

# HITCHIN FORUM

*Caring for our Town*

## NEWSLETTER

January-February 2021 No. 160

### Thoughts from the Chair

Life seems to me to be on a go-slow. My daughter, who works in the NHS, would disagree, as would anyone viewing the hospitals and vaccination centres. The past year has seen many of us more house bound and a third lock-down returns us to the sight of a ghostly town centre. Not only are the shoppers not around, after a fateful Xmas, but shops are being vacated. Well used and liked stores have been closing for several years, newer businesses are following. Like many, my online shopping reflects a changing pattern. At least we avoided the spectre of a large anchor store such as Debenham's overlooking the Biggin in the ill-fated Churchgate scheme proposed by Simons (circa 2013). Just imagine what that would look like now.

One treasured local enterprise, the Market Theatre, had been threatened with closure due to a redevelopment of the building. Fortunately the planning application has now been withdrawn due to 'a community backlash'. We hope that is the end of the threat – treasures must not be lost.

Walkers widen the muddy paths, and streets are littered with discarded face masks. Whilst it feels that there is a go-slow, planning issues, environmental concerns, and the care of our locality continue. Read on for a bit more on that.

**Mike Clarke (Co-chair)**

### Planning Update

One of Hitchin Forum's regular activities involves reviewing Planning Applications. This has been done for many years by Chris Honey, but recently Chris has relinquished his role and, after a comprehensive briefing from Ellie Clarke, I have taken over the task. It involves logging onto the NHDC Planning website each week, seeing if there is anything of note, and responding. We usually concentrate on sites in the centre of town, but also review any larger new developments. We look at and comment on appearance, scale, effects on historic buildings, access and affordable housing, as well as noise, construction issues and other effects on residents.

In judging comments from ourselves and others, the Council has to review them against its policies, and this is particularly an issue with larger new developments. The NHDC Local Plan, which sets out the policy for deciding planning issues, is way out of date – it was issued 25 years ago, in 1996. The Council's 2011 - 2031 Draft Plan is 10 years late and is currently with the Government Inspector for approval. Due to the Coronavirus and other factors, the Inspector's hearings have been further delayed, and the final hearings are due to take place by Zoom on 1-2 February 2021. Among other issues, I understand that the Inspector is particularly concerned with the loss of Green Belt in the Plan.

One large development which is currently in the offing is the Highover proposal. This is for 700 new dwellings, a school and shops between the top of High Dane and the Stotfold Road, and between Grovelands Avenue and the Cambridge railway line. Despite this currently being Green Belt land, NHDC Planning is in favour of the scheme because it makes a large contribution to fulfilling its Housing Need. Hitchin Forum, in conjunction with the Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society, had a meeting with NHDC and the developers, and have indicated that they are not opposed to the proposals, which involve 40% affordable housing, subject to a number of important provisos.

The overall amount of housing needed is a matter of considerable confusion and contention. The Government proposes a national figure of 300,000 houses per year by the mid 2020s, of which the figure for North Hertfordshire has been given as 973 houses per year. NHDC has recently assessed the need as 11,600 houses for the period 2011-2031, that is an average of 580 houses per year. This does not include providing 1,950 houses for Luton on NHDC Green Belt land near Mangrove Green, Cockernhoe and Tea Green.

The recent Government White Paper 'Planning for the Future' would change everything. However, this has attracted a lot of criticism from all quarters, including from Hitchin Forum, principally because it would remove local review of developments, large and small. I understand that a number of Conservative MPs are concerned that the proposals in the White Paper will result in unpopular developments in their constituencies, and as a result the Government is proposing that twenty cities would be asked to build an extra 100,000 new homes between them in the next 5 years, so reducing the requirements for rural areas such as North Herts as given above.

In addition to all these considerations are the longer-term effects of the internet and the pandemic, with their changes to working, travel, shopping and other influences on planning...

**Neil Dodds (Member of Steering Group)**

## **Arrivals Airspace Consultation**

There is just time for members to respond to Luton Airport's consultation on arrivals airspace – the consultation closes on February 5<sup>th</sup>. The Forum has already submitted responses to the online questionnaire, and you should have received details of these in an email dated January 13<sup>th</sup>. This article is an attempt to give some background to those responses, and to alert you to another development, of which details appear at the end of this article.

The airport has provided a welter of information on the issues which it and the National Air Traffic Service (NATS) hope will be solved by its proposals, which can be found by visiting:

[https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6\\_luton\\_arrivals/](https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6_luton_arrivals/)

Currently, aircraft arriving at both Stansted and Luton at busy times are held in the same stack. As air traffic grows, this will become unsustainable and potentially dangerous. Of course, we hope that the government will reappraise its policy on airport expansion, and traffic will not grow so rapidly, if at all, in the long run, but it is best to assume that change to airspace will come in any case.

The proposed solution is to have separate holding stacks for each airport. The proposed location of the new Luton stack is above Grafham Water, which is not the same as the old stack. This necessitates aircraft taking different routes from the bottom of the stack at about 8000ft to the points at which aircraft start their final straight descent to landing. This is over Benington, then Stevenage, St Paul's Walden and Breachwood Green when the wind is from the west (for 70% of traffic) or over Ivinghoe, Whipsnade and Caddington if the wind is from the east (for the remaining 30%). These final descents will be unchanged. The consultation is about whether residents prefer the so-called option 1, where each aircraft follows a different path within a wide area, with pilots being guided by air traffic controllers, or option 2 where all aircraft fly within the same narrow corridor, determined by GPS. Not surprisingly, the airport prefers option 2, because, it says, it is safer and more resilient to bad weather. It also claims it is more in line with the government's Airspace Modernisation Strategy. The airport frequently justifies its activities by citing its contribution to employment in the area. I suspect that the more automated approach would enable it to shed some expensive air traffic controller jobs.

Will these changes affect anybody in Hitchin? The website has a 'virtual exhibition' which includes a 'post code lookup' that tells you the effect you would experience. I have entered post codes for a range of Hitchin locations and the lookup says that there would be no change for any of the locations I have examined. The answer is, therefore, probably not (unless the details supplied are wrong). Even with the dispersed paths of option 1, there would be relatively few aircraft flying over the town. However, who knows what might happen in the future, so it is best to view the predictions with scepticism.

I think it is important to consider the effect on other areas. Spare a thought for some residents of Norton Way Letchworth, post code SG6 1AA, for instance. This is what the lookup says for these residents for westerly arrivals (i.e. for the approximately 30% of the time when the wind is from the east):

*'Negative change – effects likely to be noticeable. This postcode is within the region where changes to London Luton Airport arrival flight paths are expected, noticeably increasing impacts such as noise. Please read the consultation document for more information, especially sections 1-6.'*

If the airport gets its way, and option 2 is adopted, these residents and perhaps those in neighbouring roads will be overflowed by the vast majority of arriving aircraft when the wind is coming from the east and the airport is busy. The airport is busiest on summer days at the height of the holiday season – just the time of year when we all appreciate being able to enjoy time in our gardens, or to leave windows open at nights. Wherever you live, it would be a good idea to check the postcode lookup to see if you will be affected.

I do not think that it is acceptable to expect a comparatively small, but nevertheless significant number of people to bear the brunt of continual over-flights at such times, when the burden could be shared in a more equitable way. Neither option is perfect, but if things get back to 'normal', option 1 results in fewer people being exposed to levels of noise that are damaging to their quality of life and health.

The other development of which you should be aware is that the Airport is making a fourth attempt to get its noise footprint limit relaxed. This involves a new planning application, combining the noise relaxation with a request to raise the annual passenger cap from 18m to

19m. This means that all our previous objections have to be updated and resubmitted for this new application as well. Details can be found at <http://planning.luton.gov.uk/online-applications/> and entering 21/00031/VARCON into the Application Search.

LADACAN's Andrew Lambourne is preparing guidance on how to respond and suggests waiting until that appears on the LADACAN website before submitting anything. The deadline for submissions is Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> February. I will contact members as soon as I hear more.

**Bill Sellicks (Co-chair)**

## **Mind How You Breathe**

Hitchin's Councillors could not have known about [the ruling](#)<sup>1</sup> that air pollution had 'materially contributed' to the death of Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah in Lewisham when they discussed North Hertfordshire's 2020 Air Quality [Status Report](#)<sup>2</sup> on December 1st last year. [The minutes](#)<sup>3</sup> of the Hitchin Committee meeting suggest they were aware of the imminence of the ruling, and their misgivings about the Report reflect that. Councillors expressed opposition to the intention to revoke the Stevenage Road Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). The figures for nitrogen dioxide have been declining and are below the Air Quality Objective for the three years to 2019. The intention was that if one more year's (i.e. 2020's) monitoring figures were also favourable, it would be reasonable to revoke the AQMA. The 2020 figures will obviously be unrepresentative, due to the reduction in traffic caused by the pandemic. Councillors questioned the implication that reductions in nitrogen dioxide emissions from 2017 resulted from implementation of the North Hertfordshire's Air Quality Action Plan. The point was made that the reduction was more likely to be due to changes implemented by the automotive industry. Councillors called for an increase in air quality monitoring in Hitchin.

The London Borough of Lewisham came in for criticism in the Adoo-Kissi-Debrah verdict. North Hertfordshire's Report also shows slow progress on the measures in its Action Plan, and it barely mentions another key group of pollutants, which is just as harmful as nitrogen dioxide and possibly more so – fine particulates, so-called PM2.5s. North Hertfordshire has only one PM2.5 analyser – near the Three Moorhens roundabout on Stevenage Road, installed in 2016. Fine particulates have received only minor attention because readings are below the (non-statutory) 25µg/m<sup>3</sup> (micrograms per cubic metre) target, yet they are clearly of major concern. The more demanding World Health Organisation (WHO) target (10µg/m<sup>3</sup>) would have been exceeded in all years except 2019.

Local authorities' powers to address transport-based air pollution or climate change are limited. Central government must therefore develop a consistent national approach with robust targets and teeth. Some of this will be unpopular, some opposed by powerful lobby groups, and it is all likely to be expensive. Whilst the commitment to ban the sale of new petrol and diesel engine vehicles by 2030 is a good start, if critics of the [Environment Bill](#)<sup>4</sup> currently under parliamentary scrutiny are correct, the Bill could be no more than pre-[COP26](#)<sup>5</sup> window dressing.

The status of any target for fine particulates gives just one example of why many are concerned. In 2019, Michael Gove, then Environment Secretary, called for [the Bill](#)<sup>6</sup> to introduce 'a legally binding commitment on particulate matter so that no part of the country exceeds the levels recommended by the WHO'. This is not new - the WHO [guideline limit](#)<sup>7</sup> of 10µg/m<sup>3</sup> was first

published in 2005. The Environment Bill, as introduced, stated that a target must be laid before Parliament on or before 31 October 2022, and an amendment to bring forward the target within the Bill was defeated in Committee in March last year. In support of the amendment, the British Lung Foundation (BLF) stated ‘we should not wait until 2022 to set potentially life-saving new [limits](#)<sup>8</sup>. The BLF is only one of a number of expert groups which supported the amendment. Perhaps the Adoo-Kissi-Debrah verdict will prompt a government rethink. Perhaps some evidence that PM2.5s could increase coronavirus [mortality](#)<sup>9</sup> might also concentrate minds.

Where North Hertfordshire is concerned, without a legally binding target, there is little incentive for the additional monitoring called for by our Councillors. Without more monitoring of fine particulates, we have no idea how damaging our air could be. I hope our representatives are successful in their call for more monitoring and preventing the revocation of the Stevenage Road AQMA.

**Bill Sellicks (Co-chair)**

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| 1 | Air Pollution Contributed to Death                 | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y349pofk">https://tinyurl.com/y349pofk</a> |
| 2 | 2020 Air Quality Annual Status Report              | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/yyy26qs4">https://tinyurl.com/yyy26qs4</a> |
| 3 | Minutes of Hitchin Committee 1-12-2020 Item 37     | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y6fz539c">https://tinyurl.com/y6fz539c</a> |
| 4 | Bill Documents – Environment Bill 2019-21          | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/yxrf898y">https://tinyurl.com/yxrf898y</a> |
| 5 | COP26  | <a href="https://ukcop26.org">https://ukcop26.org</a>                   |
| 6 | WHO Limits for particulate matter                  | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y2s5sung">https://tinyurl.com/y2s5sung</a> |
| 7 | Ambient air pollution (WHO)                        | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/yb56r3cr">https://tinyurl.com/yb56r3cr</a> |
| 8 | Evidence - the British Lung Foundation (EB18)      | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y5upymd4">https://tinyurl.com/y5upymd4</a> |
| 9 | The Effects of Air Pollution on COVID-19 mortality | <a href="https://tinyurl.com/y54f79vt">https://tinyurl.com/y54f79vt</a> |

## Butts Close Update

Butts Close has once again shown its value as a green refuge for Hitchin. Throughout the Summer lockdown it gave us a place to breathe, to exercise and relax; a place to sit and slow down – and (if you’re six years old) to race around, running in and out of ‘the dip’.

I overlook the Close, and it was interesting to see how the lockdown rules really had changed behaviour. Parents were on the grass with babies and pets, but with careful spaces between them. People sat at opposite ends of the benches, and the formal exercisers did seem to maintain social distance.

As did the ‘Tree Planting Party’. We got our 120 hedge saplings safely into the ground, and all but a dozen are thriving – we’re filling in the gaps this month. But sadly, not all of Butts Close’s trees are as happy. The horse chestnuts are succumbing to a fatal bacterial infection, *pseudomonas syringae pathovar v. Aesculi*, commonly Bleeding Canker, which is infecting these beauties in a large swathe across England. As they die they become dangerous, as a falling branch can weigh 50kg. NHDC is keeping a careful eye on them and felling them when necessary.

I’m sure that Bleeding Canker at the same time as COVID is just coincidental...

**Tony Riley (Friends of Butts Close)**

## Big Spring Clean Sunday 21st March

Due to the current uncertainties, we have reluctantly decided that it would be unwise to attempt to run Hitchin Forum's six-monthly clean up in its usual form. Nevertheless, there is plenty of litter, and we want to keep up the momentum of previous events. Whilst it would not be the same in terms of the usual social aspects of the event, we think we can make an impact, and intend to invite people to collect a bag full of rubbish during their daily exercise on that day. It would be good if people shared a few pictures of what they had done.

Final details are to be confirmed. If you would like to take part, please email [hflitterpick@gmail.com](mailto:hflitterpick@gmail.com).

**Bill Sellicks (Co-chair)**

## And Now for Some Inspiration



Hitchin morning, Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January. Skies are beautiful even in lockdown! Thanks to Mike Clarke for this amazing photograph.