



NEWSLETTER

November-December 2016 No. 138

Chairman's Piece

I have not yet responded to Hertfordshire County Council's Transport Vision 2050 survey (link below) which Derrick Ashley urged us to complete at our September meeting. I've found it challenging. In 2050 I shall be 99. My transport needs will be limited to those necessary for survival and are likely to be local and passive. It's hard to imagine how the changes suggested in the Survey Report might affect me by that stage. I could take the easy way out and not answer the survey. However, I believe we should support the attempt to think long term, and since I have perfectly realistic hopes of being around and active for the next 10-20 years, my interest in the staging posts on the route to 2050 is entirely reasonable. I hope that you, like me, will eventually complete the survey by the 15th December deadline. I would like to offer a few thoughts on the survey at this stage.

The first few survey questions are general, inviting respondents to indicate their agreement or otherwise with statements about challenges, principles and aims. My problems start to arise with the question "Do you support the adoption of a policy to deliver a step change in cycling in larger urban areas?" My answer is "Yes". Sadly it is clear that Hitchin is not considered to be a larger urban area. A glance at the map of the 10 major scheme locations in the Survey Report shows that they are concentrated in the south of the county. One question asks respondents how much they agree with the inclusion of these major schemes in the overall strategy. Not being well-acquainted with the transport issues in the affected areas, I find this almost impossible to answer.

Locally, we are due to see significant development which will place additional burdens on an already congested road network. We have one, soon to be two, Air Quality Management Areas. Lorries thunder through streets which are not designed to cope with them. Parents wait in their cars for their charges outside local schools with their engines running. The roads are considered so dangerous that some regard pavements to be the rightful province of cyclists – pedestrians beware! Whether we will benefit from what the Survey Report calls a 'local Growth and Transport Plan' is unclear. We may simply retain the existing Urban Transport Plan. Even if there were to be new planning, would there be any cash left to pay for improvements after the lion's share is diverted to the major schemes?

A laudable aim is to increase walking and cycling, improve public transport and reduce car use. We see the car as an extension of our individuality. To limit its use is almost regarded as an abuse of our human rights, and provokes passionate opposition. Alongside incentives and penalties, we need a culture change, but nowhere is this really mentioned.

Fortunately, it appears that the survey provides adequate space for open-ended responses. I will need several column inches, and suspect others will too!

Bill Sellicks

Transport Vision: <http://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/your-council/consult/transportconsult/TV2050/>

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group

At our AGM, the following were elected to our Steering Group for 2016-2017:

Dave Borner - originally from London, Dave has lived in Hitchin since 1987. Now retired, he worked as an engineer in the oil industry, and takes a particular interest in energy and transport matters. A long-standing Forum member, he first joined the Steering Group in 2006 and is Vice Chairman. He would like to see local transport policy being friendlier to residents and the environment, with better facilities for cyclists and pedestrians. He is interested in preserving Hitchin's unique character.

Maureen Carroll - has been Hitchin Forum's **Membership Secretary** since 2003. Originally from north London, she has lived in Hitchin since 1978. Having retired from teaching in various Enfield primary schools, she continues to be involved in education, but now as a member of the volunteer team at the British Schools Museum in Queen Street, delivering Victorian and WW2-style lessons to visiting school and adult groups.

Ken Chapman - worked for Barclays Bank for many years, all over the country and abroad, moving to Hitchin in 1995. Since leaving Barclays, he has worked in the charity sector both as a volunteer and at "Futurebuilders", a government fund set up to make loans to charities. He was treasurer of "Living Streets", the UK charity for everyday walking, for 8 years and is still a director of its trading company. He is our **Treasurer**.

Mike Clarke - formerly Chairman, now **President** and website administrator, he has become even more familiar with all of Hitchin's nooks and crannies, and remains keen to support all efforts to ensure that sensible changes enhance where we live.

Adrian Gurney - retired from working in the strategic planning division of Ove Arup and Partners in 2009, and then ran his own consultancy until 2012. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and of the Royal Town Planning Institute. He is also an active member of the Town and Country Planning Association for whom he writes occasional articles. He is **Chair of our Planning Group**.

Judith Gurney - has lived more than half of her married life in Hertfordshire, moving with Adrian to Hitchin from Welwyn Garden City in 2000. She is now retired but taught almost all ages during her working life. She is **Minutes Secretary** to the Steering Group, and has a role with the distribution of Hitchin Forum Newsletters.

Chris Honey - has been a member of Hitchin Forum since 1996. He examines planning applications for the Planning group and comments on green issues. He is a designer with a passion for maintaining what is good about Hitchin and only accepting excellent development alongside it.

John Keene - has lived in Hitchin for 41 years, is now retired and spent most of his working life in the advertising industry. Keen by name and keen by nature, John is very involved in most of our campaigns.

Nafisa Sayany – originally from Weymouth, Dorset, Nafisa moved to Hitchin in 1996 after having lived and worked in Germany for 10 years. She works as a strategic alliance and partner manager in the technology sector. Nafisa is passionate about her home town and its environment and ensuring that it can evolve appropriately for generations to come.

Bill Sellicks - is a retired chemistry teacher who moved to Hitchin in 1984 and is our **Chairman**. A keen walker and cyclist, he would like to promote greater use of Hitchin's network of footpaths to reduce congestion on our roads, and see improved facilities for cyclists. He is concerned about development in the greenbelt, and the impact of Luton airport on the town and surrounding villages.

Andrew Wearmouth - was born in Hitchin and has always lived locally. He is a Chartered Surveyor with 40 years of experience in local government, for the last 20 of which he was Head of Estates at St Albans City and District Council.

Submission Local Plan: Members' Meeting 18th October 2016

Back in July some of the Local Plan documents were available for us to look at, and we had a discussion at the Members' Meeting on 27th July on the strategic issues raised. On Economy and Town Centres, we noted that there was no mention of improved access to Wilbury Way, or proposals for major development at Paynes Park and Churchgate. Members asked us to pursue their concerns when background studies were made available. On Green Belt and Housing, there was reluctant acceptance of the housing numbers and loss of Green Belt but members asked us to look in more detail at the potential impacts on the allocated sites.

At a second Members' Meeting, in October, the aim was to present key issues and give an opportunity for discussion on the full documentation, with a view to guiding the Planning Group and HTAG (Hitchin Town Action Group) as they put together a joint response before consultation closes on 30th November.

1. Green Belt, Housing and Design

1.1 Green Belt

Adrian Gurney (AG) suggested that two long term issues need to be addressed. On land west of Stevenage, the Submission Local Plan (SLP) proposes land should be removed from the Green Belt and be available for development from 2026. The suggestion is that we should oppose this as being unnecessary in the context of the scale of the proposed housing allocations. On creating a new settlement, the SLP proposes that the search for a site should be limited to the District. The suggestion is that sites should be investigated with other local authorities in the Housing Market Area to help make a settlement more sustainable.

1.2 Housing and Design Policy

AG outlined the extent to which the SLP has taken on board many of the policy suggestions HTAG had put forward in 2015 including a mix of housing sizes, need for residential provision for the elderly, reference to housing space standards, and the need for landscape and visual impact assessment for all developments. The inclusion of clearer guidance on, for instance, self-build housing and urban design issues will be pursued.

In response to a question on affordability AG agreed the policy area was now better covered, but the team still has concerns that claims of lack of viability might reduce numbers provided, and that there should be a legal agreement to ensure long term affordability.

1.3 Housing Sites

AG reported that the team had been on site visits, and would like to argue for open space buffers to protect the ridge line west of Hitchin and to limit views into the Highover site. Consequential traffic concerns also need to be addressed. Discussion centred on:

- Highover, where the following responses were given to issues raised by members: need for a primary school is recognised in policy, surgery provision could be provided through an 'outpost' if an existing surgery pursued the opportunity, improvements at Walsworth Community Centre should be pursued in preference to new facilities on site to help integrate the new residential area, and the possibility of financial support for improved parking in the town centre to cater for the extra journeys should be explored.
- West of Hitchin sites where, in response to a question on timing, AG suggested that they were likely to be developed early in the Plan period while the larger sites elsewhere were being prepared.

2. Economy and Town Centres

2.1 Industrial Area

Ellie Clarke (EC) reported that a recent site visit had shown that the main Wilbury Way area is smarter than it was; in discussion it was clear that this is less true of Cadwell Lane, and that Bury Mead Road is in very poor condition.

EC argued that the proposal in a Transport Technical Note of 2009 for a new link road within the industrial area at a cost of £5.8 million will not help the area. A new access from Stotfold Road would help encourage further needed investment and should therefore replace this scheme. It would also remove HGV's from nearby residential roads and so have a wider environmental benefit.

2.2 Town Centre Sites

EC suggested that the Nathaniel Lichfield retail report, on which the latest proposals are based, is unsound since, for instance, it does not take properly into account changing retail habits, current and future. There was no mention of major retail expansion in Hitchin in the last consultation, there is no supporting text in the SLP in relation to potential alternative approaches and no explanation at all of the potential role of Paynes Park in this context.

Following discussion of the Paynes Park and Churchgate sites, it was agreed that the HTAG response should challenge the need for such a scale of development prior to 2026 in the context of the slow completion rate of new housing and therefore of population growth. We should argue for an incremental development, with Paynes Park being developed first for a range of uses, with refurbishment at Churchgate and a permanent home for the Market being addressed in the early part of the Plan period.

EC agreed to check again the earlier work by HTAG on Paynes Park and consider issues such as increased number of delivery vehicles.

3. Transport

3.1 Road Traffic

Dave Borner (DB) explained the current proposals for junction redesigns around Hitchin which would involve additional traffic lights and loss of pavement and garden space to traffic lanes. The small extra capacity obtained would in all likelihood fill up very quickly giving no lasting benefit. In discussion, it was suggested that greater priority should be given to taming and reducing traffic (and thus helping with air quality and safety problems). Views on traffic lights tended to reflect a desire for fewer of them (since removal can often improve traffic flow) and that those in use should be "smart" to reduce delays.

A link road from the industrial area to Stotfold Road that would take heavy goods vehicles out of the town has not been included in the plan despite many years of campaigning by residents and councillors. It was agreed that a southern bypass would not help if it were associated with major housing development that would further increase traffic in the town.

3.2 Sustainable Transport

DB suggested that there needs to be much more emphasis on provision for sustainable transport, including targets and monitoring, which are currently missing. Suggestions for assisting pedestrians and cyclists included use of shared surfaces at crossing points (Dutch experience) sometimes, as an alternative to the heavy-handed traffic engineering proposed at some junctions. Improved direct access to the railway station from the east, a pedestrian and cyclist-friendly A505 railway underpass, new cycle routes, and extended bus services were also mentioned.

4. Healthy Communities, Natural and Historic Environment

4.1 Policies

Bill Sellicks (BS) noted that, as with housing and design, there have been major improvements in policy in all these areas, responding to comments made by HTAG. However, there remain significant omissions on such issues as healthy lifestyles, noise pollution and locally listed buildings.

4.2 Monitoring

BS reported that there were no indicators or targets covering, for instance, air quality or noise, or proportion of home to school trips by sustainable modes. It was agreed that the response should include a comprehensive analysis of the full range of targets that should be monitored to clarify the delivery of the Local Plan.

5. Response to Inspector

It was mentioned a few times at the meeting that Dave Borner and Jane Arnold were to go to a briefing session by the Inspectorate on 20th October. It is clear from the briefing that our response will need to concentrate on issues that we think affect the soundness of the Plan, particularly in relation to its effectiveness and deliverability. We have been concentrating on key issues and will provide evidence for our concerns and to substantiate suggested changes in policy. We will be using significant points raised by members as part of our evidence for concerns.

If members would also like to respond individually they will need to identify an aspect of the Plan they consider is not sound and explain why, and then suggest a specific change that would make the Plan more effective or deliverable. The email address for responses is *local.plans@north-herts.gov.uk*.

Adrian Gurney

Is this any way to finish a task?

Having been alerted to it by Bernard Eddleston, I attended the NHDC 'Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Task & Finish (T&F) Group' on September 29th. This is the first meeting on NHDC's 'larger projects' which will include Hitchin Swim Centre and the Council's offices. The work on the seven 'key projects' was intended to start in July and last for 3 – 4 months. This was the first meeting.

The original agenda stated that there would be a slot for 'Public Views on the Churchgate Project'. The very helpful Scrutiny Officer emailed – *"The meeting will be publicised as there may be some public interest in the Churchgate project" and "You are welcome to make a contribution but I cannot tell you at this stage how the group will wish handle it. It will depend very much on the level of public interest and how many others (if any) will wish to make contributions. I will keep you informed"*. However, the goalposts were moved, firstly the chairman deciding that any public contribution would have to be by written submission, and then deciding that there would be no public input. This seems contrary to the protocol agreed by the O&S Committee in March this year, which stated – *"Inviting external input into the T&FG should be mandatory."*

After the meeting the chairman told me that the change in allowing public participation was due to the concern that a dozen people might have wanted to present their views and the whole thing could have taken up too much time, *"And this is not an inquisition."* As it happened just TWO members of the public attended the meeting.

The Council's Strategic Director Finance Policy & Governance gave a long and detailed account of the Churchgate project, which was good, apart from a few minor details, like 'what about the huge public outcry about the threat of NHDC renewing the Simons contract'!! She dismissed the outcry with the curt and inaccurate, *"Timescale for the project coincided with publicity around the Localism Act which meant that a vocal minority of public were seeking to change the Council decision"*. Were the 3,000+ petition signers inspired by the Localism Act, or just outraged by a bad plan being foisted on us? Why had NHDC clung to this inappropriate, overlarge and increasingly anachronistic scheme? Please excuse the long word, but it really was the wrong time to bump up the number of shops when national trends pointed to contraction. Did they ever ask Keith Hoskins what the retail trends were? Don't be silly, they asked Simons.... and trusted Simons' flawed survey, which the senior officer had to mention. Is it possible that Simons would only present one side of the picture? Is it not risky to trust a developer who wants to retain an option on an enormous slab of land in one of the most attractive historic towns? Surely they would not be driven just by profit? Google 'Simons and the Dorchester Charles Street scheme' to see what we missed out on. Simons had the West Dorset District Council promising them £4m before backing out, citing the archaeological requirements as prohibitive. Strange that, in the middle of a Roman town, who would have guessed that was likely to be a significant issue.

Back to T&F - I learnt that the fashion for procuring potential developers has changed and, if there ever is a next time, they would do it differently. I learnt that it was the bad/good luck of the 2008 financial crisis which put off likely investors. I learnt that the senior officer would not have a Churchgate Liaison Forum

held in public again. Not sure why that would be; would a private meeting be enough to reassure the public? Must have missed that bit of research.

If the remaining meetings continue in the same vein it seems unlikely that much of any use will be learnt, but it will be interesting to see if the ensuing discussion in the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in January will help the Council manage our community projects better.

Mike Clarke

The Exchange - No change please!

In September we discovered a planning application to add a fourth and fifth floor to the Exchange on the corner of Queen Street and Hollow Lane. This has the feel of a conglomeration of shipping containers deposited on the existing roof. The grey rendered finishes and window frames, zinc and timber cladding plus the perforated steel balconies are at odds with the 50's brick building. The architects claim that this updates it and sets a precedent for upgrading neighbouring properties in this poorly designed area of Hitchin, but it merely produces a discordant look.



Image by: Anthony Cole

I remember taking interested parties round the building in the mid 90's and enthusing about it becoming a cultural community centre accommodating live-in design and workshop units, a double height hall with video projections of West End performances and films, meeting rooms, offices and luxury residences. Unfortunately, an insufficient number of others agreed with me and instead it was developed into flats and a fitness centre.

At least it was done sensitively, unlike the present application spoiling the Hollow Lane elevation, which currently steps up the hill into a 60's block. It would extend the mass of the existing building, thus dominating the buildings opposite and obliterating the southern sunshine. Not only Hollow Lane is affected visually as the addition will be seen from Windmill Hill and the Conservation Area including St Mary's Square, Biggin Lane and from both directions along Queen Street.

Were this to be granted it would set a precedent for similar height extensions to Woodcote House/Ballioli Chambers and any plans for a rejuvenated Churchgate. You won't be surprised to hear that we have put in a strong objection to this application to NHDC Planning Control!

Chris Honey

Diary dates:

15th December 2016: HCC Transport Vision 2050 **consultation deadline** (see Chairman's Piece)

6th December 2016: Town Talk - 6:30pm; Hitchin Committee - 7.30pm - Hitchin Town Hall