

Comet

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Snap consultation appears fake

I was surprised to notice Govia's 'men in suits' at Stevenage station this morning. They were there unannounced, to conduct a consultation into their proposals to remove the Moorgate service from Stevenage, and to extol their claim to be able to run extra services across the Digswell viaduct, even though this has already been declared as at maximum traffic volumes.

They heard, but clearly were not listening to the arguments put to them, as they ran off their sales type patter on how great Govia is and how much better things will be, and it's not their fault Network Rail haven't built the fifth platform.

They could not argue the point that there is no disability access at the other end of their bus replacement for the service to Watton and to Hertford. They claimed that there was no issue with needing to close Welwyn North to make more space across the viaduct. And they waved off the point that they wanted to axe the service anyway.

With just days of the three-week consultation left, I've heard nothing back from the Stevenage MP, but I have heard from both the borough and county councils who have argued traffic and social impact reasons against the Govia proposals.

There was a petition formed, but this was rejected by Government on the grounds that 'Govia are a private company so not under the Government's remit.'

This snap consultation and lack of Government or MP response to citizens is appalling. Without the media and local government we would have no voice in what is a crucial public service.

CHRIS WEBB
Wildwood Lane, Stevenage

Bulldozing over our Green Belt

Councillor David Levett omits to say in his letter responding to parish councillor Miles Maxwell, chairman of Ickleford Parish Council, that there are core planning principles contained in the Government's National Planning Policy Framework specifically relating to Green Belt land.

NHDC currently proposes to build over large areas of Green Belt land so he should have alluded to this.

One of these principles is to protect the Green Belt, recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and support thriving rural communities within it.

Section 9 of the NPPF deals specifically with protecting Green Belt land. To quote paragraph 79: "The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence."

Meadow devastated

We were shocked and dismayed that the council has had contractors cutting the long grass in the field at the back of Norton Road in Letchworth.

This was the former Norton School playing field which has been vacant for many years and fenced off so there has been no public use or reason to cut the grass at this time.

This meadow was a haven for butterflies, bees and wildlife – only to be cut down in the middle of summer for no reason that is obvious. That meadow could have

been cut in October/November.

The council is continually harassing all the houses around the field with warning letters to keep out of it and then they go along and cut down the grass. One rule of us and another for them.

What a disgrace when farmers are being asked to allow a verge around their fields for wildlife, our council completely ignores that despite all their claims to be supporters of wildlife and nature.

ANGELA SMALE
By email



Butterflies were regular visitors to the field behind Norton Road.

The NHDC Local Plan has been described by councillors as a shambles. Councillors admitted they were not happy about it, Herts County Council also objected to it but these same councillors erroneously expect a planning inspector to sort the whole sorry mess out for them, thus dodging any responsibility or culpability.

The Conservative councillors, aided and abetted by Councillor Levett voted against their own Conservative manifestos – for their manifesto instructed them to preserve the Green Belt.

This was in spite of Councillor Jim McNally maintaining that the Local Plan was "deeply flawed" and "unfit for purpose" and Councillor Tony Hunter described it as a "mess" – the like of which he had never seen before in all his many years of planning experience.

CHERYL NORGAN
High Street, Graveley

Plan's failings on air pollution

With reference to the comments by Councillor Levett concerning procedures adopted in producing the Local Plan.

Plan makers are expected under the NICE Report on 'Air Pollution: Outdoor air quality and health' published June 30 2017 to centrally incorporate their findings in to the formulation of Local Plans. The NICE Report sets out the following criteria:

- 1) Interventions to reduce emissions and exposure to road – traffic – related air pollution
- 2) Planning
- 3) Clean air and congestion charging zones
- 4) Reducing emissions from public sector transport services and vehicle fleets
- 5) Smooth driving and speed reduction
- 6) Active travel
- 7) Raising awareness

Traffic generated air pollution is a major public health issue. The NICE research programme should have been known to officials, consultants and advisors, but does not feature in the NHDC Local Plan. Indeed there is no mention in the plan of any proactive consultation having been undertaken with NICE.

It seems to us this should have been a vital part of the process.

In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that questions will be raised about the overall competence of the consultation process that was employed by NHDC to raise the Local Plan. Hopefully the planning inspector will be up to speed on all this when he considers the suitability of the plan in the autumn.

JOHN GINGELL
Ballock

Flaws in Local Plan argument

I'm grateful to Councillor Levett for his attempt to address my concerns about the NHDC Local Plan, and apologise to him and your readers for any minor inaccuracies in my original letter; unlike Mr Levett, I don't have access to planning and legal experts to guide me through this complex process.

I don't feel that Mr Levett has addressed the major points of my original letter:

Has NHDC 'actively encouraged' Barratt Homes (their words) to submit its application for site LS1 in advance of the inspector's review of the Local Plan to enable NHDC to show that there is support from developers for the plan?

Mr Levett says NHDC has an obligation to cooperate if 'approached' by developers – which is quite different to what Barratt have suggested. Our Freedom of Information request to NHDC on this subject should help clarify whether Barratt or Mr Levett is correct.

Have the respondents to the consultation – and, indeed, the inspector – wasted their time and effort if there is a possibility that the planning application process for LS1 will commence before the inspector has had a chance to rule on the soundness of the Local Plan?

Mr Levett tries to reassure by stating that the planning application for LS1 could take 12-18 months, by which time inspection should be complete. Recently, he spoke to a project manager at Barratt for the LS1 site to ask when those new homes might be available; his response included the statement that they

aim to start building by the end of 2017. Therefore, either Barratt are misleading us or NHDC has misled us and Barratt. Again, our FOI request should elucidate.

Mr Levett's letter does contain some useful points. I'm pleased that our district councillors could review the truck-load of residents' submissions to the consultation before they passed the plan. It's impressive that they could do in a brief time what the inspector and his team will need six months to achieve.

NHDC appears to have thrown away the single greatest shield to inappropriate development – the Green Belt – by proposing 87 per cent of the homes be built on such land.

We learn that the national planning framework requires consideration of developments 'that improve the economic, social and environmental conditions' of North Herts. I have yet to see much evidence that these improvements will follow.

How will increasing the size of Ickleford by 40 per cent, relocating our school from its hub position to the periphery, and putting some of the new homes three miles from the village centre improve residents' social conditions?

Where is the infrastructure to support the plan? How will the inevitable gridlock, and resultant pollution, be addressed? Where will the new schools, GP surgeries and hospitals be sited, and where will their staff be found? Where will the money for this investment come from?

Allegedly, if a frog is placed in a pan of boiling water, it will jump out immediately to save itself.

If a frog is placed in a pan of cold water which is then slowly brought to the boil it will die because it cannot sense the impending danger. I fear that residents of North Herts will be the frogs in this analogy.

The figures in the Local Plan show a thousand houses will be built each year for the next 15 years (double the current rate). Each year our infrastructure and environment will deteriorate, but we will get used to that as the new norm before the next tranche of homes is added – and so on.

Many local residents feel that NHDC has not considered more sustainable options for the housing which we agree is needed, and has

JOIN THE DEBATE: Email: news@thecomet.net or write to: The Comet, Bank House, Primett Road, Stevenage SG1 3EE.

OPINIONS

therefore let us down. It will be for the electors of North Herts to decide how best to respond to this.

COUNCILLOR MILES MAXWELL
Chairman, Ickleford Parish Council

Butts Close ban 'not a blunder'

I write in response to your Hitchin front-page article last week concerning parking issues at Butts Close and I firmly refute the suggestion that suspending parking at Butts Close was in any way a 'blunder'.

We are very aware of the parking pressures at Hitchin Swimming Centre and, along with the managers at Stevenage Leisure Ltd, we have been working for some time towards a solution that will accommodate more parking while also respecting the openness of the green space.

In order to achieve this, there are several legal hurdles that we must address as well as a small number of people in Hitchin who are opposed to our proposals.

We have already outlined why we felt it necessary to call a halt to parking on the common pending the outcome of the legal processes but to reiterate, it is a green space, not a car park, and allowing parking there was only ever intended as an ad hoc temporary solution for Hitchin Swimming Centre users on hot days.

We do not have any responsibility

to provide parking for football fans but this should not really be a problem anyway as there is plenty of parking in the town centre, for example The Lairage, which is only about five minutes' walk away.

Our priority is to ensure that users of the swim centre have adequate parking and that is why we are pursuing the possibility of creating additional parking space at the rear of the centre.

This long and complicated process will hopefully come to a conclusion when the planning inspectorate hears our commons consent application for an access road later this year. If we are successful, the next step will be the drawing up of plans for the car park.

We do fully appreciate that this is a lengthy and rather frustrating process. However, in the meantime we do have to consider and protect the interests of the users of Butts Close.

COUNCILLOR JANE GRAY
NHDC executive member for leisure

Don't miss our Cycle Challenge

The Baldock Cycle Challenge comes to the High Street on Sunday, for the first time starting and finishing in the town centre. There are two loops to this event with the first one starting at 10am, followed by another, slightly smaller loop at 1pm.

Come along and try either, or both loops; you can enter at www.active.com/baldock-hertfordshire/cycling/races/baldock-cycle-challenge-2017.

You must be 12 to ride a single loop; if you want to do both loops you must be at least 14. Registration will begin in the High Street from 9am.

Baldock has such a rich and diverse history and our events reflect that diversity.

If you enjoy theatre, you will love the production of murder mystery *The Death of a Soul Man* at the Baldock Arts & Heritage Centre on Friday, July 21. Tickets are between £10-£12 and include a ploughman's supper. The performance starts at 7.30pm.

If you love Baldock, don't just sit there – get involved! The Baldock Events Forum would love to hear from you, particularly if you would like to be considered for one of our vacancies, either as a director, or as the new town centre manager.

Just let us know on info@baldockevents.co.uk and we will get back to you.

JIM MCNALLY
Baldock Events Forum

Work together over parking?

I read with dismay your front page article on 'Parking ban is latest blunder' about Butts Close. Wouldn't it be great if NHDC and Hitchin

Town Football Club worked together to come up with a solution?

I fully supported Hitchin Town FC staying in the town and it is important that we recognise the fact that their car park has long been available as an 'overflow' for Hitchin Swimming Centre free of charge. Nevertheless, when Hitchin Town FC were under threat by a proposal that their site would be sold to a supermarket, the club highlighted the fact that they wanted to remain in the town, that many of their supporters walked to the club, and that many of their opponents' supporters walked from Hitchin railway station.

Begs the question why Stevenage FC supporters wouldn't do the same. I do understand that Luton Town FC supporters don't have a direct rail link but there are buses available, with bus stops directly outside Hitchin Town FC's ground. Disappointingly this didn't appear to be an issue when the club proposed moving to a school site further outside the town and that the club has found plenty of parking space for brand new vehicles, presumably for a local dealership.

On the other hand I laughed when I read the comments from NHDC that the "authority doesn't have any responsibility to provide parking for the football club".

If I were Hitchin Town FC I'd expect some quid pro quo for providing an overflow car park for the swim centre.

Secondly NHDC's statement that "Butts Close is a public green space

not a car park" is ironic considering that over the last 20-plus years they have allowed parking on Butts Close for the swim centre on hot days, not to mention other events and that "their potential long-term solution" involves building a new tarmac road over the public green space that is Butts Close.

NHDC's original plan submitted to the planning inspectorate for 80 new car park spaces might have made some impact if they hadn't forgotten the fact that they'd already built over half the proposed area. 37 spaces is going to make no difference at all on a hot summer's weekend at a cost to the taxpayer of £400,000 which presumably NHDC deem worthwhile in attracting additional revenue from Archers gym.

Perhaps by working together with the football club, stopping free all-day parking passes for Archers gym members, making better use of NHDC car parks in the town such as the Lairage and making the car parking charges consistent across the town, a better solution could be identified.

The 'Friends of Butts Close' have submitted a comprehensive response to NHDC's proposal which will be presented at the inquiry which will begin at 10am on November 21, continuing on November 22 as necessary.

It will be held at Hitchin Town Hall, Brand Street, Hitchin SG5 1HX.

HELEN KEMP
Bedford Road, Hitchin

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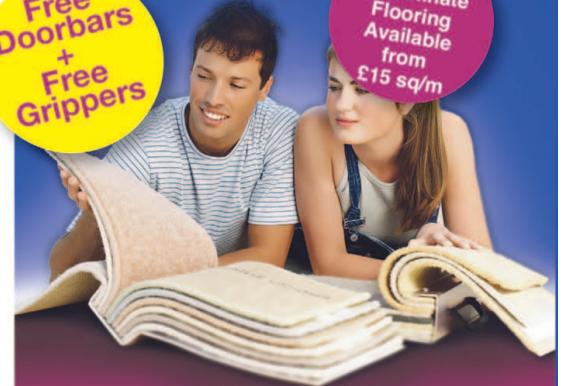
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