

# HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

## NEWSLETTER

July – August 2019 No. 154

### Chairman's Piece

On Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> May, forty-three North Hertfordshire District Councillors voted to declare a climate emergency. There was no opposition to the motion and one abstention. Full details of the measure, which comprises six broad actions, can be viewed on the North Herts District Council (NHDC) website<sup>1</sup>. I am interested in the changes which we are likely to see as a result of this decision. Perhaps the shift in focus will extend to other issues of environmental importance.

One associated area of concern is that of waste and recycling. Locally, from the increasing turn-out to support our twice-yearly litter-picks, and the higher visibility of groups such as 'Less Waste Hitchin', it is clear that residents are concerned about this. Major national events flaunt their green credentials by banning non-recyclable bottles and plastic bags. Globally, waste plastic which has not been processed correctly is having an impact on marine life in particular. Concerns about the issue are shared across generations.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency report 'The Packaging Recycling Obligations'<sup>2</sup> comes to some damning conclusions about the recycling system nationally:

*'The government has no evidence that the system has encouraged companies to minimise packaging or make it easy to recycle. And it relies on exporting materials to other parts of the world without adequate checks to ensure this material is actually recycled, and without consideration of whether other countries will continue to accept it in the long-term.'*

One country which has changed its policy is China. Whereas, in the first quarter of 2017, China accepted 40% of the UK's plastic exports, in the same quarter in 2018, it took only 3%. Whether the Chinese processed all of the waste it received prior to 2017 in a responsible manner is unclear, but British recycling companies were left urgently seeking other markets and possibly not asking too many questions.

In an attempt to discover whether North Hertfordshire's waste and recycling is treated correctly, I was initially reassured by looking at the Council's website<sup>3</sup>. There is a short account of what happens after collection. All of the waste and recycling generated in North Hertfordshire is bulked-up in Buntingford and delivered to Pearce Group, based in St Albans, where it is processed – separated into different types. After separation, plastic waste is delivered to mills in the UK and abroad. It is there that the trail grows cold – what is delivered, where, and what then happens to it, is not explained. I sought a further source of information – the most recent annual report of the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership<sup>4</sup>. Whilst this provides a wealth of interesting statistics, most showing that Hertfordshire and its District and Borough Councils are exceeding national targets in a whole range of ways, it does not answer my question. Maybe the heightened priority given to environmental issues suggested by the declaration of a climate emergency will mean that the Council will seek some answers, not just to questions about recycling, but a host of other environmental issues about which there seems, until recently, to have been a distinct attitude of complacency.

**Bill Sellicks**

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| 1 | NHDC meeting 21 <sup>st</sup> May minutes          | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y5gmu6oz">https://tinyurl.com/y5gmu6oz</a>   |
| 2 | The packaging recycling obligations                | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/yyyydwceg">https://tinyurl.com/yyyydwceg</a> |
| 3 | What happens to my recycling?                      | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y2drrs2m">https://tinyurl.com/y2drrs2m</a>   |
| 4 | Hertfordshire Waste Partnership Annual Report 2018 | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y6k8z9l7">https://tinyurl.com/y6k8z9l7</a>   |

## **Hitchin Committee and Town Talk - June 18th**

The recent local elections resulted in an altered composition of the District Council, with No Overall Control. This promises some changes in the way things are done. The balance of Councillor members at the Hitchin Area Committee seemed to be less significant, but suddenly we have the Leader of the Council and various portfolio holders sitting there (and now unable to blame 'them at Gernon Road' for any Council shortcomings, so to speak). The game has changed, and it will be interesting to see how this works out! The Hitchin Committee on June 18<sup>th</sup> was an opportunity to see our elected members in action, and they did well, in my humble opinion. They did show a 'can do' attitude and I look forward to seeing the results of their enthusiasm over the coming year.

The Committee is preceded by the Town Talk which was lively and well attended. Questions were raised on flooded pavements, disabled toilets being disabled, litter on the A602 and the prospect of a volunteer army tackling it, unused Council monies being applied to Charnwood House (the old Museum) and, of course, Churchgate.

The Area Committee then heard from and approved various funding applications, from Scouts requesting litter pickers (it is a trend!), Buzzworks extending their education programme, Creatives wanting IT equipment for their youth outreach, and ourselves helping with the refurbishment of gazebos for Market Place. One important item came up as Councillors discussed the Section 106 budget – money accruing from building developments which is allocated for local community infrastructure projects. The monitoring and completion of such agreements is not as apparent as seems desirable and all parties expressed a wish to improve that.

The next Hitchin Committee (at 7.30) and the Town Talk (at 6.30) will be at Westmill Community Centre on Tuesday October 1<sup>st</sup> – do give it a go!

**Mike Clarke**

## **Connected Cities**

The current total population of the Hitchin, Stevenage, Letchworth Garden City and Baldock area, including the surrounding villages is 221,000. This is projected to increase to 292,000 by 2050 and to 306,000 by 2080. There will be increased pressure on all authorities to accommodate these numbers by some means. It is going to take a bold new approach to planning to achieve this.

One concept designed to accommodate such population growth in a sustainable manner is known as 'Connected Cities', the brainchild of Stevenage resident Oliver Christopherson, who had the idea as he looked out over Forster Country and considered the beauty of the relationship between the peaceful countryside and the three, very different nearby towns. Christopherson proposed a model of new town design based on the Ebenezer Howard Letchworth Garden City (LGC) principles. It would have the essential element of either local development corporation land ownership - possibly through compulsory purchase - or other financial mechanisms designed to provide a reliable income stream to support long term maintenance of the community infrastructures and environment. Also important are heavy reliance on rail transport and a housing distribution with high density near the station and lower densities radiating outwards – always ensuring that the station is no more than a 1km walk from home.

A conference organised by the New Garden Cities Alliance and Connected Cities and co-sponsored by Letchworth Heritage Foundation, Bright Forest and Love Architecture Ltd., was held in June in LGC to bring together and hear from politicians Sir Oliver Heald MP and Lord Adonis; LGC Heritage Foundation experts; several transport groups, including Network Rail; the Council for the Protection of Rural England; The Independent newspaper transport journalist and writer Christian Wolmar; and members of the Connected Cities organisation.

Several case studies were presented and discussed in open forum, including a series of concepts involving Hitchin, Stevenage, LGC, Baldock and villages, aiming to satisfy the projected population growth. It is well worth looking on the website at the four scenarios<sup>5</sup> covering options ranging from no development on green belt right through to the building of new towns outside Arlesey, at Bragbury End and even a place we might call Listertown. The latter would include a new station near the Stevenage North A1(M) junction.

There is a video presentation by Lord Adonis on the website in which he proposes what is effectively a ‘reversal of Beeching’, which would provide many opportunities to create small new towns – ‘strings of pearls’ – along mostly rural lines.

There was an entertaining presentation by Christian Wolmar of The Independent newspaper in which he expressed his views that road (car) transport must be drastically reduced. Driverless vehicles he believes are a non-starter, and electric cars not of much benefit. It is the ‘rail-plus-cycle/walk’ model that is vital as part of the campaign against climate change.

Regarding Hitchin, the Connected Cities model would favour increased housing density around the station and the development of a rail-centred community half way to Letchworth (Highover Farm). On the west side of town it seems that new build housing would only be proposed if supported by some form of rapid transport system, such as light rail.

The conference covered the situation not just in North Herts but also nationwide and elsewhere in Europe. The presentations can be found on the Connected Cities website<sup>6</sup>.

**Stuart Howarth**

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| 5 | Connected Cities website | <a href="http://www.connectedcities.co.uk">http://www.connectedcities.co.uk</a> |
| 6 | Conference presentations | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y4tunote">https://tinyurl.com/y4tunote</a>         |

## **Hertfordshire’s Rights of Way**

***Presentation by Bob Fenton, Access and Enforcement Officer for Countryside & Rights of Way, Hertfordshire County Council Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2019***

In a presentation rich in relevant anecdote, some very amusing, some shocking and all informative, Bob held our attention for over 90 minutes on an evening where unfortunately the meeting clashed with other commitments (including Hitchin Committee). This being a Hitchin Forum members’ meeting, you can imagine that there was plenty of engagement from the audience, of course!

Bob explained the differences between highways and rights of way (the former publicly owned, the latter on private land) and between those rights of way, predominantly in towns, which have hard surfaces (which are the responsibility of the Highways team) and those with other surfaces which are the responsibility of his team. A right of way exists where there is habitual use of a route for a period of 20 years, except where a route is stated to be permissive. Rights of way are recorded on the Definitive Map, of which there is a web version - however, the authoritative version is paper based and can be viewed in public libraries.

In a climate where funding is dwindling, decisions about work on a right of way are made on the basis of three factors in descending order of importance. Paramount is the need to deal with anything which compromises the health and safety of users. Lower priority is accorded to improving tracks with a high level of use and demand. Lowest priority is any work which may contribute to improving the wider network. In terms of planning, all local authorities are required to have a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP). The RoWIP and a map showing planned improvements for North Hertfordshire (admittedly not that easy to use) can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/y2um3rra>.

The final section of the RoWIP is a list of suggestions by district council area. It is worth looking at these to see what could be intended for North Herts and the priority attached to each suggestion.

The most common cause of damage to paths and bridleways, and therefore intervention from Bob's team, is damage by water. Bob illustrated with examples of water damage from all over the county, together with techniques commonly used to remedy them. Perhaps the most familiar to many will be the improvements to the bridleway which runs by the river on Oughtonhead Common. Over the years, the Rights of Way team, together with the Countryside Management Service, have produced a wheelchair and trainer friendly surface by the use of crushed concrete (a waste material) and strategically placed culverts and other drainage options. The river bank along the same stretch illustrates another technique which reinforces the embankment, helping keep the path dry, using willow spars. They can be woven to produce what is an effective fence which prevents path material falling into the water. Some of the spars continue to grow and, with careful management, the new spars can either be bent and incorporated into the barrier, or cut and used elsewhere. There can be interesting issues about the choice of materials for such restoration work.

Sometimes, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) can pose a challenge in the choice of materials which the Wildlife Trusts or the Environment Agency will be prepared to accept. In one instance, the managers of an SSSI insisted on the use of pink granite chippings rather than crushed concrete to resurface a path after restoration following flood damage. Pink granite, with its high insolubility does not affect soil pH, unlike crushed concrete.

In terms of local issues, we discussed the problems of Hitchin station access, and the status of paths over land owned by Network Rail, which, unlike other landowners, is able to over-ride the requirement to allow access to a right of way if it does not suit its purposes. In Hitchin's case, this appears to be irrespective of what many of us would regard as the compelling need to provide access to the southbound platform from the east.

The severance of footpaths and bridleways by major roads was also raised as an issue with impact on the wider network. There are at least four points between Hitchin and Luton at which the A505 severs footpath or bridleway links, of which only one has any signage to indicate to drivers the likely presence of walkers. This has the effect of reducing use of those tracks, since they effectively become dead-ends for all but the most determined. Bob told us that when a new road is planned, linkages are factored-in. During the process of finalising specifications, Highways England and other agencies try to avoid any obligation to provide bridges etc. There can be a way round this – if bats can be shown to be in the area, it is essential that a tunnel be provided – the bats enjoy a higher priority than human users!

You will not be surprised to learn that there are many instances of the abuse of footpaths. Landowners can go to great lengths to discourage or even deny access. We were shown a picture of a very attractive new kissing gate festooned with yellow notices, one of which said, 'Dangerous dogs loose in field'. I think of myself as something of a dog whisperer, but I would be deterred from using this particular right of way. Bob sought a meeting with the landowner and, on pointing out that the notice was effectively an admission of liability if a walker was hurt, the notice (and hopefully the dogs) swiftly disappeared. Bob's background of 30 years with Hertfordshire Police is clearly very useful in such circumstances.

As a frequent user of footpaths and bridleways in other parts of the country, I have to say that Hertfordshire's rights of way, whilst not perfect, compare very favourably with those elsewhere in terms of maintenance, accessibility and signage. Last summer, I encountered the worst stile I have ever had to use in rural Derbyshire. It was hard to locate, surrounded by nettles and brambles and precarious. It took some minutes to negotiate and I came away bloodied. It had been in that state for a number of years – our guidebook referred to it as the worst stile in Derbyshire. Thanks to Bob and his team, there are now few stiles left in Hertfordshire – a reflection of his dedication to the principle of ensuring access to the countryside for as many as possible. Sadly, when he spoke to us, Bob had only four more days to work before his second retirement. I hope his replacement will be as effective and dedicated as he has been.

**Bill Sellicks**

***Given that the Future High Streets funding was not forthcoming, we have asked Keith Hoskins to provide an update on plans for Churchgate. In the light of the introductory comments to Bim Afolami's article in the previous Newsletter, we hope that members will agree that Keith, now an elected representative, is well qualified to provide us with a factual update on the current situation.'***

## **Special Town Talk**

**Thursday 5th September, Hitchin Town Hall, 7pm – 9pm**

Following on from the article in the last Forum newsletter regarding Churchgate, I thought I would give a brief update. As many will already know, the application for finance to the government's Future High Streets Fund was unsuccessful. There may well be further rounds of funding or some alternative scheme once the dust has settled around leadership of the national government but in the meantime, Councillors are seeking to drive the process forward and, with the encouraging support of the local MP, hope to bring together a number of ideas. Seeking outside funding can be disheartening as North Hertfordshire is not perceived as an area in need, but we should not be dissuaded and will continue to apply wherever we can – sow enough seeds and something may take root!

Hitchin Councillors have decided that there should be a special Town Talk style meeting similar to the sessions that precede the full committee meetings. It will take place on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> September – 7pm to 9pm in Hitchin Town Hall. All are welcome.

This would be an evening given over entirely to the public on the single issue of informing the emerging Town Centre Strategy with obvious reference to Churchgate and Hitchin Market. I hasten to add that it would NOT be a decision-making meeting but a chance for residents, businesses and community groups in open discussion to air their views and opinions and to ask questions.

Hitchin Committee Chairman Ian Albert has said that:

*“the new joint administration of North Herts District Council that took office in May sees this as a great opportunity for a fresh start to actively engage with the local community in an open and transparent way before any plans are developed; we want to build on the cross-party consensus that has been a key to the way that Hitchin Committee has operated over a number of years.”*

So our goal is to provide a means for interested parties to begin to set overall realistic objectives and targets for an emerging Town Centre Strategy. It's not necessarily about the minutiae but a sense of understanding the problems that face town centres and will continue to do so over the next decade and beyond. For example:

- what is happening to retail
- how to reconcile the demands of business and residential
- how to improve our environment
- how to encourage a range of services and leisure to satisfy the requirements of an increasingly discerning population
- how to support those organisations already working tirelessly to maintain and enhance the existing fabric of our historic market town.

We are not going to get anywhere near all the answers in this first two hour meeting but I hope it will give a flavour of what our expectations may be and how we can move towards achieving them; there will be more meetings, updates and progress reports as we move forward, but this is the start.

**Keith Hoskins**

***Councillor for Hitchin Highbury Ward***

# Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum Scrutiny Hearings

## *Memores Acti Prudentes Futuri - (NHDC's Coat of Arms)*

As we go to press, there have been two days of hearings into the Hitchin Town Hall/District Museum project, with one more day scheduled for 2 August. Whilst at the hearings, we noticed this Latin motto on the Council's Coat of Arms.

Memories often don't go back as long as paper files (about 12 inches thick and counting . . . ), but this project began in 2005 with a decision 'in principle' to close Hitchin and Letchworth Museums and replace them with a District Museum somewhere. This followed a Museums *Fundamental Service Review* the previous year by North Herts District Council who wanted to save money.

By closing a town museum and creating a district museum the Council was losing sight of what a museum is about in principle. Hitchin has a unique local identity, historic and cultural, it has a 1000-year-old story to tell. A museum for local people is about exhibiting, exploring and celebrating that local identity. The district of North Herts, on the other hand, is an administrative area, not a cultural area and has existed only since 1974. As an identity, it is pretty meaningless to local people. However, despite huge public opposition the Council never wavered.

Things got more complicated in 2009 when the Council decided to turn the Mountford Hall of Hitchin Town Hall into the new District Museum and turn the Workmen's Hall and Gymnasium next door into a 'community facility'. The aim this time was to kill two budget birds with one stone - convert an ageing and tatty Town Hall into a District Museum, thereby saving the refurbishment cost of the Town Hall and the build cost of a new museum. More public opposition followed, understandably. Hitchin is the main centre in North Herts and with a population at that time of 30,000+, it was unthinkable not to have a large community meeting place like the Town Hall. Besides, the Mountford Hall would be wrecked architecturally with a mezzanine floor installed, as well as functionally.

Both of these decisions were wrong in principle, and astonishingly, both were taken without any public consultation. Hitchin Forum worked with The Hitchin Society in presenting these issues to the hearings. We did not go into matters beyond 2010 when Hitchin Initiative and then Hitchin Town Hall Ltd worked with the Council to renovate the Town Hall and create a better and more functional museum in the former Gymnasium and Workman's Hall next door. We did, however, express our admiration, support and thanks to both of those organisations for the huge amount of work they did, totally pro bono.

It is impossible to pass judgment on the hearings whilst they are still in progress, but we felt the independent chairman was impeccably fair, positive, incisive and approachable. The panel (all fairly new Councillors, so no historic 'baggage' to cloud their thinking) were keen and penetrating in their questioning. They will eventually report to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that report will be made public.

Google explained what the Council's motto is: "Mindful of what has been done, aware of what will be". Hopefully, these hearings will reinforce for the Council in future that past decisions do have future implications, and we look for better days ahead!

Ellie Clarke

### Diary Dates

Thurs 5<sup>th</sup> September: **Special Town Talk:** 7pm – 9pm. Hitchin Town Hall.  
See feature article on page 5.

Tues 1<sup>st</sup> October: **Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:** 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively.  
Westmill Community Centre.

*Please note that, in view of the Special Town Talk, we will not be holding a members' meeting in September.*