

NEWSLETTER

May-June 2017 No. 141

Chairman's Piece

I wonder if you have experienced frustration because of lack of communication on the part of our local Councils? An example will illustrate my point. Passengers in vehicles travelling towards Luton on the A505 may spot Hoar's Lane, a track classified as a byway open to all traffic. It is on the left, opposite 'Wibbly Wobbly Lane', about half a mile after the Willow Lane junction. From the main road, it is not quite possible to glimpse a large fly-tip, which I reported to NHDC on March 19th this year. The rubbish is concentrated in two large tips but debris is strewn over several hundred yards. At the time of writing, the rubbish has not been cleared. By comparison, just off the B655 near New Wellbury, a consignment of old car seats which I reported on the same day has been removed.

I have revisited both sites several times since my first report. On April 14th, the Hoar's Lane tip had not been cleared, so I contacted NHDC again, requesting to know what was happening. I made it clear that I understood some of the difficulties and that this might take a time to arrange. At the time of writing, apart from an acknowledgement saying that my enquiry was being passed to the Enforcement Team, I have heard no more.

Hertfordshire Waste Partnership's Annual Report for 2015-16 reported 14,716 incidents of fly-tipping. It costs HCC £800,000 to remove the refuse. Over recent years, I have reported a range of hazardous materials – shards of glass, asbestos and an instance of 'empty' drums of chemicals, clearly labelled as harmful to the environment, the contents of one of which was a known neurotoxin. I am pleased to say that, in that case, clearance happened within a few hours. Those of us who report such things are hopefully helping councils to avoid more serious problems. I think we deserve more feedback.

On submitting a report, I always receive an acknowledgement, but it is only by revisiting a site that I know if any action has been taken, and then it is unclear by whom it was carried out. I would find the following response structure useful:

- Initially, I would like to know the likely action and a timescale for completion.
- Once the tip has been removed, a message to that effect would help.
- In some cases, nothing can be done. In these cases, I would appreciate a message saying that no action would be taken and why. A link to a website which explained the limitations on possible action, and giving details of how priorities are decided, could provide the reason.

I think it would take somebody a few minutes each day to send the appropriate messages. All of this could be put together in a matter of hours. This would all help the public to understand some of the difficulties Councils face in dealing with such an intractable problem, and hopefully encourage more people to provide useful information.

Bill Sellicks

Notes on Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting

Our members' meeting on April 18th covered the Big Hitchin Spring Clean and the plans for New Century Park, which are described later in the Newsletter. Also discussed were the following:

1. Adrian Gurney gave an update on the Submission Local Plan

North Herts District Council (NHDC) has sent Hitchin Town Action Group its own summary of the points made by HTAG, but the Inspector will see all the original submissions too.

The Submission Local Plan (SLP) was discussed at the **NHDC Full Council meeting on April 11th**. In the public participation two people from Graveley appealed for joint action by residents across the district. Two speakers from Luton appealed for more consideration about air quality and greenbelt issues and stated that Luton Borough Council should really be looking at options **west** of Luton. A Letchworth speaker commented on how any Brexit effect has been ignored, and that the priority should be local homes for local people. A Baldock councillor later spoke about the absence of any objection at this stage from his town. Baldock residents are opposed to the massive developments in their town, but feel that this stage of the plan needs to be accepted, and the opposing arguments made to the Inspector, who will decide on the strength of the points made to him.

The Planning and Enterprise portfolio holder, Councillor David Levett (DL), talked about the 5,000 comments from 2,000 respondents. He said that there had also been minor modifications after comments from Herts County Council and the Environment Agency. HCC said that there has not been enough collaboration on education, which may be significant.

DL said he expected that the inquiry into the SLP by an Inspector from the Planning Inspectorate would occur at the end of 2017, and that he thinks NHDC will be asked to do more work on it.

Adrian Gurney (AG) said that proposals for an extensive expansion of shops at both Churchgate and Paynes Park need careful attention. He believes that the Inspector will want the local community's view, not just the technical analysis. AG thinks that the retail report by Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners (NLP), on which the expansion proposals are based, is outdated. The planning press is noting even more changes in the way people shop, which the NLP report does not reflect, and it is hoped the Inspector will agree with our analysis.

An early focus in the Inspection will be cooperation between councils and the actual housing figures and if these do not seem right the inspection may be curtailed at an early stage.

Hitchin Forum will offer to speak at the public hearing when invitations are issued. AG encouraged Forum members to attend appropriate sessions.

2. The Planning Group and future arrangements – introduced by Bill Sellicks

Partly due to the imminent departure of AG, there has been a rethink about how the work of this group could be organised. It has been agreed that several task groups, with a convenor for each, will be set up. Members will be invited to join in as and when issues are being considered. It is thought that much of the work of these groups could be by email, with occasional meetings.

3. The Big Hitchin Spring Clean

Mention was made of litter inside the Boys School perimeter fence on Elmside Walk. Ellie Clarke will contact the school asking for their help with this area as Butts Close is one of the sites earmarked for rubbish clearance.

In a timely way, the Government has just issued a National Litter Strategy¹ - a must read. EC highlighted the local government cost of litter clearing, about £750m, with hot spots being motorway slip roads and service area exits. The government has asked the Highways Agency to identify the 25 worst spots. The strategy is aspirational. Higher fines are probably required, and the government has suggested fixed penalties rather than prosecution in court.

4. Butts Close

Bill Sellicks spoke in the absence of the coordinator of the Friends of Butts Close.

There is due to be an Inspector's hearing about the planned Archers & Swim Centre parking area. Bill Sellicks and Tony Riley are booked to speak at this. The Green Space Consultation and report were good, but the increased parking provision, which was not part of that, has not been sufficiently researched. The current parking usage and the issue of day long availability for Archers' season ticket holders do not appear to have been considered.

5. Open session

Town Council

A Member asked whether the establishment of a Town Council should now be pursued. The view taken has been that, until a unitary authority has superseded the current arrangements, the addition of another tier of local government is unlikely to be of much benefit. It was also suggested that the younger generation needs to be determining what structures they want, to create the right environment for the future.

Mike Clarke

The Big Hitchin Spring Clean

Nearly 100 local residents turned out on Sunday 7th May to make Hitchin clean and litter free, ready for summer. The Big Hitchin Spring Clean, organised by Hitchin Forum and now in its 6th year, collected 135 large bags of rubbish from sites around the town.

Parks and recreation grounds, including Pinehill Field, Butts Close, Bancroft and Ransom's recreation grounds, Windmill Hill, King George's playing fields and The Dell were tackled by groups and families, including 45 children. Other volunteers attacked streets like Cambridge, Nightingale and Walsworth Roads, the road junctions outside Hitchin station, Willow Lane, Moormead Hill, St Michael's and Fishponds Roads, as well as Woodside car park, filling over 42 large bags with rubbish from these streets alone. Footpaths that were cleaned up included Pinehill Path, Burton's Path, paths around Wilshere Dacre and St Andrew's Schools, Riddy Lane, Elmside Walk, College Path and footpaths on both sides of Windmill Hill.

It is a delightful event to organise. Co-ordinating nearly 100 volunteers over more than a dozen sites becomes a bit frenetic in the run-up to the event, but everyone is incredibly appreciative that this event is organised, very positive about Hitchin, and so willing to help make their town an even nicer place. It is also very satisfying because the difference it makes is so visible and passers-by express their appreciation. It is particularly heartening that so many youngsters join us on the day, and according to one Brown Owl, "it's the highlight of our year!".

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/litter-strategy-for-england>

As always, we have had a great deal of support from others. NHDC has been especially helpful and efficient this year, providing hundreds of bags, loaning us 50 litter pickers and hi viz vests and arranging the collection of all the bags of rubbish the very next day. Hitchin Initiative helps with publicity and provides us with the insurance cover we need. The local press has also been very supportive.

As usual, there were some interesting finds: half a chair, underwear, rolls of barbed wire, a beer barrel, shopping trolleys, masses of DVDs, a mattress and duvet along with the remains of lots of picnics in several dens in shrubbery on Windmill Hill, a McDonald's staff cap, and most sadly, a not-long-dead hedgehog on Butts Close.

This is probably the greatest volume of rubbish ever collected during a town clean up, but volunteers reported that most of the parks they cleaned up were in better condition than in previous years. Perhaps we've cleared out most of the rubbish from years ago and now it is much more recent litter that is being tackled.

However, there are still areas that need tackling. We have reported several hot spots to the Council for their action and we are already planning our Big Hitchin Autumn Clean Up! Details will be posted on our website: www.hitchinforum.org.uk and photos and a report of this spring's event are also available there.

Ellie Clarke

Hitchin's first 20mph scheme

Some weeks ago, readers may have seen that I replied to a letter in the Comet about Hitchin's first 20mph trial, in Bearton Ward. The letter had argued that the small '20' roundels which appeared on streets in north Hitchin were a waste of public money. The anonymous correspondent had failed to appreciate that much larger '20 zone' signs were about to be installed. These should appear at all points of entry from roads where a higher limit is in force.

I hoped that my suggested title 'No alternative facts about 20mph limits, please' would be retained, but it was abandoned in favour of '20mph saves lives'. This is an unhelpful title, as to my knowledge, there have been no fatal accidents on any of the streets involved in the scheme.

The '20 zone' signs have now been installed and I am trying to get a sense of their effect. I use Bearton Road every day as either a motorist, cyclist or pedestrian. Bearton Road is a key test of the effectiveness of the signs, because the section between Old Hale Way and Bedford Road is of a width that suggests that the speed limit should be 30mph, and there are often no parked vehicles. Since the installation of the signs, I have certainly seen cars travelling at an estimated 40mph, but there have definitely been some travelling at 20mph, which is unlikely to have happened previously.

Some drivers will drive selfishly whatever the speed limit. Since these drivers are mercifully few and far between, they should not be allowed to skew any assessment of the scheme's effectiveness. What I hope will happen is that responsible drivers will obey the speed limit and that peer pressure will encourage the rest to follow suit. I have not yet seen enough to say that is happening. I also hope that Herts County Council will see fit to publish some before-and-after speed and accident data which might demonstrate the scheme's effectiveness and justify its extension to other areas of the town.

Bill Sellicks

Lofty Plans

This tall 'storey' contains our high hopes for the improvement of two planning proposals.

71 - 81 Hermitage Road - a two-storey addition

Whilst welcoming a long-needed refurbishment of this building and the improvement of the river walkway adjacent to it, we objected to this application on two counts.

First, the addition of two storeys produces a dominance that is not compatible with the street scene due to the overbearing mass. Removal of the proposed fifth floor and consequent reduction of the lift block height will rectify this.

The new alignment of the shop front name boards and resurfacing of the facade helpfully covers up the crude detailing of the existing building and rejuvenates it. However, we have reservations about the colour of these panels based on the rendered perspective views of the proposal. The colour in these views differs from that in the elevations, it is more intense. It is difficult to suggest a better alternative without seeing the sample panels. A photograph of a typical application, in the Design and Access Statement, shows them as a light grey, which looks less aggressive. Whatever the choice of colour, the aim should be to reduce the over-dominant look to an acceptable level.

We hope that these two changes can be accommodated to produce a clean result which will respect its neighbours and complement the rhythm of this section of Hermitage Road.

Legion House, Paynes Park - a new block of flats

We suggested improvement of this area in 'Planning Hitchin's Future' over three years ago. This planning application proposes replacing the existing building with a four-storey block of 16 two bed flats. It would visually tidy up the site but would be too dominant.

The proposal would increase the tunnel effect of this part of Paynes Park due to its height and proximity to the road. The corner of the building is closer to the road edge than the one it replaces. We deduce the intention is to 'book end' the tallest part of Latchmore Court (on the corner with Brand Street) by matching it in height. This, together with the dark vertical cladding, would have a dominating/depressing appearance. We feel that it should be reduced to three storeys with mid grey cladding.

We would also recommend that balconies are included within the bay window areas of the apartments as no public space, apart from a minimal courtyard, exists. The adjacent car ramp, which we hope will be removed one day, should be softened/screened through the addition of climbing plants to integrate the mesh fencing alongside.

In both these cases living high can be improved with a reduction in colour and dimension.

Chris Honey

New Century Park

I have now attended two consultation events for this development at Luton airport.

After the first event in February, whilst I thought there would be an impact on congestion and air quality in Hitchin I did not appreciate how significant it might be. At the second event in March the estimated number of new jobs had been increased from 3000 to 4000. This is a standard ploy – it is very hard to say that we don't want jobs and there is evidence that airports routinely over-estimate the number of jobs that will result from passenger number increases in order to undermine opposition from campaigners. After the March event, on the airport website, the estimate had jumped to 7200, so they must be anticipating significant local opposition!

It was not until I found the airport's own Transport Assessment, submitted in 2013, in support of the planning application to upgrade facilities to allow passenger numbers to rise to 18 million a year, that I fully appreciated the potential impact of the New Century Park development on Hitchin. About an eighth of the airport's workforce commute from Stevenage, Cambridge or Peterborough. Assuming 4000 new jobs, if that pattern is replicated at New Century Park, that would be another 500 employees travelling through Hitchin. Some will share cars, so let us say there will be an extra 400 vehicles each day passing along the route from the A602 / A1(M) roundabout via the A602 and A505 to and from Luton. Crucially, this is through Hitchin's two Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs). Unlike the increase in traffic resulting from greater passenger numbers, which mainly occurs between 4 and 6am, these extra journeys are more likely to be concentrated in the 7-9am peak time.

Using peak time vehicle counts taken from the 2013 Assessment, 400 extra journeys equate to an increase of about 20% in peak time vehicle movements. The same applies in the afternoon. The 2013 Air Quality Action Plan has had no significant impact on NO₂ levels in the Stevenage Road AQMA so far. Air quality near the library roundabout has deteriorated to the extent that another AQMA has been declared. A 20% increase in traffic will not help. If 7200 jobs are created, that figure leaps to 35%.

We have written to the airport's agents expressing our concern and urging them to work with NHDC and HCC to find a sustainable solution. We have also shared the letter with our county councillors and NHDC's Environmental Health Officer responsible for Air Quality Action Plans. The letter is available on the Forum website.

Bill Sellicks

Diary Dates:

- Tuesday 20th June: **Forum Members' Meeting** – 7.45pm, British Schools. Details of discussion topics and presentations to follow.
- Tuesday 27th June: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm, **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm, Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place. An opportunity to discuss issues in open forum with Hitchin councillors and to hear debate and discussion on local matters.
- Saturday 1st July: **History Day** – 10am to 4pm, Church House