**Hitchin Town Talk Notes Tuesday 10 March 2020**

**18:30 – 19:30 Westmill Community Centre**

**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 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 IA Cllr Ian Albert
* Cllr MSH Cllr Martin Stears-Handscomb
* Cllr JB Cllr Judi Billing
* Cllr EDH Cllr Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg
* Cllr SC Cllr Sam Collins
* Cllr VB Cllr Val Bryant
* Cllr SH Cllr Simon Harwood
* Cllr MH Cllr Mike Hughson
* Cllr RT Cllr Richard Thake
* Cllr DA Cllr Derrick Ashley

**Apologies**

* Cllr Clare Billing
* Cllr Paul Clark
* Cllr Kay Tart
* Cllr Keith Hoskins

**Introduction**

* Cllr IA introduced himself as the Chairman of Hitchin Committee and welcomed all attendees as well as thanking them for attending. He explained that this Town Talk was going to have a transport theme however, if residents had any other queries, they could write them on post-its which had been left at the back of the room.
* Cllr SC commenced discussions. He noted that Cllr Paul Clark sent his apologies and that as the Executive Member for Planning and Transport, Cllr Clark had asked Cllr Collins to update residents on his behalf.
* Cllr SC briefly updated members of the public on NHDC’s current transport strategy, particularly in relation to cycling, parking, buses, rail and road traffic. He explained that a more detailed summary could be found on the Transport Programme Update written by NHDC’s Transport Officer and hard copies were available for the audience to pick up.
* Cllr SC explained that there will be a meeting between NHDC Councillors and Herts County Council (HCC) in June to discuss public transport provision. He noted that NHDC’s key priority of course is to encourage more people to walk or cycle in order to reduce congestion.

**Cycling**

* Cllr SC outlined that the key priorities are:
1. To create safe cycling routes through Hitchin, linking main residential areas with the train station and town centre. There are also plans to create a wider North Herts Cycling Network to link Cambridge to Stevenage and all the major towns in the district.
2. To promote cycling in the area - perhaps with sporting & promotional events.
3. To improve cycle storage/parking.

**Parking**

* Cllr SC noted the key aims related to parking are:
1. A complete review of parking in Hitchin, both on street and off street.
2. Opening up the St. Michaels Road side of the railway station.
3. An additional level on Woodside car park could be another solution.
4. The need to accommodate commuters, workers in the town, shoppers and residents.
5. EV charging hubs and a substantial increase in charging points.

**Buses**

* Cllr SC noted that NHDC are seeking ways to improve the bus provision for Hitchin and surrounding area.
* Cllr DA added that Hertfordshire will receive around £400,000 a year to enhance bus services across the county.
* Cllr DA also mentioned that HCC are looking into reinstating Sunday bus services in some areas.

**Rail**

* Cllr SC noted that NHDC are taking pro-active steps to ensure adequate rail services are regained and maintained for all stations across the district.
* Cllr SC said that NHDC are working more closely with Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) and Network Rail than it has done previously.
* Cllr DA said that unfortunately GTR have plans for services to be reduced to Hitchin due to the bottleneck created by the tunnels on the railway lines towards London, this is because priority will be given to train doing longer distance journeys such as those from Edinburgh.

**Road traffic**

* Cllr SC explained that NHDC are aware that congestion in Hitchin is a key concern for Hitchin residents and shared the following points:
1. NHDC will continue to encourage shift from private cars to other forms of transport (requires improvement in other transport modes)
2. HGV's remain an issue in the town, weight limits are not being respected. The question is whether a bypass is needed or if efforts/investments should be made elsewhere as funding is limited.
3. Car Free days could work in Hitchin – this is under investigation.
4. Traffic congestion is worsening, which has a direct and negative impact on air quality in the town. Further air quality monitoring is required.
5. NHDC should be a leader in moving residents to alternative transport modes where possible or ULEVs where not possible.
6. Hitchin to move to an EV bus town. This notion is currently under investigation.

Cllr Derrick Ashley (HCC Portfolio Holder for Growth, Infrastructure, Planning & the Economy) shared several updates with the audience.

1. Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) was adopted by HCC 18 months ago which NHDC follows.
2. LTP4 was introduced before Extinction Rebellion existed or the climate emergency was declared however it does support the need to lower carbon emissions.
3. It is important that cars become the last resort for transport and that every new development supports this transport hierarchy.
4. All new developments should be permeable for walking and favour pedestrians/cyclists.
5. One key issue in Hitchin is access to Wilbury Industrial Area. Cllr DA explained that HCC funded a study which looks at possible access.
6. Creating access to the Eastern Platform of Hitchin station remains a priority of HCC transport projects and is subject to ongoing discussions.
* Cllr JB added that dealing with Network Rail is never easy or straightforward and is often very time intensive.
* Cllr Billing noted that there is a meeting on Friday 3 April between Councillors, Officers and Network Rail which MP Bim Afolami will also attend. This is specifically to discuss access to the Eastern Platform.
* Cllr Thake highlighted that train operators such as GTR often argue that the benefits of opening the Eastern platform would not be financially repaid during their contracted term and therefore it is not a worthy investment.
* Cllr IA explained that he would like to hear suggestions from the audience and opened the floor to questions.

**Items raised for discussion:**

1. **BF** - Brian Foreman
2. **VS** - Vanessa Sibbald
3. **JM** - James Magrath
4. **ND -** Neil Dodds
5. **SG -** Shirley Goldsmith
6. **MM** - Mary Marshall
7. **NC** - Nicky Clark
8. **AS** - Anni Sander

BF said that NHDC need to take into account the ageing population of Hitchin and that the elderly will still need access to cars in the future.

* Cllr JB replied by reassuring BF that the views and needs of the elderly will not be forgotten, especially as there are Councillors who are less mobile now than they once were!
* Cllr DA noted that cars will not be eliminated entirely but NHDC will investigate alternatives which do not produce carbon emissions.

VS expressed that there have been a lot of accidents with cyclists in Hitchin because the sides of roads are so damaged with potholes. In addition, there are no cycle lanes at all, and drivers have little awareness of cyclists. Something needs to be done to place higher importance on cyclists.

* Cllr DA responded that there is space on certain roads in Hitchin to reduce space for cars and introduce cycle lanes. One of which is Walsworth Road. However, this of course will need consultation and take time.
* It is up to councils to take risks and make bold decisions.
* Cllr JB told VS that she is aware of the cycling accident that was being referred to and that she has been liaising with the family. Cllr Billing added that NHDC are in support of favouring cyclists.

JM asked if there is potential for the car park across from the station (behind B&M) to be utilised.

* Cllr DA noted that there are land ownership issues there because the land belongs to Network Rail.
* Cllr DA added that there is an opportunity to revisit land use when the Local Plan is reviewed.
* Cllr SH sad that the B&M site had been investigated in the past however, the development of it was not seen as a financially viable option.

JM highlighted that a large number of Hitchin’s roads are in dire need of repairs and that a lot of repairs which take place are substandard.

* Cllr DA replied that unfortunately HCC often carry out ‘make safe’ repairs which are supposed to be short term but end up being left due to resources lacking.
* Cllr DA stressed that it is up to residents to access the HCC repair portal to check if potholes have been reported already and if not residents should submit a report. The portal can be found at the link below:

<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/highways-roads-and-pavements/report-a-problem/report-a-street-light-or-pothole.aspx>

ND noted that there is currently no provision for cyclists around the library roundabout and on Parkway towards Hitchin. ND added that the only cycle lane in Hitchin he knows of is on St. Michaels Road and this is constantly parked over by commuters parking to use the station.

* Cllr DA said that the issue lies around the enforcement of cycle lanes as this is currently difficult. Although HCC are applying pressure on the Department of Transport to give local authorities more power over this.
* Additionally, Cllr DA noted that the introduction of cameras would hold people to account.
* AS also shared that the problem on St. Michaels Road is that the cycle lane there is not law enforceable.

SG asked how viable the introduction of electric buses is.

* Cllr SC replied that it is dependent on funding.
* He reassured that it would be viable for shorter journeys to be undertaken of electric buses however, they would need to be regular enough to make it user friendly and worthwhile.
* Cllr SH asked if anyone monitors levels of use on the bus service.
* Cllr DA said that HCC do this.

MM mentioned that at NHDC’s last Environmental Panel, Transition Towns Letchworth told attendees that they were investigating temporary traffic orders.

* Cllr DA replied that HCC are working with Sustrans. <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/>
* Cllr EDH added that one of the actions which arose from the last Environmental Panel was for NHDC officers to work more closely with Sustrans.
* Cllr EDH has been liaising with the developer of Highover to consider sustainable transport options.

NC expressed that there is a place for education of residents on the importance of sustainable transport options.

* Cllr IA asked what type of education NC has in mind.
* NC replied that she believes that many residents are totally unaware of the changes that are going to have to happen for North Herts to become carbon neutral by 2030.
* Cllr JB explained that councillors and officers are due to go into schools in the new civic year to get young peoples input on the Town Centre Strategy.
* Cllr JD said that HCC are also currently working on a new speed strategy across the county which is positive and that perhaps 20mph would be the default speed limit in residential areas soon.

JM explained that residents will respond better to bold and brave decisions made by the Council such as car free days in the town.

* AS noted that car free days are a possibility but are a large step. There have been other places in Europe which have trialled closing certain streets to cars at set times during the day. An example of this would be to close York Road during pick up and drop off times so that nursery access is pedestrianised.
* Eventually residents would adapt to this and it would create a positive shift in behaviours.
* Cllr DA explained that each new development provides an opportunity to include sustainable ideas from the offset and that Highover will hopefully be a key example of this.
* VS noted that the closure of Brandt Street due to the water works created such a safe and tranquil environment for pedestrians and it would be nice for this to happen more often.
* Cllr MSH stressed the importance of having a transport service that works for all areas, all ages and at all times of the day.

**Update from NHDC’s Transport Officer**

* NHDC is seeking to follow a broad approach to promote sustainable transport options in the District, the Sustainable Watford Initiative that Watford Borough Council are currently pursuing is what NHDC have in mind.
* We are still in the initial stages at NHDC but the information on the link below provides an example of what NHDC are seeking to emulate.
* For more information: <https://www.watford.gov.uk/info/20010/your_environment/1020/sustainable_watford>

**Meeting conclusion**

Cllr IA concluded the Town Talk and thanked residents for all their questions. Cllr IA mentioned Herts County Council’s North Central Growth and Transport Plan which is currently out for consultation. IA advised residents to read the plan and submit any comments they may have. The consultation closes on 30 March 2020. You can find the Growth and Transport Plan at the link below:

[https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/about-the-council/consultations/transport-and-highways/north-central-growth-and-transport-plan.aspx#](https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/about-the-council/consultations/transport-and-highways/north-central-growth-and-transport-plan.aspx)

Town Talk closed by Cllr IA at 7:30pm.

**The next Hitchin Town Talk will be on Tuesday 9 June at 6:30pm. Venue TBC.**