

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

July - August 2018 No. 148

Chairman's Piece

I found Robin Dartington's passionate, insightful and authoritative presentation on the recent proposals (such as they are) to refurbish Churchgate and Hitchin Market at our last meeting very interesting. Contributions from the floor reflected intimate knowledge of the many years during which no progress was made, but much public money was spent. My knowledge of the history pre 2012 is sketchy. As a result, I often find it difficult to contribute anything meaningful to the discussion, so I was quite happy for others to do so. My problems are threefold; I lack any financial expertise, I have little knowledge of architectural principles, and I confess that I am only too happy to embrace internet shopping. I see Churchgate as an unattractive thoroughfare, with very little to entice me into its shops. Unless it features a serious outdoor shop, a bike shop and a hardware store to complement Brookers, I don't see my attitude changing.

One suggestion that Robin made stuck with me. I hope that I am not misinterpreting what he said, but he called for consideration of what seemed to me to be student-type accommodation aimed at 18-25 year olds – single rooms with shared kitchens and bathrooms – to occupy part of a redeveloped Churchgate. The challenge to the assumption, replicated in the recent online 'consultation' by North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC), that the regeneration/refurbishment should be 'retail-led', is welcome. Could there also be some small business units capable of accommodating start-ups, providing work for some living in the nearby accommodation? If that were the case, other businesses might profit – food outlets being the most obvious beneficiaries.

It seems to me that Hitchin is no longer a dormitory town. Recent arrivals may commute into London, but they seem to expect the evening and weekend economy to provide much of what London provides at significantly lower cost – hence the number of recently-opened eateries and coffee shops, the beer shop and the two Turkish barbers. I am not the first to observe that Hermitage Road is starting to feel like Old Street roundabout. Could Churchgate become a 'tech hub'? I am not in any way qualified to assess the practicality of these possibilities, but that is not the point. One of the many ways in which the recent consultation was flawed was that it simply assumed a retail future for the area. How could it do otherwise given its genesis? Should we accept that retail is probably not the answer, and find out what alternatives there might be? A way of doing this is to open up the discussion to those who may be unaware of the history, but who can provide new ideas.

Is refurbishment kicking the can down the road? The recent NHDC consultation, prompted by the approach from Shearer Property Group, questioned no assumptions. Hitchin residents have useful ideas to contribute, and can be more proactive in articulating a vision for the area as a whole. Hitchin Forum has a role to play in facilitating this and Steering Group has been discussing how we might do this. Watch this space as they say.

Bill Sellicks

FROME - The New Cradle of Democracy?

At the end of May, an intrepid bunch of us (well six) ventured to Frome in Somerset, intrigued by the notion of how the town managed to create and sustain a grassroots movement that took over their Town Council in 2011 and was re-elected with an even bigger mandate in 2015. So, no flash in the pan! It remains to be seen how they will fare in 2019, but all the signs are encouraging.

We met with Councillors Peter Macfadyen and Mel Usher, key architects of IfF (Independents for Frome), with Councillor Kate Bielby and Town Clerk Peter Wynne. Peter had written the book 'Flatpack Democracy, a DIY Guide to Creating Independent Politics'. He will very soon issue a follow up to show how the project has been sustained.

Frome is a town slightly smaller than Hitchin with a population of just under 27,000. More people commute out of the town to work than commute in. However, there are 850 businesses in town, of which 72% have fewer than 5 employees. Currently the Council has a precept income of £1,268,273, all of which is dedicated to the wellbeing of its town, which is equivalent to £150.69 per year for a Band D property. This precept has risen over the 7 years that Independents have been in control. It would seem that the good people of Frome are pleased with the services that are being delivered and so there has been no widespread opposition. This year's increase equated to 15p per week.

Democracy in Frome is very open, with Town Council meetings in the round and accessible to all. No party politics means no confrontation and no pre-determined decision-making. There are healthy debates that include members of the public and a majority decision prevails. There is no formal committee structure. The Council meets monthly and there are project panels that are formed from Councillors and co-opted members of the public who may have a special interest or expertise. These panels will discuss, make recommendations and implement, then disband. At this point, a new topic is launched with different contributors. Current panels discuss Keep Frome Clean, Well-Being, Town Centre, and Sport and Leisure.

The Council now employs an Environment Manager in charge of open spaces, buildings and three town rangers; a Resilience Manager looking at sustainability, renewable energies and waste; an Economic & Regeneration Manager dealing with planning matters, health & wellbeing and business liaison and a Community Projects Officer to see how joint working with other groups can bring about improved facilities. Then there are Finance & Admin staff and a Marketing & Communications Manager, with assistants that help keep the information offices open to the public.

Frome, described in the book as having 'a history of both neglect and slightly bolshie independence', had an established Town Council in a three-tier system of local government with Mendip District Council and Somerset County Council above them. However, in the past seven years they have delivered so much for their town that come polling day, the electorate have happily split their votes between traditional party politics for District/County and overwhelmingly IfF at Town level. Their movement began as so many ideas do from an initial discussion in the pub where, rather than the usual "they should do something about it", it became "Why don't we do something about it?". The 'it' being a genuine desire to focus solely on bringing benefit to Frome, to encourage different and diverse debate and reassert that community leadership is about making bold, local decisions without fear of making mistakes.

Keith Hoskins

Congestion Ahead

In the article 'Highoverview' below, you will see that NHDC is currently considering an application for outline planning permission for 700 homes at Highover Farm on the northeast of Hitchin. Also, to our west, Luton Airport is consulting on plans to expand again, from 18 million to 38 million passengers per year, not far short of Gatwick's throughput. One thing that these developments and other new housing in North Hertfordshire and its environs can be expected to do, is generate more traffic.

NHDC has agreed in principle with developers that Highover Farm traffic can be dealt with by a little tinkering with junctions, notably the Walsworth crossroads. Previous work here has not solved problems with existing traffic, so this seems to be a triumph of optimism over experience, or perhaps just the burying of heads in the sand, when faced with a problem that is just too difficult.

As the RAC has recently commented, motorists are more dependent on their cars than ever before and they are finding that public transport is failing to provide a reliable and effective alternative. Few who have tried to use Hitchin's recent chaotic railway service would disagree with that, and neither are we alone in this area in suffering cuts to bus services and lack of provision for cyclists.

One thing seems certain: we can expect road congestion to increase. If councils seem unable to plan effectively for traffic growth, or have no power to curtail it, then we are left with desperate measures to try to cope with the problem, using whatever limited remedies are available.

On the A602, A505 and B655 to the west of Hitchin, where traffic queues for hours morning and evening, the highways engineers are looking at – you've guessed it – fiddling with junctions. Since these were originally planned to cope well with traffic, the options are rather limited. Unfortunately the options being considered threaten to be rather damaging to the urban environment – cutting an extra lane through the library garden and grabbing pavement and gardens to convert the Pirton Road mini-roundabout to traffic lights. With any luck, common sense will prevail and the town environment will not be sacrificed for questionable small short-lived gains to traffic flow. This heavy-handed traffic engineering is also inconsistent with trying to create the right environment to encourage more walking and cycling.

If the traffic engineers and planners are watching Canute-like the approaching tide of traffic, what is likely to happen once they have been engulfed?

The idea of a Hitchin southern bypass is likely to be resurrected, and indeed is already mentioned in NHDC's October 2017 Transport Strategy report (<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/ED14%20NHDC%20Transport%20Strategy%20October%202017.pdf>). This is likely to be controversial because of the lack of an obvious environmentally acceptable route. Nevertheless, commuters passing through and residents in the current congestion and pollution hotspots are likely to view it in a positive light.

A Hitchin bypass might be a good thing if carefully planned and funded for environmental benefit, and allowing traffic calming in the town centre. If it can only be funded by allowing "sustainable" development to sprawl into the countryside to the south-west of Hitchin, the answer may well be no thanks, we'll keep the congestion.

David Borner

Margaret Moss

We were saddened to hear of the death of Margaret Moss in June. She was part of the original group of Quakers who helped establish Hitchin Forum in 1992 and served as our Treasurer for the next six years. She was not only an exceptionally organised and able Treasurer, but brought Quakerly wisdom as well as plenty of chuckles to our (then) Co-ordinating Committee. Nothing was too much trouble for Margaret and although she lived in Offley, Hitchin and its future was in her heart. She was the best of colleagues.

Ellie Clarke

Football Fever...

Proposals for a Tesco, more car parking, and now a car valeting business – Top Field, owned by the Hitchin Cow Commoners Trust, is always a source of planning excitement. This time it's an application for the use of the Football Club car park for a car valeting and washing service, to be set up on the Fishponds Road perimeter behind the line of trees and hedging.

The original application was made in 2017 and the Council refused permission in January 2018, following submissions by Environmental Health, by local residents, and by Friends of Butts Close. However, the applicants have appealed to the Planning Inspectorate, and August 3rd is the deadline for any further submissions. NHDC consider that their refusal was robustly founded, but Officers may be making further representations to the Inspectorate. Friends of Butts Close consider that their original letter of objection sufficiently sets out their case.

All of the relevant documents can be found through the NHDC Planning Portal (<https://pa2.north-herts.gov.uk/online-applications/>) and searching for the application reference 17/02744/1.

Tony Riley

Highoverview

An outline planning application has been submitted by Bellcross Homes for Strategic Housing Site HT1 in the North Herts District Submission Local Plan. This is a triangular site north of Highover Farm and Walsworth bounded by the Cambridge railway line and the Stotfold Road. At present it is agricultural land associated with Highover Farm.

The proposal is for development of up to 700 dwellings with a strategic community hub including retail facilities, a primary school, open space, play space and other green infrastructure. The plan shows associated access (vehicular, pedestrian and cycle) which includes a new primary access road off Stotfold Road and limited access off High Dane. The proposal consists of 166 documents of which 11 are plans and 10 Design and Access Statements. You would be forgiven for thinking this was a detailed rather than an outline planning proposal as there are even visual indications of the house types for specified areas and four case study examples of similar recent developments.

So what is there to worry about? Bellcross/Rapleys held a public Exhibition at the Walsworth Community Centre a year ago inviting public feedback. They asked 'Do you support the proposals for land at Highover Farm?' You could answer Yes, Yes with reservations, No, or Don't know and make comment on the two lines provided! Hitchin Forum replied with a number of concerns. The timing was, and still is, confusing since the application has been lodged prior to the inspector's verdict on the

Submission Local Plan and that may have important implications. No planning application for this development should be determined until the 2011-2031 Local Plan for North Hertfordshire is in place.

There is a large area of open space, potentially for sports pitches and with access roads to it, in the northern corner of the site. If this is not designated as 'Public Open Space' the developer could add more houses in a few years time, and the Utilities Assessment for the site provides for 800 rather than 700 dwellings! No rented social housing is included and there is no access for walkers to the countryside north of the development.

Local residents feel a secondary school and doctor's surgery should be included. They are also concerned that security problems in High Dane, Collison Close and Roundwood Close will ensue and that Stotfold Road should be provided with street lighting for safer road journeys at night. Additional environmental concerns about the loss of green belt/green space and flooding were also expressed.

But by far the most unease relates to increased traffic congestion. With the Stotfold Road exit from the Highover site being 1.5 miles from Hitchin Railway Station and more than 2 miles from the town centre it is estimated that there could be at least 60% of journeys made by car and only 3% by bus to and from this area. This increase would exacerbate existing problems at the Stotfold Road/Cambridge Road roundabout and the Woolgrove Road junction with the A505. With no access to the eastern side of the railway station, the difficulty for cyclists and pedestrians under the railway bridge will increase and car parking in and around the station area will become more problematic.

There are 13 entries devoted to Transport Assessments in the application (go to NHDC planning page - <https://pa2.north-herts.gov.uk/online-applications/>, reference number 18/01154/OP) which concludes that the development 'will not have a detrimental impact on the local highway network.' We feel that insufficient attention is paid to sustainable journeys, or that sufficient involvement with the District and County Councils, Network Rail or local bus services is planned in this respect. Perhaps the proposed appointment of a Travel Plan Coordinator to promote cycling, walking and public transport use will mitigate the problem.

So, as with other housing developments taking place in Hitchin, particularly on the western edge of town, it is often the consequences caused by the site proposal, but external to it, which cause the greatest problems. One could say a wider view needs to be taken or perhaps a high overview!

Chris Honey

Update: Local Plan Examination in Public

The Examination in Public (EiP) of the Local Plan was formally closed on 27th March by the Inspector. Numerous issues were raised at the hearings, some resulting in alterations being made to the Submission Local Plan (SLP). The Inspector also asked the Council to complete a number of actions to provide additional information to the Examination. Some of these actions had already been completed during the hearings and the Council intended to finish the remainder by the end of April. The full list can be found at: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/examination-actions>.

When the Inspector had all the documents arising out of the actions, he was to decide whether he needed any further information. Those who have commented on the SLP would then have the

opportunity to provide written comments on these later documents, but only on those which related to their earlier submissions. The Council would then be able to respond to these further submissions.

So, even after the EiP is completed, the Local Plan process still has a way to go, but don't hold your breath. In June the Inspector notified interested parties that while he had expected this further information from the Council to be available during May, the Council had not yet been able to complete all the actions from the Hearing Sessions and he did not expect the material until late June at the earliest. He then will need to study them before they are put out to existing participants for comment.

The last Local Plan adopted by NHDC is now over 20 years old and it is likely to be a while yet before the next one is adopted. However, developers never delay, as you will see in the "Highoverview" article in this newsletter. Understandably, there is both uncertainty and unease here.

Ellie Clarke



And Finally - Hitchin Blooms...

Diary Dates	
Tuesday 11th September:	Town Talk and Hitchin Committee - 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively - Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place.
Tuesday 25th September:	NHDC Cabinet Meeting - 7.30pm Council Chamber, Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth. <i>We understand that Churchgate is to be on the agenda.</i>
Tuesday 23rd October:	Hitchin Forum AGM and Members' Meeting - 7.45pm