

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER
Nov/Dec 2015 No. 132

Chairman's Piece

First, let me say that it is an honour to be elected Chairman of Hitchin Forum. It was your former Chairman, Mike Clarke, who recruited me to Hitchin Forum, when I made the mistake of sounding-off about airport noise in the swimming pool changing rooms. I was immediately brought onto the Planning Group and joined the Steering Group in the summer of last year.

One of Mike's many strengths has been his ability to write entertainingly about Hitchin issues in his Chairman's Pieces. I doubt that I can match his insight, literary skill or humour, but hope that I will improve my offerings over time. I thought I would start my first piece by saying a little about what is important to me about Hitchin.

Although I moved to Hitchin in 1984, it was the impression created by a brief first visit some years earlier that drew me back. The mix of attractive, well-preserved historic buildings and the network of ancient paths and alleyways has always sustained my interest. Sadly, the effect has been marred by poor quality developments such as Churchgate - let us hope that there will be progress on that soon.

I value easy access to all parts of the town and surrounding countryside on foot and by bicycle. Unfortunately, as a cyclist, one has to be very confident of one's abilities to have the courage to take to our roads. Traffic speed, congestion and the resultant pollution are therefore major concerns of mine. We also have facilities such as our swimming centre, clubs providing a wide range of activities for all ages and a variety of public green spaces for informal recreation. I hope that the final version of the Draft Local Plan will contain strong provisions to maintain and improve the health of communities and to preserve high quality green spaces. In this respect, an encouraging development recently has been the willingness of the Countryside Management Service to engage us in consultations - on Cadwell Lane and most recently on Butts Close - please read Tony Riley's excellent account of the latter on page 4 of this newsletter.

Our recent AGM was well-attended and was followed by an informative and interesting presentation in which Councillor David Levett gave a personal view on a range of issues to do with the draft Local Plan and answered questions. Earlier, I had acknowledged, on behalf of our members, the massive contribution made by Mike and Ellie Clarke. I hope that you will forgive me for repeating some of my comments here for the benefit of those who were unable to attend.

Mike has presented the Forum view on issues from Churchgate and Bancroft to 20mph zones, and developed the Forum's impressive website and social media presence. Ellie, a founder member of the Forum, has been a tireless campaigner. She is reducing her responsibilities, but will continue to edit the Newsletter for the moment. At the AGM, we made a presentation to both Mike and Ellie, and I was delighted to be able to announce that Mike has accepted the role of President and that both are to be made Honorary Life Members of the Forum in recognition of their commitment and hard work.

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Founded 1992

Chairman: Bill Sellicks
President: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

Finally, Jeremy Burrowes is standing down as Treasurer after 17 years. Our thanks go to him for his efficiency and incisive contribution to the work of Steering Group. Jeremy will be succeeded by Ken Chapman who comes to us with a background in banking and charity work over many years. Ken's experience and expertise is typical of that of members of our Steering and Planning Groups. It is a privilege, if a little daunting, to work with them and now to be the Chairman of what is a very effective community organisation. I hope I can live up to expectations as your Chairman - it will not be dull!

Bill Sellicks, Chairman

The Big Hitchin Autumn Clean Up

Once again Hitchin came under attack a few weeks ago when around 90 volunteers, young and old, gave up their time to wage the war against litter . . .

Between them they managed to fill a staggering 100+ black sacks full of rubbish! We are now in our fifth year of organising twice-yearly clean up events and this time managed to tackle 13 sites around the town.

These included residential streets such as Common Rise, Cambridge Road, St Michaels Road, Walsworth Road, Fishponds Road and Nightingale Road, as well as large recreation grounds such as Ransom's Rec, Butts Close, Benslow Field and Purwell playing fields.

Passing motorists travelling along the Park Way bypass may have seen the more mature generation picking up rubbish, whilst on the other side of town, a large group of our younger generation, Girl Guides and Brownies, were beavering away in The Dell. Local schoolchildren from Wilshere Dacre Academy and Purwell School also gave up their Sunday morning to take part in this worthwhile event.

A common thought amongst our volunteers was that although the streets looked cleaner than they did back in April at our last event, it seems that Hitchin still has a big litter problem.

As well as the usual cans, bottles, food wrappers, hub caps, bottle tops and cigarette butts, an adult mountain bike, a crossbow arrow, a rotary clothes drier, a toilet seat and an almost new garden rake were found! A working mobile phone with messages on it and a knife were retrieved from The Dell and handed in to Stevenage police station.

The most unusual find came at the end of the morning when a small soft toy bunny was found near McDonalds. We called him Flurry; he looked sad and lost so I took him home for a wash and a hot bunny meal and advertised my find on the facebook site, 'We are from Hitchin'. Little did I know that I would have two would-be owners contact me both saying they thought Flurry belonged to them. I am pleased to say that one of these was the rightful owner so now Flurry is back safe and sound with his two year old owner!

Hitchin Forum organises the clean ups, but this could not happen without the many willing volunteers who turn out so enthusiastically, Hitchin Initiative who provide us with insurance cover, the Friends of Walsworth Common who loan us litter pickers, and NHDC who provide litter pickers and hi-viz tabards. Equally important, NHDC's contractors collect the rubbish promptly the next day.

In a particularly positive move, we are now in discussion with the Council about the frequency of their regular street cleaning, litter picking and bin emptying regimes, to explore whether Hitchin can be even cleaner and tidier through working together more closely.

More information about the event and photos of the day are on the Hitchin Forum website: www.hitchinforum.org.uk

Lynne Maylin

Local Plan Discussions

We were very pleased to welcome NHDC's Portfolio Holder for Planning & Enterprise to our October AGM to talk to us about progress with the Local Plan.

Cllr David Levett made clear that the views he would be expressing were his own and not those of NHDC. He began by praising the response that *Hitchin Town Action Group* (Hitchin Forum, The Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society, with support from Hitchin Initiative) made to the Preferred Options Report (POR) last February, and said that some of the policy proposals we made will be finding their way into the Draft Plan next year.

Housing Figures

The latest housing figures suggest an additional 2,000 homes are needed above those being considered at the beginning of the year. He is pursuing with government officials the points raised by us about the lack of evidence to suggest that North Herts is experiencing unusually high market pressures. In any case, he would prefer that NHDC should stick with the figures from the POR: he does not see that it is appropriate to take even more Green Belt land, and the reasons for excluding sites such as Priory Fields have not changed. So why should they suddenly become suitable?

Policies

Councillor Levett made it clear that he thinks that some additional and strengthened policies are essential to the Plan, and is looking to cover:

1. Cumulative impact of development, to deal with issues such as the joint traffic implications of the two recent separate applications at the cricket ground and the former Hitchin Hospital site.
2. Integration of health (as well as other infrastructure) and the strengthening of the reference to master planning and design principles to ensure implementation of

supporting infrastructure and high quality development.

3. Strengthened provision for affordable housing, by extending use of a 'local residents' condition currently used only for villages, and possibly by pursuing the opportunity for NHDC to use its capital resources to build affordable rented homes for local people.

4. Greater emphasis on the need for economic development and local employment, to enable people to live and work in the District - with specific reference to implementation of the Economic Development Strategy, and to the need for improved access to the Wilbury employment area via Stotfold Road.

5. A stronger and clearer vision statement for the District as one where people will want to live and in which they will take pride; and where they and their children will want and be able to stay. Councillor Levett asked for additional suggestions for wording: Hitchin Forum is working with other HTAG members to review our coverage of vision in our response to the POR, and provide fuller input.

Next Steps

Councillor Levett said that he was expecting the Draft Plan to be considered at Council on 21st January 2016. (*Note: this date was changed to July 2016 at the November Cabinet meeting*). He is keen that we also start thinking of needs and solutions beyond 2031. A feasibility study has begun on the appropriate scales and locations for a garden city, with collaboration from the Town & Country Planning Association.

Adrian Gurney

North Hertfordshire College Redevelopment Proposals

Hitchin Forum's Planning Group wrote to NHDC commenting on an application to redevelop the college site at Walsworth crossroads:

The application proposes 85 new dwellings in six new three- and four-storey blocks of flats, together with two terraces of three-storey houses and associated parking, landscaping, access etc.

Hitchin Forum did not object to the principle of residential development on this site, but considered several concerns raised by the application and that we should object to it. The key concerns were as follows.

Originally Walsworth was a village but now it has been incorporated into the town. However, it still has a recognisable identity of two-storey, street-fronting development in red brick with slate roofs. The site is located at the heart of this "village" and we considered the proposals did not reflect this context in terms of their form and materials.

An NHDC urban design assessment from 2007 considered the character of this part of Walsworth and recommended two-storey or three-storey terraced housing for sites of this type. The assessment also considered that the boundaries of development here should respect the close vicinity of open countryside. We felt the proposed development of three- and four-storey blocks of flats to be at variance with this assessment and to be out of scale.

We were particularly concerned that no on-site affordable housing is proposed. This omission is possible due to recent changes in planning legislation which encourage redevelopment of vacant premises. Hitchin Forum's planning group considered that, in the light of the shortage of residential development land in sustainable locations such as this one, and the pressing need for affordable housing, the funding needs of the College and financial out-turn for the developer should take second place to a substantial affordable housing provision.

We were also concerned about the large numbers of small flats that have been built in Hitchin and the need for more accommodation for families. We therefore objected to the fact that the internal floor areas of the proposed flats are well under those thought necessary for families by the Greater London Authority and the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Several other issues were raised in our letter which is on our website:
<http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/walsworth-cross-roads-housing-plans/>

Anthony Cole

Butts Close Greenspace Action Plan (GAP)

In our last newsletter, we reported on the Cadwell Lane GAP being prepared. Now NHDC has commissioned Countryside Management Services to prepare another.

Last year North Herts District Council commissioned CMS to draw up and deliver a five-year *Greenspace Action Plan* for Butts Close, allocating £30,000 for this work. In October a group of us spent a morning with the lead CMS Officer, Andrew Taylor, walking round the Close to identify what work might be put into the GAP. We submitted our findings and views to him, identifying six main areas:

Historical interpretation - boards or plinths at each end of the central path could carry a summary of the history of Butts Close;

The Pond - the eastern end of the pond remains a muddy mess, with debris but no vegetation, and this needs some decisions to be made about making this worthy of the Conservation Area;

The central wilderness area - we liked this space and suggested that it could be planted with wildflowers;

Trees and bushes around the perimeter - these all needed work to ensure healthy growth;

Furniture - decisions were needed on the type of litter bins and benches, and on their maintenance;

Cyclical management - we felt that above all, any improvements would be lost if there was no long term plan for management of the Close on a regular basis.

The Friends of Butts Close November Newsletter contains the full text of the submission to Andrew Taylor and is on Hitchin Forum's website: <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/> We are now awaiting the draft GAP for formal public consultation.

Tony Riley for *Friends of Butts Close*

Bancroft Recreation Ground Enhancement Update

Following the failure of the Heritage Lottery Bid, NHDC is now looking to stage some of the improvements over several years.

Having moved on from the failed Lottery Fund bid, the Council produced a revised work programme for the Cabinet meeting on November 10th. Individual works proposed were listed and ranked in priority with some costing, demonstrating that work is being considered carefully. Much of the revised plan seems desirable and will clearly enhance the Recreation Ground. Cabinet has now approved funding which will bring a splash park, an extended play area for older children, toilet facilities and a 'multi-use games area' (or MUGA) which may be used for soccer, basketball and tennis. All good.

However there remain a few caveats.

The MUGA does require a grant to add to the allocated Council monies. It is hoped this will come from Sport England - a body whose aim is to have 'more people playing more sport more often'. We wish the Council well in seeking that.

I spoke at the Cabinet meeting about the plan to remove the old public tennis courts - now scheduled for 2016-17. The previous proposals were labelled a 'Masterplan' and approved by the Cabinet. But that 'Masterplan' was developed in the context of making a bid for Heritage Lottery 'Parks for People' funding, and some elements were shaped for that bid. For example, the 'Parks for People' application had to demonstrate that there would be more greenery and less tarmac. Perhaps this was why the signage for Bancroft Recreation Ground was suddenly changed to "Bancroft Gardens" without any public consultation, implying an intention by the Council that the Recreation Ground should become a park. It also resulted in a proposal to remove all four public tennis courts with the area being landscaped.

The 'Masterplan' was, in fact, an 'Initial Design Proposal', prepared by BDP, the design contractors employed by the Council. During our various meetings with them, they recognized the concern about the loss of open access public tennis courts. They said that if the first phase of

the bid was successful, they would try to assess the use of those courts as that had never been measured. The bid failed, the continued deterioration of the courts led to their closure, and now no study of their use is possible.

The suggested use of the tennis club courts for open access is theoretically possible, but it is a flawed plan:

- the club must be careful to ensure access has some controls;
- the booking system in place means that there is no 'turn up and walk on' prospect;
- demand will be highest when the club courts are already being used for matches.

The MUGA design has not yet been revealed, and how that will work out is uncertain. I suggested a compromise, that the old courts be retained until the MUGA is being used, and then decide if public demand warrants refurbishing rather than removing the old courts. Whilst I live in hope that plans may change, the Cabinet voted to proceed with the removal. Arguments that they must stick to the 'Masterplan', despite other parts having been abandoned already, and that tennis is only a minority sport and should not take up so much space on the recreation ground, sounded inadequate as justifications to jettison a little flexibility.

There is also a problem for the future of the bowls club. Their age profile is higher than most sporting clubs. When they have matches people have to carry heavy bowls to the green, and parking nearby is desirable. Currently they mostly park next to the pavilion. That is deemed unsafe and Cabinet decided that any temporary allocated parking in the adjoining public car park was an impossible dream. The bowls club predict that without some compromise they will not survive.

Less tennis, no bowls, where is the sporting chance for a compromise?

Mike Clarke

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group

At our AGM, the following were elected to our Steering Group for 2015/2016:

Dave Borner - originally from London, Dave has lived in Hitchin since 1987. He works as an engineer in the oil industry, and takes a particular interest in energy and transport matters. A long standing Forum member, he first joined Steering Group in 2006 and is **Vice Chairman**. He would like to see local transport policy being friendlier to residents and the environment, with better facilities for cyclists and pedestrians. He is interested in preserving Hitchin's unique character.

Maureen Carroll - has been Hitchin Forum's **Membership Secretary** since 2003. Originally from north London, she has lived in Hitchin since 1978. Having retired from teaching in various Enfield primary schools, she continues to be involved in education, but now as a member of the volunteer team at the British Schools Museum in Queen Street, delivering Victorian and WW2-style lessons to visiting school and adult groups.

Ken Chapman - worked for Barclays Bank for many years, all over the country and abroad, moving to Hitchin in 1995. Since leaving Barclays, he has worked in the charity sector both as a volunteer and at "Futurebuilders", a government fund set up to make loans to charities. He was treasurer of Living Streets, the UK charity for everyday walking, for 8 years and is still a director of its trading company. He is our **Treasurer**.

Mike Clarke - having been chairman and website administrator for the past five years, he has become even more familiar with all of Hitchin's nooks and crannies, and remains keen to support all efforts to ensure that sensible changes enhance where we live. He is our **President**.

Adrian Gurney - has retired from working in the strategic planning division of a major planning consultancy, remains a member of the London Sustainable Development Commission and the Town and Country Planning Association. He is currently exploring ideas for research on the future of cities with the Royal Society of Arts. He is **Chair of our Planning Group**.

Judith Gurney - has lived more than half of her married life in Hertfordshire, moving with Adrian to Hitchin in 2000. She is now retired but taught almost all ages during her working life. She has taken an active role in her local neighbourhood group. She is **Minutes Secretary** to the Steering Group.

Chris Honey - has been a member of Hitchin Forum since 1996, attends the Planning group and comments on green issues. He is a designer (that's not just an occupation but a total lifestyle) who has improved the HF logo plus visual aspects of the website and publicity. He has a passion for maintaining what is good about Hitchin and only accepting excellent development alongside it.

John Keene - has lived in Hitchin for 41 years, is now retired and spent most of his working life in the advertising industry. Keen by name and keen by nature, John is very involved in most of our campaigns.

Bill Sellicks - is a retired chemistry teacher who moved to Hitchin in 1984 and is our **Chairman**. A keen walker and cyclist, he would like to promote greater use of Hitchin's network of footpaths to reduce congestion on our roads, and see improved facilities for cyclists. He is concerned about development in the greenbelt, and the impact of Luton airport on the town and surrounding villages.

Andrew Wearmouth - was born in Hitchin and has always lived locally. He is a Chartered Surveyor with 40 years of experience in local government, for the last 20 of which he was Head of Estates at St Albans City and District Council.