## Other Matters

The budget setting process has begun. Savings will have to be made again this year, not least because we are facing the reality of a negative Revenue Support Grant from central government.

Work is progressing on refurbishing the North Herts Leisure Centre in Letchworth. Much of this work was essential to keep the facility functioning safely, but a new pool and cafe are included in the works. This centre, which is operated by Stevenage Leisure Ltd on behalf of the council, produces revenue for the Council, which will go up under the agreed contractual arrangements once the work is complete.

The council's planning portal is being upgraded, to a more functional system. This will continue to be supplied by Idox PLC., the current operator. A number of you have noticed how unsatisfactory the current system is. I encourage you to try the new one and send your feed back to me or to NHDC at service@north-herts.gov.uk.

The now-adopted Grants Policy has reduced the total amount of money available for grants from the Council, and restricted the groups which are eligible. One of the big changes is that 'precepting bodies', such as Parish Councils are not allowed to ask NHDC for grants. The basis for this is that they already have the power to raise money from local residents via Council Tax. Historically, parish councils have been a big recipient of NHDC Grants, so even with a reduced budget there is an opportunity for local community groups to obtain funding. The grant-awarding committee which covers Knebworth, Codicote and other southern parishes is Southern Rural. It still has a budget of around £18,000 to spend by the end of the Civic Year, so now is the time to write your applications ready for the next committee meeting, which is on 1st December.

Note that there is a separate committee which overseas capital grants for village halls, community halls and the like. This is the Community Facilities Capital Projects Fund. The current four-year programme has one million pounds to disburse for capital projects. Parish councils are permitted to apply for capital funding from this fund.

The District parking strategy consultation is getting started. Town centre managers have been invited to give their views to the executive member for Policy, Transport and Green Issues. The consultation is expected to go on for several months and I will update you when I have more details.

The project to refurbish the Council Offices will soon be underway. It is expected that the work will start in the next month or so, and that staff will be relocated to other offices around the area. The work is being project managed by local firm, Wilmott Dixon.

Hitchin Town Hall is fully operational after the refit. Council and committee meetings will be relocated to the facility during the period over which the refurbishment of the offices at Gernon Road will take place. There continues to be a few issues with the North Herts Museum, and 14/15 Brand Street, which links the Town Hall to the Museum. The Executive Member for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs, Tony Hunter, continues to work closely with council officers to find a resolution to the ongoing dispute with Hitchin Town Hall Limited, which owns 14/15 Brand Street.

NHDC continues to make progress with Hitchin Town Hall, which is available for hire again. There is a dispute over the entrance to the adjoining museum facility, but it is hoped that this will be resolved soon.

The council is still seeking bids for refurbishment works on the offices in Gernon Road, Letchworth. Local contractors have plenty of work and have proved reluctant to bid. The executive member for finance is confident that the work will be finished on time and under budget.

## Odyssey Health Club Planning Application

The application to build 70 dwellings on part of the Odyssey Health Club, which is in Knebworth Parish, was decided at the Planning Control Committee on the 13th October. I do not have the decision yet, but it is likely that the Committee followed the recommendations of the officer to grant the application for the development and for a new access onto the B197. [I have emailed the chair of the Planning Control Committee to get confirmation of this - Steve.]

## Local Plan

The public meeting ahead of the Parish Council meeting went ahead as planned on Wednesday 12th October. The hall was full, with many of those attending having to stand. The only occasion I can recall coming close to this level of attendance was the meeting to discuss the NHDC Preferred Options, in the fourth quarter of 2014.

Paul Ward delivered a summary of the Local Plan process which was widely praised. This set the context and enabled members of the public to understand better how they could participate effectively in the Local Plan consultation process. Both of your District Councillors were present, and did their best to answer the questions addressed to them.

The Parish Council, in its regular meeting after the public meeting, decided to allocate a budget to cover the cost of a planning consultant to help it produce its response to the Local Plan consultation which started on the 19th October and will run until the end of November. All residents are encouraged to read the Plan, which will be available in the Library, and online, and to submit their representations. A new improved online system for recording representations will be accessible via the District Council's website, or an email to localplan@north-herts.gov.uk, or a letter to Planning Policy, Local Plan Consultation, North Hertfordshire District Council, PO Box 480, M33 0DE. Please ensure that you make it very clear which section of the Plan your representation relates to. As I have explained previously, these representations will be collated by NHDC and submitted to the Planning Inspector ahead of the Public Enquiry, which is likely to take place in the second quarter of 2017.