



Dacorum Environmental Forum
Full Meeting Thursday 12/05/2022

MINUTES

Attendance (Z= via Zoom)

Name	Organisation
Gruff Edwards	Chair DEF
Steve Wilson	Vice Chair DEF
Mike Ridley	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Chris Ridley	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Robin Bromham(Z)	Hemel Resident
Sherief Hassan	Hemel Resident
Cllr. ColetteWyatt-Lowe(Z)	DBC (Strategic Planning and Environment O&S Ctte.), HCC
Cllr. Garrick Stevens(Z)	Berkhamsted T.C.
Dennis Harvey(Z)	DEF
Alex Robinson	Assistant Director for Planning, DBC
Cllr. Alan Anderson	Portfolio Holder for Place, DBC
Cllr. Rob Beauchamp	DBC
Andrew Farrow(Z)	Clerk, Nettleden with Potten End PC
Cllr. Nigel Taylor(Z)	Berkhamsted TC, DBC, HCC
Paul Harris	DEF
Michael Demidecki(Z)	Justice & Peace Group, Tring

(Apologies to Zoom attendees, who were hampered in contributing to the meeting as the sound volume, particularly from speakers at the far end of the meeting room, was insufficient. Also it proved impossible for Alex Robinson's presentation to be projected on the meeting room screen or shared on the Zoom screen. This meeting was a "technology first" for DEF and it is hoped to resolve these problems for future meetings.)

Meeting started at 7:30pm

1. **Apologies etc.**

Nikki Bugden, Nash Mills PC
Katie Tyssen, DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
William Wyatt-Lowe, former DBC and HCC
Adrian England, DBC
Cllr Brian Patterson, Tring Town Council
Cllr Graham Barrett, DBC Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services

2. **Minutes of DEF Feb 10th meeting and matters arising**

These minutes were sent out on Feb 19th. Updates on Halsey Field, LA3 Master Plan and Hemel Garden Communities/New Local Plan had been included in the text of the agenda E-mail or attached to the reminder E-mail.

New Local Plan and Hemel Garden Communities

(See Item 4)

LA3 Master Plan

GE had received the previous day a response via Alex Robinson DBC to the questions posed to the DBC Chief Executive regarding LA3 that had been referred to in the May 2nd DEF agenda E-mail. In answer to the question "What has become of the 2013 Adopted Core Strategy's promise in respect of LA3 to "Extend Shrubhill Common Nature Reserve and create wider green infrastructure links.", paraphrased here, the previous day's response had included "Since the Core Strategy was adopted ... there have been some significant changes in policy at both the national and local level." and "It would have been the availability of information and the passage of time which would have contributed to the evolution of design on the site."

PH said that this was regrettable. Not only had the LA3 area served as a wildlife corridor for Shrubhill Common Local Nature Reserve, it had also been Green Belt land.

AR confirmed that the site was removed from the Green Belt in 2013 by the Core Strategy and that there was no way of putting it back. In addition there had been a planning application on the site which had been approved and therefore the prospect of the site remaining undeveloped was very low.

3. Election of Chair and Vice Chair.

No nominations had been received. **GE** and **SW** were willing to continue as Chair and Vice Chair respectively. **GE** was consequently proposed and seconded by **SH** and **CR**, and **SW** by **PH** and **SH** respectively. **SW** expressed his appreciation for all that **GE** did to keep DEF running.

4. Chiltern Beechwoods survey and Planning in Dacorum.

GE in welcoming Alex Robinson, recently appointed as Assistant Director for Planning for DBC, by way of introduction to his presentation on the reported suspension of planning decisions on residential proposals in Dacorum resulting from a Government report that revealed the amount of damage being done to the Chiltern Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation, summarised the recent history of "Predict and Provide" hpa (homes per annum) figures for housing in Dacorum that fed into the planning process.

He said that the options given in the consultation on the Core Strategy in 2010 were Option 1 - 370hpa and Option 2: 430hpa. The majority of respondees had favoured the lower growth figure of 370hpa.

In 2017 the New Local Plan's Issues and Options consultation offered three Options, of which the lowest, - 602hpa for 2013-36 was then "considered to be a reasonable target based on local evidence – particularly from the SHLAA (Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment) and Green Belt studies." The highest, Option 3: 1,100hpa came with the assessment. "A figure of this level would ... be extremely hard to achieve as it would require the use of almost all sites submitted to the Council for consideration - irrespective of whether we assess them to be suitable for housing or not."

In response to the NLP Consultation of 2021 DEF submitted arguments against higher build rates, since inevitably they would impact on Green Belt, urban open space, or both, but in August last year an E-mail from DBC Strategic Planning, introducing South Hemel Opportunities Area stated a need "to accommodate around 18,500 new homes within Dacorum to 2038", which would be 925hpa if that figure was over 20 years, i.e. approaching that of Option 3 above.

AR said that the increases in hpa figures were due to the evolution of National and local policies. Saving Green Belt land was a laudable ambition. The planner's task was to minimise the effect of its loss.

AA said that the planning process was prescriptive. There would be little or no chance of getting a Local Plan approved if it did not meet central Government building targets. However, the unprecedented level of feedback from the NLP consultation, containing as it did a preponderance of objections to the high build rate targets and their consequences, was a useful reference for DBC in its ongoing negotiations with central government about possible reductions to those rates.

Since the visuals of **AR**'s presentation could not be provided on screen, he agreed that they could be sent to attendees afterwards, and instead handed round printouts for inspection by attendees in the Meeting Room. He began his presentation by saying that the designation of the Chiltern Beechwoods as a Special Area of Conservation(SAC) gave it the highest status of protection, above that of (among others) SSSIs and LNRs. This protection had been embodied in EU law and was now part of UK law. In legal terms DBC, as the 'competent authority' in respect of planning could not give consent to any plans that would adversely affect the integrity of the SAC. Although this had been true since the time of the 2013 Core Strategy, because of the scale of growth now proposed for Dacorum the impact of nearby development on the SAC required further consideration during this round of plan making.

External consultants Footprint Ecology were therefore commissioned to survey and report on the issue. Their work was delayed by the Pandemic and their report was not available until November 2021. The report found that there were two million visits to the SAC per annum, and five hundred reports of damage caused by visitors. The types of damage included disturbance of habitats, dog fouling and den building. There was a concentration of these incidents in the vicinity of Monument Drive. Tring Woodlands were included in the survey, but were much less affected. Five thousand visitor interviews were carried out in order to gauge amongst other things the distribution of places visitors came from. This resulted in an estimate for the "Zone of Influence", with the majority of visitors coming from within 12.5 km of the SAC, substantially from Dacorum. A narrower zone of 500 metres was identified that reflected frequent visitors from "on the doorstep", and in consequence development is currently excluded within it.

The Footprint Ecology report recommended a package of mitigation measures that needed to be provided, including:

SAMM Strategic Access Management Measures (onsite mitigation measures, such as tree planting, recreation provision and footpaths to be funded by a per-dwelling tariff on nearby developments),
SANG Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace and
Gateway Solution (move current attractions off site.)

During December '21 and January '22 DBC also consulted with Natural England (NE) in order to produce a "Mitigation Strategy" to minimise the predicted effects of Dacorum's housing growth on the SAC. During January DBC sought legal opinion as to whether NE's advice on the mitigation strategy was binding. The lawyers said that NE's advice could not be ignored unless there was firm evidence that it was wrong. Therefore a moratorium on planning consents was necessary, which could also affect cases where planning permission had already been granted but where the conditions attached to the permission had not yet been met.

DBC were currently working with the National Trust (NT) on SAMM measures, and also with neighbouring Local Authorities within the Zone of Influence. It was expected that this work would lead to a release of the moratorium on (typically smaller) "windfall" developments. Developments above a certain size would have to contribute towards SANG measures. This would probably be the most complex measure to implement as it might involve third party landowners.

Re timescales, the mitigation planning would continue for about nine months. The first stage of this should take 3-6 months. Consultation on the New Local Plan would be delayed by one year to June 2023. SAC considerations would form a significant part of it and may lead to changes to the Local Plan that was

consulted on in 2020. This could affect the choice of sites and housing growth targets. HM Government's "Levelling Up" policy statement of the previous day could also affect the plan.

SW took the chair from this point and invited questions and comments.

SH asked whether some categories of damage to the SAC identified in Footprint Ecology's survey were more important than others.

AR said that most visits were for recreation, though for many the cafe near the Monument was an important attraction.

AA said that the key was to make the SAC less attractive, and to find ways of making SANGs (green spaces elsewhere in Dacorum) as attractive as the SAC.

SW pointed out that under the current NLP (draft) the largest developments (North of Hemel and East of Tring) were relatively close to the SAC.

AR concurred with this, but said that while it might be the case that locating development further away from the SAC would detract visitors, given the regional importance of Ashridge it was likely that residents would still access the site.

AA said that a high proportion of visitors to the SAC were from Berkhamsted - it was almost their "back yard".

GE said that access to the extensive footpath network to the south of Berkhamsted (*including, for instance Hockeridge Wood*) was restricted because of the A41 where in recent years pedestrian crossing points had been closed off on safety grounds. Could not some of the money from tariffs etc. be used to create pedestrian underpasses or bridges?

AR said no, the money had to be spent in Ashridge.

SW said that as well as the Chiltern Beechwoods, Dacorum's chalk streams were of internationally recognised importance, and deserved to be given the same protection/mitigation from development. More development could lead to increased over-extraction from the aquifers upon which the streams depend. Over-abstraction had already been identified by the Council and others and further development would simply add to the problem.

AA said that as the law stood, development could not be held up by considerations of water supply. It was frustrating.

AR said that the Beechwoods SAC was the predominant issue for now - more work needed to be done on hydrological effects and air quality. Advice from consultants to date indicated that these were lesser problems than the Beechwoods. In any case hydrological and air quality effects could not be properly assessed until one knew where the housing was going.

CR asked whether Natural England had anything to say about hydrology.

AR said no, it was mainly the Environment Agency.

RB said that he was a member of the South East Water Resource Forum which was looking into the possibility of importing water from other areas.

MR said that it appeared that the consultants had done a good job on the Beechwoods SAC. Could the same level of attention be given to the effects of development on other (*wildlife etc.*) sites?

AR No, they did not have SAC status, but the NLP's policies for other sites had to be "as strong as they can be."

AA said that under the Local Plan one could not require developers to replace trees lost to the development.

AR said that there would soon be a plan in place to improve the SAC. (*environmentally*).

CR Said that more houses, resulting in more visitors, would cancel the benefits afforded by investing in those improvements.

AR said that mitigation was the aim.

AA said that, regarding Biodiversity Net Gain (*see DEF minutes for 16/9/21*) the baseline assessment for Hertfordshire had been completed.

MR asked whether the net gain could be achieved by improvements outside the development sites.

AR said yes, but they should be on-site if possible.

CR said that development affected biodiversity in the area surrounding it. Halsey Field Wildlife Site, adjacent to the proposed Fairfax development near Gadebridge was a case in point.

AR said that Community Infrastructure Levies could be used for mitigation purposes on sites adjacent to a development.

AA asked whether the proximity of Halsey Field to the proposed Fairfax development could be used as grounds for refusing the application.

AR said yes, in theory.

GE and others thanked **AR** for his attendance at DEF and for his professional presentation.

5. Any Other Business

(See reference to Halsey Field update under Item 2).

Remaining Dates for 2022:

Steering Group: 28th June, 4th Oct.

Main: 15th Sept., 17th Nov.

Dates for the main meetings have been booked at the fire station assuming that their Meeting Room will continue to be available. Subject to any technical barriers, Zoom attendance will continue to be an option.