

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

March/April 2015 No. 128

Chairman's Piece

Churchgate: I recently enjoyed a brilliant live broadcast of a Shakespeare play at Letchworth's Broadway. Could a Hitchin cinema compete with all that? It may not need to compete – the place was full and a similar facility here would be good. The Churchgate saga was overshadowed by the recent and sad death of David Payne, the leaseholder of Churchgate. He was quite determined to improve and extend Churchgate, and had for many years been frustrated by the apparent blockade put up by NHDC. However the barriers had recently seemed to be weakening. His sons are now taking up the challenge to complete his aspirations and we wish them well, but, of course, it has to be right for Hitchin. Do we like the idea of a cinema? Probably yes. Do we like the idea of associated chain eateries? Probably not. Have we yet seen a viable plan for the market? Not yet. Should the market be displaced by a car park, as suggested by the cinema operators? Definitely not.

Top Field: In December we wrote to the Hitchin Cow Commoners Trust and asked a few simple questions about their deal with Richard Daniels of New Road Developments – had they complied with Charity Law by obtaining professional written advice from a qualified surveyor, and had they been formally advised by that surveyor that they should not advertise the potential disposal of the land? They have not replied to some seemingly very simple questions. Is it possible that they are too embarrassed to admit they had not complied? Are they waiting to see if the Charity Commission will first excuse them for this lapse? Maybe they have just forgotten to reply. Must ask them again!

Bancroft Recreation Ground looks likely to be blessed with a water splash area later this year and the Council will seek the community's views on this over the next few weeks. However, at the latest Hitchin Committee it seemed impossible to get a statement from officers of what other developments might occur. There is repeated talk of the 'principles of the masterplan as agreed by the Cabinet' being the long term aspirations of the Council, but nowhere are these listed, and the site plans were best described by the company contracted to draw up the overall plan as 'initial design concepts'. Hitchin Committee heard that the public tennis courts are in a state of dilapidation that indicates they need extensive work, or be removed. We were told that renovation was possible as a short term goal, and would not compromise the 'long term aspiration' of removing them. We were confused. The tennis club might offer public access tennis, but clearly not with their current 3 courts (they would need 5) and then by some other arrangement than the present email booking. The council officers said that all will be clearer in September when they will be offering up their thoughts for the future of the Rec. We trust that they will ask for views from local people about all aspects before drawing up any final plans.

The **Town Hall** shenanigans continue with one ex director excluded from Council discussion, and the current directors still amazed that they had been excluded from so much. In October the complex should open, and the District Museum will emerge from the dust. We are very fortunate that it will be sited in Hitchin, and as a volunteer who sifts through the museum archives, I hope that this part of our heritage will be highly valued and well used.

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: the work continues . . .

Adrian Gurney, Chair of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, discusses our ongoing work in trying to achieve the best future for Hitchin:

We completed the *Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG)* response to the Council's *Preferred Options Report* before the due date. Many thanks to all who attended the members' meeting on 6th January, and the public workshops on Saturday 17th January. It was very important for us to have feedback on the issues raised. There was a great deal of hard work from Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, from members of the Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society with input from the Town Centre Manager. If you haven't done so yet, please look at the HTAG response and at least the few pages of the Introduction which includes a summary of the main points in the report and the key conclusions: <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/local-plan-response/>.

Just prior to submitting the report we met representatives of the campaigns in Letchworth and Baldock (21st January) and realised we shared some basic concerns. We also presented our conclusions to the Hitchin Committee (29th January) where we were told by Councillors it was important that we underlined the concerns about Priory Fields despite its non appearance in the Preferred Options Report. As a result, we reiterated these concerns in the Introduction and elsewhere in our response, and alerted our 2,000 plus HTAG email contacts.

At the Hitchin Committee both Hitchin Councillors and the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Councillor David Levett, responded positively to the HTAG presentation summarising our concerns, and to the paper on Housing Needs we had provided beforehand (included as an Appendix to our main response). Councillor Levett agreed to meet some of the HTAG Steering Group to discuss the issues in more detail. We had that meeting on 5th March and we can report back that we found it very encouraging:

- There will be a report to Cabinet on 24th March with an update on the responses received, and we are assured that the quality of the representations is important (not just the number of responses).
- Many of our suggestions are considered helpful and we can hope that some at least will be taken on board in the Draft Local Plan due to be published in September to help make it a more useful document. The need for fuller strategic and local transport consideration is recognised (see also article by Dave Borner on page 6).
- In our view, it looks as though our contention that the housing target could be reduced has some backing in the latest government figures released at the end of February. The Council's latest Strategic Housing Market Assessment will take these figures into account in preparation for the next stage of the Local Plan to be considered by Council. Councillor Levett has agreed to meet HTAG and any other interested groups again at that time.

HTAG Steering Group will be considering our next steps at a meeting on 16th March, including possible further contact with the other towns, with the local press, and our MP. We are particularly interested in meeting with a group of our local Councillors to discuss the key issues that remain of concern, and will hope to report back on that in the near future.

Diary Dates

Monday 30 March: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting**

"**A Community Council for Hitchin?**" with guest speaker Carina Helmn of the Hertfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils. See feature article in this newsletter.

Tuesday 31 March: **Charnwood Management Association Meeting** - 7pm, Sun Hotel

A meeting to discuss possible future uses for Charnwood House, the former Hitchin Museum building.

For more details see <http://www.charnwoodhitchin.org.uk/>

The Big Hitchin Tidy Up - April 2015

Lynne Maylin organised Hitchin Forum's October clean-up and reports on plans for our forthcoming big Spring Clean.

With the evenings getting lighter, the temperature warming up and the daffodils blooming, I think it's safe to say that Spring is well on its way. It is also the time of year to have a Spring Clean which is what we are planning to do to Hitchin on Sunday 26th April.

You may be aware that over the past few years Hitchin Forum has organised Tidy Up events around Hitchin which have had a huge impact on clearing the litter from our streets and open spaces. Our last event in October 2014 saw over 60 bags of rubbish collected from over 16 different sites around the town. This was done by the 90 or so amazing volunteers who kindly gave up their time to clear this litter.

We also could not have achieved this fantastic result without the help we received from NHDC who collected the litter promptly, listened to what we had to say, provided litter pickers and bags and even provided Uncle Bulgaria from the Wombles who made an appearance to the Girl Guides clearing the litter from The Dell!

Monitoring Hitchin's Footpaths

The number of people keeping an eye on Hitchin's footpaths is slowly growing, and we are having some success with our system of notifying problems to Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Officer, Nicholas Maddex. I sent Nicholas an update on problems in January, and there has been progress on a variety of fronts.

Groundwork Trust has drawn up a specification for the required works and is in the middle of obtaining quotes to improve the safety of the section of the HOOP along Wymondley Road east of the roundabout at the junction with St Michael's Road. A number of paths have been resurfaced or had potholes filled. Signposts, which were removed during the rail curve works, have been restored in Cadwell Lane and by the NMR site. The signpost for footpath 38 on Hitchin Hill, which had been knocked over, has been re-erected. HCC acted almost within an hour when notified of a fallen tree in Cemetery

Hitchin Initiative also helped us by providing liability insurance and litter pickers.

We were also fortunate enough to have received a generous sum of money from LV Hitchin so that we could purchase more litter pickers which will make it easier for more volunteers to help next time!

So now that we are seeing the back of winter we also see what it has left behind - rubbish! So what we're aiming for in April is even more volunteers and even more sites to be cleared to make Hitchin look sparkling and bright for our townsfolk who live here and for the visitors who come to see what our amazing town has to offer.

We want to live in a town of which we can all be proud and we need your help! If you would like to volunteer to help us between **10am - 12 noon on Sunday 26th April**, then please email me at: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk

Path. Fly tipping has been removed and overflowing litter bins emptied as a result of notifications to NHDC's Service Team.

Nicholas tells me that McCarthy & Stone have agreed to widen the section of Braunds Alley alongside their development in Old Park Road, and to install a safety barrier to prevent anybody running from the path into the road. There are a number of other problems which we have raised, which appear to have a realistic chance of action in the not-too-distant future.

If anybody else would like to join us as a Footpath Warden, please get in touch with me via footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk. Whilst some of us do pick up litter, it is not obligatory – it is helpful to have people just keeping an eye open for problems and letting me know so that I can pass on the information.

Bill Sellicks

A Community Council for Hitchin?

The following is an extract from the regular local press column by our Town Centre Manager, Keith Hoskins:

Amid all the brouhaha surrounding the County Council budget setting process for the year, one could be forgiven for missing the press article alongside that was simply headlined "Unitary Authority discussed". It is worthy of more discussion, particularly as it has been brought up by Councils themselves now and is not just after dinner talk for political anoraks like me!

"Unitary", as the name implies, is a single tier administrative unit that replaces the double whammy of both County and District Councils.

Here in Hertfordshire, we have the County Council which is responsible for education, minerals extraction, passenger transport, highways, fire service, social services, libraries and waste disposal – the big ticket item stuff which is why the bulk of our Community Charge ends up with County. The District Council looks after housing, strategic planning, planning control, leisure & recreation, waste collection (as opposed to disposal), environmental health and revenue collection, even though most of it goes elsewhere.

Unitary Authorities are a variety of sizes – Bedford has a population of 161,382; Milton Keynes 255,700; Cheshire East 372,700 and when I left Berkshire back in the mists of time, the County split into 6 unitaries along District lines, the smallest being Bracknell Forest at 113,205 and the largest being Reading at 155,698. So no one size fits all.

Hertfordshire has a population of just over 1.1 million so maybe three Unitary Authorities would suit. This would replace the County plus 10 District Councils with all the potential for overlap and duplication that exists. It would also assist the general public in understanding that there is a one-stop shop for accountability in local government rather than being passed from pillar to post in search of answers.

In the present system there is also duplication of councillors – many of whom serve on both County and District Councils. While in a lot of cases that may be helpful in understanding the links, it cannot be easy to absorb the sheer volume of information emanating from County Hall and Gernon Road; have you seen the size of the average council document?

There was a view that Councils would never be serious about abolishing themselves – a bit like turkeys voting for Christmas – but the fact that this is being aired in the public domain is a refreshing exercise in democracy.

But what about Localism I hear you ask....would Hitchin's voice count for less in a larger organization? As countless towns and villages across the country have realized, the nuts and bolts requirements of daily life can be provided through a local Community Council that just covers the immediate area and delivers specifically for that area – it's a bit like a Business Improvement District for residents: much, much smaller budget than a District and entirely focused on local issues with every day links with the community it serves.

So let's continue the debate; we know how long it takes for government generally to change direction so don't expect anything radical anytime soon but time to weigh the pros and cons.

Editor's Note: There is an interesting and informative debate to be had here, so please join us in this discussion at our **Hitchin Forum members' meeting on Monday 30 March** (see Diary Dates). Carina Helmn of the *Hertfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils (HATPC)* has all the information to answer our questions about whether this could be a productive way of exerting more local control over Hitchin's future. We want your views!

Not Cricket!

Chris Honey, of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, summarises the issues around a proposal that should, on the face of it, create a fantastic new sporting facility in Hitchin, except for very fundamental problems which are not properly addressed in this planning application.

Hitchin Town Cricket Ground Ltd have applied for planning permission to upgrade their premises at Lucas Lane with a new clubhouse, changing rooms, an all weather hockey pitch with floodlighting, improved access and a reorganised car park. All very laudable, but we do have concerns about the 15m high floodlighting. This would affect the Cheshire Home next door and be visible from the valley to the west, despite a 5m high surrounding screen, itself inappropriate in such a sensitive location.

In order to finance this development, it is proposed to build 27 houses on part of the land which is immediately adjacent to Lucas Lane, presently used as a football ground. This loss is very regrettable and depends on finding an alternative site for football, possibly on Walsworth Common, but this is currently not certain. Also, although the design of the houses appears to be of good quality, the housing application is only in outline form, which means that there could be fundamental and detrimental changes when full planning permission is proposed.

Further concerns which should lead to this proposal's rejection are:

- Considerable increases in traffic movements from both the new houses and enhanced community use of the club facilities causing further access problems in Bedford Street and Oughtonhead Way which are already at full capacity. This affects pedestrians, cyclists and motor vehicles.
- The special circumstances given for building houses on the Green Belt (funding for the cricket ground improvements) are not sufficient grounds for granting this proposal. Indeed no planning for residential or other use should be considered unless the NHDC Local Plan Preferred Options results in rolling back the Green Belt. If this occurs the floodgates could open for even more residential development in this sensitive area on the western boundary of Hitchin.

So this housing application should be 'clean bowled, all out'!

Editor's Note: A fundamental part of the *Hitchin Town Action Group* submission on NHDC's draft Local Plan was that some of the housing sites proposed in the document would add to existing and already unacceptable levels of traffic congestion in the town. This is the case for four separate housing sites on the western fringe of the town, including this one, as well as that proposed at Highover Farm on the northern edge of Walsworth. We did not object in principle to housing on these sites, but said that comprehensive traffic/transport studies needed to be carried out to assess the impact of more traffic which would be generated from the development of these sites before they are included for housing in the next draft of the Local Plan.

However, the transport assessment carried out as part of the cricket club application is wholly inadequate. It does not address the very difficult situation that already exists in Bedford Street and Oughtonhead Way, which are essentially little more than village lanes, merely stating that the access from Lavender Way and Gaping Lane is unproblematic. We are very pleased, therefore, that the *West Hitchin Action Group (WHAG)* has commissioned its own traffic survey which will look particularly at the congestion in these roads, take into consideration the incremental growth of Samuel Lucas School, include a traffic count of the Gaping Lane/Bedford Street and Bedford Street/Oughtonhead Way junctions along with a parking survey along Oughtonhead Way. It will also scrutinise and criticise the shortcomings of the cricket club's own assessment and highlight the constraints on the local road network.

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group decided that this will provide very useful information about traffic congestion in this part of Hitchin and agreed to contribute £100 towards the overall cost of £3000. We stated that this sum was for the transport study alone to clarify the potential impacts of development in

this area (as sought by us from the Council in our Local Plan response), and did not represent a formal endorsement of WHAG's overall objection to any development here. We also said we would be grateful for all the results of the traffic study to be made available to us. This is a truly laudable initiative by WHAG which we are pleased to support.

Transport Planning

Hitchin Forum's Local Plan response was concerned about how essential infrastructure, including transport improvements, would form part of any housing developments in the town. Dave Borner highlights issues and responsibilities.

Until 2004, the *Hertfordshire County Structure Plan* set out planning policies and formed the basis for detailed policies in *District Local Plans*, including roads and other infrastructure. *Regional Spatial Strategies* took the place of County Structure Plans, but were then themselves abolished in 2010. To quote the Department for Communities and Local Government, "*The abolition of these unpopular and counter-productive Regional Strategies reinforces the importance of councils' Local Plans produced with the involvement of local communities, as the keystone of the planning system. It is this approach that will help deliver the homes, jobs and infrastructure we need.*"

This leaves Local Plans, such as the one NHDC is currently putting together, as the primary mechanism for planning infrastructure, although there is little sign that district councils have in practice taken any real responsibility for the "strategic" element previously dealt with by region or county. This is of more than academic interest. Without proper infrastructure plans to cope with new housing, a Local Plan may be rejected by the inspector. The proposed housing sites at Highover Farm and Lucas Lane are both examples where road infrastructure already cannot cope and the Local Plan currently proposes no solutions.

HCC remains the Highways Authority, mainly concerned with maintenance and the implementation of road schemes, rather than long-term planning or matching up infrastructure provision with housing or employment growth. HCC is also responsible for contracting bus services not already provided by commercial operators.

There results something of a vacuum when it comes to ensuring that transport infrastructure provision is consistent with Local Plans. Plans

are now only made by local government at the district or unitary authority level (although motorways and major trunk roads, such as the A1 and M1, are managed and planned centrally by the Highways Agency). The impact of new development on transport infrastructure, such as major roads passing through several local authority areas, would have to be jointly planned by these authorities and might be seen as part of the "duty to cooperate" expected of local authorities by current planning regulations.

Where there is two-tier local government, as in Hertfordshire, there results a topsy-turvy arrangement whereby the lower (district) tier is responsible for highways planning and the upper (county) tier is responsible for implementation. Furthermore, funding might come from central government via the business-led Local Enterprise Partnership, which has limited representation from districts and county. It all seems a recipe for slow, bureaucratic, inefficient and undemocratic decision-making.

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HCC has recently been installing pedestrian crossings in Hitchin using Section 106 money, obtained from developers. Whilst these crossings may be welcome, this arrangement again seems rather perverse as the district council seems to have little input into where the money is spent on such local matters, and there seems to no longer be any official consultation process or forum to decide such things. It will soon no longer be possible to make Section 106 money available in this way by pooling contributions from small developments. Instead, NHDC needs to put a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) charging regime in place quickly to ensure that money remains available for small schemes. There seems remarkably little urgency to pursue this thus far.