

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER
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Chairman's Piece

This newsletter will bring you up to date with recent developments in a number of areas of interest with articles written by those who are far more knowledgeable than I, but I would also like to alert you to two broader issues which I hope will be debated in our Steering Group and Members' meetings over the coming months.

The first issue is about the quality of consultation carried out by NHDC or Herts County Council (HCC). Local Authorities have a 'statutory duty to consult', and both councils have a 'Statement of Community Involvement'. NHDC's covers how they conduct consultations on the Draft Local Plan (DLP) and planning applications; HCC's covers minerals and waste, and services such as schools and libraries.

Hitchin Forum's Planning Group often comments on planning and transport issues, but members frequently feel that their responses are ignored. Listening to what Hitchin Forum members said when we were preparing our response to the DLP on behalf of Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG), I had the impression that there is a high level of cynicism about consultations. Officers and Councillors often find the responses to consultations unhelpful - at our last members' meeting, David Levett commented that he was disappointed that (with few exceptions such as HTAG) people did not engage with the full range of significant policy issues.

Given such widely experienced dissatisfaction with the consultation process, it is appropriate to ask some questions. What would a useful and effective consultation look like to Officers, Councillors and ourselves? How should the Council communicate its expectations for consultations? Is it possible that we might nudge NHDC and HCC towards a more effective and constructive approach? There have been some excellent examples of early involvement with the local community as reported elsewhere in this Newsletter - perhaps we can build on some of these models of good practice?

The second issue concerns Hitchin Forum itself. I believe we are an effective, credible and respected community organisation. This is the result of the hard work of a number of volunteers with significant areas of relevant expertise, our willingness to adopt a supportive, occasionally challenging, but always even-handed stance in commenting on local issues, and our proactive approach to addressing problems such as our activities on litter. However, we could increase our effectiveness and sustain our talent pool more easily by seeking to broaden the range of our membership.

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group is considering how best to recruit and retain members from across the Hitchin community as a whole, and would very much like to hear views and suggestions from Hitchin Forum members. The first opportunity for that will be at our Members' Meeting on February 9th, so please join us then (see Diary Dates for details).

Bill Sellicks, Chairman

Hitchin Town Hall Update

Just before Christmas a number of community groups were invited by Cllr Tony Hunter, the Portfolio Holder responsible for the scheme, to inspect the work so far on the Town Hall (& Museum), ask questions on aspects which are of concern, and 'to contribute to the Council's approach as their arrangements for operating the two areas are formulated'. The museum was out of bounds due to the presence of display equipment strewn around awaiting installation, so we could only peek at it from the access area on the ground floor and through the windows from the hall gallery on the first floor - but it looked very smart!

The main hall looked fairly good apart from some damp areas on the walls, which should dry out and will be painted over before the opening. The floor was well finished and is still sprung and assurance was given that its future maintenance is being dealt with - a comfort to all the country dancers.

The wall across the stage seems as solid and irreversible as we had heard. The reason for installing that had been to provide storage for the museum behind it, down to the basement level. However that area is very damp, has been for a very long time, and improving that seems likely to be an expensive business. Not ideal for museum storage.

The cable ducting in the main hall and the ventilation ducts at the top of the gallery are less intrusive than feared, and may be the price that had to be paid for modernising the building, as are the ventilation fans in the foyer - OK if you don't look up!

The site does not have cooking facilities, so any catering for events will have to be prepared elsewhere by approved suppliers. The Lucas Room is bright and equipped for conference use.

John Robinson, the council officer responsible for oversight of the scheme, then gave a presentation, including some of the issues that he faced with Hitchin Town Hall Limited, the group representing the community. He focused on the publicity given to the stage wall in

February 2014, and with the "unauthorized" photograph which appeared in the local press, apparently contravening the Development Agreement that existed between NHDC and HTH Ltd. He did maintain that the wall is reversible (like Stonehenge, it could be dismantled?). Cllr Tony Hunter was subsequently reported as saying that the specifications for the wall were known to HTH Ltd, but there seems to be some confusion about the definitions used - was it supposed to be a stud wall or a solid weight-bearing wall?

Other members of the Council team were there - Cllr Frank Radcliffe and ex councillor Tricia Cowley, as members of the Project Board, and Ros Allwood, the museums manager. Discussions continued on the safety of the stage area, the limitation of only one dressing room - John Robinson said that a second room could be made available - and the delay in opening.

The delay in opening both areas hinges on the dispute between NHDC and HTH Ltd, the counter claims of breaches in the so called Development Agreement, and the ownership of 14 & 15 Brand Street. The latter were brought into the scheme, with great vision and with promised funding by HTH Ltd, and the footprint of those properties has allowed a much larger and open area for the museum reception.

However HTH Ltd is now in receivership, having been unable to fulfil the expectations of its business plan. That was the subject of a last minute item on the agenda for the Full Council Meeting on January 21st, the outcome of which is not known to us as we go to print. How that will be resolved, and when the two facilities will be opened, remain uncertain.

Meanwhile NHDC expects to manage both the museum and the Town Hall together for the next three years. Hitchin Initiative put forward a hopeful suggestion that thereafter a joint operation with the community might be made possible. A Phoenix project which could rise from the fire of recent exchanges?

Mike Clarke

Keeping Hitchin Cleaner

What began several years ago as a one-off clean-up of the then vacant former B&Q site has evolved into a twice yearly litter clearance with nearly 100 volunteers managed by Hitchin Forum on over a dozen sites across the town. This has led to sustained improvements in some areas - especially 'scraps of wilderness' and the edges of residential areas. Volunteer cleaning initiatives such as Hitchin Forum's are increasingly echoed elsewhere in the country. However, the problems of litter stubbornly persist so we have begun discussing with Council Officers whether there are ways of working together to keep the town cleaner and tidier all year round. This has given us some useful information to consider.

Street cleaning - outside the town centre, all areas that are adopted for cleaning in Hitchin are scheduled for sweeping and litter picking on a minimum 28-day cycle, though some are done on an 'as required' basis. Some areas, like that outside the station, do not seem to be maintained to a standard that we feel is reasonable.

This has been rectified with reporting, but clearly there are areas that need much more frequent cleaning than every 28 days, whereas quiet residential roads may not need to be cleaned that frequently.

Footpaths - this is relevant for us in the context of our *footpaths warden scheme*. Routinely, footpaths should be litter picked and dog fouling removed, but they are not swept. The Council will look at neglected areas with their contractor, Veolia, and draw up a priority list to get them up to standard.

Despite limitations of time and resources, it is encouraging that the Council is keen to work with and build a network of local volunteers. They welcome any information on problem areas that we can provide and by keeping track of service complaints, they can build a more accurate picture of the service that is being received. Problems should be reported to the **helpline on 0800 328 6023**. Your call will be logged and you will be given a reference number.

Ellie Clarke, Lynne Maylin

Butts Close Greenspace Action Plan

In November 2015 the County Council's Countryside Management Service (CMS) put out their *Draft Butts Close Greenspace Action Plan* for consultation until January 2016. Friends of Butts Close (FoBC) provided an appraisal of that Draft, published in their December Newsletter. Hitchin Forum endorsed the views of FoBC, and provided links on our website to the CMS Draft and to the FoBC Appraisal. Other organisations and individual people also responded to the Council. CMS has now published the final version, which can be accessed at: <http://www.hertslink.org/cms/15475080/buttsclosegap/>

The FoBC Appraisal strongly welcomed the consultative approach being taken by CMS, and this final version confirms that the feedback Council Officers received has been fully taken into account, with a 3-page Appendix detailing comments made to the CMS. It has addressed and incorporated all of the key matters raised by consultees, and we believe it is a more robust Action Plan as a result.

But there remains the matter of its financing and implementation. The original allocation from NHDC for the Greenspace Action Plan was £30,000. The document identifies an indicative requirement of £17,700 for eight Action Plan elements, with two elements as yet uncostered. In our view, the Action Plan is right to identify the pond and its surroundings as a critical area for enhancement. It is right to state that removing silt from the pond is a major first requirement, before any other improvements to that area of the Close should be initiated, but this work is currently uncostered and unfunded. While it is clearly prudent that much of the careful redesign, replanting and husbandry of the pond and its environs should take place after the desilting process has been completed and any heavy machinery removed, this places the achievement of capital funding for this process on the critical path for successful delivery of the Action Plan.

We are therefore urging Officers and Members to prioritise this funding in order that this work can be carried out, and thus enable all the objectives of the Butts Close GAP to be achieved.

Tony Riley

Diary Dates

Tuesday 9 February: **Hitchin Forum Members Meeting**

Tuesday 1 March: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm; **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Westmill Community Centre
Discussion, debate, democracy in action in Hitchin!

ADVANCE NOTIFICATION - **The Big Hitchin Spring Clean** is scheduled for Sunday 24 April.

More information to follow.

Snippets

Footpaths Update - There have been a number of improvements to Hitchin footpaths initiated recently by Nicholas Maddex, Herts County Council's Countryside & Access Officer. Verges have been cleared near the Wymondley Road rail bridge to create a safer and easier route for pedestrians along this part of the Hitchin HOOP, and railings have been installed in St John's Path and at the bottom of Taylor's Hill. As a result of the intervention of one of our members, the reinstatement of paths on Priory Fields after ploughing was accelerated. We note that there have been other improvements, including the replacement of steps to a connecting path from Brick Kiln Lane and the resurfacing of Oughtonhead Lane where deep, water-filled potholes had long been a problem. I am working on a further report to send to Nicholas in February. If you know of any problems with surfaces, boundaries or vegetation on Hitchin footpaths please contact me at footpaths@hitchinform.org.uk .

Bill Sellicks

Brand Street Pedestrianisation - Many of you will have seen coverage of the suggestion, made by Councillor Ray Shakespeare-Smith at the January Hitchin Town Talk, that it is time to investigate the possibility of banning cars from Brand Street and Bancroft between Brand Street and Hermitage Road. The proposal was prompted by the closure of Brand Street due to the sinkhole that appeared recently, partly as a result of claims that the closure had little or no impact on traffic flow (may even have improved it in some respects) and that air quality in the town centre had improved.

Although we have not yet had the chance to discuss this in our Planning Group, there has been a lively exchange of emails between group members. We think that the proposal has merit, but that there are a number of possible consequences which should be investigated. We believe that the partial closure of Brand Street, due to water mains improvements starting in February, will provide an opportunity to collect some reasonably robust data on the effects elsewhere in the town, and to investigate the potential impact on businesses. The matter is on the Agenda for the next Planning Group meeting on 22 February and we will make time to consider it at our Members' meeting on 9 February. If there are observations that you would like to make about the proposal, but you are unable to be at that meeting, please email me at chairman@hitchinform.org.uk .

Bill Sellicks

Churchgate - This is expected to be an issue we will be looking at this year when the leaseholder, Hammersmatch, provides ideas or plans for their proposals. Any proposals will be considered in detail in Hitchin Forum's Planning Group which meets regularly. As well as Churchgate, the group will be considering the Local Plan this year but is always pleased to have suggestions for discussion topics from members. Contact: planning@hitchinform.org.uk .

Adrian Gurney

Cadwell Lane Playing Field Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) - A draft Cadwell Lane Playing Field GAP is available online at <http://www.hertslink.org/cms/> for consultation until Friday 12 February. We will post comments on it as soon as possible. We welcome the early stage consultative approach taken by NHDC and the Countryside Management Service in the preparation of both this draft plan and that for Butts Close, with HF and Friends of Butts Close being consulted before the drafts were prepared. It is clear that the views of respondents have been taken into account in their preparation.

A further welcome development is that NHDC has withdrawn its proposals for Smithson's Recreation Ground following significant local opposition. Hopefully NHDC will attempt to be more consistent in engaging local residents before it drafts such plans in future.

Bill Sellicks