



**Dacorum Environmental Forum
Full Meeting via Zoom Thursday 13/5/2021**

MINUTES

Attendance

| Name | Organisation |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gruff Edwards | Chair DEF |
| Steve Wilson | Vice Chair DEF |
| Cllr Graham Barrett | Environmental Services Portfolio Holder DBC |
| Cllr John Birnie | Chairman of Strategic Planning & Environment Overview & Scrutiny DBC |
| Mike Ridley | DEF and Friends of Halsey Field |
| Chris Ridley | DEF and Friends of Halsey Field |
| Sherief Hassan | Hemel Resident |
| Cllr Rob Beauchamp | DBC |
| William Wyatt-Lowe | former DBC and HCC |
| Cllr Brian Patterson | Tring Town Council |
| Katie Tyssen | DEF |
| Michael Demidecki | Justice & Peace Group, Tring |

Meeting started at 7:30pm

1. Apologies etc.

Cllr Ron Tindall DBC
 Cllr Adrian England DBC
 Cllr Garrick Stevens Berkhamsted Town Council
 Cllr Alan Anderson Planning & Regeneration Portfolio Holder DBC
 Martin Hicks Hertfordshire Ecology

Election of Chair and Vice Chair

No nominations were received. **GE** and **SW** were willing to continue as Chair and Vice Chair respectively. **GE** was consequently proposed and seconded by **WW-L** and **MR**, and **SW** by **RB** and **CR**, respectively.

Minutes of the Last Meeting and Matters arising

Updates on Halsey Field, LA3 Master Plan and Hemel Garden Communities/New Local Plan had been sent out with the agenda E-mail. Further updates follow here:

Halsey Field

A more recently issued Halsey Field report will be sent out with these minutes. **MR** and **CR** highlighted their disappointment and frustration at not currently being able to organise work parties on the Field because HCC had not issued the necessary licenses.

New Local Plan

MR had heard of a fairly recent communication from the Council leader to the "One Voice Alliance" to say that there would be a significant rewrite of the NLP including a thorough review of Hemel town centre and requiring a repeat of the public consultation, possibly in two years' time.

2. Point 9 of the Government's "Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution" - "Protecting Our Natural Environment" as applied to Dacorum

GE shared a screen showing the two pages of the Ten Point Plan that described Point 9. This featured:

- Creation of new National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).
- £40M additional funding across England to improve biodiversity and tackle climate change.
- Ten Landscape Recovery projects over the next four years to restore wilder landscapes in England.
- Environmental Land Management schemes alongside "Grants for farmers to invest in modern technology to make their businesses more efficient and more profitable, while reducing their emissions."
- £5.2 billion investment in a six-year programme for flood and coastal defences

A copy of the Ten Point Plan booklet will be placed on the DEF website alongside these minutes.

GE invited attendees to contribute relevant information, to raise points of inquiry and to state their aspirations for how these policies should be implemented in Dacorum.

SW chaired the topic from this point on. He said that drivers for change needed to be identified in order to see how the policy would translate locally. There were potential conflicts between national, county and district environmental priorities, and some way of resolving them had to be found. Locally it was important to get more people involved and committed to the necessary changes.

WW-L emphasised the role of farming practices, particularly soil improvement, in improving biodiversity and reducing carbon emissions. Soil improvement was more effective than tree planting at reducing carbon emissions. It could at the same time increase profitability. He referred to a recent Webinar for the Chilterns AONB on the subject of "Regenerative Agriculture".

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALM3X2dzBfc>) .

He said that trees recently planted in Keens Field were dying as a result of the recent dry weather and asked whether there were plans to restore or replace them. Also, if the public could be persuaded not to drop litter and small businesses not to fly tip it would free up DBC staff to plant more trees. *See references to Litter and Fly-tipping in DEF minutes 11th Feb 21.*

GB said that he regretted the loss of trees at Keens Field and would investigate.

SH said that in excess of £1Bn p.a. was spent nationally on clearing up Litter and Fly-tipping. He asked how much DBC received annually from fines in connection with this.

JB agreed that litter etc. was a perennial issue. DBC had increased the number of litter bins, but litter thrown from cars remained an intractable problem. The warning signs placed on the slip roads to the A41 bypass had had only a limited effect. Litter picking on the bypass was a costly operation as lane closures were required, and it needed to be carried out by HCC. A recent organised litter pick in Markyate had collected several tons. A one year trial of appointing a private contractor to enforce a Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) had been set up.

SW from his experience as a school teacher said that the best time to clear up litter was immediately. If was left it would attract further accumulations.

Moving away from the subject of litter **GE** said that the importance of existing wildlife assets had been played down under the New Local Plan, and that if it was going to be re-worked, the underlying

Environmental Assessments would have to be more rigorous. For instance TRL, who were commissioned to produce the Sustainability Appraisal Reports, had been arbitrarily casual in their assessment of the North of Hemel site by giving it an amber cross, meaning "not significant", for the Biodiversity "Sustainability Criterion" despite their having found: "The site also includes Varney's Wood wildlife site and is adjacent to Thrift Wood wildlife site, both of which contain ancient woodland, which could be affected by development. Large scale development could give rise to possible adverse effects on Chiltern Beechwood SAC (*Special Area of Conservation*)." DEF's response to the NLP had raised this amongst many other issues.

RB pointed out that the New Local Plan consultation documents were a draft, and that there would be a further release at a future date.

GE said that the E-mail of March 18th acknowledging DEF's responses to the New Local Plan said "Your comment will be considered as soon as possible. You will be notified when your comment has been confirmed as processed (valid) or when it has been classed as inadmissible" but as at May 11th this notification had not been received. *On May 20th GE received 32 messages from the consultation website each saying that a DEF comment (user 'Dacorum EnvironmentalForum') had been confirmed as processed (valid) and could be viewed by logging in and going to 'My Submissions'. However he has failed to find any DEF comments via this or any other search means.*

JB said that the responses to the consultation were still being formulated for review. His committee had not yet seen the result of this. One should not confuse the New Local Plan with Hemel Garden Communities (HGC). HGC would make provision for wildlife corridors.

GE referred to DEF's lobbying over many years for an adequate wildlife corridor for Shrubhill Common nature reserve alongside the LA3 West Hemel housing development, saying that responses from the Planning department whenever the matter was raised were "It's too early to say", then switched to "ask the developers" and that the developers' Master Plan, without an adequate corridor, had now been approved by the council.

MR said that the Topic Paper supporting the New Local Plan had a map marking the western part of North Hemel with hatching indicating "constrained land" (i.e. not to be built on). However, the map in the main NLP document did not make this distinction about the western part. He said that this slope of the Lower Gade Valley was a spectacular asset and should be protected unequivocally.

JB said that development of the area in question was not included in DBC's plans. The confusion may have arisen from developers' independent proposals, which were contrary to DBC's wishes. *An example of such contrary proposals is the recently-revealed one from Fairfax Developers to develop a site that would abut and largely surround Halsey Field and would cut it off from its wildlife feeder territories (<https://fairfax-hemelhempestead.co.uk/virtual-exhibition/>). This is the "Site 69, Land at Piccotts End", assessed and discounted in the NLP's Site Assessment Topic Paper.*

KT said that a key problem was how to communicate environmental concerns to the wider community and to get more people involved, for instance the many people she encountered while out walking with Ramblers, who clearly already appreciated our surrounding countryside.

MD spoke of the Bee Friendly Tring campaign launched last year by the Justice and Peace Group. Having observed the reduction in habitat caused by over-mowing of verges they were encouraged by HCC's subsequent commitment to only cut verges once a year. There was support for environmental improvement amongst allotment holders and the community in general.

CR said that people concentrated on tree planting and woods whereas environmental improvements in farmland were also important, for instance in halting the decline in population of linnets and skylarks.

JB said that the New Local Plan was driven by Government house building targets. As part of the re-working of the Plan, DBC were examining more potential brownfield sites. These might result from the pandemic because of a lower demand for retail and office space in Hemel town centre and the Maylands industrial area. A Task and Finish group were looking at this.

GE asked whether the Council Leader's letter of 30th Nov to the Minister of Housing, Communities and Local Government asking for a revision of the house building targets had been successful.

JB said no. The Government had been intransigent in their response.

MR said that according to a report in the Guardian (April 1st) on "How do we fix the UK housing crisis?" building houses for locals was not on the list of suggestions.

SH confirmed the report's conclusions, saying that they were supported by research.

JB said that DBC had a good record for providing affordable and social housing.

WW asked how and to whom DEF might respond to this part of the Ten Point Plan. The plan itself did not invite comment. Discussion as to the effectiveness of writing to Sir Mike Penning MP ensued, but this was inconclusive.

SH described as risible the modest sum (£40M for England) allocated under the Plan for improving biodiversity and tackling climate change. Attempts to channel new money to Dacorum would do better to focus on the much larger sum of £5.2 billion allocated for flood (and coastal) defences.

GE said that although Dacorum suffered less from flooding than did some other areas it occurred regularly for instance in Gadebridge Park and could well occur as a result of more land becoming impermeable through housing development.

SW said that most of Dacorum's current flooding problems were due to blocked drains. They should be cleaned out more regularly, so any extra money should be spent there.

RB asked whether DEF had any contact with farmers, since changes in farm practices could benefit biodiversity and carbon capture.

GE said that **SW** was a newly-appointed trustee of Box Moor Trust and that while he (GE) personally had had contacts with Bob Fiddaman, former manager at Wood Farm, in connection with new hedgerow planting projects on his land during the Eighties and Nineties, now threatened by the (drafted) North of Hemel housing development, and had spoken and written to the Halsey family (Gaddesden Estate) regarding the naming of Halsey Field, farmers' attitudes to environmentally friendly practices would continue to be framed mainly by DEFRA and the relevant grants it provided. He said that however there could well be instances of local farmers taking the initiative, and suggested that a source of information on this, which he would be happy to collate and put on the DEF website might be the Parish Councils who are on the recipient list for these minutes. (*Parish Council recipients - please let me know as much as you are able to in this regard.*) Such information would also be relevant to implementing the draft NLP's Policy DM30 - Biodiversity Net Gain - which says that all major development will be required to deliver an overall net gain in biodiversity of 10%, determined by applying the Natural England Biodiversity Metric 2.0 Calculator.

CR said that Gaddesden Estate wanted to make their land more wildlife-friendly. The new "No Plough" movement would be advantageous for soil quality.

JB referred to the Rewilding project launched last year in St Albans District with £100,000 of funding from the Council to the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT).

KT said that gardeners also had a role to play. As a gardener herself she subscribed to the "no dig" policy advocated by the Royal Horticultural Society.

BP said that Tring Town Council's Working Party on Climate Change were discussing the banning of peat-based composts on Tring allotments.

JB said that DBC staff did not use peat products, but that there was no ban on allotment holders using them. He drew attention to DBC's forthcoming annual compost giveaway on Sunday 16 May.

KT said that it was difficult for allotment holders and gardeners to obtain peat free composts because peat was still widely used in the horticulture industry and composts containing peat were sold in garden centres and DIY stores where often the labelling was confusing - 'Environmentally friendly' and 'Organic' were not necessarily peat free. Buyers needed to ask for peat free but often there wasn't a choice, particularly for larger deliveries to allotments. Growers needed to be made more aware of why it was important to buy peat free composts and there needed to be legislation to stop it being used and sold widely.

3. Any Other Business

SW said that DEF should seek ways of reaching out to more sections of the community, who might amongst other things be a source of ideas for discussion at Forum meetings. He expressed the hope that

this would be DEF's last Zoom meeting before returning to "normal" and physical meetings in the fire station.

GE said that he had asked in the past for a volunteer to deal with social media and the younger generation, and renewed this appeal.

WW-L Offered his services to develop DEF's Facebook presence. This was gladly accepted, and further direct communication (**GE/WW-L** et al) will follow.

JB Invited DEF to put forward ideas to his Strategic Planning & Environment Overview & Scrutiny committee, either by putting in guest appearances, or by communication via himself.

Forthcoming dates for 2021:

Steering Group: 29th June, 5th Oct.

Main: 16th Sept., 18th Nov.