

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

Rapleys LLP
51 Great Marlborough Street
London
W1F 7JT

30th June 2017

Re; Land at Highover Farm, Hitchin.

Dear Sir

I am writing on behalf of Hitchin Forum in response to the exhibition of plans for the above development.

Hitchin Forum contributed to the response to NHDC from Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG) on NHDC's Submission Local Plan (SLP). A copy of this response is attached with this letter.

In the response, HTAG guardedly accepted the inclusion of Highover Farm, with a higher housing total than previously proposed, amongst the strategic housing sites because it would mean that the development would be subject to the preparation of a site masterplan. It urged that there should be early involvement of local people in the development of the plans.

It seems, from the recent exhibition, that plans are already well-advanced. Whilst it is encouraging that local people have been invited to contribute, the timescale is very short, and the form on which views are sought leaves little scope for open-ended and detailed responses.

The HTAG submission expressed a number of concerns about the site, which the exhibition did nothing to allay. In view of the short timescale for this consultation, we will confine our comments mainly to issues around transport and connectivity. In addition, and in the light of recent national events, we view with concern the implication about the quality of the affordable provision by the display board statement 'extensive choice of high quality homes and provision of affordable homes to assist the council in meeting its five year land supply'. It is unclear whether there is any intention to provide social housing to rent within the development.

Whilst the developers have considered movement within the site, there was no acknowledgement of traffic impacts at, or beyond, its boundary. Other than the provision of a bus service, there was no explicit mention of this as a constraint on any display board. Some of the aspirations regarding the needs of walkers and cyclists are naive in the extreme – for instance, the idea that the development could provide access for walkers to the countryside to the north (where there are no connecting rights of way) is laughable and demonstrates a lack of research.

During the exhibitions, local people expressed their very strong concern that the plans made no mention at all of the traffic impact. HTAG drew attention to these issues in its submission to NHDC. To summarise our concerns, the proposed development is only sustainable if a solution can be found to all of the following issues:

- Stotfold Road is an accident blackspot with fast-moving traffic. There have been a number of recent fatalities.
- The Stotfold Road / A505 roundabout and Woolgrove Road / A505 junction are already congestion sites, as is the A505 under the rail bridge by the station.
- The rail bridge over the A505 to the north of the station is dangerous for cyclists and inadequate for pedestrians, discouraging a shift away from car use for those making short journeys from north Hitchin to the station and town centre.
- There is no direct access to the railway from the north and east for pedestrians and cyclists.
- The submission of a Planning Application in the near future takes no account of the schedule for the inspection of the SLP. (HTAG called for the Inspector to make site visits at peak time in order to assess the soundness of SLP policies and proposals for this development).
- The designation of an area of "Open Space" gives no protection against future additional development on this area, and indeed the proposals provide a number of potential access points to it. It is suggested that this land should be designated "Public Open Space".

It is clear that a very carefully designed package of measures needs to be implemented if sustainable transport use beyond the development is to be any more than a dream. Negotiations over such measures must include both NHDC and HCC, along with Network Rail and the local bus companies, and should be based on a realistic study of the likely impacts. The achievement of any workable solution to limit the impact of the development on the transport network will therefore be complex, taking time and energy to pursue.

Hitchin Forum therefore urges that, in order to make the development sustainable, a comprehensive package of measures should be prepared to address the multiple transport issues. These should be based on a full analysis of the likely impacts on Hitchin's road system, which should be part of the information available to the public to inform consultation. The measures should be agreed between NHDC and HCC along with Network Rail and the local bus companies, and when agreed should be implemented prior to the development. When the application is submitted, there should be a clear commitment to providing high quality affordable and social rented housing within the development.

Hitchin Forum feels strongly that this Green Belt proposal is premature and that no planning application for this development should be determined until the 2011-2031 Local Plan for North Hertfordshire is agreed and in place.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Sellicks". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Bill Sellicks (Chairman, Hitchin Forum)