

Hitchin Forum Newsletter

No. 93

Sept/Oct 2008

Autumn Diary Dates

HERITAGE OPEN DAYS IN HITCHIN

11-14 September: Free entry to historic museums, churches and other historic buildings in and around Hitchin. Organised locally by the Hitchin Society, co-ordinated nationally by the Civic Trust. Leaflets giving details and opening times available from Town Centre Manager's Office.

TOWN TALK & HITCHIN COMMITTEE MEETING

Tuesday 23 September: Catholic Church Hall, Nightingale Road
6.15pm Town Talk: public forum for raising local matters with Councillors and Police
7.30pm Committee Meeting: Hitchin matters discussed & decided by Hitchin Councillors



COUNCILLORS SURGERY

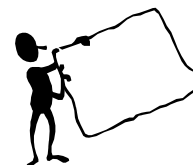
Saturday 4 October: Market Place (Church House if bad weather) 10.30am - 12 noon
An opportunity to raise matters in confidence with local councillors.

BEDFORD GALLERY QUIRE HARVEST CONCERT

Saturday 11 October: The Great Lancasterian Schoolroom, British Schools Museum, 7.30pm
Tickets: £10 (concessions £8.50) from the Museum, 41/42 Queen Street, Hitchin, SG4 9TS or ring 420144. Period music, performed on period instruments by musicians in costumes from 1700-1850. Unique music in a unique setting, with audience participation!
See also British Schools Museum "What's On September / October 2008" flyer enclosed with this newsletter for details of other events, exhibitions, talks and workshops.

PUBLIC MEETING: DOES HITCHIN NEED A TOWN COUNCIL?

Tuesday 22 October: time & venue to be announced
A follow-up meeting from that held last year. The working group set up to explore the implications of a town council for Hitchin will report their findings.



**ADVANCE NOTIFICATION:
HITCHIN FORUM ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
Friday 7 November**

Details to follow for Forum members, but please book this date now!

Hitchin Forum Members' News

Welcome to thebestofhitchin who have joined Hitchin Forum! If you are looking for a recommended local business, details of a sports club, or an idea of where to go for a great day out, then visit www.thebestof.co.uk/hitchin. Run by Keith and Louise Yexley, *thebestofhitchin* is all about promoting the best local businesses to local people whilst providing a focal point for community information. The site gets on average 9,000 visitors each month. If you are interested in finding out more about the business or are interested in becoming a 'blogger', please call 0845 618 7307.

“Homes built for nowhere but found everywhere”

The *East of England Plan*, many years in the making, was finally decided and published by the Secretary of State in May. It sets out an overall framework for development up to 2021 in a region spanning Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. Top-down pressure from central government on the region and communities like Hitchin to build ever more housing continues unrelentingly, and the *East of England Regional Assembly (EERA)* is already beginning a review of the *Plan* to update it to 2031. With ever higher housing targets, the building industry in meltdown and energy shortages likely to have a major impact on everything, this begins to feel like ‘Alice-in-Wonderland’ planning.



A completely different orientation is needed: rather than central government imposing unachievable housing targets, local communities should be given the powers and resources to create places where people really want to live, places with services, facilities, jobs and green spaces. Instead, government is now imposing so called ‘eco-towns’ on regions, without defining what they are or should be, with no research into their environmental impact or whether their locations are supportable or sustainable.

Government should be providing the broad principles to guide local planning authorities who should be evaluating and planning for local solutions. Instead we have a ludicrous situation where central government is micromanaging planning, imposing detailed programmes on communities with the result that Hitchin, for example, now has far too many small flats (hundreds already built and hundreds more under construction) and not enough family homes.

Not only are the wrong kind of homes being built, they are often badly designed. Poor design features such as all-in-one kitchen/dining/living rooms with only one north-facing window, or user-unfriendly communal gardens have often featured in Hitchin Forum’s objections to housing developments in the town. National research indicates less than 20% of new homes are of a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ standard, with 29% of so poor a standard that they should never have been granted planning permission. Common design faults include family homes built with nowhere for children to play, windows looking out onto brick walls and poorly lit areas.

“Homes built for nowhere but found everywhere - bland, boring, monotonous”, according to the national audit carried out by the *Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE)* who have now developed a ‘Building for Life’ standard for design quality. Even the *Royal Town Planning Institute* has waded into the debate saying “we want to see a means of incorporating people’s views about the place they live into design standards, instead of planners, urban designers and architects ticking off indicators as they see them.”

Another complication is that the recent downturn in housebuilding will affect the supply of “affordable” or “social” housing which is nearly a quarter of all new housing built in North Herts. An average of 120 “affordable” dwellings have been built annually in the district, but 750 are needed each year. With over 300 flats still under construction in Hitchin, should these be made available for those needing “affordable” homes? The reality is not so straightforward because few private homes reach the standards required by housing associations. This is perhaps the most telling of all indicators of the poor standards of many new developments.

Hitchin has had more than enough urban cramming and poor design: loss of gardens, green spaces and blocks of soulless flats without gardens. If the *East of England Plan* is to be reviewed in any meaningful way, it must move away from giving priority to urban development and begin to support smaller communities’ needs for affordable housing and jobs. However, the reality is that *EERA* is shortly to be dismantled by central government and its powers handed to bureaucrats at the Government Office for the Eastern Region, so *EERA* extending this *Plan* to 2031 may be more about polishing the portholes on the Titanic than planning meaningfully for the future.



Yet more flats in Hitchin?

It seems that developers are not yet convinced that Hitchin is saturated with small flats and that it is family homes that are now needed.

An application to redevelop the former bus depot on Fishponds Road proposes 40 flats in two very large 4-storey blocks. These would all be 1- or 2-bed flats, with underground parking. A small terrace of seven 3-bedroomed houses would front the main road. We have objected to the poor design proposed, which is repetitious and dull, as well as overbearing to adjacent properties. We have also objected to yet more small flats being built in Hitchin, and the traffic problems that might result.

Flats are also proposed on the old bus garage on Bridge Street. This is an important site, a 'gateway' into the town and its historic heart. We have objected to both its demolition and to what is proposed in its place. The design suggested is poor: 3-storey blocks would be too high in relation to Eric Moore's bookshop next door and the style is bland, pseudo-Georgian, "Anytown Architecture". The application is for twelve 2-bedroomed flats in 2 blocks which is clearly the easiest option for the developer, but more flats would not serve Hitchin's needs. Although the old bus garage has been allowed to become dilapidated, its facade could be modified and/or restored to form the basis of a more appropriate redevelopment. Much of Hitchin's attractiveness resides in its rich stylistic mix and local distinctiveness. Unusual and quirky buildings such as this one contribute to our interesting and characterful street frontages, and demolition should be considered only as a last resort, not the soft option.

Hitchin Station Forecourt

Signs have recently appeared at the station announcing the closure of the forecourt for 16 weeks from September 8th while the traffic layout is rebuilt.

Since the last Forum newsletter, our correspondence with Herts County Council has revealed that the reason for initiating the change is that Arriva were threatening to pull their bus services from the station forecourt unless something was done to relieve the evening rush-hour congestion which has been delaying their services.

There has still been no proper public consultation about what is being proposed so it is difficult to say what station users and bus users would really like. There is a case for returning to an arrangement whereby the buses stop in Walsworth Road where they do not need to tangle with the traffic in the forecourt.

The proposed layout gives buses priority and they will stop directly outside the station entrance. This means that they will not get caught up with "kiss and drop" drivers who were (illegally) using the bus area. However, the long queue of cars waiting to get out of the station from the car park in the evening will still present an obstacle, so it is not clear that the situation will really improve for Arriva.

Representations by cyclists and residents about the unsuitability of a shared cycle/pedestrian path have gone unheeded, and there is still no resolution of the vehicle access and parking issue for the houses in Station Approach. Motorcyclists get a particularly poor deal with no easy access to the motorcycle parking.

Although the new layout will have some benefits, there appear to be as many disadvantages. Let us hope that we do not have to pay for another rebuilding of the forecourt in a few years' time.

Tackling litter in Hitchin - it's up to us

Hitchin Forum's litter survey of the town's residential areas in March was followed by CPRE launching a national litter campaign in April. Clearly, we are not alone! Our survey found that litter in Hitchin was a far worse environmental problem than we had expected. We presented our findings to NHDC officers and Cllr Lynda Needham, the responsible Cabinet member, and found their initial response encouraging.

A follow-up survey was carried out in June and early July, when half of our original respondents reported back to us. It became clear that an initial 'blitz' had been carried out by the council at several (though not all) of the areas we had highlighted, with generally good results. However, this had not been sustained; neither street cleaning nor litter clearance were any better. At a second meeting in August, we reported these findings to the council whose response was that they are doing as much as their limited resources allow. Further, monitoring is clearly difficult in what is a large district and the problems of flytipping and litter generally are so widespread that NHDC is dependent on people reporting problems. Inadequate resources mean the council can only be reactive in dealing with problem areas.

Coincidentally, in March the Audit Commission reviewed how the council deals with what is called 'envirocrime'. 'Envirocrime' covers other aspects of antisocial behaviour such as graffiti and abandoned cars, as well as flytipping and litter. Their review consisted of written evidence to inspectors prior to a site visit, interviews with officers and elected members, and a coach tour of the district. The Audit Commission's assessment gave the council 2 out of 3 stars in dealing with 'envirocrime', so there is little external pressure on the council to improve. Our survey focused only on litter and flytipping in Hitchin, but was far more detailed in reporting assessments by residents of the problems they experienced in their own neighbourhoods.

Clearly, it should be a priority for NHDC to have clean towns, streets and neighbourhoods that local residents can be proud of. So what can be done in a situation where local residents expect a higher standard than the council can apparently deliver? Some residents are already patrolling and litterpicking their neighbourhood parks, such as Walsworth Common, and the council actively encourages this. If there are problems with street sweepers clearing accumulated detritus from kerbs where cars are regularly parked, the council is willing to liaise with established Residents Associations. Street sweepers will go in if all cars can be removed on an arranged day. Curiously, Hitchin Forum was asked to arrange this, when the council's own Community Development officer is already in contact with residents associations.

The council was keen for Hitchin Forum to carry out more follow-up surveys, but we only have the resources to do this on an occasional basis. In any case, the Forum's role is much wider, to work on a variety of town issues. Our advice is: Report & Monitor! Please report all areas where you see flytipping or accumulating litter to Customer Services: 474000 and check that it gets done. We would also be interested in hearing from anyone wanting to set up a neighbourhood litter patrol.

Churchgate - a new lease of life

The council as landlord has been seeking tenders for a complete redevelopment of Churchgate and surrounding area. We understand that 4 bidders have been shortlisted. In the meantime, the current leaseholder has submitted a planning application to refurbish most (but not all) of the existing buildings. Replacing existing canopies, installing new bay windows, cladding and rendering, and re-roofing with new gables may only be cosmetic changes, but will uplift the area. We objected to gates being installed and the developer has obliged by taking them off the plans. Churchgate is important for the town's economy and the ongoing uncertainty over its future has been unhelpful for its shopkeepers, the market and the rest of the town centre. This proposal, to some extent, breaks through that uncertainty and is probably the most sensible way forward at the moment, given the current economic climate. Hopefully the council will not see it as precluding a future redevelopment, but rather that it will, in the meantime, bring much needed investment and improvement to the area.