



NEWSLETTER

Sept/Oct 2011 No. 107

Chairman's Piece

Planning has been in the national news following the publication of the Draft National Planning Policy Framework for public comment. The National Trust, the RSPB, and an imported national treasure, Bill Bryson, President of CPRE, are all very concerned about the government seeking to shift planning controls even more in favour of developers. Using the term loosely, so loose that it is likely to fall out of somebody's ministerial bag before long, the government says it wants "sustainable development". By that the protesters fear they mean just economic development, or a pretence that they are doing all they can for the economy, so maybe sustaining their time in office. George Monbiot (The Guardian, September 6) puts it in terms that all development will be seen as growth, and thus sustainable, and thus inevitable. Somehow "localism", with communities deciding what they need, falls out of another ministerial bag. What emerges is all a bit of a mess with the fear that the valued and valuable countryside will suffer.

In the town, economic development is about Churchgate and the adjoining 7 acres. The Council thought that Hitchin town centre would lose out to thriving towns all around and so needed the stimulus of a large injection of shops, with a few big ones thrown in. Keith Hoskins (The Comet, August 11) highlighted an article by Paul Vallely in the Independent on Sunday which argued for the value of small shops and commented on the destructiveness of supermarkets. As Keith also mentions, Hitchin is doing very well in retaining small shops, with all of the social benefits that brings. We also have three supermarkets close to the centre and an excellent market. The mix seems to work well. Channel 4's 'Location, Location' on September 6 made the town seem very attractive. The English Heritage report, commented on below, gave good reasons why the town is valued and why we should work very hard to ensure that it does not become the victim of an imported and alien retail scheme. To be sustainable it does need to respect the unique character of the town, which is what sustains the present retail scene, and not spoil the sights and site around St Mary's.

Such issues and anything else you would like to discuss will come up at the AGM. This will be on Thursday November 10th at British Schools. We will circulate reports and nomination papers ahead of time. On the evening I hope we can have a brief business meeting and then a presentation and time for discussion. Please put it in your diaries.

Diary Dates

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| Sats 1 Oct/5 Nov | Councillors' Surgery, 10.30 – noon, Hitchin Market Place |
| Tues 4 October | Hitchin Forum Planning Group meeting – Draft National Planning Policy Framework - contact Ellie Clarke on 431338 for details |
| Tues 25 October | Hitchin Forum Town Group meeting NOTE: CANCELLED |
| Thurs 10 November | AGM and members meeting, 8pm, British Schools Meeting Room |

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Campaign to Protect Rural England
Historic Towns Forum

Churchgate: The English Heritage Report

In July, English Heritage's Urban Panel visited Bishop's Stortford and Hitchin, as both towns are confronted with large development proposals. John Urwin, chairman of Hitchin Forum's planning group, summarises their report:

The English Heritage Report contains not only their opinions on the Simons scheme of 2010, but it makes suggestions as to how a Churchgate development might be approached. It also makes interesting comments about Hitchin's retail and architectural context.

The Panel drew attention to the County context: the main towns in Hertfordshire are close geographically, with many subject to outside development pressures for standard retail schemes. Councils should stand firm in resisting such schemes; sustainable development means promoting the highest quality. Both Hitchin and Bishop's Stortford should concentrate on the "*particularity of the two towns*"; development should reinforce the character of a place and achieve the highest standards of design.

Few panel members, on seeing Hitchin's Market Place, could recall a place with so much commercial activity without any national chains present. Hitchin has evolved incrementally and there is no need to rush into development, they said. Due to the changing nature of retailing, this is no time to predict the future of towns on existing retail models.

St Mary's is a nationally important ecclesiastical site and "*if change is agreed upon, there should be the potential to create a new, enhanced setting not unlike that of other minster and cathedral closes.*" Whatever happens on St Mary's Square has to enhance the church's east end.

The rear of Churchgate and the "*striking*" market buildings are not harmonious with regard to St Mary's, but together, they "*animate the space. Furthermore, the shops in the centre are all occupied, and a remodelling of Churchgate, especially on the Market Square frontage, might be a more sustainable option that should be considered.*" Churchyard and St Mary's Square should lead proposals; the latter has potential for development with car parking below.

Car parking is important but pedestrian connections could be improved and cycle use should be built up.

Portmill Lane and the Post Office site have considerable potential for development, should be considered in their own right and, quite likely, developed at different times.

Hitchin should "*look the gift horse of a major store very carefully in the mouth and examine whether the reinforcement of local, specialised retail, product-based farmers' markets and so on are not more in character with Hitchin and more likely to offer a viable and distinctive future.*"

"*The Panel members saw little merit in the current proposal emerging at Churchgate . . . The Simons scheme appears to have been generated by a wish to impose on Hitchin a standard and, frankly, alien retail development.*" The Panel did not question the Design Principles of the Churchgate Planning Brief and could find no justification for their being casually overturned, though some members found the illustrative scheme 'meek'. The best approach might be to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan for the area, supported by consultation and tested by a referendum.

This report is important because English Heritage has to be consulted under planning law. We hope everyone involved in the Churchgate redevelopment will take it on board. Simons must now rethink their position and then perhaps we can arrive at a solution that allows them a profit but gives Hitchin a scheme of which we can be proud. The Government wants local people to be involved in fashioning their environment and that means that all "stakeholders" – the Councillors, the Council employees, the developers and local people – must adapt to a new way of working. Are we up for it?

NOTE: The English Heritage report will shortly be posted on our website: www.hitchinform.org.uk.

A Community Halls Strategy

John Keene summarises Hitchin Forum's response to NHDC's recent consultation on their Draft Community Halls Strategy for the District:

In the Foreword to their Draft Community Halls Strategy, NHDC quite rightly identifies the enormous benefits that multi-functional halls bring to a community in meeting the diverse needs of different community and faith groups and their contribution to community cohesion and reduction of social exclusion. These are admirable sentiments which we thoroughly endorsed. 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.

These sentiments are at odds, however, with the draft Strategy's assumption that Bancroft Hall will be closed in future and not replaced. We also queried the assertion that no shortage of community hall space has been identified in Hitchin. This is based on an untested assumption that what is to be provided at Great Ashby is an appropriate standard for elsewhere but it certainly is not borne out by local experience. Hitchin does

have church and school halls, etc but they are not available on a regular basis and lack the facilities needed by most local organisations. There will be a further reduction of such facilities once Hitchin Town Hall is renovated.

Given the population increase resulting from the hundreds of flats built in recent years in and around the town centre, we said it was obvious to us that a community hall is needed here more than ever and Bancroft Hall is ideally situated, but dilapidated. A new town centre community hall would satisfy the requirements identified in the draft Strategy, there are groups that urgently need this kind of facility and we are fortunate that Hitchin Bridge Club has the desire to manage it.

We urged the Council to reconsider its stated intention of closing Bancroft Hall without replacement and to enter into discussions with Hitchin Bridge Club in order that a solution appropriate for Hitchin can be found.

“North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility”

You might be wondering just what this is . . . as John Keene explains below, it's just our Town Hall and he gives us the latest news.

I do hope NHDC come up with a more friendly name; can you imagine remarking to people “have you visited our refurbished facility lately?” Please forward your suggestions!

What follows is a précis of the official account of the current situation:

FutureBuilders, who are part-funding the redevelopment scheme, were due to decide on 7 September whether they would agree to a revised draw down schedule for Hitchin Town Hall Ltd's grant/loan. Council staff are liaising closely with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd on this and in the meantime, both are continuing to work hard to complete necessary legal agreements.

The tendering process for the Lead Consulting Architect, who will oversee the whole project, is now well under way. Over eighty firms expressed an initial interest, and seventeen have submitted 'Pre-Qualification Questionnaires'. These are currently being assessed and this month around half a dozen companies will be invited to tender for the work.

How's that for excitement! I must admit that it had me on the edge of my seat at times! Seriously though, we must have a better name . . .

Parking at New Developments - by Dave Borner

North Herts District Council recently issued a Draft Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on vehicle parking at new development.

Until 2006, government guidelines meant that local councils were obliged to restrict the number of parking places at new developments, including residential. The rationale for this was that it would discourage car ownership and reduce the number of journeys made by car, in favour of more sustainable methods of transport.

Parking standards are now the responsibility of individual local authorities who can take into account local circumstances. The main change proposed by NHDC is to residential parking standards. Instead of an upper limit for each dwelling, a minimum standard would apply.

Experience with the development at Great Ashby has shown that lack of parking spaces does little to discourage people from owning cars, but it does cause considerable problems

for residents – similar to those experienced in older parts of Hitchin built before cars became common. There are also difficulties at retirement flats without proper parking provision, where residents may continue to own a car well into old age and visits made by carers and others also need to be accommodated.

The draft SPD proposes retaining upper limits on parking provision at developments which can be classed as trip destinations - commercial, leisure and retail developments - rather than trip origins. Parking restriction, therefore, still remains a method of promoting more sustainable transport choices, but applied at trip destinations rather than at residential development.

Hitchin Forum transport and planning groups produced a response to the draft SPD, largely in favour of the proposals. Our letter to NHDC can be found on the Hitchin Forum website, as can the draft SPD itself.

Kerbside Plastic Recycling - by Chris Honey

As an 'environ-mental' I welcome NHDC's news that North Herts residents are separating 50% of their waste to be recycled or composted. A lot of this is achieved through kerbside collection but, unlike eight out of the eleven Hertfordshire Councils, this does not include plastic in North Herts. Two Hitchin councillors sought to redress this by asking for a report to Cabinet on the feasibility of using shared services in the Herts Waste Partnership.

In the meantime, my colleagues in North Herts Friends of the Earth and I carried out opinion surveys in Hitchin town centre and at the Walsworth and Triangle Festivals. 89% wanted more plastics recycling and more on-street collection.

NHDC officers duly produced a report on the implications of a plastic kerbside recycling scheme and in particular the financial, environmental and technical considerations.

It concluded that a shared service was not currently feasible due to existing contractual arrangements, so it should not be explored any further. Currently, less than 300 tonnes of plastics and more than 8,000 tonnes of food that could be recycled are going to landfill per annum, so officers recommended that NHDC should focus on food rather than plastics. Cabinet turned down the scheme in July despite a torrent of criticism.

Waste reduction is not just about reducing landfill but about conserving valuable resources and reducing emissions. In the meantime we will have to continue using petrol to transport plastics to overflowing 'bring banks' and the Household Recycling Centre on the far side of Letchworth, knowing that NHDC collect 65% of recyclable plastics from 'bring banks', though this is only 27% of the total plastics in our waste system. A further review is unlikely until the waste contract is renewed in 2016.