



Dacorum Environmental Forum  
Full Meeting Thursday 11/09/25

Attendance (Z = by Zoom)

Name	Organisation
Gruff Edwards	Chair DEF
Steve Wilson	Vice Chair DEF
William Wyatt-Lowe	DEF
David Taylor MP	Labour Member of Parliament for Hemel Hempstead
Cllr Kevin Fielding	Berkhamsted Town Council
John Taylor	Volunteer HMWT (father of David)
Cllr Alexander Bhinder	DBC
Mike Ridley	DEF and Friends of Halsey Field
Katie Tyssen	Friends of Halsey Field
Brian Worrell	Resident, Herts. Local Access Forum, Herts. British Horse Society
Nick Hollinghurst	Public
Cllr Robin Bromham	DBC Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Operations
Mary Arnott-Gee	DEF
Cllr Robert Farrow (Z)	Tring TC

Meeting started at 7:30pm

**1. Apologies**

Adrian Whyte	Plastics and Circular Economy consultant
Paul Harris	DEF

**2. Minutes of DEF May 8th meeting and matters arising**

GE recalled that Nick Mariner of the Chilterns Conservation Board and Guy Halsey of Gaddesden Estate gave informative presentations on Farm Clusters and related matters. The issue of biodiversity in farming would come up under Item 4. The three presentation files (two from Nick Mariner) had been uploaded to the DEF website alongside the minutes.

**3. Introduction of and by David Taylor MP**

In welcoming **DT**, and paraphrasing Wikipedia, **GE** said that **DT** had served as Labour MP for Hemel Hempstead since 2024. Following the Second World War his grandparents on both sides had moved to Hemel and his parents were raised there. He had represented Hemel Hempstead in the UK Youth Parliament from 2001 to 2003. He had also worked for an international charity aimed at improving wages in developing countries and in 2009 he had founded the Labour Campaign for International Development, and currently sat as its vice-chair.

**DT** highlighted some of the Government's environmental policies and achievements to date. They had been active in promoting Clean Energy and the establishment of Great British Energy (*see 4.3 below*) in a global energy market place severely affected by the war in Ukraine. They had lifted the ban on onshore wind turbines, had planned a fourfold increase in offshore by 2030 and had allocated capital funds for solar panels on new builds. They had maintained the home insulation programme started under the previous government. They had actively participated in conferences to set international targets for emission reduction and in formulating the High Seas Treaty, and he was hopeful that China in particular had responded positively to this. Seven billion pounds had been allocated for nature conservation including for the reduction in pesticide use. Three new National Forests had been designated, and several peat and moorland schemes had been established. The nationwide Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for bottles was set to launch in October 2027. There were proposals to extend bans on bottom trawling to more Marine Protected Areas. The Government were committed to tackling chalk stream pollution and making water company executives more answerable and planned to replace OFWAT by an ombudsman. (*See 4.6 below*). He together with Victoria Collins (MP for Harpenden and Berkhamsted) had written (Sept 1<sup>st</sup>) to Chris Weston, Chief Executive of Thames Water regarding sewage discharges into the Grand Union Canal asking for "an urgent and comprehensive response" to the issue. **DT** supplied **GE** with a copy of this letter.

#### 4. Q&A on selected topics

**SW** took the chair at this point

##### 4.1 "Grey Belt" Changes to the National Planning Policy Framework.

**GE** said that the version of the NPPF published in November '24 differed from the consultation version of earlier in the year by removing purpose (c) from the list of purposes of the Green Belt that prevent it from being downgraded to Grey Belt, purpose (c) being "to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment". This change had probably been instrumental in Fairfax winning their appeal by arguing that the site was Grey Belt. A parliamentary petition initiated by the CPRE for the re-instatement of purpose (c) had attracted in excess of 10,000 signatures.

**DT** said that he supported *the Spatial Vision of Hemel Garden Communities* embedded in Dacorum's Local Plan, but was opposed to the Fairfax development and had written to Angela Rayner (at the time Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government) to express this. The appeal decision was particularly disappointing given that Dacorum had produced their (Reg. 19) Local Plan within the deadline after which appeals against the plan were more likely to succeed. He also cited the "Golden Rules" within the NPPF which should have ensured that major development on land released from the Green Belt benefited both communities and nature. He was committed to preventing urban sprawl. However, there was a need for more housing.

*DEF's submission to the consultation on the Dacorum Local Plan to 2041 Pre-Submission Version November 2024 under "Strategic Policy SS1 - Spatial Strategy for Growth" refers. See <https://dacenvforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/DEF-Submission.pdf>*

**GE** said that in essence purpose (c) had been there to prevent urban sprawl. Was **DT** therefore in favour of its reinstatement in the NPPF?

**DT** that he would consult parliamentary colleagues and get back on that question.

**NH** said that he was particularly concerned about the effect on the adjoining Chilterns National Landscape due to the fact that the large area of Green Belt land east of Tring known as Marshcroft had

now been included in Dacorum's Local Plan as a proposed site allocation for development. (*The developer's appeal had been upheld by the Inspector, and then overturned by the then Secretary of State.*)

**BW** said that "Grey Belt" categorisation was being used to convert productive farmland to housing. It was a euphemism for "Build willy nilly."

**AB** said that as councillor for the relevant ward for 19 years he had attended and spoken at the Fairfax appeal and was shocked by the inspector's decision. At Council meetings the importance of getting an early approval for the Local Plan had been emphasised as a protective measure against such speculative applications, but it had turned out to be ineffective in this case. The affair called into question the value and purpose of having democratically elected local councillors.

**KF** said that several parcels of Green Belt around Berkhamsted were under a similar threat of being unjustifiably downgraded to Grey Belt and therefore developed.

#### **4.2 Planning powers of mayors in re-organised local authorities.**

**WW-L** asked what were **DT**'s observations on the powers of mayors under the UK's reorganisation of local authorities.

**DT** said that there was a proposal to merge Herts. and the district/borough councils within it. Elected mayors already existed for some districts/boroughs.

**GE** quoting Google AI said that the powers of these elected mayors would generally involve strategic planning and housing development across multiple local councils. Their role was evolving, with the government aiming to give mayors more formal responsibility for strategic planning, potentially removing the local council's veto power in certain areas.

**RB** said that for Herts. the proposal was to divide it into 2, 3 or 4 parts but from information currently available it was not clear whether the elected mayors would be for these parts, for the whole county or for a region including the county. Watford already had an elected mayor. Ministerial statements from Angela Rayner (*see reference under 4.1*) and Jim McMahon (*Former Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution*) had not augured well for local democracy.

**WW-L** said that he understood that the UK was to be divided into areas each with a population of about 2.5 million and each with its own elected mayor. Hertfordshire (*population 1.2 million*) would therefore need to be merged. The mayors' powers might include emergency services as well as planning.

**AB** remarked that the matter was clearly still up in the air.

**DT** said that he would ascertain the current position and get back to DEF.

#### **4.3 Great British Energy and Green initiatives in Dacorum.**

**WW-L** asked **DT** to explain policies around the establishment of Great British Energy, and to say how he expected them to contribute to the Net Zero target, in particular how they would affect Green initiatives in Dacorum.

**DT** said that it was a publicly owned company that would be set up with headquarters in Scotland in order to compete with private companies and that it had been allocated £8 billion for investment in renewable energy and that it had targets, in addition to quadrupling offshore wind (*see Item 3*), for doubling onshore wind and trebling solar by 2030. Regarding solar farms e.g. the BSR Energy 130 acre proposal on farmland at Pudds Cross near Bovingdon he had no veto on planning proposals, though he had suggested masking the site by planting trees.

**WW-L** asked whether there were any proposals for energy storage in Dacorum.

**DT** said that he would find out and let DEF know.

**MR** suggested that storage could be in the vicinity of new and existing substations rather than on greenfield sites. The promotion of solar energy was desirable, but not on farmland. Use of domestic and commercial rooftops should be promoted but the removal of the original feed-in tariff and its replacement by less generous grants was a disincentive.

**DT** said that the Government were looking at this question.

**MA** said that additional pylons due to the new, green sources of energy impacted precious landscapes *e.g. proposals by Bute Energy for a pylon route round the periphery of the Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons) national park* and were a possible health hazard. Could not the power lines be underground?

**DT** said that new pylons were necessary for the provision of green energy, and the cost of underground power lines from wind farms would make them less competitive against non-green sources.

**AB** said that the methodology for energy source price comparison, Marginal Cost Pricing, was obscure and questionable.

**NH** said that (electrical) energy demand was continuously matched by topping up supply from the three main categories of nuclear, fossil and renewable, cheapest first. According to the current method the cheapest was always nuclear and the last was always gas, which led to a distortion of the market.

**RB** said as a member of DBC's Development Management Committee that they did not have much control over meeting the Future Homes Standard, energy from waste or neighbourhood heating systems.

**DT** subsequently agreed to respond to this further question from **BW** for which there had not been time:

*"I know that Great British Energy is a publicly owned company and so can I assume it will be in fair competition with other companies in the sector? Last night in relation to water companies you made it quite clear that their directors will be held to account for failings, and bonuses and other incentives withheld. Will the same be applied to the directors of Great British Energy? Who will be setting the strategic goals, performance measures, and mission of Great British Energy because as I understand it, the company will report to the Secretary of State. There is always a conflict of interest, particularly as the 'shareholders' of a publicly owned company are the public but they are never asked about investment decisions as in a private company. In my view, based on decades of experience, MPs are elected to govern and not run businesses."*

*Text from a subsequent E-mail from DT's Communications Officer Ben Phelan on the subjects of power storage and pylons will be sent out with these minutes.*

#### **4.4 Government policies and funding to encourage biodiversity in farming.**

**MR** said that at the May 2025 DEF meeting Guy Halsey of the Gaddesden Estate had reported that on his farm 34 hectares of temporary herb rich meadows had been created. However, plans to add a further 60 hectares and to convert them to organic farming standards had been delayed by a year by the Government's cancellation without notice in March 2025 of all funding for new farm environmental projects. Could **DT** explain the Government's policies and funding to encourage biodiversity in farming, bearing in mind this cancellation without notice had removed this vital support for biodiversity enhancement? How did this fit with the Government's policy for biodiversity recovery?

**DT** expressed some surprise, but said that there were budget deficits across all departments and difficult choices had to be made. Nevertheless at £2.4 billion the Government had allocated the biggest ever budget for Nature Recovery.

**BW** said that many farm nature recovery projects were in a transition phase and had already done much of the necessary work but could not begin to re-jig them to any new requirements until they knew the terms and conditions. He undertook to send **DT** a newspaper article (11/9/25) on the current situation. *(This will be sent out with the minutes.)*

**SW** said that wildlife corridors for connectivity rather than isolated nature conservation areas were vital, and were something that the recent meeting of the Colne Catchment Action Network (ColneCAN) had resolved to prioritise and that the Nature Recovery Strategy for Herts would concentrate on.

**MA** said that planned development on Green Belt at East Hemel, around Piccotts End and the Hemel Garden Communities (North Hemel) development would mean replacing existing wildlife corridors with corridors and swathes of urbanisation. East Hemel was part of the adjoining St. Albans City and District plan but she felt that the St Albans quota of housing should not be imposed on the Hemel Hempstead boundary.

**DT** said again that we needed more houses.

#### **4.5 Funding for Natural England, as affects the Chilterns National Landscape.**

**MR** said that since 24th June 2021 Natural England had been conducting a consultation into extending the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, now designated National Landscapes. This was due to be published earlier this year, and could have had considerable impact on development west of Hemel Hempstead. The consultation was cancelled at short notice just before publication, apparently on the basis of the cost to the government that would result. Given four years of expensive and extensive consultations, would the Government at least publish the results of the findings, even if they were not prepared to go ahead with implementing the recommendations at this stage? The intention of the previous government's review had been to "support improved nature recovery and public access". What strategies would be implemented by this government to compensate for this significant set-back?"

**DT** said that again it was to do with striking the right balance on funding. Plans for increasing National Landscapes in Surrey and Yorkshire were more advanced than the Chilterns plan and were going ahead. On behalf of the Box Moor Trust he had messaged (21st July) Mary Creagh, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Nature querying the decision to halt the Chilterns plan, and he supplied **GE** with copies of her reply (14<sup>th</sup> Aug.) and a further reply from Graham Horton of Natural England from which he had learnt that the accumulated data for the Chilterns plan would be shared in due course. **DT** said that he would find out when this would be and would inform DEF.

**MR** said that if it had been published earlier it might have changed the outcome of the Fairfax appeal.

#### **4.6 Protection of chalk streams in the Planning Bill.**

**SW** asked **DT** to say what he thought about the rejection on May 16<sup>th</sup> of an amendment that would have protected England's rare and threatened chalk streams by the parliamentary committee examining the government's planning bill. It appeared that the government were downgrading the priority of chalk streams.

**DT** said that he was disappointed at the committee's decision. *Chris Hinchliff, MP for North East Herts. who had proposed the amendment was suspended from the Labour Party for voting in its favour at the committee stage.* Nevertheless the proposals in the bill regarding Environment Development Plans would require developers to pay a levy to Natural England. This might have a knock-on effect on the provision of SANGS (Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces). Overall the bill was not watering down environmental protection.

#### **4.7 Environment Agency and water company influence on strategic planning.**

**SW** said that the threat to chalk streams was linked to the question of water demand due to the mass expansion of housing in Dacorum and elsewhere. Currently the Environment Agency and water companies could only offer advice, even if over-abstraction was the only option. Did **DT** agree that they should be allowed to influence strategic planning decisions by showing that there was no environmentally acceptable way of supplying the increased demand? He made the point that whilst we have national networks for the likes of electricity, gas, roads, railways and other forms of communications, we have no such network for water supply and no national strategy for water supply.

**DT** said that he would table a written parliamentary question on the subject.

**KF** said that water companies were legally responsible for dealing with waste water and runoff but in reality foul water overflows were entering chalk streams.

**MA** asked whether the water depletion of chalk aquifers caused sink holes. The environmentalist Feargal Sharkey had long campaigned against the pollution of British rivers, particularly chalk streams. She suggested that he could be invited as a speaker at a future DEF meeting.

**DT** said that he could facilitate a contact with Feargal Sharkey.

**AB** said that it was insane that water companies were legally obliged to meet the demand whatever the environmental constraints.

**SW** said that the effect of extraction could be mitigated to some extent if extraction points were located further downstream, a view shared by academics in the field.

**DT** said that the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 would ban unfair bonuses for water company executives and would introduce criminal liability for obstructing pollution investigations. There was a target to halve sewage pollution by 2030.

**RB** said that all of Dacorum's chalk streams fed directly or indirectly into the Colne and then the Thames. The Colne Valley Regional Park board were worried that plans for a third runway at Heathrow if implemented would sever chalk streams for the purposes of fish migration at a culvert under the runway. The assumed growth in flight numbers was contrary to targets for CO2 emission reduction as there was no prospect on the horizon of fuel-less aviation.

**DT** said that he was not in favour of airport expansion at either London or Luton. There was currently a review of flight paths, with more flexibility and variability in the choice of stacking areas.

**GE** thanked **DT** for coming to the Forum and putting himself "in the firing line".

## **5. Any other Business**

**GE** said that **CR** had sent him a report on the Halsey Field Wildlife Site, and that he would send this out with the minutes.

**SW** called for suggestions from the DEF circulation list (by reply to the Minutes E-mail) for future meeting topics and presenters.

Forthcoming Diary dates 2025:

Main DEF quarterly meeting: Nov. 13<sup>th</sup> (Thursday 7:30pm)

DEF Steering Group meeting: Oct. 7<sup>th</sup> (Tuesday 7:30pm)