

NEWSLETTER  
November/December 2012 No. 114

**Chairman's Piece**

Another **Hitchin Committee** – boring? No!! On Tuesday 13th November it was full of interesting content and angles. Councillors talked about **Churchgate** and the plea from Simons for more time to ummmm... (no I cannot think why they need more time before they give up). There is something of the dead parrot about this scheme. Obvious to almost everybody that it is dead, but by some unnatural reasoning it has been declared not quite moribund. Hopefully the final verdict that it has outlived any semblance of life will be declared by NHDC's elected councillors in January. It seems from the last council report that there has been a clutching at financial straws to avoid declaring it dead, whereas the criteria should be whether it is sustainable and desirable for Hitchin. Well done ye Hitchin Councillors for making your views quite plain! (see article overleaf).

The Forum's statement to **NHDC's Cabinet** on the 'Churchgate extension' was based on the idea of democracy. I find it deeply worrying that the notion of open and honest communication can be casually undermined. Hitchin Bridge Club put in some objections to NHDC's application for lottery funding for a prettification of "Bancroft Gardens", on the basis that the consultation which should precede such a project had been flawed. They made a careful critique of the process which should have involved community groups. We examined that protest and supported it. The Cabinet minutes noted this by saying *"The Portfolio Holder for Leisure stated that **he was aware of a number of erroneous comments which had been expressed by various residents/community groups in Hitchin seeking to undermine the bid to the HLF**"* (Cabinet minutes 25th September, item 48). No detail was given of what was erroneous in the comments made, and there has been no written response to the Bridge Club or ourselves to educate us in our mistaken thinking. This is shoddy and dictatorial and shows no effort in engaging with the residents that should be involved in such schemes.

I recently met a volunteer from Hitchin Counselling Service. She lives many miles away but enjoys coming to Hitchin for her volunteering, partly because she loves wandering around the old streets and interesting shops. In doing so she by-passes Royston, where a large Tesco thrives, to the detriment of the town centre. The Simons 7+acre parrot cage would destroy much of the High Street, as would a possible Top Field supermarket. There has been a preliminary obstacle to Richard Daniel's hopes of profiting from the swap of Top Field with a bit of our green belt, with Council Officers identifying problems that should be addressed for any planning application to proceed, but this parrot, or cow, is not yet dead.

Back to boring meetings – not so!! The next Hitchin Committee in January promises the opportunity for Hitchin councillors to vote for the health of the town, and the death of the parrot. NHDC (full) Council in January - date to be announced - will give the opportunity to make our views heard and for the whole district's representative members to show their support for Hitchin. Meanwhile **NHDC Scrutiny Committee** on 4th December is expected to examine the issues around **Bancroft Hall** and also the evidence of the effect of 20mph speed limits. If only we could have filmed these events before now we would have solved your worries about what to buy your beloved for Christmas. Apologies, but nevertheless have a good Christmas and exciting New Year. *Mike Clarke*

## Churchgate

**John Urwin, Hitchin Forum's representative on the Churchgate Liaison Forum, gives details of a recent NHDC Cabinet meeting and Ellie Clarke, Secretary to the Forum's Planning Group, recounts the decision taken at the Hitchin Committee and future action by NHDC:**

The latest twist in the Churchgate saga is that NHDC have received a request from Simons for a six month delay to the "*Planning Viability Appraisal Date*" and the "*First Cut-Off Date*". The former is currently 19th December and is to check whether there is a viable scheme prior to committing to the cost of preparing a planning application. The latter is 19th March 2013, by which time Simons must have submitted a planning application.

Failure to do this allows NHDC to send Simons packing (*surely "withdraw from the Development Agreement"? Ed.*).

A meeting of **NHDC's Cabinet** on 1st November debated the request. Representatives from Hitchin Society, Keep Hitchin Special, Churchgate Retailers and Hitchin Forum spoke to the Cabinet. The first three each summarised different reasons as to why Simons' request should be refused. We took a different approach, believing that councillors have got too close to the project and need to be reminded of their primary function - to **represent** their community, see [www.hitchinform.org.uk](http://www.hitchinform.org.uk).

NHDC project staff had prepared a report which made clear that even with an extension, Simons would not be able to submit a planning application by the revised First Cut-Off Date, and then the report snuck in a second reason for asking for an extension - "*to enable the Council to fully consider the alternatives outlined...below based on a complete understanding of the Council's financial position moving forward*". That little sentence effectively controlled the discussion in Cabinet.

The reasoning put forward by the project staff was that there will be changes outlined by the government next month in the amount of business rates councils will be allowed to keep, so the extension was needed to allow full consideration of other options in case NHDC withdraws from the Development Agreement.

Hidden in this reasoning is an assumption that the Simons scheme will increase the business rate for NHDC, assuming they are one of the councils that can keep the increase. This is a risk and was verbally outlined by this writer at a Churchgate Liaison Forum meeting when we said that nobody knows what effect the scheme will have, not only on Hitchin, but also on neighbouring towns. So no one can be sure that a business rate increase will result and NHDC project staff are not qualified to make this assumption. In fact, what evidence there is points against an increase, with high streets in decline as demonstrated in the review by Mary Portas. NHDC's retail study by Nathaniel Litchfield & Partners some years ago projected a need for a considerable increase in retail floor space. No sensible person believes that now. Again, we raised this as a risk that councillors might have been misinformed. The reply from the project staff? They refused to accept it was a risk.

**So most of the Cabinet discussion was based on a report containing a flawed assumption.** In the event, Cabinet decided to await further information from project staff rather than make a recommendation to Full Council about whether or not to grant an extension. They also asked for a workshop to be held so that all members of the Council are up to date on the issues before taking the decision. A special meeting of Full Council is to be convened in January to debate the issues.

We are liaising with other community groups and the business community on how best to influence this process. We will undoubtedly want you help and will keep you informed.

On 13th November, a meeting of the Hitchin Committee debated the same Cabinet report. They voted that on the basis of the evidence before them, no extension to the Development Agreement should be granted. The vote was nearly unanimous: only Cllr Bernard Lovewell (Walsworth), who is the sole Hitchin Councillor on Cabinet, abstained.

## Top Field Issues Kick Off

**John Keene, a Hitchin Forum representative on the Save Top Field Campaign group elaborates on recent developments.**

NHDC planning have provided "pre-application advice" to New Road Ltd, the development company of Richard Daniels. In the case of the proposed supermarket at Top Field, officers raised these concerns:

- Inappropriate out of centre location for a retail development.
- Unacceptable loss of playing fields that has not been justified.
- Contrary to the open character of the site.
- Size and scale of store out of keeping with the surroundings.
- Detracts from the character and setting of the Butts Close Conservation Area.
- Likely adverse impact on trees covered by a Tree Preservation order.
- General adverse impact on residential and local amenity.

## Post Office Site Development Brief

Following public consultation in August / September, the draft Development Brief was amended and reported to the Hitchin Committee in November. Some points made by the public have been incorporated into the brief. The four-storey height along the River Hiz has been reduced to three storeys and there is to be a buffer area between the three-storey frontage on Portmill Lane and the Listed Building adjacent to the site. The revised brief also acknowledges that the proximity of St Mary's Church (Grade I listed) means that the redevelopment is likely to affect its wider setting.

However, several points we made appear to have been ignored: the need to recognise the wider context of the town's opportunities and needs; reconciling the day to day commercial uses which it proposes (hotel, a few shops, residential) with any longer-term economic and social objectives for the town centre; failure to address parking and servicing. The lack of an indicative Master Plan meant there was no clear idea of the scale of the different uses (e.g. potential number of town house, location of servicing and parking areas).

The proposed "community sports facility" outside Hitchin prompted the following:

- Inappropriate development in the Green Belt that cannot be justified.
- Loss of agricultural landscape and general amenity.
- Detrimental to highway safety and amenity.
- Unsustainable location.

We concur with all of the above and add "where is the Hitchin Cow Commoners Trust's (HCCT) business plan for their sports centre?". Meanwhile, Mr Daniels would be expecting these sort of objections, and with the resources of a large supermarket behind him, will doubtless be contesting the issues. All part of the day's work for a developer, but we still wonder at the actions of the HCCT, who, unlike Mr Daniels, actually live in Hitchin!

Further, a totally new proposal has now been introduced which was not part of the original consultation. A four-storey "landmark building" is proposed on the corner of Portmill Lane and the river walkway. This could have a dramatic effect on the setting of St Mary's and the wider area, yet it has not been subject to public consideration or debate. It is also likely to increase further the already very dense level of development proposed here.

The way consultation responses have been addressed (or not) is not at all transparent. Such consultations are usually reported to Council committees in a way that lists every comment made, along with officers' responses to those comments. That allows the public and councillors to track which responses have been incorporated, and crucially, if not, why not. That could so easily have been done, given the very low response rate. Given that this process has been developer-led from the beginning, the need for transparency in this situation is even greater.

**Ellie Clarke**

## A Hitchin Neighbourhood Plan & the District Local Plan

**Adrian Gurney, Chairman of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group outlines the issues.**

A group from Hitchin Forum, together with Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society, had a meeting in October with North Herts planners to discuss a potential Neighbourhood Plan for Hitchin - in the context of the Council's need to produce a Local Plan as soon as possible.

We came away with a clearer idea of the Local Plan issues that are going to be important over the coming year. We also felt that we could recommend to our members that it would be preferable for us to put effort into influencing the Local Plan rather than trying at this stage to produce a Neighbourhood Plan.

### **The Issues**

*Is Hitchin under threat because we have no up-to-date plan?*

Officers argued that the saved policies from the 1990's are largely in conformity with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In relation to housing there is the necessary 5 years' supply and the NPPF specifically mentions the Green Belt as protected even if the Local Plan is out of date.

*How much housing will be needed?*

Housing provision will need to take into account the needs of the housing market area including Stevenage, and the housing numbers (to be published in early 2013) will be higher than those consulted on in 2012. Officers also argued that when housing location is considered in Spring next year, each of the towns in North Herts will be expected to provide for its own

needs locally, and therefore there is likely to be some effect on Green Belt (with replacement elsewhere).

*How about the future of shopping, transport and other facilities?*

The major changes in shopping habits will mean that recent research at a national as well as more local level will need to be taken into account when developing policy. How the North Herts towns function will need to be considered when looking at such issues as the provision and pricing of parking, as well as provision of open space and other facilities.

### **A Positive Role**

It was agreed that the societies could play an important role in influencing the strategic and non strategic policies in the Local Plan. There will be a section on Hitchin. We could provide a draft vision for the future of Hitchin, together with the policy areas and projects that could assist in realising that vision. Following on from the Local Plan it will be clearer whether specific issues in Hitchin then need further work which could be covered in a Neighbourhood Plan.

The aim is for the Forum, and the other societies, to each develop their own ideas amongst their membership, and then get together to provide a positive input to the Local Plan process as early as possible in 2013. The Planning Group hopes to suggest some first ideas in January.

### **Diary Dates**

Saturdays 1 December/5 January: **Councillors' Surgery**; 10.30am – noon, Market Place.

Tuesday 4 December: **NHDC's Overview & Scrutiny Committee**; 7.30pm, Council Offices, Letchworth. Scrutiny of the Community Halls Strategy in which NHDC concluded Hitchin was over-provided with community halls and that Bancroft Hall should be demolished without replacement and issues around a possible 20mph zone for Hitchin.

Tuesday 8 January: **Town Talk** (6.30pm) & **Hitchin Committee** (7.30pm); Benslow Music Trust, Benslow Lane.

**ADVANCE NOTICE:** 31 January: **Hitchin Forum Members Meeting with Rt Hon Peter Lilley.**

Details to follow for Forum members.

## Dance Studios at Archers Gym

### Hitchin Forum member Margaret Eddleston details unusual aspects of a recent planning application:

A report to Cabinet 31<sup>st</sup> July 2012 proposed the building of 3 dance studios at Archers Gym and a planning application was made on 4<sup>th</sup> October.

It is claimed that *'The provision of three new dance studios should enable the management contractor Stevenage Leisure Ltd (SLL) to increase membership and income from the leisure facility. In return the Council should receive an annual reduction of approximately £138,000 on the management fee. This should ensure payback of the initial investment of £720,000 within 10 years and further savings on the management fee of £42,000 per annum.'*

No financial detail is given to support this claim and a request to produce appropriate evidence has been refused on the grounds of 'commercial confidentiality'. When this amount of public money is being spent on providing facilities at a commercial operation, I believe the public are entitled to be satisfied that such claims are true.

The report refers to 'latent demand' for fitness by which the man in the street would read 'unmet need'. There is no unmet need for dance or fitness studios in Hitchin. All gyms are actively seeking new members and none are full.

The Council's Sports Facilities Strategy 2011 stated in relation to Health and Fitness centres that *'Market forces are working well in North Herts to ensure there is a wide range and choice of provision. It is unlikely that existing facilities are currently operating at capacity, and there is therefore spare availability to accommodate additional demand.'*

The latent demand analysis and feasibility study accompanying the report were based only on demographic research data. This omitted several competing fitness providers, failed to note that fitness and dance classes are available at virtually every church or village hall and all community centres, ignored the personal trainer sector or commuters with facilities provided by or close to their workplace.

Using this incomplete data the feasibility study implies that over 1000 new members could be

achieved at Archers. This is nonsense. Firstly, Archers' gym/shower/locker and changing facilities could never cope with such an increase. Secondly, on enquiry, I am told that only 250 new members are required to meet the financial targets. Really?

In any event any new member will come from other existing providers. Why are the Council even contemplating spending £720,000 simply to increase Archers' market share of this business?

How can this be fair to other fitness instructors, dance teachers and gyms in the town who are all trying to make a living in difficult times?

The feasibility study also states that whilst 3 studios are proposed, £720,000 might be insufficient for this, but don't worry - if that is the case they will settle for 2 studios. With no effect on the repayment?

Since the financial rationale is not disclosed try some back of the envelope calculations:-

Assuming each new member at Archers pays £400 per annum the income from 250 new members will be £100,000 per annum. The likely cost of additional instructors and running of the facility will be say £50,000 to £60,000 giving an additional return of £40,000 to £50,000 per annum. Assuming a 50/50 split of profit between SLL and NHDC, the additional income to NHDC will be £20,000 to £25,000. This will not cover the loss of interest on a capital investment of £720,000 let alone repay the capital.

Or - looking at the suggestion that the Council will get back £138,000 + £42,000 per year. Assuming the profit sharing arrangement is 50:50 this requires SLL to make a profit of £360,000 per year on a capital investment of £720,000 - a yield of 50%.

According to the Halls and Centres Strategy 2011 *'there is no deficit of community facilities in Hitchin; indeed, it is evident that a surplus exists'*. The people of Hitchin do not accept this but if the Council believe it why are they proposing to build 3 dance studios up to 400 sq.m. + ancillary

facilities for a limited range of activities when other unused space is available?

If capital of £720,000 is available for community space why is it being used for the benefit of a small group of individuals who by definition can afford gym membership fees rather than all the public and a wider and more diverse range of

activities? The town is crying out for a new central community hall, £720,000 and 400+ sq.m. would be perfect.

Lastly why has this not been discussed by the Hitchin Committee and why are our local Hitchin representatives not deciding the priorities for capital spending in the town?

## Introducing Hitchin Forum's Steering Group: 2012-13

**Jeremy Burrowes** - He fell in love with Hitchin when he first arrived in 1982 and has been a member of Hitchin Forum since soon after its formation. Being **Treasurer** and a member of Steering Group has allowed him to pursue interests such as looking after the funds, plus carrying out research and analysis of local issues. He thoroughly enjoys the opportunities to make a contribution and the camaraderie which exists within Hitchin Forum.

**Maureen Carroll** - She has been Hitchin Forum's **Membership Secretary** since 2003. Originally from north London, she has lived in Hitchin since 1978. A retired teacher, she is an active and long-standing member of the Education Team at the British Schools Museum in Queen Street.

**Mike Clarke** - **Chairman** for the past two years, he was born and brought up just 12 miles south of Hitchin. He has been resident here since 1981, having moved here to work in the local mental health service (writing a history of this - "*cold baths don't work*" - since retirement). He cycles around town and has been increasingly concerned about the perils of speeding trucks, but mostly keen to help the voice of residents be heard for the benefit of the town.

**Adrian Gurney** - He has retired from working in the strategic planning division of a major planning consultancy, but remains active as a member of the London Sustainable Development Commission and in advising the Town and Country Planning Association. He takes over as **Chair of our Planning Group**.

**Judith Gurney** - She has lived most of her married life in Hertfordshire, moving with Adrian to Hitchin in 2000. She is now retired but taught almost all ages, with her last post at John Henry Newman School in Stevenage. She is **Minutes Secretary** to the Steering Group.

**Chris Honey** - He has been a member of Hitchin Forum since 1996, attends the Steering and Planning groups and comments on green issues. He is a designer (that's not just an occupation but a total lifestyle) who has recently improved the HF logo plus visual aspects of the website and publicity. He has a passion for maintaining what is good about Hitchin and only accepting excellent development alongside it.

**John Keene** - He has lived in Hitchin for 37 years, is now retired and spent most of his working life in the advertising industry. He is **Vice Chairman** and oversees **Leisure** issues in the Forum.

**Leslie Mustoe** - He was born in Hitchin and returned five years ago on retiring from Loughborough University. He teaches voluntarily at Hitchin Boys' School, is Secretary of Hitchin Historical Society and is on the District Church Council. He oversees **Youth** issues for the Forum.

**John Urwin** - He is an enthusiast for attractive housing and joined Hitchin Forum to take part in the CASE campaign. He strongly believes we need to spread employment across the country to avoid poverty hotspots. He is Hitchin Forum's representative on the **Churchgate Liaison Forum**.

**Andrew Wearmouth** - He was born in Hitchin and has always lived locally. He is a Chartered Surveyor recently retired following 40 years in local government, for the last 20 of which he was Head of Estates at St Albans City and District Council.

## STOP PRESS: "Free After Three" Car Parking in Hitchin!

There will be free car parking after 3pm every week day in Biggin Lane and St Mary's Square car parks during December, January and February. Thanks to Hitchin Initiative who are underwriting this to the tune of £10,000 and to Hitchin Committee for their support of £1,800. It is worth noting that car parking in Hitchin is far more expensive than in the other three towns in the District so this is very welcome. Happy Christmas shopping!