

ANTAS

ASSOCIATION OF NORTH THAMES AMENITY SOCIETIES

AGM



Harpenden



The AGM was opened by Ian Fulton. He described Harpenden as a commuter town, recently grown from 10,000 to 30,000 houses. It began as an agricultural settlement and is still



NEWSLETTER WINTER 2004

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surrounded by countryside. Many buildings are listed and the whole town centre is a conservation area. Still thought of by many as 'the village', Harpenden has an international reputation due to the excellence of the Rothamsted Experimental Station, the world's first agricultural research station which started with an experiment in 1843 and is

still progressing.

The Harpenden Society (now in its 75th year) has difficulty recruiting new active members. It is important for any amenity society not to be seen as 'fuddy duddy' and current concern over development in the South East should be dealt with constructively.

It was a relief to find that the existing office bearers were willing to stand again, see back cover for details. The only disappointment was that Anthony Wethered and Diana were not at the meeting for the first time ever. Anthony has been diagnosed with motor neurone disease but he is keeping a keen interest in our activities.

the Regional Planning Group, then by the RA itself. This process will decide whether the recommendations of the Study Groups will be accepted, rejected or modified.

The RA has also prepared the Integrated Regional Strategy which consists of a set of objectives in support of the policies in the SEP. The SEP is backed by statute.

The RA has also created a myriad of advisory and other groups to help in formulating policy for inclusion in the Strategies. I am a member of the Housing Advisory Group.

South East England Development Agency

The South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) is responsible for implementing the RES [Regional Economic Strategy]. SEEDA's purpose is to see that there is growth in the Region in accordance with the laid down policy. They are charged with doing this in a manner that is sustainable and improves the quality of life. SEEDA is already involved in some very large schemes such as Chatham Maritime. SEEDA is not dependent on whether the RA is elected or not.

County, Unitary and District Councils

These bodies provide, by nomination from among their elected representatives, the bulk of the RA members. Their future detailed functions are in doubt but the things they already deal with will have to be done by someone. In the present situation County Councils are taking a lead in the SRS [Sub-Regional Studies] which will require

implementation and monitoring after the issue of the SEP [South East Plan]. There is provision for the County Structure Plans to be continued for some years, a period that will vary from County to County.

It appears that the Local Plans will still be prepared by the District Councils, with the help of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP), Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and Community Frameworks. These represent the best chance for the general public to take part in the process. This needs to be done through the County, Unitary and District Councils, probably by telephone. Time is short and opportunities are reducing.

RAISE [Regional Action & Involvement in the South East]

This is a body which was set up to represent voluntary groups in Regional matters. Any civic society would be eligible to join RAISE and it is free. RAISE provides members, at the request of the RA, to their various working groups. For instance I represent them on two SRS.

SEFS [South East Forum for Sustainability]

SEFS is similar to RAISE but has a more limited viewpoint. Its remit, whilst expressing an opinion on all matters, should have particular reference to seeing that the solutions are sustainable. Again any civic society can join but, depending on size, it could cost £25 or more. SEFS also provide members of working groups in the same way as RAISE. I am on their Committee and represented them at the Evi-

dence in Public on the Regional Waste Strategy.

Other Relevant Regional Bodies

Environment Agency
Countryside Agency, or its replacement.
South East Historic Environment Forum (English Heritage)
South East Rural Towns Forum
Regional Water Resources Forum
South East Climate Change Partnership
Forestry Framework
I have attended meetings organised by all these groups. Some are more active than others.

Conclusion

This is how I understand what the system is about. I hope I have shown how a knowledge of these matters is necessary.

If you would like more information or to see how you can become more involved please either telephone 01243 778370 or email brianhorsley.t21@btinternet.com I commend to you the opportunities I have outlined for joining LSP, LDF, RAISE and SEFS.

Finally the consultation period for the SEP, which covers the period to 2026, will be from mid-January to mid-April, 2005. More information and how you can participate can be obtained from the RA on telephone number 01483 555200.

Note: I have spent a great deal of time in the last two years gaining information, on behalf of civic societies, on the workings of Regional Government. I believe that any errors in my analysis are minor and do not affect matters of principle. •

(Continued from page 3)
gional Spatial Strategy), which will incorporate policy on 'regional spatial strategy' which used to be incorporated in Regional Planning Guidance. Many consultation meetings have been held all over the Region since Spring this year. Most elements, eg. Housing, are covered in the SEP but some Strategies, such as the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) and the Regional Transport Strategy, are separate, although mentioned in the SEP.

Another new element introduced in the SEP is Sub-Regional Studies (SRS). These are intended to cover areas with special requirements, such as the Kent Thames Gateway, which is that part of the Thames Gateway which is in the South East. SRSs are not specifically related to local authority boundaries but in total, they cover most of the built up areas in the Region. There were originally nine SRSs. They are currently being completed in a time-scale so short that some information on which they should be based, is not yet available. They will be considered by a Committee of the RA -

Understanding Regional Assemblies

We were fortunate to have at the meeting Brian Horsley, the chairman of the CTSE (the association of civic societies in the South East, the group set up by the Civic Trust to monitor the activities of the Regional Assembly for the South East of England). He provided the following explanation to give ANTAS members a clearer idea of what the system is about.

A Personal View as to How Regional Government Functions in the South East

Brian H. Horsley, Chairman, Civic Trust South East

Introduction

From discussions with members of civic societies it is clear there is little knowledge as to how Regional Government in the South East functions. It is important that it is better understood, eg. at this moment Regional Government is drawing up plans to organise much of our lives up to 2026.

A misconception needs to be cleared away, as was perpetuated in the referendum in the North East Region where the media implied the decision was whether or not to have an additional layer of government. Neither side makes clear that the only alternative on offer is not about Regional Government, it is whether to have an elected Regional Assembly. Whatever the result of a referendum, Regional Government already exists and is here to stay. This is also true in the South East.

It is important that this is understood otherwise effort can be wasted trying to make Regional Government disappear. Effort would be better employed in trying to get the system improved. To help explain this point of view I will explain the elements in more detail. I hope that this will make clear that each element will continue to function whether the Regional Assembly is elected or not.

Government of the South East

This was the first regional organisation to be created and is the local branch of Whitehall. It is there to liaise between Whitehall and the Regional Assembly (RA) and to see that proper account is taken of central government requirements and policies.

Regional Assembly

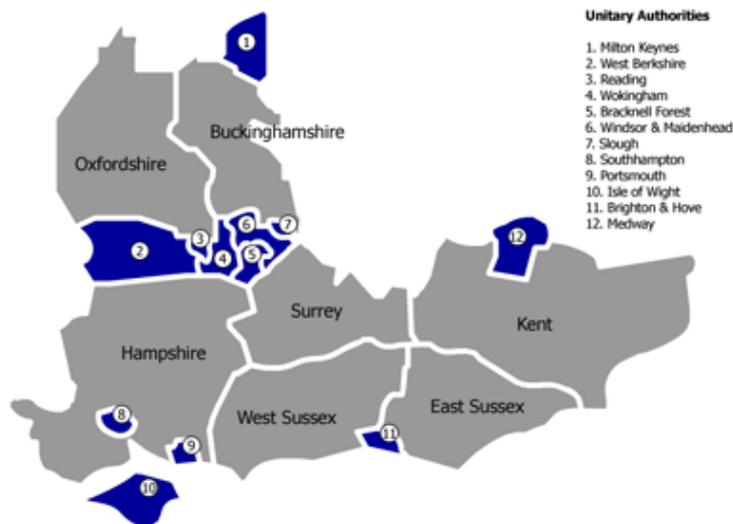
The unelected RA consists of 111 members. Of these about 100 are appointed by the elected County, Unitary and District Councils. The rest are allocated to the voluntary sector. Seven are from Regional Action and Involvement in the South East (RAISE), three by the South East Forum for Sustainability (SEFS) and the remainder are appointed by such as the faith groups.

Should a future referendum decide the RA be elected, it will have 35 members, presumably elected in a similar manner to MEPs. There would be no direct representation of the voluntary groups.

Whilst it is deplorable and anti-democratic that a large and increasing part of our local rule is by an unelected body, there are dangers in the directly elected version. We cannot

expect voluntary groups such as ANTAS or CTSE to be represented on an elected assembly because they are not elected. However such voluntary groups should be given a role which is properly funded. In my view the main danger of elected assemblies is their small size in relation to the functions they will need to carry out. There is a tendency for the whole decision making process, that is the collecting of information and the making of recommendations, to be concentrated in the hands of the Secretariat, with the members merely rubber stamping.

The current function of the RA is to put together the



framework for the local governance of the Region, currently up to 2026. The main element in this is the South East Plan (SEP - this used to be called the Re-

(Continued on page 2)

Society reports are reproduced in full on the website, www.antas.org.uk but summaries appear here

Wendover report

Oliver Statham

Wendover might have to go through the whole expense of another inquiry into over-development of the redundant Ministry of Defence Estates (MoD) Princess Mary's Hospital site.

Another concern is the proposed development of RAF Halton's grass airfield. Intrusive noise pollution from tug launched gliders, Grobs (powered gliders) and a plethora of light aeroplanes now assails, seven days a week. Concern for Halton Airspace Safety and the Environment – CHASE, has been formed to seek a reversal of the Air Ministry's decision to make Halton Airfield the RAF's centre for recreational flying. •

St Albans report

Eric Roberts

St Albans proudly reported that the average age of their committee members is younger than the average age of their membership, which remains at around 500 members despite natural wastage.

Despite the successes, the St Albans Society is fearful over the future of the evening/night economy problems of deregulation of the licensing industry and 24 hour drinking (vandalism, violence, vomit) added to loss of A1 retail to yet more A3 eating and drinking. They are becoming a beleaguered city up against some huge developments.

ANTAS views are sought on a society's liability with regard to making strong criticisms of proposals.

Could a developer sue? Are societies likely to be gagged by developers?

Hitchin report

John Davies

The Council's massive Town Centre Strategy for Hitchin has been controversial, objected to by the Hitchin Society because it incorporated Churchgate (a failed 1960s shopping centre), the market, and car parks, and surrounding Hitchin's finest building, St Mary's Church. After three years of public opposition the Council has agreed to break down the site into its component parts.

West of Stevenage is now just a small part of the 478,000 houses required to be built to the East of England by 2021. The Public Inquiry will not produce a decision until late 2005 or early 2006. By then, with increasing challenges against regional housing targets on environmental grounds, and the usual cabinet changes, the outcome is far from certain. •

High Wycombe

Frances Presland

Wycombe is concerned about backlands development, however their new planner is keen on consultation and considering options of infill such as courtyards off the main road, which could be worked up into Supplementary Planning guidance. •

Hitcham & Taplow

Eva Lipman

The National Trust ignoring protests from other organizations such as the Chil-

tern Society, persists with its intention to build houses on the green belt. If permission is granted the NT threaten to develop other land they own in Britain.

The Society is still concerned about inappropriate planning applications for developments near the river Thames and urges an overall policy for the area adjacent to the A4.

The Society again organised the annual village green party in June, which despite poor weather, attracted around 350 people and raised over £500. •

Hertford

Hertford Society is concerned that its town-centre will be overwhelmed by changes to A3 use. East Herts DC thought there was a defined mechanism for controlling the number of changes permitted, but beyond the policies in the Local Plan, no such mechanism exists. Determination of these planning applications relies on the judgement of a single development control officer.

The Society drew our attention to the Rural Urban Fringe consultation document and recommend societies check the Local Plan puts in place measures to consider alternative uses to farming. The Countryside Agency, in conjunction with Groundwork UK, is developing a new vision for the rural urban fringe, to capture its full environmental, social and economic potential. www.countryside.gov.uk/WhoWeAreAndWhatWeDo/homepage_urbanfringe.asp. •

Deregulation of the licensing industry - vandalism, violence, and vomit

Society reports cont'd

Harpenden

John Hunt

Harpenden Society warnings about car park access were ignored. Now there is the ludicrous position where the access ramp for cars cannot be used by pedestrians because it is too steep for wheel-chair users. Is a wheel-chair user a pedestrian or a vehicle? •

Chesham Society

David Carter

The Society is concerned about the effect of projected changes in population and demographic profile. They have pre-empted the planners with their own Vision For Chesham, a redevelopment of the town

centre to create optimum-sized retail units, parking and 300+ dwellings.

They are involved in a market town health check survey, funded by government (renamed to be more acceptable as Community Vision). The donkey-work seems to fall on the shoulders of Chesham Society members. •

Buckingham

Carolyn Cumming

The Society is faced with a 'change of use' application on the outskirts of the town. Modern huge shops with acres of floor space, car parking and corporate images are inappropriate for a traditional historic market town which needs shops in the centre. •

Aylesbury

The cafe culture and Evening & Late Night Economies concern Aylesbury with reference to the new Kingsbury project. The Society is worried about binge drinking and drunks.

The Civic Trust has researched the late night economy with a grant from the ODPM and sponsored by others, see the report on www.civictrust.org.uk/evening/introduction.shtml. Concerns about drinking and violence might spur discussion on the Antas website. Hostelries should be responsible for the condition and behaviour of their customers after they leave the premises.

Discussion Groups

Working with the Local Planning Authority Officers and Councillors

Carolyn Cumming summed up three pointers to success:

Professional Approach

Know the art of the possible, the impossible and the wisdom to tell the difference! By which misquote, I sum up our group's discussion on the importance of familiarity with and accurate use of the planning system. We are all having to relearn some of the new jargon (for example Local Delivery Frameworks, Regional Spatial Strategies) but the system will continue to be based on Government Planning Policies and their influence on the District Council's Plan. Arguments and objections must refer to these legal and authoritative statements if they – and you – are to be taken seriously. Intelligent use of available policies will win trust and make an ally in the Council Chamber.

Personal Contact

Do not rely on written contact alone. Try to make face to face contact as often as is practicable. Invite Members and/or Officers to an event, a workshop, or a meeting and try to include a friendly 'social' element at the end. It can often be a general conversation over a glass of wine that sparks a rewarding idea. Telephoning a Case Officer or your Councillor (particularly if you have met them) can often reveal relevant information that written communication would either avoid, or fail to grasp.

Awards and Commendations

Several Societies run Design Awards, whereby a

plaque or similar physical emblem is awarded to a successful scheme. As well as creating a permanent awareness of what civic societies do, an award presentation creates an occasion which can be used for publicity. The latter does not always have to focus on the excellent. The occasion could be used to point the finger of shame at eyesores and mistakes and to make constructive criticism. But also to make the point that, to win an award, the scheme in question should make an overall positive contribution to its setting.

The aim throughout is to present your society as an approachable, serious, professional body who have the well-being of the community at heart. •

At the AGM a new format of discussion groups or working parties was tried and proved popular and productive. The knowledge and expertise of people in the hall was once again demonstrated and shared by others. Five topics were discussed and the summaries start here.

Attracting new members to represent a balance of local residents and interests

How to attract new younger members and others to give a balanced cross section of local people. The first comment was that being young is a state of mind; what is needed are new faces with fresh ideas irrespective of age. It was however acknowledged that civic societies must be more representative if they are to retain credibility with councils and government sponsored organisations.

It is important that societies' publicity should be placed in locations that younger people use; surgeries and crèches were examples given. It is also possible for societies to create opportunities for appealing to younger people through projects of wider interest. The example was given of a mill res-

toration project (High Wycombe Society) which attracts younger visitors and can lead to membership.

Traditionally, local 'big issues' should provide an opportunity for recruitment on a wider basis, although such events can also lead to people setting up separate, single-issue campaigning organisations. Societies therefore need to act quickly and effectively to take advantage of such opportunities.

Societies can act as 'local forums' for a wide range of affiliated societies such as residents associations. Through providing mutual support, it is possible to gain individual members.

In one place (Harpenden) the local council has estab-

lished a 'Youth Town Council' elected by sixth formers in local schools. The Harpenden Civic Society is building links with this, and may eventually gain members by this route.

Lists of local groups can be obtained from libraries or the local council. Just writing letters to such organisations is not sufficient; a personal approach is essential. Overall, networking is probably the most effective way of increasing membership, and through this broadening the membership base. Even initiatives such as informal gatherings of neighbours can be used to spread knowledge of civic societies, and hence increase membership. •

Regional Assemblies – friend or foe? How can we work with them? How do we make our members more aware of the importance of them?

Chris Woodman circulated a paper of information beforehand:

1 Membership of the Regional Assemblies (mainly Council-

- lors but some quango nominees)
- 2 Activities - what activities of the RAs are we interested in?
- a) preparation of regional plan and RPG/Regional Spatial Strategy (what do we know about RAs' ability to approve/amend Local Development Frameworks, formerly Local Plans?)
- b) regional and sub-regional transport strategies
- c) economic strategy
- 3 How is the best way for civic societies to inform themselves about the work of their RA, and to influence it?

- a) internet (information not influence)?
- b) Civic Trust regional organisation?
- c) local councillors who are members of the RA
- d) representative bodies for voluntary organisations (eg. RAISE)

The group were embarrassed at how little they knew about regional assemblies before the discussion. If society office bearers know so little, can individual members be more enlightened?•



If larger issues, such as national housing policy and airport expansion are best handled by the Civic Trust through the Regional Associations, how can we help them by contributing to the process?

Peter Trevelyan summarized:

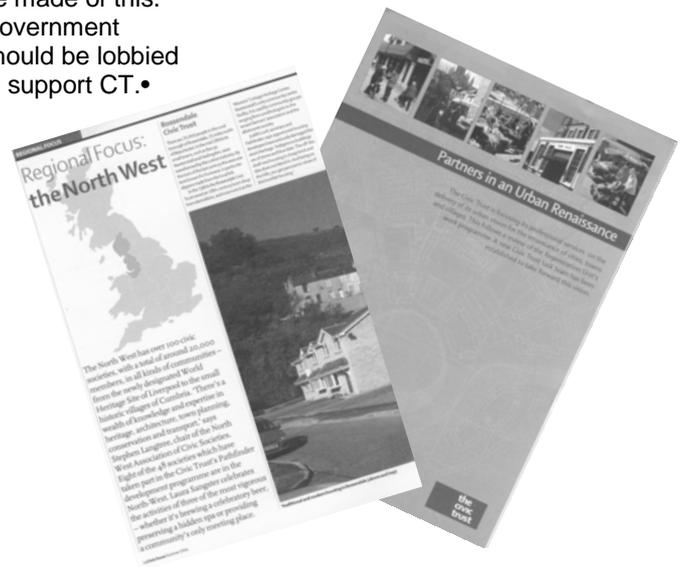
Issues - we considered that there are a many issues on which a national body should exist and make representations on behalf of amenity societies. Issues such as national housing policy / infrastructure implications/ affordable housing, aviation and transport issues, planning policy changes at the national level, urban design and local character, night-time economy and monitoring thereof. So, there is an important role for the Civic Trust as a national representative.

Awareness of CT activity -

there were conflicting responses on this. There was questioning as to whether the subscription to the CT was worthwhile for individual members' societies. On the other hand, attendance at Pathfinder Conference had boosted awareness of the role of CT. Doubt whether having CT on society notepaper now carried any weight. Useful articles in CT newsletter.

Possible contributions - felt that societies should communicate good and bad examples to CT, and that CT officers should get out more to societies. Societies

can also offer specific skills to CT and more use should be made of this. Government should be lobbied to support CT. •



Strategies for fighting campaigns and making ourselves heard

Eric Roberts reports on the findings:

Following a short brainstorming process, we came up with the following four main actions:

- 1 Involve local community
- 2 Involve local media
- 3 Create dialogue with local council/councillors
- 4 Be clear and focussed on what is being said and to whom.

Specific points:

- A Involve local community by:
- i) Liaising with Resident Groups and individuals in area
 - ii) Leaflet area with simple, clear message: Topic, what to do, when and where to write to. Give a contact number, person and address.
- B Involve local media by:
- i) Catchy/thought provoking headline
 - ii) Local papers, video, TV may follow

- iii) Remain factual, avoid too much spin but be aware of media 'needs'. Note: some general points arose here, including:
 - a) Does the society have a Press Officer? Points for and against. Establishing good lines of communication between Chairman/Officers with local press VITAL. Can be used both ways.
 - b) Be aware of growing litigation scenario. Raises question of 'what can be said?' Watch this for the future.
- C Create dialogue with local council/councillors by:
 - i) Letters direct to councillors' homes
 - ii) Letters to council officers - at office
 - iii) Phone calls as back up. Councillors' phone num-

- bers usually published; try and get Council Officers' Direct Dial numbers - avoids switchboard delay/sifting. Create a contact with their P.A. at least
- iv) Beware of e-mail. Whilst instant - some evidence of being conveniently 'lost' or not 'picked up'!
- D Be clear and focussed on what is being said and to whom, by:
 - i) Targeting audience, make them want to read on
 - ii) Using headline bullet points, not lengthy text
 - iii) Making leaflet look attractive - layout, colour
 - iv) Keeping it literate; proof-read. Avoid grammatical, punctuation errors which can be a turn off. •

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Amersham Society

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Buckingham Society

Bishop's Stortford Society

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Gt Missenden Society

Harpenden Society

Hertford Society

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Hitcham & Taplow Preservation Society

Hitchin Society

Hughenden Valley Residents' Association

Marlow Society

Potters Bar Society

Radlett Society

St Albans Society

Stony Stratford Community Association

Wendover Society



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The Chairman Writes

by Dr Peter Diplock

The many issues raised by societies in their reports once again indicate the common themes that are important in both Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire. Our meetings and network provide a valuable opportunity for people to share their concerns, ask for advice and provide solutions and suggestions to others. I believe that we should do more than we do between meetings. However, that means that already busy people agree to do a bit more, or get a few more people involved.

At our last meeting, in addition to the issues that were identified in the society reports, we had five discussion groups. The output from these is summarised in the Newsletter. There are issues that were raised in each group that could be followed up and actions taken. I would like to focus on just one this time – that is not to say that the others are not important as well! – and, if anyone is willing to progress anything – let me know.

A key issue is to attract new members to our local society. We should be aiming to encourage people of all ages and from all parts of the community to join and get involved. When you talk to people there is always something that they like about where they live and also something that they do not like. We need to harness that 'sense of belonging' and encourage them to get involved and to make a difference. People

will get involved when there is a crisis, but often that is too late. They should be encouraged to get involved before there is a crisis.

Let us know what your society is doing to encourage new members, young members.

At a recent Civic Trust meeting with representatives from each Regional Association, this topic was also discussed and will be progressed at future meetings. One point raised concerned words and actions. Do the words 'civic society' or 'amenity society' mean much to local people? Possibly not, but what each of our societies does is impor-



tant – as long as the actions are visible to the community. Visibility is important. Ways of raising visibility were also talked about in the discussion groups – let us know of your successes.

Finally, I would like to thank the Harpenden Society for hosting our AGM and also to personally thank everyone that has contributed to ANTAS during the past year.