

Hook Heath Residents' Association

2015 Newsletter

LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The work of the HHRA has changed significantly in recent years as we have reacted to the many worrying predictions of the housing needs of Woking, and sought ways to preserve the area from overdevelopment. The Green Belt in particular is in great danger of being eaten up by property developers, who are determined to build as many houses as possible whatever the cost to the environment and however detrimental to the quality of life of current residents. As you know we formed the Neighbourhood Forum for the purpose of writing a Neighbourhood Plan that would lessen the impact of future development on the area. The Committee and residents have put in a great deal of effort on your behalf, so please if you are asked to write or help in any way to save the Green Belt, don't hesitate to do so. We need all the help we can get.

Planning applications continue to come in regularly, but the majority of these concern extensions to existing private properties and generally they are not controversial. The majority of objections occur when the applicant wants to build one or more new houses following demolition of an existing house, or to build in the garden of an existing house. Several such cases are on-going and are reported on pages 6 & 7.

There are few commercial properties in Hook Heath, but several of them have plans for significant development. De Vere Venues at Gorse Hill and Methodist Homes Limited at Woodbank, Holly Bank Road, both have plans to expand their businesses. The Star Inn in Wych Hill on the boundary of our area has been sold and a change of use seems likely. (See pages 7 & 8.)

Turning to environmental matters, I would like to bring the matter of tree preservation to the fore once again. Yes I do love trees, and so should everyone. They are our lungs in this pollution-ridden world, and they are so beneficial to our mind and body. A report by Professor Mathew White of Exeter University, called "How a leafy suburb boosts your mood" points out that for every extra tree per kilometre of a road, 1.38 fewer prescriptions for anti-depressants were dispensed per head of population. So please don't cut them down; plant them and keep healthy. WBC's website contains much useful information on the care, maintenance and replacement when necessary of trees and on the regulations concerning Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs). The Council's Tree Officer is always ready to give advice. Remember, you can be prosecuted and fined for the destruction of protected trees. Also birds are now nesting, so no more cutting or lopping until October.

Traffic is still a problem. A new issue has arisen in Hook Heath Avenue, where for some unknown reason possibly related to satnav systems, articulated lorries, unable to cross the bridge to St Johns Hill Road, are having to reverse into one of the side roads in order to turn around. This happens most frequently between 6.00 and 7.00 am much to the annoyance of local residents. The situation will only get worse if the Star Inn becomes a mini supermarket. Car parking on the roads continues to cause congestion. It is particularly noticeable in Hook Heath Road between the SMC Garage and the Tennis Club. Restrictions on parking at the entrance to Pine Road have made the junction slightly less dangerous, but the promised double yellow lines have not yet appeared. There has also been an increase in on-road parking in Hook Heath Avenue for some reason. All road problems in Woking are dealt with by Surrey County Council, so feel free to complain.

At our AGM last October members approved a resolution to expand the area covered by the Association to match that of the Hook Heath Neighbourhood Forum. This adds 45 households to our catchment area located in Orchard Mains, and parts of Wych Hill, Wych Hill Rise and Blackbridge Road. The HHRA is now able to support all residents who live within the area to be covered by the Neighbourhood Plan. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome those of you from the expanded area who have recently joined the Association. I hope other residents will take this opportunity to join us also. You can do so by completing the form at the end of this Newsletter. Also at the AGM the existing Committee members were re-elected and we enrolled two new members, Gerald Griffiths and Mike Cooke, both of whom have been very active in support of the Forum.

ASSOCIATION OFFICERS

Chairman: Jean Dare
Tel: 01483 764942

Vice Chairman: Peter Hill
Tel: 01483 720943

Treasurer: Dr. David Dare
Tel: 01483 764942

Secretary: Heather Mustard
Tel: 01483 729052

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Bridget Stoney

Dr. Neil Cryer

Judith Oakley

Ron Brandman

Gerald Griffiths

Dr Mike Cooke



Jean Dare (Mrs)

Aims of the Association

1. To preserve the present character of Hook Heath and protect the local environment.
2. To provide members with help and assistance on matters affecting them, particularly in relation to letters of objection to the local Council or public enquiries.
3. To deal with planning matters that affect the area and are against the consensus of the opinion of residents.
4. To liaise with the Council and all political parties to achieve an agreed status for Hook Heath which reflects the consensus of the opinion of the residents.
5. To be aware of local issues in adjoining areas, which may have repercussions for Hook Heath, and to provide mutual support to adjacent Residents' Associations to fight plans which could be detrimental to the surrounding environment.
6. To care for other matters of common concern which arise from time to time, e.g. traffic, public services, security, trees, etc.

THE GREEN BELT UNDER THREAT

Background

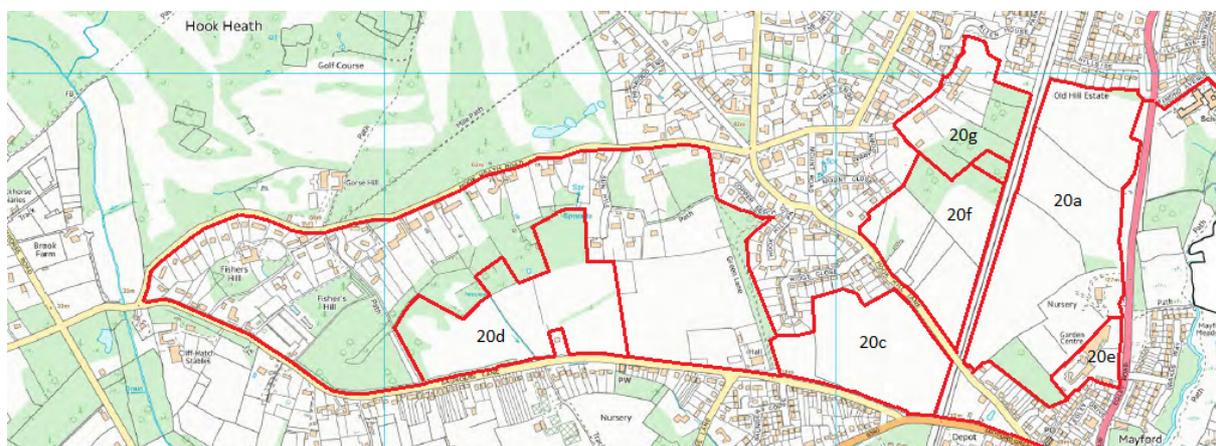
Woking Borough Council is required to build on average 292 new homes per year up to 2027 to meet the target set in the Core Strategy document of the Local Development Plan. The Council has identified sufficient sites within the built-up parts of the Borough to meet the requirements of the Plan until 2022, but in the remaining five years there is a shortfall. The planning inspector who examined the Core Strategy ruled that WBC needed to carry out a review of the Green Belt around Woking to identify new sites sufficient for 550 houses to be built in the period 2022-2027.

The Green Belt Review

WBC commissioned a firm of planning consultants, Peter Brett Associates (PBA), to carry out the review. PBA delivered their report to WBC in March 2014. It was published on WBC's website in July 2014 for information only; comment was not invited. An opportunity to comment was promised for when the Council published its own proposals for release of land from the Green Belt.

Those of you who have looked at the PBA report on the WBC website <http://www.woking.gov.uk/planning/policy/ldfresearch/greenbeltreview> will be aware that PBA were given a brief not only to find land for 550 new homes to meet requirements up to 2027, but also for 1200 new homes to be built in the period 2027-2040, i.e., 1750 in total. It is understandable that WBC would not wish to carry out a Green Belt review any more frequently than necessary, but removing land from protection should be an exceptional procedure. The Inspector's ruling may be considered sufficient justification for removing land for 550 houses, but no justification other than administrative convenience has been given for the second tranche. The origin of the requirement to build 1200 homes in the Green Belt post 2027 is also a mystery.

It is clear from the PBA report that the Hook Heath and Mayford area is under severe threat. A whole swathe of land designated Parcel 20 is recommended for release from the Green Belt. If built on it would effectively fill in all the open land between Egley Road, Saunders Lane and the Hook Heath escarpment. This area contains six specific sites on which one third of Woking's total building need outside the present urban area would be met. The remainder of Parcel 20 is also recommended for removal from the Green Belt, presumably to provide scope for more building at a later date.



Pending WBC 's proposals for release of land for building, the HHRA Committee sought professional guidance. A planning consultant was asked to undertake a review of the PBA report and to provide us with a critique. The consultant identified a number of flaws ranging from the limited scope of the PBA work, to omissions and errors in the way the analysis was conducted, and in the conclusions drawn. We understand that WBC is itself concerned that the PBA report as it stands may not be a sound basis on which to proceed. Additional work is being carried out by Council officers before proposals for land release are published and public comment invited.

The HHRA Committee has chosen not to comment publicly on the PBA report to date since it will in all probability be amended or even superseded by a new document. In the event of significant changes to the Green Belt Review we will need to seek further professional advice before commenting on proposals to release land from the Green Belt in our vicinity, and before providing guidance to Hook Heath residents on issues that could be addressed when submitting their own comments on WBC's forthcoming proposals for releasing land from the Green Belt.

A new Secondary School in the Green Belt

WBC announced plans in March this year to open a new free school to meet the need for additional secondary education primarily in south Woking. To be called the Hoe Valley School, it will open in temporary accommodation in Woking Park in September 2015, and will move to a new building on a 22 acre site (approximately half of Parcel 20a) in the Green Belt to the west of Egley Road in September 2017. The school will have use of extensive sports facilities that will also be available for public use.

An application for planning permission can be expected shortly. It is our understanding that WBC will not wait to remove the land from the Green Belt before proceeding. In normal circumstances planning permission would not be given for a new building in the Green Belt unless the activity was essential for the conduct of a rural industry. WBC will need to deploy a very strong argument that the new school is an exceptional case that merits waiving normal Green Belt building restrictions.

Residents may consider that a school would be preferable to a housing estate on the Egley Road site since the playing fields and athletics track would enable some open space to be preserved. The presence of a school will, however, increase the pressure to build on other nearby sites. Traffic congestion on the Egley Road will be another key issue to be considered. We will liaise with the Mayford Village Society on how best to respond to the expected planning application and will advise Hook Heath residents accordingly.

RESIDENTIAL PLANNING APPLICATIONS

Kineton

Planning permission was granted last year to replace Kineton, a locally listed building in Holly Bank Road, with two modern six bedroom detached houses. Construction of the new houses is now well underway. With the agreement of the developer HHRA was able to photograph the exterior of Kineton before demolition commenced. We understand that a history of the house is being compiled, and when it is completed we hope to be able to combine extracts from it with the recent photographs to make a new entry on the "History Page" of our website.

Grey Walls

Last year an application to build a new house in the grounds of Grey Walls in Hook Heath Road, another locally listed building, was provisionally approved, but subsequently withdrawn by the applicant before final approval was granted.

Greenlea

A previous application to replace Greenlea in Cedar Road with a very much larger modern house was refused last year by WBC and subsequently dismissed at appeal. A second application is currently under consideration; one of the reasons for the earlier refusal has been addressed by moving the large triple garage block from its original position forward of the building line to a new, less prominent position and reducing its bulk, but others remain. The meeting at which the application will be considered is on 14 April.

COMMERCIAL PLANNING APPLICATIONS

Woodbank

The Methodist Care Home remains empty. Last year's Newsletter recorded that an application to replace the existing care home with a larger three storey block of 1 and 2 bedroom apartments for the elderly had been refused by WBC. Since then the owner, Methodist Homes Ltd., has submitted a fresh application for essentially the same project. Apart from some minor alterations to the plans, the second application contained new legal argument that the earlier application had been incorrectly refused because Woodbank was treated as a C3 building (dwelling house) rather than as a C2 building (residential institution).

After submitting the new application, Methodist Homes Ltd. lodged an appeal against the decision on the first application with the Planning Inspectorate, and we await the result. In the meantime WBC has refused the second application.

Gorse Hill

Last April planning permission was granted to De Vere Venues to build a self-contained conference suite on the site of the existing squash courts and to convert the existing conference and training rooms in the courtyard building to 22 additional bedrooms. A new entrance was to be constructed from Hook Heath Road for which planning permission had previously been granted.

In granting planning permission WBC imposed a number of conditions, which included a requirement that the new entrance road should be built and the existing entrance closed before any of the other works commenced. Over the last 12 months a number of applications have been made to vary the detail of some of the conditions, but so far no construction has begun.

The Star Inn - An Asset for an Eyesore

The boarded-up windows and doors of The Star Inn on Wych Hill continue to blight our local landscape. It is now six months since the pub closed its doors for the last time when Punch Partnerships, the former owner, completed the sale of the freehold to a couple of private investors who negotiated a 15 year lease on the property with Co-operative Group Food Limited.

The pub, like many others across the country, had suffered from a lack of investment and frequent changes of management over many years. Meanwhile, the large food retailers including the Co-op, have been forced to defend their customer base from the inroads made by the discount retailers such as Lidl and Aldi.

One solution has been for the large retailers to take advantage of shortcomings in the existing planning legislation to acquire pubs and convert them at minimum cost (so-called permitted development) to convenience stores operating typically from 7 am to 11 pm.

The Co-op's bid to move ahead quickly with the conversion of The Star since it acquired the lease, however, has been thwarted by vigorous local opposition from residents, other retailers on Wych Hill and by the Association. Tellingly, the first application was recommended for rejection by WBC's own planning policy department on the grounds that it offended against key features of the Council's own local development plan. The application was withdrawn by the Co-op, but was soon followed by a second one, the outcome of which is awaited. Meanwhile, an amendment to the second application, involving no significant changes, has been lodged by the Co-op.

Against this background, HHRA last month (March) seized on another facet of the 2011 Localism Act and formally nominated The Star as an Asset of Community Value (ACV) in a submission to WBC.

We have argued that by its longevity, the pub has shown itself to be an established asset at the centre of the local community, contributing to the well being and completeness of that community over almost 150 years. Moreover, the property is designated by WBC as a building of "Townscape Merit".

Over the past few months, other third parties have shown interest in the site and opposition to a 7 to 11 convenience store, in an area already well served by two local small businesses, shows no sign of diminishing. Watch this space and log on to www.hhra.co.uk for updates on developments.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN PROGRESSES

It is exactly three years since the HHRA first raised the prospect of producing a Neighbourhood Plan for the area under the provisions of the Localism Act 2011. We wanted to establish if there was sufficient support from residents to make this a worthwhile exercise. We received a positive response to the idea and the Hook Heath Neighbourhood Forum became the first within the Borough.

Three years on and we have made significant progress, thanks to the sterling efforts by the Forum's officers and members of the steering group whose contributions enabled the Forum to submit a draft Plan to Woking Borough Council in December 2014. This was a key milestone.

The purpose of a Neighbourhood Plan is to enable local communities to help shape the future development of the area in which they live. Residents responded positively to the consultation which was undertaken in developing the six policies which are at the heart of the plan covering the built environment, local infrastructure and open spaces.

On behalf of those involved, I record my sincere thanks and appreciation to the many residents who commented on the Plan at the pre-submission stage last autumn. The formal public consultation, administered by WBC, which ran for six weeks in February and March, demonstrated that keen interest in the Plan has continued. More than 120 submissions - the vast majority from residents - were received, and most expressed strong support for the draft policies. That was a most encouraging response and very welcome.

Examination and Referendum

There were objections too, principally from consultants retained by developers with interests or options on land south of the escarpment and presently in the Green Belt (see "The Green Belt under threat" on pages 5 & 6) but largely outside our designated Neighbourhood Area.

Mr. Chris Collison, a widely experienced planning consultant (see our website www.hhra.co.uk for details) has been appointed to be the Independent Examiner of the draft Plan. The April meeting of WBC was scheduled to approve the formal submission of the Plan for examination and to seek funding for the costs involved but this has been deferred until May.

The Examiner's role is to ensure that the Plan is consistent with local and national planning guidelines and, if the experience of other Plans is any guide, it is likely that he will require modifications to be made before approving it. Subject to the modifications being approved, the Plan will proceed to a local referendum at which all those living or working within the Neighbourhood Area will be entitled to vote.

A majority of those casting votes in support of the Plan is required to enable WBC to accord the Neighbourhood Plan full legal status within the planning framework. So, there are hurdles yet to cross. Expect to hear more about the independent examination and referendum over the coming months by regularly visiting the HHRA website.

Next Forum Meeting

This year's first meeting of the Forum will commence at 7.30 pm at De Vere Venues Gorse Hill on Thursday 23 April. The meeting is open to all residents.

WEBSITES

The website www.hhra.co.uk is designed to keep the local community informed about matters affecting the area. The Residents' Association section currently has 38 pages and the closely linked Neighbourhood Forum area has approximately 60 pages. The number of visitors to the site on any one day can vary wildly from as many as 80 down to 15. There seems no obvious reason for the large swings.

Not surprisingly the most popular page is the one showing the current and past planning applications for the Hook Heath area. Other pages generating strong interest show the aerial views of the area and the ongoing saga concerning the Star Inn.

Pages revealing the history of houses in Hook Heath continue to draw visitors. Your Committee are always on the lookout for more information on these and on the past of Hook Heath generally. So how about writing a short piece on the interesting history of your house, perhaps with some old pictures of the area?

A new addition to the site is a search box on the home page. However, the *What's On* page about forthcoming local events may be discontinued as it has been quite time-consuming to research, without attracting much attention.

NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING

The structure of neighbourhood policing is currently being reorganised so the arrangement previously in place for St Johns and Hook Heath no longer exists. However, should you need to contact the police on a non-urgent matter you can dial 101 and ask for PCSO Naz Raja who is based in the WBC office. Non-emergencies can also be reported on 01483 571212, or by using the online reporting form at www.surrey.police.uk.

Online statistics show that for the period from February 2014 to January 2015 an average of 64 crimes per month were committed within the Mount Hermon, St John's, Hook Heath, Mayford and Sutton Green area. A comparison of crime types committed during that year shows that 44.5% were incidents of anti-social behaviour, 12.5% of violence and sexual offences, 9.5% of burglary and 8.5% of criminal damage.