerned. We ask that it does not progress this evening to committing more money to a scheme which has little or no local support in Hitchin, and indeed is strongly opposed by the elected representatives of Hitchin.

We ask that the Council should engage with the wider community in Hitchin by opening discussions in a positive and constructive way to explore the possibility of a community partnership being able to take responsibility for Hitchin Town Hall. This would enable it to remain as the principal community venue for Hitchin, while progressively becoming no longer a burden on the District Council.

We hope you will give these suggestions every consideration this evening. Thank you for giving us the time to explain our proposals.

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