

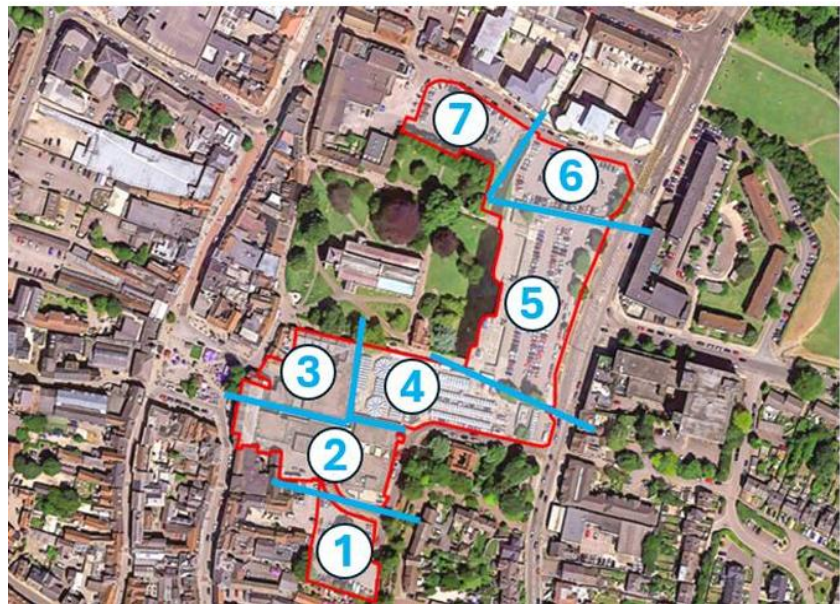
## NEWSLETTER

March – April 2025 No. 185

### Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Spring is almost here, but no frogspawn yet in my pond – maybe the cold nights have inhibited the frogs. But there are signs of life elsewhere... The Churchgate Consultation has taken another step forward with a summary report on ‘programme of engagement’ which took place last autumn. It contains much interesting stuff – [read it here](#)<sup>1</sup>.

Revitalisation of Hitchin Market comes out as the popular option, with better parking and a cinema also receiving strong support. There is much more to browse, and in May we have a members’ meeting with Chloe Gray, the North Herts officer, talking to us about the Churchgate development, and no doubt we will be referring to this interesting report.



*The site under consideration in the Churchgate development*

**A Town Council?** Another consultation has been posted on the council’s website – the [Community Governance Review](#)<sup>2</sup>. This is very brief and just asks two questions, whether St Ippolyts North parish ward should move from St Ippolyts to Hitchin, and whether there should be ‘a new parish for Hitchin, served by a new Town Council’. I understand that the council just wants to know if this gains general approval. That is, is it democratically OK? The prospect of a town council has prompted Hitchin Initiative to set up a specific website (<https://hitchin.co.uk>) to explain the possible changes and also to hold some sessions in Market Place over several weeks, ending on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> April, to discuss that prospect. And with new unitary authorities maybe being installed by 2028 it is time to work out how a town council would help this town.

The (misnamed!) **Hitchin Community Forum** meetings provide much local interest but are poorly attended by the public. Bill gives a brief report on some of the items discussed recently by our local councillors and the brave few members of the public. The question is how this could be better supported – ideas please!

In the following pages Bill has commented on why responsible community groups should not be blamed for obstruction of planning applications, with reference to our own experiences. How that scenario will play out with the government making noises about bypassing local objectors in order to push through planning permissions we wait and see. Tony Riley has compiled an impressive record in protecting Butts Close and provides a good account of the ongoing work there, while Valerie has shifted from her local focus to visit Grime's Graves in Norfolk – a fascinating place (which I must visit).

Finally, a plea – we are in the business of reviewing and revising the Hitchin Forum website. If you have any ideas about how we might do this (it has remained much the same for 13 years....) do let me know.

1. Programme of engagement:  
<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Churchgate%20consultation%20-%20Summary%20Report%20-%20February%202025.pdf> (or <https://tinyurl.com/bdhvba3d>)
2. Community Governance Review:  
<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/news/have-your-say-proposed-changes-parish-arrangements> (or <https://tinyurl.com/bdd4j55p>)

*Mike Clarke - Co-Chair*

## Report on the Hitchin Community Forum Meeting, held on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> March 25

**TOWN CENTRE MANAGER:** Tom Hardy reported on the shop vacancy rate, only 1.6%, but businesses are struggling, with changes to national insurance being cited as a big issue, so more failures likely. Even so, by national standards Hitchin continues to do well.

**POLICE REPORT:** An impressive comprehensive account, with crime increased compared with the previous year and shoplifting, violent crime and burglary all up. Incidents involving women and girls have increased although the total figure provided included reported incidents as well as actual crimes. PCSOs work hard with businesses on shoplifting, with good communication where officers are contacted directly to cut response times.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:** There was just one request for funds - from Resolve (alcoholic support organisation). This was granted.

**THE TOWN TALK:** This was a presentation by Jeff Clayton - the Hertfordshire County Council's Strategy and Programme Manager for Highways Implementation, Growth and Environment - who spoke at our last members' (and public) meeting.

**A FIVE-JUNCTION STUDY:** This included the Three Moorhens roundabout and other junctions along the route from there to the A505 Luton Road. It has concluded that there is a complex relationship between traffic flows at each, and any proposed changes need to be carefully considered. It seems that signalised junctions with better pedestrian crossing facilities are required. Park Way is to be made 40mph.

**20 MPH:** Just a resume of what has been done so far and the unwelcome news that the previous HCC administration had not agreed to extend support for 20 mph once government funding had been exhausted.

**BUS LANES (BSIP – BUS IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY) AND TOWN CENTRE:** Proposed bus lanes (the subject of consultation last year) were not supported, although something is being done to improve things in Queen Street. Improving bus transport is funded by the DfT, so efforts are being made to use the money effectively. This means that walking routes connecting, for instance, the town centre to bus stops in Queen Street are prioritised for improvements over other walking routes. At the same time, there have been cuts to resources, which means that even when funds are available, there will be delays in implementation.

In response Oughton ward councillors felt Redhill Road should be 20 mph as it's a racetrack. Similarly, Charlton Road / Willow Lane. One resident said that he thought the Willow Lane / A602 junction should be a roundabout and made a good point about how dangerous it is for pedestrians to cross Willow Lane at that point due to visibility issues.

*Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair*

## Airport update

It seems that the government is planning to stick to its published timetable for an announcement of the decision on Luton Rising's Development Consent Order to expand capacity at Luton airport. There is no further news, and the decision is expected on 3<sup>rd</sup> April.

*Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair*

## Hitchin Forum's Big Spring Clean

About 120 volunteer litter pickers turned out to tidy up the town on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> March. Rain, forecast earlier in the week, did not materialise. In spite of the cold and early mist which made it rather uninviting, litter from about 17 areas in the town was removed. Early estimates are that over 80 bags of litter were collected – the uncertainty being that volunteers often take recyclables home to put in their grey bins. The figure is similar to previous events.

The trend for people wanting to work in new areas has continued this year. We've seen for a while now that volunteers have commented that there has been less litter in the



*2<sup>nd</sup> Hitchin Beavers proudly showing off their haul on King George V Recreation Ground*

'traditional' areas, such as Windmill Hill or Butts Close. Participants are always looking for ways to maximise their impact, and one way to do that is to identify a litter hotspot to work on. It is unfortunate that some of the worst areas are alongside busy roads, and in the past, I have had to say to some would-be participants that they should not contemplate working on some of those. However, one suggestion from our autumn event was Cadwell Lane between its junction with Bilton Road and the railway bridge, which at weekends is quiet.

Several volunteers worked on that this time and made a remarkable difference to that and the nearby recreation ground. As I've commented previously, where green spaces are

concerned, this is in part due to the work of North Hertfordshire's contractors, not to mention the small and growing army of unsung local heroes who quietly work on their own areas every week. As I returned to the bottom of Windmill Hill, North Hertfordshire's contractors were already adding the bags collected to their truck! The number of disposable vapes or catering packs of nitrous oxide was much diminished compared with previous events.



*Tennis club members after a good morning's work*

If you would like to take part in the Forum's autumn event in October, please email [hflitterpick@gmail.com](mailto:hflitterpick@gmail.com) – the date will be announced soon.

*Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair*

# Busy Butts Close

We would expect the Close to be dormant these last few months, but it has been the opposite. Herts' Countryside Management Service (CMS) Volunteer Team were busy in November and January following the [Greenspace Action Plan!](#) They focused on the new hedges, the old hedgerows, and the pond area. Saplings planted for a hedge need to be cut down after a year or two – coppicing – to develop the growth underground and produce hedging rather than a row of straggly trees.

The west-facing hedge (planted by Friends of Butts Close) was coppiced two years ago. You will now see that the tops of the growth have been trimmed level, and they will start spreading laterally.



Some gaps have been filled, especially along the north end next to the car park, where people used to cut across the broken, slippery steps down to the Close. There is now a safer route just a little further along the fence.



The volunteer team also cleared, trimmed and coppiced the hedgerows along the south-facing end of the gym. They work on one third of this area at a time, so it may seem it's the same part being endlessly dug up, but it's actually in rotation.

There is also cyclical work regularly carried out on the pond. The reeds are spectacular right now but will need to be cut and thinned later this year or in early 2026, along with other work on the banks.



Then there's remedial work...

All of the benches now have paving slabs instead of muddy footwells.

Everyone Active, the people who manage the swimming pools and the gym used their fenced entrance to do some major upgrades, but left deep slashes in the ground. We understand that they will bear the costs of remediation.

And, finally, we may have caught up with the Night Detector! Using a metal detector on council property is illegal – which is

probably why he had only been seen on very early mornings or at night. But this time he was trailed to his car, and the Police were informed. He hasn't been seen since, and although it may seem a harmless hobby, it could well rob the museum of archaeological finds.

*[Note from editor: I have first-hand experience of trouble caused by a detectorist... a twisted ankle from stepping into one of the divots left by a careless so-and-so.]*

If you would like to join Tony and others in the Friends of Butts Close email group, please contact him at [buttsclose@gmail.com](mailto:buttsclose@gmail.com).

If you wish to join the volunteers on the ground, you should contact... [cms@hertfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:cms@hertfordshire.gov.uk) or sign up through the website... [www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/cmsvolunteering](http://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/cmsvolunteering)

1. Butts Close Green Space Action Plan:  
<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/butts-close>

*All photos were taken by Simon Maddison.*

*Tony Riley – member of Hitchin Forum*

## **No smoke without fire – why responsible community groups should not be blamed for obstruction of planning applications.**

Six years ago, a news article in the online architects' journal, Building Design, reported the findings of a survey carried out by Grosvenor Britain & Ireland. It led with the headline '*98% of public don't trust developers, [research](#)<sup>1</sup> shows*'.

60% of those who had engaged with consultations on local developments were likely to think large-scale schemes had a negative effect on their area. More than a third (39%) of those polled felt councils weren't interested in what local people wanted. There was support for greater opportunities for local people to influence the outcome of a development (71%). 69% thought that more transparency from developers throughout the planning process was required.

The survey was conducted at about the time that the previous government was consulting on its plans for growth entitled '*Build Back Better*'. At the time, there was much anti-NIMBY rhetoric from government ministers. Several years on, there is a change in governing party, but the demand for urgency is equally strident, accompanied by almost identical messaging about '*blockers*' and the need to remove troublesome (often environmental) red tape.

An article dated 25<sup>th</sup> January this year on the [Social Value Portal](#)<sup>2</sup> entitled '*Social Value & community engagement: Rebuilding trust between developers and residents*' refers to the earlier article implying that nothing has changed.

Rather than bemoaning the existence of the ‘blockers’ and ‘newt-whisperers’, egged on by the powerful developer and house builder lobbies, it is surely time that our politicians make the effort to consider exactly why there is a lack of trust in the actions of developers and the councils which negotiate with them. Models of good practice need to be identified and fostered across the development sector.

If readers were to examine Hitchin Forum’s letters about planning applications over recent years, a different picture would emerge. Whilst it is true to say that we do state our outright opposition to some schemes, it is by no means usual for us to be categorical in that opposition. Instead, we aim to make constructive suggestions where possible. Where housing is concerned, we invariably comment on the need for a higher proportion of affordable social rental housing in any given development.

In recent years we have engaged with proposals on Highover Farm and the various developments to the west of Hitchin. These provide examples which show how the seeds of mistrust are sown.

In late 2019 members of Hitchin Forum’s Steering Group attended a meeting organised by the agents for the developers of the proposed Highover development. Those present



*Queuing traffic close to the Highover development site on the busy Cambridge Road in the section between the Woolgrove Road and the Stotfold Road roundabouts.*

included local residents, North Hertfordshire Planning Officers and developers’ representatives. In an amicable meeting, a number of us raised a variety of concerns, often to do with issues around access and traffic impact. The Transport Assessment then available on North Hertfordshire’s [planning website](#)<sup>3</sup> included a number of anomalies. One concerned the daily number of vehicles using the A505 on the eastern side of the traffic lights at its junction with Woolgrove Road and Willian Road.

On completion of the development (at the time this was projected to be 2021) the report suggested a total of 14719 vehicles per day would be observed. Given the extra 700 homes, that represents a significant and surprising decrease when compared to the baseline figure (for 2017) of 17487 supplied in the same report. When the issue of the counter-intuitive decrease following development was raised at the meeting, the developer’s representative scratched his head and freely admitted that he had no explanation. Nevertheless, he did promise that he would investigate and get back to us with a reason. Some weeks later I received a reply - the answer was that the figure came from the modelling. On sharing the reply with colleagues, the overall reaction was

predictable: we knew it came from the modelling! What we wanted to know was why the numbers would reduce in 2021; with the benefit of hindsight, we now know that they did, but no model could have taken the covid pandemic into account when the report was compiled in 2017. We anticipated the answer might be that people would seek and use alternative routes - which we hoped would be specified - to avoid the congestion. Failing that, we thought that there might be an admission that something had gone wrong, and that the simulation needed to be run again with some of the inputs corrected. It was clear that those using the outputs of the simulations had no more understanding of the workings of their software 'black box' than we had. What confidence could we have that any of the conclusions based on the modelling could be relied upon?

Fast forward to 2022 and the [Air Quality Assessment](#)<sup>4</sup> for the proposed development at Crow Furlong at the top of Grays Lane. The assessment must surely have been carried out as a desk exercise. Had its author visited the site, they would not have repeatedly referred to 'Piriton Road' instead of Pirton Road. An elementary search of Hitchin's Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) on North Hertfordshire's website, would have revealed the existence of two AQMAs in Hitchin. Much of the report referred to just one AQMA - that on the approach to the Three Moorhens roundabout on Stevenage Road, totally ignoring the nearer one at the Paynes Park roundabout. Again, there were some very puzzling figures in the number of vehicles feeding in to some of the local junctions. I raised the issue of what I considered to be a very poor-quality assessment with councillors. Ultimately the flawed assessment was updated and most of the errors removed. I was left wondering what would have happened if I had not brought the poor assessment to the attention of councillors. The cynic in me still believes that the original assessment was deemed 'fit for purpose' in the sense that developers and consultants work on the basis that councillors are busy people, unable to devote enough time to root out inconsistencies in relatively technical reports. A report with a shiny cover, a few spelling errors and a set of conclusions seemed to be good enough.



*AQMA at the Paynes Park Roundabout. Much closer to the proposed Crow Furlong development than the AQMA at the Three Moorhens roundabout used in the analysis.*

The episode made me wonder what oversight there is of the work of consultants who provide assessments to developers to support planning applications. What degree of confidence can be placed in the output of models that support their findings? What data is fed into such models and what is the margin of error associated with the numerical outputs? Such assessments seem to play down negative impacts, often by being selective in the way that they are represented. The use of a percentage increase in traffic flow being described as 'negligible' or 'imperceptible' when a junction is already running over



100% capacity, is a common technique. Not surprisingly, I have rarely seen a transport or environmental assessment which does not have a conclusion which supports the development which is being proposed. It does make one wonder if this is a case of ‘*He who pays the piper calls the tune*’ in the sense that consultants are paid by developers to provide assessments which so often support their planning applications.

In 1976, the statistician George Box declared that ‘*All models are wrong, but some are useful*’. To whom is a model useful? In the two cases outlined above, the use of sophisticated software prohibits any interrogation of the assumptions on which it is based by all but its designers. In both instances, the outputs are useful to the developer in supporting their case, but in neither of these cases did the developer question the underlying assumptions – they had the results they wanted. The lack of transparency is ample reason for the public’s ongoing mistrust. With the routine use of artificial intelligence, reports are likely to become even more opaque in the near future.

From our politicians, it would be good to see a more balanced acknowledgement of the role of community groups in attempting to shape proposals, and more push-back against the negative views from developers’ lobby groups such as the [Home Builders Federation](#)<sup>5</sup>. Both developers and politicians should recognise, and attempt to address, the reasons for the continued public mistrust of the behaviour of developers. The way to do that is not by shutting down community concerns to facilitate quick decisions.

1. Grosvenor Britain & Ireland survey - 98% of public don’t trust developers, research shows. Building Design, July 2019:  
<https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/98-of-public-dont-trust-developers-research-shows/5100575.article#:~:text=Public%20trust%20in%20private%20developers,according%20to%20a%20new%20survey>
2. Social value and community engagement:  
<https://www.socialvalueportal.com/news-and-insights/social-value-community-engagement-rebuilding-developer-resident-trust>
3. A. Environmental Statement; TECHNICAL APPENDIX 13.2 TRAFFIC DATA (May 2018):  
[https://documentportal.north-herts.gov.uk/PublicAccess\\_LIVE/Document/ViewDocument?id=9722DCE3537B11E8813300155D944193](https://documentportal.north-herts.gov.uk/PublicAccess_LIVE/Document/ViewDocument?id=9722DCE3537B11E8813300155D944193)
4. Air quality assessment: land at junction of Pirton Road, and Crow Furlong, Hitchin (March 2021):  
[https://documentportal.north-herts.gov.uk/PublicAccess\\_LIVE/Document/ViewDocument?id=BD61192E9E4043C591CCE088E788A985](https://documentportal.north-herts.gov.uk/PublicAccess_LIVE/Document/ViewDocument?id=BD61192E9E4043C591CCE088E788A985)
5. Government’s imminent surrender to NIMBYs will see approvals plunge further in months ahead:  
<https://www.hbf.co.uk/news/planning-permission-approvals-for-new-home-sites-fall-to-another-record-low/>

*Bill Sellicks – co-chair*

# Prehistory on our Doorstep – Grime’s Graves

It really does seem that living in Hitchin puts us within striking distance of many fascinating places to visit. For example, just over an hour’s drive away is English Heritage’s Neolithic site, [Grime’s Graves](#)<sup>1</sup>, not far from Thetford.

Set in a mysterious, lunar-like landscape (see photo below), it is the best preserved and largest known prehistoric flint mine in England and the only one open to the public. The dips and humps represent the visible remains of 433 mines and pits.

On the wall outside the Visitor Centre a board (see the reproduction below) anticipates some of the questions one might ask and conveniently provides us with the answers:

<p><b>What is this unique place?</b> The hollows and bumps all around you are the remains of over 430 mines. Around 4,500 years ago, people dug deep underground to extract high-quality black flint to make their tools. Each hollow is the top of a back-filled mineshaft between 2 and 12 metres deep.</p>	<p><b>When did mining take place?</b> The shafts were dug about 4,500 years ago in the Late Neolithic period. It was a time of great change, when Stonehenge and other major monuments were being built, just before metalworking technology was introduced from Europe. Mining took place at Grime’s Graves in different phases for more than a thousand years. Flint continued to be a valued material even after the introduction of metals.</p>	<p><b>Who were the miners and where did they live?</b> Evidence suggests the miners worked seasonally during the warmer months. They may have come from the local area but some archaeologists believe that highly skilled miners travelled long distances to work here.  We haven’t yet found evidence of dwellings at Grime’s Graves but the miners and their community probably lived nearby during the mining season.</p>	<p><b>Why are these mines important?</b> This is the largest of thirteen flint mines known in Britain, and the only one where you can still descend into a shaft. Mining created an unusual chalk landscape in the sandy Breckland area, which is today an important habitat for plants and wildlife. In 1985, Grime’s Graves was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest for its plants and animals. The combination of chalk soils, sandy heath and acid grassland supports a wide range of unusual plants. Some of the re-excavated mines provide winter roosting for rare species of bat.</p>	<p><b>Why is it called Grime’s Graves?</b> The name comes from the Anglo-Saxons who associated these mysterious earthworks with their god Grim (or Woden). ‘Graves’ meant mines or earthworks. From around AD939 it was an important meeting place for the local Hundred, a group of 16 surrounding parishes, who came here to settle disputes.</p>
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Above is a photo of the visitors’ board entitled *‘Walking Trails’*. The dips and humps represent the visible remains of 433 mines and pits.



To explore the grassy landscape and to enter the mine shaft (see photos above), which is nine metres below ground and not allowed for children under 7 years, you are advised to wear flat, sturdy shoes or walking boots. Hard hats are provided free of charge. You can download a [plan from the website](#)<sup>2</sup>.

Once in the pit (known as Pit 1) you will find a multi-sensory digital projection that will immerse you in the lives of prehistoric miners. A still from the video is shown below.



In addition to Pit 1 there is Greenwell's Pit (see the information board above), which for many years was capped with a concrete cover and only accessible for research purposes. However, since April 2017 it has been reopened for guided tours. You can [book your tour online](#)<sup>3</sup>. If you are not happy with physically visiting the somewhat challenging Greenwell's Pit, you can view a [virtual tour of the pit online](#)<sup>4</sup>.



Having visited Pit 1, if you still have the energy, it is well worth completing one of the walking trails amid the distinctive Breckland heath landscape, a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a habitat for rare plants and fauna. Along the way, wherever there is a point of interest, you will encounter an information board, such as the one depicted above for Greenwell's Pit. Each information board also bears a QR code for scanning that provides an internet link to fuller information.

If you haven't already stopped by the Visitor Centre (see adjacent photo) and experienced the immersive Grime's Graves story in the new exhibition space then it is recommended you do so. Here you will also find the English Heritage shop and a vending machine that sells tea, coffee and hot chocolate. There is a [full list of the facilities](#)<sup>5</sup> on the website.

It is also worth noting that each year in the middle of June a Flint Festival takes place. The [programme](#)<sup>6</sup> for 2024 gives a good insight into highlights of these unique and exciting events.



*All photos were taken by the author.*

*Valerie Schicker - member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group*

1. Heritage's Neolithic site, Grime's Graves:  
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/grimes-graves-prehistoric-flint-mine/>
2. Plan of site:  
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/siteassets/home/visit/places-to-visit/grimes-graves/history/grimes-graves-phased-plan.pdf>
3. How to book a tour of Greenwell's pit:  
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about/search-news/new-prehistoric-mineshaft-to-open>
4. Virtual tour of Greenwell's pit:  
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/grimes-graves-prehistoric-flint-mine/history/virtual-tour/>

5. List of facilities at the site:  
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/grimes-graves-prehistoric-flint-mine/facilities/>
  6. Programme for the 2024 Flint Festival:  
[https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/siteassets/home/visit/whats-on-202425/midlands/beneaththesurface\\_handout\\_final.pdf](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/siteassets/home/visit/whats-on-202425/midlands/beneaththesurface_handout_final.pdf)
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# Notice Board

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## Health Walks Timetable

The Health Walks timetable for 2025 is now online. Just search online for '*Hertfordshire Health Walks Timetable*'.

## Triangle Community Garden Events

Keep in touch with events being held at the Triangle Community Garden by checking their calendar at <https://trianglegarden.org/events/>.

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## Dates for your Diary

Hitchin Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12 noon	First Saturday of every month. 5 <sup>th</sup> April and 3 <sup>rd</sup> May
A chance to talk about the proposed Hitchin Town Council. Hitchin Market Place	11 am to 3 pm	Friday 4 <sup>th</sup> April Saturday 5 <sup>th</sup> April
Members' meeting Talk on the Churchgate development plans by Chloe Gray, Enterprise Manager at North Herts Council. Woodside Hall, The Gainsford Room	7.30 pm to 10 pm	Tuesday 13 <sup>th</sup> May

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