



NEWSLETTER

September/October 2016 No. 137

Chairman's Piece

On walking a section of the Manifold Valley Trail from Hartington to Longnor in the Peak District National Park recently, I found myself floundering in ankle-deep mud after failing to notice a way-marker that had fallen into disrepair. I also found examples of decaying stiles and collapsing bridges. In my most recent report on Hitchin's [footpaths](#), I concluded that the forty or so that I have recently walked (we have well-over 100) are well-maintained. It is perhaps a tenuous comparison, as most of our footpaths are urban, but I believe it shows that we should be grateful to Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Officer for North Hertfordshire, Nicholas Maddex, for his (equally financially constrained) efforts to solve problems highlighted by ourselves and others. A number of long-standing issues, about which we have been pressing for some time, have been addressed in the past year, most notably the surface improvements on the Hitchin Outer Orbital Path in the Purwell area and the installation of the hand rail in St John's Path.

Further positive news is provided by the approach taken by the Countryside Management Service (CMS), working in partnership with NHDC, to produce Greenspace Action Plans (GAPs) for local areas. In the past year, GAPs have been produced for Cadwell Lane and Butts Close. In both cases, Forum members have been engaged in the consultation process and, in the case of Butts Close, the local knowledge of Forum members Tony Riley and David Howlett, together with that of others from Hitchin Historical Society continues to be put to good use in providing ideas for information boards. The most recent version of Tony's suggested design can be seen on our website and I understand that NHDC are aiming to finalise the decision on design and content by the end of October with the boards being installed in December.

We have recently taken part in early stage consultations on both [Purwell Meadows](#) and [Oughtonhead Common](#). Each consultation is a two-stage process, with broad principles established in an initial Briefing Document on which comment is invited, followed by the opportunity to comment on a more detailed draft Action Plan. This effective process is one which should be more widely used.

Our Annual General Meeting will take place at Hitchin British Schools at 7.45pm on Tuesday October 18th. Following the election of the Steering Group and other formal business of the meeting, this is the first chance for members to discuss the Draft Local Plan since our meeting on 27th July. We were constrained by the publication of the main documents, so the timing of the July meeting was not ideal with so many people away – a pity as considerable research and analysis had been completed by Ellie Clarke and Adrian Gurney. However, Adrian's article outlining the key planning issues appears in this Newsletter; we hope you will find it helpful. We trust that more will be revealed before the Cabinet meeting on 26th September at which it is expected that the Plan will be formally approved.

Bill Sellicks

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Founded 1992

Chairman: Bill Sellicks
President: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

Editor's note: Links to all the items mentioned in the above article can be found on the Forum's website home page at: <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk>

Local Plan: discussion at Members' Meeting on 27th July 2016

1. Introduction:

Bill Sellicks (BS) opened the meeting by outlining the current position of only having part of the Submission Local Plan (SLP) and some of the supporting documents. However, he suggested that the meeting was a useful opportunity to discuss some of the most significant strategic issues. The formal consultation on the full Plan would not take place until September.

2. Economy and Town Centres

Ellie Clarke (EC) explained the Planning Group's concern that the employment opportunities in Hitchin still remained unconsidered in the SLP. Following discussion, there was agreement that we should be arguing for the inclusion of a new access road to the Wilbury Employment Area from the Stotfold Road. This would be a significant opportunity for regeneration to provide jobs that would help to limit the number of new residents commuting elsewhere.

With regard to town centres EC suggested the main issue was the extent of the new retail space that was being planned for Hitchin in a much expanded Churchgate, and in an area between the High Street and Paynes Park. Discussion of the proposals clarified that the town would have additional retail and related uses covering an area double that of the existing Churchgate centre. It was agreed that, in the context of the very significant changes in retail behaviour and the long term lack of demand for major retail units, we should review the retail studies carried out for NHDC, refer back to the work carried out previously by Hitchin Forum and others on Paynes Park, and consider opposing the suggested extension of Churchgate as being detrimental to the future of our historic market town.

3. Housing and Green Belt

Adrian Gurney (AG) reminded members of Hitchin Forum's earlier opposition to the housing figures in the 2015 discussion, but suggested that (in view of the joint housing market study carried out with Stevenage) it was unlikely that challenging the latest figures significantly would be accepted by the Inspector at Examination into the Submitted Local Plan. Discussion covered the proportion of affordable housing provision (33%), the specific housing needs of the District without migration (up to 7,000 homes over the period), and the building rate (which is only expected to rise significantly over recent rates when the main sites are substantially under way). Those who spoke agreed with AG's suggestion that it was important for housing needs to be met. It was also agreed that we should seek inclusion of a financial contribution to affordable housing from even the smallest sites and should scrutinize housing design standards to ensure they are of the highest.

On the subject of Green Belt AG mentioned CPRE's (Campaign to Protect Rural England) blanket opposition to all loss, and the clarification of 'exceptional circumstances' for release of Green Belt in the case of Calverton Parish Council v Greater Nottingham Councils. The issues raised and addressed by NHDC were discussed. As regards intensity of need, only 40% of the housing need could be met on non Green Belt land that is available for development. On inherent constraints, Green Belt designations exist across the wider housing market area meaning that surplus need could not be addressed by neighbouring local authorities without Green Belt loss elsewhere. "Sustainable development" is expected to address social and economic issues as well as environmental, and the social needs of the area cannot be ignored. AG was of the view that it would be inappropriate in the circumstances to follow the CPRE blanket opposition to loss of Green Belt – a view widely reflected by those present. We should instead look at the specific cases for individual Hitchin sites, and continue to emphasise the importance of pursuing a new settlement to meet longer term needs.

On local sites, AG pointed out the increase in size of the Hlghover site by 47% to 700 homes. In discussion it was clarified that a primary school and neighbourhood centre would be included and that the area would be subject to a Masterplan (agreed by officers following HF intervention) devised for the whole site in consultation with local people. It was agreed that local residents should confer with Walsworth councillors to explore a case for objection to the development and that discussions within HF would be picked up again in September. On West of Hitchin sites AG noted the change in density with an increase of 40% to 126 homes over the three sites, and that further information was needed to assess the transport impacts. It was agreed that the Planning Group should examine the significance of the change in density on issues such as impact on the local ridgeline and access needs and that findings would be reported back to members. The potential impact on traffic of both developments highlighted the need for a more robust policy approach on this and related issues than is so far evident in NHDC's Strategic Policy document.

4. Conclusion

BS noted that further issues would need to be considered in September including more detailed concerns about open space and leisure and community provision, design standards and criteria, and heritage implications. BS remains particularly concerned about air quality and noise, the provision of an overall sustainable transport network, and a workable Infrastructure Delivery Plan. BS closed the meeting by thanking all those who had taken part in the discussion sessions, and helped to clarify HF's stance on some key issues.

Adrian Gurney

Hitchin Town Hall and the District Museum

There has been a lot of news about these 'community facilities', but is there any progress? I wrote in May *and a speedy and satisfactory resolution must be everybody's wish....* but that resolution has still not arrived.

The saga is reported in various places. The Comet and Mercury have provided parts of this, with some of their account coming from a facebook group – 'The Future of Hitchin Town Hall and Museum', which has sponsored a petition requesting a public enquiry on the tangled process.

In addition, Walsworth Councillor Liz Dennis supplied a report on August 11th, in the form of a [blog](#) on the Hitchin & Harpenden Labour website, of her meeting with NHDC's Project Executive John Robinson, which gives many details. This included some useful clarification, but also a contentious account of the changing of the lock on the Museum front door by Hitchin Town Hall Ltd.

One of the Hitchin Town Hall (HTH) directors, Brent Smith, responded to that with a public document (dated August 15th and included in this Newsletter below) that seeks to explain the current position ([see HTH Ltd website](#)).

This was followed by a letter in the Mercury from our Labour Councillors noting that it seems in part to be due to some Tory infighting and appealing for the Council to sort out the mess.

Chris Parker of Keep Hitchin Special made a presentation to the NHDC Cabinet Sub-Committee (Council Charities) on August 22nd, to which Councillor Bernard Lovewell, the Committee's chair, wrote a response – [all available on the NHDC website](#), along with a tape recording of the meeting. The upshot, after Chris had raised various good questions, was for the chairman to point out that many questions were for someone else in the Council to answer – and this Sub-Committee could only comment on issues that were directly the responsibility of the Hitchin Gymnasium and Workmans Hall Trust (HGWHT). HGWHT hold

responsibility for part of the site (where the Workmans Hall & Gymnasium stood) and will eventually, hopefully, also take over the legal ownership from NHDC for the front of the museum site (formally 14&15 Brand Street), if HTH and NHDC come to an agreement on that ownership.

Later in the meeting John Robinson gave an oral report on The Museum & Town Hall, which is also recorded and available.

Meanwhile, Hitchin Initiative (who were initially involved in the intended community partnership with NHDC to preserve the Town Hall, but handed matters over to Hitchin Town Hall Ltd when that became legally necessary) have made an offer, via Hitchin Committee to NHDC, to broker an arrangement between NHDC and HTH Ltd that would see the Town Hall and Museum opened as soon as possible (*full letter on our website*).

Is it possible to summarize the key issues? I will try here, and an explanation by HTH Ltd also follows this article. The current impasse is around the ownership of the footprint of 14 & 15 Brand Street. These were bought, by HTH Ltd, to enlarge the main Museum entrance, and that initiative greatly improved the design possibilities. These purchases came from a grant and loans from the Social Investment Business (SIB) and some local benefactors. HTH Ltd intended to pay off the loans and then generate monies for the Hitchin community from the business of running the Town Hall. Problems came from changes in what they understood would be achieved in the major refurbishment of the Hall, and disagreements with NHDC over the Development Agreement, which was set up to ensure joint working. They felt they could not generate sufficient income in line with their original business plan. They also could not launch the £400,000 fundraising campaign that was crucial to the running of the Town Hall in the early years.

The last straw for HTH Ltd was in the building of that “reversible” concrete wall across the stage, limiting what the stage could be used for (the wall was intended to help provide temporary museum storage, but the basement area for that remains damp and may not be fit for purpose). That, and the location of the cafe, which they had planned to manage, to the rear of the museum, finally scuppered their business plan.

SIB then needed to redeem their loan. They waited over a year hoping that a deal could be agreed, and then put up the land of 14 & 15 for sale. NHDC put in a low offer. HTH Finance Ltd was set up with the backing of local benefactors to buy the debt from SIB, because they were not prepared to risk the land being sold to a developer. HTH Ltd could then retain ownership of the plot of land, allowing time for a settlement with NHDC. If they had not done the deal with SIB the entrance area would have been bought by a developer who had other ideas about the use of that land, and it would have been lost forever. HTH Ltd now hope that an arrangement with NHDC can be secured as soon as possible.

It would seem that there are issues on both sides that have brought the project to the present impasse. HTH have all along wanted to ensure that a significant community asset was retained and improved for the benefit of the town. Unexpected actions taken during the development have adversely affected what HTH perceived as the best type of development to enable them to manage the facility to the maximum benefit of the town. Is it possible to resolve this impasse and get the museum working and open? We hope so and recommend the proposed mediation by HI to both parties and very much hope that it will be successful.

Mike Clarke

Hitchin Town Hall – Brent Smith’s Explanation of Current Position

17th August 2016 - from HTH Ltd website: <http://www.hitchintownhall.co.uk/>

The Directors of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd have thought it necessary to clarify some aspects of the Hitchin Town Hall saga for the benefit of the general public:

1. How did the dispute over the museum entrance arise?

Hitchin Initiative (HI) originally proposed incorporating 14 & 15 Brand Street into the plans for NHDC's museum. This allowed the provision of a more suitable entrance, the retention of the Mountford Hall and the Lucas Room for community use and the formation of the museum in mostly new construction.

2. Was this plan more costly?

Inevitably the revised scheme cost more than the original, due to the acquisition of 14 & 15 Brand Street.

3. How did HTH Ltd come into being?

HI sought funding to meet the shortfall. It was necessary to form a new company (a registered charity), Hitchin Town Hall Ltd (HTH).

4. Where did HTH's funding come from?

They managed to obtain a grant of £340,000 and a loan of £510,000 from Future Builders (now called the Social Investment Bank (SIB)).

5. What was the original plan for the Town Hall?

HTH were bringing over a million pounds to the project (part from loans from local people and organisations, part to be raised through fundraising). In return, NHDC was to lease the Town Hall to HTH, on behalf of the community, for 125 years.

6. So what went wrong?

The 'partnership' between NHDC and HTH did not work well. HTH felt strongly that certain items were not being provided as agreed, but things finally broke down over the construction of a concrete block wall across the stage. The most significant problem to HTH was that it could not launch its fundraising campaign while in dispute with NHDC and the local community up in arms over the wall. NHDC were aware of this problem but refused to budge on the issue of the wall.

7. Why did HTH terminate the Development Agreement?

HTH were forced to terminate the DA due to breaches by NHDC. (This matter remains in dispute.) This left NHDC with a million pound hole in the project; in addition to this they had other cost overruns.

8. Why did SIB appoint a Receiver to sell the freehold of 14 & 15 Brand Street?

NHDC claim that the DA is still in place, but if they truly believed this they would have met their obligation under the DA to make quarterly payments of interest to SIB. The fact that these payments were not being made forced SIB to appoint a Receiver to sell the freehold of 14 & 15 Brand Street. It is to be hoped that the District Auditor will look into this. NHDC have therefore lost the £340,000 that was coming to our town, as well as the community finance. HTH persuaded SIB to stay taking action for over a year but NHDC did nothing. Despite what has been stated by NHDC, HTH is not and has never been in receivership.

9. Did NHDC bid to buy this freehold?

There was considerable interest in the sale of the freehold, including from at least one developer. NHDC made a low bid, presumably thinking that they would be the only party bidding. Their bid would not have covered the liabilities of HTH, so people who had supported the project would have lost what they are owed.

10. Can this project still be saved?

Fortunately, a consortium of local business people (HTH Finance) bought the debt from SIB. (This is something that NHDC could have done.) HTHF have stated that their objective is to sell the freehold to NHDC for a sum that clears HTH's debts (with no profit to them) and to seek to enable the community to get the 125 year lease on the Town Hall.

11. So what is happening now?

It is likely that it will cost NHDC about £100,000 more than the final offer put to them by HTH, but NHDC must take responsibility for the risk involved in their strategy of trying to pick up the freehold cheaply.

They were trying to get part of the price paid at the cost of HTH creditors losing their money, which is not the same as giving taxpayers best value.

12. What are HTH now trying to achieve?

HTH are not trying to hamper or delay the opening of the museum and community facility, nor to hold anyone to ransom. Quite the contrary, in fact. We hope that the situation can be resolved speedily, so that the museum can open as soon as possible. NHDC claims that the problems are the fault of HTH, but this is not the case – all HTH were trying to do was to facilitate a better project. NHDC held all the power, so they must carry the blame.

Bancroft Recreation Ground

A consultation on the development of a play area for older children is being held – and closes on **October 5th**. This is a collaboration between Groundwork Hertfordshire and NHDC. The draft plan seems good, and they want as much feedback as possible; we hope that will include children of the target age, parents and grandparents! The plan incorporates an opening up of the area along the river, which is looking very sad at present, plus climbing equipment and play features. See the [NHDC website](#) for further details and give feedback on a simple [online survey](#) and do so before October 5th, when the consultation ends.

Mike Clarke

The Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up - Sunday 16 October 2016

Once again it is time to clear up the detritus of Hitchin's summer fun and get the town ready for winter! We would love everyone who has helped in the past to volunteer once again to clean up our streets, footpaths, verges, parks and other open spaces to make Hitchin sparkle again. Please spread the news and encourage your friends, neighbours, family and any groups to which you belong to join in what is a fun day, and very satisfying! Just email litter@hitchinform.org.uk to get all the information you need.

Lynne Maylin & Ellie Clarke

Diary Dates

Sunday 16 October: 10am - 12 noon - **The Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up**

Tuesday 18 October: 7.45pm - **AGM & members meeting** -

Our annual business meeting will be followed by presentations and discussion regarding the Submission Local Plan, available for public consultation in October.

Until 5th October: **Public consultation by NHDC** - Opportunity to respond to plans for a play area for older children at Bancroft Recreation Ground. [See the NHDC website for further details.](#)

STOP PRESS: NHDC taking action on dog mess

NHDC is taking action on four key locations around the district where dog mess, and in particular owners not cleaning up after their dogs, is becoming a big problem. Environmental crime officers will patrol these locations, spray dog mess with red paint, put up signs, talk to dog owners and hand out free dog poo bags and information leaflets. Further details: <http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/council-takes-part-big-scoop-campaign>