



## NEWSLETTER

March - April 2017 No. 140

### Chairman's Piece

Changing circumstances and technologies necessitate that the Forum responds and adapts the way in which it operates. When Mike Clarke recently suggested that we ought to embrace social media and use our Facebook page effectively, Steering Group agreed to bite the bullet. Valerie Schicker kindly offered to get us started, and our Steering Group's closed Facebook group was set up on a trial basis. Although a social media sceptic, I am starting to see the point. A couple of weeks ago, I wanted to organise a litter-pick on King George's Playing field. I joined Bearton Green's Facebook group, uploaded a few pictures of the mess, and called for volunteers. Within hours, six people, only one of whom I knew, had offered to help, with more apologising as they had prior commitments, and I sent out some organisational details. When it poured with rain for an hour before we were to meet, the 'should we / shouldn't we' conversation was simple (we did, and the rain stopped). Posting before and after pictures of the area we had cleared, and of the group, could not have been easier, which prompted further offers of help from those who would like to take part in future. I remain cautious - my settings reflect the fact that I don't want to be 'friended' by long-lost acquaintances, or the small army of students I upset throughout my career. I am struggling with the concept of 'liking' something. For all that, used carefully, Facebook could be a helpful tool for us. There are now technical issues to sort out with the Forum's page, but, when the glitches are sorted, we intend to make it available to the wider membership.

A further adaptation is forced on us by the imminent departure of two Forum stalwarts, Adrian and Judith Gurney. Adrian has chaired the Planning Group for five years and is a member of Steering Group. Adrian coordinated the impressive response of Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG) to the Local Plan. That HTAG's submission on the Preferred Options Report resulted in significant changes is a reflection of Adrian's wealth of knowledge and experience, coupled with dedicated hard work over many hours. Our final submission will, I am sure, carry weight with the Inspector when the Plan is subjected to official scrutiny.

We have been very grateful to Judith for her active contribution to Steering Group, and especially because she has been prepared to take on the very unpopular task of recording its minutes for the last six years!

Adrian and Judith will be greatly missed, and I am sure you would want to join me in expressing our thanks for their commitment and hard work, and in wishing them well in their new life. Their departure highlights an important issue for the Forum and similar organisations. We have in the past been fortunate in having a pool of energetic volunteers, often retired, who have been willing to devote significant amounts of time to Forum business. That pattern is changing. Elsewhere in this newsletter, I outline how we intend to cope with the work of the Planning Group in future.

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Chairman: Bill Sellicks  
President: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative  
Campaign to Protect Rural England

## Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting 20<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

The Meeting received two excellent and informative presentations. The first was from Keith Hoskins, our Town Centre Manager, giving us an update on the activities of Hitchin Initiative and the BID (Business Improvement District). Keith has been our Town Centre Manager for 20 years this April and I am sure I am not alone in thinking how lucky we have been as a town to have him working with us.

Keith addressed a number of issues, the main ones being:

1. The effect on local businesses of the new business rates revaluation. He believes that it will have little effect on a town like Hitchin, although there does seem some unfairness that large out-of-town retail occupiers are likely to have their rates burden reduced while town centre retailers face increases. Keith has offered Hitchin Initiative as the first port of call for anyone with queries.
2. Hitchin Initiative is moving imminently to 1A Churchyard. In future, they hope to offer a 7-day service, and to use the prominent shop window for art displays and the like. Consideration is being given to a "Volunteer Project" to help staff front of house and there is a new website, at [www.hitchinherts.com](http://www.hitchinherts.com). On 7th April, there will be an Open Day from 12 noon.
3. Keith explained the financial background of the BID. Business rates are collected by local Councils for Whitehall and the government then shares it round the country in accordance with perceived need. For every pound collected in North Herts only 6p comes back. Because of this, local businesses fund the BID to provide additional facilities in the town such as emergency litter clearance and Christmas lights. The BID is soon to ask its members about a possible extension to the pedestrian area, and whether large lorries should be excluded from the town centre.
4. Keith does consider it inequitable that out-of-town retail parks have free parking, when parking in town is so expensive. Hitchin provides approx. £1.5m a year to the Council from parking fees, by far the largest proportion of the District's total parking income. He also discussed the question of commuter parking and reaffirmed his belief that the railway station London platform should be accessed from St Michael's Road, with adjacent car parking.
5. The flagpole from the former British Legion building has been saved and Keith hopes it may be re-erected in the Market Place.
6. The state of highways and footways continues to be contentious. Keith expressed concern that the cycle racks outside Waterstone's, removed for roadworks, have not been replaced.
7. Last year's summer flowers were a great success, and a repeat display for 2017 has been ordered.
8. The River Walkway project has been delayed because one landowner has been unwilling to support the scheme. Should the eventual route require it, the Initiative has offered to pay for a bridge over the Hiz at Jill Grey Place.
9. The potential re-opening of the Dell at Woodside is still being considered, and Keith expressed a hope that the whole Woodside area could become an Arts Venue for the town.
10. The 2017 Events Programme is being compiled: there are already 30 events, not including the Hitchin Festival, which is yet to be finalised.
11. Finally, Keith confirmed that whilst he remains enthusiastic about all his responsibilities, he is being realistic and starting to consider succession planning. A new BID group is being formed called 'The

Next Generation’ and he hopes that they will be in place over the next two years to create the next five-year BID.

The second presentation was by Rachel Campbell, the driving force behind the 'Clean Up Hitchin' campaign<sup>1</sup>. The Campaign aims to encourage the public to use bins, rather than dropping litter, and in particular to involve young people in altering behaviour. This should not be confused with Hitchin Forum’s six-monthly litter collection events. Rachel highlighted the problems of cigarette butts, chewing gum and fast food packaging. The customised bins and “vote with your litter” concepts proved successful in 2016 and she proposed repeating them this year. She remarked that litter clearance nationwide costs Councils £1bn a year – yes, a billion! – prompting a National Litter Strategy which is shortly to be published by government, and which she hopes will help local authorities to address the problem.

A spirited discussion followed, with various ideas being raised, including the possibility of putting phone contact numbers on bins so that the Council can be called when one overflows (much like the numbers on street lights for reporting when they fail).

**Andrew Wearmouth**

## **Local Plan: what next?**

As part of HTAG (Hitchin Town Action Group), Hitchin Forum lodged comments on the District Council’s Submission Local Plan (SLP) in November 2016<sup>2</sup>. We understand there have been a large number of comments, and NHDC officers will be analysing these to identify the issues that are being raised. They will need to assess whether any of the concerns raised are new ones that were not considered when the SLP was being put together, and which could render the SLP invalid.

The expectation is that officers will be writing a report to Council to summarise the comments, and recommending that the SLP be sent to the Secretary of State - together with the full consultation responses as submitted by ourselves and others. The hope had originally been that this would happen in March: the next full Council meeting is not until 11th April, so a special meeting may be called before then.

The next stage of the process is for an Inspector to be assigned to the case and hold an Examination in Public - likely to be in September at the earliest. In the HTAG response we offered to speak at the Examination if there was a topic on which the Inspector wished to follow up on our views. Even if we are not asked, Hitchin Forum members can sit in the visitors’ gallery to listen to the debate. The Inspectorate makes clear that all the responses are given due weight whether or not a representative is taking part in the discussion.

NHDC may well be asked during the course of the Examination to look further at a few critical issues to see if minor amendments can be made without invalidating the Plan. The Inspector will only fail the Plan if there is a major issue that is not addressed in the SLP, or if there is evidence of a lack of co-operation with other Local Authorities in devising the Plan.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cleanuphitchin.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/the-districts-local-plan-our-response/>

It is clear that we will not have an approved Local Plan until well into 2018. However, the further along in the process we are the less easy it is for developers to argue that a non-designated site should be developed, or that a draft policy (on for instance affordable housing) should not be taken into account.

So we are on the way.....

**Adrian Gurney**

## **More air pollution and congestion?**

New Century Park is an area of land to the north of the eastern half of the runway at Luton airport. It includes what is currently Wigmore Park. Over 20 years ago, planning permission was granted for the area's development, but nothing has happened due to the difficulty of access. However, with the proposal of a new access route, there is now an intention on the part of London Luton Airport Ltd. to go ahead with development. An area of light industrial units and office space is envisaged, with a revitalisation of the park. As ever with Luton airport's development, the selling point is the boost to Luton's economy, especially in terms of job creation - three thousand new jobs are predicted. Coming at a time when the future of the Vauxhall plant is uncertain, this will be attractive to Luton's Development Control Committee.

There is a 5-stage consultation process, of which the event I attended in February was the first stage. This was billed as a 'stakeholder consultation', and it would be fair to say that there was plenty of scope for attendees to have their say after brief presentations from the Project Team. The obvious potential impact on Hitchin is in terms of increased traffic. Assuming the existing pattern of employment, with about 30% of airport jobs taken by Luton residents, in the order of 2000 jobs will involve additional inbound commuting, with a significant proportion passing through Hitchin, or at least along the bypass (Park Way). There will be further impact on our congestion and air quality problems. I voiced concerns about this, pointing out that the Transport Study conducted for the 2013 planning application for buildings to enable the increase of passenger numbers to 18 million per year, played-down any impact on Hitchin traffic from increased passenger numbers. I suggested that work needed to be done with NHDC with a view to establishing better public transport links between Hitchin, Stevenage and the airport. My concerns were duly noted, but the extent to which they will be listened to is hard to judge.

By the time you read this, the second stage of the consultation process, consisting of three public exhibitions, will have taken place. At the time of writing, there is little information on the proposal available on the internet, but when it appears we will let you know.

**Bill Sellicks**

## **Planning and what we can do about it**

Just before Christmas our President pointed out that the page on the Hitchin Forum website relating to Planning Matters was very much out of date. I pleaded that we were too engaged at the time in issues such as the Local Plan to do very much about it.

As we are now in a quieter waiting period for the Local Plan, we have no excuse – and have done a complete re-write. On the page, we cover the recent changes to the planning regime, and summarise some of the key areas where we have been working. The main message is that we can make a difference if we work together through Hitchin Forum, and in co-operation with other societies where appropriate.

Please take a look at the new item (<http://www.hitчинforum.org.uk/planning-matters>), and let your friends know about it. Hitchin Forum is very much hoping to involve more of the membership in what we do – and this is a good chance to see in which areas you might like to help.

It does look as though this might be my last contribution to the newsletter. Judith and I are hoping to move to Worcester to be near our two daughters and their families. We have both very much enjoyed being part of Hitchin Forum over the last 10 years or so, and making so many good friends. It makes it difficult for us to make the move, but we hope we will continue to be in touch.

**Adrian Gurney**

## **The future of the Planning Group**

As I mentioned in my Chairman's Piece, rapid social changes present a challenge to voluntary organisations such as the Forum. With people increasingly working into their 70's, we must recognise that we can no longer afford to rely on the recently-retired to take on roles which can at times feel more like a full-time job. Those of us who have retired have other interests and commitments too - at least four members of Steering Group, me included, spend significant amounts of time away from Hitchin, often abroad. A very positive trend is that we have several new members with useful expertise, who are prepared to make contributions. With full time careers, they are understandably cautious in making commitments to regular meetings and the other demands that membership of a group like Planning Group would make. Steering Group has therefore decided that the work of Planning Group should be addressed in a different way. We are setting-up five 'Working Groups' to address the issues on which Planning Group has worked in the past. These will cover the **Town Centre, Planning Policy, Transport, Open Space and Recreation and Planning Applications**. A further group will have the broader title of Member and External Relations.

To ensure communication with, and oversight by, Steering Group, each Working Group will be coordinated by a Steering Group member. Other Working Group members may be members of Steering Group, but we envisage that each group will have a flexible composition. We hope to call on Forum members who might help with particular issues. Since discussion within each Working Group is likely to be via email, we hope to avoid the need for meetings, or at least to keep them to a minimum. Groups may make recommendations for action, draft letters, or prepare reports and submissions, just as Planning Group members have done previously. The difference is that the final decision on these recommendations will require the agreement of Steering Group, rather than Planning Group. In reality, because Steering Group and Planning Group have a number of members in common, there will be a significant element of continuity.

As stated above, we hope that we might be able to call on the assistance of the wider membership from time to time to help, especially where we know a member has a particular expertise or interest.

**Bill Sellicks**

## **Footpaths and Litter**

I have just completed my 6-monthly survey of Hitchin footpaths for HCC's Countryside Access Officer, Nicholas Maddex, and it is very pleasing to report that in the case of the 50 or so of Hitchin's paths, issues to do with surfaces, overhanging vegetation and structures are few and far between.

Deep potholes in Oughtonhead Lane near to the common have been filled in, and the new surface is much less easily damaged by farm vehicle use.

Much obstructive vegetation has been cut back on many paths. Sadly, this reveals borders (invariably private property) which are little more than extended fly tips. A particularly bad case is that of the footpath which runs from Chaucer Way to the roundabout at the junction of Wymondley Road and St Michael's Road. I took pictures of the rubbish that has recently been revealed, and which was spread over a distance of about 200 metres, and sent them to the Service Team at NHDC. My email made it clear that the rubbish was bordering the path and enquired whether anything could be done. Initially, NHDC forwarded my email to HCC saying it wasn't their responsibility. It was then logged by HCC as a Highways fault, and classified as an 'obstruction' (it wasn't). A further email from NHDC then appeared, telling me that it has been logged as a fly-tipping report with their Enforcement Team. I am not sure of the significance of that, but perhaps it may indicate an acknowledgement that the landowner will need to be approached if anything is to happen.

At the time of writing, I have no further information, but NHDC's confusion, coupled with what appears to be an attempt to pass the buck, does not inspire confidence.

**Bill Sellicks**

## **The Big Hitchin Spring Clean: 7<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

Arrangements are already underway for **The Big Hitchin Spring Clean**, now in its sixth year. Invitations are going out to local residents who have helped or expressed an interest in the past, schools, clubs, uniformed and other community groups. Hitchin Forum members are also invited to join in, so please suggest areas that need ridding of litter and join us on the day to wield litter pickers and help transform the town for summer!

**Hitchin Forum** co-ordinates the twice-yearly clean-ups which last year saw nearly 90 black bags filled with rubbish from a dozen sites across Hitchin. With up to 100 volunteers, it is the town's biggest clean-up operation, swooping on parks, recreation grounds, streets, verges and rivers.

It makes a big difference, leaving the town's environment well spruced-up and volunteers feeling very satisfied. The Council and Hitchin Initiative also give us great support and we hope this year's event will be even bigger and better.

**The Big Hitchin Spring Clean** takes place on Sunday 7th May from 10am to 12 noon all around the town. Collection bags, litter pickers and instructions are provided. For more information or to volunteer, contact [litter@hitchinforum.org.uk](mailto:litter@hitchinforum.org.uk) or check the Hitchin Forum website: [www.hitchinforum.org.uk](http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk).

**Ellie Clarke**

## **Littergram**

I recently downloaded the Littergram App to my smartphone. When I see rubbish I now take a photograph, upload it to the Littergram site and send a tweet. The App automatically tags the tweet @NorthHertsDC. The Council are obliged to respond, unfortunately this does not necessarily mean they immediately clear the litter, but it is a start!

**Jennifer Piggott**

## Diary Dates:

- Tues 18<sup>th</sup> April: **Forum Members' Meeting** – 7.45pm. Details of discussion topics and presentations to follow.
- Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> May: **The Big Hitchin Spring Clean** – 10am to 12 noon, all around the town!  
Contact: [litter@hitchinforum.org.uk](mailto:litter@hitchinforum.org.uk).
- Tues 23<sup>rd</sup> May: **Town talk** followed by **Hitchin Committee** – 6.30pm, Westmill Community Centre.
- Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> July: **History Day** – 10 to 4pm, Church House.