



NEWSLETTER

November – December 2017 No. 144

Chairman's Piece

The long-awaited Examination in Public of the Submission Local Plan has begun. From a report on the rather opaque proceedings of the first morning, Steering Group found it hard to be enthusiastic about attending sessions or encouraging other members to do so. It appears that things became more interesting later in the first week, as you will see from Ellie Clarke's piece, and we have included a link to the Council's website so that you can check the schedule which is subject to change.

Given where we are in the procedure, it could be seen as timely that a database on land use in the UK, recently made public by academics at Sheffield University, has been featured on the BBC website. The data is generated from high resolution satellite imagery, and categorises land under four headings – 'built on', 'green urban', 'natural' and 'farmland'. It would be an interesting exercise to make your own prediction of what the percentages of land falling into these categories might be for North Hertfordshire before you look at the data (**Five mind-blowing facts about what the UK looks like** <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41901297>).

The BBC's Home Editor, Mark Easton, uses the figures in his blog to suggest that 'the complaint that vast swathes of our landscape have been "concreted over" doesn't stand up to scrutiny'. He is, of course, being provocative, and the whole article is more balanced. To quote the penultimate paragraph of his blog, 'There is clearly a balance to be struck between the human need for homes to inhabit, food to eat, air to breathe and space to play against a wider responsibility for the natural world.' His aim is to help encourage debate about where the balance should lie, and how that should be determined. If only it were that simple.

For the North Hertfordshire Examination, and those that have gone before, this 'debate' comes far too late, but if it were to happen, it might have an influence on decisions about planning in the future. Armed with the data for North Hertfordshire, it wasn't long before I could think of a welter of other data that would be necessary. For example, to make good decisions about development on farmland, an assessment of its value based on projections of productivity, proximity to processing facilities, markets or infrastructure and local climate would be necessary.

Quite apart from that, issues of land ownership and the difficulty of compulsory purchase (which locally have meant that only land 'brought forward' by its owner is under consideration for development) are likely to mean that a purely evidence-based approach to decision-making would be severely constrained. Increasing complexity is inevitable. How does that fit with meaningful public involvement in decision making so that participation in an exercise like the current Examination becomes more accessible? If Mark Easton's attempt to stimulate debate is to have any useful outcome, the challenge is rather greater than might be solved by the ready availability of data, however interesting and surprising that data may be.

Bill Sellicks

The Examination in Public into NHDC's Local Plan

The Examination in Public into the Council's draft Local Plan began on Monday 13th November. It is being held in the Icknield Centre in Letchworth, with a town planner from the Planning Inspectorate, Simon Berkeley, in charge. It runs for four weeks until 13th December and then reconvenes in February for two more weeks.

The overall purpose and scope of the examination is to establish whether or not the Plan is 'sound' in terms of the National Planning Policy Framework. To be 'sound', the Plan must be: positively prepared (based on a strategy which seeks to meet objectively assessed development and infrastructure requirements, including unmet need from neighbouring authorities where reasonable and sustainable); justified (the most appropriate strategy when considered against the reasonable alternatives and based on proportionate evidence); effective (deliverable over the plan period to 2031 and based on effective joint working on cross-boundary priorities); and consistent with national policy.

The Inspector has set the agenda for each day, establishing what he thinks are the 'Matters and Issues' to be considered which will ultimately determine whether the Plan is 'sound'. I have attended two sessions, mainly to get a flavour of the proceedings and understand how the issues are being considered. The opening session covered 'legal requirements' which sounded deadly dull but concentrated on the 'duty to co-operate' with other authorities. This became a bit of a back-and-forth between North Herts. District Council (NHDC) and Herts. County Council (HCC) about whether there had been sufficient co-operation on school places, in particular the need for a secondary school at Great Ashby. By the time I left, it was clear they could not decide whether it was a 'duty to co-operate' which had been breached or whether the plan was 'unsound'. The number of 'dark suits' was a bit overwhelming and planning lawyers clearly have a dull life. Verdict: not inspiring.

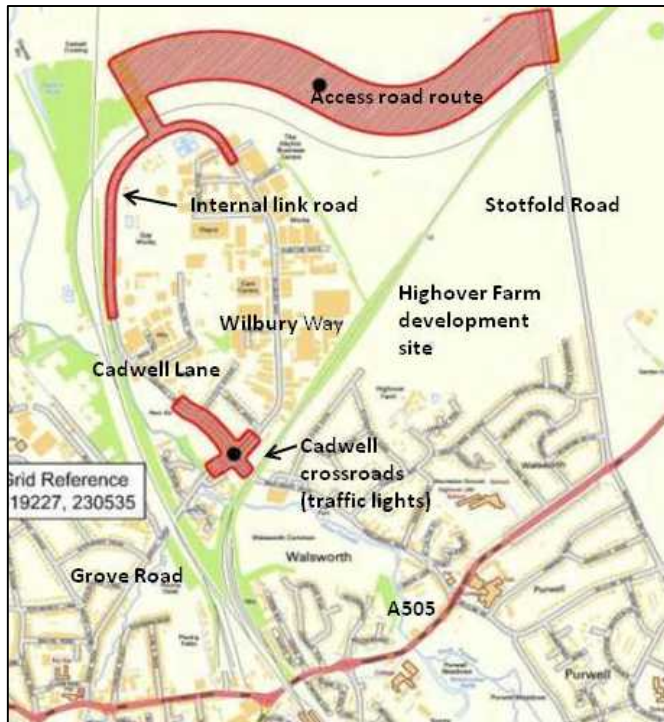
The next session I attended covered 'Deliverability', including housing trajectory, infrastructure and viability. There were even more dark suits (I counted nearly 40) but it was a bit more fun because it related to a point Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG) had made in our submission - that the housing numbers NHDC was proposing would be built were unprecedented locally and probably unrealistic. Several of the consultants present said the numbers were over-optimistic, not least because several large sites are proposed in the Local Plan and building on all of them at the same time (up to 2031) would mean they would be competing. Other consultants said their clients had managed to build similar numbers as proposed on some of these sites and found the Council helpful and co-operative. Yet another said all the large sites were in the Green Belt and therefore building on them was conditional on the Inspector agreeing to their removal from the Green Belt and so, if there were delays, it was up to him!

What became clear during this session was the very close co-operation between the Council and developers to ensure development on those sites still in the Green Belt happened as quickly as possible. There clearly is a presumption on the part of both sides that the Inspector will remove these sites from the Green Belt. A bit depressing for those campaigning against their development.

Ellie Clarke

N.B. The session on Hitchin is currently scheduled for 6th February, and some members might be interested in sessions on issues such as transport and infrastructure (advertised for 30th November). A major change has occurred in the timetable, so it is advisable to check the schedule before you go (<https://north-herts.gov.uk/home/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination>).

Hitchin Industrial Area Access Road



In our last Newsletter we wrote about the Hertfordshire County Council study into improved access to the Hitchin industrial area (*Hitchin Industrial Area Transport Study, COM15021, June 2017*). Since we had mentioned that the study (sponsored by Hitchin's county councillors) was going to be available in our response to the draft local plan, we have been able to submit it to the inspector. It remains to be seen whether the inspector is supportive, given that the issue has not been addressed by either the NHDC draft plan or HCC response.

We discussed the map shown on the left after our October AGM. It shows the most likely way that improved access would come about, at a cost of c. £6.1m.

Currently all access is via the Cadwell crossroads, which is something of a bottleneck, and likely to become more so as

traffic levels grow. HCC has looked at various ways of squeezing more traffic through here in the past. Their current thinking (carried into the draft local plan by NHDC) is to link the northern ends of Cadwell Lane and Wilbury Way. This allows better flow at the traffic lights as some of the right turns which cause delay can then be avoided. However, it does nothing to reduce the volume of HGV traffic using Grove Road.

The addition of an access road from Stotfold Road to join a new internal link road gives a better route for HGV traffic, avoiding unsuitable residential streets, which can then enjoy HGV restrictions. It also creates a through route for light vehicles from Stotfold Road via the industrial estate and Grove Road. This extra capacity would no doubt also be used by traffic emanating from the proposed Highover Farm development. There would also be the possibility of extending the industrial area to the north.

One effect of all this is to put further strain on the Cadwell crossroads. There are various options for improving the flow here (largely involving turn restrictions), or it can be left as a restriction to prevent the Grove Road route becoming too much of a rat-run. This would no doubt be resolved by further studies and consultation prior to finalising a scheme.

The Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up

Hitchin has had its semi-annual spruce-up, with over 70 local residents, including 25 young people, working to make Hitchin clean and litter free before the winter weather settles in. In the **Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up**, organised by **Hitchin Forum** and now in its 6th year, 112 large bags of rubbish were collected from sites around the town.

Parks and recreation grounds, including Pinehill Field, Butts Close, The Dell and King George's, Bancroft and Ransom's recreation grounds, were tackled by groups and families. Other volunteers attacked streets like Hitchin Hill, Stotfold Road, the entire length of Cambridge Road, Nightingale and Walsworth

Roads, the road junctions outside Hitchin station, Willow Lane, Moormead Hill and the Parkway bypass, as well as Woodside car park.

We were particularly pleased this year to have not only Brownies and Guides in The Dell but Scouts doing their *World Challenge Awards* at Ransom's Recreation Ground. They had a great time cleaning rubbish out of the river and made a big difference. Regular volunteers reported less rubbish than in previous years which is very encouraging, but there were nevertheless the usual interesting finds: a breadmaker on Parkway bypass, a sleeping bag on Butts Close (described as 'very dead' & fortunately empty), two knives, a bucket and toddler bike seat from the river at Ransom's, a partial dinner service and a scooter from King George's and two broken sinks from The Dell.



Clockwise from top left:

- the Bancroft band,
- the Ransom's gang,
- the Dell team.



Volunteers joining in are incredibly appreciative that this event is organised, are very positive about Hitchin and keen 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.

We are supported by NHDC who provide collection bags, loan litter pickers and hi viz vests and arrange the collection of all the bags of rubbish the next day. Hitchin Initiative helps with publicity and provides insurance cover.

The next event will be the *Big Hitchin Spring Clean*. Hitchin Forum members will be notified and details will be posted on our website: www.hitchinform.org.uk where a photo gallery of *The Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up* is also available.

Ellie Clarke

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group

At our AGM, the following were elected to our Steering Group for 2017-2018:

Dave Borner - originally from London, Dave has lived in Hitchin since 1987. Now retired, he worked 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 the 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. Contact: planningpolicy@hitchinform.org.uk.

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. Contact: membership@hitchinform.org.uk.

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 for 8 years of "Living Streets", the UK charity for everyday walking, and is still a director of its trading company. He is our **Treasurer**. Contact: treasurer@hitchinform.org.uk.

Mike Clarke - formerly Chairman, now **President** and website administrator, 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. Contact: towncentre@hitchinform.org.uk.

Chris Honey - has been a member of Hitchin Forum since 1996. He examines planning applications for the Steering Group and comments on green issues. He is a designer with a passion for maintaining what is good about Hitchin and only accepting excellent development alongside it. Contact: planning.appl@hitchinform.org.uk.

John Keene - has lived in Hitchin for 42 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.

Jennifer Piggott - joined Hitchin Forum in 2015 and has edited the Forum's Newsletter for the past year. Jennifer has lived in Hitchin since 1972, teaching in local schools and the University sector before retiring in 2010. Contact: newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk.

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. Contact: chairman@hitchinform.org.uk.

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.

Walk to School

Last month the Chairman's Piece asked "how could parents and children be incentivised to encourage walking to school". Currently just one in five primary school age children undertakes the recommended daily amount of physical activity. A generation ago 70% of us walked to school, now it's less than half. Also, it has been estimated that almost 20% of the morning rush hour traffic is the school run.

Part of the answer to the Chairman's question might be taking part in initiatives like the WOW (Walk Once a Week) year-round Walk to School Challenge facilitated by Living Streets, the UK Charity for Everyday Walking. Through WOW, pupils can support their school in working towards the achievement of good Ofsted results, reaching the Modeshift STARS gold level (a national schools award scheme), and are more likely to arrive at class ready to learn.

Essentially WOW rewards children who travel actively to school at least once a week with a themed badge every month. Schools are provided with free curriculum-aligned resources to go with each badge and schools which opt in use the WOW Travel Tracker to record travel data. After just five weeks of running WOW there is a 23% average increase in those walking to school. For the community there will be healthier, happier children, fewer cars on the road and better air quality. Independent evaluation of the WOW scheme has calculated approximately £4 worth of benefits (reduced cost of congestion, improved health etc.) for the community for each £1 spent.

WOW is supported by Herts. County Council, but at present there are no schools in Hitchin operating the scheme although there are several in Stevenage. Living Streets has two Project Coordinators based in the county. Parents and grandparents with children in Hitchin schools can find out more at livingstreets.org.uk where they can request information to use to encourage their children's school to consider the scheme.

Ken Chapman

Butts Close Access Road Inquiry

By the time you read this, Tony Riley and I will have made our representations at the Inquiry into the access road for the proposed car park at Hitchin Swimming Centre. It will be possible to report how that went in the next Newsletter, but the decision is unlikely to be made public even then.

Bill Sellicks

Diary Dates:

Tuesday 5th December: **Town Talk** – 6.30pm, **Hitchin Committee** – 7.30pm, Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place

Tuesday 6th February: **Local Plan Examination – Hitchin** – 2.00pm, Icknield Centre, Icknield Way, Letchworth Garden City, SG6 1EF.
(based on current schedule – please check nearer the time)

February: **Forum Members Meeting** – date to be decided in the New Year