



NEWSLETTER

May – June 2018 No. 147

Chairman's Piece

In 'To Play the King', Andrew Davies' 1993 adaptation of the novel by Michael Dobbs, the Machiavellian Frances Urquhart is introduced to the pollster, Sarah Harding. Impressed, Urquhart quickly adopts her as his advisor. In a dialogue between the pair, Harding asserts 'Delivering the poll result you want is a matter of asking the right questions' (or words to that effect).

Harding went on to meet an untimely end, and was therefore unavailable to be recruited to advise NHDC in the construction of survey questions. Last year's waste and recycling consultation saw the Council try to deliver an affirmative response to the question of whether respondents would be prepared to pay a charge for the collection of garden waste. The key question clumsily broke several rules in the market researcher's handbook including the extensive preamble, which clearly led respondents to give a 'yes/agree' response. Respondents were then asked to agree or disagree with a statement involving differing approaches to the separate collections of green and food waste.

It is hardly surprising that in the 2017 'District Wide Survey' (the Council's two-yearly customer satisfaction survey which measures its performance over a range of issues and services) the proportion of respondents who considered that '...NHDC makes an effort to find out what local people want' was 35% compared to 41% who disagreed. This is a 13% decrease in agreement with the same statement in the 2015 survey. The report on the 2017 survey, submitted to Cabinet at its meeting on 27th March 2018, points out that the fieldwork on the District Wide Survey was carried out in October/November 2017, following the consultation on charging for green waste and the subsequent decision to introduce the charge. The report argues that, although people were unhappy with the decisions taken following consultation, it did not follow that consultation was inadequate or inappropriate.

I beg to differ. The analysis contained in the report made no comment on the quality of the questions used. If in the green waste consultation, the Council had simply said that, unfortunately, to cut costs, the decision to charge for green waste was likely to be unavoidable, the decision would have been more acceptable. If other questions, aimed at mitigating the effect of the charge, had been offered as a genuine enquiry, they might have elicited helpful responses and reduced the current belief that the Council ignores the outcome of such consultations.

In June 2017, a report entitled 'The Council's Management of Larger Projects' included a significant section on the Simons debacle relating to Churchgate (<https://democracy.north-herts.gov.uk/documents/s567/Appendix%20A%20-%20Task%20and%20Finish%20Group%20Report.pdf>). Recommendation 9 of the report states 'The Council should improve its consultation and engagement with the public'. In the light of this and the area wide survey result, it would be pleasing to feel that considered criticism, such as that offered in our letter about the most recent proposals, prompted reflection about the design of consultations and what they aim to achieve. As well as our letter, the reply we received is on the HF website. What impression does it give, I wonder, about the responsiveness of the Council?

Bill Sellicks

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Churchgate Update

Since our last newsletter was issued, an additional session of the *Examination in Public* into NHDC's Local Plan was convened to consider allocations for additional shopping etc. in town centres. Officers of the Council had been instructed to consider several topics of concern at the previous hearing in December and this was an opportunity to discuss what they recommended as major changes to the Local Plan. In the event, only Hitchin's allocations for the Churchgate and Paynes Park sites were scrutinised.

Officers recommended that a **Concept Framework** should be prepared for both sites. We've heard of Master Plans, Town Centre Strategies and Planning Briefs, but this was a new one. Even the Inspector seemed bemused. In the end, it all sounded a bit of vague gobbledegook: "*A concept framework will consider existing and potential land uses, capacities for development and place-making. It will illustrate the disposition and connectivity of current and potential land uses including retail; employment/commercial; housing and other community facilities; formal/informal public open space; the market; links to car parks, bus stops, key footpaths . . . guidance on how these routes will align through and around the framework area connecting to surrounding neighbourhoods . . . and the phasing and deliverability of any site-specific proposals.*"

So far it sounded just like a Town Centre Strategy, except that it would not be a material consideration in determining planning applications. In fact, a 'Concept Framework' will "*inform the production of a new Town Centre Strategy for Hitchin.*" So another cog in a process that has already gone on for over a decade. Clearly the 2005 Hitchin Town Centre Strategy is grossly out of date. However, what followed in the discussion gives us no confidence that an updated policy guidance document will actually take account of the up-to-date retail environment.

As you know, the Council is currently considering the possibility of a refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre and its surroundings, including Hitchin Market. When asked how that would fit in with their Local Plan proposal for a huge retail expansion in the town (as the Council has been proposing for over a decade now), NHDC's Counsel replied that the small increase of 350sqm retail floor space in the current refurbishment proposal should be seen as the key to unlocking the entirety of what is misleadingly called the Churchgate site by NHDC. That is, the Local Plan proposal is for a future total redevelopment of the area joining the Market Place to Hitchin Market, St Mary's Square and Portmill Lane, and including all the nearby car parks, not just the Churchgate Centre.

The Council seems to have no clear idea about where car parking could be replaced, much less that nationally and locally the retail environment has changed dramatically: internet shopping has led to the downsizing and closing of shops with many town centres decimated. Town centres that are bucking the trend are those like Hitchin which are changing in character and becoming attractive centres for social, cultural and leisure activities.

The policies of 20 years ago promoting huge shopping expansions at Churchgate, and now Paynes Park as well, are outdated, inappropriate and unrealistic. They are probably also irrelevant because Hitchin has demonstrated very clearly over that time that it has the strength, resilience, flexibility and realism to map out its own future, and very successfully too.

Ellie Clarke

New Century Park

The planning application for the access road to New Century Park was submitted to Luton Borough Council (LBC) in December and the consultation closed in February. We did not submit any comment by the deadline, although we had already submitted comments during the earlier consultation phases. Broadly, these were to the effect that given the projected numbers of employees (a minimum of 3200 at the time we sent the letter), there would be a significant impact on peak time vehicle movements along the A602/A505 corridor through Hitchin. The planning application comprised over 1,100 pages in the planning documents and nearly 6,000 pages in the Environmental Statement.

The application can be found on the Luton Environment and Planning site: <https://planning.luton.gov.uk/online-applications/> and using the reference 17/02300/EIA.

I have been able to skim a few of the documents, mainly to do with transport. However, an advice note prepared by LBC's Planning Department is quite a revelation – I should have read it first. 'Marking their own homework' is often a description of LBC's approach to the airport's plans. This document most definitely is not – in fact it is a complete hatchet job, identifying copious errors, omissions and obfuscations. It could almost restore faith in local democracy! A few examples;-

'... in places the submission has not recognised that the Luton Local Plan 2011-31 is the adopted development plan for the area (occasionally referring to earlier versions or to the Luton Local Plan 2001-11).'

'As a major road scheme the development will have an impact on the network both locally and over a wider area, consequently simulation modelling of the network around the application site and runs of the Central Beds and Luton Transport Model to assess both the local and wider impacts should have been provided'.

'Additionally it is not clear that the assessment has considered the strategic highway network, and it should be noted that Highways England have submitted a holding request pending further assessment by their consultants Aecom'.

In fact, Highways England has requested that the application is not determined before 7th June.

I can find no submission from either NHDC or HCC, although there is a record of both having been consulted. Let us hope that Highways England will require far more rigour before Luton Borough Council makes a decision on its own planning application.

Bill Sellicks

Hitchin Festival

The Festival runs from 30th June to 29th July. Over one hundred events will take place during the month, including walks, talks, concerts, comedy and drama.

The Box Office in the Hitchin Information Centre, 1A Churchyard, will be open from 10am to 3pm daily (Mon - Sat) from Thursday 7th June (except Thursday 21st).

The Big Hitchin Spring Clean

"It's amazing that such a small number of us can make such a big difference!"

We keep saying this - but the 2018 **Big Hitchin Spring Clean** was probably our most successful litter day to date. The numbers speak for themselves: 93 volunteers (of whom 29 were youngsters) working in 12 teams filled 149 black bags. We had 24 new volunteers.

Verges, parks and other open spaces and numerous footpaths were cleared of litter. Huge amounts of fly-tipping were cleared from several sites, including The Dell, Maxwell's Path and the river at Bancroft. Where the material was too much to clear or inaccessible to volunteers, it was reported to the Council immediately after the event, but fence panels, sofa springs, car parts, a tent, sleeping bag, mattress, piles of newspapers, an artificial Christmas tree, builder's materials and a new one this year - a cache of close to a hundred doggie bags - were cleared. Such is the determination and persistence of our volunteers!

The feedback is always positive and this time was no exception. Some volunteers found it incredibly relaxing(!), all found it pleasantly sociable (*"it's lovely chatting to people you've never met before whilst doing something incredibly positive"*), and all were enthusiastic (*"it's been amazing that such a small number of us can make such a big difference"*, *"we will definitely do this again!"*). It's clear to us that the children involved enjoyed themselves every bit as much as the adults.

We are particularly grateful for the support and co-operation provided by North Herts District Council who loan us pickers and hi viz vests, provide black bags and collect all the rubbish the next morning (often before 9am!). Hitchin Initiative provides our insurance cover, without which the event simply could not happen.

Our twice yearly litter days raise our profile, introducing residents to our activities and spreading the word that Hitchin Forum does positive and practical work in the town. We have also had inquiries about how to organise these events from a local village and a Stevenage neighbourhood group. However you look at it, this is a good event for Hitchin Forum, volunteers and the town itself. A big 'thank you' to everyone who helped make this day such a success! We are already looking to fixing the date for the Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up.

But there is a bigger picture . . .

On April 1st the government introduced on-the-spot £150 fines for drivers littering from vehicles. Whilst this is encouraging, how often can it actually be realised? We are pleased that our requests to the District Council for approach roads into the town to be cleaned up have led to results, but these roads have been covered in litter for many months. It is clear to us that the present annual cleaning regime for these roads is totally inadequate and District Councillors must look to addressing this blight on our environment.

We have already been contacted by the new contractor appointed by NHDC for street cleaning and rubbish collection, Urbaser, and this is one of the matters we will be raising with them in forthcoming discussions. We need to work collaboratively with the authorities because this matter goes well beyond the endeavours of volunteers. We will continue to 'do our bit' for Hitchin, but others must also 'up their game' if we are really to address the problem of litter blighting our lives.

Ellie Clarke