



Annual Report 2018/2019

Looking back - Looking forward

Being a brief account for the Annual General Meeting of
The Society's activities during the year 2018/2019 –
with a glance ahead to the coming year

The Chairman looks back...and forward

Over the past year or more Harpenden's attraction for house buyers has continued, albeit with demand – in line with prices – rising more modestly, against a background of economic uncertainty. The misery inflicted on commuters resulting from Thameslink timetable chaos no doubt also had an effect.

While the major housing developments threatened in St Albans District Council's (updated) Local Plan have yet to materialise, there has been enough 'infill' building to increase pressure on schools, health and community facilities and, of course, car parking. The town feels ever more congested with traffic delays an everyday occurrence.

Growth is inevitable and we have to prepare for further pressures. However, government computer models for projected future growth are based on calculations which are now being challenged. We are an ageing population and recent studies indicate a slowing in UK population growth and reduced fertility rates (1.7 children per family which is low in international terms).

It throws doubt on the extent of the housing demand being imposed on local authorities in the south-east where, for good or ill, there has also been a slow down in economic growth, which may or may not be attributable to 'the Brexit factor'. There is also evidence that some economic activity is moving away from London in a welcome rebalancing. And while Harpenden will still be under pressure to allow more housing, the numbers ought logically to be reviewed.

Neighbourhood Plan approved

This is why the town's Neighbourhood Plan was important, after years when developers could submit large planning applications to SADC without reference to any formal Harpenden-centred planning document. Meanwhile the district Local Plan is still working through its tortuous processes and it remains unclear, at the time of writing, if and when it will be approved.

Two new estates to the north-east and north-west of the town are currently envisaged. The Harpenden Society campaigned in favour of the town's Neighbourhood Plan and the referendum in February gave it clear approval. It offers the

prospect of developers – as a condition of gaining planning approval – being compelled to contribute more to the funding of community facilities, at a time of ever more stringent local authority budgets.



Luton Airport expansion threat

At the Society's May 2018 Public Meeting we heard from Hazel Simmons, the leader of Luton Borough Council on its ambitions for a massive expansion of Luton Airport. Many in the audience were not convinced by her assertions on the noise and traffic congestion implications. It is hoped that the increase from 18 to 33 million ppa (passengers per annum) proposal will not get the green light as readily as previous expansion plans – when Luton BC, as the airport owner, effectively acted as 'judge and jury'. The 80%-plus projected expansion will require central government approval. Transport Secretary Chris Grayling's reputation as a bungling decision maker does not bode well for those of us wanting the brakes applied to the airport's egregious expansion plans.



The Chairman looks back...and forward continued.

Parking: no quick fixes evident

Parking problems in the town centre and surrounding residential streets grow ever more acute. The HarPark ginger group aired the findings of their research at a Society meeting in January, where District Councillor Teresa Heritage pledged to work with the Town and District councils to come up with a defined parking strategy. Despite some cynicism 'that we have seen this all before', hope was expressed that many of the parking issues would at last be addressed by officialdom.



My thanks for the hard work and contribution of Society committee members, much of which happens behind the scenes and which is apparent from the reports from our group 'convenors'. Thanks in particular to Penny Ayres and her colleagues who run our Annual Awards scheme, encouraging and recognising quality design and development in the townscape. Also worthy of commendation are those dedicated Society members who, for five years, have voluntarily enabled Harpenden's public library to be kept open on Wednesday afternoons.

We are always looking for Society members to join the committee and help take forward our many activities. In particular we are looking for a vice chairman and for someone to step into John Davis's shoes as environment watchdog. Meanwhile we welcome Hester Gabbutt to take over from Jan Smith the vital role of membership secretary.

We endeavour to maintain good communications with our members, via the Society website – www.harpendensociety.org – and our quarterly newsletter edited by Alan Bunting, as well as a monthly emailed update on Society activities.
Phil Waters

Secretary's report

It has been a busy and, dare I say, productive, twelve months for the Society. Our five generally well-attended public meetings held in Rothamsted Research's Fowden Hall embraced a diversity of speakers and topics. Professor Ranjeet Sokhi looked at local air quality issues. Marion Dunstone from Herts Community NHS Trust described the projected – but now seemingly stalled – new Health and Wellbeing Centre on the Red House site in Carlton Road. Luton Borough councillors put forward the alleged benefits for the local area of expanding its airport capacity by some 80%, in the face of vociferous protests from many in the audience.



Crime in the Harpenden and St Albans area and all its attendant challenges were addressed by high-ranking police officers and crime commissioner David Lloyd. Our final meeting saw Mary Maynard, the planning portfolio holder as a St Albans District Councillor outlining the council's statutory Local Plan in its amended form with, notably, its provisions for controlling housing development more stringently, broadly in line with Harpenden's own now 'signed off' Neighbourhood Plan.

Bob Fletcher

Arts & leisure

Final planning permission for the conversion of the present Sports Centre in Rothamsted Park into an Arts and Cultural 'hub' has now been obtained. Meanwhile preparatory work on the new much larger and more multi-functional Sports Centre to be built around the existing indoor swimming pool has started. It has involved the removal of a beech hedge, reducing the crown of a large oak tree and removing cypress trees from alongside the track between the swimming pool building and the football pitch and between the swimming pool and Amenbury Lane car park.



Clearly work on creating the new Arts and Cultural hub cannot begin until gym facilities are provided elsewhere – eventually in the new Sports Centre of course. But in order to speed things up it has been suggested they might be housed pro tem in temporary buildings elsewhere.

On other fronts, Art on the Common enjoys continued success; all the pitches for this year's show (June 8, 9) were taken up within four weeks. However the organisational back-up needs to be strengthened if, as projected, the event is to be staged, in due course, inside the new Arts Centre building, immune from weather uncertainty.

Alan Jackson

Education

Construction work on the Katherine Warrington School, Harpenden's fourth secondary school, is now well advanced, with every expectation that it will open for first year pupils in September. Headteacher Tony Smith is actively recruiting staff and says he is impressed by the calibre of teacher already appointed. The opening of the new school should bring to an end the annual anguish suffered by parents and children who previously could not gain a place at one of the town's secondary schools.



Under the auspices of the Harpenden Secondary Schools Trust, Roundwood Park, St Georges and Sir John Lawes schools have been collaborating more closely, notably on the organisation of a Drugs Awareness evening held at Rothamsted in November, which was well attended by parents and students from all three schools. The evening was deemed sufficiently fruitful for similar events to be considered on topics such as knife crime.

Chris Armitage

Membership

After three years as membership secretary and with other commitments crowding in, I am relinquishing the role and handing over the main part of it – maintaining the membership spreadsheet and monitoring subscriptions – to Hester Gabbutt, a fairly new Harpenden Society member who is keen to help increase our membership and create more interest in the kind of local issues on which the Society focuses.

I have enjoyed working with a great team dedicated to maintaining and improving the life of Harpenden residents. At the time of writing in mid-March our membership stands at 959. That is five fewer than last year although there have of course been gains and losses within that number.

We are nonetheless keen to boost our membership and I would urge our members to make potential new 'recruits' aware of diverse work of the Society. There are still many people in our town who have never heard of The Harpenden Society, or think that we are an offshoot of the Town Council or even of the Harpenden Trust. They should be assured that we are non-party political and aim principally to highlight the achievements, and concerns, of our membership and to make their views known, most especially perhaps to all three layers of local government.

We continue to look for someone to take on my secondary role of co-ordinating distribution of our newsletter four times a year. Happily a number of volunteers have come forward after our appeal in the Winter issue for more deliverers to 'play postman'. On a different volunteering subject, offers of help in preparing the tea and coffee at our evening meetings would be appreciated.

Jan Smith

Society Awards

For the second year in succession, none of the nominations received were considered worthy of the Society's prestigious Plaque and nothing this time warranted a Letter of Commendation.



But a **Certificate of Merit** for the 2018 year has been awarded to the Park House apartment development by Pegasus Life, adjoining Rothamsted Park.



A striking development contributing to Harpenden's growing townscape.

Penny Ayres

Built Environment

The major achievement was arguably the approval by referendum of the Harpenden Neighbourhood Plan which, we are assured, will have to be taken into account by developers and by St Albans District Council as the planning authority, at least when large future schemes are proposed.

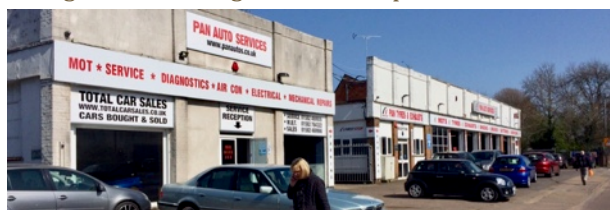
The more legally enforceable SADC Local Plan has been again postponed but in mid-March its submission to the Secretary of State was imminent. Meanwhile, subject to another Public Inquiry, Rothamsted Research's Lawes Trust parent organisation would like a site in their ownership north of Redbourn to be included in the LP for a 1000-home development, allegedly with some support from Redbourn residents.

Alas we have had another year of numerous examples where planning permission has been granted – sometimes on appeal – for a perfectly good house to be replaced with one or even houses which clash totally, usually in architectural terms, with the street scene.

The completion of Park House on the site of the long-derelict James Marshall building has been a highlight and the near completion of Harpenden House hotel development has also turned out better than expected.



The Old Cock Inn and The George are now being refurbished to include further accommodation for visitors, while the Breathing Space café and keep-fit studio in Thompsons Close is being converted to ground floor apartments.



The redevelopment of the Pan Autos site for housing in Grove Road was opposed by local residents but has been approved, alas with a reduced car parking requirement. Also the development at 2 Salisbury Avenue (on its corner with Rothamsted Avenue) has been approved despite local opposition and a reduced parking requirement. Planning permission was also granted in a Town Council application for 24 'affordable' dwellings on the former allotment site at Westfield Road.

Building the new Katherine Warrington secondary school at Batford is now underway following the imposition of 49 listed conditions, while preliminary work has started on the new Sports Centre adjoining the swimming pool in Rothamsted Park. It is linked to the eventual replacement of today's Harpenden Public Halls by an SADC-managed apartment block has been signalled.

Mike & Pauline Waddilove

Transport

Undoubtedly the highlight for the Society's Transport Group over the past year was our public meeting in January devoted to the hugely challenging issue of parking in and around Harpenden. Following on from a survey undertaken by the HarPark Group, it drew a capacity attendance in High Street Methodist Church hall. The many problems relating to every aspect of car parking were aired but with few concrete solutions proposed, as we reported in the Society's Winter newsletter. Cllr Teresa Heritage nevertheless proposed the formulation of a definite strategy 'within a few months', the essence of which will be awaited with interest though not necessarily optimism.

The Society, along with HarPark representatives, is striving, where possible, to expedite progress through the District and Town Councils. Parking regulations in Harpenden remain in the control of St Albans District Council, at least for the time being. Its Car Parking Working Party says matters should be improved with new officer recruitment, who will implement new systems effectively.

The Thameslink train timetable change of May 2018 was disastrous, but by December had just about reached a tolerable service level. Harpenden Society attended Train User meetings with the operator for the further timetable revision scheduled for May 2019 – when further service improvements are promised.



After irreparable failure of both its venerable Mercedes buses in August 2018, some £70,000 is being invested by the town council in the Harpenden Hopper community bus service, which resumed on April 2. The two new 16-seat Peugeot minibuses will, after consultation with the Harpenden Society and other potential users, serve an additional route from the town centre, via Southdown to Eastmoor Park, as well as the earlier route to the north of the town. At the most recent meeting of St Albans & District Bus Users Forum, the Harpenden Society stressed the need to ensure the active participation of Herts County Council, as the highways authority, in planning the new Katherine Warrington School's twice-daily pupil transport facilities, for children having to travel from outside as well as through the town.

Alan Falconer

Environment

As a civic society one of our prime concerns must be striving to ensure the town looks well cared for. If litter bins are overflowing for example and roadside drains are blocked, creating puddles for traffic to drench passing pedestrians, the impression gained by visitors as well as by residents is inevitably downbeat. We therefore try to encourage Harpenden Society members and indeed others who care about the town to report such matters to the relevant authority – or authorities.



It is admittedly an uphill struggle. There has alas been little if any perceptible improvement in those basic environmental shortcomings over the past year or so. But that could be, to some extent, due to lack of knowledge on where and how to report such issues. St Albans District Council and its main waste collection and litter bin maintenance contractor Veolia have a call centre on 01727 809019 while, for highway issues, Herts County Council can be contacted (free) on 01300 123 4047. Both authorities are also, of course, contactable via their respective websites.



Noise from planes flying into and out of Luton Airport remains an irritation in many parts of Harpenden, despite claims that the latest Airbus 320 series aircraft are quieter than their predecessors. Call 01582 395382 or go to noise@ltn.aero to register noise complaints, but be ready with precise timing and direction details.



John Davis

Health and wellbeing

All the group's energies, largely through the Red House Forum, have been directed towards the redevelopment of the Red House site in Carlton Road, to create Harpenden's much-needed new Health and Wellbeing Centre. But despite the assurance received over twelve months ago that a planning application for the redevelopment of the Stewarts and for



housing to be built on the site's 'surplus land' would be submitted in the late summer, but alas nothing has happened.

The delay looks certain to be further exacerbated by a major reorganisation of local NHS provision announced at the end of January. Provision of the adult community services contract in the West Herts area will be handed over in October from Hertfordshire Community Trust (HCT) to a much larger, and arguably more faceless, body, Central London Community Healthcare Trust (CLCH).

The change is being made following what is described as a 'market testing process' undertaken by Herts Valley Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), whose ongoing prevarication on the Red House plans was outlined in our Winter newsletter. HCT's chief executive Clare Hawkins has expressed great disappointment at the decision, but says the trust will not be raising a legal challenge, if only to avoid further public expenditure.

Meanwhile county councillor Teresa Heritage has said she will be taking up the question of the Red House project with the CCG, expressing the view that the Health and Wellbeing Centre is likely to be needed despite the NHS contract change.

John Harris

Society finances

Year-on-year our income fell very slightly mainly due to lower Gift Aid receipts, while expenditure rose by £290. The largest rise was in the cost of public meetings where Fowden Hall at Rothamsted is more costly to hire than Park Hall. There was a depreciation charge of £237.92 on new fixed assets that were purchased during the year, though partly offset by the reduced cost of newsletter printing. The surplus of £1,576.89 was £351.12 lower than the year before, still a very healthy figure, giving us adequate funds to meet foreseeable future costs. Fixed Assets purchased during the year were a document scanner at £255.69 and exhibition display panels costing £696.

Harry Downie

Publicity and the local economy

Editorial and promotional coverage of the Society's activities continues across a wide spectrum of local media. We enjoy coverage in the traditional local press, notably the Herts Advertiser, as well as posters in local shops and features in our own well-regarded newsletter, not forgetting social media via Harpenden Parents Network, the Harpenden on-line news magazine, and the Society's website. Society activities also receive useful publicity at our regular public meetings, where non-members – as potential new members of course – are always welcome.

NEWS

Society fears new wellbeing centre will never happen after long delays

Progress has stalled on plans for a new health and wellbeing centre in Harpenden.

The Harpenden Society has expressed doubts that the plans to redevelop the former Harpenden Memorial Hospital site in Carlton Road will come to fruition.

The wellbeing centre will be based in the former building and will offer services for diabetes, leg ulcers and bladder and bowel problems, as well as blood tests and children's speech and language therapy.

The rest of the site will be turned into affordable homes, and the adjacent Red House will be turned into flats.

In a meeting last summer, the Harpenden Society was told construction would begin during 2018, with the new centre ready

ANNE DUSLAK
Herts Advertiser

for use by late 2020.

The editor of Harpenden Society's newsletter, Alan Bunting, wrote in January: "In our winter 2017 newsletter we reported that a legal date for completion of the project had been set at April 2018.

"But here we are only three months from that date and progress can, at least to outward appearances, be summed up as appearing to have stalled.

"Among potential beneficiaries of the promised health and wellbeing centre, especially patients in Harpenden who have to travel considerable distances to clinics or hospitals outside the



An artist's impression of the proposed new centre.

town, there are feelings of frustration and even anger that the new facility looks no nearer than when it was first mooted some three years ago.

The proposals have been developed by Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust (HCNT), with the close involvement of Herts Valleys Clinical Commissioning Group (HVVCCG). A trust spokesman said: "Herts

Valleys Clinical Commissioning Group supports in principle the proposals that Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust has developed.

There are still some arrangements that need to be finalised before the scheme can go ahead.

Earlier this year, HVVCCG ran a market testing process which confirmed Central London

Picture: BHSU/STATION FIVE HARPENDEN SOCIETY

Community Healthcare NHS Trust as the new provider for adult community health services in west Herts from the autumn, taking over the role from HCT. HCT chief executive Clare Hawkins said: "We will support all staff affected by the decision to ensure that there is a smooth transition to CLCH for them and for our patients and local communities."

Retail and other businesses, particularly in the town centre, have their ups and downs, the latter most evident in recent months with the closure of Fullwoods ladies boutique, Rollings Wine, Strada restaurant, Harry's Bar, Vine Leaves café and – perhaps most surprisingly in view of its short life and sumptuous frontage and interior – the Barbarello wine bar. The loss of our NatWest bank branch was, especially to its many customers, a shattering blow.

However, the Town though continues to attract new businesses. The arrival of the MUST wine bar (replacing Rollings), the Giggling Squid restaurant (replacing Strada), the Mad Squirrel Bar (replacing Harry's) provides a measure of encouragement, as does the appearance in a short space of time, of not one but two shops – Stevensons and Beat – selling school uniforms. Meanwhile the café in the new Park House apartment building has opened for business and Tahini, a Turkish fast food 'barbeku' is due to open on the High Street/ Kirkdale Road corner.



More significantly, from a local economy standpoint, Rothamsted Research has established its newly-named Agritech Business Centre to accommodate companies wishing to join the 21 already based on the site. It is increasing floor space from 22,305 sq ft to 35,395 sq ft.

Ron Taylor

Community Safety

During 2018 we saw three police Chief Inspectors. Shane O'Neill retired and Stuart Cheek took over and was later made Head of Domestic Abuse and so Lynda Coates took over. Neighbourhood Inspector Andy Wiseman has replaced Jon Roche who is now Roads Policing Chief Inspector. Police and Crime Commissioner David Lloyd plans to increase the number of officers in Hertfordshire to over 2000.



Police priorities were speeding and anti-social behaviour linked to drugs. Cyber crime and rogue nuisance phone calls increased during the year as did bike thefts and public order, with vehicle crime continuing. Motorists are reminded to always lock their car and keep the key in a safe place with 'clever' (remote control) keys in a shield to stop them being 'read' and duplicated electronically.



Thankfully reductions were seen in damage/arson, down from 44 in January to just six in November, and burglaries down from 23 to 5. Harpenden is still regarded by the police as a relatively safe area. Meanwhile the Neighbourhood Watch OWL scheme has proved helpful to the police on a number of occasions enabling arrests to be made. Visit www.owl.co.uk for information and to join the scheme.

Paul Gardiner