

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

July/August 2016 No. 136

Chairman's Piece

Returning from a visit to the Peak District and York to meet the Newsletter print deadline, I find Hitchin transformed. A brief tour of the town centre, main streets and Windmill Hill shows Hitchin at its best, with spectacular flower displays, eye-catching 'binstallations' and unusual knitted adornments to St Mary's churchyard.

I am not well qualified to express opinions on matters horticultural – 'It would be fair to say that Bill Sellicks is no gardener' was once the verdict on my abilities – this because the attractive white-flowered plant invading the previously manicured garden of the house we had rented for a year just outside Wellington, New Zealand, was very obviously an example of a plant in the wrong place to all but me! Thirty eight years later, my gardening skills remain rudimentary, but I do recognise when plants are in the right place, and I am sure that you will agree that the planters, tubs and flowerboxes, overflowing with colourful specimens, are a welcome addition to the town centre over the Festival period and into September. There are, of course, no weeds. Thanks are due to Hitchin Initiative and Hitchin BID for their sponsorship. The town centre is also being enlivened by the indefatigable Rachel Campbell's eye-catching 'binstallations'. I hope that they will encourage people to use them. Certainly in my brief tour I found the town impressively clear of litter. Continuing the theme of litter, Forum member Clare Arends was one of those responsible for Hitchin Stitches' decorations in the churchyard. Whilst most of the decorations on display reference the importance of the wool trade to medieval Hitchin, Clare has used plastic bags as her fibre of choice to illustrate her theme of keeping the town clean and tidy.

To other matters now. Just after I had completed my last Chairman's Piece, Sarah Dobor, NHDC's Communications Manager, contacted me in response to my presentation to the Hitchin Committee in March on Consultation. Her letter referred to the Council's 2016 – 2020 Consultation Strategy, and expressed the hope that '...this puts your mind at rest that the Council does already have a way forward on the future of Consultation'. Sadly not, I'm afraid. Steering Group has discussed the response further, and I have replied outlining what we see as the weaknesses of the Strategy, and offering to be involved in any re-drafting of it. Further details of our response are available on the Hitchin Forum website: <http://www.hitchinform.org.uk/how-consultation-is-done-in-north-herts/>

One consultation approach which we have praised is that taken in preparing the Butts Close Greenspace Action Plan. It is pleasing to see that NHDC / CMS are adopting a similar approach with the Purwell Meadows GAP, starting with a walk-round on July 14th between 10.00 and 11.00am, meeting at the entrance to the Meadows in Chaucer Way. If anybody would be interested in joining me, I would be delighted to see you. The Briefing Document is available at <http://www.hertslink.org/cms/content/15488274/16532622/purwellgap17-22briefingdoc.pdf>

Finally, I look forward to seeing you at our members' meeting on the 27th July at Friends Meeting House to discuss the new version of the Draft Local Plan.

Bill Sellicks, Chairman

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Founded 1992

Chairman: Bill Sellicks
President: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

North Herts Draft Local Plan: The Next Steps

At the time of writing we have not yet seen the promised Draft Local Plan. We understand that this should be available for public consultation after the Full Council meeting of 20th July. We are holding a **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting on 27th July** (see Diary Dates for details) to give our Planning Group time to assess the Plan and present initial findings to our members for discussion.

It will be very important to have input from our members at that stage so we can concentrate on issues that are of concern and pull together a useful response with other community groups via Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG) before any deadline (probably in September). Any comments we make to NHDC will be forwarded with the Draft Local Plan to an Inspector who will run an Examination in Public in 2017.

We will send the appropriate links to the main documents to our members when we have them, but here is a summary of the main points we made in 2015 to the previous version, the *Preferred Options Report (POR)*, and what we would hope to see in the Draft Local Plan when it is published.

1. Vision and Implementation

The POR did not provide any vision of the sort of place North Herts (and Hitchin) could be by 2031, nor how it will be delivered. We argued that clear statements should be included on, for instance, the distinctiveness of the different towns and the roles they will be playing, the high quality design of new housing needed to meet the full range of local housing needs, and the wider provision of local employment that will reduce the need for long distance commuting.

We therefore want to see in the Draft Local Plan: a clear set of co-ordinated objectives; an updated Infrastructure Development Plan to ensure there is better co-ordination of housing growth, the infrastructure to support it, and how it will be financed; and a commitment to inclusion of a wider range of issues in Annual Monitoring Reports to trace progress with implementation.

2. Housing and the Green Belt

We argued in our 2015 response that it was possible to lower the housing target and reduce the loss of Green Belt. We suggested that a figure of 10,700 homes was robustly based, would enable needed levels of affordable housing to be provided and could be delivered at an achievable build rate. On the suggested Green Belt sites we were pleased to see that Priory Fields had been excluded, but stated that elsewhere we wanted to see clear and defensible boundaries, improved facilities, and some very difficult access issues addressed. Earlier this year NHDC decided they must respond to a further increase in housing need, and we have expressed concern that part of this uplift is unfounded.

We want the Draft Local Plan to include: a more robust justification of new housing need figures; clear identification of targets for affordable housing and provision of sites for self build and small developers in line with government guidance; continued exclusion of Priory Fields on the basis that the factors that led to its exclusion remain valid; and much fuller analysis of the issues related to the other Hitchin sites including a co-ordinated impact study of the west of Hitchin sites and provision for a Master Plan to guide any development at Highover Farm.

3. Economy and Town Centres

In 2015 we argued that the future of existing employment areas must be clarified to enable the attraction of more investment and a greater range of businesses. On town centres we argued that there must be more emphasis on provision for a wide range of community, leisure and cultural facilities to help centres to thrive.

We want the Draft Local Plan to: identify (with reference to NHDC's Economic Development Strategy) specific measures to assist existing employment areas through environmental and access improvements - including in Hitchin's case a new access road to the Wilbury Road industrial area; and to use the Communities section of the Plan to clarify the unique character of each of the towns and how these are

likely to be functioning by 2030 - referencing Hitchin as the main retail, service and market centre for North Hertfordshire, with a growing role as a visitor destination.

4. Transport, Community and Other Infrastructure

In 2015 the issues we raised included the weakness of the transport section in not setting out the direction of change on, for instance, sustainable transport and parking. There were also considered to be omissions in the Healthy Communities section including lack of analysis of the need for and provision of local community facilities, and of the need to protect and enhance local green space. On utility infrastructure, we suggested specific strengthening of policies related to water and waste water, flood risk and contaminated land.

We want to see clear policies and proposals in the Draft Local Plan on sustainable transport; on the range of community and recreation facilities needed; and on the control and supply of water and waste.

5. Environment and Design

In 2015 we expressed concerns about the standards of design for housing and other development. We suggested additional policies to ensure a mix of housing types and suitable space standards, energy efficient homes and work places, and a higher quality of design for buildings and the local environment. We also expressed concerns about air quality and noise levels and the need for increased use of renewable energy. On the natural and historic environment, we sought more clarity on the importance of landscape character areas and biodiversity, and also on the urban landscape covering such areas as materials and street furniture as well as shop fronts and signage.

We want the Draft Local Plan to include the full range of environmental and design principles to give them greater weight in the planning process.

We will be comparing our expectations against the new documents in July. Please come to the meeting on 27th July to have your say as we consider what our response should be to the Draft Local Plan.

Adrian Gurney

September Members' Meeting

Those who attended the last members' meeting will know that we set aside a time at the end of the meeting for questions from the floor. Several were on the theme of transport. As a result, the last Newsletter included a detailed article on transport issues, and in it we alluded to a meeting devoted to transport issues. I am pleased that Hertfordshire County Council's Portfolio Holder for Transport, Councillor Derrick

Ashley, has agreed to answer questions which reflect members' concerns at a meeting to be held on Tuesday September 13th. It may be possible for an officer to attend to deal with particularly technical queries. If that is not possible, we hope that an officer would be able to attend a later meeting.

Bill Selicks

Diary Dates

Wednesday 27 July, 7.45pm: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting -**

Presentations and discussion on the next draft of the North Herts Local Plan. An important opportunity to help shape Hitchin's future.

Tuesday 6 September: 6.30pm **Town Talk**, 7.30pm **Hitchin Committee**

Benslow Music Trust, Benslow Lane. Quarterly opportunity for round table discussion with Hitchin councillors followed by formal committee meeting.

Tuesday 13 September, 7.45pm: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting -**

Hitchin Transport Issues - a discussion with Cllr Derrick Ashley.

Footpaths Update

I am hoping that I will be able to provide my six-monthly report to HCC's Countryside Officer, Nicholas Maddex, in July. I have recently walked about 20 of Hitchin's paths, including sections of the HOOP on which Nicholas initiated extensive action over the winter. In terms of surface, overhanging vegetation and structures, the paths I walked appear in acceptable condition. Work on Gypsy Lane has made the surface much less muddy and the verges between the Wymondley Road / St Michael's Road roundabout and Coots Corner are now wider and less treacherous. Removal of vegetation has improved visibility, making crossing the road much safer. Not only that, but the amount of litter was greatly reduced – I gather NHDC have been doing a clean-up of paths recently, which is very pleasing. If you know of any issues with surface and structures for me to report to Nicholas, please contact me at footpaths@hitchinform.org.uk Fly-tipping and litter can be reported to NHDC's Service Team at service@north-herts.gov.uk

Bill Sellicks

Town Hall Snags

It was during the presentation by John Robinson of NHDC, whilst we were seated in the Mountford Hall, that I noticed strange spots of light being reflected from the left column of the stage proscenium. This was on Friday 3rd June when we had been invited to a conducted tour of the newly refurbished Town Hall. The new facilities included a forced air system for heating and ventilation, new lighting, wi-fi, sound system and a high definition projector with a 70" screen in the Mountford Hall with its refurbished sprung floor. Other items such as new toilets, cafe, kitchen and furniture contributed to the overall Town Hall and Museum £5M investment.

This presentation was enhanced by our tour of the Mountford Hall, upstairs terrace and one museum gallery plus the Lucas Room with adjoining kitchen accessed by the new balcony in the Mountford Hall. All very impressive despite the annoying ventilation ducts etc. along the outer wall and in the entrance lobby. But I was still puzzled about the light spots previously observed so I took a closer look at the column which displayed large bubbles under the new paint. Other parts of the walls in the Mountford Hall had also not been properly prepared before over-painting. In fact, in one place the cracked plaster had already exfoliated, leaving an unfinished area.

The newer additions to the town hall building, though requiring some detailed completion, were in good condition, but a review of the Lucas Room, access stairs and entrance lobby revealed a similar lack of pre-decoration attention. Also, the lobby quarry tiles were crazed and grimy in places. Accordingly, I suggested to one of the council staff that a comprehensive snagging procedure should be carried out. I remember from my student days a quotation by Mies van der Rohe that 'God is in the details'. Well with that in mind, these imperfections must be corrected since they detract from the good intention of an otherwise comprehensive refurbishment.

Chris Honey

Can anybody help?

We are very grateful to the contribution of Judith Gurney, who has recorded the Steering Group's minutes for the last five years. Judith would now like to relinquish this role and so we are looking for somebody to take over from her. The essential duties would not be onerous, and our meetings, which take place very two months, are informal, interesting, informative and not infrequently entertaining. There are other tasks that could form part of the role, e.g. arranging venues for members' meetings, but the extent to which these would form part of the role is entirely flexible.

Further details appear on the Hitchin Forum website: <http://www.hitchinform.org.uk/admin-officer/>
If you feel that you could help us, please get in touch via chairman@hitchinform.org.uk

Bill Sellicks