

Transport meeting with Jeff Clayton (Herts CC's Strategy & Programme Manager for Highways Implementation)

Held at Gainsford Room, Woodside Hall on Tuesday 10th September

In the Forum's first public meeting for some time, , Jeff Clayton, provided authoritative, honest and detailed answers to questions posed both in advance of the meeting and by attendees on the night.

Working on the questions submitted in advance, it was clear that major issues were around lorry traffic and congestion with other areas such as parking, fatal accidents at the A602 / Charlton Road junction and antisocial driving often overlapping with those. What follows is not a set of minutes, but an attempt to give a flavour of the discussion. In some cases, because questions overlapped, I have included details under headings where they seem to fit logically, rather than where the question initially arose. The meeting was designed to be an exchange of views and a major aim for Jeff was to understand the concerns of Hitchin people on a variety of subjects.

Congestion

With respect to congestion (a major concern underlying six of the pre-submitted questions) Jeff responded first to the need to incentivise walking, cycling and public transport with the aim of reducing unnecessary car journeys. He initially told us about the various ways in which projects are, and will continue to be funded:

- 'Section 106¹ funding', where a local authority negotiates with a developer to provide a sum of money to fulfil planning obligations arising from building a new development, which includes but is not limited to highways,
- and the government's Active Travel Fund (ATF) which grew out of Covid – active travel comprises walking, wheeling and cycling. This has gone through a number of rounds, and is likely to continue. This complements the [Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan \(LCWIP\)](https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/about-the-council/consultations/highways/north-hertfordshire-district-local-cycling-and-walking-infrastructure-plan-final-report.pdf), jointly developed between HCC and North Herts Council.

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Examples of changes to encourage active travel include surface improvements in the town centre for pedestrians, a proposal to reorganise the bus stops at and crossing points along Queen Street, and the just completed traffic calming measures in Bearton Road & Periwinkle Lane designed to reduce vehicle speeds closer to 20mph. The speed limit was introduced in 2016 and, though unenforced, HCC's own survey data suggests the limit had consistently been ignored as just a signs-&-lines scheme. Jeff is the sponsor for all of these schemes. Regarding speed limits, Jeff pointed out the police's expectation that 20mph limits should not need enforcing, therefore traffic calming measures such as road humps will, if organised correctly, reduce speeds where these have been a cause for concern. One member of the audience pointed out that speed cameras operate entirely automatically, generating the appropriate summons letter without causing the police additional work (assuming the motorist pleads guilty).

Whilst infrastructure is a good thing, and is, some would say slowly, being provided or improved, it is of limited use if the car remains the default for a majority, especially for short journeys such as home to school. Problems with home-school journeys are often exacerbated by the popularity of large SUVs (a trend driven largely by manufacturers and therefore only really capable of being solved by national government in consultation with manufacturers or perhaps changes in the taxation system). Some incentives are being used. When new estates are built, special offers on bus fares for residents are

¹ Derived from the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

sometimes negotiated which means bus companies can help effect behavioural change as soon as new residents move in.

The new Transport Minister apparently intends to encourage more active travel schemes. The possibility of disincentives for car use to take children to school was raised by a questioner. There are no plans for this, but in its local projects, Hertfordshire obtains data on the mode of transport for school pupils' journeys, in particular to achieve greater understanding of the problem and base plans to address it on more solid evidence. A member of the audience wondered if schools could do more to encourage their pupils to walk or cycle. Whilst that would be a suggestion unlikely to find favour with teachers (although with a less crowded curriculum one could imagine it would be a wonderful project for pupils to research and get involved with, spanning a variety of subjects) some schools work with bus companies to use students' addresses to work out the most efficient ways of bussing them to school. Jeff gave the example of a group of schools in Essex², but there are no such initiatives locally.

More generally, the unreliability of bus services (with buses late or simply missing out stops to catch up on schedules) and the barriers to access which makes them either inconvenient or uncomfortable to use was raised by one questioner. Jeff, a former bus driver and manager in the bus industry, encouraged those present to contact the bus company in the first instance with details of such complaints. Drivers simply not stopping at some stops to catch up with their schedule is unacceptable and not to be tolerated. If that does not result in action and noticeable improvement, it is then worth approaching local councillors. Beyond that, [Bus Users UK](#) is an official Alternative Dispute Resolution body recognised by government.

One questioner raised the poor quality of existing provision for cyclists, giving as an example the short section of unsegregated cycle lane in Grove Road. Cyclists among us know that that particular cycle lane is actually dangerous. It does not meet the standards now prescribed – the white line encourages drivers to drive much closer to cyclists than is currently recommended by the Highway Code. Planned cycle routes must meet standards [set out by the DfT](#)³. A further question from the floor on the subject of cycling concerned the Old Park Road / Bedford Road / Paynes Park one way system. Vehicle drivers routinely exceed the speed limit and there are points where lane-changing is difficult for cyclists: turning right both from Bedford Road into Paynes Park or from Paynes Park at the library roundabout are both manoeuvres with which few cyclists feel confident. Jeff confirmed that this and other junctions in this area are under review now.

Parking

One manifestation of the home-school journey issue is parking, and a number of questions related to this. Although submitted by a single questioner, I suspect there is a wider level of frustration and concern on the issue. It was frustration that prompted the questioner to ask: "Why are private cars allowed to park free on roadways, 24/7, without contributing to the cost of building and maintaining the roadway?" adding that "I have to pay £80pa to park outside my home - but nothing in the next road." The answer was that there are both one-off cost (surveys, signage and road markings) and continuing costs (enforcement) involved in setting-up a residents' parking scheme for which the annual charge would pay. A further parking-related question was possibly prompted following the recent work done on traffic calming in Bearton Road, where dashed lines in the road surface imply an area where it is considered safe to park. Such lines may be used to encourage vehicle owners to avoid parking near junctions in a way that reduces visibility for users of the junction. In Bearton Road, the dashed lines indicating the middle of the road have been removed. The questioner wondered who would be responsible in a head-to-head collision (the answer is that both would be partially

² Consortium of Selective Schools in Essex: <https://csse.org.uk/>

³ Cycle infrastructure design (LTN 1/20).

responsible). The rationale for the removal of the centre lines is that, especially where there are such parking bays on both sides of the road, the effective width for traffic is reduced to the extent that two larger vehicles cannot pass each other without some sort of compromise, effectively making the carriageway the equivalent of a narrow country road. The expectation is that the physical changes lead to lower speeds and better driver anticipation to reduce the likelihood or severity of such situations, such that non-verbal negotiation between drivers would take over with one manoeuvring into a vacant space to allow the other vehicle to pass. We are perhaps not so accustomed to such manoeuvres on the streets in Hitchin, although drivers on Bearton Road have been no strangers to them for many years. Unfortunately time did not allow two questions to be addressed; one dealt with the disparity between the way in which pavements and roads are prioritised for maintenance, the other to do with the effective width of pavement on which a ramp could be built in creating a vehicle entrance to allow parking in somebody's front garden. Such ramps can be a particular issue for wheelchair users and their carers because it affects the gradient of the 'crossfall' which they will have to negotiate – a short ramp is liable to ensure a steeper gradient.

Lorry traffic and the industrial estate.

This was probably the issue about which concern was most strongly expressed. Six questions were submitted in advance of the meeting, posed by residents who are clearly affected by the noise and vibration caused by heavy goods vehicles en route to and from the industrial estate. These did not highlight the only issues – that of air quality was mentioned by a member of the audience. This is also affected disproportionately by diesel vehicles, which are major producers not only of nitrogen dioxide (which is currently monitored in the affected roads) but also particulates, the smallest of which have a highly significant health impact. North Hertfordshire has a very small number of monitors capable of detecting these particulates, and those monitors have not yet been deployed in areas like Grove Road, Fishponds Road or Verulam Road. Another issue has been that the lorries have not always been netted, so that items can fall off, risking injury to passers-by or damage to other vehicles. A number of solutions were discussed. The police are willing to take action against hauliers who carry unsafe loads, but there needs to be evidence of what has happened – falling debris etc – which is hard to provide. But, in just the same way that residents should contact bus companies in the first instance about issues with a bus service, Jeff reiterated that lorry operators should be given an opportunity to answer where their details are shown on the side of a vehicle.

Re-routing lorry traffic to avoid the town centre might address the problem to some extent, but there is also the problem of who will then be affected. Questioners raised the possibility of whether the recycling operations could be re-sited to a more appropriate location. That raised issues about whether the owners would be prepared to do that, where they would go (a suggestion was near the Wymondley sub-station) and whether any new site would be opposed by those who felt they would be affected. Mention was made of the recent fires, both at the site and in a lorry. A complicating factor in putting pressure on the site operator and the hauliers is the sheer number of organisations which are involved in overseeing the operation and the consequent lorry movements. Hertfordshire County Council, North Hertfordshire Council, the Environment Agency, the fire service and the police all play a role in either permitting, regulating or inspecting the operation. Jeff did point out that for local decision-makers, residents' concerns needed to be balanced against the benefits of jobs that the industrial estate brings, and that there are other destinations within the industrial estate for lorry traffic. Whilst the number of lorry movements (and total movements) associated with the recycling operation in Wallace Way is of the order of 260 per day as shown in a planning application of 2019, the number of movements arising from other businesses is unknown and a survey to establish the

impact of various courses of action would be helpful. Following a subsequent conversation, I understand that this is under consideration, but not until the next financial year.

Charlton Road / A602 safety

Although only two questions were raised about the junction which has been the scene of fatal accidents over recent years, they provoked some useful insights both from Jeff and members of the audience. Fatal collisions have involved vehicles turning right onto the southbound A602 from Charlton Road. A suggestion put forward by a questioner was that right turns from Charlton Road into the A602 should not be permitted. Drivers wishing to join the southbound A602 from Charlton Road would need to turn north to the roundabout at the library and then use the roundabout to effectively perform a U-turn. The point was made that this would result in confusion to drivers feeding into the roundabout, especially from Paynes Park – the size of the roundabout was such that they would not have time to react to the sudden appearance of a vehicle close to the centre of the roundabout. This unintended consequence prompted Jeff to tell us that some modelling is now being done of what would happen if the junctions at Hitchin Hill, the library and A505/Pirton Road were signalised. Due to time constraints this was not fully discussed, but these junctions are all points of dispute between Hertfordshire and North Hertfordshire councils with Luton Rising in its quest to achieve consent to increase passenger numbers to 38 million per year.

The narrow pavement in Charlton Road from the junction to the left hand turn to Charlton village, which forced pedestrians to walk dangerously close to the wing mirrors of oncoming vehicles was noted – a problem exacerbated by the too infrequent cutting-back of vegetation and removal of soil from the other side of the fence. This was to be discussed at the next Charlton Society meeting on 17th October, which Jeff was due to attend.

Finally

With nearly 20 questions submitted in advance, it was inevitable that some received less attention than others, but after reading this account, if anybody feels their question was not answered, or that they would like to ask anything else, Jeff has kindly agreed to respond. Please email your questions to chair@hitchinforum.org in the first instance and we will pass them on.

Original Questions

1. Hitchin is growing, with several new residential developments. The roads are already crammed with traffic. Is there a plan to invest more in local bus services and bicycle lanes to reduce congestion?
2. Anti-social driving remains a major problem. Drivers regularly flout the speed limit. Is there a plan to improve enforcement of the rules or, failing that, install more traffic calming measures?
3. Cars are dominant in Hitchin. Has there been any consideration given to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods or car-free days? London is holding a car-free day on 22nd September. Couldn't Hitchin do the same on certain streets?
4. Pedestrianisation of Hitchin town centre seems to have been a huge success. Are there plans to extend pedestrianisation in the town centre?
5. Can the recycling plants be moved from Hitchin's 'industrial' estate to somewhere outside the town nearer to either the M1 or the A1 (for example near the Wymondley Substation)? This might also then free up brown field land for house building.

6. Are you able to tell us a little about what issues would be faced if there was an attempt to relocate the metal recycling plants to a site outside Hitchin.
7. What does HCC propose to do (in concert with NHDC as planning authority or on its own) to restrict, control or ban heavy scrap metal lorries from driving through the centre of Hitchin?
8. What is to be done about heavy lorry movements and speeding in Verulam Road?
9. Why are the roadways kept smooth for cars but not the pavements for pedestrians?
10. Why are cars allowed to park on pavements so that walkers, buggies and push chairs have to squeeze by?
11. Why are private cars allowed to park free on roadways, 24/7, without contributing to the cost of building and maintaining the roadway? *Note: I have to pay £80pa to park outside my home - but nothing in the next road.*
12. Why are some roads marked out with dotted lines where cars should be parked (free) - so keeping a road 'tidy' - but not all roads?
13. Why do ramps, cut into pavements for cars to reach private drives, extend across the full width of the pavements - so making walkers and disabled buggies keep tilting sideways - when ramps in London are only 500mm wide, leaving two thirds of the pavement level?
14. What is the plan to deal with the HGV problem in Hitchin and can the previously used Bury Mead Road diversion be continued as a temporary solution?
15. The level of traffic congestion in Hitchin during busy periods is a major concern. Main routes into town A505, A602, A600 etc are all affected. Could traffic signage on trunk roads be improved to encourage drivers to avoid the town centre?
16. Are there, or can there be more effective, public awareness campaigns with schools and parents to dissuade use of cars for home-school journeys unless really necessary? Improved cycle routes into and within town could help with this problem.
17. Fatal accidents have occurred on the A602 (Hitchin bypass) / Charlton Road junction. What action is being taken by HCC Highways to improve safety at the junction? Campaigns appear to have been simply ignored, even with the MP's backing.
18. Why can't right turns from Charlton Road be banned as has been done at the junction of the road from Willian with Letchworth Gate?