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17<sup>th</sup> June 2016

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your letter of 23<sup>rd</sup> May, which has now been considered by Hitchin Forum Steering Group.

Local residents are well-placed to enhance decision-making in partnership with officers and elected representatives. Although we recognise the constraints, we feel that more effective consultation could produce a net financial benefit for the Council. The potential gains in Council reputation should also not be underestimated.

It appears clear from the 2013 District Wide Survey that about 30% of residents believed that NHDC was not getting consultation right. The 2015 survey showed a similar level of negativity. The Strategy in place up to 2015 was clearly not working and we believe that the 2016-2020 Strategy is likely to be insufficiently robust to address this problem. The 2017 Area Wide Survey should provide the first evidence of the current Strategy's effectiveness, and if there is no improvement at that stage, we suggest that the 2016-2020 Strategy be immediately reviewed and modified.

The new Strategy sets out important principles which we support. Its essential weaknesses are that it allows considerable flexibility in choosing whether to consult, how to do so, and in what way the results of consultation will be processed and used. There is a real possibility that decisions can be taken without public scrutiny, further undermining public confidence.

Whilst the five stage process is a good basis for progress, it is an outline, open to considerable interpretation, and raises many questions. A detailed set of questions and observations on each of the 5 stages accompanies this letter.

We would not wish to impose uniformity on officers when they are under considerable pressure and financial constraint. However, we believe that public consultation is an essential tool of the decision-making process. It should be frequently used and transparent in its outcomes. We suggest that the Strategy needs to be supported by a protocol or checklist, based on the four principles, and making the intentions of the 5 stages more explicit. Hitchin Forum would be willing to take part in any reconsideration of the Strategy.

Yours sincerely,

Bill Sellicks

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