



Dacorum Environmental Forum
Full Meeting Thursday 11/5/2023

MINUTES

Attendance (Z = by Zoom)

Name	Organisation
Gruff Edwards	Chair DEF
Steve Wilson	Vice Chair DEF
Cllr elect Robin Bromham	DBC
Cllr Adrian England	DBC
Mike Ridley (Z)	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Chris Ridley (Z)	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Paul Harris	DEF
Sherief Hassan	DEF
Rebecca Williams (Z)	DBC
Mary Arnott-Gee (Z)	DEF

Meeting started at 7:30pm

1. Apologies etc.

Cllr Brian Patterson, Tring Town Council and DBC elect
Dennis Harvey, DEF
Katie Tyssen, DEF and Friends of Halsey Field

After technical challenges in earlier meetings, the arrangements for Zoom attendees worked well, including **GE**'s laptop's external mini-speakers and mid-table microphone and the projection of slides from Rebecca Williams's Shared Screen onto the meeting room screen.

2. Minutes of DEF Feb 9th meeting and matters arising

GE said that the topic of water supplies in Dacorum within the historical and current national context had been well presented by Steve Wilson and Mike Heylin respectively, both of DEF's Water Group, and had prompted a worthwhile question and answer session.

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 **PH** and **SH**, and **SW** by **GE** and **PH** respectively.

4. Latest developments in SANGs = "Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces"

In welcoming and introducing Rebecca Williams, Strategic Planning and Regeneration Officer, DBC, to present on this topic via Zoom **GE** reminded the Forum that SANGs were part of the measures to protect Ashridge from the high levels of housing growth proposed in the draft New Local Plan, and that they had been previously presented and discussed at the DEF meeting in May 2022.

RW reminded the Forum that the Chilterns Beechwoods that included Ashridge Forest had Special Area of Conservation (SAC) status that was recognised both nationally and internationally and was a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and located in the Chilterns AONB.

Her talk illustrations file (47 pages, .pdf) minus one or two pages with copyright issues due to their inclusion of photos from external sources will appear on the DEF website alongside these minutes.

She presented pictures taken in 2021 to illustrate the various kinds of damage arising from visitor footfall that currently had an impact on Ashridge, and that would be exacerbated by population growth in Dacorum. These included general erosion and soil compaction, some of which was through parking abuse, loss of habitat, paths becoming boggy and being widened through visitors seeking to avoid the mud. The most used strategic routes had come to resemble "highways" rather than footpaths in their significance in the landscape and had in places resulted in trees becoming islands surrounded by muddy footpaths. Other kinds of damage were exposure of tree roots, damage to bluebells, invasive vegetation such as the grasses and brambles that were more tolerant to recreational pressure, den building and associated deadwood removal disturbing the habitats of insects such as the stag beetles, and dog fouling.

This was all summarised by Footprint Ecology, the consultants employed by Dacorum Borough Council. They had been commissioned to report on problems and to suggest what sorts of strategic mitigation measures might be necessary. They and other ecological stakeholders and consultants had said that Ashridge's damage from recreational pressure was among the worst they had encountered. They had identified and mapped sites spread throughout the Forest where "severe" degradation had occurred, with Monument Drive chief among them. In all they categorised around 500 separate incidents or groups of incidents across the Estate as severe, moderate or light. They also surveyed Tring Woodlands which is adjacent to and located to the west of Tring Park and which also is part of the Chilterns Beechwoods SAC. Here visitor pressure was in general much less severe, possibly because there were fewer parking opportunities, and because it was only well-known locally.

Initially all planning applications were 'frozen' in a planning moratorium In Dacorum this lasted from March to November 2022. The severe problems at Ashridge had led to an "exclusion zone" that will result in many planning applications being refused where they propose net increases in new homes within 500m of the Forest boundary. In addition the affected LAs (Dacorum, Buckinghamshire, Central Beds and St Albans) with Natural England had introduced a 12.6km "Zone of Influence" where mitigation and/or cash towards it would be required for residential development, that distance having been arrived at through visitor surveys asking how far in general people were prepared to travel to find some open space. Monetary contributions would be spent principally by the National Trust at Ashridge (via SAMM payments) or by Dacorum at the two SANG sites (via SANG payments). Nearness to home was the most frequent (22% of interviewees) of the various responses to the survey question as to why visitors preferred Ashridge to alternatives. 58% of interviewees to Ashridge SAC were from Dacorum, 12% from Aylesbury Vale and 10% from Central Beds, 3% St Albans and 2% Chiltern. All these authorities formed part of the Strategic mitigation solution for Ashridge. Both the "exclusion zone" and the "zone of influence" had led to some confusion amongst applicants seeking planning permission as it affected not only entirely new proposals but also those with existing outline consent and those which already had full consent but needed pre-commencement conditions to be discharged. The associated expectation management and new processes required had increased the workload of DBC's planning department.

The Footprint Ecology Report recommended mitigation in the form of:

- Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) – a suite of measures relating to the SAC site itself.
- Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANG) to provide open space to draw visitors away from the site. This would be delivered by developers of major schemes as part of their development and for minor developments the Council were able to offer SANG spaces at Chipperfield Common and Bunkers Park. The Council hoped to work with neighbouring LAs and partners to explore the possible delivery of any cross-boundary strategic SANG solutions for the Zone of Influence.
- Gateway Solutions (moving current attractions to areas outside of the SAC designation) for possible future consideration. No other LAs have yet delivered anything like this.

Around 25 strategic solutions exist in the Country for other SAC or Special Protection Areas (SPA) sites.

Under SAMM, proposals included:

- Special protection for veteran trees.
- Ride and path damage mitigation.
- Access management (temporary closures of certain areas and signage/way marking)
- Communicating with visitors about where parking is allowed by signage and other means including phone apps. Stopping unwanted verge side parking and parking abuses.
- Provision of cycling infrastructure.
- Warden /Ranger at Ashridge.
- Monitoring - visitor counting and Ecological Impact surveys.
- A Spatial Plan – to identify future management and rationalisation opportunities.

The budget for SAMMs would be £18.3M, to be funded by a per-dwelling charge of £914 for new development that was both within the Zone of Influence and in Dacorum.

The current focus for SANGs was on Bunkers Park and Chipperfield Common, at a total cost of £16.1M to be spent over 80 years, to be funded by a per-dwelling charge of £4252 for new development within the Zone of Influence and Dacorum. Measures had been identified and agreed including signage at both sites, habitat management, access, site furniture (benches, bins), additional maintenance and monitoring and protective fencing at Bunkers Park. For each proposed SANG a "SANG capacity calculation" was carried out using a figure set by Natural England for the maximum desirable number of visitors per hectare for a SANG minus the current observed number, this difference, divided by an assumed 2.4 dwelling occupancy figure, resulting in the number of new dwellings that the SANG could mitigate for. A SANG Catchment Zones Map for Dacorum was displayed showing most of Hemel Hempstead, Kings Langley and Bovington lying within the SANG catchment areas of Bunkers Park and Chipperfield Common SANGs. Other SANGs under consideration within Dacorum included Gadebridge Park west of Leighton Buzzard Road and parts of Box Moor Trust land. The recently refused (currently at appeal) proposals at East Tring had included a SANG along its Eastern border.

In response to DEF's previously communicated question **RW** quoted survey results indicating what would be the commonest "draw factors" for other existing sites as alternatives to Ashridge. The top four requested improvements, in descending order were:

- More and better parking (26% of interviewees)
- Dog waste bins including bags
- Litter bins
- Cafes

The lowest percentage recorded was Cycle Routes at 2%.

In response to the question of which other existing sites as alternatives to Ashridge visitors would be or were drawn to the top four were Ivinghoe Beacon, Tring Park, Dunstable Downs and Wendover Woods.

Specific features requested at new SANG sites/Country Parks included

- Café (255 respondents)
- Woodland (215)
- Good walking routes (190)
- Toilets
- Natural feel
- Sufficient parking

For the Q&As **GE** handed over the chair to **SW**.

SW confirmed that Box Moor Trust of which he is a trustee were submitting SANG applications to Natural England.

PH said that the talk illustrations gave an exaggerated impression of damage caused by visitors to Ashridge, whereas in his long experience the majority of visitors were responsible people. He did not recognise the depicted examples of 'boggy highways'. Ashridge Forest was a great asset, and measures to protect it should not detract from people's Right to Roam.

AE said that we needed to accept the consultants' scientific report. We were already "in the red" in terms of damage.

RB asked what the implications were for Bunkers Park. A £16M budget over 80 years seemed a meagre amount. Had some of that already been used up in the recent plantings of whips (sapling trees)?

RW reiterated that Ashridge was under international protection. Ecologist professionals within Natural England and elsewhere had confirmed that real damage was being done to it. She herself however was a planner, not an ecologist. Dacorum had used Footprint Ecology to survey the SAC as they were the leading HRA experts in the Country. The SANG budgets had been costed in detail down to the level of interventions, maintenance, management and replacement cycles. She understood that the whip planting project had been funded by HCC. DBC applied for this external grant funding opportunity via Luke Johnson, DBC Team Leader, Trees and Woodlands, and did not affect the overall SANGs budget. *The £16M is in addition to existing DBC budgets for site management at Chipperfield Common and Bunkers Park. There is SANG funding budgeted for new Clean, Safe and Green staff to manage these sites to SANG standards.*

A large proportion of Ashridge is designated Common Land which usually has an associated Right to Roam on it.

RB said that he was excited by the possibility of enhancing biodiversity at Bunkers Park and Chipperfield Common. He also asked whether provision of children's playgrounds was being considered.

RW said that it would not be possible to replicate like for like in the SANGs what Ashridge had to offer. Draw factors were targeted at new residents. Existing residents would most likely continue to be drawn to haunts familiar to them, sometimes for personal reasons. At the SANGs there were opportunities for creating children's attractions and dog training in semi-natural environments. There had already been some resistance to creating play features at Chipperfield Common. Any play parks would need to be very rustic in look and feel. For instance coloured metal framed apparatus wouldn't be acceptable. As a result of the recent Borough elections these issues would need to be discussed with the new leadership.

MA-G asked whether the funding levies on new houses included flats.

RW Yes, they apply to any new dwelling. And any new, increase in identified 'qualifying development'.

MA-G said that she would prefer the term 'protection' to 'mitigation'. She was not in favour of play areas in SANGs. She was a regular user of Bunkers Park where recent "improvements" had included new metal gates replacing wooden ones. These were perpetually clanging to and disturbing the tranquillity.

RW said that she believed the new gates were installed in order to improve access in compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

MA-G said that on the contrary they made disability access more difficult.

RW said that decisions on the design specification and location of new interventions at the sites designated as SANGs could be influenced by "Friends of" groups or Parish Councils who already actively liaised with Luke Johnson, DBC Team Leader, Trees and Woodlands who was the main contact for both sites.

A SANG officer will be appointed in the Council to lead on SANG improvements in due course and may become the main contact for delivering new measures on the site.

MA-G asked whether woodland to the south of Breakspear Way apparently for sale would be considered as suitable for a SANG.

RW said that there was an opportunity for DBC's new leadership and administration to consider this and other available, deliverable or suitable sites.

SANG sites ideally need to be a minimum of 8-10 Ha in order to provide the 2.3/2.5km walk or other essential features to meet the SANG criteria and guidance.

SH cautioned that "Woodland for Sale" signs did not necessarily apply to where they were located.

SH said that the "soft" measures regarding parking that were proposed under SAMMs would fail to alter parking behaviour. They would on their own have no impact while parking was physically possible. The total SAMM budget did not appear to include provision for policing.

RW said that within "Gateway solutions" one option to be considered would be full or significant closure and relocation under which all or the majority of the parking available at Monument Drive would be relocated to the edge of the SAC. TROs (yellow lines) could also be considered to protect the verge edges. This would form part of a Spatial Plan being developed by the National Trust which was not yet in the public domain.

RB asked about parking provision at Bunkers Park. Although the site was within reasonable walking distance from the adjoining areas of Hemel Hempstead, would the parking provided for the new crematorium get filled up by the extra visitors to the SANG? Could the field to the right of the entrance drive from Bedmond Road be used for extra parking, thereby providing a visitor magnet?

RW said that all options were open. That field was owned by DBC and its possible use in connection with SANG would need to form part of the discussions with the new administration, which might extend to the creation of an enhanced Green Network across Dacorum which was part of the Hemel Garden Communities Connected Green Network agenda and could form part of the New Local Plan, though DBC's land holdings were mainly within Hemel Hempstead.

CR observed that on the SANGS Catchment Zones map Hemel Hempstead was designated light green. Was Hemel Hempstead an area where developers had to contribute to SANGS?

RW confirmed that yes, it applied to anywhere within 12.6km of the edge of the SAC (Ashridge Estate) i.e. the whole of Dacorum (minus the 500m exclusion zone and the SAC itself).

MR asked whether payment from a particular development went towards funding a specific SANG.

RW said that there was no such allocation for developments of fewer than ten dwellings. Payments in respect of all developments above ten dwellings that were within the catchment area of a specific SANG went towards that SANG.

MR asked whether the number or size of developments was limited by the availability of SANGs.

RW Ultimately yes, they were limited by the availability, sizes and location of SANGs or other mitigation methods. The SANGs availability situation will be constantly on the move as in time it is likely third parties will submit applications to create them either via developers' own schemes or via charitable trust stand-alone SANG proposals. Gateway Solutions will make a large difference to this too.

MR asked whether the LA3 (West Hemel) housing development was subject to SANGs contributions. **RW** said yes, as were all the Local Allocations under the existing Local Plan apart from LA5 (West Tring) as that had already obtained all permissions and begun building prior to this matter becoming apparent. They would need to commit to and pay (or deliver) both SAMM and SANG as part of their next application.

MR asked whether new developments would continue to have obligations under Biodiversity Net Gain (*see DEF Minutes 16/9/2021*).

RW Yes. They could not "double count", i.e. use the same mitigation item for both SANGS and BNG. They could enhance sites by delivering measures on top of the minimum SANG criteria in order to satisfy BNG requirements on a SANG. Similarly, Local Area for Play (LAP)s. and Local Equipment Area for Play (LEAP)s, etc. could not be double counted with delivery of the new SANG requirements.

5. Proposed management plan for Halsey Fields

CR said that the latest proposed management plan for the Halsey Fields wildlife site was still not available from HCC so this item should be carried forward to the next meeting.

6. Any other Business

None.

Remaining Dates for 2023:

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

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