

Chairman's Piece

Last week's **members' meeting on retailing in Hitchin** was a lively event with a good amount of information to digest and provoke awareness. The presentation is available on request. The only shadow over the evening was the low attendance. I am interested in how members would like us to work. Are members' meetings useful, could the topics be better chosen or better advertised, do you prefer to get information from newsletters or emails, how should we proceed? Please do make your feelings known – I will be glad to hear from you.

We think the **next members' meeting** should be just before the next Churchgate Liaison Forum when we hope that the developer, Simons Ltd., will have produced some new outline plans which we can discuss. It will be on **Monday March 21st** and we will circulate details nearer the time.

Town centre developments and predicting future patterns of shopping are clearly in the news - the retail problems are cause for comment in the Guardian of January 21st 'The British high street: R.I.P.' - *"Welcome, then, to one very depressing vision of the future. Lattes, book festivals, and high-end casual wear if you're lucky; pound shops, Ladbrokes and boarded-up businesses if you're not."* Things are changing and nobody is quite sure how it will change. Even Jeremy Clarkson is concerned and showing a tender side when none has previously seemed evident: *"You come back from a shopping centre feeling poor. You should come back from a trip into town feeling like a human being"* – as he rails against large shopping centres and supports the idea that towns only should avoid the large chains and go local, though of course making good parking provision (Sunday Times Jan 9th 'Save the high street.'). So we are not being neurotic in worrying about the future. Doing something to express our fears is good for our health, and for the town.

Mike Clarke

Forthcoming Dates for your Diary

Saturday 5 February, 10am – 12 noon - Councillors' Surgery on Hitchin Market Place

Wednesday 9 February, 9pm – Transition Towns/Hitchin in Transition – talk by Chris Honey to Churches Together meeting at Holy Saviour Church

Tuesday 8 March, 6.30pm - Town Talk; 7.30pm - Hitchin Committee at Hitchin Boys' School

(Monday 21 March – Hitchin Forum members' meeting tbc)

Wednesday 23 March – Churchgate Liaison Forum meeting at Church House
(further details available nearer the time)

Localism Bill

The Coalition Government recently published its Localism Bill, not as dry as it sounds, and it could revolutionise local communities, particularly in terms of the power that they can wield. John Urwin, Chair of Hitchin Forum's planning group explains its significance:

"Here's a formula for spending money badly: you take a monopoly; it has no competition. In most of life, the world measures you: your sales go up or down, your market share goes up or down, your stock price maybe goes up a bit. In government, I always say you have to transplant or implant accountability, because it doesn't come naturally." These are the words of the governor of Indiana, who remarkably for a Republican advocates a VAT to deal with the US debt.

Does the word "monopoly" make you think of local councils? Do you feel we get value for money from our Council Tax, which frequently increases more than inflation? Do you think that councils sometimes make bad decisions and that nothing can be done about it? Do you dislike political parties running local government? Does this frustrate you? If you subscribe to a community group like Hitchin Forum, these thoughts may cross your mind. They certainly have crossed the minds of Coalition ministers, and their solution is to introduce a Localism Bill, the aim of which is to decentralise power from central government and introduce procedures to encourage local people to play a larger part in decision making. A central part of this is to make financial information publicly available. This Bill is part of creating the Big Society.

It is likely that many of those who show an interest will be the active retired, and this should provide a valuable skill base, but it also throws up a danger that decisions will be skewed to favour this group. They may favour facilities for older people in preference to those for disabled or autistic youngsters, for example. Care will be required.

It may take longer to arrive at decisions, because more public consultation will be required and the public will need more information, but often, proceeding with caution is no bad thing. Hitchin, of course, is ahead of the curve. We already have Hitchin Initiative running the market and having their proposals to run the Town Hall approved.

So how will decentralisation be implemented? The Localism Bill introduces six actions to make the move from Big Government to Big Society. These are:



1. Lifting the burden of bureaucracy: The bill will abolish unaffordable and unjustifiable examples of top down control such as targets and performance indicators and reduce the thousands of pages of documentation to simplify decision making. The planning system is an example – it has 7000+ pages of advice. Central regulation will be retained to ensure public safety.

2. Empower people to do things their way: The Bill will allow local councils to make a wider range of decisions and will reform the planning system to give local people the power to shape their communities. Groups will be able to bid for the ownership and management of assets threatened with closure.

3. Increase local control of public finance: The Bill will allow communities to prevent council tax increases above a threshold with a referendum and will allow discounts on business rates to assist local business. It will reduce the funding streams from 90 to under 10 and allow some of them to be bundled to solve urgent problems. Power without money is pointless.

4. Diversify the supply of public services: The Bill will encourage faith groups, businesses, charities and social enterprises to run local services. Assistance will be given to encourage public sector employees to form employee led mutuals.

5. Open up government to public scrutiny: The Bill will make information about money publicly available – how it is spent, what the results are, how much is spent on salaries, and the core financial data that authorities use to make decisions. Every item of expenditure over £500 will be visible.

6. Strengthen accountability to local people: The Bill wants to encourage self government by direct participation. More choice is to be available – a current example is individual budgets for some social care. More local referendums will promote a local voice.

Will it work? The Coalition has heard people grumbling about their governance over the years and is now saying "We will give you the tools to improve matters – it's over to you, either put up or shut up!"

Will we step up to the mark?

Hitchin town centre and retail trends

Chris Honey gives details of a very interesting, informative and entertaining evening on Monday 17th January when Brent Smith gave his illustrated talk on retail trends in Hitchin:

Hitchin Initiative regularly collects information on footfall surveys, town centre floor space and vacancy rates. This, in addition to a *New Horizon Survey* for the Hitchin Initiative's bid for a Business Improvement District (BID), was compared to the *Nathaniel Litchfield & Partners* retail surveys carried out for NHDC. The first staggering difference between the reports is the number of businesses and people consulted. *New Horizon* received a 96% return on 322 questionnaires handed out to Hitchin town centre businesses and spoke to 250 people on the street. *Nathaniel Litchfield*, on the other hand, surveyed 1001 households, 601 visitors and 204 businesses, but throughout the whole of the North Herts District. Further, they only got a 4.3% response from 300 questionnaires sent out to national retailers, but nevertheless still included analysis of them. In three surveys over five years, their estimates for the amount of retail growth which Hitchin could accommodate dropped by 70%.

It is not surprising then that Brent felt their report conclusions were flawed. Results from Hitchin Initiative surveys show that the highest footfall remains at Moss's corner by WH Smith, that 72% of the 261 shops are Independents (no clone town then) and with a 6.8% vacancy rate by number (over half of which, by floor space, is Woolworths) compared to Letchworth at 19.9%, Luton at 14% and Stevenage at 10.6%, Hitchin is holding up well. Hitchin Market's 30% growth with an estimated £10m annual turnover is a good example of retail capture confirming that market towns are more secure. However, we should not be complacent when supermarkets offer ever increasing

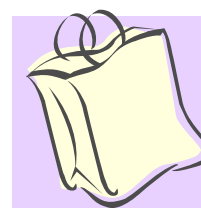
product ranges and a growing internet market makes home shopping easy.

Many analysts think that small towns should be carefully managing a decline in retail floor space rather than building more.

Open space and attractive views are also known to have commercial value. The view of the church is a visual asset to Hitchin and indeed, the Churchgate Planning Brief proposed enhancing St Mary's Square to complement it.

So, Brent concludes as many of us feel, that the Simons Ltd proposal offers far too much retail growth in a vast one time build which will do more harm to Hitchin than good. He regards the development of the old Post Office site as far more important and a wholesale refurbishment of the Churchgate shopping centre as a better solution, neither of which will cause disruption for long, unlike the massive development proposed. It would also remove the doubt or blight caused by the uncertainty of the outcome.

This is not a nimby response; it is based on hard evidence that modest and incremental growth is a more secure route for Hitchin's future. We asked for Churchgate to be improved, not for the whole town centre to be dominated by one uncomplementary single style of development.



Hitchin Town Hall

John Keene, who chairs Hitchin Forum's Leisure Issues group, updates us on the latest to do with the future of Hitchin Town Hall:

In recent years, the future of our town hall has seemed rather precarious; having narrowly escaped transformation into a nightclub a few years ago (much objection!), it was decided that the main hall be divided horizontally to become a new District Museum.

Much protest and an inspired proposal by the Hitchin Initiative has resulted in the present plan which will preserve the main Mountford Hall and Lucas room for community use while the gymnasium will have an additional floor added to create exhibition space for the new District Museum. Hitchin Forum, other community groups (and local councillors)

supported this solution which includes full refurbishment, disabled access and a cafe.

NHDC are funding the museum complex while Hitchin Initiative is applying for a £850,000 part loan / part grant from the Community Builders Fund. The timetable of events is extremely tight, and includes planning permission and listed building consent. With the final crucial meeting with the CBF having just been deferred for three weeks, we can't really celebrate until early February. Keith Hoskins reports that NHDC have been most cooperative. Fingers crossed, a good result, but expect a call to fundraising; there is that loan to repay!

Hitchin British Schools Museum

Terry Ransome reports:

Last year the British Schools celebrated a bicentenary: 2010 was 200 years since the first monitorial school opened on the site, in what was then Dead Street. While it is good to look back and celebrate many achievements, those of the last 20 years have been perhaps the most important. Since the present Hitchin British Schools Trust was formed in 1990, the old school buildings have been saved from redevelopment and turned into a nationally-important museum of elementary education, the result of tremendous effort by Trustees, staff and volunteers alike.

Kevin Morgan, recently appointed Chair of the Trust, has had connections with Hitchin since 1973 and lived here since 1989. He is Managing Director of Consilium Financial Planning Ltd in Walsworth Road, a founder member of Hitchin Tilehouse Rotary Club and very active in their charitable activities, and a member of the Hitchin Initiative Steering Group and of the Hitchin Town Hall (Community Bid) Management Group.

Kevin writes: *it was an honour to be asked to take the chair of Hitchin British Schools Trust. It is obvious that a tremendous amount of work*

has been put in by a huge number of people over 20 years. My overriding ambition is to see that the Trust builds upon all these achievements. The site now needs a significant investment to finally secure the fabric of the buildings and to improve facilities so that many more visitors can come to Queen Street to learn, have a good time, and visit our historic town of Hitchin. I intend to ensure that a winning bid is made to the Heritage Lottery fund and other grant-giving bodies in the near future, and that we develop the British Schools Museum into a truly sustainable, nationally-recognised enterprise, and a permanent tribute to all who have brought it so far.

Somewhat in the background a small group has been working since the middle of 2010 to prepare that Lottery bid. An architect, a buildings engineer and a quantity surveyor are working with the trustees and museum staff. Their plans will be presented shortly to all the museum's stakeholders, including Hitchin Forum, other local groups, NHDC and many others who have an interest and who will want to support the British Schools Museum as it continues to develop into the next 200 years!