



NEWSLETTER

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Chairman's Piece

Communication and consultation can be difficult. We try to communicate items that are of concern, but how do we know what members think unless we hear back? We did hear back over the petition on noise levels at Rhythms of the World. Members at the Town Group and the Steering Group thought that we should advertise the petition which ROTW promoted, in their appeal against the 65 decibel restriction that the Council imposed, but other members signed a counter petition to uphold the restriction. The reasons for that will be in our Town Group minutes which go to all members. The Council monitored noise levels, so there should be a well informed debate before next year's event.

There have also been varying views about proposals for evening and weekend parking charges. Strong representations have come from town centre residents, St Mary's Church and Hitchin Initiative about the potentially negative impact of this, but others regard it as a minor cost amongst many others, with some benefit in discouraging car use. We have written to the Council querying the short (3-week) consultation period, but there will be further consideration about it at the September Hitchin Committee.

These issues raise questions about how we publicise matters of concern, and how to obtain comments if we are to express a 'Forum view'. The Forum website has had a 'discussion forum' but this has rarely been used. We email members but not all have email. The Town Group has attracted some lively debates in the past two meetings, but

only a minority of members have attended. Snail mail is fine for newsletters, but not for garnering opinions on items with a 3 week consultation period. There is no easy answer, but the Steering Group wants your views and responses. Maybe start with this newsletter, and let us know, by whatever means, what you think of it and how we could do it better.

We did get some feedback on our last newsletter from Norma Atlay, Strategic Director for Finance, Policy and Governance at NHDC. She wrote concerning the information published on Churchgate, "to correct some common misunderstandings". Unfortunately her letter did not specify which of the many points made were misunderstandings. We do try to be clear in our understanding, and I have replied, asking her what she thinks we do not understand. The saga continues.

The Council also struggles with consultation and communication, and needs people to voice their views. Unfortunately NHDC can be obtuse when it does get responses. A report to a recent Hitchin Committee stated, "*The Hitchin Councillors and the Churchgate Project Board are fully aware of the public views that have been expressed and the concerns expressed by some regarding Simons proposal to build on St Mary's and Portmill Lane car parks. It should be noted that other members of the public have not voiced an objection in principle to building on St Mary's.*" The implication that 'silence means approval' seems strangely defensive. NHDC may hear the objections, but is it listening?

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Churchgate Update

There is, of course, nothing yet to report on a revised planning application from the developer, Simons, but the local press is a good indicator of ongoing public disquiet about the way the Council is handing things. Here, John Urwin, chairman of Hitchin Forum's planning group, presents a perspective:

What with bank failures, MPs expenses, newspaper criminality and alleged police corruption, is it any wonder that Joe or Josephine Public is losing faith in the institutions in our society? Matthew Parris in the Times has listed 19 other scandals waiting to be uncovered, from endemic insider trading via prison officer drug dealing and vicious social service departments to the stitch up of the public by the legal profession.

Locally we have a council engaged in the procurement of a shopping centre, besieged by letters in the local papers and mocked by Private Eye. If the council leader was up in front of a judge, many of us might believe she would be told "You are not a reliable witness and I don't believe a word you say".

Is this fair? Could the problem be that many of us do not properly understand the process being used by NHDC? Examination suggests that the process is based on that used by some government ministries to procure equipment for an end user such as the police or the military. This process starts with a list of requirements and has a working group consisting of civil servants, the chosen contractor and the user. The aim is to ensure value for money and equipment that is fit for purpose by the user.

Without going into the government process in detail, it can be seen that the Churchgate project has a list of requirements called "objectives", and it has a planning brief. It has a contractor called Simons Developments. It has civil servants in the form of the council employees and it has a user as represented by the Churchgate Liaison Forum. The members of the CLF well represent those in the community who use Hitchin, especially as there are four Hitchin Councillors. However, the outrage expressed by some in the user

community suggests that something is going wrong with the process.

The main functions of the council employees are:

1. To seek the views of the user.
2. To draw up requirement documents.
3. To oversee the bidding process.
4. To advise on 'down selecting' to one contractor.
5. To negotiate a contract.
6. To advise the contractor on the planning environment.
7. To identify as many risks as possible and put in place credible measures to mitigate those risks.
8. To keep the Cabinet informed on the progress of the project.
9. To ensure that the contractor provides an outcome which meets the approval of the user.
10. To obtain value for money for the local community.

Point 10 is the one that has sparked the avalanche of letters, which has led to a breakdown of trust that the council will guarantee point 9. The contract has unfortunately been negotiated and the way that the council employees are trying to defend those parts that most offend the user community may have resulted in the view that the employees are working to produce a development that will look good on their CVs, rather than working as public servants. The risk is that they may be seen to have an implied financial interest in the project being as extensive as possible.

The Leader of the Council is on record as saying that NHDC is working with the contractor to address the issues raised in the press and at the CLF. She has stressed the value of the CLF. There are some who believe the time has come to appeal to outside

government agencies. This approach is likely to receive short shrift from the government. We should sort out our difficulties at a local level. There is a Project Board that can stop the project going forward to a planning application. The Leader is on that Board.

We might start to resolve the problems by taking the Leader at her word. If Simons

produce a new layout that is still very unpopular we will know that the process is not serving those who use Hitchin and that she is not a "reliable witness". That would be the time for anger; meanwhile, it is better to be optimistic in spite of the scandals set out above.

Hitchin Town Hall/Museum

John Keene is the Forum's representative on the Community Group helping plan the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall into a modern community hall and district museum:

On first hearing "ojeu", you might think (as I did) of some sort of exotic fruit, available perhaps at larger branches of Waitrose. Well, it's not. It is, in fact, an acronym for *The Official Journal of the European Union*. Councils are supposed to place notices therein for jobs above a certain value. NHDC, however, was rather tardy in doing so for the post of Supervising Architect of the Town Hall conversion project, which has caused some delay to the programme (mind you, this process has been described as "the most-avoided piece of European legislation since metric weights and measures").

However, the three parties involved: NHDC, Future Builders and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd.,

continue to soldier on through the mass of legislation involved and, to use council-speak, "key points and potential solutions have been identified" which is comforting.

The schedule indicates a contract award date of 28th October, which, even if optimistic, indicates that the project is moving on. Remembering that the Hall narrowly escaped becoming a night club or being horizontally sliced in half to become the museum, it is good news to hear that the Mountford Hall and Lucas Room are on their way to being restored to their former glory. Together with the new museum, Brand Street is looking up!

Transport Issues Summary

The **Hitchin Urban Transport Plan** for all transport matters over the next five years is now available at: <http://www.hertsdirect.org/services/transtreets/transplan/tcatp/hitchinurbantransplan/> It will be discussed at a future meeting of Hitchin Forum's Transport Group. If you are interested in joining this group or just this discussion, please email Dave Borner: transport@hitchinforum.org.uk.

A North Herts District Council consultation about **parking in new developments** is available at: http://www.northherts.gov.uk/index/environment_and_planning/planning/local_development_framework/vehicle_parking_at_new_development_spd/vehicle_parking_at_new_development_spd_june_2011.htm. Hitchin Forum's Planning and Transport Groups are holding a joint meeting to discuss the document on 4 August with a view to drafting a response. If you would like to attend, please ring Ellie Clarke on 431338 or email: snoopy02@btopenworld.com.

NHDC is also considering introducing **out of hours parking charges** in NHDC's town centre car parks on Bank Holidays, evenings and Sundays. This could affect local clubs and organisations which particularly use these car parks at such times, as well as church goers and town centre residents. The deadline for comments was 22 July, but NHDC has offered to consider late responses.

Bancroft Hall: what future?

In our last newsletter, we published Hitchin Bridge Club's case for replacing Bancroft Hall. Now NHDC has issued a draft Community Halls strategy for public consultation which assumes it will be demolished and not replaced. John Keene reviews it:

The Foreword of the consultation draft of NHDC's Community Halls Strategy informs us that NHDC recognises the "enormous benefits" that "multi-functional" halls bring to a community, in meeting "the diverse needs of different community and faith groups", their contribution to "community cohesion" and the "reduction of social exclusion". It also states that NHDC is "committed to helping hall operators across all sectors to prove the need for these facilities and improve the limited funding opportunities that remain". All of which sounds as though it acknowledges the value of these facilities and wants to help! However

To determine what it considers adequate hall provision, NHDC calculates the ratio of available hall area in square metres to the size of local population as a comparator, using the "experience" of Great Ashby. This recently built community hall is already inadequate, but will be extended to 0.10 sqm per head of population. NHDC has decided this is its benchmark figure. As this hall has not even been extended yet, there can be no idea of how adequately that meets the needs of Great Ashby. Indeed, it appears to be quite arbitrary, especially when compared with figures for other districts quoted in the report, which average 0.164 sqm per head.

Judged on the 0.10 sqm figure, with the 40% uplift (see below), Hitchin is reckoned to actually have a **surplus** of hall space, which is certainly not borne out by local experience.

NHDC considers that urban areas are also "served by an extensive range of facilities for hire" and have therefore given a 40% "uplift" on the district's own urban halls to recognise this. The reasoning here is difficult to follow: towns are likely to have more schools and church halls, but of course have a larger

population, so they are equally likely to be booked; they are not available on a regular basis and are highly unlikely to have the storage facilities needed by local organisations meeting on a regular basis.

Hitchin Town Hall will be reduced to just the main Mountford Hall, splendid for large events but too big for average group activities, and the Lucas Room, rather small and lacking storage. Given the population increase resulting from the hundreds of flats built in recent years in and around the town centre, it is obvious that a community hall is needed here more than ever, and Bancroft Hall is ideally situated but dilapidated. A new town centre community hall will satisfy the requirements identified in the draft Strategy, Hitchin Bridge Club has the ability to manage it, and there are groups that urgently need this kind of facility. If lost, it will not only leave groups without a venue to meet, but will deter people from setting up new groups and clubs, one of the objectives set out in the Foreword to NHDC's draft Strategy.

Replying to an enquiry from Hitchin Bridge Club about possibly using the existing museum building as a community hall when available, NHDC stated "there would (need to be) . . . consideration of its use by other groups, who may wish to secure office/community space too". Clearly, NHDC is acknowledging here the need for such facilities in Hitchin.

NHDC's Community Halls Strategy is on NHDC's website: http://www.northherts.gov.uk/index/community_and_living/community_centres_and_facilities/community_halls_strategy_-_public_consultation.htm.

The consultation ends on 19th August, so please ensure that any groups of which you are a member are aware and respond.

Planning Applications in Hitchin

Chris Honey explained to our recent Town Group meeting how Hitchin Forum assesses and responds to planning applications in Hitchin:

Hitchin Forum's Town Centre Group used to look at significant town centre planning applications, with occasional forays further afield at large developments like those in Walsworth Road (Saunders Court and the site next to B&Q), Grove Road and Kershaw's Hill. Now, with the wider scope of the Town Group, we will be inspecting applications throughout Hitchin.

So how do we find out about them? Ellie Clarke uses NHDC's 'weekly list search' to look for the latest applications on NHDC's website, and sends those requiring investigation to Chris Honey and John Urwin, both on the assessment team.

Applications vary from large proposals like the one behind Brooker's (Cooper's Yard) and the William Ransom site to smaller developments like Thompson's Yard in Tilehouse Street and the Arriva Garage site in Fishponds Road. Adaptations and changes of use like extensions, modifications and alterations from offices or shops to residential or restaurants frequently arise. Some have to comply with LB's (Listed Building requirements), PUD's (Permitted Urban Developments), CAC's (Conservation Area Control) as well as AD's (shopfront signage), TPO's (Tree Protection Orders) and sometimes include demolishing existing buildings such as Rose Cottage in Walsworth Road.

So what do we look for? This is mainly based on aesthetic considerations like density, scale (dimension, height, volume) affecting compatibility with the development's surroundings; therefore, form, materials,

texture and colour are also considered and, most importantly, style. Where conservation of a property is proposed it is important that its period quality details are maintained, but in the case of a new development, it is not necessary for this to be neo-Georgian or Victorian in style for it to respect its older surroundings. One of Hitchin's special characteristics is its variety of style brought about by piecemeal development over the centuries rather than domineering proposals like Churchgate Shopping Centre. Other criteria include security, safety, access and sustainability plus environmental considerations such as energy conservation and production.

These applications are inspected first by reviewing them on NHDC's website and often also by inspecting the full-size plans held in Hitchin Library. It helps as well to look at the proposed site in relation to the surrounding environment. On some occasions, it is assessed further by the Town Group and at times we liaise with the Hitchin Historical Society and/or the Hitchin Society for an agreed view on the proposal.

We don't always send in comments to NHDC planning if the proposals are not offensive, but we have had extensive battles over some developments like Cooper's Yard. Sometimes we are so impressed with an application, such as the Walsworth Road Baptist Church link or the Arriva Bus Depot proposal, that we send in supportive remarks.

If this intrigues you, perhaps you would like to join our assessment team? If so, email us at planning@hitchinform.org.uk.

Diary Dates

Thurs 4 August	Hitchin Forum Planning Group meeting , (see Transport Issues)
Sat 6 Aug/3 Sept	Councillors Surgery , 10.30 – noon, Hitchin Market Place
Tues 6 September	Hitchin Forum Town Group meeting , 7.30pm, Holy Saviour Church Hall
Tues 13 September	Town Talk , 6.30pm, Hitchin Committee , 7.30pm, Westmill Community Centre

West of Stevenage Update

Ellie Clarke, committee member of the Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion (CASE), explains the latest developments:

In 1996 Herts County Council allocated land for up to 10,000 homes west of the A1(M) in their Structure Plan, proposing that the first houses should be ready by 2003. Amidst inquiries, challenges and protests, not a house has been built, Structure Plans no longer exist and the 'West Stevenage Consortium', which eventually applied for planning permission to build, no longer exists as an entity. Have protestors won the day? Not yet, but things are looking better than ever!

Most recently, North Herts District Council and Herts County Council mounted a court challenge to the Secretary of State's decision in 2009 to grant permission. They were partially successful, winning on two grounds: i) the East of England Plan says new developments must secure at least 10% of their energy from renewable or low-carbon sources and the court said the Secretary of State had ignored this; ii) the Secretary of State's permission would have allowed the developer to avoid all responsibility for the provision of temporary schools which would be needed before the permanent schools were built.

It is not just those parts of the scheme which were successfully challenged that are referred back for reconsideration; the Secretary of State now has to reconsider the whole scheme for 3,600 houses. In doing so, he must take into account all current circumstances, such as how planning policy

has changed since permission was first granted in 2009; he cannot rely on the previous situation and merely make minor changes. The government has said it will not appeal against this decision and will consider whether a second inquiry is needed.

The Secretary of State could grant permission on amended terms (this will increase the cost of developing the site) or he could refuse the application. The latter is obviously the simplest way to take into account the fact that the case for this development is now out of date. Given that the West Stevenage Consortium, a group of housebuilders including Persimmon and Taylor Woodrow, no longer even exists as such, there is now less certainty than ever that the controversial scheme will be built.

Further housebuilding in North Herts around Stevenage has also been put on hold. A planning inspector ruled in May that Stevenage Borough Council's *Core Strategy*, part of its *Local Development Framework* which included provision for 9,600 homes outside the town, was unlawful as it relied on land in North Herts which was opposed by North Herts District Council. He said it was therefore unlikely to happen so should not form part of Stevenage Council's planning framework. However, it is likely that SBC will challenge this decision, given that this had first been proposed in the East of England Plan several years ago.

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