

HITCHIN TOWN HALL - THE LATEST

At their meeting on 3 December 2009, and largely as a result of the presentation given by community representatives and behind-the-scenes lobbying by the Town Centre Manager, NHDC voted to defer the decision on whether or not to proceed with their plans for the conversion of the main town hall (the "Mountford" hall) into a District museum.

At a high-level meeting on 17 December 2009 between NHDC portfolio holders, officers and community representatives, alternative plans drawn up by members of Hitchin Initiative, were put forward that would:

- retain the Mountford Hall, managed by Hitchin Initiative, for community use;
- provide a museum in the existing gymnasium with a new first floor, and a new entrance created by purchasing and demolishing an adjacent shop.

Grant and loan funding would be sought from Community Builders, supplemented by a public appeal. It was agreed that a full feasibility study on the proposal be carried out and this was put to the full council on 11 February 2010. NHDC officers and their consultant architects co-operated fully with Hitchin Initiative in order to make a meaningful presentation at that meeting, where it was agreed almost unanimously that business plans should be worked up for both the council's and the community's schemes, and councillors will choose between the two at their June 2010 meeting.



At a well-attended meeting in the Ballroom of the Sun Hotel on 28 April, both sets of proposals for the town hall were explained by Neal Charlton, the architect for NHDC's consultants.

The main difference between the two plans is that in the original NHDC plan the main hall was given over to museum use and the gymnasium saved for community use. In the new Hitchin Initiative plan, the hall is kept for the community and the gymnasium with a new first floor added, will be the museum. This will be a smaller but more practical and flexible space for the exhibits. In the Hitchin Initiative plan the new entrance is larger and more welcoming.

The reaction from the public was far more positive than at previous Arts, Museums and Heritage Forum meetings when the town hall's future had been under discussion. Keith Hoskins, speaking for the community groups, acknowledged the unprecedented level of support that had been received from NHDC officers in preparation of these plans.

The main uncertainty about the entire project is whether English Heritage will decide to list all or part of the building, following an application made shortly before the December 2009 Full Council meeting by Keep Hitchin Special. Should the building be listed, any alterations on the site will have to be sanctioned by English Heritage, making the conversion process much longer and more complicated, and potentially very much more expensive.

The plans for both schemes can be seen here http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/annex_b_-_hitchin_town_hall_museum_feasibility.pdf.