

### Chairman's Piece

A relaxed attitude to ambiguity and lack of clarity seems to suit governments, planners and consultants. The fuzziness around the frequently used term 'sustainable' is a good example. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states 'Plans and decisions should apply a presumption in favour of sustainable development'<sup>1</sup>. In view of its importance, one would expect a definition of 'sustainable development' to appear in the NPPF's glossary. It does not, although paragraph 7 states '..... the objective of sustainable development can be summarised as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. I suppose the document's authors would say that the Framework will ensure that local authorities produce policies which themselves achieve that objective in their local plans. If so, there seems to be plenty of scope for subjectivity and inconsistency.

Andrew Lambourne raised this issue in his presentation to our members' meeting in February, an account of which appears later in this Newsletter. 'Sustainable Aviation' is an industry body comprising airports, airlines and aircraft manufacturers. To those of us who are concerned about the impact of increasing numbers of flights on noise, carbon dioxide emissions and surface traffic, the name sounds like that of a pressure group, the aims of which we would endorse. A visit to the homepage of its website<sup>2</sup> is reassuring, at least initially. A prominently displayed banner proclaims 'Sustainable Aviation is a long term strategy which sets out the collective approach of UK aviation to tackling the challenge of ensuring a cleaner, quieter, smarter future for our industry'. Further scrutiny, however, reveals that Sustainable Aviation's main priority is to continue to increase flight and passenger numbers. The impacts are a barrier to increasing flights, but when push comes to shove, it is expansion that it will promote if at all possible.

With the premature 'success' of its most recent phase of expansion, rather inconvenient consequences have resulted for Luton airport. One of these, mentioned in Andrew Lambourne's presentation, is that there has been rapid growth in the number of flights which have breached the noise conditions imposed by Luton Borough Council. The airport's response is to apply to the Council to relax the condition. In a statement slightly less prominent than the banner on its home page, Sustainable Aviation says it '.... is committed to limiting, and where possible, reducing the impact of aircraft noise'<sup>3</sup>. It will be argued that reducing the impact is simply not possible in Luton's case. It is possible, of course. An airport's noise impact could be assessed annually by an Ofsted-like external body using a range of nationally agreed measurements. If any increase in flight numbers was made conditional upon a year-on-year reduction in its measured noise impact, airports would soon write noise action plans with targets and teeth. In the government's current consultation on its aviation strategy, there is a diagram which includes the suggestion 'airports required to set noise caps which balance noise and growth'<sup>4</sup>. However, there is no definition of 'balance' to be found. Plus ça change.

**Bill Sellicks**

1. National Planning Policy Framework: <http://tinyurl.com/y7l2bmcx>
2. Sustainable Aviation website homepage <https://www.sustainableaviation.co.uk/>
3. Sustainable Aviation website 'Quieter' <https://www.sustainableaviation.co.uk/quieter/>
4. Aviation 2050: The future of UK aviation. <http://tinyurl.com/y8fd6th9>  
Figure 9 Implementation of noise policies

## The Hitchin Big Spring Clean - 2019

At risk of continually repeating myself, I think I can say once again that this, our second event working with Clean Up Hitchin, was the most successful litter day ever! Our figures are still being collected as we go to press, but they speak for themselves: using nearly 200 litter pickers, 250 volunteers - of whom 95 were children - worked on 16 sites, filled 160+ bags with rubbish, and, for the first time, 53 bags with recyclables. And even the weather co-operated; the sun shone after a stormy week and a very wet night before!

This is the first event where we have been able to recycle. This was limited to the streets and paths teams as it was the new contractor working for both North and East Herts Councils, Urbaser, who supported this. We were chosen by NHDC as a pilot to test how effective such a scheme could be, given that we had a track record of working with the Council on these events. Our volunteers rose to the occasion and all bags of recyclables collected were considered suitable for recycling, no small feat given the wet and muddy conditions in places. We wait to see whether this can be extended to parks and open spaces where John O'Conner is the contractor.

Of course, this is not only a 'litter hunt', but a 'treasure hunt' for the youngsters, thanks to Clean Up Hitchin. We had more families than ever in our parks and open spaces and the enthusiasm after the event was overwhelming, with volunteers immediately asking to help next time. One anecdote stands out in my mind: a very little boy had found a 'treasure' - a jar with a voucher inside - and turned up to claim his treat, a chocolate orange. He dutifully handed in the jar, but immediately decided the jar + voucher was his 'treasure' and we could keep the chocolate orange. However, he was persuaded to take away the rest of his prize, a bamboo toothbrush! We must thank BambuuBrush, a small Hitchin company, for donating 30 bamboo toothbrushes to complement the chocolate orange prizes!

As to 'unusual finds', there were the usual, and numerous, items of underwear (what do Hitchin people get up to in our parks and open spaces?!), but there were two outstanding items: in the Dell, a set of skis and poles, complete in their bag, and a crayfish "nursery" housed in a woolly jumper, hauled out of the river at Ransom's, examined and tenderly replaced. And these slippery new banknotes turn up in the most unexpected places.

With the event continuing to expand, we will be looking at our processes in an effort to streamline things for the future. The support of NHDC was outstanding and my thanks go to their officers for bending over backwards to oil the wheels of our Spring Clean and their offer to do whatever they can to facilitate our next event in October.

**Ellie Clarke**

### Diary Dates:

Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> April: **Forum Members' Meeting:** Vicky Wyer, of the Churchgate Resurgence Pro Bono Group, will be giving a talk on 'Ideas for Churchgate Resurgence': 7.45pm at Hitchin British Schools Museum.

Tuesday 18th June: **Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:** 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively. Venue to be confirmed.

For a photo Gallery of the  
Hitchin Big Spring Clean Volunteers

go to the website

[www.hitchinforum.org.uk/spring-clean-gallery-2019/](http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/spring-clean-gallery-2019/)

## Luton Airport Expansion.

At the Members' Meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> February, we received an excellent presentation on Luton Airport from Andrew Lambourne of LADACAN (Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise – [www.ladacan.org](http://www.ladacan.org)). It was titled "Consultations Galore" and focused on community involvement and the decision-making process for further airport expansion and local airspace change.

Andrew started by displaying maps on which were overlaid the flights currently taking place. Take-off and landing may be from the east or the west on different days, and the overlay showed the incredible intensity of flights. The Luton flights are crossed at a higher level by those from Stansted and Heathrow at 6,000 -10,000 feet. The situation is further complicated by the stacking for the four airports (including London City).

The airspace design dates from the 1950s, and is inadequate for the current number of flights. It is therefore being redesigned around GPS-controlled "tubes in space" through which aircraft will travel. These "tubes" will enable the different routes to be closer together, enabling an increase in the number of possible flights. At present the tubes relate to aircraft above 9,000 feet, but work is ongoing to link them to the ground, and this involves local consultation which will start shortly.

Andrew addressed a number of questions, as follows:

- 1) **Who is in charge nationally?** There are three responsible bodies. **The Government (Department for Transport)** creates overall policy, but this is vague regarding local issues such as noise levels. A Green Paper has been produced – "Aviation 2050" – and consultation closes on 11 April this year. Its newly-formed **Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise** is intended to influence best practice and better dialogue between communities and the aviation industry. Secondly, **the Civil Aviation Authority** is the regulator, overseeing the design of the "tubes in space" mentioned above. This is not just a local matter but requires co-operation between airports and airlines on an international scale. It is an enormous task, which is likely to take until 2026 to complete. Thirdly, "NATS", **National Air Traffic Services**, is working on achieving coordination between airports which share common airspace.
- 2) **Who is in charge locally?** Again, there are normally three bodies involved, **the Local Planning Authority, the airport owner, and the airport operator**. The owner grants the concession to the operator in return for a concession fee, and the planning authority stipulates planning conditions which the operator must follow to protect environmental and safety standards. However, in our case the Local Planning Authority (Luton Council) is also (via a holding company) the airport owner, which poses a serious conflict of interest since it benefits financially but also sets the planning conditions and decides on any enforcement action for non-compliance. The current planning permission for expansion from 9 million to 18 million passengers a year runs until 2028, but the owners now want to start expanding again as soon as 2020 to redouble to 36 million passengers. LADACAN believes this should be prevented until 2028, and only permitted then if promised mitigations have been delivered and proven to be effective in reducing noise. From Luton Council's point of view, the town is part of an Enterprise Zone, which is seeking to revive a deprived area, so the income from the airport is very useful. Airport expansion is a way of improving their finances and helping their district, but it was noted that two Luton councillors had recently resigned from the board of the holding company LLAL (London Luton Airport Limited) because they felt unable to speak freely about noise and pollution concerns. As far as external interests are concerned, flights cross county boundaries very soon after take off, becoming the problem of surrounding councils such as Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. The airport has also invested in nearby commercial areas, such as New Century Park, Capability Green, the Airport Business Park and Bartlett Square, all of which make expansion hard to fight.

- 3) **What are the local issues?** There are currently 135,000 flights a year to and from Luton Airport, and if further expansion is granted, these could increase to 240,000. The airport is already in breach of key planning conditions relating to noise, and is intending to ask the Local Planning Authority to set these conditions aside. For the reasons set out above, there is considerable pressure on councillors to agree to this. The airport is effectively incentivised by its owner to expand far quicker than they had previously said: the 2028 target is likely to be reached by 2020, well ahead of any effective mitigations to reduce noise levels. The airport owner has declared that it does not intend to apply for a second runway, but is considering building a second terminal at Wigmore Park to cope with more than 18 million passengers.

The question of pollution was then raised, with an attendee remarking on the smell of aviation fuel as far away as a mile from the airport. It is clear that the sheer number of flights over this area of the country from the four airports already creates a pollution problem, exacerbated by the carbon footprint of people travelling to and from the airport. Andrew further explained that the pollution attributed to a given airport only counts while planes are on the ground. The moment the wheels leave the ground it counts as national pollution. Additionally, the overflights to and from Heathrow and Stansted prevent aircraft from Luton climbing efficiently, which means they are often held low for long distances over the surrounding area.

So what action is available to people in these surrounding areas? A case needs to be made to influence the Planning Inspectorate, asking for the proposals to be turned down. Andrew asked that residents should Google the consultation mentioned above, and consider responding. North Herts District Council (NHDC) has expressed concern over the increased road traffic, but has said little more: councillors should be asked to respond more robustly over the noise and pollution concerns. The Luton Air Consultative Committee is intended as a talking shop fostering communication with communities, and is on [www.llacc.com](http://www.llacc.com), and Councillor Michael Muir is the NHDC representative on the consultative committee. Bim Afolami MP has been pressing for cessation of further expansion until more is done for local residents, but with little success so far. There is a contact email for complaints against particularly intrusive noise, [noise@ltn.aero](mailto:noise@ltn.aero), which asks for details of the complainant's name, postcode, and the date and time of the problem. Googling "Luton TraVis" will also provide live information regarding flights. Finally, the airport will be consulting next year on "Vision 2020 – 2050 Luton" which can be found using a web search.

**Andrew Wearmouth**

## **Churchgate**

Over the years, there seem to be almost as many twists and turns in Hitchin's Churchgate saga as Brexit, and the last few months have hardly failed to disappoint in this respect.

Vicky Wyer and I were first invited to get involved in Churchgate back in October last year by Robin Dartington, initially to do a few sketch designs of the area along the riverside. Robin's view was that the Shearer Property Group (SPG) development proposed by NHDC was inappropriate for several reasons, not least because it was exclusively reliant on high street retail, which was already in significant decline. We felt the same, so agreed to join his fledgling group of local professionals along with Stephen Boddey, director of BBR Architects and property solicitor Steven Haynes, working pro bono on an alternative vision for the area.

Once formed, Churchgate Resurgence Pro Bono (CRPB) set to exploring the opportunities offered by Churchgate, the market and the surrounding area. I had recently been speaking at conferences on the ways in which our towns and cities are changing. We can see evidence of 'the experience economy' all

around us and these concepts chime with Robin's thinking. The internet means that people can buy things more cheaply online than they can on the high street. Of course, you can't have a cup of coffee or get your hair cut online. People are seeking something more than shopping. If they are going to buy things from their local high street, they want it to be an experience from which they gain something. This is partly about what analysts call 'back-story', which in this case means a local shop that has some authenticity and local character. But it is also about having an enjoyable experience while you shop. An example of this in action is the off-licence on Hermitage Road. It closed a few years ago and was replaced a couple of years later by the Beer Shop, where you can taste the beers and even stop for a drink or two.

It is these concepts that are at the heart of CRPB's proposals for Churchgate and we want to put the market at the heart of the redevelopment. Vicky and I visited the Time Out Market Hall in Lisbon and the markets at Spitalfields and Borough, and it was our experiences at these that convinced us that the same principles can be applied, on a smaller scale, to Hitchin.

Towards the end of the design process, Vicky and I went to Altrincham in Cheshire. The economy of the town had been on its knees and the market nearly moribund when a farsighted local developer staged a turnaround very much along the lines of what we were proposing. The whole town was rejuvenated, and it is this experience that has given us the confidence to pursue our ideas.

CRPB's original aim was simply to get NHDC to 'press the pause button' on their retail-led proposals for Churchgate. Our vision ([www.newchurchgate.org](http://www.newchurchgate.org)) is to have a scheme that does not rely solely on retail, but has a mixture of market, retail, residential (for sale and for rent), as well as start-up business units and community assets.

In mid-December we heard that the existing SPG/NHDC scheme had failed to secure the necessary funding and was now 'dead in the water'. Two days later CRPB was contacted by Bim Afolami MP. He had seen the concepts and felt they could go further. In January we met first him, and then Jake Berry MP, the Government Minister for Northern Powerhouse and High Street Regeneration, along with other key stakeholders. It seemed that funds for future-proofing town centres were being made available under the Government's new Future High Streets Fund. The Churchgate area now had the potential to kickstart the regeneration of the whole of Hitchin town centre, including transport and high street improvements. All looked good, until six weeks before the deadline, it emerged that there was a second contender for the application – a health hub in Letchworth. Only one application could be made; it was a nervous night on 20<sup>th</sup> March when Full Council made its decision, but eventually it voted by 28 to 7 to back the proposal for Hitchin town centre. It was heartening to see our elected representatives consider what was best for the whole district rather than just for their own wards and this was largely due to the support of the various local groups, as well as the unstinting work of Keith Hoskins and Tom Hardy on the Hitchin economy – Hitchin is very fortunate to have them.

However, the real prize in winning the vote was not a chance to gain access to funds through the Future High Streets Fund bid (which in the first round are modest). The Council's vote demonstrated a real political will in NHDC to finally address – with the local community on board - the issues at the heart of Hitchin, and to take hold of a chance to turn the town around and make it fit for the future.

So where now? There is much still to do – the vision has advanced to the stage of a concept masterplan, and now a full feasibility study and meaningful public consultation is needed. There are still several obstacles to be faced, not least that the council does not yet control the leasehold of the Churchgate Shopping Centre, but things are looking a great deal more positive than they did this time last year.

**John Wyer**