

Planning Hitchin's Future

Hitchin Issues for the District Local Plan



Prepared by:

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Hitchin Forum

The Hitchin Society

Hitchin Historical Society

Hitchin Initiative

Introduction

Hitchin, with evidence of settlement since the late Roman period, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in Hertfordshire and the historic focus of its northern portion. It was a key market, religious and Royal centre well before the Norman Conquest. This historical importance is recognised by the Council for British Archaeology and English Heritage.

Hitchin has four important Conservation Areas, a wealth of Listed and Locally Listed buildings, an exceptionally well preserved medieval core with roots in the Saxon period and related open-field patterns embracing areas of historically interesting and architecturally distinctive eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century suburbs. Hitchin's open spaces and surrounding Green Belt are also vital parts of the town's unique character and surviving historic form.

The attractions of this "historic package" are now crucial to Hitchin's success as the district's main market, shopping and service town, and as a main residential focus and sub-regional commercial centre.

There are three positive aspects of the town that we consider to be especially important:

- The extensive historic core of the town is vibrant, attractive and well preserved and includes buildings and small scale public spaces that together with the Market provide for a wide range of locally owned businesses and specialist shops and other facilities.
- The current scale of the town relates well to the core, and fits well in its rural setting (including valued areas of landscape) so that most of the population is within walking distance both of the town centre and the countryside, particularly important since the town centre and the town as a whole have relatively few open spaces.
- The varied housing stock, and good access to work opportunities in London, Cambridge, Stevenage and Luton, means that there is a mix of population that is well integrated and reflects the variety of British society.

Our suggestions build on these strengths, examining for each issue the problems and opportunities, and suggesting relevant policy areas and proposals. Our aims for each issue are described below and considered in greater detail in the separate sections of the paper.

1. Town Centre

- Retaining and developing the provision of shops in the town centre so as to maintain Hitchin as the District's retail centre; and doing so by making incremental and small scale change in a context of changing retail habits, and by being flexible in accepting different uses.
- Creating a critical mass of leisure and cultural facilities (involving theatre, music, museums etc) that will make Hitchin a centre of choice for day and evening visits from a wide area to underpin its continued prosperity.
- Providing flexible buildings and spaces in the town centre to meet a wide range of uses and the changing needs of different people (including an older

population seeking space for different pursuits and a younger population for informal recreation).

- Managing change to enhance the historic character of the town centre.

2. Housing

- Making sites available and building small areas of family housing of different sizes and ownership types (including self build) of high design quality and energy efficiency to meet the local needs of Hitchin, while retaining the town's historic character and the integrity of the Green Belt and ensuring that vital open spaces within the built-up area are not lost.
- Enabling an appropriate level of facilities including shop and community provision in neighbourhood centres, together with flexible buildings and spaces for a wide range of uses.

3. Accessibility

- Improving accessibility within Hitchin by: providing a more coherent parking system; improving access for all to the rail station; delivery of cycle routes where they are needed to integrate less accessible neighbourhoods, schools and colleges; and improving facilities for bus services to increase usage.
- Providing improved access in order to upgrade the industrial areas, to encourage new premises to meet the needs of modern manufacturing and a wider range of jobs.

4. Open Spaces and Footpaths

- Ensuring the protection, improvement and greater use of all open spaces, riverside walkways and the extensive network of footpaths, both in the town and in the surrounding countryside.
- Improving the landscape edges of the Green Belt; and identifying views throughout the town to be protected and enhanced.

5. Design Principles and Gateways

- Suggesting a set of design principles for the urban area and its rural edges to help maintain Hitchin's distinctive character.
- Providing an example of the sort of issues that could be addressed at an important gateway to the town as the basis for a development brief, as the first of a series of such studies

In the paper we have been able to address most of these issues at least in part. However, we are aware that more work needs to be done, particularly in relation to views and design principles, and we would like to augment this work over the next few months.

1. Hitchin Town Centre

1.1 Local Plan Policy Context

We assume that there will be general policies in the plan covering town centre uses and relevant guidelines and standards, to include for instance: uses such as retail, leisure and offices to be concentrated within town centres (NPPF para 24); and the improvement of parking and the setting of appropriate parking charges to underpin the vitality of town centres (NPPF para 40).

1.2 Changes since last Local Plan

Hitchin remains a lively town, the District's largest, and with a vibrant town centre offering a range of national multiple stores, locally owned businesses and specialist shops together with restaurants and cafes and other facilities.

More recently, there have been changes in the economic and social situations of many Hitchin residents and those in its catchment area which will affect how the town might develop over the next 10 to 20 years.

The recession which began in 2008 has had a major impact which is likely to last for many years. So far employment has held up well, but this has been at the expense of “cradle to grave” jobs and their inherent security. The result, combined with inflation, is a reduction in living standards for many people; and this change may continue for much of the plan period. This will continue to favour value retailers such as charity shops and Hitchin Market that will remain of central importance to the town.

Along with this there has been the growth of internet shopping and the decline in high street sales. This looks to be irreversible as 80% of the UK population now have internet access. In prosperous Hitchin, this proportion will be higher. As retail outlets stay vacant it will be necessary to use them in other ways.

1.3 Challenges and Opportunities

Hitchin town centre faces particular challenges and opportunities in this context:

- As the main town centre in the District, and with the draw of its attractive historic environment, Market, specialist shops, major museums, theatres and other facilities it has a strong basis to increase its role as a destination for day visits for a wide range of retail, service, leisure, cultural and recreational purposes. If these aspects of the centre can be augmented and improved then it is likely that Hitchin town centre can continue to be prosperous.
- At the same time it is becoming clearer that there are a range of needs that will be growing over the plan period: younger people of school age have few opportunities to meet informally in the town; those at college and of employment age need a wider range of outlets for relaxation and cultural pursuits; older people are likely to be more active longer and seek a range of opportunities to meet and work with others. Many of these needs could be met within the town centre.

1.4 Potential Policies and Proposals

1.4.1 Developing a destination town centre

In order to strengthen Hitchin's role as a destination town centre, we suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include **policies** which address:

- The likelihood that Hitchin town centre will include fewer retail units in the longer term. New or redeveloped units provided incrementally and on a small scale may be appropriate in specific locations (see proposals below). However, changes of use particularly outside a slightly reduced core shopping frontage¹ will be expected.
- The need to retain a balanced mix of uses, in particular ensuring the night time economy uses (i.e. those open beyond midnight) are confined to areas which will limit adverse impact (including for town centre residents, and in terms of management); and with greater use of licensing controls to limit the opening hours of other premises to midnight.
- An increase in residential conversions (normally of upper floors); and in services, businesses and other facilities (at ground as well as upper levels).
- Meeting established demand for any additional convenience retail floorspace in the town through alterations and small additions to existing stores in the town centre (and in existing neighbourhood centres where appropriate), and not through major new provision elsewhere which is likely to affect town centre vitality.
- Providing protection against loss of overall levels of parking in the town centre and trying to increase these where possible; improving access, signing and environmental quality; bringing charging levels more into line with other local towns; and increasing cycle parking provision.

Suggested related **proposals** include the following where there is pressing need for improvement:

- Refurbishment of Churchgate to improve the shopping experience, retain a range of unit sizes and provide a design that will fit well with the historic setting; taking the opportunity to include other relevant town centre facilities or uses (see 1.4.2 below).
- Revitalisation of the Market by provision of a well integrated long term location of an appropriate size and layout, with suitable servicing and storage arrangements, to meet the needs of the market traders and their customers.
- Enhancement of the St Mary's Square/ Queen Street area, in the context of an upgraded Market and improved Churchgate centre. This should include improving the environment of the car parks with a landscape scheme to protect and improve views of St Mary's and The Biggin, and provide a high quality gateway into the town centre for both car park and public transport users; and give opportunity to improve layout to enable a more flexible charging system for

¹ Market Place, High Street, Bancroft as far as Hermitage Road as defined in the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy of 2004, but excluding Hermitage Road to reflect changes since the Strategy was adopted.

the car parks (e.g. paying at exit as used by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council).

- Improved pedestrian environment and landscaping in the core shopping area in the location with the highest footfall centred on Moss's Corner (and including Brand Street, and part of Bancroft). The aim would be to provide a 'shared surface' to allow continued access for buses and other vehicles including smaller servicing lorries; but with reduced speeds; and enabling a significant reduction in street furniture and guardrails.
- Provision of a highly visible visitor information facility together with a one-stop-shop for a range of public services in a central or main gateway location; together with a more co-ordinated visitor signing system related directly to the visitor centre and destinations such as St Mary's Church, the Market, Market Place, District Museum and Town Hall, the British Schools Museums, Queen Mother and Market Theatres and car parks.

To illustrate what might be achievable we have organised a workshop to study the opportunities available at Paynes Park (see Design Principles and Gateways section of this report). We would be happy to undertake a similar exercise for the above proposals. Any funding available should be directed to improving these areas.

1.4.2 Meeting community needs

In order to meet community needs, we suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include **policies** which address:

- Regular review with the local community, service providers and businesses of any lack of provision that could be met within the town centre including child care and health, and voluntary and statutory services (e.g. advice, education and police).
- The range of these uses that could be suitable for different types of premises including vacant shops and upper floors; and of any larger scale opportunity for sharing of facilities to provide a 'one stop shop'.
- The development of a new community facility in the town centre to provide for those activities that it will not be possible to provide within the Town Hall Museum, particularly with the loss of Bancroft Hall, to include space for informal activities for different ages.
- The development of improved cultural facilities (for instance a cinema) and the use of open areas in the town centre, particularly to build on the strengths of the town in terms of theatre and music performance.
- Increased use of temporary or 'meanwhile' leases to bring empty premises into use for business start ups, local community projects, craft or light engineering workshops, art displays etc in conjunction with schools, colleges and local groups.

Suggested related **proposals** include the following:

- Use of the old Hitchin Museum to provide a new all purpose community centre; this has been incorporated in the Paynes Park study (see Design Principles and Gateways section).

- Premises for a 'one-stop-shop' in conjunction with the visitor information centre at a central location or major gateway such as near St Mary's Square, possibly using an existing building, or integrated into other development.
- An extended cultural centre in the Woodside area related to the Queen Mother Theatre and Woodside Hall, including opportunities particularly for involvement of young people.

2. Hitchin Housing

2.1 Local Plan Policy Context

We assume that there will be general policies in the plan covering the overall housing targets, and relevant guidelines and standards, to include for instance: the importance of delivering a wide choice of high quality homes, and an appropriate proportion of affordable homes to meet need (NPPF para 50); and the requirement to plan for energy efficiency measures in both new and existing buildings (NPPF para 95).

2.2 Changes since last Local Plan

A disproportionate amount of housing (mainly in small flats) has been built in Hitchin within the last decade: 44% of the additional dwellings in the District as a whole between 2001 and 2011 were constructed in the town. Over the same period, more than 60% of the population increase in the four towns was in Hitchin. There are now very few brown field sites left for housing development, and green open space in Hitchin has become of increasing importance. In this context and because the town's infrastructure is already overstretched, particularly in terms of its road network and rail access, we conclude that the town's environmental capacity may already have been exceeded.

Over the same period it has become clear that the Green Belt is under increasing pressure for development. In the context of the recent Housing Options consultation, we have stated that Hitchin's Green Belt is vital in terms of:

- preserving the setting and special character of the historic town;
- maintaining its separate built integrity from nearby towns and villages/hamlets;
- and safeguarding the countryside from encroachment, especially given its landscape value and use for recreation in the context of the restricted amount of open space within the town itself.

We have therefore urged that much of the suggested housing need has to be met beyond Hitchin's Green Belt. The full responses from The Hitchin Society and Hitchin Forum on the Housing Options Consultation are included in Appendix A.

We do, however, expect that within the town suitable 'windfall' sites will become available so a degree of development within the town envelope will continue to take place. This will create the possibility of small areas of housing continuing to meet Hitchin's local needs.

2.3 Challenges and Opportunities

Hitchin faces particular challenges and opportunities in this context:

- It is important for the town that the principle of 'family housing first' is now established for new development, given the excess of flats built recently. Further, the town requires different ownership types of family houses (e.g. homes for rent, part ownership, affordable/housing association controlled, self-build as well as owner-occupied). The recent predominance of flats means that it will be particularly important to ensure that the housing has appropriate space and other related standards including for live/work opportunities.
- At the same time it will be important to ensure that existing housing and local communities are enhanced as residents seek to improve the quality of their homes, the open spaces near them, and the facilities that are available for local needs including a wide range of leisure and recreational activities. There is particular need

to address the lack of community facilities in parts of the town (from the town centre to the west, and also northwards: see Appendix B).

2.4 Potential Policies and Proposals

2.4.1 Providing new family housing

In order to enable new housing development to meet family needs and address the issues caused by Hitchin's relatively high density, we suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include **policies** which address the provision of:

- Sites for the building of small areas of family housing of different sizes and ownership types, and of high design quality to meet the local needs of Hitchin; with larger sites to include an area designated for self-build or co-ownership development.
- Family housing with: direct access to private or communal garden space adequate for at least small scale play, seating and clothes drying; and space for work and study, for internal and external storage (including recycling with direct external access), and for designated car parking and cycle storage nearby.
- Live/work homes in the town centre and in local neighbourhood centres where they could be combined with commercial start-up units or where conversions take place. Such accommodation will also provide opportunities for more of Hitchin's residents to work in the town.
- Flats, including retirement flats, which should only be considered appropriate in locations where family housing could not be provided because of the constraints of the site, and where the need for such accommodation has been established by independent research.

Suggested **proposals** include the following:

- Provision of a development brief for one of the larger sites in Hitchin (for example the former Hitchin Hospital site) to illustrate how family housing could be provided in the context of the above policies.
- Consideration of live/work units in the study of opportunities for development at Paynes Park (see also Design Principles and Gateways section).

2.4.2 Enhancing existing housing and local communities

In order to assist Hitchin residents in improving their local environment it is suggested that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan include **policies** which address:

- Retaining the integrity of the Green Belt: one of Hitchin's distinctive features is that its neighbourhoods are easily accessible to open countryside as well as the town centre. This is a strong factor in determining quality of life, making recreational opportunities available to all its residents and allowing residents independence in many of their daily activities.
- Protection and enhancement of open spaces within the built-up area which are limited in number and quality and are vital to Hitchin's quality of life and are particularly needed near housing. Improvements to recreational and other facilities

(such as provision for community / allotment gardens) need to be prioritised where they are identified by the local community.

- Assistance to residents who are seeking to improve their homes through energy efficiency or other measures (in order to minimise costs) is particularly important in Hitchin because of its large stock of older buildings.
- Provision of adaptable buildings and spaces particularly in locations in the town centre and to its west and north, in order to allow for a wide range of uses, e.g. live/work units, integrating public service facilities like police surgeries etc in community/neighbourhood centres.

Suggested **proposals** include the following:

- A community centre to serve the town centre and residential areas to the north and west (for example in the former Museum at Paynes Park, or a new build in Bancroft Recreation Ground or at Woodside), accessible by public transport, on foot or by bicycle. This facility could provide space for clubs and societies that are offering social or educational activities for members, could also contribute to an 'enjoyable destination experience', and bring people into the town centre to visit the market/shops/cafes etc.
- Designation of space for community gardens within open spaces identified by local communities, on the lines of that developed at the Triangle Garden.

3. Accessibility

3.1 Local Plan Policy Context

We assume that there will be policies in the Plan covering accessibility issues, to include for instance: the need for the transport system to be balanced in favour of sustainable transport modes (NPPF para 29) with developments giving priority to pedestrian and cycle movements and access to high quality public transport facilities, and considering the needs of people with disabilities (NPPF para 35).

3.2 Changes since last Local Plan

Hitchin as a town is eminently cyclable because of its size. Despite this, little progress on implementation has been made since the adoption of the Hitchin Cycle Route network in 1999. Since then, cycling in Hitchin has declined and in Hertfordshire a very small percentage of children cycle to school, whereas far more travel to school by car (see Appendix C1). The use of sustainable transport for home – school journeys in Hertfordshire is below both the national and Eastern Region averages.

Hitchin's industrial area has not seen the investment that could be expected in terms of the town's economic importance locally. Investment in both private businesses and in the public realm of the area has not taken place, leaving the area looking neglected. This is largely due to the ban on major development as imposed in the last Local Plan (Proposal HE2) as a result of the inadequate access.

Commuting levels continue to increase, putting pressure on train services and station car park as well as the local road network at peak times.

3.3 Challenges and Opportunities

Hitchin faces particular challenges and opportunities in this context:

- Hitchin remains more economically diverse and resilient than many towns locally in currently difficult times. Much of the town's road network is overstretched at peak times. However, there is major concern that a southern bypass would have very significant adverse impacts on the landscape quality of the Green Belt to the south of the town, and would not relieve the traffic congestion within the town as it will not be possible to prevent road space refilling with more local traffic.
- In much of the town traffic speeds are excessive, and there are issues related to pedestrian and cyclist safety.
- Inadequate transport access to the industrial estate results in a degraded quality of life on surrounding residential and main roads due to heavy industrial traffic using roads inadequate for the purpose.
- There is severe congestion at the rail station at peak times, with inadequate parking for cars and cycles. Pedestrian access is also in need of improvement.

For general parking issues see also under Town Centre.

3.4 Potential Policies and Proposals

3.4.1 Improving safety

Improving the transport network according to the hierarchy of the needs of pedestrians first, cyclists second, public transport users next, and finally motorists, will improve the quality of life for all. We suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include **policies** which address:

- Traffic speed reduction measures, considered on a town-wide basis to improve safety around schools, the quality of life for residents generally and also for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists.
- Analysis of proposed cycle routes to prioritise and implement those considered by the community to be most useful, including measures at specific accident locations and where segregated cycle paths would be helpful.
- The improvement of public transport to increase ease of access to buses through co-ordination of bus service facilities and bus stops, and wider use of real time information.
- Priority to be given to consideration of particularly difficult traffic hot spots such as restoring two way working on the gyratory at Paynes Park / Old Park Road to improve the environment here and increase investment.
- The preference for continuing to restrain traffic growth in the town by restricting provision of additional road space, and specifically by excluding any route for a southern bypass to the town.

Suggested related **proposals** include the following:

- Moderation of traffic speeds through liaison with Hertfordshire County Council in applying a 20mph speed limit to non-strategic roads throughout the town to make traffic less intimidating to cyclists and pedestrians, and reduce the severity of any accidents that do occur. A town-wide scheme will not only improve quality of life and safety, but enable the reduction of highway signage and street clutter such as railings which inhibit natural pedestrian movement. We suggest adoption of a more rigorous enforcement regime on roads that are currently rat-runs within the new 20mph area. Where the limit remains at 30mph, there is need for more rigorous enforcement and better calming measures.
- Measures to encourage cycling through School Transport Plans (see Appendix C1), and specific measures to improve pedestrian and cycle access at Hitchin station, and implementation of cycle route proposals following community consultation.
- A feasibility study to investigate the return of the Paynes Park / Old Park Road gyratory to two-way working, with measures on the ground to 'civilise' Paynes Park itself by slowing traffic and creating a town centre environment more conducive to

safe use by pedestrians and cyclists (see also under Design Principles and Gateways).

- In the context of controlling traffic access and speeds, and improving pedestrian and cyclist safety, the proposal to enlarge the Paynes Park/Tilehouse Street roundabout is considered inappropriate.

3.4.2 Improving access to employment areas

We suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include a **policy** to address the following:

- Improving access to the industrial area, which will in turn encourage much needed investment in the physical fabric of the area, leading to growth in jobs and Hitchin's economy.

Suggested related **proposals** include the following:

- Provision of a new access road to the industrial area from the Stotfold Road. The service road built recently to create the new rail flyover has demonstrated that a route is possible. This new access is crucial to the future of Hitchin's industrial area, both in terms of improving much of the rest of the town's environment by removing heavy industrial traffic from unsuitable roads, but also for investment to bring in more jobs/employment opportunities. This in turn will help reduce out-commuting.
- The provision of a relief road around the north west of the industrial area, linking Cadwell Lane and Wilbury Way, with an extension of Knowl Piece to link into it (ref AECOM Technical Note, background paper to Housing Options consultation) would help relieve the junction at Wilbury/Grove Roads only if the above access road is built.
- Encouragement, through the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, of co-operative working between businesses in the industrial estate in order to improve the physical environment, encourage new businesses and investment, and reduce the rate of turnover of businesses.

3.4.3 Improving access to the railway station

We suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include a **policy** to address the following:

- Improving access for passengers at Hitchin station and protecting existing 'railway lands' from development, other than for possible future railway use, including car parking for commuters (Appendix C2).

Suggested related **proposals** include the following:

- Measures to improve access to Hitchin station for motorists by exploring provision of additional parking at Hitchin station on some of the 'railway lands' off St Michael's Road or by some decking of the existing car park.

- Additional pedestrian access to be provided from the Benslow footbridge to the existing car park, plus measures to ease current pressure on the single width footpath on Cambridge Road under the bridge on the A505. A second tunnel here would improve access not only to the railway station, but improve pedestrian connectivity between the north eastern residential areas and the rest of the town.
- The Bus Interchange at the station should be augmented for local and longer distance services (e.g. to Pirton, Luton/Luton Airport) by making better use of the recently refurbished Station Forecourt. An improvement of the Station Approach access is required.

4. Open Spaces and Footpaths

4.1 Local Plan Policy Context

We assume that there will be general policies in the plan covering protection of Green Belt land (NPPF para 80), the conservation and enhancement of areas of landscape and wildlife importance (NPPF para 113); and also to address the needs for open space, sports and recreational facilities, and the importance of local access including adding links to existing right of way networks (NPPF paras 73 – 75).

4.2 Changes since the last Local Plan

The increasing pressure on the Green Belt has been noted in the Housing section. The Green Belt ensures that the town's boundaries are currently clearly defined in terms of its built environment, and that no part of Hitchin is much more than a mile from the nearest countryside (see Appendix D.1). In a period of reduced prosperity expected for much of the plan period, this ready access to the countryside for informal and formal recreation is likely to be of greater importance as an alternative to longer trips and holidays away from home.

At the same time there is an emphasis on the need for exercise, sport and recreation in terms of day to day health and well being. High quality footpaths and bridleways within the local countryside (and giving direct access to it) will be of increasing importance (see Appendix D.2). But so also will be the protection and improvement of recreational open spaces and access to them within the built up area (see Appendix D.2 and D.3).

4.3 Challenges and Opportunities

Hitchin and its countryside setting face particular challenges and opportunities in this context:

- Although, as the Map 'About Hitchin' illustrates, there are areas of green space within the boundaries of the town, publicly accessible open spaces in the town are limited. It is important that these spaces are maintained and improved – and not eroded by non recreational development. The significant value to the town of a wide range of natural areas (see Appendix D.4) also needs to be fully recognised.
- It is also clear from the two Maps ('About Hitchin' and 'Around Hitchin') that, while there is an extremely important historic network of footpaths within and beyond the town, there is potential to further develop green pathways and river corridors, including the provision of significant missing links.

4.4 Potential Policies and Proposals

4.4.1 Protecting and Enhancing Open Space and Natural Areas

In order to protect and enhance Hitchin's open spaces and natural areas, we suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include **policies** which address:

- Resistance to the encroachment on Green Belt land which should not be considered as an option in solving housing or transport needs; there should no longer be any mention of 'preferred directions of growth' for the town.

- Visual strengthening of the edges of the town by planting, protection of natural areas where appropriate, and by ensuring that any development within the built up area does not impinge on the rural landscape.
- Protection, maintenance and improvement of recreational open spaces on the edges of the town, provision of toilet facilities in or near to playing fields, and with careful attention to preventing vandalism by passive surveillance.
- Protection of open space in town from development, and its accessibility ensured for recreation, and community and town wide events.

Suggested related **proposals** include the following:

- Improvement of open spaces identified in consultation with a local community, to include a range of facilities, parking and access issues (see also proposal regarding community gardens / allotments in Housing section).
- Study of the enhancement opportunities on the town edge to improve local access, landscape quality and maintenance, and protection of views.

4.4.2 Improving and Extending the Footpath Network

In order to improve and extend the footpath network we suggest that the Hitchin section of the Local Plan should include **policies** which address:

- The planning and management of the footpath system within the town and its rural environs as a single system, so that completion of routes in the town can be accomplished (for instance along the Hiz) and access to the countryside from the centre of the town can be maintained and enhanced (with for instance green pathways to provide improved access between the two local nature reserves and a more direct route to the AONB).
- Improvement to the design quality of footpaths within the town in order to increase accessibility: lighting to be upgraded to a consistent standard to reduce crime and fear of crime (using sensors to reduce light pollution and energy costs); bins at either end of footpaths used by dog walkers; improved access for wheelchair users (possibly achieved by a swipe activated electronic barrier); improved signage particularly where a route leads to a place of interest to visitors to the town (e.g. Oughtonhead Nature Reserve).
- A maintenance code for all footpaths to enable consistent management of: boundary fencing and foliage, surface damage and vandalism, and litter and graffiti (with a dedicated website to notify Council Officers of problems and enable repairs to be carried out within a reasonable time).

Suggested **proposals** include the following, based on work currently being developed by Hitchin Forum through the two Maps ('About Hitchin' and 'Around Hitchin'):

- New rights of way along the river Hiz in the town centre to create a complete 'Riverside Walkway' by opening the river walk between Bridge Street and the Biggin; improvements there and elsewhere to reflect the major enhancements on the border of Sainsbury's car park including opportunities for wildlife, subject to the resolution of access and river flow management issues.
- Maintenance and improvement of the HOOP and Hicca Way to be examined. For the former, there are locations where safety is poor and pedestrian crossings should be installed and wheelchair accessibility improved.

5. Design Principles & Gateways

5.1 Design Principles

Hitchin has an important and unique historic character. So far as is practicable all development proposals affecting the Hitchin Urban Area will respect that unique character. Particular attention will be paid to schemes proposed for the Conservation Areas although the attractive make-up of the town depends on the combination of the grain and texture of all its built-up area. It is proposed, therefore, to devise some Hitchin Urban Design Principles for the town as a whole, based on the existing Conservation Area Character Statements and the Shop Front Design Guide, but also the Design Supplementary Planning Document (2011), and the specific issues outlined below.

5.1.1 The Town Centre

Hitchin's historic medieval core is of special importance. In 1953 Pevsner's Buildings of England: Hertfordshire described the town as “..without doubt, next to St Albans, the most interesting and visually most satisfying town of Herts.”; English Heritage's historic market town criteria give Hitchin a score of 100 points whereas a more typical example would achieve between 40-80 points. The town centre was included in the first rank of those designated as Conservation Areas in 1969; Conservation Area Reviews in 1997-98 and 2009-10 have underlined its historic importance and the need for proactive and sensitive management.

The town centre retains an early medieval street pattern focused on the parish church and original market place that has evolved over almost 1500 years. Many surviving buildings can be dated in origin to the 15th century and subsequent changes have created a unique grain and scale which it is vital to preserve as modern needs are accommodated. Much of the historic core forms Hitchin's largest Conservation Area and includes many Listed and Locally Listed structures.

Practical policies are needed for the long term management of this key area e.g. respect for the Conservation Area Character Statement and attention to detail in applying a Shop Front Design Guide.

5.1.2 The Suburbs

It is not just the town centre that is of historic interest. That Hitchin (except Walsworth) was never systematically “enclosed” means, unusually, the shape of the modern town has evolved within the fossilised framework of the medieval open fields. Consequently a very distinctive pattern of preserved track-ways, field-paths and property parcels has resulted from piecemeal development since the mid-eighteenth century. Included within this pattern are also important areas of open space such as at Oughtonhead, Purwell, Walsworth Common, and the wider area of Priory Park. The 2009-10 Conservation Area Review recognised the importance of the suburbs by extending Conservation Area protections to the areas of Hitchin Hill, Butts Close, Wymondley Road, and Hitchin Railway/Ransom's Recreation Ground. Proposed changes within all the suburbs must recognise the importance of the existing townscape and the presumption should be for reuse and careful infill rather than larger scale demolition and redevelopment.

5.2 Gateways

Gateways are important in influencing the perceptions of the town held by residents and visitors. An attractive gateway particularly to the historic core of the town can set the image of the town and help with understanding of its layout and the quality of its environment.

For the purpose of setting priorities we have identified three "gateways" into the town centre and its immediate environs as being important approaches to Conservation Areas and in need of enhancement in various ways.

5.2.1 The area around Hitchin railway station

- This area around Hitchin Station is now part of *the Hitchin Railway and Ransom's Recreation Ground Conservation Area*, designated in 2011. The *Character Statement* notes the survival of railway buildings and other buildings of note, providing "links to the industrialisation of this part of Hitchin in the mid to late 19th century".
- Key negative features highlighted in the *Character Statement* include the adverse effect of modern road widening schemes, over-sized modern development facing the entrance to the station forecourt and a number of large advertising hoardings facing Nightingale Road. There is also considerable pedestrian / motorist conflict, despite two pedestrian crossings. The railway bridge creates an unpleasant environment, both visually and in terms of the tunnel effect with very narrow footpath.

5.2.2 Queen Street between the junctions with Bridge Street and Hermitage Road

- This is a major gateway to the main *Hitchin Conservation Area*, an area with a high concentration of Listed Buildings and still retaining the medieval (or earlier) street layout and burghage plots. The gateway provides the entrances to the historic town from the north and south and important views directly towards St Marys and The Biggin.
- However, the area is marred by a series of modern buildings which are out of scale and lacking architectural merit (such as the carpet shop at the end of Bridge Street). Also the car parks around St Mary's Square would benefit from a comprehensive landscape scheme for those areas not subject to change as part of the Churchgate and Market refurbishments.

5.2.3 Paynes Park

- Paynes Park is on the edge of the main *Hitchin Conservation Area*, forming the boundary of the medieval core where the burghage plots ended and open countryside began to the west of the town. Its current mixed character is related to the changing opportunities for larger (suburban) houses, re-location for the livestock markets displaced from the centre of the town, and the growth of small businesses.
- The area is adversely affected by the gyratory system established in the mid 20th century, which inhibits pedestrian use of the area and the quality of the environment. The mixture of spaces and uses does provide an informal edge to the town centre but one that could be strengthened as a major gateway.

In view of the significant issues at Paynes Park and the current opportunities, we concluded that it would be useful to revisit the area covered by the Development Brief of 2005 to establish whether a fresh approach might be helpful.

A workshop was therefore organised (see Appendix E), and the following is a summary of the conclusions drawn following from that workshop.

Approaches to Development

The workshop raised some questions which an updated development brief will have to address, including:

- Is an extension of the retail core economically viable?
- Is an incremental approach, felt to be more sympathetic to Hitchin's character, more realistic in the current economic climate?
- Can the scale of parking currently available be retained through the different stages of development?
- Should the burgage plot boundaries be respected or should the ownerships be rationalised to encourage commercial developer interest?
- Should the several through routes be rationalised to channel footfall and enhance commercial viability?

Following the workshop, the specific proposals put forward by the external advisors (see Appendix E drawings) were debated further and the following conclusions drawn:

- The restoration of two way working to replace the current gyratory is seen as an important element in the improvement of the wider area; and until this is achieved immediate measures need to be taken to mitigate its impacts.
- The multiplicity of routes between the main town centre and Waitrose, the Liairage car park, the Library area and the wider residential areas to the west of Paynes Park is a positive feature and should be retained
- It is important to improve the direct route between the Arcade and the Library Garden, so as to encourage access to the community facilities.
- Similarly the alignment of West Alley as a through route for pedestrians should be retained with an improved direct connection to Braunds Alley via Nun's Close.
- Priority should be given to the establishment of a Creative Quarter for the town in an extension to the Arcade, with workshops and live/work units.
- Elsewhere across the area there should be opportunity for separate developments for live/work and residential provision, but with a more integrated layout for car parking together with landscape improvements.

Development Sequence

From the workshop debate it appeared that the following sequence of development could be anticipated, with development likely to take place in a sequence starting with the sites at the south end of Paynes Park:

Stage 1 (see Diagram "Short Term Proposals"):

- The first stage in the enhancement of Paynes Park should be mitigation of the present heavy traffic volume with pedestrians being given greater priority, by altering

the road surface and increasing pedestrian crossing times at the controlled crossing. This would enhance the connectivity between the east and west sides of Paynes Park and encourage increase in footfall, including from the wider residential areas to the west.

- The Arcade car park could be developed as a Creative Quarter, with the units on West Alley retained but with frontages also towards the Arcade area, and matching units opposite to provide for craft workshops and live/work units; and with planting on the Paynes Park frontage to link with the Library Garden.
- If the parking is to be replaced then a reconfigured layout at Jackson's Yard, involving the loss of the Barn will be required at this stage. A "meanwhile" use on the former Woolworth's parking deck could also be developed at this stage, possibly to include a roof garden with access via the adjacent pub.

Stage 2 (see Diagram "Mid Term Proposals"):

- A proposal in which the Jackson's car park site is divided into smaller projects would make it of greater interest to local developers and builders. Permeability and respect for the existing burgage plots would also be more easily achieved.
- The diagram shows live/work units along Paynes Park with access replacing the unused ramp, and with additional parking to the rear and in an under-croft. A higher value use on the top of the former Woolworth building would support the development of a lift providing access for all from ground level.
- A separate residential development is shown facing West Alley with a small public garden allowing pedestrian access through to the car parking at the rear.
- Replacement of the commercial use at the corner of Nun's Close is also indicated with the opportunity for a small garden area to be established, further strengthening the visual links across Paynes Park.

Stage 3 (see Diagram "Long Term Proposals"):

- The present office use of Latchmore Court at the northern end of Paynes Park may not be viable in the long term and a potential for refurbishment for residential use may exist. This change might encourage environmental enhancement and infill development along the lane at the rear of Brand Street.
- An upgrading of the parking area at the east end of the lane (with its solitary yew tree) to provide a public space could encourage long term linkage through to High Street and Brand Street for restaurants and shops.
- The restoration of local two way movement along Paynes Park, associated with the replacement of the gyratory system, would improve the pedestrian environment

further and enable removal of unnecessary signage and allow for further enhancement of landscaping.

The hope is that this work will be referenced in the Local Plan, and used as a basis for updating the Paynes Park Development Brief and as a model for work at the other gateways.

List of Maps, Diagrams & Appendices

Maps (Open Space and Footpaths)

About Hitchin
Around Hitchin

Diagrams (Paynes Park)

1. Short Term Proposals
2. Mid Term Proposals
3. Long Term Proposals

Appendices

Appendix A: Housing Options: Responses to Consultation

A1: Response by The Hitchin Society
A2: Response by Hitchin Forum

Appendix B: Community Facilities

Appendix C: Background Information on Transport Issues

C1: Cycling
C2: Hitchin's Railway Importance

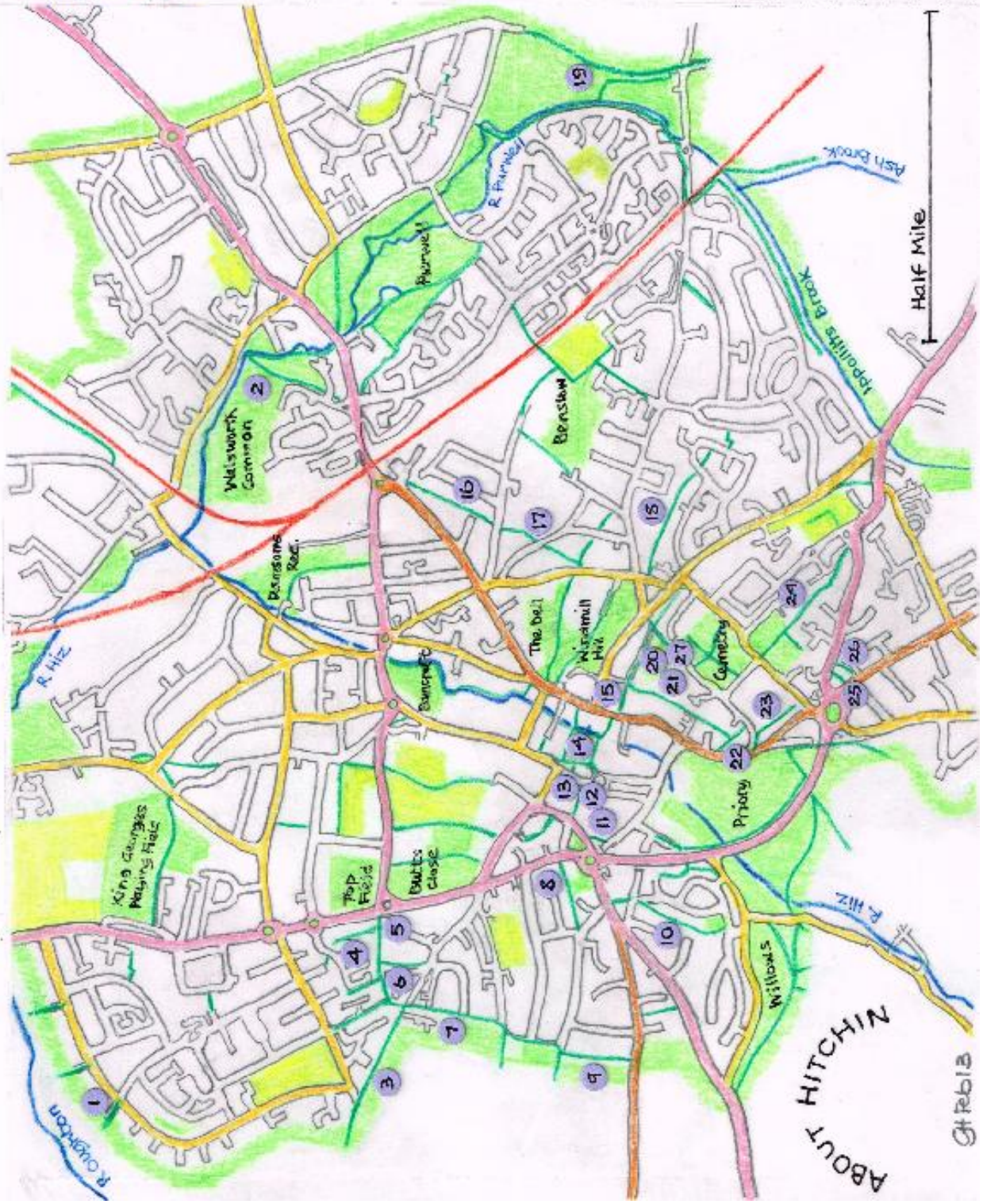
Appendix D: Review of Open Space and Footpath Assets

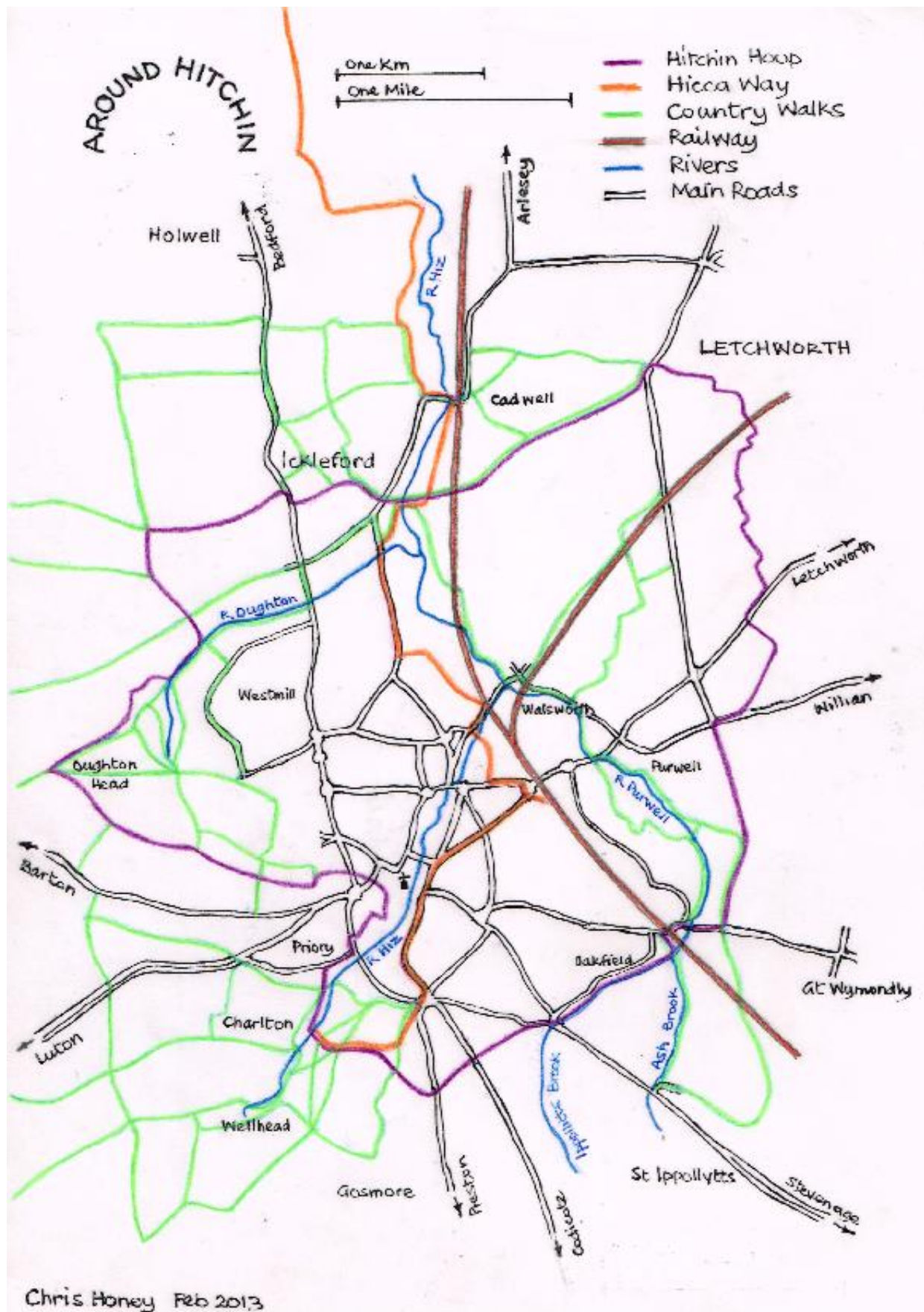
D1: Relevant Green Belt Issues
D2: Review of Footpaths
D3: Review of Recreational Facilities
D4: Areas of Nature Conservation

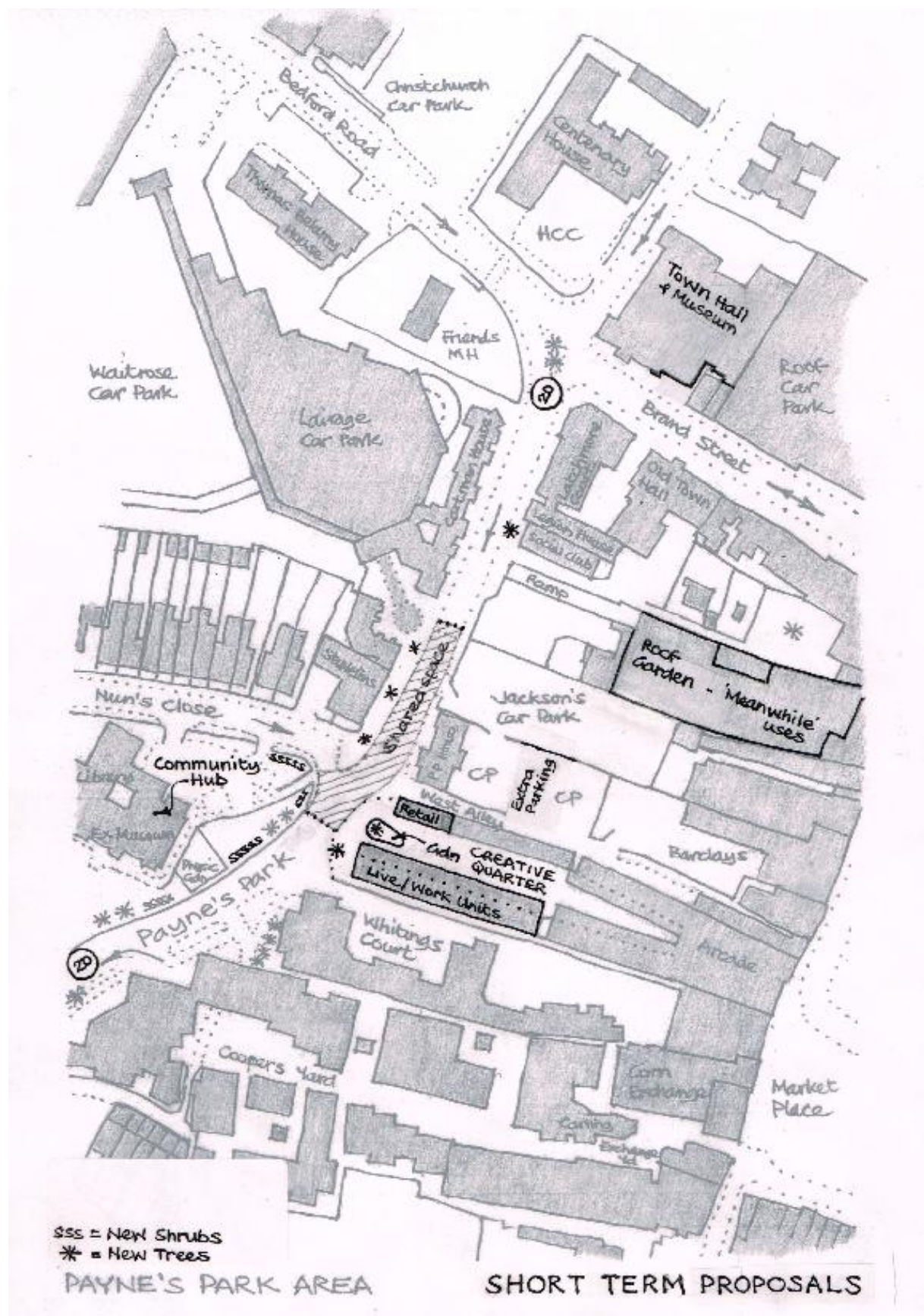
Appendix E: Community Design Workshop - Paynes Park

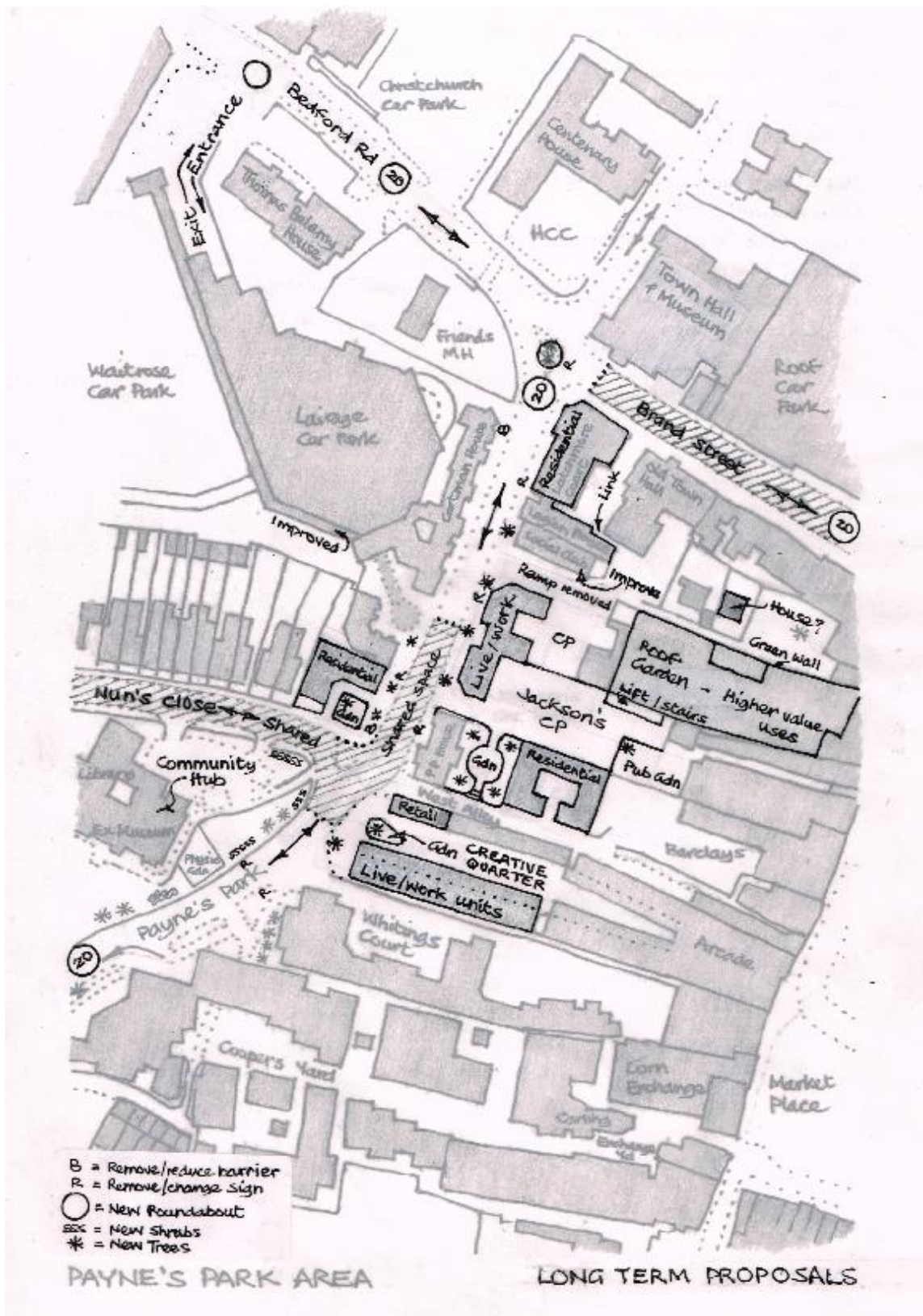
- Main Roads
- Other Roads
- Rivers
- Green Areas
- Railways
- Footways
- School Field

- 1 Westmill Lane
- 2 Bowk Path
- 3 Oughtonhead Lane
- 4 Union Footpath
- 5 Maxwell Path
- 6 Chalkdell Path
- 7 Lucas Lane
- 8 Bounds Alley
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- 14 Churchyard Walk
- 15 Lyles Row
- 16 Burton Path
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- 18 Riddy Lane
- 19 Gypsey Lane
- 20 Kershaws Hill
- 21 Storehouse Lane
- 22 Taylors Hill
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- 26 Hitchin Hill Path
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Appendix A: Housing Options: Responses to Consultation

A1: Response by The Hitchin Society

A2: Response by Hitchin Forum

Honorary President: Paul Brenham MBE DL
Vice President: Dr Adrian Haigh

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Civic Voice
The Chiltern Society
Campaign to Protect Rural England
British Association for Local History
Association of North Thames Amenity Societies

26 March 2013

Strategic Planning and Projects Group
North Herts District Council
Council Offices
Gernon Road
Letchworth Garden City
SG6 3JF

Dear Sirs

Local Plan 2011-2031
Housing Options

The Hitchin Society recognises and fully accepts the need for new housing in the area and knows that it will be a difficult and delicate operation to ensure that targets are sufficient to meet requirements and to satisfy an inspector, while at the same time ensuring that new development is properly planned, managed and carried out in the most suitable places. Although we understand the complexity of this task and the difficulties involved for NHDC, we do have major doubts about some of the issues in this consultation.

1. Process

We are very concerned that the whole premise of this consultation is seriously flawed. NHDC has taken the easy step of asking landowners and developers to offer land for house-building, which means that the whole process is developer-driven, rather than the council itself taking the initiative and asking the necessary preliminary questions.

At local exhibitions and meetings, planning officers have justified this course of action by maintaining that other councils have done the same and that it would be too expensive and time-consuming to seek proactively sites which would fit in with a strategic approach. Nevertheless, surely a more appropriate method would have been for planning officers to start the process by asking really basic questions such as the following:

- Where do we, the planning experts, think the best strategic locations are for new house-building?

- Given that North Hertfordshire is situated so close to the boundaries with Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Stevenage, how do we deal with cross-boundary issues (for instance, but not exclusively. sites east of Luton and west of Stevenage, the latter of which is back on the agenda since this consultation began)? It is clear from Part 1 of the council's documentation (Housing Numbers) that there has been initial contact with neighbouring authorities, but it is not yet clear how far NHDC is considering co-operation with them, as the NPPF recommends authorities should do when drawing up their Local Plans.
- Do we wish to see towns and villages expanded to merge with each other, or do we wish to preserve individual settlements?
- Do we think that the Green Belt around our existing settlements should be preserved entirely, partially or hardly at all?
- How can we make best use of existing infrastructure to promote genuinely sustainable development?
- Should we be considering the establishment of a new settlement somewhere in the district, rather than adding larger or smaller plots of land to existing settlements?
- How do we prioritise these often conflicting issues?

Such questions do not appear to have been asked; certainly the public is not being consulted on them. Despite the name 'strategic' being attached to the larger sites, we cannot see that there is any strategy involved, simply expediency or limited vision. If planners identified strategic locations of their own informed choice, with certain areas of land actually scheduled for development, landowners would probably be only too willing to sell land for housing, given the enormous gain compared to agricultural land values. This would certainly be deliverable.

Based on the above most fundamental concern, and following directly from it, we also find unsatisfactory the way in which the consultation has been arranged in respect of parts of the online questionnaire. Question 3 asks respondents to rank the seven 'strategic' sites in order of preference, with no opportunity given for truly strategic suggestions outside the parameters offered by the landowners and developers. Similarly, question 5, asking respondents which mix of given sites they would use, allows no leeway for more independent opinions and 'thinking outside the box'.

Is it right that decisions of such magnitude for the future of the district should effectively be made by opportunistic and self-interested land-owners and developers? We think not, that NHDC is abrogating its responsibility in this regard.

2. Housing Targets

We sympathise with the council's fears of the Local Plan being considered 'unsound' by an inspector and can understand why NHDC settled on the number of 10,700 for its new housing target. Its thinking (as set out in Part 1: Housing Numbers) seems reasonable on the face of it.

However, the NPPF requires councils to take into consideration, when setting targets, the fact that Green Belt issues will be a constraint. Also, all the data and projections used by the council and ORS derive from information available prior to the 2011 census and therefore may not be as robust as is thought. As the complete set of data from the census will not become available until October this year, we realise that the council is in a dilemma, needing to complete its Local Plan as quickly as possible, to satisfy the government and also to avoid

the danger of opportunism on the part of developers trying to slip through a gap in the Plan before it is completed.

Under those circumstances, we feel that it might be preferable for the council to concentrate now on the shorter term and plan for the longer term once more detailed, up to date information on population, employment and migration trends is available.

3. Proposed Sites

The Hitchin Society does not propose to join in the game of comparing the merits or otherwise of all the 'strategic' and non-strategic sites proposed by NHDC on behalf of landowners and developers, because we do not feel that this is the right way to proceed (see Section 1). We intend to confine our comments to the huge site located to the South West of Hitchin.

This site comprises approximately 50% of the area which Hitchin occupies today and would therefore drastically change the town of Hitchin and its hinterland. The Hitchin Society is totally opposed to such a proposal, for the following reasons:

3.1 Infrastructure – The section of the NHDC documentation dealing with this site refers to an Infrastructure Delivery Plan (2.18 – 2.21). This plan acknowledges the need for new schools, neighbourhood centres, etc. and admits that the capacity of the fire station and the Hitchin Sewage Treatment Works 'require further investigation'. It is our understanding that Anglian Water said some years ago of the sewage works that enlargement was not possible on the present site and that a new site would be needed – where would this be?

The result of the Transport Modelling (2.22 – 2.23) illustrates another difficulty with this proposal. A by-pass might, but would not necessarily, ease congestion in the town centre – NHDC admits that there would still be pinch points in the town and at junctions 7 and 8 of the A1(M). Access to the town centre would not be straightforward for the residents of such a new development - the amount of extra traffic generated by a development of 6,000 – 7,400 homes would be huge, because no part of this proposed development is within easy walking distance of the station, particularly if many were trying, as would almost certainly be the case, to get to and from the station during morning and evening rush hours. More parking capacity would also be needed at the station, especially if other railway land were to be used for housing. Clearly new roads would be built through any development, but when traffic moving to the town centre met the original streets of Hitchin, there would be horrendous congestion, probably frequent gridlock. This would add unacceptably to existing noise and air pollution levels within the town. More car parks would be needed in the town centre – where would they go? The town is already choked with traffic at busy times; this proposal would only make it worse.

We assume that the statement (2.8) about the path of a possible southern by-pass was provided by the developer, as any competent highway engineer would instantly see that such a route is a nonsense, economically and environmentally, and presumably made to justify the extent of the land proposed for housing. We are disappointed that NHDC appears to have reproduced such statements without even a cursory examination.

3.2 – Green Belt, Landscape, Amenity and Biodiversity

The land to the south and west of Hitchin is not only in the Green Belt, but is intimately connected with and vitally necessary to the life and character of the town. It is all but unbelievable that anyone could even contemplate the wholesale violation of this area of countryside. The NPPF insists that the Green Belt should not be built over for insufficient reason – the Green Belt exists for five purposes, three of which are applicable to Hitchin. These are: to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns, to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment and to prevent neighbouring towns (and presumably villages too) merging into one another. These principles would all be utterly denied by a development in this location.

Section 9.79 of the NPPF sets out the policy on protection for the Green Belt: ‘The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.’ These characteristics are stated twice in the same sentence, which clearly emphasises their importance.

The NPPF speaks of previously developed land in many Green Belt areas, which could be put to more productive use, and the legislation encourages councils to make best use of this land, whilst protecting the openness of the Green Belt. This does not, however, apply to the area south and west of Hitchin, the land here being Grade 3 farmland, needed, as the Food 2030 report said, for food production. The NPPF contains a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which it defines as having three dimensions: economic, social and environmental. The proposal to develop a huge swathe of Green Belt land around Hitchin makes no sense in any of those three dimensions, and especially not environmentally.

As the NHDC document admits, a development here would have impacts (we would say, ‘huge impacts’) on the landscape, potentially (we would say, ‘inevitably’) on the adjacent AONB, on the designated Archaeological Area and on neighbouring Conservation Areas. The Landscape Assessment acknowledges the high or moderate sensitivity of this whole area to development. This is without doubt the wrong scheme in absolutely the wrong place.

This land is not just beautiful for people to gaze at from their passing cars – it is actually very much used for recreation, and access is facilitated by the myriads of paths and tracks which criss-cross it. Hitchin has a relatively small amount of space within its built-up area, so the adjacent countryside is essential for recreational activity, serving much the same purpose as, say, Norton Common in Letchworth or the Heath for Royston. The land to the south and west of Hitchin is a well-used green lung for the residents of the town, and this space would no longer be accessible on foot, as it is now, if a huge development lay between the town and the suddenly distant countryside.

Biodiversity would also be lost if this scheme were to come to pass. As the document admits, the area contains a number of wildlife sites and an SSSI. Development here would destroy the local distinctiveness and special character of this land, and the Oughtonhead Common Nature Reserve and other wildlife sites would be ravaged.

3.3 – Sustainability – The site completely overlays two of Hitchin’s principal sources of drinking water (Wellhead and Temple End Pumping Stations) and borders the third (Oughtonhead PS). It must therefore cover the Inner and much, if not all, of the Outer Protection Zones for the former, and again cover part of the Inner Zone for Oughtonhead. Our understanding is that the Environment Agency

will not countenance development within an Inner SPZ and will demand extraordinary safeguards within the Outer SPZ.

The site also incorporates the whole of the upper reaches of the River Hiz and borders the River Oughton. The Hiz was rescued from its position as one of the most at-risk rivers in the Anglian Region in the 1990s by an augmentation scheme and we understand that further improvements are planned by the Environment Agency in the interests of the natural environment and biodiversity.

To propose building over such water-sensitive areas makes a nonsense of sustainability viewed from any standpoint.

NHDC also claims in the section on South West of Hitchin (2.15) that there would be ‘significant opportunities for sustainable energy, given the size of the development’. We believe that the use of ‘significant’ is a considerable overstatement as low density housing seriously limits the opportunity for sustainable energy solutions.

Given the water-sensitive nature of the site, the limited opportunity for sustainable energy and the inevitability that car use will be the preferred method of transport, including to the town centre and to the station, the idea that this site is in any way sustainable begins to look somewhat far-fetched.

3.4 – Proportionality – Officers at the exhibitions have suggested that this argument would carry little weight. We, however, think that it should carry significant weight – brownfield sites and infrastructure surpluses within Hitchin have already been used up. There is now much less capacity for any further increases, and this needs to be reflected in strategic planning.

The total actual and estimated dwelling completions in the district between 2001 and 2021, as a percentage, show that Baldock has contributed 5.1%, the villages 12.7%, Letchworth 15.2%, Royston 22.9% and Hitchin 44.1%. In other words, Hitchin has, or will have, contributed to dwellings in the district almost half as much again as Royston and over eight times as much as Baldock. In which case, Hitchin should not, as a matter of equity, have to contribute such a huge amount as these latest proposals might expect. The NHDC Core Strategy (Preferred Options Paper 2007), whose policy wording, according to the NHDC website, still represents the council’s latest published thinking for new policies to be incorporated into the new Local Plan, refers to the public consultation at the time and states at 2.22 that: ‘The most popular of these alternatives was the proportionate growth of the towns and villages. Our preferred option is based on this principle, although strict proportionality is unlikely to be achieved given the differing types and availability of sites around the towns. However, the preferred distribution does try to give appropriate levels of growth to all the towns and villages.’ As this policy has not been superseded, we would expect it to be adhered to, if not in the letter of the law, then at least in the spirit.

4. Conclusion

Referring again to the Preferred Options paper of 2007, the first section of the ‘Hitchin Discounted Options’ states: ‘The main discounted option at Hitchin is the major expansion of the town to the south-west. This has been suggested as a way of funding a southern bypass to the town, linking the A505 Offley Road with the A602 Stevenage Road. Whilst it is

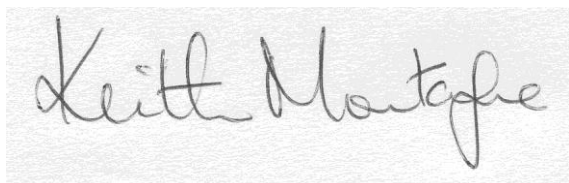
acknowledged that such a road could reduce traffic on Offley Road and Stevenage Road, the quantity of housing required to fund it is considered too high a price.' We hope that NHDC will stick to its principles on this.

However, the new houses have to be built somewhere, and wherever that may be, people will object, not least because the council's present choice of so-called 'strategic' sites will be recognised as purely arbitrary, with no foundation in logic or equity, and will therefore encourage respondents towards a reaction verging on nimbyism.

The Hitchin Society therefore suggests that it would be more appropriate for NHDC to take the courageous but sensible step of naming and investigating some sites that really are strategic, on one of which a totally new settlement could be built. These sites must, of course, be genuinely sustainable, so obvious possibilities are areas close to and easily accessible from existing stations. Such areas, which should at least be considered on their merits, include land to the north of Baldock and its station, land to the south of Royston and its station and, perhaps most obviously, land around Ashwell station, where the existing rail network could carry new residents eastwards to Cambridge with its university and Science Park, or southwards towards Stevenage and London. This last suggestion might well mean joint working with South Cambridgeshire, which NHDC could find challenging, but this option should not be dismissed out of hand.

We reiterate that we would like to see the council addressing the housing needs of its area in a much more proactive and genuinely strategic way.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Keith Montague". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Keith" is written in a larger, more prominent script, and the surname "Montague" follows in a similar but slightly more compact style. The ink is dark and the background is a light, textured surface.

K N Montague
Vice Chairman



To NHDC Strategic Planning and Projects Group

15.03.13

Hitchin Forum's Response to NHDC Housing Options Consultation 2013

1. Concerns about process

1.1 Housing targets

NHDC has opted to address local needs and low trend migration, with a total figure of 10,700 homes assessed as needed by 2031; this locally derived figure fits with employment forecasts (Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SMHA) 2013 page 14) and could be robust. However, no account has been taken of wider sub regional requirements despite the recognition from NHDC that it has a duty to co-operate with neighbouring authorities to identify its role in meeting these needs (SMHA page 18).

We are concerned that there may have to be a second round of consultation to cover such requirements (particularly from Stevenage); or that the Local Plan is found to be unsound at Examination because of this omission. This could make the District vulnerable to speculative applications for development.

However, for the purpose of the current consultation the Forum addresses the issues raised by the 10,700 total.

1.2 Identification of sites

NHDC has taken the route of seeking submissions from landowners and developers to identify sites that are available for housing development. This is a common approach among Local Authorities as they seek to ensure viability and deliverability of their Local Plan proposals. The danger is that there is more reliance on speculative approaches than on sound planning principles, and this can be particularly significant for the strategic sites.

We are concerned that this approach for the strategic sites means that the District is in danger of being poorly planned with development concentrated in areas of greatest sensitivity and with greatest infrastructure problems. In fact for the strategic sites the expectation is that these will be developed in the second half of the plan period (Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) 2012 page 12), so that the development of a properly planned alternative is a practical proposition. The Forum suggests potential ways forward that could form part of a strategic planning approach (see Section 4).

1.3 Consultation

The questionnaire (Housing Options Report (HOR) February 2013 Part 4) asks respondents to rank the strategic sites in order of preference, and then assign housing numbers to the strategic sites and non strategic sites (grouped by towns and villages). NHDC has provided documentation amounting to several hundred pages to give information that can be used to make these decisions, and respondents are asked to 'provide as much information as possible about why they support one particular site for development over another' (HOR, Forward).

We are concerned that this is a totally inappropriate formula for undertaking a consultation. The likelihood is that respondents, daunted by the overload of information, will be tempted to use the form

to 'vote' for sites outside their own area. If Councillors are asked to use the feedback as the basis for their decision making then this could amount to an abrogation of responsibility - at a time when the government is expecting strong leadership from Local Authorities in making these important decisions.

This response is addressed only to the local sites on which Hitchin Forum members have well founded information, and we have encouraged our members to respond in a similar way.

2. Hitchin's local needs

Hitchin Forum suggests that a useful starting point for assessing the local housing requirements is to assign the total outstanding housing need of 8,900² (local need plus migration) to each settlement in proportion to its size. In 2011 Hitchin's population was 27% of the District's total (Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP) page 193), which equates to approximately 15,000 homes out of the District's total of 55,300 (SHMA page 4). If Hitchin provides for its share of local needs and migration for the period to 2031 it would therefore need to find sites for 2,400 homes (27% of 8,900).

No background information is provided with the consultation papers indicating how the District's housing needs have been met in the ten years up to 2011. Hitchin's population increased by over 3,300 (i.e. by nearly 11%) between 2001 and 2011. Over 60% of the population increase in the four towns was concentrated within Hitchin (mostly in flats). In 2001 Hitchin had a population 2,000 less than Letchworth; it is now larger by 1,000.

This concentration of the District's recent growth in Hitchin explains why there are now so few sites available within its borders for the family housing needed.

The SHLA (page12) assumes that only the non strategic sites that are within existing boundaries (either Priority 1 brownfield or Priority 2 greenfield sites) are likely to be acceptable. For Hitchin, with its major development in recent years and its comparatively dense development, this amounts to only about 320 homes (HOR page 66). Of these sites two need to be questioned:

- At Churchgate (Ref H/mo2) 61 homes are identified, but it is argued that with the demise of the Simons scheme fewer homes here (say 20) would give opportunity for a fuller range of town centre uses and facilities;
- One of the sites listed at Lucas Lane (Ref H/r22: 26 homes) lies in the Green Belt and should therefore not be included as a Priority 2 site – its development is being contested on the basis of Green Belt and access issues.

Non strategic sites within Hitchin's built up area are therefore likely to contribute only about 250 homes. This leaves 2,150 to be found elsewhere.

All Hitchin's other non strategic sites (Priority 3) lie within the Green Belt and no assumption has been made by NHDC that these will be acceptable:

- All the Priority 3 sites (Ref H/r14, 25 and 30) on the western edge have problems with access and 'are not large enough to bring major benefits to the area' (SHLAA pages 38-40);
- The two Priority 3 sites south east of Hitchin within St Ippolyts Parish (Ref 098 and 110) and the one in the north east at Highover Farm (Ref 039) are all located in narrow gaps between the settlements (SHLAA pages 59-60).

3. South west of Hitchin (Ref 37)

² 10,700 minus 1,800 (numbers of homes permitted since 2011) = 8,900

The excess need related to Hitchin of about 2,150 homes is minor in the context of the scale of the strategic site shown south and west of Hitchin (for 6,000 to 7,400 homes) that has been put forward as one alternative to address the needs of the District as a whole.

Hitchin Forum's view is that development of all or part of this area of Green Belt would be totally unacceptable in relation to three of the purposes of the Green Belt (National Planning Policy Framework 2012 page 19):

- *To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns*

Hitchin has been recognised by English Heritage as an important historic town (Urban Panel Review July 2012) and by the Council for British Archaeology as of national importance. Hitchin is unusual in the retention of an extensive medieval street pattern and the close relationship of that core to the countryside. The development of the strategic site would sever the centre from its rural setting, double the physical extent of the town and increase its population by 50%. The pressure on services, facilities and the transport network would entail significant changes to the physical fabric of the town which would have a much greater impact than any benefits that might be claimed from the associated construction of a bypass.

- *To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment*

Land Use Consultant's Landscape Sensitivity Study (LSS 2012) makes clear the significance and sensitivity of this attractive area of countryside as an open undulating valley with its small villages and isolated farms lying between the historic town and the Chilterns AONB and Langley Scarp. The town has a very clear edge along the ridge line to west and south so that even partial development into the valley would have very significant impact (which by the nature of the area could not be successfully mitigated by tree planting). The area also provides an extremely important setting for informal recreation for a town with limited open space within its built up area.

- *To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another*

Part of the site area is also crucial in providing separation between Hitchin and Stevenage (LSS page 39); and much of it is also vital in retaining separation between Hitchin and the villages of Charlton, Gosmore, St Ippollytts, Titmore Green and Little Wymondley (LSS pages 38 and 48).

4. Alternative solutions

A case can be made for Hitchin that it is reaching its environmental capacity, with significant constraints in terms of its historic centre and setting. The argument would be that the excess needs have to be met beyond its Green Belt.

It is not yet clear how far Stevenage may be seeking housing sites outside its own built up area either adjacent to or within North Hertfordshire in the period up to 2031 (see 1.1 above). If it is, then there could be an argument that the additional housing need from Hitchin (and Letchworth) would contribute to a sustainable development adjacent to Stevenage, depending on its location.

Hitchin Forum does, however, have particular views on two of the sites shown close to Stevenage:

- West of Stevenage (Ref WS: 3,100 homes) is important for its rural character, sense of remoteness and for preserving open landscapes and a clear separation between Stevenage and Hitchin and the nearby villages/hamlets. There are four wildlife sites and a Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- Rush Green (Ref RG: 1,000 homes) is proposed as a new village despite the limited size of the site as shown. If extended northwards, this site could link to the West of Stevenage site, raising traffic implications for the B656 which is a minor country road.

In fact the Letchworth/Hitchin/Stevenage area as a whole is becoming increasingly congested with significant difficulties in providing infrastructure and services, and with very fragile gaps between settlements.

It may therefore be worth considering the development of a **new settlement** further north in a sustainable location with associated rail links. Such consideration would seem to be appropriate in the context of the government's espousal of the building of new settlements built on Garden City principles (NPPF page 13), and its expectation that Local Authorities will be co-operating:

- The Stevenage and A1(M) housing sub market area includes much of Bedfordshire (SMHA page 7) and there could be an argument for needs to be met at a new settlement elsewhere in the same functional sub market.
- Or NHDC could take account of the growing economic base of Cambridge and the related employment opportunities. It might then be appropriate to look for a new settlement in the north east of the District to meet these opportunities.

A new settlement could also provide for any additional needs not met by other towns or villages in the District.

Hitchin Forum therefore urges NHDC to take the significant opportunity provided by the government's support for new settlements and co-operation between authorities, in order to break the cycle of continuous recourse to the most congested part of the District, and to undertake a more strategic planning approach to housing needs.

Yours faithfully

Mike Clarke

Chair Hitchin Forum

Appendix B: Community Facilities

The importance of community halls is recognised in the Council's *Community Halls Strategy 2011*:

- *"It is widely recognised that village halls, community centres and other halls that provide space and facilities for community services and activities can make an enormous difference to the well-being of their communities. North Herts District Council is committed to the promotion of community cohesion, healthy living and the reduction of social exclusions. The District's community facilities play a significant part in achieving these aims.*
- *"The multi-functional nature of these facilities caters for the diverse needs of the different community and faith groups within the District and must be supported as far as is possible to ensure their sustainability for the current populations and generations to come."*

The Council's *Infrastructure Delivery Plan 2011-2031* goes on: *"The role of the community centre is becoming increasingly important in relation to providing a wide range of services for the public. Many organisations are considering rationalisation and the possibility of co-locating within community centres. For example, the police may wish to use offices within the community centre, adult day care could be provided in one of the community rooms and pre-schools often utilise community centres already."*

There are currently four community halls in Hitchin serving Walsworth, the Poets Estate (St Michaels Road), Sunnyside (St John's) and Westmill. These are generally well-used, with little spare capacity or sufficient facilities for additional regular club/society bookings.

There is a notable absence of community hall provision in the Strathmore area (between Bedford Road and Grove Road) and on the west and south sides of the town from Oughtonhead Lane to Willow Lane. If Bancroft Hall is not replaced, the town centre will also lack any community hall, as the revamped Town Hall will provide an entirely different sort of facility, unsuitable for weekly meetings of clubs and organisations. This gap in provision is particularly marked, given the large number of flats built/created by upper floor conversions in the town centre in recent years.

Appendix C: Background Information on Transport Issues

C.1: Cycling

Background and justification

Over the period 1999-2008 there was a decline in the % of all journeys in Hitchin by cycle from 1.1% to 0.8%¹. In Hertfordshire as a whole 2.03% (3614) of primary and secondary school pupils cycle to school². 35.77% of primary pupils and 21.01% of secondary pupils travel by car to school (this excludes journeys where the parent drops children on the way to work, which is defined as car-sharing and is a much smaller proportion of the total).² The use of sustainable transport for home – school journeys in Hertfordshire is below the national and Eastern Region averages. The case for increased uptake of cycling on health and sustainability grounds needs no further justification.

The Hitchin Urban Transport Plan May 2011 (HUTP)³ states an obvious reason for this; 'Hitchin does not possess a very developed cycle network, with the main cycling routes within the town tending to follow the highway network, thereby placing cyclists in conflict with motorised users.' Parents therefore perceive cycling as a dangerous activity.

In 1999 a detailed survey and set of proposals⁴ for cycle routes was produced. Little progress has been made towards these, but the HUTP in table 8.3 identifies a set of actions which would deliver much of it. Hitchin Forum is concerned that of 13 separate measures identified in this table, all but 4 (excluding CM2 and CM7) are subject to the proviso, stated in the footnote 'Whilst the aspiration is to implement all of the cycle routes identified in the UTP, it is acknowledged that it may not be possible to do so due to financial constraints.'

School Transport Plans

Requirements on School Transport Plans should be used to encourage provision of

- School based level 2 and 3 (at secondary level) and level 1 and 2 (at primary level) Bikeability courses⁴
- More secure cycle storage
- Assistance with cycle purchase and safety equipment (for children in receipt of free school meals?)
- Promotion of cycling to school when routes have been completed and are safe
- Annual surveys of pupils' travel habits

References

1. Hertfordshire's Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy (SMoTS) For School and Colleges 2012/13 Fig 2.1
<http://www.hertsdirect.org/docs/pdf/s/smots2012-13main.pdf>
2. Hertfordshire's Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy (SMoTS) For School and Colleges 2012/13 fig 3.2
3. The Hitchin Urban Transport Plan May 2011 (HUTP) Para 2.16
<http://www.hertsdirect.org/docs/pdf/h/hitchutpv1.pdf>
4. North Hertfordshire Towns Proposed Cycle Route Network
http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/spg19_north_herts_towns_cycle_routes_-_part_4_hitchin.pdf
5. Hertfordshire's Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy (SMoTS) For School and Colleges 2012/13 fig 4.2
6. <http://www.dft.gov.uk/bikeability/>

C.2: Hitchin's Railway Importance

Hitchin's Railway Context

Hitchin is an important junction served by both Cambridge and Peterborough line services to/from London Kings Cross, and some Moorgate services via Hertford North. It is by far the District's main railhead with about 2.7m passengers per year. The station is an important bus interchange with the potential to develop this role further e.g. to/from Luton Airport. Hitchin's railhead importance should be maintained.

Hitchin's Railway Lands

Hitchin's "railway lands" must not be reallocated to other uses without very careful thought. It is vital such land should be retained for future railway use e.g. East-West or East Coast Main Line-Luton Airport links, for improved station access and car parking. Retention of the east yard off St Michael's Road is essential. The proposed "Housing Priority 1" disposal of the west yard off Nightingale Road should be rejected, although in the long term it might be possible to envisage re-use of the ex-Midland (west) portion of this site. Railway land disposals would create an operational strait-jacket which could threaten Hitchin's current place in the hierarchy of passenger services.

Appendix D: Review of Open Space and Footpath Assets

D.1: Relevant Green Belt Issues

The town's boundaries are currently clearly defined in terms of its built environment. To the south and west they are situated on higher ground within the ridge line and are generally integrated with the landscape with tree and hedge planting including rural green lanes such as Lucas Lane, Crow Furlong and Oughtonhead Lane. Where this is not the case, they may be defined by waterways as at Purwell and Ninesprings. Modern roads form the boundaries only on the northern edges. To the south and west in particular, any extension of the urban edge would damage the topography and the extensive views to the opposite valley.

The Green Belt preserves that direct link from the medieval core to the countryside that reflects their historic relationship, and is an almost unique feature among Hertfordshire towns. The area to the south and west is an area of particular landscape importance, with the attractive settings of Charlton Village and Maydencroft Manor. It is also crucial in providing separation between Hitchin and Stevenage and also between Hitchin and the villages of Charlton, Gosmore, St Ippollytts, Titmore Green and Little Wymondley.

D.2: Review of Footpaths

Using the extensive footpaths and alleyways of Hitchin it is possible to walk all the way round and through the town. The 1898 map of Hitchin reveals how many of these pathways are of historic significance, e.g. West Alley. Many represent the medieval field paths, some even retaining their original field names such as Crow Furlong, Storehouse Lane, Burton Path and Riddy Hill Path. The names of others like Lucas Lane or Kershaws Hill recall past celebrities and yet more reveal past places or activities like Chalkdell Path, Brick Kiln Lane and Union Footpath. The majority remain as traffic free routes which connect the green areas of Walsworth Common, Butts Close and Windmill Hill to the town centre.

A number of footpaths within the town radiate out from the original centre to allow ready access to the countryside without the need for pedestrians to walk on major roads. These footpaths are of utmost importance to the vibrant life of Hitchin. Most of them lead from the town centre to nearby villages like Ickleford, St Ippollytts and Charlton or to areas of outstanding beauty like Wellhead, Oughton Head or the Purwell valley.

The Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP) and the Hicca Way are recently developed walking paths. Both pass through Hitchin. The former explores the countryside just outside the boundary of the town. The Hicca Way currently uses a temporary route through the town due to footpath closure as a result of the rail flyover work.

Examination of the footpaths round Hitchin shows that a number of paths and tracks beyond the current margin, which have their origins in the medieval field system could be lost in development. All these footpaths provide an extremely important setting for informal recreation and represent one of the reasons why expansion of the urban area is unacceptable since it would divorce the centre of Hitchin from its easily accessible countryside.

D.3: Review of Recreational Facilities

In terms of recreational provision the town lacks a facility of any great size. However, there are a number of facilities throughout the town, with Hitchin Boys School providing high quality all weather surfaces for football, hockey and tennis which are used by clubs. Butts Close, whilst not being suitable for formalised team games, is used by a number of groups for fitness training.

The town edges also provide an extremely important setting for informal recreation for a town with limited open space within its built up area. There are well used football pitches on the west of the town on Lucas Lane at Hitchin Town Cricket Club and abutting Oughtonhead Nature Reserve with access from Swinburne Avenue. It is important that these spaces and others such as at Ninesprings are maintained and not eroded. They should be protected from development and their accessibility ensured for the town.

D.4: Areas of Nature Conservation

The “Ring of Springs” around Hitchin, and their chalk streams, are an important feature of the landscape, and indeed may be unique in England. There are various Local Nature Reserves and Wildlife Reserves reflecting this, providing important wetland habitats which are a recreational and educational resource for the town and wider area. Examples of these are Oughtonhead and Purwell Ninesprings (both of which are under the care of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust), Folly Alder Swamp, The Willows, and the woodland at Charlton (managed by The Woodland Trust). It is important that these significant sites should continue to be protected.

Appendix E: Community Design Workshop - Paynes Park

Hitchin Forum arranged a Community Design Workshop on Saturday 23rd March 2013 at the Sun Hotel, Sun Street, Hitchin. Ten members of local community groups, including the Hitchin Forum, the Hitchin Society and the Hitchin Historical Society took part;

- Ellie Clarke
- Anthony Cole
- Scilla Douglas
- Bernard Eddleston
- Adrian Gurney
- Chris Honey
- Pauline Humphries
- Keith Montague
- John Wyer
- Vicky Wyer.

Two architect visitors, without previous connections with Hitchin, were also invited to take part in the workshop:

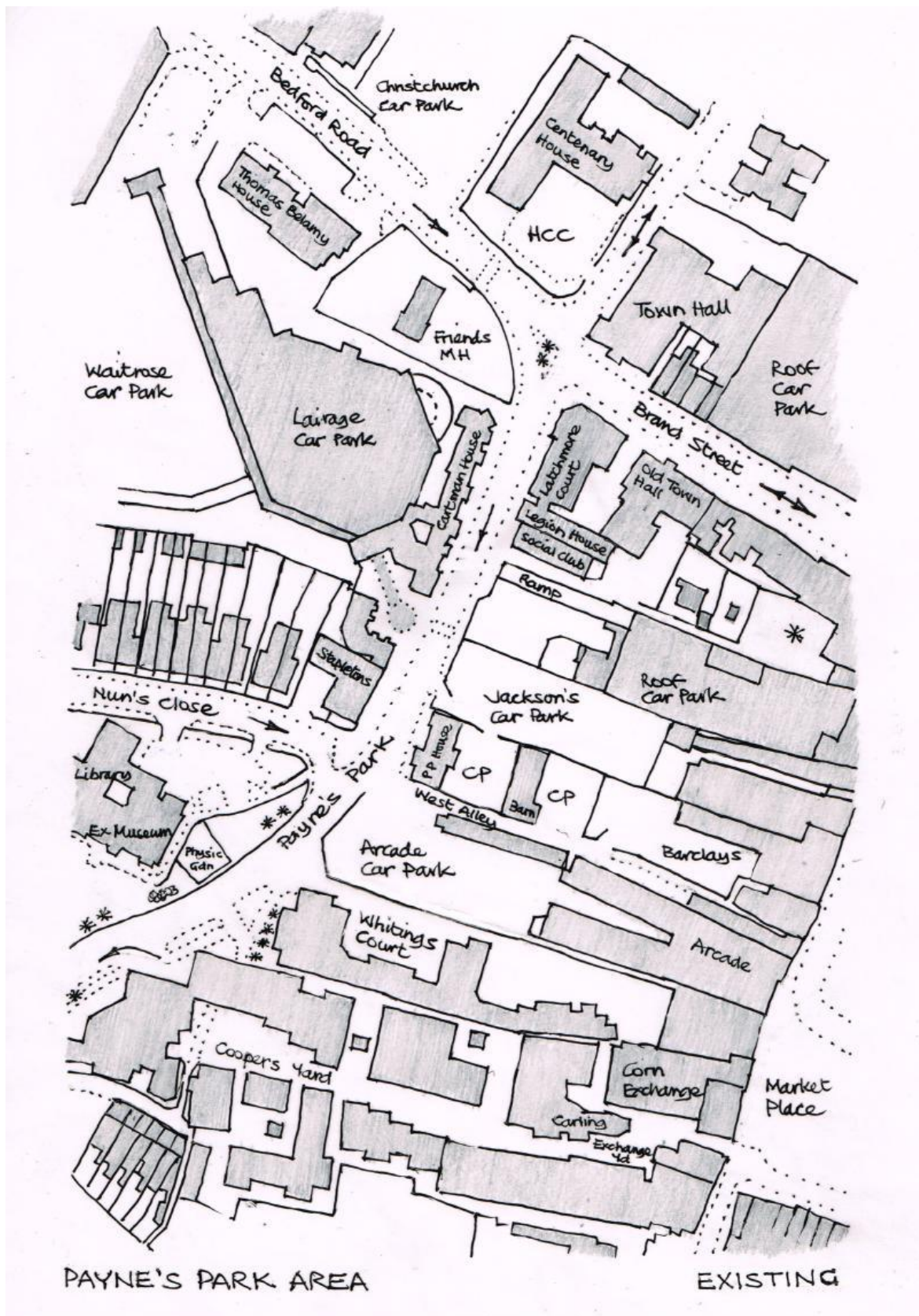
- Chris Medland of one-world design. Chris has extensive experience of major town centre redevelopments in historic towns;
- Alasdair Ben Dixon of Collective Works. Alasdair has recent experience of community based development.

The objective of this workshop was to define a development "vision" for Paynes Park as a first step towards a revised development brief. However, the workshop raised a number of questions about how to approach development and these questions perhaps represent the main outcome of the workshop.

Paynes Park is currently environmentally degraded by traffic and yet has potential for uses that contribute to the vibrancy of Hitchin. The workshop formed part of the Forum's contribution to the upcoming revision of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan and may be the first of a series looking at other areas of Hitchin.

It was an all-day workshop, starting at 9.30 and finishing about 4.00. The morning was spent on becoming familiar with the situation by reviewing the documentation and walking around the area, with the afternoon devoted to an ideas workshop and an initial documentation of the outcome.

PAYNES PARK AREA



DESCRIPTION OF PRESENT CHARACTER

The present character of Paynes Park can be described as urban backland forming a transition zone between the primary shopping activities along High Street and Market Place, which are historic features of Hitchin, and later developments on the west side of the road. This transition is reinforced by the gyratory traffic pattern along Paynes Park/Old Park Road/Bedford Road which forms a barrier and which gives the west side of the road an island character.

Although a development brief for the area was published in 2005 the off-centre location and the barrier formed by the traffic pattern have contributed to a development blight which affects the northern part of the area.

As this area is one of Hitchin's Gateways the Forum selected it for closer consideration.

Some Workshop participants considered the backland character was of value and that the quirky aspects should be retained. An over-sanitisation was to be avoided. However all participants shared a concern that the present heavy traffic along Paynes Park needed to be mitigated, pedestrians given priority and footfall increased.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS/URBAN GRAIN

The backland character of Paynes Park is a reflection of the layout of plots along the north side of High Street and Market Place. These long narrow burgage plots encouraged a high density of development on the narrow frontages to the main streets, where the footfall was greatest, and a progressive reduction in the economic potential of the land to the rear.

This pattern accommodated more marginal economic activities on the hinterland towards the rear of the plot, although this pattern does appear to have weakened in the recent past. In most cases the rear of the plot is now used for parking. In four locations the route has now become a pedestrian footpath, although in one case the access is permissive.

The "urban grain" therefore runs east to west at the regular intervals defined by the original plot widths.

In the early 20th century the burgage pattern at Paynes Park was somewhat weakened by the transfer of the cattle market from Bancroft to the rear of The Cock. The retention/ reflection of the burgage pattern or whether to supercede it was one of the questions debated at the workshop.

THE GYRATORY SYSTEM

There was extensive discussion about the barrier created by the gyratory system and the possibility of undoing the present gyratory arrangement. The Workshop noted that similar gyratory systems are being considered for redesign under the aegis of Transport for London, as part of the Mayor of London's Roads Task Force, and elsewhere.

It was recognised that in the longer term a redesign of the gyratory, with two-way traffic returning to Old Park Road, and perhaps to Bedford Road, would be desirable as it would allow the traffic volume through Paynes Park to be considerably reduced and a shared surface introduced. Due to the long gestation period for highway projects a redesign was not considered a pre-requisite for the

enhancement/redevelopment envisaged at the workshop, although it should remain an objective for this part of Hitchin.

However, the mitigation proposals put forward for the Tilehouse St./Paynes Park roundabout in the Transport Assessment for the Housing Options Consultation were strongly criticized as they were considered to further prioritize the road user at the expense of the pedestrian. There was a consensus that the present heavy traffic volume along Paynes Park needs to be mitigated and pedestrians given greater priority, in order to enhance the connectivity between the east and west sides of Paynes Park.

It was recognised that Paynes Park is an A road, however, the gyratory arrangement brings the "Link" and "Place" functions of this highway into conflict and mitigation is called for, for example:

- A 20 mph speed limit;
- An extension of the light controlled crossing zone from the present pedestrian crossing to the West Alley intersection and beyond, in order to provide easier movement between both sides of Paynes Park along its length;
- A clear change in road surface to create a pedestrian friendly zone, with removal of some barriers and signs;
- The incorporation of Nuns Close into the pedestrian friendly zone.

DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES

The work of Hitchin Forum on Planning Hitchin's Future had already identified some issues relevant to Paynes Park, such as:

- The creation of a critical mass of leisure and cultural facilities, including theatre, music, museums etc., that will make Hitchin a centre of choice for day and evening visits from a wide area to underpin its continued prosperity;
- The provision of flexible buildings and spaces in the town centre to meet a wide range of uses and the changing needs of different people, including an older population seeking space for different pursuits and a younger population for informal recreation;
- Enabling appropriate level of shop provision in the town centre through incremental and small scale change in a context of changing retail habits; and being flexible in accepting different uses;
- Making sites available and building small areas of family housing of different sizes and ownership typesof high design quality and energy efficiency to meet the local needs of Hitchin.....;
- Improving accessibility within Hitchin by: providing a more coherent parking system....and delivery of cycle routes where they are needed.....;
- Improving the visual quality of gateways into the town.

Discussion at the Workshop supplemented these objectives, as follows:

- To take advantage of Hitchin's history as a driver for tourism;
- Retention of Paynes Park House (listed), but not of the adjacent Barn;
- To take advantage of emerging patterns of economic activity as a response to the current economic recession;
- Although there was some debate on the issue, greening of Paynes Park was proposed, perhaps in the form of street tree planting or landscaping around a small public space. Enhancing the planting around the Library to create a sheltered public garden and extending it into the roadway zone to enhance the linkage across Paynes Park to Coopers Yard was also mentioned;
- Development of live/work and communal 'makery' units in new and existing premises;
- Extension of the library into the former museum to provide facilities for businesses, start-ups, or the use of the former museum for community groups.

A COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

The workshop recognised that economic considerations are the key to future enhancement and redevelopment; however there were some differences of opinion regarding their interpretation, particularly in the light of the current recession.

It is apparent that re-development of two sites in the southern part of PP has taken place as envisaged in the 2005 Planning Brief, probably reflecting the fact that these sites were large and in a single ownerships. The sites in the northern part of Paynes Park are smaller and the ownerships are more complex; re-development is therefore more economically challenging. The current unsatisfactory character is in part a consequence of these economic considerations.

Chris Medland of one-world design pointed out that economic considerations were the key to the eventual enhancement/redevelopment of the Paynes Park area. The footfall generates the development value; and measures which enhance the footfall increase the value and make enhancement/development more viable. Measures to increase footfall across Paynes Park from High Street might include a reduction in car parking charges in the Lairage. Enhanced pedestrian priority across the Paynes Park roadway and environmental improvements to the roadway and Waitrose covered walkway might also make the route more attractive.

The sheep and cattle markets previously on The Lairage and Jackson's Yard provided economic activity and footfall in the area and their current use as parking has not replaced this to the same extent.

Chris Medland also pointed out that Paynes Park is a secondary retail location, and therefore not of interest to national developers and multiple retailers, particularly in the current economic climate. Some commercial development options were discussed:

- High density residential flat development of the whole or part of the site;
- Car showrooms (tyre and exhaust business already present);
- Travelodge type hotel;
- Small cinema (already under discussion in other locations in Hitchin);

- Small scale projects of interest to local developers and builders, such as the a continuation of the Arcade axis by a development on the Arcade car park, replacing the West Alley shops with live/work units and residential development.

A DEVELOPMENT BASED ON CIVIC ECONOMY PRINCIPLES

Alasdair Dixon of Collective Works described an incremental approach, similar to that outlined in the recent NESTA/CABE publication "Compendium for the Civic Economy". This approach sees development as a process, starting with small-scale refurbishment and meanwhile uses which generate footfall, thereby arresting the current blight and encouraging more imaginative commercial development in the longer term

Examples of this approach would be:

- Examining whether the evening economy of Hitchin can be encouraged to spread into Paynes Park;
- A more specialised market as a successor to the Hitchin antique market previously located here;
- More retail units of the West Alley type, a first-step arcade;
- The encouragement of pop-up and "meanwhile" uses on the Woolworth's parking deck and ramp. These might include a night market, food stalls, a rooftop open air film club in the summer etc.
- The greening of the Woolworth's parking deck as an environmental upgrade, including solar PV umbrellas and a green wall to the lane between the Club and Woolworth's. Access to the deck from the rear of The Cock PH.

APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT

As referred to at the start of this report the workshop raised some questions which further work on a development brief will have to take a view on, these included:

- Is an extension of the retail core economically viable?
- How to resolve an apparent tension between the available commercial options and the options that would be preferred by many of the participants? In general the approaches based on the incremental approach were felt to be more sympathetic to Hitchin's character and to be more realistic in the current economic climate.
- Should the burgage plot boundaries be respected or should the ownerships be rationalised to encourage commercial developer interest?
- Should the several through routes be rationalised to channel footfall and enhance commercial viability?

DEVELOPMENT SEQUENCE

From the workshop debate it appeared that the following sequence of development might be anticipated:

1. The first stage in the enhancement of Paynes Park appears to be mitigation of the present heavy traffic volume and pedestrians being given greater priority. This would enhance the connectivity between the east and west sides of Paynes Park and increase the footfall.
2. Also it appeared evident that enhancement/development would be likely to take place in a sequence starting with the sites at the south end of PP, such as the Arcade car park and progressing northwards.
3. A “meanwhile” use on the Woolworth’s parking deck could also develop at an early stage.
4. The redevelopment of Jackson’s Yard appeared more problematical; a proposal in which this site is divided into two smaller projects would make it of greater interest to local developers and builders. Permeability and respect for the existing burgage plots would also be more easily respected.
5. The present office use of Latchmore Court at the northern end of Paynes Park may not be viable in the long term and a potential for refurbishment for residential use may exist. This change might encourage environmental enhancement and infill development along the lane at the rear of Brand Street. An upgrading of the parking area at the west end of the lane (with an existing solitary yew tree) to provide a public space would encourage linkage through to High Street and Brand Street for restaurants and shops.

PROPOSALS BY THE VISITORS

Building on the discussions in the earlier part of the workshop Chris Medland and Alasdair Dixon presented some development options which are illustrated on the following page.

“Link and Place: A Guide to Street Planning and Design”(Jones et al, 2007a).

