

Annual Report 2017/2018

Looking back - Looking forward

Being a brief account for the Annual General Meeting of The Society's activities during the year 2017/2018 – with a glance ahead to the coming year

An eventful year

During the six-year tenure of my predecessor as chairman Chris Marsden, the Harpenden Society was successful in raising its profile and in promoting numerous initiatives, notably in relation to the Red House redevelopment, the proposed Arts and Cultural Centre and the volunteering scheme for the library – to name just a few.

Our hard-working committee continues to monitor and become actively involved in specific areas of interest in the town, through its established working groups, covering: built environment; community safety; economic activity; environment; health and welfare; and transport.

In 2017 new groups were created to cover, separately, the arts, education and sports, in place of the former single arts and recreation group. The key matters concerning committee members and the Harpenden Society at large have been the Rothamsted Park arts and cultural centre proposals and the consequent need for us to achieve a closer relationship with all the arts/culture related organisations in the town.

Of no less importance among the society's interests are the continuing 'saga' over the health and wellbeing centre proposed for the Red House site as well as the planned Katherine Warington secondary school at Batford, the latter project prompting the creation of a society education working group. The new school is bound to bring additional road traffic challenges for the town, itself an issue of inevitable concern, set against the backdrop of the town council's Neighbourhood Plan (NP) and St Albans District's broader Local Plan.

The Harpenden Society played a significant part in the development of the NP. Several committee members served on the themed working groups involved in its preparation, helping to ensure its positive vision for sensible future development of the town. A set of clear local policies for development is critical given the demands being placed upon

St Albans District as a whole for new housing development, as set out in SADC's Local Plan.

Though the objective to provide the right sort of housing whilst protecting our green spaces and the character of our communities are laudable, there is currently an inbuilt financial incentive for developers in this part of the country to build large high-value – and hence high-profit – residences rather than properties affordable by the sons and daughters of established Harpenden townsfolk. The society is also exerting what pressure it can to ensure that major housing developments include proper accompanying infrastructure by way of road access and utilities provision.

Concerns have in any case been raised in recent months by experienced planners as to whether the numbers of new dwellings requiring to be built by central government is accurate, a clearer distinction needing to be made between 'need' and 'demand'. The society intends to contribute fully to the debate on these issues.

And coming down the track too is the plan by Luton Airport to increase significantly its number of flights and passengers, with all the local implications for aircraft noise and road traffic congestion.

Our new MP Bim Afolomi was guest speaker at the society's Autumn public meeting. Then, in December, we welcomed Rosemary Ross from the local history society, who looked back 80 years to recall the controversial birth pangs of the Public Halls. More recently air quality researcher Ranjeet Sokhi from the University of Hertfordshire spoke about atmospheric pollution issues.

At the society's AGM in April we hope to provide an update on the Red House plans and an extra meeting scheduled for May will give us the chance to hear and comment on the plans for the expansion of Luton Airport.

Phil Waters, *Chairman*

Secretary's Report

2017: a busy and successful year

It has been a successful year for Harpenden Society activities. During 2017 we held six evening meetings in Park Hall, as ever open to the public as well as members. Every meeting was well attended, with lively Q&A audience participation.

Five guest speakers gave their at times controversial views on transport and related issues at our January meeting under the heading of 'Shaping the way we travel'. A packed attendance was treated to an exceptionally vigorous debate on such thorny subjects as traffic congestion and, perhaps most contentious, car parking.

Harpenden's Neighbourhood Plan came under the spotlight at the March public meeting, where town clerk Carl Cheevers said the NP gave residents the opportunity to 'get involved', by completing the questionnaire circulated by the Town Council to 13,500 households in the town and attending one of the associated drop-in sessions.

Guest speaker at the April meeting was Simon Linnett, chairman of Luton & Dunstable University Hospital Trust. He provided reassurance about L&D's ongoing provision of services to Harpenden and surrounding Hertfordshire villages, pointing out that 10% of L&D's income from the NHS was in respect of its service to the population of that Hertfordshire 'enclave'.

Addressing an audience of over 100 of his constituents at a packed September meeting, the town's new MP, Bim Afolami, called for a more strategic approach to planning challenges, rather than the ad hoc process which often resulted from local authority differences.

At the similarly well-attended October meeting, the planning portfolio holder on St Albans District Council, Cllr. Mary Maynard, provided an update on preparation of the council's revised (seemingly no longer 'Strategic') Local Plan.

The Harpenden Society updated its constitution in 2017, enabling it to offer affiliate membership to charity and 'not for profit' organisations. The updated constitution can be found on the Society's website.

Bob Fletcher

Health and Welfare

A continuing healthy outlook

The main focus of the Health and Welfare working group over the past year has continued to be proposals for the Harpenden Memorial Hospital site in Carlton Road, through close involvement with the Red House Forum 'ginger group', which was formed nearly seven years ago. As group leader I am also a member of the Hertfordshire Community Trust (HCT) Red House Project Group, which owns the site and is driving the development.

However, progress is dependent on completion of the final business plan, which is currently awaited. It must show that the project is financially viable, based on the provision of services from the proposed new facility. HCT is due to provide an update at a Harpenden Society evening meeting in April.

Other work of the H&W group has been providing feedback on the NHS Sustainability and Transformation Plans (STP), intended to bring together all the health providers within county areas. Luton & Dunstable Hospital is accordingly working on a proposed administrative merger with Bedford Hospital. At a Harpenden Society meeting in April last year, Simon Linnett, chairman since 2014 of L&D University Hospital Trust, gave an assurance that such changes would not affect the people of Harpenden continuing to be served by the hospital.

John Harris

Arts and Leisure

Boost for Arts & Leisure in prospect

Unsurprisingly, the Harpenden Society's main concerns in the field of arts, leisure and entertainment have focussed on the proposed new Arts and Cultural Centre – or 'Hub' – due to be housed in the shell of the current sports centre building in Rothamsted Park. Following St Albans District Council's initial public consultation process, based on a local residents' 'wish list', the emphasis for the society has been to monitor progress of the design phase and ensure that public feedback was fully taken into account. SADC submitted its planning application in January 2018, several months later than originally planned.

The Society generally supports the proposals and has endeavoured to raise local awareness and engender local approval for the project. To no one's surprise it is likely that the new centre will not be operational as early as had been anticipated and so it is essential that the existing Public Halls are kept fully functional for at least two more years; the Society will argue strongly for this.

It is hoped that when the new Centre is launched there will be many opportunities for the society to support its inauguration and sustain its activities; these opportunities are being identified. It is also intended to encourage discussion among local arts interests regarding the uses to which the new facility might be put and the manner in which people would like to see it run. For now, the current emphasis is on making contact with our future arts leaders and on envisaging how the opportunities provided by the new facility might invigorate Harpenden's arts scene.

Alan Jackson

Built Environment

Wrong sort of homes planned

Planning applications have continued to be monitored over the last year, and objections lodged by the Harpenden Society as felt necessary, notably where it was considered the proposal contravened good planning/design principles or could have adverse effects on the town centre and designated Conservation Area.

Regrettably, much more can now be done within the rules of 'permitted development' set by central government, restricting the scope for objections, even those from local authority planners. Equally concerning, the government has said it is considering further relaxation of rules for home extensions, including loft conversions.

There continues to be an increasing number of applications in Harpenden to demolish an existing dwelling and replace it with two or more units or to unlock a backland site for a larger scheme. Some such proposals have little merit other than the construction of more homes, but in most cases these tend to be larger detached properties, rather than more modest two- or three-bedroom homes – deemed 'affordable' by some criteria – which are badly needed.

Several applications to build new blocks of flats in and around the town centre have been submitted. Whilst these would provide more homes, the society has been concerned that the blocks are disproportionately large for the sites and provide inadequate car parking. Nowadays in Harpenden a single off-road parking space for a large flat is unlikely to be sufficient.

John Lowe/Pauline Waddilove

Society Awards

At last year's Harpenden Society AGM, the primary award for developments completed in 2016 went to Shanly Homes for its Stonehurst Court apartment block at Southdown, immediately adjacent to the Harpenden Trust Centre, on the site of the former (long derelict) Rose & Crown pub. Secondary awards went to the Oddfellows Arms in Amenbury Lane and the Royal British Legion in Leyton Road, both of which had undergone extensive upgrades in appearance and structurally, to the benefit of the townscape.

The aim of our Awards scheme is to recognise and applaud developments which have contributed to the ambience and appearance of Harpenden. They need to be of architectural merit or of historic or other public interest, or which otherwise contribute visually or socially to the locality.

Harpenden Society members and others in the town are invited to suggest what they deem worthy nominations for consideration by the five members of the society's Awards Group. The top Award is the prestigious Harpenden Society Plaque, designed for permanent display attached prominently on the winning building. A Certificate of Merit goes to the runner-up and a Letter of Commendation to other suitable nominations. The Awards are presented at the Harpenden Society AGM.

Penny Ayres

Environment

Pleasant surroundings – a worthwhile aim

Our local environment is arguably under greater threat than ever before, as Harpenden's growing population generates more road traffic emitting an increasing quantity of pollution, to the detriment of air quality. This was spelled out in detail by atmospheric researcher Ranjeet Sokhi, guest speaker at the Society's February meeting.

His analysis included a reference to the harmful emissions attributable to aviation – a salutary reminder of the environmental implications for Harpenden of Luton Airport's plans for expansion, not least in terms of additional aircraft noise, at night as well as during daylight hours. Those plans necessarily also include increases in traffic volumes in the roads feeding the airport.

A gleam of hope in the battle to restrain what has, in recent years, seemed to be an uncontrolled increase in the number of flights in and out of Luton, emerged during the visit by a group of Harpenden residents to the Houses of Parliament hosted by our MP Bim Afolami. In answer to a question put by a constituent during the visit, Mr Afolami indicated that there was now a recognition by central government that Luton Borough Council's position as 'judge and jury' in approving airport expansion was essentially untenable.

On more everyday environmental matters, Harpenden Society members (and their friends and neighbours) are urged to bring to the attention of the relevant authority such issues as overflowing litter bins, blocked drain gratings and neglected and/or unsightly buildings. **NB. Contact details are on the Society web site ; click on Activities, then Environmental Issues**

John Davis

Education

The Society's newly-formed Education Working Group is intended to keep members informed of some of the projects, initiatives and news of interest relating to Harpenden's secondary and primary schools. Monitoring progress on the Katherine Warington school development at Batford is, perhaps inevitably, at the forefront of our deliberations.

Among more everyday issues, one of our main priorities must be for the Society in any way possible to support the schools in their efforts to relieve the huge problem of traffic congestion on the roads around schools at the beginning and the end of the school day. It is a tall order, in the face of issues such as pupil safety and inclement weather, but one that cannot be ignored in the context of Harpenden's manifold transport challenges.

An introductory meeting has taken place with headteachers to explore possible strategies where the Harpenden Society could play a supporting role, by way of publicity for example. Information is being gathered on individual schools' travel plans with a view to helping fulfil Harpenden's Transport and Movement Vision.

Harpenden is served by wonderful schools, and it is the Society's declared resolve to celebrate their academic and other achievements.

Chris Armitage

Community Safety

Remaining vigilant

Though we tend to consider Harpenden 'enjoying' a low crime rate, police statistics for 2017, for the 'Harpenden and Rural' area, show a 14% increase in recorded crime compared with 2016.

A recent article in the Herts Advertiser claimed that criminal activity in St Albans had risen by 26%. The chief inspector nevertheless maintained that high-visibility as well as covert police patrols had been increased and several arrests made leading to convictions. He added that Harpenden was now covered 24/7 by 'uniformed intervention teams' and Safer Neighbourhood team officers.

The often conflicting police data tends to confirm however the view, not just of cynics, that 'there are lies, damned lies and statistics'. Be that as it may, available figures indicate that, per head of population, Harpenden suffers a crime rate about four times greater than St Albans. Those aforementioned cynics might attribute our closer proximity to Luton as a contributing factor.

A spate of recent burglaries in the Roundwood/Wood End has undoubtedly given an unwelcome boost to the crime statistics. Nevertheless a straw poll among residents across the town indicated a wish for the police to prioritise their investigations into speeding and fly-tipping. If you compare the St Albans figures with Harpenden and Rural and adjust for relative population sizes, Harpenden has about four times more crime than St Albans.

Looking forward we should all take note of the advice given by the police to protect our property. We now have a page on the Harpenden Society website offering advice on combatting the main types of crime. To keep up to date sign up to the online watch link (OWL) system at www.owl.co.uk to receive information and advice by email.

Paul Gardiner

Treasurer's Report

In 2017 we had a surplus of income over expenditure amounting to £1,928.01, which is just £40 less than last year and leaves us with an accumulated surplus of £13,919.39. Our income from subscriptions and donations was £4,911.50, down from £5,370 last year. Gift aid was also down from £1,147.75 to £1,066.04. Total income, including a small amount of interest, amounted to £5,979.83, down £544 on last year.

Expenditure amounted to £4,051.82, £504 less than last year. Newsletters are more expensive since we moved to more pages but savings have been made by spending less on public meetings and the AGM spending £787.50 compared to £1,690.05 the previous year. Subscriptions to other societies was up because of a donation to Harpenden Greenbelt Association of £100.

There were several other small fluctuations year on year but the net result means that we have a stable financial position taking us forward.

Harry Downie

Transport

Getting around – no easier!

Hertfordshire's County Transport Plan was launched with a fanfare last year and submitted 'for consultation'. The outcome is awaited, though for Harpenden its impact, by way of any improvements, appears minimal.

On specific issues the Harpenden Hopper local minibus service continues at a low level of patronage, not helped by a suspension of the service early this year, attributed to mechanical problems with the relatively-aged Mercedes vehicle. Nevertheless an expansion of the route to cover residential areas to the south of the town is mooted.

Parking remains the 'big issue'. Streets progressively further away from Harpenden Station, particularly in 'the Avenues' area, are now clogged, from morning to evening on Mondays to Fridays, by commuters' cars. St Albans District Council's 'Car parking working party' has so far shown itself impotent, kicking the issue into the proverbial long grass by that favourite public sector ploy of 'launching a survey!'. Its findings are, unsurprisingly, still awaited.

Meanwhile, the HarPark activist group, supported by the Harpenden Society's Transport Working Group has at least gained the positive attention of our new MP Bim Afolami to HarPark's improvement proposals. Meanwhile Harpenden Town Council abrogates any responsibility on parking issues.

The Harpenden Society has involved itself with bus, train and cycling user groups, reviewing key issues of accessibility, service, pollution and congestion. All those user groups are commendably active. Thameslink's adherence to its published timetables remains subject to spasmodic criticism; a major improvement is promised for May.

Roadworks of one kind or another are made necessary by either road surface degradation or repair/maintenance of utilities. Bad weather may well be the cause – but it should not be the excuse – for the proliferation of recurring potholes throughout Harpenden, in major and minor roads, now awaiting repairs.

Alan Falconer

Publicity /PR

Communicating with our members and the local community requires creative content and images to make an impact in today's world of fast changing news. We achieved this with regular posters and press releases; a stand and a lively competition at Discovery Day on Harpenden Common; news updates on our web site; new display stands to use at our public meetings. (See images below)



THE NEW STRATEGIC LOCAL PLAN
Cllr. Mary Maynard will explain the changes & how it will affect future of Harpenden
Thursday Oct 19



Public Meeting
7.30 pm Reception
8.00 pm Start
Thursday Oct 19
Park Hall, Leyton Road
Harpenden



PressRelease;
The Harpenden Society Public Meeting Sept 21. 2017

Ron Taylor

ideas on stimulating new member recruitment would be more than welcome.

After two years as membership secretary – on an enthusiastic and caring Harpenden Society committee – it is gratifying to know we are working with the same aim. We are striving to help make the town's wider population aware of the many changes confronting us all and of ways they can play a part in influencing those changes for the better, not only for ourselves but for future generations.

Meanwhile, heartfelt thanks are due to our small army of committed newsletter deliverers who, four times a year, in rain or shine, ensure its distribution through members' letterboxes. Without their dedication we would be faced with formidable postage costs.

The Society's committee and its dozen working groups remain optimistic about our continuing activity in 2018 and beyond.

Jan Smith

Membership

Still striving for that 'magic' thousand membership

This year our recorded membership has dropped by fifteen to 964. Some people who have left Harpenden have not renewed their membership, though others continue to support us 'from a distance'. Needless to say, we welcome all those members who have joined the society in the last year or so, their interest undoubtedly stimulated in many instances by our involvement in proposals for the new sports and culture hub in Rothamsted Park and for the Red House site.

Meanwhile others, typically society members of very long standing, have sadly passed away. We nevertheless keep our eyes on the so-far elusive 1000 member target, which from a town with a population of some 30,000 must be a realistic ambition, even amongst those with already busy lives. Any

Please note that this is your official notice that the 2018 Annual General Meeting of The Harpenden Society will take place as part of it's general meeting to be held at 7.30 for 8.00 pm on Thursday 19 April 2018 at Rothamsted Conference Centre.