

# ANTAS

ASSOCIATION OF NORTH THAMES AMENITY SOCIETIES

## Positive Public Participation in Planning

Penelope Tollitt, Head of Urban Design at Wycombe District Council, speaks to Antas

Without doubt, the high spot of the Spring meeting was the talk by Penelope Tollitt, Head of Urban Design at Wycombe District Council, alliteratively entitled "Positive Public Participation in Planning – What, Why and How?" Penelope had been identified by your Hon. Sec. as a possible contributor to one of our meetings on the basis of High Wycombe Society reports suggesting that WDC takes participation more

seriously and genuinely than some other councils one could mention. After the talk, that was confirmed by a series of questions from the floor along the line of, "Can we have one of you, too?"

Penelope started from high principles – the Anglo-Saxon tradition that the king ruled with the consent of the barons, Thomas Paine and "The Rights of Man" (and Delacroix's art), the American

Declaration of Independence, universal male suffrage in 1918 and universal female suffrage in 1928; and more recently the "velvet revolutions" in Prague, Kiev and elsewhere. Participation, she said, was crucial to democracy. You couldn't have democracy without it, and it was vital that everybody absorbed the concept of stewardship for the public realm.

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# NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2005

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Coming back to our ordinary world, Penelope reminded us that government policy is now referred to as the “new localism”, and local planning must now be backed up by a “Statement of Community Involvement” (SCI). This required a considerable culture change on the part of planning authorities, who could argue that (a) it was all too difficult for the public to understand, (b) it threatened the role of elected councillors and the proper democratic processes, and (c) the resources for participation were not available.

One by one, Penelope dismantled each of these objections. She noted that even the Government tends to be ambivalent on whether ordinary citizens could know what was good for them but that was no reason not to seek their input. She described an ideal 5-rung “ladder of participation”, first information, then consultation, then participation, partnership and delegation. How far one should follow this ladder depended on the case. With that she moved on to a series of examples. She was underwhelmed by SEERA’s “You Shout” exercise – even the title, she said, was offensive because it encouraged confrontational thinking, not empathy and participation. And the questionnaire was a narrow approach with narrow questions. If SEERA really wanted public input, then perhaps a more effective approach would be the much-maligned focus groups to smoke out the

questions as well as the answers.

Penelope then gave us a first-hand account of two exercises in Wycombe in which she had played a key role – the Local Development Framework and then the more specific “backlands” policy. Workshops to set the agenda were vital (and well-received). Working tables served both to separate people and to bring them together. There was really no alternative to notice boards and “Post-It®” stickers to find out what people were really concerned about. A successful meeting hardly ever followed a pre-set agenda – if it was not chaotic, it was probably not effective consultation! After the meeting (or before any follow-up meeting) it was important that the stickers were properly typed up and tabulated, and flip-charts reproduced.

Finally, our speaker quickly referred to Village Design Statements. These were not straightforward because participants needed to “become good planners” if a VDS was to be adopted as “Supplementary Planning Guidance”. Also, there could be real conflicts of economic interest between neighbours, coupled with an unwillingness to upset one another.

After all too short a time for questions, Peter Diplock delivered a well-deserved vote of thanks, and we adjourned to tuck into the delicious victuals supplied by our hosts, the Amersham Society. •

*(Continued from page 3)*

comments to Guildford by hand. Other speakers thought it had been a deplorably run exercise – no printed copies seemed to have been available to those unwilling to pay £30, and it was unreasonable to expect people to print a 170pp document from the Internet. There had been no attempt to hold events that were open to the general public. The figures in the ‘My Shout’ leaflet were misleading in failing to separately identify the needs of the indigenous South-East population. The Chiltern Society noted perceptively that the problem with regional planning in the ANTAS area was that the government insisted on regarding the South-East as the ‘development engine’ of the national economy. That was what caused the big numbers for housing etc.

Finally we heard the usual variety of offerings from individual societies which have become part of ANTAS’s *raison d’être*. A memorable moment was when the Radlett Solciety waved an extract from a Middle East newspaper by ‘UK Land Investments’ offering small plots of ‘building’ land for 1,400 homes near Radlett (see their astonishingly rose-tinted website at [www.uklandinvestments.com](http://www.uklandinvestments.com)). By the time this newsletter is issued, we hope we shall have been able to post some of these round-ups at [www.antas.org.uk](http://www.antas.org.uk).

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*Penelope's paper was a joy - if only all senior planners had her insight*

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## The flowers that bloom in the Spring, boom, boom!

The Spring 2005 meeting was held at the Market Hall in Old Amersham. Many of us have driven past that eye-catching historic building in Amersham High Street. Now was our chance to see inside what Martin Brooks, of the Amersham Society, told us was just one of no fewer than 170 listed buildings in the one street. A current issue for the Amersham Society, he told us, was the new licensing laws. There was already disorder at closing time and one pub had sought an extension which would defer that to 1am. Anyone thinking of arguing that surely Amersham is too genteel for that was quickly brought down to earth by the frequent pounding of subwoofers from noisy passing cars – on a Saturday morning. Transport and parking were major issues (as everywhere). There was an issue over disabled access to the Market Hall. (If you want to see how such work can be done while respecting the ancient fabric, come to High Wycombe's Guildhall – CMW).

Peter Diplock, in his chairman's report, said ANTAS was about sharing and supporting. If member societies needed the Association's help on particular issues, they should ask the Hon Sec. ANTAS ought to respond authoritatively to major public consultations, but that depended on getting member societies' contributions. He referred to his work as a Trustee of the Civic Trust. The recent

CT-East Midlands meeting had fewer participants than today's ANTAS meeting. A large chunk of CT's subscriptions now goes to its regional associations, and societies should get involved. Much of CT's grants were ring-fenced for particular work, such as the effects of the 'night-time economy'. Societies should

*Chris Woodman, High Wycombe*

been identified by transferring printing to a firm in Knebworth, which should avoid a rise in subscriptions. After reflection, the Committee had decided against a full-scale switch to electronic distribution, because although it would save money, the people we



pass around their copies of Civic Focus, and the new CT email newsletter should be freely forwarded to individual Society members. Lastly, Peter (now living in Rutland for several years) warned that he was determined to stand down as chairman at the next AGM!

Andrew Sangster, as Hon Sec, presented a revised Treasurer's report for 2003/04 and reported that a huge saving on the colour newsletter's costs had

sought to influence would be less likely to read it.

There followed the usual review by the Hon Sec. and exchanges on recent planning consultations. Brian Horsley (CTSE) bemoaned the fact that he had received no input from societies 'north of Winchester!' about the South-East Plan, but it was pointed out that the time for comment had been very short – the Chiltern Society had delivered their

*(Continued on page 2)*

Summaries of society reports, reproduced in full on the website, [www.antas.org.uk](http://www.antas.org.uk)

**Wendover Society**

*Oliver Statham*

We are still tackling proposals to build on the former Princess Mary's Hospital site adjoining RAF Halton. An Inquiry, twin track new applications, and threat of a second Public Inquiry the Council could not afford, meant councillors can not speak as they might wish about a legitimate concern for fear of the costs of possible litigation. The Society's legal advisor may seek a judicial review.

**Hitcham and Taplow Preservation Society**

*Eva Lipman*

We are working with the Parish Council preparing for the Inquiry on the Appeal by the National Trust against the rejection of their Planning Application for 191 dwellings on the Canadian Red Cross Hospital site at Cliveden, scheduled for August. The NT now propose 170 free market units.

The Society is concerned about the profound implications of the South East Plan and the effect of increasing regionalisation powers. We are worried at the lack of publicity and information on the deadline for public comment on the draft.

**Aylesbury Society**

*Roger King, Hon Secretary*

The former Nestle factory failed to be listed by English Heritage and the Victorian buildings were demolished while the mod-

ern factory eyesore still stands. The Development Control Manager of Aylesbury Vale District Council told Fairview Homes - you sought to justify development rather than to evaluate options in line with the Council's guidelines which encouraged retaining and converting the Victorian factory and canal side wharf building. Fairview Homes showed contempt for the council, conservation and people.

On a more positive note our bi-annual Good Design Award was won by new cottages on a brown field site in a conservation area. By continuing this award we hope developers will think about the structure they are either converting or building.

**Marlow Society**

*Ron Waters, Chairman*

We have consulted with John Lewis and Waitrose on the proposed 25,000 sq.ft food store in the town centre conservation area. We object to the design, parking and traffic provision. We contributed to the Thames Waterway Plan being prepared by the Environment Agency and developed links with others involved with the river, the Thames Path and its environs. These contacts will help form a comprehensive policy for the Thames corridor along which a multiplicity of authorities exercise different controls.

Although short of active people, we have a sustained membership of nearly six hundred.

**Buckingham Society**

*David Peevers, Chairman*

We are raising our profile so that members and non-members can see what we do and join in. We have been represented on local and district forums such as the Aylesbury Vale District Council led committee working on the next local plan, Vision 2031. As a result our press coverage has increased and more people now know of the Society and our work.

**Potters Bar Society**

*Tim Field*

We led a protest against threatened closure of the Citizens Advice Bureau service and orchestrated objections to an expansion of the green waste disposal facility.

**Hitchin Society Report**

*John Davies*

There is now a realistic prospect of the failed 1969 Churchgate shopping precinct being demolished and replaced by something more appropriate - but what? Resignation or retirement of key committee members forced an expensive leafletting effort which happily led to new members who are already contributing to a stronger and re-invigorated society.

**High Wycombe Society**

*Chris Woodman*

The Demand Responsive Transport bus services that we chivvied the County Council into intro-

ducing three years ago, are successful but at the Inquiry into the Handy Cross motorway roundabout improvements, we did not get better provision for cyclists or pedestrians. £1m for safe tunnels was not forthcoming.

The application for the £500m Town Centre Redevelopment originally likened to 'Eastern Europe in the 1950s' has now succeeded following design improvements. It is helpful to have the District Council themselves urging developers to consult with us.

We are trying to preserve the ancient, pasture-like character of our unique open space, the Rye.

**Hughenden Valley Residents' Association**

*Dory Morgan*

Wycombe District Council has served a Compulsory Purchase Order on the land subject to a building plot sales scam at Cryers Hill. This is the first time a local authority has had the courage to test the legislation as recommended by the ODPM. The land would be purchased at current agricultural prices, far less than the individual plot owners paid - there could be a battle. This is an ideal test case; WDC would purchase the land and then sell it on to the National Trust. Local authorities can Compulsory Purchase on behalf of a recognized conservation group who would ultimately fund the purchase, eg. the National Trust. •

## Backland and Infill Development

*Trevor Carter, High Wycombe Society*

This phrase describes new housing built in large gardens behind and beside existing houses. Such planning applications are growing, particularly in the Cressex area of High Wycombe, exacerbated in 2003 by the publication of the Bucks County Council Housing Potential Study. In assessing the potential for all forms of housing, it included a map showing what were considered to be all viable sites for backland development.

The Wycombe District Local Plan (Appendix 1) sets out a few rules and preferences for backland developments but public disquiet indicated these were not working adequately. Late last year the Urban Design division of Wycombe District Council held two workshop meetings with Cressex residents to determine their views before developing a formal policy to control such development

At the first workshop, attended by over 100 residents, lively discussions showed strong neighbourhood tension between those broadly in favour (who believe that they should be able to do as they wish with their property) and those who have chosen to live in the area because of the large gardens and do not want

change. The various issues were drawn together under eleven headings. Topping the list were-

- Increased traffic (noise, congestion, pollution)
- Invasion of privacy (overlooking, reduced security for those by the access road)

Other headings included – overload of services and infrastructure, quality of life, loss of trees and wildlife habitat and devaluation of remaining properties.

One concern was fear of the pressurised selling techniques used by some developers and provided reassurance by explaining that Compulsory Purchase Orders can only be issued by the Council, not by private developers and confirmed that they are not pursuing CPOs for backland development.

At the second workshop those present were offered six 'Future Options'

- Status quo (no additional guidance from WDC, leave the current ad-hoc situation)
- Resist (do not have any development)
- 'Rear street' (insert a new street to the rear of existing properties with new houses backing onto existing houses)
- New street frontage and courtyards (involves knocking down existing houses and replacing them with new 'courtyard' style development that builds to the rear as well as at the front)
- Frontage development (knock down existing houses, and redevelop the frontage with nothing to rear)

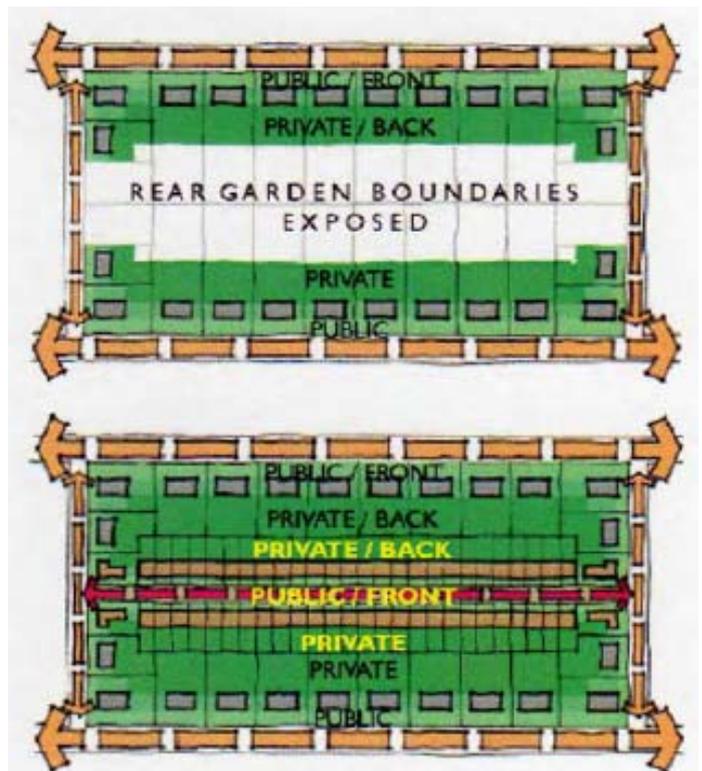
- Mixed uses at neighbourhood centres (eg. houses over shops etc)

These were scored against the eleven issues (0 for no effect to 3 for horrendous). The result showed an almost unanimous desire for no backland development. This is at odds with current Government guidelines, and also not consistent with the first workshop, where there were more people willing to consider redevelopment.

Wycombe District Council is now formulating Housing Intensification Design Advice, which will become part of the Local Development Framework to guide developers in what is likely to be acceptable. As a first stage it will test the six options above against sustainability criteria. It has issued a scoping report inviting comments on the sustainability criteria

to be used and the Planning Group of the High Wycombe Society suggested one.

The draft of the Design Advice should be released in early summer and the final version will be adopted by the Council in December. It will be interesting to then see how effective it is in controlling housing intensification in a manner acceptable to most existing residents. •



## The Countryside in and Around Towns

Andrew Sangster

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*A matter of concern in recent government documents is the switch in emphasis in the definition of 'sustainability' from maintenance and enhancement of the environment for the enjoyment of future generations to one of delivering economic and social aspirations, with the environment apparently a poor third.*

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Following publication of Defra's Rural Strategy in July 2004 the role of the Countryside Agency is changing. In future it will become 'a distinctive new body to act as a rural advocate, expert adviser and independent watchdog, with a particular focus on disadvantage'. Its current socio-economic functions will be transferred to the Regional Development Agencies and Defra. As a precursor to its new role it has recently published, in conjunction with Groundwork, a guidance document 'The countryside in and around towns. A vision for connecting town and country in the pursuit of sustainable development' (copies were available at the recent ANTAS meeting, but further copies can be obtained from Countryside Agency Publications, tel. 08701 206 466 [www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)). In the foreword it notes that 'As a nation we aspire to sustainable development and to a high quality of life for all our citizens. Given the huge pressures on our land and environmental resources, we cannot afford to overlook the potential contribution of any part of our country to achieving those goals. ...The land in question provides towns and cities with their immediate landscape setting. It also represents a dynamic and complex set of environments and a wonderfully eclectic mix of land uses and habitats. It is this dynamism and variety, plus its pivotal role in

linking town and country, that makes the countryside in and around towns ideally suited to demonstrating sustainable development'. This document links its 'vision' with the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan, which includes the provision of 200,000 new homes in South-East England with many likely to be sited on the fringes of existing settlements. One particular matter of concern in recent government documents is the switch in emphasis in the definition of 'sustainability' from maintenance and enhancement of the environment for the enjoyment of future generations to one of delivering economic and social aspirations, with the environment apparently a poor third.

Regional Plans will require local authorities to consider the use of land around settlements. As an example, Policy SS8 in the draft East of England Plan on 'land in the urban fringe' states:

'Local development documents will:

- Ensure that new development contributes to enhancing the character, appearance, recreational and biodiversity value of the urban fringe
- Seek to provide connected networks of accessible green space linking urban areas with the countryside
- Set targets for the provision of green space for planned urban extensions.

All of this suggests that civic societies should consider, in advance of their participation in the preparation of the Local Development Framework, how the land surrounding and penetrating their settlements should be protected for public benefit, and what management might be needed to achieve any objectives.

By chance, Hertford Civic Society has recently published a new version of its Green Fingers Study. The original 1976 document set out to raise awareness of the value of the five fingers of undeveloped land penetrating to the heart of the town with a view to gaining protection under the policies of what was then called The District Plan. The new version not only significantly expands the boundaries of the fingers beyond the edge of the town, but identifies the ecological assets present and considers the future 'management' of these areas for protection and enhancement of the assets, whilst ensuring public access for their appreciation and other forms of leisure. Extracts, including the Summary, Introduction, Overview and Summary of Recommendations will be posted on the ANTAS web site. Copies of the full document, complete with illustrations and maps, are available from the Secretary at the 'members rate' of £8 plus postage. •

## The Chairman Writes

Peter Diplock

I want to take the opportunity in what should be my last Newsletter contribution as Chairman to reiterate some key aspects about the role of ANTAS. ANTAS provides an excellent forum for people to get together to share experiences and problems. In this way, hopefully, some successes can be applied elsewhere and some problems can be resolved. The reports at our recent meeting show how this continues to work well. I was very pleased to see so many of our member societies present and the constant 'buzz' of discussion – I think that the lunch format provides an excellent forum after the main meeting. The recommendation from the High Wycombe Society to have Penelope Tollitt as our main speaker was an excellent choice, and of benefit to everyone present.

ANTAS must continue to support issues on behalf of our member societies – a much stronger voice than that of just one society. We must also find a way to continue to respond to consultation documents so, once again the views of member societies in Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire are heard.

Another contribution in this Newsletter that is to be applauded is the introduction of a young member to the Buntingford Civic Society Committee. Let us hope that other societies are able to follow this example.



## Chiltern Society

Geoffrey Legge, Planning Coordinator

We are celebrating our 40th Anniversary this year and the Chilterns, including the AONB, face greater threats to their special 'sense of place' than ever before.

recreational environment and many historic country towns. We have urged consideration of sub-regional status for the wider Chilterns which we

sponding to the consultations and the Society has made detailed responses to all three authorities and encouraged our members to do so.

The East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) who cover the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Chilterns, the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) covering Buckinghamshire and South Oxford Chilterns, and the Milton Keynes South Midlands (MKSM) have put forward development proposals for the next 16 and 25 years which have been subject to consultation. Whilst all promise to protect greenbelt and AONB, some of the one million plus houses proposed will either be built on these 'protected' areas or around their boundaries, exerting pressure on their socially important



cover, to both regional offices.

The Society sponsored two open meetings, in Berkhamsted with Dacorum DC to discuss EERA's plans and in Beaconsfield with Bucks CC covering SEERA's plans. CPRE Area Chairman spoke and the level of public anxiety was uniformly high regarding the unsustainability of proposals and the lack of assurances on infrastructure funding. It is clear that local authorities share these concerns. Speakers emphasised the importance of everyone re-

Our chairman in opening the meetings said, 'The Society, like many others at that time, was founded when it was difficult to get the ear of planning authorities. The gap between local people and government generally was a major issue. Over the years since, there have been enormous changes for the better as a result of all our efforts. Now many of us have the feeling that we are reverting to those really bad old days. The difference is that nowadays, local authorities and local people are talking to each other and finding common cause in trying to find a solution to the irreversible depredation of the Chil-

terns. Our Hills are a least one million years old, we do not wish thousands of years of globally unique geographical evolution to be buried by unnecessary development forced upon them for any reason'.

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## Young Talent Realised

*Derek K Cooper, Buntingford Civic Society*

The awfulness of the East of England Plan and the arrival of a new headteacher at Freman College with an exciting vision for the College and closer relationships with the town encouraged me to develop an idea which seemed to have some chance of success.

Most of us have anguished over "where is the next generation of activists who will care for the community, who will conserve the best of the past and aid in the development of the future?" There is no quick-fix answer. The pressures on young people and couples establishing their lives together are by common consent more demanding than not so many years ago.

Buntingford Civic Society proposed to the Headteacher of Freman College that if a sixth-form student who broadly met our "person specification" and was sufficiently interested, the Society would welcome that student as an "associate committee member".

Kathryn was attracted by the idea and more than met our specification. She lives in Buntingford, is highly articulate and studying issues relating to the environment and is at ease with computers. For our part, we ensure that assignments offered to Kathryn are not onerous and under no circumstances compete with her studies.

Has it worked out? Our associate committee member is a real asset.



Kathryn

She hears about things which we would never have had an inkling of. Her friends tell her that developments near their homes are impacting in ways that we would have been unlikely to learn.

Over a few short months Kathryn is increasingly raising her voice at committee meetings as she gains insight to issues. Currently, Kathryn is working with an executive committee member to adapt the English Heritage programme "Save our Streets" for our rural situation.

A really encouraging result of this initiative is the request by Kathryn's tutor that she gives a presentation at assembly on the role of Civic Societies and her involvement with Buntingford Civic Society.

Are the seeds being sown? Only time will tell.

We announce with regret, the death of vice president Anthony Wethered, founding secretary of ANTAS. His foresight and guidance will be missed but we hope his wife Diana will continue their involvement. An obituary will be included in the next edition