

Car Parking Charges Proposal from NHDC , September 2014 – HS Letter to Keith Hoskins
(to be forwarded by him to all Hitchin councillors)

Dear Keith,

The Hitchin Society is very disturbed by the proposal from NHDC to institute parking charges, albeit on a trial basis, in short-stay car parks in Hitchin from November 2014. One can understand that NHDC may be under financial pressure, but councillors might, if they actually had the good of the district's residents at heart, take into account that many of those residents, and visitors to the town too, exist under similar, and possibly worse, constraints.

It is quite unclear to us why a trial should be run in Hitchin alone – surely any worthwhile test-run should be district-wide, if meaningful and valid data are to be collected. Has this initiative been thought through? What are the criteria for judging the results of the trial? Or could this trial just be a back-door method of sliding quietly into a permanent policy?

The Leader of the Council acknowledges in her statement on this subject that Hitchin is a vibrant and popular town and claims that she wishes to continue to encourage a steady turnover of people to come into the area to support local businesses and keep the economy buoyant. The logic of this argument eludes us – how exactly does she think this will be achieved by increasing parking charges in the town? It appears to us more like a poor attempt at milking what is perceived to be a cash cow. Hitchin should not be exploited in this way for the financial salvation of NHDC.

Time and again experts have warned about high parking charges damaging the viability of town centres and have recommended free parking to help alleviate the problem. The proposed plan goes against the grain of any sensible approach to the present economic situation, when already too many retail premises are empty and businesses are struggling to survive. Now, of all times, we need to make the high street as welcoming as possible to consumers, as Hitchin has so successfully done with its Sunday markets, car boot sales, independent shops, pubs, restaurants and other activities. These have become an established and attractive part of the weekend and evening economy in the town, but Sunday and evening parking charges would have a detrimental effect on all these initiatives. Church collections are likely to suffer when congregations have to pay for parking. Businesses such as gymnasia, where members attend multiple times in a week, will come under pressure, as will the new hotel which has no dedicated parking space. This hardly seems the ideal way to foster the Council's much-vaunted 'viability and vitality' of town centres. The people of Hitchin are rapidly losing patience with a local authority which seems to be doing everything in its power to destroy the vitality and viability of the town.

In addition, the current proposal would inevitably cost money in terms of extra enforcement and new signage – would the extra revenue from charges be worth the effort? We doubt it.

Perhaps NHDC, in an effort to save money, should examine its own practices and reserves, rather than looking elsewhere for help out of its difficulties. This council has done enough damage to Hitchin without adding to the list with this proposal. This pernicious idea should be abandoned before yet more damage is done.

Yours, etc.....

(Sent as an e-mail by Keith M, Vice Chair)