



NEWSLETTER

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Chairman's Piece

Spring is here but the tadpoles have not arrived in my pond. A bit like the revised Churchgate plans. One assumes that in some dark and deep pool creative forces are at work, but nothing appears. Has the climate been too cool, have they been decimated by some predator, have they migrated to some other pond? I miss the tadpoles, but feel no loss about Churchgate plans. Maybe Simons have been reading the same predictions about e-commerce and the changes in the retail market that I have, and realised that some ponds are not for development, whatever giveaway agreements have been signed.

We are pleased that NHDC has found a new Chief Executive so quickly and look forward to hearing news of improvements in communication and community involvement. The saga of Bancroft Hall and the refurbishment of Bancroft Recreation Ground have still some miles to run. The NHDC Cabinet on 24th January saw the welcome but unnerving spectacle of a Letchworth Councillor hearing most clearly the complaints from the Hitchin community that the consultation on the future of the hall had been flawed. Sadly the minutes of the meeting did not reflect what had been heard by the dozens of concerned Hitchin residents, and seemed best described as an exercise in creative writing. The issues of how best to use the Recreation Ground, the balance of open space and a desirable indoor venue, how to keep it safe and attractive clearly needs more attention. The tennis club feel that the usage of the hall makes the area safer – more people, less mischief. Attracting Lottery funding to refurbish the grounds requires that the area has greater usage, but removing the hall and losing the hundreds of hall users would sabotage that. Another question raised at the Hitchin Committee on 6th March was about the spending of Section 106 monies (for community enhancements, paid by companies when new developments are built) - who decides and how – particularly concerning monies previously allocated for hall refurbishment, but lost in transit.

Such issues are now being included in *latest news* on the Forum website. Do check it and leave comments – while it has attracted a few hundred visitors, nobody has yet used it to comment on issues. This could be taken as a compliment that people agree with what has been posted, but we need feedback, and new ideas. We will try to include all important issues on it, and some trivia – like the hideous BT utility cabinet suggested adjacent to the Cabbies' Shelter in the Market Place. Some planner had a March hare moment – quite barmy.

To attract new people to support us we will be offering free membership from the website until the end of October. Do encourage friends to sign up.

On 3rd May we should vote in the local council elections. Do ask your ward candidates where they stand in supporting a replacement for Bancroft Hall, how they view the Churchgate fiasco. Also ask whether they will speak up for their Hitchin community, and not just play party politics.

Mike Clarke

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Historic Towns Forum

How Many Houses – and Where?

Hitchin Forum’s Planning Group report on their discussions about NHDC’s proposals for more homes and where to put them:

In preparing the *Core Strategy* section of their *Local Development Framework*, NHDC have published papers proposing numbers of houses required up to 2031 and where the land to accommodate them might be found: www.north-herts.gov.uk/core-strategy . They are asking for comments from the public by Friday, 30th March.

They have come up with numbers based on 8 scenarios as below:

A. Number called for in East of England Plan (defunct)	15,800
B. Number due to net migration	14,500
C. Number taking up all sites around Stevenage	13,000
D. Number using average annual completions since 2001	11,000
E. As above, but excluding Great Ashby	7,700
F. Number required to deliver affordable housing	7,000
G. Number as a result of population growth excluding migration	5,400
H. Number available if all brownfield sites are used	2,500

The Planning Group met on 14th March and, having considered the main consultation report and background papers, will be submitting the following comments.

Housing Need

Option F, NHDC’s preferred option, is based on the amount of housing that would be required to enable affordable housing needs in the district to be met. Hitchin Forum supports this option as a means of ensuring that local people continue to be able to live in North Herts.

However we are concerned that it will be crucial that the figures used to calculate affordable need are robust. This is especially important in the context that the Secretary of State will be expecting the achieved rate over the last 10 years to be exceeded (which would suggest at least 7,700 homes over the twenty years rather than 7,000).

If this Option is to proceed we would ask that NHDC provide a fuller explanation than given in *Defining the Housing Requirement* (Appendix 2). We would be concerned if the principle of Option F was supported only to find that the housing requirement based on this option could be significantly larger.

NHDC rightly say that any estimate of housing numbers is dependent on the occupancy rate, currently 2.33 people per household, but

predicted to be 2.14 by 2031. A small error in this figure makes a considerable difference to the number needed. We suspect that the Office for National Statistics has continued past trends from the census in arriving at this figure, a method we believe is incorrect. The current trend is for young people to remain at home for longer or rent in multiple occupancy.

Further, economic and cultural indicators are suggesting that there may not be significant growth in the economy and that the problems are long term and structural, so occupancy rates may not decline as predicted. Conversely, the need for affordable housing for families could well increase.

There is need for particular care in terms of overall housing provision, since planning in the South tends to lead on the principle of providing houses and expecting employment to follow. This means that successful Hertfordshire deprives other areas of prosperity. Water shortages and transport problems also provide cogent arguments against excessive development here.

Housing Land Availability

Even with the figures represented by Option F as currently calculated, there will be need to find sites for 2,340 more houses than can be found in the District's Priority 1 and 2 sites which exclude Greenfield and Green Belt land - as identified in the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA).

In this context Hitchin Forum makes the following comments:

There are sites identified in Hitchin as Priority 1 and 2 which we do not consider suitable: for instance at Top Field, Pinehill Field and the Lucas Lane sports pitch. We would like to have the opportunity to discuss these further with officers *before* the consultation on Preferred Options for Sites in the summer of 2012.

NHDC considers all the Hitchin Priority 3 sites identified in the SHLAA unacceptable for

development. It was agreed at the Stakeholder Consultation in November 2010 (attended by two of our members) that Hitchin has taken a higher proportion of growth than the other towns, and is appropriate only for low growth in the future.

Our view is that Hitchin has now reached the maximum size and extent for a small market town: it supports a full range of services and facilities, but with the population able to access the countryside within a short walking distance and with a clear landscape setting.

We would be very pleased if members were able to take some of these points as the basis of their own response. We advise against using the online form provided by NHDC as it is too restricting. Respond by letter to Housing Growth Targets, NHDC, PO BOX 480, M33 0DE; or by email to: ldfconsultations@north-herts.gov.uk.

Luton Airport Expansion Proposals

Hitchin Forum's Planning & Transport Groups recently met to discuss the latest proposals for Luton airport and decided to object to expansion in principle:

Abertis, the Spanish infrastructure company which operates Luton airport under contract to Luton Borough Council, has now published its own plans to expand the airport. While LBC wants to expand throughput to 18 million passengers per annum by 2020, eventually rising to 30 million, Abertis believes the constraints of the site will limit expansion to a maximum of 16 million. The airport currently handles less than 10 million, with a theoretical capacity of 12 million.

While the dispute between Abertis and LBC rumbles on, LBC is consulting on its own expansion plan, which increasingly seems to have an air of fantasy about it. London Luton Airport Limited (owned by LBC) aims to submit its plan to LBC for planning permission. Hence, unless central government intervenes, LBC will effectively be able to approve its own plan, from which it hopes to add to the c. £20million per annum it already makes from the airport. No conflict of interest there!

There will be stiff opposition to any expansion from communities in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire which already suffer from major

aircraft noise nuisance. Hitchin would suffer from increased congestion on the A505, which is not easy to relieve without environmentally damaging road-building and further pressure on the green belt to the south and west of the town.

LBC makes much of the potential for airport expansion to create employment. However, its forecast of 4,000 additional jobs seems highly optimistic, given that the expansion is expected to be in the form of further "no-frills" flights, where, by definition, further employment is kept to a minimum.

Hitchin Forum will be objecting to expansion in the current consultation (which closes on Monday 26th March), while expecting further consultation on more realistic plans in the future.

Meanwhile, government is consulting on UK aviation policy again, climate change has not gone away, and the oil price is heading back up to the levels seen in 2007 which put the survival of many airlines in doubt.

Bancroft Hall Update

Hitchin Forum is working closely with Hitchin Bridge Club to keep a community hall in Hitchin town centre. Here John Keene, of our Steering Group, reports the latest:

At the NHDC Cabinet meeting on 24th January, councillors, officers and a huge public gallery heard four separate addresses on the subject of the replacement of Bancroft Hall after its scheduled demolition in 2014. Following a little to and fro, Cllr Terry Hone (Letchworth) requested that officers re-examine the issue of providing accommodation for the various community groups currently using the Hall. We left, cheered that at last the Council were taking a serious interest in the matter. Imagine then our surprise that this apparent breakthrough was not given a mention in the official minutes of the meeting.

At the subsequent Hitchin Committee meeting on 6th March, councillors were unable to account for this curious omission. They did, however, listen to further detailed submissions from members of Hitchin Bridge Club who are forming a Bancroft Hall users group. Hitchin Councillors were supportive and agreed to a further meeting to discuss their proposals. Good news, and the first time in many months of repeated appeals that such a suggestion has been made.

Perhaps the most heartening announcement,

however, came from Keith Hoskins who stated that Hitchin Initiative was looking to become a key figure in the search for providing another venue.

A rather depressing aspect of this long saga is the fixed stance of NHDC in insisting that alternative accommodation is available. This is denied by the Bridge Club who have challenged them to produce their evidence. NHDC also persist in linking the closure of Bancroft Hall with the opening of the refurbished Town Hall, which, with so much of its area given over to the new museum, will simply not have the capacity to cope. The Bridge Club have consistently produced sound, well reasoned arguments and detailed evidence which, so far, have been routinely ignored or rejected by NHDC.

At the heart of the problem is the Council's aim of securing a grant for the improvement of *parks*, accordingly quietly re-naming Bancroft Recreation Ground as Bancroft *Gardens* (rather cunning don't you think?) and clearing the area of buildings they consider redundant. Surely to goodness this could be achieved without losing a valuable community hall; they should really get down to discussing this with the Bridge Club.

Churchgate – Challenging the Secrecy

Ellie Clarke, of Hitchin Forum's Steering Group reports on efforts to break through NHDC's secrecy:

There have long been concerns about a lack of transparency and democratic accountability in NHDC's dealings with Simons on Churchgate. After a year of pressure and an appeal to the Information Commissioner, the Council finally released their **risk register** on the Churchgate project. Analysis reveals how very 'Council-centric' this document is, with little account taken of the blight on the town, and the market in particular, due to the uncertainty created by the proposals and the continued lack of progress. There is also little awareness of the risk that such an increase in retail floor area could adversely affect the economic sustainability of the town's historic core.

Another concern has been that the **Churchgate Project Board** has tremendous power to decide the project but meets in secret. Astonishingly, the Council initially refused to make public the notes of these meetings, saying they were "*private meetings of members and officers*" and Simons attended, "*acting as an extension of the Council*". After yet more pressure, 'redacted' notes were released, revealing considerable slippage by Simons: a 'viability test' due in December 2010, heads of terms to be agreed with a Joint Venture Partner by March 2011, a viable solution for the market and anchor store by December 2011 – none of these deadlines have been met.

Recent Planning Proposals

Chris Honey, of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group reports on our recent efforts:

The Orchard and Anvil

An informal planning appeal hearing took place on 6th March 2012. It seems an informal appeal differs from a formal one due only to the absence of legal representation for either party. The appellant brought about this hearing because over four years of submitting applications for this site and amending each to comply with NHDC planning objections 'the goal posts were still moving', so they were hoping for a definitive outcome.

Unfortunately the demolition of the Orchard and Anvil pub was not disputed; instead the refusal had been based on a poor standard of design and layout. This was partly because it was deemed out of character with the area and partly because it was considered to be too crowded, with over dominance of Fells Close. Interestingly, apart from height in relation to the adjacent cottages on Nightingale Road, the scale and footprint were not questioned and the height of the buildings on the corner beside the roundabout was considered an asset. Other objections such as a renewable energy

Bridge Street Bus Garage Negotiations

Representatives of Hitchin Forum, The Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society met the site owner/applicant for its redevelopment on 2nd March. I hoped that he might be persuaded to retain and upgrade the present facade for residential use. This he might have considered had it been in its original state but he feels it is not worth retaining in its present condition.

His proposal is for a frontage 'in homage' to the present one, divided into three houses. It would be the same facade height and width, reproducing the top shape but with a mansard roof behind it providing three storeys. Constructed in brick with stone coping and window cills, a slated roof and lantern first floor central window, they would be live/work units with studios.

I feel it is a pastiche of the present facade which does not reproduce the central arch element. The developer really wants three storeys but agreed that he would look at my proposal for

requirement, noise concerns for the intended occupants, air quality and waste/recycling collection could be dealt with by planning acceptance conditions. My aesthetic conclusion was that the proposal gave a positive uplift to an area of poor architectural merit. I hope the inspector agrees with me!

When all concerned adjourned for lunch and an afternoon inspection of the site, I went home with the following conclusion. The main concern is over-development of the site, i.e. too many units, resulting in an inadequate parking facility and community area plus poor waste collection arrangements and possible dominance over Fells Close.

We await the outcome of the inspector's decision in the not too distant future. However we have since been informed that *"the Council failed to notify in writing, those who made representations at the application stage, of the date of the hearing"* so the hearing has been adjourned, pending further representations being made.

modifying the existing facade and admitted the existing top profile was better than his lookalike one and that the flank wall could be modulated to reduce its apparent volume and dominance. To the rear would be two semi-detached three storey houses in brick with tiled roofs and six car parking places. These are pleasant enough but could be more environmentally specified like those in Hartington Place Letchworth Garden City called 'Tomorrow's Garden City'.

Well there it stands then or rather doesn't, the existing facade is doomed! That regrettably accepted, the site deserves a more distinctive treatment. He did consider an ultra modern replacement but had rejected it due to anticipated refusal by NHDC Planning. Therein lies a tale: I feel that both the Ransom and Brooker's site proposals were drastically reduced in design quality by the time they got planning approval. It's time the planning department had a design adviser.

McDonald's Restaurant, Nightingale Road

Ellie Clarke, member of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, explains the latest:

In January 2012 McDonald's drive-through restaurant applied for planning permission to extend their opening times by one extra hour, morning and evening. This would mean 7am – 11pm opening, seven days a week. This was puzzling as they had been refused permission for precisely the same application in November 2011 on the grounds that it would be environmentally detrimental to nearby residents and could prejudice any future development on the adjacent railway sidings.

It turned out to be an error on their part and a revised application was subsequently submitted for only an extra hour in the morning. This looks, on the face of it, to be the thin end of the wedge. Opening an hour earlier in the morning may appear to have little effect, but 7am

opening would actually mean staff arriving much earlier than this and customer cars perhaps queuing before 7am, creating early morning noise and disturbance.

There are far more residents living near to McDonald's than when it opened in 1998, so residential amenity is now a much greater concern.

In addition, nothing has changed in terms of possible development on the adjacent railway sidings; this site could still eventually be redeveloped for housing, and any reduction in the living standards of local residents must prejudice what can happen in the locality in future, so we have asked that this application be refused, once again.

Hitchin Conservation Area & Register of Buildings of Local Interest

The Conservation Officer at NHDC writes:

At a meeting of the Council's Cabinet on 26th July 2011, Character Statements and associated mapping for the following were formally adopted by North Hertfordshire District Council:

Hitchin Conservation Area and three new Conservation Areas: Butts Close, Ransoms Recreation Ground & Hitchin Railway, and Hitchin Hill Path.

In addition, the Register of Buildings of Local Interest for Hitchin was also adopted.

English Heritage's consultation document entitled 'Understanding Place: Conservation Area Designation, Appraisal and Management' states that "...The values held by the community are likely to add depth and a new perspective to the local authority view . . . " I take this opportunity to thank Hitchin Forum for engaging with the public consultation process which began with the exhibition launch to the first round of public consultation on 4th July 2009 and ended with the second round of public consultation on 11th June 2010. I would be grateful if you would forward these comments onto your members and draw their attention to the fact that the above documentation can be viewed on the Council's website.

Diary Dates

Saturday 31 March: **Councillors' Surgery**; 10.30am - noon, Market Place

Monthly opportunity to raise issues of concern with Hitchin's County & District Councillors
(NOTE change of date due to Easter)

Tuesday 17 April: **Hitchin Forum members meeting**; 7.30pm, Hitchin British Schools

Your opportunity to hear more about local issues & share your views & ideas

Thursday 3 May: **Local Elections**; at a polling station near you.

The opportunity to vote out – or vote in!