

# HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

## NEWSLETTER

May - June 2019 No. 153

### Chairman's Piece

Given the prominence of climate change in the news recently and the surprising admission from the Secretary of State for the Environment that 'we have not done nearly enough', I wondered what our local councils had been doing.

There is little of substance on climate change on Hertfordshire County Council's Green Issues webpage<sup>1</sup>. North Hertfordshire District Council's (NHDC's) Climate Change webpage<sup>2</sup> features a comment about a 2011 Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and a Local Government Group which 'recognised the pivotal role that local councils have in tackling climate change'. To support the Memorandum, local Councils are meant to measure and report their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions annually. However, NHDC appears to go further. A Corporate Climate Change Working Group will meet quarterly to 'progress and monitor the success of the strategy' (the words 'strategy' and 'policy' are used interchangeably). I am told that this Working Group has not met 'in recent times'. There is an intention to reconvene it. The webpage has links to a Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Report (for 2013/14) and the Climate Change Policy. The GHG Report for 2013/14<sup>3</sup> is one side of A4 giving some headline figures, but no explanation or analysis. It raises a host of questions. Why aren't there more reports – at least one for each subsequent year, or even four per year?

The Climate Change Policy<sup>4</sup> is not dated, but its final sentence is 'This policy to be reviewed in 2015'. In contradiction of the webpage statement about quarterly monitoring, the Policy states that monitoring will be annual. I am told that the Policy is being revised and that the new version will be presented to Council in the autumn. The Policy's aim is to rise to the challenge of government targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by at least 34% by 2020 and 80% by 2050 (measured against 1990 levels). Between the Policy and the GHG Report for 2013/14, there is mention of two base years – 2005 (Policy) and 2008/9 (in the 2013/14 GHG report) but there is no further mention of 1990 as a base year. Given the stated aim of the Policy, one might expect that a report on progress towards the 34% reduction by next year should appear.

If local government is 'pivotal' in addressing climate change, it seems odd that Hertfordshire appears to have no policy. Why is there so much confusion at NHDC? Surely all documents and webpages should be consistent. Monitoring should be carried out as stated in the policy and the results made public. If a Working Group ceases to meet, that should be made clear, along with the reasons. The 2013/14 GHG report states 'We have followed the Government's Guidance on how to measure and report greenhouse gas emissions.' A cynic might say that the confusion is an indicator of the priority with which the Council views the issue. NHDC might blame central government. I hope that the Council makes amends in the revised Policy to be published later this year.

**Bill Sellicks**

1. HCC's Green Issues webpage <https://tinyurl.com/y23l5y3e>
2. NHDC's Climate Change webpage <https://tinyurl.com/y5lh485>
3. NHDC Greenhouse Gas Emissions 13/14v1.0 <https://tinyurl.com/y5tn5u3z>
4. NHDC's Climate Change Policy <https://tinyurl.com/y33qwh8o>

## **Our Town. Your Say**

This edition of the Newsletter introduces a new feature designed to invite contributions of views on topics related to the present and future life of Hitchin.

The topic is the choice of the contributor and articles should have a maximum of 500 words. The Forum is a community organisation with no party-political affiliation and contributors should thus avoid comments that constitute any expression of party policy at local or national level, or which have content that others may find objectionable.

The content of all Newsletters is discussed by the Steering Group prior to publication and this will include articles submitted. Thus we reserve the right to decline articles and may wish to discuss possible modifications with the contributor. Also, views expressed are not necessarily those of the Forum as an organisation.

If you wish to contribute please contact/write to the editor. The email address is: *newsletter@hitchinforum*.

In this edition we are very pleased to feature a contribution from our MP Bim Afolami.

## **My Role in Redeveloping Hitchin**

On my first day canvassing in Hitchin Market Square at the beginning of the 2017 General Election campaign, I was stopped by a wonderful elderly lady. She asked me what my plans were for Hitchin. I remarked that my major priority was to get the Churchgate centre redeveloped and improved. She paused, and said "You look young. Good luck. People have been telling me that at every election since 1987".

I start with this story because I know that so many well-meaning people in Hitchin, whether elected or not, have been talking about redeveloping the Churchgate centre for the best part of 30 years. I am passionate about finally achieving an ambitious redevelopment plan that ensures that Hitchin town centre (including but not limited to Churchgate) thrives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now this is a curious priority to have. I am not a town planner. Nor do I have a particularly creative or imaginative mindset. As the local MP I have a public profile, but no executive authority over the land or any related contractual issues – this responsibility lies with North Herts District Council. It is a priority because I believe it is a priority for most of the people in our town. As the local MP I can work to try and bring this about.

Over recent months, I have worked closely with Churchgate Resurgence Pro Bono (CRPB), local councillors (both Conservative and Labour), the Hitchin BID and others, to put together a proposal that has now been submitted to the Government for consideration under its £675m Future High Streets Fund. This fund is designed to allocate capital to kickstart the regeneration of town centres, including transport and high street improvements. We are still awaiting the Government's response. It is of course possible that our application is turned down in favour of high streets across the country that have a greater need of assistance. If so, the time spent working up a proposal that has general acceptance across all parties (not easy I can assure you) has not been wasted; there are many other bodies (such as the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership) who have expressed real interest in helping to fund our plans if our bid is not successful with Central Government.

This whole process has got me thinking about the nature of an MP's role, and the interplay between a local MP, the local councillors, and the private sector and other interested parties. On most local issues, I see my role as a local facilitator.

First, in relation to the public sector – such as schools, hospitals, roads and the like - by building a strong public profile both locally and nationally I can liaise with central Government, highlight issues, and ask written and oral questions on behalf of my constituents. Secondly, I work closely with the private and voluntary sectors too. I spend a huge amount of time with local business groups, farmers, local builders, civic groups, and charities.

But the interplay between the public and private sector is where it becomes really interesting and dynamic. Very few local problems can be solved by either the public sector or private sector alone. The private sector has the money and the agility to be able to make things happen, but they also have a profit motive which doesn't always serve the wider interests of the town 100%. The public sector has a deeply impressive public sector ethos, which seeks to improve the situation for everybody, but the politicians have four yearly election cycles and the bureaucracy can be a nightmare. As the local MP, with a background in law, banking and buying and selling businesses, I use my skills and knowledge to bring the two parties together. That way we can solve some of the biggest problems facing the town, whether they be Churchgate, mental health of young people, or improving local sports facilities.

The gridlock in Westminster may be frustrating (trust me, it is frustrating for me too!), but locally I can work with local councillors, businesses, and charities to really make a difference. Bringing people together regardless of political allegiance. In our country at large, we could do with a bit more of that!

**Bim Afolami MP**

## **Nona Blay - a Tribute**

Nona Blay, who died in March aged 95, had been a member of Hitchin Forum since its inception. She had lived in Hitchin for over 40 years and clearly was very fond of the town.

Nona was a professional musician, but had a deep interest in urban design; she thought beyond just architecture, looking at the way places work, how the spaces between buildings are used, how they generate or encourage activity. Not only was she well-informed and knowledgeable, she had real insight into the way a town works - or doesn't - and how Hitchin could work better. She always extended my thinking on whatever we were discussing.

She was particularly interested in Hitchin's riverside and had visions of great concerts taking place on St Mary's lawns, with the audience sitting on the steps down from the car park (give me a cushion please!). She would be so pleased to know that there are new ideas to rejuvenate that area and indeed the entire Churchgate and Market area, inspired this time by the community.

Nona was truly amazing; she was a talented artist and musician, and regularly informed and supported community action. Despite becoming almost blind and very deaf, she never lost her vitality for any of these. It was a privilege knowing her and I shall miss her.

**Ellie Clarke**

## Progress on Litter!

1. You may have noticed that there are now "**report if full**" phone numbers on many rubbish bins, an excellent first step to preventing overflowing bins. Hopefully unique reference numbers will be applied to each bin soon to make it even easier to report which bins are full.
2. The amount of **rubbish and fly-tipping on A-roads into Hitchin** is increasing year by year. Clearing this has usually been done in March each year, but contractual difficulties have held things up this time. Following our Hitchin Big Spring Clean in March, there have been discussions in Hitchin Forum about creating a one-off "renegade brigade" to clear the A602 from Hitchin to the A1(M). However, after some prodding by us, in May NHDC's contractors began clearing all the A-roads into Hitchin of litter and organic matter growing on central reservations. But it is clear that this work must be done more than once a year. To reduce the costs, there should be some scope for volunteers to work with contractors, particularly on the A602 where an entire lane is closed off each time, making it safer to work.
3. Speaking of our litter days, the **Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up** will take place on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> October. We are delighted that Hitchin Initiative is making its office available as the distribution and collection hub for the 'kit' for our volunteers. With numbers of volunteers doubling over the past year, we are making other changes to streamline our administration of this event. All previous volunteers will be informed nearer the time when we will also be generally publicising the event.

Ellie Clarke

### Diary Dates:

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|----------------------------------|---|
| Tuesday 18th June:               | <b>Members' Meeting:</b> 7.45pm, British Schools Museum. Bob Fenton of Hertfordshire County Council's Rights of Way Team will speak about footpaths and rights of way. <i>This is a chance to find out how to protect local paths by formalising their existence.</i> |
| Tuesday 18 <sup>th</sup> June:   | <b>Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:</b> 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively. Proposed venue is Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, Upper Tilehouse Street. Please visit the NHDC website for confirmation.  |
| Monday 1 <sup>st</sup> July:     | <b>Hitchin Festival begins:</b> All around town for the whole of July.  |
| Tuesday 1 <sup>st</sup> October: | <b>Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:</b> 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively. Venue to be confirmed.  |