



**Dacorum Environmental Forum
Full Meeting Thursday 9/5/2019**

MINUTES

Attendance

Name	Organisation
Cllr Graham Sutton	DBC Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure (designated)
James Doe	DBC Assistant Director – Planning, Development and Regeneration
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
Michael Nidd	Piccotts End Residents' Association and CPRE Herts.
Anne Lyne	West Hemel Action Group
Chris Mabley	Bourne End Village Association
Paul Harris	DEF and Great Gaddesden PC
Glenda Ferneyhough	Community Action Dacorum
Cllr William Wyatt-Lowe	HCC
Cllr Rob Beauchamp	DBC
Cllr Ron Tindall	DBC
Siva Niranjan	West Hemel Action Group
Jenny Habib	Chiltern Society
Anne Galewski	Chiltern Society Planning Field Officer

Meeting started at 7:30pm

1. Apologies

Dennis Harvey DEF
Cllr Garrick Stevens DBC

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting held 21/2/19

No corrections suggested.

3. Matters arising

Halsey Field Update

CR reported as follows:

During the Friends of Halsey Field's March work party, some of the party planted some plug plants near the main paths. These were all chalk loving plants which grow in this area but not yet in large amounts on the field. and included Field Scabious, Greater Knapweed, Lady's Bedstraw, Marjoram and Kidney Vetch. All these plants are good for invertebrates and Kidney Vetch is the food plant of the Small Blue butterfly, which is not yet resident on the field but is living in this area of Hertfordshire. Other volunteers built a fence round the deepest part of the new pond, all woven out of tree branches cut from plants on the field.

Later in March two apple tree saplings were planted on the slope. Unfortunately, the weather has been very dry since the plug plants and saplings were planted, so Friends have had to water them regularly. On Wednesday 10th April, a small group of Friends who have a good knowledge of wildflowers carried out a plant survey on Halsey Field using a half-metre quadrat. They chose two sites for the quadrat pretty much at random, except that the first was on the flat part of the field where Friends had mown and raked the grass previously and the second was on the slope on an area which had never been mown.

21 species of plants and 115 individual plants were found growing in the first site on the flat, and 15 species and 99 individual plants in the quadrat on the slope. Most of the species were the same in each quadrat. This was considered quite a good result but currently there is nothing to compare it with. The quadrat sites were marked with tent pegs, in order to be able to repeat the survey in the same places in the future.

On Monday 15th April **CR** received two 'phone calls from local residents to say that the Barn owl box on the field had been tampered with, and the door catch was open, so the door was flapping in the wind. When John Fisher, a barn owl expert, came to fix the catch on 18th April, he found a number of owl pellets on the floor of the box, which may mean that a pair of Barn Owls are considering using the box for breeding this spring. The box will be monitored regularly over the summer, and the advice is not to go too near, to avoid disturbing the owls or attracting undue attention to the box. The matter of tampering has been reported to the police and Wildlife crime team.

On Thursday 18th the Friends of Halsey Field held its AGM. Both Steve Lings and Dennis Furnell spoke at the meeting and emphasized the importance of this special site but warned of the worrying decline of species generally in the natural world, the degradation of the soil, and the fact that nature needs to be in the wider countryside and not just in nature reserves.

On Sunday 28th April Richard Tomlin led an Early Morning Bird walk through Halsey Field and Warners End wood. In spite of rather cold, dull weather, 25 Species of bird were seen or heard, including Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, Bullfinch, Song Thrush, Green Woodpecker, Blackcap and other more common species.

On 9th May a work party built a bee bank using the soil and stones dug during the construction of the new pond. An extra layer of sand then soil was spread on top of the existing pile of soil behind the pond to make a suitable habitat for mining bees. Also a plastic grid was installed in front of the top bench and filled with gravel to prevent soil erosion in front of the bench.

SW said that while the Box Moor Trust were aiming to diversify their land holdings outside the Two Waters corridor, in order to maintain their total acreage in Dacorum. This would help to maintain their interest in taking on ownership of Halsey Field, and possibly also the "Dacorum Greenway" concept (Minutes of the DEF Nov. 2017 refers.)

LA3 Master Plan and Sustainability

GE said that he had found on May 2nd that there were 73 Public Comments on the planning application on the DBC website, which he understood was being kept open until July. The official closing date had been 14th February. He had been sent a copy of CPRE Herts.'s objection letter by John Mawer of BEVA, which included the powerful point that the application had apparently not been referred to the Herts Design Review Panel, an important omission for such a major and significant expansion of the town. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Para 129) supported the use of Design Reviews.

GE said that **DEF**'s two letters to Barratts, one of the developers, on the subjects of wildlife and sustainable building standards respectively had been acknowledged (26/2/19) via Roger Smith of Savills, who said that discussion on the application was about to begin with the Borough Council, County Council and other stakeholders and would take account of the issues raised in the consultation responses. **DEF**'s concerns including those expressed in the two letters, were bulleted in the **DEF** February 21st minutes. There was a particular concern regarding the conditions attached to the timing of site clearance in relation to ground nesting birds, as these conditions are weaker in the current application than they were in the Draft Master Plan of 2014.

More recently the DBC Case Officer for LA3, Ross Herbert had invited members of **DEF**, West Hemel Action Group and Bourne End Village association to a "focused consultation session" with the developers and their consultants on Monday 20th May at the Forum. **JD** said that he would also attend. *A summary of the questions posed by DEF at the meeting and answers given will be sent out with these minutes.*

SN said that **WHAG**'s first submission had been posted just in advance of the official closing date, in order to forestall future claims that it was late and therefore inadmissible. (The second version of) a further objection, produced by **WHAG** in collaboration with their planning consultant Philip Hughes, had subsequently been sent via E-mail to DBC's planning department.

SW said he was preparing a personal response, which would draw on Sir John Lawton's 2010 Government-commissioned report 'Making Space for Nature' and HCC's Landscape Character Assessment, under which LA3 forms parts of the "Little Heath Uplands" and "Lower Bulbourne Valley" areas of study.

DBC 2017 Local Plan (up to 2036) Consultation

(See Section 5.)

The river Bulbourne: low flows and the options for mitigation and improvement.

GE said that this had been an excellent presentation. **PH** noted that the Gade north of Great Gaddesden was at present completely dried out. **RB** asked whether the current low flows in Gadebridge Park were caused by the recent restoration of the river through the upper part of the Park. **SW** said that this reduction in flow would have been much worse if the reduction in rates of water extraction at Piccotts End pumping station, had not been agreed in 2017. *See also the reference to it in Section 5 below, the paragraph beginning "JH Asked how water would be supplied to HGC".*

4. 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 **CM** and **CR**, and **SW** by **GE** and **PH**, respectively.

5. Hemel Garden Communities

GE welcomed James Doe, DBC Assistant Director – Planning, Development and Regeneration to present on this topic, and Cllr Graham Sutton, designated to continue as DBC Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure. In introducing themselves **JD** said that he had been involved with Planning in Dacorum since the late Eighties, and had participated in the launch of DEF in the early Nineties, while **GS** said that he had served as a Dacorum Councillor for over half a century, and would always have its interests at heart.

Because of connector incompatibilities **JD** was unable to display his presentation on screen, so used instead a map prepared by **MR** showing the extent of the Dacorum part of the Hemel Garden Communities proposal (HGC). **JD**'s presentation referred to the Hemel Garden Communities Charter, a copy of which has been placed for convenience on DEF's website at <http://dacenvforum.org.uk/consultation-responses-and-representations/>.

JD said that the Eastern portion of HGC (St. Albans City and District) had been under consideration as long as twelve years ago as part of the Eastern Regional Plan, with around 5000 homes. However it was withdrawn as a result of objections from St. Albans and Herts County Council. Regional Plans were then abolished. The scheme then re-emerged in the St. Albans Draft Local Plan, together with employment proposals under the Hertfordshire Enterprise Zone.

Around two or three years ago the Crown Estate had made approaches to DBC regarding their intended acquisition of land on Wood Farm, the centre of the Dacorum part of HGC. The current working figure for Dacorum's Housing Need was 1025 homes per annum, though the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) says that this is a starting figure, which could be argued downward according to local constraints. DBC planning were currently struggling to find suitable sites, and would present a possibly revised figure to Cabinet on June 25th this year.

The guiding principles for HGC were set out in the Hemel Garden Communities Charter (see above for how to access) and were in line with those of the Garden Cities Movement founded a century ago by Ebenezer Howard and resulting for example in Welwyn Garden City. Sustainability was a key objective.

In November 2018 a consortium consisting of DBC, St. Albans City and District Council, the Crown Estate, Hertfordshire County Council, the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and the Hertfordshire Enviro-Tech Enterprise Zone applied for a share of £3.7 million Government funding to fast-track survey and planning work on the project, and succeeded in being one of five successful applicants out of 100 across the country. **JD** agreed with **GE**'s interjection that this was "chicken feed" compared with the planning gain involved, which in **GE**'s estimation would be nearer to £1 billion.

JD said that the scheme would represent a 25% increase in Hemel Hempstead's population so there was a need to plan strategies, for instance on transport and how to integrate the development with the rest of the town. Planning and funding for the planning for HGC would build on planning and funding associated with the Enterprise Zone.

The next steps were:

- Testing the merits and recognising the benefits of HGC would be done as part of the New Local Plan process.
- Funding for any emerging Master Plans, including Transport and Open Spaces would continue to be sought. The Crown Estate were keen to make an early application for 2,500 homes in the St. Albans part of HGC, and Dacorum were evaluating their role in this. **JD** was not in a position to estimate when the Dacorum part of HGC would be developed.

SW then took the chair and invited questions.

AG said on behalf of the Chiltern Society who have concerns about the proximity of HGC to the AONB-designated Upper Gade Valley. There was also a special concern over the existing Site Allocation LA1 (Marchmont Farm, between Grovehill and Piccotts End), which would be surrounded by the much bigger HGC proposal. Did the fact that a grant had been obtained for the latter tie DBC's hands, making it inevitable that they would approve HGC? **JD** No. The grant was unconditional. **AG** said that the fact that HGC would envelop LA1 suggested that the current planning application on LA1 was premature, as the New Local Plan would test the merits of the HGC.

JH Asked how water would be supplied to HGC, and how building standards for water saving in the new housing would be ensured. **JD** These would be tested via the Local Plan. **GE** referred to Rob Rees of the Environment Agency's statement at the DEF February meeting that Dacorum was now within a "Closed Catchment" meaning that no more extraction from its underlying aquifers would be permitted. **SW** said that, though it would be very expensive, water could be pumped up to Dacorum from beneath London.

MN speaking for CPRE Herts and Piccotts End Residents' Association said that he was concerned at the threatened loss of yet more Green Belt on an unprecedented scale, as well as the likely damage to the Piccotts End Conservation Area. The last thing Piccotts End wanted was to be surrounded by building development. The Conservation Area would be wrecked. **JD** said it might nevertheless be necessary as Brownfield land was running out. **MN** pointed to proposals for extra housing at Henry Wells Square, Grovehill and elsewhere. Henry Wells Square was a Brownfield site, and DBC's planners had an outline plan to redevelop it years before they decided instead to support predation on the Green Belt which resulted in the loss of Marchmont Fields, now designated LA1. **JD** said that he was aware of these Brownfield sites.

PH as chair of Great Gaddesden Parish Council said that under HGC the population of the Parish would go up from 1000 to maybe 5000, and would destroy the much-valued open landscape currently buffering the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to the north from the edge of Hemel Hempstead. It would change the whole character of Hemel Hempstead.

W W-L asked whether there was yet any detail available on proposals for increasing the capacity of M1 Junctions 8 and possibly adding an 8A. **JD** there was nothing in the public domain on this at the moment. An alternative might be adding lanes to and extending the Junction 9 slip roads. **GS** said that Herts County's transport plan also envisaged extra capacity East-West for the A414.

CM said that access arrangements for the G&T site were in breach of both local and national, and asked more generally "When does necessity trump policy?". **JD** said that it was a balancing act. Although the NPPF stated that Green Belt should only be declassified in "exceptional circumstances", the Government enforced challenging demands on Local Authorities to provide ever-increasing rates of house building. Observations on this conflict of policies could be addressed to central Government. **CM** said that the housing need figure for Dacorum had been much lower in 2014 than the 1025 homes per annum now quoted by **JD** (*see GE summary below.*) **JD** said that in part this was because Dacorum was an increasingly valuable area.

SN asked when there would be a wider consultation on HGC. Would the Green aspirations expressed in the Hemel Garden Communities Charter be adhered to in practice? Experience over the case of LA3 (West Hemel) did little to create optimism on this point. **JD** said that the only opportunities for public comment would be via the New Local Plan and any subsequent Master Plans.

CR said she was horrified that the Council were now contemplating building up to the threshold of the Area of Outstanding Beauty, when their recommendation on the relevant parcels of land, quoted in the Schedule of Site Appraisals accompanying the Local Plan Consultation in 2017 had been to "Exclude from further assessment and retain as Green Belt." an assessment which DEF supported in their response. **JD** said that the re-consideration had been forced by the step increase in housing demand figures required

by central Government. The issue of whether to accept the Technical Assessment would be decided when the new Local Plan was finalised. **MR** said that this seemed to be 'cart before the horse' because it was presuming that the new Local Plan would disregard the technical assessment.

MR presented photographs of the current views of the Gade Valley from Halsey Field that would be lost to HGC. Other sites west of Leighton Buzzard Road (adjacent to Halsey Field) had also been listed in the New Local Plan for possible development. **JD** replied that this was in the hands of another developer and would be dealt with under the Plan. **MR** said that if all the building within the Plan went ahead the Halsey Field would become isolated from the wider countryside, which should also be nature friendly and provide connectivity between sites.

JD said that the issue of whether to accept the Technical Assessment would be decided when the New Local Plan was finalised, but **MR** said that this seemed to be 'cart before the horse' because it was presuming that the New Local Plan would disregard its own initial technical assessment.

RT said that with the extra contribution from HGC, even if proposed M1 Junction 8 enlargement and Junction 8A went ahead the M1 would continue to come to a stop more frequently than it already does. What was the Highways Agency going to do about it? **JD** said that that was a matter for Herts. County Council, and referred to its Local Transport Plan 4, with its emphasis on "modal shift" i.e. encouraging non-car travel. However there was not a lot of money for this. He also mentioned HCC's proposed Mass Rapid Transit scheme between Hemel and Welwyn Garden City, and proposals for extra capacity along the A414 East-West corridor. **RT** said that his question concerned North-South traffic flow, not East-West.

RB as a resident of Woodhall Farm said that the whole estate became completely isolated traffic-wise when M1 blockage and consequent overflow jammed up the Redbourn Road. This would be exacerbated by HGC. Others contributed that Grovehill, Piccotts End and Leverstock Green would be similarly affected. **JD** said that HGC incorporated a new East-West connection but that, mainly on cost grounds, there were still no plans for a Northern Bypass all the way from the M1 to the A41. *The Hemel Garden Communities Charter states that "As well as new and improved access to the M1, a new connection running from the Redbourn Road to the Leighton Buzzard Road will support and complement changes to the A414 such as a priority bus route."*

GS said that planners now had better modelling tools for predicting and planning for potential traffic and other problems. Society had become obsessed with car ownership and use. We needed more (digital) connectivity and physical accessibility through the promotion of mini commercial hubs.

SW said that planning in favour of walking as the preferred mode had declined during the development of Hemel Hempstead. The first area, Adeyfield, was much better in this respect than subsequent ones, with Woodhall Farm being the worst. LA3 would be worse still, with few assurances about local facilities. The principles given out with the first revelations about LA3 were now being chucked out of the window. Instead, the principles stated in the HGC Charter should be made to apply to LA3. **JD** said that unlike LA3, HGC had the necessary "critical mass" to put its aspirations into practice. It would be zoned into units of around 2000 homes.

GE promised to minute figures comparing the Government's requirement for 1025 homes per annum (hpa) quoted by **JD** with preceding ones:

Summary of recent history of Government Housing Demand figures for Dacorum

The options for annual averages given in the consultation on the Core Strategy of DBC's Local Development Framework in November 2010 were Option 1 (no Green Belt land take): 370hpa and Option 2: 430hpa. The majority of respondees favoured the lower growth figure of Option 1. However the

Council chose Option 2 for the pre-Submission stage, and the same figure of 430hpa was quoted in the Core Strategy/Development Plan Document of 2016.

The New Local Plan (2017) Issues and Options consultation offered three Options:

Option 1: Draft Government figure - 602hpa for 2013-36

"considered to be a reasonable target based on local evidence – particularly from the SHLAA (Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment) and Green Belt studies. The level broadly matches the number of homes that could be built on land within existing town and village boundaries . . plus some limited Green Belt land. "

Option 2: Locally assessed need - 756 hpa for 2013-36

"reflects the conclusion of the South West Hertfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA)"

Option 3: 1,100hpa for 2013-36 (this is approximately the figure **JD** quoted)

included as "it is important to include a growth option higher than our current locally assessed need level, as the need figure may increase significantly above its current level (Option 2) as the plan progresses. A figure of this level would however 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"

GE had not been able to find a summary of responses to the Consultation question regarding respondees' preferences among these three options.

In summary, the Housing Demand figure has increased from 430hpa to 1025hpa since 2016.

Also, the expectation for the proportion of this to be Green Belt has risen:

Under the Core Strategy, using the figures for Option 1 (no Green Belt) and Option 2 (some Green Belt) an estimate of the planned percentage Green Belt of total is $50/430 = 11.6\%$

With the New Local Plan a similar calculation using Option 1 and Option 2 yields $154/756 = 20\%$

Taking the timescale of the New Local Plan (20 years to 2036), and a figure of 10,000 homes, clearly impacting on Hemel Hempstead whether or not in Dacorum, the annual growth figure would be 500 from this scheme alone, all of it in Green Belt, implying a further step increase in the proportion of the total that is in Green Belt.

GE asked whether there was any target in the New Local Plan for percentage of new homes to be on Brownfield land.

JD No. The increase in percentage taken from Green Belt was inevitable since stocks of Brownfield land were depleted.

5. Any Other Business

GE had received (May 2nd) a suggestion from DEF Steering group member Dennis Harvey, who was unable to attend, that DEF ask DBC to declare a Climate Emergency, in line with many other Local Authorities (see for example <https://sustainablestalbans.org/petition/>) and an Early Day Motion signed by Dacorum's MP. A show of hands supported this, and **GE** said he would write accordingly on behalf of DEF. *All recipients of these Minutes: please send GE any suggestions as to the best person or people to write to, and in brief what points they think the request should cover.*