

Town Meeting 25/06/2025

Gareth Hawkins (GH) welcomed the attendees to the meeting and introduced Graham Fisher, (GF) Chief Executive, who would be presenting the annual review. .

Gareth ran through the agenda and format of the evening, which included a brainstorming session on the 125-year anniversary of Letchworth Garden City asking the public for ideas for celebrations.

GH noted the positive progress that Letchworth is making, with the Foundation working alongside partners and other stakeholders to preserve and steward this beautiful First Garden City. It was noted that progress can be seen around the town and is quite tangible, whilst noting that there are areas of challenge. GH acknowledged that the Broadway has become more vibrant as a direct consequence of the Emil Dale Performing Arts Academy relocating to the old Grammar school, who have done a wonderful job restoring the beautiful building and put it to great use. It has also created more vibrance in Broadway Gardens and more footfall within the town centre. GH hoped that more transformational things could happen with new occupants of buildings moving forward.

GH advised that the Foundation's investment at Standalone Farm has improved facilities on offer including works at the reservoir.

Investment has also been made at the Broadway Cinema and Theatre for replacement seating

After 13 years there is now a masterplan to finalise LG1, with site LG3 on Blackhorse Road ready for development. The public will soon see some new housing in the Garden City, which is a first for a very long time, seeing new occupants, jobs, families and contributions to the economy. GH noted that he was delighted to get this over the line and gave thanks to everyone involved in that project. Gareth handed over to Graham Fisher to present the update on the town,

Graham Fisher welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending. In 2023, there were just over 60 residents at the Garden City meeting alongside a team of 25-30 people including Governors. This evening, there are approx.170 attendees, 130 residents who have come along, many for the first time.

Graham's presentation gave an overview of the Foundation, how it works, how it is funded with money being generated from the commercial property portfolio and generated through ticket sales at the Cinema and Farm. He then ran through the Foundation strategy 2028 and the key performance achievements 2024 as well as some of the strategic challenges facing the Foundation and the town.

Graham handed back to Gareth to chair the Q&A. Many of these were sent in advance and are transcribed below.

Questions

<i>Marilyn Emerson</i> Given the probability of Letchworth being part of a unitary authority what will happen to the Letchworth	Gareth responded and noted that this is an ongoing process which hasn't yet worked its way through to a decision at regional or County level. His understanding is that there isn't an appetite for a full single unitary council.
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Heritage Foundation and how was it originally incorporated?	Marilyn Emerson advised that this hasn't been decided but the ideal population is half a million, the whole of Hertfordshire exceeds that. There are 3 options for all of the authorities. This has been promoted several times before. GH – the Foundation can't wholly formulate our strategy until we know what we are dealing with, in terms of responsibilities, roles and duties we expect those that were conducted by the now County and District Councils are divided up. We have worked well with those partners as well as Hertfordshire Futures and other stakeholders up to this point, whatever guise they take going forward, we hope to be able to live in harmony. Our ambition for the change is that it does good things for Letchworth. Hard to say at this stage but if it can address economic development for the region, better health care services, potentially also mental health services, if it did address youth services, sport and leisure facilities and help with meeting sustainability challenges then those would be good things. There will be a cost for change, there is disruption with change, uncertainty and we hope that this won't lead to more cost cutting and service rationalisation. I think the bigger question is in regard to emerging Town Councils.
Marilyn Emerson – with an emerging Town Council, although all of your achievements at macro level are laudable, where you fail as an organisation is at micro level, for instance my planning for a conservatory took 6 months, and because of your arbitrary aesthetic values cost me £5k, and because of these the value of my house is probably £15k less as you don't enforce covenants. So, if everything at a macro level is good would you be happy to hand over all the planning issues to emerging town councils as I feel this is one of the areas that most people have the grievances with.	GH - We have a statutory mandate to oversee the Scheme of Management, we do our best to meet our mandate to protect the streetscene and protect heritage and make sure we do it consistently. Do we do it efficiently, well, we get good NPS but we constantly find that there are people who have not had a perfect experience and that is something that is constantly under review. At the moment, planning decisions are something for regional Local Authority. We sit regarding Scheme of Management, the contents of which are in line with the covenants that are in ground leases. The wider Scheme of Management is about preserving the streetscene. Does that mandate change, that can only happen by statute. There are some things in there that we can't change but we could do a better job of it. <i>Daniel Allen</i> Daniel Allen advised that he is the Leader at North Herts Council. He noted that Local Government Reorganisation is happening and that there is no choice in it. Some of the information given tonight is not quite accurate. The size can be anywhere between 300,000 and 750,000 people. The whole point is to find out how this can work for your area. Now in Hertfordshire, we've said there isn't going

	to be 1 single Unitary for Hertfordshire, it could be split into 2, 3 or 4 authorities. There are a number of different versions of each. We are trying to find out how it will work, financially, geographically and for placemaking. It shouldn't affect the Heritage Foundation, we will keep working with you in the ways that we do at the moment, but we should have much better access as opposed to having to go through a County Council to speak about SEND and District Council to speak about green spaces, you will just go through the Unitary Council. As far as Town Councils go, we all know how the last one went. We have recently put out asking if anyone in Letchworth wants a Town Council, the results will be publicised on 2nd July as well as Hitchin and Baldock. Unitary are not seeking Town Councils but will look to bring in area forums.
<i>David Walker</i> What more is the Foundation going to do to attract new businesses, and hence employment, to Letchworth? Lots of new homes are planned, but they shouldn't be aimed at commuters but at people coming to new jobs.	Joseph Vallely responded for the Foundation - We are very focussed on attracting new business to the Garden City and retaining and developing exciting business. The additional investment onto our Portfolio allows us to offer better buildings for business to occupy, we believe this is already works and we are pleased to show you all the new or growing business that have made Letchworth their home. We have welcomed new business to our ground lease estate, such as Zund into our industrial estate and Oncu to Eastcheap. Our improved retail units have attracted a variety of new businesses to the town - Bella and Beast Emporium being a particular favourite of our CEO! We have welcomed Conamar, Maydencroft and Dorma Kaba to our office portfolio. We work closely with many existing businesses to assist them to develop and grow and, if we can, help them through difficult times. A particular success would be the seamless transfer of Tri-sports into Sigma Sports on Station Road. We are also work hard to facilitate redevelopment in the employment area. We committed extensive resources to facilitate the redevelopment of Starwood House, on Avenue One, now known as Click Letchworth a development by Wrenbridge a leading regional developer.
<i>David Walker</i>	Joseph Vallely responded - The Foundation are directing more money towards reinvestment into the property

The fabric of the town centre continues to look tatty with two near derelict buildings, St Michaels Church and Plinston Hall. What is the Foundation doing, as steward of the town on behalf of those who live and work here, to improve the appearance of the place and thus make it more attractive to visitors and businesses and what is the fate of the buildings in our town centre?	portfolio including the town centre properties. Where we are not in direct control, but we do seek to hold our tenants to account where it is the case. We have invested in additional staff resources to enable us to proactively manage our ground lease estate, working with our long leaseholders to encourage and facilitate reinvestment opportunities into these properties. We have completed works at the following: • Former NatWest Bank & Old Bank Chambers refurbished. • 47 Leys Avenue shop front refurbished. • 59 Leys Avenue • 19 Eastcheap • 1 Areana Parade new shop front and fit out, brand new tenant. • The Arcade • 30 Leys Avenue We have set contracts for this year for works at • Spirella & Nexus external works • The Colonnade full external decoration • 1-5 Eastcheap full external decoration • 53 Leys Avenue • 1 The Wynd • 5 The Wynd • Broadway Cinema and Theatre external refurbishment We will continue to deliver a pipeline of works to improve buildings in the town we are directly responsible for. However, it needs to be recognised that our town centre assets are only one component part of the Garden City Estate, we must balance the investment funds across our whole portfolio. St Michaels Church is owned by St Albans Diocese and is currently under offer for a sale to another church. We are not privy to the details of it, but we will do our best to preserve its external fabric. Plinston Hall has been marketed, we are in negotiation with a partner for a community use and would like to think it will take further shape this year or into 2026.
<i>Craig Johnson</i> There has been some good development of old sites, the Shelvoke site for housing. Is the Heritage Foundation really looking at all the brownfield	Graham Fisher – we are looking at part of the review of the Local Plan which is about to go live I understand from our meetings with NHC over last couple of weeks. We are going to think about how we bring forward a range of brownfield sites. We’ve struggled in some areas; Birds Hill is difficult as it has complicated land ownership such as long leases.

sites to see what's possible to redevelop into housing before going onto green field. We need to really look at the town centre, shopping has changed, the last time I counted the empty shops there were 32, 5 empty banks, other empty units around the town centre. Should we look at consolidating the town centre into a good shopping experience and do some developments like the flats at Tower Electrical on Station Road.	It isn't a simple silver bullet, I think there are easier areas particularly around Station Road, which we can potentially look at as well as looking more broadly around the industrial area, some areas of which are at the end of their life. The principle is a good one, we will be doing some work with Chris Pattison who chairs the Strategic Property Committee, to look at how we respond to the Local Plan review. It goes back to my challenge at the end - how do we rise to this challenge of building more homes to enable people to live here in an affordable way, to grow our economy and create better jobs. My criticism is the local planning process is very housing dominated we need to take a whole town approach to think more broadly about the economy as well as housing. Chris Pattison added that Letchworth is situated halfway between London and Cambridge its not a natural destination for investment and trying to persuade new employers to invest in complicated, sometimes polluted brownfield sites is difficult. We need to renew our employment base, one of the things I am thinking about is how do we regenerate our old industrial area at Birds Hill and Works Road. We should think about transitioning that into housing as it is so close to the town centre but that means we need to find space for modern forms of employment to keep our young people in the town to give them opportunities. We have got a complicated set of choices ahead of us, its helpful to have this question tonight as this is the beginning of a conversation on how we deliver the rights jobs and the right houses in the right locations around the town.
<i>Arthur Jarman</i> What steps will be taken to make proper use of the Plinston Hall building or its site? Same answer for Plinston has been given every year since it was taken out of use. It's being marketed, in the meantime it deteriorates. It could be and was a great asset to the community and it could be again. It could be a hub for young people as you've talked about. But just to give the same	Gareth responded and explained It has been under offer at least twice and is under offer again. We're hopeful that the building can be sold this time and find a new use. It is a challenging sale given the level of investment needed to bring it back into use. GH asked for a show of hands to show support in demolishing Plinston Hall of which there was 5, approx. 20% support in the room. Chris Pattison added – We'd all like to see it used, we'd like to see a cultural impact coming from the use of that building, it's not as if the Board has not been focussed on that or somehow not prioritising it. If you go back to Graham's presentation, the problem we have is that we run a very tight budget with the challenge of costs rising faster than income. We are already subsidising Standalone Farm and Broadway Cinema. The idea that we could financially

answer every year that it's being marketed really will not wash.

If it's been under offer at least twice, if it's the same situation every year then something must change because if it isn't marketed and isn't sold then change its use, demolish it, put something else there instead but don't give the same answer each and every year.

I was a Governor for a while and in every meeting, Graham will agree I posed the question and got the same answer, nothing has changed, and something must be done about it.

I believe most people here would like to see it developed into an asset for the community.

support and take a risk on Plinston Hall, as much as we would love to, we must be very careful of what we commit to and to financially support and take a risk on trying to operate Plinston Hall. That's why we have to work with partners who are prepared to come in and invest and we try and help them to do that by taking a view on rent etc to ease partners into built assets such as Plinston Hall but there is only so much that we can do which is why a review of assets across the town is really important because we want to try and make Letchworth a great place to invest in. If it's a great place to invest in and the value of our endowment goes up, then that means we can potentially leverage more cash for the town and we can take on these projects and perhaps be more in control of the future of something like Plinston Hall. Until then we really must work with third parties and try and make something work as you have heard.

Another example is the building that we are in, this was bought by the Heritage Foundation in the 1990's and it is a declining asset, the market value is less than the running cost to keep this open, we have a major problem to solve in this building with huge vacancies and a backlog of maintenance across the estate. There are some serious challenges we need to resolve which is why I'm determined we come back to you with a conversation about the future of the town and how we can solve these problems.

Member of the public – I just wanted to say that you were on about doing things for young children and youths so why can't Plinston Hall be put into use for something like that. I understand you've got to have Youth Leaders and professionals, but can it be used for that privilege. GF clarified that the frustration runs deep and that since 2019, Plinston Hall has been under offer 3 times, 1 of which was to youth led organisation, then another group targeting young people. It is under offer now for a different community use. The reality is that the deals failed because the prospective tenant couldn't raise enough money to make it financially viable either as a business or a charity which is the fundamental problem.

Hypothetically, let's say I persuade the Board to charge no rent on the building, it still needs capital investment to ensure it is compliant with health and safety issues and heating problems. There isn't a source of capital that can fund that work. We've tried to do this, but it has also become apparent that there are significant neighbourhood issues, we have learnt a lot of Emil Dale, there is challenge around noise and neighbours in Gorst Close are very noise sensitive.

	We need to be realistic on how long these things can take. We started talking to Emil Dale in 2019, it took 5 years to put things in place. These type of regeneration projects can take 10 years which sounds ridiculous but very slow but to assemble finance can be very slow. Plinston has a variety of challenges as a building and it would be simpler to knock it down, but this isn't a route we've focussed in on at this time. I think we have a positive tenant lined up; they are a private company with opportunities to invest. There are issues to resolve to enable them to use the building, particularly car parking, we are working with North Herts College to resolve these things. Should this fail, although I'm confident it will happen, maybe would have to think its come to an end and think more radically. Marilyn Emerson – I think everyone knows that Plinston Hall is there to commemorate the good service that Cllr. Plinston made to this town. I believe that a fitting memorial would be for the building to be used for wellbeing purposes. I think I'm correct in saying Cllr Plinston's son was a victim of addiction. You've spoken about wellbeing and young people. A fitting monument would be for that building to incorporate wellbeing, one of your objectives, and furthering opportunities for young people.
<i>Arthur Jarman</i> My second question concerns the town centre. Above the shops there appears to be vacant property and I wonder to what extent that vacant property could be used for housing, for flats and apartments to bring more life into the town.	Joseph Vallely – You will see visible works underway to the former HSBC unit and its neighbouring property 2-4 Leys to be converted to flats by the respective long leaseholders, working in partnership to transfer the upper parts into residential. We are working with other ground lessees to facilitate the use and physical changes to other buildings in the town. More recently, the Board released funds to the Foundation to create 3 new homes above shops in the town in Eastcheap. We own and manage 57 units (102 bedrooms) of flats above our shops in the town centre, and there are many others in our ground lease estate.
<i>Julia Sonander</i> - Have relatively recent changes in recruitment processes for: • Nominated Governors to the Governing Body and • Community Representatives on the Advisory Management Committee	Gareth responded. As you may know, we went through an extensive governance review under my predecessor a few years ago in the hope it would give the ability to attract more engagement from the community. We have a record number of volunteers in the community, and I thank them for that. It feels like becoming a governor and trustee is too far for some people in this community. We need to communicate better or make more appealing to get

widened or reduced community engagement in these processes? Please can the answer address: a) Why the Enfranchised Properties Representative Body was “selected” as the representative body for enfranchised homeowners (some information on how this body is contactable, constituted and its membership number would be appreciated). b) For each of the Nominated Governor roles, the number of nominating bodies that have registered as nominating organisations. c) Which of the existing Nominated Governors were selected through a competitive interview process. d) How many nominating organisations are recorded as a “Membership Organisations” which the Heritage Foundation rules state must have a board or governing committee of at least 15 people. (Note the charity commission suggest a board of between 5 and 12 as good practice). <i>Julia Sonander</i> If you read the Scheme of Management, my understanding of what it says, is that the Heritage Foundation should identify the nominated group and that group should choose individuals. I own a freehold property and want to get involved in that group. I don't know who leads it or how it is constituted so what has happened is there is a very	people involved and we need residents to step up and join the governance committee to see this organisation into the future. Without you, if we fall short of numbers, we can't scrutinise this organisation. We'd love more volunteers to go the extra mile and become governors and governors to go further and become Trustees. These roles are currently quite difficult to recruit for. Notwithstanding there are 92 nominating organisations for the Nominated Governor position and we still struggle to get them to nominate people to join us. There is a disconnect somewhere, GF and his team are doing extensive outreach to put forward candidates and we aren't getting enough engagement there. Coming back to the EPRB who are representing householders and are part of the process for appointing candidates to the AMC which is a scrutiny committee for Housing Applications Committee decisions. That is formed of some representatives as the equal and opposite representation for selecting those candidates to our own Nominees from the Foundation and needs to be held in balance. Those householders decided that they wanted to form a Panel, which we supported, but it was not our decision, nor our appointment. The appointment happened as householders decided they needed more representation and assembled the panel. We helped to advertise the role and made sure that those who read our communications were aware of it, but we couldn't do more as we didn't want to interfere, there was no appointment from our side to this panel. GH – I'm hearing a communication problem; we tried our best to communicate the EPRB were looking for an additional member but maybe we haven't done our best to shout it from the rooftops and making it very clear to local community in order for them to get involved. I don't think you should read from that that there is any intention to sweep this under the carpet or force a preferred candidate, if it isn't clear or accessible to all, something has failed but not deliberately.
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small number of people I suspect have decided who goes onto the AMC and people don't know how to join the EPRB but it's supposed to represent Freehold householders. I feel we have gone a long way from the checks and balances of the Scheme of Management and that they are not worked effectively, I would ask you as the Chair to have a good look at this as it is hard to engage if you feel that the democracy that was embedded in that Scheme of Management is not being adhered to. If it's a secret society, how can we get involved? <i>Julia Sonander</i> My question is as Chair of Governors can you go back to read the Scheme of Management to see if when it said representative group should be found that actually doesn't that mean finding on in the community that people can join and be part of and its that group that should then select the 2 members, not 3 people already in the AMC as volunteers.	GH – I will undertake to do that; I have sought assurances that due process was followed, and I will check again.
<i>Roger Lovegrove on behalf of Decarbonise Letchworth</i> How does the Heritage Foundation reconcile their 'Scheme of Management' obligation to maintain the quality of the 'street view' with their moral and sustainability obligations to enable homeowners to achieve a reasonable EPC rating of B or C <u>and</u> at reasonable cost and in a reasonable timescale?	Claire Pudney The Scheme of Management is a mechanism to ensure the Garden City keeps the overall appearance and character for ourselves and future generations. We recognise Sustainability is a massive issue. You'll be pleased to hear we have launched an interactive house on our website, which gives you information on all kinds of things you can do to your home to make it more sustainable. Kris Karslake our Sustainability Manager has been able to secure some grant funding from the Government; we have worked with People Powered Retrofit - a group of architects; teamed up with the Alliance for Sustainable Technology, who have reviewed our guidance

<i>Roger Lovegrove</i> Does this include a relaxation of the Design Principles to permit raising our housing stock up to a B or C EPC rating. <i>Roger Lovegrove</i> The problem is no one in Letchworth is applying external wall insulation, I understand you approved a scheme in Spring Road, but you didn't like the end result, so you haven't permitted anymore. Settle did some work on properties which you did approve but they said it cost them so much they wouldn't do it again. We need to foster and encourage people to add external wall insulation, so I look forward to changes in the Design Principles which encourage and permit external wall insulation.	and given comments. We have a building in Pixmore Way that we have carried out lots of work on. There is a document available that tells you all that you can do to your property as well as how much this can also cost you. External wall insulation is very difficult to achieve and carry out well in terms of architectural impact, and with prices starting at £20k, it is a sum that many people just do not have available. There's lots of good things you can do, a huge amount of which you don't need consent for from LGCHF. We have already suggested that you come in and speak with the team. GH – The Board have tasked HAS with this with Claire leading on this process, from my perspective you are pushing at an open door, EPC is something that everyone should be able to address. CP – We have released our latest guidance on air source heat pumps as we encourage people to have these. I think the critical thing is to look through the work we have done with People Power Retrofit as there isn't one solution, there's a whole feast of things you can do to your property, some low key. The Design Principle's are being refreshed but the team remain cautious around external wall insulation and we are looking at a holistic, fabric first, breathability approach to our housing stock. We are seeking breathable and natural materials which is a far better way of doing it than cladding your home in plastic. GH – I can think of 3 examples where we have supported a trial of this. When you talk about changing our guidance, I would be loathed to be proven negligent in 20 years when we have told you to wrap your house in plastic, create a bunch of mould problems and rot and undermine the structural integrity of your home. CP – It is an extortionately expensive treatment to do so let's look at draft proofing, double glazing, things that are achievable for everybody and not just the few that have that spare capital
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<i>Kate Thompson</i> Does the Heritage Foundation own the former Lloyds building on Birds Hill as it is in a terrible state after the fire. If you do, what will happen to it?	Gareth responded – We don't own it; we were sad to see what happened to it and were concerned for tenants and homeowners around it. We are not able to do anything about it. The point was made earlier about brownfield development, there is a lot of land assembly that must happen around that part of town. Birds Hill is a difficult project to bring forward, if a site became vacant consequently it may become eligible for development.

The audience broke into 3 groups focussing on.

- 125-year anniversary of Letchworth Garden City in 2028 led by Sarah Golding – Head of Arts, Culture and Heritage
- Best of Countryside led by Emma Dagless – Policy & Programme Manager, Nature & Wellbeing
- Best of Town led by Claire Pudney – Heritage Advice Services Manager

A summary of the workshop feedback and follow up action will be available shortly.

Graham Fished thanked everyone for their input today and for taking the time to attend the meeting. He advised that the information will be collated and reviewed. He gave thanks to the team from the Heritage Foundation for putting the event together.

Gareth Hawkins thanked everyone for their participation and contributions. He reiterated that he is looking for Governor volunteers to join the existing group. He asked if members of the public felt there was a need for an additional cinema within Hitchin as part of the Churchgate development and urged people to speak with their local Councillors.

Daniel Allen noted that he personally is against a cinema being added to the proposed development and he will work against a cinema within Hitchin as it is an amazing town with good nightlife, if out in Letchworth it is normally for a visit to Broadway Cinema and he wouldn't want to put in a risk to Letchworth Garden City.