

NEWSLETTER

November – December 2020 No. 159

Thoughts from the Chair

As a result of an exponentially swelling inbox, in 2012 I decided to unsubscribe from the campaign group 38 Degrees. I could not cope with the constant requests to support causes which required more investigation and time than I could reasonably devote to them. I think a lot of people have probably experienced similar consultation or petition fatigue and questioned the effectiveness of online campaigning.

The question of the effectiveness of contributing to consultations remains an issue. Take, for example, the attempt by Luton airport to relax a noise condition because it was in danger of exceeding it. Application 15/00950/VARCON was submitted to Luton Borough Council on 30th March last year. The vast majority of the 545 responses (including one from Hitchin Forum) were statements of outright opposition. The application is still listed on the Council's planning website as 'awaiting decision' but would appear to have been abandoned. Far from giving up, the airport has now run a 'pre-application consultation' on proposals to relax several planning conditions which are designed to allow an increase in the passenger number cap to 19 million passengers per year. The airport does not seem to have considered the groundswell of opposition, preferring to dress up the environmentally damaging proposals differently in a bid to get support from a distrusting public. One might question what function consultation really has in the planning process, and ultimately whether there is any point in engaging with it. To raise that question at all is an indicator that all is not well with a process which ought to be a major feature of any democratic system.

How can the airport get away with this arrogant behaviour? One answer might be because arrogance and cynicism characterise the approach to consultations on the part of our national politicians. In its recent consultation on 'Planning for the Future', the government invited comments on its radical proposals to change the planning system. Hitchin Forum sent two letters. The first was our response to some of the questions to which answers were invited. The second, to Cabinet Office Minister, Michael Gove, raised concerns regarding the approach taken by the authors of the consultation. We highlighted several examples of poor questions which completely ignored the Cabinet Office Guidelines for Consultation. Whilst emphasising that a key feature of the reforms was that they were designed to enable a wider demographic to engage with the planning process, the consultation was definitely not an example of best practice in terms of its own potential to reach those groups not usually engaged in planning decisions.

Sadly, there is no requirement to follow Cabinet Office Guidelines. I suspect that for those bringing forward legislation, carrying out a consultation is an irritating, potentially obstructive, but necessary box to be ticked. In fact, well conducted consultation has the potential to inform participants, generate support for proposals and hone policy to make it more effective. It will be interesting to see what response (if any) the Minister provides.

Bill Sellicks: Co-chair

Our Town Your Say

This contribution from Andrew Wearmouth, a member of the Steering Group, is his response to the last Newsletter's article from Keith Hoskins on Local Government reform. 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.

If you wish to contribute, please email the editor at: newsletter@hitchinforum.co.uk.

Local Government Reform

Following the excellent article from Keith Hoskins in the last Newsletter, I shall be grateful if you will allow me to add my own comments, because a number of questions arise from the proposal for Unitary Councils as currently suggested. The concept has been presented in the press almost as a "done deal" and the juggernaut of change is unlikely to be swayed from its path, but I feel that some answering comment does need to be made.

Keith is entirely right to want a strong Town Council to be put into place before any Unitary comes into play, and the creation of a new Hitchin Town Council with genuine powers is an absolute necessity. There have been too many complaints that the current District Councils are remote from their electorate and more localised decision-making and accountability is vital. However, the arguments in favour of Unitary Authorities are exactly the same as were put forward when local government was last reorganised in 1974. At that time, north Hertfordshire was served by five District Councils, Hitchin, Letchworth, Baldock, Royston and Hitchin Rural. Each of those was fully in touch with the needs of their public, but was arguably too small to offer the wide range of services that were starting to be needed. It was argued that by combining the five into one there would be improved outcomes and services, value for money, and improved efficiency, while establishing strong and more accountable leadership. Sound familiar?

When the redevelopment of most of Letchworth town centre was undertaken in 1973/4 (Commerce Way, Central Approach etc), the contractor required as a condition of contract that he be allowed to construct a lettable office block. Coincidentally, the new Council was due to come into being in April 1974, and so acted as a pre-let for that office block, moving in in 1975. It was convenient, but inevitably, as a result of the Council Reorganisation, the other towns lost their immediate localised point of contact. This is bound to be the case when an authority serves a larger area.

I must declare that I am not against the creation of the larger authority in principle, after all, my job at the fledgling North Herts District Council was created in 1974 when I was offered the position of Estates Surveyor, to manage their property holdings. However, without strong local representation with a Town Council it is inevitable that such further enlargement is bound to exacerbate the feeling of remoteness of government. Where would the new Unitary Authority be located? Would Hitchin be "ruled" from Stevenage, or Welwyn?

I would also like to comment on the size of the new authority and its location. In their report for the County Council, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) have produced three options. These are:

- 1) Optimising the existing 2-tier arrangement,
- 2) Creating a single Unitary Council based on the existing County boundary, or
- 3) Creating two Unitary Councils each of 600,000 people comprising a) Dacorum, Hertsmere, St Albans, Three Rivers and Watford, and b) Broxbourne, East Herts, North Herts, Stevenage and Welwyn & Hatfield.

However, the point of a report such as this is not a command for compliance, but merely a suggestion following consideration by the employed consultant. There has to be room for further adaptation of the recommendations. Hertfordshire is an incredibly diverse county, ranging from rural in the north and east, to outer London in the south. To propose that north Hertfordshire should be lumped in with Broxbourne makes no sense and appears to have been suggested simply to make the two Unitary Authorities have similar populations. It might have been more helpful if PwC had offered another option – with three or four Unitaries instead of two, or if two is a vital part of the overall plan, to split the county between north and south.

Well, that's got that off my chest. No doubt the whole concept will create a lot of discussion which hopefully will run for a while yet!

Andrew Wearmouth: Member of Steering Group

Planning White Paper – Our Response

In August, the Government published a White Paper, "Planning for the Future", for a 12-week public consultation. The Prime Minister's Foreword claimed it proposed a whole new planning system for England which would be simpler, clearer and deliver results much more quickly, whilst encouraging "sustainable, beautiful, safe and useful development rather than obstructing it". It claimed it would make it "harder for developers to dodge their obligations to improve infrastructure", would "open up housebuilding to more than just the current handful of massive corporations" and "give the people of this country the homes we need in the places we want to live at prices we can afford ...". So far so good.

The Secretary of State was ecstatic in his Foreword: "We will build environmentally friendly homes that will not need to be expensively retrofitted in the future, homes with green spaces and new parks at close hand, where tree lined streets are the norm and where neighbours are not strangers. ... Communities will be reconnected to a planning process that is supposed to serve them, with residents more engaged over what happens in their areas."

As always, the devil was in the detail. The proposals include a zoning system, creating "growth areas", "renewal areas" and "protected areas". On further examination however, this is clearly too crude an instrument to address the detailed complexity, differences and needs within local areas. Development proposals in "growth areas" would get automatic planning permission, with only the details requiring scrutiny. The notion of automatic outline planning permission or automatic approval is simplistic and naïve; it fails to recognise local distinctiveness and local complexities. It also fails to bring with it the necessary safeguards for creating high standard development.

Further, planning applications in these "growth areas" would not be open to public comment. This would considerably reduce local involvement at just the point where local knowledge is most valuable and where the impact of development proposals is most keenly felt. In our response we argued that local people must continue to have influence and our elected representatives must retain decision-making powers over planning applications. Is this not what "localism" is all about?

The White Paper proposes streamlining the information required in Local Plans in order to speed their production. This may be laudable, but Local Plans must consider sites in appropriate detail in order to be local.

The paper goes on to suggest that housing requirements should be based on affordability and the extent of existing urban areas. In other words, houses should be built where prices are highest and towns the largest. This fails to recognise that house prices are largely maintained by the national house building companies, not least because they control the rate at which they build houses. The extent of land banking by developers confirms this. Further, this approach would merely produce more housing in areas already

most expensive and congested such as the Oxford-Cambridge-London 'Golden Triangle'. We argued that development should take place where economic support or growth is most needed. There is a very real north-south divide in this country and national planning should be addressing these geographic economic and social inequalities, not setting down 'numbers policies' in a one-size-fits-all for the country.

There are many references to "beauty", "beautiful development", "fast track for beauty" without defining what this is. This is naïve and unhelpful. Good design is far more complex than this and must be considered in a more meaningful sense to include impact, scale, sense of place, connectivity, urban space, pedestrian movement and permeability and the way these together support social and economic activity. This will become even more important in the post-Covid era.

We concluded: "This White Paper emphasises speed over quality, centralised decision-making over local representative democracy and formula over creativity. It does not address the fundamental issue of viability and its disparity across England. A different approach is needed to make the planning system in England more effective – for people and the environment."

Ellie Clarke: Member

Electric Cars – The Future (We Are Told...)

In the interests of reducing UK carbon emissions, the government has decided that in a few years' time, new cars with petrol or diesel engines will not be sold in this country. Electricity is being promoted for the power source of new cars, and as a change from our usual Newsletter articles, Steering Group thought members might like one explaining the different types currently available and what we see as their advantages and pitfalls. We have also included comments on the experiences of some of our Steering Group members who have gone down that route.

There are three types of electric car available at present. Pure electric, hybrid and plug-in hybrid.

- 1) Pure electric. This is the route that the government wishes to take, as the other two options have petrol or diesel engines working with the electric power train. It is the most "green" option as it produces no carbon in usage. Until recently the range has been the limiting factor, but this is getting better, and some cars can now cover in excess of 250 miles. Nevertheless, any owner wishing to undertake a lengthy journey must first research the availability of charging points along the way.
- 2) Hybrid. These cars have two power trains, electric and petrol (or diesel) which work together. The internal combustion engine charges the electric battery and the onboard computer decides the balance of use between the two. Carbon emissions are lower than a standard petrol/diesel engine car, but as charging the battery is dependent on burning fossil fuels, the benefit is limited. When researching for my own car, I found many manufacturers were making "hybrid" cars for which the petrol/diesel element was a 2.5litre engine, and they were proud of a 40mpg outcome. I felt they hadn't got the message!
- 3) Plug-in hybrid. This is similar to the second option above, but with the extra facility of being chargeable externally, like the pure electric car. It is therefore not dependent on the engine for charge, and as a result returns much better mpg. There have been reports that plug-in hybrids are not as beneficial as previously believed, but it turns out that some users have not been bothering to plug them in! Another group that didn't get the message!

The provision of sufficient and conveniently located charging points is important. Those with driveways may be able to install a point on the side wall of their own house, but those with communal parking areas, or those in older parts of the town where street parking is the only option have more of a problem. Given the rush to make the public go down the electric route, it will be interesting to see how the government

proposes to resolve this. In the first instance it must involve local authorities, who maybe will consider the installation of “parking meter style” points in residential roads.

It is also becoming clear that the country is going to have to think hard about how we can generate sufficient power in the National Grid to charge the batteries of a purely electric future. The huge problem of pollution from freight vehicles also needs to be considered.

Owning an electric or hybrid car requires a different approach to driving, and what follows is a brief description of the experiences of some of our Steering Group in researching and buying these cars.

Member A). Battery technology is advancing all the time, but when carrying out my research in September 2019, I was concerned at the limited range of a pure electric car. I regularly visit family in Bromley, and was anxious not to have a flat battery when queuing for the Blackwall Tunnel on the way home! Plug-in was for me the ideal solution. My chosen car, a Kia, claims an electric range of 33 miles, and petrol range of 500 but prioritises electric power. The engine automatically cuts in if the computer considers it necessary, but travelling to Stotfold, Hitchin or any of the other short journeys which make up the majority of my use, I regularly get between 500 and 900mpg. This is of course not “free” motoring as I recharge the battery from my home supply, but on my standard electricity tariff, a full charge costs me about £1.20. I can also preserve the battery for specific occasions: using hybrid mode on the motorway keeps the battery charged, but I can elect to use electricity alone, reducing costs and minimising carbon emissions in an air quality sensitive zone.

Member B). I have just purchased a hybrid BMW because I was interested in seeing what some sort of electric car was like. I have been very happy with it so far and enjoy using the electric power. I feel happier now travelling into town given the lack of pollution from the car itself and can now see myself moving to an all electric car in due course. In general terms though I am concerned at the current state of the charging network across the country. In Hitchin we have charging points owned by two separate companies and I therefore need authorisation cards from both to charge my car. Why can't I just present my contactless card to pay for the charge? I have only been away once since buying the car but had similar problems in Norwich and also in finding charging points: they seem to be as common as “hens’ teeth”.

Member C). I have followed hybrid technology since working in the automotive industry in the 1980s but was never truly convinced that they would deliver good fuel consumption. However, when plug-in hybrid vehicles appeared, I was finally convinced and bought a three-year-old plug-in Prius, charging it using renewable energy via a simple 13A mains socket. The battery provides about 10 miles before the engine is required, after which it reverts to simple hybrid operation. Despite the relatively small battery, over the last four years (50000 miles) electricity provided 23% of the total energy and, in pure hybrid mode, the fuel consumption was over 60mpg on motorways and more like 100mpg around town. No wonder every other taxi seems to be a Prius.

Member D). I bought my first electric vehicle, a Prius, about 15 years ago, and have had three of them, the last being a Prius plug-in. I loved them all. I felt I was doing something environmentally friendly – though anything would have improved on the Volvo 240 we had previously! The plug-in could do 15 miles on a charge. I know plug-ins can go much farther now but this was pretty good at the time. I could plug it into a standard three-pin socket and never noticed any substantial change in my electricity bill. Friends and colleagues would comment on how much money I was saving in petrol, although of course this does not take into account the cost of buying the car in the first place, or the environmental cost of building it!

We went from a two car to a one car family three years ago. We sold the plug-in and bought a hybrid Toyota, which is not as efficient as the Prius, but serves a different purpose.

Would I have another electric vehicle? Yes, but there needs to be a better network of charging points if it is our only car. I was hoping hydrogen vehicles would become available soon: can I hang on until they are?

Member E). When researching for an electric car, I found car magazines particularly helpful. There are now many cars available, but I was never really attracted to hybrids since I wanted pure electric with zero emissions and I settled on the Nissan Leaf.

What I had not fully anticipated were the arrangements necessary to charge the battery. It is not just the number of public charging stations or their location that matters: each one is operated by a particular private charging network, and you have to download their dedicated app to use “their” point. In addition, if your home has a private driveway, you can have your own charger installed on the side of your house or garage.

Demand for the installation of a private charger has understandably intensified recently, and as a result it may take a while to get an appointment. There is a government grant towards the cost, and in order to access it OLEV (Office for Low Emission Vehicles) will require detailed information from you about your property, including photos.

All of this setting up may be enough to deter some from proceeding, but I am actually delighted with my car. The costs have been fairly high initially but these will now be much lower than with petrol or diesel. The car is virtually noiseless which enhances the driving experience, and it is a pleasure to drive. I now have the confidence to travel within a radius of 80 miles (half of the 160 mile full charge) and am looking forward to exploring the as yet uncharted wilderness of rapid charge stations on longer routes. It’s a new normal, but a journey I am very much looking forward to!

In this article we have not considered the high carbon footprint of building a car in the first place, or indeed the relative expense of buying a car with a double power train, but in the knowledge that as a small civic organisation Hitchin Forum isn’t going to change manufacturing industries that are important to world-wide economies, we have tried to concentrate on usage and appropriateness of electric cars for the people of Hitchin, and to help our readers understand the pros and cons of some of the cars available. I hope this article is helpful.

Andrew Wearmouth: Member of Steering Group

Big Autumn Clean-Up 2020

Butts Close, King George’s playing fields and part of the Poets’ estate were just some of the places given a makeover in Hitchin Forum’s Big Autumn Clean-up on Sunday 18th October. We were delighted with the turn-out, especially since the event had to be a scaled-down version of its former self due to coronavirus restrictions. People who signed up were amazingly tolerant of the number and detail of the email messages that were flying around (not least the coronavirus-specific risk assessment) and came out on the day to do a brilliant job in spite of everything. There was a great spirit, and I think everybody enjoyed themselves, despite social distancing and being restricted by the rule of 6. At the five main collection points, we collected 23 bags of recycling and 56 bags of general waste.

Over 10 more bags were taken home to put in domestic bins. Special mention should go to the Holy Saviour Guides who did a fantastic job on the Dell, long one of Hitchin’s most popular sites for those who are unable to find a bin for their packaging. There was the usual range of ‘finds’ – sofas, a car wheel, and unusually, probably a first, an amplifier. There was also one lost child, happily restored to her parents before they had noticed that she had wandered off.

Obviously, we had to tighten the instructions and restrict where people might normally pick litter, which was a shame – several people were disappointed that the Council wouldn’t support the collection of

rubbish from the verges of the bypass, for example. People even had to be given appointments to collect and return their litter pickers so they didn't all arrive at the same time.

Our six-monthly litter picks have become increasingly popular in recent years. We were disappointed to have to cancel the spring event back in March, especially as we had over 200 people who wanted to be involved. This time we had nearly 120 people taking part in over 30 teams. We are very grateful to all of them, but also to those who supported the event – especially North Hertfordshire District Council for their advice, and Hitchin Initiative for storing equipment and providing us with a distribution point when people came to collect it. I think we made a difference. We hope that we will be back to our normal format in the spring.

The event itself spawned at least 4 enquiries from people who had not taken part this time but want to do so in the future. For those who would like to take part in future events, we would like to hear from you. Please email us to register your interest for the next event, likely to be in March 2021, at hflitterpick@gmail.com.

Bill Sellicks: Co-chair

AGM 2020 report

The process

As you will know, it was not possible to hold our normal AGM for obvious reasons. A concern was raised about sending hard copy of the papers to all members. In fact, this has been the practice with all AGMs in the past – perhaps it is time to revisit that practice.

Due to a variety of unavoidable factors, we had to delay the date for submission of questions and new nominations for Steering Group. Some people received their papers after the 2nd November deadline, and we contacted members to indicate that late comments and questions would be acceptable.

Minutes of Virtual AGM (nominally 2nd November 2020)

1. Minutes of AGM held on 4th November 2019

No comments or questions were received. We have taken that as an acceptance that the minutes were accurate and acceptable as a true record of the meeting.

2. Elections to Steering Group.

We have received no new nominations, and all members of Steering Group were willing to serve for one more year in the roles identified in the Agenda. They are therefore deemed to have been elected. See profiles of current Steering Group members below.

Please note that we are very happy to hear from anybody who is interested in joining Steering Group at any stage in the year – please contact chair@hitchinforum.org.uk.

3. Reports

No questions or comments were received, so we take it that the reports were accepted.

4. Appointment of Independent Financial Examiner.

There were no objections to the appointment of Christine Skeen as IFE, so she is duly appointed.

5. AOB.

None.

Steering Group Profiles

At our recent Annual General Meeting the following Steering Group members were elected.

Ken Chapman - worked for Barclays Bank for many years, all over the country and abroad, moving to Hitchin in 1995. Since leaving Barclays, he has worked in the charity sector both as a volunteer and at "Futurebuilders", a government fund set up to make loans to charities. He was treasurer for 8 years of "Living Streets", the UK charity for everyday walking. He is our Treasurer and Membership Secretary.
Contact: treasurer@hitchinforum.org.uk or membershipsecretary@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Mike Clarke - is one of our three **Co-chairs**, website and twitter administrator. He is Hertfordshire born and bred and has lived in Hitchin since 1981. He is particularly interested in the historical aspects of the town.

Contact for website - admin@hitchinforum.org.uk or chairman@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Neil Dodds – is a retired chartered Civil and Structural engineer and is currently a volunteer for a number of local charities. He has lived in Hitchin since 1984, during which time he has campaigned against development of Hitchin's green spaces. He examines planning applications for the Steering Group.

Contact: planning.appl@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Chris Honey - is stepping down from the Steering Group for health reasons.

Stuart Howarth - moved to Hertfordshire from the Midlands in 1985 and has lived in Hitchin since 1992. He worked in the space industry in Stevenage as a spacecraft designer until he retired in early 2019. His family includes five pupils at two of Hitchin's schools. His primary interests and concerns are for the environment and the climate emergency.

Jennifer Piggott - joined Hitchin Forum in 2015 and is the Forum's Newsletter Editor. Jennifer has lived in Hitchin since 1972, teaching in local schools and the University sector before retiring in 2010.

Contact: newsletter@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Bill Sellicks - is a retired chemistry teacher who moved to Hitchin in 1984 and is one of our three **Co-chairs**. A keen walker and cyclist, he would like to promote greater use of Hitchin's network of footpaths to reduce congestion on our roads and see improved facilities for cyclists. He is concerned about development in the greenbelt, and the impact of Luton Airport on the town and surrounding villages.

Contact: chairman@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Brian Sykes - began his working life as a teacher of literature and language in this country and other parts of the world and subsequently changed direction to the training of managers and awarding of qualifications in management. He has been a Governor of Hitchin Boys' School, including a time as chair. He is a relatively new member of the Forum and is impressed by the atmosphere of goodwill that pervades all it does. Brian is one of our three **Co-chairs**.

Contact: chairman@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Andrew Wearmouth - was born in Hitchin and has always lived locally. He is a Chartered Surveyor with 40 years of experience in local government, for the last 20 of which he was Head of Estates at St Albans City and District Council.