



NEWSLETTER

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Chairman's Piece

The members' meeting of 20th June broke all records, in that the number of those offering apologies exceeded the 15 attending the meeting! Apologies were often couched in terms such as 'I would really have liked to attend the meeting, but...'. There was much interest in what Andrew Mills, NHDC's (North Herts District Council's) Grounds Manager, had to say about a range of issues, including the removal of dog bins and the management of John O'Conner's Grounds Maintenance Contract with NHDC. Elsewhere in this Newsletter you will find Mike Clarke's account of the meeting. Nevertheless, I thought it would be a good idea to tell you about one question, from a member unable to attend, which I passed on to Andrew after the meeting.

The question raised concerns, which many will share, about operatives relaxing on the job and value for money from the maintenance contract. Andrew's response was that the contract specifies outcomes which must be achieved. If those tasks are not completed satisfactorily, that is an issue which should result in a financial penalty to John O'Conner. This can only happen if the failure is noted by an inspector. There are about 2.5 inspectors, so the chances of a problem being missed are quite high, particularly as inspections are not all that the inspectors do. As he said during the meeting, Andrew is very happy to be contacted if we think something has not been done properly. In those circumstances, sending him an email will enable him to initiate an inspection, and provide valuable evidence. For those who fancy themselves proxy inspectors, Andrew's email address is given in the next article.

It should be borne in mind that Andrew's responsibility is for grounds, so whilst he would be the person to respond about overflowing bins on Butts Close, he is not responsible for bins on streets or paths. That leads me to an encouraging piece of news. Ellie Clarke has been waging a campaign to have the chronically overflowing bin outside the entrance to Highbury School emptied more frequently now it is used for dog waste. I am delighted to say that it is now scheduled to be emptied twice a week, and that is happening most of the time – well done, Ellie, who continues to monitor and report!

A couple of items of news. The date for the Inquiry into the Hitchin Swimming Centre/Archers car park encroachment onto Butts Close has been confirmed. It will be held at Hitchin Town Hall at 10am on Tuesday 21st November, continuing on Wednesday 22nd if necessary. Tony Riley will be speaking on behalf of Friends of Butts Close, and I will speak on behalf of the Forum.

Finally, a Greenspace Action Plan is to be produced for Burymead Springs. Following the model used by Countryside Management Service and NHDC for Butts Close, we have been asked to comment on the Briefing Document (which establishes broad principles, but doesn't go into detail). The Briefing Document will be available on the Forum website. The second phase of consultation in which specific details are presented to the wider public is from Monday 4th September to Monday 2nd October. As part of this, a 'walk round' is provisionally planned for Sunday 24th September 10.00-11.00 and Forum members are welcome to join this.

Bill Sellicks

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Founded 1992

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Campaign to Protect Rural England

Members' Meeting - June 20th 2017

Andrew Mills, a service manager for NHDC, who deals with green spaces and associated litter amongst other things, gave a detailed account of the workings of grounds maintenance (totalling an area of almost 3 million square metres), which is contracted out to John O'Conner Ltd. The contract covers everything from grass cutting to rivers to pest control (we are not regarded as pests within the contract terms, thankfully). He described the careful monitoring of this, with frequent checks (300 inspections per month), close communication between the Council and the contractors and continuing efforts to upgrade the service. The use of the green spaces by various organisations and the circus is under scrutiny. The circus pays for its occasional use of Butts Close, but the regular use of this and other areas by profit making organisations needs to be monitored, licensed and probably charged for – all to be considered by the Council in the future.

The emptying of litter bins needs to keep pace with their filling. Andrew said that Veolia, who empty the street side bins, should always do so when they are 75% full. John O'Conner Ltd is expected to respond to seasonal demand (for example on Windmill Hill) and increase their emptying schedules as necessary. Concern was expressed about litter which seems to be left around bins. He said that John O'Conner Ltd is responsible for a 2-metre radius around each bin.

Members asked questions particularly about litter and doggie bins and, as noted in our Chairman's Piece, he was quick to offer ready access and a rapid response to concerns of which he is notified via email (andrew.mills@north-herts.gov.uk). A specific concern has been about the Council seeking to save money by removing dog bins. This was particularly unfortunate because the new litter bins, intended to mitigate for that loss, were not available until some weeks later. However, there remains annoyance that the move, whilst saving £29k across the district, has led to more dog mess fouling the footpaths and overflowing litter bins, often adjacent to children's play areas.

Andrew's description of the management of rivers through the town was interesting. The County Council is responsible for ensuring that all rivers flow properly, the District Council has so called riparian responsibility due to owning the banks of the rivers in the public areas and should keep them in good order, and the Environment Agency has responsibility to ensure that the councils do their jobs and keep the rivers well maintained! Do you get the flow?

It was good to hear a clear account of the workings of this part of the Council's responsibilities and have our various concerns discussed. We look forward to continued productive contacts on these issues.

Mike Clarke

Development at Highover Farm

We first heard about the exhibition on the Highover Farm proposals on 16th June, just six days before the first exhibition was to take place, and via a rather circuitous route. A number of Forum members attended the exhibition. Whilst it is encouraging that local people were invited to contribute, the short timescale for responses (deadline 3rd July, with the first exhibition on 22nd June) and the form on which views were sought (which left little scope for open-ended and detailed responses) gave little confidence that views expressed were likely to make any impression on the plans.

The proposals include provision for up to 700 homes and associated infrastructure, including a new primary school, a 'Local Centre', play areas and sports pitches on land bordered by Stotfold Road, the railway line and the Rosehill Estate. Only one vehicle exit is envisaged, which is to the Stotfold Road, although there would be access for emergency vehicles, buses, pedestrians and cyclists via High Dane. A series of illustrative photographs seemed particularly fanciful – suggesting extensive mature green spaces with water features, tree-lined avenues with attractive early 20th century housing that looked very like Letchworth, and a large central community hub complete with a branch of Costa! Some basic research would have shown that the aspiration to provide pedestrian access to the 'wider countryside to the north

east of the site' is unrealistic as with the exception of the cycle track along the A505, there is no public right of way linking the Stotfold Road to Letchworth Greenway.

Given the extremely tight timescale, we chose to respond to a narrow range of issues, confining ourselves to our concern that there was no mention of any measures to address the significant impact of increased traffic on the wider Hitchin road network, the failure to make any mention of social rented housing and the extremely tight deadline for the consultation. A more detailed examination would have revealed many more issues. The display boards from the exhibition, and our letter sent to the Agents Rapleys in response are available on the Forum website.

We have subsequently discovered that a Scoping Report was submitted to NHDC by Rapleys on behalf of Bellcross Homes on March 17th. This invited NHDC to adopt its suggested content and approach to the Environmental Impact Assessment. In a decision dated 10th May, NHDC broadly endorsed the proposed content and approach, but said that assessments of impacts on air quality and contamination were required. NHDC also requested an assessment of the impact on an additional set of road junctions, including the Woolgrove Road / Cambridge Road and Woolgrove Road / Grove Road junctions, but made no mention of any issues to do with pedestrian and cyclist use of the Cambridge Road rail bridge. It was surprising that NHDC did not mention the Stotfold Road / Cambridge Road roundabout, especially as that had not been explicitly mentioned in the Scoping Report. There was one comment from a member of the public, suggesting some attempt at engagement, but implying that the Scoping Report does not seem to have been widely publicised. Details are available on the NHDC website – the reference number is 17/00680/1SCP. We will keep you informed of future developments.

Bill Sellicks

The NHDC Task & Finish Group - Episode 3

I have written twice before on the fascinating progress of the Task & Finish (T&F) Group, the child of the Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Committee, which examines how the Council deals with large projects such as Churchgate. The parent committee met on June 6th to discuss the preliminary report of the T&F Group. The public, that is myself and three other residents of Hitchin, were permitted to speak. We were graciously welcomed by the Chair of the O&S Committee and allowed to say our bits. These are all available on the NHDC's website - just go to the Meetings section to find the minutes - my words, and the contributions of the three other members of the public, including one for Keep Hitchin Special.

The Chair of the T&F Group then spoke – this is the extract from the minutes of that meeting quoting him:

“The Task and Finish Group was not intended to be an enquiry body looking to criticise past projects, nor was it intended to be a scrutiny exercise. Instead it was an exercise to see what the Council could learn from its past projects.

It would appear that the four public speakers aimed to criticise the Churchgate project, using the Task and Finish Group as a vehicle to do so. This sort of criticism was not part of the Task and Finish Group brief and it was primarily for this reason that public participation was refused during the early stages of the review, when considering Churchgate.

Councillor Weeks explained that in reviewing these projects the Task and Finish Group's aim was to identify aspects that should be avoided in future projects.”

The Chair seems muddled, having no clear definition of the terms he uses. So, it is not a scrutiny exercise, not intended to criticise past projects, but somehow the Council should avoid identified problems in future projects. Really!? How does anyone move onward and identify problems with any project unless you look for things that might have gone wrong, or gone better with a little hindsight. Healthy criticism is a universal method of achieving that. The interested and even educated public who live in Hitchin might be able to help in that task. Not according to the T&F Chairman!

However, the O&S Committee pursued their business and did a constructive job of trying to amend parts of the T&F report, and asked for it to be revised and returned to the next O&S Committee. This was scheduled for July 18th – after the editor’s deadline for this piece, so this is not the end of the story..... The amended T&F Report is contained in the minutes for that meeting and further revelations are contained therein. The following are extracts:

8.7 The Chairman Cllr Weeks did not agree with his colleagues that recommendations 4 and 9 should be changed and the Task and Finish Group report is unchanged in these respects.

Recommendation 4

8.9 There is disagreement about the proposed change to Recommendation 4 that exception reports should be made available to the public unless they are confidential. The Chairman of the Task and Finish Group believes most reports are likely to be confidential and even if they are not then publishing them would attract criticism of the Council and cause delays.

Recommendation 9

*8.10 There is disagreement about the proposed change to Recommendation 9 that engagement should continue throughout the life of the project. The Chairman of the Task and Finish Group believes consultation should not, as a matter of course, continue throughout a project as it can only lead to delays. **The Committee will need to determine the final wording.***

The last sentence is my emphasis.

The T&F Chair appears to be out of step with the members of his Group, is overly worried about delays and wants to exclude the public, and any light, from his thinking. But I have been impressed by various Councillors in the T&F Group who have tried to be clear and constructive in looking at what are inevitable areas for improvement in any project.

I did write to the Chair of the O&S Committee suggesting some ways that public engagement could be improved - by a clear statement that public participation is welcome with any future T&F exercises, by having more time to digest information and consult our members (reports should be made available at least 2 weeks before such events), and by having some avenue after such events to respond to points (for clarification or factual corrections). The next T&F Group is due to be in August or September, with public participation/ consultation/engagement due to be on the agenda. Watch this space!

Mike Clarke

Fly-tipping Update

Since my last Chairman’s Piece, there have been developments in the fly-tipping issue, so I thought it would be a good idea to share them with you. In early June, I returned to the Hoar’s Lane area. Whilst that site was no worse, numerous piles of building rubble, packaging material and a fridge had been dumped on a nearby bridleway. I sent pictures to NHDC along with a reminder that I had not received an update on my previous emails. For good measure, I copied the message to relevant Councillors.

I am pleased to report that a few days later I received a call from David Furr, NHDC’s Environmental Crime Officer. He had inspected the sites concerned. Apparently, the Hoar’s Lane tip had been reported two years previously, but the Council’s contractor had not cleared it when requested. He assured me that he is pressing them to do so. Admittedly, access is difficult. Owing to the position of the junction of Hoar’s Lane with the A505, just after a left-hand bend, police cooperation would be needed to close the nearside lane to allow safe access for vehicles. Although the contractors appear unaware of this option, police cooperation is not difficult to obtain and the tip could be cleared. A separate problem is that David does not routinely receive details of tips that the contractors are directed to clear, hence he did not know that the Hoar’s Lane tip remained.

On the subject of the more recent tips, David told me that his team had gathered some evidence that might lead to the identity of the perpetrators, and that wherever possible, they would be prosecuted.

Since his call, I have on three occasions revisited the site of the fridge and building rubble. Most frustratingly, although some of the material had been cleared, there were three more fridges to add to the original, which was still there. There were also new consignments of building materials. David's understanding is that the contractor's vehicles are too wide to travel along the bridleway. Understandably the contractors do not wish to damage the vehicles they use, which leaves them in an unequal battle with the tippers, who are probably using a battered Transit and don't care what damage is done to it. David nevertheless assured me that the rubbish would be cleared. I will keep you informed of further developments.

Bill Sellicks

Friends of Butts Close

The Butts Close Greenspace Action Plan 2016-21 (the GAP) continues to be delivered – albeit at a pace dictated by nature. The Countryside Management Service (CMS) Volunteers seeded grassland around the pond with wildflowers, but there are as yet no signs of growth.

The pond itself however has been very energetic in producing large blooms of algae. It looks pretty unappetising. This level of algae is inimical to the diversity of flora and fauna planned in the GAP, and at present the pond bears little relation to the images on the nearby interpretation board.

We advised the CMS and Andrew Mills, the Council's Grounds Manager. They said that this was likely due to the nutrients on the pond's bed being roused by the de-silting process last year and by the strong sunlight on the water, as yet unshaded by surrounding growth. It could be skimmed off by the CMS Volunteers but it would return fairly quickly: did we have any ideas?

Some research identified a cheap and ecologically sound approach, using barley straw. The straw is made up into long 'sausages' and floated on the water. Over a couple of months this breaks down and releases an oxidiser that destroys the algae, but otherwise does no harm. On the down side, the straw contributes to a new build-up of silt in the pond. Organic barley straw extract was the next proposal, and at present this is being considered by Andrew Mills and CMS. But whatever approach is used, it's good to see Council officers and a small voluntary group working together to try to solve a messy problem...

The other messy problem on Butts Close was of course the dog bin saga...

Tony Riley for Friends of Butts Close

If at First You Don't Succeed ...

The Radcliffe on Walsworth Road: Following a huge outcry, objecting to the proposal to demolish this gastropub and replace it with a mediocre building containing flats, and adding houses to the site, the owner sensibly withdrew the application. A new application to extend the existing building to contain four 2-bed flats and include two semi-detached 4-bed houses seemed a little more acceptable but also disposed of its use as a pub. Little surprise then that this proposal was refused on the following grounds:

- First, that not enough evidence had been provided that the premises could not be run as a financially viable business.
- Second, that the large extension would harm the host building and therefore the appearance of this historic area.
- Third, that the two houses lack the design quality of the other buildings on that side of Verulam Road and thus would not integrate well in this part of Hitchin's historic environment.

We wait to see if a third application will be forthcoming!

Legion House on Paynes Park: We objected to this proposal mainly because it was too dark and dominant. Amazingly, this was also withdrawn and subsequently replaced with a second application.

Well it could not be more different, gone is the dark grey cladding and flat roof and, more importantly, the fourth floor, reducing it to three storeys. The dark cladding is replaced with red brick and neutral grey rendered elevations, pitched tiled roofs, even a chimney stack! The intrusive corner has been set back, an imposing entrance on the Payne's Park elevation added and planting incorporated to the front and rear. The impression is that the pendulum has swung too far the other way. The previous proposal, with the alterations we suggested, would have been more appropriate in this context.

McDonalds on Nightingale Road: No one, even those who examined this application in great detail, could have anticipated that drastic environmental thuggery might be carried out on the boundary of this eating house. No, it's not on the McDonalds side, instead one needs to view it from the access road to Midland Cottages. The trees and shrubs which adorned this roadside have been brutally ripped out and replaced with an ugly metal retaining wall topped with a wooden fence. The residents of Midland Cottages banded together and made their strong feelings known to NHDC Planning and the applicant, so far to no avail. But they will keep trying other approaches to get it softened with planting at various heights.



Access to Midland Cottages - before



Access to Midland Cottages - after

Portmill Lane Former Loos: Would you believe that a planning application for the change of use of this redundant building to yet another restaurant has been submitted by its owner, North Herts District Council? Smells a bit doesn't it! Keith Hoskins (Hitchin Town Manager) who never gives up in promoting the best for Hitchin commented that there was a lack of spaces for bicycle and motor cycle storage in the town centre and that this would be a more appropriate use of the building.

...try, try again!

Chris Honey

Diary Dates:

- Tuesday 5th September: **Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:** 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively - Peter Morrison Hall, Benslow Music Trust.
- Sunday 24th September: **Burymead Springs 'walk round':** 10am-11am (part of the consultation on the Greenspace Action Plan).
- Tuesday 17th October: **Hitchin Forum AGM:** date, time and venue to be confirmed.
- Tuesday 21st November: **Butts Close enquiry:** 10am, Hitchin Town Hall (possibly also 22nd November).