

NEWSLETTER

July-August 2021 No. 163

Thoughts from the Chair

A flurry of planning applications has kept our new planning aficionado, Neil Dodds, on his toes recently, and I am sure that members will join me in expressing our thanks to Neil for his vigilance and responses on our behalf. Not only that, but Neil has provided two articles for this edition of the Newsletter which I am sure you will find informative. One brings us up to date on the plans for Stevenage expansion and how that is viewed by the Inspector of North Hertfordshire's Submission Local Plan as the examination of the Plan grinds to a close. The process has taken so long that Neil has provided us with a summary of what has happened so far.

As a new grandparent I have found myself spending more time in Hitchin town centre recently. Encouraged by the fine weather, families are taking advantage of the Bancroft splash park in particular. Even on a weekday, the town feels busy. The relaxed air of optimism could easily lead one to forget that we are still in the midst of a global pandemic. Bim Afolami's contribution in this edition of the Newsletter encourages us to support local businesses. Whilst I fully understand the concern about the damage to various sectors of our economy caused by lockdowns and regulations regarding social distancing, I cannot help but feel apprehensive about what will follow. I see little evidence that some people are prepared to exercise the responsibility that is required to avoid prolonging the misery caused by the pandemic. During a period of rapid growth in cases there has been a spike in infections among male football supporters as a result of socialising during the recent European Cup. According to a Public Health Scotland report¹, 1991, people with a COVID-19 diagnosis had attended one or more Euro 2020 events during their infectious period. The evidence for the efficacy of mask wearing is growing². I have been double vaccinated but am under no illusion that protection is guaranteed. I have not attended sporting events this summer because large crowds inevitably increase the chances of transmission and the opportunity for new variants to spread. I find it difficult to understand why the government does not continue to make the wearing of masks compulsory on public transport and in shops. What sort of 'freedom' is it that allows the selfish to expose themselves and, more importantly, others more vulnerable than themselves to harm, thereby increasing the burden on the health service? I for one will be continuing to wear a mask in shops and avoiding crowds.

For those in search of a more contemplative atmosphere, Valerie Schicker has provided us with a reminder of the delights of Burymead Springs. I am grateful to Valerie for reminding me that I have not visited it this year, and I am sure many of you will feel the same. Perhaps I will see you there - socially distanced of course - but I am certain it is well-ventilated enough that a mask is unnecessary!

Bill Sellicks
Co-Chair

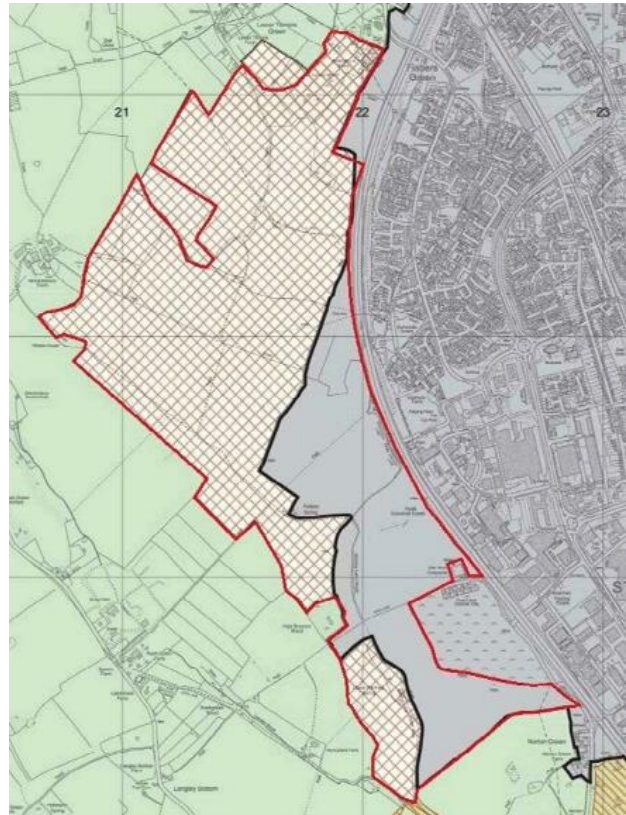
1. *Public Health Scotland COVID-19 Statistical Report - 28 June 2021*
https://www.publichealthscotland.scot/media/8268/21-06-30-covid19-publication_report.pdf
2. *An Evidence Review of Face Masks Against COVID-19*
<https://www.pnas.org/content/118/4/e2014564118>

‘Safeguarded’ Land West of Stevenage - and South of Hitchin

Map showing land already taken out of Green Belt by SBC and land potentially ‘safeguarded’ by NHDC

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.

The plan on the back page of the previous newsletter – reproduced here for clarity - shows land to the west of the A1(M) which Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) has already taken out of the Green Belt, and which it is presently engaged in developing with up to 1,500 dwellings. This is shown shaded in grey on the plan. It also shows a much larger area, stretching towards Hitchin, which NHDC wants to ‘safeguard’ for future development. This is shown hatched on the plan.



North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) wants to take this hatched area of land out of the Green Belt, so that it is ready to be developed with up to 5,000 dwellings (in 5-10 years’ time), subject to review in the next Local Plan. The intention is that the area will form an extension to Stevenage’s smaller development and be served by a new bridge over or tunnel under the A1(M), to link up more directly with Stevenage proper. NHDC has signed an agreement with the land’s owners whereby these owners have undertaken to ensure there are no fetters to the expansion of the SBC development into North Herts, and that they will continue to make the land available for development, including early release if required. They have also retained the right to apply for development of additional land, beyond the boundaries shown on the plan, if needed to meet unmet housing need or housing shortfall.

The Government-appointed Planning Inspector currently reviewing NHDC’s long-delayed Local Plan document, is not at all happy about this ‘safeguarded’ land. He points out that NHDC has itself assessed the land as making a ‘significant’ contribution to the Green Belt. The Planning Inspector states that the land is presently in the Green Belt and does not have planning permission for development. He has asked why this land has been chosen, rather than other sites. He has pointed to a lack of agreement between NHDC and SBC about which of the two’s housing needs the proposed development is to meet. NHDC has prepared a document with its answers to these questions, but the Planning Inspector has still to say if he is satisfied with them.

By way of compensation for the loss of Green Belt west of Stevenage, I understand that NHDC has proposed extending the Green Belt’s western edge, so there is Green Belt all the way between Stevenage and Luton. This sounds very good, but if it is possible for authorities to simply take land out of the Green

Belt for development as and when they decide it is needed, what value is there in this proposed compensation?

The National Planning Policy Framework states that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances. In this and in the other areas it proposes to remove from the Green Belt, NHDC is saying that the current housing shortage creates these exceptional circumstances. However, we know that the result will be more development (with the majority of housing being too expensive for local people), more traffic, more pollution and loss of countryside. Also, it indicates that future incursions into the Green Belt are definitely on the cards.

I hope what I have written sheds some light on NHDC's proposals regarding the Green Belt around Hitchin. However, there is still more to look into and I hope to work out what NHDC is proposing for development around the Green Belt villages east of Luton, and to include it in a future newsletter.

Neil Dodds
Member of Steering Group

Nature on our Doorstep – Burymead Springs



Sandwiched between allotments, the River Hiz, a scrapyard and a railway flyover, Burymead Springs is part of an ancient riverside meadow and, as such, forms a small oasis for nature of about six acres. Designated as Green Belt land, it is situated off Cadwell Lane, the industrial area on the northern edge of our town. It is owned and managed by North Hertfordshire District Council in partnership with Countryside Management Services.

In spite of its not-so-salubrious industrial surroundings, Burymead Springs is a very special wildlife site that supports a wide variety of semi-natural habitats. It comprises a reedbed, at the heart of which is a hidden (man-made) lagoon, meadows and woodland, not to mention a globally rare chalk stream,



with its clear water and lush vegetation of watercress and marsh-marigolds. If you are lucky you may see a kingfisher darting along the bank side or, if you are even luckier, you may spot one of the otters that has been recorded in the area.



The reedbed itself, a rare habitat for our county, is home to various warblers. When I visited the site in April this year, alerted by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Local Group bird sightings chat on WhatsApp, there was great excitement as a Cetti's warbler was spotted flying backwards and forwards across the lagoon, much to the thrill of onlookers with their superzoom cameras at the ready.

Between the reedbed and the River Hiz there is a pathway that takes you through a small area of alder and ash trees and a flower-rich meadow with bordering hedgerow - yet more opportunity to sample the delights this unusual site has to offer.

Valerie Schicker
Member of Steering Group

Photographs: Top left - information board, middle left - hidden lagoon, middle right - the Hiz, bottom left - Cetti's warbler.

All photographs taken by the author except the Cetti's Warbler, reproduced with the kind permission of Tony Gammage, RSPB Hitchin and Letchworth Local Group. Visit their Facebook page for more information (<https://tinyurl.com/apanm3c5>).

Our Town, Your say

Hitchin's MP, Bim Afolomi, has asked us to include the following contribution from him. We wish to remind readers that Hitchin Forum itself is a non-political organisation and 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. Members' comments are welcome, please send them to:

newsletter@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Supporting Businesses in Hitchin as we come out of COVID

The last year has been very difficult for our local high streets. With businesses being closed and having to adapt to new restrictions, I know that many of our local independent business-owners have faced incredibly hard decisions and periods of significant uncertainty.

I have sought to do everything in my power to support them and have worked with the Treasury to ensure that the right support packages have been in place, including playing a leading role working with Ministers on the creation of the Discretionary Grant scheme. I was pleased that more than £40m in business grants was received by businesses across North Hertfordshire, including almost £1.5m in Discretionary Grants¹.

Across Hitchin & Harpenden, more than £100m in government-backed loan schemes was provided to help businesses get through and bounce back from lockdown; 14,800 jobs were protected as part of the Furlough Scheme; more than 3,000 self employed people benefited from income support schemes; and last summer 129,000 meals were discounted thanks to Eat Out to Help Out. Many local businesses would also have benefited from business rates relief and VAT deferrals.

The Government's plan is for the lifting of restrictions to be irreversible and so now businesses should be able to plan for the future. As a community we have to ensure that we show our local businesses the

support they need by shopping locally now that they are re-opening and returning to full capacity. We have a fantastic set of businesses in Hitchin and we are very lucky to have a wide range of independents, chains and specialist retailers.

As your Member of Parliament, I will continue to champion the interests of Hitchin's businesses both locally and nationally as we move beyond the pandemic. We are fortunate to have a fantastic local BID in Hitchin and I have been grateful to work alongside Tom Hardy and his team to champion our local businesses and their interests. Working with them, I will ensure that the right forms of support continue to be in place in Westminster and at local Council level.

In addition to ensuring that we have the right support in place, it is also important that we grow our Town Centres, bringing in new investment and opportunities. This is something that had been a key focus of mine prior to the pandemic. As we now emerge into a different set of economic circumstances, it will require a strongly pro-business push from decision-makers to ensure we can continue driving our local economy forwards.

Hitchin businesses can rest assured that they will have my support in this.

I am also a strong supporter of creating more apprenticeships locally and making it easier for employers to find new, capable apprentices who will add something to their business. I have seen first-hand the benefits that these programmes can bring. In the Autumn, I will be hosting an Apprenticeships Fair, which will be an opportunity to connect local businesses with young people who would be interested in doing an apprenticeship.

Throughout the remainder of this Parliament – and beyond that, for however long I have the immense privilege to be your local Member of Parliament – I will always be a champion for our great local businesses in Hitchin. If you are a local business owner and need support or advice on any issue, my team and I are here to help.

Bim Afolami MP

1. *All figures have been taken from the spreadsheet Coronavirus business support schemes: Statistics - House of Commons Library (<https://tinyurl.com/5p7tpmmj>).*

The National Planning Policy Framework, The Local Plan and the Green Belt - a Hitchin Viewpoint

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies and how to apply them. It provides a framework within which locally prepared plans for housing and other developments can be produced.

The Local Plan is a plan for the future development of a local area, drawn up by the local planning authority in consultation with the community. It has to be approved by the Government-appointed Planning Inspector. For Hitchin the authority is NHDC, and the current Local Plan consists of saved policies from the old Plan covering the period 1996 to 2011, and others which have been updated through Supplementary Planning Guidance in the 10 years since 2011. The Local Plan for the period 2011 to 2031 is in draft form only and, having received much local criticism and delays, due first to administrative changes and latterly COVID, is currently with the Planning Inspector for approval.

For this region, a key consideration is the number of new dwellings needing to be built. The Draft Local Plan is based on 13,800 homes over the 20-year period of the Plan. This was subsequently reduced by the government to 11,600 homes, but NHDC's Draft Local Plan still makes provision for the greater number. In order to achieve this total, the Draft Plan proposes to remove five sites from the Green Belt

around Hitchin. These sites are land east of Highover Farm, land north of Pound Farm, land south of Oughtonhead Lane, land west of Lucas Lane and land west of Crow Furlong. Note there are also developments planned in St Ippolyts and Ickleford, also affecting the Green Belt. The Draft Plan also proposes to take a large area west of Stevenage out of the Green Belt now, for future development under a future Plan review. Strangely, they are calling this land 'safeguarded'.

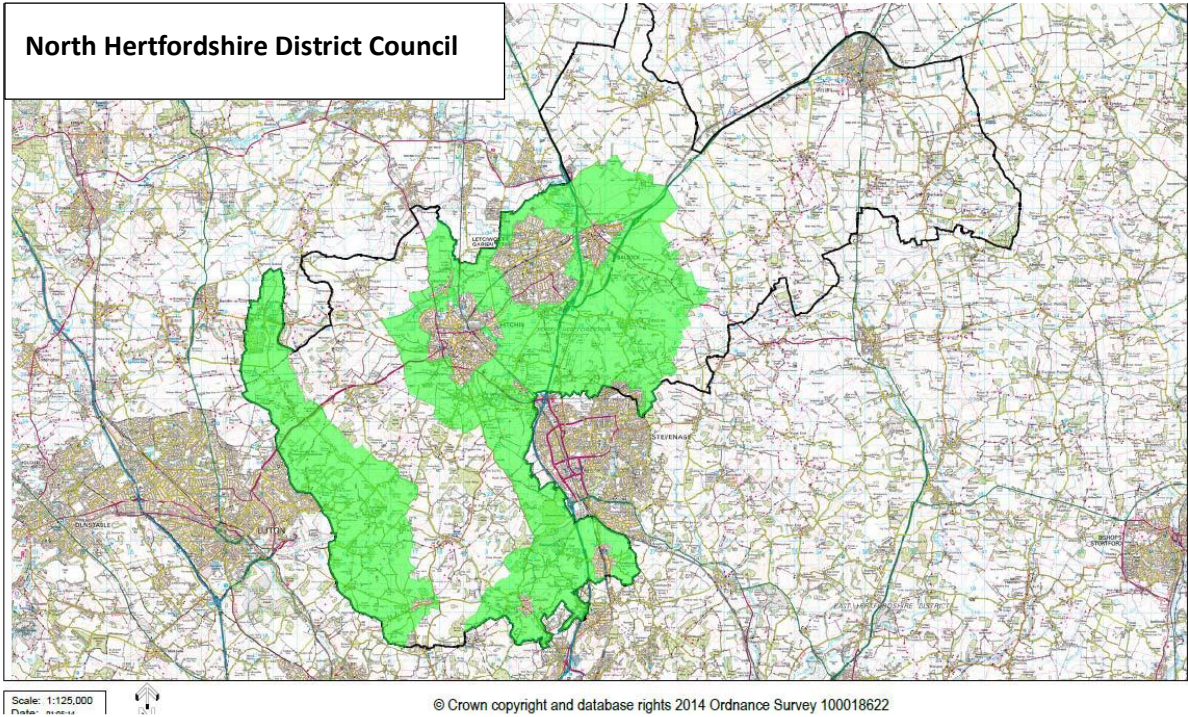
The Green Belt around Hitchin is shown below. It was an extension of the original London Metropolitan Green Belt of 1954 and was first approved in 1971, to prevent development pressures adversely affecting the local environment. The Green Belt serves five purposes:

- a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

The National Planning Policy Framework states that the Government attaches great importance to Green Belts, and that their boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances.

The Draft Local Plan for 2011 to 2031 makes the case that there is no alternative within North Hertfordshire to developing Green Belt sites. This is what has resulted in the five areas of Green Belt around Hitchin where NHDC is proposing to allow development. Consultations with developers have resulted in detailed applications for some of these Green Belt sites, but these cannot currently go ahead until the draft Local Plan is nearer to being approved.

The Government published a new planning White Paper, 'Planning for the Future', in 2020, which would change all of the current system outlined above. However, this met with a good deal of criticism, and has proved politically unpopular – more so after the recent Amersham and Chesham by-election result - so any changes to the system in the near future are likely to be moderated.



The Green Belt in North Hertfordshire

Neil Dodds
Member of Steering Group