

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

January/February 2015 No. 127

Chairman's Piece

A New Year! An MBE for our town centre manager! How good is that?

A time of hope! Whilst not being privy to all of the discussions that swirl around this area, I have been very impressed that the threat of evening and Sunday **car parking** charges was settled so well. I was delighted that the Council (eventually) made a good decision about **Churchgate**, and we look forward to progress being declared by Council officers. When Baldock and Letchworth protesters were voicing their concerns at the December Council meeting they were told that the Council does do consultation well - as shown in Hitchin!

The news about **Bancroft Recreation Ground** is that there will be a water feature installed this year. The main problem, as indicated by the discussion at Council, is that there will be a scramble of Councillors rushing to get in the water too. A report to Cabinet in December which indicated that consultations about future changes there had finished was challenged by our presentation, and then by tirades from Councillors Billing and Leal-Bennett. The Portfolio Holder then gave every indication that there will be ongoing discussions about future improvements, as and when funds become available. We welcome that warmly!

Meanwhile there has been the small matter of **Top Field**: the December March by 2000 protestors, the emergence of a website and information from the Cow Commoners, and the letter from our MP to the Charity Commission to question the actions of the Trust. We have only to add that we wrote to the Cow Commoners over a month ago (www.hitchinform.org.uk/questions-for-the-cow-commoners/) seeking their reassurance that they had complied with the specifics of the charity law. We believe they should first have received a written report from a qualified surveyor which included any reasons for not advertising the availability of the land, demonstrating that they have, in the agreement with New Road Developments, obtained best value. We await their reply.

Negotiations over the **Town Hall** seem sadly stuck. NHDC's Scrutiny Committee on 18th December did not seem to come to a satisfactory conclusion. There seems little common ground, and the Town Hall directors and all those who have supported them are pessimistic about the hopes being realised. Even the advent of the New Year has not changed that.

A small **congratulation to Herts County Council** - having reported a tree leaning across Cemetery Path, propped up only by a telephone wire, workmen cleared it within 90 minutes, on a Sunday!

We try to get our news out via the website and twitter. We have a facebook page, but it is underused. Recent peaks in our website traffic have, however, come via facebook - with links picked up and spread by others via 'We are from Hitchin', I guess. We are grateful for such spreading of our news, and if anybody would like to promote our facebook page, then please let me know.

Have a good year.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk

Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

The Draft Local Plan: Our Future - Our Chance to Make a Difference

Members of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group present issues emerging from discussions with our members:

1. Introduction

The long awaited draft of the Local Plan (*Preferred Options 2011-2031*) is now available (www.north-herts.gov.uk/localplan) and this is our big chance to influence it before the end of the consultation period on 6th February. Hitchin Forum's Planning Group together with the other members of *Hitchin Town Action Group* (HTAG), have been analysing the documents and drafting a response. We met with Hitchin Forum members (6th January) and HTAG held two public workshops (17th January) to understand the concerns of local people and also help them make their own responses. This is an outline of the important issues as we see them at the time of writing.

2. Vision and Objectives

Despite its title, this section of the main report does not provide any vision of the sort of place North Herts (and Hitchin) could be by 2031. We think it should cover, for instance, the distinctiveness of the different towns and the roles they will be playing, the high quality design of new housing meeting the full range of local housing needs, and the wider provision of local employment that will reduce the need for long distance commuting.

3. Economy and Town Centres

We think that more attention should be given to the opportunities for investment in existing employment areas with, for instance, consideration of starter workshop units and provision for creative/art/design related industries. Access to Hitchin's industrial area remains a serious issue: the metal recycling plant should be encouraged to relocate and a new link road created to Stotfold Road. The encouragement of live/work units (as we highlighted in '*Planning Hitchin's Future*') in the town and district centres could also meet needs and help increase activity. Town centres should provide for a greater range of community, cultural and leisure facilities as well as shopping - with for instance, support for Hitchin becoming increasingly a 'destination' centre, drawing visitors from a wider area to its market, specialist shops and services.

4. Countryside and Green Belt

There may need to be some drawing back of the Green Belt for this Local Plan (see Section 6 on Housing), since there is now minimal 'brown field' land in the towns, but we urge that local councils co-operate on the need for a new settlement to the north of Hertfordshire for the period after 2031. HTAG's steering group is considering the implications for the proposed developments in Hitchin's Green Belt at Highover Farm and on the sites west of Hitchin; there are very serious issues related to transport and access which must be clarified and any new Green Belt edges must be defensible in the long term. We are also still considering the arguments that Luton and Stevenage need to grow; have they already exceeded their optimal design size and are they ideal candidates for continued constraint via Green Belt?

5. Transport

This is one of the weaker sections. Although implementation is not always NHDC's responsibility, the Local Plan needs to set out clearly what measures are to be taken to move to a system of sustainable transport. Co-ordination of bus and rail services, improvements to east-west public transport routes, proper provision for cyclists and improving the environment for pedestrians are all topics which need to be dealt

with properly. Continuing expensive and environmentally damaging alterations to speed up traffic, such as in the Paynes Park gyratory, should be rejected in favour of environmental measures to calm traffic.

Improvements to existing parking provision need to be outlined, such as pay-on-exit and better signage. It also needs to be made clear how and when further car parking capacity in the town centre will be provided if there is further development, for example of Churchgate.

6. Housing and Development Strategy

The main point here is that the figures are not dictated by government. It is up to NHDC to decide the need it should be trying to meet in the context of constraints such as Green Belt. It looks as though a lower housing target for the District of 10,700 dwellings would enable the need for affordable housing to be met, and be more feasible in terms of building rates than the target suggested in the current Draft (14,200). In this context there is no requirement for NHDC to raise the target further to respond to new nationally based figures. There should be additional policies to ensure that the new housing meets local needs and is of high quality: a mix of housing types on all sites; provision for self build and sheltered accommodation; and conformity with space standards and the guidance on zero carbon homes.

7. Design

This section covers a wide range of issues but is weak in terms of clarifying what it is seeking to achieve. It presents policies that are illustrative rather than providing a comprehensive set of criteria to be taken into account in design. NHDC's existing *Design Supplementary Planning Document* is important but its principles need to be included in the Local Plan to give them weight. Protection of the living conditions of existing residents is of major importance, including noise and overlooking. There also needs to be coverage of the issues related to construction which will be very important for the development of the new housing sites (some of which will take several years to build).

8. Healthy Communities

As elsewhere, this section (which covers community facilities and green space) concentrates on issues that arise when a private development is proposed, and covers, for instance, developer contributions to leisure and cultural provision. There is no consideration of the overall needs of communities, no identification of gaps in provision and no specific proposals. On green space, two major pieces of work are relevant: NHDC's *Green Space Study*, whose conclusion on open space standards has been modified in the Draft Local Plan to reduce provision, and their *Sports Facilities Study* which has not yet been completed. We are concerned that the modified open space standards will affect the nature of the town; the distance for residents to travel to green space is important.

9. Natural Environment

This section also concentrates on the issues that arise when new development is proposed, rather than providing an overall strategy for protection and improvement, against which development can be assessed. Local Planning Authorities have been told not to include local landscape designations in their Local Plans. We think that there should therefore be more emphasis on the full range of *Landscape Character Areas* in the District, and the related opportunities and constraints. In terms of infrastructure, there should be a more coherent analysis of the growing demands placed by the increasing population, particularly with regard to ensuring adequate water supplies and sewage treatment facilities.

10. Historic Environment

This section is unusual in that it does accept that there is need for a heritage strategy and commits itself in policy to undertake it. However the rest of the single policy is concerned with proposals affecting buildings of local interest. There is no policy related specifically to proposals affecting Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Historic Parks and Gardens. We suggest there should be an appropriate policy to

cover the full range of historic assets, and that Priory Park should be included in the register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

11. Infrastructure and Delivery

Although there is much uncertainty about the way development will evolve, there needs to be a better attempt to define the schedule of housing growth over time and to estimate the infrastructure requirements to support the growth in population. NHDC's 2013 *Infrastructure Development Plan* is out of date and needs to be updated to reflect the developments now proposed. A more comprehensive method of monitoring the Plan needs to be set up to ensure that development takes place with the infrastructure to support it and meets specific needs in relation to, for instance, mix of housing types.

12. Communities

This is meant to be the section where the implications of the policies in the earlier sections are made clear for the different towns and villages. However, apart from the most minimal description of each community, there is only a summary of the housing and employment sites, with related figures. We suggest that the towns should be considered together at the beginning of this section, and each provided with a full analysis of the likely impacts of the complete range of policies - for instance, on the opportunity areas at Paynes Park, Churchgate, Hitchin Station, and Cadwell Lane/Wilbury Way. There should also be consideration of the needs of each of the housing sites - including the wider implications of access and the need for an appropriate defensible landscape edge to development. For Highover Farm we suggest that a Master Plan would be required to address the range of issues.

Our conclusion is that it will be important for there to be significant alterations to the current draft for it to meet the needs of local people and improve the places where we live our lives.

What Next?

Please use this summary as a starting point for **your own comments** - you may for instance want to place a different emphasis, or have a different view on specific sites. We suggest you do not use the pro forma consultation response form on NHDC's website as it is too restrictive. Just write a letter - indicating which of the chapters above you are commenting on - and email it to: localplans@north-herts.gov.uk.

The **Hitchin Committee** will consider the draft Local Plan on 29th January (see Diary Dates below). HTAG will be presenting a summary of its findings and analysis to that meeting and the Portfolio Holder, Cllr David Levett, will attend.

More detailed consideration will be included in the **final HTAG submission** which will be posted on our website as soon as it is completed. NHDC will be taking into account all comments received by 6th February.

Diary Dates

Thursday 29 January: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm; **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Benslow Music Trust
Regular opportunity to raise issues with Hitchin Councillors, followed by meeting of local councillors to discuss and decide local matters. Agenda includes updates on Churchgate, Town Hall/Museum, Bancroft Rec enhancement and the Local Plan: www.north-herts.gov.uk, click on 'council meetings'.

Saturday 7 February: **Councillors' Surgery** - 10.30am - noon; Market Place
Monthly surgery for raising issues of concern and sharing ideas with Hitchin Councillors.

NOTE: we are in the process of organising the next **Hitchin Forum members' meeting** and will ensure all our members receive notice of and information about that meeting as soon as possible.