

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

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Chairman's Piece

NHDC's (North Hertfordshire District Council's) Transport Strategy is an interesting document. Published in October last year, it appeared far too late for comment in HTAG's (Hitchin Town Action Group's) submission on the Local Plan almost a year earlier. It is closely related to Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC's) Transport Vision 2050 on which the Forum commented and to which the Strategy frequently refers.

It would be fair to say that those of us who read HCC's Transport Vision felt it to be almost utopian. We reflected that, since it was working towards an end state over 30 years away, this was not that surprising. An unsatisfactory feature of HCC's Vision was that it had little to say about North Hertfordshire, focussing instead on the larger centres of population to the south of the county.

NHDC's Strategy, on the other hand, is local. The Strategy 'sits alongside' the Local Plan, which makes the document more immediate than HCC's Vision, since the end date is 2031. However, the building of new roads is recognised to be at best a temporary solution to congestion and indeed can exacerbate it.

Whilst the provision of parking within new developments is recognised as necessary, reducing parking provision at destination in order to deter car use is desirable. Those backing the provision of extra parking at Hitchin Swimming Centre take note – leisure destinations are specifically mentioned!

Given that a quarter of commuting trips originating in Hitchin are to destinations within the town, walking, cycling and public transport are to be prioritised. A Sustainable Travel Planner is to be appointed, with a budget to develop behaviour change measures, working closely with District Council, County Council, the National Health Service, schools, colleges and the rail operator. The 'Strategy Elements' for Hitchin include the assumption that speeds will be limited to 20 mph on most roads and that the Highover development will be linked to the rest of the town by bus, cycle and walking routes.

The Strategy was prepared for NHDC by consultants Markides Associates. Their authors issue a disclaimer in which they refer to the document as a 'report'. Assuming that this is not simply something that should have been omitted or re-worded in the final version of the Strategy, this raises a number of questions. Just what is the document's status? If it is a report, are many of its positive elements doomed to be kicked into the long grass as either unworkable or unaffordable? Does it require ratification by the Council? Will Simon Berkeley, the Inspector presiding over the Local Plan Examination, have anything to say on these issues? There are many elements of the strategy document with which I agree and hope to see implemented. I hope I will not be disappointed.

Bill Sellicks

NHDC Transport Strategy

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/files/ed14-nhdc-transport-strategy-october-2017pdf-0>

HCC Transport Vision 2050

<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/about-the-council/consultations/tv2050-consultation-report.pdf>

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North Hitchin 20mph Scheme

I have written before about the outrage expressed by drivers at any hint that their right to speed could be curtailed. Some months ago, my brother-in-law (a self-confessed 'petrol head') told me that the traffic situation in Brighton was 'a mess', due to the wide implementation of a 20mph speed limit. I have not visited Brighton lately, and he may be right, but he does not often get out of his car. I would like to know how the traffic situation is perceived by Brighton residents who walk or cycle.

It is now almost a year since the final signs indicating the Bearton/north Hitchin 20mph zone were installed. Over the past year, I have not heard local residents complaining about the new limit, but I am going deaf and maybe I haven't spent sufficient time (or any) on Facebook! For what they are worth, my subjective impressions are mixed. I still see many vehicles travelling at well over 30mph, especially on the stretch of Bearton Road between Old Hale Way and Bedford Road which I cross or cycle along several times each day. I would also say that there are plenty of drivers who observe the 20mph limit. Only the most cautious would have travelled that slowly before the limit was introduced.

Councillor Judi Billing tells me that average speeds have indeed decreased. What is more, the decrease is such that the scheme is to be expanded to include Periwinkle Lane. This is great news. The acid test for me is the extent to which pedestrians and cyclists feel safe, and most importantly, whether parents have the confidence to allow their children to walk or cycle to school so that walking and cycling become the norm. If, as NHDC's Transport Strategy suggests, 20mph zones are established throughout the town on most roads, and that contributes to an uptake of walking and cycling, that would be fantastic.

Bill Sellicks

Churchgate Update

Our recent newsletters have reported on discussions at the Examination in Public (EiP) about the Council's intentions for the future of Churchgate. For more than a decade the Council has remained firmly in the land of extreme speculation. Their view that more shops are needed, in the form of a huge expansion of Churchgate and development on St Mary's Square, Biggin Lane and Portmill Lane car parks, was supported at the EiP by retail planning consultants. It now appears that this might change, with some retail common sense brought to bear.

Since April last year, the Shearer Property Group (SPG) has been in talks with Hammersmatch, the current leaseholder of Churchgate (NHDC is the freeholder). In September discussions began about NHDC and the Shearer Group working together and a report on a potential joint venture opportunity went to Full Council in early February.

The much-needed regeneration of Churchgate was never going to be simple. How to carry this out with tenants in the shops, how to manage the Market's functioning during works and the impact on the rest of the town all have to be considered. A complete redevelopment over a wider area would create even more problems, not least for the Market and for car parking. The developers would also need to consider the impact on the town and its retail viability during the construction phase, as well as ensuring an appropriate design of such a wholesale redevelopment alongside its integration into the Conservation Area. What is now being considered looks more realistic and, at least at face value, more manageable - if properly managed!

The Council report states that discussions with SPG have considered both developer-led regeneration and joint venture opportunities and states: *"SPG have stressed the importance of investment by the Council in the public realm and market in order to complement a regenerated shopping centre."* This is an important and much welcome reality check.

However, SPG have concluded that a developer-led regeneration is not financially viable because of the rates they could borrow at and the returns that they would need from an investment. SPG also pointed out that the Council can borrow at cheaper rates and ultimately would benefit from the wider regeneration, so might receive an acceptable financial return. The report does not mention the very high ground rent being levied by the Council which is also a disincentive to a developer-led regeneration.

We are not in a position to second-guess the financial underpinning of all this, but the proposal being considered is a regeneration of Churchgate on its existing footprint with a new frontage to Market Place, a new roof and some re-configuration of the shops *"to make them suitable for the targeted tenants"*. These are described as *"a mix of food and beverage operators and aspirational / lifestyle retailers with some smaller units currently remaining earmarked for existing tenants"*.

The report points out that the Market has lacked significant investment for years and this is an opportunity to invest in it, re-invigorating it so it is suitable for the future. There would also be investment in the surrounding area, with a suggestion of creating *"a new public space"* between Churchgate and the Market, moving the Market towards Queen Street.

There is much to welcome here, but there are also matters of concern. Clearly **design** is an issue: redesigning the Market Place frontage is welcome and provides an opportunity to move the frontage back to the original building line, reduce its horizontal impact and create something that sits more comfortably in the Conservation Area. **Hitchin Market** is pivotal in this: moving it away from the retail centre of gravity is not a good idea, and any "new public space" should be focussed on the river, not on separating Churchgate and the Market. There is also considerable pressure on the Council to reconsider its original proposal to take management of the Market back in-house. **Project management** is crucial and the Council clearly does not have this expertise. **Investment** is badly needed, but should it be funded entirely by the Council? **Public consultation** with the business community, Hitchin Market and Hitchin residents must begin immediately; protestations about commercial confidentiality must not override such an important issue for the town.

There are many issues to consider and we will undoubtedly be discussing these in future Hitchin Forum members' meetings and with other groups in the town. In the meantime, you can access the Council report on our website so please read it and begin formulating some of your own ideas! We want to hear them!

Ellie Clarke

The Big Hitchin Spring Clean

By the time you read this, our 'litter day' will have taken place, but as we go to press, it is looking to be a huge success again with over 60 volunteers already booked in to clear up a dozen sites. Interestingly, we have far more newcomers this year who, from their emails to me, are passionate about dealing with litter in and around Hitchin. More people are volunteering earlier on, with several people finding out about the event from social media which is encouraging.

Year on year we also have an increasing number of children and young people wanting to join, prompting us to invest in more children's' "T-Rex Graptor" litter pickers. We continue to work closely with the Council who provide extra litter pickers, collection bags, and prompt collection of all the rubbish from the various sites. Hitchin Initiative also give us publicity and insurance cover. All we need now is good weather!

Ellie Clarke

Footpaths

Some of you will be aware that since 2013, with the help of other Forum members, I have compiled a six-monthly report on Hitchin's footpaths to be sent to Nicholas Maddex, Hertfordshire's Countryside Access Officer for North Hertfordshire. There have been a number of benefits (although I cannot claim sole responsibility for any of these) including a hand rail in St John's Path, improvements to the verge along the short section of the HOOP between the Wymondley Road / St Michael's Road roundabout and Coot's Corner, and the replacement of part of a dangerously leaning wall near the rear entrance to Wilshere Dacre School.

I would have been due to complete my next report at the end of February, but a number of factors have caused me to adopt a different approach. The first is that, for several reports, I have not been able to identify any significant problem that is within Nicholas's remit – surfaces, borders and structures. That is not because there have been none, but because I have tended to contact him on an ad hoc basis about problems as they arise. Secondly, Hertfordshire has re-structured its Rights of Way unit by merging it with the Countryside Management Service. A consequence of the change is that there will be a greater emphasis on a wider range of volunteers, including in surveying roles. As a result, I volunteered and attended an excellent training session in February, and am waiting to hear how I can help.

We still have a Countryside Access Officer, who is now Tom Goldsmith. I am sure that Forum members would join me in expressing our thanks to Nicholas for his efforts on our behalf. I will let you know more when I have heard what my role will be. In the meantime, please do continue to contact me about footpath issues at footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Bill Sellicks

Members' Meeting – Tues February 27th

The big freeze did not stop thirty members congregating to hear Keith Hoskins' swan song as the Town Centre Manager, in which role he has combined the Business Improvement District (BID) and Hitchin Initiative responsibilities. He expressed great joy that Tom Hardy will now manage the BID, while Keith pursues a number of projects that the Initiative has had in its sights over the past few years. Tom's first big task is to steer the 2018 BID application to obtain future funding for the next five years. The BID and the Initiative now have some new directors, and a 'champions group' of younger business people hoping to help Hitchin prosper.

Keith started his talk by quoting the Nina Simone lyrics – It's a new dawn, it's a new day... Sadly he did not sing. This was the first time I have felt a twinge of disappointment at his performance. However, we cannot complain about the rest of his twenty odd years – he has done so much so well. But what next?

Keith described his own aims – to complete a number of projects, viz:

- to increase Initiative membership and fund raising,
- to gain agreement for the use of the Dell as an outdoor performance space,
- to get station access sorted – so that people do not have to struggle under the bridge when approaching or leaving to the east (important both for college students and commuters),
- to continue to build on the very successful Hitchin Festival programme,
- to see the river walkway finally opened (Bridge Street to the market, via Jill Grey Place),
- to improve the 'public realm', ie. to keep the pavements and street furniture looking good, and maybe getting to grips with overflowing gutters and jungles of wiring on our buildings,
- Churchgate is on Keith's agenda, and now the Council has pencilled in some possibilities,
- a Town Council!

The last point was followed up with a presentation by Margaret Eddleston on the subject. Margaret presented information from various towns and counties as they try to make local government more relevant and effective, having had the last reorganisation 44 years ago. It is not a smooth or universally popular option to pursue, and would ideally be combined with a reorganisation so that the county and district councils were replaced with a few unitary authorities, and each town having its own council. It seems that there is no surge of support for such changes in the county yet, with both Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities having abandoned town councils in the past, but soon it may be a new day, and a new dawn..... There is much to value in such a change and Margaret will be working on the possibility of this new civic life! See Margaret's article below for more details.

Mike Clarke

A Town Council for Hitchin

Why?

A town council would:

- give the town an elected representative voice,
- be a flag bearer for Hitchin - promoting community action and activities, safeguarding its traditions, character and identity,
- have a right to be consulted on planning matters,
- have the power to challenge and deliver better services,
- have the ability to enhance, improve or save threatened services or facilities,
- be able to raise a precept and prioritise spending on local needs and residents' choices,
- use the right to list Assets of Community Value and could step in to help save them,
- have the ability to access funding **not** available to district councils.

How?

There are two stages:

- first, through an online petition to NHDC signed by 7.5% of Hitchin residents prompting a local governance review,
- then, by a majority vote of residents in the subsequent ballot/consultation.

Other considerations

The usual objection to town councils is that they cost more and add another level of bureaucracy. Hitchin is currently represented by the Hitchin Committee. This body has virtually no powers and meets only four times a year. Replacing it with a town council would enable initial savings of £13700 per annum and give power and decision making to residents, who would have more clout with the District Council. Town councillors receive no remuneration.

Much work would need to be done between the time the petition is lodged and the following ballot of residents. There is a wealth of willing help available in the town to ensure success.

Local government is under great financial pressure and change is coming, although Hertfordshire seems to be lagging behind in this. Town councils will become more and more important during the next few years and Hitchin needs to be ready to influence, respond and adapt to these changes for the benefit of the town and its future.

Margaret Eddleston

Congestion and Pollution

One concern about the draft Local Plan is the increasing traffic congestion which will result if all of the proposed new housing is built. In addition, further expansion at Luton Airport and development at the adjacent New Century Park are likely to throw even more traffic onto the A505/A602 route through Hitchin. There is also the potential for a future Luton Northern bypass to direct more traffic from the M1 and A6 our way. While congestion is a problem in its own right, high traffic volumes also contribute to poor air quality, as found in the two Hitchin Air Quality Management Areas in Stevenage Road and at the Paynes Park roundabout. Of particular concern are the nitrogen dioxide and small particles (PM2.5) emitted, particularly by older diesel engines.

Congestion is not a new problem and it affects almost every urban area. Although the problem seems intractable, there is much agreement among those who have studied it about solutions, as well as about those measures likely to be ineffective or provide only short-term answers. Trying to satisfy demand for road capacity, by building or widening roads, modifying junctions and so on, can often bring only partial or short-term relief. People quickly adapt their lifestyles to use the new road space, and this induced demand ensures that congestion returns. More permanent solutions need to incorporate a modal shift, which means travelling less by car, more by public transport and active means (walking or cycling). The reduction in traffic does not need to be huge to make a significant improvement, as happens during school holidays in Hitchin. If the solution is so straightforward, the obvious question is why does it not happen?

Firstly, cars are very convenient and it is notoriously difficult to persuade people to travel differently. Some encouragement is needed. However, when the Blair government put forward ideas for road-pricing, a petition objecting to the idea quickly received over a million signatures. The government backed off. One commentator has described the situation in the UK as a "boorish motoring lobby defending its right to sit in unpriced gridlock." A little unkind perhaps, but it summarises the problem quite neatly.

Secondly, the alternatives need to be good. Public transport needs considerable investment if it is to be an attractive alternative. After years of cuts to bus services there is a lot of ground to make up. There is unlikely to be a large shift to cycling unless good quality facilities are provided: traffic calming, segregated lanes where possible, and safe routes through dangerous junctions. Again, this will not be cheap. A few cycle lanes painted on the road will not do.

Recent HCC and NHDC planning and strategy documents talk of modal shift, but will anything significant happen? Councils are good at preparing plans, policies and strategies, but not so good at putting them into practice, particularly when they are short of money. The 1999 North Hertfordshire's Cycle Route Survey has now been sitting on the shelf for the best part of two decades with virtually no action being taken.

So the steps needed to tackle our congestion problem are well understood. All that is necessary is a change in public attitude to the car, a large supply of money, considerable political will and joined-up thinking across all levels of government. Enough said.

There is perhaps more hope that pollution will be tackled by measures such as clean air zones and diesel scrappage. The government has just been sued successfully for a third time by the environmental activists ClientEarth over its failure to tackle illegal levels of air pollution. However, it would be a little more comforting if our government did not need to be pursued through the courts to comply with EU legislation designed to reduce the estimated 40,000 premature deaths caused by air pollution across the country each year. The Environment, Health, Transport and Environmental Audit parliamentary committees are also demanding a new Clean Air Act, and a clean air fund financed by the motor industry.

Dave Borner