

3. HTAG - THE NEXT STEPS

This is a follow-up to the summary of the suggestions made at the HTAG Launch Meeting at the Sun Hotel in October. That summary was sent to all who attended the Launch Meeting, as well as to all Hitchin Councillors. It may be seen on the website www.hitchin.co.uk.

This note forms a new Section 3 of the overall summary, showing how Launch Meeting suggestions have been short-listed by the HTAG Steering Group* for presentation to Councillors at an NHDC Hitchin Committee meeting on 12 November. It also reports on how Councillors responded to the presentation, and how it is now thought HTAG might be progressed over the coming year.

3.1 General Approach

The presentation to Hitchin Committee recognised that the District Council will be required to make a number of difficult decisions over the next year, including:

- **Draft Local Plan:** The issues raised at the Launch Meeting may be of help to Councillors as they finalise the details of NHDC's Draft Local Plan (which will guide development over the next 20 years). We think that community involvement based on the HTAG approach would also help people to take part in the public consultation stage early next year.
- **Major Development:** Specific issues such as what should happen to Churchgate are likely to come forward during the next year. We feel that the involvement of the wider public through HTAG may provide an input which would be helpful to Councillors in deciding what would be best for Hitchin.

In the shorter term, we think that it might be possible to progress some of the **specific issues and suggestions** made at the launch. We know that councils have very constrained budgets, and that funds are in short supply. The various societies in Hitchin also have very limited resources to take on any new work.

However, we believe that it should be possible to identify actions that could be carried out at relatively low cost, or otherwise be met out of existing budgets. It may well be that members of the public, and especially those who attended the HTAG Launch, would be willing to come forward and take part in the work.

3.2 Specific Proposals

There are three main areas where we suggest **early wins** could be achieved:

- There was considerable support for improving the attractiveness of Hitchin for visitors (see 2.3 in the report), and this aim is supported by Hitchin BID. As a way of encouraging visitors, we propose that we ***use mobile phone technology to provide visitors with a virtual guided tour, taking in the town's main attractions.***
- A second major theme was improving the environment of the town centre (see 2.1, 2.3, 2.5 and 2.6). We suggest undertaking a ***survey to identify unnecessary street clutter, and opportunities for "greening" the town centre through improved planting.*** The findings should help the council in deciding how to take this forward.

- A third main area of discussion was transport, with a wide range of major proposals (see 2.4). As a first task we proposed that we should lobby for ***real time information and boarding location maps at all town centre bus stops.***

There are, of course, many other topics which should be progressed - ranging from the abolition of the one-way traffic system (Bedford Road/Paynes Park) to the wide-spread concern about the provision of public toilets.

However, we would like to initiate one further **longer term project**. At the Launch there was much support for additional provision for younger people (see 2.2), and for their increased involvement in the future of the town (see 2.7). In addition, there were some particularly imaginative proposals for the Woodside area (see 2.6). We would like to initiate through HTAG, but with support from the District Council, ***discussions with local schools, Voice of Hitchin Youth, and organisations currently using facilities at Woodside to explore opportunities in this area.***

3.3 Councillor Responses and HTAG Actions

Councillors were asked for guidance on the suggested priorities and how the HTAG process might be taken forward. We also asked if Councillors saw merit in other proposals identified by members of the public, and on how these might be progressed.

General Approach:

- **Councillors** welcomed the positive approach to the future of the town and the opportunities that HTAG would provide for involving more local people in influencing actions and decisions. The Societies and the people involved in the Launch could not be seen as representing the whole population of the town (especially young people and ethnic minorities), but the initiative being taken by the Societies to work together and draw in the wider public was welcomed as a useful way forward.
- **HTAG Steering Group** suggests that there could be two HTAG meetings in the coming year to cover the Local Plan and Churchgate, using the issues and suggestions from the launch as the starting point for an agenda for those meetings. The Steering Group will try to use the Woodside project and social media to increase involvement of younger people and ethnic minorities in influencing the future of the town.

Specific Proposals:

- **Councillors** endorsed all the specific proposals. The real time bus information is looking as if it could be an early win via Herts County Council's Hitchin Urban Transport Plan. There was also strong support for the Woodside project especially with inclusion of the wider Dell and Windmill Hill area. Action plans for the projects would be needed and the Committee would consider an application to provide help with funding.
- **HTAG Steering Group** suggests that the virtual tour project be led by Hitchin Initiative with support from Hitchin Historical Society; the street survey be led by Hitchin Society and Hitchin Forum; and the Steering Group will give support to Hitchin Committee in lobbying on real time information. The Steering Group will approach organisations at Woodside to propose a potential project in that area.

None of this can happen without the active support of local people, and the success of HTAG is dependent on individual members of the public coming forward to take part in this work. We would particularly ask those who attended the HTAG Launch Meeting to consider whether they could offer to help in whatever way they can. People with links to local schools and youth groups would be essential in strengthening the involvement of young people, while members of minority groups would be more than welcome in bringing their knowledge and experience to the work of HTAG. We would very much like to broaden the membership of the HTAG Steering Group. If you feel you can help, please contact us at: hitchintag@gmail.com.

**The HTAG Steering Group currently is made up of representatives of The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Initiative.*

15.11.13