

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

November/December 2014 No. 126

Chairman's Piece

A great deal has happened over the past two months and much of this was discussed at our last members' meeting which followed the AGM. Those topics continue to be active – the Town Hall and the apparent failure of collaboration by the Council; Top Field and the lack of confidence in the Cow Commoners' management; car parking and the initial lack of consultation; local democracy and a few other things.

We were really pleased at the success of the October litter pick, and for the help from NHDC and Hitchin Initiative. Good collaboration, good effort, good result. We were also happy at the response to our petition on car parking charges, the work done by Hitchin Initiative in finding an alternative and the honest comments by the Cabinet portfolio holder. We hope to be pleased with any Cabinet decision on the matter!

We wait to hear about the future of Bancroft Rec. We were surprised to learn that the Council was not initially informed about the reasons for the failure of the Lottery bid – and only received details after a Freedom of Information request by a member of the public. We understand that any options for the future will be discussed by the project board and then by the Cabinet. We hope that the public will be included in those discussions at an early stage.

One question that arises from recent activity is whether our democratic institutions serve us well. "Clicktivism" is a newly coined term for the actions of petition and survey sites, such as change.org. The County Councillor responsible for transport issues was seemingly dismissive of the 13,000 signatures collected to protest against cuts in the county bus services, reportedly saying that this is only a mere minority of the 800,000 population of the county. But, how many voted for this Councillor in the last elections? – only 1278. The challenge to the District Council's "consultation" on car parking charges was made via a petition and followed by an online survey. Both seemed useful to gauge opinions. The numbers do at least provide a riposte to a lame view that only a few complain about these issues. If such measures could be included before decisions are made in Gernon Road, we might have more confidence in the 'democratic' processes.

In Cambridgeshire there is a wholesale questioning about the relevance of current local authority arrangements. Combining districts and setting up unitary authorities can save money, but can they deliver better local representation? A town council here had the thumbs down 7 years ago, amidst a failed experiment in Letchworth, but would a Community Council for Hitchin be useful? Discussions are beginning and will continue at our next members' meeting on 25 November! (see Diary Dates).

At the AGM John Urwin stood down from our steering group and we thank him for several years of spirited involvement. Bill Sellicks, who has already done sterling work on Luton airport and Hitchin's footpaths, has joined us.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk

Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Historic Towns Forum

The Local Plan: Our Chance to Respond

Adrian Gurney, Chair of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, highlights this major opportunity to help plan Hitchin's future:

Members will remember that early in 2013 we all thought the District Local Plan was going to be published for consultation at the end of that summer. We decided then that, together with Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society (and with support from Hitchin Initiative), we should bring together our ideas for '*Planning Hitchin's Future*' so as to influence preparation of the Plan - www.hitchinforum.org.uk/planning-hitchins-future/.

Since then we have been able to consider the potential housing sites and through letters to Councillors and the press (many written by you), the walk around Priory Fields in July and the recent survey of its usage, we have been able to bring the issues to the attention of councillors and planners - and Priory Fields has been excluded from the Draft Plan.

There is now a major opportunity to ensure that the Plan as a whole reflects Hitchin's needs and opportunities:

- The Draft Plan documents should be available on the Council's website from 17th November and we will put the link on our website so you can have a look at the issues that interest you.
- There will be a full Council meeting on 27th November to give approval for the consultation process which will start soon after and extend to 30th January when responses need to be submitted.

- We will have an opportunity at the Members' Meeting on 25th November to talk through the main issues raised and would like to discuss then what you think we should concentrate on.
- We will hold a special Members' Meeting in early January to outline our proposed response so that we can have a full discussion of the issues and help our members with their own responses.
- There may also be a Hitchin Town Action Group public event in early January so that more people in the town can be informed, and we are hoping to co-ordinate responses with the other societies.

The Plan covers the following topics: Economy and Town Centres, Countryside and Green Belt, Transport, Housing and Development Strategy, Design, Healthy Communities, Natural Environment, Infrastructure and Delivery. There is to be a separate section covering how those topics apply in each of the District's settlements, including housing and employment allocations.

We hope that, based on the work we have already done and with involvement of our members over the next two months, Hitchin Forum will be able to play a positive role in influencing the Plan as it goes forward.

Diary Dates

Tuesday 25 November: Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting

An interesting range of discussion topics is being lined up, including a preview of the draft Local Plan and a look at improving how local democracy works in Hitchin. Be there!

Tuesday 2 December: Town Talk - 6.30pm; **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Westmill Community Centre
Regular opportunity to raise issues with Hitchin Councillors, followed by meeting of local councillors to discuss and decide local matters.

Saturday 6 December: Councillors' Surgery - 10.30am - noon; Market Place
Monthly surgery for raising issues of concern and sharing ideas with Hitchin Councillors.

Priory Fields: User Survey

Bill Sellicks organised this on behalf of the Hitchin Town Action Group and reports on the very useful information gathered:

Back in July, a few Hitchin Forum members met members of Hitchin Historical Society and The Hitchin Society (as part of the *Hitchin Town Action Group*) to discuss the organisation of a walk to inform people about the extent of the proposals for Priory Fields. These had been 'brought forward' for possible inclusion in the Local Plan for housing development. We had no idea if anybody would attend. I recall we estimated somewhere between 6 and 30 might do so.

In the event, over 300 took part, not quite overwhelming our organisation, but testing the leaders' voices to some extent. There was an obvious desire to get involved with any campaign that might ultimately be needed, and well over 100 walkers left their contact details.

With Local Plan workshops pending for NHDC councillors in October, the HTAG Steering Group felt that it would be a good idea to collect some data on the use of Priory Fields to support the case that it was unsuitable for development. I agreed to help organise the survey with Keith Montague of The Hitchin Society. Using the contact details from the walk, we soon had enough volunteers (30 in total) to man four checkpoints for three 90 minute sessions per day over 3 days in late September and early October. These were sited at strategic points to ensure that we could manage to record as many visits to the site as possible.

We were very fortunate with the weather, which was warm and sunny, and I think I can speak for all of the volunteers when I say that we thoroughly enjoyed taking part and meeting so many supportive people.

And a little more on footpaths from Bill . . .

The Countryside Access Officer at the Rights of Way Service for HCC, Nicholas Maddex, has been in touch to say that he is in agreement with 6 of the 7 problems I identified for attention in the list sent him earlier this year. Chief among these is the need to make the section of the Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP), between the Wymondley Road rail bridge and Gypsy Lane, safe for walkers.

Some weeks ago, Nicholas and I met at the site to discuss the options with representatives of Groundwork Hertfordshire and the Ramblers. As a result, he is preparing plans which will include one of the verges

From the initial response to the walk, we were not surprised that the survey confirmed that the area is well-used. However, the intensity of use is remarkable – we logged 661 separate visits and at least 463 users during thirteen and a half hours of sampling. Over the survey period, the area received 49 visitors per hour (73 per hour on Sunday). The majority of users were local residents, but there were some from further afield – the most distant came from Nottingham.

Perhaps most telling, quite apart from the numbers, was the strong sense of what the area means to people. The volunteers spoke of how friendly everybody had been, and how eager they were to answer our questions. This was encapsulated by an email I received from somebody who had been away and unable to help with the survey, who said 'We moved to Hitchin in 2013 and our new community, based around visits to Priory Fields, has welcomed us.'

Following completion of the survey, a brief executive summary with the main findings was sent to councillors in time for their workshops. As we now know, NHDC announced the removal of Priory Fields from the list for consideration for housing in a press release following the second of those meetings. The decision will have been made using technical analysis based on the area's functions as Green Belt among other criteria, but we have demonstrated that an army of willing and motivated volunteers can help to provide data which can inform decisions on local issues.

The survey report is available on our website:
<http://www.hitchinform.org.uk/priory-fields-user-survey/>

being made level (and possibly wider), visibility improved, and a suitable crossing point signposted. He also agrees that a warning sign for motorists approaching Hitchin would be helpful. Once the plans have been prepared, funding will need to be obtained, so action may take some time. Nicholas has already taken action on a dangerous pothole on footpath 10 between Balmoral Road and Strathmore Avenue, and to remove the gate blocking access to footpath 26 following work on the Hitchin rail curve.

I will be maintaining and updating the inventory of footpath problems currently available on Hitchin Forum's website, which I used to prepare the list of priorities identified for attention earlier this year. If you come across any problems, please get in touch via footpaths@hitchinform.org.uk.

We have started a Footpath Warden scheme. Four of us have volunteered to keep a regular watch on certain footpaths from a total of 40 of Hitchin's paths. Problems can then be reported to me and I will liaise with the responsible officer from the county council to get it sorted. If you would like to join us on this then contact me on footpaths@hitchinform.org.uk.

Forget the standards, it's in the town centre . . .

Anthony Cole, of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, on how Hitchin town centre is not getting the standard of new housing that it deserves!

Keen observers of the new residential developments in Hitchin town centre will have noticed that recent projects, either those just completed or in progress, have been conversions from office buildings. Examples are Townsend House at 91/96 Hermitage Road and Blocks A and B at Latchmore Court, on the corner of Brand Street and Paynes Park.

Projects like this have been encouraged by a relaxation in the General Permitted Development Order 1995, which allows the change of use of offices to residential without needing to obtain planning permission. The window of opportunity for this chance closes in May 2016. The developments at Latchmore are not being carried out under this relaxation but the degree to which the local authority could influence the proposals was limited as the developer had the option to revert to it. This approach is in accordance with government policies to avoid bureaucracy in the planning system in order to speed up housing construction and is also a response to an excess of unlettable 1960's office buildings.

However, this relaxation means that the planning standards usually applying to a residential development can be disregarded to some extent. For example, those requiring the provision of affordable housing as part of the development, a good living environment in a quiet setting with enough space in the home, outdoor amenity space, public open space, and off-street parking.

I am not suggesting that the design of these developments is unacceptable, but their blinkered approach to quality sets a poor example at a time when concerns are being raised about housing standards. For example the RIBA report "Case for Space" published in 2011 states that *"the average new home in England is only 92% of the recommended minimum size."*

The report also confirmed that new homes in the UK were the smallest in Europe and that they appeared to be shrinking! Floor areas of flats provided in these recent Hitchin developments are generally acceptable in current development terms (about 50m² for a 1-bedroom/2-person flat and 61m² for a 2-bedroom/3-person flat) but do not compare with housing standards in Ireland and Germany, which would call for an extra 5m² and 10m² respectively.

However, by their very nature and location these developments are single aspect (i.e. their windows look out in one direction only), which is unfortunate if north-facing. They look out onto noisy heavily trafficked streets, where opening a window for ventilation may not be an option for most of the day. The flats on the ground floor of Block A at Latchmore Court appear particularly unfortunate in this respect. They lack access to useable outdoor amenity space, or even to a balcony or a roof garden, which is clearly called for in the NHDC Design Guidance. They have minimal parking provision, which may satisfy highway planning theorists but does not make

things easy for the residents. Parking is also named as a key consideration in the Design Guidance.

I am concerned that these standards will become the norm in central Hitchin, through refurbishment or through new-build and that in the future it will be: FORGET THE STANDARDS, IT'S IN THE TOWN CENTRE.

The Big Hitchin Tidy Up - October 2014

Lynne Maylin reports on a very successful event and the suggestions and feedback received:

We arranged this event, now in its fourth year, to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the national *Keep Britain Tidy*, which was sponsored by Waitrose and the Wombles.

It was very well publicised in the local press by both The Comet and Midweek Mercury. This great publicity meant that we had almost 100 volunteers, made up of Hitchin Forum members, the general public, students from The Priory School, Girl Guides, Cubs, Hitchin Fire crew and Waitrose staff. Areas covered included Butts Close, Ransoms Recreation Ground, The Dell, Charlton village, Gypsy Lane in Purwell and Benslow Field, as well as residential roads.

We estimate about 150+ hours of volunteer labour, over 60 bin bags filled (almost all promptly collected by NHDC the following day), and 16 sites cleared: a very satisfactory result and a significant saving to the council and its taxpayers!

We are extremely grateful to all these people who gave up their time to help clean the streets, footpaths and open spaces around the town, Hitchin Initiative in providing insurance for the volunteers and LV= Hitchin who gave us a grant. We would also like to thank NHDC for their support and help in providing litter-pickers and agreeing a dozen collection points with us, as well as providing a real life 'Womble' to come out and meet the Girl Guides in the Dell and those volunteers on Butts Close.

It is particularly encouraging that NHDC joined the national Keep Britain Tidy campaign and followed up on this by looking into ways that they can assist other community groups who

want to organise similar events. I think we may have set a trend!

We received lots of useful comments and suggestions from the volunteers which we have passed on to NHDC, including the fact that regular clean-ups seem to be making a difference. We also reported the most frequently mentioned issue - overflowing litterbins - and have asked the Council to review the frequency of bin emptying outside the town centre "Zone A", particularly in the area around the station, between the station and the college, and by Highover School. We have also reported the need for more litterbins on Redhill Path, in Westmill, by The Dell and Benslow bridge, and even the need for a doggie bin at the Stuart Drive end of Benslow Field.

We have had a response from NHDC who, over the next month, will be monitoring those bins that we have highlighted, as their contract requires that they do not become over-full. Officers will also investigate whether additional bins are required in the locations mentioned above.

They have asked that any specific problems are reported to their Helpdesk on **0800 328 6023**. This will enable them to analyse data on where the specific problems are in order to determine whether they are one-off occurrences or whether a change is required to ensure standards are maintained. If you report problems, be sure you are given a reference number so you can track progress on its removal. You can also report online by clicking on 'Report it' on NHDC's home page.

And a little praise from a member: I really admire what HF has achieved. The litter pick has now been passed on to a new generation! The Top Field meeting looks as though it will bring a triumph for local democracy. The parking fees proposals are now in the public domain. Congratulations . . . Keep going.

Off the Buses

Dave Borner, member of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, presents the issues around HCC's recent consultation on reducing bus services:

Hertfordshire County Council has recently run a consultation on cuts to bus services which it subsidises, which would involve withdrawal of some services after 6.30 pm and on Sundays. Hitchin Forum responded – see our letter of objection on our website. We were not alone: another 4,448 people took part, with only thirty agreeing to the council's plans. 13,000 people also signed petitions to object.

The main thrust of our argument was that cuts would cause hardship to those without alternative transport, have an adverse environmental impact and would be incompatible with changes needed to support plans for housing and employment growth in the county. We suggested a number of measures to increase bus usage and cut the level of subsidy.

HCC's own Local Transport Plan talks of *"promoting and supporting sustainable travel to reduce growth in car traffic and contribute to improved health and quality of life for residents with a positive impact on the environment and on the wider challenge of reducing transport's contribution to climate change."* It is hard to see

how this is compatible with cutting what is already something of a Cinderella bus service. An unimaginative knee-jerk reaction to a predictable reduction in government financing is not what is required.

The cuts were intended to save around £700,000 p.a. However, despite having been blown a consultative raspberry, HCC persists. Remarkably, another consultation on larger cuts of £1.5m is mooted for next year.

The desire for cuts stems from central government cutting revenue support grants to councils, brought about by the parlous state of the country's finances. It would be difficult to argue that money does not need to be saved somewhere. Anybody who has had to deal with HCC Highways, or has read of their activities, might reasonably conclude, even if not an expert in highways engineering, project management or procurement, that there might be savings to be made elsewhere in transport budgets which would allow bus services to be retained. At the very least, alternatives need to be aired. Now that would be a worthwhile consultation.

Top Field and the Cow Commoners

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group analyses what has become a very difficult situation for the town:

There has been considerable press coverage on the matter of Top Field and the Cow Commoners. It is now public knowledge that the Commoners have entered into a contract to sell Top Field for redevelopment as a supermarket, the contract requiring the developer to construct a replacement sports facility on Green Belt land opposite Kingshott School, on the Stevenage Road.

The Cow Commoners have supplied a statement giving their view on the matter. They have confirmed that they are not elected; they answer to themselves and choose their own fellow Commoners. At the public meeting called by the Football Club, the Commoners' spokesperson,

Maggie Dyer, stated that they have no money, and that this is the result of their previous legal actions, some £100,000 of their money having been spent on court costs.

When entering into their contract with the developer, it appears they did not consider what other options might be possible. They also appear to have entered into their contract without the benefit of professional valuation advice, contrary to the requirements of the Charities Act. Mrs Dyer stated that no money would change hands as a result of the contract, Top Field simply being swapped for the new facility on Stevenage Road. However, it seems to us that there is a disparity in value between Top

Field as a supermarket development site and a replacement football ground on Stevenage Road. It is precisely to safeguard against such issues that the Charities Act requires Trustees to commission independent valuation advice.

It is unclear why the Cow Commoners need money. They appear only to be required to provide the land, with sufficient security for the Club to be able to raise money through such bodies as the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Football Association in order to maintain facilities and make improvements.

Mrs Dyer correctly said that it was the duty of the Charity to investigate any approach made to them, but it has gone further than that. We are told that the contract exists and apparently cannot be overturned. Rather than continuing to pursue the legal case at great cost, the Football Club has now taken a new tenancy for 25 years, with a break clause if, in the first five years, planning permission is obtained for the developer's proposals.

The Cow Commoners have stated that it is now entirely a planning matter, and if the people of Hitchin do not want it, they can refuse it. That is

incorrect, because planning applications have to be decided on national planning guidelines, not on the opinion of residents, however strongly they may feel. If our Council does refuse it, then an appeal is likely, which would be decided by the Secretary of State. There is little doubt that the Cow Commoners' acceptance of the developer's approach has left the town in a difficult position.

Whilst the agreement requires both planning applications to be approved, planning grounds must be identified to refuse these schemes. In recent legislation to strengthen communities and protect their assets, the National Planning Policy Framework does state: "*Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless: the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location*".

The Club has proposed a fighting fund to pay for legal and planning advice, and Hitchin Initiative has also identified a fund, because of its concern at the effect on the town centre.

Car Parking Charges - the Campaign & More . . .

The decision on whether the Council will raise the car parking charges according to their own initial formula, by starting evening and Sunday charges, or whether they will accept the Hitchin Initiative proposal of only raising daytime charges, has not been made as we go to press. What is clear is that the Council should work more closely with the community it serves. Whilst a decision had been made in principle that evening and Sunday charging could be permitted, the Council's own Policy 6 stated that there should be consultation with the area committee and the town centre management. The time scale was too brief. Working with Hitchin Initiative we organized a petition and they organized a survey. Both were overwhelmingly against the new proposal. Hitchin councillors did meet and I was personally impressed that the portfolio holder on cabinet gave a detailed explanation of the lead up to the proposal, and seemed open to alternative suggestions, as long as the charges were likely to achieve the target 16% increase in income.

Hitchin Initiative stated that the key points included the belief that businesses could be so affected that the new charges could be a 'tipping point' for struggling businesses (with less Council income from business rates and fewer people coming to town) and it should not be Hitchin only. The underuse of the Lairage came into the discussion, with a proposal for reduced charges there.

We emphasised that the impact of evening and Sunday charging would be felt by the clubs, societies and church based activities that take place around the town centre. Many have pointed out the potential effect on retired people, parents bringing children to choirs and other activities, and anybody involved in a variety of charitable events. In the event, the consultation period was extended and we felt there was time enough to give a sensible and reasoned response.

Mike Clarke

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group

At our recent AGM, the following were elected to our Steering Group for 2014/2015:

Dave Borner - originally from London, Dave has lived in Hitchin since 1987. He works as an engineer in the oil industry, and takes a particular interest in energy and transport matters. A long standing Forum member, he first joined Steering Group in 2006 and is **Vice Chairman**. He would like to see local transport policy being friendlier to residents and the environment, with better facilities for cyclists and pedestrians. He is interested in preserving Hitchin's unique character.

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

Maureen Carroll - has been Hitchin Forum's **Membership Secretary** since 2003. Originally from north London, she has lived in Hitchin since 1978. Having retired from teaching in various Enfield primary schools, she continues to be involved in education, but now as a member of the volunteer team at the British Schools Museum in Queen Street, delivering Victorian and WW2-style lessons to visiting school and adult groups.

Mike Clarke - **Chairman** for the past four years, and website administrator. He was born and brought up just 12 miles south of Hitchin and has lived in the town since 1981. He retired from the NHS and has since written a history of local mental health services. He is a trustee of Hitchin Counselling Services, a volunteer at Hitchin Museum and a keen dinghy sailor. He cycles around town which has increased his desire to make the roads safer, but is mostly keen to help the voice of residents be heard in local developments.

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

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

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

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

Bill Sellicks - is a retired chemistry teacher who moved to Hitchin in 1984. A keen walker and cyclist, he would like to promote greater use of Hitchin's network of footpaths to reduce congestion on our roads, and see improved facilities for cyclists. He is concerned about development in the greenbelt, and the impact of Luton airport on the town and surrounding villages.

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