



NEWSLETTER

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Chairman's Piece

Olympic excitement fades and then we are back to the everyday routines. Watching the manoeuvres of the Hitchin Committee is less attractive than our gymnasts, but they are flexing and stretching a little. Frustration at how their best intentions can be defeated by officers at County Hall was vented at their last meeting on 11th September. The potential difficulties in implementing their agreed aim of introducing **20mph speed limits** across Hitchin led to thoughts on how to challenge any objections raised by officers – sadly reported from a Watford resident who had presented the many compelling facts which have moved their council to try to introduce such a limit in their town. The councillors here talked about the use of the NHDC's Scrutiny Committee as an avenue of informing and correcting misinformation which seems to have crept into council decision making.

Local democracy demands consultation on significant local changes. The failure to adequately consult was the focus for more furore over the **extension of Samuel Lucas School** as reported by Robin Dartington. Something on the agenda of the previous Hitchin Committee was the concern over **developers' monies** allocated under section 106 arrangements. The obscurity and lax mechanisms under which this is managed are highlighted here by Bernard Eddleston, and surely must lead to more transparency and scrutiny. More stretching and flexing for the councillors!

Top Field is also occupying our thoughts. It seems increasingly unfortunate that the Cow Commoners signed an option with the developer without consulting more widely. Even the NHDC representative on their Trust has no obligation to report back to the council. It seems like a secret society, but its deeds give it a public responsibility. The cost seems to be the widespread anger of townspeople, the inevitable protest by various groups in the town, damage to the Trust's reputation, enormous effort to find some resolution and expensive manoeuvres in the meantime. The focus should be on sport and recreation, but the Trust's planning has alienated rather than inspired the public. Olympic planning it is not.

Hitchin Museum has closed and soon the **Town Hall** will follow. Hopefully the hard work of Hitchin Town Hall Limited and the efforts of NHDC will lead to the emergence of the new district museum and refreshed hall two years from now. A celebratory day is arranged for 20th October.

The Hitchin Festival talk on '**Sustainable Hitchin**' which we sponsored gave food for thought, though no clear direction on what to do next. We are thinking about how to use the website to give more information on a greener Hitchin and any ideas will be welcome.

Our **AGM** will be on 1st November. I hope you can be there. If you would like to be more involved in the work of the Forum in any capacity please let us know – all of our campaigns require someone's time and efforts and we are delighted if that work can be shared more widely.

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The Post Office site – planning its future

Public consultation on a draft development brief for the former Post Office & Sorting Yard site concludes on 25th September. John Urwin, Chair of Hitchin Forum’s planning group, sets out some of the issues and concerns:

When it became clear that the Post Office site would be sold, NHDC said that they wished to see a development brief prepared that would guide development on this important town centre site. To aid this, they produced a helpful ‘scoping’ paper that set out relevant planning policies and the Council’s expectations for such a brief. The site has now been sold to a Hitchin based developer who sub-contracted the production of the development brief to a planning consultancy.

The development brief for the Churchgate area was produced quite differently. The public were invited to give their views at a much earlier stage and so were able to influence the planning principles and parameters of that brief. The end result was an excellent brief which had public support.

This time, however, a draft brief has already been prepared before public consultation began and the result is a somewhat ‘waffley’ document which does not adequately consider what the town needs or what would best serve the town. Nor does it cover the possible mix of uses and it is vague on servicing, access and parking. Proposed uses are for hotel, residential and shops and cafes, with building heights of 3 to 4

storeys. Public exhibitions in September included three possible elevations to Hermitage Road. They showed contemporary designs with a considerable amount of glass and were well-received. The development brief, exhibition display material and response form can be viewed at: <http://sorting-office.whitebarn-developments.co.uk>.

Hitchin Forum’s planning group considered the documents recently and concerns were raised about building intensity and heights and the lack of information on both landscaping and the Portmill Lane frontage. The group felt substantial work would be needed to create an attractive river walkway along what is currently a ditch: widening this area is welcomed; there must be attractive and inviting landscaping; building heights must be kept low here; and the river should be widened and its level raised, possibly by moving the weir towards Hermitage Road. Architectural treatment should vary with the use of buildings, not simply to create a variety of styles.

A briefing document is being sent to members to give further information for responding to the consultation.

Membership News

Membership Secretary, Maureen Carroll reports:

We have welcomed eight new members to Hitchin Forum since the publication of the July/August newsletter. They include Jeremy Davies, Joyce Donald, Trevor Groom and Jackie McDonald. We are very pleased to report that this brings our total new membership for the year to 24.

Calling all FRIENDS OF BUTTS CLOSE! When John Jarvis died in March of this year, we lost not only one of our most staunch, active and supportive members, but also our only known link to one of our member organisations, the *Friends of Butts Close*. It would be a matter of enormous regret to us all if the organisation ceased to exist, especially when the Council has just created a new Conservation Area here, and at this time of threat to Top Field, just across the road from Butts Close. If you are a member of the organisation, or if John passed Hitchin Forum news on to you, or if you live near Butts Close and care enough about it to take over the role John filled so ably for so many years, do please get in touch with the Membership Secretary or any member of the Steering Group, or through our website.

“Section 106” monies – to provide community facilities or not?

Bernard Eddleston explains efforts to find out what happens to the financial contributions developers are required to make as part of their planning permissions:

Whenever new community projects are proposed and the question is asked: are there *Section 106 monies* available? The answer from Council Officers is invariably that it has all been committed and there is no more available.

After some two years of work by some of our Hitchin Councillors with Council Officers, a list of Section 106 monies, including spend, was finally presented to Hitchin Committee in July. Imagine our surprise when we learned that only 1.4% of the money so far received and allocated to Hitchin has been spent. The amount of money is not insignificant. So far, from their list (which we believe is incomplete), they have received £394K and the total which will be received if all approved planning applications proceed will rise to £777K. Interest has also been earned on this money whilst it is unspent (about £40K to date); this interest is not added to the sum available but goes into general Council coffers. This cannot be correct.

So what are “Section 106 (S106) monies”? All new developments place additional burdens on the Local and County Councils in terms of education, waste collection, roads, community centres, open spaces, sports and other leisure provisions. S106 monies are the developers’ contributions towards these additional facilities.

It would appear that until recently, when our Hitchin Councillors started to ask questions, Officers had no overall picture of what they had received and what had been spent. No one seems to have an overall strategy as to how this money should be spent and as a result we are in the ludicrous position of having only spent some £5K out of the £394K so far received. Some of this money has time limits on it and if not spent has to be returned to the developer with interest!

This is further complicated by the fact that S106 monies are being phased out and by April 2014 they will be replaced by a *Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)* and there will then be

further restrictions on how existing S106 monies can be spent. So it is imperative that Hitchin Councillors have a clear strategy and priorities for this money over the next 18 months. Furthermore the Council does not yet have a policy in place for how they are going to approach CIL in 2014.

At the recent meeting of the Hitchin Committee when this was discussed, it was agreed that a priority list should be established listing the top 20 projects that Hitchin Councillors thought the monies should be spent on and that this should be monitored closely. This was a step in the right direction because at present it is not clear who decides how the money should be spent and on what. This surely should be a matter for local Councillors not Officers.

However, following the meeting a further series of questions were put to Officers because it appeared that the list provided was incomplete and in some cases misleading. The report states that it lists all S106 monies agreed with developers since 2001/2, but clearly several major developments are not included and so the completeness of the report is under question. Officers had attempted to include some projects as having S106 monies allocated to them, but at a recent Cabinet meeting, these same projects had been allocated funds from other sources such as capital reserves. In addition they were attempting to divert S106 monies to the Town Hall project when none had been requested before and no appropriate use within that project appears legitimate. At the time of writing this article, over six weeks after posing questions, we still have no reply from Officers.

It should be a matter of concern to all Hitchin residents and Councillors that we have such an unsatisfactory position with regard to these monies. We must ensure that a priority list is agreed democratically, that a complete and accurate list is established and that the monies are spent wisely for the benefit of the residents of Hitchin.

Top Field – no green belt, no braces

John Keene, Hitchin Forum Steering Group member, updates us on the battle to save Top Field from retail development and to stop a Hitchin sporting facility from being moved outside the town:

The *Hitchin Cow Commoners'* intentions to "exchange" Top Field for a site on Green Belt land off the Stevenage Road have been confirmed by drawings submitted to North Herts District Council. These "screening" documents – asking for guidance from planning officers on whether an *Environmental Impact Assessment* is needed to accompany any planning application – show a large supermarket on the present football ground and a "sports and leisure" facility opposite Kingshott School.

The Hitchin Cow Commoners' Trust (HCCT) state that, as a charity, they may not deal directly with a commercial concern (and therefore with Hitchin Town Football Club), and propose setting up a not-for-profit company to manage it (this begs the question – why not simply do that at Top Field?). Surprisingly, given the length of time since the inception of their idea – the fairly detailed supermarket plans are dated 2010 – nothing in the way of a business plan has been seen, addressing issues of sustainability or even a risk register.

On the other hand, the risks to Hitchin are obvious: a huge supermarket sited on Fishponds Road would have very serious consequences for our town centre economy and many of our small shops would find it difficult to survive. Breaching

our treasured Green Belt has, of course, horrendous implications, most immediately to some villages, but also in terms of precedent; having fought a 15-year battle against West of Stevenage, that argument would be lost instantly in principle. Our venerable Hitchin Town Football Club, presently situated on its historic Top Field site, would be shunted off to a much less accessible, out-of-town, location.

At the present time we have Hitchin Town Football Club, which also runs two junior teams, at Top Field. Across the road is the soon to be enlarged swim centre, and nearby are facilities for hockey, tennis, bowling and rugby, plus a planned new *Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA)* at Bancroft Recreation Ground. A new community centre to replace Bancroft Hall, sited perhaps on Top Field, would complete the offer, and ALL WITHIN HITCHIN.

We can only speculate as to the point in the HCCT's deliberations when this 'gem' of an idea emerged: a scheme that would, at a stroke, have so many grave implications for our town and also enrage the residents of St Ippolyts and beyond. Probably just a simple typing error on the agenda: "enhance" being inadvertently replaced by "erase". Happens all the time.

Focus on Forum members: Whitehill Ladies Group

Whitehill Ladies Group was originally a member of the Townswomen's Guild, but in 1998 we formed our own independent Ladies Group. Our meetings are held at Whitehill School, Whitehill Road, Hitchin, at 7.30pm on the second Wednesday of the month, except in December when it is the first Wednesday, and August when there is no meeting.

At present we have 43 members and any visitors are made most welcome. We do a variety of activities including listening to speakers, entertainments, fund-raising events, games, quizzes and auctions. As well as the evening meetings, we run a monthly Luncheon Club when members meet socially and enjoy a meal at a local pub or restaurant. We have a thriving Arts and Crafts section, which also meets monthly. The members are taught a variety of different crafts which they practice during the evening. There is also a Games Evening which is hosted by a different member, in her home, each month. Whitehill Ladies Group supports a number of charities throughout the year and several members hold Coffee Mornings, Tea Afternoons, and Open Days to raise funds for both the Group and charities. We always welcome new members and anyone interested in joining can contact our Secretary, Maureen Warwicker via admin@hitchinforum.org.uk

Samuel Lucas School Expansion proposals

In July, we were alerted by a member of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group that the County Council was consulting on this matter. Here is the Forum's response to that consultation, prepared by our planning group.

Hitchin Forum has no objection to reasonable school expansion which is based on proper evaluation of need, i.e. a thorough audit of capacity requirements based on comprehensive demographics analyses and which considers all schools in the town.

However, we have serious concerns regarding traffic generation in the area around Samuel Lucas. Access for vehicles is very restricted and any expansion proposals must be accompanied by a substantive Green Travel Plan which includes measure to reduce/discourage vehicle use by parents. Serious and substantive speed reduction measures are needed on the one-way system; this simply can no longer be ignored by the County Council if the number of reception age children is to be doubled here by September

Here, Forum member and local resident Robin Dartington reports on more recent efforts:

Controversy has broken out in West Hitchin over the proposal to enlarge Samuel Lucas JMI in order to meet a forecast shortage of places in Reception classes across Hitchin as a whole, of 29 places in 2013/14, 31 places the following year, dropping to 8 places a year later. No forecasts have been published beyond that (although HCC estimates cover three more years). Could there be only a short-term blip, which hardly justifies a new school that will last 100 years?

The proposed enlargement would double the size of the school from 210 children to 420. All the new classrooms would be built for September 2013, with the school growing by 30 children a year for seven years until the full capacity of 420 was utilised. The scheme would cost £3.5M and take away half the remaining historic 'leisure gardens' laid out in the 1830's, worked continuously ever since and needed into the future. HCC propose creating a new allotment site 1.5 miles away, but Hitchin will lose open space in the town that is useful as a gardening resource and for wildlife, including slow worms, a protected species.

The controversy has been caused by mismanagement of the public consultation last

2013. Despite representations made in response to the Hitchin Urban Transport Plan consultation, no traffic calming has been put in place in this road scheme, which remains hostile to residents, pedestrians and cyclists.

Finally, we accept that part of the current allotment site is likely to be lost with the expansion but hope this will be minimised as far as is possible. We would urge the school to consider part of the area for growing fruit and vegetables within the school (see the government-backed "Food Growing in Schools" report by 'Garden Organic' and others which highlights compelling evidence that food growing in schools helps support children to achieve, builds life and employability skills and improves health and well-being).

summer. A *Consultation Overview* was posted on HCC's website, parents were notified, but local residents and allotment holders were not. The plans were not displayed in Hitchin Library or debated by Hitchin Committee and nothing sent to Hitchin's civic societies. Nevertheless, 65 responses to the consultation were received, 67% against the proposal. The school governors gave support, so the recommendation to HCC Education panel on 19 September is to proceed. As a local resident, I lodged a formal complaint against the inadequacy of consultation and the local County Councillor, Derrick Ashley, agreed to front a public meeting on 12th September. This was attended by 123 people and 77 signed a petition asking for no decision before more consultation and release of more information.

No one wants a lack of places for children – the question is how to marginally increase current capacity and which site(s) to select. Wilshere Dacre School, nearby, was built to take 90 children a year but this has been reduced to 60. Oughton School is capable of expansion. Meanwhile, consultation that would have ironed out these problems long ago has been denied, but pressure on HCC will be maintained.

Government Aviation Policy and Luton Airport Expansion

Government aviation policy has been making the news again recently, largely because of the heated public debate about whether or not to build a third runway at Heathrow.

In July the government put out the first part of its draft aviation strategy for consultation, covering largely general policy issues, including noise and environmental impact. Replies are due by 31st October. The second part of the consultation will follow this autumn, when the government will issue a *Call for Evidence* aimed at eliciting proposals for maintaining the UK's aviation hub status, particularly proposals for the location of new capacity. The government framework was supposed to be in place by March 2013, but an independent commission will now consider the capacity issue, and report in 2015, after the next general election.

Meanwhile, closer to home, Luton Airport is ploughing its own furrow by proposing its own expansion – a doubling in passenger numbers from 9 to 18 million per year. The consultation on the airport's plan ends on 12th October. Worryingly, as matters currently stand, Luton Borough Council is the planning authority to decide upon the application, as well as being the airport's owner and the chief financial beneficiary from any expansion. This is surely an application which should be called in by the

Secretary of State to avoid conflict of interest, as well as ensuring that Luton fits in with the overall government aviation framework.

The main downsides to expansion at Luton are the additional noise and traffic congestion created, and it is traffic congestion on the A505 that is likely to have the biggest adverse impact on Hitchin.

The airport claims a substantial employment benefit if expansion takes place, although this is difficult to reconcile with growth likely to come from no-frills airlines, which will do all they can to keep staffing costs down. With central government obsessed with giving the appearance of encouraging growth in the economy, it is a worry that unwise or unnecessary expansion may be allowed go ahead, and that the supposed economic benefits will never materialise. Meanwhile, the problems of pollution, climate change and long-term availability of oil at a cost affordable to airlines have not gone away, however much wishful thinking goes on in government circles.

The consultations can be found at:

www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/dft-2012-35/
and www.london-luton.co.uk/en/content/8/1171/revised-masterplan/

Coming to a roundabout near you?

Hertfordshire County Council applied to North Hertfordshire District Council for permission to erect **four large advertising boards on the roundabout at the junction of Fishponds Road and Ickleford Road**. This roundabout is directly in front of the entrance to Bancroft Recreation Ground and has been beautifully planted to reflect this. It is also a 'gateway' to the town centre and is within the historic Conservation Area. We objected, saying the signs were large, unattractive and inappropriate. There is no indication as to why they are needed here and they could set a precedent. They could block drivers' sight lines, particularly of cyclists, creating a traffic danger. It is astonishing that the highways authority has submitted such an application. We understand planning officers will refuse permission if it is not first withdrawn.

Diary Dates

Saturdays 6 October/3 November: **Councillors' Surgery**; 10.30am – noon, Market Place.

Saturday 20 October: **The End of the Beginning**; day-time exhibition and evening party to celebrate Hitchin Town Hall's past and future. Details from Town Centre Manager.

Thursday 1 November: **Hitchin Forum Annual General Meeting**; details for members to follow.

Tuesday 13 November: **Town Talk (6.30pm) & Hitchin Committee (7.30pm)**; Westmill Community Centre.