

Hitchin Town Talk notes – Thursday 5th September 2019

19:00 – 21:10

PLEASE NOTE

- If you wish to report an issue to NHDC you do not need to wait until the next Town Talk meeting. Compliments, Complaints and Issues can be reported anytime to NHDC Customer Services via the NHDC Website or call 01462 474000
- You may also report issues to your local ward Councillor (contact details are on the NHDC website)

Present

- Cllr Ian Albert
- Cllr Judi Billing
- Cllr Keith Hoskins
- Cllr Martin Stears-Handscomb
- Cllr Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg
- Cllr Sam Collins
- Cllr Val Bryant
- Cllr Kay Tart
- Cllr Simon Harwood
- Cllr Paul Clark
- Cllr Richard Thake
- Cllr Claire Strong
- Anthony Roche (Deputy Chief Executive)

Issues raised this session

1. Local plan
2. Aspirations for Hitchin
3. Sites that need to be considered
4. Communication
5. Existing businesses
6. Transport
7. Market
8. Public Realm (River)
9. Working together
10. Funding

Local Plan – Anthony Roche stated that provided the Local Plan gets approved and adopted, the council will seek to develop new town centre strategies for each town. The process is local plan first,

town centre strategies second. If upon looking at the town centre strategy the evidence base changes, then it's conceivable that we would need to look at updating the local plan accordingly.

Funding – Anthony Roche stated that the funding would depend on the proposal and therefore better to consider this in the context of any potential future proposals.

Aspirations for Hitchin – Unidentified person asked how can we discuss aspirations for Hitchin if we don't know what is already happening? What are the existing plans and proposals? How much power does the council have? Anthony Roche confirmed that there were currently no proposals.

Mary Marshall stated that she would like more opportunities and facilities for young people in the town centre. She emphasised that she would like for parents to feel that their children are safe.

Robin Dartington expressed that he would like to see the character of Hitchin as a traditional market town strengthened. He stated the commerce is at the heart of the town, and there is currently a lack of high quality products in the market, and that we need to study the success of other market towns.

Hitchin should remain a walkable town/pedestrian friendly

Anna Gatward: We should preserve and enhance what we have, and avoid turning Hitchin into a faceless town.

John Marsh said that the road plan around the square is intolerable. He proposed a total pedestrianisation of the town centre. He stated that service to retail units should be separate from the pedestrian network. He also said that provision needs to be made for pop up shops, and short term marketing events. He proposed a market hall for market food sales.

Colin Dunham said that he would like to see a new car parking strategy.

Paul McPhail liked this idea and suggested that a park and ride alternative should be considered.

Nicky Clarke said that there should be a move away from using personal cars. We should work in partnership with Sainsbury's and Waitrose to create a shuttle service in the town.

Vicky Wyer stated that a comprehensive transport strategy is needed, shared car services using technology should become the norm in light of climate change.

Gordon McPhail expressed that there needs to be better connection between the train station and the town centre.

Cllr Judi Billing responded to this stating that it has been an aspiration at the County Council to open up the back end of the station to make the route more pleasant for commuters. The County Council are about to embark on a piece of feasibility work with network rail.

Unidentified person would like to see younger people being able to afford to live in Hitchin.

Unidentified person stated that the large volume of through traffic, particularly the amount of lorries going to the industrial estate is of concern.

Stuart Alder said that we need to consider the needs of the surrounding villages that come in to Hitchin to shop. In the short term we should consider car parks, however in the long term we need to explore green alternatives. We should also explore utilising pay on exit car parks, double yellow lines on Bancroft and pedestrianizing the high street. He stated that NHDC should not be anywhere near the commercial operation of the town centre, also that there should be no more shops, but more housing needs to be provided, particularly social housing.

Chris Honey said that the cultural aspect of the town needs to be preserved. He drew attention to previous strategic documents including 'Future of Hitchin' report, published prior to the local plan.

Sites around town

Robin Dartington cited Moss's Corner, Market place, Churchgate, Paynes Park all as potential sites for redevelopment.

Cllr. Dennis-Harburg stated that we should explore developing the cultural assets of the town, citing The Dell as an example.

John Simmonds and Michael Collins presented their regeneration proposal for the market, noting that it was not doing well on its current site, despite the removal of some stalls. However, it was doing better than many other markets. The proposals were to move the Market to Portmill Lane and develop Moss's Corner.

Michael Collins (architect with John Simmonds) noted that there needed to be a series of complementary interventions rather than one global plan: there should continue to be events in the old Marketplace, not the new one. There was a suggestion of the addition of a market hall. *[Hitchin had one, but removed shortly after 1750. AF]*

A member of the audience introduced himself as a Hitchin Market Trader said that the market has constantly been moved and each time it moves, it loses its footfall. He went on to say that we should use what we currently have; the market should not be moved, just adapted.

John Wyer- The market needs to be more up-market in a market hall and sell high quality goods, and retain the ability to go niche.

Mary Marshall warned against having too many high end shops and losing the providers of basic necessities.

Unidentified person: It is essential that we do not lose the trade we currently have

Unidentified person: The market should do both, market needs to serve the local people.

Regarding the Churchgate Centre, Cllr Keith Hoskins explained that in 1970, a 120 year lease was signed; it has passed through the hands of several different parties. The district council are investigating buying the lease back, but a conversation needs to happen on the community's red lines.

Red Lines

Robin Dartington said that a set of options were presented last October to the District Council, and 86% of respondents stated that the council should explore these plans.

Unidentified person stated that Churchgate should be demolished and rebuilt similar to Fun Palace and Centre Pompidou.

Unidentified person said that we should build on what we already have, nearby towns have empty shops, and we should continue to do what we do well.

David Leal-Bennett said that the council is not best positioned or suited to run a commercial enterprise, we should use local expertise and experience and create a working group to move plans forward.

Cllr Simon Harwood highlighted possible overuse of retail space, and there have been calls for a reduction in retail space and calls for alternative use of spaces, for example through the provision of services.

Cllr Sam Collins said that commercial clustering was a growing phenomenon, and it is something that is naturally developing in Hitchin – the market on Fridays and the growth of the charity shops catering to retro and vintage clothing. And we should seek to enhance these models

Michael Brown liked the idea of commercial clustering and cited the examples of Altrincham in Cheshire. Anthony Roche confirmed this was a model the Council had been looking at for some time.

Cllr Kay Tart suggested Bancroft as a site for regeneration, stating there should be initiatives all across town.

Cllr Judi Billing gave a shout out to Hitchin Hack space.

Transport

Unidentified person said the village bus services have been cut, and some consideration needs to be given to servicing the villages, possibly through a park and ride system.

Unidentified person stated that at the moment there is too much through traffic especially in Sun Street and Bridge Street; there should be a centralised distribution point with a central depot for decent pedestrianisation of the town.

John Steels remarked on the impact of the recent lorry incident in Grove Road, which resulted in grid-lock in the town for several hours

Cllr Paul Clark noted the impact of access to the industrial area, and that there are weight limits elsewhere in the town. With regard to pedestrianisation, we need to be mindful of the ageing population and also give consideration to those who are disabled.

Comment [AR1]: Didn't Cllr Clark say something in this section about reviewing transport strategies? Would be worth including

~~Paul McPhail said that when talking about pedestrianisation we should be mindful of the ageing population and also give consideration to those who are disabled.~~

Stuart Alder expressed that we should give careful consideration to putting a bypass in Hitchin. We should also get rid of all the cobble stones and replace them with smooth pavements, and move the Moss's Corner bus stop.

Vicky Wyer said that the cycle strategy of 2005 was hardly implemented, it should be revisited and broader consideration should be given to electric bikes and car share.

Vicky Clarke – concerns as a cyclist over sharing narrow B roads with HGV's.

Working with communities

~~This type~~This type of Town Talk should take the form of a road show and be taken out to community centres and schools.

Councillor Ian Albert thanked everyone for giving their time to share their thoughts and ideas.

The next Hitchin Town Talk meeting is **Tuesday 1st October** 6.30pm to 7.15pm followed by the area committee meeting. It will be held at Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place, SG5 2PG. All are welcome.

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