



HEGNPG

Supporting our Community

Hunsdon Eastwick and Gilston Neighbourhood Plan Group

<https://hegnp.org.uk/>

Annual report to Sponsor Parish Councils

1 Introduction

We are pleased to present our annual report and in doing so to thank you, as our sponsors, for your support for our work, especially your ongoing financial support.

It's been a year of big decisions made by key players – including residents at an administration-changing local election. Developers, Places for People and Taylor Wimpey will now be dealing with a new Green-led East Herts Council, who we hope will ensure the delivery of what has long been promised: the creation of homes of exceptional quality in sustainable communities with infrastructure to match.

The Neighbourhood Plan Group (NPG) has worked with all stakeholders, including local authorities and the media, to best represent and protect the interests of the local communities, and commissioned professional support, where necessary, to help achieve this goal.

We continue to work to ensure that proper regard is given to our Neighbourhood Plan at all key phases of the development, including the creation of a strategic landscape master plan and village masterplanning, and the creation of bodies and processes for the long term stewardship of the Gilston Area.

It's been a crucial year with regards to the future of our community, and I am grateful for the staggering amounts of time committed by the members of the NPG, including many who also hold Parish Council or other posts in our community, so are putting in lots of volunteer time to support local residents.

2 Financial

The NPG opened the financial year with a cash balance of **£59,641.01** and closed the year with a balance of **£51,880.27**

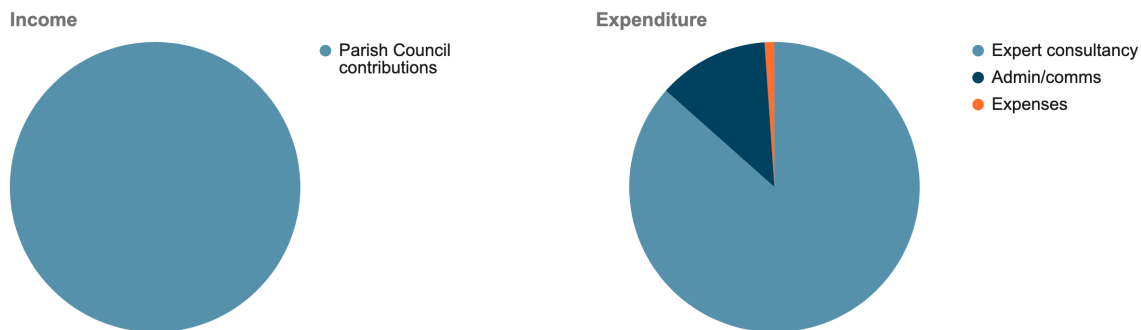
Total income for the year was £4,000

£4,000 was received as annual contributions from sponsor Parish Councils; thank you.

Total expenditure for the year was £11,436.74

£9,900 was spent on expert consultancy to assist the NPG with its responses to the ongoing planning applications and approvals for the new homes, as outline schemes, and infrastructure of Villages 1-7, matters relating to the call-in request, attendance at various meetings regarding the Gilston Area as a whole, including the Strategic Landscape Masterplanning and Village 1 & 7 master planning workshops, comments on Viability Assessment revisions, and further general support.

£1,412 was for administration and communications costs. **£124.74** was for printing, postage, webspace and other similar expenses.



3 Our Report - We summarise our work and are happy to attend a Council meeting to elaborate on this report and answer questions.

3.0 Key activities and progress over the last year included

- + Resolutions to grant planning consents, the last act of the Conservative led EHC. With planning obligations alias "S106" obligations and over 100 planning conditions
- + Our "Call in" request to Secretary of State to review the planning permissions by a public inquiry
- + Developers and EHC still persist to call us a protest group while not responding to our points and paying scant regard to the Neighbourhood Plan policies
- + Election of new EHC with new political direction and our new local Councillor investing considerable time into helping the Community
- + Create Streets' seminar
- + Master planning
- + Site survey work

The Launching of Community Forums by East Herts as the main means of communication with residents in lieu of dialogue with the Parish Councils and the NPG

3.1 Legacy of Conservative Councils Planning Committee decisions made just before the election purdah. The former Conservative run EHC made decisions to approve the Places for People's Outline application for Villages 1-6 and Taylor Wimpey's Outline application for V7 at its last Development Management Committee (DMC) meetings before the local election in May 2023. The Community was given a very short period of time to put its views to Councillors and our detailed representations were mainly ignored, Policies in our Neighbourhood Plan were set aside where EHC considered they conflicted with the applicants' proposals. Massive reports by EHC were put to members in the two weeks before the Committee meetings with substantial addendums added the day before the Committee meeting. Many of the critical Section 106 Heads of Terms were left open so not specified and responsibility for agreeing these matters were delegated to Officers. The Applicants, in contrast, were allowed a private briefing session with the Committee before it met to consider the applications. As a Community group representing both Parish Councils, we were very dissatisfied with the way the decisions were made and so a request to have the decisions 'Called In' was made in March 2023.

3.2 Our request to the Secretary of State for the applications to be "Called In' and reviewed at a public inquiry. This raised important planning policy questions, not least since the Secretary of State commended us from the Despatch box in the House of Commons for producing our Neighbourhood Plan in the face of challenges from the Developers as a formal part of the Local Plan so should have been material matters for consideration when the planning when the decisions were made.

Unfortunately our request for a Call In was rejected in the Autumn of 2023 and the decisions left with EHC's new Green Party-led Council to manage. They have decided to take forward the Conservative administration's decisions without any review or further reference back to the new DMC as the elected body for taking a decision on the applications.

3.3 Current status of the planning 'Decisions'. EHC and the developers are working on the infrastructure obligations to be written into a legal agreement with the Developers known as "Section 106 agreement" (S106) which covers very important matters about how the development will be delivered and so the promises of new schools/community facilities/Health care/Affordable Housing/Sewerage/Water/ Transport and Travel infrastructure to be delivered by the developers. We have seen past 'promises' from the developers be changed or simply not delivered. This has already happened with the 40% affordable housing requirement to be delivered at Gilston, as a requirement in the Local Plan being downgraded to 23% with the loss of 1,700 affordable housing units. EHC have made it clear that they will not consult on the S106 outcomes but we will have a short period to look at the terms of the agreements which have been under negotiation for over a year. EHC have decided not to refer the final S106 agreement back to its elected DMC but leave it for Officers to make these major decisions and so issue the formal planning Decision Notice(s) unless there is a substantial 'departure' from the heads of terms attached to the applications, when considered by the last Conservative administration.

3.4 Create Streets summer seminar. An Urban design consultancy was appointed by an interested party to review the scheme and help the community better understand what the new development could be like given that the Masterplanning work the developers started had been stopped by them. We were delighted that some 70+ residents attended a three hour intensive workshop kindly hosted at the Plume of Feathers PH in Pye Corner. Residents expressed clear preferences for the types of housing that might be delivered. We greatly appreciated the number of residents who joined this meeting.

3.4 Landscape Master Planning/Village 1 Master Planning and Village 7 Master Planning. These activities were 'restarted' in the autumn of 2023. Good progress has been made on Village 7 with a productive two way flow of ideas although there are still elements of further work to be clarified. While work on Village 1 and the critically important Landscape master plan (which is meant to proceed any 'Village' masterplanning) has been halted by the Developers, we are told on the instruction of EHC; we hope that they will restart a two way conversation given their clearly stated high regard of the importance of Community engagement.

3.5 Community Forums. The new Green Party led EHC has decided to change the regular consultation meetings and adopted a policy of holding Community Forums on a regular basis. The first of these was held in February and was well attended by residents. Both developers gave presentations, using up the majority of the allocated time, and there was considerable frustration that questions raised were not dealt with satisfactorily. We were pleased that residents attended and rightly raised lots of questions. We have suggested ways of improving the workings of these forums but EHC have, so far, sidestepped our suggestions. We are concerned that these Community Forums will not serve their purpose of engaging with and informing the Community and its elected parish councillors and the NPG on what is happening or imminently planned as the Development moves forward.

3.6 Stewardship. EHC are about to endorse a Harlow and Gilston-wide policy on Stewardship to govern the public facilities and assets which will not be adopted by EHC. We have given our views but there has been very little engagement by EHC over the last year. The importance of paying for private Stewardship of the infrastructure and public facilities in the eventual scheme has been the subject of national debate led by the Competition and Markets Authority given the problems, and inequity, that often arises through badly-conceived regimes that rely heavily on recovering costs through service charges levied on residents. We are ready to participate in the next round of discussions and believe that the structure should be established before development starts, and have strong local representation.

3.7 The new 'Green' EHC. The May 2023 Local Election resulted in a dramatic change of political leadership of EHC to it being led by a Green Party/Lib Dem coalition. We have met with the new Council Leadership and have welcomed their stated aspirations for better Community engagement and claims that they will be the "Listening Council" but so far there has been insufficient action to justify this. As yet we have seen little planning policy changes and the issues of the shortage of Affordable Housing in East Herts we suspect will become an issue,

especially given that the Gilston project is planned to deliver a shortfall of 1,700 affordable homes, as promised, for local people . The Council has prioritised very costly road infrastructure after the developers presented their financial viability assessments; these have been the subject of professional challenge but EHC is sadly content to put such new information aside.

We are grateful to our new District Councillor for the time and energy he has put into championing the Communities' views and concerns.

4 Looking forward

There are many important issues for both parishes that need resolution and the Community's voice heard.

The following key activities we anticipate will require our attention:

Issue	Comment	Likely timescale
Strategic Landscape Master Plan	EHC's policy states that this should be done in advance of Village master planning in accordance with their own Charter into which we had substantial input. This policy approach is being ignored but we will continue to ask EHC to maintain their adopted policy approach. There are important local interfaces where discussions have yet to be commenced by the Developers (ie Gilston Lane or connectivity with existing and proposed settlements)	Sometime this year
Village Masterplanning	<p>Village 7 have created a climate for sensible discussion and collaboration, there are a number of elements still expected.</p> <p>Village 1, We are waiting for the follow up meetings from the first session but we understand the Developers are committing all their resources to working on the S106</p>	<p>V7 we hope soon</p> <p>V1 sometime this year</p>
Stewardship	Villages and Airfield/ Eastwick Woods Park management arrangements - we continue to wait for the Developers and EHC to	Developers/EHC Have not committed to timetable July

	<p>re-engage with us.</p> <p>Parish Council Boundary review - we held an initial meeting with EHC and hope to have a further one</p>	2024
Section 106 Planning obligations	<p>We were initially told these would be completed by October 2023, more recently by the end of March 2024. We have not been given a fresh date but always knew that the documentation needs to be precise and will have necessary, and substantial financial commitments, for both developers and Council Tax payers so be complex and take time.</p>	Mid summer?
Highways Works	<p>We are told that the substantial taxpayer investment in the project, £172 million, has to be completed by March 2026. Works are now starting in Harlow but the new Eastwick signalised junction and A414 works into Harlow or the Church Lane and A414 Junction are at survey stage only and are unlikely to start until 2025-26</p>	
Building and resourcing the NPG team	<p>There are many decisions to be made which will affect the lives of residents of all three parishes and we welcome the interest and engagement of other members of the community joining the NPG. Alongside the 'risks' there are many 'opportunities' to enhance the facilities and services for all residents. The Community needs a voice if it is to fully benefit.</p>	

Anthony Bickmore, Chairman, HEGNPG
30th April 2024