

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

May-June 2021 No. 162

Thoughts from the Chair

As you read this you may think that enough has been said about cycling..... except.... it is a wonderful way of exploring the area. Forty years after migrating here I have discovered lots more about the highways and byways by travelling slowly through the locality. And have come across hares and deer on the fields and the occasional red kite enjoying a piece of road kill.

The other exploration I have recently tried is to wade through Stevenage Borough Council's and our own beloved North Hertfordshire District Council's docu-dump of Local Plan papers – which is mentioned later in the Planning Feedback. This is a labour of love (occasionally turning to hate) requiring time and patience. Much praise to any councillor who masters the thousands of pages, and of course our members who try wading through the mud. The recent comments or even protests from the public about development West of Stevenage show local concern about the loss of green belt land and the urban spread. Is this just nimbyism? For some more information see the article on planning at the end of this newsletter.

The now historic Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion (waged between 1995 & 2006 with substantial support from organisations like Friends of the Earth and Hitchin Forum) was staged partly by people who lived or worked in the Langley Valley – east of the Codicote Road near the Whitwell junction. It was near their back yards, so there may have been some self-interest, but they were also the people who best realised the assets of that green space, which would have been lost for ever if 5,000 (or a rumoured 10,000) houses had sprawled across it. It would have been another case of, to quote Joni Mitchell, 'Don't it always seem to go - That you don't know what you've got - Till it's gone - They paved paradise - And put up a parking lot' . Not even a bike shed.....

Mike Clarke
Co-chair

Town News

Hitchin Festival Returns for 2021

Hitchin Festival, a month-long celebration of culture and entertainment that has been part of the town since 1991, returns this July just in time to celebrate 30 years.

The Festival started life as a week-long programme of events and now spans the entire month of July each year with concerts, art exhibitions, talks and theatre shows in all parts of the town.

Some of the many events this year include a series of concerts from Benslow Music, picnic and talks with local authors Zoë Folbigg and Kathleen Whyman at Hitchin Library, lunchtime concerts in St Mary's Church, a new play from the Market Theatre based on the history of The Priory building in Hitchin, and the return of Mostly Comedy for a week of live comedy and podcast interviews with top comedians.

Festival Chair Glyn Doggett said "With the ever-changing nature of the pandemic we have been very cautious in planning this year's programme, which is slightly smaller than previous years. We are hugely grateful to those groups that have planned to host or present events as we know how quickly they have worked to get

them ready.” He continued “We are working hard to ensure all events are run in a COVID-safe way and, where possible, offering the option of live streaming or recordings to ensure as many people as possible can enjoy them. After cancelling last year, we were determined to bring the festival back in whatever way we could.”

This year there is added excitement with the reopening of The Dell at Woodside as an outdoor theatre. The venue (which is being reopened by the festival team working with Hitchin BID, The Bancroft Players and a number of local creatives) is running a week of events to mark 70 years since it was created. The programme will include children’s entertainment from The Tiny T’s theatre company, a specially created ‘Night at the Musicals’ concert as well as a number of other one-off shows including Hitchin Band, live music from Club 85, Hitchin Rock Choir, Divas in The Dell and a final night of Dreams in The Dell which will include excerpts from A Midsummer Night’s Dream - the very first show performed in July 1951.

The Dell Project

The Dell project is part of a longer-term plan to establish the space as a venue for theatre every year. However, it needs a large amount of investment and the team have started a crowdfunding campaign to progress the project and produce this year’s show. Individual patrons and corporate sponsorship, as well as arts and community grants, are all being sought.

The full programme for the festival, including the events in the Dell, will be released on 1st June and the box office will run as usual from the Hitchin Information Office in Churchyard. In the meantime, you can visit www.hitchinfestival.co.uk to find out more.

Please donate to the crowdfunding campaign at:

<https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/thedellatwoodsideopenairtheatre>



This photograph is believed to be of the first production in The Dell. It was to celebrate the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Priory Field

A promotional film for this exceptional open space is now available to view. The aim is to highlight the importance of the green spaces immediately around the town and to float the idea of establishing a 'bee corridor' or green arc that would link these spaces; from Hitch Wood via Priory Fields, on to Pirton Sunflower meadows via Oughtonhead Common, and Burymead Springs to Cadwell Farm (Hitchin Lavender).

We began with Priory Fields as this area was under threat from development a few years ago and may resurface in the future but is far too important historically and environmentally to lose. It is hoped that other local groups will commission similar recordings of their areas so that the whole corridor can be represented in the future.

The Priory Fields film is about 5 minutes long and can be found at www.hitchintv.co.uk/portfolio/priory-fields, or www.vimeo.com/537735304. Alternatively, log on to YouTube and search for 'Priory Fields Hitchin' to access.

Please share the links with others and encourage walking the footpaths across the field.

Councillor Keith Hoskins

On Social Media

Increasingly, social media, in the form of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, has taken on a greater role in our lives. Our digital existence can play a large part in how we view ourselves and in the way that we think. As such it is often criticised for the impact it has on both individuals and groups.

For example, for an individual, social media may lead to comparison and feelings of inadequacy, the development of new social norms which can result in self-harm, as well as causing us to place our feelings of happiness on the number of 'likes' we receive which, in turn, may alter our perception of ourselves.

Indeed, it is certainly harmful when it is used to foster inappropriate relationships and share dangerous or false information.

Notwithstanding, I feel compelled to defend social media, that is, if it is used in a sensible and meaningful way. For example, when it is used to build community engagement and support, share good news, and foster communication as we hope in its use by Hitchin Forum.

I'm definitely not saying that everyone should use it, that is a personal choice, but I do feel you shouldn't dismiss it, because it is a very useful and valuable marketing/educational tool in the context of our Hitchin Forum and similar organisations.

Though probably not regarded as a case for good but for illustrative purposes only, Donald Trump was quick to see the value of Twitter in getting his message across to millions. In principle, however, you don't need a lot of followers, it is sufficient to have followers who have a very large following themselves to retweet your messages and they will spread far and wide.

Facebook is often dismissed with a hint of intellectual snobbery. However, those wishing to influence the masses know its value only too well. Again, used appropriately in the marketing/educational sense, it is not only able to inform and influence our audience, but it also gives us useful information about them in terms of their comments, reactions and number of shares. Occasionally some of Hitchin Forum's Facebook posts have reached people in their thousands, though the norm is more like hundreds.

The Forum doesn't use Instagram as it doesn't appear to serve a useful purpose in our context at present, except for advertising posters such as the Litterpick and Hitchin Town Talks, but I'm happy to be proved

wrong. However, you may be surprised to learn that it is used to great effect by LALG (Letchworth Arts and Leisure Group) for advertising their events. Horses for courses.

The plus point of all social media is that it tends to attract a younger audience and if we can engage more with younger people, I would say that was a good thing.

Valerie Schicker
Member of Steering Group

Our Town. Your Say

In this edition of the Newsletter, we have four articles from guest contributors. All of them focus on cycling. The first three are written by Nicolas Lévêque. Our decision to publish all three is not just because this edition has a focus on cycling, but also because Nicolas has some interesting and insightful things to say as a result of his cycling experiences. These articles are followed by one written on behalf of Letchworth Cyclists. I make no apology for including an article emerging from Letchworth as I think it complements those of Nicolas perfectly and offers some insight into what cyclists and councils have been able to achieve in Letchworth and ideas for what might be possible here in Hitchin. We would like to remind members that the views expressed in articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of Steering Group or the Forum as a whole.

Reflection on Cycling

The efficient and friendly mode of transport

Cycling is often thought of a recreational activity, stereotypically associated with lycra-clad, middle-aged white men. I partly fit the bill, except for the lycra, and the fact that, for me, riding a cycle is not a recreational activity. It is far more than that: it is the most efficient mode of transport from A to B.

Cycling to me is an efficient way to go to the office (COVID-19 permitting) 5 miles away in Stevenage, dropping the children off to school on the way (1.5 miles), and back home again. It is to do the weekly or bi-weekly grocery shopping (generally two big shopping bags), be it in several shops around the Old Market Square, the convenience store on Walsworth Road, or the supermarket (2-3 miles round trip).

I used to drive everywhere but rarely do so now. As an engineer, I have finally realised that cycling is one solution to a not-so-complex equation involving time, distance, energy, cost and well-being.

Let us start with what the situation was with the car – something that many people will have experienced pre-COVID-19. The need to drive across Hitchin to drop the kids to nursery at a set time, the need to rush to work, beating the traffic caused by hundreds in a similar situation. The worries induced by the unpredictability of the traffic, even with the live rat-running *instructions* from the GPS navigator. The uncertainty as to when I will reach the office. The frustration of the stop/start/brake (repeat) while the clock is ticking.

I cannot talk about cycling without talking about transportation, and consequently about cars. I could tell you the long story of how we sold a car to buy a cargo bike, but it is irrelevant to the point here. What matters is the end result. Here it is, in a nutshell. . .

It is faster to cycle across Hitchin than it is to drive, be it north-south or east-west. On a day with fluid traffic (i.e. rarely pre-COVID-19), driving to the office in Stevenage saves a mere 5 minutes, compared to a brisk-yet-leisurely cycle ride. Most often, it is the same time, and on many occasions, when the traffic is bad, cycling actually saves a considerable amount of time.

Cycling is very efficient in terms of energy, more so than walking or driving. But let's face it, North Hertfordshire is somewhat hilly, and I would recommend a motor-assisted cycle to everyone, if you need to.

In effect, the electric assist flattens the hills. I have seen a woman of an honourable age cycling up Hollow Lane without any difficulty. The electric assist also increases the range of the cyclable distance. It is said that, typically, the cycle is the most efficient mode of transport on distances up to about 5 miles (incidentally, 22% of North Herts work commutes are less than 5 miles). With the electric assist this rises to more than 10 miles. Cycling then becomes almost effortless (the motor only kicks in when you pedal): even when I have a customer visiting, I cycle to work in the office clothes. For that matter, you will easily find videos of the Argentine-born Queen Máxima of the Netherlands travelling on a cycle to a royal visit. And no, it does not rain that much in the UK, and when it does it is often so light you hardly need a waterproof jacket.

The car is a cash black hole: the cost of buying the vehicle, its rapid value depreciation, its maintenance, the fuel, the insurance, etc. A cargo bike is an investment for a cycle, but still much cheaper than a car, and in effect it pays for itself in under 3 years. A simpler electric-assist cycle for an individual would do so in about one year.

Many psychology studies have demonstrated the perverse effects of driving on the emotional state. For a driver, the stress not only affects their health, it also alters their decision-making while driving, posing a danger to people around. It is appropriate at this stage to clarify a detail of semantics by pointing out that “traffic accidents” are rarely accidents: they do in fact result from bad behaviour/decisions and associated factors. And so, the other benefit I have noticed is on my overall well-being. I know my travelling time is quite predictable and repeatable. And the mild physical activity that goes with it adds to this benefit.

Five-a-day

Don't get me wrong, the car is useful in many circumstances: for distances of more than 15 miles, for people with severe mobility restrictions (for many, scooters would be a good option over shorter distances, if we provided them with safe space) and for very bulky items. But as a society, we let our individual liberty of driving anywhere, anytime, affect the lives of everyone and erode communities.

Our usage of cars is slowly or rapidly – this is somewhat subjective – spiralling out of control. According to the Office for National Statistics, over the last 15 years, the number of vehicles in Great Britain has increased by 20%. This is twice the rate of the population growth. The largest growth has been in second vehicles. To give you an example, and assuming that North Hertfordshire reflects the national trend, this means that on a street the length of Bearton Road, where about 100 cars could be parked in 2006, today we would try to park 120 cars. And we can apply it to every single street. To the layman, the “simple” solution would be to build more roads and more parking spaces, but this fails on the altar of induced demand: put simply, more roads bring more cars, and the problem only gets worse. To solve the problem, we need fewer cars, hence less space for cars, and more space for sustainable transport (including public transport, walking, mobility scooters, etc.)

Apart from commuting and shopping, the car is also used as a shuttle service for those in the family who cannot drive, in particular children and teenagers. This has, in my humble opinion, a perverse effect: we can't let them cycle on their own because the roads are too dangerous. But how do we give teenagers the experience of autonomy as a learning process to grow into adulthood if we treat them as children until they are old enough to pass the driving test? Have we forgotten what it was like to be teenagers? Cycling can give them this independence, as it does in countries like the Netherlands and Denmark. For sure, I have seen one or two teenagers cycling at speed around the Old Market Square or on the pavement down Whitehill Road, but these remain the exception. I have also seen groups of teenage girls and boys cycling responsibly along Bancroft, one behind the other, on their way to the town centre.

What puts people off cycling is being exposed to the danger of being hit by a motor vehicle. Because kinetic energy is proportional to the square of the speed, lowering the speed limit to 20 mph across the urban zone is a low-hanging fruit solution: low effort, great benefit. Whether this is sufficient without some kind of enforcement (traffic calming infrastructure or speed cameras) is open for debate but is a real question in the light of the three serious car crashes in the 20 mph Bearton area in the space of a few weeks around this time

last year. A campaign for a blanket speed limit of 20 mph across Hitchin seems to be gaining in popularity at present. This would not increase commuting time since the average speed limit in a traffic jam is much less than 20 mph. It would instil the good practice of driving slowly and calmly generally.

This danger is actually evident to car-owners themselves, as demonstrated by the current proliferation of so-called “Large Off-Road” vehicles on our streets, with SUV sales surging in what is, in effect, an arms race. While people, and in particular the driver, are cocooned and may feel safer in them, these vehicles will cause significantly more damage in a crash, especially to pedestrians, and children in particular. While it is intuitive, this is evidenced on the EuroNCAP website (<https://www.euroncap.com/en>): “Large Off-Road” vehicles achieve a high score for protection of their passengers (>90%), but the safety of vulnerable road users lags far behind (typically 60%). While the exact meaning of a score is rather unclear, the difference and its implications are obvious. The American economist and professor Gordon Tullock theorised that, through risk compensation, drivers would drive more safely with a spike in the middle of the steering wheel. And the Yerkes-Dodson Law applied to the car indicates that taking driving responsibilities away from the driver while also providing more “infotainment” brings the drivers out of the optimal zone to operate a vehicle. Unfortunately, I fear it is now unrealistic to remove many of these features from cars already in operation, hence, streets and roads can only be made safe by design. People make mistakes. We have to make sure this happens rarely (risk likelihood) and with little or no consequence (risk impact).

Five-a-day. That’s what I wanted to call this article. Oh no, it has nothing to do with fruits, vegetables or healthy eating. Five-a-day. That is the number of people killed in the UK by cars, vans, trucks and other motorised vehicles. **Every - Single - Day.** Not just on the road, on pavements quite often too, and in some cases even in their own homes. Who will be next? Your children and grandchildren? Your spouse? Your siblings? Also remember that these are rarely “accidents”. Crashes happen for a reason.

Here is something very important: the next time you hear about such a “tragic accident”, ask yourself why it happened. And to that answer, ask why. Then ask why once more. You will most often find one or more uncomfortable truths.

Cycling as transport in and out of Hitchin

Cycling in Hitchin is possible, but rarely easy. Since I have started cycling frequently, I have paid more attention to other people cycling, especially the not-so “typical” kind – and more of them have appeared as a consequence of COVID-19, in particular after the first lockdown. This includes elderly women riding down Sun Street onto Tilehouse Street, with their shopping in the panier. Parents with young children. Various couples of different generations on a leisure trip to the town centre. Clearly, if given the chance, people will cycle.

In addition to the above, there are two fundamental issues with cycling in Hitchin, and I am afraid both are also related to vehicular traffic.

First, Hitchin is a regional cross-point: The north-south axis to Bedford and Stevenage, and the east-west axis to Luton and Letchworth. Realistically, there is not much that can be done to erase this fact (bypass or tunnel costs are prohibitive). The consequence is that Hitchin is segmented by these axes making the town centre, that is one of the places people would want to cycle to, difficult to reach. Westmill is cut off by Bedford Road (A600); Bearton by the A505; the Poets Estate, Purwell and Walsworth by the A505 and the railway line. South Hitchin is affected by the A602 and the through-traffic on Whitehill Road, St John’s Road and Highbury Road. Crossing these borders is a hazard.

Second, cycling infrastructure does not exist in Hitchin. By the way, infrastructure is a perverse term: it is largely used in its singular form, meaning that any minute bit of said infrastructure is enough to tick a box on someone’s list to satisfy requirements and egos. There are bits and pieces here and there across Hitchin (largely only a bit of paint on the road), but they do not form a network, and therefore cannot be considered as infrastructure. One such example is the “cycle lane” on St Michael’s Road. This is, in my opinion, pure

hypocrisy, as vehicles (including those of many train commuters) are always parked across it free of charge. I would much rather North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have the intellectual honesty of removing the paint and acknowledging the truth by charging market value for parking there. I know that many residents also park their cars on this road because they don't have anywhere else to store them. It is a national trend: more households have two (or more) cars, and garages are rarely used for either of them because the cars are now too wide to fit in, or the garage is used as a storage facility for things that are largely unused, or they have been converted into accommodation.

In many instances, because of the lack of safe routes, people resort to cycling on the pavement, which is strictly speaking illegal (above a certain age). Many do so south of Hitchin along Stevenage Road (A602). Would I cycle on that road? I have, but at 10-15 mph. Some drivers make you understand you don't belong there. So I do cycle on the pavement, carefully and at the pace of a long-distance runner, often dismounting when passing a pedestrian. But I am still breaking the law, like so many others, because today, like every day, we do not want to be one of the five. The police turn a blind eye, because they know they would otherwise force you onto the road and throw you under a bus or a truck (and incidentally create a traffic jam, which seems to be a bigger concern to some people). Still, the status quo is clearly unacceptable.

Take a map of Hitchin and a pen. Draw a straight line between two points about diametrically opposite. Then trace the most direct path through the streets along this line. This would be the preferred walking and cycling path, more or less. But many streets have restrictions (e.g. no entry), which have been put in place with motor vehicles in mind, without considering the impact on alternative modes of transport, such as cycles. One such example is Whinbush Road.

People in Hitchin have a real desire to travel within the town (and possibly beyond) without their cars (14% already walk), but they need to be given a safe passage to do so. Some simple solutions exist such as 20 mph zones and one-way streets for cars, etc. The approach to implementing such measures seems to be through an extensive process of consultation. I would prefer a shorter consultation and fast-track trialling by implementation and observation. After all, who has ever agreed to such an increase in traffic? Who has been consulted about the ever larger and faster vehicles on our streets? Decision-makers and council officers need to be more assertive to fix the problem.

Dr Nicolas Lévêque
Forum Member

Making Space for Cyclists

Letchworth Cyclists, a group coordinated by Transition Town Letchworth, was formed in 2016 and has been campaigning to improve conditions for cyclists in Letchworth. The group worked with NHDC communities team on a project which led to the installation of cycle and scooter stands in schools and at community facilities across the town, utilising S106 funds (developer contributions towards local services). Letchworth Cyclists has also developed a comprehensive "Community Plan for a Letchworth Cycling and Walking Network" which is published on the Transition Town Letchworth website:

<http://www.transitionletchworth.org>.

In 2020 HCC published the North Central Hertfordshire Growth and Transport Plan. This included proposals for schemes to improve cycling connections between towns. HCC now plans to develop Local Cycle and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) with each District Council, and the North Herts LCWIP is expected to be produced in 2021. LCWIPs should provide a network plan for walking and cycling which identifies preferred routes and core zones for further development along with a prioritised programme of infrastructure improvements for future investment.

Royston and Letchworth have been nominated as Sustainable Travel Towns by HCC. Sustainable Travel Towns are required to plan and implement a package of measures that will achieve a significant switch to walking,

cycling and public transport. These plans are expected to include “carrots” and “sticks”, where the “sticks” might, for example, include reduced parking standards in new developments, tighter restrictions on highway parking, highway space reallocations and changes to traffic signal priorities. In Royston the Town Council led the bid to become a Sustainable Travel Town, whereas the Letchworth application was made by Letchworth Heritage Foundation. Delivery of the plans will however require a big commitment by NHDC. Sustainable Travel Towns plans are expected to be made in partnership with local communities and Letchworth Cyclists are hoping that the lead organisations will deliver on this commitment.

A key early decision for the North Herts LCWIP will be to identify the distinct urban areas it will cover. The maximum desirable cycling distance is 5km; the North Central Hertfordshire Growth and Transport Plan already provides plans for cycle routes between towns; and Royston and Letchworth are separately required to develop Sustainable Travel Town plans. Hence it would seem that the most efficient approach for delivering Sustainable Travel Town Plans would be to define each of the main towns in North Herts as a distinct Urban Area. This would mean that the LCWIP would contain within it distinct cycle network plans and walking routes improvements for Letchworth, Hitchin, Baldock, Royston and Letchworth.

The Letchworth Cyclists' expectation is that people taking up cycling will start with shorter journeys, and as their confidence grows will eventually venture farther afield. There are many short journeys within towns that are currently undertaken by car, that could instead be cycled, including school runs. This is why we would like the North Herts LCWIP to include plans for cycle networks within each town.

Local communities hold a wealth of knowledge on the existing barriers to, and the opportunities for, improving cycling conditions in their own towns. In Letchworth we have turned this knowledge into a comprehensive plan and we would be happy to share how we have done this with community cycling groups in other towns. In the meantime, Letchworth Cyclists are lobbying NHDC to work with us to finalise a community plan for a Letchworth Cycle Network that they can then adopt.

Julia Sonander, John Webb and John Baskerville on behalf of Letchworth Cyclists
John Webb is also a Forum member

Cycling. A Cautionary note!

This newsletter focuses primarily on cycling and the benefits of it. Cycling is indeed an excellent carbon-free means of travel and it provides good aerobic exercise. However, there is another side to that coin. I have occasionally recounted my experiences to Steering Group and, as a result (perhaps as a penalty for that!), I have been asked to share a few thoughts regarding the problems I have personally experienced.

I walk my dog on various parts of the Letchworth Greenway, a well-maintained track which encircles the town. It is available for walkers, cyclists and horse riders alike. However, there are some who abuse this shared facility. Now I stress that not all cyclists behave in a selfish manner, but sadly some do. There are some who treat it as their personal racetrack, charging along it with no mental risk-assessment as to the potential dangers of their behaviour. It is not just dogs that may wander about, but children too, and these cyclists have little or no awareness that others may walk across the path as well as along it. Most do not bother to signal their presence with a bell, although I have actually had a cyclist shout “get out of the way” as he charged past me. I have also been told in very rude terms that my sedate 12-year-old Labrador should be on a lead, but it is the purpose of these semi-rural ways that dogs (and children) should enjoy the freedoms they offer.

Other cyclists may ride in a gentler fashion, two abreast chatting to each other, and often they do not bother to go into single file as they approach me, forcing me into the side of the path or the hedgerow as they come past.

Cyclists, I respect your wish to use such a “green” way of staying fit, but do please be considerate of the others who have a perfect right to use the paths too.

And as a separate issue, why are cyclists still not required by law to carry insurance? Even electrically assisted bikes are not legally required to be insured, when anything with a petrol engine such as a moped must carry insurance.

Andrew Wearmouth
Member of Steering Group

Take a Little Ride Along the A602...(part 2)

An ambitious aspiration

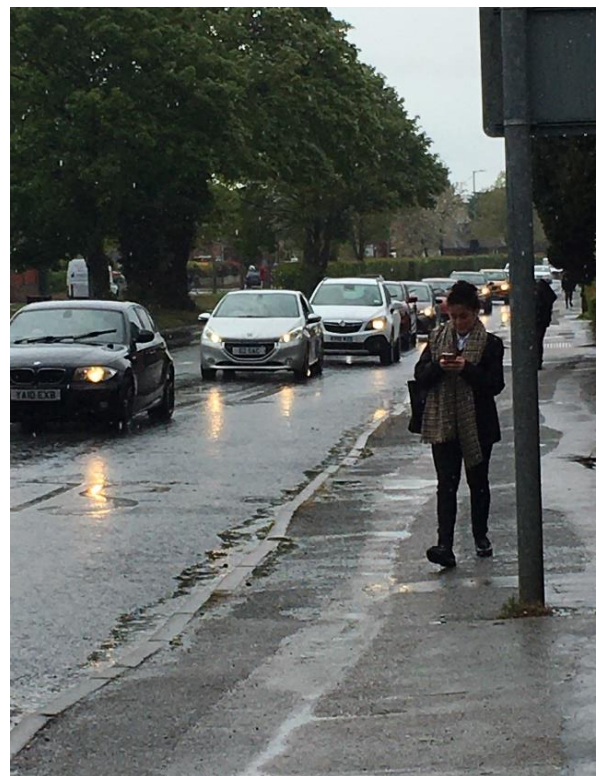
North Hertfordshire District Council in its 2017 Transport Strategy¹, suggested that over the longer term, cycling to work could be increased to 15% and above (from an existing approximate 3%). This would mean adopting measures similar to those used to support cycling in Holland where 27% of all trips are made by cycle and 84% of the population owns a bike².

Has the pandemic changed anything?

The past year has seen a massive boom in leisure cycling. Since traffic has returned to normal following the end of the most recent lockdown, I now avoid the route along the Hitchin bypass from the Three Moorhens roundabout to Charlton Road, which I discussed in the last Newsletter. I find the traffic far too intimidating.

From a point of view of cycling uptake in Hitchin and North Hertfordshire, I wondered if the new leisure cyclists have also changed their habits. Do they use their bikes to get to work or travel to the shops? Do they still use their bikes for recreation, or has the bike been relegated to the garage or shed, little more than an experiment that didn't quite turn out right? In the fullness of time doubtless there will be surveys showing whether cycling uptake, which increased during the pandemic, has been maintained. As a result of my recent, but hardly scientific, observations, I am not convinced the pandemic will have initiated any long-term changes.

The afternoon school run now appears to have been fully reinstated. A cycle ride from the Charlton Road junction to the Angels along the A602 and A600, between about 3.30pm and 4.00pm, can take up to 15 minutes (cars complete it no quicker). According to Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC's) Active Travel Strategy of 2013, 51% of children walked to nursery or primary school, whilst 47% walked to secondary school and 46% sixth form. The figure for cycling was 3%. The cars waiting to collect pupils from the Priory School in the afternoon fill most on-street parking spots on the service road between King George's Close and the school entrance together with King George's Close itself and some of the roads on the other side of the A600. There seems little new about the 'new normal'.



School run congestion. This picture was taken at about 3.40pm on the A600 near the Bearton Road junction. Although it was raining, there would be little difference if the weather was fine.

How would North Hertfordshire's aspiration be achieved?

Is it surprising that nothing much seems to have changed? Hardly - as yet, there is no new provision for cyclists, and leisure cycling is not the same as utility cycling (cycling to work or school, or shopping) which is where the major increase in take-up mentioned by NHDC will need to come from. Both HCC and NHDC identify a range of infrastructure improvements designed to bring about the step change. Worryingly, NHDC's Transport Strategy (para 5.49) suggests removing traffic from the town by means of a 'traditional bypass or set of bypasses on the town periphery' paid for by more housing. It does, however, concede that extra housing would generate more traffic. What is more encouraging is the proposal to appoint a Sustainable Travel Planner with a budget for behaviour change measures. It is not clear what this behaviour change could involve, and it would appear to assume a plan-decide-consult/persuade model of implementation. It is not hard to identify behaviours that need to change. There needs to be a campaign to persuade people not to use their cars to take children to school, or for short journeys. The move to a town-wide 20mph scheme needs to be accelerated, together with a campaign to convince people that it should be adhered to, backed-up by enforcement. Drivers should be made aware of the reasons behind anti-idling legislation and prosecuted when they break the law in this respect.

Is change possible?

Whilst an increase in take up of cycling and walking is a worthy aim, having the potential to deliver a range of environmental and health benefits, the difficulties should not be underestimated. For those cyclists prepared to brave Hitchin's streets, the provision of safe cycle routes is long overdue. When not designed into roads when they are first built, cycle lanes can reduce road space for other traffic, attracting protest from motoring groups. Innovations such as London's Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs - promoted by the government during last year's first lockdown) are intended to encourage walking and cycling but are claimed to make life harder for those dependent on their vehicles, such as tradespeople or those with disabilities. It is suggested they may even exacerbate some of the problems which they are designed to solve – concentrating traffic and therefore emissions for those living close to major thoroughfares (which are often poorer communities) in order to provide LTNs elsewhere in more well-to-do areas⁴. This polarisation between different groups of road users is counterproductive. Something new is needed to foster constructive dialogue and involve those who might change their behaviour if conditions are right. Perhaps, instead of the more conventional process of consulting on a well-developed proposal for the construction of cycle lanes in Hitchin, the use of 'peoples' assemblies', considered to be instrumental in resolving the abortion issue in Ireland⁵, could enable consensus to be achieved on how to reduce car use in advance of any concrete proposal.



A segregated cycle lane in east London. Is there room on Hitchin's roads?

1. Transport Strategy. North Hertfordshire District Council. Oct 2017 <https://tinyurl.com/y39t37wn>
2. Dutch Cycling Facts. Bicycle Dutch. 2018 <https://tinyurl.com/y5wz6rpz>
3. Active Travel Strategy. Hertfordshire County Council. 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/6uc5aamw>
4. Low Traffic Neighbourhoods: How the culture wars came to a street near you. New Statesman November 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/2n66d9tc>
5. The Irish Abortion referendum: How a Citizens' Assembly helped. <https://tinyurl.com/8tszrmcj>

Bill Sellicks
Co-chair

Planning Feedback

In my article in the last newsletter, I asked for members' views on whether Hitchin Forum should oppose development on a number of sites which are currently Green Belt. We have received 4 responses - all opposed to loss of Green Belt. Points made in the responses include concerns about:-

- proposals being inconsistent with national and local policies.
- the size of the proposed developments, and whether these numbers of new houses are really needed, nationally and locally.
- the loss of Green Belt land not being justified.
- developments that will result in loss of environmental amenity, agricultural land, wildlife habitats, nature and views.
- the adverse effects of these developments on the character of existing villages and towns.
- developments that will result in urban sprawl reducing the separation between villages and towns.
- the resulting increase in buildings, widened roads and roundabouts, and air pollution, degrading the town and villages for their inhabitants.
- proposals setting a precedent for further loss of Green Belt around Hitchin, including areas which may well be considered more valuable for amenity and views than those currently under consideration, and resulting in further urbanization.

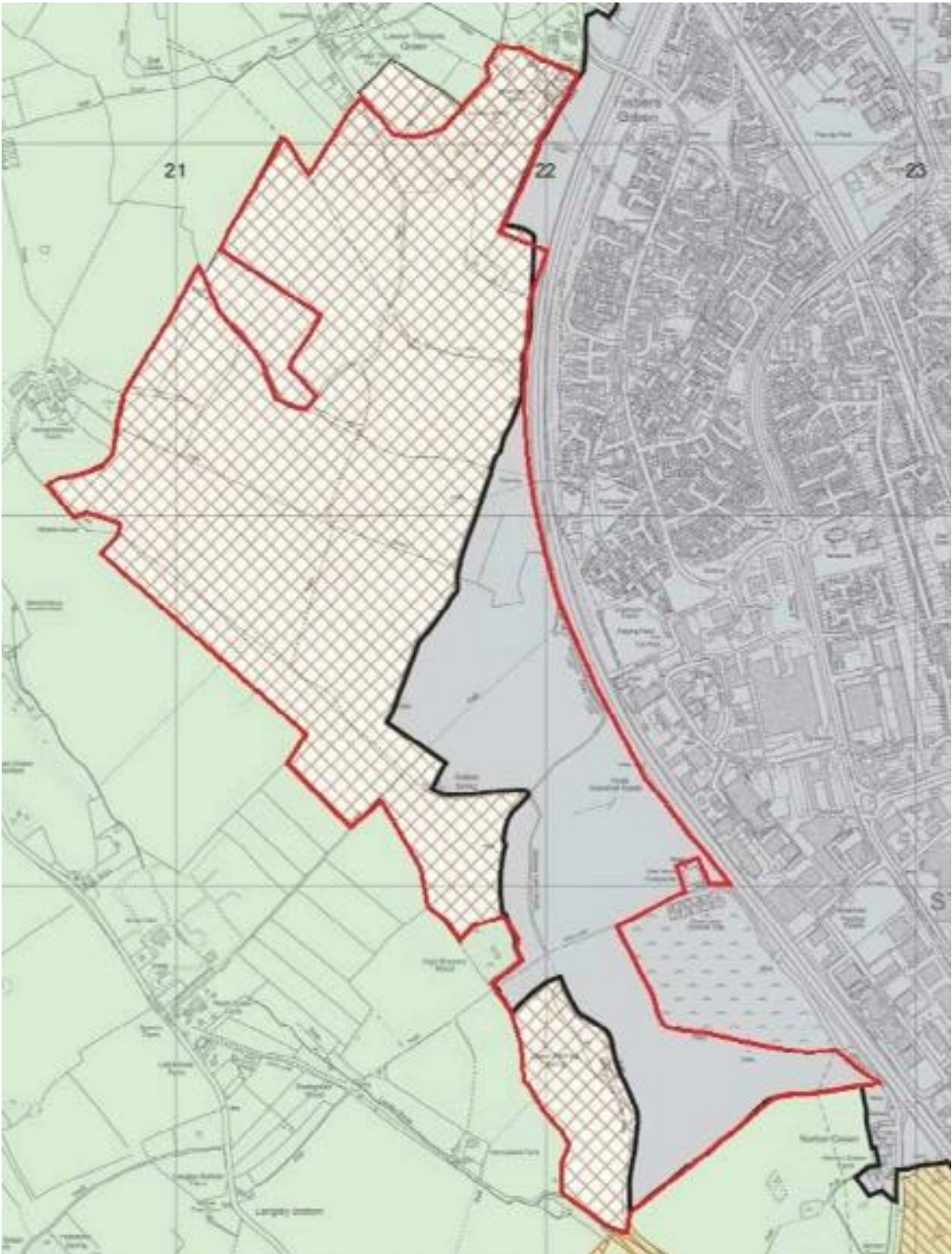
Thanks to contributors, and apologies if this over-simplifies or omits any of your points. For other members, do please let us know if you have anything to add to this list, or indeed if you consider that the additional housing justifies loss of any of these Green Belt sites.

Meanwhile, over in Stevenage, they are getting on with developing land taken out of the Green Belt to the West of the A1 (M). Up to 1,500 dwellings are planned, in two phases, with a local centre, employment area, primary school, care home and other facilities. 30% affordable housing and some self-build plots are included. All access is shown as being under the A1(M) from Gunnels Wood Road, with no vehicular access to the Codicote Road. The development is completely surrounded by the Green Belt- for now at least. Stevenage Borough Council's planning reference is 21/00356/FPM.

A map showing the extent of Stevenage Borough Council's West of Stevenage allocation is shown on the following page in grey within a red outline. Also shown on the map, in hatching, is land within the Green Belt, which NHDC is 'Safeguarding'. Safeguarding is apparently a planning procedure for reserving land for development in the longer term, outside the current Local Plan – i.e. beyond 2031. Quite what that development might be, is a matter for further investigation!

Neil Dodds
Member of Steering Group

The extent of Stevenage Borough Council allocation (grey within red outline) and land safeguarded by NHDC controlled by landowners.



The map is taken from document ED71, Statement of Common Ground, published 2018 and prepared for the North Hertfordshire Local Plan Examination. Permission to reproduce obtained 18th May 2021.