

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

January – February 2018 No. 145

Chairman's Piece

First let me wish everybody a happy new year. Whether, from the point of view of the Forum's concerns, 2018 will be happy is open to question of course. We are in a state of waiting and uncertainty.

The Examination in Public of North Hertfordshire District Council's (NHDC's) Submission Local Plan has resumed. If the Plan is judged unsound, NHDC will have less control over the planning process and will lose protection against speculative development. That fate befell St Albans City and District Council when, in 2016, an Inspector found that it had failed to cooperate with neighbours over housing targets and cross boundary issues, including infrastructure. In our context, the recent announcement from London Luton Airport Operations Limited (LLAOL) raises questions about the level of dialogue between neighbours about transport infrastructure in particular.

In response to a consultation on the development of a new business area at New Century Park in Luton airport last year, the Forum used figures from the airport's 2012 Transport Assessment to calculate that a consequence could be a significant increase in rush hour traffic along the A602/A505 corridor. Just before Christmas, LLAOL issued its new 'Vision for Sustainable Growth 2020-2050'. LLAOL says that its 2012 target of 18 million passengers per annum (mppa) will be achieved early in the next decade, rather than by 2031 as previously envisaged. It believes that an increase of up to 38mppa by 2050 is justified to meet additional future demand. LLAOL claims that each additional 1mppa will generate an extra 800 jobs. If the figure of 38mppa is achieved, the burden placed on the A505/A602 corridor due to both passenger and employee car journeys will dwarf that due to New Century Park, unless there are serious mitigation measures.

NHDC's Submission Local Plan makes little mention of the airport. It refers to an intention to 'comply with the provisions of Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC's) Local Transport Plan' (LTP). The draft LTP states that HCC '.....working in partnership with neighbouring local authorities and airport operators, will seek improvements to surface access ... and promote, and where possible facilitate, a modal shift of both airport passengers and employees towards sustainable modes of transport.' HCC appears only to have taken into account an increase to 18mppa, suggesting that it (and by implication, NHDC) had no inkling of what LLAOL was about to propose. One might expect that both NHDC and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) would be in continuous dialogue with Luton Borough Council and LLAOL.

How effective will NHDC and HCC be in defending the quality of life of residents from LLAOL's interests? Is the intention to '..promote and where possible facilitate..' sufficiently robust to prevent even more congestion and poor air quality in Hitchin? When the real debits due to the impacts on health, congestion and the natural environment appear on the same balance sheet as the credits, due to economic growth, perhaps a point will come when decision-makers will realise that continued expansion of air travel is not indispensable to national and local prosperity.

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News from Butts Close

Outcome of the Public Inquiry held 21st and 22nd November into the Council's Proposal for an Access Roadway across the Close:

Refused!

As you all know, the Council intended to build a roadway along the east side of Butts Close, in order to provide access to a planned extension car park for the Hitchin Swim Centre and Archers' Gym (see <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/butts-close-car-park-plan/>). Because Butts Close is registered Common Land, Officers needed permission from the Planning Inspectorate, part of DEFRA. However, they submitted virtually no supporting evidence with their application for consent.

Friends of Butts Close (FoBC), along with Hitchin Forum and many others, objected to these plans. Because there was so little evidence the Inspectorate set up a Public Inquiry to investigate – this is quite a rare event for these applications. The Inquiry was held over 21st and 22nd November 2017, at Hitchin Town Hall. The Council submitted voluminous documents (over 600 pages) to support their case, which was presented by a barrister. Friends of Butts Close and Hitchin Forum nevertheless argued that the Council's evidence was inadequate and their proposals disproportionate to the need for more parking. We recognized that there are parking pressures for customers of the Swim Centre and the gym, but the Council's plans could have more than doubled the number of parking spaces there, when the underused Lairage car park is just 5 minutes' walk away.

The Inspector who heard the case has agreed with FoBC and Hitchin Forum, and has refused consent. Once the Planning Inspectorate has made a decision, there is no basis for an appeal. An application for a Judicial Review would be possible, but given the rigour of the Public Inquiry the High Court is unlikely to give its permission.

This is good news for Butts Close and for Hitchin. However, the Council may now consider other plans for additional car parking for users of the Swim Centre/Archers' Gym. We will need to examine them and consider what position, if any, we should take in respect of any subsequent application made to the Council's Planning Control Committee.

The Butts Close Bollards

When we were working on the Greenspace Action Plan with Countryside Management Service we discussed what to do about the concrete bollards, which are set around the perimeter of the Close from the Fishponds Road roundabout down to the bottom of Elmside Walk. Many are crumbling with age. We had asked through an earlier Friends of Butts Close Newsletter whether people wanted them replaced or whether a post and rail fence would be preferable. Most people wanted to retain the bollards as an historic feature of the Close - they do have an art deco quality about them. There was however no capital to replace them.

But the NHDC Grounds Manager has now identified a pot of money and is using this to replace 25 of the most damaged bollards. They will be cast replicas, and they will be identical to the existing ones. He is indeed a Friend of Butts Close.

Tony Riley for Friends of Butts Close

An Interview With Keith Hoskins, Town Centre Manager

As changes are afoot at Hitchin Initiative, Ellie Clarke interviewed Keith Hoskins to find out about what the future has in store.

When town centre management was established in Hitchin in 1995 it was at the forefront of the movement to support ailing town centres attempting to recover from the economic slump of the early 90s and pressure from huge out-of-town retail developments. Hitchin's scheme was particularly innovative in that, from the outset, community involvement worked in partnership with the business community in setting it up with the support of local authorities. Is it still innovative, and what does the future hold given quite different retail issues today and the fundamental changes coming with the appointment of a separate Business Improvement District (BID) Manager?

Tom Hardy has been appointed to facilitate the specific work of the BID for town centre businesses and we hope to interview Tom about his perspective for the future of Hitchin town centre soon after his arrival (1st March). Keith Hoskins will initially work alongside Tom in order to achieve a successful BID renewal for a new five year term, absolutely essential to Hitchin's commercial future. Keith will also continue to work in Hitchin Initiative to foster other projects in the town (job title anyone?). Hitchin Initiative will continue to run the Information Office and shop and manage the Festival Box Office, but Keith is looking forward to his new role with relish (as is Keith's wont!). What projects does he foresee for the wider town?

Early work is already underway to improve The Dell to bring it to its full potential as an outdoor theatre (think Minack! – www.Minack.com). The aspiration is to create an arts centre at Woodside, complementing the Queen Mother Theatre and Woodside Hall. Is a cinema in the mix there somewhere? Another major project is to open up the London platform to access from the Walsworth side. This has become more of an issue with increasing numbers of college students arriving by train and then facing a convoluted route to the college. The possibility of development at Highover Farm adds further urgency. Then there is ensuring that the perpetual work needed is done on the public realm - paving, signage, street furniture, street art - as well as bringing together the final links to create a proper river walkway from Bridge Street through to Hermitage Road.

The BID is fully funded by businesses while Hitchin Initiative receives some income from letting out office space to the BID and Hitchin Markets and managing the Market Place. Apart from that, it remains reliant on voluntary contributions from its membership (open to individual residents if you are not already a member!) and specific fund raising. All the money raised by BID and Hitchin Initiative is spent on Hitchin and there is scope to extend this further. Could Hitchin Initiative 'morph' into a Community Council, with the power to levy rates to enable more projects to be funded in Hitchin by Hitchin residents? The capacity to raise such funds allowing more decisions to be taken by Hitchin people might have seen different results on the old museum building, public loos, the ongoing fiasco of the Town Hall/Museum and Bancroft enhancements that Hitchin people want and need.

For the future, maintaining our vibrancy is paramount. When Keith arrived in 1997 there were 11 empty units in Hermitage Road; today there are two, both under offer. But the challenges are ongoing with Hawkins, Electronic Universe and Halfords closing. He sees smaller units as the way forward and would like to see a resolution to Churchgate. There has to be an ongoing review of rental values and punitive business rates for towns the size of Hitchin with out-of-town retail centres continuing to have

comparatively cheaper rents and free parking. There is a growing clamour for government to intervene to help keep our high streets buoyant. Hitchin is helped by the fact that we do not have many institutional landlords; many are local people who have a much greater understanding of the need to maintain the town's vibrancy. However, business rates need massive reform to support smaller businesses and town centre car parking should be seen as part of a package, not a cash cow for local authorities (are you reading this before you review your parking strategy, NHDC?). Why does one pay the same rate for two hours parking on a Saturday morning as for two hours on a Wednesday late afternoon? Why not 'free after 3' or 'live after 5' schemes instead of inexorably increasing charges?

Keith says his chief delights in his job have been the people he works for and with. He has had fantastic community support and has loved the events in the town. He has also valued having the freedom to be entrepreneurial, without the constraints of local government. His greatest frustrations have been bureaucracy and not achieving things when the funding doesn't stretch that far. He also rues the seeming reduction in the importance of local democracy. Hitchin councillors are always immensely supportive, but their influence and powers continue to be eroded. Their annual budget is £30,000 - £1 per person - which leads to the obvious question: "what do you want to spend your quid on?" It is clear that 'localism' has been reversed.

Given the historic importance and cultural capacity of the town, there would be huge town-wide benefit if everyone contributed and Hitchin was in charge of its own affairs. The next few years will doubtless continue to be innovative and interesting, with close community involvement as ever!

Ellie Clarke

Local Plan: Hitchin Town Centre Proposals under Examination

In our last newsletter we reported on some of the discussions that took place during the first week of the Local Plan Examination in Public (EiP). December brought in more specific discussions and I attended during the second week when NHDC's proposals for town centres were examined. It proved to be a 9-hour marathon and very illuminating it was, for everyone, and the Inspector in particular. The session was much more informal than previously, with far fewer 'suits' in attendance, probably because the big house builders had no interests to promote. Hitchin and Letchworth did, however.

There was considerable general discussion about shopping growth "projections". Studies carried out at a national level by research group Experian seem to be the bible for predicting how much retail growth (note: it is always 'growth') must be planned for in future. These figures are translated to district and city level by retail planning consultancies like Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners (NLP), who were used by NHDC. The result seems to be that ever more shops are needed, despite the evidence before everyone's eyes that shopping continues to shift from the high street to online.

NHDC remains bewitched by these retail consultants, proposing (yet again) a huge shopping expansion (4,000 sq m gross) at Churchgate, St Mary's Square, Biggin Lane and Portmill Lane car parks as well as another 4,000 sq m of "mixed retail" at Paynes Park. This is despite the strongest possible evidence (three developers walking away over more than a decade) that huge retail redevelopment along Queen Street is a non-starter. The fact that NHDC fails to see the reality is perplexing, given that the decline of town

centre retail is a national phenomenon. Perhaps it is a brave Local Planning Authority that goes against national "projections", however much they resemble crystal ball gazing.

There are similar large scale proposals for Letchworth in the Local Plan. Indeed, the Plan becomes cavalier in suggesting that if retail development does not take place in Hitchin by 2026, it will go to Letchworth, as if market forces didn't exist. This was scotched by the Heritage Foundation who control/own more than 90% of Letchworth town centre, saying this is wholly unrealistic because they cannot attract retailers to Letchworth and they want to reduce the amount of shopping floor space in the town centre.

The complexity of the issue was further compounded because, although the Council has presented a large-scale redevelopment around Churchgate as deliverable and realistic in their Plan, the sale of the lease of Churchgate was currently under negotiation, providing no certainty that a future leaseholder will even consider such proposals. One of the tests of the soundness of a Plan is that it has to be deliverable, so this revelation had the Inspector struggling to control himself. His words to the NHDC officers and legal experts: "I MUST be told of these things".

When it came to relocation of the Market to accommodate such a redevelopment, things really began to unravel. The Inspector said he was aware from his previous life that markets can be thorny matters. Did NHDC have a definite site for the Market in future? The response was vague: it could be almost anywhere, perhaps one of the other parcels of land in the wider Churchgate area, or perhaps somewhere else in the town centre. Then it was pointed out that the traders also needed parking nearby for vans but officers were confident that could be discussed with the developer, who may or may not be willing.

It was pointed out that developing any part of the site required the redevelopment of the Churchgate centre itself as that was the only part of the site that faced onto a main thoroughfare. NHDC then stated something we have not heard before, that any of the 5 parcels of land at Churchgate (i.e. the four car parks owned by NHDC or the centre itself, which is leasehold) was capable of being developed independently. When the Inspector asked if NHDC would develop any of the parcels of land it owned without Churchgate itself being redeveloped, the NHDC table had no answer and he said he needed a clear direction on that from the Council.

The Inspector then said there were so many important details to be sorted that he suggested a Master Plan be produced. NHDC looked visibly relieved at this suggestion (after all, developers prepare such documents, they are not subject to scrutiny by an Inspector in an inquiry and a Planning Brief already exists so why not just tinker with that a bit . . .)

As for development at Paynes Park, much of the area has already been developed into flats and sheltered housing, a listed building (Paynes Park House) complicates any redevelopment and two site owners have no intention to redevelop. Yet more 'deliverability' problems.

The Inspector gave NHDC a bit of 'homework' to do, which we trust will be reported on the afternoon of 6th February when Hitchin will be the focus of the EiP. Please put the date in your diary. Full details are on NHDC's website (<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/hearing-timetetable-and-statements-week-6>) or follow the links on 'Local Plan'.

Ellie Clarke

The Big Hitchin Spring Clean: Sunday 25th March

Yes, we are already looking to welcoming spring with our big town clean up! We are planning to hold this a bit earlier than usual to avoid Hertfordshire's school Easter break as school children make up many of our volunteers. Another reason is that undergrowth seems to be springing up earlier, making it more difficult to find litter in overgrown areas. So this is an experiment to find out if we can persuade the weather to be kind a month earlier than usual!

Date for your diaries: Sunday 25 March, 10am - 12 noon. Please join in the fun by emailing: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Ellie Clarke

Leslie Mustoe

As you probably read in the Comet, Leslie died just a week before Christmas. This was a shock - I had seen him just two weeks before, when he seemed quite well. He had been a member of the Forum for several years and was invited to join the steering group after writing some incisive letters about the local scene. He became vice chairman in 2009 when that post was introduced, and continued until 2013.

As often happens, the accounts of his life at the funeral revealed much about him. He was Hitchin born and bred, and retained close ties with the town even whilst working many miles away. He was a keen educator who authored textbooks whilst a university lecturer, and continued to help students at Loughborough University and Hitchin Boys School with maths after his retirement. He formed enduring and loyal friendships. He was most recently the secretary to Hitchin Historical Society, with an eye for detail and a dry humour. He will be missed.

Mike Clarke

Diary Dates:

Tuesday 6th February: **Local Plan Examination** – 2pm., Hitchin is the topic at the Local Plan EiP. The Icknield Centre, Icknield Way, Letchworth SG6 1EF

Tuesday 27th February: **Forum Members' Meeting** – 7.45pm, venue to be confirmed. Keith Hoskins and Margaret Eddleston will speak about the new arrangements for town centre management and the Hitchin BID, and expand on some of the issues that are discussed in Ellie Clarke's article.

Tuesday 6th March: **Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:** 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively. Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place, Hitchin.

Sunday 25th March: **Big Hitchin Spring Clean:** 10am - 12 noon. All around the town.