



**Dacorum Environmental Forum
Full Meeting Thursday 13/2/2020**

MINUTES

Attendance

Name	Organisation
Gruff Edwards	Chair DEF
Steve Wilson	Vice Chair DEF
Sarah Wickens	Great Gaddesden C of E Primary School
Helen Ansell	Great Gaddesden C of E Primary School
Sara Crofts	Woodland Trust
Mike Ridley	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Chris Ridley	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Cllr Wendy Bathurst	Chipperfield Parish Council
Sherief Hassan	Hemel Resident
Cllr Garrick Stevens	Berkhamsted Town Council
Cllr Brian Patterson	Tring Town Council
Paul Harris	DEF
Peter Ablett	Boxmoor Trust
Cllr Alan Anderson	Environmental Services Portfolio Holder DBC

Meeting started at 7:30pm

1. Apologies

Dennis Harvey DEF
 Paul de Hoest Berkhamsted Town Council
 Cllr Jane Timmis DBC

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting held 7th Nov

No corrections suggested.

3. Matters arising

Halsey Field Update

CR said that the Friends of Halsey Field (FOHF) had had work parties every month during the autumn and winter months in order to keep the scrub in check and mow and rake scallops in the grass in order to encourage the growth of wild flowers. They had managed to open up some sunny glades in the overgrown north and eastern areas of the field which add to the mosaic of habitats on the site. All the management

work they had done on the field during the past two years had been logged monthly and marked on a field plan.

They had started to dig a pond which was currently full of water, and had incidentally made a smaller pool where clay was dug out of the ground to line the larger pond. No liners had been used, so the shape of the ponds could still be altered, and the work was still on-going. The ponds would probably dry up during a dry summer, but ephemeral pools are very valuable to wild life.

John Fisher, secretary of the Ver Valley Association, had kindly donated a Kestrel box and several smaller nest boxes to FOHF, and he had helped them install these during this month's work party.

On 27th January FOHF held the Big Garden Birdwatch on Halsey Field, and they spotted 16 different species of bird during one hour.

Herts County Council (HCC) had now given FOHF permission to arrange for the site to be lightly grazed during a few months per year. However, as the Box Moor Trust had stated that they would only organise grazing if this could take place over both parts of the field and HCC had refused permission for the top part of the field to be grazed, FOHF was currently in a stalemate situation.

To address concerns about the amount of dog faeces on the field, FOHF had been successful in persuading DBC to site a litter bin near the main field entrance, and assurance had been given that it was permissible to use this bin for dog poo as well as general litter.

HCC had offered FOHF a five-year lease on the site, but as this would entail paying for insurance, FOHF had turned this down. They were hoping for a more permanent solution for the future of the Wildlife Site and had asked HCC if they would consider giving it to the Box Moor Trust, as Mike Penning suggested in his letter to HCC last June. However so far, they had received no further communication on the matter.

A Scouts group had recently asked to get involved, and this was scheduled to start on Monday week with their participation in the installation of nesting boxes. The previous evening **CR** had taken part in a broadcast interview on Dacorum Radio about her environmental involvement in the area. FOHF's consultant naturalist Steve Lings also took part in the programme. *Here is a catch-up link to the broadcast: <https://www.mixcloud.com/radiodacorum/radio-dacorum-interview-with-environmentalists-chris-ridley-steve-lings-120220-at-1900-2000/>*

LA3 Master Plan and Sustainability

MR had addressed the DBC Planning decision meeting on Nov 28th (Planning application 4/03266/18/MFA) on behalf of DEF. In the short time slot allocated he had pointed out that the proposals did not comply with the Council's own Core Strategy (CS), namely:

- There was no plan for a Wildlife Corridor for Shrubhill Common Local Nature Reserve, nor a designated extension to the reserve. This conflicted with Policies CS10 and CS26. The requirement in the Core Strategy for a Wildlife Corridor could be achieved by reverting to the original specification for 900 homes.
- There were missed opportunities to encourage wildlife in suburban landscapes at very little cost, as specified in CS 29
- The proposals ignored most of the excellent recommendations in Section 18 of the Core Strategy (specifically CS28 and CS29) for housing to be "sustainable" or "zero carbon". The buildings planned were not "future proof".
- There were inadequate plans to prevent consequential traffic congestion throughout Hemel Hempstead, and a lack of proposals for supported new bus services, in line with CS8
- The proposals had not satisfied the burden of proof that the supply of the extra water would not be to the detriment of flows in either the Gade or Bulbourne Valleys. CS31 (e) required developers to "avoid damage to Groundwater Source Protection Zones".
- New strategic landscaping to mitigate the visual impact of LA3 on the Bulbourne Valley, an extension to Shrubhill Common Nature Reserve and wider green infrastructure links were all proposed in CS5, but not included in the Master Plan.

MR said that his presentation had received a round of applause and a congratulation from the ex-Mayor, but that despite nearly four hours of debate, with all the speakers (bar developers) speaking to oppose, evasive answers to questions, and some moments of high drama, the planning application was passed.

Of the sixteen councillors potentially empowered to vote, six had been excluded because of conflict of interest or on similar grounds. In the shared "representations from the public" spot, besides **MR/DEF** there had been submissions from Cllr. Fiona Guest (opposed to the Plan), BEVA (against segregation of the G&T site), and WHAG (pointing out the inadequate proposed provision for infrastructure). Much of the four hours had been taken up by questions to DBC planning officers from committee members. These included whether the developers were prepared to provide vehicular access to the G&T site through the main housing site. After a long pause the response had been that they would "consider it".

Six committee members had voted to approve the planning application, with two against and two abstaining. In response to subsequent coverage in the Gazette, **MR** had sent them a letter on behalf of DEF on 7th Dec., saying that despite their reporting (Gazette, 4th December) the reassurances by "a DBC spokesperson" that the plans complied with all regulations and policies, they did not comply with the Council's own Core Strategy, and citing the above-listed breaches. The letter had not to date been published.

On 11th February **GE** had sent DBC's chief executive a formal complaint regarding aspects of the planning approval process, including the Master Plan's non-compliance with Core Strategy policies. The complaint had been auto-acknowledged, with a promise to respond within twenty working days. The complaint, which will also be placed on the DEF website under "Consultations", was accompanied by a request for assurance that as part of the Council's ongoing dialogue with developers DBC would ensure that the project was brought into compliance with Core Strategy policies. Complaints about the planning approval process had also been submitted by West Hemel Action Group and by Bourne End Village Association.

DBC 2017 Local Plan (up to 2036) and Hemel Garden Communities

AA said that the first draft of the Plan was now scheduled to be available for public consultation at the end of June this year. The Council were "far behind" Central Government requirements on this, and were therefore "attempting to jump through several hoops at once". Regarding the recommendation in the November DEF meeting minutes that an earlier view of the plan was advisable before it became too fixed, **AA** said that since it was not yet "Public" it had to remain "Private".

Climate Emergency (Dacorum)

GE had heard that John Bell from Transition Towns Berkhamsted (TTB) was doing quite a bit to support the Berkhamsted Town Council's response to the Climate Emergency, and was currently planning an event to bring together the Local Authorities of all levels in Hertfordshire to discuss their current positions and how they can support each other. He would like to link up with DEF to see how best to enable engagement in this event by DBC Councillors and officers.

Chalk Streams

SW said that flows in the Gade and elsewhere had increased as a result of the high rainfall in recent months, but that for an adequate replenishment of aquifers average or above average rainfall would be needed for some time to come. **SW** and **AA** concurred that rainfall in Dacorum had been 136% of average from last October to December inclusive, but that despite impressions the rainfall for January 2020 had been only 87% of average.

The settlement pond at the top of Gadebridge Park had broken through its banks during flash flood conditions, thereby negating its purpose as a pollutant filter. The problem was exacerbated if regular sludge clearance (see DEV Nov. 7th minutes) was not carried out.

MR said it was inevitable that the volume of runoff from Galley Hill would at times overwhelm and overflow the pond. He suggested that Gabian baskets (large steel rod Baskets full of stones) be installed to address the problem. **AA** said that the way to progress this was for Friends of Gadebridge Park (FOGP) to recommend this measure to the Council. **SW** said that Rob Beauchamp of FOGP was also a DBC councillor, so could do this.

GE had received (Jan 16th) a communication from DBC Chief Executive Sally Marshall saying that she had been instructed by Council to write to DEF to ask for their comments as to how the River Gade, Ver and Bulbourne could be managed in the future so that they could be maintained as healthy and vibrant chalk streams, and that after receiving DEF's comments she would ask officers to include them within a letter on this matter which the council would be writing to the Environment Agency.

***SW** subsequently completed a response to DBC, which was sent to the Chief Executive on 17/2/20, and which will appear on the DEF website alongside these minutes.*

GE had received (Jan 29th) an update on the Gadebridge Park River Restoration Scheme (See DEF Minutes Sept 2018) from Kelly Standbrook of the Environment Agency, saying that they had completed all site investigations apart from trenching along the proposed route of the realigned channel and ground investigations within the proposed wetland area to the north of the park. They expected these to take place in March. They had recently carried out channel clearance on 24th January in preparation for the installation of a new monitoring weir. This would record flows for a period of at least 12 months and would allow them to compare data once their Bury Mill gauging station was relocated to the new channel. They hoped to have draft detailed designs available by July.

AA said that he had written (15/1/20) to the Environment Agency (EA) in his capacity as DBC Environment Portfolio Holder expressing the Council's concern about the health of Dacorum's chalk streams, including the recent years of no-flow in the Upper Bulborne accompanied by incursions by non-chalk-stream vegetation, and appealing to the EA to do what it could to improve the health of the chalk streams, either directly or indirectly via licensing methods. The EA had responded (6th Feb.) saying amongst other things that they had been working with water companies to reduce abstraction from the chalk aquifer since 1993, and that Affinity Water had implemented a programme of demand-management and compulsory metering. In order to have further reductions after those planned up to 2024, new resources would need to be developed, for instance a new reservoir, or a transfer of water from the Midlands or the River Severn. "Land-based" plants colonising a dry river bed, although not a chalk stream characteristic, provided areas of refuge for wildlife throughout the dry weather. Once flows returned, chalk streams were known to recover fairly quickly.

MR proposed the theory that any perceived recent improvement in the flow of the Bulbourne was due to the replacement of the lock gates at Cow Roast, meaning that the Grand Union Canal used water more efficiently and therefore placed lower demand on the river.

4. Environmental awareness in schools and amongst the young generally.

HA and **SWic** gave an enlightening and encouraging-for-the-future presentation on the various ways that school age children were being encouraged to relate to their natural environment and to engage with environmental issues.

HA said that on average the "roaming area" that was essential for a child's developing sense of their environment had shrunk over the past few generations from several miles to a few hundred yards, and that this was supplemented only by supervised activity often reached by car. A consequence was children's increasing ignorance of the natural world, many for example not knowing the word "catkins" or not able to say where acorns came from. It was the responsibility of educators to fill this gap.

SWic said that her school in Great Gaddesden had 76 children, the majority from Hemel Hempstead. Her aim was to create "cross-curricular" links by means of away-from-classroom experiences such as watching chicks hatch and observing the development of tadpoles and trout eggs. Links between the

natural world and core subjects included using acorns in order to practise counting and arithmetic. In addition pupils gained valuable experience by each class maintaining its own vegetable plot. The environment was also "embraced" in activities such as painting and picnicking in the nearby water meadow. Wider environmental issues were discussed in class including news of the fires in Australia, and fundraising in support of rescuing Koala bears. The children's Newsround on CBBC provided a stream of information and topics for such discussions. Activities included those promoted by the Forest School Association, part of an "inspirational process" originating in Scandinavia. Such activities included raft building, den making in woodland and exposure to controlled risks in order to increase the children's resilience such as those involved in whittling and tree-climbing (not simultaneously!). It was observed that a child who might have been perceived in the classroom to be backward or socially inept came to the fore and developed into a leader in outdoor activities, and that the consequent boost in confidence was carried back into the classroom. Individual pupils were encouraged to be designated as "Eco-warriors" to take lead with activities such as recycling. In this case it had helped move parents towards the provision of re-usable water bottles. An "Eco-week" was planned, to feature the preparation and consumption of locally sourced and seasonal vegetables.

CR asked whether most schools had a similar emphasis on the environment. **SWic** said yes, though it was particularly true of village schools.

WB asked who paid for Forest Schools activities. **SWic** said that the extra funding was available via the normal channels.

PH asked why Climate Change was not a compulsory part of the curriculum. **SWic** agreed that it would be a good idea. **SW** said that it would be included as part of Geography.

PA offered his congratulations to the school for dealing so widely with the issue. Box Moor Trust had a similar educational outreach, mainly via school visits (See DEF May 2018 minutes) but that the time available to make an impression on the pupils of each school was relatively limited.

5. The Woodland Trust and its work including Tring Park

SC introduced herself as a volunteer for the Woodland Trust. Her main career was as an architect and conservator specialising in historic buildings. She said that the Woodland Trust was founded in 1972 by a farmer from Southwest England who was concerned about the disappearance of local woodland. The Trust's mission statement was to achieve "A UK rich in native woods and trees for people and wildlife". It now owned over a thousand woods, covering 13.5 thousand hectares. These included Heartwood Forest near St. Albans. The Trust had planted 43 million trees over 45 years. Last year the "Big Climate Fightback" campaign was launched, with a target of planting 50 million trees each year up to 2050. To help with this they were providing free trees for local schemes, with the mix of species selected to match the type of site to be planted.

However Ancient Woodland, defined as woodland over 400 years old, could not be replaced. Half of ancient woodland had gone since the 1930s, mainly through development. Native species, defined as those present prior to the last Ice Age, included Scots Pine, Oak and Birch and were particularly valuable, since the ecosystems that they supported had had thousands of years in which to evolve. Only 13% of the UK is woodland (excluding hedgerows), whereas the European average is 40%. The Trust had Planning teams to deal with particular threats to ancient woodland such as that recently posed to Fairy Glen, near Betws y Coed in North Wales by plans for a hydroelectric scheme, a worthy project in the wrong location. An ever-present and growing threat to the UK's tree population was the one posed by pests and diseases such as Ash Die-back.

Dacorum was relatively well-provided with a variety of woods. Among the nearest Woodland Trust holdings were Cowcroft near Chesham, and Tring Park woods, also an SSSI. There was a current planning application for a parking area for 50 cars at Tring Park, but this move to promote visitor numbers needed to be accompanied by exhortations to encourage responsible behaviour by visitors, in particular dog walkers.

PA concurred that some dog walkers were irresponsible and said that on Box Moor Common this was to the detriment of other visitors' enjoyment and was a danger to the Trust's livestock. This was particularly true of "professional" dog walkers (nominally) in charge of several dogs. **SW** asked who was responsible for the National Forest (Leicestershire and adjoining counties). **SC** said that the National Forest was a planning concept, though the majority of its woodlands were in private ownership. She also cited the Northern Forest of 50 million trees that would extend from coast to coast across the northern counties of England. **AA** said that Dacorum BC planned to plant 1000 trees by the end of the year. These could not be planted in urban areas for fear of damage to neighbouring properties. Under available schemes ash and oak were excluded because of their susceptibility to pests. With so many local authorities being encouraged to plant more trees the price for the trees would increase. **PA** said that replacing losses in Box Moor Common's iconic avenues of Chestnut was increasingly problematic because of the threat of disease. This pointed toward planting smaller specimens and/or replacement by different species. The recent storms had brought down several trees or parts thereof, in some cases damaging quite expensive cars, a reminder that to own a tree is to own a liability. The problem was worse because it was difficult to predict which trees were at risk.

WB said she regretted the closure of the Chiltern Society's Woodland Project which had helped her deal with the large amount of paperwork associated with managing her small wood. **SC** said that the Trust might be able to offer some help.

CR said that on Halsey Field regeneration of trees could be to the detriment of grassland species, so they sometimes needed rooting out. **SC** said that in some situations natural regeneration was beneficial and even preferable to planting from cultivated stock.

GE asked what was the percentage of UK's ancient woodland to be lost from HS2. **SC** did not have such a figure to hand, and it would in any case depend on assessments of how much for instance of a bisected wood would count as "lost". The Woodland Trust's website contained much information on Ancient Woodland statistics and on HS2 in particular. *The site says that "HS2 is the single biggest threat to the UK's ancient woods, with 108 at risk of loss or damage."*

SC's presentation will appear on the DEF website alongside these minutes. She has also kindly supplied links to three useful websites relevant to the Trust:

UK sourced trees: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-plant-trees/uk-sourced-and-grown-scheme/>

Free trees: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/schools-and-communities/>

Planting and sourcing advice for landowners: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/large-scale-planting/>

6. Any Other Business

None.