



NEWSLETTER

March/April 2016 No. 134

Chairman's Piece

Later this year, we have two relatively infrequent opportunities to engage in the democratic process. Nationally, the debate leading up to the EU referendum has been marked by assertions, rebuttals and insults on the part of national figures. Comments in the media from the general public seem often to follow the same trend. Uncommitted voters, trying to make a rational decision based on uncontested facts, will struggle.

Locally, the next version of the Draft Local Plan will be published in July, heralding the start of a second consultation period, during which we will have a final chance to express our views on NHDC's vision for the next 15 years. Councillor David Levett, when he visited us in October, said that the response to the first draft by Hitchin Town Action Group/Hitchin Forum was one of relatively few that addressed policies, and indicated that our comments would therefore be reflected in the final draft. Why did relatively few responses engage with the policies?

In common with issues about EU membership, Local Plan policies are often technical, and hard for laypeople to engage with. By contrast, the impact of sites proposed for housing is obvious and direct, especially for those living near to sites earmarked for development. Since the consultation responses were mainly about sites, I would suggest that the way the information was presented to the public needed more thought, including a more explicit statement of how submissions might influence the final Plan. Consultation on the Local Plan is governed by the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The SCI therefore may need revisiting, but at least there are guidelines governing this process. By contrast, consultations on local projects suffer from a lack of guidelines. Could suggestions we make improve the quality and consistency of day-to-day local decision-making, and promote more effective engagement? If that could be achieved, maybe the experience gained would result in the SCI being revisited and improved before 2031.

At the March Hitchin Committee meeting, I made some suggestions about the desirable characteristics of good consultations and requested Councillors' ideas about how to take the agenda forward. Several Councillors welcomed our ideas and indicated broad agreement, and I have since had some discussions with them about moving forward. It was interesting that one Councillor asked members if any of them knew whether there was an NHDC protocol governing consultation – nobody replied. I am almost certain that there is not, and I believe that could be a good place to start. It is clear that some local authorities have developed their approach in this respect. Bristol City Council has a Code of Good Practice on Consultation which could provide an off-the-shelf solution, or at least suggest some ideas. [Find it here.](#)

I will continue to seek members' ideas and look forward to hearing your views at future Members' meetings or by email – chairman@hitchinform.org.uk

Bill Sellicks, Chairman

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Founded 1992

Chairman: Bill Sellicks
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Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

Churchgate Update

Since December 2015 we have been hoping to see the latest proposals from Hammersmatch. The expectation was that there would be a refurbishment scheme with flats provided above the shops, together with a cinema and associated restaurants (requiring a new location for the Market). But the report to the meeting of Full Council on 11 February made clear that the company has not been able to proceed with such a scheme: the cinema chain was asking for £2 million to commit to the scheme; and structural engineers had recommended that the existing structure is not able to support the addition of flats above.

In the short time before the Council meeting we were able to hold a discussion with Hitchin Forum members at our February meeting and as part of the Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG). As a result we decided that we needed to make a presentation to Council to outline our concerns and hopes for Churchgate in response to the issues raised by the Council Report.

Role of Hammersmatch: The report to Council recommended that a new idea now being explored by Hammersmatch (for a complete rebuild on the extended site) be discounted, and that discussions should not be continued. We argued that Hammersmatch are in the best position to improve Churchgate in the short to medium term (by about 2020), and that options might include a modified refurbishment with some new development to link better to the Market. The Council decided to disband the Churchgate Project Board, but agreed that they would of course consider any application put forward by Hammersmatch or other parties.

Local Plan and Town Centre Strategy: The report to Council suggested a pause until after the Local

Plan has been adopted and a new Town Centre Strategy completed, so that the needs of the town could be identified more clearly. We argued that to wait to identify a scheme until about 2020 would lead to continued deterioration, and that what is needed is an improvement to both Churchgate and the Market in the shorter term to enable Hitchin to continue to play its important role in the economic and social life of the District. The Council agreed that such a long delay would not be helpful, and did not adopt this recommendation.

Council Ownership of Churchgate: The report also recommended that the Council should consider buying out the lease from Hammersmatch using some of its capital reserves. This could draw a larger income from rents and give an opportunity for the Council itself to lead any development. We argued that such action by a Council is not always cost effective. There might be pressure to raise rents and not invest in maintenance, and the local community has already made clear its opposition to a very large scale scheme on the wider area in Council ownership such as might then be pursued. The Council, however, decided to proceed to consider the business case for purchase.

We continue to be concerned about the Council's proposal to take over Churchgate. Following a further meeting of HTAG at the end of February, we are hoping to talk directly to Hammersmatch soon to encourage them to explore realistic alternatives that would address the historic character and long term commercial health of Hitchin.

Adrian Gurney

Diary Dates

Tuesday 26 April: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting**

Lively discussion & informed presentations about latest issues of relevance for Hitchin.

Wednesday 4 May: **Hitchin Forum Planning Group Meeting**

Contact planning@hitchinform.org.uk if you have suggestions for topics you would like our planning group to discuss.

Tuesday 24 May: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm; **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm - Westmill Community Centre
Discussion, debate, democracy in action in Hitchin!

ADVANCE NOTIFICATION: Sunday 12 June: **Hitchin Celebration** to mark the Queen's 90th birthday
Free family event at Hitchin Priory with Hitchin & Bingen Town Bands etc. Watch press for details.

Planning Matters

1. Local Plan Housing Sites Update:

North Herts District Council has produced a composite document of all new sites submitted by owners and developers during the 2014-15 public consultation on the Local Plan *Preferred Options Report*. It is available at: <http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan-emerging-policy/draft-local-plan-2011-2031/local-plan-preferred>

The document contains a list of 52 additional sites across the district. We have identified 15 of these which could have a significant impact on Hitchin as the nearest urban centre, should they pass positive assessment by the planning department. Additional sites at Highover Farm and Foxholes in Hitchin, around Ickleford, and at St Ippolyts are particularly relevant; see the maps for each area and the table giving housing numbers at the end of the report.

According to officers, any sites assessed as viable will be recommended for consideration to Full Council in July 2016 and will then be the subject of formal consultation as part of the Draft Local Plan. Until such time, it would be useful and extremely welcome for the Planning Group to receive any comments, positive or negative, to facilitate an informed response should any of these sites be put forward for consultation. Contact: planning@hitchinforum.org.uk **Nafisa Sayany**

2. Proposal for New Access onto Pirton Road

A planning application for an entrance road from Pirton Road (B655) to the small wood on the corner with Crow Furlong on Hitchin's western edge has been opposed by our Planning Group. There is already access to the land from Grays Lane, which should be more than adequate for the light forestry and woodland activities given as justification.

The B655 here is narrow, twisty and near the brow of a hill. Although the road has a 40mph speed limit, this is not enforced and is widely ignored. An entrance at this point would represent an additional danger on a section of road which is already accident-prone.

The entrance proposed is much larger than necessary for woodland access, consisting of a substantial section of full width road - over 7 metres wide including pavements - encroaching on the woodland itself. It is not clear why such over-engineering is proposed or why a pavement is needed inside a wood. There is a danger that there might be a temptation to use it for other access purposes in future, for which it would be even more unsuitable.

Although the proposed entrance road would occupy a relatively small part of the wood, even this is undesirable as the wood is a haven for wildlife between Hitchin's urban area and the intensively farmed areas to the west. Numerous red and amber-listed bird species live here. The access would also unnecessarily damage an ancient hedgerow bordering the wood. **Dave Borner**

Transport Issues

1. Brand Street Pedestrianisation:

At the March Hitchin Committee meeting, Cllr Shakespeare-Smith elaborated on his idea about pedestrianisation saying that what he had in mind was partial pedestrianisation along the lines of the current situation in High Street.

County Cllr Derrick Ashley confirmed that Hertfordshire Highways are undertaking investigations of traffic flows and air quality in various parts of the town during the closure period, which we had urged in a letter to the Comet in January.

Hitchin Forum has indicated a willingness to take part in discussions of any proposals should they appear. We will keep you informed of any developments. **Bill Sellicks**

2. Parking Issues:

In February we were made aware of proposals by Herts County Council to restrict waiting in Wratten Close, Priory End, Maytrees and Whitehill Road. The Planning Group prepared a response regarding the proposals for double yellow line waiting restrictions on Priory End.

In the context of the increasing difficulty in finding parking spaces for employees and visitors to the town centre, we urged that these spaces should not be lost. In addition, we could find no evidence that the parking in Priory End caused access problems as suggested and considered it very likely that parking would be displaced to streets further out of the centre, the nearest one being St John's Road where there are already considerable pressures.

Hitchin Forum urged that priority consideration be given to the significant safety issues in St John's Road, and that a consultation should be undertaken with local residents and users of the road. It might, for instance, be possible to extend the double yellow lines further on the north-west side of the road, with residents' only parking on the opposite side. This would increase safety and address issues of local congestion at the junction with Hitchin Hill, and at the same time more adequately meet the needs of residents, particularly in St John's Path.

Jennifer Piggott

3. A Second Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) for Hitchin:

North Hertfordshire's most recent report on air quality has revealed that nitrogen dioxide levels at sites in the Payne's Park area of Hitchin were unacceptably high during 2014. DEFRA has therefore recommended that NHDC declare an additional AQMA. A second Action Plan, in addition to that for Stevenage Road (which commenced in 2013) will be required.

Nitrogen dioxide levels at the five worst sites in Stevenage Road remained about 15% above the acceptable limit in 2014. That is unsurprising since no progress has been made on Action Plan measures which might directly reduce congestion, such as improving facilities for cyclists and pedestrians, or encouraging parents to allow children to walk to school. Further housing development in Hitchin and increasing airport traffic are likely to exacerbate the situation further. A DEFRA-funded investigation into an alternative route of access for HGVs to the industrial area has been completed, although no results are publicly available at the moment. Details of progress on all of the action points in the Stevenage Road Action Plan have just been posted on the NHDC website – see the link below. More details will be available on the Forum website soon.

<http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/environmental-health/pollution/air-quality/air-quality-management-areas-north-hertfordshire>

Bill Sellicks

4. Footpaths:

In addition to the range of improvements to various footpaths outlined in our January newsletter, another of our long-term issues was addressed at the start of February.

Gypsy Lane, the bridleway section of the Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP) stretching from Purwell Lane to Wymondley Road at Coot's Corner, has long been very muddy, especially at its northern end at Purwell Lane where there has often been standing water. This has now been completely resurfaced along its entire length with measures taken to improve drainage. In turn, this provides better access to the Purwell Meadows Nature Reserve.

I am a little concerned that the improvement will increase its attraction to trail bikers and 4x4 vehicle owners, and have suggested barriers at either end. However, with the improvement to the verges along the previously hazardous section of the HOOP between Coot's Corner and the St Michael's Road / Wymondley Road traffic island, that section of the HOOP becomes far more accessible and safe for casual walkers wearing normal footwear.

As ever, if you know of any problems with surfaces, boundaries or vegetation on Hitchin footpaths please contact me at: footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk

Bill Sellicks



Gypsy Lane before Herts CC got to work



Gypsy Lane after improvements made

HOOP on the road to Wymondley with clear verges and safer walking. Well done to Herts County Council's Countryside Officer and team for making such an improvement!



Hitchin Town Hall: Debates and Deliberations

It gets a bit existential. Where has it come from, where is it now, where is it going Some of the questions about the Town Hall were answered by NHDC in a press release on March 7th, but a lot of uncertainty remains. Some of the issues were raised at the public meeting organized by the 'Future of Hitchin Town Hall & Museum' facebook group on March 9th, at which various Councillors and Hitchin Town Hall directors were present. Cllr Judi Billing reminded the meeting that the neglect of the Town Hall had been an issue for decades, and at last something has been done, but others questioned how it has been done, and when it will be fully open.

There is a lift shaft in the hall, but not enough money for the lift; however, access to the whole building is possible via the lift in the museum. Damp has been present behind the stage for decades, how long will that take to be sorted, and how much will it cost? When can community groups start booking the hall and Lucas Room?

Legal and contractual issues prevent the opening dates of the cafe and museum from being set, but the Town Hall will open in May, and some use of it will happen before then - starting with Cllr Ray Shakespeare-Smith's reception as Chairman of the Council (and I think that it was a good idea to open it up for this event). Hitchin Initiative also hopes to use it soon, but it will be good when the Council does provide details for all of the community groups about booking and maximizing the use of this valued space.

At the meeting it was good to hear Brent Smith provide positive comments. He said that whilst the end result may not be as good as he and we may have hoped, it is still very good. He has put in a lot of time and inspiration as a director of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. Without his work and that of many others the preservation of the Town Hall and its upgrading would not have happened. Nor would the vastly improved frontage and access to the museum - made possible by purchasing and demolishing 14 & 15 Brand Street. We can but hope that the problems are resolved and that we can all enjoy using the Town Hall again and visiting the district museum soon.

Mike Clarke

Hitchin's Spring Clean 2016: Sunday 24 April

Although we were unable to organise 'Cleaning for the Queen' in March, we will be 'Cleaning for Hitchin' in April and once again we are hoping for volunteers, young and not so young, to join us in cleaning up the streets, paths and recreation grounds around our fabulous town. These events really do hit the spot, with over 90 volunteers collecting 100+ black bin bags full to the brim with rubbish at our last event in October.

As well as volunteers from the residents of Hitchin, we are in consultation with local businesses about how they can also help to clear up the areas around their premises. So far the response has been very positive and we hope to get on board more businesses to make our town truly remarkable. We are also very grateful for the sterling work of our Town Rangers who deal with flytipping in the town centre.

Last year we tackled residential roads like Common Rise and main roads like Cambridge Road, St Michael's Road, Walsworth Road, Fishponds Road, Nightingale Road and the Priory Bypass. We also cleaned up large recreation grounds: Ransoms Rec, Butts Close, Pinehill Field and Purwell playing fields. If you would like to help clean up one of these, or any other area in need of a clean then we would love to have your help.

We can't do this without you! We are also grateful to NHDC who provide litter pickers and bags and collect the bags of litter promptly. Hitchin Initiative also help by providing public liability insurance.

We want to live in a town of which we can all be proud, so if you would like to volunteer to help us between **10am - 12 noon on Sunday 24th April**, then please email us at: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk

Lynne Maylin