

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

September – October 2019 No. 155

Chairman's Piece

Last year, a report about the efficacy of 20mph zones and limits was published on the government's website (<https://tinyurl.com/yywsvek7>). Whilst there is insufficient evidence to conclude that there has been a significant change in collision and casualty numbers following the introduction of 20mph limits, there has been a small reduction in average speed – of 0.7mph in residential areas and 0.9mph in city centre areas.

A drop in average speed of less than 1mph doesn't seem much. However, according to the Highway Code's table of stopping distances, at 20mph the 'typical stopping distance' is 12 metres. On a speed awareness course I attended there was a video demonstration in which a driver, travelling at constant speed, carries out an emergency stop. The car comes to a halt just touching a model car placed at the 'typical stopping distance'. When repeated at a speed 1mph higher, the driver is unable to avoid colliding with the model with some force.

In the presentation, the test driver knows exactly what to expect, it is daytime, and the surface is reliable and dry. The Highway Code's table of stopping distances assumes a driver reaction time of 0.675 seconds. A study (<https://tinyurl.com/y2nvge29>) found that the average reaction (thinking) time is dependent on the nature of the hazard. A pedestrian stepping unexpectedly into the road elicited the quickest response – 0.85 seconds on average. Only 15% of drivers managed 0.67 seconds or less, and 15% had reaction times which exceeded 1.02 seconds.

Fellow spreadsheet geek Stuart Howarth and I calculate that, if a pedestrian stepped out 12m ahead of a car travelling at 21mph whose driver had a reaction time of 0.85 seconds, the impact would be at almost 13.5mph - sufficient to cause life-changing injuries in some cases. For the 15% of drivers with reaction times of 1.02 seconds or more, the speed at impact would be nearly 17mph. The extra 1mph is clearly very significant.

In 2017, one typical newspaper heading read "Safer 20mph zones led to rise in number of road deaths but too costly to reverse, council admits" (<https://tinyurl.com/yahmj4xr>). The council's statement is scientifically illiterate (cause is impossible to attribute). Acceptance of the statement at face value by journalists is irresponsible and reflects what journalists think their audiences want to hear.

It is now well over 2 years since the north Hitchin 20mph limits were introduced. Accidents are comparatively rare events, so any reduction in accident frequency will take a while to show up. There is no way of knowing how many accidents have been avoided. I understand that a reduction in average speed has been achieved. The physics tells us that even a modest reduction could have reduced the severity of some collisions and might have enabled some accidents to be avoided altogether. The challenge is to persuade more drivers to adhere to the speed limit – something to which responsible media could usefully contribute.

Bill Sellicks

Hitchin's Big Autumn Litter Pick

As we go to press, arrangements are well underway for our Hitchin Big Autumn Litter Pick on Sunday 20th October. We are hoping for great support once again, and there will be 'little treasures' to be found for the youngsters (always exciting!).

We are pleased to have support once again from 'Clean Up Hitchin' and this time we are also joined by 'Plastic Free Hitchin'. We also got a mention in Hitchin's bid for the Great British High Street Awards (see following article) so have joined in promotional activities for the judges of that event, doing a litter-picking photoshoot in The Dell and on Windmill Hill as well as a stall in Market Place on the day of the judges' visit.

For the first time, the event will be run from Hitchin's Information Office in Churchyard where the kit for volunteers will be held for collection and return. We are grateful to Hitchin Initiative for providing this support as well as insurance cover, and also to North Herts District Council for supplying many litter pickers and hi viz vests, all of the bags and efficient collection of filled bags after the event.

Our semi-annual litter days are always great fun and particularly enjoyed by families. Teams work across the town on designated sites, both alongside roads (adults only) and footpaths, and in parks and open spaces (family-friendly). It is always a sociable and satisfying event, leaving the town brighter and cleaner.

For more information go to our website: www.hitchinform.org.uk or to join the fun email: litter@hitchinform.org.uk

Ellie Clarke



Litter-Picking Volunteers in the Market Place – September 2019

The Best Great British High Street

The Great British High Street Awards is run by The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, in proud partnership with Visa and backed by other partners.

Whilst the nation's high streets face challenges, the partnership is committed to helping businesses and communities find ways to adapt and innovate, thus ensuring that our high streets continue to thrive both now and into the future. The Awards share leading examples of the ways high streets are succeeding in overcoming the challenges of a rapidly changing environment. For more information on the awards visit the Great British High Street site: <https://tinyurl.com/yd29cta8>.

It's been announced that Hitchin is in the finals of these awards. We are delighted to have made it into the top three for England, it is testament to the myriad people who work to make our town centre so vibrant and interesting - from the businesses who run shops and services here to the people who come and spend their precious time and money in the town. We also have lots of support from the Council and local community groups and organisations who do so much behind the scenes.

Hitchin really is special and we hope the judges see that. High Streets are judged on the four pillars of success: Customer Service, Digital Transformation, Environment and Innovation. The current stage of the awards process involves a public vote. If we win the England vote we go through to the national finals and could take home the title of 'Britain's Best High Street'. We stand a really great chance, but we also need everyone to vote! Voting closes 7th October and winners will be announced in November. A link to the voting site can be found at <https://www.hitchinherts.com/>.

It's not only the vote which will decide if Hitchin makes it through to the next stage - all shortlisted high streets will be visited by the Great British High Street Judges who will assess them against their original entry.

Tom Hardy (*Hitchin Town Centre Manager*)

Annual General Meeting

Hitchin Forum's AGM this year will be held at Hitchin British Schools Museum on Monday November 4th at 7.15pm. We are seeking to make changes to the Constitution which can only be done at either a Special General Meeting (SGM) or the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Since the changes involve alterations to the role of the Chair, we will have to hold a very short SGM under the old Constitution in order to make the changes, before proceeding with the AGM.

As usual, the formal part of the meeting will be brief. After that, there will then be a short refreshment break before Stuart Howarth, Brian Sykes and I report on two recent meetings about climate change which we have attended. One was the North Hertfordshire District Council Cabinet's Panel on the Environment meeting to be held in the light of the Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency (<https://tinyurl.com/y4p8z743>). The other was a conference at Rothamsted convened by Bim Afolami MP, about how Government can achieve its goal of net zero emissions by 2050.

Bill Sellicks

Diary Dates:

Sunday 20 th October:	The Big Autumn Litter Pick:	10am - 12 noon. All around the town.
Monday 4 th November:	Hitchin Forum SGM and Annual General Meeting followed by presentations:	7.15pm.

Our Town. Your Say

The contribution to this issue comes from member Jeremy Burrowes. We would like to remind members that the views expressed in this feature are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Steering Group or the Forum as a whole. We welcome replies from other contributors.

Transport Issues in the 2020s

My first visit to Hitchin was in 1976, when I recall getting held up in heavy traffic in Tilehouse Street. This was before the Park Way by-pass was constructed. Since moving to live in Hitchin in 1982, there seem to be ever increasing amounts of road traffic along the town's main arteries. In recent years, this has led me to believe there may be a case for a further bypass of the town which would benefit many people.

Anyone who gets out and about, whether walking, cycling or driving, will have thoughts about traffic congestion. There can be few people who do not find it irritating, apart from fuel retailers and the car industry. Obvious problems are time delays, additional pollution, potentially more accidents, unsightliness and a general reduction in the quality of life of residents who live in the street or road.

The question of whether to build a bypass is of course controversial. Issues include the belief that providing more roads produces more traffic. There is the cost of the build and also the route a bypass might take which degrades the environment along its route for residents as well as nature.

There is a powerful argument that in the light of global warming, a fundamental rethink is needed, and radical steps need to be taken to reduce vehicle use. On the flip side, with the anticipated uptake of new technology in the form of electrically powered and self-driving vehicles, our streets and roads are set to become safer and less polluted, but sadly not quieter because for safety reasons, new legislation will soon require all electrically propelled vehicles to emit an artificial noise.

However, if vehicle use is to decrease and we are not to return to a pre-industrialised way of life, then other modes of transport fit for the 21st Century will need to be provided to enable people to move about for work, pleasure and simple daily life. It is unrealistic to believe that the UK population is going to be happy to have the current flexibility that vehicles offer in a rural environment severely curtailed.

New rail lines are fraught with difficulties, and the costs can be almost prohibitive, as HS2 and Crossrail are proving. Bus and coach services might have merit for local and perhaps countywide journeys, but do they offer passengers the flexibility to be conveyed where they wish to go at times they wish to travel? Walking and cycling (even with electrically powered bicycles), are more feasible for shorter journeys, so while providing safe routes around town would be desirable, this would not reduce traffic on the main trunk routes in question.

Even if we manage to remove some of the cars from our roads, the question of efficient movement of freight and deliveries is still a real issue. No one welcomes large lorries on our roads except when we want something to be delivered locally! At present, 90% of freight is moved by road and unless our national economy shrinks, the number of commercial vehicles is sure to increase.

The important A505 trunk road runs east/west through Hitchin and road users will be aware of the traffic problems which exist, particularly during busy periods. Many drivers when travelling east, quite sensibly choose the longer route along the A602 to Stevenage to join the A1(M) to re-join the A505 east of Letchworth. This puts additional traffic onto Park Way and Stevenage Road which exacerbates the problems highlighted above – traffic delays, additional pollution, accidents, etc.

While some of us might benefit from the proximity of Luton Airport, annual passenger numbers have increased from 3.2M in 1997 to currently 16.8M. The airport has plans to increase annual passenger

numbers to 38M. Many airport passengers travelling to and from the airport into East Anglia will surely use the A505 and this will greatly add to the traffic problems which already exist to the south of the town. The A505 and A602 are dual carriageways on both sides of the town and if signposted effectively, a bypass linking these roads would divert traffic from using local roads almost entirely. Satnav technology in vehicles would also be most effective in directing drivers by the quickest route.

Drone deliveries will be with us soon and it is predicted autonomous air taxis transporting people will be flying within 10 years. Apart from cluttering up our skies and burning even more energy than road vehicles, the problems of road congestion are with us now and I suggest that action to alleviate Hitchin's problems needs to be taken now. A bypass may not solve all our problems but there are many people who would support the idea. We need a mechanism to test public opinion but a decision such as this will most likely be made by people far removed from us.

Finally, I would point to some local communities which have greatly benefited from a bypass, namely Stotfold A507, Baldock and Royston A505 and Little Wymondley A602. Visit these places to see how relatively peaceful they have become in relation to how they would be if no bypass existed. It is entirely possible that residents and workers of Hitchin also benefit from these bypasses as they travel by road, just as others would benefit from a new Hitchin bypass.

As a footnote, the views above are my personal observations but extensive work has been carried out recently which argues a case for a bypass as part of additional housing development. A detailed analysis of the issues can be found on the North Hertfordshire website at: <https://tinyurl.com/y3bahpq9>.

Jeremy Burrowes

Town Centre Meeting

I went, I heard about 50% of what was said, and I am not sure I can draw any conclusions from what I heard...

A meeting on the 5th September, sometime described as a Hitchin Town Talk – usually preceding Hitchin Committee – was well attended (in the region of 80 members of the public) and may have been a first for the Council. Ian Albert, Chair of Hitchin Committee, managed the event and gave all attendees the opportunity to say their piece. What emerged, when the microphones and sound system functioned (which was about 50% of the time), was a range of aspirations and ideas, many of which have been aired before.

What should the town be aiming for? To improve footfall for the businesses? To become a destination for tourists, perhaps with a commercial cluster of market activities – such as the second-hand Friday stalls? To cater for the better off with an even better range of independent shops? And/or the provision for those who have particularly suffered with the austerity economy? To cater for our own residents and their needs? To make it a place that attracts and occupies and employs and houses younger people?

How could the infrastructure be adapted – particularly as we face the need to reduce car use? Are there alternatives to more car journeys and bigger car parks? Could there be a shuttle service so car users do not need to drive into the centre? Could there be a reduction of deliveries into the centre, with some type of distribution hub? Why is there no Sunday bus service when the shops and market are so busy? When will there be better pedestrian access to the station from the east? What happened to that District Transport Strategy – where has it been parked? What happens if more houses are built at Highover and the college site – will gridlock ensue?

And then there is the market. Could it be shifted a bit to improve the flow to and from the shops? Would a covered hall provide the right stage for more food stalls? Would it be used enough?

And then there is Churchgate – does it need a lick of paint or demolition and rebuild? Should it just be loved a little more? How much would a redevelopment cost? Could that be offset by a range of homes on part of the site? Should NHDC buy the lease from Hammersmatch? Ideas from the Churchgate Resurgence Pro Bono Group were clearly evident.

First the Local Plan needs to be adopted, and then a new Town Centre Strategy prepared. It was encouraging that Councillors were leading this with support from NHDC's Deputy Chief Executive and looking to the future, and townspeople were debating the issues. There was mention of meetings in all of the local community centres and, with a good sound system next time, the prospect of community engagement gets closer. We hope that a clear plan, which will have public support, can then emerge.

Mike Clarke

Luton Airport

During Andrew Lambourne's presentation at our February members' meeting, he informed us of Luton Airport's intention to apply to have one of the noise conditions, agreed between it and Luton Borough Council in 2013, temporarily relaxed.

The airport has expanded more rapidly than it predicted – it was due to reach 18 million passengers per year by 2028. The expansion has been such that this milestone is expected to occur next year.

The airport claims that, due to circumstances beyond its control (for example the delayed availability of quieter aircraft and air traffic control strikes on the continent forcing daytime arrivals into the night time period where tighter restrictions apply) there has been more noise than predicted. Conditions were therefore breached. This led to airlines being fined, which they don't like, and could mean that the airport stands to lose some airline customers. The airport concedes that the relaxation is contrary to the provision of Luton's Local Plan policies, but claims that the economic benefits to Luton and the surrounding area will be under threat unless the Council exercises leniency.

Once the airport submitted its application earlier this year, we objected on the grounds of the impact on the health of residents and the amenity of the surrounding area. It was gratifying that the Council itself identified serious flaws in the airport's assessments and demanded more information and evidence in support of the application. The airport has now provided the required information, and we have submitted a further objection arguing that the airport was irresponsible in allowing unrestrained expansion, effectively front-loading its profits. That the noise conditions would be broken was inevitable.

The airport predicts that it will be able to comply with the noise conditions by 2024, hence the application is for a temporary relaxation. Its track record on predictions is so poor that there is little reason to believe that this claim will be fulfilled. We have urged members of Luton's Development Control Committee to reject the application in order to prioritise public health and the state of the environment over short term commercial interests.

In a further development, LADACAN (Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise) and other pressure groups have been asked to comment (at very short notice) on changes to aircraft tracks. Technological advances mean that it is now possible for aircraft to fly along very tightly controlled tracks (so-called 'motorways in the sky'). Hitchin is fortunate in that it is some distance from the Luton runway and the majority of the suggested tracks do not appear to fly over the town. However, what has been supplied so far is indicative only, so that could change. If the approach is adopted, the technology will mean that some people could experience almost constant noise whereas others will experience very little. I have said to Andrew that my preference would be for more diffuse tracks to spread the load. If you would like to know more, please email chairman@hitchinforum.org.

Bill Sellicks