



NEWSLETTER

September – October 2017 No. 143

Chairman's Piece

During the holiday period, my morning walk to the swimming pool has been a pleasure. There are breaks in the traffic on Bearton Road so that it is easy to cross, and my walk along Bearton Avenue is not accompanied by the fumes of idling engines as parents say goodbye to their charges who attend Wilshere Dacre School. I rarely have to press the button at the Fishponds Road pedestrian crossing.

By the time you read this article, Hitchin's roads will again be clogged by traffic twice each day, some of which I am convinced represent unnecessary school run car journeys.

Some weeks ago, a letter to the Comet, written by a disgruntled Hitchin Town supporter, bemoaned the lack of parking available to fans who arrived to watch a Luton Town XI play Hitchin. Not only that, but he was unhappy that he was unable to park at busy times at the swimming pool car park when he visited Archers Health and Fitness Club. It was clear that he was a Hitchin resident. Even if he lived at the furthest point in Hitchin from the gym (the junction of Purwell Lane with Kingswood Avenue) he would have to walk a total of 1.9 miles each way to get to the gym, and he could, of course, cycle. The walk would take him half an hour each way, the cycle trip 10-15 minutes, although admittedly negotiating the Cambridge Road railway bridge would make it an unpleasant journey. He might, however, conceive a liking for walking to the extent that he would no longer feel that it was worth paying his annual gym membership.

As I write, there are reports of Public Health England's claim that 41% of adults aged 40 to 60 in England walk less than 10 minutes continuously *each month* at a brisk pace. If parents accompanied their children to school on foot, they and their offspring would benefit from the extra exercise. How many unnecessary car journeys are made in taking children to and from school each day in Hitchin? If those car journeys were not made, what would be the impact on Hitchin's congestion problem? Would the air quality improve on Stevenage Road? How could parents and children be incentivised to encourage walking to school? Could gym and pool users be incentivised to walk or cycle there?

I do not know the answers to these questions, but a survey might provide some information. Unfortunately, the quality of North Herts District Council's (NHDC's) recent consultation on the future of waste and recycling services does not fill me with confidence that any useful evidence would be generated, even if one were to be conducted. The questions were particularly poorly constructed and later in this Newsletter I will discuss our response to the questionnaire.

Bill Sellicks

Stop Press

Examination of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan will start on Monday 13th November. It will take place at the Icknield Centre, Letchworth. More information can be found on the Forum website.

Paving the Way to a New Access into Hitchin's Employment Area

In our response to NHDC's Local Plan consultations¹, we said a new access road from Stotfold Road to Hitchin's employment area should be included in the Local Plan. We argued that this was needed both to stimulate future investment in the area and to improve the quality of life in residential streets nearby. We argued that this was in keeping with the Council's economic direction by making "possible the authority's stated intention to encourage further investment, development and sustainable growth, enhancing both the physical environment and business strength of the area".

We argued the case on social and environmental grounds saying it would "remove HGV traffic from existing residential streets to improve the living environment for residents in the immediate area, as well as residents on other roads throughout the town which are used as access routes for heavy vehicles". We also said that "there is an identified environmental impact from these vehicles in terms of pollution levels in particular" as indicated by the creation of two Air Quality Monitoring Areas in the town.

It was disappointing that such a road was not even referenced in NHDC's latest Proposed Submission Draft Local Plan. However, it has been pursued by Hitchin County Cllrs Derrick Ashley and Judi Billing who funded a feasibility study out of their Locality Budgets. This in itself is innovative as it is the first time County Council Locality Budgets have been used for a major matter, rather than small projects like speed signs or resurfacing of roads.

Both Councillors presented the results of their study to the September meeting of the Hitchin Committee. In a nutshell, the study found that an access road to the employment area from Stotfold Road is feasible, using land beneath the new railway viaduct. Not only is it feasible, but it could help deal with traffic generated by the planned large housing development at Highover Farm. However, residents and businesses would need to accept a through route for light vehicles via the access road, employment area and Grove Road.

What this access road will NOT do is solve Hitchin's congestion problems. It is a fairly simple proposal: a local measure to remove heavy HGV traffic from residential roads blighted for decades by noise, vibration, lack of safety, congestion and pollution. By providing another access from the north and east of Hitchin, it could alleviate congestion at the Stotfold Road/Cambridge Road roundabout and might lead to better dispersal of traffic on this side of the town.

It is also likely to bring new investment into Hitchin's employment area which should surely be welcomed by all. As road building projects go, it is apparently a relatively inexpensive proposal, particularly with the realistic expectation of developer contributions (Section 106 monies) from Highover Farm.

Hitchin Councillors were very supportive, pointing out that a better access to Hitchin's employment area has been on the cards since the days of the Hitchin Urban District Council. It was proposed in the draft North Herts Local Plan No.2 but thrown out by the Inspector in 1996 because there was no realistic means of funding it. Cllrs Ashley and Billing are to be congratulated for navigating this through the morass of County Council Highways, District Council Planning and development funding. Now we just need this to be inserted into the current Local Plan (alert to the Inspector!).

Ellie Clarke

¹ All quotes in this article are from the Forum's response to the Local Plan consultations.

Churchgate Update

Another matter flagged up in our Local Plan consultation response was inevitably Churchgate. We said that after a decade of NHDC promoting large scale redevelopment in this area, we remain unconvinced that such development has been objectively assessed in terms of its retail need.

We now hear that the Churchgate lease has been sold, subject to contract. Any large redevelopment scheme would be some years in the future - if at all. In any case, years of neglect are plain for all to see and the Council, as freeholder, should be taking action now to ensure that substantial refurbishment is carried out in the short term.

Ellie Clarke

Hitchin's Footpaths – Update

During August, I inspected 52 of Hitchin's footpaths and bridleways in order to prepare my report for Nicholas Maddex at Hertfordshire County Council (HCC). I use the word 'inspected' advisedly, since I have to confess that I cycled many of them, which is very much against my principles. Time was short, and in my defence, except on bridleways, I always dismounted when approaching a pedestrian. I am pleased to say that, except for a fallen tree near Oughtonhead springs, I could find no serious instances of surfaces which might cause accidents, overhanging vegetation or dangerous structures, which are the issues that are the responsibility of HCC.

It is important to say that all three issues are very much a matter of judgement. Some paths I judge to be rural in nature, with either grass or stony surfaces. In these cases, I would argue that rougher surfaces are acceptable. Even so, I believe that the enormous potholes on Oughtonhead Way near the common were dangerous and needed to be filled. That was done last year very effectively. You can see the before (<https://tinyurl.com/ydhfk7rc>) and after (<https://tinyurl.com/y9lvzxd>) pictures on the Forum website, the first with my bike well on its way to the antipodes in one of the offending holes.

By contrast, a number of urban paths have deteriorating tarmac surfaces, although they are far from potholed. I have classed these surfaces as acceptable in my report, but would welcome your views about the surfaces of urban paths, particularly if you know of any accidents, which suggest that action should be taken.

I know that many of you will share concerns about litter, fly-tipping and graffiti, which are the responsibility of NHDC, and therefore do not feature in my report. With the exception of the path outside the swimming pool after busy weekends, and a few other well-used locations, I have not found the litter situation to be too bad, and recently NHDC's Service Team have responded to reports of overflowing bins quite promptly. However, one's perception of littering is very much a matter of when one visits in relation to the bin emptying and sweeping rotas. Fly-tipping seems to be less of a problem on urban paths, and certainly on Hitchin paths. I have seen nothing to match the almost systematic dumping in Hoar's Lane and other bridleways between Hitchin and Offley on which I have reported recently. Sadly, there seems to be very little chance of action on graffiti. This is a pity, as I am convinced that it creates an air of localised antisocial behaviour which I believe means that some footpaths are less well used than they should be.

My report to HCC will be available on the Forum website soon. If you wish to make any comments on the surface quality of urban paths or other issues, please contact me at footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Bill Sellicks

NHDC's Waste and Recycling Questionnaire - Consultation Revisited

You may have responded to North Herts District Council's (NHDC's) request to complete its questionnaire to 'help shape the future of waste and recycling services' in North and East Hertfordshire. In early August, a Forum member contacted me to point out that the survey was being conducted over the summer holiday period, and that abandoning garden waste collection was likely to lead to an increase in fly tipping and antisocial incineration. As a result, Steering Group agreed that I should write to Councillor Weeks, the portfolio holder, encouraging him to extend the period of consultation and pointing out some of the faults with the questionnaire, which I duly did. The reply I received attempted to reassure me that there had been a 'significant' number of responses already and that the questions had been constructed very carefully with input from Councillors, Officers and 'communication consultants'. The consultation period was not extended.

In the introduction to its Consultation Strategy, NHDC acknowledges the importance of consultation and that it has some way to go in its efforts in this respect. I do not think that this consultation demonstrated progress.

Survey Monkey makes it easy to construct questionnaires which allow the Council to claim that it has carried-out a consultation. Most questionnaires are targeted at all residents. As such, they run the risk of being completed by a self-selected group which may be unrepresentative of the population as a whole. I have asked Councillor Weeks what criteria are being used to decide on the significance of the sample and how it is decided that the sample is representative of the general population of North and East Hertfordshire.

The writing of appropriate questions is an art which few possess. Questionnaires produced by those without the necessary expertise often contain questions that are poorly constructed, which result in a lack of clarity, and sometimes questions which cannot be answered. The result is data that is unreliable and should be ignored. A sure sign of this from the respondent's point of view is when you feel you want to say 'but what about?'. I experienced that frustration with this questionnaire a number of times. There were examples of questions that were too long, that introduced bias (by leading the respondent to give a particular answer) or that provided responses that did not represent all possibilities. I have in the past attempted to construct survey questions myself, only to realise that some were unanswerable when it was too late. When the survey had been completed the data was unusable. Contrary to Councillor Weeks' assertion in his reply to me, the quality of the questions is not necessarily dependent on the amount of care and effort that has been expended in their construction.

A good way of ensuring that the questions 'work' is to run a pilot, and gather feedback from those who attempt to answer the questionnaire. Glaring errors will become apparent very readily. I have suggested to Councillor Weeks (he is also Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, so should be very interested in the issue) that in future, questionnaires should be piloted. I also said that I was sure that Forum members would be willing to be involved, but that it was important to involve a broad and representative cross-section of the population in such pilots. He has replied to say that he would pass on the suggestion to relevant officers. At the time of writing, I have not received any requests for volunteers!

Bill Sellicks

Annual General Meeting

We will celebrate the Forum's 25th year since its foundation in 1992. The traditional refreshment break will be followed by the Members' Meeting, at which a presentation on Hertfordshire County Council's recently published report on a possible access road to the industrial estate from Stotfold Road will be made by David Borner. The report runs to well over 200 pages and this synopsis should be an opportunity to get to grips with the main points. There will be a chance to ask questions. Papers for the AGM, including nomination forms and reports, will be distributed in early October.

Bill Selicks

The Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up: 15th October 2017

We are now making plans for our next *Big Hitchin Tidy Up* which takes place on **Sunday 15th October from 10am to 12 noon**. If you know of areas that could do with a bit of tender loving care, whether these are road verges, neighbourhood streets, alleyways, parks or Hitchin's rivers, please contact us! Our April Spring Clean tackled 7 open spaces, 9 roadsides, one car park and a dozen footpaths around the town. With over a hundred volunteers involved, we collected 135 large bags of rubbish, resulting in a much cleaner town.

We hope to hear from Hitchin Forum members, schools, clubs and organisations, uniformed groups and local residents who are willing to join in. We provide litter pickers and bags, organise volunteers into teams and arrange collection of bags of rubbish after the event. All you need to do is turn up with your gloves, muscle power and enthusiasm!

To volunteer or for further information, email: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk .

Ellie Clarke

Diary Dates:	
Sunday 15 th October:	10am – 12 noon – all around Hitchin – The Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up.
Tuesday 17 th October:	Hitchin Forum AGM, 25th anniversary celebration & members meeting.
Monday 13 th November:	9.30am – Icknield Centre, Letchworth Garden City SG6 1EF – NHDC's Local Plan Examination in Public begins. Details can be found on the Forum website.
Tuesday 21 st November:	10am – Hitchin Town Hall – Planning Inquiry into NHDC's Proposed Works on Butts Close. Open to the public.