



Dacorum Environmental Forum
Full Meeting Thursday 9/2/2023

MINUTES

Attendance (None by Zoom)

Name	Organisation
Gruff Edwards	Chair DEF
Steve Wilson	Vice Chair DEF
Robin Bromham	Hemel Resident
Mike Heylin	DEF Water Group
Mike Ridley	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Chris Ridley	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Paul Harris	DEF
Cllr Brian Patterson	Tring Town Council

Meeting started at 7:30pm

1. **Apologies etc.**

Jenny Habib, Chiltern Society
Sherief Hassan, Hemel Resident
Katie Tyssen, DEF and Friends of Halsey Field

2. **Minutes of DEF Nov 17th meeting and matters arising**

GE said that updates on LA3 Master Plan and Hemel Garden Communities/New Local Plan had been included in the text of the agenda E-mail. An update on Halsey Field was sent round with the meeting reminder and Zoom link E-mail.

Hertfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan 2040 Draft Plan

GE said that on 29/11/22 Christopher Stanek who had presented on Nov. 17th on HCC's Minerals and Waste Plan responded to (the only) post-meeting question, raised by William Wyatt-Lowe saying that "Hemel Hempstead Place Board are not on our list of consultees. If they wish to be kept informed we can certainly add them to the list. William had said that the matter would be taken up at the next meeting of the Hemel Place Board on Thursday 12/1/23.

3. **Future water supplies: Dacorum and the national context.**

The main item concerned past and present plans for water supply as it affects Dacorum in the regional and National contexts.

Presentations were given by DEF's Vice Chair Steve Wilson and Mike Heylin, a long-term member of

DEF's Water Group.

SW said that the Government's long-term ambition towards a National water strategy had gone "under the radar" during the COVID period. He outlined the history of governmental policy and actions in the field, starting from the nineteenth century when urbanisation had led to a hugely increased demand for water, a demand that was met by private companies.

Towards the turn of the twentieth century public concerns over sewage management had led to governmental action. In 1973 the then Labour government set up Regional Water Authorities to manage water supply and disposal, but these were chronically underfunded and therefore ineffective, particularly at preventing environmental damage.

In 1989 under the Conservative government's Water Companies Privatisation Bill tenders were invited for ten regional water companies to manage both the supply of "potable" water and the disposal of waste water and sewage. These were taken up by the private sector, much of it foreign, and this resulted in disjointedness at the National level. The companies' priorities had little to do with the state of rivers, and environmental concerns were low on their agendas. There was no National Strategy for water management until the Environment Agency's publication in March 2020.

The Environment Agency (EA) had been created under the Environment Act of 1995 with an overall duty to maintain "proper use of water resources". This somewhat vague objective was given more focus in the EA's review of March 2020 "Meeting our Future Water Needs" under its Chair Emma Howard Boyd which included the objective of meeting "the needs of the environment". This review identified five English regions, whose definition was carried through to last year's review, which is subject to a period of consultation and consequent revisions in September this year, then in 2025.

In parallel with this, the Government's "Environmental Improvement Plan" issued last month as a "working supplement" to the 2021 Environment Act, has as part of its "Goal 3" the provision of "clean and plentiful water with plenty left for wildlife" and a pledge to "restore our rivers including our rare and valuable chalk streams". Legislation to ensure that goals are met will follow. In order for Dacorum's chalk streams (the Gade, Bulbourn and part of the Ver) to accord with this, the rate of water abstraction from them will need to be reduced. The problem of complying with this while supplying Dacorum adequately with water will be made more acute if the up to 11,500 new homes now envisaged under the Draft Local Plan become reality. Where are the alternative sources? Are these latest Government pronouncements too little, too late both to meet demand and to protect the environment? Will those responsible simply find ways of getting round the legislation?

SW has supplied the following references which can be found by Googling:

- *Environment Agency March 2020: Meeting our Future Water Demands: a National Framework for Water Resources.*
- *Environment Agency 24th May 2022: " Review of England's emerging water resources plans".*
- *Dept. for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 31st January 2023: Environmental Improvement Plan 2023*

SW then handed over **MH**

MH began by commenting on the 1989 privatisation that **SW** had talked about. He said that the motivation for it was that HM Government couldn't afford to pay for the required infrastructure and

maintenance responsibilities placed on the new water companies. The water watch dog OFWAT concerned itself more with limiting the price to consumers than with environmental safeguards. Over the years the privatised water companies had undertaken seven cycles of asset management plans. Since 2000, the Water Framework Directive was the main law for water protection in Europe, but it no longer applied in the UK, in part because of lobbying by OFWAT. In the UK we had inherited a Victorian Sewerage system which now continually overflowed into our rivers. This could have been stopped if the water companies had been allowed to (*increase prices in order to*) invest as they wanted.

Each of the English regions referred to in the EA's current review comprises areas served by several water companies. During the years he had dealt with the EA it had become more focused on politics and on presenting an image to the public. It had lost many of the people with the expertise and motivation to tackle environmental issues.

Our local water companies Affinity and Thames Water produced a detailed plan for importing water from Severn Trent into the South East, but the plan did not consider the implications for wildlife etc. of importing water with a lower pH (less alkaline) than that in our region, some of which would end up in our watercourses. He described the issue as one of "the interface between industrial and natural water" (*where "industrial" refers to the water industry*). Under current plans however, Dacorum will be supplied with water from Thames Water, which is more compatible.

Regarding current river pollution levels, the South East was relatively lucky as it had been less industrialised.

In the UK the future demand for water (*as for much else*) will be largely driven by its population growth which in turn will be driven by migration to the UK from regions that will become uninhabitable because of climate change. According to a projection produced by the water industry the demand by 2075 will be more than three times that of today. To mitigate the environmental impact of this as concerns water management, per-capita demand must be reduced, and a key tool for achieving this will be pricing. Technology can also help increase supply in a less environmentally harmful way than draining the aquifers. Desalination of seawater is a clear candidate for this, but it requires a massive amount of energy, so there should be fewer restrictions on solar panel farms and/or greater use of windows that double as solar panels, something that has been shown to produce more electricity for a house than the electricity its occupancy consumes. Another way is to increase the number of reservoirs.

WRSE is an alliance of the six water companies that cover the South East region of England. Its aim is "to secure the water supply for future generations through a collaborative, regional approach to managing water resources." The website at wrse.org.uk includes a link to the consultation on the draft regional plan for South East England which runs until 20 February 2023.

Questions were then invited:

GE asked how Severn Trent were in a position to export water to the South East, since the EA's review predicted a deficit (demand exceeding supply) for all five English regions.

MH said that maybe it was wrong to assume that Severn Trent would have surplus water in future.

RB asked whether the water storage features that he had observed being incorporated into commercial buildings in Maylands Avenue were for water supply or for handling flash flooding.

MH said it was the latter. Building Regulations should insist on rainwater storage for new builds, more SuDs (sustainable drainage systems) *such as those promised for the LA3 West Hemel development* and enforcement of planning rules regarding the creation of impermeable surfaces for car parking etc.

GE said that creating an impermeable surface, most commonly turning a front garden into parking space, required planning permission.

BP said that during his four years as a Tring town councillor there had been no such planning applications.

RB said that resurfacing of roads was now done in a way that reduced water run-off by using more water absorbent materials.

RB said that the demand for water supply could be reduced through smarter designs of shower heads and of toilet flushes such as ones where one can control the duration of flush and by rainwater harvesting. *He has subsequently estimated that average rainfall on the 50 square metre roof of his house could in theory provide one third of his household's water requirement.* A Government initiative towards more water-conserving Building Standards had been stopped under David Cameron's premiership.

SW said that contrary to popular belief there had been no overall increase in "heavy rainfall events" (in west Hemel Hempstead) for the last 37 years during which he had been taking and recording measurements.

MR suggested that excess wind power on windy days could be used to supply the energy for desalination. Holding stocks of desalinated water made more sense than storing electrical energy in mega batteries, as was sometimes proposed.

MH said this would be more likely in the South East than in other regions.

MR said that if demand were to be suppressed by raising prices it would bear hardest on the poorest. Standing charges should be abolished and absorbed into the per-litre price, which should be a two-tier one, with consumption up to a certain threshold approximating to basic needs being charged at a lower rate.

CR asked whether desalination was an alternative or a supplement to building more reservoirs.

MH said it was the latter, and that it was needed since land for reservoirs was scarce. The recently proposed new reservoir near Abingdon (*about half the size of Windermere*) would be on what is currently prime farmland.

CR asked whether using desalinated water would create the same problem as importing lower pH water from other regions.

MH said that the proportion of desalinated water going back into rivers would be small. It would need to be managed as a "closed loop system".

BP asked, if Dacorum is not going to be supplied with extra water via the Grand Union Canal transfer scheme, is more extraction from aquifers the only option.

MH said that Thames Water would supply Dacorum's water from the new reservoir in Oxfordshire.

BP asked whether the new reservoir could be underground.

MH said that underground storage for instance in disused mines was under consideration in other regions.

PH said that overall there was a need for tighter regulation of the various elements in the water industry.

4. Any other Business

CR said that she had been invited to give a talk about Halsey Field (HF) to pupils of George Street School. She also distributed copies of a leaflet about HF for which these pupils had contributed pictures and text.

Remaining Dates for 2023:

Steering Group: (Tuesdays) 21st March, 27th June, 3rd Oct.

Main: (Thursdays) 11th May, 14th Sept., 16th Nov.