

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

January – February 2019 No. 151

Chairman's Piece

The Main Modifications¹ to North Hertfordshire's Submission Local Plan have been posted on its website and are being consulted upon. Those of us who contributed to Hitchin Town Action Group's 2016 submission on the Plan feel some frustration that our comments and suggestions appear to have been ignored by the Inspector in the emerging final version. The Inspector's remit seems to have been to ensure that the Plan is 'sound' within an even narrower definition of the term than we had been led to believe. One of my particular disappointments is the Plan's failure to demonstrate an unambiguous commitment to policies which are likely to reduce car use and promote cycling and walking (so-called 'mode shift'). The relevant policy wording for the Highover development is '.....provision for sustainable modes of transport and comprehensive integration into the existing pedestrian and cycle, public transport and road networks'² which does not convince me that anything will be done to address the off-site issues, among which must be the poor pedestrian link to the station and town centre provided by the Cambridge Road railway bridge.

The two main problems with encouraging walking or cycling via the rail bridge are, as ever, money and the will to ensure that a number of bodies can work effectively together. Perhaps the government's recently published two year action plan to improve the safety of 'vulnerable road users' could help. Councils are to be encouraged to invest around 15 per cent of their local transport infrastructure funding over time on safe and efficient cycling and walking infrastructure³. What 'over time' means is unclear. In 2015/16, Hitchin Station benefited from part of a £120,000 Department for Transport 'Cycle Rail Funding' grant. This was provided to support a scheme to improve CCTV security, but was shared between Hitchin, Stevenage, St Albans and Elstree & Borehamwood Stations. Hardly a game-changer!

Elsewhere, a memorandum of understanding between Network Rail and Hertfordshire County Council exists for 'a second railway crossing for pedestrians and cyclists' as a consequence of the extra housing at Baldock⁴, suggesting that Network Rail, North Herts District Council and Herts County Council can work together to initiate appropriate schemes. In the Highover context, possible solutions present serious practical difficulties. However, the contrast between the approach to developments at Baldock and Highover highlights one of the problems about the Local Plan. Policies appear to address traffic issues when new development itself could be impacted by inadequate infrastructure, especially if the development is sufficiently large. Where development exacerbates existing problems, and especially if the new development is relatively small, there appears to be no mechanism to deal with issues. Nevertheless, I understand that a review of the use of Network Rail land has been mooted to discover how the London-bound platform could be opened to relieve congestion and discourage parking in residential streets. Ways of improving cycle paths in the area should be considered as part of that review to improve the sustainable transport experience. Let us hope that the review results in a workable solution.

Bill Sellicks

- 1.&2. <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/Schedule%20of%20proposed%20Main%20Modifications.pdf>
3. http://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/758519/cycling-walking-investment-strategy-safety-review.pdf
4. www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/ED122%20MoU%20Network%20Rail%20%20HCC%20Baldock%20.pdf

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Founded 1992

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The Hitchin Big Spring Clean 2019

We are looking to build on the success of the Autumn 2018 **Big Green Litter Pick** with our next event, the **Hitchin Big Spring Clean**. This will take place on Sunday 17th March 10am - 12 noon.

The **Big Green Litter Pick** combined the efforts of **Clean Up Hitchin** with **Hitchin Forum** for the first time. It was our biggest ever event and outstanding for the support gained from local businesses. Planning for our next event is still in its early stages, but the combined litter and treasure hunt was so popular we hope to run a version of that again. As always, we are grateful for the support of Hitchin Initiative who publicise our litter days and provide us with insurance cover, and North Herts District Council who provide bags and litter pickers and efficiently collect rubbish after the event from the many sites around the town.

The ongoing public support for cleaning up Hitchin is very encouraging. One octogenarian accosted me in Sainsbury's to report she regularly litter picks in Bancroft Rec and had filled at least 60 bags over the past 6 months! We also know that many of our regular volunteers now have their own litter pickers and recently we received the following email: *"After being part of the litter pick last year, my 7-year old daughter has taken it upon herself to continue to do this. We have bought some litter pickers and now take them everywhere we go to pick up litter. She has even made posters to tell everyone else to do the same."*

We are using one of these posters on our website as an 'early flag' for our **Hitchin Big Spring Clean** so please put the date in your diaries and join us for a fun and satisfying morning, making Hitchin cleaner and brighter! To volunteer, simply email: litter@hitchinform.org.uk

Ellie Clarke

A New System for Keeping an Eye on Hitchin's Footpaths

At the end of March last year, I wrote a short article in Newsletter 146 explaining that I would not be preparing my usual report (due in February last year) on Hitchin's footpaths. Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and the Countryside Management Service (CMS) had called for volunteer Footpath Surveyors: I had completed part of the training and was waiting to hear from them about how I would be able to help. I have now completed the training and have been working to produce surveys on footpaths, not only in Hitchin, but also in the parishes of Ickleford, Pirton and Offley.

Before explaining what I have been doing, I need to correct a mistake in that article. Contrary to what I said in March, HCC's Countryside Access Officer for Hitchin is still Nicholas Maddex, although there has been a reorganisation of Hertfordshire's Rights of Way Unit and CMS.

Some of you may like to know what I have been doing in more detail, so I have written a short explanation which is on the Forum website⁵. As in the past, you might wish to inform me of problems which you have noticed and I have not. From the explanation, you will be able to access a map of Hitchin's paths, which will enable you to find their number on HCC's Definitive Map. A further link from the article will allow you to see whether I have completed a report on a particular path, and if I identified any issues. It will also give the date of the report – things could well have changed since I completed it. If you would like to see a report on any path, you will be able to request it by email to footpaths@hitchinform.org.uk, using its number on the Definitive Map. If you highlight new issues and I report them, we may be able to initiate some action, as we have done previously.

Bill Sellicks

5. www.hitchinform.org.uk/hitchin-footpaths-how-you-can-help/

A Tribute to Keith Hoskins, MBE

Never mind Brexit on 29th March. That date has another special significance for Hitchin: it is the date that Keith Hoskins is due to retire from full time work with Hitchin Initiative.

This, of course, seems impossible; can it really be twenty-two years already? I remember his interview well; he stood apart and was outstanding for his grasp of the specific issues important in Hitchin at that time and their implications, but he also had a vision for how town centre management could develop further. We had been very blessed with Julie Parkinson as our first town centre manager, and Keith clearly had the insight to help us take the next steps in Hitchin. The interview panel was unanimous, and Keith was appointed. We have never been disappointed. He has been the glue between the community and the businesses in town - there is a real art in this. I think we understand, in much more detail now, the intricacies of successful town centres in a rapidly changing world.

And Hitchin has succeeded. We have been steered through difficult times and remained more robust and nimbler as a commercial and social centre than many others. Keith has excelled in business projects - Hitchin Business Improvement District has just been voted in comprehensively for another five years. He has always been supportive of community initiatives; just one example, Hitchin Festival, has grown exponentially in stature and scale. His work in the town was well recognised when he was awarded an MBE in the 2015 New Year's Honours List. His contribution has been not only comprehensive, but unique and recognised nationally with involvement in training and leading seminars on what makes a successful town centre. Keith should be given the Freedom of Hitchin (does anyone have it to give?).

We must not lose his dexterous skills, his endless talent for spotting a different way through thorny or seemingly impossible problems, or indeed his cheeky wit. He would like to continue in part time employment with Hitchin Initiative, working on projects to improve life in Hitchin. He is making progress towards creating parking and pedestrian access on the north side of Hitchin station (what a difference that could make to rush hour snarl-ups for both nerves and traffic!). He would like to continue working on restoring The Dell to an open-air theatre and on improving visitor and commuter parking in the town, as well as enhancing public areas (think chewing gum, broken paving, redundant signs and improving visitor signage to facilities and attractions like our new museum).

So much yet to be done in Hitchin! No talent spotters needed. We have the man for the job. It is to be hoped that Hitchin Initiative will agree!

Ellie Clarke

Churchgate Update

January is not just a time for new year resolutions. Following the festive period there are the inevitable retail sales reports of mixed - or sinking - fortunes, particularly for national chain stores. These have been more extreme this year than for a decade, so the government's 'Future High Streets Fund' will be welcome, if properly targeted.

At the more local level there is usually a sprinkling of shop closures. Despite the continued growth of online retailing, Hitchin is faring better than most. Nevertheless, it is a positive move that our MP, Bim Afolami, has arranged for Jake Berry (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) to come to Hitchin to hear about the challenges facing the town, as well as measures to deal with them. The recently renewed Hitchin Business Improvement District has played a major part over the last 10 years, building on the strengths that businesses and community groups have brought to Hitchin Initiative in the decade before that.

The elephant in the room is, of course, Churchgate. Neglected for 20 years, its future direction has been uncertain for over a decade, resulting in a parallel and damaging blight on Hitchin Market. The freeholder, North Herts District Council, had been hopeful of a grant from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) which might have been boosted by a Public Works Board Loan to improve Churchgate and its surroundings, including the Market. The board considered the bid on 13th December and it is now apparent that the LEP bid was unsuccessful. However, the ideas put together by the Resurgence Pro Bono group as reported in our last newsletter are far more forward looking in social and economic terms than a mere refurbishment and carry-on-with-much-the-same shopping centre. These ideas were picked up by Bim Afolami who met with the Resurgence group just before Christmas. He was apparently very enthusiastic and arranged for the group to do a presentation to Jake Berry on 21 January.

The Pro Bono proposals also have public support and they capitalise on the historic concept of Hitchin as a Market Town. They would help Hitchin town centre become even more robust in increasing its already strong "experience economy". And they would uplift a degraded part of the town centre to a whole new level in terms of improved access, new and better facilities, appropriate social housing and a vastly enhanced river environment.

Surely the Council should be applying for LEP grant aid to enable these ideas to reach fruition over the next decade. Also, if the Council first of all bought back the head lease, it would simplify what has been a tortuous process for too many years, enabling real progress to finally take place.

Ellie Clarke and John Wyer

Membership

Many thanks to all the members who paid their subscriptions so promptly or decided to complete standing order authorities, and a gentle reminder to those who have not yet got round to paying that subscriptions are due each November 1st.

If your renewal form has gone out with the Christmas wrapping paper, you'd like to make a direct bank transfer, or if you can't remember whether or not you have paid, please get in touch with me on membership@hitchinforum.org.uk.

We recently asked members to let us know if in future they would prefer to receive newsletters in electronic format only. Just under half have now decided on this option. We shall continue to have some copies printed every time; if at any time you wish to change your choice, please let me know.

Maureen Carroll (Membership Secretary)

Diary Dates:

Tuesday 12th February: **Forum Members' Meeting:** Andrew Lambourne will give a presentation on "Consultations galore: an update on aviation policy, airspace change and Luton expansion":

Tuesday 5th March: **Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:** 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively. Venue to be confirmed.

Sunday 17th March: **Hitchin Big Spring Clean:** 10am - 12 noon. All around the town.