



NEWSLETTER

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Chairman's Piece

So much has been happening! The Council voted for common sense and not to extend the Simons' contract, but then flooded us with consultations – the controversial *Housing Options* and almost inscrutable draft *Community Infrastructure Levy*.

The Churchgate saga was a reminder of how important it is for local people and groups to work together – partly inspired by our town centre manager and Hitchin councillors. We organized a successful petition, but that would not have happened if Keep Hitchin Special had not organized a meeting and two other attendees had not badgered me to do something. All helped by NHDC producing spurious legal advice which enraged all sensible minded people (and provided column inches and condemnation in Hansard). It was, of course, the culmination of three years of frustration that our views on Churchgate had been ignored, and so the splendid response which vindicated all those who had been saying that it was the wrong plan. The future plans for the town and in particular the prospect of a South Hitchin Suburb will require more of the same. Our thoughts on both are detailed below and on the website.

Last time I mentioned a kingfisher flying along the river by Sainsbury's. A week or so later I was in the same spot and saw a red kite floating above. Both are reminders of the green spaces around the town, and the natural delights we enjoy. A 'Green Map' is emerging, partly to supplement the Local Plan vision and partly as a simple guide to what is available in and around the town. If you have good knowledge of any of the town's open spaces and paths do let me know – we will want people to check our mapping efforts.

One green space which has been quiet, apart from when there are home matches, is Top Field. The Cow Common Trustees and the leaseholder should be renewing the lease this month. The Save Top Field Campaign is reporting on Facebook - NEWSLETTER for website March April 2013.doc <http://tinyurl.com/d86nsdc> - that the football club is to seek grants and invest in a variety of community activities. We hope that the Cow Common Trustees will fulfil their responsibilities as a town charity and that football will stay at Top Field.

And so again to Churchgate.... The Council report concerning the Simons contract lacked credibility. There was insufficient regard to the financial risks and the current economic and retail climate. It also tried to scare councillors in suggesting that any alternative would take 15 years to happen. That could only be so if unnecessary obstructions were placed in the path. We understand that Hammersmatch are following on from their January exhibition and may be offering a revised vision for the renewal of that area. We look forward to seeing their proposals, so we can better understand how a cinema and other businesses might fit in, how they can refresh and strengthen the market, so that any such development will be taken seriously by the Council.

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Churchgate

Our Steering Group examines the considerable concerns expressed about the processes used by NHDC which excluded the public, leading to protest and a petition.

Councillors rely on their officials for advice and research and have to do this; otherwise the Council would not work. It must also be remembered that councillors are ultimately responsible and on occasion are personally financially liable for the decisions they take.

With regard to the Churchgate saga, there has been concern expressed by some councillors and members of the public that this relationship has been abused. In particular, there was considerable public concern about the officials' report to Full Council on 31st January.

For example, the report stated that Hammersmatch claimed to have full financial backing for its alternative plans, but that "officers have seen nothing to corroborate this". However, the managing director of Hammersmatch stated in public that he offered to supply to the Council a letter of confirmation from his bank, but his offer was refused by the officials.

Great weight was given to Simons' offer to reduce its guaranteed return from 17.5% to 15%. However, their own projections indicated a profit of only 10%, so the offer was, it seems, a hollow one. Further, there would have to have been considerable savings (on quality?) or increase in end value for 15% profit to be attained, and even then there would have been nothing left after the developer's own profit, indicating that the Council would still have received nothing out of the profits from the scheme.

Officials gave great credence to a new condition Simons had suggested, allowing the Council a further break clause in the event that Heads of Terms had not been agreed with an anchor tenant by December 2013. However this, too, was an empty offer, as Heads of Terms are not the same as a contract: a retailer may well agree such terms without any subsequent obligation.

There were also concerns about the workings of the Churchgate Project Board, where officials gained the prior approval of just a few

councillors for an action that they desired. The minutes of these meetings were heavily redacted, for commercial reasons we were told, before publication, so it was very difficult for the public to challenge anything to do with the Project Board apart from its secrecy. Democracy is, by its very nature, handicapped by secrecy.

Furthermore, councillors are swamped with paperwork and some issues require a lot of thought and background knowledge. Do councillors have the time to assimilate all this detailed information?

The good news on the 31st January was that councillors had clearly taken on board the information that they had received from their electorate, including many letters from the public and the petition, presented to Council by our Chairman. This had run for barely a week with over 3000 people voting against the Council granting Simons an extension, over 800 of whom had posted comments. The debate was very good and the decision to allow a free vote was excellent.

We were also encouraged that councillors said it is vital to rethink the future of all the town centres in the District on the basis of the issues that were raised about the Simons scheme. Hitchin might be a useful 'pilot' in that regard.

It is heartening that several councillors shared our concerns about the process which the Council followed on the Simons scheme and we are now hopeful about the potential for a more open process in future. As we go to press, the 19th March deadline for extending the contract is imminent and we understand that Simons is no longer pursuing this.

One lesson seems to be clear: people who are concerned about the future of Hitchin or North Herts need to communicate with all NHDC councillors and provide a calm and clear argument to support our position. After all, we vote for them, so they should be acting in our best interests.

Planning Matters

Adrian Gurney, chair of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, discusses some of its recent work.

Housing Options

NHDC's consultation on the housing options is ending on 28th March, so hopefully members who wanted to respond personally will have done so.

The Planning Group took the issues to two Hitchin Forum Members' Meetings in order to develop a line of argument to defend Hitchin from proposals that members consider would detrimentally affect the town - including the major strategic site on Green Belt land south and west of Hitchin.

We were able to get a slot at the Hitchin Committee on 5th March to explain our position to our councillors. We raised there the suggestion that (in line with government policy) a new settlement should be identified in co-operation with neighbouring councils at a sustainable location with rail connections away

Hitchin Section of the Local Plan

As well as commenting on the Housing Options that will form a vital part of the new Local Plan, the Planning Group has been working hard to put together input to the Hitchin section of the Plan (as agreed with officers at the end of 2012 - see article in January/February edition: <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/NEWSLETTER-Jan-Feb-2013-ws.pdf>).

Again, we have brought the issues to two Members' Meetings this year, and have liaised with Hitchin Initiative, The Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society to bring together specific ideas on: the future of the town centre;

from the most congested part of the district. The presentation was well received by Councillors and was reported in The Comet that week.

Hitchin Forum's response to the consultation can be viewed on our website:
<http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/response-to-housing-options-consultation/>

The aim is to pursue the idea of the new settlement further by liaising with bodies such as the Town and Country Planning Association who have strong links with Ministers, and by ensuring that officers and councillors have information about the steps that could be taken to pursue this option for the current Local Plan. TCPA's 'Local Authority Guide to Garden Cities' is being launched on 26th March, and we hope to use it to continue the discussions.

the specific needs of the town in terms of community facilities, jobs, types of housing and access; and the priorities for improving footpaths, open spaces and the environment. A design workshop is being held on 23rd March to consider opportunities at Paynes Park with the unravelling of the one way system - as an example of what could be achieved.

The final version of our input will be submitted to the Council in the first half of April. We will be offering to continue with some aspects of the work if we and the Council agree that this would be helpful. So there may be further opportunities to be involved over the summer.

Diary Dates

Saturday 6th April: "**Vintage Taste**"; 10am - 2pm, Hitchin Market Place. An opportunity to promote Hitchin Forum's activities. Please let us know if you can help members of our Steering Group on our stall for an hour. email admin@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Thursday 9th May: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting**; Special guest: Rt Hon Peter Lilley, MP.
Further details available nearer the time.

Luton Airport Update

Hitchin Forum Planning Group member, Bill Sellicks, summarises Hitchin Forum's work and the current situation:

Hitchin Forum objected to Luton Airport's plans to increase passenger numbers and flights. The objection letter, submitted to Luton Borough Council, aimed to demonstrate that the proposals fail to satisfy planning requirements because mitigation measures to address noise and traffic congestion are insufficiently robust or non-existent. The letter, its appendices, and the full text of responses from the Airport's consultants Terence O'Rourke to questions about noise mitigation measures (which underpin the objection) are on our website: <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk>.

Both documents were copied to Eric Pickles, local MPs, selected NHDC councillors and officers, including all Hitchin councillors. Most responses have been simple acknowledgments, but Eric Pickles' response came via the National Planning Casework Unit in the form of a statement that *'..... there are also discussions on whether the application should be considered as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP)'*. Perhaps the petition to have the proposals 'called-in' for decision by the Secretary of State may have an effect. At the time of writing, it has 3467 signatures, and it is not too late to sign (see above link to our website).

NHDC Planning Control Committee will consider the results of its consultant's report on the application on 18th April. They have been successful in their request to delay the deadline for their submission. No date has yet been set for the LBC meeting to determine the proposal.

What other opposition has there been? Pressure groups, LADACAN, HALE and others organised a joint meeting at Breachwood Green on 4th February which was very well attended and widely reported. Various campaigning methods were suggested by speakers with considerable experience of campaigning to keep expansion at

other airports under control. BANN (Beds against Night Noise) presented a signed bed at Luton Borough Council offices recently to highlight the night noise issue, which attracted media attention. Apart from these, significant conditions are likely to be imposed on the development, most notably as outlined in submissions from Thames Water, the Environment Agency and the Chilterns Conservation Board.

What now? In the immediate short term, make sure that you sign the petition against night flights. Keep an eye on the HALE and LADACAN websites: <http://www.hale.uk.net/> and <http://www.ladacan.org/> for the latest information and news of events. These pressure groups are very experienced in opposing developments at the airport and publicising their activities. Finally, at both of our recent members' meetings, instances of aircraft noise over Hitchin were mentioned, and one member has lodged a complaint with the airport. The airport's noise reports show few complaints from Hitchin, so increasing the number of complaints (and complainants) will help to demonstrate that there is an impact here.

Links to the night flight petition, (currently 749 signatures) relevant websites, and details of how to complain by e-mail and phone appear on our website: <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk>

Finally, there have been recent reports that the airport operator, Abertis, is putting the airport up for sale. It is unclear what effect this will have on the current proposals, with some saying that they will be thrown into chaos. Others express concern that, should a more aggressive buyer be found, proposals for an even more rapid expansion could result.

An Even Better Town Hall & Museum

Hitchin Forum recently supported an application to extend the entrance to the new Town Hall and Museum complex by demolishing a second shop next to the building. The frontage will be improved, providing better access to various areas from the foyer, with extra space created for a larger local study area and museum storage, which in turn frees up space behind the stage for community use.

Top Field: Charity begins . . . ?

By John Keene, a member of the Save Top Field Campaign Committee:

We have recently heard that Hitchin Town Community Football Club, a section of Hitchin Town Football Club, has been active in promoting football and other sports activities among local youth, providing playing and coaching facilities at the Arena in Baldock.

Their philosophy is that participation in healthy and positive activities enhances self-esteem and confidence, thereby reducing youth crime. They have been working with organisations including Herts CC Youth Connexions, Angels Support

Group, Child UK and the North Herts Ethnic Minority Forum. This all seems rather laudable.

On the other hand, we have the Hitchin Cow Commoners Trust, a charity, which has been working with New Road Developments Ltd to remove the football club to St Ippolyts, breach our green belt and install a supermarket on Top Field, thereby endangering local and town centre shops.

Hmm, who are the good guys here?

"Befriending Butts Close"

Hitchin Forum member and local resident, Tony Riley, documents the resurrection of The Friends of Butts Close:

John Jarvis, who sadly died a year ago this month, used to keep a careful eye on Council plans and on other developments that impinged upon Butts Close. Hitchin Forum has convened a small group of members to take over this watching brief. The 'Friends of Butts Close' are Stuart Howarth, John Keene, Helen Reason and Tony Riley.

Stuart has been digesting the voluminous documents and articles that were held by John Jarvis and by Hitchin Forum, and although he hasn't found Henry VIII's archery scorecard just yet, there is still time...

However, the more recent discussions and concerns include:

- * creating a wildflower meadow – achieved
- * getting a lifesaver ring by the pond – achieved
- * the issue of tree replacement – a satisfactory outcome
- * NHDC plans for extending the swimming pool car park – plans that are now, we think, in abeyance.

Hopefully the recent designation of Butts Close as a Conservation Area will help us to protect it.

We plan to use an occasional email newsletter to communicate. We are asking residents local to Butts Close, members of Hitchin Forum, and others who are interested to sign up for this and get involved. Tony will manage the account at buttsclose@gmail.com.

Message from the Membership Secretary:

Maureen Carroll writes: Thank you to all those who renewed their membership so promptly; just a few are still outstanding. If we have not already received your renewal, another form is enclosed, and it would be much appreciated if you would complete it and return it with your subscription as soon as possible.

We are pleased to report that since the AGM we have been joined by nine new members, including Margaret Gregory, Nigel Hall, Stuart

Howarth, Sheila Merryweather, Helen Reason and Bill Sellicks.

Do please spread the word and encourage like-minded friends and family to join. No pressure will ever be put on any members to become more actively involved than they choose or have time for – we know that many just like to be kept informed - but the more people we represent, the louder a voice we are to listen to. Application forms are available on our website.

Love Hitchin - Pick Up on Litter: 5th May, 2013

Ellie Clarke organised the town-wide clean-up last year and explains what is hoped for 2013:

Last year, Hitchin Forum launched a town-wide campaign - *Love Hitchin - pick up on litter!* - to spruce up Hitchin for the Jubilee. At the end of May, nearly 100 volunteers carried out a big clean-up of litter in Hitchin. They included members of Hitchin Forum as well as many local residents who just wanted to clear up litter hotspots in their areas. We tackled the river at Cadwell, footpaths around the town, service yards in the town centre, nature reserves and their local neighbourhood 'backlands'.

It was a huge success, with support from Hitchin Initiative who provided publicity and a dozen 'litter-pickers' for us to use, and North Herts District Council's Serviceteam who gave us lots of black rubbish bags to fill and collected them efficiently afterwards.

Several of you who joined in the effort told us how satisfying it was to do something practical. Many asked when the next one would be so we are organising another town clean-up this year, **on Sunday 5th May**. We are suggesting a two-hour slot again, **from 10am - 12 noon**, but people are free to do the job anytime around that date.

Ellie Clarke and Judith Gurney will be co-ordinating the efforts and if you would like to help with organising or have suggestions to make, please contact us at: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk. We hope to exceed what we achieved last year, so please don your gloves and join us!

Triangle Residents' Association - a report by its Committee

At the AGM of the Triangle Residents' Association on 4th February it was decided that as there were no burning issues and no one with spare time had emerged to take over, it was appropriate to close down the organisation. It had been a member of Hitchin Forum since its inception but had been dormant for the last few years.

The Association was formed in 2001 by NHDC in response partly to concerns about the rapid conversion of houses into hostels in the area. It has been responsible for improvement of play areas, new pedestrian crossings on Nightingale and Verulam Roads, the one-way system in Dacre and Radcliffe Roads, restoration of gates and railings in Ransom's Rec and tree planting, all of which have greatly enhanced the area. A parking scheme has been evolved with a great deal of help from members. Trustees were encouraged to restore central heating to the Cloisters.

As well as moderating new building developments, its members worked tirelessly to produce a Planning Brief for such developments, the first of its kind to have been recognised by

NHDC. It assisted in local adoption of the police Neighbourhood Watch scheme and Online Watch Link. Two local organisations, the Triangle History Group (an offshoot of the TRA) and the Triangle Community Garden (founded at about the same time as the TRA) are still very active and association funds remaining have been distributed to these organisations. The committee recognised the excellent work done by Hitchin Forum and recommended membership to residents.

The TRA has organised parties and jolly seaside coach trips, hosted many worthwhile and enjoyable speakers at its meetings and for many years produced an excellent newsletter distributed free to all homes as well as maintaining a website with active links. TRA always aimed to improve understanding amongst the varied faiths, between different age groups and sections of the community. Its meetings resulted in a wonderful mix of cultures and new and lasting friendships.

There is no doubt that it is partly thanks to the TRA that a valuable sense of community now exists.